

DIGGING DEEPER
ACTS



Digging Deeper Acts

Study Guide

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

The book of Acts, written by Luke, begins where Luke's Gospel left off, providing details of the birth and early years of the church that Jesus had promised to build (**Matthew 16:18**). Together the two books, Luke and Acts, form a seamless account of how the followers of Jesus "*turned the world upside down*" (**Acts 17:6**) by taking the good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ "*to the end of the earth*" (**Acts 1:8**).

Before documenting this rapid spread of the gospel, however, Luke asserted two important truths in what serves as an introduction to the book of Acts: (1) the indisputable fact of Christ's resurrection; and (2) the indispensable presence of the Holy Spirit. Apart from these two strong foundations, the church would be without hope and without direction and enablement. What was true in the first century is still true today.

ACTS

Chapter 1

Read Acts 1:1-2.

- Luke's opening statement ties this book of Acts to the Gospel of Luke which was also addressed to Theophilus (**Luke 1:3**); the name Theophilus actually means "one who loves God." While some scholars have argued that this is a general term for all believers, it is more likely a proper name. When addressing Theophilus in Luke 1:3, Luke called him "most excellent." A proper name with a title indicates this was indeed a real person, someone who belonged to the nobility, possibly as a high-ranking Roman official. Whether or not Theophilus was a believer is unknown. Luke set out to explain the entire gospel story to Theophilus, telling him about everything "***Jesus began to do and teach***" until the day he ascended to heaven.
- The following verses provide a bridge between the events recorded in Luke's Gospel and the events marking the beginning of the church. Before He "***ascended to heaven***" or "***was taken up***," the resurrected Christ taught His disciples for forty days. In that short period, He gave those "***chosen apostles***" the instruction that would radically change their lives and, through them, change the world. The fact that the apostles had been chosen by Christ (**Luke 6:12-16**) is an extremely important point. With that choosing came apostolic authority to preach, teach, direct the church, and preserve the record of his life and teaching.

Read Acts 1:3.

- "***After His suffering***" refers to the crucifixion of Jesus. During the days after Christ rose from the dead, he

showed Himself to many of His followers. Christ showed Himself and (as if more were needed) also gave many convincing proofs that He was alive. The word “*proofs*” (*tekmeriois*) refers to evidence and evidence is always based on facts. Jesus’ resurrection had not been sleight of hand or illusion, with Jesus being merely a ghostly presence. Instead, these were solid, visible, and undeniable proofs of the fact that Jesus was alive.

- These proofs would form the foundation of the forthcoming witness of the church (from Acts 1:8 forward). If Jesus had not truly risen from the dead, then nothing that proceeds from this point on in the book of Acts (or the New Testament for that matter) would make any sense or make any difference in people’s lives (**1 Corinthians 15:13-14**).
- “*Speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.*” During Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances, the main subject of His remarks was the kingdom of God (**Luke 13:18-21; 17:20-37**). His kingdom began in the hearts of His followers. When Christ returned to heaven, God’s kingdom remained in the hearts of all believers through the presence of the Holy Spirit. The ultimate culmination of the kingdom of God will not be fully realized until Jesus Christ comes again to rule, defeat his enemies, and consummate the kingdom (**Matthew 24:29-31; 25:31-46; John 14:1-3**). The term “kingdom,” at least in Acts, is often used synonymously with the gospel message (**Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31**).
- So we have the two aspects of Christianity that would soon spread like wildfire from the temple porticoes in Jerusalem: (1) witnesses who had been with the resurrected Christ; and (2) a clear message of the Gospel of Christ.

Read Acts 1:4-5.

- As the risen Christ met with His disciples, He told them many things. Luke records only a few sentences from those forty days of instruction. Christ first told His followers to remain in Jerusalem for ***“the Promise of the Father.”*** He had spoken of this earlier at the Last Supper: ***“And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Counselor, who will never leave you”*** (John 14:16-17, 26).
- ***“You shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”*** This would be a new kind of baptism. John the Baptist had baptized in water as a sign of repentance. John’s baptism prepared to welcome the coming Messiah and receive His message. John himself had said, ***“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I [...] He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire”*** (Matthew 3:11).
- The “one” who was coming was Jesus, the promised Messiah. The coming of the Spirit had been prophesied as part of the Messiah’s arrival (Isaiah 44:3; Ezekiel 36:26-27; Joel 2:28).
- All believers, those who come to Jesus Christ for salvation, receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This baptism places the Holy Spirit within the believer and positionally places the believers into Christ.
- If Jesus had stayed on earth, His physical presence would have limited the spread of the gospel because physically He could be in only one place at a time. After Christ was taken up into heaven, He would be spiritually present everywhere through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit would comfort them, guide them into His truth, remind them of Jesus’ words, give them the words to say, empower them to live the Christ-life. As promised by Christ in the upper room (John 13-17) and by the Father (see Peter’s speech

in **Acts 2:17** and following), the Holy Spirit would be the next great event in the life of the church.

Read Acts 1:6.

- When would the risen Lord set up His kingdom? This was the question uppermost in the apostles' minds. They were eagerly hoping for a glorious earthly kingdom free from Roman rule. Christ, however, sidestepped these questions about earthly kingdoms and divine timetables. Instead, He reminded His followers of their calling to be Spirit-indwelt witnesses who would take the gospel message everywhere. A spiritual revolution needed to take place first in the lives of people.
- During the years of Jesus' ministry on earth, the disciples continually had wondered about the coming of the kingdom (earthly kingdom) and what their roles would be in it. But the kingdom about which Jesus spoke was a "spiritual" kingdom established in the lives of believers (**Luke 17:21**).
- Jesus' answer was disappointing to the disciples and brought with it a rebuke and a gentle reminder that the apostles' role (like the role He had modeled on earth) was to merely walk, by faith, with God.

Read Acts 1:7.

- Neither the times nor the dates were the disciples' business. These are set by the Father's authority for the disciples; it was out of their area of concern. Later revelation through Paul and others would help clarify the issue (**1 Thessalonians 5:1-2**). What should concern and consume the disciples, however, was the loaded statement that follows.

Read Acts 1:8.

- This is the last recorded statement of Christ on earth before He ascended.
- When Jesus ascended into heaven, His physical presence left the earth, but He sent in His place the Holy Spirit so that His spiritual presence would remain among mankind (**Luke 24:49**). Luke's Gospel emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in the ministry of Christ. Luke continued that emphasis here as he focused on the Holy Spirit's role in the early days of the church. The term "spirit" (*pneuma*) occurs nineteen times in Matthew, twenty-three times in Mark, thirty-six times in Luke, twenty-four times in John, and seventy times in Acts. Christ had just reminded His followers that they would soon receive the Holy Spirit (1:5). When the Spirit comes, He told them, "***you will receive power.***" To do what? To "***be my witnesses***"; that power involves courage, boldness, confidence, discernment, giftedness, and authority. The disciples would need the Holy Spirit to fulfill their mission.
- The term "witness" provides remarkable insight into the nature of the disciples' task. A witness gives testimony based on what he or she has experienced, seen, or heard (**1 John 1:1-3**). This witnessing theme is a repeated emphasis of the apostles' work; (2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39; 13:31; 22:15). In effect, Jesus was saying to His followers: "There will be a period of time for you to witness about me between my two visits to earth. Go and tell what you know, what you've seen, experienced, and learned. Through the Holy Spirit, I'll be with you and I will return."
- The disciples took Jesus at His word and went about their task exactly as He directed: they began in Jerusalem (1-7), spread to Judea and Samaria (8-12), and then filtered out across the world to the imperial capital, Rome (13-

28). However, it is interesting to note that, they, much like the folks at the Tower of Babel (**Genesis 11**), remained in the comfortable confines of Jerusalem (**Acts 1:15; 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:28**), until God scattered them (**Acts 8:1**).

Read Acts 1:9.

- After giving this important charge, Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took Him out of their sight. This cloud symbolized the presence of God. In the Old Testament, we read that a cloud led the Israelites through the wilderness (**Exodus 13:21-22**) and that God made His presence known to the people by appearing in a cloud (**Exodus 16:10; 19:9, 16; 24:15-18; 33:9-19; 34:5; 40:34-35**). A cloud also enveloped Jesus and three of His disciples at the Transfiguration (**Luke 9:34-35**) as a visible symbol of God's presence. So when Jesus returned to the Father, He returned in a cloud that took Him "*out of their sight*."
- What a privilege for the disciples to see Jesus make this transition. The Ascension confirmed for them that Jesus truly was God. In addition, they witnessed the fact that He had physically left earth and had returned to His heavenly home; thus, the remaining work would be done by the witnesses He had left behind, operating in the power of the promised Holy Spirit (**John 16:7**).

Read Acts 1:10-11.

- While the disciples were straining their eyes, staring into the sky, two angelic messengers appeared among them. The angels confirmed what had just happened: indeed, Jesus had been taken away into heaven. They also reminded the disciples of Jesus' promise: *Someday, just as you saw him go, he will return!* In the

Olivet discourse, Jesus had described His return: “*At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory*” (Luke 21:27; Matthew 24:30; Mark 13:26). At His trial Jesus had told Caiaphas, “*In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven*” (Matthew 26:64).

- There is no disputing the promise that Jesus is coming back in a similar way as He departed. His followers would live and work in the power of the Spirit. They would walk out into the lost world, telling of all they had seen and heard regarding the one whom they had watched ascend. Surely their attitude about the sky and clouds from that day on was never the same. Every tilt of their head upward would recall the moment that He ascended and remind them of the angelic promise of His return: “*As you saw him go, he will return!*”
- What an exhausting, exhilarating six weeks! The disciples had witnessed the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of their Master, then His powerful and undeniable resurrection, and finally His awesome ascension into heaven. Surely they were reeling from all that they had seen, heard, and felt.
- Having been instructed to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit, the disciples withdrew to an upstairs room in Jerusalem.

Read Acts 1:12-13.

- Following the instructions of Christ (1:4), the disciples stayed in Jerusalem.
- This list of names of the eleven disciples parallels the list in the Gospels (**Matthew 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:14-16**). Here, as in the other lists, Peter is named first. Simon is called a Zealot. A “Zealot” most probably referred to anyone zealous for the Jewish law.

All the lists vary slightly in order, but the groupings (of the more prominent leaders and of family relationships) remain essentially the same.

Read Acts 1:14.

- Luke took special note of the fact that the disciples were joined by Mary the mother of Jesus and several other women, likely the ones who had been present at the Crucifixion and at the empty tomb (**Luke 8:2-3; 23:49; 23:55-24:10**). Also present were the brothers of Jesus. During his lifetime, Jesus' brothers (Mary and Joseph's other sons) did not believe He was the Messiah (**John 7:5**) and actually thought He was out of His mind (**Mark 3:21-35**). But Jesus' resurrection must have convinced them otherwise. Jesus' special appearance to James, one of His brothers, may have been an especially significant event in James's conversion (**1 Corinthians 15:7**).
- The main emphasis, however, is not who was present but what they were doing—praying! Prayer begins to appear as a mark of the early church. When they were fearful, they prayed. When they were confused, they prayed. When they were waiting for God to fulfill His promise to them, they prayed. When they needed an answer to a question (such as who was to be the twelfth apostle), they prayed!

Read Acts 1:15-16.

- On a day when about 120 believers were present, Peter stood up and pointed the gathered believers to the Scriptures. He put the events concerning Judas' betrayal and suicide into biblical perspective by explaining how it was necessary for the Scriptures to be fulfilled, and then he called the believers to the task of

choosing Judas's replacement—something he said was necessary (1:20-21). Peter and the disciples believed it was necessary for this Scripture to be fulfilled which gave a great lesson in biblical leadership: a combination of knowing the Word of God and applying it to our lives. Peter's reference to King David points to the Spirit-led predictions recorded in some of David's psalms, such as **Psalms 69:25** and **Psalms 109:8**.

Read Acts 1:17-19.

- It's interesting to give thought to the fact that anyone who had spent as much time with Jesus as Judas could betray him. Judas had received the same calling to Jesus and teaching as everyone else. Though chosen to share in the ministry by Christ Himself, Judas' heart became hard as he pursued things that had no eternal value (**Ephesians 4:17-19**). Judas repented and went out and hung himself (**Matthew 27:3-5**). If he repented, why would he commit suicide? The answer is in **2 Corinthians 7:10**. Godly repentance leads to salvation; worldly repentance leads to death.

Read Acts 1:20.

- Peter apparently saw **Psalms 69:25** as a prediction of the horrible end of Judas, and then he quoted **Psalms 109:8** as the basis for the necessity of choosing someone to replace him. Thus Peter's Spirit-led application of David's Spirit-inspired prediction became the basis for the gathered believers' first significant decision—replacing Judas.

Read Acts 1:21-22.

- The disciples apparently believed that a twelfth disciple would be necessary to fulfill such promises as **Matthew 19:28** and **Luke 22:28-30**. Because Judas betrayed

Christ, he would need to be replaced; however, James was not replaced after his death (12:2); because he had not defected from the faith, he still was regarded as one of the Twelve.

- Peter pointed out the qualifications of the one who was to be chosen. He was to be someone who had been with Jesus and the other disciples ***“all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John’s baptism to that day when He was taken up from us.”*** Such eyewitness involvement was absolutely necessary for the credibility of the person who would bear witness to the words and the works of Christ. This one would join the other apostles in being ***“a witness of His resurrection.”*** This individual would be a testimony to the credibility of the life of Christ and the words of Christ.

Read Acts 1:23.

- In answer to Peter’s request, the eleven apostles proposed two men who met the qualifications of 1:21-22. “Barsabas” means “son of the Sabbath.” “Matthias” means “gift of God.” Very little is known of these men, either from the Bible or from other historical sources.

Read Acts 1:24-25.

- As they prayed for direction in this decision, the apostles were mindful of God’s omniscience. God had known Judas would betray Christ and subsequently take his own life. God also knew the hearts of all the people in that room. All that these believers wanted was for God to show them which one, either Matthias or Barsabbas.

Read Acts 1:26.

- The final phase of this choosing process was that they cast lots. This casting of the lots was not done casually or flippantly, for the apostles had carefully chosen two candidates according to certain qualifications (1:21-22) and then had spent time in prayer (1:24-25).
- As far as we know, this practice did not continue after Pentecost because the “Guide,” the Holy Spirit, had come to indwell the hearts and minds of God’s people. Later, the elders would select the leaders at the various churches but not with lots. Christians, then as now, were encouraged to search the Scriptures and to know the will of the Lord (**Ephesians 5:17-18; Colossians 1:9; 1 Thessalonians 4:1; 2 Timothy 3:16-17**).
- The “disciples” are now called “apostles.” “Disciple” means follower or learner, and “apostle” means messenger or missionary or sent one. These men now had the special assignment of spreading the Good News of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

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Chapter 2

In old Testament times, the Spirit of God came upon certain individuals or groups on special occasions and in a temporary way to enable them to accomplish God's purposes (**Exodus 31:3; Judges 14:6; 1 Samuel 16:13; 2 Chronicles 20:14**). As the apostles were gathered together in Jerusalem for the Day of Pentecost, the time had come for the fulfillment of Christ's promise to send His Spirit completely and permanently upon all believers (**Luke 24:49; John 14:16-17, 26; 16:5-15**). This marvelous outpouring of God was to provide His power, desire, and direction for believers to take the life-changing message of the gospel to the ends of the earth (**Acts 1:8**).

Read Acts 2:1.

- The “***Day of Pentecost***” was an annual feast celebrated on “the day after the seventh Sabbath” after Passover (**Leviticus 23:15-16**). The word “Pentecost” means “fifty,” so named because this feast was celebrated fifty days after Passover. Originally Pentecost was the Feast of the First Fruits of the Grain Harvest, which has significance here, since the three thousand who came to faith in Christ this day were the “first fruits” of many thousands who would follow.
- Those gathered were the 120 believers mentioned in 1:15. The “one place” where they were gathered could have been the same upper room mentioned in 1:13. Most likely the believers were praying, as had been their regular practice during the period since the Ascension (1:14). What happened this day would forever change the world.

Read Acts 2:2.

- Suddenly, as the believers were gathered, they heard a noise like a violent wind (it was not necessarily movement of air, but perhaps a sound like that of wind). The wind is a good analogy for the Spirit: wind is not seen, though its effects are, and it can be found everywhere in never-ending supply.
- Some have made a connection between this event and the dry bones of **Ezekiel 37:1-14** as well as the discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus (**John 3:8**), when Jesus compared the Spirit to the wind.
- The source of this sound is made clear: it came from heaven. It would affect everyone, for it filled the whole house where they were sitting.

Read Acts 2:3.

- To the great sound of wind was added a visual image: what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. Why tongues of fire? It may be that “tongues” symbolized speech and the communication of the gospel. “Fire” symbolizes God’s purifying presence, which burns away the undesirable elements in people’s lives. On Mount Sinai, God confirmed the validity of the Old Testament law with fire from heaven (**Exodus 19:16-18**). Elsewhere in the Old Testament, fire was used to portray the presence of God (**Genesis 15:17; Exodus 3:2-6; 13:21-22; 24:17; 40:38**). John said that Jesus would baptize the people with the Holy Spirit and with fire.
- At Pentecost God confirmed the validity of the Holy Spirit’s ministry by sending fire. At Mount Sinai fire had come down on one place, but at Pentecost fire came down on all believers, symbolizing that God’s presence is available to all who believe in Him. This event

fulfilled John the Baptist's words about the Holy Spirit baptizing with fire (**Luke 3:16**). Peter declared that this event had been prophesied by Joel (**Joel 2:28-29**). Note, too, that every believer in the room received this blessing; no one was excluded. It was clear to all present that God was at work.

Read Acts 2:4.

- Luke recorded that everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages. The “filling” that occurred at Pentecost is called a “baptizing” (1:5 and 11:16) and a “receiving” (10:47). This “baptizing” or “filling” describes the Spirit's indwelling a believer. Believers receive the Holy Spirit (are baptized with the Holy Spirit) the moment they trust in Jesus Christ for salvation.
 - The Spirit's indwelling marks the beginning of the Christian experience. No one belongs to Christ without His Spirit (**Romans 8:9**); no one is united to Christ without His Spirit (**1 Corinthians 6:17**); no one is adopted as God's child without His Spirit (**Romans 8:14-17; Galatians 4:6-7**); no one is in the body of Christ except by the Spirit (**1 Corinthians 12:13**).
 - The Spirit is the teacher and change agent for the new life. He begins a lifelong process of molding believers into Christ-likeness (**Galatians 3:3; Philippians 1:6**). Those who receive Christ by faith begin a personal relationship with God and the Holy Spirit goes to work immediately to reproduce the life of Christ (**2 Corinthians 3:18; Galatians 4:19**).
 - The Spirit also unites the Christian community in Christ (**Ephesians 2:19-22**). The Holy Spirit is in all, and he works through all (**1 Corinthians 12:11; Ephesians 4:4**).

- Back again to Acts 2:4—these people literally spoke in “other languages” (**Acts 2:5-8**). All the nationalities represented recognized their own languages being spoken. This was truly a remarkable day for the church, fulfilling **Ezekiel 37:11-14**.

Read Acts 2:5-8.

- Such an event could not help but attract attention. The “*devout Jews from many nations who were living in Jerusalem*” at that time were from families who had at some point left Jerusalem to live in other nations but had since returned to the city. These people had been born and raised in other nations, speaking other languages. As the international, multi-lingual crowd gathered, they were astonished to hear their native tongues spoken by these Galileans.
- This gathering of the nations was a perfect platform for launching the worldwide mission of the church. This event made it clear to the Jerusalem church that God intended the gospel to be shared in all nations in their own languages.

Read Acts 2:9-11.

- This list includes the many lands from which Jews came to Jerusalem. The list begins from the east of the Roman Empire and sweeps to the south and west. Very likely, some of the Jews who responded to Peter’s message returned to their homelands and shared God’s good news of salvation (Acts 8). Through this divine manifestation of languages, God prepared the way for the spread of the gospel across the world. Throughout the book of Acts, we often become aware that the way had been prepared for Paul and others by people who had become believers at Pentecost. The church at

Rome, for example, was probably begun by such Jewish converts.

- The content of these speeches in each language was not sin, repentance, or judgment, but rather the proclamation of the mighty works of God.
- Some have called this event at Pentecost “Babel Reversed.” The important fact to remember about this first occurrence of “tongues” is its purpose: to communicate to the world the message of Christ. It was a sign for unbelieving Israel that the Messiah had come (**1 Corinthians 1:22**). The promised Spirit had been poured out as foretold in Joel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others. It was also an effective Spirit-given gift of a foreign language with which to spread the glorious news of God’s work in the world. The faithful believers had been waiting and praying; then came the prophesied sign that something big was about to happen. When it occurred, God delivered His message to the world.
- With all the misinformation available today, many believers tend to look at Pentecost in an entirely improper light. It is often viewed as only a tremendous outpouring of power—sound of wind, fire, signs, and wonders. If believers will take a fresh and straight-forward look at the events of Pentecost, they will find that the focus is on the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and the beginning of the witness of the apostles to the world.

Read Acts 2:12-13.

- These two verses describe a typical response of the crowd leading up to Peter’s speech. The crowd was amazed, and their amazement led them to a human explanation of what was happening. Some were mocking while others were speculating that the believers were drunk.

- This was certainly the situation when the Spirit of God was poured out at Pentecost. The people who were gathered in Jerusalem were astonished to hear the Spirit-filled Palestinian Jews speaking fluently about God in a foreign language that they had never learned. Confusion reigned until Peter delivered a convicting sermon, challenging his audience: “***Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins***” (2:38). God used this sermon, rich with Old Testament references, to draw about three thousand men and women to Himself.

Read Acts 2:14.

- Peter, the early spokesman for the Twelve, seized the opportunity. He stood up with the eleven, and addressed the crowd. Peter explained to the people why they should listen to the testimony of the believers: because the Old Testament prophecies had been entirely fulfilled in Jesus (2:14-21), because Jesus is the Messiah (2:25-36), and because the risen Christ could change their lives (2:37-49).

Read Acts 2:15-18.

- Peter answered the accusation that they were all drunk (2:13) by saying it was much too early in the day for that. He then proceeded to tie the event the crowd had just witnessed to the words of the prophet Joel, quoting from **Joel 2:28-32**. Not everything mentioned in **Joel 2:28-32** was occurring on that particular morning. The last days include all the days between Christ’s first and second comings. Peter was reminding these Jewish listeners that from prophecies like this one recorded by Joel, “***I will pour out My Spirit on all people,***” and they should recognize the event they had just witnessed as

the work of the Spirit. It would be to all kinds of people—male and female, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor.

- The “prophesying” mentioned by Peter and the visions and the dreams were common means that God used to reveal Himself at that time. The point was that all of this was the product of the Spirit’s work.
- At Pentecost the Holy Spirit was released throughout the entire world—to men, women, slave owners, slaves, Jews, and Gentiles. Everyone could receive the Spirit. This was a revolutionary thought for first-century Jews. Pentecost was designed to be a clear indication to Jew and Gentile alike that the Messiah had come!

Read Acts 2:19-20.

- As mentioned before, not everything mentioned in **Joel 2:28-32** was happening on this particular morning. This part of Joel’s prophecy probably refers to the second coming of Christ (**Revelation 6:12**). These events bear resemblance to the Tribulation period as spelled out by many other Old Testament prophets, as well as Jesus Himself (**Matthew 24:14, 21, 29-30 and the judgments of Revelation 8, 9, and 16**).

Read Acts 2:21.

- Salvation is available to everyone. Any individual who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. God’s special relationship with Israel would continue but had been broadened to include everyone who calls on the name of the Lord. God’s plans for Israel had their climax in Christ.
- It would be a while before these new Jewish believers understood that the “anyone” included Gentiles. God had to work in a special way before even Peter could

understand that the message was meant for the whole world, not just the Jews (Acts 10).

Read Acts 2:22.

- The coming of the Messiah, the miracles, and the events described by Joel were all well-established concepts to these Jewish believers. Now all that remained was for Peter to connect those events to Jesus of Nazareth. Peter made the clear connection between Jesus and the one David spoke of prophetically. “***Jesus of Nazareth is the long-awaited Messiah***” is the theme of this sermon (2:14-36) and the basis for the ensuing call to faith.
- Peter began his sermon by stating that God Himself had publicly endorsed Jesus by doing miracles, wonders, and signs through Him. Certainly many of the gathered crowd had seen or heard of the ministry of Jesus. For several years He had been speaking to huge crowds and performing incredible miracles, often in full view of thousands of people. Thus, when Peter said “***as you well know***,” he was reminding his audience that many of them were familiar with Jesus and His ministry.

Read Acts 2:23.

- With little forewarning, Peter suddenly accused his Jewish audience of participating in the Messiah’s death. God’s prearranged plan was His sovereign will to bring salvation to people through the death and resurrection of Christ. Though God’s will is sovereign, He works through people and events of history (4:28). Putting Jesus to death fulfilled God’s prearranged plan but people were held responsible for the wrongdoing. Whether or not anyone in this audience had literally participated in the trials, accusations, and crucifixion was not an issue. Peter was pointing his finger at the

crowd and shouting, “You nailed him to the cross and murdered him.”

Read Acts 2:24.

- Death could not hold the murdered Messiah. God raised Him up and numerous people could testify that they had seen the risen Christ. This was a powerful statement because many of the people listening to Peter’s words had been in Jerusalem fifty days earlier at Passover and may have seen or heard about the crucifixion of this “great teacher.” Jesus’ resurrection was the ultimate sign that what He had said about Himself was true. Without the Resurrection, no one would have any reason to believe in Jesus (**1 Corinthians 15:14**).
- Notice here that the Resurrection is attributed to God Himself. The Resurrection is a foundational part of the preaching of Acts (2:32; 3:15, 26; 4:10; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30, 33-34, 37; 17:31; 26:23). It was impossible for the Author of life to be held by the power of the grave (**John 1:1-14; Colossians 1:15-17**).

Read Acts 2:25-28.

- Peter continued his witness regarding the Messiahship of Jesus by quoting from **Psalm 16:8-11**, which was written by David. He explained that David was not writing about himself because David later died and was buried (2:29). This quote from **Psalm 16** and **110:1**, as well as **Acts 2:34-35** is prophesying Jesus’ resurrection (2:24). Peter’s audience understood “decay” to mean the grave. The emphasis is that Jesus’ body had not been left to decay but had been, in fact, resurrected and glorified. Peter wanted his audience to

realize that David was predicting the resurrection of the Messiah in these psalms.

Read Acts 2:29-31.

- The Old Testament makes a solid case for the resurrection of the Messiah; and this was very important for Peter's Jewish listeners to understand. Peter argued that the words of this psalm could not have been referring to David himself, for David died and was buried.
- If David was not speaking of himself, then he was speaking as a prophet; he was writing about one who would be resurrected from the dead. The oath looks back at **Psalms 132:11** and **2 Samuel 7:15-16**, where God promised David that one of his descendants would always sit on the throne. David did have children, who ruled, but this promise was for someone to be on the throne forever; and that someone would be Jesus Christ. David, in writing this psalm, had a vision of what was ahead and therefore had written of the resurrection of the Christ.

Read Acts 2:32.

- After having begun by tying these Old Testament references to Jesus of Nazareth, Peter again made it clear that David's prophecy was speaking of Jesus.
- The resurrection of Christ had taken place less than two months previously. The post-resurrection appearances and instruction sessions of the forty days prior to Christ's ascension must have caused a stir around the city. Peter now points out that he and the others who had just experienced this Spirit's coming had been witnesses to the predicted resurrection of Christ.

Read Acts 2:33.

- Peter had one more major point to make: this crucified one, the resurrected one, is now the exalted one, who occupies the throne of highest honor in heaven, at God's right hand (**5:30-31; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22**). Not only is Christ the predicted one in the psalms, not only had He risen from the grave, He now sits in the most authoritative, sovereign position in the universe, and this is why Jesus had the authority to pour out the Spirit with results that the audience could see and hear.

Read Acts 2:34-35.

- In **Psalm 110:1**, David again was not speaking of himself but of Christ. This verse is frequently quoted Old Testament passage in the New Testament (thirteen times) and was the primary text used to explain the exaltation of Christ. The Jews believed that this psalm referred to their coming Messiah. All three synoptic gospels, Matthew **22:41-46; Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:41-44**, report that Jesus applied this verse to Himself as the one having the highest authority because He would be instructed to sit at "***my God's right hand***." The victory belongs to Christ and not to any created being. The greatest archangels stand before God (**Luke 1:19; Revelation 8:2**), but none are allowed to sit, for sitting next to God would indicate equality. Jesus' sitting also indicates the completion of His task, the successful accomplishment of His mission.
- God promised to make Jesus' enemies a footstool; they would be under His feet. This pictures Christ as

completely victorious over His enemies and shows that the Father approves of Jesus' work.

Read Acts 2:36.

- Peter concluded his message with a solid review of his main point: *So let it be clearly known by everyone in Israel that Jesus is the Messiah.* In the prophesied plan of God, this Jesus of Nazareth had been crucified by the Jews, raised from the dead, and exalted to the throne of God.
- Throughout his message, Peter consistently applied the Messianic prophecies, the Messianic psalms, and the miraculous Resurrection to Jesus of Nazareth (2:22-23, 32). His concluding remarks did so as well. With the proclamation of Jesus as Lord and Messiah, Peter reached the climax of his message. The reference to Jesus as “lord” was likely, in this context, an affirmation of Christ’s deity.

Read Acts 2:37.

- The term “*cut to the heart*” speaks of genuine pain. It means to “strike, cut, sting sharply, stun.” The crowd was stunned! They asked the same question that Paul asked on the road to Damascus (**Acts 9:6**): “What shall we do? Peter was ready with the answer.

Read Acts 2:38.

- In answer to the people’s question, Peter presented a fourfold challenge:
 - “**Repent.**” The Greek word, *metanoesate*, means “change your outlook” or “change your mind.” This is not just sorrow or even sorrow for sin but an actual change in the way a person thinks. It is a

basic and wholehearted change of mind that results in a change of purpose, direction, and values. In **2 Corinthians 7:10** we read: “**Godly repentance leads to salvation, but worldly repentance leads to despair.**” (Example, **Matthew 27:3-5.**) The words “**every one of you**” reminds the reader that this message is for all. Everyone needs to make a decision about Christ. His offer is the only effective solution for the sin problem that plagues every descendant of Adam.

- “**Turn to God.**” In addition to turning from sin, people must turn to God who is the only one who can solve our sin problem.
- “**Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.**” John the Baptist, in preparing the way for the Messiah, had called for baptism as a sign of repentance and a changed heart. For believers, baptism is visible proof of repentance and faith in Christ’s finished work on their behalf. The idea of baptism “**for the forgiveness/remission of sins**” does not mean that baptism results in forgiveness of sins but rather that forgiveness of sins as a result of accepting Jesus as Savior should result in a baptism—an outward display of an inner conviction. Faith, not baptism, is what brings forgiveness.
- “**Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.**” The Holy Spirit is a gift from God. As Jesus promised, He is the Comforter and the one who guides His people into truth (**John 14:26**).

Read Acts 2:39-40.

- This promise of the work of the Spirit in the life of the believer has a personal application (for you), a generational application (and your children), and a global application (for all who are far off, perhaps the

Gentiles). Luke recorded no more of Peter's words to the gathered crowd except to say that Peter kept talking for a long time (with many other words), warning and pleading with the people to be saved.

Read Acts 2:41.

- What a response! Three thousand people believed and took the step of faith in Christ. Those who believed were baptized; they took that first step of publicly identifying themselves with Christ. And they were added to the church; that is, they immediately joined the fellowship of believers.
- Books about church planting and church growth are popular. Seminars about the church abound, with pastors and church boards eager to copy the techniques of a successful pastor or a fast-growing congregation. At Pentecost, after the coming of the Holy Spirit, the gathering of 120 exploded! In one day three thousand people came to faith in Christ. Now what do they do? These verses provide a concise summary of what the early church was about; it provides a model that can be applied to the modern church as well.

Read Acts 2:42.

- The three thousand new believers joined with others of like mind and faith and continually persisted in hearing the apostles' teaching. This was one reason that the replacement of Judas was so important; the apostles, the eyewitnesses of all Jesus had done and said, would be the ones whom the Holy Spirit would use to share crucial truths by which the church would be directed for centuries to come (**John 14:17, 25-26; 16:13**). From the beginning the early Church was devoted to hearing, studying, and learning what the apostles were teaching.

- They were also steadfast in fellowshiping with other believers. **Fellowship** (*koinonia*) was more than just a casual relationship at a religious meeting. It involved deeper relationships that were centered in Christ (**1 John 1:3**). **Sharing in the Lord's Supper** is "the breaking of bread," and refers to communion services that were celebrated in remembrance of Jesus and patterned after the Last Supper, which Jesus had eaten with His disciples before His death (**Matthew 26:26-29**). It likely included a regular meal shared together (**Acts 2:46; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 10:16; 11:23-25; Jude 1:12**). **Prayer** has always been a part of Christian gatherings.

Read Acts 2:43.

- The word "awe" is the Greek word *phobos*, literally translated "fear." This awe was partly caused by the many miraculous signs and wonders performed by the apostles. These signs and wonders authenticated the apostles' message, identifying it as divine truth.

Read Acts 2:44-45.

- Of the thousands of Jews who had made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Pentecost, many may have come as early as Passover (fifty days earlier). Now they were extending their stay in Jerusalem even longer to learn the basics of this newfound Christian faith. Many would likely need financial or physical help from those who lived in Jerusalem to be able to remain this long. When a need arose, believers would sell their possessions to help the needy person. This practice of having everything in common was likely a response to that specific need. After the incidents of 5:1-11 (Ananias and Sapphira), there is no further mention of

this particular practice of sharing everything, at least to the extent that it was practiced in the first few weeks of the church's life.

Read Acts 2:46-47.

- With these words this chapter comes to a close. Luke pointed out the everyday nature of the church's meetings. Believers were gathering both in the temple (that is, in large groups, possibly for apostolic teaching) and in their homes (to celebrate the Lord's Supper and, presumably, for fellowship, the sharing of needs, and prayer).
- A common misconception about the first Christians (who were Jews) was that they rejected the Jewish religion. These believers saw Jesus' message and resurrection as the fulfillment of everything they knew and believed from the Old Testament. At first the Jewish believers did not separate from the rest of the Jewish community. They still went to the temple and synagogues for worship and instruction in the Scriptures. But their belief in Jesus created great friction with Jews who didn't believe that Jesus was the Messiah. Thus, believing Jews were forced to meet in private homes for communion, prayer, and teaching about Christ. By the end of the first century, many of these Jewish believers were excommunicated from their synagogues.
- We also see here one of the repeated themes of the book of Acts: joy. These believers had glad and sincere hearts, praising God. The early church was marked by joy. Two final statements reveal two significant results of the presence of this regularly meeting, money-sharing, miracle-working, Bible-studying, God-praising group:

- The watching community was favorably impressed (the believers were enjoying the favor of all the people).
 - The watching community was coming to faith (and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved).
- These are two measurable results of any church that is living like the early church. Note, too, that the credit for the salvation of souls is not given to Peter's preaching, the apostles' miracles, or the Spirit's manifestations; it was the Lord who was adding to their number daily.

ACTS

Chapter 3

Commissioned by Christ to preach the gospel to all the earth (**Matthew 28:18-20**), the apostles were empowered to perform miracles such as healing the sick (9:34; 19:11-12; 28:8), liberating the demon possessed (5:16; 8:7), even raising the dead (9:36-42; 20:7-12). These supernatural signs authenticated the message being preached and drew people to Christ. The first eleven verses in Chapter 5 record a miracle. Peter's ensuing sermon explains the point of the miracle, particularly for the Jewish audience who witnessed it.

Read Acts 3:1.

- The Jews observed three times of prayer: morning (9 a.m.), afternoon (3 p.m.), and evening (sunset). At these times devout Jews and Gentiles who believed in God often would go to the temple to pray. Peter and John were going to the temple at 3 p.m. Peter and John were still living, for the most part, as obedient Jews, keeping the appointed times of prayer though they now had a significantly different mission.

Read Acts 3:2-3.

- The apostles were in the habit of going to prayer at the temple at the set times (3:1); likewise, this lame beggar was in the habit of begging there at these times.
- Beggars would often wait in places where they would have the most traffic, such as along the roads near cities, or as here, at the entrance to the temple. The “*Beautiful Gate*” was one of the favored entrances into the temple complex, and many people passed through it on their way to worship. Since giving money to beggars was

considered praiseworthy in the Jewish religion, the lame man wisely had himself placed where he could catch the almsgivers headed both to and from religious gatherings. As Peter and John entered the temple area, the lame man called out to them asking for money.

- Most beggars were disabled in some way and were unable to work for a living. Medical help was not available for their problems and people tended to ignore their obligation to care for the needy (**Leviticus 25:35-37**). Thus, beggars had little hope of escaping their degrading way of life. For this lame man, begging was his only means of support. The man's crippled condition is a picture of the hopeless condition of the sinner (**Romans 5:6; Ephesians 2:12**). The healing that follows is a picture of what Christ, the Great Physician, can do in the face of hopelessness.

Read Acts 3:4-6.

- Peter and John looked straight at the beggar and requested the man's attention. The beggar responded to their request obviously anticipating a handout. What was offered, however, was not what the man was seeking (silver or gold), but rather something far more valuable. Having no money to offer the man, Peter instructed the beggar to walk. Note that the command was not by Peter's authority but rather in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. In the Jewish mind-set, the name of an individual was more than a label; it represented that person's being and carried his or her authority. By using the "*name of Jesus Christ*," this actually meant that Jesus was speaking through Peter. Therefore, to walk "*in the name of Jesus Christ*" meant to walk "by the authority of Jesus Christ." The apostles were doing this healing through the Holy Spirit's power given to them by Christ (**Luke 10:17**).

Read Acts 3:7.

- To encourage the lame man to begin walking, Peter reached out to help him up. The terms that follow here reflect Dr. Luke's medical orientation—*“the man's feet and anklebones,”* which to this point had never been able to support the man, *“were healed and strengthened.”*

Read Acts 3:8.

- It did not take the man long to realize that indeed he was healed. Not only could he stand, but he also immediately tried out his new legs, moving quickly from standing, to walking, to leaping. This healed beggar was aware that the source of his healing was not Peter but God. In the midst of his excitement and this obviously emotional moment, he praised God.

Read Acts 3:9-10.

- The beggar known for his crippled condition walked into the temple area with words of praise for God. There could be no doubt about who he was or what had happened. Nor could there be any doubt about whom the beggar thought should get the credit for the miracle. The people, quite appropriately, were filled with wonder and amazement.

Read Acts 3:11.

- The scene broadened as the beggar was seen clinging to Peter and John. Even more people came running to the place called Solomon's Colonnade, a covered porch that stood just east of the outer court of the temple.

- For the Jewish observers and readers, the sign here was too clear to overlook. Isaiah had written of such a time: *“The lame will leap like a deer, and those who cannot speak will shout and sing!”* (Isaiah 35:6). All this Jewish audience needed was a “witness” to explain the significance to them. Peter, ever the one to take advantage of such a situation, seized the moment to bring a pointed message to an astonished audience.
- Peter and John’s healing of the lame man in the temple courts drew a huge crowd of awed spectators. It prompted the onlookers to want to know how such a miracle was possible. It gave the apostles an open door to declare plainly that Jesus, crucified and resurrected, was the long-awaited Messiah who fulfilled all the predictions of the prophets.
- Peter’s sermon here is similar to the one he preached at Pentecost (2:14-40). He proclaimed the truth, enhanced richly with Old Testament Scripture (3:12-16), and then called for repentance (3:17-26). In this sermon, however, Peter more clearly developed the teaching of the person of Jesus as God’s servant, the holy and righteous one and the author of life. It’s hard to believe this was the same Peter who had three times denied even knowing Jesus. Here he stood before a potentially hostile audience, powerfully proclaiming the name of Christ and pointedly accusing his listeners of their role in Christ’s death.

Read Acts 3:12.

- Peter took advantage of a gathered, attentive crowd, and he addressed them by making it clear that this miracle was not the product of his personal power or godliness. Rather, this miracle had been performed by God himself, for a very explicit purpose.

Read Acts 3:13.

- Peter wanted to make it clear to the Jewish crowd that this miracle was the handiwork of the very God they claimed to follow, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of all our ancestors. The miracle also had purpose: to bring glory to His Son, Jesus.
- Peter told them they were responsible for Jesus' death. The Roman leader Pilate had decided to release Jesus, but the Jews had rejected Pilate's offer and had clamored to have Barabbas, a murderer, released instead (**Luke 23:13-25**). When Peter said, "*Jesus whom you delivered up*," he meant it literally. Jesus' trial and death had occurred right there in Jerusalem only weeks earlier. It wasn't an event of the distant past; most of these people had heard about it, some may have actually participated in the trials or witnessed the Crucifixion. All Jews were there (and thus guilty) through their representative leadership. Remember, the people had pressured Pilate for Jesus' crucifixion and Barabbas's release. In light of that fact, note the number of times in the balance of the sermon Peter used the words "you" or "your." This was a pointed condemnation of those who stood before him: *You* handed him over...*You* rejected...*You* killed...what *you* did to Jesus...Now turn from *your* sins.

Read Acts 3:14.

- Peter called Jesus the "***Holy One and the Just.***" This clearly identified Jesus' equality with God; however, the Jews had rejected him. The horrendous nature of their deed was made all the worse by the contrasting character of the murderer (Barabbas) whose release they had demanded.

Read Acts 3:15.

- Not only had the Jews rejected Jesus, but they had killed him. With a ring of irony, Peter stated that they had killed the prince/author of life, the one who had written the book of life, the Creator (**John 1:1-4; Colossians 1:16**). The term “author” (*archegon*) means the “prince, leader, pioneer, originator,” a champion who is victorious in behalf of those whom he represents. The sense of outrage here is heightened by the use of three strong contrasts in three straight verses: (1) 3:13, the Jews had delivered Jesus to be killed, though Pilate had decided to free Him; (2) 3:14, they had rejected Jesus, and requested the release of a murderer; (3) 3:15, they had killed Jesus, though God raised Him from the dead. The one the Jews had killed was presently alive, raised by God himself! Peter and hundreds of others were witnesses of this (**1 Corinthians 15:5-8**).

Read Acts 3:16.

- Peter referred to the miracle that had gotten everyone’s attention. As before, he took no credit for himself or his companions but, instead, credited Jesus with the healing. The NIV translates the final phrase of this verse as “*this complete healing*,” here it means the thoroughness of the restoration of the man’s crippled legs.

Read Acts 3:17-18.

- The concluding ten verses record Peter’s plea to his audience to make a change. Having begun his message with strong words of condemnation, Peter took a more appeasing tone, calling them *friends* (*adelphoi*—literally, “brothers”). He acknowledged that their actions were

done in ignorance, as were the actions of their rulers (17:30; Ephesians 4:18; 1 Peter 1:14).

- The phrase “*God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer*” probably refers to such prophecies as Psalm 22; Isaiah 50:6; Isaiah 53:1-12. The Jews had not expected a suffering Messiah; instead, they had anticipated a great ruler, a conquering king. When He arrived as a lowly carpenter and then died a criminal’s death, they missed it. But Peter explained that it wasn’t too late. They may have acted in ignorance, but now they could understand that Jesus was exactly what the Messiah had been prophesied to be.

Read Acts 3:19.

- They had rejected, despised, and killed Jesus, but they could still turn from their sins, turn to God, and be cleansed. The phrase “*turn from your sins*” is a Greek term (*metanoeo*) for repentance. It actually means to turn away from a former way of life and toward a new way of life. The term “*blotted out*” (*exaleiphtenai*) is often used in Greek as a figure of speech, meaning to erase something written. In this case the “eraser” was God, and the “writing” was a list of their sins—not just their sins of killing the Author of life, but all their sins (Psalm 103:12; Isaiah 1:18).

Read Acts 3:20-21.

- The “*and be converted*” of 3:19 promises two results: (1) the coming of wonderful times of refreshment, and (2) the return of Jesus your Messiah to you again. The expressions “*times of refreshing*” and “*the time for restitution or restoration*” are unique to the New Testament. The word for “restoration” (*apokatastaseos*)

means to return something to its original state. Peter explained that a national restoration could happen if the Jews would turn from their sin and to God by accepting Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah.

- While debated among the scholars, this “final restoration” likely refers to the Second Coming, the promised coming kingdom of God, the Last Judgment, and the removal of sin from the world.

Read Acts 3:22-23.

- This quote from Moses in **Deuteronomy 18:15** refers to Christ. The Messiah would come with deliverance, just as Moses had. Most Jews thought Joshua was this prophet predicted by Moses. Peter explained that the “*prophet from among your own people*” was Jesus Christ. Jesus had fulfilled this prophecy, for he was their long-awaited Messiah! Moses had warned the people that they should “*listen to everything he [the Messiah]*” would tell them. Those who refused to listen would be cut off from the true people of God—the believers.

Read Acts 3:24.

- The prophet Samuel lived during the transition between the judges and the kings of Israel, and he was the first in a succession of prophets. Samuel had anointed David as king and had spoken clearly of the establishment of David’s kingdom (**Samuel 13:14; 15:28; 16:13; 28:17; 2 Samuel 7:12-16**). Peter wanted his audience to understand that from the inception of the prophetic office down through the whole order of the prophets, all had spoken of these days, which had found their fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

Read Acts 3:25.

- The Jews to whom Peter was speaking were the children of those prophets. God had promised Abraham that he would bless the world through Abraham's descendants, the Jewish race (**Genesis 12:3**), from which the Messiah would come. They were included in the covenant, for God intended the Jewish nation to be a separate and holy nation that would teach the world about God, introduce the Messiah, and then carry out His work in the world. Through them, because of the Messiah coming from them, all families on earth would be blessed. Israel had been given the promise of one who would come from the line of Abraham and sit forever on David's throne.

Read Acts 3:26.

- The phrase, "*to you first*" stands at the start of the sentence; it is placed there for emphasis. The message of salvation came first to the people of Israel, the descendants of Abraham, Moses, Samuel, and the prophets. They, of all people, should have known the prophecies and recognized the Messiah when He came. They were to have been the prime beneficiaries of the blessings of the covenant.
- Notice that the primary objective of the blessing was to turn them back from their sinful ways. Israel had every reason to turn to Jesus—history, heritage, bloodline, centuries of warning from prophetic messengers—but they had not recognized Him.

ACTS

Chapter 4

While Acts is a record of powerful sermons, astounding miracles, and the rapid spread of the Christian church throughout the world, it is also a reminder of spiritual warfare. Whenever believers are impacting their culture, whenever the gospel is preached, wherever the church is growing and making inroads, there is the opposition.

In these verses, the same authorities who had tried and killed, now sought to intimidate and silence His followers.

Read Acts 4:1.

- Evidently a large crowd had gathered at Solomon's Colonnade (3:11) where Peter and John were speaking to the people. This crowd drew the attention of the religious leaders, so they also came to see what was going on. The "chief priests" were mostly Sadducees who were members of a small but powerful Jewish religious sect who believed that the Pentateuch alone (Genesis through Deuteronomy) was God's Word. Because they could find no evidence of resurrection in those writings, they refused to believe in resurrection of the dead. However, Jesus had an answer for them: **Matthew 22:23-33**. The Sadducees were the religious leaders who stressed cooperation with the Roman Empire, and they also rejected the idea of a coming Messiah. The Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the teachers of the law made up the three main Jewish religious leadership "parties."
- The captain of the Temple guard was also a high-ranking Sadducee. He was the leader of the guards who ensured order in and around the temple. The captain was considered second in authority only to the high

priest himself. The temple guard had arrested Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (**Luke 22:52-54**).

Read Acts 4:2.

- Imagine these Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, listening to Peter proclaiming, right there in the temple, the resurrection of the dead. No wonder they were greatly disturbed! “Disturbed” can also be translated “annoyed, irritated, incensed.” Peter and John were refuting one of the Sadducees’ fundamental beliefs and thus threatening their authority as religious teachers. The religious leaders had thought this uprising would be finished with the death of its leader Jesus, so it disturbed them to find Jesus’ followers teaching the people in the temple.

Read Acts 4:3.

- Even though Israel was under Roman rule, the Sadducees had control over the temple grounds. Thus, they were able to arrest Peter and John for no reason other than teaching something that contradicted their beliefs.

Read Acts 4:4.

- The Jewish religious leaders were able to arrest (at least for one night) Christ’s messengers; however, they could not stop the spread of Christ’s message. The miraculous healing of the crippled man in such a visible place, combined with the powerful preaching of the apostles, sent spiritual shock waves through Jerusalem. This brought the total number of believers to about five thousand men, not counting women and children.

Read Acts 4:5.

- The rulers, elders, and teachers of religious law made up the Sanhedrin, or Jewish Council; the same Council that had condemned Jesus to death (**Luke 22:66**). This Council acted as the ruling government of Israel. They handled the local problems and religious questions but functioned under Rome's supervision. For crimes that carried capital punishment, they had to obtain Rome's approval. For instance, the Council had condemned Jesus to death, but it could not carry out the sentence; the Roman leader in the area alone had the authority to order an execution. Thus, the religious leaders had taken Jesus to Pilate, the Roman leader in the Jerusalem area (**Luke 23:1**).
- The Council had seventy members plus the current high priest who presided over the group. The Sadducees held a majority in this ruling group. These were the wealthy, intellectual, and powerful men of Jerusalem. Jesus' followers now stood before this Council, just as He had.

Read Acts 4:6.

- By listing these names, Luke was making the point that opposition to the early church came mostly from the ranks of the Sadducees. In this first trial of the apostles, the powerful Sadducees were well represented. Keep in mind that Annas and Caiaphas had played significant roles in Jesus' trial (**John 18:24, 28**). It did not please them that the man whom they thought they had sacrificed for the good of the nation (**John 11:49-51**) had followers who were just as persistent and who promised to be just as troublesome as He had been.

Read Acts 4:7.

- The Council asked Peter and John by what power or what name they had healed the man (3:6-7). They wanted to know what formula Peter and John had used. The actions and words of Peter and John threatened these religious leaders who, for the most part, were more interested in their reputation and positions than in the glory of God.

Read Acts 4:8-10.

- Jesus had told His disciples, “*On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit speaking through you*” (Matthew 19:18-20). Peter, the rough ex-fisherman, stood before a room of disapproving, scowling faces and empowered with supernatural boldness by the Holy Spirit, he began to speak. Peter demonstrated respect for his opponents by addressing them as rulers and elders of the people; he also attributed the man’s healing to “*the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead.*”
- In a few words and a matter of seconds, Peter deftly turned the tables and put the Council on trial!

Read Acts 4:11.

- Peter quoted a familiar Old Testament passage—**Psalm 118:22**—and invested it with new meaning. Most Jews regarded their nation, Israel, as the stone chosen by God but rejected by the nations. Here Peter, remembering Christ’s own teachings (**Mark 12:10-11; Luke 20:17**), identified Jesus Christ of Nazareth as the chief

cornerstone. The cornerstone was the most important stone in a building, used as the standard to make sure that the other stones of the building were straight and level. Israel's leadership, like the builders looking for an appropriate cornerstone, would toss Jesus aside because He didn't fit their qualifications for a king. They wanted a political king, not a spiritual one. Yet God's plans will not be thwarted. One day the rejected stone will indeed become the chief cornerstone, for Jesus will come as King to inaugurate an unending kingdom. He already had begun a spiritual kingdom as the cornerstone of a brand-new "building," the Christian church (**1 Peter 2:7**).

- Peter made it clear that the "builders" were the Jewish religious leaders and that they had rejected the Messiah (*"rejected by you builders"*).

Read Acts 4:12.

- Peter's argument reached a climax. The resurrected Jesus had healed the crippled man physically. That same Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah, can heal all people spiritually. Peter did not compromise his answer. Salvation does not come from being a descendant of Abraham (**Luke 3:8**) or by following the law of Moses (**John 6:32-33**). The clear gospel teaching is that there is salvation in no one else but Jesus (**John 14:6; 1 Timothy 2:5**). How then are people saved? By believing that Jesus Christ died to pay for our sins and rose again as proof that God accepted His once-for-all payment for sin.

Read Acts 4:13.

- Christ had originally chosen the Twelve so that they *"would be with Him and that He might send them out to preach and to have authority"* (**Mark 3:14-15**). Here that purpose reached fruition. Peter and John,

fishermen by trade, were ordinary men who had had no special training. Yet their testimony before the members of the Council was astonishing. Peter and John were bold, composed, and confident in their defense. As the apostles stood there with the healed cripple, speaking with authority, the members of the Council recognized them as men who had been with Jesus. Their boldness was possible only because they were filled with the Holy Spirit (4:8; 31; 14:3; 18:26; 19:8; 26:26; 28:31).

Read Acts 4:14-15.

- In the same way that the words and works of Jesus had often left the Jewish leaders speechless (**Mark 12:34**), the Council had nothing to say in the face of this supernatural healing and preaching. The Council chamber was cleared so that the leaders could decide on a course of action.
- How Luke knew what went on in this closed discussion has been debated. Possibly a sympathizer among the Council “leaked” the information. Perhaps Gamaliel, a member of the Council, told his student Paul, who later told Luke (5:34; 22:3).

Read Acts 4:16-17.

- The Council was in a quandary. The apostles had performed an undeniable, widely publicized miracle, and the masses were gravitating toward this new sect. How could the religious leaders save face, discourage further teaching and healing in the name of Jesus, and preserve their position as religious leaders? Their solution was to order the apostles not to speak to anyone in Jesus’ name again. They thought that their power and position could silence these men. Unfortunately, they completely ignored the miraculous sign and what it

meant, preferring instead to stop the apostles from doing any more such good deeds. There is a certain irony in the Council's forbidding the apostles to speak in Jesus' name because it was in Jesus' name that the man had been healed.

Read Acts 4:18.

- Because Peter and John had not broken any laws and were enjoying popularity among the people, the Jewish Council's best attempt at damage control was to summon the apostles and attempt to scare them into silence with warnings. They were simply ordered not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. Jewish law specified that at the first instance of wrong or illegal action, the guilty were to be warned and released. The second time they did wrong, they were to be beaten with rods (5:28, 40). With this official order, the Council would have legal grounds to impose more punishment in the future should the apostles choose to disobey.

Read Acts 4:19-20.

- Commanded by Christ to be witnesses (1:8) and utterly convinced of the truth of the gospel, Peter and John announced their rejection of any such ban on speaking in the name of Jesus. Actually, the apostles' response accused the Council of being at odds with the will of God. The apostles asked the Council members to judge for themselves whether they should obey the Council's orders or God's. This principle of submitting to God rather than human authority is a major Christian ethical principle.
- These men had indeed "been with Jesus" (4:13), and He had completely transformed their lives. They had lived with Him; they had witnessed his resurrection; they had

experienced the infilling of the Holy Spirit. And so they said, “*We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.*”

Read Acts 4:21-22.

- Stunned by the courage of Peter and John and fearful of their popularity among the masses, the religious leaders could do nothing more than give further threats and then let them go. One would think that these “religious” leaders would be thrilled that the people were praising God for what had happened. But that was not so. Luke’s parenthetical comment on the man’s age heightens the significance of the miracle; the man had been healed of a forty-year-old condition.
- After being sternly threatened by the same group of men who had orchestrated the crucifixion of Jesus only six weeks earlier, the followers of Jesus gathered and prayed. Their prayers weren’t for an end to persecution or for easy circumstances. Rather, the believers asked God for the boldness necessary to continue proclaiming the good news about Jesus. God gave them what every church needs: a reminder of His power and Holy Spirit (v. 31).

Read Acts 4:23.

- Upon their release, the apostles found the other believers and shared with them the details of their experience with the chief priests and elders who made up the Council.

Read Acts 4:24.

- In the face of this recent persecution, the believers spontaneously joined together in prayer to

acknowledge God's sovereign control of all things (**Psalm 146:6; Isaiah 37:16**). The believers undoubtedly found comfort in remembering that the God they served had made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them; therefore, He will have power over His enemies. Everything in heaven and earth is subject to God and His will.

Read Acts 4:25-26.

- The group's quoted from **Psalm 2**, a messianic hymn written by King David. Psalm 2 describes the rebellion of the nations and the coming of Christ to establish His eternal reign. Chosen and anointed by God, David knew that God would fulfill his promise to bring the Messiah into the world through His bloodline (**2 Samuel 7:16; 1 Chronicles 17:11-12**). This psalm is also mentioned in other places in the New Testament (**13:33; Hebrews 1:5-6; 5:5; Revelation 2:26-27; 12:5; 19:15**) because of its prophetic description of Jesus, the Messiah.
- The believers saw the Jewish leaders' opposition to Jesus as fulfilling this ancient prophecy. What irony that the Jewish rulers themselves took the place of the raging Gentile nations and became the object of the church's mission. Jesus is identified both here and again in 4:27 as the Anointed One—God's Messiah. The raging nations are paralleled with the Gentiles, the peoples with Israel. The kings of the earth compare to Herod, and the rulers are represented by Pontius Pilate, as noted in the following verse.

Read Acts 4:27.

- In fulfillment of the prophecy in Psalm 2, "kings" and "rulers" had gathered against God's Anointed One. Herod was Herod Antipas, appointed by the Romans to

rule over the territory of Galilee. Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor over Judea who had bowed to pressure from the mob of Gentiles and the people of Israel in Jerusalem. All of these had conspired against Jesus, God's anointed

- When Jesus was brought to trial, the Jewish Council had, without concern for justice or their own laws, found a way to sentence Him to death. But they could not carry out capital punishment—the Romans had to do that. So the religious leaders had taken Jesus to Pilate in order to gain the death penalty and have it carried out. At first, Pilate had not wanted to execute Jesus because he could not find any crime that Jesus had committed. After Pilate had heard that Jesus was from Galilee, he had promptly sent Him to be judged by Herod, tetrarch of Galilee, who was in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. Herod, however, had only mocked Jesus and sent Him back to Pilate. By this time, mobs had formed calling for Jesus' death (**Matthew 26:57-27:26; Mark 14:53-15:15; Luke 22:66-23:24; John 18:12-19:16**).

