

NOTES ON THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Acts

of the Apostles

Gene Cunningham

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(2 Timothy 2:3)

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Preface

While I was teaching in Myanmar/Burma in March 2019, some of my long-term, advanced students suggested that I go through the New Testament and provide basic notes, which they could then be able print as a study Bible. They specifically asked that I focus on issues that are a major area of confusion in the churches where they work. Therefore, the following commentary will focus on these five primary areas:

1. What is the nature of God's grace and how is it received?
2. What is God's plan of salvation and the clear message of the Gospel?
3. What is the Bible's teaching on the security and assurance of the believer?
4. How is the believer to live the Christian life and be effective in witness/service?
5. What does prophecy say about the last days and the order of end-times events?

Practical Suggestions

These notes are purposely brief in nature. This work is not intended to be a complete commentary. All through the work I have kept in mind those who live in remote areas of our world, who labor to both understand and to teach others the Word of God. They do not have access to Bible school or seminary training. Neither are they able to afford the vast array of books available to pastors and teachers who live in more advanced countries.

I encourage all who utilize these notes to study them with an open Bible. Pray for the illumination of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:15–23; 3:14–21) as you study. Read the context of the passage carefully. Look up and compare the references that are provided. Above all, let the Word of God—and not these notes—guide your insight into God's Word. As I always tell my students: “Never take my word for anything; search the Scriptures and prove what is true” (Acts 17:10–12; 1 John 4:1).

Before you begin any study of the Word of God, take a few moments to make sure that you are in fellowship with God, filled by means the Holy Spirit. Comprehension, like everything else in the Christian life, is a gift that can be appropriated only by faith. The Bible clearly lays out three requirements that must be met before we can expect to understand God's Word. All three require nothing from us but faith.

1. *We must be believers in Jesus Christ* (John 3:16).
It is impossible for unbelievers to understand the Word of God (1 Cor. 2:14). Jesus declared to the leading religious leader of His day that apart from spiritual birth, man is blind to the things of God. "*That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit ... You must be born again*" (John 3:6-7).
2. *We must be filled by means of the Spirit* (1 Corinthians 2:12).
Only the Spirit of God knows the thoughts of God. As believers, we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, but when we sin, we break fellowship with God and cease to function in the power of the Spirit. When we confess our sins, God is always faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). The moment we confess, we are restored to fellowship and are again under the control of the Holy Spirit and, therefore, able to learn.
3. *We must approach in faith* (Hebrews 11:6).
Only when we approach in humility, with child-like faith, will the Word of God make sense to us (Matt. 18:4; Heb. 11:3). Where we find Scripture at odds with our ideas or our desires, we must submit to the authority of the Word. Intimacy, understanding, and power are reserved for those who are willing to do God's will (John 7:17).

DEDICATION

*“This will be written for the generation to come,
that a people yet to be created may praise the Lord.”*

Psalm 102:18

While it is my hope and prayer that these notes will be helpful to all current students of the Word of God, I send them forth with a special dedication to the 144,000 Jewish evangelists who are yet to come on the scene of world history (Rev. 7:1–8). They will be the heroes of the faith in the coming time of Tribulation following the soon coming Rapture of the Church (1 Thess. 4:13–18).

To these brothers and sisters of the future, I want you to know you have been thought of, prayed for, and loved—before you even knew your mission. We of the Church Age salute you for the sufferings you will endure and the victories you will win. We bid you to be strong in the Lord, for your victory is sure in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the labor put into these notes by many hands and through many prayers, be a help to you as you boldly proclaim the name of Jesus Christ in a dark and dangerous time!

INTRODUCTION

Luke wrote the book of Acts as part two of his Gospel story. If we read Luke 1:1–4 with Acts 1:1–3 we see that both were addressed to “*Theophilus*.” The fact that Luke calls him “*most excellent Theophilus*” in Luke 1:3 indicates that he held some high government position. Because of this, some have suggested that Luke wrote this two-part story as a legal defense of Christianity, and particularly of the ministry of Paul, showing that the spread of the Christian faith was not a threat to the Roman Empire.

In the book of Acts, Luke gives a chronicle of the spread of the gospel message according to Jesus’ instructions (Matt. 28:18–20; Acts 1:7–8). At the same time, Luke shows the birth and development of the Church (Matt. 16:18), made up of all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior. The baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4–5; 2:1–12; 1 Cor. 12:13) created a new spiritual family and fulfilled the promise of the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:25–27; Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; Heb. 8:6–12; 10:16–17; 12:24).

The foundation of the Church is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. To this historical fact, the early apostles faithfully testified. These men were supernaturally gifted with power to perform signs and miracles as proof of their divine appointment (Rom. 15:18–19; 2 Cor. 12:12). The powerful ministry and mighty deeds of the apostles are recorded for us in the book of Acts, ending with the ministry of the Apostle Paul.

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

ACTS CHAPTER 1

The promise of the Holy Spirit; the ascension of Jesus; the choosing of Matthias.

The Promise of the Holy Spirit

Acts 1:1–8

1:1 *“The former account.”* This refers to the Gospel of Luke. *“All that Jesus began both to do and teach.”* This implies that Jesus now continues to work through His Spirit-empowered Church.

1:2 *“The apostles whom He had chosen.”* Here, Luke lays down the basis for the authority of the apostles. They were chosen by the Lord for the task of spreading the gospel message throughout the world.

1:3 *“He also presented Himself alive ... by many infallible proofs.”* The foundation and validity of the Church is based on the historical reality of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. *“Things pertaining to the kingdom of God.”* Because of Israel’s rejection of her King, the earthly kingdom is delayed until the future (Matt. 23:37–39; Luke 21:31). In the meantime, God is building a spiritual kingdom, made up of all who believe in Jesus Christ (John 18:36; Luke 17:21; Col. 1:13).

1:4–5 *“The Promise of the Father ... baptized with the Holy Spirit.”* John declared that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16). Here, Jesus says that this Spirit baptism was soon. The coming of the Holy Spirit marked the transition from the Old to the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:25–28; Heb. 8:7–13).

1:6–7 *“Lord, will You ... restore the kingdom.”* The disciples thought that Jesus Christ, now resurrected from the dead, would establish His reign over the Earth at that time. *“It is not for you to know.”* The unfolding of the plan of God, from the resurrection of Jesus until the earthly kingdom would be established, was not yet revealed. This revelation was part of the *“mystery”* that was later revealed to the Apostle Paul (Rom. 16:25–27; Eph. 3:1–7; 1 Thess. 5:1–2). The kingdom will not come until after the Rapture of the Church (1 Thess. 4:13–18) and the Tribulation Period, during which the remnant of Israel will turn to the Lord Jesus Christ in faith (Rom. 11:25–26).

1:8 *“But you shall receive power ... and you shall be witnesses to Me.”* The power that would enable these normal men to spread the gospel message throughout the world came from *“the Holy Spirit.”* The mission of the apostles would spread geographically from *“Jerusalem ... Judea ... Samaria ... to the end of the earth.”* The book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome and his intention to focus on evangelizing the Gentiles (Acts 28:28–31).

The Ascension of Jesus into Heaven

Acts 1:9–11

1:9–11 *“While they watched.”* It is important to Luke’s purpose in writing this book that the apostles witnessed the ascension of Jesus into Heaven. *“Two men ... in white apparel.”* These are certainly angels (Mark 16:5; Luke 24:4; John 20:12). *“This same Jesus ... will so come in like manner.”* Just as the resurrected Jesus ascended, so one day He is coming again—at the Rapture—for those who believe in Him (1 Thess. 4:13–18). At His Second Coming to Earth, it will be the same Jesus, but in a much different way (Rev. 19:11–16).

The Choosing of Matthias

Acts 1:12–26

1:13 *“They went up into the upper room.”* This was probably the same room where they celebrated the Last Supper with Jesus (Luke 22:12; Mark 14:15). The original eleven apostles are named, to identify them as the ones chosen by Jesus (Matt. 10:2–4; Mark 3:13–19; Luke 6:13–16).

1:14 *“These all continued with one accord in prayer.”* The disciples who slept in Gethsemane now have a sense of the work ahead of them and their need for God’s power (Matt. 26:40–45; Mark 14:37–41; Luke 22:40–46). *“And Mary ... with His brothers.”* The resurrection appearance of Jesus to His half-brother James must have convinced his brothers of His true identity (John 7:5; 1 Cor. 15:7).

1:15 *“Peter stood up.”* From the very beginning of Acts, we see Peter still as the leader of the disciples.

1:16 *“The Holy Spirit spoke ... by the mouth of David.”* Here, Peter expresses his conviction of the inspiration of the authors of Scripture by the Holy Spirit (1 Pet. 1:10–12; 2 Pet. 1:20–21; see also 2 Tim. 3:16). *“Concerning Judas.”* Peter realized that the Scripture anticipated the betrayal by Judas (Psalm 41:9; John 13:18).

1:18–19 *“This man purchased a field.”* This refers to the burial ground bought with the wages of his betrayal (Matt. 27:3–10). *“Falling headlong, he burst open.”* Here, Luke gives us details about Judas not given in the Gospel accounts. Judas first hung himself, but apparently the rope broke.

1:20 *“For it is written.”* This phrase declares the absolute accuracy and authority of the Word of God (Matt. 2:5; 4:4, 6, 7; 21:13; Mark 1:2; 11:17). Peter quotes Psalm 69:25 and Psalm 109:8 as the basis for selecting another apostle. *“Let another take his office.”* This is a direct fulfillment of Jesus’ warning in the parable of Matthew 25:24–30.

1:21–22 *“One of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.”* Peter stipulated that the man chosen must be a disciple that accompanied them from the time of John’s baptism until the resurrection of Jesus. Matthias (v. 23) was perhaps one of the seventy the Lord sent out (Luke 10:1).

1:24 *“O Lord ... show which ... You have chosen.”* The disciples did not trust in their own judgment but prayed for God to make His will clear.

1:25 *“That he might go to his own place.”* Based on Jesus’ revelation that Judas had never believed (John 6:64, 70–71), the disciples could be sure Judas was in Hades. It seems evident from the story of the rich man and Lazarus that the unsaved are totally alone in Hell (Luke 16:22–23).

1:26 *“They cast their lots.”* This was a common way of relying on the sovereignty of God to guide their decision-making in biblical times (Josh. 18:6; Prov. 16:33; Jonah 1:7; see also 1 Sam. 23:9–12). *“Matthias ... was numbered with the eleven.”* This is the first and last time that we read of Matthias.

ACTS CHAPTER 2

The coming of the Holy Spirit; the Church is born.

The Outpouring of the Spirit

Acts 2:1–13

2:1 *“The Day of Pentecost.”* Pentecost was fifty days after the Sabbath of the Passover (Lev. 23:15–16). Both Firstfruits and Pentecost fell on the day after the Sabbath (Sunday, Lev. 23:11, 16). Therefore, both the resurrection

of Jesus and the birth of the Church occurred on a Sunday. On this day, the Lord Jesus began the work of building His Church (Matt. 16:18).

2:2–3 *“A sound ... of a rushing mighty wind ... tongues, as of fire.”* Both wind and fire are often used as symbols of God’s presence and power (Exod. 3:2; Ezek. 37:9; Mal. 3:2–3; John 3:8).

2:4 *“They were all filled with the Holy Spirit”.* This filling followed the baptism of the Spirit, which places every believer into the Church—the Body of Christ (Acts 1:5; 11:15–16; 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27). The coming of the Holy Spirit was the fulfillment of the promise of the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:25–28). Though the baptism of the Spirit occurs only once, at the moment we believe in Jesus Christ, the filling of the Spirit, however, is repeated as we submit to Him in faith and purity (Eph. 5:15–21; 2 Tim. 2:20–21; 1 John 1:7, 9). *“And began to speak with other tongues.”* The apostles were supernaturally empowered to speak in the known languages of those who had come to Jerusalem from many other nations (vv. 5–11).

2:5–11 *“Devout men, from every nation under heaven.”* The nations listed covered the entire known world at that time. *“Everyone heard them speak in his own language.”* The miracle of tongues was the supernatural ability of the apostles to proclaim, *“The wonderful works of God”* (v. 11) in other known languages.

2:12–13 *“Whatever could this mean?”* This supernatural phenomenon created a desire in many to know what it (speaking in tongues) signified. *“They are full of new wine.”* Some of the mockers assumed they were drunk.

Peter’s Message

Acts 2:14–36

2:14–15 *“Peter, standing up with the eleven.”* Again, the prominence and leadership of Peter is seen, backed up by the other eleven apostles. *“These are not drunk ... since [as] it is only the third hour of the day.”* Peter argues that it is too early (9 a.m.) to have become drunk.

2:16–21 *“This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel.”* This prophecy by Joel (Joel 2:28–32) covers a wide array of events in the last days, but the primary focus is the coming of the Holy Spirit and the promise of salvation for all who call on the name of the Lord (Rom. 10:13).

2:19–20 *“Wonders in heaven ... and signs in the earth.”* These events will occur at the end of the seven-year Tribulation Period, just before the Second Coming of Jesus Christ (Matt. 24:29–31; Rev. 6:12–17).

2:21 *“Whoever calls on the name of the LORD.”* This “call” implies the faith that Jesus is both Lord and *“the Christ”*/Messiah (John 20:31). *“Shall be saved.”* The deliverance here includes both eternal salvation as well as deliverance from suffering the wrath of God during this life (Rom. 1:18–32).

2:22–36 *“Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you.”* The miracles and ministry of Jesus were known by all who lived in Israel (John 3:2; 9:30–33). In this first message of the Church Age, Peter makes five great points:

1. *“Him, being delivered by the determined purpose [counsel] and foreknowledge of God.”* (v. 23a) The cross was no accident. It was the fulfillment of God’s plan for the redemption of men. Thus, we see the sovereignty of God in history.
2. *“You have taken by lawless hands ... and put to death.”* (v. 23b) They had acted willfully in rejecting Jesus Christ (Matt. 27:22–23; Mark 15:12–14; Luke 23:18–23; John 19:14–16). Here, we see the freedom of men to choose, and the consequences of that choice (Hosea 8:7, Gal. 6:7).

3. **“Whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death.”** (v. 24) God the Father raised Jesus to life from the grave (Rom. 1:4; 1 Cor. 15:3–4). Because He is the Prince of Life, death could not hold Him (Acts 3:15; 5:30–31). Peter quotes Psalm 16:8–11 to show the resurrection of Jesus Christ was a fulfillment of prophecy (vv. 25–28).
4. **“This Jesus ... being exalted to the right hand of God.”** (v. 32–35) The Lord Jesus now sits at the right hand of God—the place of honor and power (Psalm 2:7–12; 68:18; 110:1–4; Matt. 26:64; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20–22; Phil. 2:5–11; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Pet. 3:22).
5. **“God has made this Jesus ... both Lord and Christ.”** (v. 36)
 - a. He is the One to whom they will all answer for their sin;
 - b. He is the One who will judge them (Heb. 4:13); and
 - c. He is also the only one by whom they can be saved from that judgment.

The Growth of the Church

Acts 2:37–47

2:37 “They were cut to the heart.” This is the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit at work through the message of Peter (John 16:7–11). **“What shall we do?”** This same question was asked of John the Baptist regarding repentance and the acts that flow from it (Luke 3:8, 10–14).

2:38 “Repent ... be baptized.” The call to repentance began with the ministry of John the Baptist (Matt. 3:2; Mark 1:4–5; Luke 3:3). The word *“repent”* means “to change one’s mind.” The focus of this call to repent meant to stop thinking that descent from Abraham could save them (Matt. 3:9) and, instead, to confess themselves to be sinners (Matt. 3:6; Mark 1:5) and to trust in the Savior. It is only through faith that we receive **“the remission of sins.”** Baptism was the first act of public confession of faith in Christ, and the first step of discipleship (Matt. 28:19). **“You shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”** Jesus had promised the coming of the Holy Spirit in the Upper Room (John 14:16–18, 26; 15:26–27; 16:7–13). Every believer in Jesus Christ is baptized by the Holy Spirit into the Body of Christ at the moment they believe (1 Cor. 12:13).

2:41 “Those who gladly received his word were baptized.” It is clear that faith precedes baptism and is the only basis for it (John 1:12–13).

2:42 “They continued steadfastly.” Here, we are given a brief but complete picture of the life of the early believers. Luke lists four activities that were the heart of the Church:

1. **“The apostles’ doctrine.”** The first priority of the church is the teaching of sound doctrine. We are to preach the gospel message to the unsaved and teach the doctrines of the Bible to the saved.
2. **“And fellowship.”** This involved the sharing of personal goods with those in need (vv. 44–45). This was always voluntary, never forced (Acts 5:4, 2 Cor. 9:7). Those who claim this was an early form of socialism are either ignorant of Church history, or intentionally deceptive.
3. **“Breaking of bread.”** Refers to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper (Matt. 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:14–20; 1 Cor. 11:23–26).
4. **“And in prayers.”** Prayer is the means by which we enter into God’s presence, praise Him, intercede for others, and make requests of our needs (Matt. 6:9–13; Eph. 6:18–20; 1 Thess. 5:17–18; Heb. 4:14–16).

2:43 *“Many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.”* There are many today who think that all the early believers were miracle workers. The Bible, however, indicates that these powers were given only to the apostles (2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:3–4). These sign-gifts were evidence that they had been personally chosen by Jesus Christ to be apostles.

2:44–45 *“Now all who believed were together.”* This speaks not so much of their physical gathering together, but their spiritual unity (Eph. 4:3–6). Their love for one another motivated their acts of sacrificial giving by those who had *“possessions and goods.”* They were simply living out the last and greatest of Jesus’ commandments (John 13:34–35).

2:46–47 *“So continuing daily ... the Lord added to the church.”* The joyous and loving atmosphere of these early believers had a great impact on those around them, winning others daily to faith in Jesus Christ. Any church today that demonstrates the love of Christ as these did would have the same impact (John 13:35; 2 Cor. 5:14–21).

ACTS CHAPTER 3

Peter heals a lame man; preaching in Solomon’s Porch.

Peter Heals the Lame Man

Acts 3:1–10

3:1 *“The hour of prayer, the ninth hour.”* Twice daily a male lamb was sacrificed in the Temple (Exod. 29:38–42; Num. 28:3–4). The first sacrifice was at 9 a.m., the second, at 3 p.m. (the ninth hour starting from 6 a.m.). These sacrifices, offered for over 1400 years, anticipated the time Jesus would be on the cross (Matt. 27:45–46; Mark 15:25, 33–34; Luke 23:44–46). These two sacrifices were accompanied by a time of prayer.

3:2 *“Lame from his mother’s womb.”* This man’s permanent condition magnified the miracle that was done in the name of Jesus of Nazareth. *“The gate ... called Beautiful.”* This gate gave entrance to the Temple from the women’s court.

3:4–5 *“Look at us.”* One glance at Peter and John would show their poverty. It also demanded the man’s full attention for what was about to be said.

3:6 *“Silver and gold I do not have.”* Here, Peter confirms what was obvious to the eye. *“What I do have I give you.”* Peter is following the instructions of Jesus (Matt. 10:8). We are not to offer for sale what God has freely given to us! *“In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.”* The power to heal was not in Peter, but in the resurrected Savior, Jesus Christ. If we represent Jesus, how can we put a price on what He has given to us?

3:7–8 *“His feet and ankle bones received strength.”* The author, Luke, was a physician, and identifies the inner working of the miracle. *“Walking, leaping, and praising God.”* It was the antics and praises of this joyful man that drew the crowd.

3:10 *“They were filled with wonder and amazement.”* God used the lame man’s joyful praises and the amazement of the crowd, to provide for a ready audience.

Peter’s Message

Acts 3:11–26

3:11–12 *“The lame man ... held on to Peter and John.”* The healed man naturally saw in these apostles the means of his healing. *“As though by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?”* Peter at once denies that

any healing power resided in himself or John, due to personal godliness (Zec. 4:6). Rather, he deflects the attention from himself and John, so as to point the crowd to Jesus Christ.

3:13–14 *“The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers.”* Peter links the man’s healing to the miracle-working God of Israel. *“Glorified His Servant Jesus.”* They all would have known of the miracle-working ministry of Jesus. The prophets often spoke of Him as the Servant of Jehovah (Isa. 42:1–4; 52:13–14; Zec. 3:8). *“Whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate.”* These events would have been fresh in their minds. *“You denied the Holy One and the Just.”* Peter accuses them of denying and rejecting their own promised Messiah.

3:15 *“Killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead.”* What a mystery that the Prince of life should be slain by His own creation! Yet, His resurrection showed Him to be victor over death and the grave (Acts 2:22–24, 30; Rom. 1:4; 1 Cor. 15:3–4).

3:16 *“Through faith in His name.”* Peter lays down the one and only condition for receiving the grace of God and that is faith in Jesus Christ. The faith that worked the miracle was not only in Peter and John, but also in the lame man.

3:17 *“I know that you did it in ignorance.”* Here, Peter confirms what Jesus prayed on the cross (Luke 23:34).

3:18 *“Those things which God foretold ... He has thus fulfilled.”* Peter wants the crowd to see that the events of the crucifixion and resurrection were a fulfillment of prophecy in God’s Word.

3:19 *“Repent therefore and be converted.”* The word *“repent”* means “to change your mind.” *“Converted”* means the outward turning from their previous rejection of Christ to a faith-reception of Him. When one has hardened their heart to the gospel message, they must come to a point where they change their mind from unbelief to faith. *“Times of refreshing.”* This included the immediate reception of the Holy Spirit and the consciousness of forgiven sins, as well as the anticipated future kingdom.

3:20–21 *“That He may send Jesus Christ.”* Here, Peter points them to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the establishment of His earthly kingdom. Without faith in Him, they would never share in this blessing. *“Times of restoration of all things.”* This speaks specifically of the millennial kingdom of Jesus Christ.

3:22–23 *“A Prophet like me.”* The typical thinking in Israel at this time was that the *“Prophet”* and *“the Christ”* were two different people (Deut. 18:15; John 1:19–21). In reality, both referred to the promised Messiah. *“Every soul who will not hear that Prophet.”* Rejection of Jesus’ call to believe on Him would result in eternal condemnation (John 3:16–19; 3:36).

3:25 *“In your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”* God’s promise to Abraham was fulfilled in the Person of Jesus Christ (Gen. 12:3; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14; Gal. 3:16).

3:26 *“To you first.”* Here, Peter anticipates that the message was to go to the Jew first and, after their rejection, to the Gentiles (Isa. 49:6; Acts 28:28; Rom. 1:16; 11:11, 25; Eph. 1:12–13; 2:11–18).

ACTS CHAPTER 4

The beginning of persecutions; prayer for boldness; life of the early Church.

