

*Faith Foundations Study Guides*

**The Progress and Power  
of the Gospel**

*A Journey of Discovery in the Book of Acts*

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# How to Use This Book

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Welcome to the Faith Foundations study guide on Acts! Whether you are just beginning your new life with Christ, or have been a Christian for many years, this study guide is for you. It is designed to help you discover, through personal study and group discussion, the incredible riches of God's Word, and to help you grow in your walk with God by applying what you learn. This book is divided into 26 lessons, each of which contains the full NIV text of the Scripture passage, several study and discussion questions, and a verse-by-verse commentary. So, together with a Bible to look up cross-references, you have everything you need for your "journey of discovery" in Acts.

## *Why Small Groups?*

These materials can be used profitably in personal study or in an adult Sunday School class. But their value will be best realized when they are used in small groups, meeting either at church during the Sunday School hour or in homes during the week. There are several reasons for this.

First, no one has perfect insight into every passage of Scripture; we can all benefit from hearing the perspectives of other believers as we seek to understand and apply the Bible. A small group gathering, using the discussion questions included in this book, is an ideal way to stimulate a sharing of observations and ideas.

Second, a small group provides a community of fellow travelers who, along with us, are seeking to follow Christ in the midst of family responsibilities, job pressures, and personal struggles. In today's fragmented and mobile society, the natural networks of neighborhoods and family no longer provide the support they once did. We need some way of making connections with others for mutual support, people with whom we can share our joys and sorrows—people who will listen, who will pray with us, who will offer a helping hand and a word of encouragement, and who will confront us in love when we've gotten off track.

Finally, a small group combines the benefits of Biblical insight and community support by keeping us accountable. If we only study the Scriptures alone, or listen to them taught in a large group, it's easy to let them go "in one ear and out the other". But when a small group of people are learning the same things at the same time, they can help one another to apply the things they are learning.

## *How Are the Groups Organized?*

The groups should be composed of 6-14 people: if they are smaller, any absences can make it difficult to maintain the discussion; if they are larger, not everyone can participate. You can meet from two to four times a month; if the group meets less than twice a month, the members aren't spending enough time together to build relationships. Some groups find that meeting three times a month during the school year, with a break during the summer, provides a good rhythm of involvement and time off.

You may choose to include a mix of married and single, older and younger members, or you may organize your groups by age or marital status. There are benefits to homogeneous groups in which the members are going through similar life experiences, but there are also benefits of a diverse group in which the younger members can benefit from the experience of the older.

Each group needs to have a recognized leader, preferably one selected and trained by the pastor or church leadership. This person's role during the meeting is not primarily to teach (although preparation of the lesson is a must), but to guide the discussion and keep the group from getting bogged down on side issues. He or she does not need to be the host; in fact, it is preferable that group responsibilities, such as providing a home in which to meet and organizing refreshments, be shared among the members.

Finally, membership in the group should be based on three commitments: To prepare for each meeting by completing the lesson in advance, which takes from 1/2 to 2 hours (but come to the meeting even if you haven't done the lesson); to place a high priority on regular attendance and come to the meetings except in case of emergency; and to keep confidential anything of a personal nature which is shared during the meetings (except when it is necessary to communicate concerns to the pastor).

## *What Is the Group Meeting Like?*

Each group meeting should last from 1 1/2 to 2 hours, and provide time for discussion of the lesson, prayer, and fellowship. A problem in many groups is for the lesson to take up most of the time, with only a few minutes left over for prayer and fellowship. This must be avoided for the goal of building relationships to be achieved.

Here is a suggested schedule:

15 minutes:	Gathering
30-45 minutes:	Discussion of the lesson
20-30 minutes:	Prayer
15-30 minutes:	Refreshments

As for child care, experience has shown that in order to receive the maximum benefit from time spent in the meeting, all members of the group need to be free to focus on the discussion, rather than caring for children. Therefore, with the possible exception of infants under one year, parents should make arrangements for child care during the meetings. Some options include "trading" child care with parents whose group meets on a different night, having a baby sitter care for children in another room during the meeting, or providing child care for all the groups at the church.

# Introduction to Acts

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## Author

The author of Acts is not named in the book; however, early Christian tradition and other internal evidence both point strongly to Luke, the author of the third gospel (see Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1). Traditional references to Lucan authorship include the Muratorian Canon (AD 170-180), Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (AD 175-185), and the Anti-Marcionite Prologue to the Third Gospel (late second century).

As for internal evidence, the author implicitly identifies himself as a participant in several of the events recounted in Acts, using the personal pronoun “we” in 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; and 27:1-28:16. Paul’s letters identify Luke as being one of those present with him during his time of imprisonment in Rome (Col. 4:14; Phlm. 23-24), and although this is not definitive, since Luke was not Paul’s only companion, the agreement of the internal references with the unanimous testimony of the early external witnesses allows us to confidently identify Luke as the author.

## Occasion and Purpose

If Acts is the second volume of a two-part project, Luke-Acts, we can find the purpose statement in Luke 1:1-4. It was Luke’s intention to write a “carefully investigated” and “orderly account” of “the things that have been fulfilled among us”, in order that its recipient, Theophilus, might “know the certainty of the things you have been taught.” In other words, Luke’s purpose was to write a well-researched, historical account of the life and ministry of Christ, and of the continuing work of the Holy Spirit after his resurrection and ascension into heaven. He did so in order to confirm for Theophilus the validity of the Christian teachings he had received.

## Date

The earliest quotations from, or allusions to, the text of Acts in other known writings come after AD 150. Thus, an earlier date for the book can only be arrived at from internal evidence. If written by Luke, a date not many years after the events recorded in Acts is likely, unless he was very young at the time they occurred. This would date the book sometime after the conclusion of Paul’s imprisonment, which ended in AD 62. An argument from silence suggest that since the author does not mention the intense persecution of Christians in Rome which began under Nero, a date earlier than AD 64 is warranted.

## Major Themes

David G. Peterson, in his commentary *The Acts of the Apostles*, identifies several theological emphases, including these:

1. **God.** God is the creator and sustainer of all things, including the heavens and the earth (4:24; 14:15, 17; 17:24-25). He is sovereign over the affairs of mankind (14:16; 17:26), and will judge the nations (10:42; 17:30-31). However, he desires a relationship with human beings (17:27). He is not confined to specific buildings, nor can he be approached via idols or man-made systems of religion (7:48-50; 17:24-29).
2. **Jesus.** The same Jesus whose life, ministry, death and resurrection were depicted in Luke’s gospel is now alive, and present and active in the world through his Spirit (1:1-5). He is Lord of all (10:36), Messiah (2:36), and the Savior of those who turn to him in repentance and faith (2:38; 3:19-20; 4:12; 13:38-39).
3. **The Holy Spirit.** The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus (16:7), who is given to all believers (2:38-39). He is the source of power (1:8), revelation and witness (2:17-18; 4:25, 31; 11:12), wisdom (6:3, 10), guidance (11:12; 20:22), encouragement and church growth (9:31), and joy (13:52).
4. **Salvation.** Salvation—forgiveness of sins and escape from the judgment of God—is available to those who repent and turn to Christ (2:38; 3:19; 4:12; 10:42-43; 13:39; 26:17-20). It is available to all, regardless of nationality (10:34-36; 15:7-11; 26:22-23).
5. **The Gospel.** God draws people to himself through the proclamation of the gospel, which is the message of God’s grace in salvation (15:7; 10:36; 13:26; 14:3; 15:7; 20:24; 26:23).
6. **The Atonement.** It was through Christ’s death, the shedding of his blood, that salvation was purchased and the church was brought into existence (3:18; 17:3; 20:28; 26:23).
7. **Miracles.** God performed “signs and wonders” in the early days of the church to validate the message, and messengers, of the gospel (2:22; 3:16; 4:10; 8:6; 14:3).
8. **Magic and Demons.** Jesus has defeated Satan and overcome the power of evil (13:6-10; 19:11-20).

# Unit 1 – Departure and Promise

## Acts 1:1-26

### Text

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<sup>1</sup> In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach <sup>2</sup> until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. <sup>3</sup> After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. <sup>4</sup> On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. <sup>5</sup> For John baptized with <sup>a</sup> water, but in a few days you will be baptized with <sup>a</sup> the Holy Spirit.”

<sup>6</sup> Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

<sup>7</sup> He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

<sup>9</sup> After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

<sup>10</sup> They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. <sup>11</sup> “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

<sup>12</sup> Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s walk <sup>c</sup> from the city. <sup>13</sup> When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. <sup>14</sup> They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

<sup>15</sup> In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) <sup>16</sup> and said, “Brothers and sisters,<sup>d</sup> the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus. <sup>17</sup> He was one of our number and shared in our ministry.”

<sup>18</sup> (With the payment he received for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. <sup>19</sup> Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)

<sup>20</sup> “For,” said Peter, “it is written in the Book of Psalms:

“May his place be deserted;  
let there be no one to dwell in it,”<sup>e</sup>

and,

“May another take his place of leadership.”<sup>f</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, <sup>22</sup> beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.”

<sup>23</sup> So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. <sup>24</sup> Then they prayed, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen <sup>25</sup> to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs.” <sup>26</sup> Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.

<sup>a</sup>5 Or in <sup>b</sup>5 Or in <sup>c</sup>12 That is, about 5/8 mile or about 1 kilometer <sup>d</sup>16 The Greek word for *brothers and sisters* (*adelphoi*) refers here to believers, both men and women, as part of God’s family; also in 6:3; 11:29; 12:17; 16:40; 18:18, 27; 21:7, 17; 28:14, 15. <sup>e</sup>20 Psalm 69:25 <sup>f</sup>20 Psalm 109:8

### Open

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Have you ever had someone you cared about leave, but promise to come back?

### Discover

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1. Who wrote this book, and to whom? Why was it written? (see Luke 1:1-4)

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2. What four promises do the apostles receive in this passage? Which of these means the most to you?

3. What “convincing proofs” did Jesus give that he was alive? (v. 3; Lk. 24:36-43; Jn. 20:27; Acts 10:41)

Why is this important? (see 1 Cor. 15:12-19)

4. How does Peter interpret the fact of Judas’ betrayal? (vv. 15-20) Does this absolve Judas of guilt?

5. Was it a mistake for Jesus to have chosen Judas as one of his disciples? Why or why not? (see Jn. 6:64, 70-71; Lk. 22:21-22; Acts 2:23)

6. Why was it good, and even necessary, that Jesus leave? (Jn. 7:39; 16:7)

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## Apply

What does this passage tell us about the power of wicked people to thwart God’s plans and purposes?

Have there ever been times in your life when things went very differently than you had hoped? How would this passage help you deal with those experiences?

# Commentary

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In the introduction (1:1-14), Luke reviews the key events of Christ's post-resurrection ministry as recounted in his gospel, and links those events to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the early church. This emphasizes the strong connection between Christ's earthly ministry and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Christ (Acts 16:7; Rom. 8:9; Gal. 4:6; Phil. 1:19; 1 Pet. 1:11; 1 Jn. 4:13).

- vv. 1-2 This book continues the narrative that began in Luke's gospel, and it is addressed to the same person, "Theophilus". We have no other information as to his identity, although the title "most excellent" (Lk. 1:3) may indicate that he was a government official (see Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25).

Note that Luke refers to "all that Jesus *began* to do and to teach," rather than what he "did" and "taught". The events of Christ's earthly life, recounted in the gospels, were only the beginning of his ministry, which continues "through the Holy Spirit" until the time of his return (v. 11).

The reference to the apostles as those whom Christ "had chosen" (see Lk. 6:13-16; Jn. 15:16) gives us a glimpse of a theme which recurs in Acts: that the events of Christ's life, death, and resurrection were part of God's sovereign plan of redemption, a plan which includes the gift of the Holy Spirit and the growth of the church throughout the world (Acts 2:16-23; 3:18-24; Eph. 1:3-12; Rev. 7:9).

- v. 3 Christ provided "many convincing proofs" of his bodily resurrection, including eating and drinking and inviting people to touch him (Lk. 24:36-43; Jn. 20:27; 21:12-13; Acts 1:4; 10:41). The fact that his resurrection was physical and literal, rather than merely spiritual or metaphorical, is essential to the Christian message. It is not a disputable matter for believers (Rom. 14:1), but a foundational truth upon which our faith depends (1 Cor. 15:12-19).

The kingdom of God was the subject of Christ's teaching in Luke's gospel (Lk. 4:43; 8:1; 9:2, 11; 18:16-17, 24-25; 21:31; 22:16). Here we see that it was also the topic of his post-resurrection discussions with the apostles, which points to the continuing importance of this topic. In a general sense, the kingdom of God refers to the reign, or kingship, of God over all of life and all of creation. At the present time, it includes the reign of God in the hearts of his people (Rom. 6:17; Col. 3:15; Jam. 4:7), as well as the power of God moving history inexorably toward its pre-ordained fulfillment (Lk. 22:15-16; Rom. 8:18-19; Eph. 1:7-10). In the future, it refers to that time when all opposition to God's rule has been eliminated, and "*every knee [will] bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge*

*that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*" (Phil. 2:10-11; see Dan. 7:14, 27; Rom. 14:11; 1 Cor. 15:23-26; Eph. 1:20-21; Col 2:15).

- v. 4 The promise that the Holy Spirit would be given is found in several places in the Old Testament (Joel 2:28-32; Isa. 32:15; 44:3-5; Ezek. 36:25-27; 39:29), and it was reaffirmed by Christ (Jn. 3:5-8, 34; 4:23-24; 7:37-39; 14:16-17, 25-26; 15:26; 16:7, 13-15). In order for the disciples to receive this gift, they needed to wait in Jerusalem, because Christ had to be exalted before sending the Spirit (John 7:39; 16:7; Acts 2:33).

- v. 5 The baptisms administered by John were expressions of repentance, appeals to God for forgiveness of sins (Mt. 3:6, 11; Mk. 1:4-5; Lk. 3:3; Acts 13:24; 19:3-4). However, they had no power to purify or transform. They were anticipatory, looking ahead to Christ and the greater baptism which he would accomplish in and with the Holy Spirit (Mt. 3:11; Mk. 1:1-3, 7-8; Lk. 3:16; Jn. 1:26-27; 29-34; Acts 19:4). Unlike John's baptism, Christ's baptism has the power to "wash away . . . sins" (Acts 22:16; see 1 Cor. 6:11; Heb. 10:22; Titus 3:5). Not that water baptism itself can accomplish this cleansing, but rather, the physical act of baptism represents the spiritual purification which Christ accomplishes through the Holy Spirit in response to faith (1 Pet. 3:21).

- vv. 6-7 The disciples understood correctly that Christ was the messianic king foretold by the ancients (Lk. 1:32-33; 54-55, 68-75; 2:38), the one through whom all of God's promises would be fulfilled (Rom. 15:8-12; 2 Cor. 1:20). They also understood that the gift of the Spirit was associated with the last days (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:14-21). And so the hope and expectation which their question gives voice to was well founded. What they did not realize was that there would be an extended period of time between the resurrection and ascension of Christ, which inaugurated the kingdom (Acts 2:36; Phil. 2:9; Heb. 2:9; 1 Pet. 3:22), and the final consummation of all things at his return. The purpose for this delay is that people of all races and nations might come to faith (2 Pet. 3:8-9; 1 Tim. 2:3-6; Rev. 7:9).

- v. 8 The apostles, and by extension, all believers, are given the responsibility and privilege of bringing salvation to the nations, as witnesses of Christ by the power of the Spirit. Note that rather than waiting for the nations to come to them, the apostles were directed to go to the nations, to initiate encounters with those who needed Christ. Note also that their commission was at once local, regional, and global: they were to go to "*Jerusalem, and . . . all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*".

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vv. 9-11 The ascension of Christ into heaven, after which power from God for ministry came upon his disciples, was prefigured by two Old Testament events: the translation of Elijah, who was taken into heaven in a whirlwind and succeeded by Elisha (2 Ki. 2:1-15), and the death of Moses, whose leadership role was assumed by Joshua (Dt. 34:1-9). Following the departure of his master, Elisha received a “double portion” of Elijah’s spirit (2 Ki. 2:9), and Joshua was “full of the spirit of wisdom” (Dt. 34:9). Likewise, the Spirit was not given to the followers of Jesus until he had departed (Jn. 16:7; Acts 2:33).

The circumstances of this departure indicate that it is final, unlike the other times that Jesus had come and gone in the forty days following his crucifixion. On at least one of those occasions, he simply disappeared (Lk. 24:31). But this time, he “was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight” (v. 9). This recalls the cloud which enveloped Jesus when his glory was revealed to Peter, James and John (Mt. 17:1-8; Lk. 9:28-36; Mk. 9:2-13). It also reminds us of the cloud of Yahweh’s presence during the time of Israel’s sojourn in the wilderness (Ex 13:21-22; 40:34-38), and the cloud which filled the temple with the glory of God in Ezekiel’s vision (Ez. 10:4). Here as well, it signifies the glory of God and the glorification of Jesus (1 Tim. 3:16; see Jn. 7:39; 12:16, 23; 17:1, 5; 1 Pet. 1:21).

The angelic messengers, the “two men dressed in white” who suddenly appear (see Lk. 24:4-7; Jn. 20:12), clarify for the disciples what has just happened: Jesus “has been taken from you into heaven”. But they also bring a promise, that Jesus will return, and in the same way that he left; i.e., that his return will be personal, bodily, visible, and glorious (see Mt. 24:30; 26:64; Mk. 13:26; 14:62; Lk. 9:26; 17:25; 21:27; 1 Thess. 4:13-17; 2 Thess. 1:7; Rev. 1:7). The promise of Christ’s return, in addition to being a great comfort, is also a stimulus to faithful service and watchfulness (Mt. 24:36-51; 25:1-13; Mk. 13:33-37; Lk. 12:35-48; 1 Jn. 2:28).

vv. 15-17 Peter now begins to fulfill Jesus’ commission to “strengthen your brothers” (Lk. 22:32). He does this by assuring them that God is in control, even in the midst of confusing and troubling circumstances. Judas’ betrayal led directly to Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion, and the apparent nullification of all that the apostles had hoped for. But in fact, this was not an unforeseen departure from God’s plan; it was not, as it seemed to them, a tragically unexpected development. On the contrary, it was both predicted and necessary: “Scripture had to be fulfilled” in this way (Ps. 41:9; 55:12-14, 20-21; 69:25; 109:8; Zech. 11:12-13).

Peter notes that Judas “was one of our number and shared in our ministry”. Was it, then, a mistake for Jesus to have chosen him, a fatal miscalculation? Not at all. Jesus was not surprised or deceived by Judas’ treachery, but knew from the beginning what was in his heart:

*“Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!” (He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the Twelve, was later to betray him.)”* (Jn. 6:70-71; see Jn. 2:25; 6:64; 13:11).

Judas was not chosen in ignorance of his capacity for treachery, nor in spite of it, but rather because of it, because that concealed wickedness would ultimately lead to the fulfillment of God’s plan. Nevertheless, Judas was fully responsible for his actions (see Mt. 26:24-25; Mk 14:21; Lk. 22:22; Acts 2:23).

vv. 18-19 Peter relates the gruesome details of Judas’ death in order to demonstrate that his betrayal of Christ, even though foreseen by the prophets (v. 16), rendered him guilty and subject to God’s wrath.

There are apparent discrepancies between this passage and the account in Mt. 27:3-10. There, we are told that the field was purchased by the chief priests, and that Judas hanged himself. And in Matthew we learn that the field was called the Field of Blood because it was purchased with “blood money”, while Acts indicates that the field was known as such because of Judas’ bloody demise. The first of these difficulties is resolved by recognizing that Judas, in effect, did buy the field, because it was his money, returned to the priests, that was used to purchase it. As for the manner of Judas’ death, we don’t know the exact sequence of events. But we can certainly imagine, for example, a scenario in which the body of a despised criminal, dead by hanging, would be left to rot and ultimately fall to the ground, bursting open. And finally, it is no contradiction for the field to have been associated with “blood” for more than one reason.

vv. 21-26 Why was it “necessary” that someone be selected to take the place that Judas had abdicated? Since Israel was made up of twelve tribes, a group of disciples numbering twelve best represented their status as the foundational leaders of the new Israel, which is the church (see Mt. 19:28; 22:28-30; also Lk. 1:32-33; Rom. 228-29; Gal. 3:16, 22, 29; 6:16; Eph. 2:11-22; 3:6; Heb. 8:7-13). The new Israel is comprised of all, both Jew and Gentile, who place their trust in Christ.

Note that the method used here to discern God’s will, the casting of lots, is never used again, after the Holy Spirit is given.

# Unit 2 – Pentecost

## Acts 2:1-36

### Text

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<sup>1</sup> When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. <sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues<sup>a</sup> as the Spirit enabled them.

<sup>5</sup> Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.

<sup>6</sup> When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. <sup>7</sup> Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans?” <sup>8</sup> Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?<sup>9</sup>

Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,<sup>b</sup> <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome<sup>11</sup> (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” <sup>12</sup> Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

<sup>13</sup> Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”

<sup>14</sup> Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. <sup>15</sup> These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! <sup>16</sup> No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

<sup>17</sup> “In the last days, God says,  
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.  
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,  
your young men will see visions,  
your old men will dream dreams.

<sup>18</sup> Even on my servants, both men and women,  
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,  
and they will prophesy.

<sup>19</sup> I will show wonders in the heavens above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood and fire and billows of smoke.

<sup>20</sup> The sun will be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood  
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

<sup>21</sup> And everyone who calls  
on the name of the Lord will be saved.’<sup>c</sup>

<sup>22</sup> “Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.

<sup>23</sup> This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men,<sup>d</sup> put him to death by nailing him to the cross. <sup>24</sup> But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. <sup>25</sup> David said about him:

“I saw the Lord always before me.  
Because he is at my right hand,  
I will not be shaken.

<sup>26</sup> Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;

my body also will rest in hope,

<sup>27</sup> because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead,

you will not let your holy one see decay.

<sup>28</sup> You have made known to me the paths of life;

you will fill me with joy in your presence.’<sup>e</sup>

<sup>29</sup> “Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. <sup>30</sup> But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. <sup>31</sup> Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. <sup>32</sup> God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. <sup>33</sup> Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. <sup>34</sup> For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said,

“The Lord said to my Lord:

“Sit at my right hand  
<sup>35</sup> until I make your enemies  
a footstool for your feet.’<sup>f</sup>

<sup>36</sup> “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”

<sup>a</sup>4 Or languages; also in verse 11 <sup>b</sup>9 That is, the Roman province by that name <sup>c</sup>21 Joel 2:28-32 <sup>d</sup>23 Or of those not having the law (that is, Gentiles) <sup>e</sup>28 Psalm 16:8-11 (see Septuagint) <sup>f</sup>35 Psalm 110:1

### Open

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- If you could go back in time to be an “apostle for a day”, and personally experience one of the events of Jesus’ ministry recorded in the gospels, what would it be?

## Discover

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1. What is the significance of the fact that people “from every nation under heaven” heard the “wonders of God” being proclaimed, all in their own languages? (vv. 5, 11; see Mt. 28:19; Rev. 7:9)

2. According to Joel, what would happen in the “last days”? (vv. 16-21)

3. When do the “last days” begin? What event marks their end?

4. What is the key promise in Joel's prophecy? What is the implied warning?

5. In his sermon, how does Peter connect the miracle that the crowd has witnessed with the person and work of Christ? (vv. 32-33).

6. How could the supremely wicked act of putting the Son of God to death be part of God's plan? (vv. 23-24; see Acts 3:18; 4:27-28)

7. Who was responsible for Jesus' death on the cross?

## Apply

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- Imagine that you are one of the people listening to Peter's sermon. How would you feel?
- What is the difference between you and those who heard Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost?

# Commentary

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- v. 1 The Jewish festival of Pentecost (Gr. “fiftieth”) was known in the Old Testament as the “Festival of Weeks”, because it occurred seven full weeks after the beginning of the grain harvest (Dt. 16:9-12; Ex. 23:16; 34:22; Lev. 23:15-21; Nu. 28:26-31). Originally, the date may have varied from year to year, but by the time of Christ it was fixed at fifty days after Passover. It was a time of sacrifices, feasting, and rejoicing, and its purpose was to celebrate God’s goodness in providing for his people. This was one of the three times each year that all Jewish men were required to present themselves before the Lord, the others being the Festival of Unleavened Bread and the Festival of Tabernacles (Dt. 16:16). This accounts for the fact that “*there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven*” (v. 5).
- vv. 2-3 Although the air did not move, the disciples heard the sound of a hurricane, a “violent wind” which “filled the whole house,” signifying the powerful presence of God in their midst (see Ps. 18:10; 50:3; 78:26; 104:3; Isa. 29:6; also Jn. 3:8). They also saw “*tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them,*” fire being another sign of God’s presence (Ex. 3:2; 13:21; 19:18; 24:17; Dt. 4:24; 2 Chron. 7:1; Isa. 30:27, 30; 66:15; 2 Thess. 1:7).
- v. 4 The filling of the Spirit enabled the disciples to “speak in other tongues”, so that those “from every nation under heaven” heard the “wonders of God” (v. 11) being proclaimed in their own language (vv. 5-6). This is what was prophesied by John the Baptist (Lk. 3:16), and also by the prophet Joel (Joel 2:28-32; see Acts 2:16-21).
- We should not make an absolute distinction between the terms “filling” and “baptism”. In Acts 11:15-17, this experience of being “filled” with the Holy Spirit is cited as a fulfillment of John’s prophecy of being “baptized” with the Spirit. And in the case of Paul, the term “filled” is used of both his initial conversion experience and of his subsequent enablement for ministry (Acts 9:17; 13:9). If there is a distinction to be made, it would be that “baptism” in the Spirit emphasizes the initial, one-time experience of transformation in which the Holy Spirit comes to indwell each believer (see Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 2:12; 6:19; 12:13; Gal. 3:27; Jas. 4:5), while “filling” usually refers to episodic or ongoing experiences of the Spirit, in which the believer is empowered for witness or ministry (Acts 4:8, 31, 52; 7:54-56; Rom. 15:13; Eph. 5:18).
- vv. 5-8 In addition to those pious (“God-fearing”) Jews who had journeyed to Jerusalem for Passover and the Feast of Weeks, there may have been some from other nations who had permanently settled there. But all of them heard God being praised in their own “native language”; i.e., in the local dialect of their country of origin, rather than in the *lingua franca* of Greek or Aramaic. Thus, from the very beginning, God’s intention to bring together into the church those from “*every nation, tribe, people and language*” (Rev. 7:9; see Mt. 28:19; Gal. 3:8) is demonstrated.
- vv. 9-11 This list of nations is not meant to be exhaustive, but representative, with countries included from all points of the compass (Jerusalem being at the center). In addition, the list includes countries both near and far. Thus, these nations represent the scope of the gospel message: it is for people everywhere in the world, including those who are near and those who are far off, both geographically and spiritually (Acts 2:39; see Isa. 57:19; Eph. 2:13, 17). Note, however, that at this point those in view are ethnic Jews and Gentile “converts to Judaism”. The extension of the gospel to non-Jews does not take place until Saul is commissioned by Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19; see v. 15). This is reaffirmed to Peter prior to his meeting with Cornelius (Acts 10:1-48; see vv. 15, 34-35).
- vv. 12-13 Even though they have witnessed an indisputable miracle, many are not convinced. Instead, they devise a naturalistic explanation (“They have had too much wine”), even though it is clearly false; inebriation has never given anyone the power to speak in other languages. And it is the same in every age; some will not believe, regardless of the evidence (see Lk. 16:31; Num. 14:11); instead, they will grasp at any remotely plausible explanation that excludes God. The issue is not lack of evidence; it is spiritual blindness and hardness of heart (Rom. 1:18-20; 2 Cor. 4:4).
- vv. 14-16 Again, as in 1:15-22, it is Peter who takes the lead. Here he addresses, not only the disciples, but the multitudes who are asking the question, “What does this mean?” (v. 12). Peter rejects the suggestion that the disciples are drunk (it is too early in the day for that!) and instead identifies this phenomenon of speaking in tongues as the fulfillment of a prophecy, i.e. Joel 2:28-32. His sermon, delivered as it was on the spur of the moment, and without time for reflection and composition, suggests the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise that the apostles would be given “words and wisdom” on an impromptu basis as circumstances required (Lk. 21:13-15; see Mt. 10:18-20; Lk. 12:11-12).

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- vv. 17-18 From Joel's prophecy we see, first, that we are now in the "last days". In other words, the last days are not just a brief period immediately prior to the return of Christ; rather, they encompass the entirety of the church age, from the day of Pentecost until the day that we are "caught up" to "meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thess 4:17). See 2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:2; Jam. 5:3; 2 Pet. 3:3. Some have suggested that the last days began as early as the birth of Christ.
- Second, we see that the Spirit, who in the Old Testament was given only to select individuals such as religious leaders and prophets, is now given to "all people," including both the young and the old, and both males and females. In fact, all of those who are truly God's servants receive this gift, regardless of age, gender, occupation, or social standing. The dramatic difference between the limited grants of the Spirit in the Old Testament and the unlimited bestowal of the Spirit in the present age is emphasized by the term "pour out": the Spirit will flow abundantly and indiscriminately, to all who are servants of God (see Isa. 32:15; 44:3).
- And third, we see that the works of the Spirit will include such phenomena as prophecy, visions, and dreams. Not all persons will manifest each of these (see 1 Cor. 12:29-30), but every disciple of Christ possesses the Spirit, and "to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good." (1 Cor. 12:7; see 1 Cor. 12:4-11; Gal. 3:26-29).
- Note that Peter's citation of Joel is not a word-for-word quotation, but an interpretive paraphrase; some wording is modified and rearranged for emphasis. This is not unusual for New Testament authors.
- vv. 19-21 The coming "great and glorious day of the Lord," also referred to as the day of Christ (Phil 1:10; 2:16; 1 Cor. 1:8, 2 Cor. 1:14) is the day of final judgment, the day on which Christ will judge all people (Acts 10:42; 17:31; Rom. 2:16; 2 Tim. 4:1; 1 Pet. 4:5). The tongues just witnessed are one of many signs which indicate that this day is coming. These harbingers of judgment include not only "signs on the earth below", but also "wonders in the heavens above". The first category would include the miracles performed by Christ and the apostles, and also signs performed by believers during the church age. The latter category points to disruptions in the earth, sky and heavens as the day grows closer, such as earthquakes and extreme weather events (see Mt. 24:27-30; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 6:12-14; 8:5; 16:18; also Isa. 34:4). However, in the midst of judgment there is mercy: "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved".
- vv. 22-24 In these verses, we see both the responsibility of man and the sovereignty of God, with no contradiction implied between the two. Those to whom Peter was speaking were personally, and corporately, guilty for the sin of putting Christ to death. Although they were assisted by the Romans, it was they who ultimately "put him to death by nailing him to the cross". Nor could they claim ignorance, because Jesus was clearly "accredited by God" by the "miracles, wonders and signs" which had been done among them. However, in doing so they were not thwarting God's purposes, but actually carrying them out; this was all accomplished according to "God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge" (see Acts 4:27-28; also Lk. 22:22, 37; 24:25-27, 46; Acts 3:18; 17:2-3; 26:22-23; 13:27-28). And if there were any question as to who is in control, God's sovereign power was decisively demonstrated when he "raised him from the dead" (see Acts 17:30-31; Rom. 1:4; Col. 2:15).
- vv. 25-28 The Psalm which Peter cites (16:8-10) has a dual sense: it expresses David's own hope of resurrection and eternal life, and also foreshadows the confidence that Christ would have as he faced the cross. Both of them knew that death was not the end: they would not be abandoned to the "realm of the dead", but in the end, would be filled with joy in the presence of God.
- vv. 29-31 The fact that David "died and was buried" tells us conclusively that only through resurrection could his hope and confidence of eternal life be fulfilled. As a prophet, he was looking forward to the "resurrection of the Messiah"; that is, Jesus Christ, who is "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20; see 1 Cor. 6:14). Christ is the hope of resurrection for the faithful of every era, including both Old and New Testament believers. Christ was also the fulfillment of God's promise to David that he would give him a kingdom that would "endure forever" (2 Sam. 7:16; see Ps. 89:3-4, 35-37; Isa. 9:6-7; Dan. 2:44; Lk. 1:32-33).
- vv. 34-35 The fact that "David did not ascend to heaven" requires that we understand Psalm 110 as looking forward to the Messiah, whom David refers to as "my Lord," even though he is one of David's descendants (Mt. 22:41-46; Mk. 12:35-40; Lk. 20:41-44). The promise here is from God the Father to God the Son: that every opposing power would be destroyed, and that Christ would reign "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come." (Eph. 1:21; see 1 Cor. 15:24; Phl. 2:9-10; Heb. 10:12-14).

# Unit 3 – What Shall We Do?

## Acts 2:37-3:10

### Text

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<sup>37</sup> When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

<sup>38</sup> Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup> The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

<sup>40</sup> With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” <sup>41</sup> Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

<sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. <sup>43</sup> Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All the believers were together and had everything in common. <sup>45</sup> They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. <sup>46</sup> Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

<sup>1</sup> One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. <sup>2</sup> Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. <sup>3</sup> When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. <sup>4</sup> Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!” <sup>5</sup> So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.

<sup>6</sup> Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” <sup>7</sup> Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. <sup>8</sup> He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. <sup>9</sup> When all the people saw him walking and praising God, <sup>10</sup> they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

### Open

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- What is your favorite holiday? Why?

### Discover

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1. How did those who came to faith begin to form a new community? What was the purpose of each of these activities? (see vv. 42-47)

Activity	Purpose

2. **Group Discussion:** Is it still necessary for the church to be doing all of these things? Why or why not?

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3. What was it that brought thousands of people to faith on the day of Pentecost? (v. 41) What was it that caused more to be added on a daily basis? (v. 47)

4. What does this imply for our evangelistic efforts today?

5. What "promise" was Peter offering? (v. 39) Who is this promise intended for? (see Gal. 3:14)

6. What does this imply for our evangelistic efforts today?

7. What was the condition of the man at the temple gate prior to his encounter with Peter? What was his condition afterward?

<b>Before</b>	<b>After</b>

8. What accounts for this change? What contribution did the man make to his transformation?

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## Apply

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How do you think the apostles managed to persuade the new believers to participate in the activities described in vv. 42-47?

How does the gift that the lame man received compare to what he asked for? What are you asking God for?

# Commentary

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- v. 37 There is a time in every believer's faith journey when the scales fall from their eyes (Acts 9:18) and their spiritual blindness is removed by God. The truths of the gospel, which formerly seemed confusing, contradictory, or nonsensical, now become not only clear, but clearly true. For some, this change is gradual, proceeding in phases (Mark 8:22-25), while for others, such as those on the day of Pentecost, it is more sudden. This change is not merely the result of a human process of education or persuasion, although God can and does use those means. Nor is it merely an incremental improvement in one's spiritual understanding. Rather, it is a supernatural work by which the Holy Spirit gives sight to those who utterly lacked that capacity. And we were all at one time among that number (see 1 Cor. 1:18; 2:14; Eph. 2:3; Tit. 3:3). The Scriptures speak of this blindness as coming from the "god of this age", who "has blinded the minds of unbelievers" (2 Cor. 4:4). However, God is also identified as its source (Jn. 12:37-41), since Satan can do only what God permits (see Job 1:12; 2:6).
- v. 38 Having come to the realization that they had grievously erred, those who heard Peter's preaching ask, "Brothers, what shall we do?". His response is that, first, they must "repent": they must make a fundamental change in their thinking, heart attitudes, and conduct, forsaking the path they had been on, and heading in a new direction. Note that although repentance is something they are commanded to do, it is also a gift of God, something that he must enable them to do (Acts 3:26; 5:31; 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:25).  
Then, as a sign of their repentance, and as a testimony to their faith in Christ, they are to be baptized. As other passages make clear, it is not physical baptism *per se* which results in forgiveness of sins, but the repentance and faith which baptism represents (see Acts 3:19-20; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38-39; 1 Pet. 3:21).
- v. 39 The "promise" which Peter speaks of here is not only the gift of the Holy Spirit, but all that the Spirit represents; i.e., the fulfillment of God's promises of blessing to Abraham and to his "seed" (Gal. 3:14). It is possible that in the specific historical context of this sermon, the "far off" people in view are the Jewish diaspora; i.e. Jews scattered throughout the earth, far from Jerusalem and Israel. However, the phrase "for all whom the Lord our God will call" appears to broaden the scope beyond ethnic Jews. In any case, we know from other Scriptures that the promises of God are for those from every people group who place their trust in Christ, because all who share Abraham's faith are his spiritual children and heirs (Gal. 3:16, 26-29; see Rom. 4:16; 9:8; Gal. 3:7-9).
- v. 40 **"Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."** The point here is not that the people of the mid- first century were uniquely wicked. It is that in order to be saved, we must, in every age, separate ourselves from the beliefs, desires, and practices which prevail in this world, which is "under the control of the evil one" (1 Jn. 5:19; see Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 6:14-17; Eph. 4:17-24; 1 Jn. 2:15; Jam. 4:4).
- v. 42 This list of practices—teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer—is not intended to describe the elements of a church service, although any or all of them could take place in the context of corporate worship. Rather, these are activities which characterized the members of this new faith community. In other words, those who had been baptized in the name of Christ for the forgiveness of sins (v. 38) did not simply become more pious or observant Jews. From the beginning, their way of life set them apart as members of a distinct group.  
First, they "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching". This took place daily, "in the temple courts and from house to house" (Acts 5:42; see Acts 3:1; 3:11-4:2; 5:18-21, 25). Note that these new converts were "devoted" to preaching; cherishing it as the very words of God, rather than merely the words of men (see 1 Thess. 2:13). They did not attend to it merely out of a sense of duty or obligation, as many do today.  
Second, they enjoyed "fellowship". This term includes spending time with others who share one's experience of faith and one's identity in Christ, for the purpose of mutual encouragement and support (1 Thess. 5:11; Heb. 3:13; 10:24-25). It also includes the practical implications of this spiritual relationship, such as meeting one another's physical needs (see vv. 44-45; also Acts 4:32-35; 6:1-2).  
Third, they shared in the "breaking of bread". Later in the history of the church, this phrase came to be used as a technical term for the Lord's Supper, but here, it is likely that it simply describes the practice of believers coming together to share a communal meal (see v. 46).  
And fourth, they prayed—not merely individually, as an act of personal devotion, but together, as an act of shared worship (see 4:23-31).
- v. 43 The "wonders and signs" performed by the apostles and others, including Stephen and Philip, were confirmation that the "last days" had begun, as prophesied by Joel (Acts 2:17-19; see Acts 5:12; 6:8; 8:6, 13; 14:3; 15:12; 19:11).