Read Acts 4:28.

- While it seemed that Satan had gotten the upper hand when the Son of God was crucified on the cross, in reality, everything occurred according to God's eternal will and plan. The believers declared that God is the sovereign Lord of all events; He rules history to fulfill His purpose. What His will determines, His power carries out. No army, government, or council can stand in God's way.

Read Acts 4:29-30.

- Common in the Old Testament are prayer requests for God to bring swift and harsh justice on the enemies of

His people: **Psalms 7, 35, 40, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 109, 137, 139, 144.** Here the apostles prayed not for divine vengeance but that God would consider the threats that had been leveled against them by the Jewish leadership. The believers did not pray that God would remove the threats, take away the possibility of persecution, or even protect them. Instead, they prayed that God would enable the believers to continue witnessing with great boldness. They also asked for displays of power to confirm their message. These believers were not afraid to ask God for great power and wonders in order that His name would be glorified.

Read Acts 4:31.

- God's answer of the apostles' prayer was both swift and powerful. When the building shook, the believers realized that God had not only heard their prayer, but He also was pleased with it. The believers were encouraged to go out and preach God's message with boldness (4:29). The final verses of Chapter 4 provide a glimpse into the inner workings of the early church. The first-century Christians enjoyed a sense of closeness and unity. It's one thing to talk of loving others; it's quite another to sell one's valuable possessions and give the proceeds to those less fortunate. Yet that kind of generosity was common in the early church. And that kind of selflessness is the essence of true fellowship.

Read Acts 4:32.

- In summarizing the daily activities of the early church, Luke noted the believers' unselfishness. Surely the church's spiritual unity (all the believers were of one heart and soul) prompted this material generosity. No one was required to contribute to the needs of others;

yet the believers willingly shared everything they had, not holding tightly to possessions, for they felt that what they had was not their own.

- The early church considered itself to be the “righteous remnant” of Israel, spoken of so often in the prophets. Isaiah wrote, “***Once more a remnant of the house of Judah will take root below and bear fruit above. For out of Jerusalem will come a remnant, Almighty will accomplish this (Isaiah 37:31-32 NIV).*** See also **Jeremiah 6:9; 31:7; Micah 7:18.** These Jewish Christians may have desired to follow God’s law as recorded in **Deuteronomy 1:4: “*There should be no poor among you.*”**
- Differences of opinion are inevitable among human personalities, but spiritual unity is essential; without spiritual unity, the church could not survive. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to urge the church in Corinth toward greater unity.
- The early church was able to share possessions and property as a result of the unity brought by the Holy Spirit working in and through the believers’ lives. This way of living is different from communism because the sharing was voluntary, didn’t involve all private property but only as much as was needed, and was not a membership requirement in order to be a part of the church. The spiritual unity and generosity of these early believers attracted others to them. This organizational structure is not a biblical command, but it offers vital principles for us to follow.

Read Acts 4:33.

- Ignoring the threats of the Jewish ruling Council (4:18), the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. As a result, the entire church experienced much “grace” (11:23; 13:43; 14:14, 26; 15:11, 40; 18:27; 20:32). “***Great grace was upon them***

all” refers to God’s favor and blessing which worked among them (6:8), strengthening them to witness. Jesus had told His disciples, “*Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples*” (John 13:35). As the outside world saw the believers’ generosity with one another, their care for the needy, and their powerful witness, they were drawn to the Lord Jesus.

Read Acts 4:34-35.

- So widespread was the generosity of the Jerusalem believers that there was no poverty among them. Lavish gifts from the sale of land or houses were brought to the apostles for distribution to those in need. Such gifts were exceptional expressions of loving concern for those in need. These good times, however, would not last. A famine would eventually result in hunger within the Jerusalem church, and then Christians would become dependent on the gifts of believers in Asia (**Romans 15:2-28; Galatians 2:10**).

Read Acts 4:36-37.

- Barnabas (Joseph) is introduced here as he gave money from the sale of a field to the apostles for the purpose of helping those in need. Barnabas would prove to be a respected and important leader in the early church. He was a Levite by birth (a member of the Jewish tribe that carried out temple duties) but a resident of Cyprus. This may explain why he was a landowner. Levites were forbidden to own land in Israel (**Numbers 18:20-24; Deuteronomy 10:9; 18:1-2**). Barnabas would later travel with Paul on Paul’s first missionary journey (13:4). John Mark (author of the Gospel of Mark) was his cousin. “Barnabas” means *Son of Encouragement*, and it would prove, over and over, to be most appropriate.

ACTS

Chapter 5

Acts 5:1-8:3 tells of internal and external problems facing the early church. Inside, there were dishonesty (5:1-11) and administrative headaches (6:1-7); outside, the church was being pressured by persecution. While church leaders were careful and sensitive in dealing with the internal problems, there was not much they could do to prevent the external pressures. Through it all, the leaders kept their focus on what was most important—spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The church has always attracted people with impure motives: hucksters who want to profit financially from religion, power mongers seeking control, the self-centered who want to be pampered and cared for, and glory seekers who want to be noticed and affirmed for their “holy” acts. Ananias and Sapphira, a married couple in the Jerusalem church, fell into this last category. They concocted a plan whereby they hoped to give a little to God but get credit for a lot. Their scheme was dishonest, and God’s judgment was swift and severe.

Read Acts 5:1-2.

- Chapters 4 and 5 have two examples of sharing. One is Barnabas, the positive example; the second is Ananias and Sapphira, the negative example. At the inception of the church, the practice of selling one’s possession in order to help those in need revealed that some of the believers were selfless and willing to be involved in other’s lives. Keep in mind that not everyone was liquidating their property, nor was there pressure to do so (Mary, John’s mother, still owned her home, 12:12). This was a freewill offering, and it appears to have been practiced only here in the early church.

- Barnabas had been introduced in the previous chapter because he would be a major player in the immediate future of the church and an example of a generous giver. Some believe that the positive response of the church to gifts from folks like Barnabas became a source of envy for Ananias and Sapphira. Desiring that same esteem from others, Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property, and gave some of the money to the apostles for the needy. They could have given any amount of the selling price, but because they apparently desired the esteem that Barnabas had received, they pretended to give all the money they had received for the field. Instead, however, they kept back part of the money. That would have been fine with the leaders. The problem was that they were saying that they gave to the apostles the total selling price. They were selfish hypocrites, boasting in a gift when they deceptively held back a portion for themselves. They were serving themselves, not others. **Proverbs 15:8:** *“The Lord hates the sacrifice of the wicked.”*

Read Acts 5:3-4.

- Given insight by the Holy Spirit, Peter saw through Ananias’s lie. Apparently involved in the new church, Ananias and Sapphira had succumbed to temptation and had lied to Peter about the amount of money they had received from the sale of their property; they had kept some of the money for themselves. The word “kept” is the same one used when Achan *“kept some of the spoils of Jericho, and ultimately caused a great defeat of Israel”* (Joshua 7:1-26).
- Ananias and Sapphira had likely been at the worship service when Barnabas had laid his gift at the apostle’s feet—a great gift, a great moment. The “wow” of the crowd, who probably knew what the gift was worth and

what level of sacrifice it was, had followed. The “buzz” probably followed on the streets, in their small group meetings: “Can you believe Barnabas gave all that away? What a man of God!” Ananias and Sapphira wanted the same reputation.

- In this passage the Holy Spirit is equated with God (one of the great passages in the New Testament on the deity of the Holy Spirit—**Matthew 28:19; 1 Corinthians 6:11; 2 Corinthians 13:13**).

Read Acts 5:5-6.

- When Ananias realized that Peter knew all about his scheme, he fell down and died. The Greek word *ekpsucho* literally means “to breathe one’s last,” and often implies death by divine judgment (5:10; 12:23; **1 John 5:16**).
- Fear would probably grip most anyone who heard of this event! It is important to note that Peter didn’t kill Ananias, nor did he ask the Holy Spirit to kill him. Peter condemned the lying, and the Spirit of God executed judgment. Consider 13:11, where Elymas the sorcerer was struck blind at Paul’s command.

Read Acts 5:7-8.

- Sapphira arrived about three hours later not knowing what had happened to her husband. Peter’s questions to Sapphira expose the fact that she was an accomplice in the deed. Peter gave her the opportunity to tell the truth, but she told the same lie that her husband had told. *“And Peter said, ‘How could the two of you even think of doing a thing like this—conspiring together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Just outside that door are the young men who buried your husband, and they will carry you out, too.’”* To test God is to see how much

one can get away with before God will respond or act according to his Word (**Exodus 17:2; Deuteronomy 6:16; Matthew 4:7; Luke 4:12**). The entire direction of this lie by Ananias and Sapphira was wrong, self-serving, church-destroying, and sinful.

- This is reminiscent of God's words to Samuel regarding outward appearances: "***The Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart***" (1 Samuel 16:7). Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for a similar sin: "***You [...] justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God***" (Luke 16:14). Pleasing God, not people, should be the desire of our heart.
- Ananias and Sapphira had conspired together to mock God and lie. An interesting Scripture to consider is **John 16:8**.

Read Acts 5:10.

- Immediately upon hearing Peter's words, Sapphira fell down at his feet and died. As she and Ananias had been joined in their "testing" of God (5:9), so they were joined in death. This is more than just a historical record of events in the early church.
- While the judgment on Ananias and Sapphira came because of their deceitfulness, their greediness must not be overlooked. Greed corrupts Christians' lives. It can affect families, churches, and ministries of all kinds (**1 Timothy 6:9-11**).
- We do not know the identities of the young men who had the grim duty of carrying the bodies out of the room. If nothing else, this would be a serious lesson for these (and other) future members and leaders of the church.

Read Acts 5:11.

- This is the first appearance of the term “church” (*ekklesia*, meaning “assembly”) in the book of Acts. It will become the regular word for the universal church as well as the local church in the remainder of the book (7:38; 8:1; 9:31; 11:22; 13:1; 14:23; 15:22, 41; 16:5; 20:28).
- God’s judgment on Ananias and Sapphira produced great fear among the believers, prompting them to realize how seriously God regards sin in the church. The repetition of the expression “**great fear**” emphasized the response of the entire church and the surrounding community.
- Even as word spread of the sudden deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, the apostles continued to preach boldly about Jesus even in the temple courts. Large crowds continued to gather; miraculous healings, signs and wonders gave credence to the message. Because of the power of God and the faithfulness of His people, the gospel was spreading, taking root, and bearing fruit in lives.

Read Acts 5:12.

- “***Solomon’s Colonnade [or Porch]***” was part of the temple complex built by King Herod the Great in an attempt to strengthen his relationship with the Jews. A colonnade is an entrance supported by columns. Jesus taught and performed miracles in the temple many times. When the believers met regularly at the Temple, they were undoubtedly in close proximity to the same religious leaders who had conspired to put Jesus to death.
- In answer to the apostles’ prayer, “***Stretch out Your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and***

wonders” (4:30), God granted the apostles power to perform miraculous signs and wonders. The miracles were from God but administered through the hands of the apostles. These healings were not random acts of kindness by a benevolent God, but rather sign-miracles intended to convince Jewish onlookers of the credibility of the Christian message and movement (**1 Corinthians 1:22**).

Read Acts 5:13.

- Although many people highly regarded the apostles and the other believers, few “outsiders” dared join them in the temple or in their faith. According to the Gospel of Luke, the people sided with Jesus until His crucifixion. In Acts, the people (the Jews in Jerusalem) sided with the disciples until the Gentile mission began. The watching community respected these believers (2:47) but likely found God’s direct and obvious work through them to be intimidating. Some may have been afraid to face the same kind of persecution the apostles had just faced (4:17), while others may have feared a fate similar to the one that fell on Ananias and Sapphira. This may simply be a reference to the fact that no more hypocrites or pretenders dared to join the group. Persecution has always had a tendency to separate the curious from the committed, the fakers from the followers, the make-believers from the true believers.

Read Acts 5:14.

- In what seems like a contradiction to 5:13, Luke explained that despite many unbelieving Jews holding back, more than ever believers were added to the Lord—great numbers of both men and women. More believing Jews than ever were coming to faith; the Spirit was

working. The thousands who joined the first day (2:41) were daily joined by others (2:47; 4:4; 6:1, 7; 9:31).

Read Acts 5:15-16.

- The news of miraculous healings, signs, and wonders was beginning to spread beyond Jerusalem, drawing people from the villages around Jerusalem. In the same way that healing had “flowed” from Christ during His ministry on earth (**Mark 5:25-34**), here it was Peter—one of Jesus’ “witnesses”—whose shadow simply had to fall across the sick and those possessed by evil spirits, and those who were sick were healed. These miraculous signs confirmed the validity of the apostles’ witness and connected their work to Christ’s healing ministry (**Luke 4:33-37; 8:26-39**).
- Evil spirits and demons are fallen angels who joined Satan in his rebellion and then became perverted and evil. In every case recorded in Scripture where demons were confronted by the power of God, they lost their power. God never created something He cannot control; He limits what evil spirits can do.
- What did these miraculous healings do for the early church? They attracted people, confirmed the truth of the apostles’ teaching, and demonstrated that the power of the Messiah, who had been crucified and had risen, was now with His followers.

Read Acts 5:17-18.

- The religious leaders did not listen and learn the gospel message that focused on the Messiah; instead, they reacted to the apostles with violent jealousy. Peter and the apostles were already commanding more respect than the religious leaders had ever received. In addition,

the apostles could do the most amazing miracles, a power the high priest and fellow Sadducees lacked.

- The key difference between the religious leaders and the apostles was that the religious leaders demanded respect and reverence for themselves, while the apostles' goal was to bring respect and reverence to God. It was the jealousy of the Sadducees that drove the events of this chapter, the first being that the leaders arrested the apostles and put them in the jail.

Read Acts 5:19-20.

- The jealous religious leaders thought they could silence the apostles by throwing them into jail. But God would not allow His servants to be silenced. In a startling moment, *“an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out.”*
- Angels are spiritual beings created by God to carry out His work on earth. They deliver God's messages (**Luke 1:26**), protect God's people (**Daniel 6:22**), offer encouragement (**Genesis 16:7**), give guidance (**Exodus 14:19**), carry out punishment (**2 Samuel 24:16**), patrol the earth (**Zechariah 1:9-14**), and fight the forces of evil (**2 Kings 6:16-18; Revelation 20:1-2**). There are both good and bad angels (**Revelation 12:7**); bad angels are allied with Satan. Eventually, the main role of angels will be to offer continuous praise to God (**Revelation 7:11-12**).
- The phrase *“angel of the Lord”* (*angelos kuriou*) denotes divine intervention. The angel of the Lord refers to God's presence (8:26; 12:7, 23; **Matthew 1:20, 24; 2:13, 19; 28:2; Luke 1:11; 2:9**). What made this incident even more remarkable was that the Sadducees, who had sent the apostles to jail (5:18) did not believe in angels!

- The angel of the Lord gave the apostles the necessary encouragement to continue in their task despite this latest opposition. The angel's charge to the apostles was to go back to the temple courts and tell the people the full message of this new life.
- The apostles' experience would be repeated later for Peter in 12:6-10 and again for Paul in 16:26-27. God will enter into any dungeon; there is none too dark or deep. He holds the keys to unlock any door; there is none too complicated or confusing for Him.

Read Acts 5:21.

- So the apostles entered the Temple and by faith did exactly as commanded by the angel of the Lord. The temple at daybreak was a busy place. Many people stopped there to pray and worship at sunrise. The apostles were already there, ready to share the good news of new life in Jesus Christ. It would only be a matter of time before their absence at the jail would be noticed and they would have a chance to witness in front of a much more hostile group than the worshipers at the temple.
- When the high priest and his officials arrived, they convened the high Council, along with all the elders of Israel. Then they sent for the apostles to be brought for trial. This "high council" included the entire group of seventy men plus the high priest, the same group that had assembled for Jesus' trial only weeks before. The religious leaders would do anything to stop these apostles from challenging their authority, threatening their secure position, and exposing their hypocritical motives to the people. They had taken care of Jesus (or so they thought), and they would take care of His followers, as well.

- After convening the entire Council, they sent for the apostles to be brought for trial.

Read Acts 5:22-23.

- The prisoners were being called for trial, so the temple guards went to the jail to get them. These “temple guards” were stationed around the temple to ensure order in that very busy place. They were Jewish priests from the tribe of Levi, stern defenders of temple order, who worked for the high priest. However, they returned rather dumbfounded, reporting that the door of the cell was locked, the guards were faithfully standing outside at their posts, but when they opened the cell door, no one was there. So complete was the miracle that no one could deny that God’s power was behind it.

Read Acts 5:24.

- The captain of the temple and the chief priests were perplexed about how these men had escaped from a locked cell. Professional guards do not lose twelve prisoners! The “captain” was a high-ranking official belonging to the Sadducees, second in authority only to the high priest.

Read Acts 5:25-26.

- Picture the scene: the high council is convened and waiting while the temple guards are searching for prisoners who are no longer in custody. In the middle of their deliberations, they receive a report that the escaped prisoners are right back in the temple doing the very thing for which they had been arrested!
- Note that the officers did not use force because they feared that the people would stone them. The

expanding reputation of the church and various events associated with it such as miraculous healings, the death of some members for lying to the church, as well as this miraculous jailbreak certainly made the leaders careful. Jealousy over the apostles popularity with the people had been one of the main motivating factors for their arrest in the first place (5:17-18). Yet that very popularity caused them to be cautious during this arrest. The same concern had been expressed with respect to arresting Jesus (**Matthew 21:46**).

Read Acts 5:27-28.

- The temple was close to the complex where the high priest lived. The apostles went peaceably with the temple guard to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. In Caiaphas' remarks, note that he did not mention the name of the one, in whose authority, the apostles were teaching; instead, he strictly ordered the apostles not to teach in "this name." It's interesting that these leaders did not want to be considered guilty of this man's blood even though they were (**Matthew 27:25**).
- The high priest said, "*this name*" and "*this Man's blood*"—both times refusing even to speak the name of Jesus and, by his avoidance of it, proclaiming it all the louder. These leaders' jealousy, even their hatred of the name of Jesus, was made clearer than ever.
- The angel of the Lord's command to preach the message (5:20) was being fully carried out, for the jealous Sanhedrin actually confirmed that the apostles had filled Jerusalem with their teaching.

Read Acts 5:29.

- These words are almost identical to Peter's words in 4:19-20. The New Testament makes it clear that

believers are to obey governmental authority (**Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17**) but not when the authority requires believers to disobey God. It would have been wrong for these apostles to obey the leaders' mandate not to speak, when they had been clearly commanded by God Himself to speak (5:20). God is the highest authority and rules in the highest court anywhere. Our first loyalty is always to Him.

Read Acts 5:30.

- When Peter, the Galilean fisherman-turned-preacher, spoke to this group of religious leaders, he identified their common heritage with the phrase “*the God of our fathers*.” The God who had parted the Red Sea and had led the Israelites to the Promised Land had also raised Jesus from the dead. These words would have baffled the Sadducee party in the Sanhedrin, for Sadducees did not believe in any type of resurrection. All the leaders must have been angered by the time Peter repeated his accusation, “*you murdered Him by hanging on a tree*.”

Read Acts 5:31.

- Not only had God raised Jesus, He also had exalted Him to His own right hand. “*Right hand*” signified the place of highest honor and authority. In ancient royal courts, the right side of the king's throne was reserved for the person who could act in the king's place. God “exalted” Christ to this position.
- The term “Prince” (*archegon*) means “originator, leader, pioneer”—one who leads the way. Though Jesus was God, He did not demand and cling to His rights as God. He made Himself nothing; He took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form, “*He humbled Himself and became*

obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross” (Philippians 2:8). Jesus is “Savior” because through His death He can offer repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. With these words Peter was offering salvation to the very people who had crucified the Savior. They, along with all of Israel, could find forgiveness through the crucified and risen Christ. Peter mentioned only Israel here, for it was not until later that Peter would understand that Gentiles were to be included in this offer of repentance and forgiveness.

- This is the heart of the gospel, repeated over and over in the book of Acts (2:38; 3:16, 19; 4:12; 8:22; 17:30; 26:20), the “full message” that the apostles were called to proclaim (5:20). Reconciliation with God is impossible without the sacrifice of Christ and the repentance of people. “Repentance” means to change one’s mind. Because of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, taking sin’s penalty upon Himself, people can come to God in repentance and receive forgiveness for their sins.

Read Acts 5:32.

- Standing before the high council, the apostles explained that they had been witnesses to these things of which they spoke. They had seen the risen and exalted Christ as He had been taken into heaven. Peter’s inclusion of the Holy Spirit as part of the witness points back to the Spirit’s coming in power on the day of Pentecost, an event with which the present audience would have been familiar. It also points back to Jesus’ promise in **John 16:7**. Peter wanted them to know that this same Holy Spirit was still at work among those who accept Christ as their Savior and is described by Paul as “***God’s guarantee that He will give us everything He promised and that He has purchased us to be His own people***” (Ephesians 1:14).

Read Acts 5:33-34.

- The high council listened to the apostles' words and became so furious that they wanted to put them to death. Except for one wise voice from an unlikely source, this council surely would have attempted to put to death these followers just as they had put to death their leader. The previous night God had used supernatural means to free the apostles from jail; here He used a less "flashy" but just as miraculous means—a Pharisee defending the church!
- The Pharisees were the other major party in the high council with the Sadducees. The Pharisees were the strict keepers of the law—not only God's law but hundreds of other rules they had added to God's law. They were careful about outward purity, but many had hearts full of impure motives. Jesus confronted the Pharisees often during His ministry on earth. They followed a similar pattern of jealousy and hostility with the apostles as they had with Jesus. Gamaliel was an unexpected ally for the apostles, although he probably did not support their teachings. He was a distinguished member of the council, a teacher of the law, and was honored by the people. He was either the son or grandson of Hillel, the great Hebrew scholar who had been the head of a school for the training of Pharisees. Gamaliel stood up to speak to the assembly, but first he ordered that the apostles be taken from the room so that the situation could be discussed.

Read Acts 5:35-37.

- Gamaliel's point was that revolutions come and revolutions go. It would not be wise to get embroiled in this one too deeply, for if it was like the others, it would disappear of its own accord.

- In both cases, when the leader was killed, his followers disbanded. If this Christ movement were like these others, with Jesus dead and gone (so they thought), His followers would soon disperse and disappear.

Read Acts 5:38-39.

- Gamaliel offered sound advice. With the leader gone, this new movement would fail and fade away on its own if its purpose or activity was of human origin. If, however, this movement truly was from God, it would be unwise to fight against it, because not only would they not be able to stop it, but they would end up fighting against God.
- The concept of “fighting against God” would be frightening for a devout Jew, so Gamaliel’s logic prevailed. Gamaliel spoke these words probably not because he was a church sympathizer nor a secret follower of Christ but rather because he had confidence in the sovereign operation of God in the affairs of people. In typical Pharisaic style, he urged extreme caution in areas of the administration of justice, and his counsel defused the situation. Gamaliel’s speech turned out to be a prophecy unconsciously given, much like Caiaphas’s speech in **John 11:50-52**.
- God used Gamaliel, a Pharisee and respected member of the Jewish community, to help free the apostles. This has always been a strategy of God. He often has used the most unlikely sources to help His people or to get His message across. For Joseph, He used Pharaohs; with Nehemiah, He used Artaxerxes; with Daniel, God used Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, and Darius; for the Jews to return to their homeland, He used Cyrus of Persia. **Proverbs 21:1: “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord; He directs it like a watercourse wherever He pleases.”** The Old Testament records God

using rebels, adulterers, thieves, and even a donkey to get His message across.

Read Acts 5:40.

- The council accepted Gamaliel's advice and decided not to put the apostles to death (5:33). Gamaliel's advice to the council gave the apostles some time to continue their work. The council decided to wait, hoping that this would all fade away harmlessly. They couldn't have been more wrong. An interesting point to ponder: the Apostle Paul had studied under Gamaliel (22:3).
- The council was not going to let the apostles off altogether. After calling the apostles back into the room, the council had them flogged. This was Jewish law (4:18). This was not a simple slap on the wrist. In a flogging, leather thongs made into whips were beaten against the bared upper body of the bound prisoner. This punishment would be given to people judged guilty of crimes: ***"If the guilty man deserves to be beaten, the judge shall make him lie down and have him flogged in his presence with the number of lashes his crime deserves, but he must not give him more than forty lashes. If he is flogged more than that, your brother will be degraded in your eyes"*** (Deuteronomy 25:2-3). Often the Jews would give only thirty-nine lashes to make sure that they did not miscount and give more than forty. The Council was probably careful to observe the correct number of lashes, while ignoring the fact that the men they had flogged had not been judged guilty of any crime. This flogging fulfilled Jesus' words to His followers in **Mark 13:9**: "You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues."
- Once again, the leaders gave the order that the apostles were never again to speak in the name of Jesus (4:18). At least one of Luke's purposes for including this

incident may have been to inform readers of the sad but consistent path the Jewish leadership had taken in the total rejection of Jesus as Messiah.

Read Acts 5:41.

- These apostles had endured tremendous pain, yet they left the council, rejoicing that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name of Jesus Christ; the name that the high priest would not even say (5:28), the name in which they had been forbidden to speak (5:40).
- Notice the attitude of the early church toward difficulty: they were imprisoned, threatened, beaten. Their response was to rejoice because they had been “considered worthy” of disgrace from their association with Christ.

Read Acts 5:42.

- Instead of making the apostles fearful, the suffering they had endured at the hands of the Jewish leaders only made them more courageous. Day after day they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ. These apostles wanted everyone to know that Jesus was the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies; He was the promised Messiah! This was the message prohibited by the Jewish high council. But the threat of prison, beatings, and even death would not deter this group of witnesses from their appointed task. The heat was on, but it was only spreading the fire!

ACTS

Chapter 6

From arrests at the hands of the Jews to the attempted deception within the congregation, the early days of the church seemed difficult. Yet the growth was phenomenal! Chapter 6 returns to an internal problem—some apparent discrepancies in the distribution of goods to the needy widows in the congregation. The result: complaints from those who thought they were being discriminated against and a rising tide of anger. It was a potential disaster. But the Spirit-filled apostles wisely solved the young church's problem.

The rapid growth of the church meant more people. More people meant more programs and larger ministries. More programs meant administrative and logistical problems that threatened to consume all the apostles' time. Rather than neglect prayer and teaching, the apostles called and commissioned a group of men to attend to the pressing needs of the body (**Ephesians 4:11-12**).

Read Acts 6:1.

- The number of believers in Jerusalem made it necessary to organize the sharing of resources. Some people were being overlooked, and some were complaining. The believers who spoke Hebrew were the native Jewish Christians, “locals” who spoke Aramaic. The believers who spoke Greek were the Grecian Jews from other lands who had been converted at Pentecost. There had developed a class distinction between the two groups, similar to racism. Though all were Christians, their backgrounds and outlooks were different.
- The Greek-speaking Christians complained that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food. Widows in general needed help

since property was passed on from father to son, and the son was responsible to care for the mother. She had no wealth of her own. (It should be noted that early in church history, “widows” became a recognized group worthy of help from the church; 9:41; **1 Timothy 5:3-16**).

- The early church took seriously the meeting of both the physical needs (distributing food and supplies) and the spiritual needs (teaching the Word) of the body of believers.

Read Acts 6:2.

- Out of the conflict there arose a meeting. The twelve apostles gathered all the disciples together and made a statement. They noted that it would not be right for them to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. The reason was not that the apostles thought they were “above” waiting on tables; rather, they knew that they had been called to preach and teach the Word of God, and that had to be their priority.

Read Acts 6:3-4.

- To correct the situation, the apostles said that the believers should choose respected Greek-speaking men and put them in charge of the food distribution program. Five requirements were clearly spelled out: the candidates had to be (1) men; (2) believers (“*from among you*”); (3) possessing good reputations, known as men of integrity; (4) solid spiritually (“*full of the Holy Spirit*”); (5) full of wisdom; looking at life from God’s point of view. Seven was the typical number of men used to handle public business in a Jewish town, the official council.

- “**Full**” of the Spirit here in Acts refers to a mature, healthy Christian life. These people had demonstrated that the Spirit was working in them.
- The apostles kept their priorities straight. They realized that both tasks were important: the task of meeting the physical needs of the church body and the task of meeting the spiritual needs of the body. They had to ask themselves the basic question: since we can only do some things, which of these are the most important?

Read Acts 6:5.

- The “**whole multitude**” (meaning all the believers) was pleased with the solution, so seven men were chosen, though how this was done was not recorded. All seven of these names are Greek, which means that the men were probably Hellenistic Jews. This would lay a good foundation for the future spread of the gospel to the Greek world. Nothing more is known about Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, or Nicolas.

Read Acts 6:6.

- Spiritual leadership is to be taken seriously by the church and its leaders. In the early church, those chosen to serve would be commissioned by the apostles. Laying hands on someone, an ancient Jewish practice, was a way to set a person apart for special service (**Numbers 27:23; Deuteronomy 34:9**).
- Were these men the church’s first deacons? They are never called “deacons” but rather “the seven men who had been chosen to distribute food” (21:8). There is no denying, however, that the seven men performed the function of deacons as the office would later be defined. However, by the Apostles “laying on hands”

they were granting authority (13:3; 19:6; **1 Timothy 4:14; 5:2; Hebrews 6:2**).

Read Acts 6:7.

- Here Luke placed one of his common punctuation marks (12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31); a report that the Word of God was spreading in ever-widening circles. Jesus had told the apostles that they were to witness first in Jerusalem (1:8). In a short time, their message had infiltrated the entire city and all levels of society. Even some Jewish priests were being converted—as many as eighteen thousand priests may have been living in Jerusalem at the time.
- The work increased and the Word spread as the Holy Spirit worked in and through the Apostles. They could not have imagined, however, an explosion of the magnitude that lay just ahead in the ministry of the church's first martyr.

Read Acts 6:8.

- Stephen was one of the managers of food distribution in the early church (6:5). The most important prerequisite for any kind of Christian service is be filled with faith and the power of the Holy Spirit. By God's grace, Stephens was a wise servant (6:3), miracle worker (6:8), and evangelist (6:10). His demonstration of great wonders and signs among the people tied his ministry to the work of the apostles and, of course, to Christ. Stephen is the first non-apostle to whom miracles are ascribed, as well as the first non-apostle whose sermon is recorded, in the book of Acts.
- It is unknown how long Stephen's ministry continued before the events of this chapter and the next occurred,

but he obviously had a powerful, visible, and influential ministry.

Read Acts 6:9-10.

- The “***Freedmen***” (*Libertines*) were probably a group of Jewish slaves and children of Jewish slaves who had been freed by Rome and had formed their own synagogue in Jerusalem. Cyrene was in northern Africa, as was Alexandria (in Egypt). Cilicia was Paul’s home province, so he may be one of those mentioned here.
- Besides being a man of high character as well as one who was used of God in doing great works (6:8), Stephen was also a skilled debater. His ministry was mainly to the Hellenistic Jews; the opposition came from that segment. Notice again the combination of Stephen’s wisdom and the empowering work of the Spirit by whom he spoke (6:3-5).
- Jesus had predicted such a capability on the part of those who would follow Him. He said the Spirit would give the words to His representatives in those situations where they were brought before others because of their faith (**Matthew 10:19-20; Luke 21:13-15**). In the words of Gamaliel (5:39), *these men who began to argue* with Stephen were, in fact arguing with God!

Read Acts 6:11-12.

- Some men lied about Stephen, causing him to be arrested and brought before the high council, the Sanhedrin, before whom the apostles had just recently appeared (4:5, 7; 5:26-27). The group falsely accused Stephen of blaspheming Moses, partly because they knew that the Sadducees, who controlled the council,

believed only in Moses' laws. They thought they could make the charge of blasphemy stick with the Sadducees if they could convince them that the accused had been attacking the laws of Moses. The Sadducees, the dominant party in the council, accepted and studied only the writings of Moses (Genesis through Deuteronomy). In their view, to blaspheme Moses was a crime. But Stephen's speech (7:2-53) would prove that accusation false. In that speech Stephen's review of Israel's history is based on Moses' writings.

- The entire council is mentioned here as being against Stephen—the elders and the teachers of religious law (called “scribes”). The crowds were riled up as well.
- Having nothing legally against Stephen, the people from the Synagogue of the Freedmen (6:9) led the charge against him by influencing others to make charges against him of blasphemy first against Moses (a hero of the law keepers), and then against God Himself. These were vague charges, hard to prove, and even harder to refute, but they were quite inflammatory.

Read Acts 6:13-14.

- Stephen, like Jesus, was the victim of a lying conspiracy. When Stephen was brought before the Jewish high council, the accusation against him was the same that the religious leaders had used against Jesus (**Matthew 26:59-61**). As it was with Jesus, this was not a total fabrication, but rather a subtle misrepresentation of Stephen's actual words. It is likely that Stephen had repeated Jesus' words from **Mark 14:58**, when Jesus was speaking of His death and resurrection (**John 2:19-21**)—words that were twisted at Jesus' trial to accuse Him of saying that He

wanted to destroy the temple (**Matthew 26:61**). (Jesus never said that he would destroy the temple; rather, he said that the Jews would destroy His temple—that is, His body.) Or, possibly, Stephen had repeated Jesus’ prophetic words that the temple would indeed be destroyed (**Mark 13:2**).

Read Acts 6:15.

- After the false witnesses had finished twisting Stephen’s teaching, everyone turned to Stephen for his reaction. They found his face shining as bright as an angel’s (**Judges 13:6; Luke 9:28-29**). Stephen’s “glowing face” would certainly call to mind the experience of Moses after being with God (**Exodus 34:29, 35**). The avid followers of Moses among his accusers (especially the Sadducees) would have made the connection.
- Stephen’s glowing face, like Moses’, was likely a literal reflection of God’s glory. Possibly Stephen had been given a glimpse of the vision that would be more evident at the moment of his death (7:55). Whatever it was, the moment was at hand for the first witness of Christ to be martyred for his faith.
- With a Moses-like glow on his face, the books of Moses solidly in his head and heart, the courage of Moses before Pharaoh, and the fullness of the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit of God, Stephen courageously answered his accusers.

ACTS

Chapter 7

This chapter records the first major speech of a non-apostle in the book, as well as the longest speech of anyone in Acts. It also records the first believer to die for his faith. Stephen, one of the seven men chosen to distribute food in the young church, was falsely accused by the Jewish religious leaders of committing blasphemy and inciting rebellion against the temple. Then he was dragged before the Jewish authorities. In his speech to them, he spoke little in his own defense but said a great deal about Israel's historical tendency toward missing what God was doing. Stephen gave a concise review of Jewish history and then abruptly called them "*stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears*" (7:51). Having said that, he accused the council of murdering the long-awaited Messiah (v. 52).

Their response to Stephen was typical of the Jews' response to every prophet throughout their history, down to and including Jesus Himself: violence. This blunt and pointed sermon sent the Jewish leaders into a rage and resulted in the first martyrdom of the church.

Stephen died as his Master had died, asking God to forgive his tormentors. In describing this scene, Luke noted that among those present at Stephen's violent death by stoning was a young man named Saul (7:58), the soon-to-be-convert to Christianity and missionary to the Gentile world.

Stephen didn't really defend himself. Instead, he took the offensive, seizing the opportunity to summarize his teaching about Jesus. Stephen was accusing these religious leaders of failing to obey God's laws—the very laws they prided themselves in following. This was the same accusation that Jesus had leveled against them.

Read Acts 7:1.

- This high priest was probably Caiaphas, the same man who had questioned and condemned Jesus (**John 18:24**) and had just recently interrogated the apostles (4:6-7; 5:26-28). He was high priest from AD 18-36. Annas, often named as the high priest, had been deposed by the Romans, who then had appointed Annas' son-in-law Caiaphas in his place. Because the Jews considered the office of high priest a lifetime position, they still called Annas by that title and gave him respect and authority within the council. Either Annas or Caiaphas gave Stephen a chance to speak in his defense by asking him, "*Are these things so?*" Just as Caiaphas had asked Jesus, "*Aren't you going to answer these charges? What do you have to say for yourself?*" (**Matthew 26:62**)

Read Acts 7:2-3.

- Stephen launched into a speech about Israel's relationship with God. From Old Testament history, he showed that the Jews had constantly rejected God's message and His prophets and that the current Jewish leaders had rejected the Messiah, God's Son.
- Before the Jewish Council, Stephen began his response to the accusations by reviewing the call of the Jewish patriarch Abraham from Mesopotamia.
- His mention of the God of glory refers to the glory of God that appeared on Mount Sinai, in the tabernacle, and later in the temple.
- Stephen's point seems to be that the glory of God came to Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia. These religious leaders were too Jerusalem focused, too temple obsessed. Stephen was saying, if they don't open their eyes, they would miss what God was doing.

It was happening, not in the temple, or in the Holy Place, or Holy of Holies, but rather in the temple courtyard and in the streets of Jerusalem. There the gospel of Jesus Christ was being preached and God's power was working through the apostles.

Read Acts 7:4-5.

- “*The land of the Chaldeans*” is the same as Mesopotamia, mentioned in the previous verse. The first stop on Abraham's journey to the land of Canaan was at Haran, a large city in the upper Euphrates valley.
- Even after settling in the Promised Land, Abraham owned no property. Only very late in his life, when he needed a place to bury Sarah, did he buy purchase any property (Genesis 23). Stephen referred to both the land, of which Abraham owned none, and his promised descendants, none of whom had even been born yet.
- The point so far seems to be that Abraham had to believe the unfulfilled promises of God and He had to look ahead in faith and trust in the God who made the promises.

Read Acts 7:6-7.

- Abraham's faith was tested further when he was told that his descendants would be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. This mention of “four hundred years” is the first of a number of difficulties in this speech concerning historical numbers, sequences, and biblical quotations. For example, see the discrepancies between the numbers in **Genesis 15:13**, the numbers in **Exodus 12:40**, and Paul's reference in **Galatians 3:17** as to the length of time of the Egyptian enslavement.

- The Hebrews did eventually come out of Egypt to worship God in Israel, but God had been with them in Egypt—still revealing himself to them, still guiding them, and still blessing them in many ways. The key was God, His will, and His guidance, not the place where He was leading.

Read Acts 7:8.

- Circumcision was a sign of the covenant made between God, Abraham, and the entire nation of Israel (**Genesis 17:9-13**). Stephen pointed out that God always had kept His side of the agreement, but Israel had failed, again and again, to keep her part. Although the Jews in Stephen's day still circumcised their baby boys, they failed to obey God in other ways. The people's hearts were far from Him.
- Isaac was Abraham's son, born to him in his old age (**Genesis 20-28**). Jacob, in turn, was one of Isaac's twin sons, born with Esau (**Genesis 25-35; 46-49**). These three men formed the foundation of the nation of Israel; God is called "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (**Exodus 3:16**). Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs which refers to Jacob's twelve sons who became the ancestors of each of the twelve tribes of Israel (**Genesis 49**).

Read Acts 7:9a.

- Stephen's speech moved to a brief summary of the life of Joseph. The mention of the patriarchs and their jealousy of Joseph showed that, from the very start, Abraham's descendants were an envious group of folks.
- The word "patriarchs" refers to Joseph's brothers who were jealous of Joseph for a number of reasons. Their

father, Jacob, obviously favored his first son by his beloved wife Rachel (**Genesis 35:24; 37:3**). Joseph alone received a valuable gift from his father, a beautiful robe. Joseph's brothers hated him. They couldn't say a kind word to him (**Genesis 37:4**). In addition, Joseph had dreams that seemed to place him as ruler over the family; so he shared the dreams with his brothers (**Genesis 37:5-11**). When they had opportunity, the jealous brothers sold Joseph as a slave into Egypt. The story is recorded in **Genesis 37:12-36**.

Read Acts 7:9b-10.

- Genesis 39-50 records Joseph's ups and downs in Egypt; yet God was always faithful to him. In the end, God gave him favor before Pharaoh himself. Joseph had shown unusual wisdom in every place that he had served, so that Pharaoh appointed him governor over all of Egypt and put him in charge of all the affairs of the palace. As the following verses demonstrate, Joseph became the savior of his people.
- Notice how often God is mentioned in this Scripture: God was with him; God gave Joseph favor; God gave Joseph unusual wisdom; God was working in an unusual way in an unusual place (outside of Israel). A wise student of history would expect God to intervene again.

Read Acts 7:11-13.

- When a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, the leaders in Egypt were not caught off guard, because Pharaoh had foreseen it in a dream from God, which God had given Joseph the ability to interpret. As a result, Joseph had wisely suggested that during the good years before the famine, extra grain be collected and held so that when the famine years came, there

would be food for everyone (**Genesis 41**). The famine reached all the way to Canaan, bringing great suffering, and *our fathers* (referring to Jacob and his twelve sons) *could not find food*. Word came that there was grain in Egypt (thanks to Joseph's wise planning), so people traveled to Egypt to purchase grain. Jacob sent his sons on their first visit to Egypt to get food, and Joseph recognized them immediately. He did not reveal himself, however, because he wanted to find out if the character of his brothers had improved since that day they sold him as a slave.

- It was on the brothers' second visit that Joseph revealed himself to them, having thoroughly tested them for change in their attitudes. In what is one of the most emotional scenes in all of Scripture (**Genesis 45**), Joseph revealed himself to his brothers. On this second trip, Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family; this opened the door for moving the entire patriarchal clan to Egypt. This was all part of God's sovereign plan to provide for Israel's needs during the famine and to move them to Egypt, as had been predicted (**Genesis 15:13**).

Read Acts 7:14-15.

- After his reunion with his brothers, Joseph sent for his father, Jacob, and all his relatives to come to Egypt. Joseph had not forgotten his faith, his roots, or his beloved father, despite a change of fortune and culture. Stephen said that there were seventy-five persons who made the trek to Egypt.

Read Acts 7:16.

- There is a problem with Stephen's reference to the location of Abraham's tomb. Genesis states that the tomb that Abraham had bought was located in Hebron

(**Genesis 49:29-50:13**). Evidently, “*the bodies that were brought back to Shechem*” refers to Joseph and his family and does not include Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their wives, who were buried in Hebron.

- The section on Abraham now completed, Stephen moved to his longest segment—the life of Moses and the events immediately following.

Read Acts 7:17-19.

- The four hundred years had almost passed, and so the time drew near for God to fulfill His promise to Abraham (**Genesis 15:13-15**). God had told Abraham that after his descendants had been in Egypt for four hundred years, he would “*punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions*” (**Genesis 15:14**).
- The nation of Israel was “born” in Egypt. The number of the people in Egypt greatly increased (from seventy-five to likely over 2 million—**Exodus 12:37**), and they experienced great prosperity until Egyptian dynasties changed and another king, who knew nothing about Joseph, became ruler of Egypt. The reference to throwing out their newborn babies is a reminder of the events of **Exodus 1:15-22**; Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill every male newborn. The slaughter of children by Herod at the birth of Jesus Christ a few short decades earlier should have been fresh in the minds of Stephen’s listeners.

Read Acts 7:20-22.

- During the days when the Hebrew midwives were under orders to kill Hebrew baby boys, Moses was born. God did not choose a convenient time for the child to be born; instead, He chose the worst of times.

During this horrible period in Israel's history, the nation's first real "deliverer" was born. He was a beautiful child in God's eyes. Stephen dealt briefly with the early rearing of the child at home, the rescue by Pharaoh's daughter (by adoption), and the rearing of Moses in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, to the point that he became mighty in both speech and action. The story is told in **Exodus 1-2**.

- Moses was a great leader of the nation of Israel and was the vehicle God used for the salvation of the nation, as well as for bringing the nation to the very edge of entrance into the Promised Land. Though Moses' estimation of himself was quite different from Stephen's statement here (**Exodus 4:10**), history records him as truly a "mighty" man.
- Again Stephen emphasized that God was working in the nation but through some very odd circumstances (adoption by an Egyptian princess) and in a strange location (outside the borders of Israel).

Read Acts 7:23-25.

- Moses' first attempt to lead his people came when he tried to save an Israelite who was being mistreated by an Egyptian. Moses, the prince, came to the defense of his fellow Israelite and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. Apparently, Moses knew his calling and thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them. Unfortunately, they did not.
- This is the first of four direct references to the fact that Israel had totally missed the work of a "redeemer" sent by God (7:27, 35, 39). Such a pattern of behavior was replayed many times in Israel's history and was happening again in the first century, as the Jews did not recognize their Redeemer, Jesus.

Read Acts 7:26-28.

- The incident with the two Israelites who were fighting presents an even more compelling case for the absurdity of Israel's initial rejection of Moses as deliverer. The two fighters questioned Moses as he interceded in their argument, "Who made you ruler and judge over us?" The Jewish Council showed the same belligerence concerning Stephen's speech, in effect saying, "What makes you think this Jesus of Nazareth should be ruler and judge over us?"
- "Listen, Israel!" Stephen was saying, "Your Redeemer has come, but you have misunderstood His motive and His method." The parallels between the nation's rejection of Jesus and its early rejection of Moses should have been another wake-up call but it wasn't.

Read Acts 7:29-30.

- Rejected by his own people and fearing for his life because he had killed an Egyptian, Moses fled the country and lived as a foreigner in the land of Midian (northwest Arabia). For forty long years, he served his father-in-law as a shepherd. Eighty years of his life gone; it seemed that Moses had spent most of his life waiting. But the wait soon would be over. There in the desert, after what must have seemed an eternity, God spoke to him. Stephen reminded his audience of the incredible moment when an angel appeared to Moses in the flame of a burning bush (**Exodus 3-4**). God was working. God was speaking. God was about to deliver His people. There was no temple here, no tabernacle, and they were nowhere near Jerusalem. God had chosen to speak from a bush in the desert!

Read Acts 7:31-32.

- Moses was amazed at the sight. As he approached the burning bush, he heard the Lord's voice. God was speaking on Mount Sinai as He would on so many other occasions, revealing more and more of Himself and His unfolding plan of redemption for His people and, beyond them, the world.
- The mention of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would connect this present revelation to all that had been said and done through the patriarchs. As God had spoken to Abraham in a foreign land, as He had led Jacob and his family to a foreign land, so now in the desert of Midian, God was speaking to Moses, preparing him to lead His people to the next stage of their salvation journey.
- Stephen wanted his audience to remember how amazed Moses was and how unusual were the timing, place, and form of revelation that God used. It was entirely unexpected and without historical precedent in God's dealing with His people. Moses, as one would expect, trembled with fear and evidently hid his face. Moses had stopped to look more closely and had listened to the voice of God. Why hadn't the Jewish religious leaders done the same?

Read Acts 7:33-34.

- The command to remove the sandals from his feet and God's designation of the place as holy ground was significant in Stephen's argument. It reminded his audience that God can speak from wherever He wishes and that any place becomes "holy ground" when God is there. God has worked in the past and will continue to work in the future outside of the boundaries of the Holy Land or any building called holy (such as a sanctuary).

- God reminded Moses that though eighty years had passed in his life and though four hundred years had gone by since Israel went down into Egypt, God had now surely seen the mistreatment of His people and had heard their groaning. So He would intervene at this point in history and rescue them.
- But God would not be doing the rescue alone. He planned to use Moses: “*Come now, I will send you to Egypt*”; surely the last place that Moses wanted to go. God’s method has always been people. He uses people from every walk of life to do His work. Moses would soon be one of them.

Read Acts 7:35.

- This verse summarizes Stephen’s speech and wraps up this review of Moses’ life. The man sent back to Egypt as Israel’s ruler and deliverer was the same Moses whom they had rejected. The sender was God Himself through the angel who appeared in the burning bush and revealed Himself to Moses.
- The word translated “deliverer” or “savior” is the Greek term *lutrotes*. It conveys the idea of redemption and is used only of Moses in the New Testament. In the succeeding verses, Stephen also notes that Moses was a prophet (7:37) and mediator (7:38). Stephen’s point seems to be that even greater than Moses, the lawgiver who “saved” Israel from Egyptian bondage, was Jesus, the grace-giver who offered eternal freedom from the slavery of sin. If Moses was beloved and revered, Jesus should be to an infinitely greater degree.

Read Acts 7:36.

- The miracle of Israel’s deliverance from Egyptian bondage, the saving of the firstborn through the blood spread upon the door frames, the direct leading of God, the destruction of the pursuing armies of Pharaoh, the

feeding by God; all these displays of God's presence and power (many miraculous signs and wonders), as well as God's revelation at Mount Sinai, were monumental miracles in Israel's history. But this was not their only purpose. So much of what God had revealed, so many of the miracles God had performed, and much of what lay behind the intricate system of sacrifices (which He would show Moses), would help God's people recognize the coming Messiah.

- The reminder of the journey “*back and forth through the wilderness for forty years*” was yet another example of Israel ignoring God and rejecting His direction of them. For forty years they wandered through the wilderness, burying the entire older generation (with the exception of Moses, Joshua, and Caleb—**Numbers 14:21-45**). It was Israel's stubborn, Holy Spirit-resisting (7:51) refusal to recognize the leading of God that got them excluded from experiencing His blessing in the land.

Read Acts 7:37-38.

- The Jews originally thought this *prophet* was Joshua. But Moses had been prophesying about the coming Messiah (**Deuteronomy 18:15**). Peter also had quoted this verse as referring to the Messiah (3:22).
- Stephen used the word *church*, *ekklesia* (translated *assembly*), to describe the congregation or people of God *in the desert*. This word means “called out ones” and was used by the first-century Christians to describe their own church community or “assembly.” Stephen's point was that the giving of the law through Moses to the Jews was the sign of the covenant.
- From **Galatians 3:19** and **Hebrews 2:2**, it appears that God may have given the law to Moses through angels. **Exodus 31:18** says God wrote the Ten

Commandments Himself (inscribed by the “finger of God”). Apparently, God used angelic messengers as mediators to deliver His law to Moses, who received those living words to pass to the nation. This message is called “*living words*” or “*life-giving words*.” These words point to life and give life (**Deuteronomy 30:19; 32:47; Romans 7:10**).

Read Acts 7:39.

- Stephen again stated what had become an obvious theme, especially in the life of Moses. The Jewish ancestors of the audience and of the speaker (*our ancestors*) had *rejected Moses*—his message, his leadership, and his claim to be speaking for God. Incredibly, they wanted to return to the slavery and idolatry of Egypt (**Numbers 14:1-4**).

Read Acts 7:40-41.

- The Jews’ ancestors had not only rejected Joseph and Moses, at one crucial point in their history they had also rejected God! While Moses was up on Mount Sinai receiving the Law, the children of Israel got tired of waiting. They forgot about God and decided that because they didn’t know what had happened to Moses, they needed a new leader and a new god. They asked Aaron to construct a god who would go before them because that God who had done all the miracles in Egypt had apparently forgotten them! In one sorry, sinful deed, the children of Israel blatantly, publicly, and corporately defied God. This “invisible” God and “absent” Moses were too much to bear. Stephen highlights this as he pictured them bringing sacrifices to the calf and holding a celebration to honor what their hands had made. The story is told in **Exodus 32**.

Read Acts 7:42-43.

- The Israelites' worship of the golden calf was the beginning of a downward spiral. At times they returned to God, but far more often they were running after the gods of the evil nations surrounding them. The reference to "host of heavenly" refers to Israel's practice of worshiping deities associated with stars and planets (**Jeremiah 8:1-2**). It was a form of godless worship that became more prevalent in the later years of the kingdom.
- This quote from Amos (**Amos 5:25-27**) supports Stephen's accusation that Israel had a history of idol worship. Moloch and Remphan were planetary divinities. Moloch was an Ammonite deity associated with child sacrifice, while Remphan was a god "borrowed" from Egypt. Both became popular options for Israel's idolatry as her history progressed.
- The ancestors of Stephen's audience, the audience who stood in rejection of Jesus Christ, had a history of rejecting not only God's messengers but even of turning from God Himself to their own handmade gods. The cost for their idolatry had been exile beyond Babylon. No one within the sound of Stephen's voice could have any doubt about the historical accuracy of that statement.

Read Acts 7:44.

- Suddenly, the subject switches to this section concerning the tabernacle. Having sufficiently denied the charge against him that he had blasphemed Moses (6:11), Stephen proceeded to address the charge that he had blasphemed God. The tabernacle was a movable worship center used by the Israelites prior to the construction of the temple by Solomon. The detailed

instructions for constructing the tabernacle were spelled out for Moses and the people of Israel (**Exodus 25-31**). The construction plans were shown to Moses by God Himself. This large and mobile tent was suitable for the wilderness wanderings because it could be taken apart and moved from location to location. It was the place where, after the nation left Mount Sinai, Moses would meet with God (**Exodus 29:42; 30:6, 36; Numbers 17:4**).

Read Acts 7:45.

- When the people finally moved into the land of Canaan under Joshua's leadership, the Tabernacle was taken with them and remained with them as they settled the land and had many battles against the Gentile nations. Stephen reminded his audience that God drove the Gentiles out of the Promised Land. This temporary and mobile tabernacle remained with the people until the time of King David, when Jerusalem was made the capital city and David began making plans for a temple.

Read Acts 7:46-47.

- King David found favor with God and asked to build a permanent structure for the God of Jacob. He desired this so much that he wrote about it in a psalm: ***"How he swore to the Lord and vowed to the Mighty One of Jacob, 'I will not enter my house or get into my bed; I will not give sleep to my eyes to slumber to my eyelids, until I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob'"*** (Psalm 132:2-5).
- 2 Samuel 7:1-15 relates God's answer to David's request: ***"When you die, I will raise up one of your descendants, and I will make his kingdom strong. He***

is the one who will build a house; a temple; for my name” (2 Samuel 7:12-13). David’s son Solomon, the next king of Israel, would oversee construction of a glorious temple to God in Jerusalem (**1 Kings 5-8**).

- Only in Christ, however, would this vision of David and promise of God ever be realized. The ultimate “temple” would be the new dwelling place of God—the hearts of men and women.

Read Acts 7:48-50.

- The tabernacle had been God’s home on earth. He had filled it with His glory. Almost five hundred years later, Solomon built the temple, which replaced the tabernacle as the central place of worship. God also filled the temple with His glory (**2 Chronicles 5:13-14**). But when Israel turned from God, His glory and presence departed from the temple, and it was destroyed by invading armies (**2 Kings 25**). The temple was rebuilt in 516 BC, and God’s glory returned in even greater splendor nearly five centuries later when Jesus Christ, God’s Son, entered it and taught. When Jesus was crucified, God’s glory again left the temple. However, God no longer needed a physical building after Jesus rose from the dead. God’s temple now is His church, the body of believers.
- God, the Most High, does not live in temples made by human hands. To support this, Stephen quoted from the prophet Isaiah: *“Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool” (Isaiah 66:1-2a)*. King Solomon, at the dedication ceremony of the new temple, expressed a similar sentiment: *“Will God indeed dwell on earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27).*

- Stephen wanted his audience to be reminded of the truth of Scripture that the temple was just a building. It was an important one, but it did not contain God, nor was it deserving of the “temple-worship” that prevailed among the Jewish religious leadership of the day. They had magnified the temple’s importance far beyond God’s intention and were giving more attention to the building than they were to the God for whose glory it had been constructed.
- As it was with in Jesus’ ministry, the religious leaders were more intent on scrupulously guarding the temple building and their traditions than they were in exhibiting the virtues of justice, mercy, and faithfulness (**Matthew 23:23-24**).
- Interestingly enough, Stephen made this exact point by what he did not say in this verse. He stopped his quotation of **Isaiah 66:1-2** right in the middle of the second verse, leaving off the balance of verse 2, which says, “*But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at My word.*” Surely every member of the scholarly Jewish Council would have known the second half of that verse, probably quoting it in their heads as Stephen was saying it.

Read Acts 7:51.

- Stephen moved to the critical point of his speech. He had responded brilliantly to the accusations against him. All that remained was to drive the point of application home to his audience. If the sermon has a major idea or theme, this verse is it. Stephen accused his hearers of being a product of their parentage—they were just like their fathers. Those who stood before him had not broken the cycle of sin that had been passed down to them.

- “*Stiff-necked*” is the very term God had used of Israel at Mount Sinai (**Exodus 33:3**) and refers to their unbending stubbornness in their unjust and unholy causes and their absolute refusal to turn back to God.
- Stephen’s reference to “*uncircumcised hearts and ears*” illustrated that though his audience had been circumcised in the literal sense and, thus, bore upon their bodies the sign of the Abrahamic covenant, their hearts were untouched, unbroken, and unavailable to the voice of God as spoken by His Holy Spirit. They were resisting the Holy Spirit.

Read Acts 7:52-53.

- Indeed, many of their prophets had been persecuted or killed: Uriah (**Jeremiah 26:20-23**), Jeremiah (**Jeremiah 38:1-6**), Isaiah (tradition says he was killed by King Manasseh—**2 Kings 21:16**), Amos (**Amos 7:10-13**), Zechariah (not the author of the Bible book, but the son of Jehoiada the priest—**2 Chronicles 24:20-22**), and Elijah (**1 Kings 19:1-2**). Jesus had made the same charges against the Jews (**Matthew 23:37; Luke 11:47-48**). Jesus had also told a parable about how the Jews had constantly rejected God’s messages and had persecuted His messengers (**Luke 20:9-19**). See **Hebrews 11:35-38** regarding the killing of the prophets.
- Not only had the Jews killed the prophets who had foretold the coming of the Righteous One (the Messiah), but they had become His betrayers and murderers. It is almost inconceivable—how could they not see their forefathers’ tendency to miss what God was doing right in their midst? The world had yawned while Abraham had packed his belongings and left the civilized world to go to who knows where. The brothers of Joseph (the literal sons of Israel) had

jealously sold their future savior into slavery. The children of Israel had rejected their deliverer, Moses, from the start to the finish of his ministry. How could they be the very ones who had received the law as ordained by angels and yet all along the way had not kept it? God Himself had been rejected by their ancestors' constant forays into idolatry. God's Messiah, the Righteous One, the Savior of the world, was the latest victim of their rebellion, and they were about to kill another—Stephen himself.