The Arrest and Defense of Peter and John

Acts 4:1–12

4:1–2 *“The priests, the captain ... the Sadducees came upon them.”* Most of the priests came from the party of the Sadducees and were wealthy aristocrats. They sought the approval of Rome, for that accord afforded them wealth and power. The captain was head of the Temple police and was subject to the high priest’s orders. *“Greatly disturbed that they taught ... and preached in Jesus the resurrection.”* The Sadducees rejected the teaching of the resurrection, being wholly concerned with wealth, power, and influence in this world (Matt. 22:23, 31–32; Mark 8:36; Luke 20:27). Mark 8:36 shows the willingness of men to choose wealth over eternal life, which is precisely the attitude of the Sadducees.

4:4 *“Many of those who heard the word believed.”* In spite of the continued opposition of the religious leaders, many continue to enter into eternal life by faith (Rom. 10:17).

4:5–6 *“Rulers, elders, and scribes ... Annas the high priest.”* This was the Jewish high court, known as the Sanhedrin. *“Caiaphas, John, and Alexander.”* These were most likely former high priests, who were known as “chief priests.” This was the very council that condemned Jesus to crucifixion.

4:7 *“By what power or by what name.”* What a perfect opening for Peter to proclaim the name of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit! The same question was asked of Jesus (Luke 20:1–2). Peter had already answered this question earlier (Acts 3:12–13).

4:8 *“Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit.”* Luke, from the start, attributes Peter’s boldness and wisdom, not to him, but to the enabling ministry of the Spirit of God (Acts 4:31; 6:3, 5; Eph. 5:18). Here, we see the fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy (Matt. 10:16–20).

4:9 *“If we ... are judged for a good deed.”* Peter immediately puts the leaders on the defensive, showing that they are hostile to a wonderful miracle of God’s grace (Acts 3:1–10).

4:10 *“By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified.”* Peter boldly accuses these leaders of the murder of the Messiah of Israel! *“Whom God raised from the dead.”* The resurrection of Jesus was a recent event, and these leaders could not refute it. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, all they had to do was to produce His dead body, and the message of the resurrection would be forever stopped—but they could not.

4:11 *“This is the stone which was rejected by you builders ... the chief cornerstone.”* Here, Peter refers to Psalm 118:22 and Isaiah 28:16. Jesus also used these verses to affirm His identity (Matt. 21:42). See also 1 Peter 2:6–8.

4:12 *“Nor is there salvation in any other.”* Apart from faith in Jesus Christ as the Savior sent from God, there is no hope of eternal salvation (John 3:16–19; John 14:6; Phil. 2:10; 1 Tim. 2:3–6).

Preaching in Jesus’ Name Forbidden

Acts 4:13–22

4:13 *“When they saw the boldness of Peter and John ... they realized that they had been with Jesus.”* These religious leaders saw the pure and holy courage of Jesus Christ reflected in Peter and John—poor and uneducated disciples.

4:14–17 *“Seeing the man who had been healed ... we cannot deny it ... let us ... threaten them.”* In these few verses, we see the darkness and the hardness of heart in those who simply refuse to believe, no matter what evidence they have. Those who are like this will receive greater condemnation in the judgment. It is not proof that convinces men of the truth of Jesus Christ, it is humility (James 4:6–10; 1 Pet. 5:5–7).

4:18 *“Commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus.”* This prohibition could have no power, for the Lord Jesus—the highest authority of all—had commanded them to preach the Good News (Matt. 28:18–20; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8).

4:19–20 *“Whether it is right ... you judge.”* Peter places the accountability for this prohibition on the religious leaders. Then he boldly declares that they will continue to proclaim the Good News. Believers always have the obligation to obey God rather than men (Dan. 3:16–18; 6:10–13; Acts 5:29).

4:21 *“The people ... all glorified God.”* The healing of the lame man, combined with the bold stand of Peter and John, resulted in many of the people coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

The Church Prays for Boldness

Acts 4:23–31

4:25–26 *“Why did the nations rage ... against the Lord and against His Christ.”* Here, they quote Psalm 2:1–2, a prophecy of the relentless antagonism of the unbelieving world against God and Jesus Christ.

4:27–28 *“To do whatever ... Your purpose determined.”* Just as in Acts 2:23, the apostles see the mighty, sovereign hand of God at work. The sovereignty of God does not nullify the free-will decision of mankind. Rather, He works in and through man’s decisions to accomplish His perfect will. Both God’s mercy and His judgment result from the fact that He is no respecter of persons and is just in every way (Rom. 2:4–6, 11; 3:26).

4:29–32 *“Grant to Your servants ... boldness ... they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and they spoke ... with boldness.”* Consider the power and effect of this prayer on the early Church, and what we can learn from it:

1. They prayed in humble submission to the will of God (v. 28; Matt. 6:10; 1 John 5:14–15).
2. They prayed in obedience to the Word of God (vv. 25–26, 29b; John 15:7).
3. They prayed in the authority and Name of Jesus Christ (v. 30; John 14:13–14).
4. They sought and received the enabling power of the Holy Spirit (v. 31; Eph. 5:18; Gal. 5:16).
5. They acted on their prayer in faith (v. 31b, James 2:17, 20).

The Life of the Early Church

Acts 4:32–37

4:32 *“Those who believed were of one heart and one soul.”* These early believers were living out the spiritual unity Paul later holds up as the ideal (Eph. 4:3–6, 13; Psalm 133:1). This outward unity and care came from the inner motivation of the love of Christ (John 13:34–35; 2 Cor. 5:14–21). *“They had all things in common.”* This was not, as some propose, an early form of socialism! This was voluntary giving to those in need by those who had wealth or possessions. Each person’s possessions remained their own until they chose to give them away (Acts 5:4).

4:33 *“With great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection.”* The resurrection of Jesus Christ was the central message of the early Church, since the fact that Christ was raised from the dead showed Him to be the true Messiah, and the Victor over sin, death/the grave, and Satan (Col. 2:13–15). *“Great grace was upon them all.”* God’s grace always goes where there is faith!

4:34–35 *“Laid them at the apostles’ feet.”* The early Church trusted the apostles to distribute their offerings to those in need. This was, again, a recognition of the *“apostles”* authority, given to them by Christ.

4:36–37 *“And Joses ... named Barnabas ... translated Son of Encouragement.”* Here, Luke introduces Barnabas, showing his gracious character and reputation. He will become an important figure in the life of Paul (Acts 11:22–26; 13:1–3).

ACTS CHAPTER 5

Sin in the Church; the apostles' power; renewed persecution and deliverance.

The Sin of Lying to the Holy Spirit

Acts 15:1–11

5:1 *“Ananias, with Sapphira ... sold a possession.”* As the story unfolds, we see that they craved the honor of Barnabas (Acts 4:36–37), without the personal sacrifice.

5:2 *“And he kept back part of the proceeds.”* The problem was not that he kept part of the proceeds for himself, but that he pretended that he was giving all that he had gained. His actions were a lie, designed to draw praise to himself and Sapphira.

5:3 *“Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?”* There is no reason to doubt that both Ananias and Sapphira were believers. They were accepted as such by the apostles. However, it is possible even for believers to fall into temptation and sin. This was especially serious, because when we act in the name of service to the Lord, yet we are dishonest, we are lying not to men but to God (Num. 32:23; 1 Sam. 16:7).

5:4 *“Was it not your own control?”* Peter makes it clear that Ananias could have done whatever he wanted with the money if he had only been honest.

5:5 *“Ananias ... fell down and breathed his last.”* Here, we have a clear case of a believer dying the “sin unto death” (1 John 5:16; 1 Cor. 5:1–5, 11–12; see Josh. 7:16–26). This can be any sin that is destructive to self and others, which is persisted in without confession or correction (1 John 1:9; 2:1–2), to the point of maximum divine discipline, resulting in death (Heb. 4:13).

5:6–10 *“How is it you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?”* Sapphira had an opportunity to tell the truth, which she failed to do. This proved that they had conspired and agreed together to try to deceive the apostles and the Church.

5:11 *“Great fear came upon all.”* This act of Church discipline early in the book of Acts, serves to warn believers down through the ages of the seriousness of treating ministry and service in a casual fashion (Acts 2:43). To make a pretense of godliness is deadly (2 Tim. 3:5)!

The Apostles' Power

Acts 5:12–16

5:12 *“Through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done.”* The New Testament record shows that it was the apostles, and those acting under their authority, who did these mighty signs and wonders (Acts 2:43; 8:6, 13; 14:3; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:4). These “sign gifts” were never wide-spread, even in the early Church. The seeking of signs reflects an evil heart (Matt. 12:38–39).

5:13–14 *“The people esteemed them highly.”* Even though the persecution caused some to withdraw from them, the overall response was one of honor. *“Believers were ... added to the Lord.”* Again, the only criteria here, is that of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:31).

5:15–16 *“So that they brought the sick ... and they were all healed.”* The healings and miracles confirmed the power of the apostles as men chosen by Jesus Christ Himself. These signs demonstrated/proved that their message was indeed from God (Zec. 4:6).

Renewed Persecution

Acts 5:17–42

5:17–18 *“The high priest ... the Sadducees ... put them in ... prison.”* Those who live in the freedom of faith and the Spirit always challenge religious authorities. They are a threat to their control over the people. Man-made religion always enslaves men, but faith in Christ always sets men free (John 8:32; Gal. 5:1, 13).

5:19–20 *“An angel of the Lord ... said ... Go ... speak ... all the words of this life.”* The apostles are commanded to go and publicly proclaim the message of the life that is found only by faith in Jesus Christ (John 1:4; 14:6).

5:25–28 *“Teaching the people ... Did we not strictly command you not to teach?”* This act of obedience to God and defiance of the religious leaders sets the stage for the apostles’ answer in v. 29. Believers must always give highest allegiance to God and His Word over all human authority.

5:29 *“We ought to obey God rather than men.”* This statement answers the challenge of Acts 4:19. Like Daniel and his friends, the apostles would not bow to any human demands that violate the Word of God (Dan. 3:16–18; 6:10–17).

5:30 *“God ... raised up Jesus whom you murdered.”* The apostles are absolutely fearless here, again accusing these religious leaders of the murder of the promised Messiah.

5:31 *“Him God has exalted to His right hand.”* The resurrection of Jesus proved Him to be the Christ and fulfilled prophecy (Psalm 110:1). *“Prince and Savior.”* As Prince, Jesus awaits His coronation as King when He establishes His Kingdom (Psalm 2:6–12; 110:1–4; Rev. 19:16; Acts 3:15). The same Greek word translated *“Prince”* here, is translated *“captain”* in Hebrews 2:10 and *“author”* in Hebrews 12:2. In the ancient world, it spoke of one who was a “prince-leader” of His people. He alone can lead us to the way of salvation (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Tim. 2:5).

5:34–37 *“A Pharisee named Gamaliel.”* This Rabbi was a famous and highly respected teacher in Israel. His most famous student was Saul of Tarsus (Acts 22:3). He reminds them of both *“Theudas”* and *“Judas,”* two of the early false messiahs who perished with their followers.

5:38–39 *“If this plan ... is of men ... but if it is of God.”* The wise counsel of Gamaliel was to let God be God, and so prove whether the apostles’ teaching was true or false.

5:40–41 *“When they had ... beaten them ... they departed ... rejoicing.”* The apostles, here, fulfill the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:10–12. It is one of the highest honors a disciple can receive—to suffer for Christ’s sake (2 Tim. 2:12; 1 Pet. 4:1, 12–16).

5:42 *“They did not cease teaching ... Jesus as the Christ.”* The apostles were not intimidated! To proclaim that Jesus was the Christ (Anointed One) meant that He was the promised Savior of the world (Psalm 2:2, 7–12; Matt. 16:16; John 20:30–31).

ACTS CHAPTER 6

The first deacons and the arrest of Stephen.

The First Deacons Chosen

Acts 6:1–7

6:1 *“There arose a complaint [murmuring] against the Hebrews by the Hellenists.”* In the time of the early Church, the Jews were divided into two groups: those living in the land who spoke Aramaic, known as Hebrews,

and those from other lands who spoke Greek. The “*Hebrews*” saw themselves as superior to the “*Hellenists*” or Greeks. The earlier unity of the disciples (Acts 2:44–47; 4:34–35) gave way to division and discord.

6:2 “*It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.*” The word “*deacon*” was originally used of a servant who was a “*table-waiter.*” Even at this early stage, the apostles recognized that some were called to minister/teach the “*Word,*” while others were to serve in practical ministry (Rom. 12:3–8; 1 Cor. 12; 1 Pet. 4:10–11).

6:3 “*Seek out ... seven men ... full of the Holy Spirit.*” The evidence of the filling of the Spirit in the lives of these men was that they were of “*good reputation*” and they displayed “*wisdom*” from God’s Word. Knowledge of God’s Word must not only inform our thinking, but also our conduct (Ezra 7:10; Luke 11:28; John 13:17; James 1:21–22).

6:4 “*We will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.*” Those who are faithful in the ministry of God’s Word must take the task seriously, and not be distracted from diligent prayer and study (1 Tim. 5:17–18; 2 Tim. 2:15; 3:16–17).

6:5 “*And they chose Stephen ... and Philip.*” All seven of those chosen had Greek names, thus they would not ignore the Greek widows (see comment on v. 1 above). Only Stephen and Philip have their actions recorded in chapters seven and eight. Stephen was the first Martyr and Philip was the first to go to the Samaritans and Gentiles (Acts 1:8; 7:54–60; 8:5).

6:7 “*The Word of God spread.*” The apostles’ resolution to the first division in the Church brought about a united outreach. “*Many of the priests were obedient to the faith.*” Thus, they would have left the obsolete Temple service (Matt. 27:50–51; Heb. 10:19–20) to serve under the new High Priest of the order of Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18–20; Heb. 5:1–6; 8:1–6, 10, 13; 9:11–15, 23–28; 10:8–18).

The Arrest of Stephen

Acts 6:8–15

6:8 “*Stephen, full of faith and power.*” Here, early in the book of Acts, we see that the filling of the Holy Spirit is always manifested by faith, obedience, wisdom, and power (Acts 6:3, 8, 10).

6:9 “*The Synagogue of the Freedmen.*” While the Temple was the place of worship for all Jews, many of the synagogues were dedicated to specific groups. This one was for Greek-speaking Jews who had been freed from Roman slavery.

6:10 “*They were not able to resist.*” Just like the Jews had done to Jesus, when they could not prevail by scriptural arguments, they turned to devious and evil methods of attack.

6:12–14 “*The elders, and the scribes ... seized him.*” The very people who had crucified Christ and rejected Peter’s message (Acts 2), now arrest Stephen, and use the same accusations against him that they used against Jesus (Matt. 26:59–61; John 2:19; Mark 14:56–59). “*This holy place and the law.*” Stephen will use these very points of their arguments against them (Acts 7:44–53).

6:15 “*All who sat in the council ... saw his face as the face of an angel.*” The supernatural radiance of Stephen’s face reflected the glory of the Christ whom he served (Exod. 34:29; 2 Cor. 3:9–10, 18; 4:6; Acts 7:2).

ACTS CHAPTER 7

The martyrdom of Stephen.

Stephen Reviews the Call of Abraham

Acts 7:1–8

7:1 “The high priest.” This was likely Caiaphas, the high priest who orchestrated the condemnation and crucifixion of Jesus (Matt. 26:3–4, 57; John 18:14, 24, 28–30). **“Are these things so?”** The accusation brought against Stephen is that he spoke against *“this holy place and the law.”* (Acts 6:13–14). In fact, Stephen was prophetically telling the truth, because in 70 A.D., Jerusalem and the Temple were completely destroyed, and the nation of Israel ceased to exist. This is why, through his message, Stephen stresses that God had worked in mighty ways in many other countries (vv. 2, 4, 6, 9, 16, 30).

7:2 “The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham.” The history of the Jewish race begins with the call of God to Abraham to leave his home, family, and country (Gen. 12:1–9; Neh. 9:7–8). This was the beginning of the theme that the life of faith is not a settled existence, which is what the priests desired, but rather a pilgrimage (sanctification process) to the Kingdom of God (Heb. 11:8–10, 13–16).

7:5 “God gave him no inheritance.” Again, Stephen is driving home the point that the life of faith is that of a sojourner (1 Pet. 2:11; Phil. 3:20). Although Abraham had no inheritance and no child, he believed God’s promise that he would father a great nation, and one day possess the land. This required faith in the resurrection.

7:6–7 “His descendants would dwell in a foreign land.” God foretold Abraham of the slavery of the nation in Egypt (Gen. 15:13–14; Exod. 1:8–14). This was to show the sovereignty of God working out in the history of Israel (Hosea 11:1).

7:8 “Then He gave him the covenant of circumcision.” The rite of physical circumcision (Gen. 17:1–14) is a sign of God’s covenant with Abraham, which spoke of justification by faith alone (Gen. 15:1–6; Rom. 4:1–5, 10–12, 22–25; Gal. 3:6–11). From Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the nation of Israel was born (Rom. 9:6–12), through whom the Messiah/Savior would come (Rom. 9:4–5).

Joseph Rejected and Sold into Egypt

Acts 7:9–16

7:9–10 “The patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph.” Joseph is in many ways a type or picture of Christ. At this point, Stephen begins to build his theme for his conclusion, which is that the current religious leaders were following a pattern of unbelief and persecution that characterized Israel’s entire history (Acts 7:51–53) and it was “envy” that ultimately motivated the religious leaders to crucify Jesus (Matt. 27:18; Mark 15:10). **“But God was with him ... and gave him favor and wisdom.”** Just as the God of Abraham had shown His favor to Joseph by giving him wisdom and authority, so He had—to an even greater degree—favored the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus (Luke 2:52).

7:14–15 “Seventy-five people ... went down to Egypt.” In Genesis 46:27 and Deuteronomy 10:22, we read that there were 70 people who went down to Egypt. Stephen is quoting from the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint), which added some of the wives to the number.

7:16 “They were carried back to Shechem.” When Stephen spoke, Shechem was in Samaria—a place hated by the Jews. Again, he is stressing that God is not limited to any special place to do His work. Both Jacob and Joseph were carried back to Canaan to be buried (Gen. 50:5–14; 24–26; Josh. 24:32).

Moses, Israel's Deliverer, Was Also Rejected

Acts 7:17–36

7:20–22 *“Moses was born ... and was mighty in words and deeds.”* Next to Abraham, Moses was the most revered man in Israel's history. Josephus, the Jewish historian, records that he was a mighty commander and military leader. Both Joseph and Moses, like the Lord Jesus, were hated and rejected by their brethren. Yet, God used them both to deliver His people.

7:23–30 *“When he was forty ... and when forty years had passed.”* The life of Moses is divided into three periods of forty years: his life as a prince in Egypt (v. 23), his time in the wilderness as a shepherd (v. 30), and his leadership over Israel from the Exodus to his death (v. 36). The number 40 is common in Scripture to represent a time of testing (Matt. 4:1–2; Luke 4:1–2). *“He supposed that his brethren would have understood that God would deliver them.”* The mission of Moses as a physical deliverer was misunderstood, just as was the mission of Jesus Christ—Israel's spiritual Deliverer.

7:32 *“I am the God ... of Abraham ... Isaac ... Jacob.”* Here, Stephen links the call of Moses with the founders of the nation (v. 8). This quote (Exod. 3:6) was used by Jesus to prove the resurrection of the dead to the Sadducees (Matt. 22:31–32).

7:33 *“The place where you stand is holy ground.”* The incident of the burning bush occurred in the land of Midian (Exod. 3:1–2), again proving that it was not the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem that was holy, but that any place where God appeared and worked, was a holy place.

7:34 *“I have ... seen ... I have heard ... and have come down ... I will send you.”* Stephen clearly proves that God is actively involved in the affairs of men.

7:35 *“This Moses whom they rejected.”* Stephen continues to stress the historical hardness of heart and disobedience of Israel (Matt. 23:29–39). Their rejection of Jesus was simply a continuation of the nation's rebellion against God.

The Prophecy of the Messiah and Israel's Exile

Acts 7:37–43

7:37 *“The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me.”* This prophecy, from Deuteronomy 18:15, 18–19, spoke of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus was like Moses in that He was also a deliverer and lawgiver. But where Moses was a physical deliverer, Jesus delivers those who believe in Him from sin, death, and Hell (John 3:36; 5:24; Col. 2:13–14). Just as His deliverance is superior to that of Moses, so also is His law (Rom. 8:1–4; 13:8; Gal. 5:14; Heb. 7:12, 18, 22; 8:6–7, 13; 10:9–10).

7:38 *“With the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai.”* This “Angel,” who first appeared to Moses in the burning bush (v. 30–33; Exod. 3:1–10), was an appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Old Testament. This is called a “Christophany,” meaning “a visible appearance of our Lord before He came in the flesh (John 1:14).”

7:39 *“Whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected.”* When the Israelites rejected the “living oracles” (v. 38) given to Moses by the “Angel,” they turned to the worship of the golden calf (v. 41; Exod. 32:1–6). Stephen is building the case that the rejection of Jesus by the leaders of his day was equivalent to idolatry when they continued Temple worship, after the rending of the veil (Matt. 27:51). *“In their hearts they turned back to Egypt.”* Rejection of the living oracles caused hardened hearts and the Israelites turned back from entering the promised land (Num. 13–14; Psalm 95:8–11; Heb. 3:7–19).

7:41–43 *“Then God ... gave them up to worship the host of heaven.”* This shows how rejection of the truth always goes from bad to worse (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28; Eph. 4:17–19; Gal. 5:1–7). *“I will carry you away beyond Babylon.”* The exile of Israel from the land for 70 years was a preview of what was about to happen to Israel in 70 A.D. with the destruction of the city and dispersal of the nation throughout the world. The destruction of the Temple, spoken of in Acts 6:14, would surely come.

The Blessing and Favor of God Rejected

Acts 7:44–53

7:44 *“Our fathers had the tabernacle ... in the wilderness.”* Because the religious leaders made an issue of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem (Acts 6:13–14), Stephen shows that God was faithful to dwell among His people as they wandered in the wilderness.

7:45–46 *“David, who found favor before God.”* David was called by God *“A man after His own heart”* (1 Sam. 13:14). His story and his kingdom were the highpoint of Israel’s history as a nation.

7:48 *“The Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands.”* The Jews had the idea that God dwelt in the Temple, therefore they were safe from any invading forces. Stephen makes the same point Solomon made when he dedicated the Temple: that God is omnipresent and is not bound to any geographic location (1 Kings 8:27–30). The wonder of the New Covenant is that by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, every believer becomes a temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19).

7:49–50 *“Heaven is My throne.”* Here, Stephen quotes Isaiah 66:1–2 and Psalm 102:25 to prove his point that God cannot be confined to one place!

Stephen Is Killed by the Mob

Acts 7:51–60

7:51 *“You always resist the Holy Spirit.”* Although they were under the convicting power of the Spirit (Zec. 4:6; John 16:7–11; Rom 8:5–8), they hardened their hearts and resisted the truth.

7:52 *“Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?”* Here, his accusation is very similar to that of Jesus’ condemnation (Matt. 23:34–39). *“Who foretold the coming of the Just One.”* The prophets all spoke of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ—the only truly righteous Man who ever lived (Luke 24:25–27, 44–45; Acts 3:14, 18; 1 Pet. 1:10–11). *“Of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers.”* Stephen directly charges them with the guilt of the murder of their own Messiah! (see Acts 3:13–15).