- vv. 44-45 These verses describe the radical sense of community which prevailed among the early Jerusalem believers. First, they “were together”. This does not mean that they actually lived together in shared housing, or in a distinct settlement, such as the nineteenth-century Oneida or Shaker communities in the United States; they still maintained their separate homes (v. 46). But they gathered together frequently for worship, prayer, shared meals, and fellowship. In other words, they viewed their membership in the visible body of Christ as central to their identity, and not merely as another affinity group.
- Second, they “had everything in common”, converting “property and possessions” into funds that were used to meet the material needs of other believers. This does not mean that they sold literally everything they owned; otherwise, they would have had no homes in which to break bread together (v. 46; see 12:12; 16:40; 18:26; 21:8). But they considered their possessions to be a stewardship; something that God had entrusted to them not only for their own benefit, but for the benefit of the community. Thus, “from time to time” the owners of real estate and other goods sold them, and distributed the proceeds to the poor (Acts 4:32-35). The purpose was to ensure that the poor were not lacking in the basic necessities of life, with the result that “there were no needy persons among them” (4:34). Paul later expands on this idea, making economic parity among believers, at least to the extent needed to eliminate their poverty, an explicit goal (2 Cor. 8:13-15).
- This did not constitute a rejection of private property *per se*; they did not immediately dispose of everything they owned, as Jesus had called on the rich young ruler to do (Lk. 18:18-25). Nor does it imply that the poor had a right to demand or confiscate the goods of the rich; the redistribution of wealth was to be entirely voluntary (see 5:4; also 2 Cor. 8:8; 9:6-15).
- vv. 46-47 The fellowship of the early believers was not intermittent or occasional, but frequent: they met together “every day”. They gathered together in large group meetings in the temple courts, as well as in smaller gatherings in private homes. Note that the meetings in the temple courts would have been public (see Acts 5:12-21). Thus, their joyous worship of God, and the preaching of Christ by the apostles, would have been open and visible to all—not only to the committed believers, but also to interested observers and curious onlookers. This public witness was undoubtedly one of the reasons that “*the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved*”.
- v. 1 This passage recounts a physical healing which took place at the entrance to the temple courts. As Christ healed the lame during his earthly ministry (Mt. 11:5; 15:30-31; 21:14; Lk. 7:22), the Spirit of Christ now performs the same work through Peter.
- Peter and John were visiting the temple “at the time of prayer,” most likely to participate in those prayers, which accompanied the daily sacrifices. At this early stage, the disciples had not yet separated themselves from the religious practices of the Old Covenant; their understanding of the implications of Jesus’ definitive and final sacrifice (see Heb. 9:26-10:14) was not yet fully developed.
- vv. 2-3 The magnitude of this miracle is highlighted by two facts. First, the beggar had been “lame from birth” and was now over forty years old (4:22). Thus, the change in his physical condition could not be explained away as an unexpectedly quick recovery from illness or injury. Second, this was not a minor affliction, but a complete disability. He could not walk at all, but had to be carried to the temple. And so the change was from a state of utter inability to one of full ability; as a result of his healing, he “jumped to his feet” and was “walking and jumping and praising God” (vv. 7-8).
- Note that what the beggar asked for, and what he actually received, were different. He asked for something relatively minor that would address a felt need: a few coins. But what he truly needed, and what he received, was a transformation.
- vv. 4-5 “**Peter looked straight at him**” This beggar was likely accustomed to being invisible—either completely ignored, or at most, acknowledged only by some coins hurriedly dropped into his lap. To be seen and directly addressed would have been unusual. But this is consistent with the way in which Jesus approached the outcasts of society; he touched lepers (Lk. 5:13); he conversed openly with a Samaritan woman (Jn. 4:9); he allowed a prostitute to anoint him with perfume (Lk. 7:36-39); and he shared meals with sinners and tax collectors (Mt. 9:10-11).
- vv. 6-8 Although Peter gave the command to walk, and provided assistance by taking him by the hand, the man still had to respond in faith by jumping to his feet and beginning to walk.
- vv. 9-10 “**they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened**” Even though they had witnessed an indisputable miracle, not everyone in the crowd came to faith; Acts 4:4 tells us only that “many” who saw what had happened, and who heard Peter’s message, believed.

# Unit 4 – The Name of Jesus

## Acts 3:11-4:22

### Text

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<sup>11</sup> While the man held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade. <sup>12</sup> When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? <sup>13</sup> The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. <sup>14</sup> You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. <sup>15</sup> You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. <sup>16</sup> By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.

<sup>17</sup> "Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. <sup>18</sup> But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. <sup>19</sup> Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, <sup>20</sup> and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. <sup>21</sup> Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. <sup>22</sup> For Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. <sup>23</sup> Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from their people.' <sup>a</sup>

<sup>24</sup> "Indeed, beginning with Samuel, all the prophets who have spoken have foretold these days. <sup>25</sup> And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.' <sup>b</sup> <sup>26</sup> When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways."

<sup>1</sup> The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people.

<sup>2</sup> They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. <sup>3</sup> They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. <sup>4</sup> But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.

<sup>5</sup> The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family. <sup>7</sup> They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

<sup>8</sup> Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! <sup>9</sup> If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, <sup>10</sup> then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. <sup>11</sup> Jesus is

"the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone." <sup>c</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

<sup>13</sup> When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. <sup>14</sup> But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. <sup>15</sup> So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. <sup>16</sup> "What are we going to do with these men?" they asked. "Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it. <sup>17</sup> But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name."

<sup>18</sup> Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. <sup>19</sup> But Peter and John replied, "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! <sup>20</sup> As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

<sup>21</sup> After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. <sup>22</sup> For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.

<sup>a</sup>23 Deut. 18:15,18,19 <sup>b</sup>25 Gen. 22:18; 26:4 <sup>c</sup>11 Psalm 118:22

### Open

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How do you make important decisions? Do you ask your friends? Read books? Pray? Consult experts?

# Discover

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1. In the text on the previous page, circle every instance of the word "name". Why is this such an important term? What does it tell us about God's plan of salvation?

2. It is common today to believe that there are many paths to God. In the space below, write down some of the ways in which people seek "salvation," whether that be eternal life, enlightenment, or some other kind of spiritual transcendence.

What does Acts 4:12 have to say about these? (see also Jn. 3:18; 14:6; 1 Tim. 2:5)

3. What crimes had Peter's hearers committed? (3:13-15) Was there any hope for them?

4. Peter indicates that they had acted in ignorance (3:17), and that their actions fulfilled God's purposes (3:18). Does this absolve them of guilt? Should it?

5. What command do the authorities give to Peter and John? How do they answer? (4:18-20)

6. Based on the events of this passage, would you consider Peter and John to be nice people? Why or why not?

# Apply

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- |                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Have you ever been told not to speak about Jesus? How did you respond?         | <input type="checkbox"/> What labels does our society place on those who claim that Jesus is the only way to God? Has the desire to avoid being viewed in this way ever influenced your willingness to talk about Jesus? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> If no one is telling you to stop talking about Jesus, what does that indicate? |                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |

# Commentary

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- v. 11 Solomon's Colonnade was a covered porch, constructed along the inside of the wall which surrounded the outer court of the Jewish temple, the Court of the Gentiles. This court was a place where both Jews and Gentiles were permitted to enter, and it was common for teachers to address their students here, and to engage in debates and dialogues (see Jn. 10:22-39).
- v. 12 Peter's question, "**Why does this surprise you?**" seems disingenuous. Miracles are highly unusual events; would we not expect those who witness them to be surprised? But if we serve a God who is omnipotent, who "*does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths*" (Ps. 135:6), then it should not shock us when He acts in unexpected ways. Recall that Jesus rebuked the Sadducees for denying the possibility of resurrection, telling them that "*You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God*" (Mt. 22:29).  
The second question, "**Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?**" is a useful correction to those who imagine that supernatural gifts, such as the gift of healing, are a divine endorsement of, or a reward for, one's character or doctrine. The human tendency is to idolize men and women who are gifted, whether in music, athletics, science, or leadership ability. But Peter redirects their gaze from the gifted one to the Giver (see Acts 14:8-18; 28:1-6; also 1 Cor. 1:10-14).
- vv. 13-15 Peter's words are direct and unequivocal. His hearers are guilty, and guilty not of any ordinary transgression, but of the ultimate crime of murdering the "Holy and Righteous One", the "author of life". Not only did they disown him, rejecting him as their Lord and Messiah, but they were actively complicit in his execution, having "handed him over to be killed" (see Jn. 19:1-16). However, in spite of their treachery, God fulfilled His purposes through Christ and raised him from the dead, a fact to which the apostles were witnesses (see Acts 2:22-24).  
In referring to "**The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers**", Peter links the resurrection of Christ, and the power now demonstrated in the healing of the blind man, to the promises which God made in ancient times to the patriarchs. All of those promises are now fulfilled in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20; Gal. 3:16). Likewise, the reference to Jesus as the "servant" of God is not merely an acknowledgement of his faithfulness, but is an explicit reference to the prophecy of the suffering servant in Isaiah 52:13-53:12, one who was "despised and rejected by mankind" (see Acts 8:32-35; Lk. 22:37).
- v. 16 Just as the Israelites, beginning with Abram, called upon the name of the Lord for blessing and deliverance (Gen. 12:8; Ps. 116:4, 13; Joel 2:32), in the present age people are to call on the name of Jesus, who is the Lord (Acts 2:21, 32-36; 4:12). This implicit linkage between Jesus and the One whose name was invoked in the Old Testament is a clear affirmation of his deity (see Rom. 10:9-13). Note that this is not a magical incantation; the name of Jesus is not a formula that can be used to manipulate supernatural powers (as the sons of Sceva learned, Acts 19:13-16). Rather, calling upon the name of Jesus is an act of faith by which we appeal to a personal savior to come to our aid.
- v. 17 Although the Jews "acted in ignorance", and although it was through their actions that God fulfilled his preordained purposes (v. 18), they were nevertheless guilty of sin (see v. 19; Mt. 26:24). Ignorance of God's holy requirements does not absolve one of guilt, although the penalty for willful disobedience may be different than for transgressions which result from a lack of knowledge (Lk. 12:47-48; see Lev. 5:17; Num. 15:27-31).
- vv. 19-20 Peter's appeal to the Jews identifies three results which would flow from their repentance and acknowledgement of Jesus as "Lord and Messiah" (Acts 2:36). First, that their sins would be "wiped out", i.e., that they would be entirely cleansed of guilt (Acts 2:38; Heb. 9:13-14, 26-28; see Isa. 43:25). Second, that "times of refreshing" would come. This may refer to the time between Christ's ascension and his return, during which the Holy Spirit continually renews and refreshes us (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 4:7-18; Col. 3:10). And third, that Jesus, their Messiah, would return. This seems to imply that Christ's Second Coming will not take place until there has been a general turning to faith on the part of ethnic Jews (see Rom. 11:1-32).
- v. 21 Elsewhere, the return of Christ is envisioned as a time of judgment, and of the destruction of the enemies of God (1 Cor. 15:20-26; Rev. 19:11-21; 20:11-15). Here, the focus is on the promise: the restoration of the created order to its intended purpose (Eph. 1:8-10; Col. 1:17-20). This was foretold "long ago through his holy prophets" (see Isa. 65:17-25; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1-22:5).
- vv. 22-23 The prophecy referred to here is taken from Dt. 18:15, 19 and Lev. 23:29 (see Acts 7:37). The ultimate prophet like Moses, the one whose words must be listened to and obeyed, lest one forfeit one's soul (Mt. 10:28; 16:26), is Jesus. Anyone who fails to do so will be "completely cut off," that is, utterly destroyed (see Heb. 2:2-3; 10:28-31; 12:25).

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- v. 24 In what sense did Samuel and “all the prophets” (see Lk. 24:27) speak of the present age? To understand this, we must realize that prophecy views the future “telescopically”: just as viewing a landscape through a telescope will compress the distance between near and far locations, events which are separated from one another by centuries or millennia may be spoken of together in the same prophecy. Also, prophecies can have multiple referents, with earlier, limited, fulfillments foreshadowing the complete and final fulfillment in Christ. Thus, when Samuel and Nathan spoke of the establishment of David’s kingdom (1 Sam. 15:28; 28:17; 2 Sam. 7:11-16), the prophecy looked ahead not only to Solomon, his immediate heir (1 Ki. 2:12, 24; 8:20, 25; 9:5), but also to Christ, the ultimate son of David (Mt. 1:1; Lk. 1:32; Rev. 22:16)
- vv. 25-26 The prophecies of the Old Testament, and God’s covenant with Abraham, were given to the Jews. When Christ began to minister, he went initially to the Jews (Mt. 10:5-6; 15:21-28; Rom. 15:8); likewise, after he had risen, the message of the gospel came first to the Jews on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Peter’s point is that, having this primacy, his Jewish audience should be all the more ready to accept Christ as their Messiah. But God’s plan was never limited to the Jews; rather, his intention has always been that “all peoples on earth will be blessed” through them (see Gen. 12:3; 22:18). And so now in Christ, the distinction between Jew and Gentile has been eliminated, and salvation is offered to all on the basis of faith (see Rom. 1:16; 3:22, 29; 10:12; Gal. 3:7-9; Eph. 3:1-6).
- vv. 1-3 The Jewish religious officials are thrown into confusion. They thought the problem of Jesus had been dealt with when he was crucified and his followers scattered, but now the multitudes are turning to him again. The searing accusations of 3:13-15, although directed to the crowd, were surely heard by those who played the leading part in orchestrating his death. They now likely feared becoming victims of the same mob which they had incited against Jesus.
- vv. 5-7 Peter and John are brought before the “rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law”, that is, the Sanhedrin. This was the same body that tried Jesus, and condemned him to death on false charges of blasphemy (Mt. 26:57-66; 27:1-2; Mk. 14:53-64; Lk. 22:66-71; Jn. 18:12-14; 19-23). It was likely now their intention to do the same with the apostles; the question they asked of them, “By what power or what name did you do this?” is very similar to the question they asked of Jesus prior to his arrest (Luke 20:2).
- vv. 8-12 As Jesus promised (Lk. 12:11-12; 21:14-15), Peter is enabled by the Holy Spirit to speak powerfully in his own defense, and in defense of the gospel. Despite being thrust into a highly stressful situation, he does not evade the question or seek to appease his accusers, but answers clearly and forcefully. Compare this to his conduct on the night of Christ’s arrest (Lk. 22:54-62). Something has changed!
- v. 11 The “rulers and elders of the people” (v. 8) sought to put Peter and John on trial, but in reality it is they who are being judged. For they, the supposed “builders” of Israel, have rejected Jesus, the one whom God made the “cornerstone” of the entire building. The text Peter cites is Psalm 118:22, which was also cited by Jesus in the parable of the vineyard (Mt. 21:42; Mk. 12:10; Lk. 20:17). In its New Testament context, the building of which Christ is the cornerstone is the church, the people of God (Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:4-10).
- v. 12 Jesus is not just a better way; he is the only way (Jn. 14:6). A large number of people are willing to regard Christ as one of many great prophets or teachers. But to claim that He alone is Lord and Savior, and that there is no other way to heaven, is to assert that all other gods are false gods, and that all other paths lead to destruction. This exclusive claim is the offense of the gospel. Tragically, many professing Christians seek to downplay, or even to deny this truth. But to do so is to deny the gospel, for “there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved”.
- vv. 13-17 The evidence is irrefutable; the leaders “could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say.” But they reject the evidence of their own eyes and refuse to believe. Note that their discussion does not even touch on the question of whether Peter’s message is true; their only concern is how to keep it from spreading. Their prejudice and the desire to protect their own power and privilege will not allow them to accept the truth, or even to consider it. We should remember this when the statements of leaders and authority figures seem to conflict with the Word of God.
- vv. 18-22 When we are told not to “speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus,” may our response be the same as Peter and John’s: “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? . . . . As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” Doing this in a way that is faithful, that is respectful of people and institutions, and that is appropriate to the context requires discernment and courage. But silence is not an option.

# Unit 5 – God’s Power and Will

## Acts 4:23-5:16

### Text

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<sup>23</sup> On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. <sup>24</sup> When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. <sup>25</sup> You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

“Why do the nations rage  
and the peoples plot in vain?

<sup>26</sup> The kings of the earth rise up  
and the rulers band together  
against the Lord

and against his anointed one.<sup>a b</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. <sup>28</sup> They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. <sup>29</sup> Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. <sup>30</sup> Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

<sup>31</sup> After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

<sup>32</sup> All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. <sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all <sup>34</sup> that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales <sup>35</sup> and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”), <sup>37</sup> sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.

<sup>1</sup> Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property.

<sup>2</sup> With his wife’s full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles’ feet.

<sup>3</sup> Then Peter said, “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? <sup>4</sup> Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God.”

<sup>5</sup> When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. <sup>6</sup> Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

<sup>7</sup> About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. <sup>8</sup> Peter asked her, “Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?”

“Yes,” she said, “that is the price.”

<sup>9</sup> Peter said to her, “How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.”

<sup>10</sup> At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. <sup>11</sup> Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

<sup>12</sup> The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon’s Colonnade. <sup>13</sup> No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. <sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. <sup>15</sup> As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter’s shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. <sup>16</sup> Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed.

<sup>a</sup>26 That is, Messiah or Christ <sup>b</sup>26 Psalm 2:1,2

### Open

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Would you say that it is important to always tell the truth in your personal relationships? Why or why not?

# Discover

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1. Verse 23 tells us that when Peter and John were released, they “went back to their own people”. Who were “their own people”? (see Mt. 12:46-50; Mt. 10:37)

2. The “rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law” (4:5) had Peter and John imprisoned, questioned them, and decided whether they would be released. It would seem, then, that these people were firmly in control of events. Is that the case? Why or why not? (vv. 24-28; see Ps. 2:1-2; Acts 2:23-26).

In the space below, paraphrase (i.e., restate in your own words) the message of Psalm 37:1-13.

3. In verse 29, the disciples prayed that God would enable them “to speak your word with great boldness”. Do we need to ask the same thing for ourselves? Why or why not?

4. Verses 32-35 describe the financial help that the believers provided to one another. Why did they do this? Does this example have any relevance to us today? (see Lk. 3:11; 2 Cor. 9:6-7; James 2:15-16; 1 Jn. 3:17-18)

What would following this example look like in practice, for you personally?

5. What motivated Ananias and Sapphira to do what they did? Why was this so serious an offense?

# Apply

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- |                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Who do you consider to be “your people”?                                                                                                                                | <input type="checkbox"/> Is the sin of Ananias and Sapphira something that the church needs to guard against today? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Are there any situations in your own life, past or present, in which unrighteous people seem to be in control of events? What does this passage have to say about that? | <input type="checkbox"/> Is it something that you need to guard against in your own heart?                          |

# Commentary

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vv. 23-24 Having been released, Peter and John now return to “**their own people**,” that is, to the other apostles, and to the wider group of believers who would be concerned about their welfare. Clearly the Jewish leaders and those who are aligned with them can no longer be considered “their own people”, since they have rejected Christ and are actively opposing the preaching of the gospel (4:17-18). Here we see that, from the very beginning of the church, our spiritual union with other believers creates a community that transcends ethnic identity, one which supersedes our previous religious heritage and even our closest family relationships (see Gal. 3:28; Mt. 12:46-50; Mk. 3:31-35; Lk. 8:19-21; Mt. 10:37; Lk. 14:26).

What was the purpose of their report? Beyond letting their friends know of their welfare, it was to affirm God’s power to confound his enemies and accomplish his purposes, despite the opposition of powerful men. Thus we see the response of the believers, addressing God as “**Sovereign Lord**”, and as the one who “**made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them**,” including mankind and every authority, both earthly and supernatural (see Ps. 146:6; Acts 14:15; 17:24; Isa. 45:12; Col. 1:16). The one who made all things also has the power to govern and direct all things. His rule is not stymied, nor even hindered, by the malicious actions of wicked men and demonic powers. The Lord is not frightened or dismayed by their actions; on the contrary, he laughs at them, knowing that their defeat is certain (Ps. 2:1-4; 37:1-13).

Note that the prayer of praise and worship was communal; they “raised their voices together in prayer” to God. The suffering of Peter and John was the suffering of all, and the joy in their deliverance was likewise shared by all (see 1 Cor. 12:25-27).

vv. 25-27 The text quoted is Ps. 2:1-2, in which the Psalmist describes the futility and danger of rebelling against the Messiah, the one whom God has appointed ruler over all the nations. In this context, the “kings of the earth” and the “rulers” who have conspired together to oppose the preaching of Christ are the Roman government and the Jewish leaders (v. 27). These political and religious authorities appear to possess absolute power and authority; nevertheless, their defiance of the Lord will lead to their ruin, for as the Lord tells his Son (Ps. 2:9),

*“You will break them with a rod of iron;  
you will dash them to pieces like  
pottery.”*

In contrast, those who trust in Christ will be vindicated by the power of God, who rules over all. As Psalm 2 concludes (Ps. 2:11), “*Blessed are all who take refuge in him.*”

v. 28 “**They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.**”

Not only can the enemies of the gospel not ultimately prevail, but even in their rebellion, they are unknowingly carrying out God’s plan. In other words, not only are they doomed to fail, but every action they take with the intention of thwarting God’s purposes actually has the effect of advancing them (see Acts 1:16-20; 2:23-26; 3:13-15). This knowledge should be an encouragement to Christians in the modern era who witness apparent setbacks in the cause of Christ. Ungodly court decisions and wicked, deceitful government officials cannot prevent the fulfillment of God’s purposes. On the contrary, God will use them to bring about the end result that he intends.

vv. 29-31 It is instructive that the believers do not pray for the opposition of wicked and powerful men to cease. They accept this as the expected result of the preaching of the gospel, as those who do not want their sin exposed will always seek to suppress the truth (Rom. 1:18). Rather, they pray for boldness for themselves, and for more opportunities to proclaim the word of God, in spite of the slander, threats, and persecution that will surely come (Jn. 15:20; 2 Tim. 3:12). Their request was immediately granted, as “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly”. (v. 31, see v. 33).

vv. 32-35 As in 2:44-45, we see that the strong sense of community which has arisen among these new believers is producing an attitude of radical selflessness, resulting in a sharing of physical resources so profound that it actually eliminated poverty among them (v. 34), at least for a time (see Acts 24:17; Rom. 15:26). On the one hand, note that this sharing was entirely voluntary, and so cannot be used as an argument for forced income redistribution (see 2 Cor. 9:7). Nor did they sell everything they owned; for example, they continued to own their own homes (Acts 2:46; 12:12). On the other hand, their example cannot be dismissed as being limited only to that specific time and place, for the poor are always with us, and the Scriptures indicate that we have an obligation to help them (see Dt. 15:11; Mk. 14:7; 2 Cor. 9:6-15). The key point is that their generosity was motivated by love and a sense of Christian unity, empowered by the Holy Spirit, for they were “*one in heart and mind*”, and “*God’s grace was . . . powerfully at work in them all*”.

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- vv. 36-37 Here the actions of one Joseph, who was called Barnabas, are presented as an example of the generosity which was characteristic of the Jerusalem believers. The choice to highlight Joseph's actions is a bit of literary foreshadowing; his role as an early supporter and longtime ministry companion of Paul, and as a key figure in the extension of the gospel to the Gentiles, will be related later in the book (Acts 9:26-28; 11:19-24; 13:1-3). This incident is one of the reasons that he was considered "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith" (Acts 11:24).
- Note that in this passage, in which Barnabas is identified as the "son of encouragement", it is not his uplifting words, but his practical actions, which are recounted. Sometimes encouragement requires more than words, and providing basic necessities like food, clothing, and medical care communicates more eloquently than even theologically accurate speeches (Jam. 2:15-16; 1 Jn. 3:17-18).
- vv. 1-11 Wherever true piety is recognized and honored, those who desire the applause of men will attempt to counterfeit it (see Mt. 6:1-16; 23:23-33). But their self-serving actions, motivated by pride rather than love, will receive God's condemnation and judgment, rather than his approval and favor. They do not lead to unity, but rather to spiritual one-upmanship and conflict, to "jealousy and quarreling" (1 Cor. 3:3).
- v. 1 Note the apparent similarity between the actions of Ananias and Sapphira and those of Barnabas. Both of them sold property, and both of them brought proceeds from the sale and "put it at the apostles' feet". In terms of their external, observable actions, Ananias and Sapphira mimicked exactly what Barnabas had done. Yet Barnabas' gift was received, and theirs was rejected. Why? Was it because they failed to turn over to the church all the proceeds of the sale? No. It was because they conspired together to deceive the people of God and their leaders, as vv. 3-4 make clear. Deception in the body of Christ undermines trust and unity, and is a grievous sin against God. Thus, the note that Ananias did this "together with his wife" and "with his wife's full knowledge". Both of them were complicit in the scheme to obtain honor under false pretenses, and both of them paid the price for their sin.
- v. 3 Ananias' actions were prompted by Satan, the enemy of the church, but Ananias was nevertheless responsible and culpable for his choices. He did not resist Satan (Jam. 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:8-9), but instead yielded to him and allowed him to fill his heart with evil intention, which resulted in evil deeds.
- v. 4 Ananias was under no obligation to sell the land, or to deliver the entire proceeds to the church once it was sold. Yet he falsely claimed to have given all he received from the sale, because he sought the praise of men, a desire which cannot coexist with seeking the praise of God (Jn. 5:44; 12:43; Rom. 2:29; Gal. 1:10).
- Although Ananias and Sapphira lied to the apostles and to the members of the church, their sin was ultimately against God. The fact that lying to the Holy Spirit constitutes lying to God (v. 4) is clear testimony to the Spirit's deity.
- v. 5 The suddenness and severity of the judgment against Ananias does not tell us that his sin was more egregious than other sins, whose consequences are not immediately fatal. Rather, it is an indication that the holiness and integrity of the church is of the greatest concern to God, and that violations of its purity will have severe (even if delayed) consequences. And so the "fear" which "seized all who heard what had happened" was not an unfortunate byproduct, but an intended consequence, of this judgment, in order that any who might seek to pervert religion for their own selfish ends (1 Tim. 6:3-6) would be warned against doing so.
- vv. 7-9 Sapphira was not the primary actor in this scheme. She was not the one who sold the land, or brought the proceeds to the church. However, she did conspire together with Ananias to misrepresent what had taken place, and so her guilt was equally serious, and likewise constituted a "test" of the Holy Spirit. She provoked the Spirit by an overt act of rebellion, in effect shaking her fist in God's face and daring him to respond (see Ex. 17:2, 7; Num. 14:22; Deut. 6:16; Ps. 78:18; Mt. 4:7; Lk. 4:12; Acts 15:10).
- vv. 12-16 We are not told what "signs and wonders" were performed by the apostles, but works of healing were prominent among them (vv. 15-16; see 2:43; 4:16, 22, 30). As a result, many more "believed in the Lord"; that is, they believed the good news which was being preached by the apostles, and which was authenticated by the miracles they performed.
- The statement that "No one else dared join them" seems to contradict the statement that "more and more men and women . . . were added to their number". This could mean that, although they believed, they were reluctant to join the public meetings in Solomon's Colonnade, due to fear of official persecution. Or, it could mean that the people were reluctant to come near to the apostles themselves, as they witnessed the awesome power of God working through them.

# Unit 6 – We Must Obey God

## Acts 5:17-6:14

### Text

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<sup>17</sup> Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. <sup>18</sup> They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. <sup>19</sup> But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. <sup>20</sup> “Go, stand in the temple courts,” he said, “and tell the people all about this new life.” <sup>21</sup> At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people.

When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin—the full assembly of the elders of Israel—and sent to the jail for the apostles. <sup>22</sup> But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, <sup>23</sup> “We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside.” <sup>24</sup> On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were at a loss, wondering what this might lead to.

<sup>25</sup> Then someone came and said, “Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people.” <sup>26</sup> At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them.

<sup>27</sup> The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. <sup>28</sup> “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.”

<sup>29</sup> Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings! <sup>30</sup> The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. <sup>31</sup> God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. <sup>32</sup> We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

<sup>33</sup> When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. <sup>34</sup> But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. <sup>35</sup> Then he addressed the Sanhedrin: “Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. <sup>36</sup> Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. <sup>37</sup> After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. <sup>38</sup> Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or

activity is of human origin, it will fail. <sup>39</sup> But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.” <sup>40</sup> His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

<sup>41</sup> The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. <sup>42</sup> Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

<sup>1</sup> In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews<sup>a</sup> among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. <sup>2</sup> So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. <sup>3</sup> Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them <sup>4</sup> and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

<sup>5</sup> This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. <sup>6</sup> They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

<sup>7</sup> So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

<sup>8</sup> Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. <sup>10</sup> But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

<sup>11</sup> Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.” <sup>12</sup> So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. <sup>13</sup> They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. <sup>14</sup> For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”

<sup>a</sup> 6:1 That is, Jews who had adopted the Greek language and culture

# Open

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- How would you define courage? Can you give an example?

# Discover

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1. What motivated the religious leaders? (vv. 17, 26, 28; see Lk. 11:43; 20:46; Jn. 5:44) How do their actions compare to the response of John the Baptist when his disciples left him to follow Jesus? (Jn. 3:27-30)

2. Does the response of the apostles to the religious leaders contradict the later teaching of Peter and Paul? (v. 29; see 1 Pet. 2:13-17; Rom. 13:1-7) Why or why not?

3. Do you agree with Gamaliel's argument (vv. 34-39)? Why or why not?

4. How do the apostles react to being whipped (vv. 40-42)? What enables them to do this?

5. Describe the conflict in 6:1-6. What was the cause? What was the resolution? What character qualities did the apostles' response demonstrate?

6. What does the example of Stephen tell us about opposition to the gospel, and how we should respond to it?

# Apply

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- What would you think if a pastor or Christian leader responded with anger to those who started following someone else? Have you ever been in this situation, in either the role of leader or follower?

- Have you experienced any situations in which you were faced with the choice of obeying God or human beings? What was the result? If you had been in the apostles' place, what do you think you would have done?

# Commentary

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- vv. 17-18 In their own minds, perhaps the high priest and the Sadducees saw their actions as necessary for maintaining social order and defending their God-ordained authority. Perhaps they saw themselves as faithful shepherds, turning a group of misguided sheep away from a dangerous path. But in truth, they were motivated by the base human emotion of envy; they “*were filled with jealousy*” because, as the apostles continued to preach and perform miracles of healing, “*they were highly regarded by the people*” and “*more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number*” (5:13-14). More than anything, these leaders craved the respect and honor of men (see Mt. 23:6-7; Lk. 11:43; 20:46; Jn. 5:44), and they reacted harshly when this was threatened. Contrast this with the response of John the Baptist when told that his disciples were leaving to follow Jesus (Jn. 3:27-30).
- vv. 19-21 Note that God’s actions to subvert the decree of the Jewish leaders were accomplished secretly, out of sight of the people. This created ambiguity and uncertainty, allowing for varied responses of both faith and unbelief. In a similar way, while the death of Christ was public, both his birth and his resurrection were private and unseen by the multitudes.
- There are two other occasions in Acts when disciples were miraculously freed from jail (12:6-11; 16:25-30). However, there are also occasions when servants of Christ were killed (e.g., Stephen, 7:54-60; James, 12:1-2), or languished in prison for years (e.g., Paul, 24:27). God acts according to his own plans and purposes. Our trust, therefore, must be in his character and in his promises, rather than in our expectation of a specific outcome.
- The angel’s command to “*Go, stand in the temple courts . . . and tell the people all about this new life*” makes it clear that the disciples were correct in disregarding all commands to the contrary from the religious officials (v. 28), and also makes clear that they were to proclaim the good news about Jesus openly and without apology. Thus, it truly was a case of choosing to “obey God rather than human beings” (v. 29).
- vv. 21-26 The Sanhedrin and the officers of the temple guard are completely flummoxed; one imagines them gaping at one another in amazement and confusion. The scene is actually rather comic. How foolish they were to think that the gospel and its messengers could be contained in a prison made by human hands! When the news comes that the apostles whom they had imprisoned are now free and openly preaching “in the temple courts”, their humiliation is complete (see Ps. 44:7; 71:24; 109:28).
- vv. 27-28 If the religious leaders had any interest in understanding what was taking place; if they were open to the possibility that God was at work among them, they would ask the apostles how they managed to escape from a heavily guarded prison, an apparent miracle. But they did not; their only concern was the fact that the apostles had defied their edict not to preach the gospel, undermining their authority and reputation.
- v. 29 The apostles did not completely reject the authority of the religious leaders, even though they were opposing the gospel. Thus, the apostles allowed themselves to be arrested and imprisoned, and they cooperated with the various tribunals in which they were questioned. In fact, they obeyed the authorities in every regard, except when doing so would have contradicted the command of God (see Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17). At that point, they were forced to choose, and as Peter boldly stated, they concluded that “We must obey God rather than human beings!” (see v. 20). Human authority is to be respected and obeyed, but it has limits.
- vv. 30-33 If the religious authorities were expecting a recantation or capitulation, they were sorely disappointed. How does Peter respond to the accusation that they had “*filled Jerusalem with your teaching*”, and were “*determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood*” (v. 28)? By doing exactly what he was accused of; that is, by preaching the gospel to the Sanhedrin, and by stating that they bore personal responsibility for the death of Jesus. But this was not a mere gesture of defiance; it was an act of grace and an offer of salvation, since even those who were guilty of putting Christ to death could be forgiven if they would repent (see Acts 2:23, 36-40). The response, however, was not one of repentance, but of murderous rage (v. 33).
- The reference to the means of Jesus’ execution, a “cross” (Gr. *xylon*, translated “pole” in Gal. 3:13), would bring to mind the law of Deut. 21:23, that “anyone who is hung on a pole” (i.e., as a result or means of execution) “is under God’s curse”. And indeed, this was true of Jesus: as Paul writes in Gal. 3:13. “*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us*”. The forgiveness offered in v. 31 is possible only because Jesus paid the price for our sin on the cross.
- vv. 34-37 At this critical juncture, Gamaliel, a respected Pharisee, intervenes to counsel calm and watchful observation rather than rash action. He does this by reminding the assembly of two incidents from recent history in which attempted revolts came to nothing, concluding that this movement also will come to nothing if it is not of God.

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vv. 38-40 We may be tempted, because the outcome of Gamaliel's intervention was the release of the apostles, to think that his words were wise and true. But in fact, his speech was a mixture of truth and error, popular piety and political calculation. Consider his statement that if the work of the apostles "**is of human origin, it will fail.**" Is this true? Yes, in the long run. We know that the rulers of this age and the wisdom of this age will eventually come to nothing (1 Cor. 2:6). When Christ returns, he will destroy "all dominion, authority and power" (1 Cor. 15:24); in the end, every knee will bow to Christ and every tongue acknowledge his lordship (Phil. 2:9-11). But in the meantime, many false religious movements will thrive and will deceive many (Mt. 24:5, 11, 24), some persisting for generations and even centuries. And so we cannot view the apparent temporal success of a religion, sect, or doctrine as evidence that it is of God. On the contrary, we must evaluate all things by the Word of God, and compare them against the teachings of Christ delivered by the apostles (Acts 17:11; Gal. 1:6-12).

But Gamaliel did not challenge the Sanhedrin to do this. And so, even though they were very familiar with the text of the Old Testament, they rejected the Savior of whom the Scriptures spoke, because they did not truly "know the Scriptures or the power of God" (Mt. 22:29; see Jn. 5:39-40; Acts 8:30-35; 17:2-3; 18:28).

As for the "wait and see" attitude which Gamaliel counseled, this may seem wise and prudent, but it is not a godly response to the preaching of the gospel. It does not please God if we passively defer judgment when we hear his word. On the contrary, we are called to action, to response, to faith and obedience. For "*I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.*" (2 Cor. 6:2; see Heb. 3:7; 4:7; Mt. 4:21-22). On the day of judgment, many will find that they waited too long to respond (see Lk. 14:15-24).

vv. 41-42 The actions of the disciples were unusual in two ways. First, they responded to being whipped, not by cursing their persecutors or complaining against God, but by rejoicing! They considered it a privilege to suffer in the name of Christ. We would do well to emulate their attitude and example (Mt. 5:11-12; 2 Cor. 12:9-10; Col. 1:24; Jam. 1:2; 1 Pet. 4:13, 16).

Second, they did not in any way curtail or conceal their activities; on the contrary, "**Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.**" Their zeal for the gospel trumped their natural desire for personal safety.

vv. 1-7 Luke has already documented the great generosity which prevailed among the believers in Jerusalem, with the result that "there were no needy persons among them" (Acts 4:34; see 2:44-45; 4:32-35). This sharing of resources would have been especially important for widows, who were subject to poverty without the support of their husbands. Concern for widows is found in both the Old and New Testaments (see Ex. 22:22; Jam. 1:27; 1 Tim. 5:1-16).

The conflict here concerned a dispute over the administration of charity: it was claimed that those distributing food to widows were showing favoritism, giving preference to Hebrew-speaking Jews, while providing little or nothing to Jewish believers who had come from a Hellenistic, or Greek-speaking, background. This was an explosive accusation. If true, not only did it contradict the explicit commands of the Old Testament (Deut. 10:17-18; 24:19-21; 26:12-13), calling into question the fitness of the apostles to lead, but it threatened to create a culturally tiered society within the church, contrary to the principle of equality in Christ (Gal. 3:28).

The response of the apostles showed wisdom and humility. They acknowledged the legitimate concerns of the people, delegated authority to others who were qualified for the task ("known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom"), and rededicated themselves to their primary responsibility: "prayer and the ministry of the word". Note that they did not themselves make the selection, but left it to "the whole group" (v. 5), ensuring that those who were appointed would have widespread support. However, they did endorse those who were chosen, and sought God's blessing on their work, by praying and laying hands on them.

vv. 8-14 Stephen's responsibilities in the task of food relief (v. 7) did not prevent him from exercising a broader ministry, which included performing "great wonders and signs" by the grace and power of God. He also disputed with opponents of the gospel, by the wisdom which the Spirit supplied. The eloquence of his speech was a fulfillment of Christ's promise (Lk. 12:11-12; 21:14-15), and his arguments were so powerful and convincing that no effective response was possible (v. 10). His opponents had to either concede, or resort to lies and slanderous attacks. They chose the latter, spreading falsehoods to turn the populace against him. We do not know specifically what Stephen was teaching. But we do know that it was maliciously twisted and misrepresented in order to support a false claim of blasphemy. As a result, he was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin.

# Unit 7 – Israel’s History of Unfaithfulness

## Acts 6:15-7:56

### Text

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<sup>15</sup> All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

<sup>1</sup> Then the high priest asked Stephen, “Are these charges true?”

<sup>2</sup> To this he replied: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran. <sup>3</sup> ‘Leave your country and your people,’ God said, ‘and go to the land I will show you.’<sup>a</sup>

<sup>4</sup> “So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. <sup>5</sup> He gave him no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. <sup>6</sup> God spoke to him in this way: ‘For four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated. <sup>7</sup> But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,’ God said, ‘and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.’<sup>b</sup> <sup>8</sup> Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.

<sup>9</sup> “Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him <sup>10</sup> and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.

<sup>11</sup> “Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our ancestors could not find food. <sup>12</sup> When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers on their first visit. <sup>13</sup> On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph’s family. <sup>14</sup> After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. <sup>15</sup> Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our ancestors died. <sup>16</sup> Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money.

<sup>17</sup> “As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt had greatly increased. <sup>18</sup> Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. <sup>c</sup> <sup>19</sup> He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our ancestors by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.

<sup>20</sup> “At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. <sup>d</sup> For three months he was cared for by his family. <sup>21</sup> When he was placed outside, Pharaoh’s daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. <sup>22</sup> Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.

<sup>23</sup> “When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his own people, the Israelites. <sup>24</sup> He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. <sup>25</sup> Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. <sup>26</sup> The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, ‘Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?’

<sup>27</sup> “But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, ‘Who made you ruler and judge over us? <sup>28</sup> Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’<sup>e</sup> <sup>29</sup> When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons.

<sup>30</sup> “After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. <sup>31</sup> When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to get a closer look, he heard the Lord say: <sup>32</sup> ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’<sup>f</sup> Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look.

<sup>33</sup> “Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. <sup>34</sup> I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.’<sup>g</sup>

<sup>35</sup> “This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, ‘Who made you ruler and judge?’ He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. <sup>36</sup> He led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness.

<sup>37</sup> “This is the Moses who told the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.’<sup>h</sup> <sup>38</sup> He was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us.

<sup>39</sup> “But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. <sup>40</sup> They told Aaron, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don’t know what has happened to him!’<sup>i</sup> <sup>41</sup> That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made. <sup>42</sup> But God turned away

from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets:

*“Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel?”*

<sup>43</sup> You have taken up the tabernacle of Molek

and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship.

Therefore I will send you into exile<sup>j</sup> beyond Babylon.

<sup>44</sup> “Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. <sup>45</sup> After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, <sup>46</sup> who enjoyed God’s favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. <sup>k</sup> <sup>47</sup> But it was Solomon who built a house for him.

<sup>48</sup> “However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says:

<sup>49</sup> “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord.

Or where will my resting place be? <sup>50</sup> Has not my hand made all these things?”<sup>l</sup>

<sup>51</sup> “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit!