Read Acts 7:54.

- These strong and sudden accusations (stronger even than Peter's accusations in 3:13-15) obviously incited the crowd. These final words so enraged his hearers that they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. Their rage could no longer be restrained.

Read Acts 7:55-56.

- In contrast to their rage, Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit, the ultimate source of strength and courage (6:3, 5, 8, 15). The text tells us that as the maddened crowd drew nearer, Stephen kept his gaze steadily upward. In the process, he saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God's right hand.
- This is the first record of the appearance of the resurrected Christ since his ascension in Acts 1. The posture of the Savior is of no small importance. Scripture makes it clear that Christ's normal posture upon completion of His work of redemption was to "sit" at the right hand of the Father:
 - **Psalm 110:1:** *"The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies Your footstool.'"*

- **Mark 14:62:** *“Jesus said, ‘I Am [the Messiah]. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.’”*
- **Colossians 3:1:** *“If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.”*
- **Hebrews 1:3:** *“[Jesus] being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.”*
- **Hebrews 1:13:** *“To which the angels has He ever said, ‘Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies Your footstool’?”*
- **Hebrews 8:1:** *“Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens.”*
- **Hebrews 10:12:** *“But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God.”*
- **Hebrews 12:2:** *“Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising its shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”*
- However, just before his death, Stephen saw Christ standing. **Luke 12:8** records Jesus saying: ***“If anyone acknowledges me publicly here on earth, I, the Son of Man, will openly acknowledge that person in the presence of God’s angels.”*** In this scene, as the church experienced the first (of many) to die for faith in Christ, Luke wanted his readers to know martyrs do not die alone out of the gaze of their Savior. Christ was not only present at the right hand of the Father, but He also was (at least for Stephen) standing to receive His

faithful servant home. There can be no greater or more honorable reception than to have the Son of Man standing at one's entrance into His presence.

- Stephen saw the heavens opened. It's interesting that the heavens opened at the baptism of Jesus (**Luke 3:21-22**) as a sign of affirmation of Jesus' deity. It was accompanied by the voice of God and the descending of the Spirit.
- Stephen's reference to Jesus as the Son of Man is a rare use of that title for Christ outside of the Gospels. Jesus exclusively referred to Himself as the Son of Man (**Luke 9:22; 12:8**). At Jesus' trial before the Jewish Council, Jesus promised the revelation of the Son of Man (**Matthew 26:64**) and then was tried for blasphemy. Luke was making the connection between Stephen and Jesus, which would have reassured those readers who feared persecution for their faith.

Read Acts 7:57-58.

- This pictures a violent mob taking the law into their own hands. The wording of this scene—covering their ears, shouting loudly, rushing together, and dragging Stephen out of the city—leads one to conclude this was a sudden, impassioned, violent (and probably illegal) action.
- With dramatic style Luke gave what would seem to be a passing piece of information about the one who kept the coats while the stoning occurred: a young man named Saul. Saul, of course, is Paul (13:9) who wrote many of the letters in the New Testament. Saul was his Hebrew name; Paul, the Greek equivalent, was used as he began his ministry to the Gentiles.
- Paul hated and persecuted Jesus' followers. This is a great contrast to the Paul about whom Luke would write for most of the rest of the book of Acts—a devoted

follower of Christ and a gifted gospel preacher. Paul was uniquely qualified to talk to the Jews about Jesus because he had once persecuted those who believed in Jesus and understood how the opposition felt. Paul is a great example of how God reaches and changes people.

Read Acts 7:59-60.

- As they were in the process of stoning Stephen, he made two fascinating statements, both reminiscent of Christ's words on the cross. The first, "***Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,***" is similar to Christ's final words in **Luke 23:46** (in some manuscripts). The second is a word of forgiveness: "***Lord, do not hold this sin against them.***" It's interesting to consider that Stephen's face reflected Christ's glory in 6:15, and here he responds as Christ did.
- The final words of this chapter describe one who belongs to Christ—he fell asleep (**1 Corinthians 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15**).

ACTS

Chapter 8

After the martyrdom of Stephen, the Jews stepped up their persecution of the followers of Christ. The man introduced as Saul (8:1) proved to be a major leader in this widespread campaign of intolerance and terror. From a human perspective, this was a dreadful turn of events; from a divine perspective, it produced a far greater good. The Christians who had been comfortable and perhaps a bit too complacent in Jerusalem were now forced by the Spirit to go to the Gentiles, beginning with the persecution that drove them out of Jerusalem. Acts 1:8, going to Judea was the first step. During these times of terrible persecution, the church grew!

This chapter gives us a look at the early stages of ministry by another of the “seven”—Philip (6:5). In contrast to Stephen, Philip lived to old age, evangelizing and pastoring throughout the region (21:8). A comparison of Stephen and Philip provides a beautiful reminder that God uses His servants however and how long He sees fit. Both were solid, spiritual men. Both were effective evangelists. Both were mightily used of God in the spread of the gospel message. Yet Stephen was killed as the church’s first martyr while Philip was left to serve faithfully for decades. This should be an encouragement to all believers to continue working where God has planted us, for as long as He leaves us, and to stop worrying about what He chooses to do with others (**John 21:20-22**). It is His message and His church.

Read Acts 8:1.

- In the final words of Luke’s record of Stephen’s martyrdom, Saul was introduced subtly into the text as a young man in charge of keeping the coats of those

who were stoning Stephen (7:58). The opening verse of this chapter adds the information about Saul's current attitude: he was not there by accident or just passing by. He was there giving approval to Stephen's death—a fact he acknowledged later in his report of the incident (22:20).

- Saul was a native of Tarsus, a city of Cilicia (modern-day south-central Turkey) and may have entered into the controversy with Stephen at the synagogue in Jerusalem where Stephen had been debating (6:9-10). Luke mentioned him only in passing here before recording the details of his conversion in Chapter 9. From Chapter 13 onward, Paul's ministry will be the central focus of the book and the main instrument for the church's outreach to the Gentile world.
- The phrase “*on that day*” or “*at that time*” implies that Stephen's martyrdom caused an immediate increase of persecution against those who followed Christ. The persecution forced the Christians out of Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria, thus fulfilling the second part of Jesus' command (1:8).
- Virtually all the Christians except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. The Greek word for “*scattered*” (*diesparesan*) is related to the Greek word for “seed” and carries the rich picture of God spreading His Word to bear fruit in an ever widening circle from Jerusalem (6:7). Not every Christian left Jerusalem, for a church remained there for the balance of the New Testament era. Leadership of the Christian movement continued from the Jerusalem church for quite some time. Eventually, the major missionary center moved north to Antioch. Paul would regularly return to Jerusalem to report and to bring monetary support to the suffering Jerusalem saints from the Asian and European churches (16:4; 21:1-20).

Read Acts 8:2.

- What a contrast between this verse and the next one! ***“Devout men carried Stephen to his burial and made great lamentation over him,”*** while Saul ***“made havoc of the church.”*** The expression “godly or devout men” was used by Luke for the Jews who had been open to the Christian message at Pentecost (2:5). He had used the adjective “godly” to describe Simeon (**Luke 2:25**) and would use it later for Ananias (22:12).
- Obviously the loss of a person so important, respected, and needed in the church would be a huge blow. Likely, many were forced to rethink their understanding of the sovereign God who had been blessing His church. Meanwhile, an intense Pharisee by the name of Saul began attacking the church.

Read Acts 8:3.

- Evidently spurred on by the Jewish council’s murder of Stephen, Saul zealously went on the attack. Saul passionately tried to protect the Jewish faith (9:1, 13). He later described these activities thoroughly in his testimony before King Agrippa (26:9-11).
- Saul was dragging off both men and women and putting them in prison. Evidently, Saul had been given legal authority to carry out this persecution.

PHILIP PREACHES IN SAMARIA

This is the second step of the Gentile mission in Acts 1:8—***“to Samaria.”*** Philip’s trip into Samaria and his ministry there reveals the marvelous truth that Jesus, the promised Jewish Messiah, was also the King and Savior of Gentiles.

The message of Christ is a worldwide gospel. All nations and languages are invited and included (**Isaiah 56:3; Daniel 7:14**) in the kingdom of God.

Opposition to the gospel from Simon the sorcerer failed to halt Philip. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he performed miraculous signs to validate his message. The underlying truth is clear: nothing can stop God's powerful and eternal plan to fill heaven with worshipers from "***every nation and tribe and people and language***" (**Revelation 7:9**).

Read Acts 8:4.

- The persecution caused the believers who had fled Jerusalem to scatter into other nations. As they went, they were preaching the Good News about Jesus. The gospel message was spreading like wildfire! Satan had attempted to defeat the young church, but all he did was to make a way for the further spread of the gospel.

Read Acts 8:5.

- Israel had been divided into three main regions: Galilee in the north, Samaria in the middle, and Judea in the south. The city of Samaria (in the region of Samaria) had been the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel in the days of the divided kingdom before it was conquered by Sargon of Assyria in 722 BC. During that war, Sargon had taken many captives, leaving only the poorest people in the land and resettling it with foreigners. These foreigners had intermarried with the Jews who were left, and the mixed race became known as Samaritans. The Samaritans were considered half-breeds and religious apostates by the "pure" Jews in the southern kingdom of Judah, and the two groups hated each other. But

Jesus went into Samaria (**John 4**), and He commanded His followers to spread the gospel there (1:8).

- Philip is not the apostle Philip (**John 1:42-44**) but a Greek-speaking Jew; he was one of the seven men who had been chosen to help distribute food in the Jerusalem church (6:5). Philip went directly to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. The Samaritans responded in large numbers.

Read Acts 8:6-8.

- The effectiveness of Philip's ministry is highlighted here as crowds gathered and saw Philip perform miraculous signs. These miracles authenticated the message and the messenger and got the attention of onlookers. Thus, the gathered crowds paid close attention to all he said. Crying with loud voices, evil spirits were cast out of people. The "shrieks" of these spirits revealed their rage at encountering a power greater than their own. (**Mark 9:25-26**)
- Philip's miraculous acts were reminiscent of Jesus' ministry. He also encountered and drove out many demons during His ministry on earth. Demons, or evil spirits, are ruled by their leader Satan. Most scholars believe that they are fallen angels who joined Lucifer in his rebellion against God. Although demons can be powerful, they are not omnipotent or omniscient and cannot be everywhere at all times. Demons are active, but Jesus has authority over them, and He gave this same authority to His followers. Although Satan is allowed to work in the world, God is in complete control. God can drive demons out at any time and end their destructive work in people's lives. Eventually, Satan and his demons will be thrown into the lake of fire, forever ending their evil work in the world (**Revelation 20:10**).

- In addition to freeing people from demon possession, Philip also healed many paralytics and cripples. As a result of the healings and the message he brought, there was great joy in that city. Joy is a recurring theme of the book of Acts and should be an ingredient of any legitimate Christian ministry.

Read Acts 8:9-11.

- The balance of this chapter reports two significant experiences of Philip as he faithfully spread the gospel. The first incident involved a sorcerer named Simon. Evidently, Simon had quite a following in the region and was using his sorcery to draw crowds of his own (he had amazed the people of Samaria for a long time with his magic). Simon's magic was not for entertainment or to trick people. He was a charlatan whose goal was to get rich.
- In the days of the early church, sorcerers and magicians were numerous and influential. They worked wonders, performed healings and exorcisms, and practiced astrology. The "wonders" included magic tricks, but the sorcerers utilized the power of Satan or other evil spirits (**Matthew 24:24; 2 Thessalonians 2:9**). Simon had done so many wonders that some even thought that he was the divine power known as the Great Power (in other words, the Messiah); however, his powers did not come from God (8:18-24). Evidently, Simon's ego played a large part in promoting his popularity, as he boasted that he was someone great.

Read Acts 8:12-13.

- In sharp contrast to Simon and his magic is Philip and the message of Good News concerning the Kingdom of God.

- Both men and women came to believe in Jesus Christ and were baptized. Even the sorcerer himself appeared to believe and was baptized. So now the man who previously had a large and diverse following was following Philip wherever he went, himself being amazed by the great miracles and signs that Philip, in the power of Christ, was performing. The wording of these verses makes it sound as though Simon's belief focused on the miraculous power (which he desired) more than on Christ.
- There is some question about the sincerity of his profession of faith and the genuineness of his conversion. In his conversation with Peter (8:18-24), the description of Simon does not have the sound of one who truly had come to faith.

Read Acts 8:14.

- Peter and John were sent to Samaria as apostolic representatives to find out whether or not the Samaritans were truly becoming believers. The Jewish Christians, even the apostles, were still unsure whether Gentiles (non-Jews) and Samaritans (half-Jews) could receive the Holy Spirit. It wasn't until Peter's experience with Cornelius (Chapter 10) that the apostles became fully convinced that the Holy Spirit was for all people. It was John who had asked Jesus if they should call fire down from heaven to burn up a Samaritan village that refused to welcome them (**Luke 9:51-55**).

Read Acts 8:15-16.

- This was a crucial time for the spread of the gospel and for the growth of the church. Peter and John went to Samaria to help keep this new group of believers from becoming separated from the other Christians.

There was deep-seated hostility between Jews and Samaritans that went back centuries. The Jews looked down on the Samaritans for not being pure Jews; the Samaritans resented the Jews for their arrogance. However, Samaritans were coming to faith in Christ through Philip's preaching, and there could be no denying that they should be included among the believers. So they had been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, but this baptism was not yet connected with the church in Jerusalem.

- When Peter and John saw the Lord working in these people, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. It may seem odd that the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them. Some have interpreted this event to point out that the Samaritans' faith was inadequate or that the filling of the Holy Spirit is a second work of grace after regeneration. But such conclusions are not correct. There is a simpler solution.
- It seems apparent that God chose to have a dramatic filling of His Spirit as a sign at this special moment in history—a "Samaritan Pentecost" paralleling the Pentecost that the Jews had experienced in Chapter 2. Normally, the Holy Spirit enters a person's life at conversion; it is then that the Spirit baptizes, seals, and indwells that person. But this was a special event. The pouring out of the Spirit would happen again with Cornelius and his family (10:44-47), a sign that the uncircumcised Gentiles could receive the gospel.
- With the verification by Peter and John that the Samaritans' faith was genuine, these new believers were incorporated into the church.

Read Acts 8:17.

- These Samaritan believers received the Holy Spirit as the apostles laid hands on them. Receiving the Spirit

would both confirm Philip's evangelistic work among the Samaritans and tie the Samaritan church spiritually to the church in Jerusalem. There have been various theological interpretations of this event. Catholics emphasize the sacrament of confirmation as separate from baptism. Charismatics have used it to justify the doctrine of baptism in the Spirit as a second work of grace. But in the New Testament and specifically in Acts, there doesn't seem to be any pattern for this type of teaching.

- One of the likely reasons for the delay between the water baptism of these folks and the baptism of the Spirit was to keep the Samaritan church united with the Jewish church. Because of the historical conflict between these two groups, it would be crucial to have an apostolic presence for this significant event. The presence of apostles, especially two with such a high profile—Peter and John—would give unquestionable credibility to the Samaritan spiritual movement. These two apostles, through whom the Samaritans first received the Holy Spirit, would confirm to the rest of the Jerusalem church that indeed God was doing the same thing among the Gentiles that He was doing among the Jews.
- The book of Acts records a time of great transition. The old order of things—pre-Messiah, pre-Cross, pre-Resurrection, pre-Pentecost—was being replaced by the new order (the New Testament). Acts reports much of that transition.
- One of the most significant changes in God's relationship to people was the nature of the Spirit's work in the life of a person of faith. Rather than a temporary visitor to individuals, the Spirit became a permanent resident of the community of believers. Some had believed in God but had not heard of Christ or of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Others had been

baptized with John's baptism but had not heard the rest of the story about the one who followed John (for example, Apollos in 18:24-26). Still others (like these Samaritans) had heard of Christ and had been baptized with water but had not yet received the Holy Spirit.

Read Acts 8:18-19.

- Simon was the sorcerer from 8:9-13 who had supposedly believed and been baptized. But he was more interested in miracles than in Christ. So when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he wanted to have that power as well. Simon foolishly believed that Peter and John were in the same business as he had been (sorcery and magic), so he offered them money for the power to give the Holy Spirit through his hands to anyone.

Read Acts 8:20-23.

- Peter's stern answer was a stinging rebuke. Simon's errant thinking had led him to believe that God's gift could be bought. Note the terminology Peter used in rebuking Simon: his heart was not right before God; his behavior was called wickedness; his thinking was called evil; he was said to be full of bitterness; and, in the most sweeping of condemnations, Peter said that Simon was still, despite his supposed conversion, held captive by sin. The implication was that Simon had not genuinely come to Christ ("perish" is a very strong word!); he was still held captive by sin, rather than being freed from it (**John 8:31-32, 36; Galatians 5:1**). He was at least having serious trouble with spiritual perception. We see here God's attitude about the absolutely free nature of grace and salvation.

Read Acts 8:24.

- Simon was apparently terrified. He seemed to respond well to the rebuke, asking Peter to pray to the Lord for him. It is hard to tell whether his outcry was simply a fear of terrible consequences for having insulted these powerful visitors or a genuine change in heart toward God. He is a biblical example of the many that play around the fringe of Christianity; they see religion as useful only for the avoidance of bad consequences rather than the initiation of a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ.

Read Acts 8:25.

- The witnessing work of the apostles, as predicted by Christ, was spreading beyond Jerusalem to Samaria, the second stop on the gospel's march to the world: ***"...Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth"*** (1:8). Likely encouraged by what they had just experienced in Samaria, Peter and John made their way back to Jerusalem testifying and preaching the word of the Lord, the Good News, in many Samaritan villages. As Peter and John continued to learn God's strategy for reaching the world, the rest of the apostles would also be enlightened, and through them, so, would the church back in Jerusalem.

PHILIP AND THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH—8:26-40

This passage is set carefully and strategically after the initial work in Jerusalem and before the conversion of Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles (Chapter 9). This is the third step of expansion to the uttermost parts of the world (1:8). The gospel of Christ was leaving a purely Jewish audience and beginning to be spread to the world. In the

story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, we have a wonderful picture of God’s global love and His surprising plan to get the good news of Christ to those who have never heard. Philip was instructed by God to suddenly leave Samaria to go south into the desert. There he met a prominent official from the court of Candace, queen of Ethiopia. The official, called a “eunuch,” was reading (but not understanding) the writings of the prophet Isaiah.

After the man invited Philip into his carriage, Philip was able to “*tell him the Good News about Jesus*” (8:35). The man embraced the gospel, was baptized into the faith, and returned to Ethiopia rejoicing (and, one can only presume, sharing what he had learned). Meanwhile, Philip was instantly transported more than twenty miles away to the city of Azotus! Obviously, God had also prepared the hearts of people there to respond to the truth.

Read Acts 8:26-28.

- The angel of the Lord appeared at various times in Scripture giving directions to people: an angel spoke to Hagar (**Genesis 16:9**); Abraham (**Genesis 22:11-15**); Moses (**Exodus 3:2**); Balaam (**Numbers 22:22-35**); the nation of Israel (**Judges 2:1, 4**); Gideon (**Judges 6:12, 21-22**); Samson’s parents (**Judges 13:3-21**); Elijah (**1 Kings 19:7; 2 Kings 1:3, 15**); Joseph (**Matthew 1:20; 2:13, 19**); Zechariah (**Luke 1:11**); shepherds (**Luke 2:9**); Peter in jail (**Acts 5:19; 12:7**). In this instance, an angel of the Lord directed Philip to go south. Philip, without one question being asked (or at least recorded by Luke), got up and went. God handled the details, set up the appointment, timed the arrival of the Ethiopian, and told Philip which chariot and what to do. After this encounter Philip would be whisked to his next assignment.

- In the sovereign strategy of God, Philip was sent to the side of the road where he met an Ethiopian eunuch traveling home from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Ethiopia is located in Africa, south of Egypt. The eunuch obviously had a zeal for God because he had traveled such a long distance to worship in Jerusalem. The Jews had contact with Ethiopia (known as Cush) in ancient days (**Psalms 68:31; Jeremiah 38:7**), so this man may have been a Gentile convert to Judaism since he had a copy of Isaiah's prophecy.
- The distance of Ethiopia from Israel underscores the tremendous commitment of this individual to come to Jerusalem to worship. The fact that the official was seated in his chariot and reading the prophet Isaiah are clues to his importance and wealth.

Read Acts 8:29-30.

- The Holy Spirit himself directed Philip at this point to go over and walk along beside the carriage. Again, Philip immediately complied.
- There were plenty of differences between Philip and the eunuch that a less resolute person than Philip may have used as excuses not to engage in conversation. There were racial differences (Greek/Ethiopian), religious differences (Jew/Gentile), vocational differences (evangelist/government worker), socio-economic differences (poor/rich), physical differences (Philip possibly hot and dirty from walking/the Ethiopian likely cool and clean in his chariot). Philip could have backed down because of those differences and because he could have been thought a robber, a beggar, or a fool. But he didn't. Philip went.
- As Philip ran over, he heard the man reading from the prophet Isaiah. After observing for a moment, Philip asked a brilliant question: ***“Do you understand what***

you are reading?” In so doing, Philip exhibited two of the most important characteristics of an effective evangelist: The first is patience. He waited to find out where the man was in his understanding before diving in with the gospel. A second characteristic is the power of observation. Philip looked for an opportunity to engage the man at a meaningful level.

Read Acts 8:31.

- The court official expressed the frustration that every Bible student throughout the ages sensed at times: *“How can I understand this passage unless someone explains it to me?”* This perfect lead-in to the gospel was made even better, considering the passage he was reading. First-century Jews debated the meaning of the “suffering Servant.” They were unsure if it meant Isaiah, the nation of the Jews as a whole, or the Messiah. It took Jesus to reveal the true meaning.

Read Acts 8:32-34.

- As Philip was invited to join the eunuch in the chariot, he discovered which passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: Isaiah 53. There is no better place to be reading in the Old Testament for a picture of Jesus Christ than Isaiah 53. The passage is Isaiah’s prophecy about the great suffering Servant, His rejection, His silence before His accusers, His death with wicked men, the substitutionary nature of His suffering, His burial in a rich man’s grave, and His ultimate resurrection.
- The eunuch asked about the identity of the individual presented in the passage, the one who was silent before the shearer...deprived of justice...His life taken. In an

almost pleading tone, he said, “***Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about?***” What an opening!

Read Acts 8:35.

- Philip began with this same Scripture, added to it many others, and told the eunuch the Good News about Jesus. It is important to note that Philip began where the man was—he listened intently, adapted the message to his audience, and then explained the Good News.
- In this day of the “busy Christian,” perhaps one of the hindrances to the spread of the gospel is our unwillingness to give ourselves to the hard and time-intensive task of listening, adapting, and loving others into a relationship with Christ.

Read Acts 8:36.

- Whatever Philip said to the court official, it is obvious that he came to faith. Evidently included in what Philip had taught was the fact that baptism was the next step in this newfound faith. The official seemed to be exhibiting some of the zealous characteristics of a new believer: “***Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?***” Philip began where the Ethiopian was, but he did not stay there. Philip gave the Ethiopian the rest of the story, maybe the rest of Isaiah 53, including the coming of Christ, His substitutionary death, His resurrection, and His offer of eternal life.

Read Acts 8:37.

- Most of the earlier Greek manuscripts do not include this verse, so it is likely an intrusion into the text. It is a full and complete statement of belief: “...believe with all your heart...believe that Jesus Christ is the Son

of God.” We may assume that the official’s conversion was clearly verbalized to Philip, whether in the above words or not. Otherwise, the baptism never would have taken place.

Read Acts 8:38.

- After commanding the chariot to stop, the official and Philip went down into the water. There Philip baptized him. The witnesses to the baptism included at least Philip and the chariot driver, though a man of such high position may have been traveling with a sizable entourage.
- Commanded by Christ (**Matthew 28:18-20**), water baptism was an outward visible sign of one’s identification with Christ and with the Christian community. This was one of the first acts of new converts in the early church. In submitting to baptism, this official was proclaiming his faith in Christ publicly.

Read Acts 8:39-40.

- Philip was suddenly transported by the Spirit of the Lord to a different city. Azotus is Ashdod, one of the ancient Philistine capitals, about twenty miles north of Gaza. Philip continued his single focus: proclaiming the good news to all the towns. Philip disappears from the Acts story at this point, but ultimately he ended up in Caesarea. The only other mention of Philip is in 21:8-9. Twenty years later, Philip was still at Caesarea with four daughters.
- Nothing more is recorded regarding the newly converted eunuch, other than this wonderful report that he went on his way rejoicing—clear evidence of the Spirit’s work in this new believer’s life (**Galatians 5:22**).

ACTS Chapter 9

SAUL'S CONVERSION-9:1-19a

Acts 1:8 seems to be a concise outline for the entire book. Chapters 1-7 describe the gospel being preached in Jerusalem. Chapter 8 shows believers, under threat of persecution, taking the good news of Jesus to Judea and Samaria. Chapter 9 records a monumental event in the history of the church—the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Saul (later known as Paul) would be God's apostle to the Gentiles (**Galatians 2:8; Ephesians 3:8**). He would lead the church in spreading Christianity "*to the ends of the earth*" (Chapters 10-28).

No one was better suited to the task than Paul: a "real Jew" (**Philippians 3:5; Galatians 1:14**), a native of Tarsus thoroughly acquainted with Greek culture (17:22-31), a citizen of Rome (16:37), and trained in a trade so that he could support himself (18:3) as he traveled and ministered. However, before Christ would use this highly gifted man, He first must transform him. Little did Saul know what lay ahead for him on the road to Damascus!

Read Acts 9:1-2.

- Saul, mentioned as a participant in the stoning of Stephen (7:58; 8:1), was so zealous for his Jewish beliefs that he began a persecution campaign against all who believed in Christ—all who were followers of the Way (**Philippians 3:6**). This name implied "the way of the Lord" or "the way of salvation." Christ had earlier claimed to be "*the way*" (**John 14:6**). This designation is found a number of times in Acts (19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22; 16:17; 18:25-26).

- Why would the Jews in Jerusalem want to persecute Christians as far away as Damascus? There are several possibilities: (1) to seize the Christians who had fled; (2) to prevent the spread of Christianity to other major cities; and (3) to keep the Christians from causing any trouble with Rome.
- The letters requested by Saul would not only introduce him, but they would provide him with the high priest's authorization to seize followers of Christ and to arrest both men and women and bring them back in chains.

Read Acts 9:3.

- Damascus, a key commercial city, was located about 175 miles northeast of Jerusalem in the Roman province of Syria. Several trade routes linked Damascus to other cities throughout the Roman world. Damascus was one of the ten cities known as the Decapolis (**Mark 5:20; 7:31**). Saul suddenly found himself overcome by a brilliant heavenly light. Though the text does not actually state that Saul saw Christ, the fact is implied since seeing the resurrected Lord was a requirement of New Testament apostleship (**1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8**). Also, the testimonies of Ananias (9:17) and Barnabas (9:27) confirm an eyewitness encounter.

Read Acts 9:4-5.

- Not only did Saul witness the brilliant glory of the Lord, but he also heard the voice of Jesus Christ (for the rest of what Jesus said, see 22:8, 10, 17, 21; 26:15-18). Saul thought he was pursuing heretics, but according to the voice, his actions were tantamount to attacking Jesus Himself; ***"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting"*** (**Matthew 25:40, 45**) This is a powerful

statement about the union that exists between Christ and His church.

- As he lay there in the dust, Saul must have been reeling from the realization that Jesus, the crucified founder of this detested sect, had been resurrected by God and exalted in divine glory. Saul was not serving God, as he had thought, but opposing Him!

Read Acts 9:6.

- What a conversion! In an instant, Saul was changed from an enemy of God to His servant. After Paul's first question was answered, "***Who are you, Lord?***" ("***I am Jesus.***") His immediate response was "***What do You want me to do?***"
- According to Paul's own testimony in 26:16-18, Christ gave him, at this moment, a brief preview of his future ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles. Further details would come once he made his way into the city of Damascus.

Read Acts 9:7.

- Those accompanying Saul heard the sound of someone's voice and saw some kind of light (22:9), but they didn't understand the full significance of this encounter. They saw no one, nor had they heard the specific words spoken to Saul (26:14).

Read Acts 9:8-9.

- Saul was temporarily blinded by this revelation (Old Testament accounts of God using blindness, **Genesis 19:11; 2 Kings 6:17-20**), so his companions led him by the hand to Damascus.

- Saul certainly had a lot to think about during those three days. He realized that despite his zeal for God and his recent activity of arresting Christians had been in direct opposition to God. The voice from heaven had told him that in persecuting the Christians, he was persecuting this one named Jesus, who Saul realized because of the heavenly light and glory he had seen, was indeed the Messiah for whom the Jews were still waiting. Saul probably would have begun to think about the many prophecies he had studied in his training as a Pharisee, prophecies that spoke of the coming Messiah. He would have been forced to conclude that Jesus had indeed met the requirements and fulfilled the prophecies. These Christians whom Saul had been chasing believed Jesus had risen from the dead; and Saul had just seen the risen Christ in His glory. Suddenly, all that Saul had believed was being torn down and replaced with a new truth—the very truth that he had been seeking to extinguish. As Saul was thinking about all this, he was also praying (9:11).

Read Acts 9:10.

- As Saul waited for further instruction, the Lord began speaking to Ananias, “***a godly man in his devotion to the law [who] was well thought of by all the Jews of Damascus***” (22:12). Ananias, a Jew, had become a believer in Christ—a disciple who responded to the call of God with the same words of submission uttered by his forefathers Abraham (**Genesis 22:1**), Jacob (**Genesis 31:11**), Moses (**Exodus 3:10**), and Samuel (**1 Samuel 3:10**): “***Here I am, Lord.***”

Read Acts 9:11-12.

- The meeting between Saul and Ananias was divinely arranged. The Lord gave specific instructions to Ananias about where to go and for whom to look; in a

separate vision, he told Saul to expect the arrival of Ananias. Such divine revelation with separate individuals having similar visions would be repeated again in 10:1-23.

- Straight Street was and still is one of the main thoroughfares of Damascus. Ananias was directed to the street and to the house of Judas. God also had led those in Paul's entourage to take him to this particular house.

Read Acts 9:13-14.

- Ananias was understandably shaken by the Lord's command to go and find Saul of Tarsus. Christians wanted to stay far away from Saul. His reputation as an enemy of the church was well documented, and the intent of this particular mission to Damascus was widely known. Ananias knew Saul had been authorized by the leading priests to arrest every believer in Damascus. Fearful of what might happen, Ananias began to protest, "***Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem.***" The ultimate measure of faith is how believers respond to commands that seem illogical (**Exodus 14:16; 1 Kings 17:3-14; 2 Kings 5:10; John 9:1-11**). Despite his protests, however, Ananias was up to the task.

Read Acts 9:15-16.

- Ananias's protest was met with a divine statement that Saul was God's chosen instrument. What irony that the most zealous Jew and most anti-Gentile would be the chosen witness to the Gentiles. The Christian-hater from Tarsus had been handpicked by God to carry the name and message of Christ before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. For the rest of his life, Saul marveled that he would be the recipient

of such mercy and grace, as well as be the appointee for such a noble task. Saul, who had caused horrible suffering for so many Christians, would find that he, too, must suffer. He would find himself witnessing for Christ in front of Gentile audiences, Jewish audiences, and kings, as he suffered severely for his faith.

Read Acts 9:17.

- Ananias's actions fulfilled at least two purposes. First, he functioned almost in a prophetic role, serving as God's confirming mouthpiece in the commissioning of the great apostle: "*The Lord Jesus, who appeared to you [...] has sent me.*" Second, his visit served as a ministry of personal encouragement. Saul must have been encouraged when he heard Ananias greet him as *Brother*. God had told Ananias to go to Saul and lay his hands on him "*so that he might receive his sight*" (9:12). So when Ananias arrived, he told Saul that Jesus had sent him to open his eyes and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Although there is no mention of a special and dramatic filling of the Holy Spirit for Saul (such as occurred for the twelve apostles), his changed life and subsequent accomplishments bear strong witness to the Holy Spirit's presence and power in his life.

Read Acts 9:18-19a.

- Upon conclusion of this experience, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he regained his sight. Saul was baptized, presumably by Ananias, and he ended his three-day fast. Following this encounter, nothing more is known about Ananias. He was used by God to prepare Saul who would evangelize most of the known world and write a significant portion of the New Testament.

SAUL IN DAMASCUS AND JERUSALEM–9:19b-31

The change in Saul was instantaneous. In less than one week, he went from being eager to destroy the Lord's followers (9:1) to preaching about Jesus in the synagogues (9:20). The believers were understandably suspicious, but Saul's powerful and persistent preaching, coupled with efforts by the Jewish leaders to kill him (9:3), finally convinced the apostles that his conversion was genuine. According to **Galatians 1:17-18**, Saul spent three years in Arabia between the time of his conversion (9:3-6) and his journey to Jerusalem (9:26). According to Luke, following Saul's acceptance by the apostles, the church enjoyed another growth spurt and a time of peace.

Read Acts 9:19b-20.

- Saul began his new ministry immediately, for at once he began to preach. As would become his lifelong pattern, Saul went first to the synagogues so that he might preach the truth about Jesus to his Jewish kinsmen. His message, in summary, was that Jesus is the Son of God. Describing Jesus as the "Son of God" spoke of Jesus' intimate and unique relationship with God the Father; it also identified Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah of Israel (**Matthew 26:63; Mark 14:61; Luke 22:67-70**). Saul could do this so soon after his conversion because his experience on the road to Damascus had been unmistakable. Saul knew that Jesus was alive, that Jesus was God's Son, and that Jesus was the Messiah.

Read Acts 9:21.

- The change in Saul caused his hearers to be amazed. They had expected Saul to show up and begin arresting followers of Jesus, for that was how he had made havoc

in Jerusalem among the Christians. They also knew why he had come to Damascus in the first place—to bring Christians back to Jerusalem bound before the chief priests. Yet here was this enemy of Christianity preaching the Christian message! Surely these Jews made this information known to their leaders back in Jerusalem (9:23).

Read Acts 9:22.

- The Jews were baffled (literally, “thrown into confusion, confounded”) by Saul’s powerful preaching. His words were filled with power as he continued proving that Jesus is the Christ. The verb “prove” as used here means “to put together.” Essentially, what Saul was doing was taking Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah and putting them together with the facts of Jesus’ life, thus proving to the Jews living in Damascus that Jesus was the one to whom the Scriptures pointed.

Read Acts 9:23-25.

- Saul’s preaching was gaining such attention that the Jewish leaders decided to kill him. But God had other plans for Saul, and so here protected him. The other believers, too, convinced of Saul’s transformed life, were willing to help him escape the city. They let him down in a large basket through an opening in the city wall so that he could bypass the city gate where his murderers waited for him. In some of the ancient walled cities, houses were built right on the city walls (**Joshua 2:15**). It would not have been too difficult, therefore, for one of the believers who lived in such a house to use a window in his home for Saul’s escape.

- According to **Galatians 1:17-18**, Saul left Damascus and traveled to Arabia, the desert region just southeast of Damascus, where he lived for three years.

Read Acts 9:26.

- After his three-year sojourn in Arabia, Saul arrived in Jerusalem only to find himself in a delicate situation. Word had come from Damascus about Saul's shocking conversion, for the Jewish leaders had already tried to kill him (9:23). But when Saul tried to meet with the believers, they were afraid of him. The Jerusalem church viewed Saul's behavior with suspicion. Where had he been for three years? If Saul had become a follower of Christ, why had he not reported to the apostles in Jerusalem? Clearly, the believers viewed this unexpected turn of events as part of a plot to infiltrate the church and do more harm.

Read Acts 9:27.

- Barnabas, in keeping with his nickname ("Son of Encouragement," 4:36), encouraged Saul by acting as his "sponsor." He vouched for the genuine transformation of Saul's life. **Galatians 1:18-19** explains that Saul stayed in Jerusalem only fifteen days and that he met only with Peter and James (the brother of Jesus). Barnabas told these two apostles about Saul's experience on the Damascus road (how Saul had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him), as well as about his work in Damascus (he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus). These facts seem to have convinced the apostles of the genuineness of their former enemy's conversion.

Read Acts 9:28.

- Satisfied with the character reference supplied by Barnabas, the apostles received Saul into their fellowship. He stayed with them (for fifteen days according to **Galatians 1:18**) and promptly began speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.

Read Acts 9:29-30.

- While in Jerusalem, Saul felt led to witness to the very same audience that had masterminded the stoning of Stephen—some Greek-speaking Jews (6:9-10). As might be expected, he encountered furious opposition. Saul was, in their eyes, a traitor, so they immediately began to devise a way to give him the same treatment they had given Stephen—they plotted to murder him. In these short sentences, we can see two characteristics of Saul, even as a new believer in Christ: he was bold and he stirred up controversy. These would characterize Saul's ministry for the rest of his life. Here we must insert the added details provided by 22:17-21. God reminded Saul of his calling to go to the Gentiles. With the help of the believers, Saul escaped to Caesarea, where he then made his way to his hometown of Tarsus. Saul's departure helped quiet conflicts with the Jews. **Galatians 1:21-24** probably refers to Saul's continued ministry both in Caesarea and Tarsus.

Read Acts 9:31.

- After Saul, the most zealous persecutor, was converted, the church enjoyed a brief time of peace. The following series of verses is one of Luke's familiar summary statements or church progress reports (2:46-47; 4:4, 32; 5:12-14; 6:7; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30-

- 31). After every crisis, the power of God was present and the church grew. The gospel was spreading, and the church was growing in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. It was now time for the message of Christ to be taken to the “*ends of the earth*” (1:8).
- Saul now disappears from the record until Acts 11:25, several years later. In the interim, Paul had some experiences that are not recorded in Acts but are mentioned in **2 Corinthians 11**.

PETER HEALS AENEAS AND RAISES DORCAS–9:32-43

After describing Saul’s astounding conversion, Luke focused again on the ministry of Peter, specifically on the miraculous signs that accompanied his preaching. As a medical doctor (**Colossians 4:14**), Luke recognized that only supernatural power could instantly heal a paralyzed man like Aeneas (9:33-34). Even more amazing was the resurrection of Dorcas, a believer with a long history of doing good deeds for others. Her restoration to physical life caused many in Joppa to believe in Christ.

The final verse of Chapter 9 mentions Peter’s lodging with Simon, a leatherworker, a “tanner.” This is significant because under Jewish law, leatherworkers (people who made leather out of animal hides) were considered “unclean.” Like a trickle of water through a dike, this single sentence foreshadows the great and imminent flood of God’s mercy to the Gentiles.

Read Acts 9:32.

- Peter, the leader of the apostles, was last mentioned in 8:25 returning from Samaria to Jerusalem with John. Capitalizing on the newfound climate of religious tolerance (the result of Saul’s conversion and departure

to Tarsus), Peter began an itinerant ministry throughout Israel. He came to Lydda, a predominantly Gentile community about twenty-five miles west of Jerusalem. Lydda was a fairly large town and commercial center at the intersection of highways connecting Egypt to Syria and Joppa (on the Mediterranean coast) to Jerusalem. When Peter arrived in Lydda, he came to the Lord's people. The gospel likely came to Lydda as a direct result of the mass conversion at Pentecost (Chapter 2) or from those who had fled the Jerusalem persecution (8:1)

Read Acts 9:33-34.

- Nothing more is known about Aeneas other than this fact of his miraculous healing from an eight-year crippling illness. It could be assumed that the word "there" refers to the community of believers, and that one of these believers was this paralytic. The healing was done by Jesus Christ and it was immediate. No longer an invalid, Aeneas would have no further need to sit on his mat. He could get up and take it home.

Read Acts 9:35.

- This miracle was not an end in itself but a confirming sign of the truth of the gospel. The phrase "***all who dwelt at Lydda***" was probably not meant to be taken literally; rather, it was Luke's way of reporting that a vast number of people turned to the Lord and were saved, including not only those in Lydda but in the larger area of Sharon, a coastal plain about ten miles wide and fifty miles long stretching north from Lydda toward Carmel.

Read Acts 9:36-37.

- The important harbor city of Joppa sits 125 feet above sea level, overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. Joppa was the town into which the cedars of Lebanon had been floated to be shipped to Jerusalem and used in the temple construction (**2 Chronicles 2:16; Ezra 3:7**). The prophet Jonah had left the port of Joppa on his ill-fated trip (**Jonah 1:3**).
- It was customary to bury corpses before sundown. The believers had only washed Dorcas' body (without yet giving it the customary anointing); however, and had laid it in an upstairs room, suggesting that they believed that she could be raised. The church had not previously experienced miracles of this nature, though such signs had occurred during the life and ministry of Christ. Perhaps word about the healing of Aeneas had reached Joppa from Lydda because the believers dispatched two men to find and bring Peter (9:38).

Read Acts 9:38-39.

- Joppa was only about ten miles northwest of Lydda. To go and find Peter and bring him back would have taken these two men six to eight hours. Once located and presented with the need in Joppa, Peter got up and went with them. The text indicates the haste with which all this was accomplished. Arriving, Peter was immediately ushered to the room upstairs; there he met a group of mourning widows. Clearly, this woman's death was a major blow to the church in Joppa.

Read Acts 9:40-41.

- This scene bears striking resemblance to Jesus' raising the daughter of Jairus (**Mark 5:35-43**). Peter

had been an eyewitness to that miracle. Like Christ, he first asked them all to leave the room. Then, after getting down on his knees to pray, Peter uttered a command that was almost identical to the one spoken by Jesus. Whereas Jesus had said in Aramaic, “*Talitha, cumi*” (translation: “Little girl, arise!”), Peter said, “*Tabitha, cumi*” (“Tabitha, arise!”); a difference of only one letter.

- Tabitha (Dorcas was her name in Greek) opened her eyes and sat up. Only then did Peter touch the woman (probably in keeping with the Jewish ceremonial laws against touching corpses—**Leviticus 21:1; Numbers 5:2; 9:6-10; 19:11**), helping her to her feet. Then he presented this back-from-the-dead saint to her overjoyed friends.

Read Acts 9:42-43.

- As a result of this startling miracle, many citizens of Joppa believed in the Lord. Peter stayed a long time in Joppa at the home of Simon, probably in order to teach the people more thoroughly the full implications of the gospel. Perhaps Peter recognized the truth that a faith built solely on miraculous experiences tends to be rather shaky.
- It is significant that Peter stayed with a man who was, by vocation, a leatherworker (also translated “tanner”). A leatherworker made animal hides into leather. Hence, this occupation involved contact with dead animals, and Jewish law considered it an “unclean” job. Peter was already beginning to break down his prejudice against people who were not of his kind and customs that did not adhere to Jewish religious traditions. This would set the stage for what is reported in the next chapter.

ACTS

Chapter 10

CORNELIUS CALLS FOR PETER—10:1-8

In his earthly ministry, Jesus had said that the Spirit of God was like a wind blowing unpredictably through human lives (**John 3:8**), convicting individuals of their sin and drawing them to Himself (**John 16:8, 13**). In the history of the early church recorded in the first nine chapters of Acts, this saving work of God's Spirit was mostly confined to the Jews. Suddenly Acts 10 describes the Spirit's sovereign activity in a Gentile army officer stationed on the Mediterranean coast.

An angel of the Lord visited the Roman officer Cornelius in a vision. He told Cornelius to summon Peter the apostle. This is a turning point in the history of the church. The one true God—the God of the Hebrews—was about to unveil His eternal plan, hidden through the ages: ***“There is no longer Jew or Gentile...you are all Christians...one in Christ Jesus”*** (**Galatians 3:28**).

The book of Acts continues with its steady, singular message: God is directing the expansion of His church, founded on the crucified and resurrected Christ. The conversion of Cornelius, the first Gentile convert recorded in Acts, portrays a significant step in the process of expansion.

Read Acts 10:1.

- This Caesarea, sometimes called Palestinian Caesarea, was located on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, thirty-two miles north of Joppa. The largest and most important port city on the Mediterranean in Palestine, Caesarea was the capital of the Roman province of

Judea. This was the first city to have Gentile Christians and a non-Jewish church.

- This Roman army officer was a “centurion,” a commander of one hundred soldiers. A centurion was similar to a noncommissioned officer in the military today. The Italian Regiment could have included up to six hundred soldiers.
- Because of frequent outbreaks of violence, Roman soldiers had to be stationed to keep peace throughout Israel. But most Romans, hated as conquerors, did not get along well in the nation. As an army officer, Cornelius was in a difficult position. He represented Rome but he lived in Caesarea. During Cornelius’s years in Israel, he had been conquered by the God of Israel. With a reputation as a godly man, Cornelius was respected by the Jews (10:2).

Read Acts 10:2.

- Four significant aspects of Cornelius’s character are noted: (1) He was devout; (2) he was God-fearing; (3) he was a generous giver; and (4) he was consistent in prayer.
- Cornelius’s sincere search for God is evident in this description of him. The word “devout” (*eusebes*) is used only here and in 10:7 to describe one of his soldiers. The term “God-fearing” is a technical term for a Gentile who attended the synagogue and followed the Jewish laws but had not been circumcised. This is different from a “proselyte,” who was more thoroughly committed to Judaism and, thus, often harder to reach for Christ.
- The reference to Cornelius’s being devout is supported by his activity of giving to those in need and praying regularly. Cornelius’s faith had hands; he was

regularly involved in activities that displayed his interest in serving others.

Read Acts 10:3.

- The time, about three o'clock, was likely one of Cornelius's regular times of prayer. This was one of the hours of prayer at the temple. Cornelius may have prayed faithfully for many years, but on this particular day an angel of God came to speak to him. Later, Cornelius would describe this angel as "a man in dazzling clothes."

Read Acts 10:4.

- Even this veteran soldier showed fear before the angel of the Lord. God saw Cornelius's sincere faith. His prayers and generous giving had been a memorial offering before God, a sacrificial offering to the Lord. The "memorial offering" conveys that Cornelius's faithful prayers had been noticed by God (**Leviticus 2:2; Philippians 4:18**).
- Luke had already mentioned the habit of Cornelius to care for those in need (10:2), and the angelic messenger did so as well. Believers must never forget God's love for the poor (**James 2:5**) and the importance of caring for them (**Exodus 22:22-27; Leviticus 25:35-37; Proverbs 14:31; Luke 6:21; Galatians 2:10; 1 Timothy 5:3-5**). Jesus could not have been more clear on the importance of the subject (**Matthew 25:44-45**).
- The angel painted Cornelius's actions as offerings to God. That is a beautiful picture of what our properly motivated acts of faith are—they ascend to God like the smoke of a sacrifice. This is the language of the Levitical sacrifice (**Leviticus 2:2**), commonly applied

to our prayers and good deeds done in Christ's name
(**Philippians 4:18; Hebrews 13:15-16**).

Read Acts 10:5-6.

- God told Cornelius to send for a man named Simon Peter because Peter would give him more knowledge about the God he was already desiring to please. Cornelius was directed to send messengers to Joppa (thirty-two miles south of Caesarea) to find Peter, who was still staying with Simon, a leatherworker (9:43). Cornelius was instructed to invite Peter to come and visit.

Read Acts 10:7-8.

- Cornelius responded without delay (reminiscent of the centurion in Jesus' dealings in **Luke 7:8**) because he understood the nature of giving and receiving orders. He obeyed the message of the angel and sent his most trusted aides to get Peter—two household servants and a devout soldier, the latter of whom is described as one of his personal attendants.

PETER VISITS CORNELIUS—10:9-33

Even as Cornelius's messengers were on their way to get Peter, the apostle was having a divine vision of his own. In this vision, three times Peter was commanded to kill and eat a number of unclean animals. Of Jewish descent, Peter was both horrified and confused by this strange dream.

The meaning of the vision slowly became clear, however, when the messengers arrived and told their story (10:17-23). Peter recognized God working in and through all

these unusual events. Freed from his Jewish prejudices (10:28), Peter accompanied the men back to Caesarea.

Read Acts 10:9-10.

- Like Cornelius, Peter prayed daily. Morning and evening were the common times to pray, and evidently Peter made it a habit to pray in the middle of the day as well (**Nehemiah 1:4-11; Psalm 55:17; Daniel 6:10**). This significant opening of the door to the Gentiles was God-directed, but note that the two men (Cornelius and Peter) were devout, God-dependent men of prayer. It is no coincidence that Peter and Cornelius were both found praying when God revealed more of Himself to them.
- Peter went up on the roof to pray. Houses in Bible times usually had flat roofs accessed by an outside staircase. The roof would have given Peter privacy. As he prayed, he became hungry and evidently fell into a trance while he was waiting for lunch to be prepared. During this trance God spoke to him.

Read Acts 10:11-13.

- Peter saw something like a sheet being let down to earth from heaven. The voice, obviously that of someone in authority (probably God Himself), told Peter that he was free to “*rise up...kill and eat*” the animals, including reptiles and birds. According to Jewish law, these particular foods were forbidden (**Leviticus 11**). These food laws made it difficult for Jews to eat with Gentiles without risking defilement. The point of this vision was that God was working outside and beyond Israel, and if Peter was to be a part of what God was doing, he must understand that nothing was unclean.

Read Acts 10:14.

- Always ready to voice his opinion, Peter expressed directly to the Lord the courage of his conviction not to eat anything impure or unclean. Once again, Peter was questioning God about something with which he disagreed (**Matthew 16:23; John 13:8; 21:20-21**). It is unclear whether the sheet included both clean and unclean animals or just unclean. Whatever the case, Peter would not “rise up, kill, and eat” because these animals had been prohibited by God’s law (**Leviticus 11**). Peter had never eaten of such food and was not about to start.

Read Acts 10:15-16.

- This educating of Peter, as with the educating of most believers, took a little repetition. God was revealing something that would be startling to Peter’s Jewish mind; God was basically nullifying the Jewish dietary laws and, by analogy, God was preparing Peter to meet an unclean Gentile. This, in essence, was what Jesus had taught (**Mark 7:14-23; 1 Timothy 4:4**). The repetition of this truth three times is a testimony in part to the seriousness of the message and possibly to Peter’s difficulty in recognizing this as God’s genuine revelation to him. The repetition was meant to drive home the message about reaching “unclean” people groups. Some link this with Peter’s threefold denial of Christ (**John 18:17, 25-27**) and his threefold restoration by Christ (**John 21:15-17**).

Read Acts 10:17-18.

- Peter was very perplexed, and his confusion is understandable. For centuries the dietary restrictions

had been in place for devout Jews. As Peter reflected over what the vision could mean, his God-sent visitors arrived to provide an opportunity for Peter to apply what the voice from heaven had said. God's timing is always impeccable, and His sovereign hand over the spread of the gospel is an ever present part of Luke's record.

Read Acts 10:19-20.

- Peter's perplexity was set aside as the Spirit spoke to him. In order to help Peter get the point of this difficult new arrangement, God told him to get up and go downstairs. There he would meet the men whom God had sent ("***I have sent them***"). These men would take Peter to see the real meaning behind the vision of the sheet and the animals. In this event, an angel of God spoke to Cornelius, a voice from heaven spoke to Peter, and here the Holy Spirit spoke directly to Peter.

Read Acts 10:21-22.

- Peter was greeted by three men at the door (10:19-20) who introduced the one they represented (Cornelius) as a righteous and God-fearing man and added that he was respected by all the Jewish people. Cornelius's godly character had obviously built him a good reputation. Peter was informed of the heavenly message that Cornelius had received, and he recognized it as being somehow related to his own.
- The openness of Cornelius to whatever Peter would have to say was a beautiful foreshadowing of the coming Gentile openness to the message of the Cross.

Read Acts 10:23-24.

- Peter had been staying at the house of Simon the leatherworker. Peter continued to remove barriers: not only was he staying in a place that his prejudices would have previously prohibited, but he also went a further step by inviting Gentiles into that home to be his guests. This kind of fellowship would have been unacceptable to a strict Jew. A sheet had been let down from heaven, and Peter's eyes were being opened.
- Peter was wise to take with him some of the brothers from Joppa (six believers, according to 11:12). Some things, particularly changes as radical as Peter suspected were on the horizon, were better observed firsthand rather than explained secondhand. Possibly Peter knew it was easier for him to accept this new Gentile openness to the gospel because he had been present at the "Samaritan Pentecost" (8:15-17). If God were truly doing something new, it would be best that other believers could see it as well.
- The eagerness and expectation of Cornelius was obvious because he called together his relatives and close friends, possibly many, considering Cornelius's reputation for kindness and piety. Note, too, his confidence that Peter would come.

Read Acts 10:25-27.

- The reaction of Cornelius to Peter's arrival was that of one who felt he was in the presence of a messenger of God. The text says he "***fell down at [Peter's] feet and worshiped him.***" Peter ordered Cornelius to stand. In the Jewish faith, worship given to a human being would be blasphemy.

- Peter's statement, "*I myself am also a man*" was profound. Certainly these words would be spread throughout the Gentile world that the great apostle had equated himself with a Roman centurion.
- Evidently the two men were outside the house and alone; they talked together awhile before going inside where the others were assembled. Again, Peter's prejudices had to be put aside in order for him to enter this Gentile home to fellowship with those gathered there. Word would spread. Tongues would wag, and they did (11:2-3). But God was behind this opportunity and Peter apparently knew it.

Read Acts 10:28-29.

- Peter acknowledged his breaking of Jewish laws to enter this Gentile home, but he continued and gave the gathered audience the benefit of God's vision of the sheet from heaven. Peter had gotten the message. The vision was not primarily about food; the dietary issues were secondary to the human ones. (The Jews were not prohibited from fellowshiping with Gentiles, but the gentile dietary practices made them "ceremonially" risky to associate with.) The vision was from God and was about people, specifically those people whom the Jews considered "unclean." Without reserve, Peter stated God had shown him that he should never think of anyone as impure.

Read Acts 10:30.

- Cornelius recounted his experience for the sake of Peter and his gathered guests. Luke recorded it as it was an important vision, and in each retelling, more details were added or emphasized. This will be repeated again by Peter in the next chapter (11:4-14).

Here Cornelius added to his description of the angelic messenger, saying that he had been wearing dazzling clothes.

Read Acts 10:31-32.

- Cornelius recounted to Peter what the angel had told him to do. Surely the specifics given to Cornelius about Peter's whereabouts showed how God was behind this meeting.

Read Acts 10:33.

- Cornelius commended Peter for being kind enough to come. He then stated the obvious and important fact that those present (all of us) were in the presence of God and that their sole purpose was to listen to all that the Lord had commanded Peter to say. Cornelius had complete confidence God was about to speak to them through Peter, and on behalf of all those gathered there, he expressed eagerness to hear what God had to say. If ever there was a teachable audience, it was this group.

**THE GENTILES HEAR
THE GOOD NEWS—10:34-43**

Having been sovereignly (even miraculously) guided to the home of Cornelius and having been impressed by the truth that God doesn't show partiality (10:34), Peter took the keys of the kingdom of heaven given him by Christ (**Matthew 16:19**) and opened the door of salvation to the Gentiles.

Peter's message was simple and brief: Christ lived, died, and rose again, and "***everyone who believes in Him will have their sins forgiven through His name***" (10:43).

Read Acts 10:34-35.

- Peter's words marked a great change in the life of the church; the door of the gospel was swinging wide open to the Gentiles. Look at Peter's wording: *no partiality, every nation, anyone*. These terms express Peter's clear understanding of the universal application of Christ's work on the cross and the subsequent universal offer of the gospel. For more on God's acceptance of all kinds of people, see **Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 3:25; James 2:1, 9; 1 Peter 1:17**. Because God doesn't discriminate on the basis of race, economics, or sex, neither should we believers.

Read Acts 10:36.

- Assuming that his audience had already heard much of the information about the coming of Christ and the birth of the church, Peter proceeded to tell the story of Christ's life and death in detail. This is a beautiful summary of the teaching of the apostles, and it perfectly parallels the Gospel of Mark. This verse expresses the clear purpose of the gospel—to provide an opportunity for people to experience peace with God. The means by which that happens is through Jesus Christ, to whom Peter refers to as "***Lord of all***."

Read Acts 10:37-38.

- Peter started where Mark's Gospel does—with the baptism that John preached. He moved on to mention

Christ's ministry from Galilee and throughout Judea, including the good works and miracles Jesus had done. Peter's audience would likely have been familiar with most of these events. The miracles and the healings were a demonstration of Jesus' power, as well as the fact that God was with Him and in fact had anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and power (**Isaiah 61:1-3; Luke 4:16-21**). The anointing of which Peter was speaking had occurred at Jesus' baptism, when the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, had descended upon Him (**Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22**).

Read Acts 10:39-41.

- Peter stated that he and others had been witnesses to the ministry of Jesus, including His crucifixion and His resurrection. They had been chosen by God as witnesses in that Christ had appeared to them (Peter, the apostles, and hundreds of others—**1 Corinthians 15:5-7**) and even ate and drank with them after His resurrection. Peter acknowledged there was no general appearance of Christ to the public but rather to those who had been chosen by God. In no way should that diminish the magnitude of the miracle or the credibility of the testimony of the witnesses. The fact that they had eaten and had drunk with Him should squelch any rumor that Jesus had appeared in some “phantom” form.
- This was solid, decisive proof of Christ's resurrection and was confirmed by one who had been there, had seen it, and had participated fully in it.

Read Acts 10:42.

- Christ came to judge (**2 Timothy 4:1; 1 Peter 4:5**). The command of the resurrected Christ was for these

witnesses to preach to the people and to testify that Christ was the appointed judge of the living and the dead. He is the one before whom ultimately all people (Jew and Gentile alike) will stand and give account.

Read Acts 10:43.