7:53 *“Who have received the law ... and have not kept it.”* Elsewhere, we are told that the law was given through the agency of angels (Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:2). This is why the author of Hebrews declares Jesus to be superior to the angels (Psalm 2:7; Heb. 1:1–14) because Jesus Himself is the Living Word (John 1:14) and, therefore, the only true and perfect Mediator between God and men (1 Tim. 2:5).

7:54 *“They were cut to the heart.”* This was deep conviction (John 16:8), which on the Day of Pentecost had brought many to faith in Christ (Acts 2:37–41). Here, however, they harden their hearts all the more. *“They gnashed at him with their teeth.”* This is an expression of intense rage and anger, such as those cast into hell will experience (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30).

7:55–56 *“Being full of the Holy Spirit ... saw ... Jesus standing at the right hand of God.”* The filling of the Spirit, which characterized Stephen’s life (Acts 6:5, 8), sustained him through death. After the resurrection and ascension, Jesus sat down at the Father’s right hand (Psalm 110:1; Heb. 1:13). Here, Jesus stands to welcome Stephen into Heaven!

7:58 *“They cast him out of the city.”* Like his Lord, Stephen *“suffered outside the gate”* (Heb. 13:12). *“At the feet of a young man named Saul.”* Here, Luke introduces us to the person who will become the main figure in the book of Acts. In Acts 8:1–3, we see just how dedicated Saul of Tarsus was to the destruction of the Church. The accusation of Stephen against the religious leaders (v. 52) applied especially to Saul, and yet the Lord sought and saved him (Acts 9:1–19; 1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13; Phil. 3:6). God’s grace is greater than all our sin!

7:59–60 *“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”* Stephen knew that he would immediately pass into the presence of the Lord (Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 5:6–8; Phil. 1:21). *“Lord, do not charge them with this sin.”* Also, like his Savior, Stephen prayed for the forgiveness of his persecutors (Luke 23:34; Matt. 5:44). *“He fell asleep.”* Sleep is used as a figure for the death of those who believe, because, while the spirit goes directly to God, the body rests in the grave—awaiting the awakening of the resurrection (John 11:11; 1 Cor. 15:51; 1 Thess. 4:13–18).

ACTS CHAPTER 8

The Church scattered; the Gospel goes to the Samaritans and an Ethiopian; Jesus’ commission in Acts 1:8 is being fulfilled through persecution.

Saul’s Persecution Spreads the Gospel

Acts 8:1–25

8:1 *“Saul was consenting to his death.”* Paul himself later affirms this truth (Acts 22:20). *“A great persecution arose against the church.”* It was in his pursuit of this persecution that Saul/Paul came to know Jesus Christ (Acts 9:1–5). *“They were all scattered ... except the apostles.”* The word *“scattered”* is *diaspeiro*, which pictures the sowing of seed in a field. The words *“Jerusalem ... Judea ... Samaria”* remind us of Jesus’ commission to the apostles (Acts 1:8) and show us that God is at work fulfilling His plan even through the evil actions of those who hate Jesus Christ (John 15:18).

8:3 *“Saul ... made havoc of the church.”* First, he was a consenting bystander; now, his hatred of the Church is inflamed to full force. The phrase *“made havoc”* is a term that spoke of being mangled by a wild beast. *“Entering every house”* refers to the meeting places of the local church. Both men and women were imprisoned by Saul’s hatred, a fact he later greatly regretted (Acts 22:19; 1 Cor. 15:9; 1 Tim. 1:12–17).

8:4 The persecuted and scattered believers *“went everywhere preaching the word.”* God worked through the evil of persecution to spread the message of the Good News (Gospel). Truly, God works all things together for good (Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28).

8:5 *“Philip went down to ... Samaria.”* After the fall of the Northern Kingdom (722 B.C.), Assyrians inter-married with Jewish women, resulting in a mixed race—the Samaritans. They were despised by the Jews (John 4:9). They only accepted the first five books of the Old Testament and worshiped at Mt. Gerizim (Deut. 11:29; 27:12; John 4:20). This Philip was one of the original deacons (Acts 6:5).

8:6–8 *“The multitudes ... heeded ... and there was great joy.”* God confirmed the message of Philip with mighty works; his words and works brought great joy to those who received the truth by faith. Faith in Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sins, and the assurance of eternal salvation always result in joy (Rom. 5:1–2; Phil. 4:4).

8:9–10 *“Simon ... previously practiced sorcery... the great power of God.”* The practice of *“sorcery”* suggests demonic powers being displayed by Simon. Satan always seeks to imitate and resist the true power of God (Exod. 7:10–12).

8:12–13 *“When they believed Philip ... Simon himself also believed.”* Though many doubt the genuineness of Simon’s faith, no distinction is made between him and the others who believed. Steeped in sorcery as he was, it would be easy for such an immature believer to fall into the error of vv. 18–19.

8:14 *“The apostles who were at Jerusalem ... sent Peter and John to them.”* During the formation of the early Church, it was necessary to show apostolic authority over events taking place. Therefore, the Holy Spirit was given through their direct involvement (vv. 15–16). Later, the normal means of Spirit-baptism was received at the moment of faith (Acts 10:43–44).

8:17 *“They laid hands on them.”* This was an ancient custom showing the identification of one person with another (Acts 6:6; 13:3). In the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, it showed that the offering was sacrificed in place of the one who offered it (Lev. 3:1–2, 8, 13). Peter and John identified these people as believers in Jesus Christ, sharing the faith that they preached.

8:18–19 *“Simon ... offered them money.”* There is no indication that Simon did not receive the Holy Spirit along with the rest (vv. 12–13). Otherwise, he would not have desired the ability to give the Spirit to others. His grave error was to think that the grace of God could be bought with money.

8:20–21 *“Your money perish with you.”* The sin of Simon is very similar to that of Ananias and Sapphira—two believers who had perished by misusing money in relation to the service of God (Acts 5:1–11). The implication is that Simon is extremely near to ending in the same fate. *“You have neither part nor portion.”* These words speak of inheritance and signify the unique position of the apostles who were directly chosen and commissioned by Jesus Christ. Simon is not one of them.

8:22–23 *“Repent therefore of this your wickedness.”* Notice that Peter does not tell Simon to “repent and believe” because he had already trusted in Jesus Christ as his Savior. However, he needed to “repent” of his sin for cleansing (1 John 1:9).

8:24 *“Pray to the Lord for me.”* In this request, Simon reveals three important facts: first, he believes that Jesus is the Lord; second, he acknowledges Peter’s apostolic position and asks for his intercession; and finally, his request demonstrates a repentant heart.

8:25 *“They returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel.”* Many other Samaritan villages heard the gospel message proclaimed as Peter and John returned home.

Philip and the Ethiopian

Acts 8:26–40

8:26 *“An angel of the Lord.”* God used both an angel messenger and the Holy Spirit (v. 29) to guide Philip to the desert road that led from Jerusalem, through Gaza, and down to Africa.

8:27 *“A eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen.”* This official seems to have been a proselyte to Judaism, who had *“come to Jerusalem to worship.”*

8:28 *“He was reading Isaiah the prophet.”* On this journey to Jerusalem, he had acquired a copy of the scroll of Isaiah, the most evangelistic of all the prophets.

8:29–30 *“The Spirit said ... go near ... so Philip ran to him.”* The obedient response of Philip is wonderful and is in great contrast to that of Jonah (Jonah 1:1–3). *“Do you understand?”* After hearing what the eunuch was reading, Philip gave him a chance to ask for clarification. In this way, the spiritual hunger of the Ethiopian is made clear.

8:31 *“How can I, unless someone guides me?”* God uses men to reach men. Teaching requires both a student and a teacher. God has uniquely gifted certain believers to be teachers (Rom. 12:6–8; Eph. 4:11–12; 1 Pet. 4:10–11).

8:32–33 *“He was led as a sheep to the slaughter.”* By the providential design of God, the eunuch was reading from Isaiah 53:7–8, a prophecy of the sufferings and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. God’s guidance puts the right person in the right place at the right time with the right information!

8:35 *“Philip ... beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him.”* The ministry of Philip was powerful because he always kept the focus on the Lord Jesus (Acts 8:5). The real power of ministry is not in the minister, nor in his method, but rather in the message where the Person and the work of Jesus Christ is central.

8:36–38 *“What hinders me from being baptized? ... If you believe ... you may.”* The ritual of water baptism has no reality apart from faith in Jesus Christ. In baptism, the new believer is proclaiming to the world his/her union with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection to new life (Rom. 6:1–6). This spiritual union is the result of the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5; 1 Cor. 12:12–13), which occurs at the moment we believe.

8:39–40 *“The Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away.”* This word *harpazo*, meaning “caught up” or “caught away,” is also used for the Rapture of the Church (1 Thess. 4:17), and of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ (Rev. 12:5). *“The eunuch ... went on his way rejoicing.”* As with the Samaritans (v. 8), the assurance of forgiveness and salvation brought great joy to the eunuch (1 Pet. 1:6–9).

8:40 *“Philip ... preached ... till he came to Caesarea.”* Philip continues his evangelistic ministry, and later settled in Caesarea—a seaport. Later, Paul and his missionary team would stay in his home (Acts 21:8).

ACTS CHAPTER 9

The Lord Jesus confronts Saul on the Damascus Road; Saul becomes a believer and preaches Christ in Damascus.

Jesus Confronts Saul

Acts 9:1–9

9:1 *“Saul, still breathing threats and murder.”* The hatred of Saul for the disciples of the Lord Jesus was intensified because of the spread of the gospel message. His intent now was not just to imprison believers (Acts 8:3), but to murder them as well.

9:2 *“If he found any who were of the Way.”* Based on Jesus’ words in John 14:6, the early Christians were often referred to simply as disciples of Jesus, or followers of The Way (Acts 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22).

9:3 *“Suddenly a light shone around him from heaven.”* This was the light of the glory of Jesus Christ revealed to Saul (1 Cor. 15:8; 2 Cor. 4:6).

9:4–5 *“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”* Here, the Lord Jesus shows that the Church is His body on Earth (Rom. 12:4–5; 1 Cor. 12:12–20; Eph. 1:22–23; Matt. 25:40). *“I am Jesus ... It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”* Goads were sharpened sticks used to prod oxen along in their work. This statement shows that Saul was fighting against strong conviction in his own mind about the justice of his actions.

9:6 *“Lord, what do You want me to do?”* Here, Saul recognizes the Jesus he is persecuting as the LORD (*Jehovah*) of the Old Testament. Once we know *“Who”* Jesus is (v. 5), the surrendered soul can only ask *“what”* we should do (v. 6). God has a plan for every life. Discipleship is to discover and to fulfill the will of God (John 7:17). God reveals His will through His Word to those who are willing to do it. *“You will be told what you must do.”* Again, we see that God uses men to reach men. The obedience of Ananias will play a role in Saul’s obedience to God.

9:8–9 *“When his eyes were opened he saw no one ... they led him by the hand.”* The Lord blinded Saul so that he could ponder his own spiritual blindness. This would help him to better understand the blindness of his own kinsmen (Matt. 15:14; 23:16–17, 24–26; Rom. 11:8, 10, 25; Eph. 4:18).

Ananias Ministers to Saul

Acts 9:10–19

9:10 *“A certain disciple ... named Ananias.”* God used apostles, deacons, and even a simple disciple named Ananias. We owe much to this faithful man for his role in bringing about the transformation of Saul (his Hebrew name) to Paul, his Roman/Greek name (Acts 13:9; Rom. 12:1–2).

9:11 *“Arise and go ... inquire ... for one called Saul of Tarsus ... behold, he is praying.”* During the three days of his fasting (v. 9), Saul had been praying. Since Ananias had heard of Saul, this information was given to encourage him.

9:12 *“In a vision he has seen ... Ananias coming.”* This was the first recorded vision of the man whose visions and revelations would be instrumental in forming the Church (2 Cor. 12:1–5, 7–10).

9:13–14 *“Lord, I have heard ... about this man.”* Ananias is obviously reluctant to confront Saul, due to his knowledge of Saul’s commission to arrest believers. *“How much harm he has done to Your saints.”* For the first time in Acts, believers—who have been called disciples, or followers of The Way—are called *“saints,”* meaning “sanctified ones” : those set apart to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

9:15–16 *“Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine.”* The Lord reveals His future purpose for Saul; his ministry *“before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel”* is the theme of the last half of the book of Acts. Here, Jesus anticipates *“How many things he must suffer for My name’s sake.”* Paul would endure extreme suffering for the cause of Christ (1 Cor. 4:9–13; 2 Cor. 4:7–15; 6:3–10; 11:23–33).

9:17 *“Brother Saul.”* Here, Ananias addresses Saul as a fellow believer in Jesus Christ. Ananias not only came to open Saul’s eyes, but *“That you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”* Only by the filling ministry of the Holy Spirit could Saul, or any other believer, be empowered to fulfill the calling of God (Acts 6:3, 5; 7:55; Eph. 5:18). The filling of the Spirit implies an emptying of self (Matt. 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23) and submission to the leading of the Spirit (Rom. 8:14; Gal. 5:16, 18).

9:18 *“He arose and was baptized.”* By this action, Saul showed his submission to the command of Jesus (Matt. 28:18–20) and openly confessed his union with Christ by faith (see Rom. 6:1–6). This union is the result of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which occurs at the moment we believe in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 12:13).

Saul’s Early Ministry

Acts 9:20–31

9:20 *“Immediately he preached the Christ ... that He is the Son of God.”* It is most interesting to observe Saul/Paul’s spiritual development he is seen as: a brother (Acts 9:17), a witness (Acts 9:20–22), a disciple (Acts 9:26–28), a prophet/teacher (Acts 13:1), and finally, he steps into the role of an apostle—expressing authority and power (Acts 13:9–12). He was gifted as an apostle at the moment he believed but, like each of us, he had to grow into his calling (Eph. 4:1).

9:21 *“Then all who hear were amazed ... Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name ...?”* Nothing gives power to our witness more than a transformed life (Acts 26:19–23; Rom. 12:1–2; 1 Pet. 3:15).

9:22 *“Saul increased all the more in strength.”* Even apostles had to grow up spiritually (2 Pet. 3:18). *“Proving that this Jesus is the Christ.”* Now all of his training as a Pharisee and his instruction from the Old Testament Scriptures is used to demonstrate the truth that Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah.

9:23 *“The Jews plotted to kill him.”* From the very beginning, his effectiveness made Saul/Paul a target of the envious Jewish leaders. Similar was their motive to kill Jesus (Matt. 27:18; Mark 15:10).

9:25 *“The disciples ... let him down ... in a large basket.”* Paul recalls this as the beginning of his sufferings (2 Cor. 11:30–33). It was probably after this that Paul went into Arabia for three years (Gal. 1:15–18).

9:27 *“Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles.”* Barnabas was a gracious believer, known for his gift of encouragement (Acts 4:36–37). Later, it was he who brought Paul to Antioch to be a teacher to the church there (Acts 11:25–26).

9:29 *“He spoke boldly ... and disputed against the Hellenists.”* These *“Hellenists”* were Greek-speaking Jews—the same group who instigated the murder of Stephen (Acts 6:9), to which Saul gave his consent (Acts 7:58; 8:1; 22:20). Yet now he is proclaiming the same message Stephen did, that Jesus is the Messiah. *“They attempted to kill him.”* The life of Paul was in danger from the moment he began to proclaim the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 9:15–16; 26:15–18).

9:30 *“When the brethren found out, they ... sent him out to Tarsus.”* Tarsus was the home city of Saul (Acts 9:11; 11:25; 21:39; 22:3).

9:31 *“Then the churches ... had peace and were edified.”* The Gospel had been planted in the first two geographical areas Jesus commanded to be reached (Acts 1:8). Proclaiming the Gospel brings unbelievers to faith in Christ. However, the next step is to build up their faith through sound teaching (2 Tim. 2:15; 3:16–17; Titus 2:11–15). From Tarsus, Paul would go to Antioch, where the final part of his mission would be conducted (Acts 11:25–26; 13:1–5).

The Healing Ministry of Peter

Acts 9:32–43

9:34–35 *“Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you.”* The apostles’ power to heal was an extension of the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ. *“So all who dwelt at Lydda and Sharon ... turned to the Lord.”* The goal of the physical healing was intended for more than just the alleviation of suffering. It was to show the power of God to heal souls, and it brought many to eternal life.

9:36 *“A certain disciple ... Tabitha (Aramaic) ... translated Dorcas (Greek).”* Her name meant “Gazelle,” a small and graceful antelope in Israel. *“Full of good works and charitable deeds.”* This disciple showed her faith by her good works on behalf of others (Eph. 2:10; Titus 2:7–8, 11–14).

9:37–38 *“They laid her in an upper room.”* The fact that they did not bury her showed they trusted that Peter could raise her to life.

9:39 *“All the widows stood by him weeping.”* Widows in the ancient world were often deprived of all help. These destitute women were the recipients of the kind ministry of Dorcas who made garments for them.

9:40 *“Peter put them all out ... and prayed.”* Here, Peter mimics the ministry of Jesus to Jairus when He raised his daughter (Matt. 9:23–26; Luke 8:49–56).

9:42 *“It became known ... and many believed on the Lord.”* Again, as in v. 35, the miraculous healing was designed to bring many to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

9:43 *He stayed many days ... with Simon, a tanner.*” A tanner was considered unclean since his work required handling dead animals. God is gradually preparing Peter for his coming vision and outreach to the Gentiles, also considered unclean by the Jews (Acts 10:10–16; 28).

ACTS CHAPTER 10

Peter, prepared by a vision, brings the gospel message to the household of Cornelius.

The Vision of Cornelius

Acts 10:1–8

10:1 *“Cornelius, a centurion of ... the Italian Regiment.”* This man was in command of one hundred Roman soldiers. Remember that it was a centurion who caused Jesus to marvel due to his great faith (Luke 7:1–10).

10:2 *“A devout man ... who feared God.”* Cornelius was what Jews called “a God-fearer.” They often worshiped in the synagogues and believed the Scriptures but did not convert to Judaism. Four things are said of Cornelius: 1) He was *“devout,”* having reverence for God, 2) he *“feared”* the true God, 3) he gave generously to the poor, and 4) he prayed to God daily. But he did not yet know the Lord Jesus Christ.

10:3 *“About the ninth hour ... he saw ... an angel of God.”* This was the hour of prayer in Jerusalem (Acts 3:1), and the hour Jesus died on the cross (Matt. 27:45–50; Mark 15:33–37; Luke 23:44–46).

10:4 *“Your prayers ... have come up for a memorial.”* God remembers our prayers and good deeds and will reward believers at the Judgment Seat of Christ (Matt. 6:4, 6, 18; Luke 6:35; 2 Cor. 5:9–10; Rev. 5:8; 8:3).

10:5–6 *“Now send ... for Simon ... Peter.”* Since the tanner he was staying with was also named Simon, the angel gives the name *“Peter,”* which the Lord Jesus gave to him (Matt. 16:17–18). The name means “rock” and spoke of Peter’s firm and strong reliance on the Lord.

The Vision of Peter

Acts 10:9–23

10:9–10 *“As they ... drew near the city.”* The timing of the vision was designed to prepare Peter for their arrival and request. *“About the sixth hour ... he became very hungry.”* The sixth hour is twelve noon. God used Peter’s hunger in connection with the command given in the vision.

10:12–16 *“Rise, Peter; kill and eat.”* Here, God commands Peter to go against all his Jewish training since childhood. These unclean animals, listed in Leviticus 11, were never to be eaten by Jewish people, as part of the Mosaic Law. *“What God has cleansed you must not call common.”* The lesson for Peter is that God is able to cleanse the most foul things of the Earth, and make them holy. This lesson is preparing Peter to go to the house of Cornelius (v. 25).

10:17–20 *“While Peter wondered ... the Spirit said ... ‘Arise ... go down.’”* The Holy Spirit confirms the heavenly origin of the vision and urges Peter not to doubt, since the men calling for him were sent by the Lord Himself.

10:22 *“Cornelius ... was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you.”* Their words confirm not only the upright character of Cornelius, but also his visit by the angel. The mounting evidence of God’s perfect timing, the

vision, and the Spirit's voice, show that Peter had much prejudice to overcome. Perhaps he also remembered the interaction of Jesus with the other Centurion (Luke 7:1–10).

At the House of Cornelius

Acts 10:24–33

10:24–25 *“Cornelius was waiting ... and worshiped him.”* Since the angel had directed him to call for Peter, Cornelius would have considered him a very holy man. Even the Apostle John, overcome by his visions, fell down to worship an angel (Rev. 22:8–9) and was rebuked for doing it.

10:26–27 *“Stand up; I myself am also a man.”* Peter is making the point that no man is worthy of the worship, which only God deserves (Acts 14:14–15). *“He ... found many who had come together.”* Cornelius wanted all his friends, fellow soldiers, and relatives to hear what Peter would say.

10:28 *“You know how unlawful it is.”* Here, Peter admits that he is violating the Jewish religious custom, although no Law of Moses forbade contact with Gentiles. *“But God has shown me ... I should not call any man common or unclean.”* Sometime later, Peter would violate his newfound wisdom, at the church in Antioch (Gal. 2:11–21).

10:30–33 *“Four days ago I was fasting.”* Cornelius relates the angelic visitation to Peter and the command to send for him. *“We are all present before God, to hear.”* The gathered company eagerly awaits Peter's words, which will lead them into eternal life.

Peter's Message to Cornelius' Household

Acts 10:34–43

10:34 *“God shows no partiality.”* This principle is stressed throughout the New Testament (Acts 17:27; Rom. 2:11; Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:25; James 2:1). All men are equally sinners before God and, for this reason, Christ died for all mankind (Rom. 5:6–12, 19–21; 1 John 2:2).

10:36–38 *“Jesus Christ—He is Lord of all—that word you know.”* Peter had learned, perhaps from the messengers of Cornelius, that they knew of the ministry of Jesus. What they did not know about was His death, burial, and resurrection. It was perhaps the earthly ministry of Jesus which had awakened Cornelius' spiritual hunger for more truth (Matt. 5:6).

10:39–41 *“We are witnesses.”* Peter stresses this fact twice (vv. 39, 41), so as to validate his message, as one who was chosen by Jesus Himself. *“Him God raised up.”* Again, Peter wants to confirm that he was an eyewitness of the resurrected Christ.

10:42–43 *“He who was ordained by God to be Judge.”* The position of Jesus as the only Mediator between God and men is critical to understand that He is the only way of salvation (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Tim. 2:5). *“To Him all the prophets witness.”* As Jesus had shown the disciples (Luke 24:25–27, 44–45), *“whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.”* Faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for receiving forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life (Rom. 6:23; Gal. 3:22). The *“whoever”* here, reinforces the “no partiality” of v. 34.

The Holy Spirit Given

Acts 10:44–48

10:44 *“The Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard.”* The indication is that as soon as Peter declared the necessity of faith in Jesus Christ, all who were in the house believed. From this point on, the Holy Spirit immediately baptizes those who believe into the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:2).

