



# Commentary on The Book of Acts

- This commentary is designed to help you in your study of the Book of Acts. It is not intended to replace your *personal* study of the Scriptures.
- Read through the Book of Acts before, during, and after your reading of the commentary. If you do this, you will get more out of the commentary.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF ACTS

### *The Sequel*

Early and reliable Church tradition testifies that Luke, the physician and traveling companion of Paul (see Col. 4:14; Philemon 24; and 2 Tim. 4:11), is the author of the Book of Acts and the Gospel of Luke. Noting the common authorship of Luke and Acts is absolutely essential for understanding both of these New Testament books. Each book must be understood in light of the other. Acts is the second part of a two-volume work, through which Luke intended to tell the story of Jesus and the early Church. Luke and Acts each bear much resemblance to ancient historiographies (i.e., history-writings) of the first-century Greco-Roman world. (Another view states that the Gospel of Luke is more like the ancient biographies from this same cultural context.)

The Holy Spirit inspired Luke to write in order to show how Jesus and the early Church fit into the history of *salvation*. It is important to understand that this history includes both Jews and Gentiles. *The journey of the Gospel* is a good summary for the Book of Acts. Luke's proclamation in and through his first volume was Jesus is the Savior for all kinds of people. The focus of Luke's second volume is how God worked through the early Church, especially Jesus' apostles, to spread the "good news" (the meaning of the word "gospel") about Jesus and His offer of salvation in God's Kingdom. This journey begins in Jerusalem and moves outward to different parts of the Roman Empire.

### *The Story*

The story of Acts revolves around the spread of the Gospel and how Jews and Gentiles responded to this message. Since the late second century A.D., "the Acts of the Apostles" has been a common and popular title for this book. Yet, this book focuses on the early church *as Jesus' disciples*. In other words, Luke's overriding concern was to demonstrate the work of God *through* those who followed Jesus. For this reason, some have entitled the book "the Acts of the Holy Spirit." However, it may be more accurate to give the title "the Acts of God" (i.e., God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit) to this book. Both God the Father and God the Son play important and prominent roles in the story of Jesus' followers spreading the Gospel.

Paying attention to three major themes can help readers understand the structure, purpose and message of this story. Each one is related to God's action: the plan of God, the Kingdom of God, and the mission of God. The history of salvation has been progressing according to God's sovereign plan. Acts presents the early Church as not always knowing how they fit into God's unfolding plan of salvation. But through the Scriptures, Jesus' instructions, and the Spirit's guidance, the early Church in Acts was often able to understand and live in light of this plan. In Acts (and the New Testament as a whole), salvation is presented as life within the saving sovereignty of God. In other words, being saved is receiving and experiencing salvation *in the Kingdom of God*. Jesus came as the unique agent of God, the One who decisively reestablished God's reign on the earth and defeated the

kingdom of darkness. The story of Acts is also about God advancing His Kingdom through Jesus' followers, who are strengthened and guided by the Spirit. The third major theme – the mission of God – most fully represents the focus of the story. God's mission of spreading the Gospel of Jesus the Christ *and* the early Church's active participation in this mission help the story have forward movement and structure. As God works through Jesus' followers to fulfill this mission, God's Kingdom advances according to His plan.

Luke wanted the original readers of Acts to know that God calls *all* who follow Jesus to take part in God's mission. By studying Luke's prologue to his Gospel (see Lk. 1:1–4), one can discern that the original readers of Luke-Acts needed their understanding of the story of Jesus and the early Church to be deepened and expanded. Also, it seems that these readers had a basic foundation of knowledge about Jesus, the message of the Gospel, and the early Church. The Book of Acts builds on this foundation by seeking: (1) to *inform* them about God's mission and how He fulfills it through His Church; and (2) to *inspire* them to become followers of Jesus who are passionately and personally involved in this mission. Through the story of Acts, God intends to speak to *all* readers about who Jesus is and what it means for His followers to be His witnesses. The theme of witnessing is helpful in comprehending the overall structure of the book. After an initial chapter of preparation, the rest of the story focuses on Jesus' followers bearing witness to Him in specific and new areas. The following is a broad outline for the book:

- I. Preparation (chap. 1)
- II. Witnesses in Jerusalem (chaps. 2–7)
- III. Witnesses in All Judea and Samaria (chaps. 8–12)
- IV. Witnesses to the Ends of the Earth (chaps. 13–28)

## I. PREPARATION (chap. 1)

Acts 1 is a chapter of *preparation*. In this chapter, the apostles and many other followers of Jesus go through a preparation process for their God-given mission. Also, attentive readers are prepared for the main action of the story, which will take place in chapters 2–28. The events in this chapter most likely occurred in the year 30 AD, with 1:1–11 covering about a 40-day period and 1:12–26 about a 7-day period.

### A. Prologue (1:1–11)

Both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts begin with a *prologue*. However, Luke's prologue in Acts is different in that it includes the first part of the story itself. In Acts 1:1–11, there is a seamless transition from Luke's direct address to Theophilus and other readers like him (1:1–2) to the first narrated action of the story (1:3–11). Also, it is important to understand that the prologue to Luke's Gospel introduces both this Gospel *and* Acts. The prologue to Acts serves a similar purpose for Luke's second volume *and* connects Luke and Acts in significant ways.

Luke started his second volume with a backward look to his first volume (his "former book"). Verses 1–2 give readers Luke's summary of the Gospel of Luke: the *beginning* of Jesus' actions and teachings "until the day He was taken up to heaven." Before His ascension into heaven, Jesus instructed His apostles about their God-given and God-empowered mission of proclaiming the Gospel to all nations (compare Acts 1:2 with Lk. 24:44–51). In Acts, Jesus *continues* acting and teaching after His ascension. However, the story of Acts begins in 1:3–11 by rehearsing Jesus' instructions and ascension from a different angle and with some expansion. Luke intentionally created some overlap between the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts, so that readers of Luke-Acts could see why and how Acts is the sequel to the Gospel.

Acts 1:3 provides Luke's transition to the story proper, and the "one occasion" of 1:4–5 is set within the forty-day period depicted in 1:3. After His crucifixion ("His suffering") and resurrection, Jesus demonstrated to His apostles that God had raised Him from the dead (such as "eating with them" in 1:4?) and taught them about God's Kingdom. Jesus' teaching here probably revolved around two areas: (1) how Scripture was *fulfilled* in His death and resurrection; and (2) how Scripture *promised* His ascension and return, the coming of the Holy Spirit, and their mission (see Lk. 24:44–49). All of these teachings related in one way or another to the coming of God's reign ("the Kingdom of God") to the earth. It was during one of *these* forty days that Jesus gave them a very important command about their future. The apostles were in Jerusalem at this time. Jesus told them to remain there as they wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit, who is the promised gift of the Father for Jesus' followers. While John the Baptist baptized Jesus' apostles (and other followers of Jesus) "with water," Jesus would baptize them "with the Holy Spirit." This outpouring of God's Spirit was promised in

the Old Testament and was often connected there with the coming of God's future, saving reign (see Is. 32:14–20; 44:1–5; Ezek. 39:25–29; Joel 2:28–32; and Zech. 12:7–10).

In 1:6–11, Luke narrated Jesus' ascension and the last dialogue He had with the apostles before He returned to heaven. These verses begin with Jesus' final meeting with the apostles during the forty-day period of 1:3. The apostles knew that they were living in a time of fulfillment – God bringing to pass what He had promised in the Old Testament. It was this awareness that led them to ask about the timing of the restoration of "the kingdom to Israel" in 1:6. What the apostles had in mind in their question is unclear: did they refer to the restoration of God's creation under God's reign or merely the political restoration for the nation of Israel? (This question is difficult to answer in light of the Gospels presenting the apostles previously misunderstanding the nature and coming of God's Kingdom in and through Jesus.) In His answer (1:7–8), Jesus directed their attention *away from* speculation about God's plan of redemption (its "times or dates") and *to* empowerment for their God-given mission (being Jesus' "witnesses").

God would, in fact, give them power within God's Kingdom. God's purpose in doing so was to enable them (as with all of Jesus' followers in all times and places) to spread the Gospel of Jesus the Messiah throughout the world. In the story of Acts, God used the apostles and many other followers of Jesus to be Jesus' witnesses "in Jerusalem" (chaps. 2–7), "in all Judea and Samaria" (chaps. 8–12), and "to the ends of the earth" (chaps. 13–28). Before God the Father took Him up to heaven "before their very eyes" in 1:9, Jesus wanted His disciples to focus on and prepare for God's mission for His Church. The ascension scene closes in 1:10–11 with the appearance of two angels ("two men dressed in white"; see Lk. 24:4) who interpret this event for the apostles. The angels told them that there was no reason to remain there "looking into the sky." Jesus' return would be in *the future* and accompanied by the *same* glory ("in the same way") as in His ascension. Until this time comes, God calls the whole Church to participate in *His* mission of redeeming the world.

## **B. Waiting in Jerusalem (1:12–26)**

Acts 1:12–26 is Luke's account of the apostles and many other followers of Jesus *waiting in Jerusalem* for God to fulfill His promise of giving Jesus' followers the Holy Spirit. The focal points of this passage are the life and leadership of this community. After depicting what community life was like in 1:12–14, Luke turned his attention, in 1:15–26, to the replacement of Judas, one of Jesus' apostles.

Verses 12–14 are connected with the events of 1:6–11 and provide the background for what takes place in verses 15–26. Readers learn in 1:12 that the apostles were at "the hill called the Mount of Olives" – a place about three-fourths of a mile ("a Sabbath's day walk") away from Jerusalem – when they witnessed Jesus' ascension. In obedience to Jesus' command in 1:4–5, the apostles returned to Jerusalem to wait for the promised coming of the Holy Spirit. It is possible that the apostles' dwelling place during this time is the same location as the Last Supper (compare 1:13 with Lk. 22:7–13). Those who accompanied the

eleven apostles were certain female followers of Jesus (see Lk. 8:1–3; 23:55; 24:10) and Jesus' mother and brothers. This group of Jesus' followers was united and met "constantly" for prayer to God, which likely centered on God's future action and His preparing them for this work in, among, and through them.

Chapter 1 concludes in verses 15–26 with one more act of preparation: the apostolic replacement of Judas. Unlike the preparation of united prayer in 1:12–14, this act was not initiated by God (cf. 1:4–5). This does not mean, however, that selecting a twelfth apostle was against God's will. There was symbolic significance to having *twelve* apostles, for these twelve men represented the twelve sons of Jacob for the Church. Just as God's *old* covenant people began with twelve people, so would His *new* covenant people have their origins with a group of twelve. The necessity of a replacement arose after Judas had betrayed Jesus (see Lk. 22:1–6, 47–53) and then committed suicide (see Mt. 27:1–5). It is important to understand that Judas' betrayal and his replacement were part of the plan of God. Peter led the disciples (and, through the account, readers) to see how this plan has been revealed in the Scriptures, particularly the Psalms.

The phrase "in those days" in 1:15 indicates that 1:15–26 is an account of an event that occurred during the situation and time period narrated in verses 13–14. The apostle Peter, one of three of Jesus' inner circle among the apostles, initiated the replacement process among the gathered disciples (were there only 120 "believers" at this time?). In 1:16–17, 20–21, Luke narrates Peter's speech to this group. Verses 18–19 are a narrative aside about (1) Judas' purchase of a field with the reward money for his betrayal of Jesus and (2) the naming of this field after his suicide. This aside to readers informs them that since Judas was dead, there was no opportunity for him to remain as an apostle. Peter began in 1:16–17 by declaring that certain Scriptures, which came through "the mouth" of King David, were fulfilled in the betrayal of Judas. This Scripture is from the Psalms – 69:25 and 109:8, respectively – and quoted in 1:20. Peter's point in 1:20–22 seems to be that just as the first reference was *already* fulfilled by God, so the second reference ("May another take his place of leadership") would *also* come to pass through them. By choosing a replacement for Judas, the disciples themselves would be God's instruments for fulfilling Psalm 109:8. According to Peter, the one who could replace Judas to return the number of Jesus' apostles to twelve had to meet one important requirement. This disciple of Jesus must have been with Jesus and the other disciples during a certain time period – from the time of John's baptism until Jesus' ascension. By meeting this requirement, this new apostle could be a "witness" of Jesus' resurrection along with the other eleven apostles. To fulfill their God-given mission of being Jesus' witnesses, each apostle needed to be able to personally testify to all the important events, especially the resurrection, of Jesus' life and ministry (compare 1:21–22 with 1:8). In 1:23–26, the gathered disciples agreed upon and carried out a plan. They would seek God's will, through prayer and the casting of lots, about which of the two men they chose would replace Judas. God knows "everyone's heart" (see 1 Sam. 16:7) and would show them *His* choice (see Pr. 16:33). (This proposal shows that God often works in and through the actions

of His people.) The prayerful casting of lots revealed that God chose Matthias to be “added to the eleven apostles.”

## II. WITNESSES IN JERUSALEM (chaps. 2–7)

The focal point of Acts 2–7 is the disciples being *witnesses in Jerusalem*. Their testimony about Jesus in Jerusalem (and throughout the Roman Empire) begins after God pours out His Spirit on all of Jesus’ followers in chapter two. Chapters 3–5 center on the witness of Peter and John and the persecution that comes in response to the testimony of Jesus’ disciples in Jerusalem. In Acts 6–7, the story of Acts turns to Stephen’s testimony and martyrdom.

### A. The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit (chap. 2)

Chapter two revolves around *the outpouring of the Holy Spirit*. In Acts 1, Jesus prepared His followers for this event by instructing and commissioning them (1:3–11), and His followers prepared themselves through united prayer and the selection of a twelfth apostle (1:12–26). It is important to understand that Acts 2 relates both a past event *and* a present reality. The first disciples of Jesus knew that God would continue to fulfill His promise of sending the Spirit to indwell and empower those who turned to Jesus as their Lord and Savior. One of Luke’s intents in and through chapter two is to have readers comprehend and accept these truths. Acts 2 can be presented as unfolding in the following way: the beginning of the outpouring and reactions to this event (2:1–13); Peter’s speech about the outpouring, Jesus as King, and the Gospel (2:14–41); and the communal life of Jesus’ followers after this event (2:42–47).

Luke narrated the event itself in verses 1–4. God began to pour out His Spirit on Jesus’ followers on “the day of Pentecost,” which is also known as the Feast of Weeks and celebrated God’s provision in the grain harvest (see Lev. 23:15–21). Among many Jews in the first-century A.D., this festival was connected to the giving of the Law (this fact is helpful in interpreting the significance of this event occurring *during* Pentecost). The location for this event was a house where they were gathering together, most likely for prayer (compare 2:1–2 with 1:13–14). Luke’s description of the coming of God’s Spirit at this Pentecost focuses on certain sounds and sights that are reminiscent of God’s presence in the Old Testament. The “sound” that was “like...a violent wind” may recall “the sound of the trumpet” that accompanied God’s coming to Mount Sinai before He gave the Law to Moses. And the “tongues of fire” can bring to mind God’s descent at this time “in fire” (see Ex. 19:16–19). These sounds and sights indicate that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was related to God’s new covenant with the renewed people of God. The Jewish festival of Pentecost was associated with the making of God’s covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19–24). And this *particular* Pentecost pointed to the reality of the new covenant, which God made in Jesus and by His Spirit (see Jer. 31:31–34 and Ezek. 36:24–28). The disciples speaking in other

tongues were outward expressions (or manifestations) of their being filled with the promised gift of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2:5–13 is Luke’s account of the immediate reactions to the awesome, promised work of God in 2:1–4. The narrated reactions were those of God-fearing Jews who had come from throughout Israel and from those nations to which Jews had been dispersed throughout their history. Since Pentecost was one of Israel’s three annual pilgrimage festivals (see Deut. 16:1–17), pious and hopeful pilgrims from among the Jews in “every nation under heaven” were drawn to Jerusalem. What attracted the attention of several thousand Jews were the sounds of the coming (“a sound like the blowing of a violent wind”) and impact (the disciples speaking “in other tongues”) of God’s Spirit. The wind sound first brought the crowd together. Then, *each* person hearing the gathered disciples speaking in *each* person’s “own language” led to this crowd’s bewilderment. In 2:7–12, the “amazed and perplexed” crowd wondered aloud about how and why they, as an *international* group, were all hearing the disciples (the “Galileans”) declare “the wonders” of God’s work. (Note that it would not have made sense to them for Israelites from the province of Galilee to be able to speak such a diversity of languages.) The probing question of the crowd in 2:12 and the mocking statement of some in 2:13 provide the background and focal points for Peter’s speech in 2:14–41.

The *whole* speech, which was inspired by God’s Spirit, answers the question in 2:12 – “What does this mean?” In verses 14–21, Peter begins by directly addressing the comment in 2:13 about the disciples supposedly being drunk. The explanation that the disciples were drunk was not satisfactory, since no one would have gotten drunk at “nine in the morning.” Peter’s proclamation in verses 16–21 was that the event they heard and saw was actually the partial fulfillment of Joel 2:28–32 (note that the quotation does not include all of 2:32). Both Peter and (likely all of) his audience at this time would have been familiar with God’s promises in this Scripture. With the coming of Israel’s promised Messiah, Peter could declare that God’s promised reign of salvation had come to the earth. The “last days” of this prophecy had arrived. It is important to understand that there is an *already but not yet* aspect to God’s coming Kingdom in and through Jesus. After Jesus’ ascension to the right hand of the Father, God’s Kingdom continues to advance through the work of God’s Spirit, whom Jesus sends (see 2:33). The pouring out of God’s Spirit, marked by this Pentecost, has already begun and ushers Jesus’ followers into life in God’s Kingdom. The promise in 2:17–18 that God will pour out His Spirit on “all people” (lit., “all flesh”) will be completely fulfilled by the time of Jesus’ return. “All people” does not refer to every person but to every *kind* of person, regardless of their race, religion, social location, or background. The disciples “declaring the wonders of God” is one example of the Spirit-inspired “prophecy” and is a sure indication that God had initiated the fulfillment of this promise. The “wonders” and “signs” in 2:19–20 are related to God’s judgment that will occur “before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord,” a reference to Jesus returning in glory, triumph, and judgment. “Everyone who calls on” Jesus as Lord and Savior will escape this future judgment and enter into the salvation of God’s Kingdom. Acts 2:21 functions both as an

explanation that Jesus' followers have been (and will be) saved *and* as a proclamation to Peter's audience (and the readers of Acts).

While verses 14–21 are focused on explaining *what* happened, the emphasis in verses 22–36 is on proclaiming *why* these things occurred. The answer in 2:14–21 to the question, “What does this mean?” is that the promised Spirit of God has been poured out. Acts 2:22–36 answers this same question in the following way: the crucified Jesus of Nazareth has been resurrected and exalted by God the Father and is the One who has poured out the Holy Spirit. It is only in light of what God did through and to Jesus that the outpouring of God's Spirit can make complete sense. This part of Peter's speech starts off in verse 22 with what the audience knew and could not contest: God accredited Jesus by doing “miracles, wonders, and signs...through Him.” Many Jews could have thus acknowledged Jesus as a prophet of God. Peter, however, proclaimed that Jesus was *and is* more than a prophet, because the crucifixion of Jesus by the Jews and the Romans happened according to God's plan. Peter's testimony in 2:23–24 is that God's will for Jesus was that He would be crucified *and* resurrected from the dead. God raising Jesus from the dead cancelled out the shame of the Cross and vindicated Jesus' claims about His origins, identity, mission, and destiny as the Son of God.

In 2:25–36, Peter turned to how the Scriptures, particularly Psalms 16:8–11 and 110:1, pointed to Jesus' resurrection and ascension. The words from Psalm 16:8–11 in 2:27 (compare Ps. 16:10 with this verse) are what Peter concentrated on in verses 29–32. According to Peter, David spoke of “the resurrection of the Messiah” – and not *his own* resurrection – in these references to “the grave” and “decay.” Peter could confidently tell them that David had been abandoned to the grave and that his body had seen decay. David's God-given prophetic knowledge enabled him to know that God would fulfill His covenant promise to David about restoring David's royal dynasty (see 2 Sam. 7:1–17 and Lk. 1:26–33). Peter and the eleven other apostles were “all witnesses of the fact” of Jesus' resurrection and could confirm this interpretation of Scripture. Their personal testimony also included Jesus' ascension. God the Father exalted Jesus to His “right hand,” a reference to Jesus' lordship in God's Kingdom and His “place” on David's “throne” (compare 2:33 with 2:30), and then gave Him “the promised Holy Spirit” to pour out on His followers. This act of pouring out was what Peter's audience had seen and heard among the gathered disciples. Peter used another Psalm of David, in 2:34–35, to demonstrate that the Scriptures also spoke of Jesus' *ascension*. Although David “did not ascend to heaven,” Jesus did so and is “the Lord” to whom God had said, “Sit at my right hand...” in Psalm 110:1. This part of Peter's speech concludes in 2:36 with a statement that was intended to encapsulate his message about Jesus. All of Israel, including this audience, needed to know that the same Jesus *they* had crucified “God has made...both Lord and Christ” in Jesus' resurrection and ascension.

Acts 2:37–41 consists of the audience's response to Peter's words in 2:14–36, Peter's proclamation of the Gospel, and the audience's response to this message of salvation. The Holy Spirit convicted the audience (“they were cut to the heart”) of their sin of rejecting the Messiah, whom God had promised to them in their Scriptures for the redemption of the

world. Knowing that rebelling against God would eventually lead to His judgment against them, the audience asked the twelve apostles about what they could do to solve their plight. In 2:38–40, Peter told them what they must do by laying out what it means to call on the name of Jesus to be saved (see 2:21):

- Calling on the name of Jesus – repentance and baptism
- Being saved – the forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit

Implicit in the exhortation to “repent and be baptized...in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” is the faith in Jesus that He has made God’s promised redemption a reality for those who trust Him. Not only are Jesus’ followers forgiven of their sins, they are also given new life – eternal life, life in God’s Kingdom – in receiving the Holy Spirit. Baptism is a sign (i.e., a pointer to a certain reality) and a symbol (i.e., a picture of this reality) of this new life and is to be accompanied by repentance (i.e., the turning to God that begins with the changing of one’s mind). God will fulfill this promise of salvation in His Kingdom for all whom He calls to Himself among the Jews and the Gentiles. What Luke narrated in chapter two of Peter’s speech is not the entirety of it, for Peter also witnessed to them “with many other words.” In the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., God would later bring His judgment on this “generation” of Jews for their rejection of their promised Messiah. Peter’s exhortation about his audience saving themselves refers not only to the judgment of God in Jesus’ return but also this earlier judgment. About three thousand people showed their acceptance of Peter’s message as they were baptized.

In 2:42–47, Luke narrated the communal life of Jesus’ followers soon after this promised coming of God’s Spirit. Verse 42 is an overall summary of what life they were devoted to:

- “The apostles’ teaching,” which was focused on Jesus and consisted of His teachings and His understanding of the Old Testament (see Lk. 24:13–32)
- “The fellowship” of believers, who were united with and committed to one another (cf. 1:13–14)
- “The breaking of bread,” which revolved around the Lord’s Supper and probably included a larger meal
- “Prayer,” which included praising God for His wonderful work in, among, and through them

This summary is filled out in 2:43–47. Everyone in Jerusalem was filled with awe by God’s wonderful work at Pentecost and amazing ministry through the apostles. The believers were regularly gathering together and voluntarily selling certain possessions and goods to help those in need among them. Their meeting places were both public (honoring God “in the temple courts”) and private (enjoying the Lord’s Supper and joyful meals “in their homes”). God was praised wherever they met, and every Israelite in Jerusalem was gracious toward this community. Throughout this period of time, God continued on a daily basis to call people to call on Jesus’ name and so be saved.