- Christ came to forgive sin. In contrast to the preceding verse, Peter turned to the prophets' testimony for the opposite side of judgment—salvation. Jesus Christ was the long-awaited Savior who would offer forgiveness of sins to everyone who believes in Him (**John 3:16**). Two examples of prophets testifying about Jesus and His forgiveness of sins are Isaiah (**Isaiah 52:13-53:12**) and Ezekiel (**Ezekiel 36:25-26**).
- Note again that Peter made it clear this message is for everyone, not just the Jews. Everyone sins. Everyone needs salvation. Everyone needs forgiveness; man's part is to believe.

THE GENTILES RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT—10:44-48

To confirm the Gentiles' acceptance by God and their full inclusion in His kingdom as heirs of grace, Luke recorded these new converts' experience of the Holy Spirit. Exactly as had happened with the Jewish believers at Pentecost (Chapter 2), these Gentile converts began speaking in unlearned foreign languages. The Jewish believers who had accompanied Peter from Joppa (10:23) were amazed (10:45). But there could be no doubt about what they had just witnessed.

Read Acts 10:44.

- Peter's sermon was interrupted by the Holy Spirit who fell upon all who had heard the message. Luke recorded the original Pentecost in Chapter 2. Chapter 8 told of the "Samaritan Pentecost." This event could be called the "Gentile Pentecost." The Spirit came upon all those in attendance.
- Unlike the Samaritan believers who had waited between belief and the baptism of the Spirit, which had come by the laying on of apostolic hands (8:17-18), the Spirit fell on these Gentile believers, just as He had at the first Pentecost—no laying on of hands, no praying for the Spirit to fall—God just did it!

Read Acts 10:45-46a.

- The "*circumcised believers*" could be translated "the Jewish believers" (11:2). These were the men who had accompanied Peter (10:23). They were astonished that the same phenomena of Pentecost was being demonstrated even on the Gentiles. As at Pentecost, reported in Chapter 2, these Gentiles experienced speaking in tongues and praising God. It is likely that without these accompanying signs, the skeptical Jewish contingency of the church would not have believed that these Gentiles were genuinely converted and Spirit-indwelt. With these visible signs, there could be no doubt.
- This was a powerful testimony to Peter and his Jewish friends of the necessity of fully accepting Gentile believers into the body of Christ. Whatever lingering questions Peter may have had about his vision of a sheet and animals or about Cornelius's visit by an angelic messenger would have been put aside in light of this event. The apostles had not invited these

Gentiles into the kingdom—God had. Like so many other amazing salvation scenes in the book of Acts, the apostles realized their role was not to convict, convince, and convert (that’s the Spirit’s work)—but rather as witnesses.

Read Acts 10:46b-47.

- In this situation, the believers were baptized after they received the Holy Spirit, publicly declaring their allegiance to Christ and identification with the Christian community. Peter’s words, “*received the Holy Spirit just as we did*,” reveal the impressiveness of what they had just seen. It was undeniable, irrefutable evidence that God had come to the Gentiles. They were now full-fledged, Spirit-indwelt members of the body of Christ. No human opinion, apostolic or otherwise, could change that.

Read Acts 10:48.

- These new Spirit-baptized believers were then baptized with water in the name of Jesus Christ, and Peter was invited by his new Christian brother to stay with them for several days, presumably for further instruction on what had just happened and what was next in their new life in Christ.

ACTS

Chapter 11

PETER EXPLAINS HIS ACTIONS—11:1-18

Word of Peter's eating with Gentiles caused a negative reaction among the Jewish believers back in Jerusalem. The incident violated Hebrew customs. Following a detailed explanation of events by a persuasive and changed Peter, others became convinced that God had ordered these surprising circumstances. The Jerusalem church began to accept the Gentile mission.

Read Acts 11:1-3.

- Gentiles are people who are not Jews; the Jewish believers are often referred to in the Scriptures as “the circumcised believers.” Most Jewish believers thought God offered salvation only to the Jews because God had given His law to them (**Exodus 19-20**). A group in Jerusalem believed that Gentiles could be saved, but only if they followed all the Jewish laws and traditions—in essence, if they became Jews before they became Christians (this would be the topic of discussion at the Jerusalem Council, Chapter 15). Both groups were mistaken. God chose the Jews and taught them His laws so they could bring the message of salvation to the whole world (**Genesis 12:3; Psalm 22:27; Isaiah 42:4; 49:6; 56:3-7; 60:1-3; Jeremiah 16:19-21; Zechariah 2:11; Malachi 1:11; Romans 15:9-12**).
- Note that the apostles were still in Jerusalem; they had not scattered with those who had fled the persecution following Stephen's martyrdom.
- Peter was criticized for entering a Gentile home and then eating a meal with Gentiles. Both practices were

terribly offensive to devout Jews who feared accidentally breaking one of their strict dietary regulations.

- As is often the case, the critics criticized first and gathered their information later. Before Peter even arrived back in Jerusalem, the news reached the apostles and other believers in Judea that the Gentiles had received the word of God. Instead of rejoicing, some of the Jewish believers criticized him. The criticism of Peter was not that he had gone to Caesarea or that he had preached to Gentiles but rather that he had eaten with them. Some Jews were so obsessed with the Jewish dietary restrictions that they rushed to “*strain out a gnat*” while “*swallowing a camel*” (**Matthew 23:24**). Peter, however, was in good company, for this was an accusation commonly leveled at Jesus (**Mark 2:16; Luke 15:2**). Eating with Gentiles would also later become a source of conflict between Paul and Peter.
- The word of God being received by the Gentiles was big news in Jerusalem. A Samaritan or two did not seem to be controversial. A solitary Ethiopian official, likewise, was easy to understand and rejoice over, but an entire gathering of influential Gentiles in a Gentile city in a Gentile setting? (Not to mention that they received the Holy Spirit in the same fashion that the newborn church had at Pentecost!). That was a frightening shift of emphasis for this still very Jewish church. The potential for a division within the church between Jews and Gentiles and the problems that would erupt at the “fellowships” (which invariably involved food—2:42, 46) could cause huge problems. The result could easily have been two entirely separate churches instead of one had not the apostles handled it wisely.

Read Acts 11:4-7.

- Peter repeated the events in great detail, step by step (10:30). Evidently he thought the best defense against his critics would be simply to tell the story as it happened. Peter's message from this point to 11:15 leaves out the nonessential details from the original accounts of his vision and of the angelic messenger who spoke to Cornelius (10:1-23 and 10:30-48).
- Peter wanted this potentially hostile (already critical) audience to know that he had been praying at the time he saw the vision. Peter told them the sheet came close to him and he looked at it closely. This account also mentions the more detailed presence of animals that would have been prohibited by the Levitical restrictions, adding beasts of prey to the list described in 10:12.

Read Acts 11:8-10.

- Peter repeated for his audience his refusal to “kill and eat” (11:7) these animals as instructed by the Lord. He quoted the response of the voice from heaven, instructing him not to call anything impure that God has made clean. Finally, he noted the threefold repetition of this dialogue between himself and the Lord and the pulling of the sheet back up to heaven again. This event and all the effects of it in Cornelius's life became a primary argument for the Gentile mission in the early church.

Read Acts 11:11-12.

- Peter added to this recounting the exact timing of the whole event: “*at that very moment*” as he spoke of the arrival of the three men from Caesarea. Upon the

command of the Holy Spirit, Peter had accompanied them, citing the Spirit's command not to worry about their being Gentiles.

- He had taken six brothers with him to Caesarea to witness what was to happen and help recall it accurately. Peter must have understood that God was at work and thought that something controversial (or potentially divisive) might take place. The potential for misunderstanding was evidently great enough for these men to have also accompanied Peter back to Jerusalem to report to the apostles. Jewish law only required two witnesses. The fact that Peter had six witnesses reveals the seriousness of the issue and the significance of the event.

Read Acts 11:13-14.

- In two sentences Peter summarized the experience of Cornelius, which has already been recorded twice (10:1-7; 10:30-32). It would be important to the Jewish audience to hear that an angelic messenger had also appeared to the principle Gentile figure in the drama.
- Peter added a significant statement that had been excluded from the other accounts of Cornelius's experience: the angel had told Cornelius that he and his entire household will be saved. It's interesting to consider that God's intent from the start was to bring this Gentile soldier, along with his friends and family, to Christ. Perhaps Cornelius had told this to Peter when they first met (10:27).

Read Acts 11:15-17.

- Peter described that moment when “*the Holy Spirit fell upon them [the Gentiles] as upon us [Jewish*

believers/ at the beginning.” The “beginning” refers to Pentecost (Chapter 2) and has the idea of a one-time event never to be repeated.

- There was no missing Peter’s intentional and overt word choice here: the Holy Spirit of God had come on these Gentile believers just as He had come on the Jewish believers. There was no difference between the two “Pentecosts” other than the Jews’ experience had come first. All of this was for the purpose of proving to the Jerusalem church that they must accept each new group of converts (the Samaritans, the Gentiles) because God had put His guarantee on them by repeating Pentecost.
- Peter added what he had been thinking when the event had occurred, for he remembered something the risen Christ had said right before His ascension: “***John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit***” (1:5). Up until the event in Cornelius’s house, Peter (along with the rest of the Jewish believers) must have thought that the baptism of the Holy Spirit was reserved exclusively for Jewish believers. Having witnessed the baptism of the Holy Spirit on Gentile believers, Peter realized Jesus’ words had a much broader application. In fact, Jesus had also demonstrated clearly that He and His message were for all types of people. He had preached in Samaria (**John 4:1-42**), in the region of the Gerasenes, populated by Greeks (**Mark 5:1-20**), and He had even reached out to Romans (**Luke 7:1-10**). The apostles shouldn’t have been surprised they were called to do the same.

Read Acts 11:18.

- The theological discussion stopped with the report that God had given the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles.

This was a turning point for the early church. They must accept those whom God had chosen, even Gentiles.

- The response was one of praising God as the congregation remarked on the fact that “***God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.***” This is a remarkable example of the spiritual health of this young church. Though steeped in centuries of Jewish rules and regulations, they had seen enough of God’s wonders over the past few months to know that God was moving in some new ways. It’s interesting to remember that they had the words and example of Christ pointing them toward the Gentile world (**Matthew 28:19; Acts 1:8**). The fact that they were so open to what God was doing and so responsive to Peter’s leadership speaks well of the work of the Spirit in their lives.

THE CHURCH IN ANTIOCH OF SYRIA–11:19-30

To show that Peter’s evangelistic encounter with the Gentile Cornelius was not an exception, Luke mentioned the widespread outreach that had begun taking place in Antioch. This effort by believers from Cyprus and Cyrene to preach to non-Jews had both the power and the blessing of God on it, so that “***large numbers of these Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord***” (11:21).

It was just a matter of time until Antioch became the church’s base of operations. From there the Disciples of Christ (or “Christians” as they were coming to be known; 11:26) would carry on a sovereignly directed, full-scale Gentile mission.

The focus of the church is shifting to the north, to this incredible missionary church in Antioch of Syria. The

balance of this chapter gives a close-up view of a church that can be used mightily of God to change the world.

Read Acts 11:19.

- As Peter was dealing with this new issue of Gentiles entering the church, God was at work elsewhere. The seeds of missionary work were being sown after Stephen's death, as many believing Jews were persecuted and scattered, settling in faraway cities and spreading the gospel. The Good News was being preached but only to Jews. The believers who were scattered had not yet received the news that the gospel message was meant for Gentiles as well, but all that was about to change. When the church accepted Peter's testimony that the gospel was also for Gentiles, Christianity expanded into Gentile areas, and large numbers of Gentiles became believers.
- At this point, the Jerusalem church was no longer the "sending center," partly because of the anti-Christian sentiment in Jerusalem and partly because of the new Gentile thrust of the outreach. Antioch became the new sending center—three hundred miles north of Jerusalem. An important commercial center and the third largest city in the Roman Empire (population 500,000), the city of Antioch was located fifteen miles inland from the Mediterranean Sea on the Orontes River. The city had been founded in 300 BC by the Seleucids and had been the western capital of their empire. Under the Roman Empire, Antioch became the capital of the province of Syria. The city enjoyed a beautiful location and abundant water supply.
- There was also a large Jewish population in Antioch. When persecution against Christians broke out in Jerusalem after the death of Stephen, many Christians fled to Antioch in Syria. Antioch was a horribly

corrupt city and was the center of worship for several pagan cults that promoted sexual immorality and other forms of evil common to pagan religions. This city would be home to the church that was sovereignly chosen to fund and direct the next decade of church expansion under a new missionary, Paul.

Read Acts 11:20-21.

- Cyprus is an island off the Mediterranean coast from Antioch, and Cyrene was a city in northern Africa. Fortunately, some men of Cyprus and Cyrene had the courage to spread the gospel of the Lord Jesus outside of the confines of Judaism. When these believers spoke, the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord.
- Evidently this small beginning turned Antioch into a place where the believers aggressively preached to the Gentiles.

Read Acts 11:22-23.

- The Lord's working in Antioch (11:20-21) prompted the leaders of the Jerusalem church to send someone to investigate. Barnabas was the chosen one. He was a wise choice for a number of reasons. From Cyprus, he would have had a natural, national connection with the "evangelists" who had started the movement in Antioch. Barnabas was a generous man, having participated in the offering for the needs of the early Jerusalem church (4:36-37). His most redeeming quality, however, was wrapped up in the meaning of his name: "son of encouragement." Barnabas had been the one willing to stick his neck out when everyone else was afraid of Saul of Tarsus and suspected Saul's conversion to have been a trap for

Christians (9:27). Barnabas was living up to his name by encouraging the believers. The Greek term here for encouraging is *parekalei* and can carry the idea of “encouragement,” “comfort,” “help,” or even “strong urging” and “counsel.”

Read Acts 11:24.

- Barnabas is described by three modifiers here: (1) a good man; (2) full of the Holy Spirit (reminiscent of the qualifications of the “seven” in 6:1-6); (3) full of faith. These latter two characteristics were specifically used to describe Stephen in 6:5. The ministry of the gospel was thriving; a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

Read Acts 11:25-26.

- Saul had been sent to his home in Tarsus for protection after his conversion caused uproar among the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem (9:26-30). He stayed there for several years before Barnabas brought him to help the church at Antioch. Evidently, the work at Antioch had grown so that it was too much for Barnabas to handle alone.
- Barnabas and Paul’s ministry in Antioch was marked by their teaching (for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people). Those who became believers were consistently and systematically instructed in the Scriptures by these two teachers.
- The young church at Antioch was a curious mixture of Jews (who spoke Greek or Aramaic) and Gentiles. It is significant that this was the first place where the believers were called *Christians* (“Christ ones” – the ending “-ian” means “belonging to the party of”).

Read Acts 11:27-28.

- Prophets were not limited to Old Testament times (13:1; 15:32; 21:9). God appointed certain people to be prophets to the church, and Paul ranked “prophets” second only to apostles in his list of those gifted by the Holy Spirit (**1 Corinthians 12:28**). The Jews believed that prophecy had ceased during the time of the Exile but would resurface as a sign of the Messiah’s coming. Peter had quoted the prophet Joel in his sermon at Pentecost: “*Your sons and daughters will prophesy*” (2:17). Prophets had special gifts in ministering God’s messages to His people. At times, they would foretell the future (as Agabus did here), but the gift of prophecy was also valued for its role in exhorting, encouraging, and strengthening God’s people (**1 Corinthians 14:31**).
- In the early church, these prophets seem to have traveled from place to place. Agabus was part of a group of prophets who came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. Through the Spirit, Agabus predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. Agabus later would predict Paul’s arrest in Jerusalem (21:10-11). What happened was actually a series of famines during the reign of Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54). These verses seem to introduce the reason for the Antioch church’s support of the “mother” church in Jerusalem, mentioned in 11:29-30.

Read Acts 11:29-30.

- Because there were serious food shortages during this time due to the famine, the believers in Antioch assisted the church in Jerusalem. Luke phrases it: “*Everyone giving as much as they could*” (**1 Corinthians 16:2; 2 Corinthians 9:7**). The daughter

church had grown enough to be able to help the mother church. The solid reputation for the spiritual integrity of Barnabas and Saul is affirmed by the fact that they were the ones entrusted with the money to be taken to the elders of the church in Jerusalem. This visit was most likely the second visit of Paul to Jerusalem, occurring in about AD 46. This visit corresponds to **Galatians 2:1-10**. His first visit was in **Acts 9:26-29**, and that correlates with **Galatians 1:18-20**).

- This is the first mention of “elders” in the New Testament (15:4, 6; 16:4; 21:18). By the time of the establishment of the church at Antioch, elders were appointed to manage the affairs of the congregation. Not much is known about their role in those days, but clearly their responsibilities included managing the church’s financial affairs.
- The chapter ends with a very healthy picture of this young and mostly Gentile church. They had two high-quality teachers, Barnabas and Saul. They had a solid group of giving saints donating enough money to tend to the local needs of the congregation and send something to the “mother church” at Jerusalem. The idea of a Gentile-Christian congregation sending help to a Jewish-Christian church highlights the quality of its spiritual character.
- The church at Antioch would be used mightily by God in the next phase of the spread of the gospel. After a few more events, the first real “missionary team” would be sent out from this congregation. With a generous hand reaching back to help those who had planted this church and an aggressive vision looking forward to what God would do through it, this church would be a major force over the next decade in reaching a lost world for Christ.

ACTS

Chapter 12

JAMES IS KILLED AND PETER IS IMPRISONED—12:1-5

The rapid growth of the church in Jerusalem brought fierce opposition. Persecution often accompanies progress (**1 Corinthians 16:9**). Unable to stop the masses from embracing this new faith, the Jews launched a direct attack upon the Christian leaders. Beyond mere threats and warnings (4:18-21; 5:40), Herod had James executed and Peter arrested.

These were tense and traumatic times, but the church began to pray “very earnestly” (12:5). It is important to remember that God was not finished with the church at Jerusalem nor the Jewish element of Christianity.

Read Acts 12:1.

- The church was growing dramatically, but the king was increasing the persecution. This was King Herod Agrippa I, the son of Aristobulus and grandson of Herod the Great. His sister was Herodias, who had been responsible for the death of John the Baptist (**Mark 6:17-18**). Herod Agrippa I was partly Jewish. The Romans had appointed him to rule over most of Palestine, including the territories of Galilee, Perea, Judea, and Samaria. He persecuted the Christians in order to please the Jewish leaders who opposed them, hoping to solidify his position. Agrippa is mentioned in the Bible only in this chapter. He died suddenly in AD 44 (12:20-23), a fact also recorded by the historian Josephus.
- The Christian movement created an unexpected opportunity for Herod to gain new favor with the Jews.

Gentiles began to be accepted into the church in large numbers. Many Jews had been tolerating this new movement as a sect within Judaism, but its rapid growth alarmed them. Persecution of Christians was revived, and even the apostles were not spared. Agrippa orchestrated the first execution of an apostle, James, followed by the imprisonment of Peter.

Read Acts 12:2.

- James and John were two of the original twelve disciples who followed Jesus. They had asked Jesus for special recognition in His kingdom (**Mark 10:35-40**). Jesus said that to be a part of His kingdom would mean suffering with Him (“*drinking from the same cup*” **Mark 10:38-39**). James and John did indeed suffer; Herod executed James, and later John was exiled (**Revelation 1:9**). These two brothers were the first (James) and the last (John) apostles to die. Their lives and ministries somewhat parallel two of the “seven” from 6:1-6—Stephen and Philip. In the sovereign plan of God, one was taken early, and the other was left to minister for many years. These are reminders again that believers have a “General” who will send, move, protect, and then bring home His soldiers as He sees fit. An interesting scripture is **John 21:20-22**; Peter inquires about how he and John might die. Christ’s answer was, “*What is that to you? You follow Me.*”
- There is a great deal to be learned here from what did not happen to James and what did happen to Peter later in this chapter. Imagine being a part of both prayer meetings. The church surely had prayed as fervently for James as they did for Peter. The church may have been praying at the same location, involving most of the same people, perhaps even the same servant girl

(Rhoda; 12:1-3). Peter was miraculously set free. James, however, was killed with the sword (beheaded).

- Was there something wrong with the way the believers prayed for James as opposed to Peter? The wrong words? Scriptures? Posture? Was there not enough faith? Did God love Peter more than James? The answer to all these questions is no, but they are the kinds of questions Christians often ask when faced with such a clear example of the contrasting will of God for two lives. The sovereign choices of God in the lives of these two apostles—equally loved by God, needed by the church, and missed by their friends and family—communicate the sovereignty of God and our need to trust in His goodness whatever the outcome.

Read Acts 12:3-4.

- Herod, in the self-serving spirit of the previous Herods of the New Testament, took special delight in the positive political benefits he received from executing James. Herod Agrippa's uncle was Herod Antipas, who had participated in the execution of Christ (**Luke 3:1; 23:6-12**), and his grandfather was Herod the Great—the paranoid murderer of Bethlehem babies as he attempted to kill the newborn Christ (**Matthew 2:1-17**). Since James's execution pleased the Jewish leaders, Herod Agrippa then arrested Peter during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the week-long festival directly following Passover. This was a strategic move since more Jews were in the city than usual, and Herod could impress the most Jews by imprisoning the most visible of the church leaders.
- Peter was well guarded by four squads of four soldiers each; each squad would have guarded Peter for one-fourth of a day! Evidently, Herod knew of Peter's previous escape (5:19-24) and wanted to be sure that

such would not happen this time. Luke stressed this detail to set the scene for the mighty power of God. Herod planned to give Peter a public trial after the Passover.

Read Acts 12:5.

- Herod undoubtedly was planning to execute Peter, but the believers were praying fervently for Peter's safety. The Greek structure of this sentence emphasizes the contrast here between the imprisoned apostle and the prayers of the saints. On the one hand, Peter was kept. On the other, prayers were sent. Something was bound to happen. The believers are here called *the church*, a clear identified entity in Jerusalem.

PETER'S MIRACULOUS ESCAPE FROM PRISON-12:6-19

James was already dead. Peter was in prison. From a human perspective, the situation appeared terribly grim, but from a heavenly perspective, this was just another opportunity to display the infinite power of God: *“the rulers plot together against the Lord...but the one who rules in heaven laughs/scoffs at them”* (Psalm 2:2 , 4).

When an angel of the Lord miraculously delivered Peter from prison, Herod left for Caesarea (12:19). The plan and purposes of God cannot be thwarted. Jesus assured His followers, “I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18).

This section of Acts is one of the most exciting and most humorous scenes in the whole book: exciting, because Peter was in jail and was prayed for by a faithful, fervent, praying church; humorous, because this praying church didn't really believe God had answered their prayer even

when they had their answer at the front door of their prayer meeting.

Read Acts 12:6.

- A few years later, Peter would write these words in one of his letters: “*When He was reviled, [He] did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously*” (1 Peter 2:23).
- Luke carefully recorded the location of the soldiers (12:4) in charge of making sure this reputed jail-breaking apostle (5:19-24) did not slip away again and leave Herod with a serious public-relations problem. Two soldiers were chained to Peter, one on either side, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. Luke again stressed the power of God over earthly rulers. Herod was doing his best to prevent another escape. But it would not be enough.

Read Acts 12:7-8.

- The same type of jailbreak had happened to the apostles before, as recorded in 5:19-24, but more detail is given here. From his sleep, Peter was roused by an angel tapping him on the side and was told, “Get up quickly.” The command was accompanied by the chains falling off Peter’s wrists. Evidently, neither the angel nor Peter touched the chains; God was setting Peter free.
- One can picture the groggy Peter, thinking that he was dreaming (12:9), needing the instruction of his angelic liberator to help him get his clothes on. Peter complied with the angel’s directions, but he had to be reminded to put on his coat. Then he followed the angel out of the cell.

- Nothing is written about the whereabouts of the guards, who were likely not the only prison guards on duty. A couple of them would have been posted at every gate, every door, and at any possible escape route from the prison. The soldiers may have been dazed, asleep, or blinded from the whole event. In the end, it would be a deadly miracle for them (12:19).

Read Acts 12:9-10.

- Peter seemed dazed as he followed the angel's instructions because he thought he was seeing a vision. Peter may have been seeing this as similar to his experience with the sheet let down from heaven, recorded in Chapter 10 (the same word is used here for "vision" that was used for his vision at Joppa in 10:17). Though Peter was following the angel as they made their way out of the prison, he was not really aware of what was happening.
- They passed two sets of guards before arriving at the Iron Gate which led to the city. With dramatic effect, the gate mysteriously, miraculously opened for them by itself (the Greek is *automate*; automatically), and they passed through it into the city. The angel stayed with Peter a little longer, then suddenly vanished.

Read Acts 12:11.

- Whether Peter just took a while to wake up or there was something about the angel's work that had him dazed and the night air brought him to his senses is unknown. The text just says Peter came to himself and, speaking to himself, verbalized his confidence that the Lord has sent His angel and rescued him. The term translated "rescued" means to "deliver or save" and implies a daring rescue.

- Peter also verbalized his awareness of Herod's motives and Herod's plans to use Peter's incarceration (and possible execution) as another way to please the Jews. Peter's awareness of his life-threatening situation, particularly in light of the recent execution of James (12:2), made his peaceful sleep in the prison cell all the more marvelous. Peter had seen enough to trust that the Father was in control of his life.

Read Acts 12:12.

- Once he realized that he was not dreaming, Peter went directly to the house of Mary, the mother of John, also called Mark. John Mark, mentioned here in passing, was the author of the Gospel of Mark and became an important character on the first journey of Paul (13:5, 13; 15:37-39).
- Mary's house was large enough to accommodate a meeting of many believers. An upstairs room in her house may have been the location of Jesus' last supper with His disciples (**Luke 22:8**) and/or the place where the 120 earliest believers met for prayer (1:15; 2:1). Evidently Mary's home was a common meeting place for the Jerusalem church (or part of it), at least for prayer. This particular night, with their beloved Peter in prison and the apostle James recently martyred, a large group had gathered for prayer.

Read Acts 12:13-15.

- Peter knocked at the outer entrance. Rhoda, the servant girl, answered the door. Rhoda was so excited to hear Peter's voice that she forgot to open the door! Meanwhile, the sober, serious saints, who were praying for Peter's release, failed to realize that the answer to their prayer was standing at the door, trying

to get in! They even went so far as to accuse the poor girl of being crazy. At her insistence, they speculated that maybe Peter's angel was at the door, indicating they thought that he must have been executed already! Luke records their reaction but doesn't comment on it. No one went to open the door!

Read Acts 12:16.

- One wonders what was going through this usually impatient apostle's mind at this point. Certainly, his absence from prison would be noticed soon. The guards would likely know exactly where to look for him. The servant girl had recognized Peter's voice, but the others, so busy praying for Peter's release, wouldn't come to the door to let the freed apostle in! If ever people should stop praying and do something, that was the time!
- As Peter continued knocking, someone finally went to the door and opened it. Everyone was amazed.

Read Acts 12:17.

- The pandemonium was so loud that Peter had to quiet the crowd by motioning with his hand. He recounted the story of his escape.
- Peter instructed that the information about this miracle be passed on to James and the brothers. This James was Jesus' brother, who became a leader in the Jerusalem church (15:13; **Galatians 1:19**). The James who had been killed earlier (12:2) was John's brother and one of the original twelve disciples. Peter's instruction to inform James indicates that James may have already been recognized as a key leader of the Jerusalem church. Perhaps through this series of events and this statement before the gathered church,

Peter was officially stepping down from direct leadership of the Jerusalem believers.

- In a short period of time, likely because of his certainty that Herod's soldiers would be after him, Peter left the Jerusalem church. It is unknown exactly where he went.

Read Acts 12:18-19.

- Meanwhile, back at the prison, there was a great commotion. Under Roman law, guards who allowed a prisoner to escape were subject to the same punishment the prisoner was to receive. Their lives were on the line, so a commotion was in order! After a thorough search for Peter, these sixteen guards were sentenced to death.
- Herod's departure to Caesarea sets up the next scene. The Jews considered Jerusalem their capital, but the Romans made Caesarea their headquarters in Palestine. That was where Herod lived.

THE DEATH OF HEROD AGRIPPA—12:20-25

Herod Agrippa's fate should not surprise us. The Scriptures proclaim that pride goes before a fall. "***Your sin will find you out***" (32:23); "***Pride goes before destruction.***" (Proverbs 16:18) "***We reap what we sow!***" By foolishly setting himself against God and refusing to give Him glory, Herod guaranteed his own disastrous demise: he was "***consumed with worms***" (12:23).

Read Acts 12:20.

- Tyre and Sidon, coastal cities on the Mediterranean, were free and self-governing but economically

dependent on Judea. It is unknown why Herod had been quarreling with them, but representatives from those cities were trying to appease him by having secured the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king.

Read Acts 12:21-22.

- Bedecked in his royal robes, Herod was seated on the platform to address the people of Tyre and Sidon who were attempting to obtain a trade agreement from him. Herod used a festival for Caesar as the appointed day. This was AD 44 and may have been just before Passover, approximately one year after Peter's escape from prison. The people had already approached and possibly bribed Herod's personal assistant, but here they also resorted to ridiculous flattery—shouting out to the ego-driven Herod that his voice was the voice of a god and not of a mortal. The Greek historian Josephus also recorded this event in his “Antiquities of the Jews” (19.334).

Read Acts 12:23.

- While neither account (Luke's or Josephus's) described Herod Agrippa's response to the crowd, Luke explained that God acted, and he did so instantly. An angel of the Lord was God's vehicle to strike Herod with a horrible illness, described in gory detail: “**he was eaten by worms and died.**” Some scholars suggest that the worms were intestinal roundworms, which grow ten to sixteen inches long and rob the body of nutrients while causing intense pain.
- The reason for this judgment was that Herod accepted the people's worship instead of giving the glory to God. God knew what was going on in Herod's heart

and refused to share His glory with any earthly potentate. Herod died a horrible death accompanied by intense pain; he was literally eaten alive by worms, from the inside out. To be eaten by worms was considered to be one of the most disgraceful ways to die. Pride is a serious sin. God chose to punish Herod's pride immediately. God does not immediately punish all sin, but He will bring all to judgment (**Hebrews 9:27**). Those who set themselves against God are doomed to ultimate failure.

Read Acts 12:24.

- In great contrast with the verse above, Luke described quite a different scenario for the church. God's Good News was spreading rapidly. The death of James, the imprisonment of Peter, and other persecutions had not slowed the steady expansion of the church.
- This sovereignly directed, expanding influence of Christianity is the theme of Luke's book (1:1-8). Verses like this form transition points for the book, as Luke wrapped up one section and moved on to another (2:47; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30-31). With this verse, the middle section of the book comes to a close. The gospel message has made its way from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria.
- Along the way, a Jewish zealot named Saul had been converted (Chapter 9). Saul (later called Paul), along with his various traveling companions, will become the focal point of Luke's record for the remainder of the book.

Read Acts 12:25.

- This verse picks up from the story in 11:27-30, where Barnabas and Saul had been sent with the famine relief

funds from the church at Antioch for the believers in Jerusalem. Barnabas and Saul were probably not in Jerusalem for the events of this chapter; instead, they made the trip sometime after Herod's death. Luke, in his arrangement of his writing, chose to put the events of Peter and Herod at this point in the book of Acts.

- Upon the completion of their mission, Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch, having picked up John Mark in the process. John Mark was also Barnabas's cousin (**Colossians 4:10**). His mother Mary often would open her home to the church (12:12), so John Mark would have been exposed to most of the great teachers and teachings of the early church. He had become a believer and had the great opportunity to travel with these two men of God. It would be the education of a lifetime, but not in the way he expected.

ACTS

Chapter 13

BARNABAS AND PAUL ARE SENT OUT—13:1-3

Luke's history of the church changes focus to the Gentile ministry and the subsequent spread of the church around the world. Beginning in Chapter 13 with the Spirit's selection of Paul and Barnabas to become special missionaries, Paul replaces Peter as the central figure in the book of Acts as the church continued its Spirit-led penetration farther out into the world beyond Jerusalem.

Read Acts 13:1.

- The church at Antioch became the sending center of the mission to reach the world (the last part of Jesus' commission in 1:8). This first verse gives us an idea of its truly international makeup and of the broad spectrum of people who were being reached by the gospel.
- Until this point it appeared that Barnabas and Paul had been the principle teachers in the church of Antioch (11:26). This list shows, at least, three others who were said to have had the gifts of being prophet and teacher. Barnabas appears first on the list because he was likely the leader of the group. Simeon had a Latin nickname, *Niger*, which means "black-skinned"—probably because of his dark complexion. There is some speculation that this was the same Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross of Christ (**Mark 15:21**), but that is unknown. The next name on the list is a man from Cyrene by the name of Lucius. Cyrene was in North Africa. Lucius was probably among the Cyprian and Cyrenian men who first preached the gospel to Gentiles in Antioch (11:20-21). The fourth individual was Manaen (whose name means "comforter"). He was involved at the highest levels of government, as he was a member of the court

of Herod the ruler. It is interesting that one of the church leaders was a member of Herod's court.

- Saul was a highly trained rabbinic Jew and a Roman citizen. His name closes the list of this very diverse group. He may have been listed last because he was the newest believer or possibly because he was, at this point, the second most important person on the list (in Greek, sometimes the two most important words in a sentence are placed at the first and last positions). Whatever the case, Saul would not be in the background much longer.
- The social, geographic, and racial variety of these people shows that the Spirit of God had been moving rapidly and over a broad geographic area. Not only had the Good News spread to these areas, but the Spirit of God used cosmopolitan Antioch to put together a diverse team for the next "phase" of kingdom expansion.

Read Acts 13:2-3.

- The believers were worshipping the Lord and fasting when God sent them a special message. Just as both Peter and Cornelius received messages while praying (Chapter 10), so God spoke to these believers as well. "Fasting" is designed to give believers a specified period of time in order to focus on the Lord. People who are fasting can set aside the time of preparing and eating meals and use it to worship and pray. Also, their hunger pangs will remind them of their complete dependence upon God (**2 Chronicles 20:3; Ezra 8:23; Esther 4:16; Matthew 6:16-18**).
- The Spirit spoke, possibly through one of the prophets in this group (13:1). The Spirit told them to set apart Barnabas and Saul. The word for "set apart" is *aphorizo*. It is used to describe three important events

in Paul's life: (1) his birth (**Galatians 1:15**); (2) his conversion (**Romans 1:1**); and (3) here, his sending to the Gentile mission field.

- The laying on of hands was a symbolic act that indicated public recognition of calling and ability as well as the association of a particular congregation with a ministry. The roots of the practice are found in the Old Testament where it was used to set someone aside for an office (**Numbers 27:23**), bless someone (**Genesis 48:14**), or dedicate something to God (**Leviticus 1:4**). The church at Antioch was identifying itself with these two men and with their mission.
- Even after the Spirit had spoken and the choice had been made, there was more prayer and fasting before the congregation endorsed these two to the task at hand. With that, they sent them off.

PAUL'S FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY—13:4-12

Having been chosen by God to embark on what came to be called the “first missionary journey,” Paul and his entourage (Barnabas and John Mark, at the very least) set sail. The target of this evangelistic thrust was the Gentile population of Asia Minor. The mission stopped first on the island of Cyprus where they confronted a false prophet named Bar-Jesus. Twice on this short narrative, the Holy Spirit is mentioned so as to demonstrate the truth that the spread of the gospel is God's idea and can only be done in and by the Spirit's power.

Why did Paul and Barnabas go where they did? The Holy Spirit led them. They first visited Barnabas's home country. Then they visited key population and cultural centers to reach as many people as possible.

Read Acts 13:4.

- The Holy Spirit was the central force in sending Saul and Barnabas (along with John Mark; 13:5) on their journey. Seleucia was a seaport of Antioch, a few miles north of the city at the mouth of the Orontes River. Cyprus, an important island on the Mediterranean, was about one hundred miles to the southwest.

Read Acts 13:5.

- Salamis, the leading city on Cyprus, was their first stop. It was located on the east coast of the island and was the seat of government. As would become his custom for years, Saul began his witness in the Jewish synagogues (**Romans 1:16**). Saul's credentials as a highly trained Pharisee, a former student of Gamaliel (22:3), would have been more than enough to prompt an invitation to speak, at least until his reputation for bringing such a radical message began to precede him.
- John Mark was on the trip as their assistant. The nature of Mark's job is not spelled out, though the word used here (*hupereten*) has led to speculation that he instructed the new converts and also was in charge of practical needs. His premature departure from the journey would become a source of friction between Saul and Barnabas (15:37-39).

Read Acts 13:6-7.

- The missionary team traveled the length of the island from east to west (about one hundred miles), arriving at the town of Paphos, a regional center of government. There they met a Jewish sorcerer (magician). Bar-Jesus is further described as a false prophet who was an attendant of the proconsul Sergius Paulus.

- A “proconsul” was a high Roman official. Also described as an intelligent man, this proconsul functioned as the governor of the island of Cyprus. He may have been the same Sergius Paulus who was a high official in Rome under Emperor Claudius. Such leaders often kept private sorcerers. As governor, Sergius Paulus was conducting an official investigation. He had received news of these traveling Jewish evangelists and was concerned about disruptions in the Jewish communities. For Paul and Barnabas, presenting the gospel to the proconsul was a great opportunity (13:12).

Read Acts 13:8.

- Trouble was brewing; however, because Bar-Jesus realized that if Sergius Paulus believed in Christ, he would no longer need a sorcerer. Apparently Bar-Jesus’ Greek name was *Elymas* (meaning “sorcerer” or “magician”), and he was going to do his best to stop any influence Barnabas and Saul might have on the governor.

Read Acts 13:9-10.

- At this point Luke noted that Saul was also known as Paul. The implication is that he already had both names but began to go by the latter, preferring to use his Roman name for the balance of his Gentile-oriented mission. No person, apart from Jesus himself, shaped the history of Christianity like the apostle Paul. After this, Paul is always called by his Roman name in Luke’s record.
- Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit, a phrase used in the book of Acts (2:4; 4:8, 31; 7:55) to indicate a spiritual man.

- Not intimidated by his spiritual rival, Paul boldly looked straight at Elymas and exposed the source of his sorcery. This is the first recorded presentation of the word of God to the Roman world, and it would be crucial that a clear distinction be made between Christianity and the perverted spiritualism so prevalent in the Empire. Paul further characterized Elymas' sorcery as full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Evidently Paul had seen enough of what Elymas did to know what he was up to, and he was not going to allow this intelligent Roman governor to be fooled anymore.

Read Acts 13:11.

- Paul's rhetorical questioning of the sorcerer turned to an announcement of judgment, telling him that the Lord's hand was against him.

Read Acts 13:12.

- This miracle was all it took to convince Sergius Paulus. He believed. Notice also that his astonishment was not at the powerful act he had witnessed but rather at the teaching about the Lord. Sergius Paulus is the highest ranking converted official recorded in the New Testament.

PAUL PREACHES IN ANTIOCH OF PISIDIA—13:13-43

Leaving the city of Paphos on the island of Cyprus, Paul and his companions sailed north, arriving at Perga. For an unknown reason, John Mark abruptly left the venture at that time and returned to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas continued inland to Antioch of Pisidia.

As would be his custom throughout his ministry, Paul went first to the Jews. In the synagogue he reviewed God's historic dealings with the Jews and then argued that Jesus was "God's promised Savior" (13:23), the fulfillment of every ancient messianic prophecy. The initial reaction to Paul's preaching was favorable.

Read Acts 13:13.

- Having traveled Barnabas's homeland (Cyprus) from coast to coast, the party boarded a ship for the mainland. They arrived at the province of Pamphylia, landing in the port town of Perga.
- *"There John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem."* Why John Mark left them is never explained.
- Paul accused John Mark of lacking commitment and, therefore, Paul refused to take Mark along on another journey (15:37-38).
- John Mark's story does not end here, though. It is clear from Paul's later letters that Paul grew to respect Mark (**Colossians 4:10**) and that he needed him in his work (**2 Timothy 4:11**). Somewhere along the way, after what must have been a miserable season in his life, John Mark got back on track. He became one of four privileged writers of a New Testament Gospel. He was restored completely to usefulness even in the ministry of Paul; he is a great inspiration for believers of moving beyond failures to faith.

Read Acts 13:14.

- When they went to a new city to witness for Christ, Paul and Barnabas went first to the synagogue. They would go on the Sabbath, taking advantage of the Jewish custom of inviting itinerant teachers to speak (Jesus had

set the example, **Luke 4:16**). Often the Jews who were attending the synagogues believed in God and diligently studied the Scriptures. Tragically, however, many could not accept Jesus as the promised Messiah because they had wrong thoughts regarding the kind of Messiah He would be. He was not, as they desired, a military king who would overthrow Rome's control, but He was a servant king who would defeat sin. Paul and Barnabas did not separate themselves from the synagogues but tried to show clearly that the very Scriptures the Jews studied pointed to Jesus.

Read Acts 13:15.

- In a synagogue service, first the “Shema” would be recited (this is **Deuteronomy 6:4**, which Jews would repeat several times daily). Then certain prayers would be spoken, followed by a reading from the Law (Genesis through Deuteronomy), a reading from the Prophets (intended to illustrate the law), and a sermon.
- The synagogue rulers would decide who was to lead the service and give the sermon. A different person would be chosen to lead each week. Since it was customary for the synagogue leader to invite visiting rabbis to speak, Paul and Barnabas often had an open door when they went to a synagogue. But as soon as they spoke about Jesus as Messiah, the door would shut; they would not be invited back by the religious leaders, and at times were forced out of town!
- The invitation from the synagogue rulers was to speak a message of encouragement. What an open invitation for the gospel! There can be no more encouraging word than the fact that God has come to earth and opened a door to heaven, providing atonement for sin and offering new life in Jesus Christ! Such an invitation was all Paul needed.

Read Acts 13:16.

- Paul's sermon, which continues through 13:41, probably was included as a typical example of what Paul would say to a synagogue gathering. It shows how Paul first preached the gospel to a Jewish congregation. The opening address to the people of Israel and to the devout Gentiles who fear the God of Israel covered both groups of possible worshipers—Jews by birth and Gentile God-fearers.

Read Acts 13:17-18.

- Paul began his message by emphasizing God's covenant with Israel ("**God...chose our fathers**"). This was a point of agreement because all Jews were proud to be God's chosen people. Paul would go on to explain how the gospel fulfills the covenant. His review of Israel's history is like Stephen's lengthy review of the same in his sermon to a Jewish crowd in Jerusalem (Chapter 7). This was a common form of address known as an "historical retrospect"—a sketch of the course of God's work in the nation's history. Paul would move quickly from Abraham to Moses, Samuel, and David and eventually come to Jesus (13:23).
- The sermon has three major parts, with each section marked by Paul's direct address to the audience: (1) the preliminary historical figures leading up to the coming of Messiah in 13:16-25; (2) the rejection, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ (13:26-37); and (3) the appeal to believe (13:38-39). After the implied mention of Abraham ("chose our ancestors"), Paul moved to the "***dwelt...in the land of Egypt.***" Moses' name is not mentioned, but rather, God is pictured "***with uplifted arm***" leading Israel out to the wilderness (**Exodus 6:1, 6 and Psalm 136:11-12**).

Read Acts 13:19-20.

- Paul passed over any reference to the giving of the law, though he would later speak about its inability to save people (13:39). He did not name the seven nations in Canaan whose land had been given to Israel as an inheritance; these were well known to Paul's audience (**Deuteronomy 7:1**). The 450 years was an inclusive figure for all the events that had occurred so far in Paul's survey: from the move to Egypt (400 years), the wandering in the wilderness (40 years), through the distribution of the land under Joshua (10 years). Paul summarized the period of the judges with two words, "judges ruled," leading up to the time of the prophets, beginning with Samuel, who was considered the first prophet.

Read Acts 13:21.

- Israel's kingdom period began with Saul, son of Kish (**1 Samuel 9:1-2**), who was the first king.

Read Acts 13:22.

- Saul, of course, had been removed from the throne because of his disobedience (or "partial" obedience; **1 Samuel 13:1-14; 15:1-25**). Then David, son of Jesse, had become the new king, replacing the rejected Saul, who did not possess the same heart for God, nor was he one who would do everything God wanted him to do (**1 Samuel 14:14**).

Read Acts 13:23.

- A large jump over Old Testament history occurred here, as Paul went from King David directly to one of his

descendants, Jesus. Paul described Jesus as “***God’s promised Savior of Israel.***” This is the only place recorded in Acts where Paul called Jesus “Savior.” Peter used the same term in 5:31.

Read Acts 13:24-25.

- This reference to John refers to John the Baptist. John was the last of the prophets, the one who would prepare the way for the coming of Messiah. Yet even this great prophet had not considered himself worthy to untie the sandals of the Messiah who would come after him. John’s whole thrust was to try to turn Israel to the Savior by preaching repentance and baptism. “Repentance” means changing one’s mind—an about-face from a sinful life to a life lived for God. Baptism with water was a way of publicly showing one’s commitment to turn away from sin and toward God.

Read Acts 13:26.

- With this direct address to his Jewish brothers, Paul appealed for them to come to faith in Jesus Christ—the one to whom all the prophecies of their Scriptures pointed. The salvation that Christ offers is for both Jews (sons of Abraham) and devout Gentiles (fearers of God who aligned themselves to worship in the Jewish community). The two main streams of thought that will follow are: (1) Jesus’ death and resurrection fulfilled Old Testament Scripture; and (2) through that death, the offer of forgiveness of sins is made to all people. To his Jewish brothers, Paul made a potent declaration: “This salvation is for us!”

Read Acts 13:27.

- Paul joined Peter and Stephen in blaming the Jews who rejected Christ (the people in Jerusalem and their leaders) for killing Jesus. Yet that had fulfilled prophecy (**Psalm 118:22; Isaiah 53:3**). The failure of the Jews to recognize Him or realize that He was the one the prophets had written about was made all the worse by the fact that they had sat every Sabbath and had heard the prophets' words read. They had been exposed to the prophecies but had missed the fulfillment of those prophecies (**Luke 24:46; Acts 3:18**).

Read Acts 13:28.

- Although the Jewish leaders found no cause for a sentence of death during Jesus' trial, they still asked Pilate to have Him killed. Because of the Roman occupation of the land of Israel, the Jewish leaders could not carry out the execution. So, after the Jews had condemned Jesus, they had to convince the Roman ruler of their providence to carry out the sentence, and that was Pilate. Pilate had even pointed out to the Jewish accusers the fact that they had no grounds for execution, but in the end he gave in to their demands (**Luke 23:4, 14-15, 22**).

Read Acts 13:29.

- Jesus' death had fulfilled all the prophecies. Oddly enough, the very Jews who had killed Jesus were the ones who would have been the best versed in all those prophecies. In their blindness, they killed Jesus because they had refused to believe that He was their Messiah; all the while fulfilling the Scriptures about the death of

their Messiah! After Jesus had been crucified on the cross, He was placed in a tomb (**Luke 23:44-56**).

Read Acts 13:30.

- But the tomb was not the end of the story. In this note of triumph, Paul reported what most would think impossible; God raised Him from the dead (Luke 24). Without the Resurrection, there would be no gospel, no salvation, no Good News to spread. But Paul, though he had not been among the apostles to witness the Resurrection, had seen the risen Christ and, thus, could testify to the truth of this statement (9:1-6).

Read Acts 13:31.

- The credibility of the Resurrection had been affirmed by witnesses—His followers, those who had gone with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They had seen the resurrected Christ over a period of many days.

Read Acts 13:32-33.

- The structure of these last few verses follows a four-part Christian confession much like the one in **1 Corinthians 15:3-5**: Jesus was crucified, placed in a tomb, raised from the dead, and seen by many in the days that followed.
- Paul tied together all of the events that he had been recounting to that moment as he and Barnabas stood before them bearing this Good News. The promise God had made to their common ancestors had come true in their own time. After centuries of waiting, watching, and wanting, the Messiah had come. His name is Jesus.
- To support this statement, Paul quoted from three Old Testament texts already considered by most Jews to

have been referring to the Messiah; **Psalm 2:7**; **Isaiah 55:3**; and **Psalm 16:10**. **Psalm 2:7** pictures God the Father as speaking to his Son. This moment had been publicly recognized (although it already was a reality) in Christ's life on the day of His baptism (**Luke 3:22; 9:35; Acts 10:38**).

Read Acts 13:34.

- A more direct proof for the Resurrection came from **Isaiah 55:3**, which promised holy and sure blessings. This prophecy by Isaiah was a reference back to the covenant first promised to David by Nathan the prophet in **2 Samuel 7:6-16**. The eternal throne did not find fulfillment in David. But in Jesus Christ, who rose from the dead, there is an eternal King who will reign forever.

Read Acts 13:35.

- **Psalm 16:10** also offers proof of the promised Resurrection. This argument was the same one Peter had used on the day of Pentecost and was a strong promise of resurrection for the Holy One of God. Judging from the popularity of its use, this psalm must have been one of the strongest cases to the Jewish audience for the necessity of the resurrection of the Messiah.

Read Acts 13:36-37.

- The words of **Psalm 16:10** could not have referred to David, because David died and was buried, and his body did, in fact, suffer decay; many in Paul's audience had likely been to the site of David's tomb in Jerusalem. Therefore, Paul was saying that David must have been writing prophetically of one who would come after he

had died, someone whom God raised and whose body did not decay. That person was Jesus of Nazareth.

Read Acts 13:38-39.

- With his Scriptural support for the Resurrection stated, Paul explained the spiritual significance of what Christ had done; then he called his audience to believe. With Christ's substitutionary death and the approval of God as demonstrated in the Resurrection (**Romans 1:4; 4:25**), through Jesus (His sacrifice) the forgiveness of sins has been made available. This proclamation included the necessity of "belief" and the promise of "justification." These rich theological terms, the cornerstones of Paul's theology, are spelled out in his letters to the Galatians and the Romans.
- Note that this justification is from everything you could not be justified from by the Law of Moses. The law could not give them justification. Instead, being "justified" could occur only through the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross (**Romans 5:9**). Because God is holy, He cannot accept people by simply disregarding or ignoring their sins. Nor can He accept His own people, the Jews, merely on the basis of their relationship to Abraham or by their trying to follow the law of Moses, for the sinful human nature had to be dealt with. And God did this through the sacrificial death of His Son. This justification is God's approval, given to people only on the basis of what Christ did. It is an acquittal that sets free all those who are otherwise hopeless prisoners of sin. Because of Christ's shed blood on the cross, people no longer have to bear the penalty for sin—death (**Romans 6:23**). Jesus paid it all.

Read Acts 13:40-41.

- Paul’s final words were words of warning. He drew from a common theme sounded by many of the prophets: “*Be careful that you don’t miss what God is doing right before your very eyes.*” Paul cited **Habakkuk 1:5** as a representative passage in which the prophet warned Judah of its impending judgment—the exile to Babylon. In the same way their ancestors had failed to recognize what God was doing among them, Paul’s audience was about to miss what God was doing in their day.

Read Acts 13:42.

- After the sermon, the reception must have been positive, for Paul and Barnabas were invited back to speak further on the next Sabbath. But this warm welcome would not last long.

Read Acts 13:43.

- The two groups addressed twice by Paul—Jews and godly converts—followed them out of the synagogue. These were probably the ones who were ready to respond to the gospel message or perhaps even already had. The simple message from these two missionaries was to urge them, “by God’s grace, keep giving consideration to the grace of God (literally to “continue in the grace of God”).

PAUL TURNS TO THE GENTILES—13:44-52

Declaring boldly the death and resurrection of Christ and the forgiveness that is possible only through him (13:38-

39), Paul and Barnabas drew huge crowds on their second Sabbath in Antioch of Pisidia. Among those gathered were a number of jealous Jewish leaders (13:45). Despite efforts by these leaders to discredit Paul and his message, the assembled Gentiles eagerly embraced the gospel. This further enraged the Jewish leaders who were eventually able to stir up a mob that ran Paul and Barnabas out of town. These events serve as an example of the entire ministry of Paul: stiff opposition from most Jews and joyous acceptance of the gospel message by many Gentiles.

Read Acts 13:44-45.

- In one short week, the news had spread through the city of Antioch so that on the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear what Paul and Barnabas had to say. This huge and unusual turnout was likely due to a Gentile influx rather than a Jewish one, since the Jewish attendance at the synagogue probably was fairly constant.
- The Jews in attendance were filled with jealousy. Jealousy is a deed of the flesh and obviously a dangerous and deadly emotion! The jealousy of the Jews led them to talk abusively against Paul's message, although it must have been difficult debating this brilliant disciple of Christ. The Greek term *blasphemountes* (from which comes the word "blasphemy") describes the Jews' abusive arguing.

Read Acts 13:46-47.

- In answer to this jealous and abusive response from the Jews, Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, stating the necessity of their going to the Jews first. Why was it necessary for the gospel to go first to the Jews? God planned that through the Jewish nation, all the world

would come to know Him (**Genesis 12:3**). Also, the message of Jesus is basically a Jewish one, steeped in Old Testament prophecy and promises directly made to the Jews. They, of all people should have been the most ready for the fulfillment that had come in Christ. In addition, Paul, a Jew himself, loved his people (**Romans 9:1-5**) and wanted to give them every opportunity to find the truth and then join him in proclaiming God's salvation. Unfortunately, many Jews did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah and did not understand that God was offering salvation to anyone, Jew or Gentile, who comes to Him through faith in Christ. They should have been the ones evangelizing their Gentile neighbors; instead, someone else would have to do it. Paul quoted **Isaiah 49:6**. God had set the Jew to be a light for the Gentiles. He wanted them to be the privileged announcers of salvation to the ends of the earth. But it was not to be. Their jealous hatred of the good news of Christ was but a foreshadowing of the anger that surfaces against those spreading His good news. In rejecting the Messiah, the Jews had, in essence, judged themselves unworthy of eternal life.

- The evangelistic thrust was thus turned to the Gentiles. God had planned for Israel to be the light (**Isaiah 49:6**). But Israel had forsaken that task, so it was given to the church to carry out. Through Israel came Jesus, the light of the nations (**Luke 2:32**). This light would spread out and enlighten the Gentiles; Israel had been faithless, unresponsive, and blind.

Read Acts 13:48.

- Contrast this Gentile response to that of the Jews. The Gentiles were very glad and thanked the Lord for His message. In a strong statement about the sovereign hand of God, Luke wrote, "*And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.*" The Greek verb for

“appointed” is *tetagmenoi* from *tasso*, a military word meaning to “arrange” or “assign.” Various people were “assigned” to eternal life by Him (the unmentioned “Appointer”). The significance in this situation is the fact that those “appointed” were Gentiles. Thus was set the pattern that would surface again and again—the Jews reject, the Gentiles respond in great numbers, and, in turn, the Jews become belligerent and often physically violent against the Christians.

Read Acts 13:49-59.

- Again, Luke noted the spread of the Word of the Lord despite the Jews who stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas. The Jews used their contacts in high places—women of high standing and leading men—to drive Paul and Barnabas out of their part of the country. The “women of high standing” were probably Gentile women from the upper class who were proselytes and attended the synagogue. The “leading men” were city magistrates.
- Evidently, these jealous Jews would stop at nothing to get the missionaries out of their city. Using every type of pressure available—political, economic, social—they worked hard at ridding themselves of this perceived threat to their way of life. This was a sad moment; those so desperately in need of salvation driving from their city the bearers of the Good News—news of forgiveness, of justification before God. And they drove it out of their region.

Read Acts 13:51.

- Often, Jews would shake the dust off their feet when leaving a Gentile town on the way back to their own land. For Paul and Barnabas to do this to Jews

demonstrated that Jews who reject the gospel are not truly part of Israel and are no better than pagans. It was a gesture of utter scorn and disassociation. Jesus had told His disciples to shake from their feet the dust of any town that would not accept or listen to them (**Mark 6:11**). This symbolized cleansing themselves from the contamination of people who did not worship God. The disciples were not to blame if the gospel was rejected, as they had faithfully presented it.

Read Acts 13:52.

- In contrast with the paranoid, politicking Jews, working hard to rid themselves of the gospel messengers, the believers, most of whom were Gentiles, were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. Like the coming of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem at Pentecost (2:3-4), in Samaria at the laying on of the apostles' hands (8:17), and in Caesarea during Peter's preaching (10:44-46), the believers here were "*filled with joy*"—the kind of inexplicable and overflowing joy of one freshly filled with the loving, forgiving Spirit of God.

ACTS

Chapter 14

Chased out of Antioch of Pisidia (13:50), Paul and Barnabas journeyed southeast to the region of Galatia, stopping first in the city of Iconium. Again the missionaries went straight to the synagogues, where they preached the gospel and saw many believe in Christ. Alarmed by the success of this message, the Jews in Iconium immediately launched an attack against the messengers who had brought it (14:2). Ignoring the miraculous signs that confirmed the divine nature of the gospel, the Jews (together with some unbelieving Gentiles) made plans to stone Paul and Barnabas. Learning of this plot, the missionaries fled, taking their message to the cities of Lystra and Derbe and the surrounding area.

Read Acts 14:1.

- Iconium was located about sixty miles east and a bit south of Antioch of Pisidia. What happened there confirmed that the mighty movement of God in Antioch was no fluke; God was working with such power “*that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks*” were coming to faith. As in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas began in the synagogue.

Read Acts 14:2.

- As in Antioch, the Jews in Iconium opposed the gospel. They spurned God’s message, rousing the Gentiles and stirring up distrust against Paul and Barnabas.
- These tactics, similar to what had been used in Antioch of Pisidia, appear to have riled up the entire population.

Read Acts 14:3.