10:45 *“Those of the circumcision ... were astonished.”* These Jewish believers had just been given a dramatic proof that God made no distinction between Jew and Gentile. This proof would calm the questions of the Jerusalem council (Rom. 1:16; 2:10–11; Acts 11:17–18).

10:46 *“They heard them speak with tongues and magnify God.”* This is again a proof that tongues were understandable foreign languages (Acts 2:4–8). In essence, Pentecost reversed the curse of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9). The gift of tongues was a “sign” to unbelieving Israel that their rejection of the Messiah would lead to God’s judgment on the nation (Isa. 28:11–13; 1 Cor. 14:20–22).

10:47 *“Can anyone forbid water?”* Peter is addressing the believing Jews who accompanied him, as witnesses that the Holy Spirit had been given to the Gentiles. *“Baptized.”* Water baptism is an outward ritual that acknowledges the inner baptism of the Holy Spirit at the moment of faith (Acts 8:36–38; Eph. 1:13–14).

10:48 *“Then they asked him to stay a few days.”* This time would have been spent in fellowship and further instruction in order to strengthen their faith.

ACTS CHAPTER 11

Peter defends his mission to the Gentiles; Paul becomes a teacher at Antioch.

Peter Defends His Mission to the Gentiles

Acts 11:1–18

11:2 *“Those of the circumcision contended with him.”* These Jewish believers wanted to maintain Jewish superiority and observance of the Law of Moses. They created much division in the early Church (Acts 15:1–5; Gal. 1:6–8; 2:1–5). These “Judaizers” were attempting to mix law and grace, works and faith—which is impossible, like mixing oil and water. This is the age-old problem of religion: man adding to what God has said (Rom. 4:1–6, 16; 11:6; Gal. 3:1–6; see Hab. 2:4; Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38).

11:3 *“You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”* This was the very cultural taboo that Peter referred to in Acts 10:28. It was not based on the Law of Moses, but rather on rabbinical tradition (Matt. 15:1–6; Mark 7:1–13; Gal. 1:14). Peter’s vision had overcome his prejudice, yet later in Antioch, he fell into this error again (Gal. 2:11–21).

11:4 *“Peter explained it ... in order from the beginning.”* Peter patiently describes his vision and the Lord’s command (vv. 5–10). Along with the supernatural giving of the Holy Spirit, this presented these Jewish legalists with an irrefutable argument for their accusations against Peter.

11:6 *“I observed it intently and considered.”* Here, Peter reviews his own state of mind while the vision was being seen. He was visually focused and mentally alert.

11:9 *“What God has cleansed you must not call common.”* This was the main lesson of the vision. God had sanctified the Gentiles through the sacrifice of Christ; they were no longer to be considered “common” or unclean. Jesus taught a similar lesson regarding food in Mark 7:15 (see also 1 Tim. 4:3–5).

11:12 *“The Spirit told me to go with them.”* The voice of the Holy Spirit is now added to the authority of the heavenly vision. *“These six brethren accompanied me.”* Peter had wisely taken twice the number of witnesses required by Jewish law (Deut. 17:6; 19:15; 2 Cor. 13:1; 1 Tim. 5:19; Heb. 10:28).

11:13–14 *“Call for ... Peter ... who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.”* This statement gives additional information about the message of the angel in Acts 10. The object of Peter’s mission and

message was to bring the good news of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. The result of this salvation was the baptism of the Holy Spirit on all who believed.

11:16 *“Then I remembered the word of the Lord.”* Here, Peter refers to Jesus’ words in Acts 1:5. The baptism of John was a sign of confession of sins, in preparation for the Messiah’s coming (Matt. 3:6; Mark 1:5). Even John the Baptist declared that only the Messiah/Savior could baptize with the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11).

11:17 *“If therefore God gave them the same gift ... who was I that I could withstand God?”* What God had done for Jewish believers on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2), He had now done for Gentile believers. Peter’s argument shows that if the Jewish believers resist this evidence, they are actively opposing God. Yet, it is clear that Peter later wavered from his own conviction when confronted in Antioch by the legalistic Jews from Jerusalem (Acts 15:2; Gal. 2:11–21).

11:18 *“Then God has granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.”* Here, the word *“repentance”* refers back to the word *“believed”* in v. 17. When anyone believes in Jesus Christ, they have *“changed their mind”* from resisting Him to receiving Him, and the result of that faith is a new creation (2 Cor. 5:16–17). This change of mindset results in the transformed life of the child of God (Rom. 12:1–2; Eph. 1:13–14; 2:4–10).

Note: This sets the stage for the rest of the book of Acts, which details Paul’s ministry as the Apostle to the Gentiles.

The Founding of the Church of Antioch

Acts 11:19–30

11:19 *“Those who were scattered.”* Luke resumes events from Acts 8:1. *“Traveled as far as ... Antioch.”* The church of Antioch will become the first major missionary-sending church to the Gentile world. *“Preaching the word to no one but the Jews only.”* This is the same prejudice originally overcome by Peter’s experience with Cornelius.

11:20 *“But some of them ... spoke to the Hellenists.”* These were Jews who had adopted the language and much of the culture of the Greek world. They became a bridge between the strict Jewish believers and the Gentiles.

11:21 *“A great number believed.”* Note that their faith in Christ preceded a turning to Him in seeking to live a God-honoring life.

11:22 *“They sent out Barnabas ... as far as Antioch.”* God had providentially prepared Antioch to play a vital role in the spread of the early Church. The spiritual hunger of the believers in Antioch will call for more advanced teaching (Heb. 5:12–14).

11:23–24 *“When he ... had seen the grace of God.”* God was at work in a powerful way in Antioch. He always works in mighty ways where there is great spiritual hunger. *“He ... encouraged them all.”* The great spiritual motivation of these new believers brought joy to Barnabas (*“son of encouragement,”* Acts 4:36; also, his spiritual gift, Rom. 12:8), and his exhortation to them was to continue to grow in grace and truth (2 Pet. 3:18).

11:25–26 *“Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul.”* Barnabas knew the limitations of his own spiritual gift. He knew the work in Antioch demanded someone gifted as a teacher. So, he went to find Saul in Tarsus. This was approximately ten years since Saul became a believer. *“For a whole year they ... taught a great many people.”* Saul is now developing his gift of apostleship for a greater role in the early Church. *“The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.”* They had been called Nazarenes (Acts 24:5), disciples (Acts 6:1; 9:1), and followers of The Way (John 14:6; Acts 9:2; 24:14). Now they are identified as those who believe in and follow the Christ. It is in Antioch that believers, both Jews and Gentiles together, are called by one name.

11:28 *“A great famine throughout all the world.”* The Jewish historian Josephus writes that this famine occurred in the year 46 A.D.

11:29 *“The disciples ... determined to send relief.”* In this way, God used the famine to bind together the Gentile churches with the “mother” church in Jerusalem (see Matt. 28:19; Acts 1:8). Paul speaks of the effect of this offering in Romans 15:25–27 and 2 Corinthians 8:1–15. This monetary gift was voluntary, according to each one’s desire and ability to give.

11:30 *“Sent it ... by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.”* This visit to Jerusalem is recounted by Paul in Galatians 2:1–10. At that time, he was still having to contend with the Jewish legalist faction in the church.

ACTS CHAPTER 12

Herod persecutes James and Peter; Herod dies under God’s judgment.

James Martyred, Peter Imprisoned

Acts 12:1–4

12:1 *“Herod the king.”* This was Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great (Matt. 2:1–23). His uncle, Herod Antipas murdered John the Baptist (Mark 6:14–29).

12:2 *“Then he killed James ... with the sword.”* James was the first of the twelve apostles put to death. Both James and John, when their mother sought to promote them to Jesus’ right and left hand in the kingdom, said that they could drink of His cup (Matt. 20:20–23), and He said that they would indeed.

12:3–4 *“He saw that it pleased the Jews.”* The Jewish religious leaders had been ineffective to stop the spread of Christianity. They now saw that they had an ally in Herod. *“He proceeded further to seize Peter also.”* James and Peter, along with John, formed the leadership of the apostolic band (Matt. 17:1; Mark 5:37; 14:33; Luke 9:28). *“He put him in prison ... four squads of soldiers to keep him.”* This would have been a total of 16 Roman soldiers to guard a Jewish fisherman! Surely, they remembered the soldiers who guarded Jesus’ tomb (Matt. 27:62–65; 28:11–15). *“To bring him before the people after Passover.”* Since no executions could take place during Passover, Herod waited to kill Peter until the feast was over.

An Angel Delivers Peter

Acts 12:5–19

12:5 *“Constant prayer was offered to God for him.”* We do not read of prayer being offered for James. Perhaps it all took place too quickly. Here, however, the prayers of God’s people bring a miraculous deliverance. Peter had been delivered by an angel before (Acts 5:17–20).

12:6 *“Peter was sleeping.”* The next day he was to be executed, and Peter is fast asleep! His faith brought rest and peace in the midst of tribulation (Rom. 5:1–5). For each shift, two soldiers were chained to Peter and the other two guarded the door.

12:7 *“An angel of the Lord ... struck Peter on the side.”* So sound was Peter sleeping that he did not notice the light shining around the angel. The angel had to strike him to wake him up. *“The chains fell off his hands.”* No power of Satan or of this world can stand against the power of God!

12:8 *“Gird yourself and tie on your sandals.”* The angel caused the chains to fall off and he opened the iron gate, but he did not do for Peter what Peter could do for himself.

12:9–10 “*So he went out ... but thought he was seeing a vision.*” The whole event was so unusual. Peter did not know if he was dreaming or seeing a vision, such as the one at the house of Simon the tanner (Acts 10:10–16).

12:11 “*Now I know ... that the Lord has sent his angel.*” Peter now realizes his deliverance is real. Sometimes God works in such amazing ways, it is difficult to believe—even when we are in the middle of it. “*Has delivered me ... from all the expectation of the Jewish people.*” This shows that the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish people, as a whole, continued through the ministry of the apostles and sealed the fate of the nation.

12:12 “*He came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark ... where, many were ... praying.*” This is most likely the same house in which the disciples gathered together on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 1:13; 2:1). John Mark was the author of the Gospel of Mark, which tradition says Peter dictated to him.

12:13–15 “*Rhoda ... ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate.*” It is comical that Rhoda did not open the gate and let Peter in. As he continues to knock, the prayer group refuses to believe their prayers have been answered. “*It is his angel.*” They perhaps believed his guardian angel had come to announce his death (Gen. 48:16; Dan. 10:20–21; Matt. 18:10; Heb. 1:14).

12:17 “*Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren.*” James, the half-brother of the Lord (Mark 6:3) and author of the book of James, now becomes a leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13–21; 21:18).

12:18–19 “*There was no small stir among the soldiers ... Herod ... commanded that they should be put to death.*” This was the common fate of any Roman soldier who failed to guard a prisoner.

Herod Judged by God

Acts 12:20–25

12:20 “*Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon.*” We are not told the reason for this anger. The effect, however, is hinted at in that their food supply was in danger of being cut off.

12:21 “*Herod ... gave an oration.*” In Greek culture, the heroes were either orators or athletes. To give a great speech, complete with proper voice control and gestures, was like winning a great athletic contest.

12:22–23 “*The voice of a god and not of a man!*” Surely, much of this praise was due to their desire to make peace with Herod. The flattery of powerful, political figures has never ceased to be a tactic of the weak and subservient. “*An angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God.*” It is the utmost evil for any man to claim the praise due only to God. The Lord will not share His glory with any man (Isa. 42:8). The pride and perversion of man will always end in the wrath of God (Rom. 1:18–32).

12:24–25 “*The Word of God grew and multiplied.*” Both God’s mercy and His judgment promote the Word of God. “*Barnabas and Saul ... took with them John ... Mark.*” This resumes the story from Acts 11:30—the mission of Barnabas and Saul to Jerusalem (Gal. 2:1–10). It also serves to introduce John Mark, who will go with them on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:5).

ACTS CHAPTER 13

Barnabas and Saul begin the missionary outreach to the Gentiles.

The Beginning of the Mission to the Gentiles

Acts 13:1–12

13:1 *“In the church ... at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers.”* It is worth noting that Barnabas is listed first; Saul is listed last.

13:2 *“The Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul.’”* The first organized missionary outreach to the Gentiles was done at the command of the Spirit of God. *“For the work to which I have called them.”* Every believer in Jesus Christ has a spiritual gift (Rom. 12:6–8; 1 Cor. 12:4–11; Eph. 4:7, 11–16). Therefore, each of us is called to a different role to play in the Body of Christ.

13:3 *“Having fasted and prayed ... laid hands on them.”* Having been informed of the will of the Spirit, the leaders then fasted and prayed for the success of the mission ahead. The laying on of hands on these two servants signified unity of purpose and the authorization of the church (Acts 6:6; 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6).

13:4 *“Being sent out by the Holy Spirit.”* Both the Spirit and the Church are said to be the sending agency. The Holy Spirit is working through the Church to do the will of God.

13:5 *“In Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews.”* Salamis was on the island of Cyprus, the home of Barnabas (Acts 4:36). This was a good place to start, as Barnabas would be familiar with the country and the people. It was Paul’s practice to always go to the Jews first, then to the Gentiles (Rom. 1:16). *“They also had John Mark as their assistant.”* The word *“assistant”* is *huperetes*, a word used for the lowest galley slave. John Mark was to be a lowly servant to whatever need they might have. This could explain his later defection (v. 13).

13:6–7 *“A false prophet, a Jew whose name was Bar-Jesus.”* His name means “Son of Jesus,” and he is the first obstacle met on this mission. *“With the proconsul, Sergius Paulus.”* This Roman official, a Gentile, is open to the Word of God. The Jewish false prophet will seek to hinder him from becoming a believer. This scene sets the stage for the rest of the book of Acts, as the Gentiles are eager to hear the Word of God, while the Jewish opposition will only intensify.

13:8 *“But Elymas ... withstood them ... to turn the proconsul away from the faith.”* This gives the sorcerer’s Greek name. He sought to hinder the proconsul from hearing the Gospel.

13:9 *“Then Saul, who also is called Paul.”* Here, Luke shifts from using the Hebrew name “Saul,” to the Greek name “Paul.” This shift is deliberate, as the story in Acts is changing from a focus on the early Hebrew origins of the Church, to the spread of the Gospel to the Gentile nations.

13:10 *“O full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil.”* It is worth noticing that up to this point the name of Barnabas has always been listed first (Acts 11:25, 30; 12:25; 13:1–2, 7). Yet, in this crisis moment, it is Saul/Paul who rises to the challenge. From this point on, it will be Paul who is in command of the mission (v.13).

13:11 *“The hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind.”* Elymas no doubt claimed that God’s hand was on him as a prophet. Here, the hand of God will be upon him for judgment, making him blind for a time. This marked the first miracle worked by the Apostle Paul, and the beginning of his full apostolic ministry. As was said in the notes at Acts 9:20, Saul had to grow into his ministry—as we all do.

13:12 *“Then the proconsul believed ... being astonished at the teaching of the Lord.”* The message that he heard, combined with the display of the divine power he had seen, convinced him of the truth of Paul’s message about Jesus Christ.

Paul's First Recorded Message

Acts 13:13–41

13:13 “*John ... returned to Jerusalem.*” Later, Paul and Barnabas would separate over John Mark’s conduct. Paul considered his departure a defection from the work (Acts 15:37–39).

13:14 “*Antioch in Pisidia.*” The Antioch from which they started was in Syria. This Antioch was in Galatia. “*Went into the Synagogue.*” Paul’s love for his own Jewish people (Rom. 1:16; 9:1–3; 10:1–2) compelled him to seek out the Jews first.

13:15 “*After the reading of the Law and the Prophets.*” Paul would have known these Scriptures, being a trained Pharisee. As Jesus showed His disciples (Luke 24:25–27, 44–45), He was the central message of all the Scriptures (Col. 1:18). This was an open door for Paul to proclaim Jesus Christ.

13:16 “*Men of Israel, and you who fear God.*” Present in this synagogue were both Jews and Greek God-fearers, like Cornelius (Acts 10:1–2).

13:17–20 “*The God of this people Israel chose our fathers.*” This refers to the selection of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as the fathers of the nation (Rom. 9:5–13). Paul quickly reviews the Exodus (v. 17), the wilderness wanderings (v. 18), the conquest under Joshua (v. 19), and the time of the Judges (v. 20). The Almighty hand of God was upon Israel in her development as a nation.

13:21–22 “*They asked for a king; so God gave them Saul.*” The prophet Samuel declared that this request, in effect, rejected God as their king (1 Sam. 8:4–9, 19–22). Though Saul began very humble (1 Sam. 9:21; 15:17), he became arrogant, selfish, and domineering in the end (1 Sam. 15:10–11, 26).

13:22 “*I have found David ... a man after My own heart.*” This reference is from 1 Samuel 13:14 and Psalm 89:20. The spiritual high point of Israel was during the reign of King David.

13:23 “*From this man’s seed ... God raised up ... a Savior—Jesus.*” Paul now comes to the main point of his message. God had promised that the Messiah/Savior would be of the seed of David (Gen. 3:15; 2 Sam. 7:12–13). This is why the genealogies in Matthew 1 and Luke 3 are so important. Paul boldly declares that Jesus of Nazareth is the long-awaited Messiah.

13:24–25 “*After John had first preached ... the baptism of repentance.*” It was critical to mention John the Baptist, whose ministry would have been known to all of them.

13:26 “*To you the word of this salvation has been sent.*” Paul identifies his mission as a God-ordained event to present to them the message of salvation. This offer is not confined to Israel, as was John’s baptism. The offer of salvation is both to the “*family of Abraham,*” as well as “*you who fear God,*” meaning the Gentiles among them.

13:27–28 “*Those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers.*” Here, Paul places the guilt on the leaders and people of Jerusalem, who did not even know the Scriptures they read every Sabbath (Hosea 4:6). “*Asked Pilate that He should be put to death.*” In unbelief, they fulfilled Scripture by crucifying Jesus Christ.

13:30–31 “*But God raised Him from the dead.*” Paul presents the resurrection from the dead as the undeniable proof, confirmed by many witnesses (1 Cor. 15:4–8), that Jesus is in fact the Savior—the Son of God.

13:32–33 “*Glad tidings.*” This is the essential meaning of the word “Gospel,” “*that promise which was made to the fathers.*” The promise of a redeemer runs through the Old Testament (Gen. 3:15; 12:3; 22:14, 18; Neh. 1:10; Job 19:25; Isa. 47:4; 48:17; 54:5; 63:16; see Gal. 3:16). “*God has fulfilled ... in that He raised up Jesus.*” The

victory of Jesus Christ over the grave is a sure promise of eternal life to all who believe in Him (1 Cor. 15:3–4, 20–22, 55–58). **“You are My Son, today I have begotten You.”** This quote from Psalm 2:7 speaks of the Father’s words to the Son on resurrection morning.

13:35 “You will not allow Your Holy One to see corruption.” Note that the decay of death is mentioned in vv. 34–37. Paul’s point is that these promises could not have been made to David—they could only apply to the Lord Jesus.

13:38–39 “Through this Man is preached ... the forgiveness of sins.” The *“forgiveness of sins”* was a major part of the promise of the New Covenant (Jer. 31:34; Ezek. 36:25–27). **“By Him everyone who believes is justified.”** The Lord Jesus Christ did what the Law of Moses could never do—provide a righteous standing before God on the basis of the merits of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:1–4).

13:40–41 “Beware, therefore.” Paul anticipates the rejection of the message by some and gives fair warning of the eternal consequences of rejecting Jesus Christ. His quote from Habakkuk 1:5 was the prophet’s warning of the coming Babylonian captivity. Now, it stands as a warning of the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the nation in 70 A.D., which was the result of Israel’s persistent rejection of their Messiah (Lev. 26:3–45; Hosea 4:6).

The Gospel Received by the Gentiles, Rejected by the Jews

Acts 13:42–52

13:42–43 “The Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them.” The overwhelming response of the God-fearing Gentiles was a hunger to know more. This response was shared by **“Many of the Jews and devout proselytes.”** The *“proselytes”* were Gentiles who had fully converted to Judaism, as opposed to the God-fearers, who sought to know the God of Israel without fully embracing Judaism. **“Continue in the grace of God.”** It was obvious to Paul and Barnabas that God was working in the hearts and souls of many of this congregation.

13:45–46 “They were filled with envy.” Envy is the most devilish and murderous emotion known to man (Matt. 27:18; Mark 15:10; Acts 7:9; 17:5). **“The word of God should be spoken to you first.”** Again, this was based on Paul’s conviction that, since Christ came through Israel (Rom. 9:4–5), Israel should hear first (Rom. 1:16). **“You reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life.”** Those who refuse to believe in Jesus Christ are condemned on the basis of their unbelief (John 3:16–19). **“Behold, we turn to the Gentiles.”** Though Paul continued to go into the synagogues and preach (Acts 14:1; 17:1, 10, 17; 18:4), he anticipates the final and ultimate rejection by Israel as a nation, and the formation of the mostly Gentile church.

13:47 “For so the Lord has commanded us: ‘I have set you to be a light to the Gentiles.’” This quote from Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6 is addressed to the Messiah (Luke 2:32; John 8:12). However, Paul sees his work as the continuation of the work of Jesus Christ (Matt. 5:16). Those who faithfully serve Him share in His work (Matt. 28:18–20).

13:48 “As many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.” God in His all-knowing wisdom had recorded the names of all who believe before the foundation of the world (2 Tim. 2:19; Rev. 13:8; 17:8). This does not imply lack of human freedom, as this whole passage shows. The Jews are guilty because they rejected Christ (vv. 45–46); some Jews and the Gentiles are saved because they believe in Christ. God works according to divine capacity, which we cannot hope to comprehend. Man is required by God to work according to human capacity and is either blessed or cursed, based on what they choose to do about Jesus Christ (John 3:16–19).

13:49 “The word of the Lord was being spread.” Those who had heard and believed were spreading the gospel message. What a glorious beginning to Paul’s ministry!

13:50 “But the Jews ... expelled them from their region.” Those who cannot refute truth by sound argument always seek to have it banished and silenced.

13:51–52 *“They shook off the dust from their feet.”* This was Jesus’ instruction to the disciples in the event of the rejection of the gospel message (Matt. 10:14; Luke 10:11). *“The disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.”* Paul left behind a thriving community of new believers, filled with the joy of the Lord (Rom. 5:1–5; Gal. 5:22–23).

ACTS CHAPTER 14

As the missionary journey continues, persecution intensifies; Paul is stoned in Lystra.

Driven out of Iconium; Worshiped as Gods in Lystra

Acts 14:1–18

14:1 *“A great multitude both of Jews and of the Greeks believed.”* Paul continues his habit of going to the synagogue first. The great success of his and Barnabas’ ministry would bring intense persecution.