<sup>52</sup> Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—<sup>53</sup> you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”

<sup>54</sup> When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup> But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

<sup>56</sup> “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

<sup>a</sup> 3 Gen. 12:1 <sup>b</sup> 7 Gen. 15:13,14 <sup>c</sup> 18 Exodus 1:8

<sup>d</sup> 20 Or was fair in the sight of God <sup>e</sup> 28 Exodus 2:14

<sup>f</sup> 32 Exodus 3:6 <sup>g</sup> 34 Exodus 3:5,7,8,10 <sup>h</sup> 37 Deut.

18:15 <sup>i</sup> 40 Exodus 32:1 <sup>j</sup> 43 Amos 5:25-27 (see Septuagint) <sup>k</sup> 46 Some early manuscripts the house of Jacob <sup>l</sup> 50 Isaiah 66:1,2

## Open

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What is your spiritual heritage? How have your parents and grandparents influenced you?

Have you ever looked into your family’s genealogy? Any interesting (or embarrassing) discoveries?

## Discover

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1. When we read that that Stephen’s face was shining “like the face of an angel” (6:15), what does that signify? (see Ex. 34:29-35; also Mt. 17:1-2; Heb. 1:3) What does it imply about his message?

2. In his narrative, Stephen recounts the ways in which God was faithful to the promises he made to Abraham (see 7:5-7). Find them in the passage and list them below.

3. From the narrative in this passage, what are the ways in which Joseph was like Christ?

# Discover

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4. From the narrative in this passage, what are the ways in which Moses was like Christ?

5. What point is Stephen building up to when he talks about the faithless responses of the people of Israel to Joseph and to Moses (see 7:9, 39, 51-53)?

6. When Stephen tells the members of the Sanhedrin that “Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised” (v. 51), what does he mean? (see Rom. 2:25-29; Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4) What do they need to do?

7. What is the reaction of the members of the Sanhedrin to Stephen’s message? Does this tend to confirm or refute his accusation?

8. What is the significance of Stephen’s statement that, “the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands” (7:48)? What contrast is he making? (7:44-50, see also Jn. 4:19-24)

9. Stephen had a vision of “Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (7:55). What does this position imply about Jesus? (see Dan. 7:13-14; Mt. 16:27-28; 25:31-32; 26:64)

# Apply

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- What lessons have you learned from your own personal history? How have your past experiences of following God, or not following him, affected your present attitudes and actions?
- What spiritual heritage are you leaving for your own children, or for others whom your life influences?

# Commentary

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- v. 15 The glory of God is often represented as a radiant, brilliant light (Ps. 50:2; 76:4; 80:1, 3, 7, 19; 118:27; Ezk. 1:28; 10:4; 43:2; Mt. 17:1-2; Lk. 2:9; Jn. 1:5; 2 Cor. 4:6; Heb. 1:3; Rev. 1:16; 21:10-11, 23). Moses' face shone after having been in God's presence (Ex. 34:29-35; 2 Cor. 3:7-18). And so when Luke notes that Stephen's face was shining "like the face of an angel", it tells us that he was in the immediate presence of God (see vv. 55-56), and that what he is about to say comes directly from God.
- vv. 2-56 Stephen's speech can be analyzed in various ways. From a structural point of view, it consists of a narrative (vv. 2-34), an argument (vv. 35-50), and an appeal (vv. 51-53). But the main significance of the speech is theological. Stephen is demonstrating that the people of Israel have repeatedly rebelled against God and violently rejected his messengers. And Jesus is the greatest of these, the prophet *par excellence* (compare Lk. 20:9-19). Thus Stephen is not merely defending himself, but indicting those who have put him on trial, linking them to this historical pattern.
- vv. 2-3 In these verses, Stephen makes two subtle but important points. First, that God appeared to Abraham "while he was still in Mesopotamia", that is, far from the land that he and his descendants would later possess. And so God is not limited to working only among the inhabitants of geographic Israel. If in times past he could call Abraham from a pagan country and an idolatrous heritage, he can likewise now call to himself people from every nation and culture.
- And second, that in order to follow God, Abraham had to separate himself from his people. The implication is that it may be necessary to separate from one's extended family, one's religious traditions, and even one's native land, in order to be faithful to God's call (Mt. 10:35-37; 19:29; Lk. 14:25-26). Many of Stephen's generation would find this to be true (see Acts 8:1; 11:19; see Jn. 9:22; 12:42; 16:2).
- vv. 4-5 The statement that "*God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land*" is a reminder to Stephen's audience that every one of God's promises were fulfilled, including this one, since both he and his accusers were standing on the soil promised to Abraham. Thus, the chronic unfaithfulness of Abraham's descendants could not be attributed to the failure of God's promises.
- vv. 6-7 Likewise, God was faithful to fulfill this promise made to Abraham, of release from centuries of bondage in Egypt, and judgment against their oppressors.
- v. 8 Stephen further establishes the faithfulness of God, in contrast to the unfaithfulness of his people, by recounting the covenant that he established with Abraham, and then reciting the list of offspring which Abraham and Sarah were given, in fulfillment of that covenant: Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's sons, "the twelve patriarchs". All of this despite the apparent impossibility that the promise of descendants could be fulfilled (Gen. 17:15-19; Rom. 4:18-19; Heb. 11:11-12).
- vv. 9-16 Stephen now summarizes the events of Joseph's life (Gen. 30:22-50:26). Why Joseph? Because he was an example of a deliverer, chosen by God, who was initially rejected by his own people (in this case, his brothers; Gen. 37:1-36). Stephen is preparing to make the case that the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish leaders fits this same historical pattern (v. 51). Making the comparison even more pointed, Stephen notes that Joseph's brothers acted out of jealousy (v. 9), the same motive attributed to the "high priest and all his associates" (Acts 5:17) when they arrested the apostles.
- However, ultimately Joseph was vindicated because "God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles" (vv. 9-10) and he was enabled to save "his whole family" (v. 14). In the same way, Christ saves all those who come to him.
- vv. 17-38 In this section, Stephen makes a similar point concerning Moses, who was called by God (v. 34), but rejected by the people of Israel (vv. 35, 39).
- vv. 20-22 These verses contain subtle details which support the portrayal of Moses as a *type* of Christ; that is, a person whose life and character anticipated those of Jesus Christ. Moses was recognized from birth as being special; he was "no ordinary child". He was "educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action". In the same way, Christ was uniquely set apart from birth (Lk. 1:26-38; 2:8-38); he was also "filled with wisdom" (Lk. 2:40); and he was "powerful in word and deed" (Lk. 24:19).
- v. 30 The number forty is frequently used in the Bible, as in verses 23, 30, and 36, to indicate completeness or maturity. Here, it suggests that God's purposes in the three phases of Moses' life were fulfilled just as God intended. His plans to save his people through Moses were not hindered by initial rejection or by official persecution. Likewise, his saving purposes in Christ were not delayed or hindered by the persecution of the Jewish leaders, but were fulfilled at exactly the right time (see Gal. 6:9; Eph. 1:10; 2 Thess. 2:6; 2 Pet. 3:9).

- vv. 35-38 Stephen makes the correspondence between Christ and Moses more explicit, recalling Moses' words that God would "raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people" (v. 37; see Deut. 18:15), a promise which Peter applied to Christ (Acts 3:22). Both Moses and Jesus spoke with authority from God: Moses received "living words to pass on to us" (v. 38), the coming prophet would likewise "tell them everything I command him" (Deut. 18:18). Jesus fulfilled that promise, testifying that "I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me" (Jn. 8:28).
- The comparison between Jesus and Moses extends to their treatment by the people of Israel; even though Moses had been appointed as "ruler and deliverer by God himself", his authority and leadership were rejected (v. 35; see v. 27; Ex. 2:14).
- Another link between Christ and Moses is found in Moses' role as the "deliverer" who "led them out of Egypt" (vv. 35, 36). As Moses led his people out of physical slavery and oppression in Egypt, Jesus delivers his people out of bondage to sin (Ex. 6:6; Lk. 2:48; 24:21; Rom. 3:24; Gal. 3:13; Eph. 1:7; Heb. 9:12, 15; 1 Pet. 1:18).
- vv. 39-41 These verses demonstrate that the rejection of Moses' authority was not an isolated event, but an ongoing pattern that indicated a fundamental rebellion against God. This eventually resulted in overt idolatry, the worship of a golden calf at Mt. Sinai (see Ex. 32:1-8). In spite of the miracles they had witnessed and experienced, in their hearts the ancient Israelites had not abandoned their attachment to their prior lives in Egypt, nor did they completely forsake the Egyptian gods. And so when difficulties arose, they sought to return (Nu. 11:4-6; 14:2-4).
- vv. 42-43 In judgment against the idolatry of the Israelites, God "turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars" (see Dt. 4:19, 17:3; 2 Ki. 2:5; 2 Chr. 33:1-5, Jer. 8:1-2, Zeph. 1:5). The penalty for their disobedience was to be allowed to persist in it, filling up the measure of their sins and storing up judgment for themselves (see Ps. 81:11-12; Rom. 1:22-28; 1 Thess. 2:16; Rom. 2:5).
- The text which Stephen quotes is Amos 5:25-27, a prophecy in which God asks whether the people of Israel had been faithful to worship him exclusively during the time of their Exodus wanderings. The implied answer is that no, they had not. Instead, they continued to worship idols, even after being delivered from Egypt. Ultimately, this persistent disobedience resulted in their expulsion from the land of Canaan and exile in other lands.
- In citing Amos' prophecy, Stephen replaces the word "Damascus", the place of exile of the northern tribes of Israel, with "Babylon", the place of exile of the southern tribe of Judea (see 2 Kings chs. 17 and 24-25). When New Testament authors refer to the Old Testament, they often do not quote it word-for-word, but adapt the text for their own purpose and message, as Stephen does here.
- vv. 44-46 The references to the tabernacle highlight the stubborn disobedience of the people of Israel. Although this structure was designed by God as the place where he was to be worshipped (v. 44; see Ex. 25:8-9; Heb. 8:5), and although it stood literally in the center of Israel's encampments during the time of their wilderness sojourning (Num. 2:17), they persisted in worshiping at the tabernacle of the Ammonite God Molek (vv. 42-43). Even Solomon, the builder of the temple, later reverted to paganism and erected a shrine to Molek (1 Ki. 11:4-7).
- vv. 47-50 The tabernacle, and later the temple, were holy places where the presence of God was uniquely manifest (Ex. 25:8; 29:44-45; 40:34-35; Num. 9:15-23; 1 Ki. 8:10-13, 9:3; 2 Chron. 5:14; 7:1). However, neither those places, nor any other physical location or man-made building, can contain him. Since all things in the heavens and the earth were created by him, he cannot be encompassed by any of them (Isa. 66:1-2; see 1 Ki. 8:27; 2 Chron. 6:18). The implication of this truth is that God was never limited to acting only through the religious practices and institutions which were centered on the temple. But this truth was a direct threat to the power of the religious leaders who controlled temple worship.
- vv. 51-53 Stephen brings his oration to a thunderous conclusion, denouncing the members of the Sanhedrin as the spiritual descendants of those who opposed God throughout Israel's history. Echoing the words of Moses, he labels them as "stiff-necked" (Ex. 33:3, 5; Dt. 9:6; 31:27) and "uncircumcised" in their "hearts and ears" (see Dt. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 9:26; Ezk. 44:7, 9). Although they had been physically circumcised as a sign of the covenant between God and Israel, there was no faithfulness toward God in their hearts or behavior, and so their circumcision was meaningless (see Rom. 2:25-29).
- vv. 54-56 Stephen's vision of the "Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" testifies to Jesus as the one who will come as Messiah to deliver his people, and also as the judge of the whole world (see Dan. 7:13-14; Mt. 16:27-28; 19:28; 24:3-51; 25:31-32; 26:64; Mk. 14:62; Lk. 22:69; Jn. 5:25-27).

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# Unit 8 – Persecution Scatters the Church

## Acts 7:57- 8:25

### Text

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<sup>57</sup> At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, <sup>58</sup> dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

<sup>59</sup> While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” <sup>60</sup> Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

<sup>1</sup> And Saul approved of their killing him.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. <sup>2</sup> Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. <sup>3</sup> But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

<sup>4</sup> Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. <sup>5</sup> Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. <sup>6</sup> When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. <sup>7</sup> For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. <sup>8</sup> So there was great joy in that city.

<sup>9</sup> Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, <sup>10</sup> and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, “This man is rightly called the Great Power of God.” <sup>11</sup> They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery. <sup>12</sup> But when they believed Philip as he

proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. <sup>13</sup> Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

<sup>14</sup> When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. <sup>15</sup> When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, <sup>16</sup> because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>17</sup> Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

<sup>18</sup> When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money <sup>19</sup> and said, “Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”

<sup>20</sup> Peter answered: “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! <sup>21</sup> You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. <sup>22</sup> Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. <sup>23</sup> For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.”

<sup>24</sup> Then Simon answered, “Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me.”

<sup>25</sup> After they had further proclaimed the word of the Lord and testified about Jesus, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.”

### Open

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- What is the most amazing thing you have ever seen? How did you respond?

### Discover

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1. Stephen’s death parallels the death of Christ in several ways. See how many you can identify, comparing Acts chapter 7 with Luke chapters 22-23.

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2. Stephen's sermon did not bring about repentance; instead, his hearers became enraged, and attacked and killed him. What should he have done differently? Why? (see Mt. 24:9; Jn. 15:18-25; 16:1-3)

3. What did the opponents of the gospel intend to accomplish by persecuting the church? What actually happened? How did their actions actually help to bring about God's purposes?

4. How do the events of this passage fulfill Acts 1:8?

5. Why did Peter and John go to Samaria? Why did the Samaritan believers not receive the Holy Spirit until Peter and John arrived? (compare Acts 10:44-47; 15:7-8)

6. What things did Simon misunderstand about the power of the Holy Spirit? (see Jn. 3:8; Acts 2:38; 10:45; 11:17) Why was it necessary for Peter to publicly rebuke him?

7. Who are the groups or individuals in this passage who are the unlikely objects of God's grace and mercy?

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## Apply

Even as he is dying a violent, painful and unjust death, Stephen continues to love his enemies, asking God to forgive them for what they are doing to him. To what extent does your life reflect this kind of attitude toward those who treat you unfairly?

Who do you know who seems an unlikely candidate for God's grace and mercy? What should be your attitude toward them?

# Commentary

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- vv. 57-58 Stoning was the penalty prescribed in the Old Testament law for blasphemy (Lev. 24:13-16; see Acts 6:11) and for idolatry, the worship of false gods (Deut. 13:6-11; 17:2-7). The offending person was to be taken away, outside the camp or to the city gate, and rocks hurled at them until they were dead. The execution was to be carried out communally, with everyone participating (Lev. 24:16; Deut. 13:9; 17:7), so that *"all Israel will hear and be afraid, and no one among you will do such an evil thing again"* (Deut. 13:11).
- Stephen was killed in the manner prescribed in the Old Testament. Those who committed this act doubtless considered themselves to be obeying and honoring God (see Jn. 16:2). Did genuine belief, then, make this a righteous act, or at least render them guiltless? No, as Stephen understood (v. 60), it was a sin for which they needed to be forgiven. Sincerity of belief is never an excuse for opposing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Ironically, by putting Stephen to death, his attackers validated the point of his sermon; that they stood in the spiritual lineage of those who murdered Israel's prophets (Acts 7:51-52).
- vv. 59-60 There are several similarities between the death of Stephen and the death of Christ. Both testify before the Sanhedrin of Jesus "standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:54-56; see Lk. 22:66-69); both cry out to God and commit their spirits to God (v. 59-60; Lk. 23:46); both pray that God will forgive those who put them to death (v. 60; Lk. 23:34). However, while Christ prays to God the Father, Stephen appeals to Jesus as Lord, testifying thereby that he has power over life and death, and that he is the divine judge who will vindicate his people and condemn his enemies.
- vv. 1-3 The intention of the religious authorities in persecuting the church was to eradicate it. But instead, their actions had the opposite effect, as *"all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria"* (v. 1) and *"those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went"* (v. 4). Note that this dispersion of witnessing believers was a fulfillment of Christ's prophecy in Acts 1:8. Once again, man's opposition to God was not only ineffectual, it actually had the opposite effect of accomplishing God's purposes.
- The fact that those who stoned Stephen *"laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul"* (v. 58), and that he *"approved of their killing him"* (v. 1), indicates that Saul was already a leader of those who opposed the gospel. He now began working in earnest "to destroy the church", a goal he pursued with misguided zeal (v. 3; see Acts 22:4-5; 26:9-11).
- v. 4 One might expect that those who had been driven away from homes, family, friends, and occupations would be reluctant to speak openly about their faith, lest they be persecuted further. But instead, they were bold and fearless, talking about Jesus "wherever they went". Here we see that, from the beginning of the church, the proclamation of the word was not limited to apostles or prophets, but was part of the daily life of ordinary believers in whatever circumstances they found themselves.
- v. 5 In continuing fulfillment of Acts 1:8, Philip traveled to Samaria and proclaimed Jesus as Messiah (see Jn. 4:25-26). This was a radical act, because Samaritans were despised by Jews (see Jn. 4:9; 8:48). According to 2 Kings 17, the Samaritans were descendants of colonists who settled in Israel after Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom and deported the Jews. These settlers merged the worship of the true God with the worship of their own gods (2 Ki. 17:41). Samaritan religion differed from Judaism in several ways, including rejection of all but the first five books of the Bible, and worship which centered on Mt. Gerizim rather than Jerusalem (Jn. 4:20).
- vv. 6-8 The words Philip spoke, and the signs that he performed, caused the Samaritans to pay "close attention to what he said". The miraculous works of healing and exorcism helped gain Philip a hearing and attested to the validity of his message. Jesus' earlier visit to Samaria (Jn. 4:1-42) also may have helped prepare these people to receive the gospel.
- vv. 9-12 Simon was no mere conjurer or stage magician; his sorcery was sufficiently impressive to have convinced the Samaritans that he was a godlike being, the "Great Power of God". It is likely that he was able to perform genuine miracles, with power that was demonic in origin (see Mt. 7:22-23; 24:24; 2 Thess. 2:9-11; Rev. 13:11-14; 16:13-14). And yet, when people heard the gospel and witnessed the "signs and miracles" (v. 13) performed by Philip, they ceased following Simon and turned to Christ instead (v. 12). Thus, this encounter demonstrates the surpassing power of Christ, and the word of God, over all other supernatural forces.
- v. 13 The text tells us that "Simon himself believed and was baptized". But it appears that his "belief" was not a saving faith in Jesus as Messiah. He was merely seeking after a greater source of supernatural power (see vv. 18-23). Compare with John ch. 8, a passage in which those who "had believed" (Jn. 8:31) rejected Christ's teaching and were told "you do not belong to God" (Jn. 8:47).

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v. 14 When the apostles received the surprising news of conversions and baptisms among the Samaritans, they sent high-ranking emissaries, Peter and John, to verify what was happening. One imagines that they were hopeful, but cautious, considering how unlikely such an event would have seemed to them. It would be as if we today heard rumors of large numbers turning to Christ from one of the contemporary pseudo-Christian cults, men and women rejecting their former false doctrines and embracing Biblical Christianity. Such news would be received with joy, but joy tempered with skepticism: could it really be true?

The visit by Peter and John allowed them to validate that these reports were accurate, and to ensure that the doctrines being taught, and the practices being followed, were in accordance with the truth. It also allowed them to give their apostolic seal of approval to the inclusion of Samaritans in the church. After this, no one could claim that Samaritans were beyond the reach of the gospel, or outside the scope of God's saving grace.

vv. 15-17 When Peter and John arrived, they were persuaded that these indeed were "new believers". However, something was missing: *"the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them"*. And so, *"Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit"*. Thus, the promise of Acts 2:38 was fulfilled:

*"Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"*

But what accounts for the delay? Why had they not received the Spirit previously, immediately upon their repentance and baptism? The text does not tell us, but we can exclude some possibilities. It was not due to a deficiency in the Samaritan's faith: we are told that Philip preached the gospel faithfully (vv. 5, 12), and that the Samaritans "paid close attention" to his preaching (v. 6). Nor was it because an apostle was required to be present in order for the Spirit to be given; see Acts 9:17-18. And finally, it was not because they were in need of a "second blessing," a fuller experience of the Spirit, because they had not yet received the Spirit at all. Rather, it seems likely that God withheld the gift of the Holy Spirit until the apostles arrived, so that they could be witnesses of the fact that Samaritans were now being incorporated into the people of God. Later, the reception of the Holy Spirit by the Gentiles provided the same kind of confirmation (see Acts 10:44-47; 15:7-8).

vv. 18-19 Simon's offer of money, in exchange for the ability to bestow the Spirit by the laying on of hands, reveals his complete lack of understanding of the situation. He assumed that the apostles were magicians like himself, motivated by personal gain. He thought that the Holy Spirit was a supernatural force that could be manipulated by the performance of rituals and the recitation of incantations. He did not understand that the Holy Spirit was actually a divine Person, who acted according to his own will rather than man's (Jn. 3:8). He did not understand that the Holy Spirit was given only in response to faith in Christ. And he did not understand that the Holy Spirit was a gift, one which could not be earned or purchased (Acts 2:38; 10:45; 11:17).

vv. 20-21 Simon's fundamental problem was not his lack of understanding, however; it was that his heart was *"not right before God"*. He was not motivated by a desire for God's glory, but a desire for wealth and personal prestige. This is the second example in Acts of pretenders using religion to acquire money and honor: Ananias and Sapphira tried this as well, with fatal results (Acts 5:1-10). Other Scriptures indicate that this will always be a problem in the church (see 1 Tim. 6:5; Tit. 1:7, 11; 1 Pet. 5:2).

Perhaps Simon had hopes of regaining his standing as the spiritual leader of the Samaritans, and with it, the influence and income that he had formerly enjoyed. But Peter rejects his offer and publicly states that, to the contrary, he has "no part or share" at all in the work of the gospel. A direct statement like this was needed so that the new believers would clearly perceive the distinction between Simon's sorcery and the work of the Holy Spirit, lest they be tempted to merge the false and the true as they had in the past.

vv. 22-23 The language here seems to indicate that Simon is still outside the kingdom. He has not experienced freedom from the power of sin (Lk. 4:18; Rom. 6:7, 14, 18); on the contrary, he is "captive to sin", and needs to repent of his wickedness and pray for forgiveness. His sin is a bitter root that is poisoning his heart; in Deut. 29:18, the "root" which produces "bitter poison" is the sin of idolatry which threatens to defile the entire community; that may be implied here as well (see Heb. 12:15). Note that greed is often associated with idolatry (1 Cor. 5:10-11; Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5).

v. 24 Simon does not repent of his sin, but only asks for prayer that he may escape the consequences. The text does not record a response from Peter, but a desire to avoid God's wrath is not in itself sufficient for salvation; there must be repentance and faith also.

# Unit 9 – Two Conversions

## Acts 8:26-9:31

### Text

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<sup>26</sup> Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.”<sup>27</sup> So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian<sup>a</sup> eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship,<sup>28</sup> and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet.<sup>29</sup> The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

<sup>30</sup> Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

<sup>31</sup> “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

<sup>32</sup> This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

<sup>33</sup> In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.

Who can speak of his descendants?  
For his life was taken from the earth.”<sup>b</sup>

<sup>34</sup> The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?”<sup>35</sup> Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

<sup>36</sup> As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?”<sup>37 c</sup> <sup>38</sup> And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.<sup>39</sup> When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.<sup>40</sup> Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest<sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.<sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

<sup>5</sup> “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied.<sup>6</sup> “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

<sup>7</sup> The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see

anyone.<sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus.<sup>9</sup> For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

<sup>10</sup> In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!”

“Yes, Lord,” he answered.

<sup>11</sup> The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.<sup>12</sup> In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”

<sup>13</sup> “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup> And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

<sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.<sup>16</sup> I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

<sup>17</sup> Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”<sup>18</sup> Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized,<sup>19</sup> and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.<sup>20</sup> At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.<sup>21</sup> All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?”<sup>22</sup> Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

<sup>23</sup> After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him,<sup>24</sup> but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him.<sup>25</sup> But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

<sup>26</sup> When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.<sup>27</sup> But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.<sup>28</sup> So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.<sup>29</sup> He

*talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews,<sup>d</sup> but they tried to kill him.<sup>30</sup> When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.<sup>31</sup> Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.*

<sup>a</sup>8:27 That is, from the southern Nile region  
<sup>b</sup>8:33 Isaiah 53:7,8 (see Septuagint)  
<sup>c</sup>8:37 Some manuscripts include here *Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." The eunuch answered, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."*  
<sup>d</sup>9:29 That is, Jews who had adopted the Greek language and culture

## Open

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- Have you ever had an awakening, or a sudden realization, that resulted in a change of course in your life?

## Discover

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1. The examples of conversions in Acts are not random, but purposefully chosen. What is significant about the conversion of a man from Ethiopia? (see Acts 1:8)

2. What else about him represented the fulfillment of prophecy? (see Isa. 56:3-8)

3. Why was he unable to understand the significance of what he was reading? How was this remedied?

4. How would you describe Paul prior to his conversion? (9:1-2; see 1 Tim. 1:13; Acts 8:1; 22:4, 22:19-20; 26:10). Why is this significant?

5. Why would God choose someone like this to be an apostle? (see 1 Tim. 1:12-16)

6. In persecuting Christians, whom was Paul really attacking? (9:4-6) Why does this matter?

## Apply

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- Do you know anyone who seems so hardened or antagonistic toward God as to be unreachable? What should your attitude be toward them?
- What do people in "unreached" parts of the world need most? What can you do to provide this?

# Commentary

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- vv. 26-39 This passage continues the fulfillment of Acts 1:8, as the gospel comes to a native of Ethiopia. At that time, this land would have been considered the “ends of the earth”; Homer, in *The Odyssey*, refers to “Ethiopians off at the farthest limits of mankind” (1.26; Robert Fagles trans.). This specific Ethiopian also represents the fulfillment of Isa. 56:3-8, which promises inclusion in the kingdom of God for those who were formerly excluded, including eunuchs and foreigners.
- v. 26 God sovereignly directs the expansion of the gospel through an angel who appears to Philip. Philip obeys, although he is not told why he is being sent, or whom he is to meet.
- vv. 27-28 The fact that this man had journeyed such a great distance to worship at Jerusalem testifies to his desire for God. The land from which he traveled is not modern-day Ethiopia (Abyssinia), but an ancient kingdom south of Egypt which is today part of the Sudan, referred to elsewhere in the Bible as Cush (see Gen. 2:13; Ezk. 29:10). This is one of the nations to which Isa. 11:11 tells us the Lord will “reach out his hand . . . to reclaim the surviving remnant of his people”.
- vv. 29-31 Although the Ethiopian was reading the Scriptures, he could not understand their full meaning, their fulfillment in Christ, without someone being sent to him who could explain them (see Lk. 24:25-27, 44-47; Rom. 10:14-15).
- vv. 32-33 The text cited here, Isa. 53:7-8 is part of a longer passage, the Servant Song (Isa. 52:13-53:12; see Mt. 8:17; Lk. 22:37; Jn. 12:38; Rom. 10:16; 15:21; 1 Pet. 2:21-25).
- vv. 34-35 Philip’s answer makes clear that the one being referred to is Jesus; he is the one who was despised and rejected by mankind (Isa. 53:3), who voluntarily went to the place of his execution (Isa. 53:7), and who suffered for our transgressions as an offering for sin, thereby bringing about our healing (Isa. 53:5, 10).
- vv. 36-38 The Ethiopian sees a body of water and takes the initiative to request baptism, evidence of the work that God has been doing in his heart as Philip explained the gospel. Note that in the NIV, verse 37 is omitted. This verse, containing an explicit statement of faith by the Ethiopian prior to his baptism, is found in only a few ancient manuscripts and is considered to be a likely addition by a scribal copyist.
- vv. 39-40 This could indicate that Philip was taken by supernatural means to Azotus (see 1 Ki. 18:11; 2 Ki. 2:16; Ezk. 3:14), or simply that he is being directed by the Spirit to journey to a new place of ministry.
- vv. 1-2 For those who are familiar with the ministry of Paul the apostle (formerly Saul), and with his writings on love, grace, and mercy, it is shocking to be reminded of the viciousness of his prior vocation as the chief persecutor of Christians. He testifies against himself that he was a “violent man” (1 Tim. 1:13) and the “murderous threats” referred to here were very real. Not only did he arrest and imprison both men and women, but he had them beaten (Acts 22:19), and persecuted them “to their death” (Acts 22:4; see 8:1; 22:20; 26:10). In short, he was dedicated to eradicating this movement by any brutal means necessary; he was an example of Jesus’ warning that “*the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God*” (Jn. 16:2). His conversion was therefore all the more remarkable; a transformation of the heart, mind, and will of a man utterly opposed to the message of the gospel.
- The identification of Christians as those “who belonged to the Way” is consistent with texts that describe a life of faith and obedience to God as “the way of the Lord”, and also with Jesus’ description of himself as “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn. 14:6). See Gen. 18:19; Judg. 2:22; Prov. 10:29; Mt. 21:32; 22:16; Acts 18:25-26; 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22; 2 Pet. 2:2, 21.
- v. 3 The light that shone around Saul was “from heaven”, a manifestation of Christ’s divine glory (see Mk. 9:2-3; 2 Cor. 4:4, 6; Eph. 5:14). In Biblical accounts, such a display often accompanies an appearance of God or of an angel. Note that Saul saw, not only a light, but Christ himself (Acts 9:27; 26:16; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8).
- vv. 4-6 Saul’s question, “Who are you, Lord?” reveals that he does not yet know who is speaking to him. The reply, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” and the rebuke, “Saul, why do you persecute me?” make clear that in attacking the church, Saul was not merely oppressing the followers of Christ, but was persecuting Christ himself (see Lk. 10:16; Mt. 25:40; 1 Cor. 12:12-13, 27).
- vv. 7-9 Although his companions heard a noise, they did not understand the words or see a bright light: the revelation contained in the words of Christ, and in the vision of his glory, was for Saul alone. His blindness was both a judgment for his opposition to Christ (see Acts 13:11), and also a physical sign of his spiritual blindness (see Mt. 23:16-26; Jn. 9:3-41), a disability that only Christ could heal. The three days of fasting may have been a sign of mourning and repentance, as Paul absorbed the full implications of what he had heard and seen (see Neh. 1:4; Jl. 1:14; 2:12; Jon. 3:7-8).

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- vv. 10-12 In this passage, Ananias receives a vision directing him to visit Paul, who had himself experienced a vision telling him to expect Ananias. This dual revelation was needed because God was doing something completely unexpected. In fact, Ananias was so shocked at what he was being told to do that he had to make sure the Lord understood the risks involved! (vv. 13-14) His concern was legitimate: if God had not been working in Paul's heart, such a mission would have been suicidal.
- These are not the only visions through which God directed the expansion of the gospel in the New Testament. Peter and Cornelius received parallel visions that brought them together (Acts 10:1-23; 11:4-14). Paul also received further visions at key points in his ministry: one directing him to go to Macedonia (Acts 16:6-10), and another instructing him to remain in Corinth (Acts 18:9-10).
- vv. 13-14 Ananias does not immediately obey, but neither does he refuse to carry out the Lord's command. Rather, as he expresses his reluctance, stating the reasons for his hesitation, he is implicitly asking for help to overcome his fear. And the Lord graciously condescends to his weakness, providing the assurance that he needs (vv. 15-16).
- Note the description of believers as "your holy people". In the Old Testament, this was a term for those who were physically descended from Abraham and who followed the Mosaic law (Ex. 22:31; Deut. 28:9). But now, as the prophet Daniel foretold, the "holy people" of God are the followers of the Son of Man, Jesus Christ (Dan. 7:13-14, 18, 22, 27; Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:18; Col. 1:12; 2 Thess. 1:10).
- vv. 15-16 Not only was Paul called to follow Christ, he was called to a unique ministry: "to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel". Although Paul was the premier apostle to the gentiles (Rom. 11:13; see Rom. 1:5; Gal. 2:7-9; 1 Tim. 2:7), he also preached faithfully, and first, to the Jews (Acts 9:20; 13:5, 14, 46-47; 14:1; 17:2, 10, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8). Paul consistently testified that he did not take up the mantle of an apostle on his own initiative, but was chosen by God for this role (Acts 26:15-19; Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; 9:16; Eph. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1).
- The latter part of this prophecy, regarding the suffering that Paul would endure, will be abundantly fulfilled (2 Cor. 11:23-27). The persecutor would become, for the rest of his life, the persecuted.
- vv. 17-19a Ananias overcomes his fear and goes to Paul. He lays hands on him, for healing and for the filling of the Holy Spirit, and Paul receives physical baptism as a result (see Acts 22:12-16).
- vv. 19b-20 We might have expected Paul to confer with the apostles before beginning his public ministry; after all, they had spent the last three years with Jesus, and would therefore be expected to know his life and doctrine better than anyone. But this was not necessary, as Paul had received from the Lord, not only a call to preach the gospel, but also an in-depth knowledge of its content and significance (Gal. 1:11-24). A key feature of Paul's preaching was that "Jesus is the Son of God" (see Rom. 1:3-4; 1:9; 5:10; 1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Cor. 1:19; Gal. 1:16; 2:20; Eph. 4:13; 1 Thess. 1:10), a doctrine that was considered by the Jews to be heretical, and worthy of death (Lev. 24:16; Mk. 14:60-64; Jn. 5:18; 19:7).
- vv. 21-22 Paul's rabbinical training gave him an extensive knowledge of the Old Testament (see Acts 22:3; 26:5), and the Spirit now empowers him with superior ability in theological argumentation (although he lacked rhetorical eloquence; 1 Cor. 1:17; 2:1). Thus, the Jews were unable to refute his proofs from Scripture that "Jesus is the Messiah". This echoes the description of Stephen's preaching ministry (Acts 6:10).
- vv. 23-24 As with Stephen, the opponents of the gospel cannot refute the truth, and so they attempt to eliminate the message by silencing the messenger. This is the response of Satan in every age, because he is a liar and a murderer and hates the truth (Jn. 8:44). He will ultimately fail (Rev. 12:10-11), but until then, those who speak boldly in the name of Christ can expect to be attacked and persecuted.
- vv. 26-27 The believers in Jerusalem react with alarm to the news that their former chief persecutor is coming to pay them a visit. They suspect that he is falsely claiming to be a disciple in order to infiltrate and destroy their community. But Barnabas vouches for Paul, testifying as to his conversion and subsequent ministry in Damascus, and he is accepted.
- vv. 28-30 Paul's ministry in Jerusalem parallels his experience in Damascus: preaching, attempted assassination, escape. From a human point of view, it might seem as if the preaching of the gospel was continually being interrupted. But in fact, God was using persecution to direct Paul to new fields of ministry (see commentary on 8:1-4).
- v. 31 Whenever we experience mistreatment, harsh persecution, or simply unyielding resistance to the gospel, we should remember that God can change the heart of even someone like Saul, who was a violent persecutor of the church. As in Paul's day, God is able in this age to bless the church with a time of peace, to strengthen it, and to cause it to increase in numbers.

# Unit 10 – Peter and Cornelius

## Acts 9:32-10:48

### Text

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<sup>32</sup> As Peter traveled about the country, he went to visit the Lord's people who lived in Lydda. <sup>33</sup> There he found a man named Aeneas, who was paralyzed and had been bedridden for eight years. <sup>34</sup> "Aeneas," Peter said to him, "Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and roll up your mat." Immediately Aeneas got up. <sup>35</sup> All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord. <sup>36</sup> In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor. <sup>37</sup> About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. <sup>38</sup> Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Please come at once!" <sup>39</sup> Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them. <sup>40</sup> Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. <sup>41</sup> He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive. <sup>42</sup> This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. <sup>43</sup> Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.

<sup>1</sup> At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. <sup>2</sup> He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. <sup>3</sup> One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!"

<sup>4</sup> Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked.

The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. <sup>5</sup> Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. <sup>6</sup> He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea."

<sup>7</sup> When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants.

<sup>8</sup> He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

<sup>9</sup> About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. <sup>10</sup> He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. <sup>11</sup> He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. <sup>12</sup> It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as

well as reptiles and birds. <sup>13</sup> Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." <sup>14</sup> "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

<sup>15</sup> The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

<sup>16</sup> This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

<sup>17</sup> While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. <sup>18</sup> They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

<sup>19</sup> While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three <sup>a</sup> men are looking for you. <sup>20</sup> So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

<sup>21</sup> Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?"

<sup>22</sup> The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." <sup>23</sup> Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers from Joppa went along.

<sup>24</sup> The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. <sup>25</sup> As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. <sup>26</sup> But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself."

<sup>27</sup> While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. <sup>28</sup> He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. <sup>29</sup> So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?"

<sup>30</sup> Cornelius answered: "Three days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me <sup>31</sup> and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. <sup>32</sup> Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.' <sup>33</sup> So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."

<sup>34</sup> Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism <sup>35</sup> but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. <sup>36</sup> You know the message God sent to the people of Israel,

announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.<sup>37</sup> You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—<sup>38</sup> how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

<sup>39</sup> “We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross,<sup>40</sup> but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.<sup>41</sup> He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.<sup>42</sup> He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.<sup>43</sup> All the

prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

<sup>44</sup> While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.<sup>45</sup> The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles.<sup>46</sup> For they heard them speaking in tongues<sup>b</sup> and praising God.

Then Peter said,<sup>47</sup> “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.”<sup>48</sup> So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

<sup>a</sup>10:19 One early manuscript two; other manuscripts do not have the number.

<sup>b</sup>10:46 Or other languages

## Open

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- Are there any foods which you abstain from, or have you ever observed a strict diet in the past? If so, why?

## Discover

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1. What characteristic of both Tabitha (Dorcas) and Cornelius is cited as evidence of the quality of their faith? (9:36; 10:2, 4, 31) Do Christians value this virtue today?

2. Do you think Aeneas would say that the conversions which followed his healing were worth eight years of suffering as a paralytic? (see Jn. 9:1-3) Why or why not?

3. During those years, did he know how God would use his illness? What application can you draw from this?

4. In the space below, note the key elements of Peter’s vision.

# Discover

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5. How would you summarize the meaning of Peter's vision?

6. During the time preceding Cornelius' baptism, how would you describe his spiritual condition? Based on this example, whose prayers does God hear, and whose charitable acts does He regard?

7. Why is it significant that most of Peter's message (10:34-43) concerns the historical events of Jesus' life?

8. When in Joppa, Peter stayed "for some time" with a man named Simon, whose occupation was that of a tanner. This is all we know of him; he plays no other part in the narrative. Why even mention his name?

9. Is it possible for those who minister in Christ's name, including pastors, to be put on a pedestal, or regarded more highly than is appropriate? When might this happen? What is the proper response when it does? (see 10:25-26)

10. Peter states that "God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right" (10:34-35). Does this mean that people in other nations and cultures do not need to trust in Christ in order to be saved? (see 10:36-43; also Acts 4:12)

# Apply

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Do you know anyone like Cornelius? How can you reach out to them concerning the gospel?

What attitudes or practices from your cultural or religious background could hinder you from sharing Christ with others? Are there any people-groups, or any types of people, that you would find it difficult to share Christ with?