- The persecution seems to have partially been the reason that Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time in Iconium. The powerful preaching of 14:1 is further referred to as “*speaking boldly in the Lord*” (4:13; 13:46).
- As had been the case everywhere they had gone, God confirmed the message of his grace by enabling Paul and Barnabas to do miraculous signs and wonders. These kinds of miracles had also been present in the ministry of the apostles (3:1-11; 5:12-16). Paul would later refer back to the miracles God did on this mission as evidence of God’s working among them (**Galatians 3:5; 2 Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:3–4**).
- In Acts, signs and wonders were key to revealing the work of salvation in Christ and to proclaiming the gospel. They authenticated the apostles’ authority and the authority of those associated with them (Barnabas in 14:2-3; Stephen in 6:8; Philip in 8:5-6). A “sign” (*semeion*) is a miracle whereby God shows Himself to be almighty. A “wonder” (*teras*) is an amazing miracle that causes astonishment. In the Old Testament, the word “wonder” referred to God’s redemptive activity when Moses led the Hebrews from Egypt (**Deuteronomy 26:5-11**). In the early church, these great miracles, empowered by the Spirit, showed God’s new redemptive work in Christ. Following are some of the verses in Acts where signs, wonders, and miracles are mentioned:
 - 2:19–“I will cause wonders in the heavens above.”
 - 2:22–“God publicly endorsed Jesus of Nazareth by doing wonderful miracles, wonders, and signs through Him.”
 - 2:43–“The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders.”

- 4:30–“May miraculous signs and wonders be done.”
- 5:12–“The apostles were performing many miraculous signs and wonders.”
- 6:8–“Stephen ... performed amazing miracles and signs.”
- 7:36–“By means of many miraculous signs and wonders, he led them out of Egypt.”
- 8:6–“Crowds listened intently to what he had to say because of the miracles he did.”
- 8:13–“He was amazed by the great miracles and signs Philip performed.”
- 14:3–“The Lord proved their message was true by giving them power to do miraculous signs and wonders.”
- 15:12–“Everyone listened as Barnabas and Paul told about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.”

Read Acts 14:4.

- In Iconium, a rift developed among the residents. Some believed the rumors and sided with the Jews, while others sided with the apostles.

Read Acts 14:5-7.

- A mob, stimulated by their mind-poisoning leaders, became much more brutal than had been the case at any point in the apostles’ ministry. Apparently a coalition had formed between the Gentile and the Jewish leaders in opposition to the apostles. They decided to attack the apostles and stone them. Fortunately, the apostles heard of the plan and fled for their lives. The next stop was Lystra, a smaller city about twenty miles south of Iconium.

PAUL AND BARNABAS IN LYSTRA AND DERBE—14:8-20

At Lystra, the missionaries healed a man crippled from birth. The pagan Gentiles of the area saw this miracle and concluded that Paul and Barnabas must be Greek “*gods in human bodies*” (14:11 NLT). Despite an immediate rejection of this foolish notion and loud explanations to the contrary, the apostles “*could scarcely restrain the people from sacrificing to them*” (14:18 NLT)!

Suddenly, the fickle mob turned murderous, prodded by some angry Jews from nearby Antioch and Iconium. Together they stoned Paul, dragged him out of Lystra, and left him for dead. Then, in one of the most amazing moments of New Testament history, the bloody apostle got up and went back into the city. His joyful perseverance in the face of extreme persecution is testimony to the power of the Holy Spirit in a believer’s life.

Read Acts 14:8.

- In contrast to what had been mostly a preaching and teaching ministry thus far (although there is a reference to signs and wonders in Iconium—14:3), the major event of Lystra involved a man who had been crippled from birth. This verse has the identical wording used in Luke’s description of the lame man healed by Peter in 3:2. The fact of his being “crippled from birth” assures that the healing was real. The people of the area would know beyond a shadow of a doubt this person had a lifelong physical ailment that could not be cured.
- Other similarities between this miracle and the healing recorded in Chapter 3 include the steady gaze of the apostle (compare 14:9 to 3:4) and the exuberant response of the healed man (compare 14:10 to 3:8). To the early

readers of this book, the miracle confirmed Paul's status as an agent of God, comparable to Peter.

Read Acts 14:9-10.

- Paul recognized that this man had faith, so he addressed the man with authority: “***Stand up straight on your feet!***” the apostle commanded, and the man jumped up and began to walk for the first time ever. An interesting verse to ponder is **Matthew 13:58**.

Read Acts 14:11-12.

- Evidently, the crowd that witnessed this miracle was large. The response was immediate and emotional. Concluding that these men were gods in human bodies, they went so far as to decide that Paul was Hermes and Barnabas, Zeus. They called Barnabas “Zeus,” the father of the gods, perhaps due to Barnabas's seniority or appearance. Paul, as the chief speaker, was seen as Hermes (the messenger of the gods).
- According to Greek and Roman mythology, Zeus and Hermes (their Roman names were Jupiter and Mercury) were two gods. People from Lystra claimed these gods had once visited their city and, according to the legend, no one offered them hospitality except an old couple. So Zeus and Hermes killed the rest of the people and rewarded the old couple.
- When the citizens of Lystra saw the miracles of Paul and Barnabas, they assumed that the gods were revisiting them. Remembering the story of what had happened to the previous citizens, they immediately honored Paul and Barnabas, showering them with gifts. The fact that they shouted in their local dialect shows why Paul had let the crowd go so far. He knew neither the language nor the local myth.

Read Acts 14:13.

- The matter quickly got out of hand. The priest of Zeus was in the process of bringing oxen for a sacrifice. He wanted to honor these noble visitors who were in town! Both he and the crowds were ready to offer sacrifices to these two who must be gods.
- “*When people stop believing in God, they do not believe in nothing. They believe in anything.*” G. K. Chesterton

Read Acts 14:14-15.

- Barnabas and Paul were horrified by news of an impending sacrifice on their behalf, so they tore their clothes, a common Jewish gesture of horror or sorrow. Imagine being a servant of the Most High God and having someone try to worship you?
- Paul and Barnabas affirmed the fact that they were not visiting gods but mere mortals just like the residents of Lystra. They immediately took advantage of the startled, gathered, and attentive crowd to preach the good news. What a perfect platform! These sincere, excited believers in Zeus had been ready to spend the time, money, and effort to worship a god that didn't exist. So Paul directed them to “*the living God, who made the heaven and the earth.*”

Read Acts 14:16-17.

- Contrast this sermon to a crowd of idol-worshipping pagans with Paul's sermon to the Scripture-literate Jews in Chapter 13. This message was perfectly designed for a crowd accustomed to superstitious worship built around the various gods of nature. This is one of two speeches to Gentiles recorded in Acts (17:22-31) and differs from Jewish sermons in its absence of Old

Testament references. This shows Paul's creative adaptability.

- God had been trying to get the people's attention. The first witness these people should have noticed was the good things that God had made and had given abundantly to all—the rains, the fruitful seasons, food, and even joy. This general revelation was in place to encourage all observers to consider God.
- God who is a gracious, patient Creator, was waiting for them to see what was in plain view.

Read Acts 14:18.

- The impact of the miracle of the healed man was almost too strong to counter. In spite of the message of the apostles, the worshippers of Zeus had difficulty stopping what appeared to be a sacrificial ceremony. It is further testimony to the character of Paul and Barnabas that such was not permitted to go on.

Read Acts 14:19.

- A small Jewish contingent in Lystra may have informed Jews from Antioch and Iconium of the presence of these “troublemakers.” The healing miracle would only have deepened the jealousy and heightened the resolve to take drastic action to rid themselves of them.
- The Jews were effective in wooing the crowd, winning them over to their view that the apostles should be stopped. Paul was stoned and dragged out of the city, left for dead. According to Scripture records, this is the only time Paul was stoned (**2 Corinthians 11:25**). Nothing is said about what they did to Barnabas.

Read Acts 14:20.

- This is one of the most powerful moments in the book of Acts. Paul, surely bloody and bruised from the stoning he had just endured, surrounded by believers (maybe some who had just come to faith through his ministry), got up and went back into the city. This courageous messenger, who had faithfully preached the Good News and had been persecuted for it at every turn, got up, dusted himself off, and went back to work. Others would have quit, but not Paul. The next day he left for the next stop on his missionary journey—the town of Derbe.

PAUL AND BARNABAS RETURN TO ANTIOCH OF SYRIA—14:21-28

Following a successful evangelistic campaign in Derbe, the missionaries backtracked through all the cities visited on their missionary journey. The goal was to strengthen the believers and to appoint elders in the churches.

Having done this, Paul and Barnabas returned to their home base in Antioch of Syria and reported to the church there.

This brief passage not only demonstrates God's grace and faithfulness, but it also sets the stage for the coming controversy over the presence of newly converted Gentiles in a previously all-Jewish church.

“Most of the grand truths of God have to be learned by trouble; they must be burned into us with the hot iron of affliction (Psalm 119:67, 71), otherwise we shall not truly receive them. No man is competent to judge in matters of the kingdom, until first he has been tried; since there are many things to be learned in the depths which we can never know in the heights.” Charles H. Spurgeon

Near the end of their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas went back through the cities where they had ministered and “*appointed elders in every church ... turning them over to the care of the Lord*” (14:23).

Read Acts 14:21-22.

- Paul and Barnabas once again preached the Good News, this time in Derbe. The phrase “*taught many*” or “*made many disciples*” shows that there was more than just an evangelistic campaign in progress. There is no mention of opposition in Derbe. Perhaps that is why they were able to get to the discipleship phase of ministry.
- Having reached the easternmost part of this first journey, as incredible as it must seem, Paul and Barnabas retraced their footsteps, returning to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch of Pisidia, even to places where they had experienced rejection of the most violent sort! What a courageous pair! They went home the hard way!
- The purpose of this return trip was mainly to strengthen the believers and encourage them to continue in the faith. Apparently, the believers left behind in these cities were facing persecution from the sources that had attacked Paul and Barnabas, for Paul told them that “*we must through many tribulations enter the Kingdom of God.*”

Read Acts 14:23.

- To evangelism and discipleship was added leadership. The apostles established healthy churches in the areas where people responded to the gospel. They appointed elders in each church (this is the first mention of elders in church history). The further explanation, with prayer and fasting, recalls the way this missionary team had been commissioned (13:3) and the spiritual process by which they proceeded through every major decision.

The commissioning (“*commended them to the Lord*”) probably involved laying on of hands.

Read Acts 14:24-25.

- Paul and Barnabas had faced stoning in Lystra (14:19), a violent mob of Gentiles and Jews in Iconium (14:5), and a jealous, manipulating coalition of influential Jews in Antioch of Pisidia (13:50). Yet they retraced their footsteps, returning to each place they had been. Their preaching in Perga most likely included the same prayerful selection and commissioning of elders mentioned in 14:23, as well as the strengthening of the believers and encouragement to continue in the faith mentioned in 14:22.
- It appears that they had not preached in Perga on the outward leg of the journey. The record states only that John Mark had parted company with them there (13:13). They may have left that region quickly for one reason or another. On the way back, however, they did minister in Perga.

THE END OF THE FIRST JOURNEY

From Antioch in Pisidia, Paul and Barnabas went down the mountains back to Pamphylia on the coast. Stopping first in Perga, where they had landed, they went west to Attalia, the main port that sent goods from Asia to Syria and Egypt. There they found a ship bound for Seleucia, the port of Antioch in Syria. This ended their first missionary journey.

Read Acts 14:26.

- Finally, from the port city of Attalia, they sailed back to Antioch of Syria, the point of their commissioning to the

grace of God (13:1-3). The road-weary travelers had completed the work for which they had been sent.

- And what a journey it had been! There were two more journeys yet to come in the book of Acts, plus a trip to Rome, and even these do not finish the story of Paul's ministry.

Read Acts 14:27-28.

- Paul and Barnabas returned to their sending church in Antioch and called the church together to report all that the Lord had done on their trip; they made it very clear that the work had been done by God. God was the one who ***“had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.”*** Paul and Barnabas had witnessed it with their own eyes.
- Imagine the attention the two missionaries received at those meetings. They recounted the stories that Luke recorded—ships and sorcerers, Roman government officials coming to faith and powerful political enemies mounting a smear campaign, mob scenes, hurried getaways, one deadly time where Paul did not escape, the names and the faces. Surely Paul and Barnabas would speak at length about the new faces of those brand-new brothers and sisters in Christ and that privileged moment when the spark of faith ignited into a roaring flame. Yes, there had been horrible difficulties but none bad enough to erase the joy of seeing the Lord draw multiple men, women, and children to Himself (**John 6:44**).
- There were now churches needing prayer, elders to encourage, conflicts to manage, and heresies to challenge. God Himself was beginning something great among the Gentiles, and this bloody but unbeaten team, sent by this praying church in Antioch, was determined to be a part of it!
- ***“[Paul and Barnabas] stayed [in Antioch] a long time with the disciples.”*** This journey had probably taken the

better part of a year and had aroused the interest of the Jerusalem church, who would want the apostles' report as well (see the next chapter).

- Paul probably wrote his letter to the Galatians while he was staying in Antioch (AD 48 or 49) after completing his first missionary journey. Galatians was probably written before the Jerusalem Council (Chapter 15) because, in the letter, the question of whether Gentile believers should be required to follow Jewish law was not yet resolved. The council would meet to solve that problem, as recorded in the next chapter.

ACTS

Chapter 15

THE COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM–15:1-21

As many Gentile believers came into the church, legalistic Jews demanded that these new converts be circumcised. Fierce arguing about this issue resulted in the first church council. At Jerusalem, the apostles and elders convened to consider the relationship between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, between Moses' law and the gospel of grace.

The council concluded, based on the Old Testament book of Amos (as expounded by James, leader of the proceedings), and in light of the experiences of both Peter and Paul, that Gentiles were accepted. Further, the council ruled that salvation depended solely on belief in Jesus' death on the cross to pay the penalty for man's sin, not on keeping the law of Moses.

Read Acts 15:1.

- These men were of a group called the Judaizers who came from Judea (perhaps from Jerusalem) to Antioch; they held the opinion that Gentiles could not be saved unless they were circumcised.
- God had made the covenant of circumcision with Abraham (Genesis 17). This covenant was a sign of Abraham's, as well as his descendants' obedience to God in all matters, and it signified the Jews as God's covenant people. Once circumcised, there was no turning back. The circumcised man would be identified as a Jew forever. More than any other practice, circumcision separated God's people from their pagan neighbors.

- The problem described in this verse involves the terms under which Gentiles could be admitted into the church. These Jews from Judea were not disputing that Gentiles could be saved. They were insisting, however, that Gentiles must adhere to the laws of Moses, including the physical rite of circumcision. In effect, they were saying that Gentiles must first become Jews before they could become Christians.
- These Judaizers were not evil; unlike their hard-hearted and hateful Hebrew brothers who rejected Jesus, these legalists were sympathetic to the teachings of Jesus and in some way they had associated with the early church. Although moral and God-fearing, Paul called them “false brothers,” for their beliefs were far from the true gospel (Galatians 2:1-10).
- To understand the Judaizers’ actions, we need to understand their mind-set. They were steeped in the long and proud history of the Jews. Certainly the Hebrews were God’s chosen people. God had given the Jews numerous advantages, blessings, and responsibilities. He had been faithful to them, even during their rebellious periods. And Jesus, their long-awaited Messiah, had come. Then they had experienced the bewildering and exciting events of Pentecost.
- In the early days, all of the believers were Jews. In fact, the early church was viewed as a sect within Judaism. But soon Gentiles began putting their faith in Christ. Furthermore, Paul and his colleagues were intentionally seeking to bring Gentiles into the community of faith. To the strict Jews among them, this was acceptable, except that they believed Paul’s message to be dangerously incomplete. Paul wasn’t asking these Gentile converts to follow the old ways! He wasn’t saying anything to these ex-pagans about circumcision and keeping the law! So the Judaizers set about to correct the problem. They believed they had Scripture on their side (**Genesis 17:14**;

Exodus 12:48-49). Even Jesus had said, “*I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to fulfill them*” (**Matthew 5:17**). The Judaizers concluded that Christianity was not intended to bypass Judaism but to build on it.

- The Judaizers were afraid that soon the moral standards among believers would be weakened if they did not follow Jewish laws. The message Paul, Barnabas, and the other church leaders believed was that the law cannot bring salvation—only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ can a person be saved.

JUDAIZERS VERSUS PAUL

As the debate raged between the Gentile Christians and the Judaizers, Paul found it necessary to write to the churches in Galatia. The Judaizers were trying to undermine Paul’s authority. The debate over Jewish laws and Gentile Christians was officially resolved at the Jerusalem Council.

Read Acts 15:2.

- This was no small difference of opinion. This debate over circumcision and keeping the law was a major dispute, a serious theological crisis. If not handled wisely, the debate could have split the church. So Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem along with some local believers. They would meet with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this question.

Read Acts 15:3.

- On their journey to Jerusalem (a trip of about three hundred miles), Paul and Barnabas paid visits to several congregations. The church in Phoenicia was founded by

believers who had fled from Jerusalem (11:19); Samaria had been evangelized by Philip (8:5). Rather than being alarmed at the news of the conversion of Gentiles, these believers expressed much joy.

Read Acts 15:4.

- The language of the text suggests a public meeting. This group received Paul and Barnabas; they even welcomed them, although there were some in the group who still held a view far different than Paul's. Paul and Barnabas reported to the church that the events in question were things God had been doing through their ministry. God surely would not be drawing the Gentiles to Himself if He did not want them in His church or if they still had to fulfill other requirements before they could be saved.

Read Acts 15:5.

- Called here believers, these Judaizers belonged to the party of the Pharisees and elsewhere are referred to as "false brothers" (**Galatians 2:1-10**). These Christians had been Pharisees before they converted (like Paul). They found themselves having compatible views with Christianity because Pharisees believed in resurrection and in a Messiah, but many were reluctant to accept anyone who did not adhere to the oral tradition of law in addition to the Scriptures. Since only God knows the human heart, it is impossible to make a blanket statement regarding the eternal "destination" of this group. Probably some were sincere believers (though obviously confused about the relationship between law and grace). Others likely were blindly trusting in their own moralistic efforts to make them acceptable to God. Still others may have been infiltrators with evil motives.

- Whatever the “believers” individual status before God, the common concern of all in the Judaizer camp was that all Gentile converts be required to obey the law of Moses, especially regarding circumcision.

Read Acts 15:6.

- The exact makeup of this council is unknown. Other apostles (besides Peter, Paul, and James) may have been summoned and present. Verses 12 and 22 indicate this discussion took place in the presence of the entire congregation. But the clear implication is that the church leaders, the apostles and church elders (and not the whole assembly), deliberated and decided this volatile issue.

Read Acts 15:7.

- The Gentile question prompted much discussion. Literally, the wording suggests that the delegates inquired, debated, questioned, and perhaps even argued. After lengthy interaction, Peter shared his experience of how God had used him to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. Specifically, he was referring to the incident described in Chapter 10, where God had sovereignly led him to share the gospel with the Gentile Cornelius. If the Jerusalem Council took place in about AD 50, then Peter was referring to an event that had occurred about ten years earlier.

Read Acts 15:8-9.

- Jews considered Gentiles impure and required them to undergo proselyte baptism in order to convert to Judaism. Peter made it clear that God had purified Cornelius and his family as a result of faith alone. God had made no distinction between them as Gentiles and

the Jewish believers (10:34-48). All people have access to forgiveness and eternal life through their faith in Christ.

- Peter bolstered his argument by noting God’s outpouring of the Spirit. The Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit when they believed by faith, not because they had done any works of the law (10:44-46; Galatians 3:2). The presence of the Spirit in them was the clearest evidence of their acceptance by God (**Romans 8:9**).

Read Acts 15:10-11.

- Peter warned that by making strict adherence to the law a prerequisite for salvation, the church would be guilty of putting God to the test (that is, provoking God to wrath by doubting His wisdom and plan). Furthermore, the Jewish believers would be putting an unbearable yoke on the Gentiles. The word “**yoke**” was a common figurative term for religious “obligations.” It was the heavy wooden harness used by oxen to pull carts or plows (**Matthew 23:4; 11:28-30**).
- If the law was a yoke that neither the Jews of that day nor their ancestors had been able to bear, then how did having the law help them throughout their history? Paul wrote that the law had been a guide that was designed to point out their sins so they could repent and return to God (**Galatians 3:24-25**).
- Peter urged the council not to adopt a double standard. Salvation, whether for Jew or Gentile, is through the grace of the Lord Jesus (**Ephesians 2:8-9**). What the law could never do, God did through Jesus Christ (**Romans 8:1-4**). “Grace” is unmerited favor from God. People can do nothing to earn grace; it is simply given by God voluntarily to those He saves. No one deserves to be saved, and no religious, intellectual, or moral effort can

earn salvation because it comes only from God's mercy and love.

Read Acts 15:12.

- Peter, Paul, and Barnabas related their recent experiences in ministry among the Gentiles. What gave their presentation added authority was the report of ***“many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles.”*** The missionaries gave full credit to God for these miracles. The Greek word for “signs” (*semeia*) suggests “miracles that point to a divine truth.” “Wonders” (*teras*) are divine acts that produce awe. The clear implication is that these supernatural events revealed God's endorsement and blessing of their ministry to non-Jews.

Read Acts 15:13-14.

- James was Jesus' half-brother and the writer of the Epistle of James (perhaps already written and distributed prior to this council). Very little is known about the relationship between James and Jesus when they lived in Joseph and Mary's home in Nazareth. It is known, however, that the townsfolk who saw Jesus as a boy and young man were amazed at His wisdom and miraculous power but rejected His adult claim to be the Messiah (**Matthew 13:53–58**). These skeptics included Jesus' own family. At one point in Jesus' ministry, His earthly family tried to stop Him and restrain Him (**Mark 3:21**); presumably James was one of the family members who claimed that Jesus was out of His mind. The apostle John reported, ***“Even His brothers did not believe in Him”*** (**John 7:5**).
- Yet just a few years after that incident, James became the leader of the church in Jerusalem (12:17). We don't

know how James attained that important position (Clement of Alexandria wrote that he was chosen for the office by Peter and John), but clearly he was the leader. When this controversy over Gentile believers threatened to divide the church, Barnabas and Paul met with the elders and apostles in Jerusalem and submitted to their authority to James as the moderator, spokesman, and announcer of the final decision.

- That *this* James is the James mentioned earlier as Jesus' brother is confirmed by Paul in **Galatians 1:18-19**: *"It was not until three years later that I finally went to Jerusalem for a visit with Peter and stayed there with him for fifteen days. And the only other apostle I met at that time was James, our Lord's brother."* Later Paul adds, *"James, Peter, and John, who were known as pillars of the church, recognized the gift God had given me, and they accepted Barnabas and me as their co-workers"* (Galatians 2:9).
- What changed James from a skeptical younger brother to a committed follower of Jesus and outspoken leader of the church? He saw his brother alive; he saw the risen Christ! Writing to the Corinthians, Paul listed the eyewitnesses to the Resurrection: "For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time" (1 Corinthians 15:3-8).
- Then, after the Ascension, we find James with the apostles, Mary, and others, praying continually and waiting for the Holy Spirit as Jesus had told him to do

(1:4–14). The description of events here suggests that, as the leader of the church in Jerusalem, James was highly respected and known for his righteous life and devotion to the law. According to church tradition, he was called “Camel Knees” because of his prayer habits.

- The phrase “*God at first visited*” is important because it underlines the truth that God had already made clear His plan to include Gentiles in the church before Paul and Barnabas ever went on the first missionary venture.
- The phrase “*a people for His name*” (previously used only of the Jews as the people of God) here describes the Gentiles. This would have been heard as a remarkable statement by James.

Read Acts 15:15-18.

- Recognizing the need to base any decision on something more substantial than mere experience, James went to the Scriptures. He demonstrated how all the events in question corresponded with the witness of the Old Testament prophets. This was the ultimate test.
- Scholars have long wondered about this passage of Acts and the Old Testament quote it contains. James’s quote includes a text different from the Hebrew text and different even from the Septuagint (an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament). It is not clear why James did this, but it is obvious how he understood and applied this passage to the crisis facing the early church.
- Without going so far as to specifically say that this prophecy found in **Amos 9:1112** was being “fulfilled” in these events, James did say that what was happening in the church (God’s obvious acceptance of the Gentiles and their genuine conversion and their inclusion in this new entity called the church) “agreed” completely with “*the words of the prophets*” that had been written long before in the Old Testament. In God’s judgment the

dwelling of David was reduced to ruins. God's covenant with David stated that one of David's descendants would always sit on his throne (**2 Samuel 7:12-16**). The exile of the Jews made this promise seem impossible. But after this God would rebuild and restore the kingdom to its promised glory. This was a promise to both Israel and Judah, not to be fulfilled by an earthly, political ruler but by the Messiah who would renew the spiritual kingdom and rule forever. James quoted these verses, finding this promise fulfilled in Christ's resurrection and in the presence of both Jews and Gentiles in the church. All other peoples may seek...even all the Gentiles envision the messianic kingdom, which will be universal and include the Gentile nations. When God brings in the Gentiles, He is restoring the ruins. After the Gentiles are called together, God will renew and restore the fortunes of the new Israel. All the land that was once under David's rule will again be part of God's nation.

- Even though James quoted just one prophet, Amos, he said "prophets" (plural), perhaps alluding to other written Scriptures, like **Isaiah 2:2; 11:10; 25:8-9**; and **Zechariah 8:23**. His main point was that Gentile salvation apart from the law does not in any way contradict the Old Testament Scriptures.

Read Acts 15:19-21.

- Without actually mentioning circumcision, James echoed Peter's argument by ruling that we (referring to the leaders in the church who were Jewish) should not make it difficult for the Gentiles to become Christians and join the church. This was, in effect, a rejection of the circumcision requirement.
- This judgment also included the stipulation that the Gentile converts should abstain from food polluted by idols. This was a problem in the New Testament

churches whereby meat was first sacrificed to idols and then sold in butcher shops (**1 Corinthians 8:1-13; 10:18-33**). They were also to abstain from sexual immorality, which was often a part of idol worship, although this probably referred to the common practice of marrying close relatives, and homosexuality (**Leviticus 18:6-20**). Finally, they were not to eat the meat of strangled animals or to consume blood. This reflected the biblical teaching that life is in the blood. Strangling an animal would keep the blood in the circulatory system and not drained away, thus causing blood to be eaten with the meat (**Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 17:10-14**).

- If Gentile Christians would abstain from these practices, they would get along better with their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ. Of course, there were other actions inappropriate for believers, but the Jews were especially concerned about these four. This ruling reflected the law of love (described by Paul in **1 Corinthians 8-10**). There was a sense in which the Jews needed to be patient with these new Gentile believers who were not familiar with all the Old Testament laws and rituals. And there was a sense in which the Gentiles needed to be sensitive to the Jews who were there first, being careful not to offend their weaker consciences.

THE LETTER FOR GENTILE BELIEVERS—15:22-35

The Jerusalem Council summarized in a letter its decision regarding Gentile circumcision. This letter was carried to Antioch of Syria by Judas and Silas. Paul and Barnabas accompanied these specially chosen messengers.

Essentially, the letter instructed the Gentile converts to strictly avoid idolatry, immorality, and eating the meat of

strangled animals—activities, common among the Gentiles that were especially offensive to Jewish sensibilities.

This directive brought joy to the believers at Antioch. The Jerusalem entourage stayed for a while, strengthening the believers and teaching the word of the Lord.

Read Acts 15:22.

- The apostles did not hold a church office but a position and function based on specific gifts (**1 Corinthians 12:28**). Elders were appointed to lead and manage the local church. In this meeting, the apostles submitted to the judgment of an elder—James, Jesus’ half-brother.
- A representative from the Jewish believers and one from the Gentile believers were appointed as delegates to go with Paul and Barnabas to deliver the council’s decision to Antioch of Syria and the surrounding churches. Judas was a Jew; Silas was a Greek. They were two of the church leaders and are called “prophets” (15:32). Their presence together would give credence to the council’s ruling. Later, Silas would accompany Paul on the second missionary journey in place of Barnabas, who would visit different cities with John Mark. Peter referred to Silas as the coauthor of 1 Peter (**1 Peter 5:12**), but it is not known when he joined Peter.

Read Acts 15:23.

- This letter summarized the findings of the Jerusalem Council. It would serve to validate the verbal report that Paul, Barnabas, Judas, and Silas would be delivering to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia.

Read Acts 15:24-27.

- In this letter, the Jerusalem church disassociated itself from those certain persons who had been pressing for the circumcision of Gentile converts. Although the Judaizers had gone out from among the believers in Jerusalem, they had received no instructions from the apostles and had been acting without their approval. They were not to be regarded as spokesmen for the church. Rather, the men bringing the letter (Paul, Barnabas, Judas, and Silas) had been chosen as representatives of the church, with authority to speak on behalf of the elders and apostles.
- The letter conveyed the unanimity of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem in these matters, as well as the great warmth and respect that the Jerusalem elders felt for Paul and Barnabas, who had risked their lives for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ. The letter introduced Judas and Silas (15:22) who would also give an account of the decision made by the church leaders.

Read Acts 15:28-29.

- The letter implies a clear leading of God in the decision rendered (it seemed good to the Holy Spirit). Two of the council's requirements involved issues of morality (avoiding idolatry and sexual immorality), and two involved issues of food. The dietary restrictions were because the early church often shared common meals (similar to modern-day church potluck dinners). Sometimes called "love feasts" and held in conjunction with the Lord's Supper (**1 Corinthians 11:17-34**), these meals would bring Jews and Gentiles together. In such settings, a Gentile might horrify the Jewish Christians by eating meat that was not kosher. In this compromise agreement, legalistic Jews no longer insisted that the Gentiles had to be circumcised to be saved, and the

Gentiles accepted a change in their eating habits. These decisions should not be regarded as divine ordinances but rather as stipulations for fellowship between the two parties. Their concerns were not so much theological as practical.

- *“False doctrine does not necessarily make a man a heretic, but an evil heart can make any doctrine heretical.”* Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Read Acts 15:30-31.

- Luke painted a picture of a teachable, eager church in Antioch. Whereas the false teaching of the legalists had been burdensome and a source of great confusion, the divine wisdom behind the ruling of James and the elders resulted in a joyful, encouraged congregation. The law obligates; the gospel of grace liberates.
- The end result of the potential crisis was great joy. It's easy to see why. First, a wise and careful approach to conflict resolution had been followed. Second, the leaders had ruled only after lengthy discussion and leading by the Spirit. Third, the members of the church had submitted to their God-appointed leadership.

Read Acts 15:32-33.

- Judas and Silas remained in Antioch for some time to encourage and strengthen the believers there. They then were sent off in peace by the believers and returned to Jerusalem.

Read Acts 15:34.

- Several of the more reliable, ancient manuscripts do not contain this verse.

Read Acts 15:35.

- The length of Paul and Barnabas's stay in Antioch is not known; "some days" (15:36) could indicate a period lasting as long as several months. The fact, however, that many others were ministering in Antioch opened up the opportunity for Paul to attempt another missionary endeavor.

PAUL AND BARNABAS SEPARATE—15:36-41

When the time came for a second missionary journey, Barnabas and Paul had a sharp disagreement concerning John Mark. Barnabas wanted to take this young man, his nephew, but Paul refused, citing John Mark's desertion during the first evangelistic endeavor.

This incident demonstrates the sovereignty of God as two missionary teams were formed: Paul and Silas, and Barnabas and Mark. Even though no further word is given regarding the results of Barnabas and Mark's evangelistic efforts, we see God's messengers departing Antioch in two directions.

Read Acts 15:36.

- Paul wanted to take another trip, primarily to revisit the churches that had been established on the first missionary journey. Evangelism would prove to be a major component of Paul's mission, but establishing and equipping the believers in every city seems to have been his primary objective (**Ephesians 4:11-12**).

Read Acts 15:37-38.

- The grand plan of Paul and Barnabas to launch a follow-up campaign quickly unraveled when the topic of John Mark came up. The men disagreed over the inclusion of

this young believer on another missionary trip. Paul adamantly opposed taking him along. Because he had deserted them on the first journey (13:13), Paul may have felt that he would be an unreliable person to have along. The debate between the old colleagues led to a strong disagreement.

- Why John Mark deserted has been a subject of great debate. He may have simply been homesick. He may have become afraid due to the opposition of certain parties to the gospel message. He may have intended to accompany Paul and Barnabas only as far as Pamphylia and had simply failed to communicate this fact.
- Nevertheless, despite Mark's previous behavior, Barnabas saw great potential in this young man. Barnabas, the "encourager," as his name means, used that gift in developing this young man into someone who eventually would serve the church well, writing the Gospel of Mark as well as becoming a valuable help to Paul himself (**Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11**).

Read Acts 15:39.

- Barnabas and Paul's disagreement was so sharp that they ended up separating. Barnabas took John Mark and sailed west to Cyprus. These two are not mentioned again in the book of Acts.
- It is important to note that the disagreement was not about theology. Both men would continue to teach the true gospel message. Through this disagreement, God doubled the missionary effort.

Read Acts 15:40-41.

- Paul's second missionary journey, this time with Silas as his partner, began approximately three years after his first one ended. The two visited many of the cities

covered on Paul's first journey, plus others. This journey would lay the groundwork for the church in Greece.

- Silas had been involved in the Jerusalem Council; he was one of the two men chosen to represent the Jerusalem church by taking the letter and decision back to Antioch (15:22). Paul, from the Antioch church, chose Silas, from the Jerusalem church, and they traveled together to many cities to spread the Good News. This teamwork demonstrated the church's unity after the decision at the Jerusalem Council.

ACTS
Chapter 16

PAUL'S SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY—16:1-5

The apostle Paul, concerned about the spiritual well-being of his Gentile children in the faith, took Silas and returned to the churches of Asia Minor. At Lystra, Paul met Timothy, who proved to be a beloved and dependable colleague. Together these men set about “from town to town” (16:4) to communicate the decision of the Jerusalem Council and to strengthen the churches.

Acts 16 records Paul and Silas embarking on what is called the second missionary journey.

THE SECOND JOURNEY BEGINS

Paul and Silas set out on a second missionary journey to visit the cities Paul had preached in earlier. This time they went by land rather than sea, traveling the Roman road through Cilicia, then northwest toward Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium. The Spirit told them not to go into Asia, so they turned northward toward Bithynia. Again the Spirit said no, so they turned west though Mysia to the harbor city of Troas.

Read Acts 16:1.

- Acts 14:6-21 describes the rough treatment Paul and Barnabas had received during their last visit to the city of Lystra. That was where Paul had been stoned, dragged out of the city, and left for dead. Paul had already gone back to that city once (14:21), and on this second journey, he returned again. If anyone ever doubted Paul's courage or tenacity, this verse ought to change that opinion! So concerned was Paul for the

believers in these cities that he risked his life to make sure they were growing in the faith.

- In Lystra lived “*a certain disciple named Timothy.*” Timothy may have become a Christian after Paul’s first visit to Lystra. Timothy already had solid Jewish training in the Scriptures from his mother (a Jewish believer) and grandmother (**2 Timothy 1:5; 3:15**). When Paul arrived on this second journey, Timothy had grown into a respected disciple of Jesus.
- Both this verse and the next one mention that Timothy’s “*father was a Greek.*” The reason for mentioning this is explained in the following verse.

Read Acts 16:2-3.

- Timothy’s excellent reputation in the church and, evidently, Paul’s need for an assistant like John Mark, compelled Paul to invite Timothy to join them on their journey.
- Apparently, Timothy wanted to go, for he submitted to being circumcised before they left—clearly a mark of his commitment. Timothy was the son of a Jewish mother and Greek father. Under Jewish rabbinic law and since his mother was Jewish, Timothy was Jewish and needed to fulfill the covenant. So Paul asked Timothy to be circumcised in order to remove some of the stigma that might have hindered his effectiveness in ministering to Jewish believers. Timothy’s mixed Greek/Jewish background could have created problems on their missionary journeys because many of their audiences would contain Jews who were concerned about keeping this tradition. Timothy’s submission to the rite of circumcision helped to avoid that potential problem.
- Paul may appear to be inconsistent here with his teaching in **Galatians 2:3-5**, where he refused to let Titus be circumcised. This is easily resolved when

considering the difference in the circumstances of the two situations. In Galatia, circumcision was being proclaimed (heretically!) as a method of justification. Paul wanted to clarify that it was not, so he intentionally left Titus uncircumcised to make his point. Here in Lystra, early on in his evangelistic endeavors, Paul was more intent on avoiding any potential offense that might hinder the spread of the gospel (**Romans 9:32-33; 1 Peter 2:8; 1 Corinthians 1:23; 9:19-23**). Although the Jerusalem Council had just ruled that circumcision was not necessary for Gentiles, Paul apparently thought that Timothy's mixed religious background might hinder his effectiveness. So, because Timothy was partly Jewish, he was circumcised.

Read Acts 16:4-5.

- At least one of the new items on the agenda of this trip was explaining the decisions that were made by the apostles and elders at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). The Jewish/Gentile issues that had been decided at the council would likely arise again in the largely Gentile areas where Paul was traveling. Luke did not record which cities were visited, just that they went from town to town.
- The term “*strengthened*” is the Greek word *estereounto*, which means “to be made solid or firm.” Stability and growth were the marks of this healthy church, flourishing here as the church has done elsewhere throughout this book (2:47; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24). Critics of Paul's Gentile-oriented ministry were looking for Paul's ministry to fail. Yet here, in the first real penetration of the gospel into the Gentile world, the church thrived in exactly the same way the mostly Jewish church had in its early days.

A CALL FROM MACEDONIA—16:6-10

Forbidden by the Holy Spirit to go into the provinces of Asia and Bithynia, Paul and his companions were directed instead past Mysia to the city of Troas. There Paul had a divine vision instructing him to go to Macedonia. These supernatural events served to underline the sovereign guidance of the Holy Spirit in Paul's evangelistic efforts.

HOW GOD SOVEREIGNLY GUIDED HIS PEOPLE IN ACTS

- Direct revelation (1:4-5, 11; 8:29; 10:19; 13:2; 16:6-7; 20:23)
- Scripture (1:20)
- The casting of lots (1:23-26)
- Unexpected supernatural acts (2:1-41)
- The apostles' teaching (2:42)
- Judgment (5:1-11)
- Church "growing pains" (6:1-7)
- Persecution and evil opposition (7:54-8:1; 14:5-7; 20:3)
- Angelic messengers (8:26; 10:3-8; 27:22-26)
- Miraculous relocation (8:39)
- Direct, life-altering encounters with the risen Lord (9:3-9)
- Visions (9:10; 10:3-8, 9-16; 11:6; 16:9-10; 18:9-11; 23:11)
- Human instruments/messengers (9:17-19, 27-28)
- Times of intense prayer (10:9; 13:2)
- Bringing to their minds the words of the Lord (11:16)
- Prophetic utterances (11:28; 21:4, 10-12)
- God-honoring, Spirit-led discussions among church leaders (15:1-31)
- Promptings by the Spirit (15:28; 19:21; 20:22)
- Closed doors (16:6-7)
- Favorable circumstances (19:8-11)
- Having them take advantage of civil/legal/political rights (25:10-12)

Read Acts 16:6.

- The regions of Phrygia and Galatia included much of modern-day Turkey, yet God, for reasons known only to Him, did not allow the missionaries to go into the province of Asia at that time. “Asia” referred not to the continent but rather to the Roman province of that name. In Paul’s day Asia was the western part of what is today called Asia Minor. Ephesus probably would have been the leading city in this region. The gospel did soon make it to Ephesus (and the rest of Asia), but only in God’s timing.
- The spread of the gospel was and always will be God’s advancing program, not Paul’s nor the apostles’. The Holy Spirit made the agenda and the travel itinerary, and Paul and Silas listened. We are told simply that the Holy Spirit told them not to go to the province of Asia at that time.

Read Acts 16:7-8.

- The travelers moved on to the border of Mysia and tried to enter Bithynia, a province just to the northeast of Asia, but again they were prohibited by God Himself. The Holy Spirit had closed the door twice for Paul, so Paul must have wondered which geographical direction God wanted him to take in spreading the gospel.
- Like the faith-filled soldiers they were, Paul and Silas avoided Mysia and went down to Troas. There, at last, God opened the door.

Read Acts 16:9-10.

- Finally God spoke. During the night, Paul had a vision in which he saw a man of Macedonia who was standing and begging him to “*Come over to Macedonia and help*

us.” (9:10, 12; 10:3, 17; 18:9; 22:17, other references of God communicating through visions.) Macedonia had been a Roman province since 146 BC and was located in what is today northern Greece.

- This anxious crew got ready at once, having drawn the obvious conclusion that God was behind the vision and that Macedonia had been prepared by God to respond to the gospel. Such would indeed be the case.

LYDIA OF PHILIPPI BELIEVES IN JESUS

16:11-15

In response to the Macedonian call, Paul and his associates immediately boarded a ship at Troas and sailed across the Aegean Sea, landing at Neapolis, the port city for Philippi (in what is now northern Greece). Shortly after their arrival, the missionaries somehow learned of a group of God-fearing women who would meet together each Sabbath on a riverbank to pray. After they spoke to these women, Lydia, a wealthy cloth merchant, embraced the gospel. She became the first European convert, and she hosted Paul and his traveling companions in her home during their ministry in Philippi.

Acts 16 highlights the stories of three individuals who became believers through Paul’s ministry in Philippi: Lydia, the influential businesswoman (16:14), the demon-possessed slave girl (16:16-18), and the jailer (16:27-30). The gospel was affecting all areas of society, just as it does today.

Read Acts 16:11-12.

- The travelers made their way across the upper portion of the Aegean Sea from Troas to Samothrace (a small island in the Aegean), then on to Neapolis, the port city

for Philippi. From Neapolis, Philippi was a ten-mile journey inland.

PAUL TRAVELS TO MACEDONIA

At Troas, Paul received the Macedonian call and he, Silas, Timothy, and Luke boarded a ship. They sailed to the island of Samothrace, then on to Neapolis, the port for the city of Philippi.

Philippi was the leading city of the region of Macedonia (northern Greece today), although it was not the capital city. With mountains on every side and its port city of Neapolis on the Aegean Sea, Philippi had originally been a strategic site in the Greek Empire.

Philippi was a city with a Roman garrison stationed there to keep it secure. The Philippians were proud of their Roman heritage and standing. Later, Paul would write a letter to the church he started in this city—the book of Philippians (probably from prison in Rome around AD 61). The letter is personal and tender, showing Paul’s deep friendship with the believers there. The ministry in Philippi would be significant. The positive response to the gospel in this city, as described in the next few verses, was likely the reason for the mission’s team remaining there for some days.

Read Acts 16:13.

- Inscribed on the arches outside the city of Philippi was a prohibition against bringing an unrecognized religion into the city; this may have been the reason for the prayer meeting being held outside the city on a riverbank. Ten Jewish males were necessary in a location to establish a synagogue. It appears there was

no synagogue in Philippi, forcing Paul and his companions to search for the seekers of God elsewhere.

- Paul's first evangelistic contact in Macedonia was with a small group of women. Paul never allowed gender or cultural differences to keep him from preaching the gospel. He presented the gospel to these women, and Lydia, an influential merchant, believed. This opened the way for ministry in that region.

Read Acts 16:14.

- Lydia was a dealer in purple cloth, a valuable and expensive material often worn as a sign of nobility or royalty. Lydia may have been a wealthy businesswoman. She was obviously a person of means, since she had guest rooms (16:15) and servants. Greek women of Lydia's day held elevated status and were able to conduct business and hold honorary public titles.
- Lydia was a worshipper of God, and God was at work in her life because “[*He*] ***opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.***”

Read Acts 16:15.

- After Lydia's conversion, “***she and her household were baptized.***” These same words are used to describe other conversions in Acts: Cornelius in 10:24, 44; the Philippian jailer in 16:31; and Crispus in 18:8 (**Romans 16:10-11; 1 Corinthians 1:16**). The other members of Lydia's household may have included servants as well as children. It is assumed, of course, that only those who truly had come to believe in Christ were baptized. As is commonly the case, however, the Lord may have reached whole families through the salvation of one of the members who shared the Good News with the other family members.

- Lydia's sincerity and the genuineness of her conversion appear in her invitation to the missionaries to use her house as their home base while in Philippi. Lydia convinced the travelers to stay at her home. She urged them until they gave in.

PAUL AND SILAS IN PRISON–6:16-40

While in Philippi, Paul's missionary team encountered a demon-possessed slave girl who continually attempted to disrupt their ministry. When an exasperated Paul commanded the evil spirit to come out of her, the girl lost her fortune-telling ability. This infuriated her masters, who had Paul and Silas dragged before the city authorities and thrown in prison.

God used an earthquake to free his servants and bring about the salvation of the Philippian jailer and his family. The next day, after the city officials learned that they had unlawfully beaten and jailed two Roman citizens, they apologized and begged Paul and Silas to leave the city. They did so after a final visit with Lydia and the believers at her home. Despite opposition, the gospel continued to spread.

Read Acts 16:16.

- The next recorded contact by Paul came from a significantly different level of society. This verse describes the missionaries meeting a slave girl. Worse still, she was demon-possessed. Fortune-telling was common in Greek and Roman culture. People used many superstitious methods for trying to see the future—from interpreting omens in nature to communicating with the spirits of the dead. This young slave girl had an evil spirit, and she made her masters rich by interpreting

signs and by fortune-telling. Her masters were exploiting her unfortunate condition for personal gain.

Read Acts 16:17.

- What the slave girl said was true, although the source of her knowledge was a demon. Paul and his companions indeed were “*servants of the Most High God*” and, in fact, were telling others the way to be saved. Why did a demon announce the truth about Paul, and why did this annoy Paul? If Paul accepted the demon’s words, he would appear to be linking the gospel with demon-related activities, not to mention the prophecy-for-profit approach that this girl’s owners had taken. Such association would damage the message of Christ.

Read Acts 16:18.

- Evidently, the young girl followed them every day as they made their way from Lydia’s home to the place of prayer down by the river. Finally Paul became so troubled that he directly rebuked the spirit that was abusing the girl. Using the powerful name of Jesus Christ, Paul commanded the demon to depart. And at that moment the spirit left her.

Read Acts 16:19.

- The owners were angry with Paul. They had been using the servant girl and her demonic powers solely for making money. They were infuriated that their business venture had been ruined. So they dragged Paul and Silas into the marketplace before the authorities where they would seek their own brand of justice.

Read Acts 16:20-21.

- These “*magistrates*” were obviously the “authorities” of 16:19. Each Roman colony had two of these “governors” over them. Paul and Silas were brought before them for some form of a trial.
- The charge was not that they had performed an exorcism on a slave girl, but rather that these men were Jews and were throwing the city into an uproar. The mention of the men’s Jewish roots was likely to arouse some of the prejudice that was present in this Roman colony and may explain why Luke and Timothy (both at least part Gentile) were not accused.
- The disruption of the city is said to be because Paul and Silas’s were teaching customs unlawful for Romans. These two government officials would be interested in keeping the peace (an important aspect of their job in a Roman colony) as well as enforcing the laws against foreign religions proselytizing Romans in a Roman colony. They were interpreting the law to say that the exorcism was proselytizing Judaism. Thus, the accusations were effective.

Read Acts 16:22.

- The twisting of the truth by these accusers was effective enough to motivate a mob to assemble quickly, which serves as proof of the accusation that Paul and Silas were throwing the city into an uproar (16:20).
- Wanting to keep the peace, the city officials ordered Paul and Silas to be stripped and beaten with wooden rods. Rods were wooden poles bound together and carried by these magistrates and were used to beat offenders. This was not the only time that such had happened (or would happen) to Paul. He wrote in **2 Corinthians 11:25** that it happened three times.

Read Acts 16:23-24.

- After the severe flogging, Paul and Silas were thrown in prison, and Luke subtly introduced the next unsuspecting convert to Christianity—the jailer who was ordered to keep them securely. The jailer imposed his version of maximum security—taking them to the heart of his prison (the innermost cell) and there fastening their feet in the stocks.

Read Acts 16:25.

- What an incredible scene this must have been! Paul and Silas were barely into their first stop on what promised to be an effective Macedonian evangelistic campaign; God had verbally called them there (16:9-10). In short order, however, they found themselves the victims of false charges, locked up in the depths of a Roman jail, in stocks! So what did they do? Blame God? Give up? No, their jail term was marked by only two activities: *“praying and singing hymns to God.”*
- The other prisoners were listening as Paul and Silas sang and prayed. The Greek word for “listening” (*epekroonto*) is a strong word implying that the prisoners were listening intently. It is a reminder to all believers that the world is watching when we suffer.

Read Acts 16:26.

- The answer to the prayers of Paul and Silas came with suddenness and authority in the form of a great earthquake, shaking the foundations of the prison, bursting open doors, and breaking loose the chains of every prisoner in the place.

Read Acts 16:27-28.

- Guards were responsible for their prisoners and would be held accountable for their escape. The punishment was usually the same sentence that would have been the prisoner's. Sometimes the guards were even executed (12:19). Possibly in order to avoid a Roman execution or perhaps to avoid having to live with the shame of his career failure, the jailer "***drew his sword and was about to kill himself.***"
- Paul intervened, shouting, "***We are all here!***" Paul was not speaking of just himself and Silas but of all the prisoners. All the prisoners were still there, sitting in a wide open jail, without chains. Why would the other prisoners not have fled the moment the doors were open? Most likely, God kept them there. The other prisoners had listened intently to all that had been prayed and sung (16:25). They may have known that the earthquake surely had something to do with the praying and singing of the two prisoners.
- These freshly liberated prisoners were now held captive by something stronger than chains; they wanted to know more about this God who could shake the world. They would not have to wait for long.

Read Acts 16:29-30.

- The jailer called for a light. A torch was needed to see into the unlit prison. Once inside, the jailer "***fell down trembling before Paul and Silas.***" Then he brought them out, evidently from the inner recesses where the stocks were located. He asked the question, the most profound and important question in life: "***What must I do to be saved?***"

Read Acts 16:31-32.

- This is the profound and important answer to the most profound and important question of the previous verse. The answer to the jailer's question is "***Believe.***" This is not just faith for faith's sake; it is faith with a very serious object. It is belief on the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The result is that you will be saved.
- The application of such a message was broader than just the jailer. It was relevant to his whole household. It was also relevant to the whole group of unfettered prisoners who were surely listening intently. Luke included the interesting phrase "***they spoke the word of the Lord to him***" to summarize the rest of what Paul and Silas said to the jailer.
- Paul and Silas spoke also to the jailer's family. Behind this whole scene echoes the promise of the Savior in 1:8: "***You will be my witnesses.***" Surely no one who heard Jesus that day would have ever believed that one of those places of witness would be a Philippian prison stockade freshly opened by a heaven-sent earthquake.

Read Acts 16:33-34.

- The jailer's conversion, like Lydia's, was followed by clear, demonstrated deeds reflecting the reality of the life-change that had occurred internally.
- The terms "***the same hour***" and "***immediately***" show that the new convert did not waste any time about making his public profession of allegiance to Jesus Christ through baptism. Those in his household who became believers were baptized as well.
- Afterward, the entire household rejoiced because they all believed in God. Who in that household could ever have dreamed that one of their father's prisoners, bound

in chains, would one day bring a message that would set them all free from their sin?

Read Acts 16:35-36.

- What brought the city officials to the decision of freeing the prisoners is not stated. Maybe it was the way the officials had let the mob determine their actions. Perhaps it was the brutal nature of the punishment with so little evidence against them. Maybe it was the earthquake that shook some sense into the governing authorities. Whatever the reason, Paul and Silas were told by the jailer, who had become a brother in Christ, “*Depart and go in peace.*”

Read Acts 16:37.

- That would not be the last word, however. Paul had often been unfairly treated, beaten, and stoned, all illegally in light of his Roman citizenship. Yet here he chose to speak up. He may have wanted to give the new young church in Philippi some breathing room from the local authorities. A public escort out of the prison by the Roman magistrates would certainly buy the church some precious time to grow and strengthen rather than being preoccupied with possible arrests and trials of the members. The word would spread that Paul and Silas had been found innocent and freed by the leaders.

Read Acts 16:38-39.

- Roman citizenship had certain privileges. These Philippian authorities were alarmed because it was illegal to have a Roman citizen flogged. In addition, every citizen had the right to a fair trial, which Paul and Silas had not been given. Roman citizens were

permitted to travel throughout the Empire under Rome's protection. They were not subject to local legislation or local legislators! Even Roman governors had no authority to beat, imprison, or torture a Roman citizen without direct permission from Rome. No wonder the magistrates were alarmed when they heard that Paul and Silas both were Roman citizens. The magistrates' jobs (and lives) were in jeopardy and in the hands of the very ones they had treated so unfairly.

- The magistrates personally, politely, contritely came *to* appease, escort, and request that Paul and Silas leave the city. What a far cry this was from the harsh treatment of the day before. And what a sad day for them. They were asking the bearers of God's light to leave their city; they were sending away the ones who had the words of eternal life. Once again, the theme is repeated: the light shines and some believe, some refuse, and many, far too many, just simply miss it.
- In Philippi, one wealthy business owner had caught it, as had a pitiful little slave girl with huge problems. So, too, a prison official. As diverse as they were, they had all found a Savior. Their paths to Christ had been different, but the result was the same. How sad that these leaders of the community would send away the ones who had the answers they all so desperately needed.

Read Acts 16:40.

- Paul and Silas left the prison and returned to Lydia's home. As had been their custom everywhere they had been, they spent time meeting with the new believers and encouraged them for a while longer before they took their message to the next city.
- Note that Luke returned to the third person "they" in this verse, as the first "we" section of Acts ends. This may

indicate that Luke stayed behind in Philippi to continue the work while Paul and Silas moved on toward Athens. The next “we” section begins at 20:5.

- The book of Philippians stands as a testimony to the health of this first church in Europe. Lydia’s generosity and the jailer’s kindnesses exemplified the solid, spiritual character of the early days of the Philippian church. Who could have known what their influence would be? A few years later, when Paul was sitting out a trial in Rome, he would write them a note and, in it, commend them for their support of him (**Philippians 1:5, 7; 4:16-19**).

ACTS
Chapter 17

PAUL PREACHES IN THESSALONICA—17:1-9

Leaving Luke in Philippi, Paul, Silas, and Timothy journeyed in a southwesterly direction along the Grecian coast, eventually arriving at Thessalonica. There Paul repeated his usual procedure: go first to the synagogue and preach to the Jews and God-fearing Greeks. The response was typical—a revival among the Greeks, and a riot at the hands of the Jewish leaders! Here a mob accused the Christians of turning “the world upside down” (17:6).

Read Acts 17:1.

- Thessalonica was about one hundred miles from Philippi, along the Egnatian Way toward Athens. Amphipolis was about thirty miles from Philippi, and Apollonia, an additional thirty miles. No record is given of any ministry occurring in these towns. Thessalonica was one of the wealthiest and most influential cities in Macedonia, with a population of over 200,000. This is the first city where Paul’s teachings attracted a large group of socially prominent citizens. The most important Roman highway (the Egnatian Way), extending from Rome all the way to the Orient, went through Thessalonica. This highway, along with the city’s thriving seaport, made Thessalonica one of the wealthiest and most flourishing trade centers in the Roman Empire. Recognized as a free city, Thessalonica was allowed self-rule and was exempted from most of the restrictions placed by Rome on other cities in the Empire. With its international flavor, however, came many pagan religions and cultural influences that challenged the faith of the young Christians there. After his ministry in Thessalonica,

Paul would write two letters to the Thessalonian believers (1 and 2 Thessalonians), encouraging them to remain faithful and to turn away from the false teachers who tried to refute their beliefs.

Read Acts 17:2-3.

- A synagogue (a group of Jews who would gather for teaching and prayer) could be established wherever there were ten Jewish males. Paul's regular practice was to preach in synagogues as long as the Jews would give permission. Often those who weren't Jews would come to these services and hear Paul's preaching. Paul spent three Sabbath days ministering to the Jews.
- The fact that Paul spent three Sabbaths in the synagogue does not mean he spent only three weeks in Thessalonica. Paul probably was there for much longer (a time period that occurred between 17:4 and 17:5). He had to have been there long enough to do everything mentioned in his letter to the Thessalonians, such as work at his trade (**1 Thessalonians 2:7-9**), win converts, instruct new believers in the Christian life (**1 Thessalonians 4:1-2**), and form a strong bond of love with these believers (**1 Thessalonians 2:17-20**). Paul's letter to the Philippians indicates that he was in Thessalonica long enough to receive from the Philippians financial help "more than once" (**Philippians 4:16**).

Read Acts 17:4.

- The response at Thessalonica was typical of the response Paul had experienced from the beginning days of his missionary travels. Some of the Jews were persuaded, as well as a large number of God-fearing Greeks. The gospel continued to reach more Gentiles

than Jews. In Thessalonica, however, a third group responded: “*not a few of the prominent [leading] women.*” The Greek word for “prominent,” *proton*, means “first,” or “most important.” These were influential women in the upper class (16:14; 17:12) who had come to faith, had been baptized, and were actively participating in whatever aspects of discipleship and instruction were available.

Read Acts 17:5.

- So far Paul’s ministry was following its usual course. The gospel was preached in the synagogues with meager response from the Jews. The Gentiles, however, were responding in great numbers (both worshippers in the synagogues and others). Then, as had been the custom, the non-responding Jews became jealous and set their sights on running these “heretics” out of town or worse. The Jewish leaders didn’t refute the theology of Paul and Silas, but they were jealous of the popularity of these itinerant preachers. Their motives for causing the riot were rooted in personal jealousy, not doctrinal purity. They rounded up some bad characters off the streets, formed a mob, and started a riot in the city. The leaders of the mob knew where to find Paul and Silas—at Jason’s house. Jason was an early Thessalonian convert who, like Lydia, had convinced the travelers to stay in his home.

Read Acts 17:6-7.

- The mob had not found Paul and Silas at Jason’s house. Perhaps Paul and Silas had been informed and had hurried away from the dangerous crowd. So they grabbed Jason and some of the other believers and brought them before the city council. They shouted out their accusations, presumably because of the noise of

the gathered mob. Their accusations, like all good lies, bore some resemblance to the truth but were presented in their worst light. Paul and Silas were not guilty of treason against Caesar just because they declared allegiance to the King of kings, for Christ's kingdom is of an entirely different sort than Caesar. The Jewish leaders had difficulty manufacturing an accusation that would be heard by the city government. The Romans did not care about theological disagreements between the Jews and these preachers. Treason, however, was a serious offense in the Roman Empire. Although Paul and Silas were not advocating rebellion against Roman law, their loyalty to another king sounded suspicious.

