



JOURNEY THROUGH
ACTS



Welcome to the book of Acts! You're about to see how Christianity went from a tiny Jewish sect to a multiethnic movement that upended and outlasted the Roman Empire. Imagine trying to convince someone that an executed Jewish carpenter they'd never heard of had returned from the dead and was the Son of God, *and* that weakness, sacrifice, and kindness were more powerful than wealth or military might. Somehow, they proved it. This is the origin story of the kingdom of God. You'll witness moments that seemed like they'd end everything: violent oppression, internal conflicts, shipwrecks, and imprisonment. Despite all of that, Christianity shaped civilization as we know it today.

Daily Reading Assignments - January 1st - April 5th, 2026

Many of you love having specific, daily reading assignments. These first pages have each day's Scripture reading. If you're using this guide and it's *not* Jan-Apr 2026, feel free to ignore or even tear out these pages.

X	Date:	Reference	Notes
	Thursday, January 1st	Acts 1:1-14	Happy New Year!
	Friday, January 2nd	Acts 1:15-26	
	Saturday, January 3rd		
	Sunday, January 4th		See you at church!
	Monday, January 5th	Acts 2:1-13	
	Tuesday, January 6th	Acts 2:14-36	
	Wednesday, January 7th	Acts 2:37-47	Wed Night / 6pm
	Thursday, January 8th	Acts 3:1-26	
	Friday, January 9th	Acts 4:1-22	
	Saturday, January 10th		
	Sunday, January 11th		Church!
	Monday, January 12th	1 Peter 1:3-21	
	Tuesday, January 13th	Acts 4:23-37	
	Wednesday, January 14th	Acts 5:1-16	Wed Night / 6pm
	Thursday, January 15th	Acts 5:17-42	

	Friday, January 16th	Acts 6:1-7	
	Saturday, January 17th		
	Sunday, January 18th		Church time :)
	Monday, January 19th	Acts 6:8-15	
	Tuesday, January 20th	Acts 7:1-29	
	Wednesday, January 21st	Acts 7:30-53	Wed Night / 6pm
	Thursday, January 22nd	Acts 8:1-8	
	Friday, January 23rd	Acts 8:9-25	
	Saturday, January 24th		
	Sunday, January 25th		Get to church!
	Monday, January 26th	Acts 8:26-40	
	Tuesday, January 27th	Acts 9:1-19	
	Wednesday, January 28th	1 Cor 15:1-11; Gal 1:11-24	Wed Night / 6pm
	Thursday, January 29th	Acts 9:20-31	
	Friday, January 30th	Acts 9:32-43	Women's Retreat 6pm-8pm
	Saturday, January 31st		Women's Retreat 8:30am-2pm
	Sunday, February 1st		Church Day!
	Monday, February 2nd	Acts 10:1-23	
	Tuesday, February 3rd	Acts 10:24-48	
	Wednesday, February 4th	Acts 11:1-18	Wed Night / 6pm
	Thursday, February 5th	Acts 11:19-30	
	Friday, February 6th	Acts 12:1-25	
	Saturday, February 7th		
	Sunday, February 8th		See you at church!
	Monday, February 9th	Acts 13:1-12	
	Tuesday, February 10th	Acts 13:13-25	
	Wednesday, February 11th	Acts 13:26-52	Wed Night / 6pm
	Thursday, February 12th	Acts 14:1-20	

	Friday, February 13th	Acts 14:21-28	
	Saturday, February 14th		Valentine's Day!
	Sunday, February 15th		Get to church
	Monday, February 16th	Acts 15:1-21	
	Tuesday, February 17th	Gal 5:1-12	
	Wednesday, February 18th	Acts 15:22-35	Wed Night / 6pm
	Thursday, February 19th	Acts 15:36-41	
	Friday, February 20th	Acts 16:1-15	
	Saturday, February 21st		FMSC - 12pm
	Sunday, February 22nd		It's Church!
	Monday, February 23rd	Acts 16:16-24	
	Tuesday, February 24th	Acts 16:25-40	
	Wednesday, February 25th	Phil 1:3-30	Wed Night / 6pm
	Thursday, February 26th	Acts 17:1-15	
	Friday, February 27th	1 Thess 2:1-20	
	Saturday, February 28th		
	Sunday, March 1st		Church
	Monday, March 2nd	Acts 17:16-34	
	Tuesday, March 3rd	Acts 18:1-17	
	Wednesday, March 4th	1 Cor 2:1-16	No Wed Activities
	Thursday, March 5th	Acts 18:18-28	
	Friday, March 6th	Acts 19:1-22	
	Saturday, March 7th		Daylight Saving Time!
	Sunday, March 8th		See you at church!
	Monday, March 9th	Ephesians 2:11-3:13	
	Tuesday, March 10th	Acts 19:21-41	
	Wednesday, March 11th	Romans 8:1-39	No Wed Activities
	Thursday, March 12th	Acts 20:1-12	