## B. Healing and Preaching in Jerusalem (chap. 3)

*Healing and preaching in Jerusalem* is the main subject of chapter three. God works through the apostle Peter to heal a crippled man and to proclaim the name of Jesus. The healing and the reaction to it in 3:1–11 provide the occasion for the proclamation in 3:12–26.

The events of Acts 3 fall within the general situation of Jesus' followers Luke narrated in 2:42–47, which is Luke's description of how they lived in community after God poured out His Spirit. It was during "one day" of this time period that Peter and John went to the Jerusalem temple for prayer and came across a crippled man. Verses 1–2 set the stage for this interaction. Peter and John were like the rest of Jesus' followers – they were "devoted...to prayer" and went daily to the temple courts (see 2:42, 46). The crippled man was also doing a regular activity, namely, begging at the temple gate called Beautiful (probably the one that provided entrance from the Court of Women to the Court of the Israelites) from those entering the temple courts. While the crippled beggar was seeking money from Peter and John, Peter was prepared to give the man something that would make begging unnecessary.

In 3:3–5, Peter and John got the man's attention, so that the man could know what Peter was about to give him in Jesus' name. The Holy Spirit guided Peter in his ministry to this beggar and worked through him to restore the crippled man. As one of Jesus' disciples, Peter did ministry in the authority of Jesus (see Lk. 9:1–2), who was also empowered by the Holy Spirit (compare 2:4 with 2:22 and Lk. 7:18–23), and according to His character. Previously, the man did not enter the Court of the Israelites ("the temple courts" in 3:8) out of obedience to the Law of Moses (see Lev. 21:16–20). Because God had restored him through Peter's actions, the man was now able to do so and came into this area with jubilant praise of God. Verses 9–11 consist of Luke's account of the reactions that lead to Peter's speech in verses 12–26. All the people who were in the temple courts reacted with "wonder and amazement" at the sight of this healed beggar praising God for his restoration. The beggar seems to have held on to Peter and John out of gratitude to allowing God to work *through them* as his healer. Based on Peter's questions in 3:12, it appears that the observers in the temple thought that Peter and John were healers who had healed this beggar.

The location for Peter's speech in 3:12–26 was Solomon's Colonnade, a portico that ran along the eastern side of the outer temple area. Since Peter and John had the attention of these Jews, Peter took the opportunity to proclaim Jesus as the One who had given healing to this man. According to Peter, there was no reason for them to believe that "the power or godliness" of Peter and John enabled them to make the man walk. The implicit point in 3:12 may be that God is the *only* one who could have restored the beggar to health. Peter explains who Jesus was and is in 3:13–15, so that he can point to Jesus as the man's healer in 3:16. While the God of Israel "has glorified His servant Jesus" (see Is. 52:13), the people of Israel had, on the whole, dishonored Jesus. Although Pilate held some responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion, the Jewish leaders and the people were the ones who turned Jesus over to Pilate to be killed. Jesus, "the Holy and Righteous One," was disowned by the people for the sake

of releasing Barabbas, “a murderer” (see Lk. 23:13–25). The Jewish people killed “the author of life,” but God honored Jesus by raising Him from the dead (cf. 2:23–24). Peter and John were “witnesses” of Jesus’ resurrection and could attest to this act of God as well as Jesus’ ascension to heaven (see 2:32–33). It was because of Peter’s faith in *this* Jesus that he was enabled by God’s Spirit to provide healing for the beggar. Peter trusted in Jesus as the resurrected and ascended Messiah of Israel, the One who had given the promised Holy Spirit to Peter and all of Jesus’ followers to indwell them and empower them for such ministry. The main point here is that Jesus, “the author of life,” healed the man *through* Peter.

As in his speech in chapter two, Peter made sure, in 3:17–26, that his audience knew how his testimony about Jesus affected them. These men of Israel and their “leaders” had *previously* “acted in ignorance” when they “killed” Jesus (compare 3:17 with 3:13–15). After Peter bore witness to Jesus’ *true* identity and significance, he gave these Jews an opportunity to respond with repentance and faith to the good news about Jesus. Peter’s audience needed to know that Jesus’ crucifixion was not an accident. God had foretold through all His prophets that His Messiah would suffer (see Lk. 24:45–49). Peter exhorted his audience to repent of their sins and turn to God by trusting Jesus for their salvation in God’s Kingdom. If they followed this exhortation, they would enter into God’s Kingdom and experience “times of refreshing.” But there is also a future aspect to this salvation. God the Father has appointed Jesus to return in the future as the world’s Lord and Judge “to restore everything,” that is, to re-create the whole world according to God’s initial intent and design for His creation. As Jesus’ followers live and serve in God’s Kingdom, they *already* experience new life and are, in one sense, new *creatures* (see 2 Cor. 5:16–20). Jesus remains exalted at the right hand of God the Father until “the time comes” for Jesus to return and fulfill God’s promise of the New Creation.

Peter followed up the promise of salvation in God’s Kingdom in 3:19–21 with a warning about *not* listening to Jesus in 3:22–23. Most of the Jewish people did not respond with repentance and faith to the good news about God’s Kingdom coming in and through Jesus. Since Jesus was and is the predicted prophet Moses spoke of in Deuteronomy 18:15–19, God would bring judgment (being “completely cut off from among His people”) on those Jews who did not receive Jesus as their Lord and Messiah (see 2:36). It was important for Peter’s audience to understand that *all* the prophets have foretold “these days” of living in God’s Kingdom and waiting for Messiah’s return (compare 3:24 with 3:18). These Jews were “heirs” of all the prophecies and of all the covenant promises in their Scriptures, so they had a special place among all the nations. God had promised to Abraham that He would bless “all peoples on earth” through one of his “offspring” (see Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4). Jesus of Nazareth was and is this descendent of Abraham through whom God’s covenant love and blessings come to all peoples. While the Old Testament promised the redemption of the *whole* world, God sent His servant Jesus *first* to the Jewish people. The Gospel will be proclaimed in and to all nations, but the people of Israel, including this audience, had the privilege of hearing this message before the Gentiles.

### C. Persecution and Prayer (chap. 4)

Two activities dominate Acts 4 – *persecution and prayer*. After the Sanhedrin persecuted Peter and John for being witnesses to the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth (4:1–22), these apostles joined the rest of Jesus’ followers for prayer (4:23–31). This chapter closes with another summary description of the life of Jesus’ followers in community (4:32–37).

The events Luke narrated in 4:1–22 come about as a direct response to what happened in chapter 3. Moreover, chapter 4 begins in the evening of the day covered in the previous chapter. The healing of the crippled beggar at the Jerusalem temple and the reaction to this miracle (3:1–11) led to Peter’s preaching about the name of Jesus in the temple courts (3:12–26). The persecution of Peter and John arose because of this preaching. Those who persecuted the two apostles were from among the temple authorities. The captain of the temple guard, accompanied by the priests and the Sadducees, led the way in their arrest. Peter and John were put in jail until the next day, since it was too late for the Sanhedrin (i.e., the Jewish ruling council) to meet to address their actions (cf. Lk. 22:63–66). What concerned the Sanhedrin was the act (“teaching the people”) *and* content (proclaiming *in Jesus* “the resurrection of the dead”) of their “speaking to the people.” Most of the Sanhedrin consisted of Sadducees, a group who denied the existence of the spiritual world and the afterlife. This fact helps to explain their aversion to the proclamation of Peter and John about the future “resurrection of the dead” that would come about with the return of Jesus. In contrast to this rejection of their message, many in Peter’s audience heard *and* accepted this message, bringing the group’s number to about 5,000 men (compare 4:4 with 2:41).

Verses 5–22 move the story forward to “the next day,” the time when the Sanhedrin questioned Peter and John and then commanded them to desist speaking/teaching “in the name of Jesus.” This meeting of the Sanhedrin, which consisted of seventy members, included:

- The rulers, elders, and teachers of the law
- Caiaphas the high priest, Annas the father-in-law of the official high priest, John (possibly the son of Annas), Alexander, and other men of the high priest’s family

The question they put before Peter and John in 4:7 was an inquiry into the authority (“by what power or what name”) they were operating under as they spoke to the people about Jesus. Peter’s response in 4:8–12 shares two key features with his speeches in 2:12–41 and 3:12–26: (1) contrasting the actions of God with those of the people of Israel; and (2) showing how Jesus relates to the fulfillment of Scripture. While Jesus was the focal point of both Peter’s speech in chapter 3 and the Sanhedrin’s questioning, the crippled beggar who had been healed was also important to the preaching and the proceedings. Peter proclaimed the name of Jesus *after* and *in response to* the reaction of “wonder and amazement” to the healing from the people in the temple courts (see 3:8–12). Therefore, it was necessary for Peter to address the healing as well as the preaching: “It is by the name of Jesus Messiah/Christ of

Nazareth...that this man stands before you healed.” If these Jewish leaders had been truly listening to Peter in 3:12–26, they would have known the answer to their question in 3:7.

All the people of Israel, including (or especially?) its leaders, needed to “know” this truth about the Jesus, whom *they* had crucified but whom *God* had raised from the dead (compare 4:10 with 2:32–33 and 3:13–15). Quoting from Psalm 118:22, Peter declared that these leaders (“you builders”) had “rejected” Jesus (“the stone”), whom God has honored through raising Him from the dead (He became “the capstone”). Peter’s Spirit-inspired application of Psalm 118:22 to Jesus turns on the Old Testament imagery of the temple as God’s house (see, e.g., 2 Sam. 7:1–17). The Jews understood the temple in Jerusalem to be God’s dwelling place on earth. After Jesus’ crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension and the outpouring of God’s Spirit (see Acts 2:22–24, 32–33), the *new* locale for this special place is in and among Jesus’ followers (see also 1 Pet. 2:4–9). Like the capstone of a building, Jesus provides the foundational and essential support for this spiritual house. In 4:12, Peter not only continues proclaiming Jesus’ name but also invites the Sanhedrin to turn to Jesus for salvation (cf. 2:21). The salvation God offers in His Kingdom is only “found in” Him. These Jewish leaders had a choice to make – would they continue their rejection of Israel’s promised Messiah or would they turn to Jesus in repentance and faith?

What transpires in verses 13–22 reveals that the Sanhedrin chose to reject Jesus and His heavenly authority. Before the Sanhedrin gave Peter and John their official verdict about their disturbing activity, they needed to meet privately to discuss the matter. Two factors made this private conference necessary for the Sanhedrin. First, Peter and John had the boldness (“the courage”) to speak in such an official setting that only those who were specially trained in rhetoric usually had. The Sanhedrin was “astonished” by the skillful speech of men from Galilee (“men” who “had been with Jesus”) and, thus, unable to respond to their words about Jesus (see Lk. 21:12–15). The second factor was related to the nature of the miraculous healing. These Jewish leaders could not “deny” the reality of the healing with the healed man in their midst and with his infirmity being well known by those who frequented the temple (compare 4:16 with 3:2, 8–10, 16). To stop the news of this “outstanding miracle” from spreading among the Jewish people *outside of* Jerusalem, they commanded Peter and John “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.” The reply of Peter and John in 4:19–20 will become characteristic of how Jesus’ followers in Acts will respond to Jewish and Gentile restrictions on how and when they can bear witness to Jesus. The main issue of the proceedings was whether or not God was with Peter and John in their ministries. These two apostles were convinced that God was calling – and even compelling – them to be witnesses of Jesus. Both the apostles and the Sanhedrin knew that God was a *higher* authority who had to be obeyed. The Jewish ruling council could not decide how to punish them because all the people in Jerusalem believed that God was with the apostles and praised God for such a miraculous healing. Thus, the Sanhedrin’s “further threats” in 4:21 stopped short of any sort of official punishment.

Just as the events of 4:1–22 flow out of the events of chapter 3, so what occurs in 4:23–31 is directly connected to 4:1–22. Acts 4:23–31 is Luke’s narration of: (1) Peter and John

reporting to the gathered disciples the words of the Sanhedrin; (2) their common prayer to God; and (3) God's answer to this prayer. The unity among Jesus' disciples continues in 4:24–30 as they humbly approach God in prayer as the "Sovereign Lord." Their prayer begins with acknowledging that God created the whole world and everything in it. The implicit point here, a truth that is often found in the Old Testament, is that God is King over *His* creation. In 4:25–26, the disciples included Psalm 2:1–2 in their prayer to declare in 4:27–28 that these Spirit-inspired words were fulfilled in Jesus' crucifixion. Herod Antipas (one of "the kings"; see Lk. 23:6–11), Pontius Pilate (one of "the rulers"; see Lk. 23:1–25), the Gentiles ("the nations"), and the Israelites ("the peoples") conspired against Jesus (God's "Anointed One") to kill Him. (Note that Messiah/Christ means "anointed one.") Their conspiracies, like those of the opponents of God and David in Psalm 2, were unsuccessful. Their actions were part of God's plan as was God raising Jesus from the dead (compare 4:28 with 2:22–23, 32–33 and 3:13–15). It is interesting that the disciples make no reference to Jesus' *resurrection* here. The emphasis seems to be on the persecution that Jesus faced as God's "holy servant." God was with Jesus, and He would also be with His followers. In their requests to God in 4:29–30, the disciples identified themselves with Jesus as ones who were *also* being persecuted by the temple authorities in their prayer (see Lk. 22:1–6, 66–71 and 23:1–25):

- To enable them to speak God's word with "great boldness"
- To perform miraculous signs and wonders (such as healing) through their proclamation of the name of Jesus (compare 4:30 with Ex. 3:19–20)

These prayer requests could only be fulfilled in the disciples being filled with the Holy Spirit. This filling happens in 4:31 and results in their speaking God's word boldly. The shaking of their meeting place indicates that God would also answer their *second* request – the same power that created the earthquake would also carry out miraculous signs and wonders through them (see 5:12).

Luke followed up the accounts of the persecution (4:1–22) and the prayer (4:23–31) with a summary of the life of Jesus' followers after these events (4:32–37). This summary not only provides an update for the *communal* life of Jesus' followers. It also looks forward to the events of 5:1–11 in that the general situation depicted in the summary is contrasted with the actions of Ananias and Sapphira in chapter 5. The main point Luke wanted to make about the life of this community was that they were "one in heart and mind." Their common faith in Jesus united them together and expressed itself in love for another (see Gal. 5:6) as they provided for the needy among them. In terms of their possessions, they were willing to share with one another. In terms of their properties, some sold their lands or houses to give, through the administration of the apostles, to those in need. It is also important to know that the apostles were being empowered by the Holy Spirit to testify to Jesus' resurrection as Lord (compare 4:33 with 4:31). Verses 36–37 transition from the summary to 5:1–11. Barnabas, who sold a field to generously give to the needy among them, is a foil for Ananias and Sapphira in the following passage.

#### D. Ananias and Sapphira (5:1–11)

Acts 5:1–11 revolves around the deception and deaths of *Ananias and Sapphira*. Readers are prepared for this passage in two ways. First, the summary description of the communal life of Jesus' followers in 4:32–37 sets up readers for the actions of this married couple. Also, the negative example of Ananias and Sapphira is contrasted with the positive example of Barnabas in 4:36–37. Through 5:1–11, Luke provides readers with a full and realistic picture of how Jesus' followers lived in community in Jerusalem during the time of chapters 2–7.

This account begins with a narration of Ananias, “with his wife’s full knowledge,” selling a piece of property in order to give money to the apostles for the helping out of the needy among Jesus’ disciples. The language in 5:1–2 is reminiscent of Barnabas’ sale of a field and generous donation in 4:36–37. The key difference here is that Ananias did not bring all of the money to the apostles. It seems that Ananias and Sapphira wanted to be known as being generous – as Barnabas (the “Son of Encouragement”) was – without actually acting in such a way. In 5:3–11, there is a pattern that occurs twice: (1) Peter’s confrontation of Ananias/Sapphira; (2) the death of Ananias/Sapphira; and (3) the reaction of “all who heard” about the death(s). The cumulative effect of this pattern is to raise the tension in the story as “great fear” grips certain characters. Peter may have confronted Ananias first because he – as the one who legally owned the property – was more culpable for the deception.

Peter’s words to Ananias in 5:3–4 focus on both spiritual and practical dimensions of his deceptive act. Satan (and not the Holy Spirit; see 2:1–4) had filled Ananias heart, with the result that he lied to the Holy Spirit in keeping back some of the sale price while claiming that the whole sale price was being given. (Note that by lying to the leadership of the community of God’s new covenant people, Ananias lied to God Himself.) Moreover, this deception was unnecessary in as much as it was not a *requirement* to sell this property or to give all of the proceeds. As soon as Ananias heard Peter’s words, God disciplined this man by taking his life. (Or is it perhaps better to understand his death and Sapphira’s death as God’s judgment?) Since immediate burial was the custom in Palestine, young men buried Ananias soon after his death.

Verses 5–10 move the story forward by about three hours. Sapphira came to the gathering of Jesus’ followers (or at least, the apostles) in Jerusalem but did not know about Peter’s confrontation of her husband and his subsequent death. Since Sapphira was complicit in her husband’s deception, Peter also confronted her. Peter’s approach to confronting Sapphira seems to be distinct in one important way – she was given an opportunity to repent and to tell the truth. When asked about the price she and Ananias got for the land, she lied by communicating the same false price as her husband had done. Before pronouncing that God would take not only her husband’s life but her own, Peter asked her why she had agreed with Ananias to test the Spirit of the Lord. This was a rhetorical question. Sapphira immediately died by the disciplining hand of God. God’s intent in taking the lives of Ananias and Sapphira seems to be present in verse 11 – God desired that His whole church

(and all else who heard about these events) would seriously consider that His *holy* presence was among them. God's presence sets apart to God each believer and the whole believing community, and this was an essential truth that the early church needed to know and take into account.

#### E. Arrest and Release (5:12–42)

The two focal points of 5:12–42 are *arrest and release*. In 4:1–22, Peter and John were arrested and released. All of the apostles are arrested and released twice in 5:12–42. As in 4:1–22, the cause for the arrests is the apostles' testimony to Jesus.

Acts 5:12–16 serves two purposes. The first is to provide another summary of Jesus' followers living in community (cf. 2:42–47 and 4:32–37). Luke's second purpose is to show readers why the apostles will face the persecution of the Sanhedrin in verses 17–40. The activity of the apostles and the subsequent response among the Jewish people in and around Jerusalem leads to this persecution. God answered the disciples' prayer in 4:30 (to perform miraculous signs and wonders through Jesus' name) by empowering the apostles to perform "many" miraculous signs and wonders in Jerusalem. The combination of this work of God and the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira (and the threats of the Sanhedrin from 4:21?) led the people in Jerusalem to highly regard the believers but to be unwilling to join them in Solomon's Colonnade, the typical public meeting place of the believers (compare 5:12 with 3:11). There was, however, some more positive response among the Jewish people. During this time, the Lord continued to add to the number of believers on a regular basis (cf. 2:41; 4:4). The "result" of the situation depicted in 5:12–14 was that people from in and around Jerusalem brought "their sick and those tormented by evil spirits" to be healed by God as He worked through the apostles.

The first arrest and release of the apostles (as a whole group) occurs in 5:17–20, and the activity of the apostles in 5:21–25 leads to their re-arrest in 5:26. Certain members of the Sadducees had the apostles arrested because of their extreme jealousy over the honor Peter and the other apostles were receiving among the people. This opposition was not really concerned with the truth of the apostles' claims about Jesus. As in 4:1–7, the apostles were put in jail until the *following* day, the time when the Sanhedrin could officially meet to question the apostles. In 4:19–20, Peter and John claimed that their speaking in the name of Jesus was in obedience to God. This claim is confirmed for readers in 5:19–20, when an angel *of the Lord* freed them from jail and commanded them to return to the temple courts to continue to proclaim the Gospel ("the full message of this new life"). Their obedience to God, through the command of this angel, is narrated in 5:21. The account, in 5:21–24, of the Sanhedrin sending for the apostles and not finding them there in a "locked" jail is comical and seems to mock the Sanhedrin. The apostles were re-arrested after someone told the Sanhedrin that they previously arrested men were teaching the people in the temple courts. The captain with his officers brought the apostles the Sanhedrin, but they did so without force out of fear of the people's reaction to such actions (compare 5:26 with 4:21–22). The

questioning of the high priest focuses on two aspects of the apostles' activity. First, the apostles disobeyed "the strict orders" of the Sanhedrin from 4:18 ("not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus") by filling Jerusalem with their teaching about Jesus. The second aspect is the fact that the apostles' teaching claimed that the Sanhedrin were "guilty" of Jesus' "blood" (see 3:13–15, 17–18). The reply of the apostles in 4:29–32 enraged the Sanhedrin in many ways and could have cost the apostles their lives:

- The apostles had to obey God, *not* the Sanhedrin,
- The God of Israel raised Jesus, the one whom *they* had crucified (compare 5:30 with Deut. 21:23), from the dead.
- God the Father exalted Jesus (through Jesus' ascension) to His right hand "as Prince and Savior" that Jesus might provide Israel (including *its leaders*) with the gifts of repentance and the forgiveness of sins (see 2:32–39).
- The apostles *and the Holy Spirit* were "witnesses" of these things.
- God had given His Spirit to the apostles and the rest of Jesus' followers, who were "those" (*rather than* the Sanhedrin) "who obey" God.

God, in His providence, kept the Sanhedrin from putting the apostles to death through the words of Gamaliel, an honored rabbi of the time. The claim of the apostles was that they were acting in accordance with the sovereign plan of God. Gamaliel wanted the Sanhedrin to "consider carefully" how they might respond to this claim. The historical examples of "Theudas" and "Judas the Galilean" demonstrated to Gamaliel that those movements whose "purpose or activity is of human origin" are destined to "fail." In other words, the Sanhedrin would not need "to stop" the followers of Jesus. But if this movement was of divine origin, then the Sanhedrin would be risking "fighting against God" in their attempts to hinder the Jesus movement. Although Gamaliel's speech persuaded the Sanhedrin, they had the apostles flogged as a punishment for their disobedience. The apostles responded with (1) rejoicing in God counting them "worthy of suffering disgrace" for the sake of Jesus ("the Name") and (2) continuing the public ("in the temple courts") and private ("from house to house") teaching and proclamation of the Gospel (i.e., Jesus is Israel's promised Messiah).

#### **F. The Seven Servants (6:1–7)**

Acts 6:1–7 is about *the seven servants* the disciples chose to address a problem that arose within the early church in Jerusalem. This problem was related to "the daily distribution of food" to the widows among Jesus' disciples. Like most other gatherings of Jews at this time, the disciples sought to take care of their widows. But there were difficulties in the administration of providing for this needy group.

The fact that the number of disciples was increasing "in those days" helps to explain why this problem arose: some of the widows among the Grecian Jews were being overlooked as the group grew in size. All of Jesus' first followers were Jews. While some were Hebraic Jews (those who resided in Jerusalem and primarily spoke Aramaic/Hebrew), others were

Grecian Jews (those who *originally* lived outside Palestine and primarily spoke Greek). The language barrier most likely contributed to the conflict between these two subgroups of Jesus' disciples. Moreover, the Grecian Jews may have felt as if the widows of the Hebraic Jews were given priority in the daily distribution of food to the needy among them. The Twelve apostles took the lead in solving this problem as they addressed the whole gathering of disciples in 6:2–4. It became clear to the apostles that a small group of disciples should be responsible for the proper administration of donated resources (cf. 4:34–45). Since God called the apostles to focus on the “prayer and the ministry of the word” of God (see 1:6–8), the disciples should choose seven male disciples who were “full of the Spirit and wisdom.” After recognizing that the apostles' proposal pleased the whole group, they chose seven disciples, whom the apostles set apart for this task. (That all seven servants had Greek names may indicate the disciples' intent to communicate their commitment to the welfare of the Grecian Jews as well as the Hebraic Jews.) The conclusion to the account in 6:7 shows readers that the apostles' proposal was effective in freeing up the apostles to concentrate on their God-given ministry.