Read Acts 17:8-9.

- The story told by the leaders of the riot had its desired result. The whole lot of them—from the city officials to the people of the city—were thrown into turmoil by these manipulative accusations. Because there was no substantive case, however, and because Jason and the other believers had done little more than house the accused, they were released. Jason posted “security”—putting up cash for freedom. This probably was not “bail” as we know it, insuring his presence at a future trial because there was really no court case. More likely it was a pledge of sorts, assuring the authorities that Paul and Silas would leave town and not return.

PAUL AND SILAS IN BEREIA—17:10-15

God continued to use persecution and opposition to spread the good news of forgiveness and eternal life through Jesus Christ. The uproar in Thessalonica forced Paul and Silas to journey to Berea where they found a very teachable and receptive Greek audience. In a short time, however, hostile

Jews came from Thessalonica to attack Paul's work in Berea. But this succeeded only in getting the great evangelist to Athens!

Read Acts 17:10.

- Waiting for the protection of darkness, the brothers, who had obviously been hiding Paul and Silas from the riot in Thessalonica, sent them on their way to Berea. There they would begin again in the Jewish synagogue. Even though in every city the missionaries faced angry crowds, it is important not to miss what was really happening along the way. The term “brothers” describes men and women of both Jewish and Greek descent, who just a few weeks earlier (maybe just a few days) had been lost in their sins and living in darkness. Working through two faithful messengers, God had brought them the light. They had come to Christ, had received forgiveness of sins, and had begun walking in that light (**Ephesians 5:8-10**). Even though they were terribly young in the faith, they had put their lives, their jobs, their reputations, and their friendships on the line for the sake of the gospel and these gospel messengers (**1 Thessalonians 1:7-10; 2:14-16**).

Read Acts 17:11.

- Berea was about forty-five miles south of Thessalonica. The people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica. Instead of hurling attacks, they listened eagerly to Paul's message. Instead of forming a mob to run the missionaries out of town, they searched the Scriptures day after day to confirm whether or not Paul and Silas were teaching the truth. What an ideal audience! They exhibited the characteristics that every teacher of the Word would love to find in a listener:
 - “Open-minded”—they were teachable.

- “Eager listeners”—they were open to hear the truth.
- “Scripture searchers”—they did not take everything and everyone at their word. They did their homework.
- “Truth seekers”—they were looking for absolute truth.

Read Acts 17:12.

- Here, in contrast to so many cities before, many of the Jews believed, as well as many Greeks described as prominent men and women. God honored the fact that these leading men and women of the city were searching for the truth.

Read Acts 17:13.

- What began as a wonderful situation did not last, however. Though there appeared to be no trouble from the Berean Jews, trouble followed Paul from Thessalonica. When the Jews there heard of Paul’s ministry at Berea, they went to Berea in order to agitate the crowds.
- The jealous Jews in Thessalonica followed Paul to Berea to cause trouble. How horrible and all-consuming is the sin of jealousy! Jealous people spend their days in well-concealed envy, operating under some very well-articulated, pious-sounding principles. While they never really build anything positive themselves, they do a great job of destroying or blocking that which they envy in the work of others. These envy-blinded, violent Jews, like so many of their kindred before them, were attacking the very spokesman of God Himself.

Read Acts 17:14-15.

- Again, the believers rushed to protect Paul, sending him away to the coast. Fortunately, the gospel message was so identified with Paul that it caused most of the Jewish anger to be directed at him, leaving his traveling companions more freedom to build up the churches. Thus, Silas and Timothy were allowed to stay behind in Berea. Those who were escorting Paul took him as far as Athens. They left him there only after he instructed them to have Silas and Timothy join him as soon as possible.

PAUL PREACHES IN ATHENS—17:16-34

Paul's brief stay in Athens is a remarkable case study in the universality of the gospel. The Athenians were cosmopolitan, philosophical people, given to all sorts of idolatrous beliefs. At Mars Hill, Paul demonstrated his ability to be all things to all people (**1 Corinthians 9:22**), preaching the gospel of the resurrected Christ with concepts and terms that the Athenian philosophers could easily grasp. Some scoffed at his message, but others indicated an interest in hearing more. This chapter deals with the early stages of Paul's second missionary journey. He and his fellow travelers worked their way down the peninsula of modern-day Greece. Luke recorded Paul's message to the idol worshiping intellectuals at Athens at length. That message revealed Paul's God-given wisdom for dealing with those who knew very little about the true God but who felt very secure in their intellectual abilities.

Read Acts 17:16.

- What can be viewed today in Athens as wonderful works of art and architecture were, in their day, the

worshipful expression of a culture steeped in godless idolatry. Athens was named after the goddess Athena, and there were temples in Athens for all the Greek gods. Paul was deeply troubled by all the idolatry he saw everywhere in the city. This representative of God could not help being infuriated that such a great city and such a great culture would be so deeply involved in worshiping anything or anyone other than the living God. With its magnificent buildings and many gods, Athens was a center for Greek culture, philosophy, and education. Philosophers and educated people were always ready to hear something new; thus their openness to hear Paul speak at their meeting in the Areopagus (17:18-19). Athens had been the political, educational, and philosophical center of the world in its prime, the home of men such as Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Epicurus, Zeno. But that was four hundred years before Paul's visit. When Paul arrived, it was a small town (ten thousand or so residents) reliving the glory days and filled with intellectuals spending their days philosophizing.

Read Acts 17:17.

- Paul had a balanced and adaptive approach to his ministry in Athens. In the synagogue, he debated with the Jews and worshiping Gentiles, likely using the arguments recorded at other places in the book of Acts, seeking to prove to them that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah. Between his Sabbath debates with the worshipers in the synagogues, however, Paul spoke daily in the public square (the agora, which was the central marketplace) to whoever would listen.

Read Acts 17:18.

- The Epicureans and Stoics were the dominant philosophers in Greek culture. The Epicureans,

followers of Epicurus (341-270 BC), believed that the chief purpose for living was pleasure and happiness. If God existed, He didn't interfere in human affairs. Epicureans are similar to modern-day materialists and hedonists. The Stoics were followers of Zeno (320-263 BC), who taught on a porch or patio called a "stoa," hence the name "Stoics." The Stoics felt that a great "purpose" was directing history. Humans' responsibility was to align themselves with that purpose through duty and self-discipline. This, quite logically, led to pride and self-sufficiency ("I am the master of my fate!"). The Stoics are similar to modern-day New Age followers and pantheists. These philosophers began to dispute with Paul. The word for "dispute" in this context has the idea of battling around ideas. Some of these philosophers characterized Paul's arguments as "babbling." They were saying that his ideas were not as well thought through or as valid as theirs. Others of these philosophers recognized in Paul's teaching about Jesus and the resurrection the fact that he was advocating foreign or strange gods.

Read Acts 17:19-20.

- Paul's dialogue in the marketplace led to an invitation to address the Areopagus, which had been the judicial and legislative seat of government of Athens—a council or court. By Paul's time, however, their responsibilities involved little more than overseeing certain areas of religion and education. The Areopagus often met on a low hill in Athens near the Acropolis. As Paul stood there and spoke about the one true God, his audience could look down on the city and see the many idols representing gods that Paul knew were worthless. These intellectuals, ever interested in hearing new ideas, wanted to hear this new teaching that Paul was presenting. The word "know" will surface many times

in the verses that follow. Here the descendants of the most influential thinkers in Western civilization, who had been on a centuries-long quest for knowledge, were given an opportunity to receive the ultimate knowledge—God entering the human race to redeem fallen humanity and put them in a position to know not philosophy but rather a person, the person of Jesus Christ.

Read Acts 17:21.

- Luke explained that the Athenians and many who were residing there (foreigners) spent days at a time discussing the latest ideas. Evidently, these were somewhat highbrow intellectuals who loved to hear and discuss the latest fads in philosophy and theology. The picture is that they rarely actually did anything they discussed—they just enjoyed tossing around ideas.

Read Acts 17:22-23.

- Paul was well prepared to speak to this group. He came from Tarsus, an educational center, and had the training and knowledge to present his beliefs clearly and persuasively. Paul was a rabbi, taught by the finest scholar of his day, Gamaliel, and he had spent much of his life thinking and reasoning through the Scriptures. Luke recorded this sermon in more detail than many of the others, likely as a sample of how Paul addressed the typical lost, intellectual Greek. Rather than arguing the Scriptures as he would with a Jewish audience, he adapted his message and backed up a step or two to speak of a Creator; then he moved toward speaking about a Savior and Judge. The speech had three major movements: (1) the introduction in 17:22-23; (2) the section on the unknown god in 17:24-29; and (3) the section explaining the revelation of God in 17:30-31.

- Paul began his address by affirming the “religious” nature of his audience: “*I perceive [...] you are very religious.*.. Some suggest that Paul’s statement was derogatory rather than complimentary, but the latter is most likely the case. He chose a starting point, a place where they could agree, rather than starting with their differences. The term translated “very religious,” however, is a combination of the Greek words *deido* (to fear or revere) and *daimon* (evil spirits), which may contain a subtle rebuke concerning the spiritual realities behind their religion. Paul next explained what he had seen in their city. Note that Paul did not come in and blast their religion without seeking to understand it first. Nor did he fail to do some appropriate observation of their culture, art, and architecture before addressing the fallacies. The Athenians had built an idol to the unknown god for fear of missing blessings or receiving punishment. The Athenian philosophers were either polytheistic (worshipped many gods) or pantheistic (believed all nature was god), so it would be natural for them to build an altar for fear that they might have overlooked a god. Archaeological finds have shown many such altars with the inscription, “to the unknown god(s).” Paul’s opening statement to the men of Athens was about their “unknown god.” He promised that in the balance of his speech he would proclaim to them the answer that the inscription “to an unknown god” was seeking. If the purpose of a good introduction is to strike a point of need as well as stimulate interest, Paul had begun eloquently. He would give these seekers the information that they and their ancestors had sought for centuries. Surely, he had their undivided attention at this point.

Read Acts 17:24-25.

- The central body of Paul’s speech is a presentation of God as the Creator, the one who made the world and

everything in it. In words reminiscent of Stephen's (7:48-50), Paul explained that this Creator does not live in shrines built by humans, even spectacular wonder-of-the-world Greek structures. God does not need anything from mortals since He Himself is the source of life and breath and all things. This was likely a subtle jab at the Greek notion of the gods' needing human services. Certainly Paul understood the philosophical positions of his audience and was willing and able to dialogue with them in their frame of reference before leading them to his.

Read Acts 17:26-27.

- From general characteristics of the Creator God, Paul moved to the more specific Judea-Christian claims that God created all life and all nations from one ancestor. This would likely rub proud Greeks the wrong way since they believed themselves to be radically superior to all other nations (whom they called “barbarians”). This Creator God not only created the nations, but He also allotted the times of their existence as well as the boundaries of their borders. The purpose of all this was so that people would search for God...and find Him. The word “*grope*” is a vivid picture of the way a person in darkness (without the help of the light of God's revelation) searches for God (**Ecclesiastes 3:11**). Paul was affirming the validity of the Athenians' search, though he painted the picture as “groping” rather than what they would likely prefer to call “intelligent, philosophical, and logical reasoning.”
- This “unknown god” is not only knowable, indeed He is not far from anyone! This contrasted to the Greek gods, which lived in seclusion and could not be approached. The need that motivated the construction of an altar “to an unknown god” (17:23) could be realized in Christ, for He was very near and available to be known!

Read Acts 17:28.

- To illustrate and support his point, Paul quoted first from Epimenides, a Cretan poet from 600 BC (whom he also quoted in **Titus 1:12**): “*In Him we live and move and have our being.*” The next quote is from Aratus (a Stoic poet from Cilicia, 315-240 BC) in a line from his work *Phainomena*: “*For we are also His offspring.*” Both of these statements from well-known and accepted literary sources of the day served Paul’s purpose well in arguing for the fact that the creation and sustaining of life was in the hands of the one God whom they did not know but who was very near and very knowable. The sense of humanity being God’s “offspring” means that all receive life and breath from Him. There are many seeking and finding words in 17:27-28: “search,” “grope,” “find,” “not far,” “in Him,” “we are His.” These words and phrases would have been heard by those in the audience who were seeking for the truth. Paul was exposing three false Greek ideas: (1) God was unknowable; (2) God lived in man-made temples; (3) God was not involved in human affairs.

Read Acts 17:29-30.

- Paul began to wrap up his message, building this statement on all that he had presented thus far and gently correcting where the Greeks had been incorrect: “*And since this is true,*” they needed to make some changes. Their thinking had been incorrect. They should not think of God as an idol who could be constructed by human hands. God is profoundly bigger than any idol. Also, the Athenians must understand that although God had overlooked people’s former ignorance (not in the sense that He condoned it but rather that He had not yet judged it: **Acts 14:16; Romans 3:25**), He now commanded everyone

everywhere to turn from idolatry and turn to Him. This was a serious and somber word to the gathered Athenians. They would do well to hear it and respond. Whatever the nature and consequences of their former failure to respond to God, it was nothing compared to ignoring what was being offered in the finished work of Christ.

Read Acts 17:31.

- Paul confronted his listeners with Jesus' resurrection and its meaning to all people—either blessing or punishment. The Greeks had no concept of judgment. Most of them preferred worshiping many gods instead of just one. And though their gods became angry from time to time, there was no real accountability in the way that Paul was presenting. However, God has set a day for judging the world, and the judge had been selected—the man He has appointed: ***“Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed”*** (Daniel 7:14). All judgment had been given to the one who was raised from the dead—Jesus Christ (John 5:22)—the one Paul had been proclaiming in Athens since the day he had arrived (17:18). To the Greek mind, the concept of resurrection was unbelievable and offensive, but on this issue the whole gospel hinged (1 Corinthians 15:13-14). Although Paul knew it would offend their philosophies, he did not hold back the truth. Paul often would change his approach to fit his audience, as he did with this one, but he never changed his basic message.

Read Acts 17:32.

- The mention of the resurrection would, of course, draw an immediate reaction from this group of intellectuals.

How absurd! Some laughed, yet there were others who seemed intrigued and asked if they could hear more about this later. The latter group may simply have been patronizing this fellow scholar and visiting lecturer. Paul's speech was not in vain, however, as the next verse shows.

Read Acts 17:33-34.

- Though the discussion had ended with a few sneers and a polite invitation to return, Paul's time had not been wasted; some joined him and became believers, one of them even a council member named Dionysius. The Council was the Areopagus, or Council of Ares (17:19-20). It was the court of Athens that met on the Hill of Ares or Mars Hill. It was like the Senate or city council (in Greece today, the Supreme Court is called the Areopagus). Only one other convert is mentioned, a woman named Damaris, though we are told there were others. Although there is no record of a church being founded in Athens and Paul soon moved on to Corinth (Chapter 18), his visit to Athens was not a failure. The responsibility of the messenger is to present the message, and Paul certainly did that. The fruit was God's responsibility.

ACTS
Chapter 18

**PAUL MEETS PRISCILLA AND AQUILA
IN CORINTH—18:1-17**

The spread of the gospel requires a team effort by individuals with different gifts. In Corinth, Paul met Priscilla and Aquila, a married couple (and fellow tentmakers) who proved to be faithful partners in the gospel (**Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19**). Paul's ministry in this decadent city was long and fruitful (18:11). Not even a concerted effort by the Jews could stop him from teaching the Word. When brought into court in Achaia, Paul was quickly released by Gallio, the proconsul, who adamantly refused to intervene in their disagreement over "words and names and Jewish laws" (18:15). This favorable decision enabled the gospel to continue to spread throughout the Roman Empire.

Read Acts 18:1.

- Ancient Corinth had been destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC, but it had been rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 46 BC because of its strategic seaport. By Paul's day (AD 50), the Romans had made Corinth the capital of Achaia (present-day Greece). Only fifty miles from Athens, Corinth by this time was regarded as the most influential city of Greece. The population was about 650,000, comprised of 250,000 free citizens and 400,000 slaves. Corinth was a major center of commerce. Located on a narrow strip of land near two bustling seaports and at a busy crossroads for land travelers and traders, the city was wealthy and materialistic. Corinth was a center of culture. Though not a university town like Athens, there was great interest in Greek philosophy and wisdom. Aristides

claimed that on every street in Corinth one could meet a so-called wise man who had his own solutions to the world's problems. The city was permeated with religion; at least twelve temples were located there. The most infamous of these temples was dedicated to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and featured one thousand "sacred" prostitutes. Another temple, dedicated to Apollo, employed young men whose job was to fulfill the sexual desires of male and female worshippers. Largely due to this fact, the city was notorious for its immorality. So brazen was the unbridled licentiousness that a new Greek verb was eventually coined: to "Corinthianize" meant to practice sexual immorality. When Plato referred to a prostitute, he used the expression "Corinthian girl." From a human point of view, Corinth was not the type of place where one would expect to launch a thriving ministry, but Paul didn't view things from an earthly perspective. He saw Corinth as a great ministry opportunity. Later he would write a series of letters to the Corinthians dealing, in large part, with the problems of immorality. First and Second Corinthians are two of those letters.

Read Acts 18:2-3.

- Priscilla and Aquila had just been expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius's decree against Jews. Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Trained in the art of tent making, Aquila and Priscilla had packed up the tools of their trade and had made their way to Corinth. There they met Paul, who joined them in the business of tent making. Tents were much in demand because they were used throughout the Empire to house soldiers. As a tentmaker, Paul had a transportable livelihood that he could carry with him wherever God led him. Since ancient craftsmen did not compete as merchants do today but rather formed cooperative trade guilds and

often lived in close proximity, it is not surprising that Paul and Aquila worked together. Paul chose to work to support himself during his stay in Corinth. The presence of so many religious promoters in Corinth may have added an incentive for Paul to earn his own living. Paul wanted to disassociate himself from those teachers who taught only for money. As Paul lived with Priscilla and Aquila, he must have shared with them his wealth of spiritual wisdom. They likely were already believers (or else Luke, it seems, would have mentioned their conversion).

Read Acts 18:4.

- Paul never veered from this ministry philosophy. Because of his great burden for his lost Jewish brothers (**Romans 9:2-3**), Paul would go each Sabbath to the synagogue (9:20; 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:2, 10, 17; 18:19; 19:8). There he would speak to both Jews and Greeks (Gentiles who had converted to Judaism).

Read Acts 18:5.

- Upon the arrival of his colleagues, Paul was able to set aside his tent making and devote himself exclusively to preaching. Silas and Timothy must have brought with them a financial gift from the believers in Macedonia (**Philippians 4:15**). They also brought a good word about the perseverance of the believers in Thessalonica (**1 Thessalonians 3:6-8**). Paul must have been encouraged by all these factors. With newfound strength, he solemnly declared to the Jews that the Messiah was Jesus.

Read Acts 18:6.

- The antagonistic Jews in Paul's audience became abusive and began to blaspheme and slander the apostle and his message. "Shaking his garments" (13:51) was

a dramatic gesture that depicted Paul's desire to separate himself entirely from even the dust found in such a rebellious synagogue. His pointed statement, "***Your blood be upon your own heads!***" is a reference to the Jews' own responsibility for their eventual spiritual destruction and brings to mind the sobering warning of Ezekiel: "***Then if those who hear the alarm refuse to take action; well, it is their own fault if they die***" (Ezekiel 33:4). Because Paul had given his countrymen a clear opportunity to be saved, he would later be able to say, "***I have been faithful. No one's damnation can be blamed on me***" (20:26). In essence, Paul was telling the Jews that he had done all he could for them. Because they continued to reject Jesus as their Messiah, he would turn his attention to the Gentiles, who would prove to be more receptive.

Read Acts 18:7-8.

- Titius Justus, called a worshiper of God, was probably a Gentile. Some have speculated that this was Gaius (**Romans 16:23; 1 Corinthians 1:14**). His house became Paul's base of operations, and its proximity to the synagogue gave the apostle convenient and ongoing contact with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks. As the synagogue ruler, Crispus would have been responsible for maintenance of the synagogue complex and the services held there. Such a position would have made him a prominent and well-to-do person in the community. Thus, his conversion (and that of his household) was a significant breakthrough for the church.

Read Acts 18:9-11.

- Apparently, the conversions of Crispus and other Corinthians (18:7-8), together with the formation of a

growing “house church” right next door to the synagogue, must have provoked great controversy and opposition. Otherwise, the words of the Lord (“***Do not be afraid***”) in Paul’s vision would make no sense. In contrast to his treatment elsewhere (17:5, 13), no one would lay a hand on Paul during this time in Corinth. The phrase “***I have many people in this city***” likely refers to the group of believers already in Corinth together with the large number of people there who had been “appointed for eternal life” (**Acts 13:48**). Others who became Christians in Corinth were Phoebe (**Romans 16:1**; Cenchrea was the port city of Corinth), Tertius (**Romans 16:22**), Erastus (**Romans 16:23**), Quartus (**Romans 16:23**), Chloe (**1 Corinthians 1:11**), Gaius (**1 Corinthians 1:14**), Stephanas and his household (**1 Corinthians 16:15**), Fortunatus (**1 Corinthians 16:17**), and Achaicus (**1 Corinthians 16:17**). As a result of this divine word of assurance, Paul spent eighteen months in Corinth preaching and teaching. During that year and a half, Paul established a church and wrote two letters to the believers in Thessalonica.

Read Acts 18:12-13.

- God’s promise was that Paul would not be personally harmed (18:9); this guarantee did not prevent an attack on his ministry. In time, the Jews would successfully manage to have Paul charged with promoting a religion not approved by Roman law. Such behavior amounted to treason. But Paul was not encouraging obedience to a human king other than Caesar (17:7), nor was he speaking against the Roman Empire. Instead, he was speaking about Christ’s eternal kingdom. This sequence of events took place when Gallio, the brother of Seneca the philosopher, was proconsul of Achaia

(modern Greece). He had come to power in AD 51-52, and he enjoyed a good reputation among his people.

Read Acts 18:14-15.

- This was an important judicial decision for the spread of the gospel in the Roman Empire. Judaism was a recognized religion under Roman law. As long as Christians were seen as a sect within Judaism, the court refused to hear cases brought against them. If they had claimed to be a new and separate religion, they could easily have been outlawed by the government. In effect, Gallio was saying, “I don’t understand all your terminology and finer points of theology (and I don’t wish to). Handle the matter yourself, and don’t bother me.” Gallio’s decision proved to be extremely beneficial for the emerging Christian church for the next ten years. His ruling became a legal precedent used in Paul’s trial in Rome. If Gallio had found Paul guilty, every governor in every province where Paul or other missionaries traveled could arrest the Christians. By not ruling against Paul, the Romans were including Christianity (as a sect of Judaism) as one of the legal religions of the Roman Empire. Gallio, in effect, helped spread the gospel throughout the Empire.

Read Acts 18:16-17.

- The fact that Gallio had Paul’s Jewish accusers driven from the courtroom rather than merely sent away, reveals his irritation with what he evidently felt were petty, trumped-up charges. Many prominent Romans viewed the Jews with disdain; they considered them uncultured, given to strange beliefs, and prone to troublemaking. The official proceedings have been concluded, and the gathered crowd became unruly and erupted in violence. This mob may have been Greeks

venting their feelings against the Jews for causing turmoil, or it may have included some Jews. If the latter is true, Sosthenes, the newly designated leader of the synagogue (after the conversion of Crispus, 18:8) became the focal point of the mob's anger and frustration, probably because he was seen as the one responsible for losing the case against Paul and leaving the synagogue worse off than before. A man named Sosthenes is mentioned in **1 Corinthians 1:1**, and this may be the same man. If so, he would later become a convert and a companion of Paul. Whether the mob consisted of Greeks beating up a Jew or the Jews turning against one of their own, Gallio was unconcerned and paid no attention.

PAUL RETURNS TO ANTIOCH OF SYRIA—18:18-23

Read Acts 18:18.

- Following the failure of the Jewish plot against him, Paul continued ministering in Corinth. The vow Paul took may have been a temporary Nazirite vow, which would end with shaving the head and offering the hair as a sacrifice (**Numbers 6:18**). Or it could have been a personal vow of thanksgiving, offered in light of God's protection while in Corinth.

Read Acts 18:19-21.

- From Corinth, Paul sailed east with his coworkers Priscilla and Aquila. Arriving at Ephesus at the mouth of the Cayster River, the missionary team disembarked. 18:23-28 reveals that Priscilla and Aquila settled in Ephesus; Paul used this layover to pay a quick visit to the Jewish synagogue. Though the Jews were receptive to Paul's message, he apparently felt a more pressing

need to return to Antioch. He promised to return to them “*if it is God’s will*” (James 4:15).

Read Acts 18:22.

- With the five-hundred mile voyage from Ephesus completed, Paul went up to Jerusalem, then down to Antioch; the prepositions indicate the geographical elevation of the ancient city. Having been away from Antioch of Syria for some two years, Paul had much good news to report to his fellow believers. This verse marks the end of Paul’s second missionary journey.

Read Acts 18:23.

- Verse 23 marks the beginning of Paul’s third missionary journey, which lasted from AD 53 to 57. Leaving the church at Antioch, Paul headed toward Ephesus, but along the way he revisited the churches in Galatia and Phrygia. The heart of this trip was a lengthy stay (two to three years) in Ephesus. Before returning to Jerusalem, Paul also visited believers in Macedonia and Greece. As Paul set out, one of his priorities was helping the believers to grow. This verb (*episterizo*) is only used twice in the New Testament and conveys the idea of establishing or making strong (edification mixed with encouragement). Such was Paul’s regular practice—to keep visiting those he had led to Christ and the churches he had founded.

APOLLOS INSTRUCTED AT EPHESUS—18:24-28

Left in Ephesus by Paul, Priscilla and Aquila met a gifted speaker named Apollos, who had great passion for Christ but an incomplete knowledge of the gospel. Equipping him with a more accurate message, they sent him on to Achaia, where

he was used powerfully by God. This small investment in one life by the faithful Priscilla and Aquila resulted in enormous eternal dividends!

Read Acts 18:24.

- From Alexandria, the second most influential city in the Roman Empire came a Jew named Apollos. Growing up in that Egyptian city's university atmosphere, Apollos was highly cultured and educated. As a Jew, he also possessed a wonderful grasp of the Old Testament. It is not stated what prompted him to move to Ephesus.

Read Acts 18:25.

- Apollos was an eloquent and powerful speaker. He had an accurate, though incomplete, message. While he had "thorough knowledge" (18:24) of the Old Testament, he was familiar with only the baptism of John the Baptist. John had focused on repentance from sin and on water baptism (**Matthew 3:2**) as an outward sign of commitment to and preparation for the Messiah's kingdom. Apollos was probably urging people in a more eloquent fashion to do the same. Apollos was "*fervent in spirit*." He needed to see the entire picture, and then he would be a powerful witness for Christ.

Read Acts 18:26.

- The eloquent, fiery young man who was so ably interpreting and applying the Old Testament messianic Scriptures in the synagogue was quickly noticed by Priscilla and Aquila. Upon hearing Apollos preach, they immediately recognized the deficiencies in his message. Consequently, they took him aside and

explained the way of God more accurately, telling him about the life of Jesus, His death and resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit. As Aquila and Priscilla set forth the historical facts of the gospel, Apollos must have seen many Old Testament prophecies become clear. The reports of his subsequent ministry suggest that he was filled with new energy and boldness after he received the complete gospel message.

Read Acts 18:27.

- With his more complete theology, Apollos, who had been thinking about going to Achaia, was encouraged to do so by the Christians in Ephesus. They sent along a glowing letter of introduction asking the believers in Achaia to welcome him. He quickly became the verbal champion of the Christians in Achaia (probably Corinth), debating the opponents of the gospel in public. Read what Paul says of Apollos's impact in **1 Corinthians 4:1, 6**.

Read Acts 18:28.

- Apollos proved to be a master debater. His arguments for the messiahship of Jesus were so powerful and logical that the Jews could not oppose him. His reputation spread far and wide (**1 Corinthians 1:12; 3:4-6; 4:6**), and Paul came to view him as a trustworthy co-worker in the gospel (**1 Corinthians 16:12; Titus 3:13**).

ACTS

Chapter 19

PAUL'S THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY—19:1-7

Evidence from Paul's epistles suggests the great apostle launched out on his third missionary journey in an attempt to undo the damage caused among the churches by numerous opponents of the gospel. Beginning at Antioch, Paul journeyed in a northwesterly direction through Galatia and Phrygia (18:23), eventually coming to Ephesus on the west coast of Asia Minor. There he met some believers who, like Apollos, knew only John's baptism and had only a sketchy understanding of the gospel. Their reception of the Spirit confirmed Paul's authority as an apostle and gave them equal standing in the church.

Read Acts 19:1.

- After the parenthetical story of Apollos, Luke continued his record of Paul's third missionary journey, begun in 18:23. Paul traveled an interior road across Asia Minor, though no reason is given. It may have been the shortest (though least traveled and most dangerous) route to Ephesus, or perhaps there were congregations along this path that Paul wanted to visit. He arrived in Ephesus, a hub of sea and land transportation, ranking with Antioch in Syria and Alexandria in Egypt as one of the great cities on the Mediterranean Sea. The population of Ephesus during the first century may have reached 250,000. The temple to the Greek goddess Artemis (Diana is her Roman equivalent) was located there. The worship of Artemis was also a great financial boon to the area because it brought tourists, festivals, and trade. Paul would stay in Ephesus for about three years. Ephesus had great wealth and power as a center for trade. It was a strategic location from which to influence all of Asia. From Ephesus he would write his

first letter to the Corinthians to counter several problems that the church in Corinth was facing. Later, while imprisoned in Rome, Paul would write a letter to the Ephesian church (the book of Ephesians). Upon his arrival, he promptly found a group of several believers. Based on 19:3-5, these men probably were students of John the Baptist. They had embraced his ministry and teachings. One first-century sect of Jews actually believed that John the Baptist was the Messiah. There is evidence into the fourth century that some groups claimed John as their founder. As in the case of Apollos, these individuals were sincere but were hampered by an incomplete knowledge of the gospel.

Read Acts 19:2.

- Paul's question to this group of Ephesian men underlines the truth that apart from the Holy Spirit, there is no salvation (**Roman s 8:9, 16; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 1:13**). The Spirit is the one who imparts life (**John 3:5**). The reply of these men is difficult to interpret. John the Baptist had talked plainly about the coming of the Holy Spirit (**Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:32-33**). Perhaps this answer implies that they were unaware that the time of the Spirit's outpouring had come at last. Whatever the case, like Apollos (18:24-26), these men needed further instruction on the message and ministry of Jesus Christ. They believed in Jesus as the Messiah, but they did not understand the significance of His death and resurrection or the role of the Holy Spirit in the birth and life of the church.

Read Acts 19:3.

- John's baptism was a sign of repentance from sin only (**Matthew 3:2, 6, 8, 11; Mark 1:4-5; Luke 3:8**), not a sign of new life in Christ. John's ministry had been preparatory. His baptism had anticipated something

greater, pointing forward toward Christ, the fulfillment of all things. Christian baptism, on the other hand, looks back on the finished work of Christ. These Ephesian men had experienced the former, not the latter.

Read Acts 19:4-5.

- After adequate explanation, these men were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Given Paul's remarks in **1 Corinthians 1:14-17**, it may be that an unnamed associate of Paul actually performed this baptism. This is the only place in the New Testament where we find an instance of rebaptism.

Read Acts 19:6-7.

- Usually the Holy Spirit would fill a person as soon as he or she professed faith in Christ. Here that filling happened later because these folks had not fully trusted in Christ as Savior. The Holy Spirit's supernatural filling endorsed them as believers and showed the other members of the group that Paul had the same apostolic authority as did Peter to bestow the Spirit. In any event, this is the final recorded instance of speaking in tongues in the book of Acts. In order to interpret (and apply) the work of the Holy Spirit in Acts, believers must remember several truths. First, Acts is a book of transitions, documenting the end of the "old covenant" age of Israel and the law and the beginning of the "new covenant" age of the church and grace. Second, Acts is a history book that describes what did happen, not necessarily a doctrinal manual intended to prescribe what is supposed to happen. Third, there really is no set pattern for the reception of the Spirit in Acts. Sometimes people received the Spirit at baptism (2:38; 8:38), sometimes after baptism (8:15), and sometimes before baptism (10:47). The instances of tongues-

speaking in Acts are erratic, not the general rule (2:4; 10:44-46; 8:39; 13:52; 16:34). In Acts, Luke was primarily describing the spread of the gospel. In the epistles, the apostolic witnesses presented a more comprehensive doctrine of the Holy Spirit

PAUL MINISTERS IN EPHESUS—19:8-20

Paul's ministry in Ephesus lasted more than two years and was marked by an obvious movement of God's Spirit. Luke wrote that "***the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor***" (19:17) through bold preaching, supernatural healings, and transformed lives.

Read Acts 19:8.

- Paul was making good on a promise. He had paid an earlier visit to this same synagogue at the end of his second missionary journey while on his way back to Antioch and Jerusalem (18:19-21). Though his visit had been brief, he had found a receptive group of Jews and had pledged to return at the first opportunity. Given Paul's volatile history with the Jews (and his rather blunt preaching about Jesus as Messiah), it is surprising that he was able to minister at the synagogue for three full months before encountering opposition.

Read Acts 19:9.

- In time, Paul's teaching at the synagogue became too pointed, and the Jews became obstinate; a spiritual "hardness of heart" set in (**Hebrews 3:7-15**), and they refused to believe the gospel. In their rebellion, they publicly maligned (spoke evil of, reviled, insulted) the Way (a common name for early Christianity: 9:2; 19:23;

24:14). Consequently, Paul moved his ministry to a nearby lecture hall (school).

Read Acts 19:10.

- Paul faithfully labored in Ephesus. His lectures were “daily” (19:9) and continued for the next two years. These were two of the most fruitful years for the expanding church. The province of Asia refers to Asia Minor or modern-day Turkey. During this time, spiritually hungry Asians must have traveled to Ephesus to hear Paul speak. “Throughout Asia” would include the area in which were the seven churches listed in Revelation 2 and 3 and the church in Colosse as well.

Read Acts 19:11-12.

- Paul’s ministry in Ephesus was accompanied by extraordinary miracles—long-distance healings as well as exorcisms. The miracles had a threefold purpose: (1) to demonstrate God’s ultimate power and authority (in a city where Satan had a stronghold: 19:18-19); (2) to authenticate Paul as an apostle and a spokesman for the one true God (**Mark 16:20; Romans 15:18-19; 2 Corinthians 2:12; Hebrews 2:1-4**); and (3) most obviously, to demonstrate compassion and mercy to those in great need. Some scholars see in this passage an effort by Luke to show Paul as being equal with Peter (whose shadow healed people). It’s interesting to consider the following scriptures: **Mark 5:27-34; 6:56; Luke 8:44; Acts 5:15** Because of modern abuses of these kinds of displays by charlatans who would make money with healing cloths “blessed” by a minister, we should take note. Only Jesus, Peter, and Paul were given this power.

Read Acts 19:13-14.

- This team of Jews was traveling from town to town making a living by claiming to heal and drive out demons. This was a common occurrence in Israel. Here they were trying to use Jesus' name in an effort to match Paul's power. The sons of Sceva were impressed by Paul's work, obviously more powerful than their own. They eventually discovered, with pain (19:15-16), that no one can control or duplicate God's power. These men were calling on the name of Jesus without knowing Him personally.

Read Acts 19:15-16.

- The self-proclaimed exorcists, out for easy money, invoking the name of Jesus superstitiously, ended up so overpowered by an evil spirit in a man that they all received a beating! Eventually, they fled for their lives. Here is a clear incident that demonstrates the truth that knowing about Jesus is not the same as knowing Him. The surprising knowledge and great strength of a demon-possessed person is recorded in other places (Luke 4:33; 8:28).

Read Acts 19:17.

- The report of the encounter between the sons of Sceva and the evil spirit spread quickly throughout the area. The self-appointed exorcists were humbled and discredited. The name of the Lord Jesus came to be viewed as the most powerful name and not one to be taken lightly.

Read Acts 19:18-19.

- Ephesus was a center for black magic and other occult practices. Superstition and sorcery were commonplace.

Many of the Ephesian converts had been involved in these dark practices. However, the demonstrated power of the name of Jesus over evil spirits (19:11-17) became the motivation for a spiritual house cleaning in the lives of many of the new believers in Ephesus. Specifically, they renounced their fascination with occult practices. Then, taking the remnants of their pagan pasts, they burned them at a public bonfire. Making a clean break was costly; the magic books alone were worth several million dollars (literally, fifty thousand drachmas). A drachma was a silver coin equal to a worker's pay for one day.

- As the Ephesian believers realized, one cannot be a believer in Jesus and hold on to the occult, black magic, or sorcery. Once a person begins to dabble in these areas, it is extremely easy to become obsessed by them and our hearts depart from the Lord. But God's power is greater (**1 John 4:4; Revelation 20:10**).

Read Acts 19:20.

- Here is another of Luke's "progress reports." As the events in Ephesus powerfully demonstrated, the gospel was spreading, touching hearts, and changing lives. Christ was building His church, "***and all the powers of hell will not conquer it***" (**Matthew 16:18**). But that doesn't mean the powers of hell would surrender easily.

THE RIOT IN EPHEBUS—19:21-41

In the great cosmic conflict for the souls of men, every intrusion of good is met by the fierce resistance of evil. Such was the case in Ephesus. A silversmith named Demetrius, who manufactured small idols of the Greek goddess Artemis, became alarmed by the mass conversion of Ephesians to Christianity. Gathering his fellow tradesmen,

he convinced them that Paul and his message were a serious threat to their livelihood. A riot at the city's amphitheater ensued, and it took a soothing plea from the mayor to rescue Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's traveling companions.

Read Acts 19:21.

- Wherever Paul went, he could see Rome's influence. Paul wanted to take the message of Christ to the world's center of influence and power. His desire to preach the eternal truths of God in the so-called "eternal" city (**Romans 1:15**) comprises the balance of the book of Acts.

Read Acts 19:22.

- Paul had decided to depart from Ephesus before the trouble recorded in 19:23-41 broke out, but he stayed awhile longer. He sent two of his young protégés, Timothy and Erastus, ahead to do advance work in the region (Macedonia) he intended to visit. It was a common practice for leaders to have assistants. Moses had Joshua, Elijah was served by Elisha, and Timothy did quite a bit of traveling for Paul. Timothy would eventually become an overseer/pastor in the church at Ephesus. **Romans 16:23** refers to an Erastus who was the "city treasurer," or city manager of public works in Corinth. This may have been the same individual.

Read Acts 19:23-24.

- Artemis was a goddess of fertility. She was represented by a carved female figure with many breasts. A large statue of Artemis (19:35) was in the great temple at Ephesus. The festival of Artemis involved wild orgies and carousing. Obviously, the religious and commercial

life of Ephesus reflected the city's worship of this pagan deity. After a period of relative peace and steady growth for the Ephesian church, the gospel became offensive and intolerable to the city's craftsmen because of the way it was undermining their ability to sell silver idols of Artemis. Converts to Christianity were no longer buying these products. Consequently, for economic and religious reasons, the Way (Christians) came under scrutiny, suspicion, and eventually attack. Demetrius, a leader and prominent member of the silversmiths' guild, was the instigator of this trouble.

Read Acts 19:25-26.

- In the first century, craftsmen united with one another to form professional trade guilds. Similar to modern day unions, these groups adhered to self-prescribed standards and practices. In this instance, Demetrius, perhaps the leader of this powerful guild, gathered not only the silversmiths who produced the miniature images of Artemis for sale at the temple but also others employed in related trades. (Archaeologists have also located images of the goddess made out of terra-cotta and gold.) During the months that Paul had preached in Ephesus, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen had not quarreled with his doctrine. They only became concerned when his preaching threatened their profits. Because they derived major income from making and selling silver statues of the Ephesian goddess Artemis, the craftsmen knew their livelihood would suffer if people started believing in Jesus and discarding the idols.

Read Acts 19:27.

- Demetrius' strategy for stirring up a riot was to appeal to his fellow workmen's love of money and then to

encourage them to hide their greed behind the mask of patriotism and religious loyalty. It would be difficult to get Ephesian citizens worked up about the slumping sales of a group of idol makers. However, it would be easy to rally the masses behind a noble campaign to defend the honor and reputation of the goddess and her magnificent shrine. It seemed to be a perfect plan; the craftsmen would be able to guard their economic interests, and the Artemis-worshipping citizens of Ephesus would see themselves as heroes for the sake of their land and beliefs. Religious fervor, nationalism, and materialism make a volatile combination.

Read Acts 19:28-29.

- The ploy of Demetrius worked perfectly. In short order, the gathered crowd was enraged (literally, filled with wrath) at the Christians in their city and the subversive message of the gospel. They began to cry out, “Great is Artemis (Diane) of the Ephesians!” This was standard formula for pagan worshipers—to cry out “Great is _____” (inserting the name of their deity of choice). Spilling out into the street, this group moved through the city, infecting other citizens with their passionate resentment. As the gathering became an unruly mob, they made their way to the theater, apparently to stage a large demonstration. Archaeologists have determined that this open-air auditorium could seat nearly twenty-five thousand people. As the crowd rushed along, fueled by their fury, they managed to seize two of Paul’s known travel companions, Gaius and Aristarchus. (Aristarchus, a native of Thessalonica, would later accompany Paul on other journey: 20:3-4; 27:1-2; Gaius is probably not the same Gaius mentioned in **Romans 16:23** or **1 Corinthians 1:14**.)

Read Acts 19:30-31.

- Paul wanted to go to the theater, most likely to speak up and defend his companions but also to have the opportunity to preach to such a large crowd. But the other believers, fearing for his safety, stopped Paul from going. These officials were the most prominent men of the province of Asia, responsible for the religious and political order of the region. Clearly, Paul's message had reached all levels of society, crossing all social barriers and giving Paul friends in high places. Out of a dual concern for both public order and the well-being of their Jewish Christian friend, these powerful authorities begged Paul not to venture into the theater.

Read Acts 19:32.

- Luke's observations about any in the rioting crowd, not even knowing why they were there, is rather humorous. The scene in the theater was one of total confusion. The word translated "confusion" literally means "to pour together" and conveys the idea of being stirred up, agitated, in an uproar.

Read Acts 19:33-34.

- This Alexander may have been pushed forward by the Jews as a spokesperson to explain that the Jews were distinct from the new religion that was causing economic problems for the silversmiths. Long after Paul and his missionary friends left Ephesus, the Jews would still have to live and work there. So it seemed obvious to them that they needed to distance themselves from the Christians. The attempt was futile. The gathering had become anti-Jewish as well as anti-Christian. Reasoning with a hysterical mob that has

whipped itself into a frenzy is impossible. They shouted down Alexander by chanting, “Great is Artemis (Diana) of the Ephesians” and keeping it up for two hours!

Read Acts 19:35-36.

- Into the chaos stepped the town clerk of Ephesus. This individual was the highest ranking civic official—something akin to our modern-day office of mayor. Such a person typically presided over citizen assemblies and was the city’s representative of the provincial headquarters of Rome located in Ephesus. This respected leader somehow managed to get the attention of the angry mob. Then, using the same rhetorical tools of persuasion that Demetrius had employed to whip the crowd into a frenzy, appealing to their civic pride and religious devotion, he managed to bring about calm and order. The mention of the statue that fell from heaven was likely a reference to a meteorite that was regarded as divine and placed in the Ephesian temple. This mysterious object from above was considered proof that Artemis was a great and powerful goddess. In short, the clerk’s argument was that the citizenry need not (for religious reasons) fear the intrusion of Christianity and should not (for political purposes) degenerate into disorder.

Read Acts 19:37-39.

- With the crowd quiet and under some semblance of emotional control, the town clerk briefly reiterated the facts of the case involving the Christians. First, they were not “*temple robbers*,” a term that can broadly refer to sacrilege. Nor had they uttered public denunciations of Artemis; instead, they simply were proclaiming the greatness of Jesus Christ. So, clearly, this was not a religious issue. Given that, if this was a conflict

involving economic matters, Ephesus had an adequate legal system through which personal grievances could be addressed. Consequently, the clerk urged Demetrius and the members of the silversmiths' guild to pursue their dispute with the Christians through legal channels. Each province had a judge or proconsul who presided over a citizens' assembly, which looked into disputes and settled lawsuits. Since these forums were held at regular intervals, the plaintiffs could soon pursue justice through the proper legal channels, order could be preserved, and Rome would not end up taking disciplinary measures against the populace of Ephesus.

Read Acts 19:40-41.

- The city of Ephesus was under the domination of the Roman Empire. The main responsibility of the local city leaders was simply to maintain peace and order. If they failed to control the people, Rome would remove the appointed official from office. The entire town could also be put under martial law, taking away many civic freedoms. The clerk's straightforward reminder must have had a sobering effect on the Ephesian people. The contrast is remarkable; a screaming mob rushing to fill the theater became an orderly group dismissed by the town clerk. The riot in Ephesus convinced Paul that it was time to move on. But it also showed that the Lord would use even man's laws to provide some protection for Christians as they challenged the worship of the goddess Artemis/Diana in the most idolatrous religion in Asia.

ACTS

Chapter 20

This chapter records the conclusion of Paul's third missionary journey. Paul was heading for Jerusalem, intending to arrive before the Feast of Pentecost. On the way, he took time in Troas to encourage the believers; then he had a tearful farewell with the elders of the church in Ephesus. These events reveal the heart of the apostle. His speeches and actions offer a model for ministry.

PAUL GOES TO MACEDONIA AND GREECE—20:1-6

Venturing down through Macedonia and into Achaiah, Paul expressed a fatherly concern for the communities of believers that he had been instrumental in founding.

Read Acts 20:1.

- Paul then sent for the disciples, presumably those he had been teaching in Ephesus for two years. The key word in this verse describing Paul's ministry is the Greek term *paraklesis*, the same word used by Jesus for the coming Holy Spirit (**John 14:16; 15:26**). It literally means "called alongside," and further meanings are "counsel" or "encourage." The term carries with it two general ideas: (1) communication—the teaching of truth; and (2) compassion—the exhortation or encouragement that comes from a caring, concerned "Counselor." The word will show up again in 20:2 and 20:12 where, after the events in Troas, the people were "greatly comforted." Encouragement is a major theme in Acts; it is offered by Barnabas (4:36; 11:23) and by Paul (13:15; 16:40; 20:1-2; 27:35-36). After saying his

farewell, Paul left for Macedonia, to continue his ministry of encouragement.

Read Acts 20:2-3.

- **2 Corinthians 2:12-13** and **7:5-7** give a few more details about this journey. 2 Corinthians was written during this part of the journey. Paul had written 1 Corinthians while still in Ephesus. On this trip Paul likely retraced his steps, visiting many of the churches he had established on his second journey (16-18) and arriving ultimately in Greece (specifically Corinth) 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. Paul's three-month stay was brought to a close in typical fashion as a Jewish plot was discovered against the apostle, causing him to decide to return through Macedonia. Paul had been treated roughly in most of these locations; Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea (16:11-17:14). But, like his difficult first journey through Phrygia and Galatia, to which he returned several times, Paul returned again to the places he had visited on his previous tours (19:21).

Read Acts 20:4-5.

- This is an unusually complete listing of those who accompanied Paul on this part of the journey. The company may have provided accountability and security as Paul was carrying the offering from the Asian churches for the suffering church at Jerusalem (**2 Corinthians 8-9**). These men who were traveling with Paul also represented churches that Paul had started in Asia: (1) Galatia, Gaius and Timothy; (2) Asia,

Tychicus and Trophimus; (3) Macedonia, Sopater, Aristarchus, and Secundus. Having the men deliver the gifts to Jerusalem, gave the gifts a personal touch and strengthened the unity of the universal church. Paul discussed this gift in one of his letters to the Corinthian church (**2 Corinthians 8:1-21**).

Read Acts 20:6.

- Jews celebrated the Passover (which was immediately followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread) according to Moses' instructions (**Exodus 12:43-51**), even if they couldn't be at Jerusalem for the occasion. But Luke's reference to the feast does not necessarily mean that he, Paul, and the others celebrated it—an unlikely occurrence in this totally Gentile setting. It was simply a calendar marker, telling when all these things occurred. The use of “we” here shows that Luke again had joined the group. The last “we” section was 16:10-40.

PAUL'S FINAL VISIT TO TROAS—20:7-12

In Troas, the believers gathered on Sunday, and Paul preached a lengthy, late-night sermon. A young man by the name of Eutychus fell asleep and fell to his death out of the third-floor window in which he was sitting! Paul calmly restored Eutychus to life, and the church resumed its worship service.

Read Acts 20:7-8.

- The gathering of this group was on the first day of the week. This is one of the clearest New Testament references to the church meeting on Sunday rather than on Saturday, the Sabbath. The breaking of bread most

likely refers to the Lord's Supper. Evidently, the meeting began in the evening, presumably because the church members were not available to come during the day due to work. Because Paul and his companions intended to leave the next day, Paul had an extended teaching time. He kept on talking until midnight! The many lamps were candles in lanterns. The combination of the heat from the candles and the gathered number of people in an upstairs room probably made the room very warm; this no doubt helped Eutychus fall asleep.

Read Acts 20:9-10.

- Paul spoke on and on, and Eutychus, likely sitting in the window because of the crowd in the room, sank into a deep sleep. He fell out of the window, three stories, to his death. Luke, the physician, confirmed the fact that Eutychus was dead. Paul went to the boy and took him into his arms (literally, the text says “he fell on” or “threw himself on” the boy). Paul addressed the concerned flock. “Don’t worry,” he said. Then with those powerful Resurrection-reminiscent words, he added: “He’s alive!” Can you imagine the impact that moment would have had on the watching congregation? On Eutychus’ family? On Eutychus? The believers at Troas surely must have retold that story for years to come. The raising of Eutychus would have reminded everyone of Peter’s similar miracle with Dorcas (9:36-42). It also would have identified Paul’s actions with Elijah and Elisha of the Old Testament (**1 Kings 17:21; 2 Kings 4:32-35**).

Read Acts 20:11-12.

- Following this amazing miracle, the meeting was resumed upstairs where they broke bread (most likely, they ate a meal, then celebrated the Lord’s Supper),

followed by Paul's continuing to teach until daylight! The believers were greatly comforted (literally, "encouraged") a repeated feature of Paul's ministry.

PAUL MEETS THE EPHESIAN ELDERS—20:13-38

Traveling south to Miletus, Paul summoned the elders of the Ephesian church in order to bid them farewell. In his charge to them, Paul reviewed his ministry among them, described the Spirit's leading him to Jerusalem, and challenged them to shepherd the church in their care. This discourse reveals Paul's pastoral heart (20:18-20, 31, 36-37), reiterates Paul's preoccupation with preaching the gospel of grace (20:24-25), and records the presence of a well-trained group of disciples who would be able to carry the message of Christ throughout Asia.

Read Acts 20:13-15.

- Paul traveled ahead by land to Assos, which was about twenty miles away, a much shorter distance than a ship had to travel. The rest of the party went on ahead by ship. At Assos, the party was reunited, and Luke faithfully recorded the inland passage trek of their ship to Mitylene, then past the island of Kios and Samos, eventually arriving at Miletus. Miletus was situated at the mouth of the Maeander River on the Aegean Sea (in modern-day Turkey).

Read Acts 20:16.

- Paul had missed attending the Passover in Jerusalem, so he was especially interested in arriving on time for Pentecost, which is fifty days after Passover. He was carrying gifts for the Jerusalem believers from churches in Asia and Greece (**Romans 15:25-26; 1 Corinthians**

16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8:1-9:15). The Jerusalem church had been experiencing difficult times.

Read Acts 20:17.

- Paul wanted to visit with the elders of the church at Ephesus, so he sent word for them to meet him at Miletus. Paul's message to the elders is an example of a typical address of Paul to the spiritual leaders of the churches he had begun. In the same way that Luke included a message of Paul to the Jews in the synagogues (13:16-41), a message to the Gentiles in the streets (14:15-17), and a message among the intellectuals in the "classroom" (17:22-31), here Paul's message is one of encouragement to those he had placed in charge of the local churches.

Read Acts 20:18-19.

- Paul's meeting with the Ephesian elders had three parts: (1) a review of Paul's past ministry in Ephesus (20:18-21); (2) an explanation of the present situation of Paul and the church (20:22-27); and (3) an instruction for these shepherds of God's flock to help them faithfully carry out their responsibilities in the future (20:28-35). Paul described his ministry among the Ephesians, reminding the elders that they had observed his humble character. As successful as Paul's ministry was—the miracles, decisions, baptisms, and successfully disciplined believers and planted churches—he did not boast. Under his ministry there, the word of the Lord had spread widely (19:20). The glory, however, was consistently given back to the one directing it all; it was the Lord's work, not Paul's.
- Another characteristic of Paul's ministry to the Ephesians was the presence of tears; his work was done

with passion and compassion. It was not a coldhearted teaching ministry or a distant discipleship ministry; there was warmth and cooperation, sympathy and empathy (**Romans 9:2; 2 Corinthians 2:4; Philippians 3:18**). Paul's ministry also showed endurance. He spoke of the trials that were endured due to the plots of the Jews.

Read Acts 20:20-21.

- Paul's ministry in Ephesus revealed boldness in speaking truth, whether in a public or private setting, but also living out that truth before the people. The mention of "homes" may refer to house churches. A good spiritual leader has the courage to tell the truth no matter what the consequences. Paul had one message for all. Both Jews and Gentiles alike were in need of the central message of repentance and faith toward Jesus Christ (**Acts 26:20-23; Romans 10:9-10; 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2**).
- In this day of growing complexity, the church often falls prey to the temptation to become sophisticated and complicated. Believers must never let the message get lost in the trappings of ministry (buildings, programs, schedules, calendars) or the ever-present busyness of church activities. The message must not be prejudiced; it's applicable to Jews and Gentiles alike. It is not optional, and it must not be overly complicated. It is just one message: turn from sin, turn to God, and believe in Jesus Christ.

Read Acts 20:22-23.

- Paul's message to the Ephesian elders shifted from a description of his past work among them to a description of the present and immediate future for him.

That future would begin in Jerusalem, where Paul said he was being drawn irresistibly by the Holy Spirit. Compare this word “bound” or “drawn” with similar examples of the Holy Spirit’s leading in **Luke 2:27; 4:1; Acts 8:29; 10:19; 11:12; 16:6-7**.

- The Holy Spirit told Paul that he would be imprisoned and experience suffering. Paul anticipated this, as reflected in some of his letters: “*Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there*” (**Romans 15:31**). Paul’s strong character was a good example to the Ephesian elders as well as to all Christians, many of whom would suffer for Christ.

Read Acts 20:24.

- Paul’s statement of his priorities and values is a great perspective for any believer of any age. Self-preservation was not a thought in Paul’s mind. Paul used one of his favorite athletic pictures to illustrate what he meant; his life was a race that must be finished (**1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Philippians 2:16; 2 Timothy 4:7**). Life or death was irrelevant to Paul. His sold-out, single-minded desire was to finish the race well. As he would tell the Philippians in a letter not too many months hence, “*I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death*” (**Philippians 1:20**). Paul’s goal in life was to tell others about Christ (**Philippians 3:7-13**). Paul further clarified what he meant by the “ministry” when he said that it was testifying to the gospel of God’s grace. The gospel is a message of forgiveness, freedom, and a future.

Read Acts 20:25.

- Paul may have been convinced that he would never see any of these men again. It is unknown if he ever did, but at this somber moment, Paul was saying good-bye to a group, most of whom were led to Christ by him and probably all of whom had been taught by him.

Read Acts 20:26-27.

- In a solemn declaration, Paul claimed his innocence of anyone's damnation. He was likely referring to the people of Ephesus before whom he had boldly and thoroughly proclaimed what must be known for salvation and growth in Christ. All of God's counsel that had been revealed to Paul was presented to these folks. As shepherds of the flock, we Christian leaders must also be careful to teach "the whole Bible" as the Lord has laid it out for us—a systematic and progressive teaching of the entire Bible.

Read Acts 20:28.

- This begins the final section of Paul's message to the elders of Ephesus. The verbs have changed from the declarative (I did, we did) to the imperative (Go do!). There are basically three charges: (1) "***Keep watch;***" (2) "***Be shepherds;***" and (3) "***Be on your guard***" (20:31). In this verse, Paul outlines the philosophy of the ministry that pastors and church leaders should follow. The first charge was to "keep watch," first over themselves and then "***over all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.***" Although Paul had likely chosen and trained most of them, the operative force behind everything had been the Holy Spirit. The flock was the church of God, an entity that

God had bought (literally, “acquired, obtained”) with His own blood, shed by Christ on the cross. Those who lead God’s people must keep a careful watch over themselves and the flock. The leadership (elders, pastors, deacons) would be the first line of attack from the enemy (the “wolves” mentioned in the next verse). Before the flock could be protected, the shepherds must protect themselves! These leaders were to “shepherd.” They were to guide, direct, protect, feed, and help the flock to grow into its full potential (**Psalm 23; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Peter 5:1-4**). And from what did these elders need to guard themselves and the flock? The following verses explain.

Read Acts 20:29-30.

- With a vivid, colorful shepherding image, Paul forewarned the Ephesian elders of the coming attack on the flock by vicious wolves. Some would attack from outside the church. These false teachers would invade the church after the departure of Paul and, like wolves, ruthlessly attack the flock. They would bring with them their fine-sounding words, not sparing a soul who would be deceived and follow them. Other attacks would come from the church (“*even some of you*”). Paul warned that some of their own members, in order to build a following, would distort the truth and lead away a portion of the flock. False teachers did, in fact, hound the church at Ephesus. This is confirmed in the later books of the New Testament (**1 Timothy 1:6-7, 9-20; 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 1:15; 2:17-18; 3:1-9; Revelation 2:1-7**).

Read Acts 20:31.