# Commentary

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- vv. 32-35 In this brief narrative, we see the healing power of Christ working through Peter as he travels around the country, preaching the gospel and encouraging “the Lord’s people”. These believers would have been Jewish Christians who were driven out of Jerusalem due to persecution, and also residents of the area who had been converted through the testimony of these refugees and the preaching of Philip (see Acts 8:4, 40).
- Although this is not stated, it is likely that Aeneas was a disciple. The details of the story—the fact that he had been paralyzed for such a long time, and the sudden nature of his transformation—make clear that this was not a natural recovery from illness, but a miraculous restoration of health. The result was that a great number of people in that region turned to the Lord.
- v. 36 Joppa was a coastal city, about 37 miles northwest of Jerusalem. In the Old Testament, it was the port through which cedar was shipped to build the temple, and the departure point from which Jonah attempted to journey away from God (2 Chron. 2:16; Ezr. 3:7; Jon. 1:3).
- The character quality of Dorcas which is highlighted here is her generosity; she was “always doing good and helping the poor”. Perhaps the items of clothing she made (v. 39) were intended for distribution to those in need.
- vv. 37-38 The fact that Peter was summoned from nearby Lydda and asked to come at once suggests that the disciples were hoping he would be able to restore Dorcas to life, as Jesus had done (Lk. 7:11-17; 8:41-56; Jn. 11:43-44), and as the prophets Elijah and Elisha had done (1 Ki. 17:17-24; 2 Ki. 4:18-37). Such a hope would not be unreasonable following the healing of Aeneas.
- vv. 39-40 Peter’s actions are similar to those of Jesus when he healed the daughter of Jairus (Mk. 5:21-43; Lk. 8:41-56). There were no incantations, no rituals, no administrations of potions or elixirs. Peter asked the crowd to leave, and after praying, simply commanded the girl to get up, whereupon she opened her eyes and arose. There were no screams and no convulsions. This is how God often works: quietly, simply and powerfully (see 1 Ki. 18:22-39; 19:11-13)
- vv. 41-43 Peter continues to care for Dorcas, taking her hand and helping her to her feet, then summoning the other believers. As with Aeneas, when the miracle became known, “many people believed in the Lord.” The fact that Peter remained in Joppa “for some time” suggests that he found a fruitful field of ministry in this area, working with the new believers.
- vv. 1-8 In this passage, we have the first of two parallel visions in which God speaks first to Cornelius and then to Peter, in order to bring about the reception of Cornelius (and by extension, Gentiles) into the church.
- vv. 1-2 Caesarea was an important city: a major port, the administrative center of the province of Judea, and the home of the Roman provincial governor. Likewise, Cornelius was person of some importance, commanding a military force of about 100 men. Given the prominence of the place and the person involved, it is not surprising that these events came to the attention of church leaders (Acts 11:1-18), raising important theological questions concerning the inclusion of Gentiles in the church.
- The description of Cornelius as “devout and God-fearing” suggests that, although he was a Gentile, he and his family attended synagogue, participated in the times of Jewish prayer, and sought to live according to the ethical principles of Judaism. Furthermore, he “gave generously” to those who were in need. Cornelius was a person who believed in, and worshipped, the God of the Old Testament. However, he was not a *proselyte*, i.e., one who had become a full member of the Jewish community through circumcision and who adhered fully to the Jewish Law. Therefore, he would be considered ritually unclean by observant Jews (Acts 10:27; 11:1-3).
- vv. 3-4 The time of Cornelius’ vision, “about three in the afternoon,” is a sign of his adherence to Jewish worship practices, as this was the time of the evening prayers which accompanied the temple sacrifices.
- Cornelius was awed and amazed when God’s angelic messenger appeared to him. But hearing that his prayers and offerings had been received by God would have reassured him that this visitation was a sign of God’s favor and blessing, rather than a cause for concern.
- vv. 5-8 Several things are notable about the angel’s instructions and Cornelius’ response. First, the directions are specific, reflecting the omniscient knowledge of God. Second, no reason or larger plan is revealed to Cornelius. He is simply told what to do, and he obeys immediately and without question. And finally, Cornelius is not commanded to go to Peter himself, but is told to send representatives. As a consequence, many others learn of his vision and are privileged to hear the gospel: first, his servants and his aide-de-camp, when he directs them on their journey, and then Cornelius’ family and friends, whom he gathers together in anticipation of Peter’s visit (vv. 24-27).

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- vv. 9-10 This is the second of the two visions that God uses to bring Cornelius and Peter together. The reference to Peter's physical hunger suggests that this has helped to prepare him spiritually for an encounter with God (see Mt. 4:1-11; Ezr. 8:23; Neh. 1:4; Ps. 35:13; Dan. 9:3).
- vv. 11-14 In a trance, Peter has a vision of "something like a large sheaf" being lowered from heaven to earth, filled with a wide variety of creatures (see Gen. 6:20), including those which were forbidden for Jews to consume as food (Lev. 11:1-47; 20:25-26; Dt. 14:3-19). And so, when Peter hears a voice telling him to kill and eat them, he is appalled. The conviction that some animals are impure has been drilled into him from his youth; the idea of receiving them into his body in the form of a meal is repugnant to him.
- vv. 15-16 Previously, when Jews declined to eat what the Law declared to be unclean, they were commended and their refusal was held up as an example of faithfulness (Dan. 1:1-16; see Ezk. 4:9-15). But this time is different. Instead of withdrawing the command or praising Peter for his fidelity to the Law, the voice reaffirms the command, stating "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean". The implication is clear: the dietary restrictions of the Law were temporary, and God has now voided them, declaring all foods to be acceptable (see Mk. 7:14-15; Rom. 14:14-20; 1 Cor. 8:8; Col. 2:16; 1 Tim. 4:3-4). By extension, the Jewish traditions which labeled Gentiles as unclean, in part because of their dietary practices, have also been annulled (v. 28).
- This passage supports the principle that the laws of the Old Covenant are not eternally immutable, but are subject to being superseded, revised, or repealed by the One who gave them (see Heb. 7:18-19; 8:13; Mt. 12:1-8).
- vv. 17-23 Peter's vision is intended to prepare him for what happens next: even while he is mulling over what he has seen, the men sent by Cornelius appear, and he is instructed by the Spirit to accompany them without delay. He does so, taking along six of the believers from Joppa, perhaps as witnesses (Acts 11:11-12).
- vv. 24-29 Cornelius gathers together a large number of friends and family, expecting to hear a word of great importance. His worshipful response to Peter's arrival reflects this anticipation, and indicates that he views Peter as a messenger of God. But Peter rejects any reverence shown to him personally, stating "I am only a man myself" (see Acts 14:8-15).
- vv. 30-33 The first part of Cornelius' statement, "we are all here in the presence of God" is an acknowledgement of God's omniscience and omnipresence, a recognition of the fact that, wherever we are and whatever we are doing, we are in full view of God (Heb. 4:12-13; Ps. 33:13-15; Pr. 5:21; Jer. 23:24). And the second part, "to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us" is a statement that they embrace this fact, that they are ready to hear and heed the word of God as they stand before Him. The theological term for this is *coram Deo*, which means "to live one's entire life in the presence of God, under the authority of God, to the glory of God" [R.C. Sproul].
- vv. 34-35 When Peter states that "God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right," he does not mean that all religions lead to God, or that being a good person is all that is necessary. On the contrary, it is "everyone who believes in him" who "receives forgiveness of sins", and this comes only "through his name" (v. 43; see Acts 4:12; Jn. 14:6). What he means is that national origin and ethnic identity do not confer any advantage, or form any impediment, to being accepted by God. All who come to Him through faith in Christ will be received equally on that basis (Rom 3:21-22; 10:12).
- vv. 36-43 Peter now reviews the historical facts of the gospel. The key observation here is that the "good news of peace through Jesus Christ", i.e. the promise of reconciliation with God and freedom from sin, is based on the historical facts of Jesus life, death, and resurrection. It is because these events *actually happened* that we have hope (see 1 Cor. 15:1-19). The apostles were not devising clever tales (2 Pet. 1:16), or passing on stories heard from others, but testifying to what they saw and experienced (Acts 1:8, 21-22; 2:32; 3:15; 4:20; 5:32; 10:39, 41; 13:31; Jn. 19:35; 1 Jn. 1:1; 4:14). The conclusion is that "everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (v. 43); i.e. that the offer of salvation, which is made possible by the work of Christ, is made to every person, without exception.
- vv. 44-48 As Peter is speaking, the Holy Spirit comes upon all of his hearers, so that they were "speaking in tongues and praising God", as at Pentecost (Acts 2:3-11; see 19:6). The Jews who came with Peter were astonished, and were persuaded by this supernatural display that God had accepted the Gentiles, just as he had accepted them, on the basis of faith in Christ (see Acts 11:17-18). As a result, they received water baptism, just as the those who believed at Pentecost (Acts 2:37-41).

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# Unit 11 – Gentile Christians

## Acts 11:1- 30

### Text

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<sup>1</sup> The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. <sup>2</sup> So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him <sup>3</sup> and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

<sup>4</sup> Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: <sup>5</sup> “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. <sup>6</sup> I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. <sup>7</sup> Then I heard a voice telling me, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’

<sup>8</sup> “I replied, ‘Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’

<sup>9</sup> “The voice spoke from heaven a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ <sup>10</sup> This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.

<sup>11</sup> “Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. <sup>12</sup> The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man’s house. <sup>13</sup> He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. <sup>14</sup> He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.’

<sup>15</sup> “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. <sup>16</sup> Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with <sup>a</sup> water, but you will be baptized with <sup>b</sup> the Holy Spirit.’ <sup>17</sup> So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?”

<sup>18</sup> When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

<sup>19</sup> Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. <sup>20</sup> Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. <sup>21</sup> The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

<sup>22</sup> News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. <sup>23</sup> When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. <sup>24</sup> He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

<sup>25</sup> Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, <sup>26</sup> and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

<sup>27</sup> During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. <sup>28</sup> One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) <sup>29</sup> The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. <sup>30</sup> This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

<sup>a</sup>16 Or in <sup>b</sup>16 Or in

### Open

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Have you ever been criticized for associating with the “wrong” kind of people?

### Discover

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1. Why is Peter so careful to recount everything that he experienced and witnessed (vv. 1-18)?

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2. Verses 1-17 are essentially a retelling of the events just recounted in chapter 10. What additional information, if any, does this passage provide?

3. What specific elements of the narrative in vv. 1-17 indicate that God is orchestrating all of these events?

4. What do these verses tell us about salvation as a gift of God?

v. 18

  

v. 21

  

v. 23

5. Why do you think the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch (v. 22)?

6. Why would Barnabas and Paul spend a whole year teaching the new believers in one city (v. 26)? Wouldn't it have been a better use of their time to spread the gospel in other unreached areas?

7. Why is it significant that the disciples were called "Christians" for the first time in Antioch? (v. 26)

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## Apply

- In this passage, we see that those who left Jerusalem due to persecution took the opportunity to witness for Christ in their new surroundings. What does this tell us about their beliefs and attitudes?

- How can you likewise take advantage of your own unplanned or undesired circumstances?

# Commentary

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- vv. 1-18 This passage is a retelling of the events related in the previous chapter. Why go over the same ground again? First, the repetition of this material emphasizes its importance in salvation history: this is a key turning point in the extension of the gospel to the Gentiles. Second, differences in perspective between multiple narratives of an event give us a more complete understanding; as, for example, the accounts of Jesus' life in the four gospels. And third, the retelling of this story by Peter to those who were questioning him indicates how important it was that the church as a whole understand everything that had happened. This understanding is what led to their acceptance of the Gentiles, and to further missions work among them (vv. 18-20).
- vv. 1-3 The initial reaction of these Jewish Christians, upon learning that the Gentiles had received the gospel, reveals how great a change was required in their beliefs and attitudes. Until this time, they had assumed that following Jesus required one to fully embrace Judaism, including its laws and dietary restrictions. In other words, they assumed that becoming a disciple of Christ was something that only an observant Jew could do. And so they were confused by these events, in which Peter offered the gospel to Gentiles with no requirement that they be circumcised, and even shared meals with them. They demanded an explanation.
- vv. 4-8 It is notable that when challenged, Peter does not rely on an appeal to his authority as an apostle. Nor does he take personal offense. Instead, he willingly explains his actions, sharing freely everything he has seen and heard, the "whole story" "from the beginning". In doing so, he guides these believers along the same spiritual and theological journey that he had traveled himself. Pastors and teachers, and all those who are mature in their understanding, would be wise to emulate Peter's example (see 2 Tim. 2:24-25; 4:1-2; 1 Pet. 3:15).
- vv. 9-10 The repetition of the command emphasizes its importance. The ritual impurity of specific foods in the Mosaic Law has now been eliminated (see Mk. 7:14-20). More importantly, the impurity of the Gentiles with regard to the Law of Moses has been done away with as well. The ceremonial cleansing from sin offered by the Law has been replaced by the actual cleansing from sin obtained through Christ, a cleansing made available to all people on the basis of faith rather than ethnic or racial identity (Acts 15:9). Thus, there is no longer any distinction between Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2:11-22), and no legitimate reason for Jews not to share meals with Gentiles (see Acts 2:11-14).
- vv. 11-14 This portion of the story provides additional detail which corroborates Peter's testimony, and confirms that these events were the work of God. First, he notes that "six brothers" went with him to the house in Caesarea. These would be witnesses who could be consulted to verify what Peter was saying, twice the number usually required (see Mt. 18:16; 2 Cor. 13:1). Second, note the timing: the appearance of three men from Caesarea occurred "right then", that is, immediately after Peter's vision. This was not mere coincidence, but evidence of a divine purpose at work. Third, Peter received a word from the Spirit instructing him to accompany these men back to Caesarea. And fourth, when Cornelius related the vision he had received, it contained details that he could only have known from divine revelation; i.e., Simon Peter's name and location, and the fact that the message he carried would bring salvation (see Acts 2:21, 47; 4:12). Not only that, but the contents of the visions received by Peter and Cornelius corresponded with one another, indicating that God was the author of both.
- vv. 15-17 These things happened to Cornelius and his household in the same manner as they happened to the apostles in "the beginning" at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), i.e. with the sign of speaking in tongues accompanying the reception of the Holy Spirit. This outward evidence of God's presence and activity, which both groups shared in common, indicates that the Gentiles are to be received into the church as equal participants in the gospel, with no distinction between Jew and Gentile (v. 17).  
Note that although Peter states that the outpouring of the Spirit happened "as I began to speak", the previous narrative in Acts 10:34-44 tells us that he had time to share the gospel, which included the statement that "*everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name*" (10:43). And so the Holy Spirit was poured out in connection with the preaching of the gospel (11:14), and the reception of the Spirit accompanied their response of repentance (11:18) and of faith (15:7-8). Whether the gift of the Spirit preceded their faith and repentance, or vice versa, however, cannot be established from this passage; they are presented as happening virtually simultaneously.
- v. 18 The response of the Jerusalem believers, that "even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life" shows that they understood the centrality of God's sovereignty in salvation; i.e., that not only forgiveness of sins, but even repentance itself, is a gift of God (see Acts 13:48; 16:14; 18:27; 2 Tim. 2:25).

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v. 19 This verse links back to 8:1-4. There, we learned that after Stephen was martyred “a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria” (8:1). In that passage, the author noted that those who were forced to flee Jerusalem “preached the word wherever they went” (8:4). Here again we see the effects of that persecution, as the believers who were threatened and harassed because of their faith in Christ “traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word”.

Note that these migrations were not the result of any planned or organized missionary strategy; ordinary believers were simply responding to their circumstances, reacting to events that required them to leave one place for another. But rather than complain about the hardships involved in uprooting their families and leaving behind the lives they had built in Jerusalem, they took the opportunity to share the gospel with their new neighbors and associates.

vv. 20-21 Some of those who experienced persecution in Jerusalem were not residents, but “men from Cyprus and Cyrene” who had traveled there, either for the feast of Pentecost (2:10) or for other reasons. While those mentioned in verse 19 shared the gospel only with Jews, these men “began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus”. As a result, “a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord”. Note that, although the verbal witness of these men was clearly instrumental, the response of faith and repentance among those to whom they spoke is credited, not to the persuasiveness of their speech, but to the fact that “the Lord’s hand was with them”.

vv. 22-24 In response to the reports from Antioch, the church in Jerusalem sent one of their leaders, Barnabas, as an emissary to these new believers. Supported by his endorsement and encouragement, the gospel continued to spread, and a “great number” of them “were brought to the Lord”. Note again that all of this is attributed to God and not man; it is “what the grace of God had done”.

Doubtless Barnabas was chosen for this mission because of his ability to discern the work of the Lord even in the midst of new and uncertain circumstances; as when Saul, the former persecutor of the church, presented himself as a disciple (9:26-28). In navigating these shifting theological and sociological currents, it was critical that someone who was “full of the Holy Spirit and faith” be enlisted to assess the genuineness of this apparent movement of the Spirit.

vv. 25-26 We last read of Saul (also called Paul; 13:9) in 9:30, where he was bundled off to Tarsus, his birthplace (22:3), after his bold preaching resulted in attempts on his life by the Hellenistic Jews (9:29). Recall that Barnabas was the one who endorsed Saul and helped him gain acceptance among the believers in Jerusalem (9:26-28). Now, Barnabas realizes that he needs help instructing the “great number” (vv. 21, 24, 26) of new believers in Antioch. And so he travels to Tarsus to recruit Paul to join him in the work there.

Note the importance which was placed on instructing the new believers, and not merely making converts (see 18:11; 19:8-10; 20:19-20). It was so important that, at this critical point in the advance of Christianity, two of its key figures paused and focused on teaching for “a whole year”, building up and strengthening the church in one location rather than seeking out new mission fields. Later, this would bear fruit for further mission work, as Antioch became a sending church and base of operations for Paul’s missionary journeys (Acts 13:1-3, 14:26-27, 18:22-23).

The fact that “*The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch*” indicates that they were no longer considered a Jewish sect, but a separate group, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles, with distinct beliefs and practices. Primary among these beliefs was the centrality of Jesus Christ; thus, they were called “Christians”, or followers of Christ.

vv. 27-30 In addition to the teaching ministry of Barnabas and Saul, the ministry of prophecy also served to strengthen the church at Antioch. Although prophecy in the New Testament can take the form of exhortation, i.e. “forth-telling”, this specific incident is a case of predictive prophecy, or “fore-telling”. Luke assumes that his readers, looking back on this as a past event, will know which famine is being referred to, noting only that it “*happened during the reign of Claudius*”. As recorded by the historian Josephus, this was likely the great famine which took place between 46-48 A.D., when Tiberius Alexander was procurator of Judea.

The point of the narrative, however, is not the supernatural nature of the prophecy, but the response of the church. In anticipation of the need of their “brothers and sisters living in Judea”, the disciples in Antioch took up a collection to help them, and commissioned Barnabas and Saul to deliver it. Thus, the principle of mutual aid, earlier seen among the members of a given congregation (2:44, 4:32-35), is extended to include Christians in other geographic locations, as members of one universal body of Christ.

# Unit 12 – A False God and a False Prophet

## Acts 12:1- 13:12

### Text

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<sup>1</sup> It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. <sup>2</sup> He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. <sup>3</sup> When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. <sup>4</sup> After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

<sup>5</sup> So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

<sup>6</sup> The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. <sup>7</sup> Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

<sup>8</sup> Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. <sup>9</sup> Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. <sup>10</sup> They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

<sup>11</sup> Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen."

<sup>12</sup> When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. <sup>13</sup> Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. <sup>14</sup> When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

<sup>15</sup> "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

<sup>16</sup> But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. <sup>17</sup> Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

<sup>18</sup> In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. <sup>19</sup> After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there. <sup>20</sup> He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. After securing the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply.

<sup>21</sup> On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. <sup>22</sup> They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of man."

<sup>23</sup> Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.

<sup>24</sup> But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.

<sup>25</sup> When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from <sup>a</sup> Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark. <sup>1</sup> Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. <sup>2</sup> While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." <sup>3</sup> So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

<sup>4</sup> The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. <sup>5</sup> When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.

<sup>6</sup> They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, <sup>7</sup> who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. <sup>8</sup> But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. <sup>9</sup> Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, <sup>10</sup> "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?" <sup>11</sup> Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun."

Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. <sup>12</sup> When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

<sup>a</sup> 25 Some manuscripts to

# Open

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- According to the world's perspective, identify one or more "power(s)" that you have. What are the limits of those powers?

# Discover

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1. This passage relates two conflicts between God and his servants and other, seemingly powerful entities. What in these verses illustrates the power of Herod, and by extension, of imperial Rome?

12:1-3	12:19
12:4-6	12:20-22

2. In contrast, what "weapon(s)" did the followers of Christ have? (12:5-10; see 2 Cor. 10:3-4; James 5:16)

3. What was the outcome of this conflict?

4. What did Peter do to bring about this result?

5. What power and influence did Elymas have, or appear to have?

6. What was the result of the conflict between Elymas and the missionaries to Cyprus?

7. Why did the proconsul put his faith in Christ? (13:12)

# Apply

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- What does this passage tell us about different kinds of power? How does that affect your view of yourself and others?

- What does this passage tell us about seemingly hopeless situations, and what our response to them should be?

# Commentary

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vv. 1-18 The narrative now shifts to Jerusalem.

In this passage, we have an account of Peter being miraculously released from prison. But we also read about James, who was “*put to death with the sword*” (v. 2). Why was only one of them delivered? We do not know; God’s specific purposes are not revealed. The contrasting fates of these two men reminds us that the Lord’s thoughts, and his ways, are higher than ours (Isa. 55:8-9; see Isa. 40:13-14; Rom. 11:33-34). God can deliver from trials at any time, but he sometimes chooses not to do so. Nor does he necessarily explain his reasons. Our role is not to judge his actions, but rather to trust in his wisdom, his goodness, and his power, knowing that “*weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning*” (Ps. 30:5b; see Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:17; 1 Pet. 1:6-7).

vv. 1-3 Two clarifications are in order. The “Herod” whose actions are recounted here is Herod Agrippa I. He is the grandson of Herod the Great, who received the wise men on their journey to see the newborn Jesus, and who ordered that the male infants of Bethlehem be slaughtered when they did not return (Mt. 2:1-18). Both of these men are to be distinguished from Herod Antipas, the Tetrach of Galilee, who executed John the Baptist (Mt. 14:1-12) and who was instrumental in bringing about the death of Christ (Lk. 13:31, 23:6-12; Acts 4:27-28).

Also, note that the “James” whom Herod executes is James the apostle, the brother of John and the son of Zebedee (Mk. 1:19-20). After his death, another James, the brother of Jesus, took a prominent role in the leadership of the church (Acts 12:17; 15:13-21; 21:18; Gal. 1:19; 2:9)

Why did Herod persecute the church? As a Jew, perhaps he was determined to eliminate what he viewed as a heretical cult. But as a political leader, he would also have been alarmed at reports of religious tumult among the people he was charged with governing (Acts 6:12, 7:54-8:1; and later, 17:5; 19:25-41; 21:27-36). A failure to maintain order would not be tolerated by the emperor.

v. 4 Herod’s intentions regarding Peter are not benevolent; he is not interested in an evenhanded administration of justice. Although the NIV indicates that he “*intended to bring him out for public trial*”, the Greek text does not specifically mention a trial; a literal rendering would be closer to the ESV, “*intending . . . to bring him out to the people*.” Given Herod’s treatment of James, it is likely that his intention was to bring Peter out for a public execution, rather than a public trial.

Peter’s release, which came during the Passover feast, reminds us of the deliverance which all believers experience from the power of sin and Satan (Acts 13:39; 26:18; Rom. 6:18, 22; 8:2). For we enjoy this freedom as a result of an event which occurred during Passover, the death of Christ (Jn. 18:28; see 1 Cor. 5:7; 1 Pet. 1:19; Heb. 9:15; Rev. 1:5). And Passover itself was the commemoration of a great deliverance, that of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt (Ex. 12:1-51; see Lev. 26:13; Deut. 5:15; 6:21; 15:15; 24:18).

The fact that Peter was guarded by “*four squads of four soldiers each*”, i.e., one squad of four soldiers for each 6-hour watch, emphasizes how securely he was being held, and therefore, how miraculous was his deliverance. Note also the mention of his being bound, with not one, but “*two chains*” (v. 6).

v. 5 Consider what is being contrasted here: “***Peter was kept in prison, BUT the church was earnestly praying to God for him.***” [emphasis added] A secularist would mock the idea that the power of prayer could be compared to the political and military might of imperial Rome. In the 1930’s, when it was suggested to Stalin that he should cease oppressing Catholics in Russia, he responded derisively, asking, “*how many divisions does the Pope have?*” But the events of Peter’s deliverance show this attitude to be gravely mistaken.

vv. 6-11 It is instructive to note what Peter did to initiate his own deliverance, which is nothing. He did not devise a clever plan of escape. He did not overpower the guards. He did not, Houdini-like, release his own shackles. He was asleep, and humanly speaking, utterly helpless. But when the chains fell off his wrists, and the angel commanded Peter to get up and follow him to freedom, he obeyed. In the same way, our freedom from sin is due, not to our own efforts, but to what Christ has done on our behalf (2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 3:5). Our part is merely to respond in faith and obedience.

vv. 12-15 When Peter goes to the place where the believers were gathered to pray, he is left standing at the door while they argue about whether it is really him! Initially, they deny the possibility, and speculate that it must be an angelic messenger, perhaps his guardian angel (see Mt. 18:10). Although they had been praying earnestly for him, when their prayers were actually answered, they couldn’t believe it. This suggests, first, that God often answers our prayers in gloriously unexpected ways (Eph. 3:20); and second, that God answers prayer even when our faith is weak (see Mt. 17:20; Lk. 17:6; but note also Mt. 21:21; Jam. 1:5-7).

- vv. 16-17 Peter continued knocking, seeking admission to the house so that he could share the good news of his deliverance. This is the kind of persistence that we are encouraged to emulate (Lk. 8:4-15; 11:5-10; 18:1-8; Gal. 6:9; Eph. 6:18; Heb. 12:3; Jam. 1:1-8; Rev. 2:3). Do we abandon our efforts to tell others what God has done when we encounter a “door” that does not immediately open? We should not give up so easily, but remember that God has promised to strengthen us (Isa. 40:31; see Eph. 3:16; Col. 1:11; 2 Thess. 2:16-17; 3:3). Perhaps behind that door a debate is raging, and it will eventually be opened!
- vv. 18-19 The penalty in the Roman empire for allowing prisoners to escape was death: note the reaction of the jailer in Acts 16:16-28, when the doors of the prison in which Paul and Silas were being held were opened by an earthquake.
- Verse 19 states that Herod “went from Judea to Caesarea”. Since the city of Caesarea is actually within the province of Judea, this can be understood to mean that he left the city of Jerusalem, in Judea, and traveled to the city of Caesarea. This interpretation is supported by the Greek verb used here, translated “went”. One sense of the term is “went down”, and it is typically used of someone traveling away from Jerusalem, as the city is on a raised plateau about 2490 feet above sea level (see Acts 8:5; 11:27; 15:30; 18:22).
- vv. 20-23 This narrative is included to remind us that God will eventually judge those who arrogantly put themselves in God’s place and disregard his authority, those who oppose him and oppress his people (see Acts 1:15-20; 4:25-31; Rev. 18:1-24).
- Herod did not demand that he be worshiped as a god, as Nebuchadnezzar had done in ancient times (Dan. 3:1-3). However, when the people of Tyre and Sidon spontaneously hailed him as one, calling out, “*This is the voice of a god, not of man*” (v. 22), he implicitly accepted their acclamation. He did not protest, or disavow their worship. Contrast this with Paul and Barnabas’ response in a similar situation (Acts 14:8-18). Thus Herod failed to “give praise to God”. He was struck down by an angel of the Lord, and in time, perished, being “eaten by worms”; a gruesome, but instructive, end. King Nebuchadnezzar received the same lesson, in a humiliating but less fatal manner (Dan. 4:28-37).
- vv. 24-25 In the conclusion to this section, we see that by removing Herod from the scene, God has eliminated a source of persecution, enabling his word to “spread and flourish”.
- The narrative now turns to Barnabas and Saul, as they return to Antioch following their mission to Jerusalem (11:27-30).
- v. 2-3 Here as elsewhere, prayer is associated with fasting (see Ezr. 8:23; Neh. 1:4; Dan. 9:3; Lk. 2:37; Acts 14:23). Fasting was a recognized expression of piety in Jesus’ day; the fact that his followers did not fast prompted questions by the Pharisees and others (Mt. 9:14; Lk. 5:30-33). Jesus replied that his disciples would fast after his departure (Lk. 5:33-35), and he gave instructions for the proper observance of a fast (Mt. 6:16-18). He also fasted himself, in preparation for being tested in the desert (Mt. 4:2).
- Note that the church is not directed to call Barnabas and Saul to ministry, but rather to officially acknowledge the call which they have already received from the Holy Spirit.
- vv. 4-5 Although the leaders of the church at Antioch were the human instruments of their commissioning, Paul and Barnabas were “sent on their way by the Holy Spirit”, because their journey was taken at His initiative and direction. Their preaching in the Jewish synagogue at Salamis is consistent with Paul’s regular practice of seeking out the local synagogue when he arrived in a new town (Acts 13:14; 14:1; 17:1-2; 18:4, 19; 19:8). It is also consistent with the priority reflected in the statement that salvation is “*to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile*” (Rom. 1:16; see Acts 3:25-26; 13:46-47).
- vv. 6-8 The missionaries respond to an invitation from the Roman proconsul, a Gentile, to come and speak the word of God. However, they are opposed by his attendant, Bar-Jesus or Elymas. This man is of Jewish heritage, but he does not hold to an orthodox Jewish faith, as he practices sorcery, which is condemned in the Old Testament (Ex. 22:18; Dt. 18:10, 14; 2 Ki. 17:17; Mal. 3:5). He is a false prophet, one who has perverted (v.10) the faith of his ancestors in order to gain influence over a powerful man, Sergius Paulus.
- vv. 9-12 The response of Paul is immediate and uncompromising. He does not seek a middle ground between the gospel and the teachings of this “child of the devil”. Instead, he denounces him as one who is “an enemy of everything that is right”, and who is “full of all kinds of deceit and trickery”, and proclaims a judgment of temporary blindness. Note that Paul did not do this on his own initiative or on his own authority. Rather, he was “filled with the Holy Spirit”, and the judgment which fell on Elymas was not from Paul, but was a manifestation of the “hand of the Lord”.

# Unit 13 – Ministry to Jews and Greeks

## Acts 13:13-14:20

### Text

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<sup>13</sup> From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. <sup>15</sup> After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the leaders of the synagogue sent word to them, saying, “Brothers, if you have a word of exhortation for the people, please speak.”

<sup>16</sup> Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: “Fellow Israelites and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me! <sup>17</sup> The God of the people of Israel chose our ancestors; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt; with mighty power he led them out of that country; <sup>18</sup> for about forty years he endured their conduct <sup>a</sup> in the wilderness; <sup>19</sup> and he overthrew seven nations in Canaan, giving their land to his people as their inheritance. <sup>20</sup> All this took about 450 years.

“After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet. <sup>21</sup> Then the people asked for a king, and he gave them Saul son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, who ruled forty years. <sup>22</sup> After removing Saul, he made David their king. God testified concerning him: ‘I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.’

<sup>23</sup> “From this man’s descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised. <sup>24</sup> Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel. <sup>25</sup> As John was completing his work, he said: ‘Who do you suppose I am? I am not the one you are looking for. But there is one coming after me whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.’

<sup>26</sup> “Fellow children of Abraham and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. <sup>27</sup> The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. <sup>28</sup> Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. <sup>29</sup> When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the cross and laid him in a tomb. <sup>30</sup> But God raised him from the dead, <sup>31</sup> and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people.

<sup>32</sup> “We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors <sup>33</sup> he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm:

“You are my son;  
today I have become your father.’ <sup>b</sup>

<sup>34</sup> God raised him from the dead so that he will never be subject to decay. As God has said,

“I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.’ <sup>c</sup>

<sup>35</sup> So it is also stated elsewhere:

“You will not let your holy one see decay.’ <sup>d</sup>

<sup>36</sup> “Now when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his ancestors and his body decayed. <sup>37</sup> But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay.

<sup>38</sup> “Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. <sup>39</sup> Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses. <sup>40</sup> Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you:

<sup>41</sup> “Look, you scoffers,  
wonder and perish,  
for I am going to do something in your days  
that you would never believe,  
even if someone told you.’ <sup>e</sup>”

<sup>42</sup> As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. <sup>43</sup> When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.

<sup>44</sup> On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. <sup>45</sup> When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy. They began to contradict what Paul was saying and heaped abuse on him.

<sup>46</sup> Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. <sup>47</sup> For this is what the Lord has commanded us:

“I have made you <sup>f</sup> a light for the Gentiles,  
that you <sup>g</sup> may bring salvation to the ends  
of the earth.’ <sup>h</sup>”

<sup>48</sup> When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

<sup>49</sup> The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. <sup>50</sup> But the Jewish leaders incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. <sup>51</sup> So they shook the dust off their feet as a warning to them and went to Iconium. <sup>52</sup> And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

<sup>1</sup> At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed. <sup>2</sup> But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the other Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. <sup>3</sup> So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders. <sup>4</sup> The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. <sup>5</sup> There was a plot afoot among both Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. <sup>6</sup> But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, <sup>7</sup> where they continued to preach the gospel.

<sup>8</sup> In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth and had never walked. <sup>9</sup> He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed <sup>10</sup> and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.

<sup>11</sup> When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" <sup>12</sup> Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. <sup>13</sup> The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the

city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

<sup>14</sup> But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: <sup>15</sup> "Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. <sup>16</sup> In the past, he let all nations go their own way. <sup>17</sup> Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy." <sup>18</sup> Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.

<sup>19</sup> Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. <sup>20</sup> But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city.

<sup>a</sup> 13:18 Some manuscripts *he cared for them*

<sup>b</sup> 13:33 Psalm 2:7 <sup>c</sup> 13:34 Isaiah 55:3

<sup>d</sup> 13:35 Psalm 16:10 (see Septuagint)

<sup>e</sup> 13:41 Hab. 1:5 <sup>f</sup> 13:47 The Greek is singular.

<sup>g</sup> 13:47 The Greek is singular. <sup>h</sup> 13:47 Isaiah 49:6

## Open

- Have you ever traveled outside your home country? What similarities and differences did you notice between people at home and in other places?

## Discover

1. In the space below, summarize the actions of Paul and Barnabas, and the responses they received, in each place where they ministered.

Paul and Barnabas	Response(s)
Pisidian Antioch	
Iconium	
Lystra	

2. How do Paul and Barnabas react to repeated persecutions? (13:50-51; 14:5-7, 19-20)

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3. Why did Paul and Barnabas go first to the local synagogue when they entered a new town? (13:14; 14:1; see 13:46-47; also Acts 3:26; Rom. 1:16).

4. Why does Paul spend so much time talking about the history of Israel (13:17-22)?

5. To whom do the promises in the Old Testament apply? (see 13:16, 23, 26, 32-39)

6. Jesus was innocent of the charges made against him (13:28; see Lk. 23:4, 14, 22; Heb. 4:15). Why then did God permit him to be executed? (see 2 Cor. 5:21; Colossians 2:13-15).

7. Did following the Law of Moses, which included the sacrificial system, ever remove the guilt of sin? Why does this matter? (13:38-39; see Rom. 3:20; 8:3; Heb. 10:1-4; Gal. 2:16, 21)

8. How does God provide evidence of His existence and His nature to those who do not yet have the gospel? (14:15-17; see Rom. 1:18-20; Ps. 104)

9. In this passage, we see a dramatic contrast between those who receive the message with joy and those who violently oppose it. How do you explain this discrepancy? (13:48; see Jn 6:35-44; Deut. 29:2-4)

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## Apply

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- For non-Jews, in what sense is the history of Israel our history also?
- Were you ever a “scoffer”? What changed?

- Someone might argue that since God has “appointed” those who will believe (13:48), we do not need to sacrifice and work hard to spread the gospel. How would you respond?

# Commentary

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vv. 13-14 From the identification of the group as “Paul and his companions”, we see that Paul is now recognized as the leader of the expedition. John’s departure is noted here only in passing, but in 15:36-41 we learn that Paul considered his leave-taking to be premature, even a “desertion”, and that he refused on that basis to include him in a subsequent trip. Note that this John is not one of the twelve apostles, but “John, also called Mark” (15:37), who according to the early church Fathers was the author of the second gospel (see also Acts 12:12, 25). References to him in Paul’s writings indicate that the two were later reconciled (Col. 4:10; Phlm. 1:23-24; 2 Tim. 4:11).

vv. 17-20 Paul presents Jesus’ resurrection as the fulfillment of an ancient promise made to the people of Israel (13:23, 32-33) and as the consummation of the saving purposes of God. Those purposes began with the choosing of Abraham and his descendants, and continued through their four centuries of captivity in Egypt, their escape from bondage, their 40-year sojourn in the wilderness, and their eventual conquest of Canaan (13:17-20; see Deut. 4:37-38; 7:1-9; 10:15; 14:2).

Although this address is directed to a primarily Jewish audience, and is based on the history of Israel, Paul explicitly includes “Gentiles who worship God” as being among those to whom the promise has now come (13:16, 26, 38-39).

vv. 21-23 Paul continues the chronology, recounting Israel’s transition from a nation governed by judges to one ruled by kings. The first of these was Saul. His successor was David, from whom Jesus was descended. The promise Paul refers to is found in 2 Sam. 7:12-16 and 1 Chron. 17:11-14; see also Isa. 9:6-7; 11:1-16; 53:1-12; Ezk. 34:22-24.

vv. 24-25 John the Baptist was a transitional figure, preparing the way for Christ (Mt. 3:1-3). He recognized that Jesus was far greater than himself, and pointed to him as the one whom “all the people of Israel” should believe in and follow (John 1:29-34; 3:22-36; Acts 13:25; 19:4). John preached repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and administered baptism as a sign of repentance (Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3). Now Jesus has come, the one through whom that forgiveness of sins is obtained (13:38-39).

vv. 26-27 Paul brings home to his hearers the need for a personal response to what they have heard: “*it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent.*” He appeals to them not to be like “scoffers” who “perish” (13:40-41); they must avoid the faithless response of “the people of Jerusalem and their rulers”, who, despite the clear

testimony of the Old Testament prophets, did not recognize Jesus as the promised Messiah. Instead, they condemned him to death, doing exactly what those prophets had foretold (see John 1:10-11; Acts 2:23-23; 3:13-18; 4:27-28).

vv. 28-31 Jesus was innocent of the charges laid against him, which even Pilate could see (Lk. 23:4, 14, 22). Yet the people wanted him executed, and Pilate submitted to their demand (Lk. 23:23-25).

Not only was Jesus not guilty of these specific charges, but unlike every other person who has ever lived, he was entirely holy and blameless, and therefore did not deserve to die as a punishment for sin (Jn. 8:46; Heb. 4:15; 7:26; 1 Pet. 2:22; 1 Jn. 3:5; see Rom. 3:9-23; 6:23). Why then did God allow him to be crucified? So that through his death he might make atonement (payment) for the sins of others; that is, for our sins (see Rom. 3:25; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13-14; Col. 2:13-15).

vv. 32-33 In the context of the verse quoted here, Psalm 2:7, the title “son” does not refer to the eternal relationship between the members of the Trinity. Rather, it is a coronation title which refers to Jesus’ post-resurrection exaltation and ascension to the throne of David, and his continuing role as king, under God the Father, over all of creation (Heb. 1:3; 10:12; 12:2; see Lk. 22:69; Acts 2:32-36; 5:30-31; Rom 8:34; Eph. 1:20; 1 Pet. 3:22; also, Heb. 1:5; 5:5).

vv. 38-39 The law of Moses, including its system of animal sacrifices, did not justify anyone; that is, make them righteous before God. Indeed, it was completely unable to do so (Rom. 3:20; 8:3). All it did was repeatedly remind the Israelites of their guilt and their need for a Savior. As the author of Hebrews writes (Heb. 10:1-4):

*“The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”*

The good news is that this justification, which neither the Mosaic law nor any religious system of rules and duties can ever accomplish, this forgiveness of sins and freedom from the power of sin, is now available to all who believe, through Jesus Christ the Lord (Gal. 2:16, 21; 3:11, 24).