### **G. The Arrest of Stephen (6:8–15)**

Acts 6:8–15 is Luke's account of *the arrest of Stephen*, who was one of the seven servants the gathered disciples chose in 6:1–7. Although the apostles had faced persecution for their being Jesus' witnesses in chapters 4–5, the persecution brought against Stephen was of a different nature. In chapter 7, Stephen became the first martyr among Jesus' disciples. Stephen's arrest here sets up readers for his defense and death in the following chapter.

The persecution begins because of unsuccessful opposition to Stephen's message about Jesus. Stephen, however, did more than speak to the Jewish people about the good news of Jesus as their Messiah. God's Spirit filled Stephen with God's grace and power and enabled him to do great wonders and miraculous signs among the people (as the apostles had previously done). Members from the Synagogue of the Freedmen (a group of Grecian Jews who were freed slaves or the children of them) observed Stephen and argued with him. But since they could not stand up to the wisdom or power God's Spirit had given him, they secretly persuaded some in the crowd (in the temple courts?) to make false accusations against him. They accused Stephen of speaking “blasphemy against Moses and against God.” These troublemakers stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. This agitated group seized Stephen and brought him, along with some false witnesses, before the Sanhedrin. According to these so-called witnesses, Stephen spoke against the temple (“this holy place”) and “the law” of Moses as he referred to Jesus destroying the temple and changing the law. (See Mark 14:53–58 and 15:25–30 for the charge about Jesus destroying the temple.) After hearing these words, everyone in the Sanhedrin was focused on Stephen and saw confidence on his face. Verses 11–15 provide the context for Stephen's defense in 7:1–53.

## H. The Defense and Death of Stephen (chap. 7)

Chapter 7 consists of *the defense and death of Stephen*. The direct and immediate consequence of Stephen's defense of his message about Jesus (7:1–53) is his death by stoning (7:54–60). The false charges against Stephen in 6:11 were potentially lethal, since blasphemy was punishable by death according to the law (see Lev. 24:15–16 and Deut. 17:7).

Acts 7:2–53 is Stephen's reply to the high priest's question in 7:1 – "Are these charges true?" The content of Stephen's speech is a selective retelling of Israel's history (7:2–50) and an application of this history to his audience (7:51–53). Stephen selected events to address the charges in 6:13–14 about "speaking against" the temple and the law. The history can be divided into three parts: (1) Abraham and Joseph – before the Law (7:2–19); (2) Moses – the Law (7:20–43); and (3) David and Solomon – the temple (7:44–50). Each part focuses on major figures in Israel's history as God related to and worked through them. Also, it is important to notice how Stephen downplayed the role and significance of the Promised Land in Israel's history. The following chart highlights the major *events* in this history, Stephen's *interpretation* of these events, and the *significance* Stephen seems to attach to these interpreted events.

EVENTS	INTERPRETATION AND SIGNIFICANCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The call of Abraham (7:2–3; see also Gen. 12:1–3)</i></li> <li>• <i>God's promises to and covenant with Abraham (7:4–8)</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• God's covenant relationship with Israel began with God's calling and promises to Abraham.</li> <li>• This relationship existed before any Israelite possessed the Promised Land.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The patriarchs' betrayal of Joseph and God's salvation of Jacob's family through Joseph (7:9–16)</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Although the patriarchs rejected Joseph, God still worked through him to bring about the salvation of Jacob's family. Likewise, God's work of salvation was not stopped by the envy of the Jewish religious leaders (see Mk. 15:1–10)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The oppression of the Israelites in Egypt (7:17–19)</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The promise Stephen focused on was God's redemption of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, not God's gift of the Promised Land to the Israelites (compare 7:17 with 7:4–7).</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Moses' birth and upbringing (7:20–22)</i></li> <li>• <i>The Israelites' rejection of Moses as their rescuer (7:23–29)</i></li> <li>• <i>The call of Moses (7:30–34)</i></li> <li>• <i>The Exodus and the wilderness wanderings (7:35–38)</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Israelites rejected the one God set apart and sent to be "their ruler and deliverer"; Moses and Jesus are alike in this way.</li> <li>• God sent Jesus in fulfillment of Moses' prophecy about a future prophet from among the Israelites (see 3:17–23 and Deut. 18:15–19).</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Israelites' rejection of God at Mt. Sinai (7:39–43; see also Ex. 32–34)</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Israelites' unfaithfulness to God and the covenant began during the wilderness wanderings and eventually led to their exile in Babylon.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The making of the tabernacle and the building of the temple (7:44–50)</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• God directed the Israelites to make the tabernacle but <i>not</i> to build the temple.</li> <li>• God's magnificent glory and holy presence cannot be contained in any "house."</li> </ul>

Stephen's application of his words about Israel's history are the harshest words of Jesus' followers toward the Sanhedrin up to this point in the story of Acts (see 4:8–12 and 5:29–32). Stephen changed his focus from Jews who had rejected God and His plan of salvation in the past to those who did the same in the present. The Sanhedrin was the same as their fathers: they were "stiff-necked people," who refused to turn from their rebellion against God. The Holy Spirit had been at work among and through the Jews throughout their history. Both their fathers and the Sanhedrin resisted the work of the Holy Spirit as they killed the prophets God sent to them. These prophets had called them to repentance and to return to God, and ultimately, they (through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) "predicted the coming" of Jesus ("the Righteous One"). It was the Sanhedrin – and not Stephen – who had not obeyed the law. Moreover, these Jewish leaders had betrayed and murdered the promised Messiah of God.

The reaction of the Sanhedrin to Stephen's speech is best characterized as extreme rage. Stephen, who was full of the Holy Spirit, was given a vision of God's glory and Jesus standing at God's right hand (see 2:32–36 and Ps. 110:1). Jesus' posture of standing, rather than sitting, at the right hand of God the Father seems to mean that Jesus was honoring his witness and welcoming him into the presence of God. Stephen's words in 7:56 seal his fate. Stephen commented on his vision by telling his audience to look, as heaven opened, to see Jesus ("the Son of Man") standing at God's right hand. Believing Stephen's claim to a heavenly vision to be blasphemy, the false witnesses (and the Sanhedrin?) dragged Stephen out of the city in order to stone him. Luke noted that a young man named Saul held the cloaks of these men, so that he could introduce him into the main action of the story in chapter 9. Stephen's prayer (compare 7:59 with Lk. 23:46) and his final cry before his death (compare 7:60 with Lk. 23:34) are reminiscent of some of Jesus' last words in the Gospel of Luke. As a follower of Jesus, Stephen sought to live *and* to die as Jesus did. Since Stephen addressed Jesus in prayer in 7:59–60, it is clear that he saw Jesus as being fully God. (Note that it took the early Church a few hundred years to fully work out the implications of calling Jesus of Nazareth "God.")

### III. WITNESSES IN ALL JUDEA AND SAMARIA (chaps. 8–12)

Chapters 8–12 revolve around the activity of the disciples as they were *witnesses in all Judea and Samaria*. The disciples' testimony to Jesus was not limited, however, to these two provinces in the land of Israel. God worked through the disciples to spread the Gospel in other areas as well. Luke uses the phrase "all Judea and Samaria" to represent the outward movement of the Gospel from Jerusalem. The mission of God, as laid out in 1:8, continues as He works through many disciples of Jesus to spread the Good News of Jesus to new areas. It is important to understand that Luke's account of this work of God is selective: Luke did not cover every new facet of the ministry of the disciples during this time period. In Acts 8–12, Peter continues to be the main, human character, but Luke begins to introduce Paul (particularly, in chapter 9), the one who will be the main, human character in Acts 13–28.

#### A. The Scattering of the Church (8:1–4)

Acts 8:1–4 is about *the scattering of the Church*. These verses function as an introduction to chapters 8–12 and are important for understanding the plotline of the rest of the book. Jesus promised in 1:8 that His disciples would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and so be empowered to be Jesus' "witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." God used the great persecution that began on the day of Stephen's martyrdom (see 7:54–60) to fulfill the "in all Judea and Samaria" part of this promise. As the Church scatters, its witness to Jesus spreads.

The events of chapter 7 (Stephen's defense and death) lead directly to what transpires in 8:1–4. When Stephen was being martyred for his faith in Jesus, Saul was present, holding the cloaks of the witnesses who stoned Stephen (cf. 7:57–60), and "giving approval to his death." Stephen's testimony, which included direct and full indictment of those Jews who rejected Jesus, seems to have been a catalyst that led to "a great persecution" of the Church. Earlier opposition to the disciples' testimony to Jesus, in chapters 4–5, was based primarily on the Sanhedrin's jealousy of the growing honor of the Church (especially the apostles) in Jerusalem. Stephen's death for being a witness to Jesus in Jerusalem demonstrated the increase of opposition *in intensity*. The great persecution that broke out against the Church after his death shows that opposition to Jesus' disciples grew also *in scope*: all of the disciples, except the apostles, were "scattered throughout Judea and Samaria" because of this persecution. The disciples were now persecuted for *who* they were. The apostles seem to have remained in Jerusalem to send support, encouragement, and guidance to the scattered disciples as they needed help in other areas. The situation of being dispersed from their homes was worsened by Saul pursuing and prosecuting them for being Jesus' followers. Luke contrasted Saul's actions with those of godly, Jewish men who buried Stephen and mourned deeply for his martyrdom (a sign of repentance for rejecting Jesus?) The scattered disciples preached the message of the Gospel "wherever they went" and likely faced Jewish opposition, such as from those like Saul, to their preaching about Jesus. Verse 4 provides the

setting for Philip's activities in the rest of chapter 8 and the explanation for the existence of other communities of Jesus' followers in new areas.

## **B. Philip in Samaria (8:5–25)**

The ministry of *Philip in Samaria* is the focal point of 8:5–25 and an example of Luke's summary statement about the scattering disciples' spreading of the Gospel in 8:4. God impacted all of Samaria through Philip's ministry work there, and Luke chose to highlight, in these verses, the effects of this work on a sorcerer named Simon. The apostles Peter and John also play an important role in God's activity in Samaria.

Luke structured the account of Philip's ministry in Samaria to focus on Simon's magic (see, especially, verses 9–13) and the possible transformation that could have come from hearing the Gospel (see, especially, verses 18–24). When Philip was dispersed from Jerusalem, he went to a Samaritan city and proclaimed there that Jesus was Israel's promised Messiah. God empowered Philip (as He did with the apostles; see 5:12) to perform miraculous signs (delivering many from evil spirits and healing many paralytics and cripples). Consequently, the city paid attention to Philip's message and was filled with joy over God's miraculous work there. Before giving the account, in 8:12–13, of "all the people of Samaria" turning to Jesus in faith and repentance, Luke narrated, in 8:9–11, how all social classes among these people followed and honored Simon because of his amazing magic. Philip preached the good news that Jesus had come to reestablish God's reign on the earth. And the Samaritan people changed their attention and allegiance from the demonic powers behind the magic of Simon to Jesus, the one who brings the gracious reign of God. Their trust in Jesus was demonstrated as they were baptized, a public sign of commitment to Jesus and the community of His followers. The most notable conversion for Luke was that of Simon the sorcerer, though the exact nature of this change comes into question later in this account.

The apostles, especially Peter and John, come back into the story when the apostles sent Peter and John, after hearing about Samaria's acceptance of the Gospel, to give their approval as leaders of the Messiah-following community. Peter and John verified that these Samaritans had, in fact, turned to Jesus as the Lord of God's Kingdom. But since the Holy Spirit had "not yet come upon any of them," the two apostles prayed for and laid their hands on them to receive the Holy Spirit (receiving the Spirit is a normative reality for all of Jesus' followers). In verses 18–24, Simon returns to the story to interact with John and, especially, Peter. It seemed to Simon that Peter and John had performed some sort of magic in laying hands on the Samaritans to receive the Spirit from God. This conclusion led Simon to offer Peter and John money to give him "this ability." Peter's rebuke of Simon in 8:20–23 revolves around the condition of his heart. The Holy Spirit was and is a gift of God and cannot be bought and sold. Simon's heart was "not right before God," and his wicked offer kept him from having any "part or share" in the ministry of the apostles. Peter exhorted Simon to repent and to ask for the Lord's forgiveness. Simon's response in 8:24 shows that there was

no repentance in his heart. Instead of changing his mind about his relationship to God, Simon merely wanted to avoid the consequences of his actions, namely, God's judgment for his rebellious heart. Before returning to Jerusalem with their reports of God's work and their ministry, Peter and John testified about Jesus and proclaimed the Gospel in this Samaritan city. Their return trip was filled with opportunities of preaching the Gospel in many Samaritan villages. All of the apostles, like Peter and John, would have seen the proclamation and acceptance of the Gospel in the province of Samaria as a significant step in the progress of the Gospel. The Jewish people viewed Samaritans as heretics – they were a racially-mixed group that had distorted the faith and heritage of Israel. That God had given His Spirit to Samaritans demonstrated the spreading of the Gospel outside the confines of Jerusalem *and* Judaism.

### C. Philip and the Ethiopian (8:26–40)

Acts 8:26–40 revolves around the interactions between *Philip and the Ethiopian*. These two men encounter one another because of the sovereign direction of God. Through Philip and the Old Testament, God brought the Ethiopian man to hear and accept the good news about Jesus.

In 8:26, this account picks up the storyline of Philip from 8:5–25 (see 8:5–13) with the command of an angel of the Lord to head in a southwesterly direction from Samaria. This desert road that connects Jerusalem to Gaza was the same road that an Ethiopian eunuch was traveling on. As a eunuch, this Ethiopian man was able to be “an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace” (“Candace” was a title for the mother of the reigning monarch in Ethiopia at this time). Since the man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, he may have been a Jewish proselyte or, at least, a God-fearer (a Gentile who believed in and honored the God of Israel but did not fully embrace every aspect of the Jewish way of life, with circumcision and dietary laws being notable examples). When Philip came across the Ethiopian eunuch, the man was reading aloud from the book of Isaiah. (At this time, the act of reading was almost always done aloud, even when one was alone.) The Holy Spirit told Philip to go to the Ethiopian's chariot and “stay near it.” This command and Philip's obedience to it gave Philip the opportunity to hear the eunuch reading Isaiah and, then, to ask him if he understood what he was reading. The eunuch acknowledged to Philip his need for someone to explain the reading to him, so that it would become understandable to him.

After inviting Philip to come up into the chariot and to sit with him, the eunuch shared the words from Isaiah 53:7–8 (quoted in Acts 8:32–33) and asked Philip if the prophet was talking about “himself or someone else.” The eunuch's question in 8:34 was one of the inquiries Jewish readers in the first-century were bringing to this passage. Isaiah 53:7–8 is part of what is often called in modern times the fourth “Servant Song” (Is. 52:13–53:12), a passage that was very useful for the early church in understanding and proclaiming Jesus as Israel's promised Messiah. Philip began with Isaiah 53:7–8 and used other passages from the Old Testament to tell the eunuch “the good news about Jesus.” One can imagine that, on the

basis of Jesus' example in Luke 24:13–27, Philip's Scriptural teaching covered passages throughout the Old Testament. At some point, the eunuch repented and came to faith in Jesus. It seems that Philip included the rite of baptism in his conversation with the eunuch (cf. 2:37–39), for the eunuch asked to be baptized upon seeing some water. Did this man ask, "Why shouldn't I be baptized?" because he was previously prohibited from taking part in Jewish religious activities as a eunuch (see Deut. 23:1)? The interactions between Philip and the Ethiopian both began *and* ended with God's intervention: the Spirit somehow took Philip away and brought him to Azotus, a city north of Gaza. The eunuch never saw Philip again, but he was focused on the joy of his salvation in Jesus the Messiah. Philip continued northward (probably up the coast) from Azotus and preached the Gospel in all the towns he came across until he reached his destination, Caesarea Maritima.

#### **D. Saul's Encounter with Jesus (9:1–19)**

*Saul's encounter with Jesus* is the subject matter of 9:1–19. After Jesus revealed Himself to Saul, Saul was transformed from being a persecutor of Jesus' followers to one of His followers. Also, Jesus gave Saul an important calling in the service of God's mission of spreading the Gospel around the world.

The word "meanwhile" in 9:1 returns the focus of the story to Saul and his persecution of the Church (cf. 8:1–3). Saul's activity of "breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" took him to Damascus in his pursuit of them. Saul had obtained the authority of the high priest to extradite any disciples (those "who belonged to the Way") that were there to take them as prisoners to Jerusalem, where they would be tried before the Sanhedrin for their views about Jesus and the law. Saul's encounter with Jesus happened as he and the men traveling with him were near Damascus. God used this vision of Jesus (9:3–6) and Ananias' vision of Jesus (9:10–16) to turn one of the early church's fiercest opponents into one of God's most forceful agents. On this part of Saul's journey to Damascus, heaven opened and a light from there flashed around him. This sight knocked Saul to the ground. The voice from heaven in 9:4 was that of Jesus: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" In his persecution of Jesus' followers, Saul was actually persecuting Jesus *Himself*. Jesus' relationship with the Church is such that some New Testament authors (such as Paul!) can call the Church "the body of Christ" (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 12:12–27). Paul's response of asking, "Who are you, Lord?" is somewhat difficult to interpret. Did Saul recognize the voice of Jesus from Stephen's vision (see 7:54–60)? Or, was Saul using "Lord" in a more general way (the Greek word *kurios* here can also be translated as "Sir"), not knowing that the voice was coming from heaven? Jesus replied by identifying Himself as the "Jesus" Saul had been persecuting and then commanding Saul what to do next: get up, go into the city, and wait there for what Jesus would tell him what he "must do." Saul's companions were speechless, hearing the voice as a sound but not seeing anyone. Saul, with the help of his companions, obeyed Jesus' commands. Saul was left blind by the light from heaven for three

days and fasted from food and drink during this time. It is reasonable to assume that Paul's fasting was accompanied by praying, seeking God's guidance to make sense of this vision.

Luke then introduced Ananias, the one Jesus would use to heal Saul and to communicate Jesus' calling for Saul. Verses 10–16 seem to have happened three days after Saul's encounter with Jesus. The Lord Jesus called to Ananias in a vision and commanded him to go to Saul, giving him specific directions to his location. Readers learn in 9:12 that Jesus had given Saul a vision of Ananias coming to him to restore his sight. Ananias, who was most likely a resident of Damascus, knew of Saul's persecuting activity in Jerusalem *and* his official pursuit of Jesus' disciples ("all who call on your name") in Damascus. Ananias' bargaining with God is reminiscent of that of Abraham (see Gen. 18) and Moses (see Ex. 3–4). Jesus' response was to exhort Ananias to be obedient to His commands and to inform him about what His sovereign intentions for Saul. Jesus had "chosen" Saul to be His "instrument" – he would "carry" Jesus' "name" before many Gentiles, many of their kings, and many Jews who were in Israel and dispersed throughout the Roman Empire. The obedient Ananias certainly passed on these words about Saul's God-given calling when he met Saul in Judas' house. Saul had put his faith in Jesus as Israel's promised Messiah sometime between his encounter with Jesus and Ananias' visit. After placing his hands on Saul, Ananias told him that the Jesus who had appeared to him had sent him for two purposes: (1) to heal the blindness; and (2) to pray for Saul to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Luke narrated the restoration of Saul's sight and his subsequent baptism, but there is no account of Saul being "filled with the Holy Spirit." However, the fact that God had given Saul His Spirit becomes clear in 8:20–21. Saul regained his strength after ending his three-day fast by taking some food and then spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.

#### **E. Saul in Damascus and Jerusalem (9:20–31)**

Acts 9:20–31 focuses on *Saul in Damascus and Jerusalem*. Through his encounter with Jesus and interactions with Ananias, Saul became a Spirit-filled follower of Jesus. This passage contains two accounts of Saul's early ministry (one in Damascus, the other in Jerusalem) as one of Jesus' disciples who was being faithful to God's calling on his life (see 9:15–16).

The statement that "Saul spent several days...in Damascus" provides the temporal setting for his ministry in this city. (How much time is meant with the phrase "several days" is unclear.) Saul immediately ("at once") began preaching in the Damascus synagogues that Jesus is "the Son of God," a title for Israel's promised Messiah that did not *originally* indicate divinity. Saul's audiences were "astonished" that they were hearing the man who had persecuted Jesus' disciples in Jerusalem and intended to do the same in Damascus *now* proclaim Jesus' name!. As God empowered him, Saul's preaching became so "powerful" that he baffled the Jews in Damascus as he proved (through an exposition of the Old Testament) that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah God had promised to Israel. Jesus' promise about Saul's suffering in 9:16 begins to come to fulfillment in 9:23–24, when the Jewish response to

Saul's preaching turned to persecution. The Jews conspired to kill Saul – their plan was to capture and to kill Saul as he exited through the city gates. After Saul learned of their plan, those who had accepted Saul's message about Jesus helped him by lowering him, under the cover of darkness, through an opening in the city wall.

Saul's escape from Damascus took him to Jerusalem. While the Jewish response to Saul's activity was astonishment, the response from among Jesus' followers was fear. It seems that they thought that Saul's attempts to join the fellowship of the disciples were a ruse. Barnabas, a godly disciple in Jerusalem (see 4:32–37), helped Saul out by convincing the apostles that Saul:

- Had encountered Jesus on his journey to Damascus
- Had been commissioned by Jesus to proclaim Jesus' name
- Had preached "fearlessly" in Damascus

Barnabas' encouragement to the apostles enabled Saul to be fully accepted as one of Jesus' disciples – Saul stayed with the disciples and moved about freely in Jerusalem. Saul's preaching ministry continued as He spoke boldly in Jesus' name in Jerusalem. Saul once again faced persecution after his talks and debates with the Grecian Jews incited them to try to kill him. As in Damascus, the disciples helped Saul to escape persecution (compare 9:29–30 with 9:23–25). The Jerusalem disciples learned of these attempts on Saul's life and took him to Caesarea Maritima, where they sent him off (probably by sea) to Tarsus. Verse 31 is another of Luke's summary verses about the condition of the community of Jesus' followers. The Church at this time consisted of local communities throughout the provinces of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. These scattered but gathered disciples:

- Enjoyed a time of peace (because Saul was no longer persecuting the Church?)
- Was strengthened and encouraged by the work of the Spirit, in the community *and* through the Old Testament and the apostles' teaching
- Grew in numbers as they lived in reverence of Jesus.

#### **F. Peter in Lydda and Joppa (9:32–43)**

The focal point of the story changes from Saul in Damascus and Jerusalem (9:20–31) to *Peter in Lydda and Joppa* in 9:32–43. This account of Peter's ministry serves two purposes. First, Peter is reintroduced to the center stage of the story. The second purpose is to show how Peter ended up staying "in Joppa...with a tanner named Simon" in order to set up readers for his actions with Cornelius in chapter 10.