- Paul’s final warning is simply, “*Watch!*” (literally, “keep alert”). The leaders needed to remember Paul’s

example of alertness, his constant watch and care over them night and day. Since the vicious enemy is always around (both inside and outside the church) and always looking for victims, the shepherd must be on the alert. The major role of elders is to guard the flock. They are to watch over and protect the church from everything that comes against it: sin, laziness, deception, distraction, disaster. One of the major benefits of believers putting themselves under the leadership of a church and its elders is that they receive not just instruction or correction but protection as well. Paul pointed to his own three-year shepherding of the Ephesian church as an example. The few incidents recorded in Chapter 19 serve as examples of how constant and vicious the attacks could be. Remember them, Paul said, and stay awake!

Read Acts 20:32.

- Paul pronounced a benediction of sorts to this group into whom he had poured so much of his life; he committed them to God and to the message of His grace. This was evidently a common parting phrase as it occurs elsewhere in the book (14:23, 25; 15:40). The “*word of His grace*” that Paul was commending them to had two essential characteristics: (1) It has the ability to build one up (strengthen one’s faith); and (2) is an inheritance to all who are sanctified (26:18; **Ephesians 1:18; Colossians 1:12; 1 Peter 1:4**).

Read Acts 20:33-34.

- Returning to remarks similar to those with which he opened (20:18-20), Paul reminded the elders of two more characteristics of his ministry: (1) contentment and self-restraint; he had not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing; (2) diligence; he had worked hard with

his own hands to support himself and his companions. Paul was a tentmaker; he supported himself with this trade. Paul worked not in order to become rich but to be free from being dependent on anyone. He supported himself and those who traveled with him (**Philippians 4:11-13; 1 Thessalonians 2:9**).

Read Acts 20:35.

- Paul's hard work at tent making also enabled him to support the weak, those who were struggling physically, spiritually, emotionally, and maybe even financially, thus setting an example for the Ephesians to follow. These words of Jesus, "It is more blessed to give than to receive," are not recorded in the Gospels. Obviously, since not all of Jesus' words were written down (**John 21:25**), this saying must have been passed on orally through the apostles. Certainly the theology of this statement is found abundantly in Christ's teachings.

Read Acts 20:36-38.

- Paul's relationship with these believers is a beautiful example of genuine Christian fellowship. He had cared for them and loved them, even wept with them in their needs. They responded with love and care for him and sorrow over his leaving. They prayed together and comforted one another. What a sorrowful scene this was. Yet how wonderful it must have been to be so thoroughly, completely, and healthily bound to others, not through the earthly cords of family or marriage, but with ties that are even closer—those of a shared Savior, a shared salvation, a shared solution to the deepest problems of the soul. These believers possessed in Christ the kind of depth and integrity in relating to one another that the world longs for but so rarely finds. Like Paul, all believers can build strong relationships with

other believers by living a Christ-centered and life of sharing, caring, sorrowing, rejoicing, and praying with one another. And, like Paul, the best way to gather others around is by dying to self for them and for the gospel. It is not surprising that these men accompanied him to the ship. They may have stood, wept, and prayed until the mast of their beloved shepherd's ship disappeared over the Aegean horizon, and only then returned to Ephesus, determined more than ever to shepherd their flock with the passion of the one who had so lovingly shown them the way.

ACTS

Chapter 21

PAUL'S JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM—21:1-17

Upon making his way to Tyre, Paul was urged by the believers not to go to Jerusalem. Nevertheless, the apostle pressed on. At Caesarea further prophecies were given, warning Paul of certain imprisonment if he journeyed to Jerusalem. Unmoved, Paul adamantly determined to complete his mission even if it meant dying “for the sake of the Lord Jesus” (21:13). God’s sovereignty is the underlying theme. This truth becomes more apparent upon viewing how this Jerusalem visit ultimately paved the way for Paul’s trip to Rome! This chapter looks more like a travelogue than a record of the Acts of the Apostle. Yet, all believers can learn a great deal about the benefits of being involved in the work of the gospel in people’s lives.

Read Acts 21:1-3.

- Having said farewell to the Ephesian elders at Miletus, Paul continued his journey to Jerusalem. The stops along the way—Cos, Rhodes, and Patara—were a normal day’s run for the smaller ship they were on. At Patara they boarded a different ship, possibly a larger vessel that could make the longer, open-sea trip to Phoenicia. Luke recorded the sighting of Cyprus in their transit of the Mediterranean; surely sparking memories for Paul of his first journey with Barnabas. The ship put in at Tyre in Syria, its destination, giving Paul and his group a week’s rest before they shipped out again.

Read Acts 21:4.

- A church had been founded in Tyre, probably soon after the dispersion of believers from Jerusalem following

Stephen's martyrdom (8:1; 11:19). Paul and his traveling companions (20:4) found the local believers and stayed with them a week. Certain believers who had the gift of prophecy prophesied through the Holy Spirit, warning Paul not to go to Jerusalem. Some have speculated that Paul was wrong or disobedient to go to Jerusalem. Was Paul disobeying the Holy Spirit by continuing his journey to Jerusalem? It is very doubtful. More likely, the Holy Spirit showed these believers about the suffering that Paul would face in Jerusalem, and they drew the conclusion that he should not go there because of that danger. This is supported by 21:12-14, where the local believers, after hearing that Paul would be turned over to the Romans, begged him to turn back. Acts 20:22 and 21:14 show that Paul determined that it was God's will for him to go to Rome, as does the fact that God directly told him that he was to go to Rome (23:11). Paul said he was "irresistibly drawn" by the Holy Spirit to go to Jerusalem (20:22). He believed God wanted him to go to Rome in chains. The phrase "*through the Spirit*" simply means that the Spirit had revealed Paul's suffering in Jerusalem and beyond. His importance to the church organizationally, and their love for him personally, compelled them to persuade him to stay safe. But, like his Savior before him, Paul "*resolutely set out for Jerusalem*" (Luke 9:51).

Read Acts 21:5-6.

- After the week was over, the journey continued. They were escorted outside the city by the disciples of Tyre with whom Paul had been ministering. All of them came, along with wives and children, to say farewell to their friend. As at Miletus (20:36-38), the farewell from Tyre was a tender time of prayer on the beach. Some say that Paul was cold and harsh (based on the stinging rebukes he passed out to churches like those in Galatia

and Corinth or to individuals like Barnabas and even Peter); however, we must consider passages such as these. Whether it was from the elders at Ephesus or the believers at Tyre, there was a warm, loving response to his ministry virtually everywhere he went.

Read Acts 21:7.

- Ptolemais was the only stop between Tyre and Caesarea, and there the stay was much shorter—only one day. Still Paul and his companions greeted the believers. As with Tyre, there is no mention of how or by whom the church had been planted in the area.

Read Acts 21:8-9.

- In Caesarea lived Philip, called here the Evangelist. The last record of his activities is found in 8:26-40. Philip had been one of the seven men chosen to serve the tables in the early days of the church at Jerusalem. In contrast to Stephen, one of the “seven” who was martyred very early on, Philip had ministered for many years, ending in Caesarea. Philip had four unmarried daughters and they all had the gift of prophecy. From this we learn that the gift of prophecy was given to both men and women. Women actively participated in God’s work (2:17). Other women who are recorded in the bible as prophesying are Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Noadiah, Isaiah’s wife, and Anna. It is a little surprising here that in light of the other prophecies concerning Paul’s journey to Jerusalem and to Rome, these four prophets made no mention of it.

Read Acts 21:10-11.

- Fifteen years earlier, Agabus had predicted the famine in Jerusalem (11:27-29). He arrived at Philip’s home from Judea and gave a graphic display of what lay ahead

for Paul, giving more detail as to what the previous prophecies had been warning. Agabus gave the information of Paul's impending arrest—naming the Jews of Jerusalem as the culpable cause and of his being handed over to the Gentiles—foreshadowing his long journey ultimately to a courtroom in Rome.

Read Acts 21:12-14.

- Spurred along by the graphic and foreboding prophecy of Agabus, the believers in Caesarea urged Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Even Paul's traveling companions added their voices to the crowd. Evidently, they had heard enough from the Holy Spirit on the subject and had decided that Paul should pursue another course. Paul was an invaluable and, to them, irreplaceable asset to the church. In addition, he had not always walked into a fight; instead, he had escaped at times, fleeing some cities to save his life. Paul had avoided confrontation in Ephesus and had appealed to his Roman citizenship in Philippi. Why must he go to certain imprisonment in Jerusalem?
- The answer, pure and simple, was that Paul knew God wanted him to go. Paul had faced rejection and persecution from the beginning. Doors had closed on the second journey (16:6-8) and then had swung wide open to Macedonia (16:9-10). God had led Paul, coming to him during difficult times to spur him on (18:10). Paul knew he would be imprisoned in Jerusalem, and although his friends pleaded with him, Paul knew he must go. No one enjoys pain, but a true disciple wants above all else to please God. Paul was not ignoring the warnings—he was not suicidal—he simply disagreed with his brothers and sisters in Christ as to whether the prophesied difficulties outweighed the potential progress that could be made for the gospel. And the ultimate issue, the will of God, was the one to

which Paul's friends finally resigned themselves: "*The will of the Lord be done.*"

Read Acts 21:15-17.

- The trip from Caesarea to Jerusalem was about sixty-five miles, a two day journey on horseback. Notice that the entourage had been joined by a few more courageous disciples from Caesarea who were not afraid to join Paul. The home of Mnason may have been in Jerusalem or at some point along the journey there. Mnason was from Cyprus and was one of the early disciples.
- Upon their arrival in Jerusalem, Paul and his friends were received warmly, a testimony to the growing reputation of the apostle and gratitude for the generous gift he was bringing from the churches (24:17; **Romans 15:25-27**; **1 Corinthians 16:1-4**; **2 Corinthians 8:13-14**; **9:12-13**). Paul had not forgotten the charge of the Jerusalem church from years ago to remember the poor (**Galatians 2:10**). The Jerusalem elders had never thought that they would be the beneficiaries of Paul's obedience to their charge; much less had they imagined that the support would come from predominantly Gentile churches.

PAUL ARRIVES AT JERUSALEM—21:18-25

At long last, Paul reached his destination: Jerusalem. He was warmly welcomed by the believers there. A "detailed account of the things God had accomplished among the Gentiles through his ministry" (21:19) gave the leaders of the church reason to praise God. Aware, however, of the strong Jewish animosity toward Paul, James and the elders encouraged the apostle to participate in a public Jewish ceremony of purification at the temple. They felt such an act

would quell the false rumors circulating about Paul—that he was actively undermining the Mosaic Law.

Read Acts 21:18.

- James, Jesus’ brother, was the leader of the Jerusalem church (15:13-21; **Galatians 1:19; 2:9**). He was called an apostle, even though he wasn’t one of the original twelve who had followed Jesus. Of the inner circle of Peter, John, and James (John’s brother, not the James of this chapter), only Peter and John were still alive at this time. Both were actively involved in missionary endeavors elsewhere, leaving James, Jesus’ brother, with the heavy responsibility of leading the mother church in Jerusalem. It was not only an influential church, but it had also been a horribly persecuted church (since Stephen’s day), and at this particular time, it faced famine and poverty. This was obviously an important gathering, since all the elders of the Jerusalem church were present. The “we” section ends here and will not appear again until 27:1. It is unclear whether Luke was no longer with them (an unlikely event) or whether he just changed his literary style.

Read Acts 21:19-20a.

- The fact that Paul reported to this group shows his sincere humility and submission to these honored coworkers in spreading the gospel (**Ephesians 5:21; Philippians 2:3-8**). After a very successful missionary career at great cost to himself, he had plenty to boast about. He could easily have looked down at the “old guard” who were still ministering not far from the site of the great commissioning by Christ (1:8). But he didn’t. The Jerusalem elders responded well to Paul’s report of what God had done among the Gentiles. They praised God—a testimony to their love for the spread of

the gospel and their submission to the way God directed His movement. There was no envy, competition, or criticism from these leaders, only praise.

Read Acts 21:20b.

- Everything was not going smoothly in the church in Jerusalem, however. The ancient Jewish historian Josephus described this time period (approximately AD 56 or 57) as a time filled with political unrest and strong Jewish nationalism. There were several uprisings by Jews against their Roman leaders, of which had been brutally put down by Felix, the Roman procurator. This caused even more anger from the Jews and intensified their hatred for Gentiles. Paul, missionary to the Gentiles, entered the city with news of vast Gentile conversions. The elders informed Paul of the large contingency of Jews who had believed. The problem, however, was that all of those Jews were zealous for the law, meaning that they probably would not be rejoicing in Paul's message of grace or the success of Paul's ministry among the Gentiles. This explains the wisdom of James and the elders to have a meeting alone with Paul rather than in an open forum. While they supported Paul and his ministry, he was somewhat of a hindrance to their continued ministry to the Jews. This was the reason behind their request that he join in the purification rites (21:22-24).

Read Acts 21:21.

- The Jewish Christian “zealots” had been informed, through rumors, that Paul was teaching the Jews he had contacted and lived among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses (“turn away” is the Greek word *apostasian*, from which the word “apostasy” comes). Not only that, but they had heard that Paul was minimizing the rite of

circumcision and allowing the Jews to stop living according to the Jewish customs. The Jerusalem Council (Chapter 15) had settled the issue of circumcision of Gentile believers. Evidently, there was a rumor that Paul had gone far beyond the council's decision, even forbidding Jews to circumcise their children. It was true that Paul was downplaying the importance of circumcision and did not require keeping the Jewish customs, as he taught the Gentiles. Paul taught both Jews and Gentiles that salvation did not depend on keeping the law (**Galatians 3:24-29; 5:1; Colossians 2:11-17**). He taught Gentiles not to get circumcised (**1 Corinthians 7:18-19**), but there is no evidence that he taught Jews to abandon the practice.

Read Acts 21:22-24.

- The rumors about Paul, of course, were not true, but Paul willingly submitted to this Jewish custom to show that he was not working against the council's decision and that he was still Jewish in his lifestyle. The Jerusalem elders suggested that Paul join four men among their number who had made a vow. The details are unknown, but they seem to have taken the Nazirite vow (**Numbers 6:13-21**). Paul was to join and sponsor them (pay their expenses) for the final stages of their purification rites. Often a Jew who had been in Gentile territory for a lengthy time would undergo ritual purification upon returning to his homeland. The time period for this purification was seven days. This may have been what the elders were asking Paul to do. Evidently the other four participants were too poor to afford the expenses of the final sacrifices, so Paul's generous offer to pay these expenses and join them would refute the reports about him and show that he was living in obedience to the law. In reality, the zealots' zeal was misplaced. A far more appropriate response

by the leaders could have been to say to these rumormongers, “The Jerusalem Council made an authoritative decision (probably at least eight years ago by this time) and communicated it in written form at the time. Paul was here, agreed to abide by the ruling, and, to our knowledge, has announced and enforced the ruling everywhere he has gone. By all accounts he is a brave and godly soldier of the Cross who has been incredibly successful in announcing the Good News to the remote parts of the Gentile world. Your rumors are untrue.” It seems absurd that this hardworking apostle, who had just brought to Jerusalem a generous offering from his Gentile ministry, should be asked for some of his hard-earned money to placate that group. But when asked, Paul graciously gave the money and went along with the leaders’ suggestion.

- The church has always been susceptible to the legalist, the one who demands religious performance out of those who wish to be numbered among the faithful. These Jerusalem leaders seemed to have been intimidated by their Jewish Christian brothers and were riding a fence, placating the zealous at the price of grace. There are two ways to think of the Jewish laws: Paul rejected one way and accepted the other: (1) Paul rejected the idea that the Old Testament laws could bring salvation to those who kept them. Salvation is freely given by God’s gracious act and is received through faith. The laws are of no value for salvation except to point out sin and show a need for a savior. (2) Paul accepted the view that the Old Testament laws prepare for and teach about the coming of Jesus Christ. Christ fulfilled the law and released people from its burden of guilt. Paul was simply keeping the laws to avoid offending those he wished to reach with the gospel (**Romans 3:21-31; 7:4-6; 13:9-10; Galatians 3:23-29; 4:21-31**). Those who think Paul was wrong for going along with the request by the elders forget one

of the marks of Paul's ministry: ***“To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law”*** (1 Corinthians 9:20). This was one of those times when it was not in anyone's best interest to offend the Jews, so Paul wisely chose to comply.

Read Acts 21:25.

- Here, quoting almost word for word, the elders stated the past ruling of the Jerusalem council: the Gentile believers should abstain from ***“things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality”*** (15:19-21). It is not clear who this restatement of the council ruling was for—themselves, Paul, or those among them who may have been wavering. Perhaps this statement is best understood as given to assure Paul that they were not changing the ruling or adding anything to what had been decided years earlier.

PAUL IS ARRESTED—21:26-36

Paul's attempt to placate his enemies was an utter failure. A group of Jews from Asia spotted him in the temple and incited a crowd to seize him. Dead set in their determination to reject the message of salvation in Christ, these opponents of Paul refused to look objectively at the facts. Instead, they whipped the mob into a frenzy by making a series of false and highly inflammatory accusations against the apostle. Only the quick action of a detachment of Roman soldiers saved Paul from being beaten to death.

Read Acts 21:26.

- Paul's agreement to their request was a sign of his greatness. He had been a huge influence in many lives, yet he did not flaunt it. He had begun churches all over Asia and Europe—in such leading cities as Antioch, Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus. He had a huge following in Rome itself, although he had never been there. He had been the point of attack from both Jews and Gentiles. He had endured more blows, seen more converts, performed more miracles, trained more leaders, and made more of an impact than these elders could begin to know. He could have told them all what he had accomplished, but he didn't. In submission to their sensitivity, he paid for a ceremony in order to appease the religious zealots. He began the purification ritual with the four others and proceeded to the temple area to be “*a Jew to the Jews*” (1 Corinthians 9:20) so that he might win some of them. But Paul's gracious action appeased none of his detractors, at least not enough of them to stop those who were against him.

Read Acts 21:27-28.

- The opposition to Paul appears to have come from unbelieving Jews from Asia who recognized him in the temple during the time of the completion of the purification ritual. These Jews, present for the Feast of Pentecost, must have recognized Paul from his ministry in their area. Since they knew who Trophimus was (see next verse), they likely were from Ephesus and may have even been a part of the riot there (19:28-41). They stirred up the whole crowd, seized Paul, and in mob-like fashion began to shout their biased case against Paul. Contrary to their emotional accusation, Paul had not been everywhere, nor had he taught everyone, nor had he been against the Jews, their laws, or their temple.

The pinnacle of this argument was the accusation that Paul had actually brought Greeks into the temple, thus defiling their holy place. The Greek to whom they were referring was Trophimus, the Ephesian who was traveling with Paul. Luke would clear up that accusation in the next verse.

Read Acts 21:29.

- Luke explained that the Jewish accusers had seen Paul in the city with Trophimus, whom they knew to be a Gentile from Ephesus. Then, without any investigation whatsoever, they assumed Paul had taken Trophimus into the temple area. Gentiles were not permitted past the “Court of the Gentiles” under the direct threat of execution. No one would know that better than Paul. But they reported this event as though it had actually happened (21:28)!

Read Acts 21:30-31.

- The city was thrown into an uproar, and a great riot followed. Paul was dragged out of the Temple, and the gates were closed behind him. These were the gates between the inner court and the Court of the Gentiles. The temple guards (Levites) shut the gates to prevent the mob from coming inside. How ironic that the final scene at the temple in the book of Acts is the gates slamming shut to keep Paul out. Evidently, the mob was going to try to either beat him or stone him to death. Because Jerusalem was under Roman control, an uproar in the city would quickly be investigated by Roman authorities. The commander of the Roman regimen at this time was Claudius Lysias (23:26). He was head of a cohort (a special group, part of a legion) of Roman soldiers, perhaps as many as a thousand men. Lysias was the senior Roman official in Jerusalem.

Read Acts 21:32-33.

- Lysias called out his soldiers and officers. The quick action of Lysias and the close proximity of the garrison (the Antonia Fortress was adjacent to the temple area) were all that saved Paul's life. The seizing of Paul by the crowd (in 21:30) was superseded by the seizing of Paul by the Roman soldiers. Paul actually was fortunate to be arrested and bound. Luke, ever the one for details, wrote that Paul was bound with two chains. The chains handcuffed him to a Roman soldier on each side. This would be normal treatment for a criminal. After seizing Paul, the commander asked the crowd who the chained man was, and what crime he had committed.

Read Acts 21:34-36.

- The commander could not get a direct answer to his question (21:33) because the crowd could not agree on what the issues were. Because the commander could not find out the truth, he ordered Paul to be taken to the fortress, probably the safest place for the apostle in all Jerusalem! This was the Fortress of Antonia, built by Herod the Great to defend the temple area. It was located northwest of the temple and connected by stairs to the Court of the Gentiles. The fortress housed nearly one thousand soldiers. In the process of moving their prisoner, the mob, supposedly seeing the object of their anger being safely whisked away, got so violent that Paul had to be carried by the soldiers! The murderous mob pursued, all the while shouting, "Kill him, kill him!" These were almost identical to the words another murderous crowd had shouted to Pontius Pilate concerning Jesus just a few decades earlier (**Luke 23:18; John 19:15**).

PAUL SPEAKS TO THE CROWD—21:37-22:23

Paul's defense before the Jewish mob in the temple courts is a textbook example of how to communicate to a hostile audience. He disarmed the Roman commander by speaking to him in Greek. Then he established common ground with the Jews gathered below him by speaking to them in their own language. Presenting his credentials as a devout Jew trained under the highly respected rabbi Gamaliel, Paul then described his unlikely encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus Road. The crowd listened attentively until Paul mentioned Christ's command to go "*far away to the Gentiles*" (22:21). At the very mention of that word *Gentile*, the mob erupted in anger. Although Paul knew his statement would cause controversy, he refused to dilute the truth.

Read Acts 21:37-38.

- By speaking in Greek, Paul showed that he was a cultured, educated man and not just a common rebel starting riots in the streets. The language grabbed the commander's attention and gave Paul protection and the opportunity to give his defense. The historian Josephus wrote of an Egyptian who had led a revolt of thousands of Jews in Jerusalem in AD 54 (just three years previously). This self-proclaimed prophet had convinced his fanatical followers to accompany him to the nearby Mount of Olives. He said that, at his word, the walls of Jerusalem would collapse and this miraculous event would precipitate the destruction of the Roman Empire. Governor Felix had dispatched troops to deal with this insurrection. Hundreds of Jews were either killed or captured, and the Egyptian ringleader of this sect had disappeared into the desert. Lysias apparently assumed that Paul was this rebel, returning to make more trouble.

Read Acts 21:39-40.

- All these events took place outside the fortress of Antonia, the Roman garrison that adjoined the temple area on the northwest side. From the headquarters of Claudius Lysias, two flights of stairs led down into the outer court of the temple. The staircase would prove to be an excellent platform from which to address a crowd gathered in the plaza-like court below. The commander agreed to Paul's request. The text does not tell us why. Perhaps he was convinced that Paul was not some insurrectionist or rabble-rouser, or he may have thought that Paul could explain to the crowd what had happened, and hopefully they would disperse peacefully. So he gave Paul permission to speak. Why did Paul try to further the cause of Christ in the middle of a near riot? First, the Jews had leveled some false charges against him (21:28), and it's likely that he wanted to set the record straight. Second, on a deeper level, Paul, the evangelist, felt great compassion for his confused, blinded countrymen. He verbalized this burden in **Romans 9:1-4**: *"I tell the truth in Christ; I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh, who are Israelites,, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises."*
- Paul looked out on an enraged mob, and his heart broke. He ached for his people to understand the truth about Christ. He had been just like them—spiritually blind (until Jesus had blinded him physically to "unblind" him spiritually). Paul wanted his Jewish brothers to experience this same salvation. When Paul began speaking to the assembled crowd, he addressed them in

their own language, Aramaic, the common language among Palestinian Jews. He spoke in Aramaic not only to communicate in the language of his listeners but also to show that he was a devout Jew and had respect for the Jewish laws and customs.

ACTS
Chapter 22

PAUL SPEAKS TO THE CROWD

Read Acts 22:1-2.

- With this courteous salutation, Paul began the first of five defenses recorded by Luke in the book of Acts. He commanded the mob's attention by speaking Aramaic because many Jews of the Dispersion (that is, Hebrews who were born or reared outside of Palestine) could not speak Greek or Hebrew. The mob would have assumed that Paul, an outsider, could speak only Greek. Paul's ability to speak Aramaic gave his Jewish credentials even more weight and helped give him a hearing.

Read Acts 22:3.

- Paul began his defense with a brief personal history, almost a verbal resume of his impressive Jewish credentials. In deliberate fashion, he answered the charges of his critics and tried to alleviate their suspicions by purposely highlighting all the personal facts that would build his credibility with them. He chose his words carefully, seeking to “*find common ground with everyone*” (1 Corinthians 9:22). The statement, “*I am indeed a Jew*” declared Paul's brotherhood with the crowd. He was not hostile to Judaism. How could he be? He was a Jew by birth! “*I was brought up in [Jerusalem].*” Though born in Tarsus, Paul had been reared in the holy city of David. Not only that, but he had been educated under Gamaliel, the most honored rabbi of that time. Gamaliel was well known and respected as an expert on religious law (5:34). Who could say anything bad about a student of Israel's greatest scholar?

- At Gamaliel's feet, Paul was "*taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today.*" The Pharisees were legendary for their rigorous keeping of the most minute details of the law (**Matthew 23**). This statement by Paul was intended to refute the allegation in 21:28 that he had been telling everyone to disobey the Jewish laws. In saying this, Paul was alluding to his former prominent role in the persecution of Christians. He recognized the sincere motives behind their desire to kill him and that a few years earlier, he had shared that same well-meaning but misguided passion.

Read Acts 22:4-5.

- Having commended his Jewish audience for their zeal, Paul described how his passion for Judaism and against Christianity had been even more intense. Beyond merely accosting Christians on the temple grounds, Paul had sought their deaths (7:54-60; 26:10). Furthermore, with the official sanction of the high priest and all the council, Paul had actually traveled to far-off cities like Damascus, hunting and arresting the followers of Jesus. These were widely known indisputable facts, making Paul's testimony extremely powerful.

Read Acts 22:6-9.

- Paul's conversion is recorded in Chapter 9. Here Paul told the story himself, as he later would to Felix and Agrippa (26:1-32). He made it clear that his conversion was not an issue of defection but a matter of divine intervention! Paul had been about his business, intent on his mission (rounding up the followers of Jesus) and apparently very content and settled in his pro-Jewish, anti-Christian state of mind. Suddenly, at about noon

(at a real time) and approaching Damascus (at a real place), Paul had been blinded by a great light from heaven, so bright that it had knocked him to the ground. Even his companions had witnessed this flash. Next, Paul heard a voice addressing him by his former name (Saul), a voice claiming to be Jesus of Nazareth. Paul's very own countrymen had condemned Jesus and had collaborated with Rome in His crucifixion. Paul himself, as everyone knew, had launched a personal campaign to persecute the followers of Jesus. And now here was Paul, "***a real Jew if there ever was one...a member of the Pharisees***" (Philippians 3:5), standing on the steps of the Antonia Fortress, claiming that he had reluctantly but undeniably encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. For the audience in the temple court, this must have been a mind-numbing, heart-stopping moment. Without referring to a single Old Testament prophecy or launching into a theological discourse, Paul used his personal experience to press the points that Jesus was both alive and glorified.

Read Acts 22:10-11.

- Blinded, confused, shocked, scared—Paul's mind must have been reeling as he lay in the dust. If this experience was true, Jesus had not been merely an itinerant Galilean rabbi with messianic ambitions. He was the resurrected and glorified Messiah, the Lord, from whom Paul would have to submit to. He had responded with a humble question, "***What shall I do, Lord?***" Paul related to his audience the physical effects of this divine revelation. He had been unable to see and had to be led into Damascus by others. There Jesus had told him that he would receive further instructions. There is no record that his colleagues saw the vision or that any of them were converted.

Read Acts 22:12-13.

- To give further credence to his testimony before such a zealous Jewish mob, Paul described the role Ananias had played in his conversion. Paul mentioned Ananias's stellar reputation among the Jewish community of Damascus as well as his utter devotion to the law—facts that Luke did not disclose in Chapter nine. Omitted here are the background details (revealed in Chapter 9) about Ananias's faith in Christ, his charge from God to go and find Saul, and his understandable reluctance to seek out a known persecutor of the church. It is a streamlined version of events, but Paul did mention that it was Ananias who was instrumental in the restoration of his sight.

Read Acts 22:14-15.

- Immediately following his undeniably miraculous healing, Paul reported that he had heard through the lips of this respected, devout Jew his unexpected, unsought commission. Ananias had made it clear that the supernatural events being experienced by Paul were the sovereign work of none other than the God of our ancestors. In zealously opposing Jesus and His followers, Paul had assumed that he had been serving and honoring the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. Through the announcement of Ananias, he had learned the truth. The God of the Hebrews, far from leading Paul to fight Christianity, was selecting him to become the leading spokesman for this new faith! Paul would be a witness to all the world (an obvious reference to the Gentiles) of the fact that Jesus of Nazareth, crucified by men, had been resurrected and exalted by God. In referring to Jesus as the *Righteous One*, the pious Ananias had employed a term previously

used by Stephen (7:52) to designate Jesus as the Messiah.

Read Acts 22:16.

- Baptism (**Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 1:4-8; Acts 2:41**) indicates acceptance of and identification with a certain leader, group, or teaching. Baptism in the name of Christ would be a powerful outward sign of Paul's inward cleansing from sin and his embracing of the gospel. This verse does not teach, as some try to argue, that baptism saves—Paul was filled with the Spirit before his baptism with water (9:17-18)—nor does it teach that the ordinance of baptism literally washes away our sins. Faith alone, calling on the name of the Lord (**Romans 10:9-13**) saves, and baptism depicts that truth. A more literal rendering would be “get yourself baptized; having previously called upon His name.” In other words, the text is saying: “Since you have called on the Lord's name, now get baptized.”

Read Acts 22:17-18.

- Paul continued to answer the mob's accusations. He stated, in effect, that he was not anti-temple (21:28). By praying and worshiping there, he demonstrated his continued respect for the temple, even as a follower of Jesus. While he was praying in the Temple, Paul received a heavenly vision. The Greek word for “trance” is *ekstasei*, the same root used to describe Peter's dream-like encounter on the rooftop in Joppa (10:10; 11:5). In this vision, Jesus appeared and warned Paul to promptly leave Jerusalem because the Jews would not accept his testimony. In 9:29-30, Luke reported that Paul departed Jerusalem upon the advice of his Christian brothers. This apparent discrepancy is easily resolved by viewing Paul as led by both human

counsel and divine revelation. The advice from worried believers probably came first, later being confirmed by that other stronger, more irresistible voice (20:22).

Read Acts 22:19-20.

- Never one to run from controversy or trouble, Paul protested mildly. He obviously felt convinced that his conversion from a notorious persecutor of Christians into an ardent evangelist for the Way would impress his Jewish accusers. Surely, they would marvel at the change in his life. He could not and would not have done such a complete about-face without compelling reasons.

Read Acts 22:21.

- For Paul's own safety and for the fulfillment of God's eternal plan, Paul needed to leave Jerusalem. A plot on his life was in the works (**Acts 9:22-23**). Specifically, the Lord was commissioning Paul to take the message of salvation to the Gentiles. There are three confirmations of Paul's commission to the Gentiles: (1) God's words to Ananias (9:15); (2) Paul's record here; and (3) Paul's quote of Christ's words to him at his conversion (26:16-18). Given his past history, Paul surely must have realized that stating this call would send the crowd into a frenzy, but he did not minimize or avoid declaring the truth.

Read Acts 22:22-23.

- These people had listened intently to Paul, but the word "Gentiles" (22:21) brought out all their anger and exposed their pride. They were supposed to be a light to the Gentiles, telling them about the one true God, but

they had renounced that mission by becoming separatist and exclusive. Did the Jews hate the Gentiles? No, not really, because continual efforts were made by the Jews to try to convert the Gentiles. The implications of Paul's testimony and Christian gospel were clear, however. He was suggesting that the Gentiles could be saved and made right with God without first subscribing to the law and submitting to Jewish circumcision. In effect, Paul was claiming divine approval for the idea that Jews and Gentiles could have equal standing before God. This message collided head-on with the blindness, pride, and prejudice of the Jews. The results were explosive. But no matter how furious the mob or intense their opposition, God's plan would not be thwarted. The Gentiles were hearing the gospel through Jewish Christians such as Paul and Peter.

PAUL REVEALS HIS ROMAN CITIZENSHIP—22:24-29

Irritated at Paul for having created such a ruckus and eager to force some sort of confession, the Roman commander ordered the apostle flogged. Paul barely escaped this sentence by mentioning his Roman citizenship. Here is yet another instance of God's sovereign control over lives and events. Who knows how the spread of the gospel might have been hindered had Paul not been a Roman citizen?

Read Acts 22:24-25.

- The commander, who only minutes before had been impressed enough with Paul to give him the opportunity to speak to the crowd, suddenly became annoyed. Weary of the continual upheaval surrounding Paul, he ordered the apostle to be lashed with whips. He believed this torture would force a confession by Paul

or at least an explanation about what was really going on. By his own testimony (16:22-23; **2 Corinthians 11:24-25**), Paul had been beaten with rods and had even received, on several occasions, the Jewish “thirty-nine lashes.” The scourging proposed here by commander Lysias was different. This was the same kind of flogging that Jesus had been subjected to just before His crucifixion. Using a short leather whip imbedded with bits of bone and metal, a Roman soldier would rip away the flesh of his victim with each blow. If this punishment didn’t kill or permanently maim the recipient, it took months or even years to recover. Paul, ever the shrewd servant of the Lord, resorted to his civic privilege. By law, a Roman citizen could not be punished without first having a trial, nor could a Roman citizen be interrogated by beating or torture. The Roman law allowed citizens to appeal to Rome. In dramatic fashion, just as the blows were about to begin, Paul asked, *“Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?”* Paul knew the law. He knew the answer to that question. It was most certainly not legal. There had been no trial, hearing, or formal charges presented.

Read Acts 22:26-28.

- Paul’s question stunned and scared his captors. They had come dangerously close to violating strict Roman laws. In quizzing Paul, the commander learned that Paul had been born a Roman citizen (apparently his father had somehow achieved this status). The commander admitted that he had been forced to purchase his citizenship. Buying one’s citizenship (actually bribing the right people in power) was a common practice and a good source of income for the Roman government. Bought citizenship was considered inferior to citizenship by birth.

Read Acts 22:29.

- Paul's revelation about himself effectively ended the proceedings. The commander realized how close he had come to breaking the law himself. Paul was likely freed from his chains immediately but still detained for the night at the Fortress of Antonia (for his own protection, given the volatile nature of the crowd).

PAUL APPEARS BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN 22:30-23:11

Having been saved from the murderous mob at the temple the previous day, Paul was brought before the Jewish High Council. When he sensed the charged atmosphere (he was slapped after uttering the first sentence of his defense!), Paul decided to focus the Sanhedrin's attention on something even more controversial than himself—the theological debate concerning the resurrection of the dead. Immediately, the Pharisees and Sadducees began to argue, and Paul was led back to the safety of his cell. There the Lord appeared to him in a comforting vision, assuring him that he would preach the Good News in Rome. No amount of human opposition can thwart God's plan and purposes.

Read Acts 22:30.

- In an unusual move, the Roman commander ordered the Jewish High Council (the Sanhedrin) into session in order to hear Paul's case. If Paul were found innocent there, the commander could release him. If found guilty by the Jewish court, however, then the commander would see that Paul, as a Roman citizen, would go before the Roman governor (and, if necessary, on to Rome). Paul was freed from his chains by the

commander and brought in to state his case before the council. Paul consistently used his times of persecution as opportunities to witness for Christ. His enemies were creating a platform for him to address the entire council.

ACTS

Chapter 23

Read Acts 23:1.

- With clear, solid eye contact, the first words Paul said to the assembled Jewish religious leaders were, “***I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.***” Two times in Acts (here and in 24:16) and twenty-one times in his letters (**1 Corinthians 4:4; 2 Corinthians 1:12; 1 Timothy 1:5; 2 Timothy 1:3**), Paul referred to his clear conscience. He wanted his audience to know that he was at peace with his spiritual and moral conduct that had resulted in his trial before them. He was ready to stand before God and be accountable for his decisions and actions. The word for “good conscience” is *pepoliteumai*, from which we get our word “politics”—doing one’s duty as a citizen. Here, of course, Paul was referring to his duty as a citizen of the kingdom of God. In essence he was saying, “I am here today because I have been doing God’s word!”

Read Acts 23:2-3.

- Almost as soon as Paul began speaking, he was slapped on the mouth. Obviously, Paul had already offended Ananias the high priest, his accuser! Ananias became high priest in AD 48, and he reigned through AD 58 or 59. Josephus, a respected first-century historian, described Ananias as profane, greedy, and hot-tempered. He was hated by many of his Jewish contemporaries because of his pro-Roman policies. Paul’s outburst came as a result of the illegal command that Ananias had given. Ananias had violated Jewish law by assuming that Paul was guilty without a trial and by ordering his punishment (**Deuteronomy 19:15**). Maybe Paul had **Leviticus 19:15** in his mind in his

accusation of Ananias's breaking the law himself: "***You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor.***" Jesus also questioned the legality of His similar treatment during His mockery of a trial before this same council (**John 18:20-23**). Paul had not yet been charged with a crime, much less tried or found guilty. Paul's use of the term "***whitewashed wall***" also recalls Jesus' similar description of the Pharisees in **Matthew 23:27**. This amounted to calling Ananias a hypocrite. "Whitewashed wall" may refer to the practice of whitewashing gravestones. This created a clean and positive appearance for what contained death and corruption.

Read Acts 23:4-5.

- When Paul was given the information that he did not know, that the one whom he had rebuked was the high priest, he apologized—not to the individual but to the office. It is clear that Paul was submitting to the Word as he quoted the appropriate passage from Exodus 22:28, a verse that prohibits speaking evil of a leader of the people. Here Paul exhibited again, even in a very difficult situation, that God's Word mattered. Obviously Paul had not recognized Ananias as the high priest; his words seem to express amazement that one who would behave so badly (and illegally!) toward him could be the high priest. Most likely, Paul simply did not know who the high priest was or even that he was present at the trial. Because Paul had been in Jerusalem only sporadically for about twenty years, he may have never seen Ananias, maybe only knowing him by name or, more likely, by reputation. This meeting had been called by the Roman commander, not the council members, so the members may not have been in their

official robes, which would have identified the high priest (22:30).

Read Acts 23:6.

- The Sadducees and Pharisees were two groups of religious leaders but with strikingly different beliefs. The Pharisees believed in a bodily resurrection, but the Sadducees did not. The Sadducees adhered only to Genesis through Deuteronomy, which contain an explicit teaching on resurrection. Paul's statement about his hope moved the debate away from himself and toward the religious leaders' festering controversy about the resurrection of the dead. By identifying himself as a Pharisee and the descendant of Pharisees, Paul utilized three tactics: (1) he opened the door for inserting the gospel of the resurrected Christ, at least with the part of the council who believed in resurrection; (2) he got some sympathy and support from a part of the council; (3) he surfaced an ongoing controversy that would embroil the council in hopeless debate. Paul's sudden insight that the council was a mixture of Sadducees and Pharisees is an example of the power that Jesus promised to believers (**Mark 13:9-11**). God will enable His people to speak boldly when they are under fire for their faith.

Read Acts 23:7-8.

- Paul's tactic worked; the council was divided. Their historic argument about the resurrection, angels, and spirits came to the surface. This was the same issue over which the Sadducees had tried to trap Christ (**Matthew 22:23-33**) but without success. The Sadducees were a part of the Jews who believed the messianic age had begun with the Jewish revolt under Judas Maccabeus. They did not believe in any future

heavenly reality. It is not likely that Paul was simply causing a distraction, though that was the result. Rather, he was utilizing this opportunity, maybe his last with his Pharisee “brothers,” to tell them the truth, to introduce them to his Savior. Reaching them was his main motive: “I know you believe in the resurrection, and I have a Resurrection you have to investigate!”

Read Acts 23:9.

- The dispute caused an immediate great uproar. As expected, the Pharisees came to the vigorous defense of one who spoke so positively about one of their valued positions—resurrection. Paul had, in fact, stated that the resurrection of the dead was the reason that he was on trial (23:6)! The Pharisees alluded to another area of their differences between them and the Sadducees by speculating on the fact that a spirit or an angel may have spoken to him. They may have drawn this conclusion based on some of Paul’s remarks to the crowd at the temple court the day before (22:17-18). The Sadducees would have argued strongly that such communication was not possible because they didn’t believe in the existence of spirits and angels.

Read Acts 23:10.

- Finally the disagreement (literally, “standoff”) became so heated that the Roman commander had to step in. Evidently, Paul was in the middle of it all and had to be removed by the Roman troops. From there he was safely removed to the barracks of the Antonia fortress. Just as had been Paul’s experience for the last decade of ministry, he was once again attacked by the Jews and treated kindly by the Gentiles—locked in a Roman prison in order to protect him from the high court of the Jews!

Read Acts 23:11.

- And when night came, the Lord appeared to Paul (literally, “stood by him”). The Lord had always been with Paul, but He knew that His faithful servant needed Him closer that night. Look at the richness of the encouragement of the Lord here. Christ told Paul to be encouraged and then gave him the substance of why he should be so. First, he gave Paul a word of praise for his faithfulness in his ministry; “*for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem...*” Second, He gave Paul a word of promise: “*so you must also bear witness at Rome.*” God, in essence, promised Paul safe passage to another field of ministry. We might imagine that after His visit, which was another in a long line of God’s encouraging appearances to Paul, the apostle rolled over and drifted off to the kind of restful sleep that only a child safe within his Father’s strong arms can experience (**Psalm 127:2**).

THE PLAN TO KILL PAUL–23:12-22

The morning after God had pledged to deliver Paul safely to Rome, a group of Jews gathered to plot the murder of the apostle. How futile! The Lord Himself had declared through the prophet: “From eternity to eternity I am God. No one can oppose what I do. No one can stop my actions”(Isaiah 43:13). Paul’s nephew learned of the plot and revealed it to the Roman commander in Jerusalem.

Read Acts 23:12-13.

- The Lord Himself had come to Paul in prison and essentially had promised him safe passage to Rome. Meanwhile, these zealous Jews bound themselves with an oath to neither eat nor drink until they had killed

Paul. These sincere but misguided Jews would have to go without food for a long time. It would be ten years or so before Paul's death in Rome!

Read Acts 23:14-15.

- This group of over forty men announced their oath to the leading priests and other leaders. Their plan was to get the high council to have Paul return to a meeting with them under the guise of examining his case more fully. And, exposing their contemptible character, they planned to kill him on the way. Evidently, the Jewish leaders thought this was a good idea and went along with it! To these leaders, politics and position had become more important than God. They were ready to plan another murder, just as they had done with Jesus. As always, however, God, not the council, was in control.

Read Acts 23:16-17.

- This is the only biblical reference to Paul's family. Some scholars believe that Paul's family disowned him when he became a Christian. Paul wrote of having suffered the loss of everything for Christ (**Philippians 3:8**). Paul's nephew, who is never named, was evidently able to visit Paul, even though Paul was in protective custody. Roman prisoners were often accessible to their relatives and friends who could bring them food and other amenities. How the nephew heard of the plan is not stated. There also is no mention of any others of Paul's relatives. Once Paul received the information, he immediately sent his nephew to the commander. Although God had told Paul that he would go to Rome, God did not explain how he would be kept safe. There is a healthy balance here of Paul trusting in God's sovereignty and yet wisely utilizing the God-sent

provisions that would come his way—his Roman citizenship, the Roman soldiers, the Roman prison, and now, a piece of important information from a relative. Paul trusted God, but he kept his eyes open to see just how the Father would deliver him.

Read Acts 23:18-19.

- Paul's nephew was delivered to the commander, to whom the centurion dutifully reported the young man's purpose for being there. The commander, in a gentle motion, took the young man by the hand (giving the impression that the nephew was likely quite young) and pulled him out of the pressured limelight, probably in an attempt to get a correct story. He then asked, "***What is it that you have to tell me?***" The kindness with which the centurion and commander treated Paul and his nephew causes one to wonder what opinion they held of this whole situation. Their generous treatment may have been a result of their trying to correct their earlier failure to give Paul the protection a Roman citizen was due (and thus their jobs were in jeopardy: 22:24-29), or perhaps Paul now was simply receiving the Roman citizen's correct treatment. It may be, however, that they recognized the drastic difference between the courageous, Christ-like apostle and his paranoid, murderous rivals.

Read Acts 23:20-22.

- Paul's nephew gave a detailed report of the plot (23:12-15). He boldly told this commander, whose military air and authority would likely be a little intimidating for a young lad, "***Do not yield to them, for more than forty of them lie in wait for him.***" The lad even knew about the oath. How he obtained the information is unknown, but there is no doubt about its accuracy. Evidently, the

ambush was already in place, simply waiting for the commander's order to send the prisoner to the council chambers. The commander wisely told Paul's nephew to keep his silence on the report he had given. After this, the only member of Paul's family mentioned anywhere in the New Testament disappeared into the silence of unrecorded history.

PAUL IS SENT TO CAESAREA—23:23-25

Guarded by an armed escort of almost five hundred Roman soldiers, Paul was transferred to Caesarea and the jurisdiction of Governor Felix. He would be safe there until it was time for him to leave for Rome. God's sovereignty is visible in both the actions of these secular authorities and in the resulting spread of the Good News.

Read Acts 23:23-24.

- There were 470 men dispatched to guard one prisoner—two hundred soldiers, two hundred spearmen, and seventy horsemen. The commander knew that the forty assassins would fight to the death, and he did not want to have to explain the assassination of a Roman citizen under his protection. The zealous desire to kill Paul on the part of the Jews in ambush was more than matched by the extent to which the Romans went to protect him. On the other hand, after the visit by the Lord Himself (23:11) and the sovereign exposure of the plot to his nephew (23:16), Paul was probably amused at all this commotion. With God on his side, he could have walked unarmed and unescorted to Caesarea and arrived without a scratch. Still, the Roman commander placed a contingent of soldiers around him. Instead of returning Paul to the Jewish council, the commander sent him to Caesarea, sixty miles to the northwest.

Jerusalem was the seat of Jewish government, but Caesarea was the Roman headquarters for the area. There the judicial process would be continued before the Roman court (Governor Felix), a process that was begun when Paul had exercised his rights as a Roman citizen (22:25).

Read Acts 23:25-26.

- Felix was the Roman governor or procurator of Judea from A.D. 52 to 59. This was the same position that Pontius Pilate had held. While the Jews had been given much freedom to govern themselves, the governor ran the army, kept the peace, and gathered the taxes. How did Luke know what was written in the letter from Claudius Lysias? In his concern for historical accuracy, Luke used many sources to make sure that his writings were correct (**Luke 1:1-4**). This letter was probably read aloud in court when Paul came before Felix to answer the Jews' accusations. Also, because Paul was a Roman citizen, a copy may have been given to him as a courtesy.

Read Acts 23:27-30.

- This letter has all the feel of a formal description of the events as well as the careful wording of a subordinate commander (Claudius Lysias) to his superior (Governor Felix). It must be noted that in his first sentence, the commander carefully rearranged the order of events, leaving out the fact that he had chained Paul and had been in the process of having him flogged when the information about his Roman citizenship was brought to light—a careful cover-up to protect himself (22:23-28). His phrase “*Coming with the troops I rescued him*” was definitely a twisting of the story to present himself to the governor in the best possible light. Here

Claudius stated that Paul was charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. For the early readers of Acts, these would be encouraging precedents and may have helped them in their own struggles with the Jews or with Roman law. Claudius's final sentence describes the plot and his choice to send Paul to Caesarea, where his safety could be more easily insured.

Read Acts 23:31-32.

- Evidently, this was a forced march, with the soldiers traveling by horseback as far as Antipatris, more than thirty-five miles. At that distance from Jerusalem (and at that speed), the prisoner would certainly be safe from pursuers, so the soldiers had been released to return to Jerusalem, leaving Paul with the seventy horsemen to accompany him the final twenty-five miles to Caesarea. The last few miles into Antipatris provided excellent terrain for an ambush, so that was likely part of the reason that the large contingent went so far before turning back.

Read Acts 23:33-35.

- And so Paul and his Roman escorts arrived in Caesarea and were presented to Governor Felix. The governor asked regarding Paul's province, Cilicia, and agreed to hear the case when his accusers arrived. As mentioned before, Felix was the governor (procurator) of Judea from about AD 52 to 59, holding the position that Pontius Pilate had held during Jesus' day. The historian Tacitus described Felix's career with a stinging epigram: "He exercised the power of a king with the mind of a slave." He was regarded as a poor governor. He dispensed justice arbitrarily and served his own ends. Jewish revolts increased under his administration. Thus, the platform was set for Paul to speak before the

leading rulers of the area (recorded in the next three chapters). When God has a willing person, there will be no end to the places he or she can be used, with phenomenal opportunities for effective work. The gospel was spreading by the sure, sovereign hand of God, through His trustworthy servant, the apostle Paul. Paul's testimony before these governors (Chapters 24-26) was yet another step in God's getting the apostle to his long-awaited destination: Rome. And this journey was not at the expense of the church at Antioch, or Paul's tent making business, but rather the government of Rome!

ACTS

Chapter 24

PAUL APPEARS BEFORE FELIX—24:1-27

The next three chapters provide a look at an interesting trio of politicians: Felix, Festus, and Agrippa. All three held significant offices in the Roman regime that dominated their world. All three came face-to-face with the gospel of Jesus Christ through the testimony of none other than the apostle Paul. As determined from the text, all three rejected Christ. The reasons were different, but the results were the same. The first trial was before Felix, the Roman governor in Caesarea. Tertullus, a lawyer from Jerusalem, arrived with Ananias, the high priest, and presented the Jews' baseless case against Paul. Paul responded brilliantly, winning a reprieve from Felix. This legal postponement lasted about two years, during which time Paul had many opportunities to speak about Jesus Christ to Felix and his wife Drusilla.

Read Acts 24:1.

- The accusers arrived—Ananias, the high priest, and the lawyer Tertullus, along with several Jewish leaders. They had traveled sixty miles to Caesarea, the Roman center of government, to bring their false accusations against Paul. Their murder plot had failed (23:12-15), but they were persisting in trying to kill him. The term translated “lawyer” is the Greek word *rhētoros*, which literally means “public speaker.” The word is only used here in the New Testament, but other Greek sources at the time used the term in courtroom settings, so it came to have the more specialized meaning of “attorney” or “advocate.” Tertullus had been hired by the Jewish council to present its case before the Roman court. Because of the wealth and influence of his clients, he was likely one of the top lawyers available.

Read Acts 24:2-4.

- Tertullus began the religious leaders' case against Paul before the Roman governor Felix. The case, which surely is only summarized here, began with gushing flattery, which seems to have taken up almost as much time as the case itself! The flattery is even more sickening, given the historical record of Governor Felix, who is remembered as a violent and corrupt ruler and was hated by the Jews. Tertullus the lawyer/orator spoke of peace under Felix, his foresight, and reform. He said that the Jews had profound gratitude to him. In reality, there had not been "peace" but violence. Tacitus wrote: "[The Romans] created a desolation and call it peace." Felix's "foresight" was basically nothing more than his political maneuvering to enhance his position in Roman power politics. His "reforms" consisted of little more than lining his own pockets at the expense of his subjects. There was nothing excellent about the way he was ruling, nor had the Jews ever been grateful for anything he had done.

Read Acts 24:5-6.

- Finally, Tertullus got to the case. He made three accusations against Paul: (1) he was a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world; (2) he was the ringleader of an unrecognized Nazarene sect, which was against Roman law; (3) he had tried to desecrate the temple. The religious leaders hoped that these accusations would persuade Felix to execute Paul. While the charge that Paul was a "troublemaker" was insulting, it was too vague to be a substantial legal charge. This charge was designed to persuade Felix that Paul was causing rebellion against Rome, enough trouble to reflect poorly on the governor's responsibility of keeping peace in the Empire. Keeping peace was a

major part of his job description and job security. The second charge, that of Paul's leadership of a "Nazarene sect," of course, referred to the Christian, named after Jesus' hometown of Nazareth. Tertullus was attempting to distance Christianity from Judaism, since the latter religion was allowed by Rome. If Felix would not persecute Paul on the basis of his disruption of the peace, maybe he would do so if Paul were seen as a leader of a religious sect or cult that was not sanctioned by the state. The third charge, desecration of the temple, was likely designed to push Felix toward allowing the Jews to put Paul to death. It was one of the few offenses for which the Jews could still exact the death penalty. Originally, Paul had been charged with actually bringing a Gentile (Trophimus) into the temple area, thus desecrating it. Here the charge was modified to read that Paul "tried" to desecrate the temple—an attempted desecration rather than an actual one. Evidently the accusers knew they had no proof of the actual desecration, so they had to shift their strategy to say they had seized him in order to prevent the desecration.

Read Acts 24:7.

- Most modern versions do not include this verse because it is not found in the most ancient manuscripts. It was added to depict the Roman commander's arrest of Paul as an unwanted and inappropriate interference in an offense that the Jews had every right to prosecute.

Read Acts 24:8-9.

- Tertullus' reference here is probably to Paul. Felix could learn the truth of the accusations by examining him. When Tertullus finished his remarks, the other

Jews chimed in, affirming the truthfulness of their legal counsel's case.

Read Acts 24:10.

- The governor gave the apostle permission to speak, so Paul began his defense. Tertullus and the religious leaders seemed to have made a strong argument against Paul, but Paul would refute their accusations point by point. Paul's introductory remarks were much more cursory and to the point, in contrast to Tertullus' flowing flattery. Paul simply alluded to the fact that Felix had been a judge of Jewish affairs for many years, thus making him a good person before whom to make his defense. This is likely the only accomplishment on which Paul could compliment him—that he had been around long enough and had tried enough cases involving Jewish affairs to be familiar with the nature of what was before him. While Paul's compliments weren't overflowing, his remarks did show respect for the Roman government (**Romans 13:1-6**) and confidence in the integrity of the due process of law.

Read Acts 24:11-13.

- Paul answered the first charge (stirring up riots) by stating the easily verifiable trip he had made to Jerusalem no more than twelve days previously. The implication here was that he had not been in Jerusalem long enough to stir up trouble. Also, he stated that he had come to Jerusalem for the purpose of worship after an extended absence. He was not there to stir up trouble. He said the governor would not be able to find anyone who saw him arguing with anyone or stirring up a crowd in the city. In good legal fashion, Paul explained that his accusers could not prove the charges.

He knew his accusers could not present a shred of evidence that he had desecrated the temple.

Read Acts 24:14.

- In this verse, Paul began to answer the second accusation—that of being a ringleader of a Nazarene sect. His answer to this accusation continues through 24:16 and provides the opening for the gospel. Paul affirmed that he followed the Way, which his accusers called a sect. He obviously preferred the name “the Way” to the more disparaging term used by his accusers. The term “Nazarene” implied something sectarian and perhaps even militant. The term “the Way” was not only known to Felix (24:22), but it also reflected a more universal and positive nature of Christianity; it provided a “way” to the Father, a “way” to deal with sin, and a “way” to live (9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4). “The Way” was the earliest name for the Christian church. It probably came from **Isaiah 40:3, 10-11**, referring to God’s people led on God’s way. It also had analogies to **Matthew 7:14**, “the way of salvation,” and to **John 14:6**, where Jesus referred to himself as “the way.” Paul took this opportunity to tie the roots of the Christian movement to the God of the Jewish people—“*the God of my fathers*”—and particularly to the Old Testament Scriptures. He affirmed before Felix his firm belief in the Jewish law and everything written in the books of prophecy. It would be hard to make the “heretic” or “sectarian” label stick with an argument as strong as this one. Paul was still worshiping the same God and holding to the same moral code as his accusers. He would soon get more specific.

Read Acts 24:15-16.

- Paul moved on to some important specific parts of his beliefs, again presenting his case in the most general terms possible. Avoiding the controversial Messiah discussions, Paul went straight to the issue of resurrection and judgment. He stated, first of all, his hope of a resurrection of both the righteous and the ungodly (**Daniel 12:2**). This is, of course, the proclamation he had made in his case before the Jewish council that had won him support from the Pharisees and attack from the Sadducees (23:6-9). Because of this resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked, Paul sought to maintain a clear conscience before God and everyone else. Here is the strong personal testimony of one who expected to stand before his Maker and give account for his life. In stating it this way, Paul not only bore witness to the fact that he was ready to meet God but also, by implication that all people must get ready for such a meeting of their own. In so doing, Paul aligned himself perfectly with the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, of whom Jesus said: “***When He comes, He will reprove/convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment***” (John 16:8).

Read Acts 24:17.

- Paul finally moved to the last accusation that he had tried to desecrate the temple. Paul stated the main purpose of his Jerusalem trip: “***to bring alms and offerings to my nation.***” This is the only mention, at least in the book of Acts, of the collection for the saints in Jerusalem. Paul’s letters refer to it several times (**Romans 15:25-28; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8:13-14; 9:12-13; Galatians 2:10**), but for the most part, it is left out of the Acts record. The gifts were important to Paul. This offering tied the

Gentile church back to its theological and spiritual roots; the gift would build unity between the Jewish and Gentile factions of the church. It was also a tangible expression of the genuineness of the Gentiles' faith and the high level of their maturity in Christ. Since Luke was likely compressing this whole court scene, Paul's words "to bring offerings" were either a reference to the offerings he had agreed to fund at the prompting of the Jerusalem elders (21:24) or his own purification offerings for his past months of living among the "unclean" Gentiles.

Read Acts 24:18-19.