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- vv. 40-41 The passage quoted is Habakkuk 1:5. Habakkuk was a prophet to the southern kingdom of Judah during the late 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. He warned the unrighteous Jews of that time that God would judge them by raising up a ruthless warrior nation, the Babylonians, to invade and conquer them (Hab. 1:6, 12). However, the people did not take heed and repent, but only scoffed. As a result, when the attack came they were taken by surprise and perished (2 Chron. 36:14-19). Paul warns his hearers not to make the same mistake; not to disregard the warning and the offer of escape from judgment which they were now receiving. Note that Habakkuk 1:5 is only one of many examples (“the prophets”, 13:40). Throughout the Old Testament, the people of Israel repeatedly fell into sin, disregarded the warnings of God’s messengers, and suffered judgment, then repented and were blessed by God, only to repeat the cycle once again (see Neh. 9:26-30).
- vv. 44-45 The opposition by “the Jews” (i.e., the Jewish leaders, 13:50) is attributed, not to the gospel message, but to the base human motive of jealousy (see Acts 5:17; 17:5). They were envious of the crowds that Paul was drawing, and perhaps fearful that their own influence and standing would be diminished. Such a reaction is not unknown even among ministers of the gospel (1 Cor. 3:3-4; contrast Jn. 3:26-30; 1 Cor. 3:5-9).
- vv. 46-47 In rejecting Paul’s message, the Jewish leaders thought they were judging the gospel as unworthy of acceptance. But in reality, they were judging themselves as unworthy to receive it. When men judge God or his works, they are really only passing judgment on themselves. The focus of Paul’s labors now shifts to the Gentiles, although he continues to speak to Jewish audiences when he has the opportunity (Acts 14:1; 17:4, 17; 18:4; 20:21). Note that in emphasizing Gentile ministry, Paul is not settling for an inferior approach, a “Plan B”. It was always God’s intention to extend grace to the Gentiles, as Isa. 49:6, quoted here, indicates (see Lk. 2:25-32; Jn. 4:22). But it was also his plan to do so in a specific order: after the offer of salvation had first been made to the Jews (Acts 3:26; Rom. 1:16; see Mt. 15:21-28; but note also Rom. 11:1-36).
- vv. 48-52 In contrast to the reaction of the Jews, many Gentiles who heard the message “were glad and honored the word of the Lord”. Luke attributes their joyful acceptance of the gospel to God’s sovereign choosing; they believed, not because they were more clever, more spiritually sensitive, or more righteous than others, but because they had been “appointed for eternal life” (see Jn. 15:16; 1 Thess. 5:9; Mt. 11:27).
- vv. 1-2 Although salvation is due to God’s sovereign choice (13:48), He uses human means to bring about conversion, primarily the preaching and teaching of the gospel (Rom. 1:15-16; 10:13-15). The fact that faith is a work of the Holy Spirit, and not a work of man, does not excuse us from laboring in the work of the ministry.
- vv. 3-4 The result of Paul and Barnabas’ ministry was a deeply divided city, with the entire population either siding with or against the missionaries. This kind of stark polarization is a common response to the preaching of the gospel (Mt. 10:34-36; Lk. 12:51-53; Lk. 2:34). To those in whose hearts God is working, the gospel is highly attractive; it is the wisdom and power of God, in which they sense the “pleasing aroma” of Christ. But to others, it is a dangerous and destructive foolishness that carries the nauseating stench of death (1 Cor. 1:18, 22-24; 2:14; 2 Cor. 2:15-16).
- vv. 8-10 Luke is very clear on the cause and extent of this man’s infirmity: he was “lame”, he “had been that way from birth”, and he “had never walked”. Thus, his ability to stand and walk could only be due to a miraculous work of God, and not a natural recovery from an injury.
- vv. 11-15 The crowd’s reaction to the man’s healing is extremely positive, but also terribly misguided. They interpret this supernatural display as the work of two of their own gods, Zeus and Hermes! The apostles respond in horror, tearing their clothes at this blasphemy (see Mt. 26:65), and insisting that they are only men, and not gods. They then adapt the message to their hearer’s primitive understanding, urging them to abandon their polytheism and their “worthless” idols, and to turn to the one living God, the creator of all things (see Hab. 2:18-19; Ps. 115:2-8).
- vv. 16-17 Paul appeals to common grace, the blessings which God bestows on all the people of the earth, to bring the crowd to an understanding of His nature as omnipotent and benevolent Creator. Although in the past, God did not reveal himself to all the nations of the earth as fully as he did to Israel, he nevertheless provided ample evidence of his goodness and power through the world which he created and sustains. This providence includes the “rain from heaven and crops in their seasons” which “provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy” (see Rom. 1:18-20; Ps. 104).
- vv. 18-20 When the Jews “from Antioch and Iconium” arrive, they are able to shift the people’s response from attempted worship to attempted murder (compare Mt. 21:8-9; 27:20-23. But God preserves Paul’s life.

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# Unit 14 – Gentiles and the Law

## Acts 14:21-15:35

### Text

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<sup>21</sup> They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, <sup>22</sup> strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said. <sup>23</sup> Paul and Barnabas appointed elders<sup>a</sup> for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. <sup>24</sup> After going through Pisidia, they came into Pamphylia, <sup>25</sup> and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia.

<sup>26</sup> From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. <sup>27</sup> On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. <sup>28</sup> And they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

<sup>1</sup> Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” <sup>2</sup> This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. <sup>3</sup> The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. <sup>4</sup> When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

<sup>5</sup> Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.”

<sup>6</sup> The apostles and elders met to consider this question. <sup>7</sup> After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. <sup>8</sup> God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. <sup>9</sup> He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup> Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup> No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

<sup>12</sup> The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. <sup>13</sup> When they finished,

James spoke up. “Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. <sup>14</sup> Simon<sup>b</sup> has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. <sup>15</sup> The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

<sup>16</sup> “After this I will return  
and rebuild David’s fallen tent.  
Its ruins I will rebuild,  
and I will restore it,  
<sup>17</sup> that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,  
even all the Gentiles who bear my name,  
says the Lord, who does these things<sup>c</sup>  
<sup>18</sup> things known from long ago.<sup>d</sup>

<sup>19</sup> “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. <sup>20</sup> Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. <sup>21</sup> For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”

<sup>22</sup> Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, men who were leaders among the believers. <sup>23</sup> With them they sent the following letter:

The apostles and elders, your brothers,  
To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. <sup>24</sup> We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. <sup>25</sup> So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— <sup>26</sup> men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>27</sup> Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. <sup>28</sup> It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: <sup>29</sup> You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.

<sup>30</sup> So the men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. <sup>31</sup> The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. <sup>32</sup> Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. <sup>33</sup> After spending some time there, they were sent off by the believers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. <sup>34</sup> <sup>e</sup> <sup>35</sup> But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.

<sup>a</sup>23 Or *Barnabas ordained elders*; or *Barnabas had elders elected* <sup>b</sup>14 Greek *Simeon*, a variant of *Simon*; that is, Peter <sup>c</sup>17 Amos 9:11,12 (see Septuagint)

<sup>d</sup>18 Some manuscripts *things*— / <sup>e</sup>18 *the Lord's work is known to him from long ago* <sup>e</sup>34 Some manuscripts include here *But Silas decided to remain there*.

## Open

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- Which of these best describes your natural inclination: (a) rule-maker, (b) rule-keeper, (c) rule-bender, (d) rule-breaker, or (e) anarchist?

## Discover

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1. Chapter 15 recounts the emergence and resolution of a critical theological issue. State this issue in the form of a question. What conclusion did the apostles and elders at Jerusalem come to?

2. In reaching this conclusion, what evidence did they consider?

3. Is this question still relevant for us today? Why or why not?

4. Why did the leaders at Jerusalem choose the specific things in vv. 20 and 29 to ask the Gentiles to observe? Are we still obligated to follow these precepts today? Why or why not?

5. In addition to (possibly) these things, are there any other rules or laws which we as Christians are required to follow? (see 1 Cor. 9:21; Jn. 14:15, 14:23-24; 15:10)

6. Under the Old Covenant, did the Jews make themselves acceptable to God by following the Law (15:10; see Heb. 10:1-3)?

## Apply

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- To what extent do you feel that your standing with God depends on how consistently you obey His commands?
- Do you think that guilt is a good thing, or a bad thing?

# Commentary

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vv. 21-22 At the conclusion of their successful ministry in Derbe, the missionaries return to the cities where they had recently been persecuted, “*strengthening the disciples and encouraging them*”. They do not allow the threat of injury, or even death, to keep them from this vital work. This raises a question: should we be unconcerned for our personal safety when engaged in gospel ministry? Should we ignore danger when following what we understand to be God’s call?

On the one hand, we know that God is able to protect his people (Jn. 17:11-15; Rom. 15:31; 2 Thess. 3:3; 2 Tim. 4:18; 2 Pet. 2:9; see Ps. 12:7; 27:5; 31:20; 140:4; 141:90). And Paul explicitly disregards prophetic warnings when preparing to travel to Jerusalem (Acts 21:10-14). But we also see that Paul and Barnabas fled Iconium when they received news of an imminent attack (Acts 14:5-6), and they left Pisidian Antioch in response to persecution (Acts 13:50-51; see Mt. 10:23; also Acts 9:23-25).

Perhaps the only firm conclusion we can draw is that we should be courageous, trusting at all times in God’s care and provision—but also prudent and clear-eyed about the risks we face; not heedlessly rushing into, or remaining in, perilous situations. Most importantly, we must ask the Holy Spirit to guide us, and to give us wisdom and discernment (Col. 1:9-10).

The statement that “*We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God*” does not mean that we should seek out suffering or persecution in order to qualify for heaven. Rather, Paul is warning that such experiences are to be expected by those who follow Christ (see Jn. 14:20; 2 Tim. 3:12). Therefore, we should not be surprised, or regard them as a sign of God’s disfavor (1 Pet. 4:12-13; Heb. 12:5-7). Instead, we should receive them with joy (Jam. 1:2-4). This truth was not theoretical for those who had recently come to faith in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch: the persecutors of Paul and Barnabas in these places would likely persecute them also.

v. 23 Appointing elders helped ensure that these new believers would “remain true to the faith” (v. 22). It was essential for the churches in this region, buffeted by corrupting religious influences, to be led by godly men who could discern, teach, and defend the truth of the gospel (Tit. 1:5-9).

vv. 24-28 Paul and Barnabas’ return to their commissioning church at Antioch must have been a time of great rejoicing in “all that God had done through them”. Most significantly, he had “opened a door of faith to the Gentiles”, reinforcing the growing understanding that the Jewish people were not the sole, or perhaps even the primary, focus of the gospel.

15:1 The purity of the gospel has always been under attack, from the time of the apostles until now. This gospel is the good news that salvation is by grace through faith, and that it is not the result of our own works, but is a free gift from God, a gift that is based on the finished work of Christ on the cross (Eph. 2:8-9; 2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 3:5; see Heb. 7:27; 10:10).

The “Solas” of the Reformation were a reclamation of these truths, i.e., that salvation is *Sola Gratia*, *Sola Fide*, and *Solus Christus* (by “grace alone”, through “faith alone”, and in “Christ alone”). The word “alone” is key, because often, false teachers do not explicitly deny the importance of faith in Christ, but rather insist that faith is not sufficient, and that more must be added to it in order to make one acceptable to God. In this case, the “more” which is claimed to be necessary is physical circumcision and adherence to the Law of Moses (v. 5; see Rom. 3:28-30; 4:9-12; Gal. 2:1-5).

vv. 2-4 When Paul and Barnabas traveled from town to town preaching the gospel, they witnessed the Gentiles being converted on the basis of faith, without adopting the laws or religious practices of Judaism (Acts 13:38-39). And this is what they reported when they arrived in Jerusalem.

v. 5 Some of the Pharisees who had come to accept Jesus as their Messiah argued that although Gentiles could be saved, they first had to become Jewish converts, or *proselytes*, which required circumcision and adherence to the Jewish law.

vv. 6-11 Peter’s appeal is based on his experience of preaching to Gentiles and seeing them come to faith, receiving the Holy Spirit as a sign of God’s acceptance (Acts 10:1-11:18). Note Peter’s clear statement that purification of the heart, formerly represented in Judaism by the blood sacrifices of the Mosaic Law, was now accomplished through faith alone rather than through any religious rite (see Heb. 9:21-22; 10:1-3; 10:19-23).

vv. 10-11 Not only does Peter state that the Gentiles need not adopt the Law of Moses, he goes further and acknowledges that the Jewish people themselves had not been able to keep the Law; it was “*a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear*”. In other words, not only is adherence to the Law no longer required, but making oneself acceptable to God through law-keeping was never actually possible (Heb. 10:1-3).

Peter’s emphatic “No!” makes clear that a reliance on law-keeping as a means of salvation is utterly incompatible with coming to God on the basis of grace (see Gal. 3:2).

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vv. 13-14 The fact that James speaks last, and that his judgment is the final recorded word on the matter (vv. 19-21), highlights his leadership position in the Jerusalem church (see Acts 12:17; 21:17-19). His argument is that, based on what they have seen and heard, God has clearly acted to “choose a people for his name from the Gentiles”. Just as in the past he chose Israel out of all the nations to be his “own people” and his “treasured possession” (Ex. 6:7; 19:5-6; Dt. 4:20; 7:6; 14:2), he has now chosen to call to himself, from among the Gentiles, those who will belong to him.

vv. 15-18 In the text cited here, Amos 9:11-12, the prophet anticipates the restoration of the Davidic kingdom. Amos’ description of David’s “tent” as being fallen and in ruins was predictive, for at the time of this prophecy, about 750-760 B.C., both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel enjoyed peace and prosperity. However, they had become morally corrupt, and Amos foretold their downfall, followed by the promise of eventual restoration.

That Jesus was the one who would reign eternally as the heir of David is a common theme in the New Testament (Lk. 1:31-33; Acts 2:29-36; Heb. 1:8; see 2 Sam. 7:16; Isa. 9:6-7; Dan. 2:44; 7:14, 27). He is the one who restores the Davidic kingdom, not only for the people of Israel, but for all the peoples of the earth.

vv. 19-21 James’ resolution of the matter is rather surprising. He does not tell the Gentiles to keep the Ten Commandments. Nor does he instruct them to obey the “moral” laws of Moses, while disregarding the “civil” and “ceremonial” laws. In fact, the few instructions which he does give include both matters which are “moral” (the prohibitions against sexual immorality and idolatry), and those which would be considered “ceremonial” (the prohibition against consuming blood and the meat of strangled animals). What are we to make of this?

First, James is addressing the question of what Gentiles must do in order to “be saved” (15:1). The Pharisees claimed that they must be circumcised and follow the law of Moses (15:5), and James rejects this view (see Eph. 2:14-16). However, he is also concerned with how Jews and Gentiles are to fellowship together. By avoiding the specific behaviors listed here (sexual immorality, idolatry, and those dietary practices which were especially offensive to Jews), Gentile Christians would avoid making themselves odious to their Jewish brethren. Note that Paul gives similar instructions in 1 Cor. 8:1-13; 9:19-23, where he asserts his freedom from all dietary laws, but also declares his intention to do nothing that would interfere with fellowship and evangelism; see also 1 Cor. 10:14-33.

Since Christians do not accept the Mosaic Law as a set of binding rules, does this mean we are *antinomian*, or without law? Should each of us simply do whatever seems right to us (Jdg. 17:6)? No; as Paul states, “I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law” (1 Cor. 9:21). Under the new covenant, Christians do have a set of rules, or precepts, for conduct: the teachings of Christ and of his apostles (2 Pet. 3:2). It is not the word given through Moses which we must obey, but the word given through Christ (Jn. 14:15, 14:23-24; 15:10, 14).

James’ final remark, that “*the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath*” seems to indicate that, although the Mosaic Law is not binding on Christians as a requirement for salvation, it is nonetheless worth studying as a source of wisdom and understanding.

v. 22 We do not know what process was used to make final this decision; however, we do know that it represented the joint judgment of both the leadership, the “apostles and elders”, and the corporate body of believers, “the whole church”.

v. 24 The fact that the teachings of the Pharisees had disturbed and troubled the church at Antioch is noted, implying that those teachings were false and destructive. Which was true. But this is not always the case: the truth can also be troubling and disturbing (see 1 Ki. 18:17; Dan. 2:3; Mt. 2:3; Mk. 14:32-33; Lk. 1:29; Acts 17:8). In other words, this kind of reaction suggests a conflict between truth and falsehood, but it does not in itself tell us which is which.

v. 28 This message is presented as being coming from “the Holy Spirit and . . . us”. Even though no explicit mention has been made of the Spirit’s involvement in the decision-making process, His presence and leading are acknowledged, and His authority is implicitly appealed to as undergirding that of the apostles and elders. Does this mean that every decision which is agreed to by the leaders and congregation of a church can be said to come from the Holy Spirit? No. Here, the narrative makes clear that their decision is in accord with both the teachings of Scripture and the observed facts concerning how God is working, but unfortunately, such is not always the case.

vv. 30-35 The positive reception to the message which is noted here, and the fact that it is accompanied by the encouragement and strengthening of the believers, provides further testimony as to its validity.

# Unit 15 – Second Missionary Journey Begins

## Acts 15:36-16:10

### Text

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<sup>36</sup> Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing."<sup>37</sup> Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them,<sup>38</sup> but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work.<sup>39</sup> They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus,<sup>40</sup> but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord.<sup>41</sup> He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

<sup>1</sup> Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek.<sup>2</sup> The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him.<sup>3</sup> Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for

they all knew that his father was a Greek.<sup>4</sup> As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey.<sup>5</sup> So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

<sup>6</sup> Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.

<sup>7</sup> When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.<sup>8</sup> So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.<sup>9</sup> During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."<sup>10</sup> After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

### Open

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- When you find yourself in a dispute with someone, is your natural inclination to: (a) dominate them and try to win, (b) yield to preserve the relationship, (c) try to understand their position, (d) seek a compromise, (e) walk away, or (f) other?

### Discover

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1. With so much of the world still in spiritual darkness, why would Paul and Barnabas spend time going back to the places they had already been (15:36)? Wasn't this a misuse of their time and resources?

2. What was the substance of Paul and Barnabas' disagreement (15:37-41)? Which of them do you tend to agree with? Why?

3. Do you think there is ever a time when believers should separate, rather than continuing to serve God together? If so, when should they do so, and when should they not?

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4. What do the following passages teach concerning cultural adaptation in evangelism?

1 Cor. 8:1-13	Rom. 14:1-23
1 Cor. 9:12-23	Gal. 2:11-16
1 Cor. 10:14-33	

5. Based on these passages, can you state a principle that identifies when it would be appropriate to comply with a religious "law", and when it would not be?

6. What did Paul teach concerning circumcision? (see Gal. 2:3-5; 5:1-12; 1 Cor. 7:18-20)

7. Do you think Paul's decision to have Timothy circumcised was in conflict with the decision of the Jerusalem council (15:1-30), and with his own teaching? Why or why not?

8. Why were the missionaries unable to preach in Asia, and in Bythina (16:6-7)? Did that mean they had made a mistake?

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## Apply

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In what way have you used your freedom in Christ to adapt to others, in order to share the gospel with them? In what ways could you do so?

Has a concern over what other Christians would think ever hindered you from associating openly with unbelievers?

# Commentary

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v. 36 Instead of immediately setting off for new areas of the ancient world, where the gospel had not yet been preached (see Rom. 15:20; 2 Cor. 10:15-16), Paul suggests to Barnabas that they “*go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing*”. Paul is aware that even in places where there has been a genuine and joyful reception of the gospel, the dangers of apostasy, division, and false teaching are always present (Gal. 1:6-9; 2:4; Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 15:1-2, 12; 2 Cor. 11:2-4, 12-14; 26; 1 Tim. 1:3; 2 Pet. 2:1).

This is true because Satan does not willingly yield spiritual “territory,” and does not abandon it even after it has been wrested from his grasp; rather, he lies in wait and schemes to undermine the continuing work of the gospel (1 Pet. 5:8; see Job 1:7; 2 Cor. 2:11; Eph. 6:11). Therefore, we cannot rest on past victories. If even the congregations that were founded and instructed by apostles were at risk of wandering from the faith, we must always be vigilant, regarding not only ourselves (Mt. 24:42-44; Lk. 12:35-40; 2 Jn. 1:8), but also our brothers and sisters (Gal. 6:1; Jam. 5:19-20) and our churches (Mt. 7:15; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2).

vv. 37-38 The dispute between Paul and Barnabas is recounted in a matter-of-fact way. We are told that they disagreed concerning whether they should take John Mark on their journey, and that the reason for disagreement was his conduct on a previous mission. The narrator, Luke, does not take a position on whose judgment was superior, nor does he indicate that either Paul or Barnabas acted from any sinful or base motive. Rather, we are told only they could not agree on how to proceed together, and therefore chose to pursue two independent courses of action.

Perhaps we can draw from this an application, that it is not always a bad thing when believers choose to pursue their calling to serve God separately, rather than together. Not all differences can be resolved via logic or appeal to the Scriptures, and there may be occasions when it is better to separate than to be in continual friction. Yes, Paul does warn against conflict and division (1 Cor. 1:10; 11:8; 12:25). But in those cases, his primary concern seems to be unity of spirit, love, and mutual respect, and there is no indication that those qualities were lacking here. Rather, this appears simply to concern a question of how best to apply godly wisdom and judgment.

The risk in such situations is that matters of preference or opinion are often cast as moral or spiritual issues, causing needless conflict, and tempting brothers and sisters to judge one another (Rom. 14:10-13).

vv. 39-40 Although Paul and Barnabas had a “sharp disagreement,” and parted ways as a result, their relationship was apparently not severed: Paul mentions Barnabas elsewhere as a co-laborer for the gospel (1 Cor. 9:6), and also later refers to Mark as a companion who has brought him comfort in prison (Col. 4:10-11).

Note that both of the new teams, Paul and Silas and also Barnabas and Mark, were “*commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord*”, indicating that neither pair was considered by the church to be in rebellion against God, nor acting sinfully.

vv. 1-3 The reader could be forgiven at this point for being a bit confused. Did not Paul just argue strongly that Gentiles could not be required to be circumcised, a judgment which the Jerusalem council endorsed? Did he not stand firmly against those who demanded that Titus be circumcised (Gal. 2:3-5). And in fact, doesn't he argue that Gentiles should not be circumcised (Gal. 5:1-12; 1 Cor. 7:18-20)? How, then, even while he is engaged in communicating the judgment of the Jerusalem council to the churches (Acts 16:4), does he consider it appropriate to have Timothy circumcised? (One suspects that Timothy may have wondered this himself.) Either we have here a massive contradiction which strikes at the heart of the gospel, or something else is going on.

The most likely conclusion is that Paul is making a distinction between a general requirement that one be circumcised in order to be saved, which he rejected, and a voluntary decision to do so in a specific case, in order to eliminate a potential cultural obstacle to Jewish evangelism. This is implied by the statement that Paul took this action concerning Timothy “*because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek*”.

When Judaizers demanded adherence to the Old Testament law, including laws concerning circumcision and dietary restrictions, Paul adamantly opposed them, because the purity and clarity of the gospel were at stake. But he was nevertheless willing to submit to those laws when, in his judgment, doing so would remove a barrier to evangelism (1 Cor. 9:20; see Rom. 14:1-23; 1 Cor. 8:1-13; 1 Cor. 10:14-33; Gal. 2:11-16). In other words, when it served the cause of the gospel, he considered himself free to do those things which, under the new covenant, he was no longer required to do. It may seem inconsistent to us, but for Paul, the principle of radical freedom (1 Cor. 9:19-23) included the freedom to submit to the Mosaic law, as well as the freedom not to do so. He was free both to exercise his rights, and to waive them (1 Cor. 9:12, 15, 18).

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vv. 4-5 The decisions of the Jerusalem council were not delivered as suggestions to consider, but as directives to “obey” (Gr. *phulassō*; see Lk. 11:28; 18:21; Acts 7:53). Whether the churches accepted these requirements because they represented the judgment of a council, or because they came from the church in Jerusalem, or because they were endorsed by “apostles and elders”, the fundamental source of authority was the Holy Spirit (15:28), who was acknowledged to be speaking through these men and through this process.

The result of this communication was the rapid (“daily”) numerical and spiritual growth of the church. The “so” in verse 5 indicates that this growth validated the actions which the leaders had taken in Jerusalem; i.e., that their decision not to require the Gentiles to keep the Law of Moses was correct, as both a practical matter (“grew daily in numbers”) and as a matter of theology (“were strengthened in the faith”).

vv. 6-8 Surprisingly, the Holy Spirit does not enable and support the missionaries’ plans, but instead frustrates them. First, He prevents them from “preaching the word in the province of Asia”. And then he refuses them entry into Bithynia.

It is not clear how the Spirit’s intention was communicated. It is possible that the missionaries received explicit prophecies or visions directing them away from these places (see 13:1-3; 16:9-10). But since no prophecy is mentioned, it is equally likely that they were kept from working in these areas by human opposition or logistical difficulties, and they attributed these developments to the influence of the Holy Spirit, directing them through their circumstances. We cannot know with certainty. What we do know is that their travels were not random, nor guided solely by human judgment, but were sovereignly directed by the Spirit of the risen Christ.

In the same way, when our intentions are thwarted, including our plans to serve God in some way, we should not be greatly disappointed. Rather, when it is clear that we cannot proceed as we had planned, we should regard it as God’s way of directing us into another path or another place of ministry, according to his wise plans and purposes. However, it is also true that discerning when we should persevere in spite of difficulties and opposition, and when we should instead seek a different path, is seldom a simple matter.

vv. 9-10 Once again, we have a clear example of God sovereignly directing the timing and direction of the spread of the gospel; emphasizing that this is not man’s work, but His. Having prevented the missionaries from taking the route that seemed good to them, he now indicates supernaturally where he would have them travel instead; i.e. to Macedonia.

Should we expect similar guidance? In the record of Acts, visions are recorded only a few other times, primarily at key inflection points for the progress of the gospel (see 9:10-12; 10:3; 10:9-19; 11:5; 18:9; 22:17-21; 26:12-19). It seems more reasonable to view these as unusual occurrences, rather than the typical way that God directs his people.

Note that the author of this book, Luke, here begins to use the pronoun “we”, indicating that he has joined the group and is now giving his own first-person testimony.

# Unit 16 – Earthquake

## Acts 16:11-17:15

### Text

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<sup>11</sup> From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. <sup>12</sup> From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

<sup>13</sup> On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. <sup>14</sup> One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. <sup>15</sup> When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

<sup>16</sup> Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. <sup>17</sup> She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." <sup>18</sup> She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

<sup>19</sup> When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. <sup>20</sup> They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar <sup>21</sup> by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."

<sup>22</sup> The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. <sup>23</sup> After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. <sup>24</sup> When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

<sup>25</sup> About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. <sup>26</sup> Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. <sup>27</sup> The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. <sup>28</sup> But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

<sup>29</sup> The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup> He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

<sup>31</sup> They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household."

<sup>32</sup> Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. <sup>33</sup> At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. <sup>34</sup> The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

<sup>35</sup> When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: "Release those men." <sup>36</sup> The jailer told Paul, "The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace."

<sup>37</sup> But Paul said to the officers: "They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out."

<sup>38</sup> The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. <sup>39</sup> They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. <sup>40</sup> After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. Then they left.

<sup>1</sup> When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. <sup>2</sup> As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, <sup>3</sup> explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah," he said.

<sup>4</sup> Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.

<sup>5</sup> But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. <sup>6</sup> But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, <sup>7</sup> and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." <sup>8</sup> When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. <sup>9</sup> Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

<sup>10</sup> As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. <sup>11</sup> Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than

those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.<sup>12</sup> As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.

<sup>13</sup> But when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, some of them went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up.<sup>14</sup> The believers

immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea.<sup>15</sup> Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

<sup>a</sup>16:12 The text and meaning of the Greek for the leading city of that district are uncertain. <sup>b</sup>17:5 Or the assembly of the people the Lord.

## Open

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- Have you ever experienced an earthquake? What did it feel like?

## Discover

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1. In this passage, who opposes the gospel? Why?

2. Who receives the gospel? Why?

3. What does this passage tell us about those in the jailer's household who were saved (see vv. 31, 32, 34)? Were they saved because of their relationship to him, or for another reason?

4. In the accounts of Paul and Silas' ministry in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea, the response of women is specifically noted. Why is this significant?

5. Why do you think Paul demanded that the magistrates escort them from jail publicly, and not "quietly"?

## Apply

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- How were Paul and Silas able to pray and sing hymns of praise to God when they were unjustly treated and lied about? Was this easy for them, or difficult? Is this how you typically respond?

- What do you do when you hear a new teaching on religion or spirituality? Would your response qualify as "noble"?

# Commentary

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- vv. 11-12 The city of Philippi was designated a Roman colony after the defeat there of Brutus, one of the assassins of Julius Caesar, at the Battle of Philippi in 42 B.C. This status granted its citizens many privileges, including exemption from Roman taxes. They were thus keenly aware of their special relationship with Rome, a relationship they did not wish to put at risk by permitting violations of Roman law, or by mistreating a Roman citizen (vv. 21, 35-39).
- vv. 13-14 Ordinarily, when Paul entered a city to preach, he went first to the synagogue (Acts 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:1-2, 10, 17; 18:19; 19:8). But here, he and his companions went “*outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer*”. This suggests that there was no synagogue in the city. The reason is unknown; perhaps the building of a synagogue had not been permitted by the authorities. Or perhaps the number of Jewish men was insufficient to form a congregational quorum, since by tradition ten men were required. At any rate, the location where these women had come to pray underscored their marginal status; they were literally outsiders in their society.
- Note that Lydia’s response to the message is attributed to the fact that “*the Lord opened her heart to respond*”. Paul was faithful to preach, and Lydia gave him her attention, but it was God who ultimately enabled her to believe (see Jn. 6:44, 65).
- v. 15 Since the members of Lydia’s household were baptized along with her, some have understood this and similar passages to support the practice of infant baptism (see Acts 11:14; 16:33; 18:8). However, we aren’t told whether these households did in fact include small children. Neither is it clear whether those children, if present, are implicitly included among those in the “households” who were baptized. What we do know is that in all of these narratives, baptism followed faith in Christ, and was the result of the gospel being heard and understood (Acts 10:44-48; 11:14; 16:14, 31-34; 18:8).
- vv. 16-18 Why did Paul cast out the spirit who was prompting the slave to testify about them? He likely did so in order that the truths she was speaking would not deceive someone into thinking that she was a true prophet or servant of Christ. It is important to realize that not everyone who speaks the truth does so from a pure or godly motive. Satan and his demons quote Scripture (Lk. 4:10-11) and testify to Christ’s Lordship (Lk. 4:33-35; 41; 8:27-29), but in doing so, their intent is to undermine God’s purposes, not advance them.
- Satan masquerades as an “angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14), and poses as a truth-teller, even though he is a liar (Jn. 8:44).
- And those who are serving his purposes (often unwittingly, 2 Tim. 2:25-26) also seek to be viewed as servants of Christ and of righteousness (2 Cor. 11:12-14). Thus we need to be on guard, not only against lies, but against the truths which are told by deceivers in order to gain the trust of the unwary and ultimately lead them astray (Rom. 16:17-18; Col. 2:3-4; 2 Tim. 3:12-13).
- vv. 19-21 The slave’s owners objected to the ministry of the apostles only when it threatened their self-interest; i.e., when their slave was freed from demonic influence and was thus unable to earn money by divination. But although their reason for attacking the missionaries was financial, they appealed to the authorities on the basis of a need to maintain order and uphold Roman law; concealing their true motives behind a pretense of civic-minded virtue. In the same way, those who oppose Biblical Christianity today often conceal their intent by appealing to virtues such as tolerance or freedom.
- vv. 22-24 The treatment of Paul and Silas was completely unjust. Their arrest, punishment, and imprisonment were based on malicious falsehoods, and they were mistreated in violation of their status as Roman citizens (see v. 37). Likewise, those who follow Christ should not be surprised if they are lied about, slandered, mistreated, and in general, unjustly treated in this world (Jn. 15:20). But justice will be done in the end (Lk. 18:7-8; Acts 17:31; Heb. 1:8).
- v. 25 One of the most difficult times to praise God is when we are suffering, especially when that suffering is unjust; i.e. when it is due to our obedience and faithfulness rather than our sin. But this is when it is most important for us to rejoice and give glory to God, not only for our own spiritual welfare, but also for the sake of the unbelievers who are watching (Phlp. 1:12-14; Col. 1:24; 1 Pet. 1:6; 2:12; 4:12-16).
- vv. 26-28 It would be natural for Paul to assume that since God had miraculously loosened his chains and opened the prison doors, He intended for Paul to immediately depart. Paul could also have viewed the jailer’s imminent suicide as divine judgment upon that man for his role in hindering the gospel. But instead of considering only his own situation, Paul showed concern for the jailer’s temporal and eternal welfare. Would we do the same? How often do we view an answer to prayer in a self-centered way, as if the only thing that mattered were God’s response to our own needs? When God blesses us, we should not only give thanks, but also consider that He may have a greater purpose in mind, as He did here.

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vv. 29-34 The power that was demonstrated in the earthquake, and the love and concern that Paul showed for him when he could have taken advantage of the situation to escape, convinced the jailer that the God which Paul and Silas worshipped was the one true God. His question, "what must I do to be saved?" reflects an understanding of the gospel message which he had likely heard them preaching, both before and during their imprisonment; a message which included the promise of forgiveness of sins and escape from God's judgment.

Regarding the salvation of the jailer's "household", each person who comes to Christ must exercise faith for themselves: parents cannot believe on behalf of their children, nor children for parents, nor husbands for wives or vice versa. Thus, note that the jailer's "whole household" was saved and baptized because "he had come to believe in God—he and his *whole household*" (v. 34). Note also that the baptism did not take place until after Paul and Silas had instructed everyone; they "*spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house*" (v. 32). These statements indicate that all who were baptized received instruction and believed.

God often blesses families in this way: 1 Cor. 7:13-14 tells us that the spouses and children of believers are "sanctified"; that is, "set apart" to receive the special influence of the Spirit through the prayers, the testimony, and the example of their believing spouse or parent(s) (see Eph. 6:4).

vv. 35-39 At first, Paul's response seems out of character; it appears that he is not only insisting on his rights, but pridefully demanding an apology for how he was treated. But Paul is concerned for more than himself. He and Silas, and by extension all Christians, had been labeled as disruptive troublemakers who were inciting the people to rebel against Rome (Acts 16:20-21). The accusations against them, and their punishment, had been heard and seen by all. Therefore, it was important that these falsehoods be publicly repudiated by the authorities, so that the work of the gospel would not be hindered, and so that the believers in Philippi would not be similarly maligned and mistreated.

We should be careful to distinguish between the need to humbly accept mistreatment in the name of Christ (Mt. 10:23-25) and our obligation to defend the gospel and its representatives from libel and slander. The latter may require that we offer a personal defense (see Acts 21:17-22:1; 24:1-13; 25:6-11; 26:1-3; 1 Cor. 9:1-18). However, when we do, the ultimate goal is not merely to vindicate ourselves, but to defend the gospel.

vv. 1-3 Paul preached in small towns, such as Lystra, and remote places such as Berea (which Cicero referred to as "a town off the beaten track"). But he also sought out influential cities and population centers, so that the greatest number possible might hear and believe (see 1 Cor. 9:19). In this case, Thessalonica was the most populous city in the region of Macedonia and the seat of the Roman provincial government, and both Amphipolis and Thessalonica were district capitals.

From the description of Paul's evangelistic preaching, we can observe: First, that he "reasoned with them"; i.e. that his preaching was based on truths which could be explained, demonstrated, and understood. It engaged the mind, not only the emotions. Second, that he preached "from the Scriptures". His preaching was expositional; it did not depend on philosophy, eloquence, or memorable illustrations for its impact, but on the inherent power of Scripture (Heb. 4:12). And third, that it focused on the death, resurrection, and identity of Christ (see Lk. 24:13-27; 1 Cor. 1:23; 2:1-5).

vv. 4-5 Although Paul was successful in persuading some of the Jews, others not only rejected the message but violently opposed it. In contrast to Paul's approach of reasoning from the Scriptures, they resorted to mob violence and slanderous attacks (vv. 6-7). Ironically, they even blamed the missionaries for stirring up trouble, when it was they who incited a riot!

vv. 6-7 In the sense that the mob intended it, their accusation that the missionaries were proclaiming Jesus as "another king" was false. Paul and Silas had no intention of trying to overthrow the Roman government (see Jn. 6:15; 18:36). But in another sense, their words were true: Jesus' authority supersedes that of every earthly ruler, both now and in the future. He is the one to whom we owe ultimate allegiance (Mt. 28:18; 1 Cor. 15:27; Eph. 1:18-23; Philp 2:9). That is why ungodly despots and dictators hate Christianity; why they seek to destroy, co-opt, discredit, and marginalize it: because Christians, although they are generally law-abiding citizens or subjects (Rom. 13:1-8) reject their claims of absolute authority (see Acts 5:29).

vv. 11-15 Unlike the Jews in Thessalonica, those in Berea "received the message with great eagerness" and many came to faith. Note that their acceptance of the message was not due to gullibility or credulousness; rather, they took the claims of the gospel seriously and diligently "examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true".

# Unit 17 – Paul Among the Philosophers

## Acts 17:16-34

### Text

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<sup>16</sup> While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup> So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. <sup>18</sup> A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. <sup>19</sup> Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? <sup>20</sup> You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.” <sup>21</sup> (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

<sup>22</sup> Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

<sup>24</sup> “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. <sup>25</sup> And he is not served by human hands,

as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. <sup>26</sup> From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. <sup>27</sup> God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. <sup>28</sup> ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ <sup>a</sup> As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ <sup>b</sup>

<sup>29</sup> “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. <sup>30</sup> In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. <sup>31</sup> For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

<sup>32</sup> When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.”

<sup>33</sup> At that, Paul left the Council. <sup>34</sup> Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

<sup>a</sup>28 From the Cretan philosopher Epimenides

<sup>b</sup>28 From the Cilician Stoic philosopher Aratus.

### Open

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- What teacher would you say has had the greatest impact on your life, other than the Biblical authors?

### Discover

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1. Athenian society was characterized by devotion to the gods of the Greek pantheon. That was idolatry. But in a broader sense, idolatry can be defined as giving your highest allegiance and devotion to someone or something other than the true God, because you consider that person or thing to have ultimate worth and value. In other words, an idol is anything, other than God, that has “first place” in your heart and life.

By that definition, what are the idols of our society?

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2. What is the standard for our devotion to God? (see Mark 12:28-30) Is it acceptable to him to be worshipped as one of many “gods”? (see Ex. 23:13; Deut. 16:21-22; Isa. 42:8)

3. How can you tell what someone “worships”?

4. What was Paul’s response to the idolatry that he witnessed in Athens?

5. What will happen to those who persist in worshipping those things which are not God?

6. In Paul’s speech to the Areopagus, he addressed several misconceptions about God. In the space below, identify the false ideas and the related truths.

False Idea	Truth
v.24	
v. 25	
v. 29	

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## Apply

- Do you worship the God of the Bible, or a god of your own imagination? Are you sure?
- Do you ever try to control or manipulate God?

- Is there anything in your life to which you give the kind of devotion that should go to God alone? If so, what will you do about it?