It is unclear whether Peter's travels about the country are part of the return trip to Jerusalem Luke noted in 8:25. Since there is no mention of John being with him, the best interpretation seems to be that this is a different occasion. During this time of traveling ministry, Peter went to visit the saints in Lydda. God used the healing of a paralytic named Aeneas to bring the residents of Lydda and nearby Sharon to come to Jesus as Lord. These

people were most likely Jews, since Luke marks the conversion of the *Gentile* Cornelius and household, in chapter 10, as a landmark in the life of the early Church. Luke also noted God's restorative work through Peter in the city of *Joppa*. After Tabitha, a Jewish disciple who cared for the poor, became sick and died, the disciples in Joppa sent for Peter to come immediately to them from nearby Lydda. Her body was washed but not buried, possibly in anticipation that God would work through Peter to restore her to life. Peter went with the two men who came from Joppa to the upstairs room where Tabitha's body was placed. The widows who were among the poor Tabitha had helped expressed their grief around Peter and showed him the robes and other clothing Tabitha had made for them. In a very simple way, Peter knelt down, prayed, told Tabitha to "get up," and presented her alive to the believers and the widows. This miraculous act of God became known all over Joppa and was used by God to bring many people to faith in Jesus. This account of Peter's ministry in Lydda and Joppa closes with comments about the length of time ("for some time") and the specific location ("with a tanner named Simon") of his stay in Joppa. After reading 9:32-43, attentive readers know two important things about Peter: (1) God was *continuing* to work through Peter; and (2) Peter was staying in Joppa with a tanner named Simon. Knowing these things prepares readers for God's action with and through Peter in chapter 10.

#### **G. Peter and Cornelius (chap. 10)**

Acts 10 revolves around God's action with and through both *Peter and Cornelius*. On the one hand, this chapter is about the conversion of Cornelius. On the other hand, this account also focuses on the change of Peter's mind about Gentiles, such as Cornelius.

Luke included much material and many details in Acts 10. One way for readers to make their way through this chapter is to concentrate on the occurrences and sequence of the visions and trips in Luke's account of God's work here. The first vision is that which Cornelius receives from God who sent an angel to him. That God gave Cornelius a vision is significant – he was a Gentile who was sincerely seeking God. Cornelius lived in Caesarea Maritima and was a centurion (a commander who had authority over one hundred soldiers) in the Italian Regiment. Luke noted that both he and his whole family were "devout and God-fearing." (These descriptions probably indicate that the household of Cornelius consisted of God-fearers.) Cornelius' devotion to and fear of God was evident in his generous giving to the needy and his regular prayers to God. This vision occurred at three in the afternoon, which was the second time of daily prayer for Jews, and may have been given to Cornelius while he was praying. After getting Cornelius' attention, the angel communicated to him (the Greek word for "angel" also means "messenger") about his relationship with God and a command from God. Cornelius' prayers and gifts to the poor were seen by God as "a memorial offering" before Him, something that was pleasing to God. The command about sending men to bring back Peter from Joppa to himself in 10:5 was not accompanied by the rationale for these actions. Why Cornelius should obey this command would only become clear at a later time. Cornelius immediately obeyed God's command

after the angel left him by telling two of his servants and a devout soldier about his vision and then sending them to Joppa.

Verses 9–23 fast forward to “the following day,” the time when Peter received his vision from God. As the three men from Cornelius were on their journey to go to the house of Simon the tanner in Joppa, Peter went up on the roof of Simon’s house to pray. Since he was hungry, Peter asked for something to eat. God gave Peter the vision as the meal was being prepared and as he fell into a trance. What Peter saw in his vision was a strange sight that happened three times for emphasis:

- “Something like a large sheet” came down from heaven with an abundance of “all kinds” of God’s creatures (see Gen. 1:26–28) on it
- God commanded Peter to get up, to kill, and to eat what he killed
- Peter would not obey God’s commands because he would not eat some of the creatures that were “impure or unclean”
- God told Peter not to “call anything impure” that *He* had “made clean”

The conclusion of the vision was the sheet being taken back to heaven. The reference to “impure or unclean” food is based on God’s commands to Israel about clean and unclean foods in Leviticus 11. These distinctions between what was clean and unclean came from God’s revelation to Israel about how they were to live in a holy (i.e., set apart to God) way in God’s created order. Most Jews believed in and sought to live according to this revelation of God. God’s vision to Peter about eating unclean animals must have been very difficult to understand and grasp. God’s orchestration of the meeting of Peter and Cornelius continues as the men sent by Cornelius arrive at Simon’s house “while Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision.” The Spirit told Peter that He had sent three men to them and that Peter was to have no hesitation in going with these men who were looking for him. Peter was obedient in meeting them *and* in wanting to know why they had come to him. Readers learn more about Cornelius in the reply of the men about the angel and his command: Cornelius is also righteous and respected by all the Jewish people in Caesarea Maritima. Before beginning the trip the next day with some of the disciples from Joppa, Peter welcomed the three men as his guests.

Acts 10:24–48 is concerned with Peter’s meeting with Cornelius and his relatives and close friends *and* the preaching and acceptance of the Gospel. Peter, the disciples from Joppa, and the three men sent by Cornelius arrive in Caesarea Maritima the day following their departure. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his family and close friends for this special occasion. When Cornelius fell at Peter’s feet to revere him, Peter would not allow Cornelius to show him such respect (compare 10:25–26 with 3:11–12). In 10:27–33, Peter (vv. 28–29) and Cornelius (vv. 30–33) explain to the large gathering of people why everyone was present. Although it was against Jewish tradition (“our law”) for Jews to associate with or visit Gentiles, God had shown Peter that he should not call any person – and not just any food! – “impure or unclean” (compare 10:28 with 10:13–15, 19–20). In light of this revelation from God, Peter came to Cornelius “without raising any objection” and was

curious about why Cornelius had sent for him. Cornelius' answer to Peter's question in 10:29 consists of a retelling of the events of 10:3-8 and an interpretation of Peter's trip to them. Cornelius recognized two important truths: (1) God was present in the gathering; and (2) God had commanded Peter to communicate a message to the gathering. The message that Peter gave in 10:34-43 is guided by his realization in verses 34-35: God accepts all those "who fear Him and do what is right" amongst "every nation," not just from among the people of Israel. Verses 36-41 are a proclamation about what God through and for Jesus of Nazareth:

- God sent Jesus, the "Lord of all," to tell Israel "the good news of peace" and anointed Him with the Holy Spirit to do good deeds and to heal.
- The Jews crucified Jesus but God raised Him from the dead.
- The apostles were witnesses of both His ministry and His resurrection, which they could confirm was a *bodily* resurrection (see 1:3-4).

In 10:42-43, Peter turned from the past to the present. Jesus had commanded the apostles to preach to the Jewish people and testify that He God had appointed the resurrected Jesus as "judge of the living and the dead," the One who will return in both salvation *and* judgment. This good news, however, was not just for the Jews. The Old Testament ("all the prophets") bears witness that everyone – whether *Jew or Gentile* – who trusts in Jesus as Lord "receives forgiveness of sins through His name" (compare 10:43 with 2:37-39).

God had arranged for Peter to speak this message to this audience, because they were receptive to God and the salvation He offers in Jesus. By the end of Peter's message, the whole audience had accepted the Gospel and the Holy Spirit came on all of them while Peter was still speaking. To the knowledge of the circumcised believers, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit had occurred *only* with Jews who had come to faith in Jesus (the Ethiopian eunuch *may* be an exception in the story of Acts; see 8:26-40). These believers were, thus, astonished by God giving the gift of the Spirit to Peter's *Gentile* audience, who had spoken in tongues and praised God like the Jewish believers in 2:1-4. Before ordering that these Gentiles "be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ," Peter asked a rhetorical question about if he anyone could keep these people from being baptized with water. The expected answer was "no." Those who have received the Holy Spirit should be allowed to go through the Christian rite of baptism. This account closed with Peter accepting his audience's request to stay with them for a few days. Presumably, Peter's time with them was filled with fellowship, teaching, and encouragement.

## H. Peter's Explanation of God's Work (11:1–18)

*Peter's explanation of God's work* in chapter 10 is the focal point of 11:1–18. Peter defended his actions and explained the work of God as he spoke to many Jewish believers in Jerusalem. It was necessary for God, in Acts 10, to change Peter's mind about the status of Gentiles before God – that He accepts people from *all* nations who fear Him and do what is right. God used Peter in these verses to change the minds of his critical audience about the same topic.

Acts 11:1–3 sets the stage for Peter's speech in 11:4–17. The apostles and the disciples ("the brothers") throughout the province of Judea heard about the Gentiles accepting the Gospel ("the word of God") in Caesarea Maritima. When Peter went to Jerusalem (immediately after his few day stay in Acts 10?), the Jewish believers there criticized him for entering the house of and eating with "uncircumcised men." Their focus was on the Jewish tradition built up around the Law of Moses, not on the sovereign and gracious work of God. To address this criticism, Peter retold events from 10:9–48 to encourage his audience to embrace the same conviction God had led him to believe. Peter's focal points in this retelling were twofold: (1) the meaning of the God-given vision; and (2) the initiative and sovereignty of God. Two new and important details are present in Peter's precise account of what "happened" in the Gentiles' reception of God's word. First, the angel told Cornelius that Peter would bring them "a message" that would lead to their salvation (compare 11:13–14 with 10:32–33). The second detail was that, after the Holy Spirit had come on Cornelius and the other Gentiles, Peter remembered Jesus' promise from 1:4–5 about giving the Holy Spirit to His followers (see also Lk. 3:15–18). The main point of Peter's speech is found in 11:17 – Peter could not "oppose God," who had accepted these Gentiles *as Jesus' followers* and given them "the same gift" of the Spirit. Peter's audience was convinced by his speech and had no further objections about Gentiles not becoming Jews in order to follow Jesus. Instead, these Jewish believers praise God for giving these Gentiles the change of mind and way of life that leads to eternal life ("repentance unto life").

## I. The Church in Antioch (11:19–30)

Acts 11:19–30 is about *the church in Antioch*. The story of Acts returns here to the scattering of Jesus' disciples and the resulting spreading of the Gospel from 8:1–4. God's work through Jesus' followers in Antioch is another example of the progress of His mission of bringing the Gospel to areas outside of Jerusalem. Also, this passage focuses on the ministries of Saul and Barnabas.

Those who had been scattered by the persecution "in connection with Stephen" preached the Gospel wherever they went (see 8:2, 4). In 11:19, readers learn that these disciples traveled as far as "Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch." Most of them told the message of the Gospel only to Jews. But some of the scattered disciples, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and told both Jews *and* Gentiles (those who were God-fearers?) the

good news of Jesus as Lord of God's Kingdom. God worked in a mighty way through them to bring a great number of people to faith in Jesus. As in 8:14, the apostles sent representatives to approve and guide those who had accepted the Gospel. On this occasion, Barnabas was the representative because he was known to be a good man, who was full of the Spirit and faith. After arriving and seeing the evidence of God's grace at work among the believers in Antioch, Barnabas was glad about God's work and encouraged them to be faithful to the Lord. Barnabas' ministry continues in Antioch after he went to Tarsus, Saul's hometown, to look for Saul and to bring him to Antioch. Together, Barnabas and Saul spent a whole year teaching the great number of people who had "believed and turned to the Lord" (compare 11:25-26 with 11:20-21). Luke's comment about the disciples first being called "Christians" at Antioch is evidence of his interest in the historical contexts of the life of Jesus and the early Church. The term "Christian" has the sense of "Christ-followers" and was likely intended to be derogatory. Those who called the disciples "Christians" did so to mock them for their imitation of their "Christ/Messiah." Luke's account of the church in Antioch also included words about God's work through a prophet named Agabus. It was during the one-year period of Barnabas and Saul's teaching ministry that some prophets went from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of those prophets was Agabus, who predicted "through the Spirit" a severe famine that would affect "the entire Roman world." This famine happened in approximately 46 AD, during the reign of Emperor Claudius (r. 41-54 AD). God had sent Agabus to move the disciples to action. (The main role of God's prophets is to speak forth His word and to change the behavior of His people.) God's word was effective in that the disciples in Antioch provided help for the disciples by sending a gift, with Barnabas and Saul, to the elders among the Judean disciples. This act of charity was likely important in fostering unity and fellowship between the Jewish and Gentile church in Antioch and the more Jewish churches throughout Judea.

#### **J. The Escape of Peter (12:1-19)**

Acts 12:1-19 revolves around *the escape of Peter*. In chapters 8-11, the disciples in Jerusalem were being scattered by the persecution that began with Stephen's martyrdom (see 8:1-2). God used this scattering to bring the Gospel to new areas as these scattered disciples spread the Gospel to peoples outside of Jerusalem. In 12:1-19, the focal point of the story returns to Jerusalem, where God delivered Peter from the persecution of King Herod (that is, Agrippa I).

Verses 1-4 set the scene for what follows in verses 5-19. The phrase "this time" likely refers to the time period represented in 11:27-30. The persecution of Peter is part of a larger opposition to the Church. Agrippa I arrested some who belonged to the Church and then had James the son of Zebedee, one of Jesus' Twelve Apostles, executed. This Jewish ruler, who was ruthless and cruel like his grandfather Herod the Great, is known for his continual pursuit of pleasing the Jews and his typical success in this endeavor. Seeing how the execution of James pleased the Jews in the areas of his rule (or, at least, in Jerusalem)

encouraged Agrippa I to also persecute Peter. Agrippa arrested and imprisoned Peter on Passover, the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread's. His intent was to bring Peter out for public trial after the Passover. Peter was guarded by four squads, each one consisting of four soldiers and covering one of the four watches of the night. This scene of imprisonment helps sets the stage for the miraculous nature of Peter's escape from Agrippa's persecution.

What changes Peter's situation was God answering the prayers of the Church, who was "earnestly praying to God for him." Luke narrated, in 12:6-11, how God sent an angel to rescue Peter from the public trial that was going to take place the following day. Two of the four soldiers ("sentries") were sleeping on either side of Peter, and the other two stood guard at the entrance to the jail cell. It is amazing that Peter and the four soldiers were somehow able to sleep through the angel's sudden appearance in the cell! Perhaps God kept the soldiers asleep and blessed Peter with the peace that comes with trusting in Him. After waking Peter up, the angel gave him specific directions to lead him out of the prison and out of Jerusalem. These directions were necessary as Peter "thought he was seeing a vision" and not actually experiencing this escape. Considering the unusual circumstances of Peter's escape, his understanding of his experience is somewhat understandable. It was only after the angel suddenly left Peter that he realized that "what the angel was doing was really happening" – all doubt was removed about the Lord sending an angel to rescue him.

In verses 12-19, the setting of the story moves from a prison to a house. Also, the focal point of the story now includes both the one prayed *for* and the ones *doing* the praying. When Peter realized that his "vision" was actually real, he went to the house of Mary, who is the mother of John Mark, where many were gathered and praying for Peter. A servant girl named Rhoda answered the door when Peter knocked at the house's outer entrance, but she did not let him in because of her extreme joy over Peter's deliverance. A courtyard would have likely separated the street entrance from the inner entrance. Therefore, those in the house would not have also seen Peter and thus did not believe Rhoda's excited exclamation about Peter being at the door. Moreover, they might have wondered why Rhoda did not let Peter into the house! Rhoda's insistence about Peter's presence led them to say, "It must be his angel." The source for their declaration was a belief that a person's spirit or guardian angel could wander the earth and appear to be that person. Peter's continued knocking finally got the attention of those in the house, who responded with loud astonishment. Peter communicated to them the need for silence in order to keep his location a secret from others. After giving them a description of the Lord's rescue, Peter told them to inform James (the brother of Jesus and new leader of the Jerusalem church) and the other disciples in Jerusalem about God's act of deliverance.

This passage closes with comments about Peter and Agrippa I. It seems that Luke's general reference to Peter's departure to "another place" is intended to take the readers' focus off of Peter, who will only make another appearance in the story in chapter 15. The following morning, the soldiers were very distressed about Peter's absence in the jail cell, for it was common to give guards who lost prisoners the intended punishment for the crimes of these prisoners (see 16:27-28 and 27:42-44). (Note that imprisonment was used in the first-century

Greco-Roman world to keep prisoners as they were *awaiting* trial and judgment.) Agrippa would have likely been furious that he could not please the Jews by trying and executing Peter. Since Agrippa's thorough search for Peter did not result in finding him, he cross-examined the guards to learn about what had happened. None of the guards saw or even knew the reasons for Peter's escape from prison, so Agrippa had them executed. After this incident with Peter, Agrippa went from the province Judea to Caesarea Maritima and stayed there a while. The half-Jewish Agrippa would have been more comfortable and at home in this city than in Jerusalem. Herod's travels in 12:19 set up readers for his death in 12:20–25.

#### **K. The Death of Herod (12:20–25)**

*The death of Herod* is the focal point of 12:20–25. While 12:1–19 emphasizes God's deliverance of His friends, 12:20–25 highlights God's judgment against His enemies. The wicked actions of Agrippa I ("Herod") are a foil for the faithfulness of Peter (and other disciples of Jesus) to God in the story of Acts.

The scene for Agrippa's death is of a political nature. United representatives from the people of Tyre and Sidon sought an audience with Agrippa to address the problems caused by the king's quarrelling with these two peoples. Agrippa had control over their food supply, so it was necessary for the good of Tyre and Sidon to ask for peace from him. To have an opportunity to speak with Agrippa, these representatives would have likely needed the support of someone like Blastus, who had the ear of Agrippa as "a trusted personal servant of the king." Blastus helped them by setting up an appointed time for a meeting with Agrippa. The king delivered a public address to his audience in his royal robes and sitting on his throne. What provoked the wrath of God against Agrippa was his response to his audience as they attributed divinity to him ("This is the voice of a god, not a man"). While royalty may invite or even command respect from others, no ruler should ever receive the honor that belongs only to God. As someone who was familiar with the Jewish faith and way of life, Agrippa should have known this truth about God and *His* glory. The Lord sent an angel to strike Agrippa down for not giving "praise to God." The statement that Agrippa "was eaten by worms and died" (a possible reference to the effects of intestinal roundworms) does not necessarily mean that his death was an immediate one. God's judgment of Agrippa is balanced by the continued work of God in increasing the prominence of the Gospel and in spreading this good news to new areas. The final verse of chapter 12 returns to Barnabas and Saul, who had gone from Antioch to Jerusalem to deliver a gift of famine relief from the disciples in Antioch (see 11:27–30). Upon finishing their mission, they returned from Jerusalem to Antioch and took John Mark with them (compare 12:25 with 12:12). Readers are thus prepared for the church at Antioch sending off Barnabas, Saul, and John Mark on their God-given missionary work.

#### IV. WITNESSES TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH (chaps. 13–28)

In Acts 13–28, the story of Acts turns its attention to Jesus' disciples being *witnesses to the ends of the earth*. The particular focal point of the story is the missionary work of Paul and his companions. Jerusalem continues to play a central role in the story in these chapters, but new centers for the life and mission of the Church, such as Syrian Antioch, also become important. While Peter was the main, human character for chapters 1–12, Paul takes on this role in the story in chapters 13–28. Throughout these chapters, God continues to accomplish His mission of spreading the Gospel throughout the world. What distinguishes this major section from the previous two major sections (chaps. 2–7 and chaps. 8–12) is the Church's intentional sending out of missionaries, under the sovereign guidance of God, to Gentiles as well as Jews.

##### A. The First Missionary Journey (chaps. 13–14)

Chapters 13–14 cover *the first missionary journey* of Paul and his companions. In the story of Acts, Luke relates three such journeys. Acts 13:1–3 and 14:26–28 frame their missionary work in Cyprus, Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe.

###### 1. Sending (13:1–3)

The first missionary journey begins with the Holy Spirit *sending* Barnabas and Paul to do their God-given work. God's commissioning of these two missionaries occurred through the church at Antioch. These verses are important in establishing for readers God's initiative in and approval of this missionary work to both Jews *and* Gentiles.

Acts 13 picks up the storyline from the end of Acts 12, where Barnabas and Saul (and John Mark) are with the church at Antioch. God commissioned Barnabas and Saul in the context of worship. Prophets and teachers had been fasting and were gathered (with other disciples?) to worship the Lord and seek His will for their part in God's mission of spreading the Gospel. (Note that the wording in the Greek seems to indicate that, in 13:1, the first three names refer to prophets and the last two to teachers.) In light of Christ's revelation of Paul's calling (see 9:1–19), the "work" God called both Barnabas and Saul to was to proclaim the name of Jesus the Messiah to new peoples among the Jews and the Gentiles. The church at Antioch continued their prayer and fasting in pursuit of God's provision, guidance, and empowerment for this work. After the disciples there knew more about God's plan for the two missionaries, they commissioned them for their work and released them from their ministry in Antioch.

## 2. *Cyprus (13:4–12)*

The first place Barnabas and Saul went to on Paul's first missionary journey was the island of Cyprus. The two missionaries were accompanied by John Mark, who was "their helper," one who served by their side in proclaiming God's word. For this part of the first missionary journey, Luke chose to focus on Barnabas and Saul's interactions with a proconsul and his attendant.

It is important to note that disciples of Jesus had previously preached the Gospel to both Jews and Gentiles on this island (see 11:19–21); therefore, the missionary work in 13:4–12 involved preaching the Gospel in old mission fields as well as new ones. The Holy Spirit guided Barnabas and Saul from Antioch in Syria to the nearest seaport, Seleucia, to sail from there to Cyprus. The first city they proclaimed God's word in was Salamis, the main city on the island and a port city on its east side. The main location for their proclamation of the Gospel was the Jewish synagogues in that city. Paul went to the Jews in each new area (usually to the synagogues or other places for Jewish gatherings) to give them the first opportunity to hear the Gospel, since God had uniquely prepared them to accept the message of salvation (see Rom. 1:16 and Eph. 2:11–13). One can assume that God-fearers were likely present in these synagogues in Salamis.

Verses 6–12 turn to their missionary work in Paphos, which is on the other side of the island. They were invited by the proconsul (a governor appointed by Rome) of Paphos to speak God's word. This intelligent man, named Sergius Paulus, had an interest in the Jewish faith and life, but he was also being led astray by Bar-Jesus, one of his attendants. Bar-Jesus, also known as Elymas the sorcerer, was a false prophet who had misrepresented the God of Israel and His ways. (It was common for educated Romans such as the proconsul to be interested in divination, one of Bar-Jesus' practices.) When Barnabas and Saul told Sergius Paulus the good news about Jesus, he tried to prevent the proconsul from putting his faith in Jesus. Saul's rebukes of Bar-Jesus in 13:10–11 have a prophetic tone to them and revolve around Bar-Jesus' commitment to the ways of the devil (not the God of Israel!) and his perversion of "the right ways of the Lord." Guided by the Holy Spirit, Saul pronounced God's judgment on Bar-Jesus for these things. God's hand was against Bar-Jesus not only to judge him for his wickedness but also to show him that Saul was a *true* representative of the God of Israel. While readers are not told about what happened to Bar-Jesus, it is clear that the demonstration of God's power changed the proconsul. God used the temporary blinding of Bar-Jesus to bring Sergius Paulus to believe Barnabas and Saul's teaching about Jesus as Messiah and Lord. The "teaching about the Lord" amazed the proconsul and convinced him that Saul, and not Bar-Jesus, was telling the truth about the one, true God.

### 3. *Pisidian Antioch (13:13–52)*

Acts 13:13–52 revolves around the missionary work of Paul (Saul's Roman name) and Barnabas in Pisidian Antioch. In 13:4–12, the Holy Spirit moved Paul to take the lead in dealing with Bar-Jesus. Paul continues to be the focal point for the rest of the first missionary journey, as God works through him to accomplish His work.