14:2 *“But the unbelieving Jews.”* Here, the same envy rises up as was seen in Acts 13:45. Nothing makes shallow religious leaders so hateful as to see the crowds flock to hear someone who is teaching the Truth (John 14:6; John 15:18–27)!

14:3 *“The Lord ... was bearing witness to the word of His grace.”* In these early days of the Church, because the apostles were bringing an entirely new message on the scene, God gave the apostles power to perform *“signs and wonders”* in order to confirm that their message was from God (Rom. 15:19; 2 Cor. 12:12).

14:5–6 *“When a violent attempt was made ... they ... fled to Lystra.”* This was in keeping with the command of Jesus to the disciples (Matt. 10:23).

14:9 *“Paul ... seeing that he had faith to be healed.”* The original Greek of this passage reads, *“Faith to be delivered [saved].”* Paul observed the man’s faith in what he was preaching and determined to also “save” him from his affliction.

14:11–12 *“The gods have come down to us.”* An ancient legend in this region was told that one day Zeus and Hermes would come down in human form. No doubt they saw, in the more handsome Barnabas, Zeus—the chief god, and likened Paul to Hermes, who was the messenger of the gods, because of his powerful teaching.

14:13 *“Then the priest of Zeus ... brought oxen and garlands.”* Unbelieving religious leaders are always quick to spot an opportunity to promote their phony leadership.

14:14–15 *“Turn from these useless [vain] things to the living God.”* These are almost the exact words Paul uses when speaking to the Thessalonian believers (1 Thess. 1:9–10). By calling their worship of Zeus “an empty religion,” Paul will further inflame the hatred of the crowd (v. 19).

14:17 *“He did not leave Himself without witness.”* Because of the ignorance of this population (Gentiles) of the Old Testament, Paul speaks in terms they can understand (1 Cor. 9:19–23). Creation and nature are powerful witnesses to the Creator and Sustainer of the universe (Psalm 19:1–6; Matt. 5:45; Rom. 1:19–20; Col 1:15–18; Heb. 1:2–3).

Paul Stoned, Yet Continues to Minister

Acts 14:19–28

14:19 *“Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium ... persuaded the multitudes ... they stoned Paul.”* This will be the pattern throughout Paul’s ministry. Unbelieving, hostile Jews will seek to follow him and stir up hostility to his

message until the end of his life (Acts 17:5, 13; 18:12; 20:3, 19; 21:27; 2 Tim. 4:6–7). **“Supposing him to be dead.”** It has been suggested that it was during this event that Paul had his vision of Heaven (2 Cor. 12:1–4).

14:20–21 “He rose up ... he departed with Barnabas.” Paul was beginning, on this first missionary journey, to experience the sufferings the Lord had foretold *“he must suffer”* (Acts 9:15–16). He proved to be faithful in the face of all those sufferings (2 Cor. 11:22–33). **“They ... made many disciples.”** Paul’s effective witness was no doubt enhanced by the marks of his stoning. (Gal. 6:17).

14:22 “Strengthening the souls of the disciples ... saying, ‘We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.’” Paul did not preach a soft or easy message. His gospel was full of the challenge of Jesus Christ to His disciples (Matt. 5:10–12; Luke 14:26–35). The only way to overcome afflictions is to **“continue in the faith.”** This requires spiritual growth to maturity (Rom. 5:3–5; Heb. 5:12–6:2; 1 Pet. 4:12–14; 2 Pet 1:5–7).

14:23 “When they had appointed elders in every church.” The local church needs leadership who can both teach and be an example (1 Tim. 3:1–13; 5:17–20; Titus 1:5–9).

14:25 “They ... preached the word in Perga.” In Acts 13:13, they had passed through Perga without preaching. This may have been because of conflict over John Mark’s departure, or perhaps because of a Spirit-led compulsion to reach Antioch in Pisidia.

14:26 “They sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God.” It is estimated that this entire mission journey took up to three years. Surely, the *“grace of God”* had supplied and sustained them through many trials!

14:27 “They reported all that God had done ... that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.” What had begun with Peter’s visit to the house of Cornelius, now blossomed into a worldwide mission under the apostleship of Paul. It is most important to notice that Luke always puts the emphasis on God’s grace and man’s faith (Acts 3:16; 4:33; 11:23–24; 13:8, 43; 14:3, 9, 22, 26–27; 15:11). God’s grace includes all that He has done for us through Jesus Christ. Faith is the reception of the gifts of His grace through belief in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. God reaches out to mankind in grace. We can only reach out to receive His gift of life through simple, childlike faith (Matt. 18:3; Eph. 2:8–9).

ACTS CHAPTER 15

The perversion of the gospel message and the Jerusalem council.

The Judaizers Pervert the Gospel of Grace

Acts 15:1–5

15:1 “Unless you are circumcised ... you cannot be saved.” This inclusion of circumcision into the gospel message implied becoming a proselyte to Israel. In other words, the Gentile had to become a Jew. It was an attempt to keep the Church under Hebrew authority. It was also the beginning of a never-ending list of do’s and don’ts (v. 5). This is the very heresy Paul wrote the book of Galatians to expose and destroy (Gal. 1:6–9; 2:1–21). It was apparently at this time that Paul had to rebuke Peter for compromising under pressure from the Jews (Gal. 2:11–14).

15:2 “Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them.” Part of this dispute is recorded by Paul in Galatians 2. The two missionaries to the Gentiles took a bold and resolute stand against this false teaching. After much debate, it was determined that the question must be decided in Jerusalem—by the other apostles.

15:3 “They caused great joy to all the brethren.” The theme of joy and rejoicing follows everywhere the gospel message goes (Acts 8:8, 39; 13:52; 15:31; 20:24).

15:4 *“They reported all the things that God had done.”* As with Peter’s earlier report (Acts 11:1–17), they simply relate what God had done. The point is that if God is pleased to accept the Gentiles by faith alone and that He also gave them the Holy Spirit, who could question the will of God?

15:5 *“It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.”* The question is: Does God give salvation by grace alone through faith alone? Or does it come by faith plus works? As with most church disputes, these believing Pharisees are not so much concerned with truth as they are with power. They want to become the “authorities” in the newborn Church movement. To add any work to the Gospel of grace, is to nullify the grace of God (Rom. 4:16; 11:6; Gal. 2:16, 21). The tearing of the veil in the Temple (Matt. 27:51) and, later, the total destruction of the Temple, proved that the Old Covenant had fulfilled its purpose (Gal. 3:23–29) and had given way to the New Covenant (Heb. 7:22; 8:6–13; 10:9–10).

Peter and James Uphold the Grace of God

Acts 15:6–21

15:7 *“Peter rose up and said ... God chose ... that by my mouth.”* Here, Peter refers to his experience in the household of Cornelius (Acts 10–11). By simple faith alone, apart from works, the believers in Cornelius’ household received the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:43; 11:15–17). His experience with the Gentiles who believed was consistent with what Paul and Barnabas had experienced with the Gentiles in Antioch.

15:8 *“So God ... acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit.”* Again, the question is: Who can argue against the gracious work of God? God made no distinction between the Jews who believed and the Gentiles who believed.

15:9 *“Purifying their hearts by faith.”* If God accepted Gentile believers, purified their hearts, and gave them the Holy Spirit based on faith alone, who could argue that circumcision or law-keeping was necessary for salvation?

15:10–11 *“Why do you test God by putting a yoke ... neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?”* In these two verses, Peter actually uses the same argument Paul had used against him in Galatians 2:14–16. *“Through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.”* Both Jew and Gentile were saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:8–9).

15:12 *“The multitude ... listened to Barnabas and Paul.”* Once again, they recited the mighty work of God through them on behalf of the Gentile believers.

15:13 *“James answered, saying ... listen to me.”* James spoke last, and his counsel was given great weight. First of all, James was the half-brother of the Lord (Matt. 13:55), who did not believe until Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection (John 7:5; 1 Cor. 15:7). He was first among the three pillars of the Jerusalem church (Gal. 2:9) and was acknowledged as the leader of that church. His decision against the Judaizers is impressive, in light of the fact that he appears to have been a strict law-keeper. James was ultimately martyred by stoning.

15:15–17 *“With this the words of the prophets agree.”* James upheld the firsthand testimony of Barnabas, Paul, and Peter, by quoting Scripture. He quotes Amos 9:11–12, from the Greek (Septuagint) version, *“After this I will return,”* that is, after God had claimed His people among the Gentiles (Acts 15:14). Christ would call out His Church predominantly from among the Gentiles. After which, He would return at His Second Coming, and rebuild the Tabernacle of David for the Kingdom Age (Millennium). This same point is made by Paul in Romans 11:25. Nothing could be more clear that God is not done with Israel! *“Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name.”* In the earthly kingdom of Christ, both Jew and Gentile will worship together.

15:18 *“Known to God from eternity are all His works.”* James closes with a statement that affirms the all-knowing nature of God, as revealed in His Word.

15:19–20 *“We should not trouble those ... who are turning to God.”* In this statement, James makes it clear that salvation—whether for Jew or Gentile—is based on God’s grace, received by faith (vv. 7–8, 11). The addition of circumcision and law-keeping would only become a “yoke” of burden (v. 10) that would trouble Gentile converts. However, as a concession, he adds four practical observances to minimize friction between Jewish and Gentile believers. These were given to avoid the more free Gentile converts from becoming a stumbling-block to the weaker, law-observing Jewish believers (Rom. 14:1–23; 1 Cor. 8:1–13). The four practices mentioned were all observed as part of idol worship in the ancient world.

15:21 *“For Moses has had ... those who preach him in every city.”* Because of the presence of synagogues throughout the Gentile world, it would be wise not to antagonize them, or to put a stumbling block in the way of new Jewish converts to the Faith.

The Final Decision Recorded

Acts 15:22–35

15:22 *“Then it pleased the apostles and elders.”* The council agreed to send two representatives, one from the Jewish faction (Judas), and one from the Hellenist or Greek faction (Silas—shortened Greek form of the Latin Silvanus). These men would represent the Jerusalem church in supporting the position of Paul and Barnabas that salvation was by grace alone through faith (Eph. 2:8–9).

15:23 *“They wrote this letter.”* This was a wise move to convey the decision of the council both in writing and by witnesses. The actual letter they wrote is found in Acts 15:23–29.

15:24 *“Some who went out from us ... to whom we gave no such commandment.”* The Judaizers who stirred up the trouble in Antioch no doubt claimed that they were representatives of the Jerusalem church. This was a severe blow, not only to their false doctrine, but also to their pride. No doubt some of these men followed Paul and stirred up trouble for his ministry from this point on.

15:25 *“With one accord ... our beloved Barnabas and Paul.”* The Jerusalem church declares their affection and support for the missionary team to the Gentiles. The listing of Barnabas first suggests that they still considered him the leader of the team.

15:26 *“Men who have risked their lives.”* The sufferings endured during the first missionary journey, most of them by Paul, were evidence of their faithfulness and devotion to the truth (Rom. 16:3–4; Phil. 1:29–30; 2 Tim. 1:8; 2:1–3, 9–10; 3:12).

15:28 *“It seemed good ... to lay upon you no greater burden.”* It is crucial to note that these requirements were in no way essential to salvation. Rather, they were for those who had already believed, in order to avoid unnecessary provocation between Jewish and Gentile believers (Rom. 14:12–16; 1 Cor. 8:8–13).

15:31 *“They rejoiced over its encouragement [content].”* The early victory of grace and truth was crucial for the future growth of the Church. The Gentiles were filled with joy to know that they were not entering this church as inferiors to their Jewish brethren!

15:35 *“Paul and Barnabas ... teaching and preaching the word of the Lord.”* These two had achieved great success together, both in their first missionary outreach, and in establishing the foundational doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone.

Division Between Paul and Barnabas

Acts 15:36–41

15:37–38 “*Barnabas was determined ... Paul insisted.*” Barnabas, being of a very gracious nature (Acts 9:26–29), was willing to overlook John Mark’s earlier defection (Acts 13:13). Paul was not willing to do so. Later, this breach between Paul and John Mark would be healed (2 Tim. 4:11), possibly due to the willingness of Barnabas to not give up on him.

15:39–41 “*They parted from one another.*” At this point, Barnabas drops out of the picture in Acts. Silas, also known as Silvanus, now becomes a companion with Paul (2 Cor. 1:19; 1 Thess. 1:1–2) and will also be jailed with him in Philippi (Acts 16:19–31). He also wrote the first epistle of Peter at Peter’s dictation (1 Pet. 5:12).

ACTS CHAPTER 16

Timothy joins Paul and Silas; Paul’s Macedonian vision; the Philippian jail.

Paul Finds Timothy

Acts 16:1–5

16:1 “*Then he came to Derbe and Lystra.*” Remember that it was in Lystra where Paul had been stoned (Acts 14:19–20). What courage he had in going back to that place! “*A certain disciple was there, named Timothy.*” In the very place he had met the most opposition, a flourishing church existed and a dynamic, young disciple is found. Timothy’s mother was a believing Jewess (2 Tim. 1:5); his father, apparently, an unbelieving Greek.

16:2 “*He was well spoken of by the brethren.*” Young Timothy was a man of good reputation (1 Tim. 3:7). No one among the believers there doubted the faith or obedience of Timothy.

16:3 “*Paul ... took him and circumcised him because of the Jews.*” Paul had just fought a battle in Antioch and Jerusalem against requiring circumcision (Acts 15:1–5), where he refused to circumcise Titus—a Greek (Gal. 2:3). This contrast creates much confusion for many believers. However, in Antioch and Jerusalem, the issue was whether circumcision was essential for salvation. In Timothy’s case, he was already a believer, and his circumcision was based not only on his Jewish heritage through his mother, but also to avoid offending many Jews who lived in that area.

16:4 “*They delivered to them the decrees ... determined by the apostles.*” This referred to the letter sent from Jerusalem to Gentile believers (Acts 15:22–29).

16:5 “*So the churches were strengthened in the faith.*” It is significant that the effect of the Jerusalem letter was to strengthen faith, not to diminish it. The case for salvation by grace through faith alone was firmly established by this letter.

The Open Door to Macedonia

Acts 16:6–15

16:6 “*They were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia.*” The word “*Asia*” refers to what we know as modern Turkey. This is interesting since it is the region where the seven churches mentioned in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 are found. The Spirit does not send the witness until the time is right. When God closes one door, He always opens another. Later, Ephesus, which is in this area, would become the center for Christian missions.

16:7 *“The Spirit did not permit them.”* Paul did not allow these closed doors to discourage him. The key, when one way is blocked, is to keep moving. The Apalai Indians in Brazil once told me, “You can only steer a canoe if it is moving faster than the river.” You can’t steer a ship that is sitting still!

16:9 *“A vision appeared to Paul ... a man of Macedonia ... ‘Come over ... and help us.’”* Macedonia was the threshold of Europe. While it was cultured and prosperous, it was spiritually dark and in need of the light of the Gospel (John 8:12).

16:10 *“We sought to go to Macedonia.”* This is the first time Luke uses “we” with regard to Paul’s journeys. It is believed that Luke joined Paul and his company in Troas. It has been suggested that he was the “*man from Macedonia*,” since he was a Greek. Luke was also a physician (Col. 4:14) and may have joined Paul to act as Paul’s personal physician.

16:11–12 *“Therefore, sailing from Troas ... to Philippi ... a colony.”* This city was named after Philip, the Father of Alexander the Great. It was a Roman colony where there were many Roman citizens, and where all the laws and customs of Rome prevailed.

16:13 *“On the Sabbath day we went ... to the riverside, where prayer was ... made.”* Apparently, there was no synagogue in Philippi, but there was a Jewish place of prayer by the river.

16:14 *“Lydia ... a seller of purple ... who worshiped God.”* This woman was a proselyte to Judaism and a successful businesswoman. *“The Lord opened her heart.”* Spiritual hunger on the part of Lydia was met with the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:17–19).

16:15 *“She and her household were baptized.”* What Paul shared with her, she took to her whole household, and all received the Gospel by faith. *“Come to my house and stay.”* Lydia’s home most likely became the gathering place for the first local church in Europe.

Paul and Silas Imprisoned

Acts 16:16–24

16:16 *“A certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination.”* This poor girl was not only demon-possessed, but was also a slave of at least two masters who used her for personal profit.

16:17 *“These men are servants of the Most High God.”* Under the guidance of the demon, this girl spoke of the gift of salvation, which she herself desperately needed.

16:18 *“Paul, greatly annoyed ... said ... come out of her.”* Paul did not want his message, or the Lord Jesus Christ, to be associated with demonic utterances. By his apostolic authority, he commanded the demon to come out of her.

16:19 *“Her masters ... seized Paul and Silas.”* Unsaved men will always value personal profit over all spiritual values. They cared nothing for this poor girl, but only for their personal gain (Matt. 16:26).

16:20–21 *“These men, being Jews ... teach customs ... not lawful for us, being Romans.”* They use both ethnic and cultural accusations to inflame the magistrates. They do not realize, at this point, that both Paul and Silas are Roman citizens (v. 37). It was illegal to beat or imprison a Roman citizen without proper court proceedings.

16:22–23 *“The magistrates ... commanded them to be beaten with rods.”* While the Jewish form of punishment was scourging with a whip, the Roman form of punishment was beating with rods (2 Cor. 11:24–25). *“They threw them into prison.”* This treatment of Roman citizens was a grave offense against Roman law. They must have actively chosen to remain silent, for if they had declared their Roman citizenship, this could not have happened.

Paul and Silas were willing to suffer, in order to make Philippi a safer place for believers after their departure (v. 35–40).

16:24 *“He put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.”* The beating, then imprisonment, and now the use of the stocks, brings the violation of Roman laws to three grave offenses against Paul and Silas—both Roman citizens.

The Jailer Saved and the Magistrates Shamed

Acts 16:25–40

16:25 *“Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God.”* The beating they had received was severe (“many stripes,” v. 23), yet they are praising God, knowing this is a high mark of His favor (Matt. 5:10–12; Acts 5:41; Phil. 1:29–30). *“The prisoners were listening to them.”* We find out that the jailer was also listening (v. 30).

16:26 *“There was a great earthquake ... all the doors were opened ... everyone’s chains were loosed.”* God commands natural disturbances, both for judgment, and for deliverance (1 Kings 19:11; Isa. 29:6; Matt. 27:54; Rev. 11:13).

16:27 *“The keeper of the prison ... was about to kill himself.”* This was because, according to Roman law, any guard who allowed a prisoner to escape was put to death (Acts 12:19).

16:28 *“Do yourself no harm.”* Seeing the intent of the jail keeper, Paul calls out to save his life. This becomes the opportunity to lead him to faith in Jesus Christ—to the saving not only of his soul, but also the souls of his household (v. 31).

16:30 *“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”* The jailer knew the reason they had been arrested. He heard their witness through their prayers and songs. His fear at the earthquake and his conviction by the Holy Spirit (John 16:7–11) moved him to cry out for spiritual deliverance.

16:31 *“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.”* The answer to our lost condition is always simple faith in Jesus Christ, the Savior (John 3:16, 36; 5:24; 6:47). *“And your household.”* The salvation of his household is not automatic. Paul is saying that the offer of salvation by grace through faith extends to them as well (Acts 10:43–45; 16:14–15).

16:32 *“Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.”* What a great opportunity for a Bible class! Since the other prisoners were also experiencing this event, certainly they would have heard the Gospel. Paul and Silas (v. 29) strengthen the faith of these new believers as much as time permitted.

16:33 *“And he took them ... and washed their stripes.”* He most likely would have washed away the blood and perhaps poured some oil into the wounds (Luke 10:34). *“He and all his family were baptized.”* Paul and Silas no doubt explained the meaning of water baptism as a public act of identification with Christ, and the first step of commitment to discipleship (Matt. 28:19; Rom. 6:3–6).

16:34 *“And he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household.”* Luke loves to record the joy that results from faith in Jesus Christ (Luke 8:13; 15:7, 10; Acts 8:8; 13:52; 15:3). In fact, joy and rejoicing is the theme of the epistle that Paul later sent to these believers (the book of Philippians).

16:35 *“Let those men go.”* Perhaps they were frightened by the earthquake or were convicted, by their own conscience, of the evil they had done.

16:37 *“They have beaten us ... uncondemned Romans, and have thrown us into prison.”* Only now do we read that Paul makes his and Silas’ Roman citizenship known. His words here state charges that could be leveled at the magistrates that were worthy of severe penalty.

16:38–39 *“They were afraid ... Then they came and pleaded with them.”* No doubt, *“the magistrates”* were begging Paul and Silas not to bring charges against them. Paul had perhaps kept their Roman citizenship a secret, even at the point of the beating, to ensure greater safety for the Christians who would remain in Philippi.

16:40 *“When they had seen the brethren, they encouraged them and departed.”* Lydia and her family, the jailer and his family, and perhaps many others, had come to faith in Jesus Christ. Even though Paul’s time here was brief, the Philippian church became the most faithful in supporting the Apostle in all of his years of ministry (Phil. 1:3–11; 4:14–20).

ACTS CHAPTER 17

Paul goes to Thessalonica, then to Athens—the intellectual capital of the world.

Paul’s Success Leads to a Riot in Thessalonica

Acts 17:1–9

17:1 *“They came to Thessalonica.”* After a journey of over one hundred miles, Paul came to this city, which was the great crossroad between East and West. The Gospel planted here would spread throughout the Roman world. Again, Paul began in the Jewish synagogue.

17:2 *“Then Paul ... reasoned with them from the Scriptures.”* Paul wisely used passages like Psalm 2, Isaiah 53, and Zechariah 12 to support his claim that Jesus was indeed the Messiah/Savior who was prophesied to come.

17:3 *“Explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again.”* Paul’s method here is much like what Jesus used with the disciples (Luke 24:25–27; 44–45). *“This Jesus ... is the Christ.”* The Gospel is based not only on what Jesus did, but also on who He is. *“The Christ,”* according to Old Testament prophecy, had to be both God and man in order to bring salvation to men (John 20:30–31; 1 Tim. 2:5).

17:4 *“And some of them were persuaded.”* Most of those who believed were Gentiles, which again aroused the envy and malice of the Jewish leaders. Paul reminds these Thessalonian believers of their early conversion in 1 Thessalonians 1:3–10.

17:5 *“The Jews ... becoming envious ... took ... evil men from the marketplace.”* Here, the Jewish leaders, who claimed to represent God, manipulated and used evil men to stir up the people (Matt. 26:59–60; 27:3–8, 17–20; Mark 15:9–15).

17:6–7 *“These who have turned the world upside down have come here too.”* This was actually a charge of treason against Rome. In reality, however, Paul and his team were seeking to set the world right in the sight of God, through faith in Jesus Christ. *“Acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar.”* Just like the religious leaders in Jerusalem, these Jews would rather claim allegiance to Caesar than to Christ (Luke 23:1–2; John 19:15).

17:9 *“When they had taken security from Jason ... they let them go.”* In effect, Jason posted a bond to assure that there would be no further trouble. This meant that Paul and Silas had to leave Thessalonica, even though they had planted this church. The Thessalonian church was second only to the church in Philippi in their obedience to the faith, and support of Paul (1 Thess. 2:1–13).