- As to the charge of desecration, Paul was ceremonially clean when he was discovered in the temple courts. As to the charge of causing an uproar, he stated he was found, "*neither with a mob or with tumult.*" The problem came when some Jews from the province of Asia showed up. They, in fact, had caused the uproar, not Paul. In fact, said Paul, they should have been in the courtroom that day to bring charges against him if they had any. Their false accusations had caused the riot in Jerusalem (21:27). How could Paul be held guilty for what they did? This was a strong point in Paul's defense, one that his accusers simply could not refute.

Read Acts 24:20-21.

- Paul suggested that Felix ask those members of the Jewish high council who were present what wrongdoing they found in him. Paul explained that he had made a controversial remark by claiming to believe in the resurrection of the dead (23:6). Paul knew it was unlikely that any of his accusers would attack that statement in Felix's presence, and they kept their

silence. This, of course, gave Paul a chance to present the Resurrection again, this time before Felix and his court, as well as to those Pharisees (accusers) who had been present at Paul's meeting with the Jewish Council in Jerusalem. Thus the charges verbalized by Tertullus had been answered, and all that remained was for Felix to respond.

Read Acts 24:22-23.

- Felix had been governor for six years and would have known about the Christians (he was quite familiar with the Way). The Christian movement, which had involved thousands of people from the first day on (2:41, 47; 4:4), would have been a topic of conversation among the Roman leadership. Hopefully, too, the Christians' peaceful lifestyles had already proven to the Romans that Christians didn't go around starting riots. Some believe the language of this verse indicates that Felix had more than a little knowledge of Christianity. Felix's knowledge of and exonerated the church seemed very important to Luke, and for good reason. Luke wanted the original readers of his book to have a solid record that found Christians innocent, even as they experienced ongoing persecution all over the Roman Empire. That is probably why Luke went to such lengths to record Roman court decisions from Gallio (18:14-15), Felix, Festus, and Agrippa (Chapters 24-26). Felix decided to delay the hearing until the commander Lysias could get there to give his testimony as to what had transpired. It is not recorded whether Lysias came to Caesarea or not. Likely he did, but as the next few verses indicate, for various political and fiscal reasons, Felix did not want to complete Paul's trial. It appears this postponement became indefinite. Paul was kept in custody, but evidently, he was given a great deal of freedom by Governor Felix, who allowed

visits by his friends in order to take care of his needs. Paul had a number of Christian brothers and sisters in Caesarea who loved him dearly and would readily visit him and take care of him (21:8-14). Such freedom was likely the result of Paul's being a Roman citizen against whom no crime had yet been proven.

Read Acts 24:24.

- After an unnamed period of time, Felix and his wife Drusilla sent for Paul and heard him speak concerning faith in Christ. Drusilla was the daughter of Herod Agrippa (Chapter 12) and the sister of Herod Agrippa II, making her part Jewish. At this time, she was likely only twenty years old. She had left a previous husband to marry Felix, which she did contrary to Jewish law since Felix was a Gentile. Some sources say that Drusilla was the one most interested in what Paul had to say about Christ and Christianity. But it would be her husband who would come under conviction!

Read Acts 24:25-26.

- Paul's discourse with Felix and Drusilla included an interesting trio of topics: righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come. Like Paul's remarks earlier in the trial (24:15-16), these three areas track with Jesus' description of the convicting work of the Holy Spirit (**John 16:8**) and would likewise be areas of great conviction for Felix. As stated earlier, Felix's career was marked by brutality and injustice; thus, the subject of righteousness and judgment would likely be more than a little uncomfortable. History also records that Drusilla was Felix's third wife, and he had to break up her previous marriage in order to free her for himself. Thus, a discourse on self-control would likely not have been something he would have enjoyed hearing.

Christianity was not a particularly comfortable message, and Felix responded like an individual under conviction: “*Go away for now.*” Felix was afraid. He surely did not like this shift from an enjoyable jousting about politics or religion into morality and responsibility. Like so many people today, Felix wanted to keep his religion contained, categorized, and irrelevant. Paul confronted Felix, forcing him to deal with its full convicting message, and Felix wanted no part of it. The trailing words of Felix’s rejection of Paul’s message are the most telling: “*When I have a convenient time, I will send for you.*” What a pitiful statement for anyone to say. Translated: “I’m too involved, too busy with other things, to worry about God.” Notice, too, another example of Felix’s poor character. He frequently sent for Paul, hoping the apostle would offer him a bribe, supposedly to buy his freedom. He often sent for Paul and, so, was regularly exposed to the truth. There is no record of Felix’s ever coming to faith. How sad to be so regularly exposed to such profound truth and yet never take advantage of its life-changing, destiny-changing character.

Read Acts 24:27.

- Two years went by in this way—two full years while Felix toyed with the apostle Paul in the fashion described above. For two years this apostle to the Gentiles was out of commission, out of the pulpit, and serving as Felix’s personal spiritual conversationalist. On the other hand, one wonders what it was like for Paul. Were these rest and recuperation years? This hard-driving missionary must have been frustrated at the delay. Surely he must have thought about those who had gone before him who had suffered similar delays and disappointments—Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Jeremiah, Daniel, Nehemiah, and others. By keeping

Paul in prison, Felix could gain favor with the Jews. Eventually, Porcius Festus took over as governor of the region. He was a welcome successor. After Felix mishandled a political situation between the Jews and Greeks at Caesarea in AD 60, where he took unnecessarily harsh military action against the Jews, he was called back to Rome. Josephus wrote that things would have gone badly for him there, had his brother Pallas not interceded for him.

- Festus is recorded in history as a more just ruler than Felix, although he was not on the scene very long. When Festus came into office, he inherited the imprisoned apostle and the Jewish leaders with their definite agenda.

ACTS

Chapter 25

PAUL APPEARS BEFORE FESTUS—25:1-22

When Felix was replaced by Porcius Festus, the Jews once again made their case against Paul. During this trial before Festus, the new governor, Paul, using his rights as a Roman citizen, asked for and received the promise of a hearing before Caesar. This legal decision thwarted the final action of Paul's Jewish enemies.

Read Acts 25:1-2.

- The new governor, Festus, wasted no time; after just three days on the job, he went to Jerusalem, where the leading priests and other leaders resided. Festus was procurator or governor of Judea AD 58-62. Little is known about Festus, though most of it is favorable, particularly in contrast with Felix whom he succeeded.
- One of the first items on his agenda was the prosecution of Paul. Three days into his governorship, the Jewish leaders met with him and made their accusations against Paul. God had allowed his most effective apostle for Gentile evangelism and church planting to sit in custody for two years, the apparent victim of Roman bureaucracy. But this was not God's perspective. The gospel would not be stopped simply by imprisoning Paul. Most likely, Paul was leading those around him to Christ, even in his chained condition.

Read Acts 25:3.

- Although two years had passed, the Jewish leaders still were looking for a way to kill Paul. The plot had expanded from the original forty-plus leaders (23:12-

13) to all the Jewish leaders. They told Festus about Paul and tried to convince him to hold the trial in Jerusalem (so they could prepare an ambush). The ruthless Jews had obviously abandoned all hope of a conviction of Paul by the Romans, so they decided to take matters into their own hands. Their plan was driven on by at least two years of failure.

Read Acts 25:4-5.

- By God's intervention, Festus decided to leave Paul in Caesarea. The trial would not be moved, so Festus informed the Jewish leadership that those in authority could return with him. In Caesarea, in his courtroom, they would be allowed to make their accusations.

Read Acts 25:6-7.

- After a few days, Festus returned to Caesarea, where on the very next day, the case of this Roman citizen, alleged troublemaker for the Jews, began again. As before, the Jewish leaders from Jerusalem made many serious accusations they couldn't prove—probably all the same baseless accusations from two years before. Luke's use of the words "gathered around" has led some to speculate that Paul was surrounded by his attackers. From their perimeter positions and their superior numbers, they hurled their vicious accusations at him. The apostle, standing in the middle alone, was left to answer their attacks.

Read Acts 25:8.

- Paul denied all the charges that had just been leveled at him again: "*Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, now against Caesar have I*

offended in anything at all.” He applied his denial to the three main areas of accusation: the law, the temple, and Caesar. These were the same charges brought by the Asian Jews (21:28; 24:5-6). Paul’s mention of Caesar was a new twist. Paul needed to keep the Roman law involved because the issues of the law and the temple were the Jews’ jurisdiction and would lead to his immediate death.

Read Acts 25:9-11.

- Only about two weeks into this new procuratorship, Festus wanted to get off to a politically healthy start with the people he was governing. The Jews were known as a difficult people to govern, and many Roman political careers had been dashed at this Judean outpost (including that of Festus’ immediate predecessor, Felix). It is not surprising that Festus would wish to do the Jews a favor. Catering to what he knew they desperately wanted, he asked Paul if he would be willing to go up to Jerusalem to stand trial before him there. Festus knew the Jews had no case against Paul, but either he wasn’t willing to aggravate and enrage them further or he simply didn’t know how to investigate such religious matters. Whatever Festus’ motive behind this offer to switch the location of the trial, it became irrelevant at Paul’s next words. In short, Paul was saying: ***“I stand at Caesar’s judgment seat, where I ought to be judged. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you very well know. For if I am an offender, or have committed anything deserving of death, I do not object to dying; but if there is nothing in these things of which these men accuse me, no one can deliver me to them.”*** Then Paul made a startling statement: ***“I appeal to Caesar!”*** Every Roman citizen had the right to appeal to Caesar. This didn’t mean that Caesar himself would hear the case, but that the citizen’s case would be tried by the highest court in the

Empire; it is much like appealing to the Supreme Court. This right of appeal to the emperor provided Roman citizens protection in capital offense trials carried out by local judges in the provinces. Festus saw Paul's appeal as a way to send him out of his jurisdiction and the country and, thus, pacify the Jews. Paul made this demand because he knew he would not get a fair trial in Jerusalem, and so did Festus. Paul had been in custody for two years. He had wanted to visit Rome for the purpose of preaching the gospel (**Romans 1:10**). To go to Rome as a prisoner was better than not to go there at all.

Read Acts 25:12.

- Festus probably felt enormous relief at having a way out of this difficult situation. Paul's request led Festus into a conference with his advisers (these were his legal experts and higher officials) giving what seems to be a quick reply: "***You have appealed to Caesar? To Caesar you shall go!***" Humanly speaking, it is probably better that it happened this way. If Festus had ruled on the case, he likely would have set Paul free—free to make his own way (without an armed escort) back to Antioch or on to Rome. The bloodthirsty group of Jewish leaders would have done their best to make sure that Paul didn't live to see another day. Instead, Paul would have an armed guard all the way to his next preaching stop. Though he would have a few more audiences with whom to share the gospel between there and Rome, few were more prestigious than the one he was about to meet.

Read Acts 25:13-15.

- King Agrippa was Herod Agrippa II, son of Herod Agrippa I, and a descendant of Herod the Great, the last of the Herod dynasty that ruled parts of Palestine from

40 BC to AD 100. Like great-grandfather, like grandfather, like father, like son; Agrippa inherited the effects of generations of powerful men with flawed personalities. Each son followed his father in weaknesses, mistakes, and missed opportunities. Each generation had a confrontation with God, and each failed to realize the importance of his decision. At this time (AD 60) Agrippa II was a young man of about thirty-three. He ruled the territories northeast of Palestine, bearing the title of “king.” With power over the temple, he controlled the temple treasury and could appoint and remove the high priest. Bernice was his sister. When she was thirteen (AD 41), she had married her uncle, Herod Chalcis, who died in AD 48. Then she became a mistress to her brother, Agrippa II. In AD 63, she married King Polemon of Cilicia, but in the early 70’s, she became mistress to Emperor Vespasian’s son, Titus. Here Agrippa and Bernice were making an official visit to Festus to pay their respects. Agrippa, of Jewish descent, could help clarify Paul’s case for the Roman governor. Agrippa and Festus were anxious to cooperate in governing their neighboring territories. The relationship between the Herodian dynasty and the Roman governors had always been sticky (remember Herod Antipas and Pontius Pilate, for example, sending Jesus back and forth: **Luke 23:1-12**). Both rulers had certain authority—usually the governor over the military, and the Herodians over the temple and the priesthood. Both answered to Rome, though the governor did so more directly since he was a direct appointee. This state visit was an extended one (spending many days there), giving Festus an opportunity to discuss Paul’s case with the king. He began with a summary of the case his predecessor had left behind. Festus made it clear that the chief priests and elders of the Jews (with whom Agrippa would have had great influence because he was the one who appointed the high priest and controlled the

temple treasury) had brought the charges and that they were asking to exercise their right to have Paul executed.

Read Acts 25:16-17.

- Festus described the details of the case with some embellishment. He included at the outset, for example, a statement about how he quickly pointed out to the Jewish leaders that Roman law does not convict people without a trial and how the accused are given an opportunity to face their accusers and defend themselves.

Read Acts 25:18-20.

- Quickly reviewing the facts, Festus explained that he had expected a different set of charges. He did not anticipate the points of dispute concerning their own religion and dispute over a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive. Festus's retelling of the trial details to Agrippa reveals the fact that he was at a loss how to investigate such matters. Particularly confusing seems to have been the part about the "dead man" being allegedly alive. In his review of the facts for Agrippa, Festus claimed that the reason for his desire to move the trial to Jerusalem was the religious nature of the case rather than the political pressure of the powerful Jewish leadership.

Read Acts 25:21-22.

- Festus quickly concluded his review. Paul had appealed to the emperor, so he was kept in custody until arrangements could be made to get him to Rome. Festus' quick review of the facts had its desired result:

Agrippa wanted to hear the man himself. Agrippa no doubt knew a great deal about the Way, the story of Christ, the Resurrection, and all the uproar in Israel. Paul's audience with Agrippa was set for the following day. It would be a golden opportunity for all those present—Festus, Agrippa, Bernice, the royal entourage, the high-ranking officials (25:23)—to hear more from this ex-Pharisee about the “dead man named Jesus” who he claimed had come back to life!

PAUL SPEAKS TO AGRIPPA—25:23-26:32

King Agrippa, in Caesarea with his sister Bernice for a political visit with Festus, the new governor, became embroiled in the controversy over Paul. Festus, mindful of Agrippa's familiarity with Jewish law and practice and needing to prepare some kind of legal paperwork for Caesar, arranged a special audience with Paul. Festus found Paul's testimony absurd; Agrippa found it pointed and a bit too personal. Nevertheless, Paul took advantage of this situation to tell about his encounter with Christ and his fervent belief in the truth of the gospel.

Read Acts 25:23.

- Into the room came the new governor, the king on a state visit, and a controversial prisoner. This description of the arrival of Agrippa and Bernice at the auditorium, “*with great pomp*,” is surely presented as irony. The real royalty in the room was the prisoner, the born-again child of the King of kings. Paul's audience included military officers; also present were prominent men of Caesarea. Paul probably had been given little or no advance notice of this interview. Jesus had predicted this kind of situation: “*When you are brought before*

synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say” (Luke 12:11-12). Many “rulers and authorities” had gathered in that room; the Holy Spirit would give Paul the words to speak.

Read Acts 25:24-25.

- Festus, as the Roman governor in charge of the court at Caesarea, opened the proceedings. Festus explained that the local Jewish leadership and those in Jerusalem were demanding Paul’s death. In his judgment of the case, however, Paul had done nothing worthy of death. That would be a significant check to those who were chasing, imprisoning, and prosecuting Christians in the Roman world. Because Paul had appealed his case to the emperor, he would be sent to Rome.

Read Acts 25:26-27.

- Festus went on to explain that he was at a loss for what to write in his report to the emperor. He was required to prepare a legal brief, detailing the charges, that would be sent along with the appeal to Emperor Nero. Explaining his reason for the gathering, Festus explained that he wanted Paul examined. King Agrippa could help Festus put into words the charges against Paul because Agrippa was “an expert on Jewish customs and controversies” (26:3).

ACTS

Chapter 26

Read Acts 26:1-3.

- After hearing Festus' opening remarks, Agrippa ordered Paul to speak in his own defense. What follows is an excellent example of Paul's powerful oratory skills and the most complete statement of his defense. Paul began with a gesture of his hand, likely a common oratorical practice of the day. The thoroughness of the record of this speech and details like this hand motion indicate that Luke must have been present. The accusing Jewish leaders, however, were not present, so Paul could freely express his thoughts. Paul aimed his remarks most directly at Agrippa (26:1-28), though other very important people were in the audience. Agrippa's verdict, though not a formal judicial one in Paul's case, would be important for Paul and, thus, for all of Christianity. Agrippa not only was an expert on Jewish issues, but he was also a very influential government figure for Israel. This message flows in this fashion:
 - Introductory remarks (26:1-3)
 - Paul's early life (26:4-11)
 - Paul's conversion and call by Christ (26:12-18)
 - Paul's obedience to the vision and ministry (26:19-21)
 - Paul's message (26:22-23)
- The balance of this chapter contains Paul's exchange with Festus and then Agrippa and the conclusions of these two leaders concerning Paul. While containing much of the same information about Paul's conversion recorded in Chapter 9 and in his testimony before the Jewish crowd in Chapter 22, there are a few subtle differences. One notable absence is the incident with Ananias, the devout Jew, and the restoration of Paul's

sight. That part of Paul's testimony would not be as interesting to a Gentile crowd as it would have been for a Jewish one. The essence of Paul's message to this audience was that there was nothing in his life, calling, or ministry that promoted or deserved this legal and physical attack by the Jewish leaders. While it appears that Paul did not win Festus or Agrippa to Christ, he certainly won this case for his innocence (26:31-32). Paul began with words of commendation for Agrippa; he seems to have felt genuinely fortunate to have this opportunity to be evaluated by him. Paul alluded to Agrippa's knowledge of Jewish customs and controversies. Paul's plea to please listen, while directed to Agrippa, would surely draw the whole crowd into what he was about to say.

Read Acts 26:4-5.

- Paul began with his early life, which from the beginning had been spent among the Jews in Tarsus and in Jerusalem (where he had received much of his training). Paul's contemporaries, including some on the Jewish Council who were attacking him, knew of his solid Jewish heritage and the fact that he had belonged to the strictest sect of the Jews, the Pharisees. By mentioning this, Paul established that there could be no doubt about the thoroughness, seriousness, or excellence with which he pursued his Judaism. The Pharisees were renowned for their meticulous commitment to the knowledge of the Scriptures and to their traditions. Being a Pharisee meant that Paul was already committed to the importance of the resurrection from the dead—a major tenet of the Pharisees, one that prompted their ongoing debate with the Sadducees who did not believe in a resurrection (23:6-9). Of course, this issue would take on much more significance as Paul's message unfolded.

Read Acts 26:6-7.

- Paul used the rich heritage of God's promise to his and Agrippa's common ancestors as a connection to Agrippa and to the Jews. They all shared the same hope, that God would keep the promise He had made to his people, a hope that was tied to the resurrection of the dead (23:6; 24:15). If any Jews, from Abraham forward, had any hope for the fulfillment of any promise that God had made, it must be tied to a belief that he would be resurrected in some form at some time, or the whole concept of God's promises would be ludicrous. That was Paul's point. The absurdity was that Paul was being attacked for holding to this hope that was shared so adamantly by his Jewish brothers.

Read Acts 26:8.

- While he was addressing the king singularly concerning their ancestral "hope" in 26:7, Paul addressed his question to the whole audience, which was mostly Gentile. He asked them why it was so incredible (literally, "unbelievable") to any of them that God can raise the dead. Since so much of the Jewish hope was tied to a belief that God raises people to continue life beyond this one, why were the Jews arguing with Paul about resurrection? The reason, of course, was one well-documented case of a certain Resurrection that had been confirmed by hundreds of eyewitnesses. This had become the lifework of those who had been closest to the scene of this Resurrection. In addition, many had already given their very lives for the cause—a cause whose whole credibility rested on the truth of the resurrection of this one whom Paul was about to name.

Read Acts 26:9.

- Paul named himself as one who believed in the resurrection of the dead as a solidly educated Pharisee

but who vigorously opposed the movement that hung on the Resurrection of Jesus. He not only refused to believe that Jesus of Nazareth had been resurrected, he also was convinced that he should do all that was possible to kill the movement.

Read Acts 26:10-11.

- With the sanction of the leading priests, Paul began capturing believers in Jerusalem and sending them to prison. He even went so far as to cast his vote against Christians when they were condemned to death. Much of Paul's work was done through the synagogues where Paul found most of the Christians in the early days of the movement. This would remind Agrippa that the Christian movement had Jewish roots. In the synagogues Paul would have believers whipped in order to try to force them to curse Christ (literally, "to blaspheme"). Paul was so passionate, so violently opposed to those who knew Christ, that he hounded them in distant cities in foreign lands. He took his campaign of terror on the road, becoming a missionary for Judaism as he tried to protect the faith from these heretics who believed a man had been resurrected from the dead.

Read Acts 26:12.

- Paul had been headed to Damascus, armed with the full authority and commission of the chief priests. He likely mentioned the priests again for the benefit of King Agrippa, the one who appointed, supervised, and funded the priesthood at Jerusalem. This was the same group that was attacking Paul. They were his former employers! The event that had moved Paul from his past position as a hunter for the priests to being hunted by the priests had been quite extraordinary.

Read Acts 26:13-14.

- The event occurred about noon, when Paul saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around him and his traveling companions. The presence of this bright light from heaven is mentioned in all three accounts: in Chapter 9 (the actual event), in Chapter 22, and here. The voice from heaven is also central to all three accounts. The revealed word of the risen Christ to the apostle Paul is the centerpiece of the story. In Aramaic, Paul had been addressed and asked, “*Why do you persecute me?*” Notice, as has been the case in every account, Jesus made it clear that Paul had not been persecuting heretics but, rather, Christ Himself. One important addition to Christ’s words here is not included in either Chapter 9 or 22. Paul added that Christ had said, “*It is hard for you to kick against the goads.*” An ox goad was a sharp stick used to prod cattle. It implies that Christ was already trying to “goad” (that is, “direct” or “steer”) Paul in the right direction. His passion and his conviction were commendable, but he was not headed in the direction that God wanted him to go.

Read Acts 26:15-16:.

- Upon Paul’s inquiry as to the identity of the speaker, the voice answered: “*I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting.*” In that moment, it all came together for Paul—the Resurrection, the pricks to his conscience (the “goads”), the deepening conviction that this movement called “the Way” held the truth. The information to follow is also unique to this particular recounting of the Damascus road experience. From his prostrate position, Paul was commissioned by Christ Himself. He was to be Christ’s servant (**1 Corinthians 4:1**) and Christ’s witness (the ongoing theme of Acts predicted in Christ’s words in 1:8). Paul would tell the world about not only

this experience at Damascus but also about the other times that Christ would come to him. Paul was to be the recipient of a great deal of God's "light" to pass on to both Jews and Gentiles.

Read Acts 26:17-18.

- Imagine the sobering word at the start of a ministry. When Jesus said, "***I will deliver/rescue you,***" in this statement was the promise of danger from which Paul would need rescue. The two sources of the danger would be his own people (the Jews) and the Gentiles, in whose court he stood. At Paul's conversion, Jesus had promised Paul the kind of trouble that Paul had already been causing for the Christians. Despite the trouble, however, Christ promised him rescue. Christ's words of commission to Paul sound like the work predicted of the Messiah in places like **Isaiah 35:5; 42:7, 16; 61:1**. Paul was to turn many people from darkness to light, which he did (**2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 4:18; 5:8; Colossians 1:12-13**). Paul was to be God's instrument of turning both Jew and Gentile from the power of Satan to God, inviting them to receive forgiveness of sins, which he did (**13:38; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14**). Paul was also to offer both Jew and Gentile a full place among those who are sanctified by faith, which he did (**Romans 8:17; Colossians 1:12**). Paul took every opportunity to remind his audience that the Gentiles had an equal share in God's inheritance. This inheritance is the promise and blessing of the covenant that God made with Abraham (**Ephesians 2:19; 1 Peter 1:3-4**).

Read Acts 26:19-20.

- From that point, Paul had been obedient to the heavenly vision (**1 Corinthians 9:1, 16**). He had begun in Damascus. How shocking it must have been for the

residents of Damascus (both unbelieving and believing Jews) to have seen the difference between the Paul they had heard of and the Paul who had arrived. Paul recorded his progress from Damascus to Jerusalem, to Judea, and beyond. Ultimately, his mission field, under the sovereign leadership of God, was the Gentiles. Though the locations changed and the nationalities changed, the message was the same at every stop: “Repent...turn to God...do deeds consistent with repentance.” This message, of course, tied Paul to John the Baptist (**Matthew 3:2, 8**) Jesus (**Matthew 4:17**), and Peter (**Acts 2:38**). They all called for personal conversion—a change of heart and mind that showed itself in a change of direction. Paul had preached this message to both Jews and Gentiles in synagogues, streets, prisons, and courtrooms throughout the Empire. And many had decided to repent and believe.

Read Acts 26:21-23.

- For his simple obedience to this incredibly powerful calling, for his faithful presentation of this gospel message, Paul had been arrested in the Temple. Attempts had even been made on his life. But God had been true to His promise to rescue him (26:17). God protected him, leaving him alive to tell the facts to everyone, including those before whom he was standing. Then Paul summarized what he had said in front of every Jewish audience so far in his ministry: ***“I stand [...] saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come”*** concerning the suffering Messiah and the promise of His resurrection (13:27-41). This Resurrection, which followed the rejection and murder of the Messiah, would serve as a beacon, a light to Jews and Gentiles alike.

Read Acts 26:24.

- Festus could not stand it anymore, and he erupted. The message of this suffering Messiah was one thing, but to actually believe that He had been killed by His own people and then had been raised from the dead as a light to the world was too much for the humanistic mind of the Roman governor. He decided that Paul must be insane, that Paul had studied himself into insanity. All this talk about Moses and the Messiah, repentance and forgiveness—all of it confusing—compelled Festus to blurt out, “*Paul, you are mad.*”

Read Acts 26:25-27.

- Paul affirmed to the governor that he was not out of his mind but instead speaking the sober truth that was for all those within its hearing. Paul turned to Agrippa for confirmation of what he had just presented, stating his certainty that none of these things had escaped his notice. Agrippa’s responsibilities for the temple activities at Jerusalem would surely have caused him to cross paths with the activities of the church. He would likely have been familiar with not only the Old Testament Scriptures, but also the basics of Jesus’ life and the start of the church. Paul’s statement that this was not done in a corner reminded his audience that Christianity had been a very public movement from the moment of the inception of the church on that first Pentecost, when three thousand people had been converted in the temple courts at Jerusalem in one day (Chapter 2). Next, Paul got very personal and direct with King Agrippa, asking and then answering his own question about Agrippa’s knowledge of and belief in the prophets. Agrippa could provide, if he were so inclined, plenty of information to Festus on the subject of Judaism, the Messiah, Jesus, and the Way. He could corroborate what Paul had said so far

and confirm that his message was not far removed from mainstream Judaistic theology. But Agrippa did not.

Read Acts 26:28.

- Paul's direct question probably embarrassed Agrippa in front of this powerful crowd. Regarding Agrippa's response, it is difficult to tell whether Agrippa's tone of voice was harsh or joking, though the desired effect was to brush Paul off. If Agrippa were to say that he did not believe the prophets, he would have lost influence with his Jewish constituency. If he were to say that he did believe the prophets, then he would have played into the hands of Paul the evangelist, who then would say that Agrippa would have no reason not to believe in Christ. So Agrippa just retaliated quickly, reminding the apostle who was the prisoner and who was the potentate: ***“Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”***

Read Acts 26:29.

- The passion of the apostle and the universal need of the gospel message comes through in Paul's response to Agrippa's brusque statement. Notice how Paul changed the tone of the exchange. This was not Paul the debater; this was Paul the evangelist with a tender heart for the lost souls in need of finding the Savior. Paul explained that it didn't matter to him whether it took Agrippa a short time or a long time; he prayed that Agrippa, along with all who were listening, would become just like him, except for the chains. That is, Paul wanted them to find the Messiah who had found him that day on the road to Damascus. He wanted them to know that this Savior was needed by everyone—from the lowliest court janitor to the king and governor sitting in their seats of honor. He was saying, “Take it from the one who used to hunt

Christians in the name of his religion; there isn't a soul that's too far away to be found by this Savior."

Read Acts 26:30-31.

- Agrippa may have been getting uncomfortable with the way the conversation had turned. Maybe he was moving toward conviction. Perhaps he had simply heard all he needed to hear to know what he thought of it all. In any case, Agrippa decided that the meeting was over. Festus and Agrippa discussed the case and agreed that Paul was innocent. King Agrippa, a Jewish sympathizer and well versed in Jewish issues, added his legal vindication of the Christian movement. This word would be of great comfort and usefulness to believers around the Empire who were experiencing increasingly intense pressure from those who wanted to prosecute the Christian movement as being anti-Jewish and anti-Roman.

Read Acts 26:32.

- Paul's appeal to Caesar, of course, had pretty much taken the matter out of the jurisdiction of Festus and Agrippa. Paul had to go to Rome. Though he could have been set free, Paul was instead free from the murderous Jews and setting out on an all-expense-paid trip to Rome.

ACTS
Chapter 27

PAUL SAILS FOR ROME—27:1-12

Finally, Paul boarded a boat for Rome, probably in October (AD 59). He was accompanied, at the very least, by Luke and Aristarchus. This was too late in the fall to be on the open seas. And, sure enough, bad weather made for rough sailing. Paul sensed real danger ahead and encouraged the crew to find safe harbor for the winter. Nevertheless, the leaders of the voyage pressed on.

Read Acts 27:1-2.

- Some have wondered why Luke would devote such great emphasis to Paul's journey to Rome. Stories of sea voyages and shipwrecks were popular during this time. Typically, heroes survived these epic dramas, while evil people didn't. This story of Paul's journey also gives modern-day readers an eyewitness account of the details of ancient sea travel. It shows that God's sovereignty is at work in human history. The first person plural pronoun "we" indicates that Luke had again joined Paul (for the first time since Chapter 21). Perhaps Luke accompanied the apostle to Rome so as to serve as his personal physician. Aristarchus may have been acting as Paul's personal attendant or servant. Aristarchus was the man who had been dragged into the theater at the beginning of the riot in Ephesus (19:29; **Philemon 1:24**). There is no evidence to suggest that Luke and Aristarchus had been arrested and would also be tried; they probably just wanted to support their friend and colleague in the gospel ministry. It is not stated whether the centurion Julius was a believer, but he took good care of Paul (27:3). Later, Julius would single-handedly protect Paul and the other prisoners

from being executed during the shipwreck. He is one of several Roman centurions in the New Testament who are portrayed favorably (**Luke 7:1-10; Luke 23:47; Acts 10:1-48**).

Read Acts 27:3.

- Sidon was about seventy miles north of Caesarea, where this journey had begun. A brief stop in Sidon permitted the Christians there to provide food and supplies for Paul's needs. The Christian community there may have originated from the dispersion of believers from Jerusalem after the death of Stephen (11:19). The Roman officer named Julius showed kindness to Paul, who was a prisoner, allowing him to go ashore to visit with friends. Julius may have been advised by Festus to give preferential treatment to Paul.

Read Acts 27:4.

- The most direct route from Sidon to Myra would have directed the ship south and west of Cyprus (the same route Paul had traveled when he had returned from his third missionary journey). The summer and early autumn winds, blowing from the west and northwest, however, required the ship to remain close to the coast, sailing north of Cyprus between the island and the mainland.

Read Acts 27:5-6.

- Rounding the northeast peninsula of Cyprus, Paul's vessel would have once again faced the strong headwinds from the west and northwest. But by hugging the coastline and (most likely) taking advantage of the gentler night breezes, the ship was able

to dock at Myra. In this port city on the southern coast of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), Julius located an Egyptian (Alexandrian) ship sailing for Italy. This was a large grain ship (big enough to carry 276 passengers; 27:37-38). Egyptian grain was a Roman staple at this time in history, and Myra was a key hub of the imperial grain service.

Read Acts 27:7-8.

- With the favorable travel period quickly coming to a close, the captain of the Alexandrian ship pushed westward in an attempt to reach Italy before winter. But the elements were already beginning to make sailing west difficult. Cnidus, with its two harbors and ample accommodations, would have made an excellent stopping point from which to wait for favorable winds. But the weather conditions made it difficult to put in there. Thus the ship's captain chose to head south toward Crete. Crete is the largest island in the Aegean Sea. In better weather, captains would sail to the north of Crete. With winter fast approaching, however, the northern route was suspect. The northern coast had few suitable harbors and left ships unprotected against the often dangerous winds; therefore, Paul's ship journeyed to the eastern tip of Crete and then west along the southern coast, where harbors were more available. Even this attempt to travel under the lee of the island (along the south coast) was a trial. The small harbor at Fair Havens did not afford much protection. Nevertheless, since the coastline just beyond Fair Havens veers sharply northward and exposes vessels to the full force of the northwesterly winds, the ship put in there to wait for the wind to shift.

Read Acts 27:9-10.

- Because of the reference to *the Fast* (the Jewish Day of Atonement, on the tenth day of the month Tishri), it is possible to set the date for this voyage as early October (AD 59). Waiting for favorable weather at Fair Havens, the ship's anxious commanders had a decision to make: Should they stay put and find winter quarters in Fair Havens (or nearby Lasea)? Or should they push on westward in an attempt to complete their journey to Italy before winter? A guiding principle of sailing was that it was dangerous from mid-September to mid-November and disastrous from mid-November to mid-February. Luke did not record whether or not this decision was the subject of a public discussion. Nevertheless, Paul made his prediction known to the centurion and the ship's captain that to continue the trip would result in disaster. Paul's warning may have been stimulated by his own experience. Prior to this voyage, he had written, in **2 Corinthians 11:25**, that he had already survived three shipwrecks. Paul probably was exhibiting common sense from the weather/sailing calendar. In ancient times ships had no compasses and navigated by the stars, so Paul understood that overcast skies and strong northwesterly winds made sailing west all but impossible and very dangerous. Later, Paul would be given a further confirmation of the ship's and its occupants' fate, 27:21-26.

Read Acts 27:11-12.

- Apparently, by this time the worsening weather conditions had eliminated any remaining hopes of reaching Italy. Although the weather was not ideal for sailing, the pilot and the owner of the ship didn't want to spend the winter in an exposed harbor like Fair Havens. Because the ship had been contracted out for the official

state transport of grain, the Roman officer could have overruled them. But he deferred to the captain's nautical expertise and decided to take a chance. The practical Roman regarded the advice of a seasoned sea captain as being more reliable than the religious intuitions of a Jewish tentmaker. The ship departed for Phoenix, only a few miles west along the southern coast of Crete.

THE STORM AT SEA—27:13-26

Leaving the relative safety of Fair Havens, Paul's vessel encountered a violent "northeaster" (27:14) that "raged unabated for many days" (27:20). The crew tried valiantly to weather the storm but eventually gave up all hope of saving their lives, much less the battered ship. Paul gathered the ship's crew and encouraged them with two promises of God: (1) that he (Paul) had been guaranteed safe arrival in Rome; and (2) that everyone sailing with him would be protected from harm. One truth stands clear in the middle of this nerve-racking voyage: Life may get messy, complicated, or even frightening, but God's will cannot be thwarted!

Read Acts 27:13-15.

- At this time of year, the winds in the Mediterranean made sea travel difficult. The winds were considered dangerous after September 15 and impossible between November 11 and March 10. But favorable winds and weather at that moment caused the captain to proceed with the journey. Had these conditions continued, the ship would have brought the passengers and crew to their destination within hours, certainly less than one day. But the air currents suddenly changed (a common occurrence in these waters), and the resulting north wind coming down off the mountains of southern Crete was deadly!

In describing this wind, Luke used the Greek word from which we get our English word “typhoon.”

Read Acts 27:16-17.

- The tiny island of Clauda (some twenty-three miles south) provided a temporary cover from the storm as the ship moved behind (south of) it. The sailors used this brief respite to tie everything down and prepare for the worst. The lifeboat they managed to hoist aboard was an important tool in ancient sailing. No doubt filled with water and on the verge of breaking loose or crashing into the mother ship, the lifeboat had to be brought on board. Anyone who has ever attempted to right an overturned canoe filled with water can appreciate the difficulty of such a task. Another emergency measure was “banding” the ship with ropes. This involved passing ropes (or chains) under the ship to hold it together. Pulled tightly in a transverse fashion, such cables would hopefully help hold the timbers against the tremendous force of the stormy waves. Even though Syrtis, on the northern coast of Africa (Libya), was some four hundred miles away, the sailors began to fear the prospect of being driven there. The legendary quicksand and shoals in the southern Mediterranean were treacherous even in normal weather, so much so that Alexandrian ships would sail northward to Asia and then west to Italy to avoid this area. To combat this possible drift, the sailors lowered the sea anchor. This had the effect of giving the ship a dragging resistance to the wind and waves. By putting the ship on a starboard tack (her right side to the wind) and by utilizing storm sails, the ship would have been able to drift slowly in a westerly direction.

Read Acts 27:18-19.

- Despite all the emergency measures taken, the ship was being pounded, perhaps even beginning to take on water.

Crew members began to jettison the cargo (the grain) to make the ship lighter. When this proved inadequate, the sailors eventually threw the ship's tackle overboard. This is likely a reference to nonessential gear—extra sails and yards (the stout poles used to support and spread the sails). Such actions indicate the crew's absolute desperation.

Read Acts 27:20.

- The severity of the storm obscured the sun and stars by which sailors navigated. The ship was being driven and tossed by the winds. It probably was leaking. A bleak sense of doom and despair permeated the passengers and crew.

Read Acts 27:21-22.

- The passengers and crew probably had not eaten due to fear, busyness, depression, or seasickness. They may have been fasting, or supplies may have been depleted (and were being rationed) due to the extra length of the journey. Why would Paul talk to the crew this way? Perhaps this was merely his fleshly side, which was not beyond the temptation to say, "I told you so." More likely, he was reminding the crew that, with God's guidance, he had prophesied this very problem (27:10). Because he had been right in the past, they should listen to him now and have hope. Paul told them, "None of you will lose your lives." For no one to die in a shipwreck would be considered a great miracle in the ancient world. In the future, they would listen to Paul (27:30-32), and their lives would be spared as a result.

Read Acts 27:23-24.

- Standing under dark skies on the deck of a ship that was bobbing like a cork, Paul stated the reason for his

unlikely confidence. The previous night he had been visited by an angel of his God, the sum of whose message was, “Paul, relax! You’re going to Rome. Nothing will prevent that. Everyone with you will be safe, too.” This was similar to the assurance he had been given in 23:11.

Read Acts 27:25-26.

- After relating this encouraging vision to his despairing shipmates, Paul admonished them (for the second time), to, literally, cheer up. Such a change in attitude was based not on some kind of false bravado. Paul felt cheered or encouraged because of his faith in God, relying wholeheartedly on the clear-cut promises of God.

THE SHIPWRECK—27:27-44

God had revealed to Paul that a shipwreck was inevitable (27:26). Sure enough, the ship ran aground and began to break apart just off the coast of Malta. Though the experience proved to be harrowing, all 276 people on board were able to swim safely ashore. Repeatedly during this grim experience, Paul had proclaimed his faith in God. Now, during this end of Paul’s two-week-long nightmare at sea, God demonstrated His faithfulness and mercy.

Read Acts 27:27-28.

- In the two weeks that had passed since departing Fair Havens, the Alexandrian ship found itself adrift in the Adriatic Sea (here a reference to the central part of the Mediterranean Sea between Italy, Crete, and the northern coast of Africa). Perhaps the sailors sensed they were approaching land because they heard the sound of breakers in the night. Soundings were made by throwing a weighted, marked line into the water. When the lead

hit the bottom, sailors could tell the depth of the water from the marks on the rope.

Read Acts 27:29.

- If breakers were being heard in the distance, to continue to push toward land in the dark would have been foolhardy. Anchors acted as a kind of primitive breaking device; ships had many anchors (from five to fifteen). Therefore, the crew let down four anchors to keep the ship off the rocks and to keep the bow pointed toward the beach. They prayed for daylight so they could see where they were going.

Read Acts 27:30-32.

- In the night, a group of sailors, not convinced by Paul's earlier assurances that all aboard would be saved, decided to escape from the ship. Under the guise of going out in the ship's dinghy to drop additional anchors and stabilize the vessel, the men intended to head for shore. Somehow Paul discerned their real intentions. He may have been divinely warned or merely suspicious because of his own sailing experience. He alerted the centurion, Julius, and the Roman soldiers of the plot, implying that their own safety would be in jeopardy if these sailors were allowed to carry out their plan. Unlike the situation at the beginning of the voyage, Paul had the centurion's ear and was functioning almost as the commander of the ship. Paul's words were followed completely, even when they went against common sense. The soldiers derailed the sailors' plan by cutting the lifeboat free. Without this smaller boat to ferry passengers to shore, everyone aboard was forced to depend on the Lord.

Read Acts 27:33-35.

- With a voice-of-experience sensing the task just ahead (making it to shore in cold, choppy waters), Paul encouraged his fellow travelers to gain strength and sustenance by eating. They had barely eaten for two weeks (due to a combination of fear, forced rationing, fasting, seasickness, and pre-occupation with just surviving the storm). Again, Paul assured everyone of God's promise of safety. There, in the midst of dire circumstances, Paul presided over a traditional Jewish meal. Some believe that Luke's wording at this juncture indicates that Paul was actually celebrating communion. If so, it is likely that many of the recipients missed the deeper significance—the majority of the 276 passengers were probably not believers. More likely, Luke was paralleling the way Jesus broke bread with His disciples (**Luke 9:16; 24:30**). Thus, Luke was portraying how Christ was present with them and would bring them through this disaster.

Read Acts 27:36-38.

- Some critics have argued that this is too high a number of people on the ship. However, the historian Josephus wrote of being on a vessel bound for Italy with six hundred fellow passengers. Ships of this size were common. The passengers and crew were encouraged and began eating. There was no need to ration what was left or save it for later, for they knew they would soon be on land. Had they not eaten, they might not have had the strength to swim to shore. In the first instance of jettisoning (27:18), some of the cargo had to be kept for ballast, lest the ship become completely unmaneuverable. Now, by lightening the load even more, the ship would ride higher in the water and be able to get closer to shore before running aground.

Read Acts 27:39-41.

- The disoriented sailors had no idea where they were. The geography and topography of what is now known as St. Paul's Bay on the northeast shore of modern Malta fits this description. They prepared to run the ship ashore. The sailors cast off the anchors, thus eliminating any kind of "braking action." They loosened the ropes that held the steering-oars in place (these long wooden paddles served as a primitive kind of rudder). Hoisting a small sail (the foresail) would let the wind drive the ship ashore. Before reaching land, however, the ship became wedged on a sandbar. Striking this underwater barrier between the two seas, the ship could go no further. Fierce waves began to strike the exposed rear of the vessel. Already weakened from a two-week pounding on the open seas, the ship quickly began to fall apart.

Read Acts 27:42.

- Roman soldiers were charged with the safekeeping and safe delivery of any prisoners in their care. The law required them to pay with their own lives if any of their prisoners escaped (12:19; 16:27). In the certain chaos of a shipwreck, it would be relatively easy for prisoners to slip away. The soldiers' instinctive reaction was to kill the prisoners so as to prevent this from happening.

Read Acts 27:43-44.

- Despite the potential for risk, the centurion Julius was impressed enough with Paul to keep the soldiers from carrying out their plan. As the highest ranking official, he had the full authority to make this decision. Some swam; others floated ashore on pieces of the collapsing

ship. The evacuation plan worked because everyone reached land in safety. No prisoners are recorded as having escaped. This sequence of events preserved Paul for his later ministry in Rome and fulfilled his prophetic utterance that everyone on the ship would be saved (27:22). In the minds of both Greeks and Romans, surviving a disaster at sea was evidence of a person's innocence. The powerful sea gods were not believed to spare the guilty.

ACTS
Chapter 28

PAUL ON THE ISLAND OF MALTA—28:1-10

Detailed plots on his life, angry mobs, storms at sea, shipwrecks—all the forces of hell seemed to have been intensifying their efforts to keep Paul from reaching Rome. Now, on the island of Malta, the attack continued; Paul was bitten by a poisonous snake. Paul not only survived the serpent's attack unharmed, but he turned around and healed a number of sick people on the island. During the three-month stay in Malta (28:11), Paul was showered with hospitality. What the devil intended for evil God turned into good.

Read Acts 28:1-2.

- In about two weeks, the storm had pushed Paul's ship some 470 miles west of Fair Havens, Crete. Only when the crew and passengers came ashore did they realize that they had reached Malta, an island 60 miles south of Sicily and 320 miles from Rome. The islanders there were of Phoenician ancestry and had given the island its name (taken from the Canaanite word for "refuse"). Malta had excellent harbors and was ideally located for trade. Many Roman soldiers retired there. Though the islanders were considered barbarians by the Greeks and Romans (because they spoke a Phoenician dialect), they demonstrated warmth and hospitality to Paul and the rest of the shipwreck survivors.

Read Acts 28:3-4.

- In cold weather, reptiles become extremely lethargic. Lying in a bundle of twigs and brush, a snake might easily go unnoticed. Apparently, the jostling of Paul's

walking combined with the warmth of the fire caused the poisonous snake to become roused. It struck Paul on the hand. The Maltese people quickly tried to make sense of these events by using their pagan presuppositions. Steeped in Greek legends and stories of gods relentlessly bringing wrongdoers to justice, they concluded that Paul must have been guilty of murder. Though he had somehow escaped divine retribution in the shipwreck, Nemesis, the Greek goddess of retribution, must have orchestrated this additional means of punishing him.

Read Acts 28:5-6.

- To the amazement of the Maltese observers, Paul not only did not drop dead, but he also did not even exhibit any swelling or discomfort. Paul was unfazed by this experience with the snake. God had promised safe passage to him (27:23-25), and nothing could prohibit his reaching Rome. When these superstitious pagans saw that Paul was unhurt by the poisonous viper, they did a complete about-face in their assessment of him. They had assumed that Paul was a murderer (28:4); now they decided he was a god. A similar appraisal is reported in 14:11-18 when Paul ministered at Lystra. It is reasonable to assume that Paul deflected any idolatrous comments in the same manner as he had done previously.

Read Acts 28:7.

- The chief official of the island is literally the “first man of the island” probably referring to a kind of political authority, like a governor. Apparently wealthy, this governor, named Publius, had a large estate. Whether he invited all 276 people to his home or whether he invited only Paul (and Luke) is unclear. In view of the miracle on the beach (the snakebite), Paul’s “divine” reputation,

and the illness afflicting Publius' father, it is likely that Publius entertained only Paul and his immediate entourage (perhaps also Julius and the ship's owner).

Read Acts 28:8-10.

- Malta fever is now known to be caused by microbes in goats' milk. This illness, like dysentery, seems to have been common on the island. A person could be ill for a few months to two or three years. When Paul learned that the father of Publius was suffering from this disease, he visited him, laid hands on him, and prayed over him. This is the only reference in Acts that mentions both prayer and laying on of hands. The man's complete healing followed. The news of this miracle spread quickly, and soon everyone with any kind of disease or ailment came to Paul to be cured. Paul probably also proclaimed the gospel in all its fullness during his stay; however, Luke does not state that here. Three months passed (28:11), because the shipwreck survivors had to wait for the passing of winter and arrangements to complete their journey on another vessel. When at last the time came to leave the island, the grateful Maltese people gave Paul and his friends many gifts and provisions for the remainder of their trip of 320 miles to Rome.

PAUL ARRIVES AT ROME—28:11-16

The last leg of Paul's journey to Rome was almost anticlimactic: smooth sailing, a warm reception by some Italian believers, his own private lodging (house arrest rather than imprisonment in a Roman penal facility). The stage was now set for Paul to begin ministering in the most influential city in the world.

Read Acts 28:11-12.

- Ships began sailing again between mid-February and mid-March, depending on the weather. Sailing vessels often would be named in honor of certain deities. These deities were thought to serve as protectors and would be called upon in times of trouble. Castor and Pollux were the twin sons of Zeus, the patrons of navigation. Their constellation (Gemini) was considered by sailors to be a sign of good luck.

Read Acts 28:13-14.

- Rhegium is modern-day Reggio on the “toe” of Italy. Puteoli is now called Pozzuoli and is located some 150 miles south of Rome. Situated in the Bay of Naples, Puteoli was the preferred point of entry for Alexandrian wheat ships (prior to the building of larger port facilities at Portus, near Ostia, during the reign of Claudius). At Puteoli, Paul and his colleagues met some fellow Christians and were allowed to stay with them for seven days (apparently while the ship was being unloaded or while the centurion Julius was conducting other official business). How is it that a community of believers came to be in Puteoli? From cosmopolitan Rome (with its many visitors), the gospel spread quickly to surrounding areas.

Read Acts 28:15.

- The believers in Rome heard about Paul’s imminent arrival, probably due to messengers sent by the believers in Puteoli. Eager to meet and greet the great apostle, an entourage headed south and intercepted Paul’s party at the Forum on the Appian Way, a town about forty-three miles from Rome. A second welcoming committee of

Roman believers encountered Paul at The Three Taverns, thirty-five miles south of Rome. Paul's entrance to Rome was more like a victor's triumphal entry than a prisoner's march. A "tavern" was a shop or a place that provided food and lodging for travelers. The Appian Way, a main thoroughfare to Rome from the south, featured many such inns. Paul was grateful for this warm Italian reception; he thanked God and took courage. Curiously, nothing more is said about Paul's interaction with the Roman church. Instead, Luke chose to focus on Paul's outreach efforts to the Jewish community in Rome, and then after their rejections, his outreach to the Gentile population.

Read Acts 28:16.

- At last Paul arrived in Rome, the most influential city on earth. This was the fulfillment of a long-term desire (**Romans 1:10-16**). Paul's private lodging was a rented house (28:30). Though guarded around the clock (in four-hour shifts) by a soldier (perhaps members of the Praetorian—or palace—guard, **Philippians 1:13**), Paul had much more freedom than a typical prisoner.

PAUL PREACHES AT ROME UNDER GUARD—28:17-31

Paul's first act in Rome was to call together the Jewish leaders. He wanted to declare his innocence of the charges brought against him in Jerusalem. But more than this, he wanted to proclaim the gospel to his Hebrew brothers. A meeting was arranged in which Paul gave an all-day lecture on the kingdom of God and the Messiahship of Jesus. Only a few of the Jews accepted his message, but even those who rejected the gospel left quietly. Consequently, for two solid years, Paul was able to preach and minister unhindered to all

who came to see him in his rented quarters, and the stream of visitors was apparently quite steady.

Read Acts 28:17.

- The decree of Claudius expelling Jews from Rome (18:2) happened eleven years previously (AD 49-60), so by the time of Paul's arrival, Jewish leaders were back in Rome. These Jews were likely an unofficial gathering of the leaders of various synagogues, not an official ruling body. After three days (presumably to settle into his new accommodations), Paul called together the local Jewish leaders because he did not have the freedom to visit them in their synagogues. Beginning his presentation, Paul stated his innocence in the charge of violating Jewish laws or customs. Nevertheless, he had been handed over to the Roman government. This phrasing is similar to Christ's statements as found in **Luke 9:44; 18:32**. The Jews in Rome were not hostile to Paul (28:21-22).

Read Acts 28:18-19.

- Paul reiterated the Romans' inability or unwillingness to execute him. On three separate occasions, statements had been made to the effect that Paul had done nothing to deserve the death sentence (Claudias Lysias in 23:29; Festus in 25:25 and 26:31). Paul emphasized that he had appealed to Caesar (25:11) because the Jewish leaders had adamantly and unjustly continued to pressure the authorities for a conviction. He felt he had no other recourse. And he further assured the Jews of his own motives in appealing to Caesar—not because he was trying to harm his own countrymen but solely to be declared innocent and set free.

Read Acts 28:20.

- The phrase “*the hope of Israel*” has been mentioned several times by Paul (23:6; 24:15; 26:7; 28:20). For Paul, the messianic hope meant the fulfillment of God’s messianic prophecies first given to the patriarch Abraham. For all of its history, the nation looked forward to a time when God’s anointed one would rule over a heavenly kingdom. Because of his conviction that Jesus of Nazareth was that long-awaited Messiah and because of Christ’s resurrection from the dead, Paul was adamant that his message and theology were consistent with Jewish hope through the ages. Paul wanted his countrymen to come to see (as he had) that this relatively new entity known as the Christian church was not a dangerous sect or departure from traditional orthodox Judaism but simply the next phase in the unfolding plan of God that had been first announced to Abraham.

Read Acts 28:21-22.

- The Jewish leaders had not heard specific allegations about Paul and his case, but they had heard a steady stream of negative comments about the sect of people who followed the one called Christ. There was a growing group of these people right there in Rome. The people talking against Christianity may have been Jews who kept up with events in Israel, together with skeptical Romans. Christians were denounced everywhere by the Romans because they were seen as a threat to the Roman establishment. They believed in one God, whereas the Romans had many gods, including Caesar. The Christians were committed to an authority higher than Caesar. The Jewish leaders from Jerusalem probably had given up on their attempt to have Paul prosecuted once his case came under the jurisdiction of the Roman emperor. Or perhaps they had heard about the shipwreck

and presumed that Paul had been killed. In any case, they hadn't sent any word against Paul to the Jews in Rome. While Jews were allowed to practice their religion, they were viewed with some contempt by their "cosmopolitan" Roman neighbors. Whatever information the Jewish leaders had, they expressed an interest in hearing what Paul had to say.

Read Acts 28:23-24.

- A meeting was arranged, and when the time for that appointment came, great numbers of Roman Jews came to hear from Paul. It was an all-day affair, during which Paul used the Old Testament to "explain" the gospel to the Jews. In essence, Paul reminded the Jews of the many Old Testament prophecies and references to the Messiah; then he skillfully demonstrated how Jesus, in His coming, living, dying, and rising, exactly fulfilled every divine promise and every Jewish hope. The focus of Paul's message was the kingdom of God. This kingdom was a major preoccupation of Jewish thought and continues to be a major source of discussion. Some Christians believe the kingdom of God has already come in a spiritual sense because of the coming of the King (**Luke 10:9-11; 17:20-21**) and His bestowing of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to dwell in the hearts of believers. Other followers of Christ believe the kingdom is yet future—a full, final, and physical reign of Jesus (after His return) over a perfect earthly kingdom where sin and evil no longer exist. It is doubtful that Paul lectured all day or that his presentation was a monologue. As per Jewish custom, we can suppose this was an energetic and often heated dialogue, with much questioning back and forth. The effect of this long discourse and discussion was that some of the Jewish leaders were convinced. Others, however, refused to

believe, demonstrating hard-heartedness (218:27) and spiritual blindness (**Romans 11:10; 2 Corinthians 4:4**).

Read Acts 28:25-27.

- In this interchange, Paul had the final word, and it was a strong rebuke. He compared the departing, arguing Jewish leaders to the long-ago audience of Isaiah the prophet (**Isaiah 6:9-10**). Those Jews had heard the very word of God and had seen the spokesman of God, but because of stubbornness and pride, they had been unable to understand and perceive the deeper, life-changing implications of the divine revelation that was being extended to them. Rather than submitting to judgment by the truth, they had sat in judgment of truth. The great irony is that these Jews viewed themselves as religiously successful and slated for divine commendation, when in truth they were spiritually blind, deaf, and under divine condemnation! However, in Paul's words; 28:24, some were convinced and believed.

Read Acts 28:28.

- As he had done on several prior occasions (13:46; 18:6; 19:8-10), Paul announced a turning from the unresponsive, hard-hearted Jews to the receptive Gentiles. From that point on, the non-Jews would be given priority when it came to evangelical witness. At some future point, Paul apparently expected a change of heart by his countrymen (**Romans 11:25-32**), but for the immediate future, Paul would direct his ministry to those who were eager to embrace the truth about Christ.

Read Acts 28:29.

- This verse is not included in most of the ancient manuscripts. It was most likely a scribal addition, but it

adds nothing new. The fact that the Jews were arguing among themselves is a point previously made in 18:25.

Read Acts 28:30-31.

- Luke's record ends abruptly, but this was common. A number of ancient works have sudden endings. While Paul was under house arrest, he did more than speak to the Jews. He wrote letters, commonly called his Prison Epistles, to the Ephesians, Colossians, and Philippians. He also wrote personal letters, such as the one to Philemon. This ending shows the gospel going forward to Rome as the great commission had directed. It had now reached the international capital of the Gentiles. He welcomed all who visited him, and that list was surely long. Luke was with Paul in Rome (**2 Timothy 4:11a**). Timothy often visited him (**Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; Philemon 1:1**), as did Tychicus (**Ephesians 6:21**), Epaphroditus (**Philippians 4:18**), and Mark (**Colossians 4:10**). Paul witnessed to the whole Roman guard (**Philippians 1:13**) and was involved with the Roman believers.
- Tradition says that Paul was released after two years of house arrest in Rome and then set off on a fourth missionary journey. Five reasons for this tradition are as follows: (1) Luke does not give us an account of his trial before Caesar, and Luke was a detailed chronicler; (2) the prosecution had two years to bring the case to trial, and time may have run out; (3) in his letter to the Philippians, written during his imprisonment in Rome, Paul implied that he would soon be released and would do further traveling; (4) Paul mentions several places where he intended to take the gospel, but he never visited those places in his first three journeys; (5) early Christian literature talks plainly about other travels by Paul.

- During Paul's time of freedom, he may have continued to travel extensively, even going to Spain (**Romans 15:24, 28**) and back to the churches in Greece. The books of 1 Timothy and Titus were written during this time. Later, Paul was imprisoned again, probably in Rome, where he wrote his last letter (2 Timothy). During this first Roman imprisonment, he spoke with all boldness and no one tried to stop him. The Greek word *akolutos* ("without hindrance") is the last word of Acts, thus ending the book on a triumphal note. Why does Acts end here and so abruptly? The book is not about the life of Paul but about the spread of the gospel, and that had been clearly presented by Luke. God apparently thought it was not necessary for someone to write an additional book describing the continuing history of the early church. Now that the gospel had been preached and established at the center of trade and government, it would spread across the world.



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