Most of 13:13–52 consists of Paul's speech to the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch in 13:16–41. Verses 13–15 set up readers for this speech in terms of the story's spatial and social settings. "Paul and his companions" (note that Barnabas is not mentioned by name in 13:13) sailed from Paphos to Perga in Pamphylia, a province on the south coast of Asia Minor. Before they departed from there to go to Pisidian Antioch, John Mark left them to return home, to Jerusalem. During their first Sabbath in Pisidian Antioch, they went to a synagogue, where they were invited to give "a message of encouragement" to the people, who were both Jews and God-fearers (see 13:16, 26). (It was customary to ask a qualified, visiting Jew – such as Paul – to do this after the Scripture readings.)

Paul took the opportunity to tell them the good news of God sending the promised Savior of the world. In 13:16–25, Paul's message starts with a selective, theological retelling of Israel's history. This story of God's salvation climaxes with Jesus coming in fulfillment of promises related to Messiah *as* the Son of David. Beginning with God's choosing of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Paul made reference to consecutive events and periods leading up to King David (13:17–20):

- Israel's 400 year stay in Egypt, miraculous deliverance from Egyptian slavery, and wilderness wanderings
- Israel's conquest and possession of the Promised Land
- Israel being led by judges until the time of Saul

David was introduced in contrast with Saul, the king the people wanted and God gave to Israel. Saul was disobedient to God and His covenant, but God found David to be a faithful servant (compare 13:21–22 with 1 Sam. 16:1–13). It was from David's descendants that God brought Jesus, the Savior of all who trust Him among the Jews and the Gentiles, to Israel. The final set of events covered prior to Jesus' coming was the ministry of John the Baptist, who prepared Israel through the preaching of repentance and baptism for Jesus' ministry (see Lk. 3:1–18).

The emphasis shifts, in 13:26–41, from the story of salvation to the "message of salvation," though this story is still important throughout the rest of Paul's speech. Paul wanted his audience to know that this message had been sent to Jews and God-fearing Gentiles such as himself, Barnabas, and his audience. The residents of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize that Jesus had come to bring God's saving reign to the earth. These two groups showed their rejection of the Gospel in their unjust crucifixion of Jesus, which were actions that fulfilled the Scriptures read in the synagogues! God reversed this human judgment by raising Him from the dead, and the apostles in Jerusalem had been witnesses of

His resurrection to the Jews. Paul and Barnabas had come to Pisidian Antioch to tell the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles there the good news about Jesus of Nazareth – that Jesus' resurrection signaled the fulfillment of God's promises to their fathers. The quotation of Psalm 2:7, in 13:33, shows that the resurrection was a confirmation of Jesus' unique and exclusive relationship with God as His Son. The Scriptural references in 13:34–35 also make points related to the significance of Jesus' resurrection:

- The promises made to David about establishing the throne of his kingdom forever (see 2 Sam. 7:1–17) are made possible by and fulfilled in the resurrected Jesus (Isaiah 55:3 in Acts 13:34).
- David's words about God "not" letting His "Holy One see decay" ultimately speak of Jesus and are fulfilled in His resurrection (Psalm 16:10 in Acts 13:35).

Since the resurrection was and is essential to the proclamation of the Gospel, Paul made it clear, in 13:36–37, that Jesus, not David, was the One who "did not see decay" because of His resurrection. Paul's preaching of the good news ended with a promise (13:38–39) and a warning (13:40–41). The promise is that salvation in God's Kingdom ("the forgiveness of sins") is available to all who believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord. The warning comes through a quotation and use of Habakkuk 1:5 (see Hab. 1:1–11 for the context of this verse). This verse was originally about the southern kingdom not believing that God would exile them from the Promised Land (an event that occurred in 586 B.C.). This judgment came because of their rejection of God and His covenant. The people of Jerusalem, their rulers, and everyone else (whether Jew or Gentile) who reject Jesus and the New Covenant would also face God's judgment (Jerusalem would be partially judged in the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D.).

Verses 42–52 are Luke's account of the reception and rejection of the Gospel among the Jews and Gentiles of Pisidian Antioch. Initially, the response to Paul's speech was favorable. Paul and Barnabas were invited to return on the next Sabbath to tell them more about Jesus and the message of salvation. Many of the Jews and God-fearers were so interested that they followed them. Paul and Barnabas took this opportunity to talk with them personally and urged them to continue seeking God's grace. On the next Sabbath, nearly the whole city gathered (in the synagogue?) to hear the word of the Lord from the two missionaries. Like the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem (see 5:17), the Jewish leaders of Pisidian Antioch were filled with jealousy over the focus and attention Paul and Barnabas were receiving. Their contradiction of Paul's words about God and salvation were met with a bold response from Paul and Barnabas in 13:46–47. This response revolved around God's plan of redemption and the roles Paul and Barnabas played in God's work of spreading the Gospel. The two missionaries were obeying God by speaking God's word about Jesus to the Jews "first." Their rejection of the Gospel was tantamount to passing judgment on themselves, and gave Paul and Barnabas an opening to "turn to the Gentiles" in Pisidian Antioch. This turn would also be done in obedience to God's commands. Isaiah 49:6, which is quoted in 13:47, refers to the Servant of the Lord in the book of Isaiah *and* to Paul and Barnabas being "a light for the Gentiles." God uses Jesus' followers, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to bring the good news and reality of

God's "salvation" in Jesus "to the ends of the earth." Paul's use of Isaiah 49:6 demonstrates that he saw his calling (see 9:15–16) to be a part of the mission Jesus gave to the apostles (and all of Jesus' followers) in 1:8. Others were involved in this mission, but Paul is the character Luke focuses on in chapters 13–28 as Jesus' followers continue to be His witnesses throughout the world.

The Gentiles responded with gladness and honored the word of the Lord in their city. And everyone whom God had appointed for eternal life believed in Jesus. The word of the Lord – that salvation in Jesus was for *all* peoples – spread through towns and villages surrounding Pisidian Antioch. The Jewish leaders continued and increase their opposition to the Gospel by getting the God-fearing Gentiles of the city's women of high standing and leading men to persecute Paul and Barnabas. After they were expelled from the region, they protested the persecution by shaking the dust of the region from their feet. This gesture was consistent with Jesus' teaching (see Lk. 9:1–5) and a sign of God's judgment on the city. The disciples left Pisidian Antioch and went to Iconium, being filled with joy and with the Spirit despite or because of this persecution (see 5:33–41).

Literary Context: Patterns in Paul's Missionary Work

Good storytellers know how to tell stories in such a way that they capture and keep the attention of their readers/hearers. The author of the Book of Acts is an excellent storyteller. In 13:13–52, Luke gives an extensive and detailed account of the missionary work of Paul and Barnabas in Pisidian Antioch. If this was done with the accounts of Paul's missionary work in *every* city, readers/hearers of the story may lose interest in the events and message of the story. Luke's narrative strategy seems to be to highlight certain patterns in Paul's missionary work, as he makes his way through the northern and eastern parts of the Mediterranean. The pattern present in 13:13–52 is that Paul went to the Jews first, faced opposition from the Jews (and at times the Gentiles), turned his attention to the Gentiles, and was expelled from the city.

4. *Iconium and Lystra (14:1–20)*

Luke's account of the missionary work of Paul and Barnabas in *Iconium and Lystra* is found in 14:1–20. The missionaries continue their strategy of going to the Jews first. Opposition to the Gospel from among both Jews and Gentiles continues and increases.

Luke provides readers with a summary of the missionary work in Iconium in 14:1–7. The usual strategy of going to the Jewish synagogue was employed, and their preaching of the good news was so effective that "a great number" of Jews and Gentiles (only God-fearers?) believed the message about Jesus. As in Pisidian Antioch, initial success among the Jews changed to opposition. Those Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and told them falsehoods about the Paul, Barnabas, and other disciples there. This persecution

did not stop the two missionaries from pursuing the accomplishment of their calling. They spent considerable time there, spoke boldly for the sake of Jesus and the Gospel, and were enabled by Jesus to do miraculous signs and wonders. These acts of God through them confirmed the message of God's grace in Jesus and could have counteracted the poisoning of the minds of the Gentiles there. The result was that the city was divided. After Paul and Barnabas learned about a plot to mistreat and stone them, they fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country. In this area, their ministry of preaching the good news continued.

The account of their ministry in Derbe is given in 14:20 and is very short. Luke narrated their ministry in Lystra in 14:8–19 and focused on a misunderstanding that arose because of the healing of a crippled man. While Paul was speaking to a crowd in Lystra about Jesus, he came across this man and was empowered by the Spirit (see 1 Cor. 12:1–11) to know that he had the faith to be healed. The Holy Spirit also empowered Paul to pronounce the man's healing. The response of the crowd, in 14:11–13, to this healing makes sense to readers when they know about an ancient folktale. According to this story, the gods Zeus and Hermes came to a town in this area in the form of human beings. Since the town did not welcome these "gods...in human form," they destroyed the town in their wrath. The healing of the crippled man led the crowd in Lystra to think that these two gods were once again among them in human form. The crowd assumed that Barnabas was Zeus and that Paul, as the chief speaker between the two, was Hermes (Hermes was the son of Zeus and the divine herald of the gods). The priest of Zeus initiated a ceremony of offering sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas. Paul and Barnabas were barely able to keep the priest and the crowd from sacrificing to them. After tearing their clothes in distress, they spoke to them, in 14:14–17, about themselves and the identity and character of the one, true God. The two missionaries told the crowd that they were mere men who had come to bring them good news. God was calling them to turn from their "worthless" idols to serve "the living God," the Creator of everything. Although God had "let all nations go their own way" in their ignorance, the testimony of God's kind providence in giving them plenty of food and much joy was available to them. There is no mention of Jesus in their speech, for Paul and Barnabas had to first convince these superstitious people that *they* were not gods. Things go from bad to worse in 14:19–20. Some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and somehow won the crowd over to persecute Paul. The crowd stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. Courageously, Paul got up and returned to the city. Paul and Barnabas spent more time in Lystra (preaching the good news?) before they left the next day for Derbe.

5. *Derbe and the Return to Antioch (14:21–28)*

Acts 14:21–28 focuses on the missionary work of Paul and Barnabas in *Derbe and the return to Antioch*. As they return to the place from which they were sent to do their work, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch to visit the disciples there. Their purpose was to strengthen these disciples and to encourage them to remain true to their new faith.

The missionary work of Paul and Barnabas was much more successful in Derbe than it was in Lystra. No mention is made of opposition to the Gospel in this city. Apparently, Luke found nothing noteworthy to report about their work in Derbe. The return trips to Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch revolved around (1) preparing them for coming hardships, such as persecution, and (2) establishing church leadership in each city. While Paul and Barnabas worked on appointing appropriate leaders (“elders”), they also trusted the Lord to do *His* work in strengthening them in their life and mission. After they had gone through the area of Pisidia, they went to the area of Pamphylia. Paul and Barnabas did not preach the word when they first went to the city of Perga in 13:13–14. But they did so on their way back to Antioch. Their next destination was Attalia, the port from which they sailed to the coastal village of Seleucia and traveled on to Syrian Antioch. It was in Antioch of Syria that the church had committed them to God and His empowering grace for “the work they had now completed.” Immediately, Paul and Barnabas gathered the church together to report to them about God’s work through them, especially His drawing of the Gentiles to Himself. The two missionaries remained in Antioch for a long time, presumably resuming their respective ministries there.

**B. The Jerusalem Council (15:1–35)**

Acts 15:1–35 revolves around *the Jerusalem Council*. The focal point of the meeting was the missionary work of Paul and Barnabas during their first missionary journey (chaps. 13–14). Paul and Barnabas did not teach that those who follow Jesus must be circumcised and embrace all the traditional Jewish customs. In response to certain Jewish believers from Judea bringing a contrary teaching to Antioch, the church in that city sent Paul, Barnabas, and some other believers to Jerusalem to resolve the matter.

It is not possible to know the exact identity of the Jewish believers who caused the sharp dispute and debate between them and Paul and Barnabas. Luke’s reference to them coming from the province of Judea *could* mean that they came from or were connected to the Jerusalem church. One thing is certain: these followers were not teaching that Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection were unnecessary for salvation in God’s Kingdom. The difference between the two groups was related to the core identity of Jesus’ followers. These Jewish believers taught that those Gentiles who come to trust Jesus as Lord and Savior must also take on the traditionally Jewish way of life as their own. The reference to circumcision in 15:1 is likely a way of speaking of obedience to the whole law of Moses, and not just the

biblical commands to circumcise males (see Gen. 17). The church at Antioch deferred to the church in Jerusalem in deciding the answer to this question. As the delegates from Antioch made their way to Jerusalem, they traveled through the provinces of Phoenicia and Samaria and told the Jewish believers about the conversion of the Gentiles. These believers were “very glad” when they heard this news. The church in Jerusalem, including the apostles and elders, welcomed the delegates and heard their reports about God’s work through them among the Gentiles. The “question” that arose in 15:2 comes up again when some of Pharisee Jewish believers in Jerusalem claimed that Gentile believers must undergo circumcision and obey the law of Moses.

The Jerusalem Council takes place in 15:6–29, as “the apostles and elders met to consider this question.” Although “much discussion” took place, only three contributions are narrated for readers in this account: Peter’s speech (vv. 7–11); the reports of Barnabas and Paul (v. 12); and James’ speech (vv. 13–21). Each contribution revolves around past events and interpretations of those events for the question at hand. Peter gave a short recounting of the work God did through him in chapter 10 among Cornelius and his household and friends. This account was followed by similar points of Peter in 11:1–18, where he explained this work of God through him to many Jewish believers in Jerusalem. The main point of Peter’s speech is that God “made no distinction” between the Jewish and Gentile believers (cf. 10:34–35 and 11:15–17). God showed His acceptance of both groups by giving the Holy Spirit, the One who purifies hearts, to *all* who had put their faith in Jesus. According to Peter, the claim made in 15:5 is tantamount to testing God (recall the consequences of doing such a thing in 5:1–11). To require Gentile believers to live under the “yoke” of the law was to oppose God and His work. Moreover, Jesus’ followers believe that God’s salvation in His Kingdom is *only* available because of His “grace” in Jesus. The implicit point in 15:10–11 is that obedience to the law of Moses is not required for the salvation of Gentile *or* Jewish believers. The reports of Barnabas and Paul relate the miraculous signs and wonders of God and confirm the points Peter made about God and His activity. The focal point here is on the fact that God had worked through the two apostles “among the Gentiles,” just as He had done among the Jews (see 5:12).

As the leader of the church at Jerusalem, James spoke up to offer an interpretation (15:13–18) and a “judgment” (15:19–21). James interpreted Simon’s description of God’s activity as a demonstration of His concern to include the Gentiles in His new covenant people. God did not call the Gentiles to first become Jews in order to follow Jesus and so receive salvation in God’s Kingdom. The words of the prophets – specifically, Amos 9:11–12 (and possibly Jeremiah 12:15 and Isaiah 45:21) – are “in agreement” with James’ interpretation: God’s work of restoring His Kingdom on the earth through His Messiah *includes* drawing Gentiles to come to know and serve Him. In God’s fully-restored Kingdom, both Jews and Gentiles will live under the gracious reign of the Son of David, Israel’s Messiah. Jesus rebuilt “David’s fallen tent” by being from the royal line of David. God’s word confirmed the points of view of Barnabas, Paul, and Peter.

James made his judgment about the question placed before the Jerusalem Council in light of this interpretation. The judgment, however, was not a direct answer to the question. Since God's plan of redemption was unfolding in this way, Jesus' followers would hinder God's work of converting the Gentiles if they required them to obey the law. Compromises could not be made in terms of the Church's understanding of God and His ways. But James thought the Jewish and Gentile believers needed to make concessions for the sake of fellowship and unity. The point James made in 15:21 seems to be that since the law of Moses was so well known, the Jewish believers would have been offended if the Gentile believers did not practice some aspects of it. Those aspects are covered in 15:20 and related to idolatrous and immoral practices that were common among many Gentiles. ("Food polluted by idols" is a reference to food that was offered in pagan worship and later sold in pagan markets.) By abstaining from these things, the Gentile believers would allay the Jewish believers' fears that they would not reject their former, pagan way of life.

Since the apostles, the elders, and even the whole church agreed with James' judgment, they decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Antioch with a letter and two confirming witnesses. The body of the letter begins, after a typical introduction in the New Testament world, by establishing two important facts. First, those who had disturbed the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia were *not* teaching according to the authority of the church in Jerusalem. The second fact is that Judas and Silas were sent along with Barnabas and Paul to confirm the veracity of the letter. (Notice the descriptions given to Barnabas and Paul in 15:25–26 to increase their credibility.) The authoritative position taken in 15:28–29 is given more weight by declaring that the requirements "seemed good to the Holy Spirit" as well as to the apostles and elders. The church in Jerusalem believed that God was guiding them in the Jerusalem Council. Therefore, these followers of Jesus could tell the recipients of the letter that they would "do well" if they followed these requirements. It was not necessary for the recipients to be circumcised and follow the whole law, but it was wise and good for them to listen to the apostles and elders on this matter. By doing so, they would be able to live in a way that was more holy and honoring to God.

In verses 30–35, Luke narrates the sending of the four men to Antioch, the effects of the letter on the church there, and the ministry of the four men in Antioch. The letter had a great impact on the believers in Antioch because it was accompanied by Judas, Silas, Paul, and Barnabas. They gathered the church and delivered the letter to these believers. The recipients of the letter in Antioch were glad to hear it because they received it as a needed exhortation. Judas and Silas acted as prophets when they encouraged and strengthened their brothers in Antioch to be faithful to Messiah and His Way. These two leaders from Jerusalem (cf. 15:22) returned there after some time and with the approval ("the blessing of peace") of the believers in Antioch. Paul and Barnabas, however, remained in Antioch for an unspecified amount of time. Their ministry along with many others consisted of teaching and preaching the word of the Lord.

### C. The Parting of Paul and Barnabas (15:36–41)

*The parting of Paul and Barnabas* is the focal point of 15:36–41. This passage could also be called “the beginning of the second missionary journey,” since these verses include Paul’s departure to return to the churches he and Barnabas established during their missionary work in chapters 13–14. The “sharp disagreement” that led to their parting was over their different ideas about this missionary task.

Paul told Barnabas that they should return to the brothers in the towns where they preached the Gospel in order to assess and strengthen them. John Mark had deserted Barnabas and Paul in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work God had called them to do (see 13:1–13). Barnabas, who was known as an encourager (see 4:36–37), wanted to take John Mark with them, presumably to help him grow in his faith and character. Paul, however, thought this was an unwise strategy. If Luke told readers *why* John Mark had left them, it would be easier for readers to understand and evaluate the disagreement between and parting of Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas’s decision was to take Mark with him and to sail to his hometown of Cyprus to strengthen the churches there. Paul chose Silas as his missionary partner and turned his attention to strengthening the churches in the provinces of Syria and Cilicia. One can safely assume that Paul would have delivered the letter from the Jerusalem Council to the Gentile believers in these areas (compare 15:40–41 with 15:22–27).

### D. The Second Missionary Journey (16:1–18:22)

In Acts 16:1–18:22, Luke narrates *the second missionary journey* of Paul. While Barnabas and Saul accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey, it is Silas and Timothy who are the two companions that Luke chose to highlight here. Certain themes and patterns from Paul’s earlier missionary work continue to be present. As Paul and his companions spread the Gospel to new peoples, they experience both reception and rejection from among both the Jews and the Gentiles. After a time of *preparing* (16:1–10), Paul and his companions did missionary work in *Philippi* (16:11–40), *Thessalonica and Berea* (17:1–15), *Athens* (17:16–34), and *Corinth* (18:1–17). The second missionary journey concluded with Paul *returning* to Syrian Antioch (18:18–22).

#### 1. *Preparing* (16:1–10)

The first missionary journey began with sending (see 13:1–3), and the second one starts in 16:1–10 with *preparing*. Paul prepared for this missionary work by (1) taking Timothy “along on the journey” (16:1–5) and (2) seeking God’s will for their missionary task (16:6–10).

After the parting of Paul and Barnabas (see 15:36–41), Paul departed with Silas (and not Barnabas) to revisit, evaluate, and strengthen certain churches. These communities of

faith were the gatherings of Jesus' disciples in the provinces of Syria and Cilicia; Barnabas and Mark went to Cyprus to pursue a similar missionary task. In 16:1–5, Paul went to the rest of the churches he and his companions had brought the Gospel to during the first journey. (These churches are most likely the recipients of Paul's letter to the Galatians.) Luke records Paul and his companions traveling to Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium, but one can safely assume that they also went to Pisidian Antioch (see 13:13–14:28). During his stay in Lystra, Paul came across a disciple named Timothy. Based on Paul's description of Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:2 (his "true son in the faith"), Paul may have led Timothy to faith in Jesus as Lord. Since the disciples in Lystra and Iconium "spoke well" of Timothy as a servant of Christ, Paul wanted him to participate in this missionary journey. But one matter had to be resolved before their departure: Timothy was an uncircumcised Jew (one's Jewish status came through the mother, not the father). In light of the Jerusalem Council and its decision and letter (see 15:1–35), it may be surprising to some readers that Paul made such a decision. However, the need of circumcision for Timothy was a practical matter relating to *a Jew choosing* to practice Jewish customs. The Jerusalem Council met to decide whether or not *Gentiles must* become Jews to follow Jesus. The Jews who lived in the area of Lystra knew that Timothy's father was a Greek, and they would be scandalized by Timothy's lack of circumcision. Throughout their travels, Paul and his companions (including Timothy) delivered the decisions reached by the Jerusalem Council for the people to obey. The Council's exhortations strengthened these churches, which, consequently, "grew daily in numbers" because of their corporate spiritual vitality. (An important Biblical principle here is that healthy churches are growing churches.)

Acts 16:6–10 is Luke's account of Paul and his companions discerning where God had called them to preach the Gospel. Verses 6–8 focus on their ignorance of the calling of God for this endeavor. Initially, Paul and his companions remained in the southern region (the Phrygian region) of the province of Galatia ("the region of Phrygia and Galatia"). The Holy Spirit had somehow prevented them from entering the provinces of Asia and Bithynia. Did God use Silas, the prophet (see 15:32), to communicate God's will at this time? Since they could not go northward (to Bithynia and Pontus) or southward (to Asia), they continued traveling west until they reached the port city of Troas. It was during their stay in this city that they were able to discern God's calling (16:9–10). God gave Paul a vision (in a dream?) of a Macedonian man standing (on the shore?) and begging him to cross the Aegean Sea to help the Macedonians. Paul and his companions immediately left for Macedonia after they had concluded that God had revealed His will to them through this vision.

## 2. *Philippi (16:11–40)*

God called Paul and his companions to preach the Gospel to the Macedonians, and their missionary work in this province revolves around *Philippi* (16:11–40). Paul’s missionary strategy was to focus on major cities such as Philippi in order to establish churches and missionary centers. These churches would, then, spread the Gospel to nearby and connected areas. Two individuals take center stage with Paul in this passage – Lydia (16:11–15) and a jailer (16:16–40).

Acts 16:11–12 traces the trip of Paul and his companions from Troas to Philippi. From Troas, they sailed straight to Samothrace and then traveled by land to Neapolis and on to Philippi. The importance of Philippi is communicated in Luke’s description of the city:

- “A Roman colony” – its citizens had Roman citizenship and lived according to Roman laws.
- A “leading city” – although not Macedonia’s capital, it was a major city.