Paul and Silas Minister in Berea

Acts 17:10–15

17:11 *“These were more fair-minded.”* This refers to the Jews in the synagogue. *“They received the word with all readiness.”* They were eager to hear the Word of God and receive it (see Matt. 13:3–9, 23). *“Searched the Scriptures daily.”* As Paul presented the claims of Christ, these Jewish listeners compared his words to Scripture and found them to be true.

17:12 *“Therefore many of them believed.”* Both Jews and Gentile seekers came to faith by hearing and reading the Scriptures in light of Paul’s message. It is always true that faith comes by a willingness to hear the Word of God (Rom. 10:17; Eph. 1:13–14).

17:13 *“The Jews from Thessalonica ... came ... and stirred up the crowds.”* Their envy of Paul’s success and hatred for the gospel message drove them to a frenzy to shut down his ministry. This pattern would be repeated for the rest of Paul’s life (John 15:18; 1 John 3:13).

17:14 *“The brethren sent Paul away ... both Silas and Timothy remained there.”* Since Paul was the focus of the hatred of the Jews, Silas and Timothy remained behind, after Paul’s departure, to instruct these new believers and strengthen them in the faith. At the same time, Silas plays a role in helping Timothy develop into a faithful minister (Phil. 2:19–23; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2–5).

Paul Preaches in Athens

Acts 17:16–34

17:16 *“While Paul waited ... his spirit was provoked within him.”* In the time of Paul, it was said that it was “easier to meet a new god in Athens than a man.” Because idol worship is actually demon worship (1 Cor. 10:20), Paul was indignant at the spiritual slavery of the people. After Silas and Timothy rejoined Paul in Athens, Paul sent Timothy again to Thessalonica, to see if they were standing firm in their faith. When Timothy joined Paul in Athens, he came with good news from Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:1–3, 6–8).

17:17 *“He reasoned in the synagogue ... and in the marketplace daily.”* Athens was a place of much intellectual discussion and debate. Paul presented the Gospel as a true and reasonable solution to man’s sin and the darkness of idolatry.

17:18 *“Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.”* The Epicureans taught that everything in life was by chance, and the best way to live was to indulge in every pleasure and gratification. The Stoics believed in fate—everything was ordained to happen—and the best way to live was by self-discipline, and to treat good or bad fortune with personal detachment. *“This babbling ... a proclaimer of strange gods.”* They assumed that “Jesus” and “Resurrection” were two new gods.

17:19 *“They took him ... to the Areopagus.”* Also called “Mars Hill,” because it was named for Mars, the Latin god of war. It was a prominent place from which many could hear the message of Paul.

17:21 *“The Athenians ... spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.”* Like many people today, they were not interested in seeking and finding the truth (2 Tim. 4:3). They simply wanted to be the first to hear or tell something no one else knew.

17:23 *“I even found an altar ... TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.”* Paul used this “altar” to preach Christ. These philosophers had no grounding in the wisdom of the Old Testament. So, Paul began with God—the Creator (Rom. 1:18–23).

17:24–29 “*God, who made the world ... since He is Lord of heaven and earth.*” In these verses, Paul explains vital truths about God:

1. He is creator of all things (v. 24);
2. He does not need man’s works, because He gives life to all (v. 25);
3. All mankind is made by Him and given both a time and place to dwell on the earth (v. 26);
4. God has so designed the world that men should seek Him, and He is near to each of us (v. 27);
5. Our daily existence depends upon Him (v. 28); and
6. God should not be reduced to an image of gold, silver, or stone (v. 29).

17:30–31 “*God ... now commands all men everywhere to repent.*” God restrained His judgment on the nations in their ignorance. Now, however, Jesus Christ—the very Light of God (John 8:12)—has come, and men must choose for or against Him (Matt. 12:30; Luke 9:50; Mark 9:40; John 1:4–5, 9–13; 3:19). This repentance means to turn from their idols to the Living God (1 Thess. 1:9–10). “*He will judge the world ... by the Man whom He has ordained.*” Paul brings the focus to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Righteous Judge (John 5:21–29).

17:32 “*When they heard of the resurrection ... some mocked.*” The Greeks believed that the soul lived on after death. However, they considered the body to be a prison, and they rejected the idea of a bodily resurrection. This is why Paul had to spend so much time teaching about the resurrection to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15).

17:34 “*However, some ... believed.*” Paul’s message broke through to some of the audience, by the power of the Spirit (John 16:8). “*Dionysius the Areopagite.*” This man would have been a high official or judge in the Areopagus—the meeting place of the council. “*Damaris.*” This woman may have been either a woman of high culture, or perhaps a temple prostitute. Either could have been present at Paul’s message.

ACTS CHAPTER 18

Paul goes to Corinth, meets Aquila and Priscilla, and stays for six months; the early ministry of Apollos; Paul returns to Antioch, then begins his third missionary journey.

Paul’s Ministry in Corinth

Acts 18:1–17

18:1 “*Paul departed ... to Corinth.*” Corinth was considered the most immoral city of the ancient world. It was the center of the worship of the goddess Aphrodite, whose temple employed one thousand prostitutes (1 Cor. 6:15–16).

18:2 “*He found ... Aquila ... Priscilla.*” This wonderful couple became close friends and co-workers of Paul in many places (Acts 18:18, 26; Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19). “*Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome.*” The Emperor gave this order in 49–50 A.D. It is believed this was due to a reaction to the teaching of Jesus as the Christ/Messiah.

18:3 “*Because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them.*” Every Jewish father taught his son a trade. It was especially important for Rabbis to have one, since a teacher who charged for his ministry was considered to be a hireling (John 10:12–13). As a tentmaker, Paul was able to minister free of charge, something he boasted about (1 Cor. 9:18; 2 Cor. 11:7, 9–10; 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8).

18:4–5 “*He reasoned in the synagogue ... and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ.*” As always, Paul began in the Jewish synagogue, but the Jews rejected the preaching of Jesus as the Christ.

18:6 “*Your blood be on your own heads.*” Paul faithfully gave them the truth and, by their rejection, they were guilty of willing unbelief (Ezek. 33:1–11). “*I will go to the Gentiles.*” Jewish rejection of the Gospel worked to

open the door for his ministry to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46; 28:28). In the end, the grace God has given to the Gentile church will work for the salvation of Israel (Rom. 11:25–32).

18:7–8 “*Justice ... Crispus ... and many of the Corinthians ... believed.*” Justice was a Gentile; Crispus was a Jew (1 Cor. 1:14). They, along with many other Corinthians, heard and believed the message.

18:9–10 “*The Lord spoke to Paul ... by a vision.*” This is Paul’s third recorded vision (Acts 9:3–6). “*Do not be afraid ... for I am with you ... I have many people in this city.*” Both the opposition of the Jews and the sinfulness of the society in Corinth were discouraging to Paul. With this encouraging vision he would be strengthened to press on in the work.

18:11 “*He continued there, a year and six months.*” This was one of Paul’s longer stays in one place (Acts 19:10).

18:12 “*The Jews ... rose up against Paul.*” Thinking they would find favor with the new proconsul, Gallio, the unbelieving Jews charged him with treason against Rome, for Caesar was considered a god. “*Judgment seat.*” The word used here, is *bema*—the same word used for the Judgment Seat of Christ (Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10).

18:14–17 “*When Paul was about to open his mouth ... he drove them from the judgment seat.*” Gallio was famous for his kindness and moderation. Here, he was obviously angry with the deceitfulness of the Jews. “*The Greeks took Sosthenes ... and beat him.*” Sosthenes, a synagogue ruler like Crispus (v. 8), leader of the Jewish opposition to Paul, later became a believer and worked with Paul (1 Cor. 1:1).

Paul Returns to Antioch

Acts 18:18–23

18:18 “*So Paul ... took leave of the brethren.*” After continued ministry, Paul departed from Corinth and Priscilla and Aquila went with him. “*He had his hair cut.*” It was common for Jewish men, when especially thankful to God for some blessing, to take the Nazarite vow (Num. 6:1–21) as an expression of gratitude. This was usually done for 30 days as suggested by Mishna, a collection of Jewish oral law. The cutting of the hair signified the end of the vow. It is important to remember that Paul continued to keep the law, so as not to be a stumbling block to his ministry among the Jews (1 Cor. 9:19–20).

18:19 “*He ... reasoned with the Jews.*” This time of ministry was apparently successful, as they asked him to stay longer (v. 20). This laid the foundation for the Ephesian church.

18:21 “*I must ... keep this coming feast in Jerusalem.*” Paul felt compelled to be in Jerusalem for the feast. We do not know which feast this was.

18:22 “*When he had ... greeted the church, he went down to Antioch.*” Paul greeted the Jerusalem church while at the feast. His return to Antioch was the end of his second missionary journey.

18:23 “*After ... some time ... he departed ... strengthening the disciples.*” Paul left Antioch and went through the Galatian region again, in order to strengthen the faith of the disciples he had won on his first missionary journey. Faith must be fed to grow strong, and the meat for the soul is sound teaching (2 Tim. 1:13; Titus 1:9, 13; 2:1; Heb. 5:14; 2 Pet. 1:5–7; 3:18). This was the beginning of his third missionary journey.

The Discovery and Instruction of Apollos

Acts 18:24–28

18:24 *“A certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria ... mighty in the Scriptures.”* Where Athens was the center of philosophy, Alexandria was known as a center for Old Testament scholarship. His eloquence caused some in Corinth to favor him over Paul (1 Cor. 1:12–13).

18:25 *“Instructed in the way of the Lord ... he knew only the baptism of John.”* Apollos had learned from the ministry of John the Baptist that the Messiah was coming. Like the disciples Paul found in Ephesus (Acts 19:1–7), he needed to be instructed further that Christ had been crucified and rose again.

18:26 *“Aquila and Priscilla ... explained to him the way of God more accurately.”* Here, we see both the wisdom and the tact of this amazing couple. They do not embarrass Apollos but pull him aside in order to inform him further in the work of Christ.

18:27 *“He greatly helped those who had believed through grace.”* With a letter of commendation from Aquila and Priscilla and the believers in Ephesus, Apollos was able to minister in Corinth and strengthen those who came to Christ by grace through faith (Acts 15:11; Eph. 2:8–9).

18:28 *“Showing ... that Jesus is the Christ.”* Apollos was able to use his eloquent messages to greater effect, due to the instruction he received from Aquila and Priscilla about the Lord Jesus Christ.

ACTS CHAPTER 19

Paul returns to Ephesus and ministers mightily for two years.

Two Baptisms; Two Covenants

Acts 19:1–7

19:2 *“Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”* This passage has confused many believers. Paul met these disciples but noticed something lacking in their lives. The normal sequence, seen in the household of Cornelius, is that the Holy Spirit was given at the moment of faith (Acts 10:44–45). *“We have not ... heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.”* These men were disciples of John, the last prophet of the Old Covenant (Matt. 11:9–11). They had been instructed that the Christ was coming, but knew nothing of the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord.

19:3 *“Into what then were you baptized?”* The rite of baptism represents identification of the person being baptized with something else (see baptism notes from Matt. 3:6). These disciples received the baptism of repentance, looking forward to the Savior but, like Apollos (Acts 18:25), lacked instruction concerning the finished work of Christ. They believed the Messiah was coming but did not yet know who He was. In essence, they were Old Testament believers who had to enter into the New Testament (New Covenant) faith.

19:4 *“John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance.”* John’s baptism was a call to recognize one’s sinfulness in preparation for the coming King. *“Saying ... that they should believe on Him who would come after him.”* The people who were baptized by John did not yet know Jesus Christ. *“On Jesus Christ.”* Faith is focused on revealed truth. When it is revealed that Jesus is the Christ, He becomes the focus of our faith.

19:5 *“They were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.”* In keeping with the commission of our Lord (Matt. 28:18–20), Paul would have fully instructed them in the finished work of Christ on the cross (John 19:30).

19:6 *“The Holy Spirit came upon them.”* Tongues and prophetic utterance were visible signs given to the early Church to verify the presence of the Spirit. As Isaiah prophesied (Isa. 28:11–13; 1 Cor. 14:20–22), tongues were a sign to unbelieving Israel that judgment was coming because of their unbelief. After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., tongues gradually passed away (1 Cor. 13:8–13).

God Worked Mightily through Paul

Acts 19:8–12

19:8 *“He went into the synagogue ... reasoning and persuading.”* Paul continued to reach out to the Jewish community, but the trend of the Jewish rejection of their Messiah/Savior continued.

19:9 *“But when some ... did not believe ... spoke evil of the Way.”* When the clear truth is rejected, there is no further point in discussion (2 Tim. 2:23; Titus 3:9). *“He ... withdrew ... reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus.”* This was probably a school of philosophy. Most schools shut down during the heat of the day. This provided Paul a place to instruct those who were coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

19:10 *“All who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus.”* From Ephesus, the Word spread to the Colossians and the seven churches of Asia (Revelation chapters 2 and 3). Ephesus now became the new center of evangelism and missions.

19:11–12 *“God worked unusual miracles.”* It is clear that these works were unusual even for the Apostle Paul. *“Even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought ... diseases left them ... evil spirits went out of them.”* These unusual healings and casting out of demons were a demonstration of the power of God to overcome evil. Ephesus was a center of demonic worship and activities.

Truth Conquers Superstition and Witchcraft

Acts 19:13–20

19:13 *“We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches.”* All power in the name of Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:9–10) is based on a personal relationship with Him by means of faith. These phony exorcists used the name of Jesus as if it were a magical name. This is, in fact, “[taking] *the name of the Lord your God in vain*” (Exod. 20:7).

19:14 *“Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest.”* It is very common, where there is religion without genuine faith, for people to mix false religion with witchcraft and demonism.

19:15 *“Jesus I know ... but who are you?”* The demon recognized their faithless attempt to tap into the power of the Lord Jesus, who the demon knew and feared (James 2:19).

19:16 *“Then the man ... leaped on them ... so that they fled.”* Here is a good warning to those who use the name of Jesus without faith in Him. In the end, it will only result in their greater judgment.

19:17 *“The name of the Lord Jesus was magnified.”* The contrast of Paul’s powerful ministry with the failure of the Jewish exorcists caused many to turn to Christ in faith.

19:18–19 *“Many who had believed ... who had practiced magic.”* Faith always brings us out of darkness into the light of Christ (Rom. 13:12; Col. 1:13; 1 Pet. 2:9). *“Fifty thousand pieces of silver.”* This amount totaled the wages of an average worker for nearly 150 years!

19:20 *“So the word of the Lord ... prevailed.”* The language here pictures a military campaign in which the Word of God is victorious in the end (Isa. 40:8).

The Great Riot in Ephesus

Acts 19:21–41

19:21 *“Paul purposed in the Spirit.”* Paul made his missionary plans through prayer and reliance on the Spirit of God to guide him. *“Macedonia ... Jerusalem ... Rome.”* Paul wanted to revisit the Philippian and Thessalonian churches on his way back to Jerusalem, where he gave a mission report to the elders and James (Acts 21:18–20). Then he decided it was time for him to visit the capitol city of Rome.

19:22 *“So he sent ... Timothy and Erastus, but he ... stayed in Asia for a time.”* We should note that these two ministered to Paul, so that Paul could minister to the multitudes. The best way to train for the ministry is to learn to be a humble servant. By this time, Paul had many young men who he was training. They were to prepare the churches for his coming.

19:23 *“A great commotion about the Way.”* Because of Jesus’ words, recorded for us in John 14:6, the early Church movement was simply referred to as *“the Way”* (Acts 9:2; 18:25; 19:9; 22:4; 24:14, 22).

19:24–26 *“Demetrius ... called them together.”* This man, like so many today, had no concern for truth or for souls, but only for personal profit (Matt. 16:26; Mark 8:36; Luke 9:25; 12:19). *“This Paul has persuaded ... many people.”* Paul’s teachings against idolatry (Psalm 115:3–8; Isa. 44:10–20) had cost the idol-makers much money.

19:27–28 *“So not only is this trade of ours in danger of falling ... but also the temple of the great goddess Diana ... whom all Asia and the world worship.”* The temple in Ephesus dedicated to Diana, also called Artemis in Greek, was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Demetrius links their trade to the temple so as to inflame an emotional response from the crowd, now a dangerous mob: *“they were full of wrath.”*

19:29 *“The whole city was filled with confusion ... rushed into the theater with one accord ... seized Gaius and Aristarchus.”* Paul may not have been with them at the time. The names are common ones, mentioned in other places (Acts 20:4; Rom. 16:23; Col. 4:10).

19:30–31 *“And when Paul wanted to go in to the people.”* Paul’s disciples, along with high officials who were his friends, restrained him from entering the large theatre which held 25,000 people. The courage of the Apostle Paul was without question (Rom. 15:15).

19:33–34 *“Alexander.”* The Jewish segment of the population did not want to be identified with Paul. They urged Alexander, a Jew, to explain this to the crowd. The crowd’s reaction was crying out with one voice, *“Great is Diana of the Ephesians!”* for two hours.

19:35 *“The city clerk ... quieted the crowd.”* This man was responsible for order in the city. *“The image which fell down from Zeus.”* This was possibly a meteor fragment that was worshiped in the temple as a sign from Zeus, their chief god.

19:37 *“For you have brought these men here.”* The city clerk testifies that neither Gaius or Aristarchus had committed any crime against the people or their religion. This indicates that in presenting the truth of Jesus Christ, Paul had wisely avoided attacking their false religion. It is enough to simply present the truth of the Gospel, and those who are receptive will choose Truth over deception.

19:38 *“The courts are open.”* The clerk declares that if Demetrius or anyone else wants to charge Paul or his companions, they must do it legally—through the courts—and not in a riot (v. 36). Roman law did not tolerate civil disturbances, and Roman soldiers would restore order by force of arms.

19:40 *“For we are in danger ... there being no reason ... for this disorderly gathering.”* If word of this riot came to the ears of the Roman authorities, the city would be placed under martial law, and possibly lose many of the current freedoms they enjoyed.

ACTS CHAPTER 20

Paul journeys toward Jerusalem.

The Jews Plot to Kill Paul

Acts 20:1–6

20:1 *“Paul ... departed to go to Macedonia.”* Here, he would revisit the churches of Philippi and Thessalonica. During this time, Paul had written 1 Corinthians from Ephesus, 2 Corinthians from Macedonia, and the Roman epistle from Corinth (from Nelson Study Bible).

20:2–3 *“He came to Greece.”* Here, he would have visited the church of Corinth. *“The Jews plotted against him.”* Paul’s life was in constant danger as he travelled (2 Cor. 11:23–28). Since his original plan was to return to Antioch, in Syria by ship, they may have planned to throw him overboard or kill him by some other means.

20:4 *“Sopater ... Aristarchus ... Secundus ... Gaius ... Timothy ... Tychicus ... Trophimus.”* These names show us that Paul had, what was equivalent to, a travelling seminary. These were all young men being trained for future ministry. They were also chosen to accompany Paul with the gift from the churches to the poor church of Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:3–4).

20:5–6 *“At Troas.”* Troas was the gateway between Asia and Europe. Paul would leave some items here, possibly planning to retrieve them when he journeyed on to Rome. However, his arrest in Jerusalem made this impossible (Acts 21:26–40; 2 Tim. 4:13).

Ministry at Troas

Acts 20:7–12

20:7 *“Now on the first day of the week.”* The early Church met on Sunday in remembrance of the Lord’s resurrection. Just as the Sabbath was dedicated to the Old Covenant (Exod. 31:13, 17), so Sunday became the worship day dedicated to the New Covenant (1 Cor. 16:2). *“To break bread.”* The order of the early church service involved a love feast and the Lord’s table, along with singing, teaching, and prayer (Acts 2:42; Jude 12).

20:9 *“Eutychus ... was overcome by sleep”* These meetings were held at night so that the laborers could attend. After a long day of work, and probably having eaten something, Eutychus went to asleep and fell three stories down.

20:10 *“His life is in him.”* He was dead but, at Paul’s touch, came to life again.

20:11 *“He ... talked ... even till daybreak.”* This was an all-night session with the Apostle Paul. Many of those who listened would have had to go to work after dawn, having worked all the previous day. Yet, in years to come, would have remembered that night with great joy.

Paul Travels by Foot

Acts 20:13–16

20:13–14 *“Paul ... had given orders, intending himself to go on foot.”* Paul may have had need for some solitude, and time for prayer—perhaps even need for some exercise. Whatever the reason, the fact that Luke declares that

Paul gave orders implies that he would not be denied this time. ***“He met us at Assos.”*** Though Paul was nearing 60 years old, he was still able to cover 20 miles of rugged country on foot!

20:16 ***“Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus.”*** Had he stopped to visit the Ephesian church; they would have begged him to stay awhile. ***“He was hurrying to be at Jerusalem ... on the Day of Pentecost.”*** Paul wanted to deliver the offering from the Gentile churches at a time when many Jewish believers would be present. His desire was always to maintain unity between Jewish and Gentile believers.

Paul’s Message to the Ephesian Elders

Acts 20:17–38

20:17 ***“He sent ... for the elders of the church.”*** The term *“elders”* is referring to those who lead the churches. This title is the same as *“overseer”* and *“shepherd”* (pastor), both of which are used for the same men in v. 28. In 1 Peter 5:1–4 the same three titles are used for the leaders of the church.

20:18 ***“What manner I always lived among you.”*** Paul not only lived a blameless life among them, but it was his boast that he provided for his own needs and those of his team (v. 34; 1 Cor. 4:12; 9:6, 18).

20:19–21 ***“Serving the Lord ... I kept back nothing ... repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.”*** In these verses, Paul summarizes his philosophy of ministry in *“serving the Lord”*:

1. *“with all humility”* (v. 19),
2. *“with many tears and trials”* (v. 19),
3. proclaiming all the truth (vv. 20, 27),
4. teaching in various places (v. 20),
5. urging *“repentance toward God”* (from opposition to submission, v. 21), and
6. *“faith in Jesus Christ”* (v. 21).

As always, repentance speaks of the recognition of our lost and helpless condition, and our need of a Savior. Faith is the receiving of Jesus Christ as the only hope of salvation (John 14:6; Acts 4:12).

20:22–23 ***“I go bound in the spirit ... chains and tribulations await me.”*** Paul knew from the warnings of the Spirit that great trials awaited him in Jerusalem. Yet, he was compelled to go to the church there—for the sake of his ministry (Rom. 15:25–26, 31; 1 Cor. 16:3).

20:24 ***“So that I may finish my race with joy.”*** Like his Savior, Paul was willing to pay with his life to fulfill the will of God (2 Tim. 4:6–8; Heb. 12:2).

20:26 ***“I am innocent of the blood of all men.”*** By faithfully warning all men of the judgment of God on sin, and of the saving work of Christ on the cross, Paul was free of the guilt of their blood (Ezek. 33:1–9; Acts 18:6).

20:28 ***“Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock.”*** These leaders must recognize the great responsibility upon them to care for the flock of God. ***“Shepherd the church.”*** Those who believe must be strengthened and sustained by sound teaching from the Word of God. ***“Which He purchased with His own blood.”*** This is a strong statement of the fact that Jesus Christ is God.