	Friday, March 13th	Acts 20:13-38	
	Saturday, March 14th		
	Sunday, March 15th		Worship with us.
	Monday, March 16th	Acts 21:1-16	
	Tuesday, March 17th	Acts 21:17-26	St. Patrick's Day!
	Wednesday, March 18th	Acts 21:27-40	No Wed Activities
	Thursday, March 19th	Acts 22:1-21	
	Friday, March 20th	Acts 22:22-30	
	Saturday, March 21st		
	Sunday, March 22nd		Church is here!
	Monday, March 23rd	Acts 23:1-11	
	Tuesday, March 24th	Acts 23:12-35	
	Wednesday, March 25th	Acts 24:1-27	No Wed Activities
	Thursday, March 26th	Acts 25:1-27	
	Friday, March 27th	Acts 26:1-32	
	Saturday, March 28th		
	Sunday, March 29th		Church!!
	Monday, March 30th	Romans 15:1-27	
	Tuesday, March 31st	Acts 27:1-26	
	Wednesday, April 1st	Acts 27:27-44	Wed Night / 6pm
	Thursday, April 2nd	Acts 28:1-14	
	Friday, April 3rd	Acts 28:15-31	Good Friday
	Saturday, April 4th		
	Sunday, April 5th		He Is Risen!

The author, Luke, begins by reminding us that we are reading the sequel to his biography of Jesus, which we call the book of Luke. The fact that there's a Part Two means that the story of Jesus doesn't end with his resurrection or even his ascension. This should encourage us to see ourselves as part of the ongoing story of Jesus. Like the earliest followers, we live in the time between his going and his returning (Acts 1:11). In this way, Acts is a book uniquely for us. Not that it provides a step-by-step blueprint, but a framework for navigating the world until His return.

Use the space below to write down observations, questions, and prayers.

Notes:

- “Theophilus”, to whom this letter was written, literally means “Friend of God.” While it is a real name from the first century, some believe Luke might be using it to address *anyone* taking their next step toward Jesus.
- Books of the Bible didn't initially have titles. They were added later by other Christians. Given that Jesus tells the Apostles to wait for the Spirit to come to them and the Spirit's heavy influence on the following stories, some have suggested that a more accurate name for this book than *Acts of the Apostles* might be *Acts of the Spirit*.

Early on, they knew it would be essential to have eyewitnesses who could confirm the reality of Jesus's resurrection. As they wait, Peter interprets several Psalms to suggest that they fill the empty spot left by Judas with someone who had been with Jesus from the beginning.

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Notes:

- Peter is eager to replace Judas, so there will be a full twelve apostles to spread the news of Jesus's resurrection. We know that later, Paul would be selected by God himself. It's not clear if Peter jumped the gun or if this was part of God's plan all along. Either way, it's important that the message be spread. It is interesting to note that we don't hear from Matthias after this episode.
- *Is casting lots to determine God's will a real thing* (Acts 1:26)? Good question. This is an ancient practice to ascertain the will of the gods, and the Israelites also practiced it to determine what Yahweh wanted (Joshua 7:14, 18; 1 Samuel 10:19-24; 1 Chronicles 24:5; 24:31). It's worth noting that it doesn't appear in Scripture again after this instance.

It would be hard to overstate the importance of what is taking place in this chapter. *God himself is showing up.* However, this time, His arrival is not on a mountaintop (Exodus 19:18) or in a temple (1 Kings 8:10–11) *but in a people.* The arrival of the Spirit mirrors other places in Scripture where God shows up: noise, wind, and fire (Ezekiel 1:4). There's a clear reversal of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9). There, the nations were scattered and separated by languages. Here the nations are gathered, and everywhere they hear the good news in their own language (Acts 2:8–11). There, man tried to reach God through his own means; here, God comes to man.