# Commentary

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- v. 16 Paul's distress at the idolatry of Athens was a response, not merely to the statues of Greek gods displayed around the city, but also to the many temples erected in their honor, each with its associated priests and ceremonies. What made idol-worship so pervasive, and so insidious, is that it was integrated into every aspect of Athenian life: every trade and every human activity had its patron idol, to whom one would make offerings and from whom one would seek benefits. There were temples in the city dedicated to *Hephaestus*, the patron god of craftsmanship, metal working, and fire; to *Athena*, the goddess of wisdom and of victory in war; and to *Poseidon*, the god of the sea, earthquakes, and horses.
- Paying homage to these false gods was a routine part of daily life, in business, government, and even marriage and family. For example, when a child was born, a celebration called the *Amphidromia* took place, in which the infant was presented to the household gods and received its name. Major civic holidays also revolved around the gods, such as the annual *Panathenaia*, a festival celebrated in honor of the goddess Athena, which featured competitions in poetry, music, athletics, and horsemanship.
- The Greek verb *parōxuneto*, translated as "greatly distressed", describes the mixture of grief and anger that Paul felt at seeing these evidently spiritually-minded people (v. 22) giving to idols the honor and devotion due to God alone. The term *parōxuneto* is also used in the *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Old Testament in use in Paul's time, to describe God's anger at idolatry (Dt. 9:7, 18, 22; Ps. 106:28-29; Isa. 65:2-3).
- v. 17 Paul did not merely feel outrage at the idolatry he saw; it moved him to action. As elsewhere, he preached to "Jews and God-fearing Greeks" in the synagogue. But he also went out into the marketplace and reasoned "day by day with those who happened to be there". This was not unusual; the Greek *agora* was a place of commerce, and also a kind of open-air discussion forum where people came to promote and debate ideas (v. 21). For example, the philosopher Socrates (469-399 B.C.) taught here, centuries before Paul, engaging in dialogue with anyone who wished to test his views.
- v. 18 The response of the philosophers, "What is this babbler trying to say?" suggests that Paul is not using the philosophical categories or forms of discourse that they are accustomed to, resulting in confusion. As a result, he seems to be talking nonsense (see 1 Cor. 1:18-21; 2:1-2; 2 Cor. 10:10).
- vv. 19-21 The *Areopagus* was an administrative body, similar to a council of elders, which had wide-ranging authority over Athenian life, including matters of religion, education, and public morality. The place where they had traditionally met was given the name "Areopagus" also. The Romans called it "Mars Hill" (Acts 17:22, KJV) because of its association with Ares, the Greek god of war, whose equivalent in the Roman pantheon was Mars. And so either the council, or the location, and by *metonymy* the council also, could be in view here.
- The Athenians were a people devoted to the pursuit of knowledge: twice in these verses, they use the Greek verb *ginōskō*, "to know", in requesting an explanation from Paul. However, as Paul indicates in his response, the true God was "unknown" to them; they were "ignorant" of Him (v. 23; see v. 30). In the words of Timothy, they were a people "*always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth*" (2 Tim. 3:7). But as Timothy also reminds us, God "*wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth*" (1 Tim. 2:4). And so He sent Paul to make known to them the truth about Himself (v. 23).
- Luke observes that the Athenians "*spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas*". But they were by no means unique in this: eighteen centuries later, Henry David Thoreau wrote, in *Walden*, "*Hardly a man takes a half-hour's nap after dinner, but when he wakes he holds up his head and asks, 'What's the news?' . . . What news! how much more important to know what that is which was never old!*"
- vv. 22-23 It is unclear whether Paul's observation, that "in every way you are very religious" was intended to be a compliment, a way of establishing common ground with his audience, or an ironic criticism, underscoring his point that despite all of their pagan piety, they were still ignorant of the truth about God.
- vv. 24-25 Paul makes two points about the true nature of God, contrasting them with the false assumptions of idolatry. Both points assert God's sovereign independence against attempts by men to control or manipulate Him. First, he "does not live in temples built by human hands" (see 1 Ki. 8:27; 2 Chron. 2:6; Isa. 66:1-2; Acts 7:48-50). Thus we cannot contain Him in one place by erecting a temple in His name and filling it with priests and statues. Second, "he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything." On the contrary, we depend on Him: "*he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else*" (see Ps. 50:9-13; Neh. 9:6; Isa. 42:5).

- v. 26 Paul's statement that "From one man he made all the nations" asserts a fundamental unity among all people, all races, and all nations. For we all, regardless of ethnicity or national origin, are descended from a single man and a single woman, Adam and Eve (Gen. 2:4-5:32). We are literally members of one family, every person related to every other person. This idea was a challenge to the Greeks, who considered themselves superior to other races of people. It is also a rebuke to those today who claim that one race is inherently superior to another.
- In addition, the migrations of various peoples throughout the earth, the growth and decline of nations over time, and the contours of their borders, is under the sovereign administration of God (see Deut. 32:6-8; Dan. 2:20-21; Job 12:23; Ps. 22:28; 47:8; 82:8).
- v. 27 God's purpose in creating mankind was relational; he did not bring us into existence merely for his amusement, or as a kind of science experiment, so that he could sit back and watch what would happen. He created us with the express purpose of being known by us; he desires to be sought and found. The Bible promises that those who seek God will find him (Dt. 4:29; 1 Chron. 28:9; 2 Chron. 15:2; Prov. 8:17; Jer. 29:13; Mt. 7:7-8; Lk. 11:9-10). However, as Paul teaches in Romans, people in their natural state, that is, apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, do not seek God (Rom. 3:10-11; see Ps. 14:1-3; 53:1-3).
- The observation that God "is not far from any one of us" could be viewed as a statement about the nature of God; i.e., that he is everywhere present. Or it could be a statement of God's readiness to be found; his willingness, at any time, to respond to those who earnestly seek him.
- v. 28 The statement that, "*in him we live and move and have our being*", expresses the ease with which we can connect with God. We don't need to travel to a temple or some other holy place to do so, because he is everywhere around us (Jn. 4:19-24). We simply need to reach out to him wherever we are.
- The quote, "We are his offspring," is by the Greek poet Aratus of Cilicia, who originally addressed these words to Zeus. But Paul repurposes the poem to describe the relationship between the true God and his creation, mankind (Gen. 1:26-27).
- v. 29 Paul's conclusion is simple: since we are God's offspring, made in his image (Gen. 1:26-27), we should not think that the opposite is true; i.e., that the true God is something we can craft out of silver or stone, or create out of our own imagination.
- v. 30 In the past, God overlooked the "ignorance" of those who fashioned gods out of gold, silver, and stone (see Acts 14:16; also Rom. 3:25). He did not punish or prevent idolatry, and as a result, idols proliferated throughout the world. Every nation had its own gods, represented by statues and carvings bearing their images. In the Old Testament, they were given names such as Ashtoreth, Baal, Chemosh, Dagon, and Molek. In New Testament times, shrines and temples dedicated to the gods of the Greek and Roman pantheons filled the known world. As Paul writes in Romans, they "*exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles*" (Rom. 1:23). Even today, people all over the globe worship a multiplicity of false gods.
- In the face of all this, God has shown great tolerance and patience. However, with the coming of Christ into the world, and his life, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, that time is coming to a close. God's forbearance is ending, and his judgment is imminent. (v. 31). Therefore, he now "*commands all people everywhere to repent*". Note that this is not merely an invitation or a request; it is not an option to be considered, but a command to be obeyed. Note also that it is addressed to "all people everywhere". In other words, every person anywhere in the world who is worshiping any other god must repent of their idolatry and turn to the one true God; there are no exceptions. The bad news is that those who fail to do so will be judged (see Rom. 1:18-25). But the good news is that those who heed the call to repentance will be forgiven and reconciled to God, through his Son Jesus Christ (see 1 Thess. 1:8-10).
- v. 31 Jesus is both the Savior of those who repent and turn to him, and the judge of those who do not (Acts 10:42; Rom. 14:9; 2 Cor. 5:10; Jn. 5:22, 27; 2 Tim. 4:1, 8). His power and authority to judge derive from his identity as sovereign over all things (see Mt. 28:18; Acts 2:32-36; 1 Cor. 15:20-25).
- vv. 32-34 The response to Paul's teaching was varied. Some "sneered". Their education and erudition had not made them wise or perceptive, but merely arrogant. The idea of resurrection seemed ridiculous to them, and they rejected it out of hand. Others were unconvinced, but open-minded and desirous of hearing more. Perhaps God was working in their hearts, and would eventually bring this seed of the gospel to fruition. And finally, some, even in sophisticated, learned, urbane, skeptical Athens, were persuaded and believed.

# Unit 18 – Corinth and Ephesus

## Acts 18:1-19:7

### Text

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<sup>1</sup> After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. <sup>2</sup> There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, <sup>3</sup> and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. <sup>4</sup> Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

<sup>5</sup> When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. <sup>6</sup> But when they opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.”

<sup>7</sup> Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titus Justus, a worshiper of God. <sup>8</sup> Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized.

<sup>9</sup> One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. <sup>10</sup> For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.” <sup>11</sup> So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.

<sup>12</sup> While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews of Corinth made a united attack on Paul and brought him to the place of judgment. <sup>13</sup> “This man,” they charged, “is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law.”

<sup>14</sup> Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to them, “If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. <sup>15</sup> But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law—settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things.” <sup>16</sup> So he drove them off. <sup>17</sup> Then the crowd there turned on Sosthenes the synagogue leader and beat him in front of the proconsul; and Gallio showed no concern whatever.

<sup>18</sup> Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sisters and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchreae because of a vow he had taken.

<sup>19</sup> They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the

synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. <sup>20</sup> When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined. <sup>21</sup> But as he left, he promised, “I will come back if it is God’s will.” Then he set sail from Ephesus. <sup>22</sup> When he landed at Caesarea, he went up to Jerusalem and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch.

<sup>23</sup> After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. <sup>25</sup> He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor<sup>a</sup> and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. <sup>26</sup> He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.

<sup>27</sup> When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers and sisters encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. When he arrived, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. <sup>28</sup> For he vigorously refuted his Jewish opponents in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah.

<sup>1</sup> While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples <sup>2</sup> and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when<sup>b</sup> you believed?”

They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”

<sup>3</sup> So Paul asked, “Then what baptism did you receive?”

“John’s baptism,” they replied.

<sup>4</sup> Paul said, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” <sup>5</sup> On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup> When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues<sup>c</sup> and prophesied. <sup>7</sup> There were about twelve men in all.

<sup>a</sup> 18:25 Or with fervor in the Spirit

<sup>b</sup> 19:2 Or after

<sup>c</sup> 19:6 Or other languages

### Open

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- Who has personally encouraged you to persevere when you were facing difficulties? What was the outcome?

# Discover

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1. In this passage, how do we see reason and persuasion utilized in evangelism? (18:4; 19:25-28)

2. Is this sufficient to bring someone to faith? What else is needed? (v. 27; Acts 16:14; 26:28-29)

3. What do you think of Paul's response in 8:5-7? Is it one we should emulate? Why or why not?

4. How would you describe the role of Priscilla in this passage? (see also Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Tim. 4:19). Does this surprise you?

5. Why does Paul work as a tentmaker in Corinth (18:1-3; see 1 Cor. 9:1-18)? When does that change? (18:5; see 2 Cor. 11:7-9)

6. Is this a universal model for Christian missionaries and ministers? Why or why not?

7. Consider how Priscilla and Aquila responded to Apollos, who was well educated and a powerful speaker, but whose theology they considered to be incomplete. Should we follow their example? Why or why not?

# Apply

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What kinds of ministry do we see being carried out in this passage, and by what kinds of people? Which of them do you identify with?

Where do you see the sovereign hand of God at work in this passage?

# Commentary

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- v. 1 The second of Paul's missionary journeys, begun in Acts 15:36-41, now brings him to Corinth, after traveling about 37 miles (60 km.) by land from Athens. Corinth was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia. It was situated on an isthmus, a narrow strip of land connecting mainland Greece with the Peloponnese peninsula. It had two ports; one leading to the gulf of Corinth and the Ionian Sea on the west, and one connecting to the Saronic Gulf and Aegean Sea on the east. Its central location on land and sea trade routes, and its status as a provincial capital, made it a cosmopolitan and prosperous city.
- v. 2 We are not told how Paul came to meet Aquila and Priscilla. Since nothing is said about their conversion, it is likely that they were already followers of Jesus, perhaps having been exposed to the gospel in Rome. Their departure from that city was due to a persecution by the emperor Claudius in about 49 AD; the Roman historian Suetonius tells us that he expelled all the Jews from Rome due to conflicts over a man named "Chrestus". This could have been a misspelling of the name "Christus", which would refer to divisions within the Jewish community concerning Jesus, or it could have been someone else, as "Chrestus" was a fairly common name.
- vv. 3-5 Paul's work as a tentmaker was consistent with the practice of Jewish *rabbis* at the time, who typically supported themselves with a trade or occupation. In contrast, Greek philosophers and teachers were paid by their students, and Greeks regarded manual labor to be indicative of low status. As a result, Paul was looked down upon by upper-class Greeks. This was exploited by the false apostles in Corinth, who claimed that he and his teaching had little value, because he preached free of charge (2 Cor. 11:5-13). Paul argued that although he had the right to receive compensation for his labors (1 Cor. 9:3-14; Gal. 6:6), he chose not to do so, in order that he not be accused of coveting, and so that the need to support him would not be a burden to the church (Acts 20:33-35; 1 Cor. 4:12; 9:12, 15-18; 1 Thess. 2:8-9; 2 Thess. 3:7-8). However, this was not an inviolable rule; Paul did accept financial support, although not from those to whom he was currently ministering. This was likely why he was able to devote himself exclusively to preaching when Silas and Timothy arrived in Corinth: they brought a gift from the believers in Macedonia (2 Cor. 11:8-9; see Phil. 4:15-18).
- v. 6 Paul's response to the rejection of the gospel by the Athenian Jews was to do three things: First, "he shook out his clothes in protest". This action, similar to shaking the dust from one's feet, was intended as a testimony against them; it was a public way of removing any trace of connection with those who had placed themselves under God's judgment (see Mt. 10:14-15; Mk. 6:11; Lk. 9:5; 10:10-12; Acts 13:50-51). Second, he stated that he had fulfilled his obligation to warn them, and thus bore no responsibility for their ultimate fate (see Ezk. 33:1-9; Acts 20:26-27). And third, he declared that he would turn from his attempts to evangelize the Jews in this place, and would direct his efforts to the Gentiles instead. This was not a final or comprehensive abandonment of Jewish outreach; Paul resumed preaching in the synagogue when he arrived in Ephesus (v. 19).
- vv. 7-8 Although Paul no longer preached to Jews in the synagogue, he didn't go very far, moving "next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God." From that base of ministry, he continued to see fruit from among both Jews and Gentiles, including even "the synagogue leader, and his entire household".
- vv. 9-11 Although Paul has ceased direct confrontation with his Jewish opponents, their antagonism does not diminish but rather intensifies, as demonstrated by their escalation of the matter to the civil authorities (vv. 12-13). Thus it is necessary for the Lord to strengthen Paul's resolve, and also to clarify that he should continue in Corinth, rather than going on to another place of ministry, as was previously the pattern when strong opposition arose (Acts 13:49-51; 14:4-7; 14:19-20; 17:5-10; 17:13-15). He does this by assuring Paul of his *presence* ("I am with you"), his *protection* ("no one is going to attack and harm you") and his *provision* ("I have many people in this city"). As a result, Paul is not compelled to leave Corinth, but perseveres in ministry there for a year and a half. The statement that "I have many people in this city" is not a reference to secret Christians, but rather a promise that Paul's work here would be productive; i.e. an assurance that there were many whom God had chosen for eternal life who would come to faith as a result of Paul's continued ministry (see Acts 13:48).
- vv. 12-13 As at Philippi (16:19-24) and Thessalonica (17:5-9), Paul is brought before a Roman tribunal and accused; in the first case, the alleged crime was promoting conduct prohibited under Roman law; in the second, "defying Caesar's decrees" by identifying Jesus as a king. However, here the charge is not civil, but religious; i.e. that Paul is "*persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law*"; that is, the Jewish law (see v. 15).

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- vv. 14-17 Although Paul is prepared to make a defense of his conduct and teaching (see Acts 22:1; 24:10; 25:8; 26:1-2), Gallio interrupts him; he has no interest in hearing the details of the dispute, nor in adjudicating a matter of Jewish law. The fact that Gallio speaks dismissively to the Jews, and that he actively drives them away and then watches impassively as the synagogue leader is attacked, suggests a general hostility toward them.
- v. 18 We aren't given an explanation for Paul's decision to have his hair cut; for instance, whether his vow was an expression of thanksgiving for protection, or whether it was an appeal for a future blessing, such as safe travel. What we can conclude, however, is that Paul did not consider this observance of a Jewish religious custom to be a compromise of his Christian faith (see 1 Cor. 9:19-23).
- vv. 19-22 In these verses, we have little more than an account of Paul's movements, without a view to his motives; e.g. why he left Ephesus so soon after his arrival, or why he left Priscilla and Aquila there while he went on to Jerusalem. However, it is reasonable to infer that he intended them to continue the ministry there, and considered them capable of doing so without his direct oversight (see 18:24-28; 1 Cor. 16:19).  
Note that Paul did not receive specific direction for every detail of his journey, nor was he given advance guidance for all future events: his promise to return is not firm, but conditioned on it being God's will (see 1 Cor. 4:19; 16:7). Note also that Paul does not consider the desires of others to be a clear indication of God's will, or to be binding on him; he feels free to decline the request of the Ephesian Jews to remain with them longer, even though that course would offer the potential for fruitful ministry (compare Acts 21:10-14).
- v. 23 This verse represents the initiation of Paul's third missionary journey, which he began by strengthening the churches formed as a result of his first journey.
- vv. 24-25 The fact that Apollos "had been instructed in the way of the Lord" and "taught about Jesus accurately" implies that he was a believer in Christ when Priscilla and Aquila met him. In addition, the "great fervor" and boldness (v. 26) of his preaching suggests that it was enabled by the Holy Spirit (see Acts 4:8, 29, 31; 6:10; 9:28; 13:9-10; 14:3). However, he was acquainted only with the baptism of John. That baptism was a sign of repentance and anticipation, rather than explicit faith in the risen Christ as Savior, and was superseded by the baptism of Christ (Lk. 3:16; Jn. 3:22-30; Acts 1:5; 11:15-16).
- v. 26 In this verse, we have three examples which are worthy of imitation. First, Apollos spoke "boldly in the synagogue". Christianity does not need lukewarm defenders (see Rev. 3:15-16). Second, although he taught "accurately" (v. 25), his theology was incomplete, and so Priscilla and Aquila took him aside and "explained to him the way of God more adequately." In other words, rather than confront publicly, they sought an opportunity to discreetly correct. And third, although Apollos "was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures" he was not too proud to receive instruction: the narrative implies that he accepted the correction which Priscilla and Aquila offered.
- vv. 27-28 When Paul engaged with Greeks who did not know, or did not accept, the Hebrew scriptures, he reasoned from first principles and commonly accepted truths (Acts 17:18-34). But when Apollos speaks to Biblically-literate Jews, he argues from the scriptures. Note that he assumes they are capable of reasoning their way to faith; he teaches (v. 25), "refutes", "debates", and "proves"; actions which are directed to the mind (see also 18:4). Note also that his education and knowledge are identified as advantages in the work of evangelism (v. 24).
- vv. 1-4 Paul's encounter with these "disciples" illustrates the fact that not all spiritual journeys follow a similar pattern. It appears that they had somehow received word of John the Baptist's teaching, and were following it as best they understood. But their knowledge was incomplete. They knew nothing of the Holy Spirit, whom both John and Jesus spoke of. Paul even had to inform them that Jesus was the one John prophesied about (v. 4). It is reasonable to conclude, then, that either these men were "disciples" of John (see Lk. 5:33; 7:18; 11:1), or they were disciples of Jesus whose grasp of his person and works was tenuous. This contrasts with Apollos, who "knew only the baptism of John", but who nevertheless "had been instructed in the way of the Lord" and "taught about Jesus accurately".
- vv. 5-7 Paul's question, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" (v. 2) is diagnostic: he is seeking to discern their spiritual condition. The question implies that the Holy Spirit would normally be received at the time one exercises faith, although in Acts various sequences of faith, baptism, and reception of the Holy Spirit are seen (2:38; 8:14-17; 10:44-48). Their negative response to the question indicates that their faith was resting on an inadequate foundation and they needed to take another step; i.e., to embrace Jesus and to be baptized in his name.

# Unit 19 – Uprising in Ephesus

## Acts 19:8-20:12

### Text

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<sup>8</sup> Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. <sup>9</sup> But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. <sup>10</sup> This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. <sup>11</sup> God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, <sup>12</sup> so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.

<sup>13</sup> Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, "In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out."

<sup>14</sup> Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. <sup>15</sup> One day the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?" <sup>16</sup> Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.

<sup>17</sup> When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. <sup>18</sup> Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. <sup>19</sup> A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. <sup>a</sup> <sup>20</sup> In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

<sup>21</sup> After all this had happened, Paul decided <sup>b</sup> to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. "After I have been there," he said, "I must visit Rome also." <sup>22</sup> He sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, while he stayed in the province of Asia a little longer.

<sup>23</sup> About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. <sup>24</sup> A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in a lot of business for the craftsmen there. <sup>25</sup> He called them together, along with the workers in related trades, and said: "You know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business. <sup>26</sup> And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all. <sup>27</sup> There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited; and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty."

<sup>28</sup> When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" <sup>29</sup> Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia, and all of them rushed into the theater together.

<sup>30</sup> Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. <sup>31</sup> Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater.

<sup>32</sup> The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there.

<sup>33</sup> The Jews in the crowd pushed Alexander to the front, and they shouted instructions to him. He motioned for silence in order to make a defense before the people. <sup>34</sup> But when they realized he was a Jew, they all shouted in unison for about two hours: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

<sup>35</sup> The city clerk quieted the crowd and said: "Fellow Ephesians, doesn't all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven? <sup>36</sup> Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to calm down and not do anything rash. <sup>37</sup> You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess. <sup>38</sup> If, then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. They can press charges. <sup>39</sup> If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal assembly. <sup>40</sup> As it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of what happened today. In that case we would not be able to account for this commotion, since there is no reason for it." <sup>41</sup> After he had said this, he dismissed the assembly.

<sup>1</sup> When the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said goodbye and set out for Macedonia. <sup>2</sup> He traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece, <sup>3</sup> where he stayed three months. Because some Jews had plotted against him just as he was about to sail for Syria, he decided to go back through Macedonia. <sup>4</sup> He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia. <sup>5</sup> These men went on ahead and waited for us at Troas. <sup>6</sup> But we sailed from Philippi after the Festival of Unleavened Bread, and five days later joined the others at Troas, where we stayed seven days.

<sup>7</sup> On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. <sup>8</sup> There were many

*lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting.*<sup>9</sup> *Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead.*<sup>10</sup> *Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "He's*

*alive!"*<sup>11</sup> *Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left.*<sup>12</sup> *The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted.*

<sup>a</sup>19:19 A drachma was a silver coin worth about a day's wages. <sup>b</sup>19:21 Or *decided in the Spirit.*

## Open

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- What is a place you have never been that you would like to visit? Why?

## Discover

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1. What conclusions about spiritual power can we draw from the contrasting examples of the miracles performed through Paul (19:11-12; 20:10), and the experience of the seven sons of Sceva (19:13-16)?

2. Why did the people respond as they did (19:17-19)?

3. What was Demetrius' argument? Was he right? (19:23-27)

4. What do you think Paul would have said if he had been permitted to speak to the crowd? (19:30-31)

5. How did God use the actions of unbelievers in this passage to advance the gospel?

## Apply

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- What do people today rely on for spiritual power, blessing, and protection? What do you rely on?
- In Paul's journey to Macedonia, he focused on encouraging the believers. Do we see a similar emphasis in churches today? Do you do this?

# Commentary

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- vv. 8-10 The Jews in Ephesus are initially open to the preaching of the gospel. Interest has likely continued to grow since Paul's first visit, due to the ministry of Apollos, Priscilla and Aquila (18:19-26), and he is able to preach "boldly" in the synagogue for a period of three months. However, as at Corinth (18:1-7), strong opposition eventually leads Paul to abandon the synagogue and to seek another venue for public instruction and evangelism. In this case, the new site is a lecture hall that was either owned, or used for teaching, by a man named Tyrannus.
- The change proved to be beneficial: Paul was able to teach "daily" there for a period of two years, and the location made the gospel easily available to a broad cross-section of the population (we might see similarities today with new churches meeting in theaters or other nontraditional spaces). As a result, the good news was widely disseminated, so that "*all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord*".
- vv. 11-12 Two observations can be made concerning the healings and exorcisms that were accomplished through materials which Paul had touched. First, Luke makes it clear that the healing power did not reside in the items themselves; they were not magical charms or talismans. Nor did the power come from Paul. Rather, it was "God" who "did extraordinary miracles *through* Paul", using these means. This is similar to the healing power which flowed through Peter (Acts 5:12-16) and Jesus (Lk. 6:19; 8:43-48). Second, Paul did not take any action to sanctify these objects for the purpose of healing; the miracles were simply something that God chose to do, independent of any action or intention on Paul's part.
- vv. 13-17 The experience of the seven sons of Sceva shows that the works being done through Paul were not *magic* (i.e., a supernatural power which can be wielded by human beings according to their will). Nor were the words "in the name of Jesus" an incantation that could be used to manipulate spiritual beings or forces. Rather, the healings were *miracles*; something that God accomplishes as he is pleased to do so. The difference is this: as his children, we can pray and ask God to work in ways that seem good to us. But he is sovereign: we cannot compel him to act through the use of spells, rituals, or amulets. Nor would we want to even if we could, as his knowledge and wisdom are far superior to ours (Isa. 40:13-14; 55:8-9; Rom. 11:33-36).
- Magic of all kinds is condemned in the Old Testament under the terms *divination*, *witchcraft*, *sorcery*, and *consulting mediums and spiritists* (Lev. 19:26, 31; 20:27; Deut. 18:10-11, 14; 1 Sam. 15:23; 2 Ki. 21:6; 2 Chron. 33:6; see Gal. 5:20)
- vv. 18-20 As news of the humiliation of the sons of Sceva spread throughout the city, the response was dramatic. Seeing that the power of God was greater than sorcery, and realizing that occult practices were not compatible with Christian faith, many people confessed their involvement with these things and publicly turned away from them. The destruction of valuable scrolls, likely containing secret spells and incantations, demonstrated the believers' commitment to trusting only in Christ, as they renounced their reliance on other sources of spiritual power, protection, and blessing.
- vv. 21-22 The Greek text here reads "decided in the Spirit" (see NIV note), suggesting that the decision to go to Jerusalem was not just the result of Paul's own assessment of the need, but a response to prompting by the Holy Spirit (see Acts 13:2-4; 16:6-10; 20:22-23). Paul also indicates that this is something he "must" do, implying a divine compulsion. One purpose for this visit was to bring financial relief to the believers in Rome, by delivering funds which had been collected from other churches (see Acts 24:17; Rom. 15:25-31; 1 Cor. 16:1-4).
- vv. 23-25 As Greeks turned to Christ, they did not just add Jesus to their personal pantheon of gods; instead, they abandoned other deities in order to follow him alone (see Jn. 3:17-18; 8:12; 14:6; Acts 4:12). As a result, they no longer purchased silver idols and other pagan artifacts. And so in Ephesus, violent opposition to the gospel came not from the Jews, but from those who profited from the worship of Artemis, and this opposition was a reaction, not to Christian teachings, but to the effect of Christianity on the local economy.
- vv. 26-27 Demetrius continues to make his case against Paul, broadening it to include the threat to honor and reputation. If Paul continues to persuade "large numbers of people" that "gods made by human hands are no gods at all," then not only would their trade as silversmiths be brought into disrepute, as the idols and other religious items they fashioned came to be seen as spiritually worthless, but the temple itself, and even the goddess Artemis, would lose their place of honor and reverence among the people.
- vv. 28-29 Artemis was the central deity of the city of Ephesus. Reverenced as a mother-goddess and honored as the city's founder and protector, her likeness was engraved on coins and official documents. An attack on her reputation would be seen as a threat to the city itself, and to its citizens. Demetrius' warning therefore has its intended effect, enraging the crowd and inciting a riot.

- vv. 30-31 Rather than seeking to flee or avoid the controversy, Paul “wanted to appear before the crowd”. Since what Demetrius said was essentially true, it is likely that Paul sought, not to refute him, but to testify to the superiority of Christ over Artemis and all false gods. However, more cautious (and perhaps in this situation, more prudent) voices prevailed, and he was either persuaded or prevented from doing so. The fact that “officials of the province” were among those “begging him not to venture into the theater” underscores the extent to which the gospel had already penetrated all strata of Ephesian society.
- vv. 32-34 At this point, the Jews hurriedly put forward one of their own, a man named Alexander, to “make a defense”. In the context, it seems clear that their goal was not to defend Paul, but rather to defend themselves against any suspicion that they, as fellow monotheists, were in league with him, and were taking advantage of the official toleration they enjoyed to undermine civil religion and public order. The fact that the crowd’s negative reaction was due to the fact that “he was a Jew” shows that their concern was well founded.
- vv. 35-36 The city clerk, a high local official, allowed the crowd to chant and express their devotion to Artemis for two hours (!). Now, sensing that the time is right, he takes the stage to quell the uprising. His first point is that Demetrius’ concerns are overblown; that neither Paul nor Christianity poses any real threat to the honored place which Ephesus enjoys as the “guardian of the temple of the great Artemis”. However, from our perspective twenty centuries later, we can see that he was far too sanguine about the threat which Demetrius identified.
- vv. 37-39 The second point is that, from a legal perspective, the uprising had no basis, since no evidence had been presented that Paul or his companions had done anything to disrespect or blaspheme the goddess Artemis. This was true, but also beside the point: Demetrius was warning of *future* implications to the worship of Artemis if the gospel continued to spread, not alleging that there had been any explicit attacks on her temple or name. At this point, the city clerk continues by insisting that if they wish to bring such charges, they must do so in a lawful way and follow regular procedure.
- vv. 40-41 The clerk’s final appeal turns the tables on the crowd and carries an implicit threat: if they do not disperse, those who instigated and participated in such an unruly gathering could be subject to charges themselves: they could be accused of rioting by the Roman state.
- vv. 1-3 After such a perilous experience, we might have expected Paul to keep a low profile: despite the clerk’s soothing words, the tensions which led to the uprising had not fully or permanently abated, and further attacks could come at any time. But instead, Paul gathered and encouraged the disciples. He then continued to encourage other believers as he departed and “traveled through that area”.  
Paul’s focus on encouraging the churches highlights the importance in ministry of addressing, not only the *cognitive* components of faith; i.e., what we think, believe, and understand, but also the *affective* aspects: what we value, despise, love, hate, and fear; what gives us joy, angers us, inspires us, or compels us to action. As the 18<sup>th</sup> century American pastor, theologian and revivalist Jonathan Edwards, wrote<sup>1</sup>, “*True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections.*”
- v. 7 Some argue that this verse supports the establishment of Sunday as the day for Christian worship, since it was on the “first day of the week” that the believers “came together to break bread,” and because Paul delivered a (rather lengthy) sermon. However, although the circumstances are suggestive, the evidence is not conclusive. First, the term “breaking bread” does not always refer to a service of Communion, as in 1 Cor. 10:16; it is simply a term for sharing a meal, whatever the occasion (see Lk. 24:28-30; Acts 2:42, 46; 27:33-38). In addition, elements which would identify this as the Lord’s Supper, such as the sharing of a cup (1 Cor. 11:20, 23-26) are not mentioned here. As for Paul’s sermon, he spoke to groups of believers on many occasions and on many days of the week. In this case, it appears that they all gathered together on a Sunday to share a meal and to hear Paul preach, because he and his companions were scheduled to depart the following day.
- vv. 8-12 Of all the “extraordinary miracles” (19:11) which were done through Paul, the raising of the young man, Eutychus, may have been chosen for inclusion in this narrative because it had parallels in the deeds of the Old Testament prophets Elijah and Elisha (see 1 Ki. 17:17-23; 2 Ki. 4:32-35), indicating that the same power, from the same God, was now at work.  
It is difficult to say which is the more remarkable; that Paul was able to perform a miracle and raise a man from the dead, or that, having done so, he simply picked up where he left off and continued “talking until daylight”!

<sup>1</sup> Edwards, Jonathan. *Religious Affections*. Ed. John E. Smith. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Perry Miller, ed., p. 95

# Unit 20 – Farewells

## Acts 20:13-21:16

### Text

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<sup>13</sup> We went on ahead to the ship and sailed for Assos, where we were going to take Paul aboard. He had made this arrangement because he was going there on foot. <sup>14</sup> When he met us at Assos, we took him aboard and went on to Mitylene. <sup>15</sup> The next day we set sail from there and arrived off Chios. The day after that we crossed over to Samos, and on the following day arrived at Miletus. <sup>16</sup> Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost.

<sup>17</sup> From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. <sup>18</sup> When they arrived, he said to them: “You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. <sup>19</sup> I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents. <sup>20</sup> You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. <sup>21</sup> I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

<sup>22</sup> “And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. <sup>23</sup> I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. <sup>24</sup> However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.

<sup>25</sup> “Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. <sup>26</sup> Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of any of you. <sup>27</sup> For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. <sup>28</sup> Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, <sup>a</sup> which he bought with his own blood. <sup>b</sup> <sup>29</sup> I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. <sup>30</sup> Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. <sup>31</sup> So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

<sup>32</sup> “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

<sup>33</sup> I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing. <sup>34</sup> You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. <sup>35</sup> In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

<sup>36</sup> When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. <sup>37</sup> They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. <sup>38</sup> What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.

<sup>1</sup> After we had torn ourselves away from them, we put out to sea and sailed straight to Kos. The next day we went to Rhodes and from there to Patara. <sup>2</sup> We found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, went on board and set sail. <sup>3</sup> After sighting Cyprus and passing to the south of it, we sailed on to Syria. We landed at Tyre, where our ship was to unload its cargo. <sup>4</sup> We sought out the disciples there and stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. <sup>5</sup> When it was time to leave, we left and continued on our way. All of them, including wives and children, accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray. <sup>6</sup> After saying goodbye to each other, we went aboard the ship, and they returned home.

<sup>7</sup> We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and sisters and stayed with them for a day. <sup>8</sup> Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. <sup>9</sup> He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.

<sup>10</sup> After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. <sup>11</sup> Coming over to us, he took Paul’s belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, “The Holy Spirit says, ‘In this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.’”

<sup>12</sup> When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup> Then Paul answered, “Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” <sup>14</sup> When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, “The Lord’s will be done.”

<sup>15</sup> After this, we started on our way up to Jerusalem. <sup>16</sup> Some of the disciples from Caesarea accompanied us and brought us to the home of Mnason, where we were to stay. He was a man from Cyprus and one of the early disciples.

<sup>a</sup>20:28 Many manuscripts of the Lord

<sup>b</sup>20:28 Or with the blood of his own Son

## Open

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- Have you ever been urged not to follow a course of action that you felt led to pursue? What was the result?

## Discover

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1. In Paul's final address to the elders of the Ephesian church (20:17-35), what were the main points?

2. What do you think his purpose, or purposes, was/were in speaking to them?

3. What does Paul mean by his statement that "I consider my life worth nothing to me"? (20:24; see Phlp. 3:8).

4. How is the Christian life like a race that must be run? (20:24; see 1 Cor. 9:24; Heb. 12:1)

5. How should we respond to those who promote false doctrines, or who exploit or abuse their followers? Do different circumstances call for different approaches? (20:28-31; see Gal. 1:6-9; 2 Tim. 2:14-25)

6. In spite of all the warnings he received (Acts 19:21; 20:22-24; 21:4, 10-14) Paul maintained his determination to journey to Jerusalem. Was this wise? Why or why not?

## Apply

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- Can you honestly say, as Paul did, that "I consider my life worth nothing to me" (v. 24)? Why or why not?

- If the Christian life is a "race" (v. 24), how is your race going?

# Commentary

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- vv. 13-15 Paul's companions, who were identified in v. 4 and who now again include Luke (indicated by the use of "us" and "we" in vv. 5-6), set sail for Assos. Paul elects to journey there alone, on foot, a distance of about 20 miles; we are not told why. In Assos, they rendezvous and Paul boards the ship; they then sail on to Mitylene, Chios, Samos, and Miletus.
- v. 16 Paul's desire to reach Jerusalem by Pentecost was so strong that he chose not to pause in Ephesus to encourage the believers there. This decision shows Paul's commitment to maintaining a connection with his Jewish heritage, as the harvest festival known in Judaism as the "Festival of Weeks" (Ex. 34:22; Lev. 23:15-21; Deut. 16:9-10, 16), was one of the most significant celebrations on the Hebrew calendar. In addition, Paul considered the financial gifts which he and his companions were bringing from other churches to be an important expression of unity between Jewish and Gentile believers; presenting those gifts during the festival would doubtless be a potent symbol of that unity.
- vv. 17-21 Although he could not spare the time for extensive ministry in Ephesus, Paul had a message which he wished to share with the leaders of that church, and so he sent word that they were to join him in Miletus. The first part of the message is a reminder of his past labors among them (v. 31): both his way of life (vv. 18-19) and his teaching (vv. 20-21). Concerning the first, he had served "*with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing*". In other words, everything about his life had shown that he was motivated by the truth of the gospel, rather than a desire for personal gain (see v. 33; also 2 Cor. 2:17; 7:2; 11:9; 12:14-17; 1 Thess. 2:5). Paul's intention was not to praise himself, but use his example to remind them of the kind of lives they themselves must lead (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phlp. 3:17; 2 Thess. 3:7, 9; see Heb. 6:12; 13:7). The references to Paul's teaching likewise held reminders of the obligations these men had as elders: to preach boldly, not watering down the message or omitting anything that their people needed; to teach the word, both through public proclamation and individual instruction and counseling; and to tell all people without exception, "both Jews and Greeks", that they must repent and trust in Jesus.
- vv. 22-23 Just as Paul was compelled by God to preach (1 Cor. 9:16-17), he is now "compelled by the Spirit" to journey to Jerusalem, despite the severe trials that the Holy Spirit has indicated await him there (see 21:10-14).
- v. 24 When Paul refers to his life as "worth nothing", he intends it in a relative, not an absolute, sense. He does not mean that his life has no value whatsoever. But compared to the importance of the task he has been given—that of "testifying to the good news of God's grace"—any concerns about his personal safety and longevity fade into insignificance. His goal is not to avoid suffering, nor to live as long as possible, but to accomplish all that God has called him to do, and to be faithful to Christ until the end of his days. This echoes his statement in Philippians 3:8 that he considers everything else in his life "a loss" and "garbage" compared to the "surpassing worth" of knowing Christ. Paul's characterization of the Christian life as a race that must be successfully completed has parallels in his other letters (1 Cor. 9:24; Gal. 2:2; 5:7; 2 Tim. 4:7; see also Jam. 1:12; Heb. 3:14; 6:11; 10:36; 12:1). Jesus likewise emphasized the need to stand firm until the end (Mt. 10:22; 24:13; Mk. 13:13; Rev. 2:26).
- vv. 25-27 Paul's declaration that he is "innocent of the blood of any of you" hearkens back to the warning of the prophet Ezekiel, that those who have knowledge of God's coming judgment, but who do not warn others or attempt to turn them away from their sin, will themselves be judged (Ez. 3:18-21; 33:1-6). Paul's reference to this principle indicates that he considers it to have continuing validity in the present age.
- v. 28 The position of elder in a church is not merely an honorary or ceremonial role. It is an appointment of great responsibility; one which requires active engagement, watchfulness and care on a continual basis. Tellingly, Paul notes first the necessity that elders keep watch over themselves, and then the responsibility they have toward their people. In order to effectively care for others, elders must ensure that their own spiritual health is strong (see 1 Tim. 4:16). Yet leaders often neglect their own walk with God because of the demands of their ministries, with potentially tragic results. In many ancient Greek manuscripts, the phrase "the church of God" reads "the church of the Lord" instead. This was likely a change made by copyists, to make clear that the phrase "his own blood" refers to the blood of Christ being shed to purchase the church (Rev. 5:9; 14:14; Tit. 2:13-14), rather than the blood of God the Father. However, since all three members of the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—are God, then the blood of Christ is in fact the blood of God: God the Son. And so either reading is theologically defensible.

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vv. 29-31 Paul's warning, that "savage wolves" would infiltrate the church and seek to destroy the flock, highlights what is at stake in Christian ministry. When pastors and teachers proclaim the gospel, they are dealing with matters of spiritual life and death, which have eternal consequences. And so it is not hyperbole to describe the influence of false teachers as a mortal threat.