Paul and his companions stayed there for several days. During their first Sabbath in the city, they went outside the city gate to the river, where they had expected to find “a place of prayer” (a synagogue?). Jewish communities liked to meet near running water for their religious gatherings, whether their meeting place was a synagogue or not. It seems that there was not enough of a Jewish presence in Philippi for a synagogue to be built and operated. (A minimum of ten Jewish men was necessary for the founding of a synagogue.) The gathering here consisted of female Jews and at least one God-fearer (“a worshipper of God”) – Lydia, who was a wealthy, traveling merchant from Thyatira (in the province of Asia). The missionary team sat down with these women and spoke to them about Jesus and the Gospel. Luke only records the response of Lydia, highlighting God’s sovereign work in enabling people to receive the message of salvation. God “opened her heart,” so that she could repent of her sins and trust Jesus as Lord. Lydia’s household also came to faith in Jesus, and she and her household were baptized. Lydia expressed her faith in love (see Gal. 5:6) when she invited Paul and his companions to stay at her house. Lydia’s words in 16:15 may have been necessary, in her mind, because of the social taboo many Jews had about accepting hospitality from Gentiles. (Jews could be considered “unclean” by eating and dwelling in such places.) Moreover, it seems that Lydia was a single woman. Since she persuaded them, they stayed at her home for the rest of their time in Philippi.

Readers are prepared for Paul’s interactions with the Philippian jailer in verses 16–24, in which Paul’s actions lead to his and Silas’ imprisonment and opportunity for meeting the jailer. Paul and his companions continued to go to the place of prayer to minister to those who gathered there. On one occasion, they were met by a slave girl who had been afflicted by a spirit. This girl was able to come up with so-called predictions of the future (deceitful proclamations by demons) and earned her owners “a great deal of money...by fortune-telling.” The spirit moved her to follow Paul and his companions, loudly identifying them as “servants of the Most High God” who were telling people “the way” of salvation. While

these statements were factually true, Jesus' followers should not trust the words and actions of demons. This demonic witness greatly troubled Paul. Why Paul waited for many days before he commanded the spirit to come out of the girl is unclear. It is this act of God's liberation (done "in the name of Jesus Christ") that became the catalyst for the imprisonment of Paul and Silas. The owners of the slave girl were angered by their loss of having a fortuneteller at their disposal. But they brought Paul and Silas before the magistrates at the marketplace (the local place where magistrates would meet) under the pretense of their breaking Roman law. According to the owners, Paul and Silas were advocating that the Philippians ("us Romans") should embrace foreign customs. Essentially, the charges were that they were proclaiming an illegal religion (one not permitted by Roman laws), which was activity that led to civil unrest. The crowd at the marketplace joined in the attack, and the magistrates were convinced that Paul and Silas were deserving of punishment (being "stripped and beaten") and should be tried for these charges. Paul and Silas would only remain in prison for one night and would not face trial.

Acts 16:25-40 revolves around Paul and Silas' imprisonment, their interactions with the Philippian jailer, and their release from prison. Their time in jail parallels Peter's experience in 12:1-19. Both Peter and Paul and Silas were imprisoned because of persecution for their testimony to Jesus and were awaiting trial. In both cases, God miraculously intervened to affect the leaving of the prisoners. However, while Peter escaped, Paul and Silas legally left prison. Before Paul and Silas' release from jail occurred, God used them to bring the Philippian jailer and his whole family to faith in Jesus. As Paul and Silas were praising God in prayer and with hymns around midnight, God's intervention happened and was accompanied by a violent earthquake. God opened up all the prison doors and loosened all the prisoners' chains. The jailer's immediate response was to prepare to commit suicide, probably because of the punishment he knew he would have to face for losing prisoners. Paul kept the jailer from killing himself by alerting him to the presence of all the prisoners in the jail. It seems that the jailer had somehow heard the message of the Gospel (through their prayers and songs?), for he asked Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" This occurred after he had brought Paul and Silas out of their jail cell. They told the jailer that both he and his household could be saved if they believed in the Lord Jesus and then spoke God's word to the man and his family. The jailer demonstrated his new faith in washing their wounds, and both he and his household declared their faith by immediately being baptized by Paul and Silas. The jailer's hospitality (like that of Lydia) and joy were also expressions of his new faith.

The actions of the jailer provide a foil for what the Philippian magistrates did before and after the jailer's conversion. At daylight, the local magistrates sent their officers with the orders to release Paul and Silas. (Did they realize that they had mistreated Paul and Silas?) The jailer passed on the orders to the two men with the encouragement that they should "go in peace." Paul, however, disputed this resolution to their imprisonment. Since both he and Silas were Roman citizens, it was not right for them to be publicly beaten without a trial *and* to be thrown into prison without formal charges. According to Paul, the magistrates needed

to personally escort Paul and Silas out of the prison in order to restore the missionaries' honor. These Roman authorities were alarmed, for their treatment of two Roman citizens had broken Roman law. They came to appease Paul and Silas and requested that they leave Philippi, removing the possibility of any further trouble from the missionaries. Paul and Silas did not immediately leave the city. That happened only after they returned to Lydia's house to meet with and encourage the Philippian believers.

Literary Context: The "We" Sections

Every narrative has a narrator. In the Scriptures, the narrators are almost always third person, reliable, and omniscient. The Book of Acts contains one of the few times in the Scriptures when the narrator makes his presence known in the first person. There are three sections (often called the "we" sections) where it seems that Luke, the author of Acts (and the Gospel of Luke), joined Paul during his missionary work and travels: 16:10–17; 20:5–21:18; and 27:1–28:16. The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts can be described as a historically and theologically reliable account of the story of Jesus and the early Church. By researching personal eyewitnesses, oral traditions, and written documents, Luke was able to write such a story (see Lk. 1:1–4). In the "we" sections, Paul used *his own* personal experiences as a resource for writing.

3. *Thessalonica and Berea (17:1–15)*

Paul's missionary work in *Thessalonica and Berea* is the focal point of 17:1–15. The way in which Luke narrates this work highlights the contrast between the Jews in Thessalonica (17:1–10) and Berea (17:11–15). However, Jewish response to the Gospel, on the whole, remains that of rejection.

Paul and his companions traveled along the Via Egnatia to get to Thessalonica, the capital of the province of Macedonia. Paul followed "his custom" of going first to the Jews, meeting and speaking with them in the synagogue. On three consecutive Sabbath days, he had conversations with the Jews about what their Scriptures said about Israel's Christ/Messiah. The result of their mutual questioning and answering was Paul "proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead" (compare 17:2–3 with Lk. 24:45–49). And Paul identified Jesus of Nazareth as the One who came in fulfillment of the Messianic promises. The reaction to Paul's message in the synagogue was mixed. Some of the Jews, a large number of God-fearing Greeks, and many wives of prominent citizens came to faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord. But most of the Jews (especially its leaders?) were jealous of the growing honor of the Gospel, so they started a riot in the city and then blamed Jesus' followers for the trouble they caused! Since they could not find Paul and Silas at Jason's house, they brought Jason and some other Christian brothers before the city officials. The

Jews (and the bad characters from market place?) claimed that Jesus followers had instigated civil unrest and that Jason had shown these rabble rousers hospitality. The supposed source of the social chaos Jesus' disciples created was their proclamation that Jesus was King. While it is true that the Jesus movement led to social changes, Jesus never advocated a military, political revolution. The preaching of the Gospel *did* include declarations about Jesus reestablishing God's Kingdom on the earth (see Lk. 4:16–30). But the claims in 17:6–7 were false and a perversion of the message of the Gospel. Both the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil by these false claims. The city officials would not let Jason and the others go until they posted bond. Most likely, they were made to pay a security deposit to ensure that Jason's guests, Paul and Silas, would not cause further trouble.

Under the cover of night, the disciples in Thessalonica sent Paul and Silas away to Berea, where they had a better reception in the synagogue. Immediately, Paul and Silas went to the synagogue to preach the Gospel. The Bereans demonstrated that they were of "more noble character than the Thessalonians" by being open to Paul's "message" and by carefully studying the Scriptures. Among those in the synagogue, *many* Jews, many prominent Greek women, and many Greek men believed in Jesus (compare 17:12 with 17:4). The Thessalonian Jews who had opposed the Gospel heard about Paul's preaching of God's word at Berea and went there to turn the crowds against Paul and the Gospel (compare 17:13 with 17:5). The immediate reaction of the disciples was to send Paul off to Athens. Silas and Timothy were able to stay at Berea, because the persecution focused on *Paul's* preaching activity. The men who safely escorted Paul out of Thessalonica returned to Silas and Timothy with instructions for them to join Paul as soon as possible. They would not rejoin Paul until Paul traveled on to Corinth for ministry there (see 18:5).

#### 4. *Athens (17:16–34)*

Acts 17:16–34 is Luke's account of Paul's missionary work in *Athens*. Paul's strategy seems to change in this city, as he preached the Gospel in both the synagogue *and* the marketplace. Typically, Paul would only go to Gentile places (such as the marketplace) to preach *after* Jewish reaction of the Gospel.

Although Paul was waiting for Silas and Timothy to meet up with him, he was not going to waste this time. The city being "full of idols" greatly distressed and prompted him to reason with those in the marketplace as well as Jews and God-fearers in the synagogue. (The marketplace was a place for both commercial *and* religious activities.) Athens was the cultural and intellectual capital of the Roman Empire, and philosophers and listeners would gather for debate. Paul faced the disputes of two rival schools of philosophical thought:

- The Epicureans – the gods were remote and unconcerned about human life, and humans should do everything they can to achieve fulfillment and to avoid pain.
- The Stoics – everything is "god" (the belief of pantheism), and humans should accept whatever "fate" brings their way.

There were two kinds of reactions to Paul's message. First, some called Paul a "babbling" (lit., "someone who collects scraps"), an insult against those who gathered up and incoherently used others' ideas. The second reaction was the serious charge that Paul was "advocating foreign gods" (compare 17:18 with 16:20–21). Paul's preaching "the good news about Jesus and the resurrection" was confusing to this second group. Probably, the Greek word for resurrection (anastasis) was misunderstood as a proper name (Anastasis) for some goddess, the consort of another god called Jesus. The overall response of this group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers was to force him to present his "new teaching" to the Areopagus. The word "Areopagus" (Greek for "Mars Hill") is both a place-name and a term to describe the council that met at that place. Although this meeting of the Areopagus in chapter 17 was likely not an official meeting, Paul's interactions with them were of a serious nature. The council was a judicial body that was responsible for the oversight of religion and education in Athens. Luke's parenthetical comment in 17:21 alerts readers to be prepared for the council to not seriously engage Paul's claims in his speech in 17:22–31.

Paul's speech unfolds in the following way: the purpose of the speech (17:22–23); God as Creator and Lord (17:24–29); and God's command to repent (17:30–31). Paul's opening comments about the Athenians being thoroughly "very religious" seems to be friendly but may be an implicit criticism, since Paul may mean very *superstitious* here. Paul used an altar he came across with the inscription "to an unknown god" as the starting point for his speech. According to a legend, Athenians offered a sacrifice to an unknown god and successfully placated this god who had brought a plague upon the city. This inscription is likely connected to that legend. The purpose of Paul's speech was to tell them about the one, true God. Their worship of an unknown god reflected their ignorance about the reality of the God Paul would proclaim to them. Paul's approach in this proclamation to Gentiles is noticeably different from his recorded preaching messages elsewhere in Acts. There is no mention of the history of Israel. Moreover, the overall orientation of Paul's message is philosophical rather than historical. Essential to Paul's philosophical message about the one, true God was the understanding of God's nature and work as Creator and Lord. Paul declared that the God who created everything is "the Lord of heaven and earth." The Creator and Lord of All does not live in pagan temples and is not dependent upon human service for life. All people are dependent *upon God* for their life, breath, and every other good thing. Acts 17:26 is an allusion to God's creation of Adam, how all nations are descended from Adam (and Eve), and God's sovereign work in guiding the times and places for each nation (the Biblical account is found in Genesis 1–11).

Verse 28 contains two quotations from pagan sources, the first to support a point in verse 27 and the second to lead into a point in verse 29. Implicit in 17:27 is the fall of humanity in Genesis 3. God created humanity and guided their development after their fall from God's intent and design so that humans might seek and find God. The first quotation in 17:28 may be from Epimenides, a Greek philosopher, and backs up Paul's point that God is "not far from each one of us." Implicit in 17:29 is humanity's creation in "the image of God" (see Gen. 1:26–28). The second quotation, which is from the Greek astronomer Aratus, bears

witness to Paul's point that humans (as "God's offspring"), not idols, are God's "image" on the earth. Paul's speech reaches its climax when he calls his audience to obey God's command "to repent." It is important to understand that Jesus' first and second comings are implicit in the final section of Paul's speech. Since the time of Jesus' first coming, God is no longer overlooking the kind of ignorance pagans, such as the Areopagus, had exhibited in their worship of idols. Repentance is now called for in light of the coming judgment that will accompany Jesus' return. Jesus is "the man" God appointed to "judge the world with justice" on this "day," what is often called "the Day of the Lord" in the Old Testament. God validated Jesus' role as Lord and Judge of the world by raising Him from the dead.

As in the synagogue, reaction from the Council was mixed. Some of them sneered at the concept of the resurrection of the dead (most Greeks believed in the immortality of the soul, and not the body). But others wanted to hear more about the "subject" of resurrection. After leaving the meeting of the Areopagus, Paul spoke further with this second group and a few of them became believers in Jesus. Paul had demonstrated that he was not advocating foreign gods, since the Greek poets could be cited to reinforce Paul's message. The truth about God was available to these lovers of wisdom (the meaning of the word "philosophers"), but they were unwilling to truly consider the reality the Gospel represents.

#### 5. *Corinth (18:1-17)*

In 18:1-17, the story of Acts turns to Paul's eighteen-month ministry in *Corinth*. Luke's account of this time of missionary work includes Paul staying and working with friends and facing and overcoming enemies. Also, Silas and Timothy rejoin Paul in these verses.

After Paul's time of preaching in Athens, Paul went to Corinth, which is the administrative center for the province of Asia. The friends Paul met and made in Corinth were Aquila and his wife Priscilla. Both of them had been expelled from Rome because of Emperor Claudius' edict in 49 A.D. that all Jews must leave Rome. (This edict seems to have been made in response to the Jewish disturbances caused by their opposition to Jesus' Jewish followers in Rome.) It seems that the husband and wife were followers of Jesus. And like Paul, they were tentmakers (or leatherworkers). This Christian couple invited Paul to stay with them, and Paul worked with them in the business of tent-making. These connections provided Paul with the personal support he needed to go to the synagogue to try to persuade Jews and Greeks there to believe the Gospel. Paul's preaching activity changed when Silas and Timothy came to him from Macedonia. Based on references in Paul's letters (see 2 Cor. 11:9 and Phil. 4:10-19), readers of the New Testament can know that they came with a gift from the Philippian believers. Thus, Paul was able to devote himself "exclusively to preaching."

Paul's testimony that Jesus of Nazareth was Israel's promised Messiah ceased *within the synagogue* when most of the Jews opposed Paul and defamed him. Paul's response was symbolic and forceful. Paul's shaking out his clothes in protest is a picture of God's judgment if these Jews do not repent and turn in faith to God's Messiah. Paul was clear of his

"responsibility" to tell them the Gospel. They had their opportunity to hear God's message of salvation, and their judgment was on their own heads. Paul was now free to shift his missionary work to the Gentiles. Paul's base of operations changed from the synagogue to the house of Titius Justus, a God-fearer. Many Corinthians, including Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household, believed and were baptized.

Paul had faced and overcome enemies in the synagogue, but he would still encounter threatening opposition from among the Jews. Jesus spoke to Paul in a vision to encourage him to "not be afraid" and to "keep on speaking" God's word. Jesus' presence and protection were promised to Paul. God would use the new covenant "people" of God, made up of both Jews and Gentiles, in Corinth to keep Paul from harm. This encouragement worked, for Paul stayed for a year and half in Corinth to train disciples ("teaching them the word of God"). Jesus may have given Paul this word of encouragement to prepare Paul for the united, Jewish attack Paul would experience when "Gallio was proconsul of Achaia" (in 52 A.D.). These Jews seized Paul and brought him into court with the charge that he was persuading people to worship God in ways contrary to the Mosaic law. It was unnecessary for Paul to speak up in his defense. Gallio declared that it was "unreasonable" for him to be "a judge of such things" as a dispute between two Jewish groups. This ruling was significant because it was an official statement that the Jesus movement was to be considered as part of the Jewish faith. Since Judaism was a legal religion according to Roman law, Christianity was protected under this official status. The effect of this ruling would help out Christian missionaries in, at least, the province of Achaia and possibly other areas. After Gallio had everyone ejected from the court, the Jews turned on Sosthenes the synagogue ruler and beat him in front of the court. That Gallio showed absolutely no concern for this mob behavior is a reflection of the often unjust treatment people experienced in Roman courts of the first century.

## 6. *Returning (18:18–22)*

Paul's second missionary journey closes with Paul *returning* to Syrian Antioch. This was what Paul did at the end of his first missionary journey, since Syrian Antioch was his main base of operations for his missionary work. Before returning to the mission field, Paul needed to return to a place he might have called "home" for rest and renewal.

After staying in Corinth "for some time" (at least a year and a half; see 18:11), Paul made his way, with Priscilla and Aquila, to Syrian Antioch. Before they began their sea voyage from Cenchrea (a port of Corinth), he had his hair cut off for the sake of a Nazarite vow (see Num. 6:1–21) he had taken. This vow would be completed when Paul would present the hair in the temple along with offering the appropriate sacrifices (this likely occurred in 18:22). The reason for the vow is unstated by Luke. Perhaps, this Jewish rite was done to seek God's protection or in gratitude for this act of God. Another stopping point was Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila and went into the synagogue to reason with the Jews there. The Ephesian Jews seemed to be open to the message of the Gospel, as they asked him to spend more time with them. Paul declined but promised to return *if* it was

God's will. Since the Holy Spirit had earlier kept Paul from entering the province of Asia (see 16:6–10), it is likely that Paul concluded that God had a different plan for him. From Ephesus, Paul sailed to Caesarea Maritima, where he went up to Jerusalem and greeted the church there. (Regardless of what direction they came from, Jews always spoke up going “up” to Jerusalem.) The last leg of Paul's journey was from Jerusalem to Antioch. One can imagine that Paul updated the church in Syrian Antioch about what God did through him and his missionary companions (see 14:26–28).

#### **E. The Third Missionary Journey (18:23–20:38)**

*The third missionary journey* of Paul can be found in 18:23–20:38. Most of this missionary work was done in the city of Ephesus, which would become a major center for Christianity in the first century A.D. Paul spent nearly three years establishing and strengthening churches in Ephesus, so that these followers of Jesus could impact the whole province of Asia.

##### **1. Apollos (18:23–28)**

Luke's account of Paul's third missionary journey begins, in 18:23–28, with a short narrative about *Apollos*, a knowledgeable, intelligent, and effective teacher of God's word. Luke wrote the Book of Acts in such a way as to focus on two main, human characters – Peter (chaps. 1–12) and Paul (chaps. 13–28). But other human characters are also important for understanding the story of God spreading the Gospel through Jesus' followers.

Verse 23 informs readers that the first part of Paul's third missionary journey was a return to the churches in the Phrygian region of Galatia (“the region of Phrygia and Galatia”). Paul's task was to strengthen these disciples in their faith. Paul also accomplished this goal at the beginning of his second missionary journey (see 15:36–16:6). The rest of this passage turns to Apollos, who had come from Alexandria, in Egypt, to Ephesus. As a native of Alexandria, Apollos had access to vast amounts of information and instruction – he was “a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures.” (The Jews in Alexandria were known for their scholarly endeavors.) Apollo's instruction in the way of Jesus (“the Lord”) enabled him to teach others about Jesus “accurately.” Although Apollos spoke with great fervor, he seems to have not known about the outpouring of God's Spirit in Acts 2. Priscilla and Aquila were in Ephesus (see 18:18–19) and heard Apollos' accurate but incomplete bold speech about Jesus in the synagogue. These two more mature missionaries invited Apollos to their home in order to explain to him God's way “more adequately” (this explanation likely included the story and teachings of Jesus). At a later time, Apollos wanted to go to Achaia (especially to Corinth) and was encouraged and commended to go by the Ephesian disciples. The letter of recommendation from the Ephesian disciples opened the door for Apollos to be “a great help” to the believers in the province of Achaia. (Such letters were often used to prepare some person/group to receive another person/group.) Apollos' ability

to refute the Jews in public debate (in the synagogue?) about the identity of “the Christ/Messiah” of Israel could have freed these believers up from some form of persecution.

## 2. *Ephesus (chap. 19)*

The focal point of Acts 19 is Paul’s ministry in *Ephesus*. Paul experienced persecution from both Jews and Gentiles in this chapter. Also, the practice of magic among both Gentiles and Jews impacted Paul and his ministry.

The first part of Luke’s account of Paul’s Ephesian ministry is Paul’s initial time of bringing the Gospel to Ephesus and the whole province of Asia (19:1–12). Paul takes center stage in the story of Acts when Luke narrates how he took the road from Pisidian Antioch to arrive at Ephesus. Before entering the synagogue to preach Gospel, Paul first encountered and ministered to some of the disciples of John the Baptist. After speaking with them, Paul learned that they had believed John’s message about the need for repentance but did not know about the Holy Spirit (see Lk. 3:1–18). Their beliefs seem to have been accurate but incomplete. Either they had not heard the message directly from John or they had heard an indirect and watered-down version of this message. They had received “John’s baptism,” an ethical (re)orientation toward God that was symbolized in this ritual act. Paul gave them the *full* message about John and his “baptism.” John baptized Jews so that they might repent of their sins and turn in faith to Israel’s Messiah (“the one coming after” John). When they heard this, they believed and were baptized. God, in His sovereignty, decided to give these new believers the Holy Spirit in a way that recalls the events of Pentecost (compare 19:4–7 with 2:1–4). It seems that God outpoured the Spirit like this to make it clear to this group of “about twelve men” that the Spirit was real, present, and active in the life and mission of the Church.

Paul then turned his attention to the synagogue and persuasively proclaimed God’s Kingdom there. After three months of this activity, some of the synagogue attendees refused to believe and publicly maligned Jesus’ followers (“the Way”). Paul responded by leaving the synagogue and moving his meeting place to the lecture hall of Tyrannus. Most likely, this hall was available and rented by Paul during the hours of 11 A.M. to 4 P.M., an ancient equivalent of a siesta. Paul’s ministry here (proclaiming the Gospel and training disciples) was very effective. Two years of Paul’s daily discussions resulted in all the Jews and Gentiles in the province of Asia hearing the word of the Lord. One should not think that Paul did all the spreading of the Gospel (other disciples were also involved) nor that all who heard the Gospel believed it (hearing is not necessarily believing). Paul’s ministry was effective, in part, because of God’s choice to do “extraordinary miracles through Paul.” People were so filled with expectation about Paul’s ministry that they hoped that God would use contact with his sweat rags (“handkerchiefs”) and aprons (items used in leatherworking) to bring healing and deliverance from evil spirits. God graciously met people in these expectations, but these acts of God should not be confused with magic.