20:29–30 ***“Savage wolves will come in ... to draw away disciples after themselves.”*** There will always be *“hirelings”* in the ministry (John 10:12–13; Phil. 1:15–16). They seek to feed off the flock, instead of caring for it (Ezek. 34:1–10). Instead of humble service, they seek to dominate the church for their own gain (1 Tim. 6:3–5; 3 John 9–10).

20:32 *“I commend you to God and to the word of His grace.”* Only the Spirit of God, working through the Word of God, is able to bring us to maturity and assure us of a rich, eternal reward (Matt. 6:1, 6, 19–20; 1 Cor. 3:10–15; Heb. 5:14–6:1; 2 Pet. 1:10–11).

20:35 *“I have shown you in every way ... it is more blessed to give than to receive.”* Paul’s life and ministry were a vivid example of the teachings of the Lord Jesus. Giving is a reflection of God’s grace (John 3:16; Rom. 6:23); receiving is a picture of our faith. We magnify, glorify, and praise the grace of God, but never our faith!

20:36 *“He knelt down and prayed with them all.”* The Ephesian epistle is built around Paul’s prayers for this church (Eph. 1:15–23; 3:14–21). Paul was a man of prayer because he believed in the power of prayer. Prayer was, in his mind, the key to winning every spiritual battle (Eph. 6:10–18).

ACTS CHAPTER 21

Paul returns to Jerusalem and is arrested.

Warnings on the Way to Jerusalem

Acts 21:1–14

21:1–3 *“We ... set sail, running a straight course.”* By the descriptions he gives, it seems that Luke especially enjoyed travelling by sea.

21:4 *“Finding disciples ... they told Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem.”* This was a message Paul had received before (Acts 20:23). We cannot know, at this point, whether he was being forbidden from going to Jerusalem altogether, or whether he was not to go at this particular time. The problem in Jerusalem arose because of the many Jewish believers who had come for the Feast of Pentecost, who were zealous law-keepers (v. 20).

21:5 *“We knelt down on the shore and prayed.”* Once again, Paul’s devotion to prayer stands out (Phil. 1:3–11).

21:7 *“We ... greeted the brethren.”* Paul’s journey to Jerusalem was a visit to many believers on the way, perhaps because he sensed he would not see them again (Acts 20:25).

21:8 *“Philip the evangelist.”* This is the Philip who was chosen as a deacon (Acts 6:5), who then evangelized in Samaria (Acts 8:4–12) and ministered to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–39). After this, Philip seems to have settled in Caesarea (Acts 8:40).

21:9 *“Four virgin daughters who prophesied.”* This was an ongoing fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel, which Peter quoted on the first Pentecost (Acts 2:17–18; Joel 2:28–32). Once the whole New Testament Scriptures were completed, there was no further need for this gift (1 Cor. 13:8–13).

21:10–11 *“A certain prophet ... Agabus ... Thus says the Holy Spirit.”* This same Agabus predicted the world-wide famine (Acts 11:27–28). *“He took Paul’s belt.”* In the manner of the old prophets, he acts out his message (1 Kings 11:29–31; Isa. 20:3–4; Jer. 13:1–11; Ezek. 5:1–4). He does not tell Paul not to go to Jerusalem, but only that he will be bound and delivered to the Gentiles. It may be that, in light of Paul’s determination to go to Jerusalem (Acts 20:22–23; 21:13), the warning not to go was no longer included.

21:13–14 *“I am ready ... to be bound, but also to die.”* Paul was convinced that he must be in Jerusalem—whatever the cost. *“The will of the Lord be done.”* Even his friends decided that further argument was useless. They commended him to the will of God. It may well be, as mentioned in the note on v. 4, that Paul was not so much forbidden to go, as he was being warned not to go at this time. As we will see (vv. 18–24), the problem was not that

he went to Jerusalem, but that due to the multitude of Jewish law-keepers, Paul was led into a serious compromise with them.

Paul Walks into a No-Win Situation

Acts 21:15–25

21:17 *“The brethren received us gladly.”* By now, Paul was known and respected throughout the world as the Apostle to the Gentiles.

21:18–19 *“On the following day Paul went in with us to James.”* This James, the Lord’s half-brother (Matt. 13:55; Acts 15:13; 1 Cor. 15:7), was still the leader of the church in Jerusalem. *“Which God had done among the Gentiles.”* Paul gave a mission report of God’s grace to the Gentiles through him.

21:20 *“You see ... how many ... Jews ... all zealous for the law.”* Because of his insistence to be in Jerusalem at Pentecost, thousands of Jews, both believers and unbelievers, were present. Paul will attempt (wrongly, in my opinion) to pacify the believing Jews regarding law-keeping and, in so doing, he will be recognized and attacked by the unbelieving Jews from Asia. He has walked into a no-win situation!

21:21 *“They have been informed ... that you teach ... to forsake Moses.”* This is not what Paul taught at all. He taught that the Law could not save us (Gal. 1:6–9; 2:1–5, 16; 3:11–14, 24–26). Paul should have stood firm on what he taught, instead of trying to pacify people who distorted his teaching. Once the veil in the Temple was rent (Matt. 27:51), based on the finished work of Christ (John 19:30), the sacrificial system was no longer acceptable to God (Gal. 3:10–14, 23–26; 4:21–31; Heb. 7:17–22; 8:1–2, 6–7, 13; 10:5–10).

21:23–24 *“Therefore do what we tell you.”* This compromise by James is doomed to fail. *“Four men who have taken a vow.”* In light of v. 25, this was a Nazarite vow (Num. 6:1–8). *“Take them ... and pay their expenses.”* This would have been a very costly venture. Following the purification, each would have to offer a yearling lamb as a burnt offering, a ewe lamb as a sin offering, and a ram as a peace offering, along with unleavened bread, oil, and grain (Num. 6:14–15). These were to be offered by the priest in the Temple (Num. 6:16–18). The problem is that the veil in the Temple was ripped from “top to bottom” when Jesus, “the Son,” offered the perfect sacrifice to God the Father (Matt. 27:51). This meant that no further sacrifice was acceptable to God, and to offer a lamb for sin was equal to “crucifying the Son of God afresh” (Heb. 6:6; 10:11–18). I believe it was this compromise, after Paul had rebuked the Galatian believers severely for seeking to follow the law, that caused the Gentile believers in Asia to forsake him (2 Tim. 1:15).

21:25 *“Concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written.”* Here, James refers to the letter from the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:22–29). It was clear that the leaders of the Jerusalem church knew that Christ had fulfilled the Law on our behalf. They were in a difficult situation that called for much sensitivity on their part. The issue is that of Law versus grace, which is addressed in the epistles to the Galatians and Hebrews. The issue was ultimately resolved in 70 A.D. when the Temple was destroyed, making sacrifices impossible.

The Riot in the Temple and the Arrest of Paul

Acts 21:26–40

21:26 *“At which time an offering should be made for each one of them.”* These offerings are given in Numbers 6:13–15. Again, such offerings were made invalid once Jesus Christ made the final and total payment for sin on the cross (John 19:30).

21:27 *“The Jews from Asia ... laid hands on him.”* These were not the believing Jews, who misunderstood Paul’s teaching (vv. 20–21). These were hostile, unbelieving Jews who had followed Paul and incited riots everywhere

Paul went (Acts 14:2, 5, 19; 17:5–6, 13; 18:12–13). By compromising with legalistic parties in the church, Paul walked into a trap of the unbelieving Jews who wanted him destroyed.

21:28 *“This is the man ... he also brought Greeks ... and has defiled this holy place.”* Their accusations were all false, but the last part, about bringing Greeks into the Temple (v. 29), was added to stir up an emotional reaction from the crowd. Isn’t it amazing that it was their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah that ultimately brought the Romans to destroy the Temple in 70 A.D.?

21:31–32 *“As they were seeking to kill him ... the commander ... took soldiers.”* There was a garrison of Roman soldiers in the Fortress of Antonia, which was connected to the Temple grounds by either a tunnel or two flights of stairs. Since two centurions are mentioned, there must have been at least two hundred soldiers who responded. The appearance of these Roman soldiers saved Paul’s life.

21:33 *“The commander ... commanded him to be bound.”* The Roman commander assumed Paul was the cause of the riot, and so arrested him.

21:34–35 *“When he could not ascertain the truth.”* The uproar made it impossible for the commander to determine why they were beating Paul. *“he had to be carried ... because of the violence of the mob.”* Either Paul was so badly beaten that he could not walk, or the soldiers surrounded him and carried him to shield him from further violence.

21:38 *“Are you not the Egyptian.”* This was a reference to a false prophet who had claimed to be the Messiah and led a revolt against Rome in 54 A.D.

21:39 *“I am a Jew ... a citizen.”* Paul identifies himself not only by his Jewish heritage, but also his Greek culture, being raised in Tarsus—a great university city. When he said the word *“citizen,”* it implied his Roman citizenship, which he would make more clear in Acts 22:25. *“Permit me to speak to the people.”* The courage of Paul in the face of violent mobs displays the power of faith (Prov. 28:1).

21:40 *“Paul ... motioned with his hand ... there was a great silence.”* Paul had a truly commanding presence due, no doubt, to the Presence of the Holy Spirit. Paul surprised the commander by speaking in cultured Greek (v. 37), but he now spoke to the crowd *“in the Hebrew language.”*

ACTS CHAPTER 22

Paul gives his defense to the crowd and claims his rights as a Roman citizen.

Paul’s Defense Is His Vision of Christ

Acts 22:1–21

22:1–2 *“Brethren ... fathers ... He spoke to them in the Hebrew language.”* Paul identified with this crowd by sympathy (Rom. 9:1–5; 10:1–2), shared history, and language. *“They kept all the more silent.”* The *“great silence”* of Acts 21:40 became even more hushed as he addressed them as a fellow Jew.

22:3 *“I am ... a Jew ... brought up ... at the feet of Gamaliel.”* According to Acts 5:34, Gamaliel, as a teacher of the law, was *“held in respect by all the people.”* He spoke in favor of lenience toward the apostles (Acts 5:35–39). Many believe he was the leader of the Jewish high court—the Sanhedrin. The fact that Gamaliel trained Paul would give him great credibility in the eyes of this crowd. Gamaliel is believed to have died before this event, in 52 A.D.

22:4–5 *“I persecuted this Way ... as also the high priest bears me witness.”* By showing his zeal in persecuting Jesus’ disciples, Paul conveys his understanding of the zealous rage of this mob.

22:7 *“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”* Paul, relating his experience on the Damascus Road (Acts 9), explains his change from persecutor to champion of the Gospel of Christ. A transformed life is often the greatest witness (Rom. 12:1–2; 1 Pet. 3:15). It is our personal experience of union with Christ that gives credibility to our faith.

22:8 *“I am Jesus of Nazareth.”* All of those from Judea in this crowd would have known the name of Jesus. They all would have known of His crucifixion, and the earthquake, and the tearing of the veil, and the talk of His resurrection (Matt. 27:51–54; Mark 15:33–38; Luke 23:44–45).

22:10 *“Arise and go into Damascus ... you will be told things which are appointed for you to do.”* Here, Paul begins to build the case for his apostleship—the plan and purpose of God for his life. Every believer should understand that God has a specific plan for his or her life, and this plan is related to our spiritual gift (Rom. 12:3–8; 1 Cor. 12:4–7; Eph. 4:3–8, 11–16).

22:12–13 *“Then ... Ananias, a devout man according to the law.”* This would also build sympathy in the mob, since Ananias was *“having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwell there.”*

22:13–15 *“Brother Saul.”* Ananias identifies Paul as his brother—both as a Jew, and as a believer in Jesus Christ. *“The God of our Fathers has chosen you.”* If Saul/Paul was divinely chosen for a special task, to resist that ministry would be to resist the will of God. Remember Gamaliel’s words in Acts 5:38–39. *“See the Just One ... For you shall be His witness to all men.”* The term *“Just One”* is a reference to the Messiah (Isa. 45:21). If Paul was to be a witness to all men, that would include the Gentiles.

22:18 *“Make haste ... for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me.”* This vision probably occurred during Paul’s initial visit to Jerusalem (Acts 9:26–30) when the Jews plotted to kill him. God forewarned Paul of the ultimate rejection of the Lord Jesus Christ by the Jewish leaders and the nation as a whole.

22:21 *“Depart, for I will send you ... to the Gentiles.”* Paul had the attention of the crowd up to this point. He was able to make the case that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah. However, the Jewish prejudice against all Gentiles brought an immediate and violent reaction.

Paul Proclaims His Roman Citizenship

Acts 22:22–30

22:22 *“Away with such a fellow from the earth.”* It is difficult for people today to understand the absolute contempt and hatred that the Jewish people had for the Gentiles. One rabbi is recorded as saying, “The Gentiles were created to ignite the fires of hell.” To think that Paul claimed a commission from the God of Israel to bring the Gentiles into the kingdom, without first becoming proselytes to Judaism, was unthinkable to them. The unlimited free offer of the grace of God will always incite hatred from those who are bound by law (Gal. 4:21–31).

22:24 *“The commander ordered ... that he should be examined under scourging.”* “Scourging” was used in the Roman Empire as a means of questioning. It was designed to force the victim, by extreme pain, to answer truthfully. The victim was bound to a pillar or post, with their back exposed. A whip with many thongs, having bits of metal and bone tied into them, was used. It was not unusual for one to die under scourging. Yet, Paul endured this from the Jews five times (2 Cor. 11:24).

22:25 *“Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?”* Under Roman law, no Roman could be either bound or scourged unless they were first convicted in court and condemned. It is interesting that in Philippi Paul did not make known his and Silas’ Roman citizenship (Acts 16:22–23, 37–38). They may have willingly endured the punishment so as to make the Roman officials reluctant to further harass or persecute the church there.

22:26–27 *“Take care ... for this man is a Roman.”* The centurion knew that they had already violated Roman law by having Paul bound without trial. *“Are you a Roman?”* At this point, the commander would have been terrified of what he had already done. *“He said, ‘Yes.’”* Paul confirms his citizenship.

22:28 *“With a large sum I [the commander] obtained this citizenship.”* Roman citizenship originally belonged only to those born in Rome. Gradually, the privilege was extended to those who rendered special service to Rome, or those who by military service or a large sum of money could gain it. *“But I was born a citizen.”* Paul’s Roman citizenship was probably the result of a father or grandfather who had gained this prized citizenship, and then the privilege passed down to sons. This made the status of Paul’s citizenship of much higher value than that of the commander’s.

22:29 *“Then immediately those ... withdrew from him; and the commander was also afraid.”* The penalty for binding or scourging a Roman citizen, not guilty of any crime, was death. They had already violated the first of these.

22:30 *“He wanted to know for certain why he was accused by the Jews.”* The boast of Roman law was that it was totally impartial. Here, the Roman commander sets up a hearing with *“the chief priests and all their council”* in order to gather all the facts, before making his final decision. The injustice of the Jewish leaders will quickly become evident to him (Acts 23).

ACTS CHAPTER 23

Paul successfully divides the council; a plot to kill him leads to his removal to Caesarea.

The Council Divided Regarded Resurrection

Acts 23:1–10

23:3 *“God will strike you, you whitewashed wall!”* This was the same accusation Jesus used against the religious leaders (Matt. 23:27). It was an open charge of the worst kind of religious hypocrisy. The corruption and greed of Ananias were well known. *“You command me to be struck contrary to the law.”* Jewish law was also designed to be fair and just, but as always happens, it had been corrupted (Lev. 19:35; Deut. 25:1–2).

23:5 *“I did not know, brethren, that he was high priest.”* Paul certainly knew that Ananias was the high priest (Acts 22:5). His statement appears to be sarcastic, indicating that the corrupt actions of Ananias had disqualified him for the office. *“You shall not speak evil of the ruler of your people.”* Paul was an expert in Jewish law (see Exod. 22:28).

23:6 *“I am a Pharisee ... concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged.”* Paul very shrewdly divided the council by bringing up the issue of resurrection. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead; the Sadducees did not (Matt. 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27). Paul’s point was actually correct, for he was being judged for proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 22:6–10).

23:9 *“We find no evil in this man ... let us not fight against God.”* They are repeating the counsel given by Gamaliel, Paul’s teacher (Acts 5:34–39; 22:3).

The Plot to Kill Paul Discovered

Acts 23:11–22

23:11 *“The Lord stood by him.”* We know that Jesus Christ appeared to Paul at least four times (Acts 9:3–6; 18:9–10; 22:17–18 and here). There, were probably other appearances as well (Gal. 1:11–12; 1 Cor. 11:23;

2 Cor. 12:2–4). **“You must also bear witness at Rome.”** Here, Jesus Christ affirms that Paul’s desire to minister in Rome was indeed according to the plan of God (Acts 19:21; Rom. 1:15).

23:12 “Some of the Jews ... bound themselves under an oath.” So great was their hatred of Paul, and of the Gospel he preached, that they were willing to resort to murder. The oath gave their actions an appearance of religious duty.

23:14–15 “They came to the chief priests and elders ... Now you ... suggest to the commander that he be brought down to you.” The willingness of the chief priests and elders to become partners in this plot shows both their total spiritual corruption, as well as their recognition that their charges against the Apostle Paul could not prevail.

23:16 “Paul’s sister’s son ... told Paul.” This is the only mention of Paul’s relatives. His family was obviously well connected to the Jewish council. The courage of this young man saved Paul’s life.

23:17–21 “Take this young man to the commander.” The fact that Paul’s nephew knew all the details of the plot shows again how connected Paul’s family was with the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem.

Paul Sent to the Governor Felix

Acts 23:23–35

23:23 “He called for two centurions ... ‘Prepare two hundred soldiers.’” Each centurion was commander over one hundred Roman soldiers. With the horsemen and spearmen, there would be a small army guarding Paul on his journey to Caesarea.

23:25 “He wrote a letter.” In a case like this, it was required that the subordinate officer write a letter to his superior, explaining the case being brought before him.

23:26 “To the most excellent governor Felix.” While this letter is very professional, in reality, Felix is recorded in history as being very corrupt. His headquarters was not in Jerusalem, but in Caesarea. The commander’s letter is an example of a professional and objective evaluation of the facts.

23:31 “Then the soldiers ... brought him by night to Antipatris.” This was a fortified Roman town about 40 miles from Jerusalem. The country between the two is rugged and well-suited for ambush. Once at Antipatris, the danger of ambush was small, as they would be in open country for the 25 miles to Caesarea. The soldiers and spearmen therefore returned to Jerusalem.

23:34 “The governor ... asked what province he was from.” This question was the formal beginning of Paul’s case. As a Roman, Paul had the right to be tried in his own province. Since Cilicia fell under the jurisdiction of Felix, he agreed to hear the case.

23:35 “He commanded him to be kept in Herod’s Praetorium.” This was the residence of the governor, built by Herod the Great. There was also a Praetorium in Jerusalem (John 18:28). In Rome, Paul would lead many of the palace guards of the Praetorium to faith in Christ (Phil. 1:13).

ACTS CHAPTER 24

Paul is accused by Ananias and gives his defense.

The False Charges of Ananias

Acts 24:1–9

24:1 “*A certain orator named Tertullus.*” The inclusion of this orator was an obvious attempt to make their charges seem more valid and polished. He may also have been a lawyer, or one who often represented lawyers.

24:2–3 “*Tertullus began his accusation.*” His first words were nothing but gross flattery in an attempt to gain the good favor of Felix, who loved being praised. In fact, the Roman historian Tacitus spoke of Felix as a brutal, greedy, and corrupt official.

24:5 “*We found this man ... a creator of dissension ... throughout the world.*” In reality, as the record of Acts shows, Paul always conducted his ministry in a quiet and orderly manner. It was the hatred of the Jews, everywhere he went, that resulted in riots. “*A ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.*” Since Rome had been plagued by several self-styled messiahs (Acts 5:36–37; 21:38), this was an attempt to present Paul as a revolutionary against Rome. The charges implied here are treason against Rome and heresy against the Jewish religion, which was protected by Rome.

24:6 “*He even tried to profane the temple.*” This was the false charge used by the mob in Jerusalem to incite the riot against Paul (Acts 21:28).

24:6–7 “*We ... wanted to judge him according to our law.*” Here, Tertullus presents the Jewish mob as decent, law-abiding citizens, who were kept from their duties by the brutal commander, Lysias. All of the charges by Tertullus are an act of projection—imputing to someone else the very faults of the accusers. This twisting of truth is as old as Satan (John 8:44–45), who in the Garden accuses God of wanting to keep Adam and Eve from the very thing Satan himself wanted—to “*be like God/the Most High*” (Gen. 3:1–5; Isa. 14:13–14).

Paul Gives His Defense

Acts 24:10–21

24:11–12 “*No more than twelve days since I went up to Jerusalem.*” Paul answers the charge of treason by declaring that only a short time ago he went to Jerusalem—surely not enough time to incite a revolt. “*Neither ... in the temple disputing with anyone nor inciting the crowd.*” It was the Jews who attacked Paul, not the other way around.

24:14 “*This I confess ... according to the Way ... I worship the God of my fathers.*” Paul openly proclaims himself to be a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, declaring that “*The Law and ... the Prophets*” all speak of Him (Luke 24:27, 32, 44–45).

24:15 “*I have hope in God ... there will be a resurrection of the dead.*” The only hope of resurrection is grounded in the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Luke 24:25–26; Phil. 3:10).

24:17 “*I came to bring alms and offerings to my nation.*” These offerings were the financial aid given by the Gentile churches for the church in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:25–28; 1 Cor. 16:1–3; 2 Cor. 8:1–4).

24:18–19 “*Some Jews from Asia ... They ought to have been here.*” See the note on Acts 21:27. Roman law required that any accused person had the right to face his accusers in court (Acts 25:16). The absence of these accusers was a serious breach of Roman law.

24:21 “*Concerning the resurrection of the dead I am being judged.*” Paul twice emphasizes the resurrection (v. 15). By doing this, he is both giving Felix a witness to the truth of the Gospel, and also framing the accusations against him in a religious context. Rome did not judge in religious matters at this time (Acts 18:14–15).

Felix Delays Paul's Case Indefinitely

Acts 24:22–27

24:22 *“Felix ... having more accurate knowledge of the Way.”* First, members of the early Church are spoken of as Nazarenes (v. 5), then as followers of *“the Way.”* This spoke of Jesus as *“The way, the truth, and the life”* (John 14:6). Felix probably gained his knowledge of the followers of Jesus through Drusilla, his Jewish wife (v. 24). Her grandfather, Herod the Great, had tried to kill the infant Jesus (Matt. 2:16–18). Her uncle was the Herod who killed John the Baptist (Matt. 14:1–12; Mark 6:14–29; Luke 9:7–9). Finally, her father was the Herod who had the Apostle James put to death (Acts 12:1–2).