How then should we deal with them? Many Christians confuse godliness with being pleasant and inoffensive, and fear being labeled as judgmental or intolerant. They want to be loving, as they should. But it is not love to allow those we consider our brothers and sisters to be led astray spiritually, to their eternal ruin. Paul laments that even in his day, Christians were all too willing to tolerate heretical, self-serving and abusive teachers:

*" . . . if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough." (2 Cor. 11:4; see 11:19-20)*

What then should be our response to false teachers? First of all, to forcefully oppose their doctrines (Gal. 1:6-9; 1 Tim. 4:1-2; 6:3-5). This requires discernment, because such persons do not openly acknowledge their intentions, but "masquerade as servants of righteousness" (2 Cor. 11:15). In fact, deceit is an essential part of their approach (Mt. 7:15; Rom. 16:17-18; 2 Cor. 11:13-15, 26; Eph. 4:14; 5:6; Col. 2:4, 8; 2 Tim. 3:13; Tit. 1:10; 2 Jn. 1:7). Therefore, we must be "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Mt. 10:16). At the same time, those who are genuinely confused should be treated with patience and gentleness, even as we clearly point out their errors (2 Tim. 2:14-25).

v. 32 This verse expresses an important effect of the word of God, which is fundamentally a revelation of his grace toward mankind: not only does it save us, so that we are considered "sanctified", or set apart to God, but it also strengthens us spiritually and ensures that we will receive the glorious inheritance that God has prepared for us (Rom. 8:16-17; Eph. 1:13-14, 18; Tit. 3:5-7).

vv. 33-35 Once again, Paul uses his own example to exhort the Ephesian elders to serve the flock and to seek the good of their people, rather than using their position to enhance their social standing or personal wealth. The temptation to exploit the natural generosity and appreciation of their people for personal gain is one that pastors and teachers must resist (see 2 Cor. 2:17; 7:2; 11:9; 12:14-17; 1 Thess. 2:5).

vv. 1-3 In these verses, Luke provides a detailed log of the sea journeys of Paul and his companions (see also 20:13-15). Two notes of interest: the reason for the change of ships in Patara was that the voyage to Phoenicia would be about 400 miles, and so a transfer to a larger vessel was required. Also, the fact that the second ship had to "unload its cargo" at Tyre was the reason for the extended stay there (v. 4). Details such as these reinforce the fact that what we are reading is actual history (see Lk. 1:1-4), rather than historical fiction or a pious fantasy.

vv. 4-6 This passage presents an interpretive challenge: the statement that "Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem". Some have taken this as prophetic guidance from the Holy Spirit instructing Paul not to continue, in conflict with the direction he received previously (19:21 [see NIV note]; 20:22). However, we can also read this as describing a situation in which the disciples in Tyre, learning through the Spirit what awaited Paul in Jerusalem, urge him not to go. Note that in 20:22-23, Paul is explicitly warned by the Spirit what hardships lay ahead, but also explicitly directed to proceed (see 20:22, "compelled by the Spirit").

vv. 7-9 As Paul and his companions travel, there is no mention of inns or hotels. Instead, they are welcomed by believers and provided with hospitality (see Acts 9:43, 16:15, 21:4, 16). In Caesarea they are hosted by "Philip the evangelist" (not the same as Philip the apostle), who fled Jerusalem twenty years previously to escape a persecution led by Saul (8:1-5). He was "one of the Seven" who had been chosen to oversee the distribution of food to widows (6:1-6). Philip then had an itinerant ministry of evangelism, traveling through Samaria and eventually to Caesarea (8:40), where he apparently settled. Now he is providing food and lodging to his former persecutor, a testimony to the grace of God in both his and Paul's lives.

vv. 10-14 Once again, Paul is warned prophetically about the suffering which awaits him in Jerusalem (see Acts 21:27-36; 23:9-10; 12-20); once again his companions (including Luke) urge him not to proceed; and once again he determines to continue. His steadfast commitment to bear any cost "for the name of the Lord Jesus" persuades his companions finally to relent and accept whatever God's will might be. As events transpired, he would not be required to yield up his life in Jerusalem, but this passage demonstrates that he was more than ready to do so for the sake of the gospel.

# Unit 21 – Unexpected Events

## Acts 21:17-22:21

### Text

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<sup>17</sup> When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers and sisters received us warmly. <sup>18</sup> The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. <sup>19</sup> Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

<sup>20</sup> When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. <sup>21</sup> They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. <sup>22</sup> What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, <sup>23</sup> so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. <sup>24</sup> Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everyone will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. <sup>25</sup> As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality."

<sup>26</sup> The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them.

<sup>27</sup> When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, <sup>28</sup> shouting, "Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place."

<sup>29</sup> (They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple.)

<sup>30</sup> The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. <sup>31</sup> While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. <sup>32</sup> He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.

<sup>33</sup> The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. Then he asked who he was and what he had done. <sup>34</sup> Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another, and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks.

<sup>35</sup> When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the

soldiers. <sup>36</sup> The crowd that followed kept shouting, "Get rid of him!" <sup>37</sup> As the soldiers were about to take Paul into the barracks, he asked the commander, "May I say something to you?"

"Do you speak Greek?" he replied. <sup>38</sup> "Aren't you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the wilderness some time ago?" <sup>39</sup> Paul answered, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people." <sup>40</sup> After receiving the commander's permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. When they were all silent, he said to them in Aramaic <sup>a</sup>:

<sup>1</sup> "Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense." <sup>2</sup> When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet.

Then Paul said: <sup>3</sup> "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. <sup>4</sup> I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, <sup>5</sup> as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

<sup>6</sup> "About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. <sup>7</sup> I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?'

<sup>8</sup> "Who are you, Lord?' I asked.

"I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. <sup>9</sup> My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.

<sup>10</sup> "What shall I do, Lord?' I asked.

"Get up,' the Lord said, 'and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.' <sup>11</sup> My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

<sup>12</sup> "A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. <sup>13</sup> He stood beside me and said, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very moment I was able to see him. <sup>14</sup> "Then he said: 'The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. <sup>15</sup> You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard. <sup>16</sup> And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.'

<sup>17</sup> "When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance <sup>18</sup> and saw the Lord speaking to me. 'Quick!' he said. 'Leave Jerusalem immediately, because the people here will not accept your testimony about me.'

<sup>19</sup> “‘Lord,’ I replied, ‘these people know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you.’<sup>20</sup> And when the blood of your martyr<sup>b</sup> Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.’

<sup>21</sup> “Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

<sup>a</sup>21:40 Or possibly *Hebrew*; also in 22:2  
<sup>b</sup>22:20 Or *witness*

## Open

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- How are you different than you were ten years ago? What accounts for the change?

## Discover

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1. What problem do James and the Jerusalem elders relate to Paul? Describe it in your own words.

2. Why do you think this problem had arisen? (see 1 Cor. 7:18-19; Gal. 5:6; 6:15)

3. What was the solution proposed by James and the elders? Did Paul agree to the plan? Why do you think he responded in the way he did?

4. How would you describe Paul's attitude toward the Jewish law in the beginning of his story? (22:1-5) His attitude toward Christians? What changed, and why?

5. Describe what Ananias said and did. Why was his involvement significant?

## Apply

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- |                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> This is a good opportunity for each person to share their own experience of coming to know Christ. All of them will be unique, and none of them will be exactly like Paul's. | <input type="checkbox"/> If you haven't yet trusted Christ for salvation, share your spiritual journey so far. |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Who else would benefit from hearing your story?                                       |

# Commentary

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Over the next three chapters (21:17-24:23), Luke recounts the events of a perilous twelve-day period in which Paul is attacked by a mob in Jerusalem, arrested by Roman soldiers, narrowly avoids being flogged, is questioned by the Sanhedrin (at which time another fracas breaks out), is transferred to Caesarea under Roman guard in order to shield him from an assassination plot, and finally appears before the Roman governor.

vv. 17-19 Note that Paul and his companions “went to see James”; i.e., that James the brother of Jesus was viewed as the primary recipient of their report (see Acts 12:17; 15:13-22; Gal. 2:9).

vv. 20-21 The leaders of the Jerusalem church express gratitude for the work that God has been doing among the Gentiles, and they report that God has also been working among the Jews, so that “many thousands” of them have come to faith. However, the parallel growth of the church among Jews and Gentiles has exposed a fault line: the status of the Jewish Law.

Although the Jerusalem church had previously determined that Gentile believers were not obligated to observe the Law (Acts 15:21-29; reaffirmed here in v. 25), the question of the Law’s role in the lives of those who came to faith from a Jewish background had not been resolved. As a result, many Christians of Jewish heritage were “zealous for the law”, a phrase which echoes Paul’s description of himself prior to his conversion (Gal. 1:14; Acts 22:3).

The charge that Paul was teaching the Jews living in Gentile regions to “*turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs*”, was not strictly accurate: Paul’s position was not that Jewish religious practices should be abandoned, but that they had no inherent saving value, and were therefore not required for followers of Christ (1 Cor. 7:18-19; Gal. 5:6; 6:15). In fact, he observed these practices at times himself (Acts 16:3; 1 Cor. 9:20). However, such theological nuances were lost on his opponents, who were primarily concerned with enforcing outward expressions of traditional Jewish piety and identity.

vv. 22-26 In order to demonstrate that the accusations against Paul were false, James and the elders of the Jerusalem church devised a plan. Paul would cover the cost of a purification offering, on behalf of four men who had made a Nazirite vow of dedication to God (Num. 6:1-21; see Acts 18:18). This would show his support for traditional Jewish religious practices.

As for the instruction that Paul “join in their purification rites”, it is unclear what this refers to, as he had not taken a similar

Nazirite vow. Perhaps he was to undergo a purification ceremony prior to entering the temple; a rite which would be considered necessary after his extensive travels among the Gentiles.

Although Paul did as he was asked, events did not turn out as James and the elders had hoped.

vv. 27-32 While the plan was unfolding, Paul was spotted at the temple by “some Jews from the province of Asia”. The fact that they were not local residents may indicate that they had followed Paul to Jerusalem for the express purpose of inciting the people there to attack Paul, just as those who had previously traveled to Lystra (14:19) and Berea (17:13) for that purpose.

Their denunciation of Paul was twofold: first, that he taught “*against our people and our law and this place*”. In a sense, this was true; Paul taught that it was no longer necessary to become a Jewish proselyte, or to be circumcised and observe the Mosaic law, in order to be reconciled to God (Acts 15:1-2; Rom. 3:21-30; 4:12, 16; Col. 3:11). His teaching was “against” the temple in that, under the new covenant, the animal sacrifices performed there were no longer necessary: the sacrifice of Christ fulfilled the purpose for which they were originally instituted, thus making them obsolete (Rom. 3:25; see Heb. 7:26-27; 9:26-28; 10:1-18).

The second charge, that Paul had brought an uncircumcised Gentile into the part of the temple reserved for Jews, was more serious, as this was strictly forbidden (Ezek. 44:6-9). Although the claim was based on a mistaken assumption concerning Paul’s companion, Trophimus, it did not matter. The accusation was so incendiary that the crowd became outraged, and began to violently assault Paul (vv. 30-31, 35). He was saved from death only by the immediate intervention of the Roman military commander and his troops.

vv. 36-40 According to the historian Josephus, in about AD 54 a self-styled prophet, an Egyptian, attempted to rally the Jewish people against their Roman occupiers. Although many of that man’s followers were killed, he escaped. And now, since Paul is speaking Greek, a language widely spoken in Egypt, and because the crowd has reacted so strongly to him, the commander wonders if he may be that person, returning to Jerusalem for the same purpose.

Paul’s response, that he was not from Egypt, but from Tarsus, “no ordinary city”, let the commander know that he was a person of some status: in the ancient world, one’s social standing was related to one’s place of origin. As a result, Paul was permitted to address the crowd.

- v. 1-2 Paul requests a hearing, stating that he intends to present a “defense”. His use of this term (Gr. *apologia*) does not indicate that this is some kind of judicial proceeding, but rather that he seeks to provide facts and reasoning to explain his actions. Although the crowd’s previous response to him was impulsive and confused, he is appealing to them to listen patiently, and to thoughtfully consider what he has to say.  
The crowd “became very quiet” when hearing him speak in Aramaic, because this indicated that he was not a foreign agitator, but someone of more local origin.
- vv. 3 Paul begins by identifying himself as one who shares the ethnic and religious background of his hearers, stating, “I am a Jew”. He was raised in Jerusalem and was “thoroughly trained” in the Mosaic Law by a highly respected rabbi, Gamaliel, a Pharisee (Acts 5:34). This sect was known for their earnest dedication to obeying every requirement and prohibition of the Law, applying it fastidiously to even the smallest acts of daily life. For example, Jesus observed that they tithed their spices, “mint, dill and cumin” (Mt. 23:23). Thus, Paul could legitimately claim to have been “just as zealous for God as any of you are today” (see Gal. 1:14).
- vv. 4-5 Not only had Paul been zealous for the Law, but he was also zealous in persecuting followers of Christ, even “to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison” (Acts 9:1-2, 22:19-20, 26:9-11). This raises an obvious question: What happened to transform Paul from a murderous opponent of Christianity into one of its most ardent proponents? The answer lies in his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus.
- vv. 6-8 This is one of three complementary accounts of Paul’s Damascus road experience in Acts (see 9:3-9; 26:13-18). Each of them contains a different set of details; here, we have both of Paul’s questions: “Who are you, Lord” (v. 8) and “What shall I do, Lord” (v. 10). We also learn here that it was “about noon”, the implication being that the light was so bright it outshone even the noonday sun.
- vv. 9-11 Although those who were traveling with Paul saw the light and heard the sound of the Lord’s voice (and thus could corroborate his account), they did not see Christ, nor did they understand the words which he was speaking; only Paul (then called Saul) was given the full revelation of the risen Savior. Also, although they witnessed the flash of light, they did not experience its full intensity: it did not blind them as it did Paul.
- vv. 12-13 In order to address the charge that he was an anti-Jewish propagandist (21:28), Paul highlights the role of Ananias, and especially his credentials as an observant Jew: “*He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there*”. Ananias’ endorsement of Paul as a “brother”, and his pronouncement of God’s blessing on Paul’s ministry (vv. 14-15) are strong evidence in Paul’s defense.  
In addition, not only did Ananias’ role in the miraculous restoration of Paul’s sight indicate that God was at work in Paul’s life; it also emphasized that He was acting to call Paul into ministry through the agency of a faithful Jew, stressing the continuity between the old and the new.
- vv. 14-15 This title, “the God of our ancestors”, is used throughout the Old Testament (e.g., Dt. 26:7; 2 Chron. 20:6) to indicate that the God of Israel was the same God who had long ago called the patriarchs. Ananias’ use of this title therefore emphasizes a fundamental connection between Christianity and Judaism, that the God of Israel is the same God whom Christians worship (Acts 24:14), who raised Jesus from the dead (Acts 5:30), and who has now revealed Himself to Paul and commissioned him as his witness.  
The identification of Jesus as the “Righteous One” also highlights the link to Judaism, as this is how the Old Testament prophets describe the coming Messiah (Isa. 53:11; Jer. 23:5; 33:16; Zech. 9:9; see Acts 3:14; 7:52).
- v. 16 The implication here is that Paul followed Ananias’ instruction to “*be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name*”. In doing so, he acknowledged that his former life had not made him acceptable to God, but had instead alienated him from God (Eph. 2:3; 1 Tim. 1:12-16), and he received the forgiveness offered through Christ.
- vv. 17-18 This visit to Jerusalem took place three years after Paul’s initial encounter with Christ (Gal. 1:15-18). He mentions it here because the second vision confirms the commission he received in the first. It also parallels Isaiah’s vision (Isa. 6:1-13), in which the prophet is called to witness to the people of Israel, but warned that his message will be rejected. In addition, the parallel links “the Lord, high and exalted” (Isa. 6:1) with the risen Christ, who now addresses Paul.
- vv. 19-21 The warning that Paul’s testimony of Christ would not be accepted by his own people is vindicated by their response in v. 22, and throughout his ministry. The key point of rejection was the message that Gentiles could be accepted by God without first becoming Jewish proselytes, and that God would even intentionally seek them.

# Unit 22 – Testimony and Turmoil

## Acts 22:22-23:35

### Text

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<sup>22</sup> The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!"

<sup>23</sup> As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, <sup>24</sup> the commander ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. He directed that he be flogged and interrogated in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this. <sup>25</sup> As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty?"

<sup>26</sup> When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and reported it. "What are you going to do?" he asked. "This man is a Roman citizen."

<sup>27</sup> The commander went to Paul and asked, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?"

"Yes, I am," he answered.

<sup>28</sup> Then the commander said, "I had to pay a lot of money for my citizenship."

"But I was born a citizen," Paul replied.

<sup>29</sup> Those who were about to interrogate him withdrew immediately. The commander himself was alarmed when he realized that he had put Paul, a Roman citizen, in chains.

<sup>30</sup> The commander wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews. So the next day he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the members of the Sanhedrin to assemble. Then he brought Paul and had him stand before them.

<sup>1</sup> Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, "My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day."<sup>2</sup> At this the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. <sup>3</sup> Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!"

<sup>4</sup> Those who were standing near Paul said, "How dare you insult God's high priest!"

<sup>5</sup> Paul replied, "Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: 'Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.'<sup>a</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, descended from Pharisees. I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead."<sup>7</sup> When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. <sup>8</sup> (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees believe all these things.)

<sup>9</sup> There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously. "We find nothing wrong

with this man," they said. "What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" <sup>10</sup> The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks.

<sup>11</sup> The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."

<sup>12</sup> The next morning some Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul.

<sup>13</sup> More than forty men were involved in this plot.

<sup>14</sup> They went to the chief priests and the elders and said, "We have taken a solemn oath not to eat anything until we have killed Paul. <sup>15</sup> Now then, you and the Sanhedrin petition the commander to bring him before you on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his case. We are ready to kill him before he gets here."

<sup>16</sup> But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul.

<sup>17</sup> Then Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the commander; he has something to tell him." <sup>18</sup> So he took him to the commander.

The centurion said, "Paul, the prisoner, sent for me and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you."

<sup>19</sup> The commander took the young man by the hand, drew him aside and asked, "What is it you want to tell me?"

<sup>20</sup> He said: "Some Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul before the Sanhedrin tomorrow on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about him. <sup>21</sup> Don't give in to them, because more than forty of them are waiting in ambush for him. They have taken an oath not to eat or drink until they have killed him. They are ready now, waiting for your consent to their request."

<sup>22</sup> The commander dismissed the young man with this warning: "Don't tell anyone that you have reported this to me."

<sup>23</sup> Then he called two of his centurions and ordered them, "Get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen <sup>b</sup> to go to Caesarea at nine tonight. <sup>24</sup> Provide horses for Paul so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix.

<sup>25</sup> He wrote a letter as follows:

<sup>26</sup> Claudius Lysias,

To His Excellency, Governor Felix: Greetings.

<sup>27</sup> This man was seized by the Jews and they were about to kill him, but I came with my troops and rescued him, for I had learned that he is a Roman citizen. <sup>28</sup> I wanted to know why they were accusing him, so I brought him to their Sanhedrin. <sup>29</sup> I found that the accusation had to do with questions about their law, but there was no

charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment.<sup>30</sup> When I was informed of a plot to be carried out against the man, I sent him to you at once. I also ordered his accusers to present to you their case against him.

<sup>31</sup> So the soldiers, carrying out their orders, took Paul with them during the night and brought him as far as Antipatris.<sup>32</sup> The next day they let the cavalry go on with him, while they returned to the barracks.<sup>33</sup> When the cavalry arrived in Caesarea, they delivered the letter to the

governor and handed Paul over to him.<sup>34</sup> The governor read the letter and asked what province he was from. Learning that he was from Cilicia,<sup>35</sup> he said, "I will hear your case when your accusers get here." Then he ordered that Paul be kept under guard in Herod's palace.

<sup>a</sup>23:5 Exodus 22:28

<sup>b</sup>23:23 The meaning of the Greek for this word is uncertain.

## Open

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- How are ever narrowly escaped physical danger? If so, how did the experience affect you?

## Discover

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1. What evidence do we see in this passage that God is in control of Paul's circumstances?

2. What statement by Paul infuriates the crowd, to the point of demanding his death (22:21-22)? Why is this so offensive to them?

3. What does Paul claim is the doctrine for which he is on trial before the Sanhedrin? Why is this doctrine so critically important? (23:6; see 1 Cor. 15:1-57)

4. What was Paul's response when threatened with scourging (22:23-29)? What would you infer from this, concerning his willingness to suffer for his testimony of Christ?

5. What personal assurance does Paul receive from Christ (23:11)? How does this compare to the promises we have received?

## Apply

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- How might this passage affect your view of your own circumstances?

- What is your own attitude toward taking risks, and potentially suffering, for Christ? Is it the same as Paul's? Should it be?

# Commentary

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vv. 22-24 As Paul relates the Lord's directive that he go "*far away to the Gentiles*" (v. 21) the crowd reacts in furious outrage. The idea that God would bypass his chosen people and appeal directly to the Gentiles was utter heresy to them, and Paul, having made this statement, was judged a blasphemer and thus deserving of death (as Christ had been; see Mt. 9:3; 26:64-66; Mk. 14:62-64; Lk. 4:24-29; Jn. 10:30-39).

Their responses of shouting, throwing off their cloaks, and flinging dust into the air expressed their intense anger at Paul and their rejection of the claims he had made. These actions also demonstrated their repudiation of any connection with him, as they cast away from themselves the clothing, and even the dust, which were contaminated by his presence (see Acts 7:57; 13:51; 18:6).

The commander's order that Paul be taken to the relative safety of the barracks likely saved his life. However, Paul would have felt little relief: to be "flogged and interrogated" was a terrifying prospect. The Roman practice of scourging was a type of torture used to compel prisoners to testify. It consisted of being whipped with leather strips in which shards of metal or bone were embedded, ripping into the flesh and causing great agony. The prophet Isaiah tells us that when Christ suffered this torment, "*his appearance was . . . disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness*" (Isa. 52:14; see Mt. 27:26; Mk. 15:15).

vv. 25-28 Paul appropriately questions the legality of the process by which he was condemned to be flogged. Not only is he a Roman citizen, and thus exempt from flogging as a form of punishment or interrogation, but he has not even been charged with a crime, let alone tried and found guilty. However, the fact that Paul presents this as a question, in a calm and self-possessed manner, suggests that he is still prepared to suffer if necessary (see Acts 21:13; also 9:16; 20:24).

vv. 29-30 At the disclosure of Paul's citizenship, his interrogators quickly depart, and even the commander is alarmed. All who had a part in placing him in chains were at risk: to treat a Roman citizen in this way was not only illegal, but a direct affront to the Roman state. And so Paul is immediately released from his bonds. However, he is kept under arrest so that the commander can continue his quest to understand the reason for the Jews' accusations against him. Thus, he convenes a meeting of the Jewish leaders, the "chief priests and all the members of the Sanhedrin", and brings Paul to make his defense before them. But the outcome will not be what the commander had hoped for.

vv. 1-2 In addressing the Sanhedrin, Paul is not intimidated or servile; he is not seeking to avoid their censure or win their favor (Gal. 1:10). Thus, his eyes are not cast down: he looks "straight at" them. But neither is his posture haughty or superior. Rather, he addresses them as "brothers"; i.e., as fellow Jews and as equals. But they likely viewed his assumption of equality as insolent.

Paul's claim of having "fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day" refers to his obedient response to the vision he received, which he recounted in 22:1-21. Paul makes the same point later in his appearance before Agrippa, after having similarly related the circumstances of his calling (26:19; see 26:1-23).

vv. 3-4 Ordering that Paul be struck on the mouth, the organ of speech, was an attack on his testimony concerning Christ, and Paul's response should be seen in that light. He is reacting, not only to an unjustified assault on his person, but to the faithless response of the Jewish leaders to the words and deeds of their Messiah. His use of the epithet "whitewashed wall" recalls Jesus' condemnation of the "teachers of the Law and Pharisees", who

*"are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean."* (Mt. 23:27)

In addition, this recalls the judgment of the prophet Ezekiel against the false prophets of his day, who "whitewashed" over sin, lies and corruption (Ez. 13:8-16; 22:28).

Paul's response was an exposure of the high priest's hypocrisy; i.e., purporting to judge Paul under the law while himself breaking the law. It was also a stark reminder of the judgment to come upon those who led Israel astray (Mt. 23:1-36).

v. 5 Paul's response here shows appropriate humility: he does not retract his warning, or the truth of his assessment, but agrees that according to Scripture (Ex. 22:28) it was improper for him to directly censure the high priest. How it was that he did not initially recognize him as such is unclear.

v. 6 Paul's invocation of the "hope of the resurrection of the dead", a point of contention between the two main parties represented in the Sanhedrin, may seem like a cynical ploy to divide his adversaries. But it is a statement of the fundamental theological issue at stake: that in Jesus Christ, the ancient hope of Israel (Ez. 37:1-14; Dan. 12:1-3) and of all mankind, i.e., that of eternal life and victory over death (see Heb. 2:14-15), has finally been realized. This emphasis is seen throughout Acts (Acts 2:22-24; 4:1-2; 17:30-31; 24:14-16; 26:6-8, 22-23; 28:17-20; see also 1 Cor. 15:1-57).

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- vv. 7-8 The controversy between the Pharisees and Sadducees is described using the Greek word *stasis*, which implies that it was no mere academic disagreement, but a loud and rancorous debate (other uses of this term in Acts: “sharp dispute”, 15:2; “rioting”, 19:40; “riots”, 24:5). As vv. 9-10 relate, it became a “great uproar”, so violent that the commander feared for Paul’s very life.
- Luke’s comment that the Sadducees “say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits” requires explanation. Their denial of a hope of resurrection is mentioned in the gospels, in the context of an encounter with Jesus in which they try to confound him on this point (Lk. 20:27-40; Mt. 22:23-33; Mk. 12:18-27). However, it is unlikely that they denied the existence of angels altogether, since those beings are clearly attested in their Scriptures, our Old Testament. The more likely meaning is that, given their position on life after death, they excluded the possibility of departed souls existing, or appearing, in the form of angels or spirits.
- vv. 9-10 The response of the “teachers of the law who were Pharisees” is remarkable. Paul’s tactic of going directly to the heart of the matter; i.e., the hope of resurrection, has apparently had its intended effect: they now profess acceptance of the possibility that he has in fact had an encounter with a “spirit or an angel” (although they do not explicitly address Paul’s claim that it was the risen Christ). Further, they exonerate Paul of any wrongdoing, proclaiming that “We find nothing wrong with this man”. This implies that they judge his testimony not to be blasphemous or worthy of condemnation.
- But this opinion was not shared by all; on the contrary, the dispute between the parties grew so heated that once again, Paul had to be forcibly extracted from the melee by the Roman commander and taken to the safety of the barracks.
- v. 11 Following these tumultuous events, Paul receives a visit from the Lord, who exhorts him to “Take courage”, and grants him assurance of further protection, so that he might testify in Rome (see 18:9-10). Many Christians today might wish for a similar appearance and affirmation. But we should keep these things in mind: First, that Christ has in fact given us assurance of his presence, with all that implies, promising “surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Mt. 28:20). Second, that Paul had a unique, and uniquely pivotal, role in the development of the early church. And third, that Paul suffered greatly, and was repeatedly and viciously persecuted (see 2 Cor. 11:23-12:10). If we desire similar consolations, would we also wish for comparable suffering?
- vv. 12-33 In the account of Paul’s escape from Jerusalem to Caesarea, we are reminded of God’s sovereign power to care for his people and carry out his purposes. Not only has Paul twice been rescued from an angry mob, but he is now providentially protected from a conspiracy of deeply committed assassins, who are abetted in their scheme by powerful religious leaders.
- vv. 12-15 The men who planned to kill Paul took an oath of fasting, and reported this to the “chief priests and the elders”, implying that they considered his murder to be an act of religious devotion, one which had God’s blessing (see Jn. 16:2).
- vv. 16-22 We are not told how Paul’s nephew learned of the plot against him. But the respect which the Roman authorities have for Paul is demonstrated by the fact that both the centurion and the commander are willing to grant his request to give the young man a hearing. In contrast, the commander’s opinion of the Jewish leaders is reflected in the fact that he accepts the report of their duplicity as credible, and immediately acts on it.
- vv. 23-24 A band of forty men intent on killing Paul might seem like overwhelming force. How could he possibly survive? But here we see God’s provision: a detachment of Roman soldiers, equally dedicated to protecting him, with a number that is a dozen times greater (See 2 Ki. 6:8-17).
- vv. 25-30 This letter from the commander to the Roman governor, Felix, is written so as to put its author, Claudius Lysias, in the best possible light; a human element that speaks to its authenticity. Note that he gives as his reason for rescuing Paul that he “had learned” he was a Roman citizen, when in fact he came to this knowledge only later. He also conveniently omits the fact that he ordered Paul to be scourged.
- Note that again (see v. 9), we have testimony that Paul is innocent of any crime deserving of death, or even imprisonment, this time from a secular Roman authority. Perhaps Luke includes this detail in his account in order to build a case among his readers for official tolerance of Christianity.
- vv. 31-33 The soldiers and cavalry reached the halfway point of Antipatris, a distance of about 35 miles, during the night. At that time, since a protective detail of this size was no longer needed, the soldiers returned to the barracks while the horsemen continued on with Paul. The next day, they arrived in Caesarea, where the governor read the letter and ordered that Paul be kept in custody, pending the arrival of his accusers.

# Unit 23 – Before Governors and Kings

## Acts 24:1-25:22

### Text

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<sup>1</sup> Five days later the high priest Ananias went down to Caesarea with some of the elders and a lawyer named Tertullus, and they brought their charges against Paul before the governor. <sup>2</sup> When Paul was called in, Tertullus presented his case before Felix: "We have enjoyed a long period of peace under you, and your foresight has brought about reforms in this nation. <sup>3</sup> Everywhere and in every way, most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with profound gratitude. <sup>4</sup> But in order not to weary you further, I would request that you be kind enough to hear us briefly.

<sup>5</sup> "We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect <sup>6</sup> and even tried to desecrate the temple; so we seized him. <sup>7</sup><sup>a</sup> <sup>8</sup> By examining him yourself you will be able to learn the truth about all these charges we are bringing against him."

<sup>9</sup> The other Jews joined in the accusation, asserting that these things were true.

<sup>10</sup> When the governor motioned for him to speak, Paul replied: "I know that for a number of years you have been a judge over this nation; so I gladly make my defense. <sup>11</sup> You can easily verify that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. <sup>12</sup> My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple, or stirring up a crowd in the synagogues or anywhere else in the city. <sup>13</sup> And they cannot prove to you the charges they are now making against me.

<sup>14</sup> However, I admit that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, <sup>15</sup> and I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. <sup>16</sup> So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.

<sup>17</sup> "After an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings. <sup>18</sup> I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts doing this. There was no crowd with me, nor was I involved in any disturbance. <sup>19</sup> But there are some Jews from the province of Asia, who ought to be here before you and bring charges if they have anything against me. <sup>20</sup> Or these who are here should state what crime they found in me when I stood before the Sanhedrin—<sup>21</sup> unless it was this one thing I shouted as I stood in their presence: 'It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.'"

<sup>22</sup> Then Felix, who was well acquainted with the Way, adjourned the proceedings. "When Lysias the commander comes," he said, "I will decide your case." <sup>23</sup> He ordered the centurion to keep Paul under guard but to give him some freedom and permit his friends to take care of his needs.

<sup>24</sup> Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> As Paul talked about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you." <sup>26</sup> At the same time he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him.

<sup>27</sup> When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favor to the Jews, he left Paul in prison.

<sup>1</sup> Three days after arriving in the province, Festus went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> where the chief priests and the Jewish leaders appeared before him and presented the charges against Paul. <sup>3</sup> They requested Festus, as a favor to them, to have Paul transferred to Jerusalem, for they were preparing an ambush to kill him along the way. <sup>4</sup> Festus answered, "Paul is being held at Caesarea, and I myself am going there soon. <sup>5</sup> Let some of your leaders come with me, and if the man has done anything wrong, they can press charges against him there."

<sup>6</sup> After spending eight or ten days with them, Festus went down to Caesarea. The next day he convened the court and ordered that Paul be brought before him. <sup>7</sup> When Paul came in, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him. They brought many serious charges against him, but they could not prove them.

<sup>8</sup> Then Paul made his defense: "I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar."

<sup>9</sup> Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?"

<sup>10</sup> Paul answered: "I am now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. <sup>11</sup> If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!"

<sup>12</sup> After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: "You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!"

<sup>13</sup> A few days later King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to pay their respects to Festus. <sup>14</sup> Since they were spending many days there, Festus discussed Paul's case with the king. He said: "There is a man here whom Felix left as a prisoner. <sup>15</sup> When I went to Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews brought charges against him and asked that he be condemned.

<sup>16</sup> "I told them that it is not the Roman custom to hand over anyone before they have faced their

accusers and have had an opportunity to defend themselves against the charges.<sup>17</sup> When they came here with me, I did not delay the case, but convened the court the next day and ordered the man to be brought in.<sup>18</sup> When his accusers got up to speak, they did not charge him with any of the crimes I had expected.<sup>19</sup> Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive.<sup>20</sup> I was at a loss how to investigate such matters; so I asked if he would be willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial there on these charges.<sup>21</sup> But when Paul made his

appeal to be held over for the Emperor's decision, I ordered him held until I could send him to Caesar."

<sup>22</sup> Then Agrippa said to Festus, "I would like to hear this man myself."

He replied, "Tomorrow you will hear him."

<sup>a24:7</sup> Some manuscripts include here *him, and we would have judged him in accordance with our law.*<sup>7</sup> But the commander Lysias came and took him from us with much violence,<sup>6</sup> ordering his accusers to come before you.

## Open

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- Do you have any fears or phobias? How do you deal with them?

## Discover

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1. What charges do the Jewish leaders bring against Paul before Felix?

2. What are the main points of Paul's defense before Felix?

3. How did Felix respond? Why?

4. When given the opportunity to speak privately with Felix, what does Paul talk about?

5. How do the events of this passage fulfill prophecy? (Mt. 10:18; Mk. 13:9; Lk. 21:12)

## Apply

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- Given all the twists and turns in this story, and the actions of dishonest, greedy, and politically motivated people, it is difficult to remember that Paul is not a victim of his circumstances, but that all of these things were a part of God's good and wise plan. Do you experience the same difficulty concerning your own "story"?
- What can we learn from Paul about how to respond to attacks and false accusations? How is he able to respond in this way?
- What risks does Paul take in this passage? What enables him to take those risks?

# Commentary

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- vv. 1-4 Tertullus praises the Roman governor Felix, mentioning the “long period of peace” which the Jews have enjoyed under his leadership. This was a bit of formal flattery, but also an implicit appeal for Felix to rule in their favor, on the basis that Paul had (according to them) acted to undermine the very peace for which Felix was responsible. In other words, by accusing Paul of a breach of public order, they sought to make this a matter of civil concern, and a matter of personal concern to Felix, rather than merely an internal religious dispute.
- vv. 5-9 The Jews did not allege that Paul was guilty of sedition against the Roman state; they did not have to. The charge that he was disrupting the peace of the empire by inciting riots, and that he had provoked outrage among the Jews by attacking their holy place, would be enough to render him subject to death or imprisonment, if true. However, this was false: in fact, it was the “Jews from the province of Asia” who “stirred up the whole crowd” (21:27-29).
- v. 10 Paul demonstrates appropriate respect for civil authority (Rom. 13:1-7), stating that he is glad to present his case before Felix. Paul also recognizes that Felix has been a “judge over this nation” for “a number of years”. Therefore, he is presumably knowledgeable in Jewish affairs.  
Paul’s appearances before Felix and other rulers fulfill Christ’s prophecy that his followers would be “*brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles*” (Mt. 10:18; see Mk. 13:9; Lk. 21:12).
- vv. 11-13 Paul makes two points in his defense. First, that his intention in visiting the temple was not to desecrate it, but to worship there as a faithful Jew. And second, that although he is charged with inciting a riot, his accusers did not actually observe him doing anything to provoke the crowd, and thus cannot prove their charges.
- vv. 14-16 Paul makes a confession, which is not an admission of any wrongdoing, but a testimony of his identity as a follower of “the Way”, i.e., Christianity (see Jn. 14:6; Acts 9:2; 18:25-26; 19:9, 23; 24:22). He emphasizes the continuities in the faith of God’s people under the old and new covenants, stating that he worships the same God as do his Jewish accusers, “the God of our ancestors”; he shares their faith in the Old Testament Scriptures as God’s Word, believing “*everything that is in accordance with the Law and . . . the Prophets*”; and he affirms with them the hope of resurrection. Therefore, what he is teaching is not a departure from, or repudiation of, that ancient faith, but rather the fulfillment of it.
- vv. 17-21 Paul makes several arguments in his defense. First, that he came to Jerusalem “[a]fter an absence of several years”. In other words, he was clearly not in the habit of stirring up trouble in the Jewish capital, since before this incident he was spending all his time elsewhere. Second, his purpose in visiting was to bring “gifts for the poor and to present offerings”. Third, he was “ceremonially clean” when he was accosted in the temple courts (likely as a result of the purification ritual referred to in 21:26); thus, the charge of desecrating the temple (24:6) was false. Fourth, when he was seized, he was not accompanied by a group of people, as would have been expected if he were indeed inciting a riot. Nor was he doing anything to disturb the peace; on the contrary, he was quietly going about his business as a faithful Jew.  
But not only does Paul defend his own conduct, he challenges the actions of his accusers. The “Jews from the province of Asia” who made the initial accusation against him (21:27-29) have not come to testify before Felix, as they should have done if they were willing to stand by their account. Paul also invites them to report what conclusion they reached when he was tried before the Sanhedrin, knowing that they failed to find any evidence to convict him, and that even some of their own had stated, “We find nothing wrong with this man” (23:9). In summary, this was a comprehensive and devastating rebuttal of the charges against Paul.
- vv. 22-23 Perhaps it is becoming clear to Felix that this is primarily a theological dispute, rather than a civil or criminal matter. Or perhaps he simply wishes to allow time for Lysias to travel to Caesarea to testify concerning these events. At any rate, he suspends the proceedings and orders Paul to be detained, but with some freedom of movement and association.
- vv. 24-26 As we read of Paul speaking to the Roman governor of “faith in Christ Jesus” and of “righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come”, we need to remember that he is not merely seeking to make the best of a bad situation. On the contrary, Paul regarded his arrest, imprisonment, and trial as a divinely-appointed opportunity to bring the gospel to this influential ruler. Felix responded in fear, apparently realizing that he was indeed guilty of sin and in need of forgiveness. Although he was not ready to receive the gospel at this time, he continued to engage with Paul on a regular basis for the next two years (vv. 26-27). However, he had mixed motives; he was hoping for a bribe. Tragically, although he was being offered eternal riches, his eyes were fixed on that which is ultimately worthless (Mt. 6:19-21).