Acts 19:13–22, the second part of Luke’s account in chapter 19, revolves around the dangers related to magic and the rejection of it. In 19:13–16, readers can see how magic is both dangerous *and* different from God’s working miracles through Jesus’ followers. Seven Jewish men, all sons of a Jewish chief priest named Sceva, were involved in magic and attempted to drive out evil spirits from people. After hearing about Paul speaking the name of Jesus to deliver people from evil spirits, this group attempted to invoke Jesus’ name in an incantation. Since Jesus was a common Jewish name, they had to qualify which Jesus they were referring to (“whom Paul preaches”). One evil spirit answered the men by saying that it knew Jesus and *about* Paul, but it did not know them. Essentially, the question in 19:15 is intended to communicate that this group had no authority over the evil spirit. The man who had the evil spirit jumped on them, overpowered them, and gave them a severe beating. Two points can be drawn from the incident in verses 13–16: (1) Jesus is Lord of All; and (2) He cannot be manipulated or controlled into doing the bidding of any human being.

The emphasis shifts in verses 17–20 from the dangers of practicing magic to those who reject magical practices. God used this incident to increase the presence and honor of the name of the Lord Jesus in Ephesus. Both Jews and Greeks were *more* convinced of the Biblical truths about Jesus and His present and coming Kingdom. And God used these events to bring about a spiritual renewal in the Ephesian churches. Many of those who had already believed came to gatherings of Jesus’ followers to openly confess their evil deeds. Moreover, many of those who confessed in this way also publicly burned their sorcery scrolls. The total value of the scrolls amounted to over 135 years worth of day’s wages (a drachma was a silver coin that was worth about a day’s wage). Through this spiritual renewal, the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power. After the events of 19:1–17 (or, at least, 19:13–17), Paul made a major decision – he would pass through Macedonia and Achaia to get to Jerusalem and then he “must visit Rome also.” There is a sense in 19:21 that Paul knew that these travel plans were line with God’s will. Two of Paul’s helpers, Timothy and Erastus, were sent on ahead to Macedonia. Paul, however, did not leave right away. Paul’s departure would come after he stayed in Asia a little longer.

It was “about that time” that Paul and other followers of Jesus faced the consequences of “a great disturbance about the Way” (19:23–41). The one who lead the charge in persecuting Jesus’ followers was Demetrius, a successful and wealthy maker of silver shrines of Artemis. Demetrius called together the guild of silver workers in Ephesus and riled them up with charges about Paul and the impact of his ministry. Everyone in Ephesus, including the guild, had seen and heard about Paul convincing a large number of people in Ephesus and throughout the whole province of Asia to turn from idols to the one, true God revealed and known in Jesus Christ. The supposed “danger” before them was threefold: (1) their trade losing “its good name”; (2) their city would lose its fame if the temple of Artemis was “discredited”; and (3) the goddess Artemis would be “robbed of her divine majesty” in Asia and throughout the world. The guild became furious when they heard this, and eventually, the whole city was in an uproar. After seizing two of Paul’s traveling companions, the crowd rushed into the Ephesian theater, a building that can hold about 20,000 people! Paul wanted

to appear before the crowd to defend himself and the Gospel. But the disciples and some of his friends among the social elites strongly discouraged him from doing so. The assembly had become a mob. The Jews tried to push Alexander to the front to calm down the crowd, which was apparently opposing both Jesus' followers and the Jews in Ephesus. (Both Jews and Jesus' followers were sometimes derided as "atheists" for not believing in *many* gods.)

The city clerk, the leader and spokesperson for assemblies in the city, was able to accomplish this feat in verses 35–41. There were three effective parts to the city clerk's speech. First, the "facts" of the greatness of Ephesus, the temple of Artemis, and Artemis' image (probably a meteorite) were well known throughout the Greco-Roman world. (According to some listings, this temple is one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.) The second part was that the accused had not done anything illegal with regards to the temple or the goddess. Therefore, if there were any *financial* grievances, then these charges could have been pursued in the courts with the proconsuls. Finally, the real danger the Ephesians had to deal with was the charge of rioting, *not* the loss of civic or religious pride. If the Roman authorities at the provincial level and above heard about this mob, then they may have sent Roman soldiers to keep the peace. After finishing his speech, the city clerk was able to dismiss the assembly.

### 3. *Traveling and Teaching (20:1–12)*

In 20:1–12, Paul began his trip to Jerusalem, and the activities that dominate these verses are *traveling and teaching*. This is Paul's planned trip to Jerusalem and Rome. Paul had decided that he would pass through Macedonia and Achaia on his way to Jerusalem (see 19:21–22).

Paul set out for Macedonia after the uproar of the mob in 19:28–41 had ended and after he had encouraged the disciples in Ephesus. Paul's ministry in Macedonia and Achaia ("Greece") was that of encouraging the disciples to be faithful to Jesus and probably revolved around Philippi (in Macedonia) and Corinth (in Achaia). Paul's travels took him through Macedonia, but he stayed for three months in Achaia. Paul changed his plans of setting sail for Syria from Achaia because of a Jewish plot against him. Many of Paul's missionary companions accompanied him for this part of his trip. They went on ahead to wait for Paul and Luke at Troas. Sometime during Paul's travels through Macedonia, Luke seems to have rejoined Paul (the last "we" section was in 16:10–17, when Paul was in Philippi). Paul and Luke (and possibly other missionary companions) joined these men five days after the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The missionary party stayed seven days in Troas.

An incident that happened on the seventh day, Sunday ("the first day of the week"), is narrated for readers in verses 7–12. During a long night of teaching of the disciples, a young man named Eutychus was accidentally killed. Paul spoke to the people from the early evening until midnight, the time when this young man fell asleep and then fell from a third story widow to his death. The fumes from lamps and the length of Paul's teaching contributed to his deep sleep. Paul went downstairs to the man, and God raised him from

the dead through Paul. Everyone returned to the meeting for the Lord's Supper (breaking bread) and further teaching. At daylight, Paul finished his teaching and departed.

#### 4. *Farewell to the Ephesians (20:13–38)*

Acts 20:13–38 is centered on Paul's *farewell to the Ephesians*. This is the only instance in Acts of Luke recording a speech of Paul to Jesus' followers. Paul's words here provide a window for readers into the heart of Paul as a pastor.

Verses 13–17 provide the context for Paul's speech. Paul arranged to speak to the elders of the church in Ephesus, as he was en route to Jerusalem. This occurred in Miletus, and these verses trace Paul's travels from Troas to this city. From Troas, the missionary party went, without Paul, to Assos. Paul walked from Troas to Assos and joined them on the ship to Mitylene. After these travels, the whole party arrived off the island of Kios. Then, they all sailed to the island of Samos, the location from which they went to Miletus. For some reason, Paul had decided to sail past the Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia. It is possible that Paul may have known about some trouble from the Jews he may have faced there. Paul's goal was to reach Jerusalem by the day of Pentecost. Based on references in Paul's letters (see, e.g., Rom. 15:23–29), it seems that Paul was going with a collection for the poor in Jerusalem that he had gathered from among the Gentile churches. This may have contributed to Paul being "in a hurry to reach Jerusalem."

Paul's speech in 20:18–35 can be best described as a farewell address, which can be divided into three parts: (1) Paul's past life and ministry in Ephesus (20:18–21); Paul's present sense of his future (20:22–27); and Paul's exhortations for the future of the Ephesians (20:28–35). Although the first part is about Paul's time in Ephesus and the province of Asia, it can also be taken as descriptive of his overall missionary work. The Ephesians themselves knew about Paul's way of life. Paul's service to the Lord was characterized by great humility and deep grief over the persecutions of the Jews. Paul did not hesitate to preach all that would be helpful to them, whether publicly (in the synagogue or the lecture hall of Tyrannus) or privately (in the houses of believers). The content of Paul's speaking God's word revolved around repentance and faith, two essentials of the Christian life that are interconnected. (These two focal points are also found elsewhere in the speeches in Acts and Jesus' teachings in the Gospels.)

The emphasis shifts in the second part from what the Ephesians knew to what Paul knew at the time. The Holy Spirit had compelled Paul to go to Jerusalem, but Paul did not know what was going to happen to him there. What Paul did know was that the Spirit had been warning him (through prophets?) that prison and hardships were in his future. Paul was ready for what lay ahead of him, for he was willing to risk his life for being faithful to his God-given calling, which was being a witness to the good news of God's grace (see 1:8 and 9:15–16). What was also clear to Paul was that none of the Ephesians would ever see him again; this can be taken as a prediction of his death. Before turning to the future of the

Ephesians, Paul reemphasized that he had not hesitated to proclaim to them “the whole will of God.” Therefore, the Ephesians were responsible for their own future, spiritual condition.

In the last part, the role of the leadership of the Ephesian churches comes to the forefront of Paul’s speech. Verses 28–31 are about the protection of the church. God called the leaders to keep watch over the spiritual condition of themselves and their churches (“the flock”). They were to consider themselves to be shepherds, those who guarded the sheep from false teaching. The false teachers would come from both outside *and* inside the church of God. In 20:32–35, Paul changed his focus from the character of the teaching in the church to the character of its leaders. Before turning to more exhortations for the leaders, the leaders were committed to God and His word. In other words, Paul’s trust was in God and how He would exercise His authority through His word to the Ephesians. God’s word could build them up spiritually and could ultimately lead them to their inheritance, as those who are sanctified, in God’s Kingdom. Paul exhorted the leaders to follow his example of working to support himself and his missionary companions. It was not right for Paul and other missionaries to burden those who were poor (“the weak”) by relying *on them* for their financial support. Jesus’ words backs up Paul’s teaching here: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (this is oral tradition and not found anywhere in the New Testament). Paul’s final exhortations go beyond financial support for church leaders. Paul wanted the Ephesians’ relationships with one another to be characterized by mutual, holy, self-giving, self-sacrificing love.

After Paul finished speaking with the Ephesian elders, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. These leaders understood the significance of Paul’s farewell address, for they all wept as they embraced and kissed him. Paul’s statement about never seeing his face again was particularly sorrowful for these leaders with whom Paul had spent nearly three years.

## **F. Paul on Trial: Jerusalem and Caesarea (chaps. 21–26)**

Chapters 21–26 revolve around *Paul on trial* as he is in *Jerusalem and Caesarea*. Throughout his missionary journeys, Paul was concerned with following God’s leading. It was during the third missionary journey that Paul discerned that God planned for him to go to Jerusalem and then on to Rome (see 19:21). What God would call Paul to do in these two major cities becomes clear in the remainder of the Book of Acts. Readers discover, however, that the story of Acts does not conclude the life of Paul.

### **1. Warnings on the Way (21:1–16)**

Acts 21:1–16 is about *warnings* Paul received *on the way* to Jerusalem. This journey to Jerusalem can be seen as going as far back as the beginning of chapter 20. In 19:21, Paul had a sense that God would send him to Jerusalem and then to Rome.

One way to understand 21:1–16 is to focus on Paul’s travels and his personal interactions on the journey. All of Paul’s voyages in these verses were probably aboard

merchant vessels. The first leg of the journey took Paul and his companions (including Luke) from the mainland of Miletus to Patara, with stops at the islands of Cos and Rhodes. The second leg took them from Patara directly to Tyre. While at Tyre for a seven-day stay, the disciples there urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. They had been somehow informed by the Spirit (“through the Spirit”) that Paul would face some serious trouble in Jerusalem, so they (mis)interpreted this as a need to discourage Paul from going there. They were like the Ephesian elders in that they knelt and prayed before saying good-bye and accompanying Paul to the port (cf. 20:36–38). Finally, the third leg of the journey was by land – they went from Tyre to Jerusalem, with stops at Ptolemais and Caesarea Maritima. As in Tyre, the brothers in Ptolemais showed them hospitality for their one-day stay there. Their time in Caesarea Maritima lasted for “a number of days,” and they stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist (cf. 6:1–7 and 8:26–40). Four of his children were unmarried women who were prophets. It seems that they prophesied about Paul’s future, as Agabus does in verses 10–11. Agabus came from Judea to bring a word from God (he performed the same function as in 11:27–28, going from Jerusalem to Syrian Antioch). The prophecy comes in the form of a symbolic prophetic act (as prophets sometimes did in the Old Testament). Paul’s belt was used to symbolize Paul being bound by the Jews of Jerusalem and handed over to the Gentile authorities (the fact that it was *Paul’s* belt was meant to personalize the act). The focal point of the revelation from God was about *what* was going to happen. It was not intended to be a warning to *not* go to Jerusalem. Paul’s response was to declare that he was “ready” to face both imprisonment *and* death for the sake of following and honoring Jesus (but Paul’s heart was broken by their weeping!). From Caesarea to Jerusalem, Paul and his companions were accompanied by disciples from Caesarea. The reference to “the house of Mnason” (an early disciple from the island of Cyprus) is either to the place where Paul stayed in Jerusalem or (less likely) some stopping point between Caesarea and Jerusalem.

## 2. *Arrival and Arrest (21:17–36)*

All the events of 21:17–36 revolve around Paul’s *arrival and arrest*. Paul’s arrival in Jerusalem leads to his arrest by the commander of the Roman troops. The event of Paul’s arrest in Jerusalem is the beginning of a set of events that will result in Paul going to Rome.

Acts 21:17–25 is about the responses to Paul’s arrival and report about his ministry. The brothers in Jerusalem received Paul and his companions warmly. At some point, Paul gave the collection for the poor Jewish believers in Jerusalem to the church leadership there (see 1 Cor. 16:1–4). The next day, Paul met with James and all the elders to give them detailed ministry reports, focused on how God had worked through Paul among the Gentiles. The report prompted praise and cautionary planning from these leaders. The *problem* was connected to the many thousands of Christian Jews (probably not residents of Jerusalem) and their zeal for the law. These Jewish believers were misinformed about Paul’s teaching. They thought that he taught all the Diaspora Jews to not live according to the law. (Their fear was that the Jews outside of the land of Israel would lose their distinctive identity

among the Gentiles). Paul's actual teaching was that this kind of obedience was unnecessary for Gentiles, but Jews could obey the law *if* they wanted to do so. The implication seems to be that the actions of these misguided Jews could have led to violence against Paul and a mob scene. The leaders' *solution* to this problem was to have Paul participate in a Nazarite vow of four men (see Num. 6:1-21) by joining in the purification rites and paying for whatever temple expenses came up. This religious act would be a public indication that he was not personally against Jews practicing the law, since he was "living in obedience to the law." Paul personally participated in a Nazarite vow in 18:18, so this was not inconsistent with his own way of life. The decision and actions of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 are reaffirmed here (cf. 15:22-35), thus showing that they had no problem with Paul's mission to the Gentiles.

Unfortunately, the solution James and all the elders came up with to deal with the problem of opposition to Paul backfired. Verses 26-36 cover Paul's activity in the temple, the uproar some Jews from the province of Asia created, and the commander's rescue of Paul from the violent mob. Paul agreed to go along with the proposed solution of the leaders. The four men and Paul went through the required purification rites (it was necessary for Paul, since he had come from abroad). Paul then went to the temple to notify the temple of when the (seven) days of purification would end and the appropriate offerings would be made at the temple (this would have included a presentation of the cutoff hair). The plan went well until some Jews from the province of Asia who had seen Paul earlier in Jerusalem with a Gentile (believer?) noticed him again. These Jews falsely assumed that Paul had brought this man into the inner temple precincts (where Gentiles were not allowed). So, they stirred up the whole crowd at the temple, seized him, and accused him of wrongdoing. The wrongdoing was related to his teaching (against the Jewish people, their law, and their temple) and supposed desecration of the temple (by bringing a Gentile into a forbidden area). The last charge was very serious and a capital offense. The whole city joined the mob. They dragged Paul to the larger Court of the Gentiles and then shut the temple gates to prevent violence from happening within the inner temple area. Paul was rescued from the attempts to kill him by the commander of the Roman troops, who were stationed at the Antonia Fortress (north of and adjacent to the temple). The sight of the commander and his soldiers arriving led them to stop beating Paul, fearing that they themselves would experience the force of the Romans. The commander arrested Paul and had him bound with two chains, in order to find out Paul's identity and actions and, thus, the reason for the mob scene. The uproar was so great and confusing that the commander could "not get at the truth." The soldiers had to carry Paul away to prevent him from being harmed by the violence of the mob.

### 3. *Paul's Defense before the Crowd (21:37–22:30)*

What 21:37–22:30 centers on is *Paul's defense before the crowd*. In 21:27–36, Paul was arrested after some Jews from the province of Asia incited the whole city of Jerusalem against Paul. The commander of the Roman troops arrested Paul to remove him as the focal point of the mob and to discover the reason for the violence against him. Paul's defense here is to the crowd that followed him.

Prior to entering the barracks in the Antonia Fortress, Paul obtained the commander's permission to speak to the crowd. But it was first necessary to convince the commander that Paul would not provoke the crowd to further violence. The commander mistook Paul for an Egyptian who had started a violent revolt in Judea (these terrorists were suppressed under the rule of Governor Felix). Paul was able to gain credibility by informing the commander that he was a Jew from a prominent Greek city, namely, Tarsus, in Cilicia. Paul's shared Greek cultural background with the commander made it easier for him to receive the commander's permission.

Paul gave his speech to the crowd from the steps of the fortress and spoke in Aramaic to the crowd. The Jewish crowd was more willing to listen to Paul's defense ("they became very quiet"), because he spoke the dominant language of Jews in Palestine. Paul's defense speech can be divided in the following way: Paul's life before encountering Jesus (22:3–5); Paul's encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road (22:6–11); and Paul's life after encountering Jesus (22:12–21). In the first section, Paul went over his Jewish heritage and persecution of Jesus' followers. Although he was born in Tarsus, he was brought up in Jerusalem. Paul's Jewish upbringing included training in the law from one of the greatest Pharisees, Gamaliel (see 5:33–40). Paul's zeal for God, like that of his audience, led him to persecute those who followed Jesus. This persecution could be verified by the collective memory of the high priest and the whole Sanhedrin (compare 22:4–5 with 7:54–8:3). The references to imprisoning and punishing Jesus' followers in Damascus set up the second section, where Paul rehearses most of his encounter with Jesus in 9:1–9. New details are found in Paul's recounting of this event – his companions saw the glorious "light" of Jesus' appearance (but not Jesus Himself) and heard the sound of Jesus' voice (but did not understand Jesus).

In the third section, Paul's speech moves to its most controversial topic, namely, Paul's calling to testify about Jesus to both Jews *and* Gentiles. As in 9:10–19 (compare with 22:12–16), Ananias is instrumental in Paul's recovery of sight and receiving his God-given calling. Paul highlighted that it was the God of Israel ("the God of our fathers") who had chosen Paul to know God's will and to see and hear Jesus ("the Righteous One"). God called Paul to be a witness of the resurrected Messiah. Verses 17–21 recount an event not covered earlier in the story of Acts, though the general context is provided in 9:26–30. At this time, Paul returned to Jerusalem and had a vision of Jesus during a time of prayer at the temple. During a trance, Jesus told Paul to "leave Jerusalem immediately" to escape the persecution of those many Jews who would not accept Paul's testimony about Jesus. Paul seems to object

to Jesus' command on the basis of his belief that these Jews will see Paul as one who is actively zealous for God *as they were* (compare 22:19–20 with 22:3–5). In other words, these Jews would be willing to hear Paul's testimony or, at least, not persecute him in their rejection of it. Paul's speech concludes with a command and promise from Jesus. The promise is in line with Jesus' commissioning of the apostles in 1:8 – in going “far away to the Gentiles,” Paul would be moving toward “the ends of the earth.”

Acts 22:22–30 relates the immediate aftermath of Paul's defense speech. Nowhere in Paul's speech did he directly refute the charges made against him in 21:27–28. But Paul was not given the opportunity to do so. The crowd was no longer willing to listen to Paul after he said that God had sent him to proclaim the good news of God's Kingdom *to the Gentiles*. These Jews let their nationalism get in the way of truly hearing the Gospel. Since Paul's defense speech did not dispel the violent mob, the commander had Paul taken into the barracks and sought a new way of examining him. In the Greek and Roman judicial systems, torture, such as flogging, was used to question people. The commander hoped that this approach would be effective in learning why this Jewish mob wanted Paul to die. As soldiers were about to flog him, Paul alerted the centurion present that he was a Roman citizen. After the commander was informed about Paul's claim, he personally investigated the matter and learned that Paul was born a citizen (the idea that Roman citizenship could be bought was abhorrent to many Romans). The commander and those involved in questioning Paul were alarmed that Paul had been put in chains. Verse 30 moves the story ahead to the next day, when the commander brought Paul before the Sanhedrin to discern “exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews.” The commander sought to answer the following question: was Paul breaking Roman and/or Jewish laws? The Jewish ruling council could help the commander to determine the answer to this question (the Sanhedrin only had an advisory role for this proceeding).

#### 4. *Paul versus the Sanhedrin (chap. 23)*

The focal point of Acts 23 is *Paul versus the Sanhedrin*. Although the accusations against Paul did not originate with the Sanhedrin (see 21:27–36), they did take advantage of the situation to persecute Paul for his testimony about Jesus. The Sanhedrin was unable to take advantage of the assembly to examine Paul (23:1–11), but they did take part in a (failed) plot to kill him (23:12–35).

Acts 22:30 sets the context for the events of 23:1–11 – the *Roman* commander ordered the Sanhedrin to meet in order to determine the exact reason for the *Jewish* accusation of Paul. While Paul was able to make a defense, the Sanhedrin did not come to any conclusion about the charges from the mob at the temple. The beginning of Paul's defense – his claim to have been faithful in his “duty to God” – was met with an ordered strike on the mouth from the high priest, Ananias. Paul rebuked Ananias (“God will strike you”), who was known for his brutality and thievery, for his hypocrisy – violating the law by having Paul struck while *supposedly* judging him “according to the law.” Ananias was like a “whitewashed wall” in

that his formal garments covered up his wicked heart. Paul's reply to the question about insulting God's high priest can be understood in, at least, two ways. The use of the quotation from Exodus 22:28 means that Paul intended to respect authority. But Paul's words in 23:5 may also have implied that Ananias was not *behaving* the way God called Israel's high priest to act.

Discerning that the Sanhedrin was going to be biased against him, Paul closed his defense with a statement that divided the Jewish assembly. The Sanhedrin was made up of Pharisees and Sadducees, two groups with distinctive and opposing approaches to life with God and sociopolitical engagement. Paul's declaration that he was on trial for his "hope in the resurrection of the dead" served to spark "a great uproar" between these two groups. The Pharisees were willing to admit the possibility that God had spoken to Paul through "a spirit or an angel." And the Sadducees, who deny the reality of spirits, angels, and the resurrection of the dead, were enraged by such a claim. The dispute between the rival groups became so violent that the commander had to rescue Paul for a third time (compare 23:9-10 with 21:30-36 and 22:22-29). This meeting of the Sanhedrin did not help the commander learn about the Jewish opposition to Paul, but the actions of this body may have showed the commander that they were unstable and unreliable. It seems that Paul went away from the meeting feeling discouraged about his future. Jesus appeared to Paul on the following night to encourage him that it was God's plan for him to testify about Jesus in Jerusalem *and* Rome (compare 23:11 with 19:21). Paul had nothing to fear in Jerusalem, for God would be with him from Jerusalem to Rome and while in Rome.

What happens in 23:12-35 takes Paul from Jerusalem to Caesarea and moves him forward in his journey to Rome. These verses revolve around Paul escaping a plot of some Jews. This plot started with over forty Jewish men who had made an oath that they would not "eat or drink until they had killed Paul." (According to Rabbinic law, this oath could have been broken if it became impossible for the oath takers to do the promised action.) The chief priests and elders of the Jews (two subgroups who made up part of the Sanhedrin) were complicit in this plot. Their part in the conspiracy against Paul was essential – they would convince the whole Sanhedrin to petition the commander to bring Paul before them for more information. Their real motive in this petition would be to give the oath takers an opportunity to kill Paul *on the way* to the meeting of the Sanhedrin.