24:24–25 *“Felix ... heard him concerning the faith in Christ.”* Luke does not record Paul's witness concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, but this was an open opportunity for Paul to explain the gospel message in full. *“He reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come.”* Paul was always prepared to give a reasonable defense of the faith (1 Pet. 3:15–16). Felix, who had married and divorced twice before he took Drusilla away from her husband, was obviously convicted by Paul's words, and asked him to *“Go away for now.”*

24:26 *“He also hoped that money could be given him by Paul.”* For a rich bribe, Felix, who by now was certain of Paul's innocence, would set Paul free. This was something Paul could not do (Exod. 23:8).

24:27 *“After two years.”* We have no scriptural record of these two years that Paul was kept in Caesarea. *“Felix ... left Paul bound.”* Since Paul would not give a bribe, Felix tried to gain favor with the Jews.

ACTS CHAPTER 25

Paul is tried before Festus, the new Governor, and appeals to Caesar.

Paul Defends Himself before Festus

Acts 25:1–12

25:2–3 *“Then the high priest ... petitioned him ... that he would summon him to Jerusalem.”* Even after two years, the Jewish leaders were willing to break both Roman and Jewish law and seek to ambush and kill the Apostle Paul. There is no hatred so great as religious hatred against Jesus Christ.

25:5 *“Let those who have authority ... accuse this man.”* The Jewish council was not able to deceive Festus. He strictly follows the laws of Rome and demands evidence against Paul (Acts 25:17–19).

25:7 *“The Jews ... laid many serious complaints ... which they could not prove.”* Roman law demanded clear evidence of guilt, especially for one who was a Roman citizen. The innocence of Paul is becoming clear to Festus (Acts 25:17–18, 25).

25:8 *“Neither against ... the Jews ... the temple ... nor against Caesar have I offended.”* In one brief sentence, Paul refutes all the false charges they had brought against him (Acts 24:5–6).

25:9 *“Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem.”* Because Paul knew of the plot to ambush and kill him, he could not agree to this arrangement. He had only one other option—to appeal to Caesar, the right of every Roman citizen.

25:10 *“I stand at Caesar's judgment seat.”* Here, Paul uses the privileges of his Roman citizenship to appeal to the highest court in the Roman Empire. Paul's arrest in Jerusalem, and his appeal to the Roman court, all worked together to bring about the desire of Paul and the will of God (Acts 19:21; 23:11; Rom. 1:15; Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28).

25:11 *“If I am an offender ... I do not object to dying.”* Paul’s sense of justice was so great that, if he had been guilty of the charges against him, he would have been willing to die.

King Agrippa Prepares to Hear Paul

Acts 25:13–27

25:13 *“King Agrippa and Bernice came to Caesarea.”* King Agrippa and Bernice were actually brother and sister. Because Paul had already appealed to Caesar, he was not required to give a defense before them. However, he no doubt saw this as an opportunity to present the gospel message to them.

25:14 *“Festus laid Paul’s case before the king.”* Festus had a problem. Because he had sought to appease the Jews, he forced Paul to appeal to Caesar. Now, it was required that he send a letter to Caesar, declaring the charges against Paul (vv. 25–27). He wants Agrippa, who was an expert in Jewish law (Acts 26:3), to help him formulate his charges.

25:16–19 *“The custom of the Romans ... questions ... about their [accusers] own religion.”* Had Festus been honest and objective, he would have released Paul. Rome did not settle religious disputes (Acts 18:14–16). While Rome prided itself on justice based on evidence, the Jewish leaders were willing to violate all the Law of Moses (Exod. 20:16; Deut. 19:15), in order to have Paul killed, just as they had done with Jesus Christ.

25:23 *“Agrippa and Bernice ... with great pomp ... and the prominent men of the city.”* Here, Paul is being treated like a novelty, to provide entertainment for the high-class leaders and citizens. Nevertheless, he used this as an opportunity to present the Gospel to many powerful people. Believers need to expect injustice from the rulers of this world (John 15:18). That should never keep us from openly proclaiming the truth about Jesus Christ. Paul was fulfilling the prophecy of Jesus (Matt. 10:18)

25:24 *“You see this man ... the Jews petitioned ... that he was not fit to live.”* Paul is presented in a very negative light, yet his conduct and truthfulness shine through all the false accusations (Matt. 5:16).

25:25 *“I found ... nothing deserving of death.”* By his own admission, Festus admits that Paul should have been set free. Because of all the friction between Rome and Jerusalem, his desire to please the Jews had caused him to compromise justice.

25:26–27 *“I have nothing certain to write ... to specify the charges against him.”* When Festus speaks of *“my lord,”* he is speaking of Caesar. To send a prisoner to Rome without specific charges would bring down the wrath of Caesar on the head of Festus. His hope is that Agrippa can help him formulate specific charges.

ACTS CHAPTER 26

Paul presents his defense before Agrippa.

Paul Reviews His Early Life

Acts 26:1–11

26:1 *“Paul stretched out his hand.”* This was a common gesture among speakers, designed to bring silence and command attention (Acts 12:17; 13:16; 19:33; 21:40). Though a small gesture, it indicated the speaker had culture and training.

26:3 *“Because you are expert in all customs ... questions which have to do with the Jews.”* It is this expertise that Festus is counting on to help him discern how to charge Paul (see note above, Acts 25:14).

26:4–5 *“My youth ... was spent ... at Jerusalem ... I lived a Pharisee.”* As Saul of Tarsus, Paul was from a very prominent family (Phil. 3:4–6) and was raised up to be both a Pharisee and a rabbi (Acts 22:3).

26:6 *“I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God.”* This refers to the promise of the coming Redeemer and Savior, resulting in resurrection to eternal life (Rom. 1:1–4).

26:7 *“For this hope’s sake ... I am accused by the Jews.”* The hope of the resurrection from the dead is central to Paul’s teaching (1 Cor. 15:16–19; Col. 1:27; Titus 1:2; 2:13).

26:9 *“Contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.”* Paul introduces Jesus Christ as One he himself once hated (1 Tim. 1:12–13).

26:10–11 *“Many of the saints I shut up in prison ... I cast my vote against them.”* Here, Paul may have remembered the death of Stephen (Acts 7:58–59). His violence against the early Church was well known (Acts 8:1–3; 9:13–14; 22:19–20; Gal. 1:13–14).

His Conversion on the Damascus Road

Acts 26:12–18

26:12 *“I journeyed to Damascus with authority ... from the chief priests.”* It is most interesting that the word “apostle” (*apostolos*) refers to “one given a commission from highest authority.” It was often given to ambassadors and commanders of naval fleets. Paul began as Saul, the apostle of the high priest, and became, by grace, Paul—the Apostle of Jesus Christ!

26:14 *“I heard a voice ... in the Hebrew language.”* This is the only place where we are told Jesus spoke to Saul/Paul in Hebrew. *“It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”* A goad was a sharpened stick or staff used to prod the unwilling oxen to pull their load. If the ox kicked at the goad, it only hurt itself more. God had been convicting Saul (John 16:8), and his conscience was being wounded by his hard-heartedness.

26:15 *“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”* When the members of the Body of Christ are persecuted it is Christ Himself who is the target of the abuse (John 15:18; 16:33).

26:16–18 *“I have appeared to you for this purpose.”* God had a plan for Saul/Paul before his life began (Jer. 1:5; Rom. 1:1–4; Gal. 1:15). The following statements are an amazing summary of Paul’s calling. *“To make you a minister and a witness.”* Even here, in the presence of royalty, Paul is fulfilling his commission. *“I will deliver you from the Jewish people.”* From the very beginning, the Lord warned Paul of the hostility of the Jews (Acts 22:18). *“To open their eyes ... to turn them from darkness to light.”* The work of regeneration delivers us from darkness to light, and delivers us from the power of Satan, resulting in an eternal inheritance (2 Cor. 4:1–6; Col. 1:12–14; Gal. 3:26–29; 1 Pet. 1:4–5).

His Proclamation of Jesus Christ

Acts 26:19–23

26:19 *“I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.”* Paul could say that he faithfully carried out his mission to the end of his life (2 Tim. 4:6–8). The grace of God overwhelmed Paul, making him a debtor to the plan of God (Rom. 1:14–15; 8:12).

26:20 *“[I] declared ... that they should repent.”* To repent means “to change one’s mind completely,” resulting in a change of life (Rom. 12:2). When one changes their mind about Christ—turning from unbelief to faith—the result is a “new creature” in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). The effect of the indwelling Holy Spirit, along with spiritual growth, results in *“works befitting repentance.”* (Matt. 3:8; Luke 3:8; Titus 2:14–3:8).

26:22–23 “*Witnessing ... those things which the prophets and Moses said would come.*” Paul proclaimed the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy in Jesus Christ (Luke 24:26–27, 32, 44–45). “*That the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead.*” Because Jesus is the first ever to rise, never to die again, He is called “*the first born from the dead*” (Col. 1:15, 18). His resurrection is the promise of the future resurrection of believers (1 Cor. 15:20–24).

The Response of Festus and Agrippa

Acts 26:24–32

26:24 “*Paul ... Much learning is driving you mad.*” Festus, possibly under strong conviction, suggests that Paul’s training had driven him insane. The natural man is not able to understand the Word of God apart from the light of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 1:18, 22–25; 2:11–15).

26:26 “*The king ... knows these things ... this thing was not done in a corner.*” Ever since the miraculous birth of John the Baptist, followed by the amazing events taking place in Jesus’ ministry, word of these things had spread far and wide (Matt. 2:1–6; Luke 1:65–66).

26:28 “*You almost persuade me to become a Christian.*” The fact that Agrippa used the title “*Christian,*” shows that he had heard of these teachings (Acts 11:26). Not until eternity will we know if Agrippa ever came to faith in Jesus Christ.

26:29 “*I would to God that ... all who hear me today.*” With the exception of his chains, Paul’s deep desire was that all that who heard him of this great crowd might become like him—a believer and follower of Jesus Christ.

26:31 “*This man is doing nothing deserving of death.*” At this point, Paul could have been released, except that he had already claimed the right to be heard in Rome. It is so often true that when things go what we think is the worst possible way, God is at work bringing about His perfect plan (Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28).

ACTS CHAPTER 27

The terrible sea voyage to Rome, shipwreck, and God’s deliverance.

The Perilous Journey Begins

Acts 27:1–8

27:1 “*Paul and some other prisoners.*” It is very possible that some of these prisoners had been condemned to death and were on their way to fight in the Gladiatorial Games in Rome. What an opportunity these prisoners had to hear the Gospel from the Apostle Paul! “*Julius, a centurion of the Augustan Regiment.*” This regiment bore the name of Caesar Augustus and must have been a highly trained and honored regiment. Julius would have been an experienced and distinguished centurion.

27:2 “*Aristarchus ... was with us.*” This loyal disciple had been with Paul since he left Thessalonica (Acts 19:29; 20:4; Col. 4:10; Phi. 24). Since Paul refers to him as a “*fellow prisoner*” in Colossians, he may have stayed with Paul as his personal slave. We know that Luke was with them because of his use of the words “*we*” and “*us*” (vv. 1–7).

27:3 “*Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him liberty.*” This was extraordinary treatment of a prisoner by a Roman centurion. This soldier certainly saw Paul as a man of integrity and honor, who could be trusted entirely.

27:4 *“The winds were contrary.”* The reference to the *“Fast”* in v. 9 probably refers to the Feast of Atonement (Lev. 16:29–34). This means that they were sailing during late September or early October—the most dangerous time of the year. The winds, at this time, come out of the West; and they were sailing East, into the wind.

27:6 *“The centurion found an Alexandrian ship.”* This ship would have been a cargo ship for grain, coming out of North Africa.

27:7–8 *“We ... arrived with difficulty ... passing it with difficulty.”* Luke uses the repetition of this phrase to indicate the perilous conditions they were facing. This was only the beginning! In the next verse, he uses the word *“dangerous.”*

Paul Warns of Dangers Ahead

Acts 27:9–12

27:9–10 *“Sailing was now dangerous ... Paul advised them ... this voyage will end with disaster.”* Paul had much experience in sea travel. But he was also guided by the Spirit of God. His warning was ignored but, in the end, proved all too true.

27:11 *“The centurion ... the helmsman ... the owner of the ship.”* All three ignored the warnings of Paul, much to their peril and ultimate loss.

27:12 *“The majority advised to set sail.”* The majority rule is usually wrong. In this case, one man gave wise counsel, and the majority ignored him. If they could reach Phoenix, on the island of Crete, they would have safe harbor for the winter, but it was not to be.

In the Peril of the Sea

Acts 27:13–38 (2 Cor. 11:26)

27:14 *“A tempestuous head wind ... called Euroclydon.”* This wind was a violent wind that blew out of the northeast and was feared by all sailors of those seas. They had to let the wind drive the ship.

27:16–17 *“Running under the shelter of an island called Clauda.”* This was a small island with no harbor, but it provided some shelter to prepare for the worst. They brought the small skiff, or landing craft, aboard. *“They used cables to undergird the ship.”* This was an indication of their great fear—that they would be driven onto the sandbars off the northern coast of Africa.

27:18 *“We were exceedingly tempest-tossed.”* By now, the storm had complete control of the ship. *“They lightened the ship.”* They would have begun to throw the cargo of valuable grain overboard to accomplish this.

27:19 *“We threw the ship’s tackle overboard.”* This was the most extreme measure—leaving them no way, whatsoever, to guide the ship. It is clear that Paul, Luke, and the others were involved in these efforts.

27:20 *“All hope that we would be saved was finally given up.”* All those aboard the ship resigned themselves to die in the waves. All except one faithful, courageous man—the Apostle Paul.

27:21 *“Men, you should have listened to me.”* I am sure that no one on that ship was happy to hear Paul say this. However, he was not gloating. He wanted to get their attention for the instructions he was about to give them. He was claiming leadership of the ship! From now on, the captain of the ship, the Roman centurion, and everyone else, would be taking orders from Paul!

27:22 *“Now I urge you to take heart.”* What great power there is in the courage and assurance of one confident man! *“There will be no loss of life ... but only of the ship.”* Paul is now speaking from his apostolic authority, based on God’s message to him. How comforting his words must have been.

27:23 *“There stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong.”* Paul was a prized possession of God, as were Luke and Aristarchus. And because of his presence and counsel, the ship would be saved.

27:24 *“You must be brought before Caesar.”* God’s will could not be hindered. *“God has granted you all those who sail with you.”* This implies that Paul had been praying for the deliverance of everyone on the ship.

27:25 *“Take heart, men, for I believe God.”* Paul’s confidence in God, and faith in His word, gave him courage in the face of great dangers. Like Abraham from long ago, Paul’s faith overcame seemingly impossible odds (Rom. 4:16–22).

27:26–29 *“We must run aground on a certain island.”* This implied the thing sailors feared most—being driven onto land by the storm. Paul’s word was soon proven true, as the sailors realized they were nearing land. *“They dropped four anchors ... and prayed for day to come.”* To be driven onto a rocky coastline would have been a disaster.

27:31 *“Unless these men stay ... you cannot be saved.”* When God promises deliverance (v. 24), it comes with the condition of obedience. Paul knew that he would be saved, but said to the centurion and soldiers that they would not, unless his directions were obeyed.

27:33 *“As day was about to dawn, Paul implored them all to take food.”* Paul knew that the dawn would bring the final effort to save their lives. They had not eaten for two weeks!

27:34 *“Take nourishment, for this is for your survival.”* Paul was a supremely spiritual man, but this did not hinder him from being practical as well. He links his encouragement to eat some food to the success of their survival. Paul was able to master his circumstances because he himself was mastered by God.

27:35 *“He took bread and gave thanks to God ... he began to eat.”* Paul was able to give thanks in all things (1 Thess. 5:18). He then set the example, by beginning to eat.

27:36–37 *“They were all encouraged ... in all we were two hundred and seventy-six persons.”* Every one of these people, from captain to centurion, to sailors and prisoners, had been given a living example of the power of faith and the value of knowing the true God.

Shipwrecked but Safe, Because of God’s Faithfulness

Acts 27:39–44

27:40 *“They hoisted the mainsail ... and made for shore.”* This shows that they did not throw all tackle overboard (v. 19). At this point, they must have thought their troubles were nearly over. We should never base our optimism or confidence on how things appear. Paul shows us that our assurance is based on God’s Word (v. 25, see Jer. 23:29; Heb. 4:16).

27:41 *“They ran the ship aground ... the stern was being broken up.”* In many ways, this was the most dangerous time of the entire perilous journey. Again, Paul becomes the indirect means of saving many lives, because of the commanders growing attachment to him.

27:42–43 “*The soldiers’ plan was to kill the prisoners ... but the centurion, wanting to save Paul, kept them from their purpose.*” The soldiers knew that if any prisoners escaped, their lives would be forfeited (Acts 12:19). However, this veteran Roman centurion had come to see in Paul a spiritual warrior that he both trusted and admired.

27:44 “*And so it was that they all escaped safely to land.*” “*And so*” the Word of God, and the assurance of Paul, was fulfilled before their eyes (vv. 22–26).

ACTS CHAPTER 28

Paul ministers on the island of Malta, finally arrives in Rome, is again rejected by the Jews, and declares that the Gospel will go to the Gentiles.

Paul’s Ministry in Malta

Acts 28:1–10

28:1 “*The island was called Malta.*” This island had a port (v. 11) and was only 60 miles south of Sicily, off the southern tip of Italy. Many of the people on the island are Christians to this day.

28:3 “*Paul ... gathered a bundle of sticks.*” Paul was not like so many so-called leaders today, who would not stoop to do menial tasks. He was a true leader, who led by example in both spiritual and practical ways. “*A viper ... fastened on his hand.*” The poise of Paul in this incident is one of the greatest examples of his total trust and confidence in the plan and purpose of God.

28:4 “*No doubt this man is a murderer, whom ... justice does not allow to live.*” Like many people today, these natives assumed that any bad thing that happens is indicative of some sin on the part of the victim (John 9:1–3). While this idea is misguided, there is in it at least an awareness that sin must be punished.

28:6 “*They changed their minds and said that he was a god.*” People who base their worldview on superstition change their mind like the wind (Acts 14:11–20; Eph. 4:14). Only the Word of God, based on His unchangeable nature, can give us a solid foundation on which to build our lives (Mal. 3:6; Matt. 7:24–27; Heb. 13:8; James 1:17).

28:8 “*Father of Publius lay sick ... Paul went in ... and prayed ... and healed him.*” Again, we see that God is directing events to provide Paul an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel. While we are not told of his witness to the many who came to him (vv. 9–10), the record of his life in Acts would assure us that he must have led many to Christ.

Paul Arrives in Rome at Last

Acts 28:11–16

28:11 “*After three months.*” Paul’s journey from Jerusalem to Rome took about five months altogether. “*We sailed in an Alexandrian ship.*” Like the ship that wrecked, this would have been a grain ship bringing cargo from northern Africa to Rome. “*The Twin Brothers.*” This is a reference to Castor and Pollux—mythical figures believed to be the guardians of those who traveled by sea.

28:13–14 “*We came to Puteoli, where we found brethren.*” How encouraging it must have been to Paul to find believers along the way in places he had never visited! Many seeds of the Gospel would have been planted by those who were in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:8–11).

28:15 “*The brethren ... came to meet us.*” Now believers from Rome to whom Paul had written the Roman epistle, came to meet him. “*Appii Forum and Three Inns.*” These lodging places were over 30 miles from Rome. It was

the custom in ancient times to go out to meet visiting dignitaries. The more honored they were, the further the welcoming delegation would go to meet them. At last, Paul's desire—expressed in Romans 15:24—was fulfilled.

28:16 *“Paul was permitted to dwell ... with the soldier who guarded him.”* This arrangement was in no doubt due to the commendation of the centurion Julius, who would have reported on Paul's conduct and leadership. If there was one thing Rome valued, it was the ability to be level-headed and take decisive action in times of crisis.

Paul's Ministry in Rome

Acts 28:17–29

28:17–19 *“Men and brethren ... I have done nothing against our people.”* Paul begins his meeting with the Jewish leaders by giving a brief summary of how he came to Rome in chains.

28:20 *“For the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain.”* Paul makes it clear that the Gospel he preached was not a heresy, but rather the fulfillment of all the prophecies of the coming Messiah.

28:22 *“We desire to hear from you ... concerning this sect.”* From the very beginning, these Jewish leaders show that they consider the followers of Jesus to be a heretical sect or cult *“spoken against everywhere.”*

28:23 *“Persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law ... and the Prophets.”* Paul presented the Lord Jesus Christ to these leaders as the fulfillment of the prophecies in their own Scriptures (Matt. 1:22–23; Luke 24:25–27, 44–45). *“From morning till evening.”* How vast was the knowledge Paul had of the Old Testament!

28:24 *“Some were persuaded ... and some disbelieved.”* Paul was able to win some to the faith but, for the most part, the Jewish leaders remained in unbelief. There is no middle ground when it comes to the Gospel. Either one believes it or rejects it (Matt. 12:30). Those who believe immediately receive eternal life (John 5:24). Those who reject remain under the wrath of God (John 3:19, 36).

28:25–27 *“The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah.”* Here, Paul quotes Isaiah 6:9–10, a prophecy of Israel's ultimate rejection of Jesus Christ. In Romans, Paul makes it clear that this hardening and blinding were the result of Israel's willful unbelief (Rom. 9:30–33; 10:16, 21; 11:20, 23).

28:28 *“Therefore ... the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles.”* In this one simple statement, Paul summarizes what he wrote in Romans 9–11. These three chapters summarize the story of God's favor to Israel, of Israel's rejection of Jesus Christ, and of the prominence of the Gentiles throughout the history of the Church.

Paul's House Arrest and Ministry

Acts 28:30–31

28:30 *“Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house.”* Again, this speaks of the trust and respect given to Paul by the Roman authorities. We can also assume that Paul either had sufficient support coming in from the churches to rent this house (Phil. 4:10–16), or it is possible his father had died and left him his inheritance. During this time, Paul was guarded by members of the elite Praetorian Guard, many of whom he led to Christ (Phil. 1:12–13), even members of Caesar's household (Phil. 4:22). *“Received all who came to him.”* There were, perhaps, visitors from all over the known world, as well as the comings and goings of his trusted co-workers (Col. 4:7–15; 2 Tim. 4:11–13).

28:31 *“Preaching ... and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ.”* In essence, Paul's home became an evangelistic center and seminary. In addition, during this time, Paul wrote the prison epistles: Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon.

In the ending of the book of Acts, Luke shows us that the words of Jesus Christ from Acts 1:8 had been fulfilled, and would continue to be fulfilled, throughout the history of the Church Age. Each and every believer today is a continuing part of this glorious story!

Conclusion

Just as the Gospels record the birth and earthly life of Jesus, so the book of Acts records for us the birth and early life of the Church—the Body of Christ. The book of Acts was written by Luke as a sequel to his Gospel, showing how the story of Jesus Christ spread from Jerusalem throughout the Roman world, in obedience to Christ's command (Matt. 28:18–20; Acts. 1:8). The work continues today through every believer who faithfully witnesses to the love of Christ, and by every scriptural missionary endeavor throughout the world.