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- v. 27 The decision to leave Paul in prison when leaving office was an act of pure political expediency, a further injustice added to his two years of detention. But in doing so, Felix was not frustrating God's plans for Paul; all of these events were under His control, and proceeding according to His plan.
- vv. 1-3 The Jewish leaders see the arrival of a new provincial governor as an opportunity to renew their attempts to eliminate Paul. Having previously failed to accomplish this through the Roman legal process, they now intend a more direct approach: to ambush and murder him on the way to Jerusalem. The fact that they are planning to take an action which will expose them as having dealt deceitfully with Festus reveals the depth of their hatred; they are willing to risk a poisoned relationship with Rome in order to remove Paul from the earth.
- vv. 4-5 Festus responds as a responsible agent of Roman justice. Likely aware of the previous plot to attack Paul under similar circumstances (23:12-22), he declines the Jewish leaders' request for a "favor" and insists that any trial should take place at Caesarea, rather than Jerusalem.
- v. 8 Paul followed the Mosaic law when it enabled his witness among Jews, but otherwise, he was free to live as one "not having the [Mosaic] law" (1 Cor. 9:19-22). In his statement that "*I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law*", we see that he viewed this freedom, not as acting "against" the law, but as recognizing its changed role in the present age.
- v. 9 At this point, Festus' commitment to justice wavers, and he attempts to find a politically acceptable compromise. Rather than declaring Paul innocent, which would offend the Jews, or guilty, which the evidence does not support, he suggests a transfer to Jerusalem. Perhaps to make the idea more palatable, he assures Paul that, although the trial would take place on his accusers' turf, he would be standing trial "before me", that is, before Festus rather than the Sanhedrin.
- vv. 10-12 Paul rejects the proposed change of venue, likely sensing that it is a trap set by his accusers that would effectively "hand [him] over" to them. At the same time, he can see that he will not receive justice from Festus, even though the Roman governor knows "very well" that Paul is innocent. And so he exercises his right as a Roman citizen to demand that his case be taken to a higher court: that of Caesar himself. This will not only extricate Paul from a perilous situation, it will also allow him to carry out his intention to visit Rome for the sake of the gospel, a calling which was confirmed by Christ (Acts 19:21; 23:11). Festus has little choice but to grant his request.
- v. 13 As the ruler of a neighboring Roman territory, it was natural for Agrippa to pay a visit to Festus, the newly installed governor of Judea. This "Agrippa" is Herod Agrippa II. He was the son of Herod Agrippa I, who also played a role in the early church (Acts 12:1-23), and he was the grandson of Herod the Great (Mt. 2:1-20). Bernice was his oldest sister, who had previously been married to his uncle. At this time, these two—Herod Agrippa I and his sister, Bernice—were living together in an apparently incestuous relationship.
- vv. 14-16 Agrippa was known to be "well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies" (26:3). And so Festus takes the opportunity of his extended visit to confer with him concerning Paul's case. Festus' report of the Jewish leader's request (25:1-3) provides additional details: they had "asked that he be condemned", and requested that Paul be handed over to them, presumably for trial and punishment under their authority. Festus' response was that, as a Roman citizen who was currently in his custody, and whose rights he therefore had a responsibility to protect, Paul would be afforded the right to a formal trial, at which he could confront his accusers and present a defense.
- vv. 17-19 In contrast to Felix, who allowed Paul to languish in jail for two years, Festus emphasizes that he took his responsibilities as a judge seriously: he did not delay, but acted swiftly and "*convened the court the next day*". However, what he heard from Paul's accusers surprised him: rather than claiming any serious breach of Roman law, they "*had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive.*" In other words, as Festus saw it, Paul's alleged offenses were not civil in nature, but merely matters of theological dispute among Jews.
- vv. 20-22 Based on what he has reported so far, the appropriate thing for Festus to do would be to release Paul from custody. However, since he was "*wishing to do the Jews a favor*" (25:9), he had not done so, instead proposing to Paul that he be tried in Jerusalem, presumably because this is where matters of a religious nature could best be adjudicated. But Paul instead appealed to Caesar. Festus gives no reasons for Paul's response, but Paul likely understood that a return to that city would be a death sentence for him, given his enemies' determination to extinguish his life, and the unreliability of Rome's protection.
- Hearing all of this, Agrippa is intrigued and requests to hear Paul himself. This is a request which Festus is apparently happy to grant, since he is "*at a loss how to investigate such matters*".

# Unit 24 – Paul Testifies Before Agrippa

## Acts 25:23-26:32

### Text

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<sup>23</sup> The next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high-ranking military officers and the prominent men of the city. At the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. <sup>24</sup> Festus said: “King Agrippa, and all who are present with us, you see this man! The whole Jewish community has petitioned me about him in Jerusalem and here in Caesarea, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. <sup>25</sup> I found he had done nothing deserving of death, but because he made his appeal to the Emperor I decided to send him to Rome. <sup>26</sup> But I have nothing definite to write to His Majesty about him. Therefore I have brought him before all of you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that as a result of this investigation I may have something to write. <sup>27</sup> For I think it is unreasonable to send a prisoner on to Rome without specifying the charges against him.”

<sup>1</sup> Then Agrippa said to Paul, “You have permission to speak for yourself.”

So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defense: <sup>2</sup> “King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews, <sup>3</sup> and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently.

<sup>4</sup> “The Jewish people all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. <sup>5</sup> They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee. <sup>6</sup> And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today. <sup>7</sup> This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that these Jews are accusing me. <sup>8</sup> Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?

<sup>9</sup> “I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. <sup>10</sup> And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord’s people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. <sup>11</sup> Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities.

<sup>12</sup> “On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. <sup>13</sup> About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my

companions. <sup>14</sup> We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, <sup>a</sup> ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’

<sup>15</sup> “Then I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’  
“ ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied. <sup>16</sup> ‘Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. <sup>17</sup> I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them <sup>18</sup> to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

<sup>19</sup> “So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. <sup>20</sup> First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds. <sup>21</sup> That is why some Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. <sup>22</sup> But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen— <sup>23</sup> that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”

<sup>24</sup> At this point Festus interrupted Paul’s defense. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.”

<sup>25</sup> “I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable. <sup>26</sup> The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. <sup>27</sup> King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.”

<sup>28</sup> Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”

<sup>29</sup> Paul replied, “Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.”

<sup>30</sup> The king rose, and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with them. <sup>31</sup> After they left the room, they began saying to one another, “This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment.”

<sup>32</sup> Agrippa said to Festus, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.”

<sup>a</sup>26:14 Or Hebrew

## Open

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- Would you rather be a wealthy person in the 1920's, or a middle-class person today? Why?

## Discover

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1. In your own words, describe the scene in this passage. For example: Where does it take place? Who is in attendance? What are they thinking and feeling? What is at stake?

2. Why had Festus requested that Paul be heard by Agrippa?

3. What is Paul's main point in his introduction (26:1-8)?

4. What is the significance of Paul's history as a persecutor of Christians (26:9-11)?

5. In 26:12-23, Paul describes his encounter with Christ. What was the message he received?

6. What was Festus' response to Paul's presentation? Agrippa's response? The others?

## Apply

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- If you were granted a one-hour audience with the leader of your country, as well as his or her closest advisors, what would you say to them?
- Do you have any stressful or risky encounters coming up in the future? How can Paul's conduct in this passage be an example to you?

# Commentary

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v. 23 As we read the account of Paul's defense, we should keep in mind that he is not only speaking to King Agrippa, but indirectly to all who are present, including "*high-ranking military officers and the prominent men of the city*". Thus the opportunity which God has given him, to promote the gospel among the elite of this important city, extends to the entire ruling class.

The "great pomp" which accompanied the arrival of Agrippa and Bernice was intended to demonstrate their power, wealth, and status. Paul, by contrast, was poorly attired (1 Cor. 4:11). Yet, from God's perspective, Agrippa and Bernice were clothed in moth-eaten rags (Mt. 6:19; Isa. 64:6; Jam. 5:1-2), while Paul was clothed in the power and righteousness of Christ (Lk. 24:49; Gal. 3:27).

vv. 24-27 In Festus' review of Paul's case, he once again testifies that Paul is innocent of any wrongdoing; this is the second of three such declarations by the Roman authorities (v. 25; see 23:29; 26:31).

Festus' political dilemma is real. He was taken by surprise when Paul demanded to have his case taken up by a higher court, and had little alternative but to comply. However, he knows that this will bring the whole affair to the attention of Caesar, and he lacks any finding that would justify Paul's continued detention or trial. Thus, Festus is in danger of being exposed as weak and incompetent: yielding to pressure from the "Jewish community", lacking the integrity and courage to simply release an innocent man, a Roman citizen, but unable to find an acceptable resolution. Perhaps Agrippa can come to his aid.

vv. 1-3 Paul requests that the king "listen to [him] patiently", because he intends to speak at some length: not only responding to the specific accusations made against him, but also relating the events of his life before and after his encounter with Christ, and making a defense of the gospel.

vv. 4-6 Paul's argument, here and elsewhere in Acts (24:15-16; 26:6-7; 28:20) is that the Christian faith which he taught and practiced was not a departure from the ancient religion of Judaism, the religion in which he was raised and which he had followed strictly as a Pharisee, but that Christianity represented the fulfillment of the promises made to "our ancestors". He bases his argument on the idea that the central hope of Israel had always been resurrection and eternal life, and that this hope has now been fulfilled in Jesus, who is both the Messiah and the first to be raised from the dead (Acts 26:23; see Ezek. 37:11-4, Isa. 25:8, 26:19, Dan. 12:1-2; Ps. 16:9-10; 1 Cor. 15:20).

vv. 7-8 Not only is Jesus the one through whom mankind's enduring hope of eternal life has finally been realized, but this is what Paul's own people, the Jews, have been yearning for throughout their long history. And yet, ironically, it is because of this very doctrine, the promise of eternal life through faith in Christ, that Paul is being persecuted by them. Although they "earnestly serve God day and night," their service is to no avail; "*they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge*" (Rom. 10:2).

The reference to "our twelve tribes" alludes to Israel in its completeness; i.e., not viewed merely as individuals scattered and dispersed among the nations, but as a cohesive whole, a people who will someday be reconstituted and gathered together, as prophesied in the Old Testament (Ezk. 37:15-28). This emphasis on unity also points to the fact that the promise is for every member of Israel, including not only ethnic Jews, but all who share the faith of Abraham (see Rom. 4:9-16).

vv. 9-11 Paul is unsparing in his description of himself as a cruel and merciless persecutor of Christians; as he writes in 1 Tim. 1:13, he was "a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man". In his misdirected zeal, he sought to root out believers wherever they were, going "*from one synagogue to another*" and even pursuing them "*in foreign cities*". His actions included having Christians thrown into prison and even put to death, believing that he was completely justified in doing so (see Jn. 16:2). The comment that he "*tried to force them to blaspheme*" may mean that he tried to make them deny Christ, perhaps by means of torture, or that he attempted to obtain statements of Christian belief which the Jews would consider blasphemous.

vv. 12-16 In this account, we have details which augment the narratives in Acts 9:1-19 and 22:6-15. For example, in all three passages, Paul relates that he fell to the ground, and then arose at the Lord's command (26:16; 9:4-6; 22:7-10). Here, he adds that his companions also fell to the ground ("we all", v. 14). We can assume that they got up when Paul did, after which they "stood there speechless" (9:7).

There is an apparent discrepancy in the revelation that Paul had been chosen to be a "witness to all people of what you have seen and heard" (22:15). In the earlier account, this is spoken by Ananias, while here, Paul relates the statement in the context of his initial encounter with the Lord. It may be that Paul received this word first from Christ, and then again from Ananias as a confirmation. Or, since Ananias received this revelation from the Lord (9:10-16), Paul may be condensing the narrative here, by focusing on Christ as the source of the commission rather than on Ananias as its messenger.

- vv. 17-18 Although Jesus is sending Paul to minister to *“your own people and . . . the Gentiles”* he knows that Paul will encounter resistance and even active opposition; so much so that he will need to be rescued from both groups (v. 17). In other words, even an explicit commission from Christ does not guarantee a uniformly positive response to our message, nor does it mean that our lives and ministries will be pain- and conflict-free (see Mt. 10:24-25).
- Paul’s call focuses on the effects of the gospel, which is the good news that every Christian bears witness to. He is to *“open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light”*; that is, deliver them from their spiritual blindness (see 2 Cor. 4:4-6; 1 Jn. 2:11). Jesus also used the metaphor of blindness to describe those who lack spiritual understanding (Mt. 23:16-19; Jn. 9:39-14; 12:37-41). Tragically, many who are “blind” do not realize it, but see themselves as perceptive and insightful (Rom. 2:18-24; Rev. 3:17-18).
- In addition, he is to turn them *“from the power of Satan to God”*; i.e., lead them out of their present condition of slavery, under the dominion of Satan and sin, and into a place of freedom and willing submission to God (see Rom. 6:1-23; Gal. 4:8; Eph. 2:1-5; Col. 1:12-14). This requires a “turn”, as following Christ is not merely a matter of adding something to one’s life, or making minor alterations; rather, it is a complete change of course, away from the world and toward God (see Acts 3:19, 26; 9:35; 11:21; 14:15; 15:19; 20:21; 26:20; 1 Thess. 1:9).
- The result of this enlightenment, repentance, and deliverance will be salvation; i.e., *“forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me”*. Note that in this context, the term “sanctified” does not refer to the ongoing process of growing in personal holiness, but to the state of being set apart to God as one of his own.
- vv. 19-21 Paul preached a salvation that requires repentance, and which produces the evidence of a changed life. Some Jews responded violently to this message, because he insisted that they, and not only the Gentiles, needed to repent; i.e., that their ethnic heritage and religious rituals were not sufficient to reconcile them to God.
- vv. 22-23 Paul continues by asserting that the gospel which he proclaims is not a heretical deviation from his Jewish faith and heritage, but rather is the fulfillment of it: referring to the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ, he declares that this is *“what the prophets and Moses said would happen”* (see Acts 2:14-36; 3:12-26; 13:16-41, 24:14, 28:23).
- vv. 24-25 Paul’s claims—that Christ had risen from the dead, that the purpose of this event was to bring light, not only to his own people but also to the Gentiles, and that all of these things were foretold in the Old Testament—are more than Festus can bear: he exclaims loudly, *“You are out of your mind, Paul!”* These teachings seem to him like the ravings of a madman (see 1 Cor. 1:18; 2:14), and he concludes, *“Your great learning is driving you insane,”* i.e. that Paul has lost his grip on reality as a result of peering too long and too intently into the mysteries of the Hebrew Scriptures (see Mk. 3:21). However, Paul answers that he is in fact not insane, but that the things he is saying are both “true and reasonable”.
- v. 26 Paul refers to King Agrippa’s familiarity with “these things,” i.e. the facts of Christ’s life, his death, and reported resurrection, and also to the king’s familiarity with the interpretation that his followers had given to them. Paul does this in order to show that his teachings were not solely the product of his own (allegedly unbalanced) mind; nor were they developed in secret (“in a corner”). On the contrary, these doctrines had arisen from the church at large, acting in public, and in response to a set of historical events. As a result, they were common knowledge among those people who had been paying attention to current religious events, including the king.
- v. 27 Paul now addresses Agrippa on a personal basis, referring to the fact that, although a Gentile, he accepted the Hebrew Scriptures as true.
- v. 28 Agrippa’s response could be viewed as incredulous, bemused, surprised, or even offended. He understands that Paul is making a personal appeal to him to believe the gospel on the basis of fulfilled prophecy, and he deftly turns the question aside, implying that he would need more time, or perhaps additional arguments, in order to consider it.
- v. 29 Paul affirms that his desire is for all who hear him, including the king, to become followers of Christ, as he is. His wry addition, “except for these chains”, is a reminder to them of why he has been made a prisoner.
- vv. 30-32 Once again, Paul is declared innocent of wrongdoing by government officials, as they agree among themselves that *“This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment.”* However, since Paul has made a formal appeal to Caesar, the case is out of their hands: they must send him on to the imperial court. Note that, rather than this being a miscalculation on Paul’s part, it likely saved his life: if he had been released, he would no longer have been under the protection of the authorities, and thus would have been at risk of assassination (see 25:3)

# Unit 25 – Shipwreck and Salvation

## Acts 27:1-44

### Text

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<sup>1</sup> When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the Imperial Regiment. <sup>2</sup> We boarded a ship from Adramyttium about to sail for ports along the coast of the province of Asia, and we put out to sea. Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, was with us.

<sup>3</sup> The next day we landed at Sidon; and Julius, in kindness to Paul, allowed him to go to his friends so they might provide for his needs. <sup>4</sup> From there we put out to sea again and passed to the lee of Cyprus because the winds were against us. <sup>5</sup> When we had sailed across the open sea off the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia. <sup>6</sup> There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy and put us on board. <sup>7</sup> We made slow headway for many days and had difficulty arriving off Cnidus. When the wind did not allow us to hold our course, we sailed to the lee of Crete, opposite Salmone. <sup>8</sup> We moved along the coast with difficulty and came to a place called Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea.

<sup>9</sup> Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Day of Atonement. <sup>a</sup> So Paul warned them, <sup>10</sup> “Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also.” <sup>11</sup> But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship. <sup>12</sup> Since the harbor was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided that we should sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix and winter there. This was a harbor in Crete, facing both southwest and northwest.

<sup>13</sup> When a gentle south wind began to blow, they saw their opportunity; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete.

<sup>14</sup> Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the Northeaster, swept down from the island. <sup>15</sup> The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along. <sup>16</sup> As we passed to the lee of a small island called Cauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure, <sup>17</sup> so the men hoisted it aboard. Then they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together. Because they were afraid they would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor<sup>b</sup> and let the ship be driven along. <sup>18</sup> We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard.

<sup>19</sup> On the third day, they threw the ship’s tackle overboard with their own hands. <sup>20</sup> When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.

<sup>21</sup> After they had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: “Men,

you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. <sup>22</sup> But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. <sup>23</sup> Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me <sup>24</sup> and said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.’ <sup>25</sup> So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. <sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island.”

<sup>27</sup> On the fourteenth night we were still being driven across the Adriatic<sup>c</sup> Sea, when about midnight the sailors sensed they were approaching land. <sup>28</sup> They took soundings and found that the water was a hundred and twenty feet<sup>d</sup> deep. A short time later they took soundings again and found it was ninety feet<sup>e</sup> deep.

<sup>29</sup> Fearing that we would be dashed against the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight. <sup>30</sup> In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they were going to lower some anchors from the bow. <sup>31</sup> Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, “Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved.” <sup>32</sup> So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it drift away.

<sup>33</sup> Just before dawn Paul urged them all to eat. “For the last fourteen days,” he said, “you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food—you haven’t eaten anything. <sup>34</sup> Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head.”

<sup>35</sup> After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. <sup>36</sup> They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. <sup>37</sup> Altogether there were 276 of us on board. <sup>38</sup> When they had eaten as much as they wanted, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea.

<sup>39</sup> When daylight came, they did not recognize the land, but they saw a bay with a sandy beach, where they decided to run the ship aground if they could. <sup>40</sup> Cutting loose the anchors, they left them in the sea and at the same time untied the ropes that held the rudders. Then they hoisted the foresail to the wind and made for the beach. <sup>41</sup> But the ship struck a sandbar and ran aground. The bow stuck fast and would not move, and the stern was broken to pieces by the pounding of the surf.

<sup>42</sup> The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping. <sup>43</sup> But the centurion wanted to spare Paul’s life and kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land. <sup>44</sup> The rest were to get there on planks or on other pieces of the ship. In this way everyone reached land safely.

<sup>a</sup>27:9 That is, Yom Kippur

<sup>b</sup>27:17 Or *the sails*

<sup>c</sup>27:27 In ancient times the name referred to an area extending well south of Italy.

<sup>d</sup>27:28 Or about 37 meters

<sup>e</sup>27:28 Or about 27 meters

## Open

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- If you were going on a journey to a faraway destination, and cost or time was not an issue, would you prefer to travel by land, sea, or air? Why?

## Discover

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1. In this passage, Paul and those traveling with him experience a perilous sea voyage and life-threatening storms. Why do you think that God, who controls the weather, would allow all these things to happen?

2. Why did the centurion disregard Paul's advice the first time (vv.9-11)? Why did he listen to him the second time (vv. 21-32)?

3. Contrast Paul's actions and state of mind through this ordeal with that of the sailors. Give examples.

4. Why were the crew and passengers not eating? Why did Paul encourage them to eat? What did their willingness to do so indicate?

5. Why is it significant that Paul gives thanks, in the midst of a terrible storm (v. 35)?

## Apply

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- What conclusions can we draw from the fact that, by the end of this story, the de facto leader of the 276 seamen, soldiers, and passengers on board the ship was Paul the prisoner?
- Are you experiencing any "storms" at the present time? Are there any lessons you can apply from this passage?

# Commentary

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- v. 1 The “we” in this passage encompasses all of the ship’s company, including Paul, Luke, who is the author of this book, and another companion, “Aristarchus” (v. 2). The Roman governor had decided that they should “sail for Italy” because of Paul’s assertion of his right to be tried before Caesar (Acts 25:9-12). Additional passengers included the crew, a centurion named Julius, the Roman soldiers accompanying him, and other prisoners.
- v. 2 Although traveling in response to a royal decree, the group did not sail for Rome aboard a government or military vessel; instead, the centurion booked passage for himself and his charges aboard a private merchant ship, one which was bound for “ports along the coast of the province of Asia” Evidently, Luke and Aristarchus were able to do the same for themselves.
- v. 3 Here we see evidence of the esteem in which Paul was held by the Roman officials, as the centurion allows him to debark from the ship (doubtless with an accompanying guard) and to visit friends in the port of Sidon “so they might provide for his needs”, a privilege which was not granted to the other prisoners. These friends were likely believers with whom Paul was previously acquainted, although we have no record of his having traveled to Sidon previously.
- vv. 4-6 In the port of Myra, the travelers transfer to another merchant ship: one carrying grain (v. 38) from Alexandria in Egypt to Rome. The remark that “the winds were against us”, requiring them to sail to the leeward side of the island of Cyprus, foreshadows the storms which are to come.
- vv. 7-8 The crew attempts with increasing difficulty to sail in a westerly direction, first from Myra to Cnidus along the southern coast of modern Turkey, and then southwest to Crete. There, the ship hugs the southern coast of the island in order to seek shelter from the wind, finally arriving at Fair Havens, the modern port of Kaloï Limenes.
- vv. 9-10 Luke tells us that “sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Day of Atonement”. Confirmation of this observation comes from the date of the annual Jewish fast, which ranged from late September to early October, and from the writings of the ancient Roman author Vegetius, who indicates (*On Military Affairs*, 4.39) that it was perilous to sail in this part of the Mediterranean after September 15.  
Paul shares his judgment as an experienced traveler, that continuing on would “bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also”. His opinion will later be amended, after he receives an angelic revelation (vv. 22-24).
- vv. 11-12 Given that the question concerned matters of maritime navigation and seamanship, it is unsurprising that the centurion chose to heed “the advice of the pilot and of the owner”, rather than the judgment of Paul, an itinerant preacher and prisoner whose expertise in this area would not have been obvious. The reference to “the majority,” however, suggests that this was ultimately a communal decision.  
By this time, they had given up any expectation of reaching Rome, and were instead seeking a better-protected harbor in which to overwinter. Their goal was the port of Phoenix, i.e. modern Phineka, about 40 miles further up the coast.
- vv. 13-14 Those who are familiar with Homer’s *Odyssey* may hear echoes of this and other epic tales in Luke’s narrative of the ship’s final, doomed voyage. This does not mean that the events of Acts are equally fictional, but rather that Luke is adopting, either intentionally or unintentionally, some of the conventions of that literary genre.  
When a “gentle south wind began to blow,” it seemed to validate the group’s decision to proceed, and they did so immediately. Such a wind would have conveyed them westward to their immediate destination. However, their hopes were soon dashed by “a wind of hurricane force” which came suddenly upon them. Luke refers to this storm as a “Northeaster”; the Greek term used is *typhōnikos*, from which we get the word *typhoon*. Regardless of the name, they were in grave and immediate danger.
- vv. 15-17 Ancient sailing vessels did not have the ability to tack into the wind, and so the sailors had no choice but to allow the ship to be “driven along”. This posed several dangers: the lifeboat, which was towed behind the ship, could break apart and be lost, or it could be thrown against the ship, causing damage; the ship could be driven uncontrollably into a hazard such as a sandbar; or the force of the wind and the waves could simply tear the ship apart. The term “we” in verse 16 likely indicates that not only the members of the crew, but all able-bodied men on board, were involved in the desperate effort to keep the ship intact and afloat.
- vv. 18-20 The furious storm does not abate, but continues for several days, during which time “neither sun nor stars” could be seen, making it impossible to navigate or even to determine their location. The crew continues their attempts to keep the ship intact, by throwing overboard everything that could possibly be spared. But as the storm rages, and their options diminish, they come to despair of any hope of being saved from shipwreck and likely drowning.

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- vv. 21-22 The severity of their struggles, and the fear and dread which gripped them as they contemplated their likely fate, had taken such a toll that neither crew nor passengers had any appetite. Luke notes that “they had gone a long time without food” and Paul attributes this to the fact that they had been “in constant suspense” (v. 33). This detail underscores how dire their situation had become, and thus how surprising it was when Paul shared the news that “not one of you will be lost”. In such hopeless circumstances, only a revelation from God would allow him to make such a hopeful statement.
- Note that even after Paul reminded them of his earlier, prescient warning not to sail from Crete, the sailors were not prepared to accept his assurances: their unbelief is demonstrated in their secret, and craven, attempt to escape the ship via the lifeboat, leaving the passengers to fend for themselves (vv. 30-32).
- vv. 23-26 There are two parts to the revelation that Paul receives: first, that he himself would not be lost, due to the fact that God had determined he would “stand trial before Caesar” (reaffirming what the Lord told him in 23:11); and second, that “the lives of all who sail with you” would be spared as well. This second assurance, in which the lives of the soldiers and sailors were “given” to Paul, imply that this is in response to Paul’s prayers on their behalf seeking their deliverance. Not only would they not lose their lives, but they would escape completely unharmed: he states that “*Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head*” (v. 34).
- By telling them that they would “run aground on some island”, Paul is preparing them in advance, so that when it happens they will not view it as a contradiction of his earlier assurances, but rather as a confirmation of them.
- vv. 27-29 In ancient times, the term “Adriatic Sea” referred to a larger region than it does today, extending as far as Sicily, Crete and Malta. Their likely position, entering what is now St. Paul’s Bay on Malta, would have been within this area. It is likely that they heard the waves breaking against the shore, indicating that they were nearing land; their speed and relative direction were then confirmed by taking soundings, i.e. by lowering a weighted line into the water which had markings to indicate depth. Rapidly decreasing depth meant a rapidly approaching shoreline, raising the concern that the ship would be “dashed against the rocks”. In response, the sailors dropped anchor, hoping to slow the progress of the ship long enough for daylight to reveal a means of rescue.
- vv. 30-32 Here, the actions of the sailors, who were the ones best able to evaluate the situation from a professional mariner’s point of view, demonstrate how great was the peril that they all faced. In such a storm, attempting to reach shore in a lifeboat would be almost suicidal, and yet they judged it to be their best hope of survival. From this we can see that if they are all to reach shore safely, an act of miraculous preservation will be required.
- At this point, we see that the centurion is now heeding Paul’s counsel; perhaps he regrets having disregarded it previously (Acts 27:911). The decisive and irrevocable action of cutting loose the lifeboat effectively sealed their common fate: they would either all survive together, as Paul had promised, or would all perish together.
- vv. 33-36 For the sailors and soldiers to abandon even their basic need for food was in effect a statement of resignation to death; Paul’s exhortation to eat was thus an appeal for them to choose hope over despair. His words have the desired effect: they “were all encouraged and ate some food themselves”. Note that Paul takes this opportunity to witness to the goodness of God, as he “gave thanks to God in front of them all”.
- vv. 37-38 The number of crew, soldiers and passengers on board, 276, illustrates how unlikely it would be, from a natural point of view, for every single person to be saved. Among such a large number, there would be many who were unable to swim, or physically incapable in one way or another.
- The fact that they all ate, and then took practical steps to make survival more likely by throwing the cargo overboard, which would enable the ship to pass more easily over the shoals, indicates that they were beginning to place hope in their prophesied survival.
- vv. 39-41 The sailors take several practical steps to accomplish their goal of running the ship aground on the beach; however, they strike a sandbar instead and the boat begins to disintegrate due to the “pounding of the surf”. Their only hope is for everyone to abandon ship and make for the shore.
- vv. 42-44 As the sailors attempted to save their own lives at the risk of the rest of the ship’s passengers (vv. 30-32), the soldiers now intend to kill the prisoners to save themselves; likely because a prisoner escape would mean punishment or death for them (see Acts 16:27). But they are prevented from doing so by the centurion, on account of Paul. Thus Paul is the reason for their temporal salvation, and ultimately, the salvation of everyone on board, all of whom “reached land safely”.

# Unit 26 – Paul Comes to Rome

## Acts 28:1-31

### Text

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<sup>1</sup> Once safely on shore, we found out that the island was called Malta. <sup>2</sup> The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold. <sup>3</sup> Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and, as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. <sup>4</sup> When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to each other, “This man must be a murderer; for though he escaped from the sea, the goddess Justice has not allowed him to live.” <sup>5</sup> But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects. <sup>6</sup> The people expected him to swell up or suddenly fall dead; but after waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god.

<sup>7</sup> There was an estate nearby that belonged to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us to his home and showed us generous hospitality for three days. <sup>8</sup> His father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him. <sup>9</sup> When this had happened, the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured. <sup>10</sup> They honored us in many ways; and when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with the supplies we needed.

<sup>11</sup> After three months we put out to sea in a ship that had wintered in the island—it was an Alexandrian ship with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux. <sup>12</sup> We put in at Syracuse and stayed there three days. <sup>13</sup> From there we set sail and arrived at Rhegium. The next day the south wind came up, and on the following day we reached Puteoli. <sup>14</sup> There we found some brothers and sisters who invited us to spend a week with them. And so we came to Rome. <sup>15</sup> The brothers and sisters there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these people Paul thanked God and was encouraged. <sup>16</sup> When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him.

<sup>17</sup> Three days later he called together the local Jewish leaders. When they had assembled, Paul said to them: “My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. <sup>18</sup> They examined

me and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death. <sup>19</sup> The Jews objected, so I was compelled to make an appeal to Caesar. I certainly did not intend to bring any charge against my own people. <sup>20</sup> For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain.”

<sup>21</sup> They replied, “We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, and none of our people who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you. <sup>22</sup> But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect.”

<sup>23</sup> They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. He witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus. <sup>24</sup> Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. <sup>25</sup> They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: “The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your ancestors when he said through Isaiah the prophet:

<sup>26</sup> “Go to this people and say,  
“You will be ever hearing but never understanding;  
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.”

<sup>27</sup> For this people’s heart has become calloused;  
they hardly hear with their ears,  
and they have closed their eyes.  
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,  
hear with their ears,  
understand with their hearts  
and turn, and I would heal them.’<sup>a</sup>

<sup>28</sup> “Therefore I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!”<sup>[29] b</sup>

<sup>30</sup> For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. <sup>31</sup> He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!

<sup>a</sup>28:27 Isaiah 6:9,10 (see Septuagint)

<sup>b</sup>28:29 Some manuscripts include here *After he said this, the Jews left, arguing vigorously among themselves*

### Open

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Have you ever enjoyed unusual hospitality from strangers? Have you ever provided such hospitality?

## Discover

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1. Describe the experiences of Paul and his traveling companions among the natives of Malta, with examples. How does this compare to his treatment by other groups later in the passage?

2. For two years, Paul was held under house arrest in Rome, shackled and under guard. How did this experience advance the gospel? (vv. 30-31; see Phil. 4:12-13)

3. Why did Paul invite the Jewish leaders in Rome to come and visit him? What was his message to them? (vv. 17-21)

4. When larger numbers of Jewish leaders and others came to hear Paul, what was his message to them? How did they respond?

5. What does the quote from Isaiah (vv. 25-28) imply about the reception of the gospel among the Jews? How does this compare to what Paul writes about God's plan for the Jewish people elsewhere? (see Rom. 11:1-6; 25-32).

6. What is the significance of Paul's warning that "*I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen*"? (v. 28; see Rom. 11:11-15)

## Apply

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- |                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><input type="checkbox"/> How would the events in this passage, although far removed in time and geography, encourage you to take an active role in advancing the gospel in your own place and time?</p> | <p><input type="checkbox"/> How has the study of Acts affected your walk with God? What will be different in the future because you have studied this book?</p> |
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# Commentary

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- v. 1 “. . . *we found out that the island was called Malta.*” The storms of life sometimes carry us to places unknown or undesired. Yet God is with us in all our journeys, and will safely bring us home at last.
- v. 2 God’s provision and care for Paul, as well as his fellow passengers, is seen in the remarkably kind and hospitable welcome they received, both initially and continuing throughout their three-month sojourn in Malta. The indigenous people were literally “barbarians” (trans. *islanders* in the NIV); i.e., they were not native speakers of Greek and were thus considered to be culturally backward. They might have been expected to be wary of, or even hostile to, a large group of strangers washing up on the shore of their island home. But instead, they were open and welcoming.
- vv. 3-5 The fact that the islanders, who would be familiar with the local fauna, expected Paul to die from the bite of this viper tells us that it was indeed poisonous, and thus his ability to “shake it off” unharmed was a miracle (see Mk. 16:18; Lk. 10:19). They assumed that the attack was divine retribution by the Greek goddess “Justice”. But this happened to Paul, not as punishment for some great misdeed, but “so that the works of God might be displayed in him” (Jn. 9:3), as it provided a platform for ministry and witness.
- v. 6 The people’s opinion of Paul changed radically as he failed to show any ill effects from the snake bite; rather than a murderer, they now considered him to be a god! When Paul and Barnabas received a similar response in Acts 14:11-18, they immediately and strongly contradicted the crowd’s false conclusion and redirected their worship to the true God. Although Luke does not mention Paul’s response in this case, it seems likely that he would have corrected their misunderstanding in a similar way.
- v. 7 The “chief official” of the island (literally, “first man”) may have been the local representative of the Roman government. He was a person of wealth who was able to show “generous hospitality” to the castaways. It is unclear whether the recipients of his largesse were the entire company of 276 or a smaller contingent that included Paul.
- vv. 8-9 Paul’s prayer before healing his host’s father demonstrated that he was not a god, or a holy man whose healing power was innate, but rather that he was a man who was reliant upon, and a servant of, the one true God, of whose healing power he was only the instrument. This healing provided an opportunity to minister more extensively to the island’s population, as “*the rest of the sick . . . came and were cured*”.
- v. 11 There are two notable items in this verse. Surprisingly, although they had earlier barely escaped with their lives, they departed only three months after arriving in Malta; i.e., late January or early February, which was still winter and not yet considered a safe time of year for sailing. Several explanations have been offered, but the most likely is that the recklessness and greed which caused the owner and pilot of the ship to hazard a risky crossing three months earlier (see Acts 27:10-12) were again in evidence. The “Alexandrian ship” which they sailed on, and which had wintered on Malta, was likely full of grain, and its cargo would fetch a high price in Rome at this time of year.
- Second, the ship was adorned with the “Heavenly Twins” (which the NIV identifies as Castor and Pollux), the gods of safe maritime travel. One wonders if Luke notes this ironically, since Paul was certainly depending on the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob for his safety, rather than the imaginary deities of the Greeks.
- v. 14 In Puteoli, 130 miles outside of Rome, there were believers who invited the travelers to remain with them for a week. We do not know how many of the company were invited to do so, but we can be confident that this arrangement would have required, and thus that it received, the agreement of the centurion who was responsible for the prisoners. Presumably, he was glad to be temporarily relieved of the burden of paying for their food and lodging.
- v. 15 The believers in Rome had learned, probably from those in Puteoli, that Paul would be arriving soon, and so two separate groups came to meet him and escort him into the city: one originating at the Forum of Appius, about 43 miles south of Rome, and one departing from the Three Taverns, 33 miles out from the city. As he caught sight of this welcoming entourage, Paul was encouraged and gave thanks to God.
- v. 16 In Rome, Paul is under house arrest, a lenient form of detention in which he could freely interact with visitors and even large crowds (vv. 17, 23, 30). His status as a Roman citizen may have influenced this, but the arrangement also suggests that he was not considered to be a criminal or a threat (see 26:30-32; 28:18). Nevertheless, he was still guarded and chained (v. 20). But as he notes in his letter to the church at Philippi, written from Rome, his detention, and the conversations which those assigned to guard him would have been exposed to on a daily basis, “*served to advance the gospel*” because “*it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ*” (Phil. 4:12-13).

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vv. 17-18 Not long after arriving in Rome, Paul contacts the leaders of the Jewish community and invites them to visit him. One reason for doing so would be to put their minds at ease about his intentions, in case his undeserved reputation as a “trouble-maker” had preceded him (vv. 21-22; see Acts 17:5-8; 21:27-36; 24:1-9). Another would be the desire to proclaim first to the Jews in this city the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ, as per his usual practice (see Acts 14:1; 17:1-2, 10; 18:19).

Paul’s words to them echo his previous speeches before the Sanhedrin, and also before Felix, Festus, and Agrippa: he relates the events of his recent past, including his arrest and imprisonment, defends his actions, and asserts that he is innocent of any crime, or any offense against Judaism.

vv. 19-20 The reason Paul gives for his present condition is that “[t]he Jews objected” to his release from custody. In spite of being unable to prove the charges against him (Acts 25:7), and in spite of the judgment of the Roman authorities that he had done nothing worthy of punishment (Acts 23:29; 25:25; 26:31), his Jewish accusers demanded that he be sent to Jerusalem for trial, intending to kill him on the way (Acts 25:3, 9). As a result, he was compelled to make an appeal to Caesar (Acts 25:11).

Having established that his arrest and imprisonment were not due to an offense against the Roman state, but were the result of unjust religious persecution from his own people, Paul now gives the specific reason: “*It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain*”. Recall that when in Jerusalem, Paul was told by Christ: “*As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome*” (Acts 23:11). That included testimony to Gentiles, but also, as in Jerusalem, to the Jewish people and their leaders. This interview is therefore part of the fulfillment of that prophecy and that commission. Even after all the resistance, opposition, and even violent persecution that he has received, Paul remains faithful to his calling, ardently seeking the salvation of his fellow Israelites, and urging them to embrace their hoped-for Messiah (see Rom. 9:1-3; 11:13-14).

vv. 21-22 Somewhat surprisingly, the Jewish leaders in Rome tell Paul that they have not received any news about him, whether by letter or personal report. Thus, they are willing to give his views a hearing, and to allow many others to hear him as well (v. 23). They are, however, aware that Christianity, which they consider a “sect” of Judaism, is controversial, and that “*people everywhere are talking against*” it. Perhaps we can consider them as being, if not neutral, then cautiously open-minded.

vv. 23-24 Much Christian teaching today treats only a few Old Testament passages as referring to Christ. And yet here, when speaking to a Jewish audience, Paul is able to teach about Christ for an entire day from “the Law of Moses and . . . the Prophets”; i.e., the entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament (see Mt. 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Lk. 16:16; 24:27; Jn. 1:45). Similarly, when Jesus appeared to two disciples on the road to Emmaus, he said, “*This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.*” (Lk. 24:44).

As previously when Paul is speaking to a Jewish audience, the response is mixed: “*Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe.*”

vv. 25-27 These verses include a quote from Isaiah 6:9-10, in which the prophet is commissioned by God to bring his word to the people of Israel, despite knowing that they will reject it. Paul thus equates the rejection of the gospel by the Jews in his time as being parallel to the rejection of God and his prophets by the people of Israel in ancient times (see Mt. 5:11-12; 13:13-15; 23:29-38; Mk. 4:12; Lk. 6:22-23; 8:10; 11:47-51; Acts 7:51-53; 13:26-27). Note, however, that their rejection is not absolute or final: some of them did believe. As Paul notes in Romans 11:5, “*at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace*” and God’s stated plan is for “all Israel” to be saved (Rom. 11:26).

v. 28 Paul’s concluding statement, “*I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!*” is consistent with his stated strategy in Romans 10:19-21 and 11:11-15; i.e., that in seeing the Gentiles come to faith and enjoy the riches of fellowship with God, his hope is that the Jewish people will be moved by jealousy to turn to God also.

vv. 30-31 For two years Paul continued to proclaim the gospel. We do not know for certain what happened after that; the 4th century historian Eusebius wrote that Paul was tried and released, and later martyred under the Roman emperor Nero.

We might wish for a more conclusive ending from Luke, but remember that Acts is not a biography of Paul; it is a history of the spread of the gospel throughout the world following the resurrection and ascension of Christ, by the power of the Spirit of Christ. We also are not told how the lives and ministries of other major characters in Acts ended, such as Peter or Barnabas. Thus, although of interest to us, the story of the last years of Paul’s life are not essential to the purpose for which Luke was writing.

## Acknowledgments

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The primary commentary consulted in the preparation of this work was: *The Acts of the Apostles (Pillar New Testament Commentary)* by David G. Peterson. All views expressed, however, are those of the author.

## About the Author

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