Paul's nephew somehow heard of this plot and told Paul about it. (Thankfully for Paul, Roman citizens could receive visitors!) In 23:17-21, Paul was able, with the help of a centurion, to inform the commander through his nephew. Before dismissing Paul's nephew, the commander cautioned him against telling anyone else the reported plot. This was a wise move to protect both Paul and his nephew from these plotting Jews. The commander's orders and letter, in 23:23-30, reveal that he took the threat very seriously. The orders moved Paul from custody in Jerusalem to Caesarea Maritima and provided him with an abundance of protection during the journey. The letter to Governor Felix essentially recounts selected events from 21:27-23:24, highlighting and overstating the commander's heroic actions. Paul's escort left at nine in the evening and stopped at Antipatris, a kind of halfway mark between

Jerusalem and Caesarea, until the next day. From there to Caesarea, only the cavalry was necessary, given that they were far enough away from the threat in Jerusalem. The letter the cavalry delivered explained why they handed Paul over to Felix and how Paul's accusers were ordered to go to Felix. The governor learned about what province Paul was from to ensure that he had a high enough rank to make a ruling on Paul's case. (Rulers in some provinces may have outranked him and have been the appropriate ones to take Felix's place in this matter.) Paul was kept under guard in Herod's palace, the governor's headquarters, until Paul's accusers would arrive to present their case against him.

5. *Paul before Felix (chap. 24)*

Acts 24 is about *Paul before Felix*. The commander of the Roman troops at the Antonia Fortress ordered that Paul be sent to Felix in Caesarea *and* that his accusers go to Felix to present their case. Paul's accusers make their case against him here, but Felix postpones making a final decision about what to do with Paul.

This chapter begins by moving the story forward five days. The high priest travelled from Jerusalem to Caesarea Maritima with some of the Jewish elders and a lawyer named Tertullus. Their intent was to bring "their charges against Paul before the governor." In this Roman setting, it would have been helpful for the Sanhedrin to have a man trained in Greco-Roman rhetoric to present these charges. The Sanhedrin's lawyer prepared Felix to hear the charges by honoring him for establishing peace for a long period and wisely ruling over the province of Judea. (The historical record reveals that this "peace" was brutally enforced and that the Jews of Caesarea Maritima complained about his way of ruling.) Paul was accused of being "a troublemaker" among the Jews throughout the Roman Empire. This charge was false since Paul had only been throughout the northern and eastern parts of the Mediterranean. It was true that he was a leader of what was called "the Nazarene sect" (referenced to as "the Way" elsewhere in Acts), viewed as one of the expressions of the Jewish faith. Both the charge about being a troublemaker and the other charge about trying "to desecrate the temple" would have been major concerns to Felix *and* punishable by death. These things would have been seen as counterproductive to maintaining (the ideology of) the *Pax Romana*, "the Roman Peace."

Paul's defense (24:10–21) begins his speech in a similar way to Tertullus (compare 24:10 with 24:2–4). Paul, however, spoke truthfully and did not flatter Felix to persuade the governor to be open to *his* speech. It was true that Felix had been "a judge" over the province of Judea for "a number of years," making him able to know and understand the situation Paul was facing. Verses 11–13 focus on Paul's accusers and their charges. Rather than stirring up a riot in Jerusalem and desecrating the temple, Paul was worshipping in a peaceful way. Therefore, the false charges of Paul's opponents could not be proven to Felix. Before directly addressing the charges against him (24:17–21), Paul spoke of himself as a follower of the Way (24:14–16). The God Paul worshipped was the God of Israel ("the God of our fathers"). And what Paul believed and hoped for was in line with the fulfillment of the

promises of God in the Old Testament (“the Law and...the Prophets”). Jesus the Messiah had reestablished God’s saving reign on the earth and would return to consummate God’s Kingdom. (The reference to having “the same hope in God as these men” applies only to the Pharisees among the Sanhedrin.) During this future time, God would resurrect “both the righteous and the wicked,” give the righteous in Christ the fullness of their salvation, and punish the wicked for their rejection of the world’s Savior. Paul’s self-description leads into his refutation of the charges. Paul came to Jerusalem to bring the Jewish people gifts (the collection for the poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem) and to present offerings (as he took part in the Nazarite vows of four Jewish men; see 21:20–26). Some Jews from the province of Asia found Paul in the temple courts being ceremonially unclean. As those who started the disturbance, these Jews should have been before Felix to bring charges against Paul (see 21:27–36). Moreover, the Sanhedrin was unable to state any crime that Paul had committed, unless they considered his outburst and *their* reactions to it a criminal act (see 23:6–10).

In 24:22–27, Luke narrated what happened to Paul in Caesarea Maritima as he waited for Felix to make his decision about Paul’s case. Although Felix was “well acquainted with the Way” and had already received a letter from Lysias the commander, Felix said he would decide the case when Lysias came to him. This was clearly a delay tactic. It is possible that Felix wanted to protect Paul from his violent opponents or, at least, to keep further disturbances from happening in his province. Paul was given some freedom and had to rely on the support of his friends to obtain the necessary food and clothing. (Note that all ancient prisoners had to depend on others – and not the state – for their basic needs.) Felix’s more sinister motives for postponing his judgment become clear for readers in verses 24–27. Felix and his wife Drusilla, a Jewish woman, listened to Paul as spoke about “faith in Christ Jesus,” a message that focused on righteousness, self-control, and God’s coming judgment. Paul’s words made Felix afraid, possibly because these truths about God and His Kingdom were piercing Felix’s heart. Felix, however, would only listen to Paul on his terms and was secretly hoping for a bribe from Paul. To make matters worse, Paul was not let go when Porcius Festus succeeded Felix. Wanting to grant a favor to the Jews prevented Felix from following the custom of releasing prisoners awaiting trial and judgment at the end of one’s office.

## 6. *Paul, Festus, and Agrippa (chap. 25)*

Chapter 25 revolves around the interactions among *Paul, Festus, and Agrippa*. After Paul appears before Governor Festus (25:1–12), Festus consults King Agrippa about Paul’s case (25:13–22). Finally, Paul is introduced to Agrippa by Festus (25:23–27).

Acts 24 closed with Festus replacing Felix as the governor of the province of Judea. One matter Festus had to deal with at the beginning of his governorship was Paul’s case. In 25:1–12, Festus hears the charges against Paul and Paul’s defense. Festus traveled from Caesarea Maritima to Jerusalem in order to interact with many important Jews there. The chief priests and Jewish leaders appeared before him, so that they could present their charges

against Paul and urgently request the transfer of Paul to Jerusalem. They hoped that Festus, like Felix, would want to grant them a favor (compare 25:3 with 24:27). Their plan was to ambush and kill Paul along the way (cf. 23:12–15). Festus was, in fact, willing to do the Jews a favor (see 25:9), but he had Paul’s accusers go to Paul (instead of Paul going to his accusers). Several days later, Festus returned to Caesarea Maritima, convened the court, and had Paul brought before him. The Jews from Jerusalem made many serious and unfounded charges. And Paul defended himself by declaring that he had done nothing wrong against the temple or against Jewish and Roman laws.

It seems as if Festus was unaware of the ambush of 25:3. But since Festus wanted to grant the Jews the requested favor, Festus asked Paul if were willing to stand trial before Festus in Jerusalem. Both the prosecution and the defense had to agree to this change. Paul considered himself to be “standing before Caesar’s court” in Caesarea Maritima and, thus, saw no need to be tried in Jerusalem. Paul’s comment about not refusing to die if he were *rightly* found guilty of capital offenses may indicate that he knew that a transfer to Jerusalem was likely to result in his assassination. In light of the probable Jewish threat, Paul made an appeal to Caesar’s court in Rome (all Roman citizens could do this). Festus’ conferral with his council helped him to decide that he would grant Paul’s appeal, which was a positive for Festus. Festus was able to *offer* a favor to the Jews and not be held ultimately responsible for a difficult case.

King Agrippa II (who lived from 27 to 100 A.D.) was consulted after Agrippa and his sister Bernice (she was also the sister of Drusilla, Felix’s wife) came to Caesarea Maritima “to pay their respects to Festus.” (Official visits like this often occurred when someone entered a new, high position in the Roman Empire.) Since Agrippa and Bernice planned to spend many days there, Festus discussed Paul’s case with the king (along with other administrative matters?). What Festus told Agrippa in verses 14–21 consists of Festus’ account of his interactions with the accusing Jews and Paul and his views on Paul’s case. Festus’ understood the case to be about a religious dispute, focused on Paul’s claim that a dead man named Jesus was alive. Agrippa offered his help, and Festus accepted it. Paul would appear before Agrippa on the following day, so that he could hear from Paul himself and provide a different perspective. Many Jews and Romans considered Agrippa to be an expert in the different forms of the Jewish faith that existed in the Roman Empire. The entrance of Agrippa and Bernice into the audience room at Herod’s palace is an example of the Romans’ enjoyment of pageantry. The “great pomp” was likely intended to make a big impression on the high ranking officers, the leading men of Caesarea Maritima, and even Paul. Festus’ words in 25:24–27 essentially repeats what Festus said to Agrippa in 25:14–21. The purpose in the later verses was to make a formal introduction of Paul’s case to Agrippa before an official audience. The most important part of the formal introduction is found in verses 26–27 – Festus needed Agrippa’s help in investigating Paul in order to write an informed letter to the Emperor about the charges against Paul.

## 7. *Paul before Agrippa (chap. 26)*

This chapter centers on *Paul before Agrippa*. This is Paul's last formal defense that the story of Acts records. As in Acts 22, Paul's defense here focuses on his encounter of Jesus on the Damascus road. This event is central to Paul's understanding of his life, faith, and calling.

After receiving permission to speak for himself, Paul gave his defense in 26:1–23. The defense can be understood as consisting of four parts: the introduction (26:1–3); Paul's Jewish way of life (26:4–11); the vision from heaven (26:12–18); and Paul's obedience to the vision from heaven (26:19–23). Paul's introduction prepares Agrippa to be open to Paul's defense. Paul was truly fortunate to have an audience with someone well acquainted with the Jewish religion(s). In the second part, Paul's Jewish heritage and Jewish hope become the focal points of his defense. Paul's Jewish way of life began as a child, and Paul's accusers could verify that he lived a thoroughly Jewish life as a Pharisee (see Phil. 3:1–6). Paul declared that he was on trial for his hope in Israel's promised Messiah. The Jews were hoping that Messiah would come and reestablish God's Kingdom on the earth. Included in this work of God was the resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. God, however, worked in a way that the Jews did not expect – the Messiah was crucified and then raised from the dead. What was unexpected in God resurrecting Jesus was not the resurrection itself, but the fact that He was raised from the dead ahead of the general resurrection (compare 26:8 with 26:22–23). In his zeal for God, Paul did all that he could “to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth” (cf. 22:3–5). Paul's obsessive persecution of Jesus' followers began in Jerusalem and took him to foreign cities.

The third part – the vision from heaven – is very similar to 22:4–11 (Paul's first recounting of his encounter with Jesus) and 9:1–9 (Luke's narration of the event itself). A unique aspect of Paul's second recounting is that Paul's God-given calling comes to Paul during his encounter – and not through Ananias (see 9:15–16) or during a trance in the temple (see 22:17–21). God called Paul to serve Him and to bear witness to the resurrected Messiah. As God's “servant,” Paul would suffer. But God would rescue Paul from the persecution of both the Jews and the Gentiles. Those Jews and Gentiles who responded to Paul's proclamation of the Gospel would be reconciled to God and have a place among the community God set apart for Himself. In the fourth part, Paul spoke of his obedient response to the vision from heaven he received. The message Paul preached to both Jews and Gentiles centers on faith in Jesus as God's promised Messiah (turning to God) and a true repentance that demonstrates this faith. It was because of this preaching activity that Paul faced Jewish persecution in 21:27–36 (and afterward). With God's help, Paul was able to testify, despite opposition, to all kinds of people (“small and great alike”) about Jesus. Paul's claim was that his message about the Messiah was in fulfillment of God's promises in the Old Testament.

Acts 26 closes with two conversations – the first involving Paul, Festus, and Agrippa (26:24–29) and the second including Agrippa and Festus (26:30–32). When Festus heard Paul speak of the Messiah's suffering and resurrection, Festus interrupted Paul's defense by

shouting that Paul's great learning had driven him insane. Paul responded by saying that his claims were "true and reasonable" and by directing his attention to King Agrippa. Knowing "all the Jewish customs and controversies" enabled Agrippa to have an advantage in understanding all the eyewitness reports he had heard about Jesus and His followers. If Agrippa believed the Scriptural promises, then he could make sense of all these reports and begin to follow Jesus. Agrippa's response in 26:28 seems to be a way of putting off a decision to believe Paul's presentation of the Good News about Jesus of Nazareth as Israel's Messiah. Paul wanted Agrippa and all his listeners to become Christians (i.e., Christ-followers), whether it took a short time or a long time to be persuaded to do so. The private conversation Agrippa, Festus, Bernice, and other officials had about Paul's innocence is an indication for readers that Paul had not broken any Roman or Jewish laws (cf. 25:24-25). And Agrippa's statement to Festus about Paul's appeal to Caesar and his freedom shows that Paul was not headed to Rome because he was guilty of any crimes.

### **G. Paul on Trial: Rome (chaps. 27-28)**

In Acts 27-28, *Paul being on trial in Rome* becomes the focal point. With the legal proceedings that took place in Caesarea (see chaps. 24-26), the story of Acts was already moving from Jewish to more Roman settings. Paul's appeal to Caesar meant that he had to go to Rome to face trial there. As Paul travels to Rome and is awaiting trial there, Rome and the Roman Empire become the dominant setting for the story.

#### **1. Setting Out (27:1-12)**

Acts 27:1-12 is about Paul *setting out* for Rome. These verses reveal and foreshadow that Paul's voyage to Rome will be filled with difficulties and even disaster. The decisions Paul and others make here affect their journey to Rome.

Paul and some other prisoners traveled to Rome (in the province of "Italy") under the oversight of a centurion named Julius, a member of the Imperial Regiment (a special group of guards who had the responsibility of escorting prisoners). Presumably, other soldiers were with Julius to provide the necessary support. Luke also noted that Aristarchus, who was Paul's "fellow prisoner" (see Col. 4:10 and Phlm. 23-24), was with Paul and Luke (note that the narrator was present with Paul during the events of 27:1-28:16). The ship they all boarded had originally embarked from Adramyttium (in the province of Asia) and went to Sidon (in the province of Syria), where Julius kindly allowed Paul's friends there to provide for Paul's needs. They boarded another ship, which was from Alexandria of Egypt at Myra (in the province of Lycia). (This ship was most likely a large grain ship heading for Rome.) Their next three stopping points were Cnidus, Salmone, and Fair Havens. The difficulties the ship encountered in bad winds indicate that the sailing season would soon be over. Sailing had already become dangerous, because they were past the time of the Day of Atonement ("the Fast" in September/October). An important decision had to be made at the third

stopping point – whether or not they would winter the ship (until spring) in Fair Havens or in Phoenix (both were on the island of Crete, and Phoenix was about 40 miles away from Fair Havens). Paul’s warning about the disaster and great loss they would experience was not heeded, in light of the unsuitability of the harbor in Fair Havens. Instead, the centurion followed the advice of the pilot and the ship’s owner. Moreover, the majority of the passengers decided it was best to go on to Phoenix.

## 2. *Storm and Shipwreck (27:13–44)*

The *storm and shipwreck* that Paul and the other passengers endure and survive are the focal points of 27:13–44. Unfortunately, Paul was right in his warning in 27:9–10 that sailing on was an unwise and dangerous decision. After encountering a terrible storm for a long time, the passengers realized that a shipwreck would most likely occur.

It appears that the ship was taking a wise course until “a gentle south wind” was replaced by “a wind of hurricane force” (lit. “a typhoon wind”). The ship could not sail along the shore of Crete, as they had planned. Roman ships had only one sail and did not have the ability to turn well into the wind. Therefore, they had to give way to the wind and let it drive the ship along whatever course the wind took it. As they passed to the protective shelter (“the lee”) of a small island called Cauda (south of Crete), they were forced to hoist the lifeboat aboard and pass ropes under the ship. These and other measures done in 27:16–20 were the correct things to do when in a fierce storm. The powerful wind, the “northeaster,” drove them in a southwest direction toward Northern Africa and dangerously close to its coast. It became necessary to lower the sea anchor to prevent the ship from being run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis (in Northern Africa). For the next two days, they threw overboard the ship’s cargo and tackle to lighten the ship. Although they took all these precautionary measures, the passengers gave up all hope of being saved after the dark and raging storm continued for many days.

Hope comes from the mouth of Paul in 27:21–26, when he encouraged the passengers with news of God’s promise and instructions to save them. Not taking Paul’s advice had led to “damage and loss” for the ship and its passengers, but no one would be lost. The ship, however, would be destroyed. God’s gracious promise came to Paul through an angel – Paul was to “not be afraid,” since God would bring him safely to “stand trial before Caesar” and the rest of the passengers would also live. Paul trusted God to fulfill this promise, but he also instructed them that it would be necessary to run the ship aground on some island. After fourteen days of voyaging through a violent storm, it became very clear that a shipwreck was imminent. As they were still being driven across “the Adriatic Sea” (in ancient times, this referred to an area far south of Italy), the sailors sensed that they were approaching land. Dropping four anchors from the stern and praying for daylight did not prevent the sailors from an attempted escape from the ship. Paul told the centurion and the soldiers that these men must stay with the ship; otherwise, *they* would not be saved from the shipwreck (the sailors were needed to guide the ship). The soldiers got rid of the lifeboat, so that the sailors

could not leave the ship to its fate. Paul took leadership and encouraged the passengers to eat some food. This sustenance would be needed for strength and energy to make it safely to land when the predicted shipwreck occurred. It seems that the grain was being used to provide stability for the ship (cf. 27:18) and was unnecessary to keep after everyone had eaten. Their predicament got somewhat better when daylight came. The sailors were unable to recognize the visible land, but they did see a bay with a sandy beach, a good place to run the ship aground. Getting the ship ready to head for the beach, they accidentally struck a sandbar and ran the ship aground. When the ship broke up, the soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to keep them from escaping. If they did escape by swimming away, these soldiers could have received the punishment these prisoners may have faced if found guilty (compare 27:42 with 12:18–19 and 16:27). The centurion had grown to respect Paul (cf. 27:1–3), so he kept the soldiers from carrying out their plan in order to spare Paul’s life. The centurion’s plan was to take control of the situation and make sure that the prisoners did not get away. With God’s help and Paul’s faith in God, everyone was able to reach “land in safety.”

### 3. *Stranded on Malta (28:1–10)*

Acts 28:1–10 revolves around Paul and the other passengers being *stranded on Malta*. Although the passengers of the ship survived the storm and the shipwreck in 27:13–44, they were not out danger when they safely reached a then unknown island. The island’s residents could have been unfriendly or the island could have uninhabited and unsafe.

Paul and the passengers discovered that the island was called “Malta” and that its residents were very friendly. The islanders (i.e., natives and non-Greek speakers) showed them “unusual kindness” by building them a fire and giving them shelter from the rain and cold weather. Paul contributed to making the fire and was bit by a seemingly nonpoisonous viper in the process. The islanders’ immediate reaction was to assume that the god of justice (“Justice”) had allowed Paul – “a murderer” – to escape the sea only to kill Paul at this time. Paul, however, shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects. And the islanders later believed that his invulnerability to the snake bite indicated that he was a god (Paul and Barnabas were thought to be gods by superstitious pagans in 14:8–13). God provided food and shelter for Paul and the others through Publius, the Roman governor (“the chief official”) of the island. Publius welcomed them into his home and gave a banquet for them for three days. Paul had the opportunity to do ministry in the name of Jesus the Messiah. God healed Publius’ father through Paul’s ministry, and this healing of an important man’s father drew many other sick to come to Paul to be healed. All those who sought healing were healed by God. Out of gratitude, those who were healed (and maybe all the islanders) honored Paul and the rest in many ways and provided them with the needed supplies for their remaining voyage to Rome.

#### 4. *Paul in Rome (28:11–31)*

The focal point of 28:11–31 is *Paul in Rome*. Paul finally arrived at Rome and was able to testify about Jesus in this important city. The story of Acts closes with Paul having an active ministry in Rome.

Verse 11 picks up the story from 28:1–10. Paul and the other passengers waited for three months on the island of Malta to resume their voyage to Rome. The ship they traveled on was from Alexandria of Egypt and one that had wintered in the island. After stopping at Syracuse (in the province of Sicilia) for three days, the traveled to Rhegium and then on to Puteoli. Some disciples at Puteoli invited Paul and his companions (and the prisoners, the centurion, and the soldiers?) to spend a week with them. After their stay in Puteoli, Paul, still escorted by the centurion, was met by some of the disciples in Rome at the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns (places along the Appian Way, which leads to Rome). These disciples had heard about Paul's arrival and came to meet him and welcome him to Rome. Paul thanked God for their visit and was encouraged by their presence. When Paul got to Rome, he discovered that he would be allowed to live by himself in rented quarters. However, a soldier would also be with him and handcuffed to him. This was not a formal imprisonment, but Paul was not truly free.

Acts 28:17–29 focuses on Paul's interactions with the Jews in Rome and their reception and rejection of the Gospel. Paul called together the leaders of the Jews in Rome three days after his arrival. These leaders needed to know why Paul had come to Rome. Certain Jews had prosecuted Paul because of his preaching of the Gospel, but Paul's appeal to Caesar was not about opposing the Jewish people. Paul was in Rome to defend himself against unjust persecution *and* to talk with the Roman Jews about the Good News of Jesus the Messiah ("the hope of Israel"). The reply of the Roman Jewish leaders in 28:21–22 reveals that they were not prejudiced against Paul and that they were open to Paul's message. During a later arranged meeting, these leaders and large numbers of Jews came to hear Paul at the place where he was staying. For a full day, Paul proclaimed to them that Jesus of Nazareth had reestablished God's Kingdom, basing his teaching on what the Old Testament says about Israel's Messiah. Only some were convinced by Paul's words, and it seems that most would not believe. Paul's final statement to them resulted in disagreement among these Jews and, eventually, their departure from Paul. The truth that the Holy Spirit had spoken to the Israelites of the days of Isaiah the prophet applied to most of Paul's audience. Paul declared that Isaiah 6:9–10 described those who had rejected the Gospel on this occasion. Like these Israelites, they had rejected God's offer of salvation because they were unwilling to repent and turn to God for their healing. Paul wanted them to know that God would send the good news of salvation in Jesus to the Gentiles and that *they* would be more willing to listen and accept this message. As in 13:46–47, Paul's point was not that Jews no longer had opportunities to believe the Gospel and be saved.

The last two verses of the story of Acts are about both Paul's ministry and the journey of the Gospel. Paul stayed for "two whole years" in his rented house, awaiting trial and

judgment at Caesar's court. Luke does not tell his readers how Paul's case ended or if his case came to a resolution. Those who were in Paul's situation had to have their accusers present their charges within two years. It seems that Paul's accusers never came to Rome. Luke's focal point was Paul's bold and unhindered preaching of God's Kingdom and teaching about Jesus' lordship as Messiah. In the capital of the Roman Empire, Paul was able to preach the Gospel to all who came to see him. Based on other historical records (including 1-2 Timothy and Titus), Paul was released, did more traveling and ministry, and was executed by the Roman Empire in 64 A.D.