Notes:

- Scholars have noted other parallels between events in the Old Testament and the coming of the Spirit in Acts 2. In Exodus 32:28, when they built the golden calf, “about 3,000” were killed. In Acts, “about 3,000” are saved. It certainly seems like the coming of the Spirit in Acts 2 represents God's deliberate undoing of the sin and destruction people have introduced into the world.
- There's plenty of debate about the concept of speaking in tongues. It's worth pointing out that the “tongues” being spoken here were distinct languages. It prompts the crowd to ask, “What does this mean?” (Acts 2:12). That's a good question for us to ponder: What *does* this mean?

Just weeks earlier, Peter denied even knowing Jesus; now he is boldly proclaiming him to an enormous crowd. He tells them they are experiencing the fulfillment of Joel 2:28-32. Just like Jesus promised, Peter has the privilege of opening the Kingdom of Heaven to all (Matthew 16:19). It's worth slowing down and carefully reading through this sermon. Peter, quoting Joel, claims that everyone who calls on the name of the "Lord" will be saved, referring to Jesus, yet the original quote says that everyone who calls on the name of "Yahweh" will be saved.

Notes:

- Peter calls the moment they're experiencing "the last days" (Acts 2:17). This is one of those terms that can be confusing. When we think of "last days," we conjure images of Revelation, Armageddon, and the Apocalypse. Biblically, "last days" is more accurately understood as the final era of time, but not necessarily the end of the end times. Whether 100 days, 100 years, or 100 centuries, the next thing on God's calendar is the return of Jesus.
- Peter quotes Psalm 16:8-11 and Psalm 110:1 to prove to this crowd that Jesus was the Messiah. It's a clever argument. Peter points out that David speaks of someone who would die but not be dead long enough to decompose. The prevailing wisdom thought David was speaking of himself, but Peter points out the obvious: we know where David's tomb is right now, and he's still in it. However, we can look to Jesus's tomb, and it's empty.

The crowd's response to Peter's sermon is emotional. There's a sense of shock, even horror, as they become convinced that this Jesus, whom they'd dismissed and condemned as a fraud, was in fact the long-awaited Messiah. They were "cut to the heart." The experience of conviction is a painful blessing. It's a crucial step of the pathway of repentance and transformation. You can't be a whole person without going through the breaking of conviction.

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Notes:

- Many of us are familiar with Acts 2:38. This is one of the most explicit outlines of the full human response to God. Though most debates are relatively recent, there have been questions about baptism throughout church history. People ask, “Is baptism essential?” It seems clear that Peter’s answer would be “yes,” but one wonders if Peter might respond, “Why are you even asking?” What would prompt someone to argue about the necessity of baptism as part of one’s process of having our sins forgiven (Acts 2:38)? It’s helpful that Peter included the line that the promise of forgiveness and the Spirit was for everyone, including us (Acts 2:39).

As we move on from the big moment in chapter 2, we continue to see ripple effects of God's kingdom breaking out in the world. If Acts 2 is the earthquake, then we'll continue to experience the aftershocks: another miracle, another crowd, another sermon. Imagine how the man's life changed after this encounter? He'd never stood, much less walked or jumped (Acts 3:2). What did that feel like? A crowd quickly forms to witness the spectacle. Peter takes advantage of the opportunity and launches into a wildly bold message. No opening jokes or playful banter. About two sentences in, he lobbs this bomb on them: "You killed the author of life," then follows up with hope, "but God raised him from the dead." Can you think of a time you experienced tremendous guilt followed by a deep sense of mercy?

Notes:

- This time, Peter draws on elements of Deuteronomy 18:15-19 and Genesis 22:18; 26:4 to make his case about Jesus. We sometimes mistakenly dismiss the Old Testament as irrelevant to our understanding of Jesus and Christianity. However, the New Testament is built on the framework of the Old. It's impossible to count exact references, but by some measures, the New Testament is composed of around 30% of Old Testament quotes, allusions, stories, and references.* To ignore the Old Testament is to contribute to our own misunderstanding of the New.

*Beale, G. K. and D. A. Carson. Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2007.

We'll occasionally interrupt the narrative of Acts with relevant passages from the Epistles. It's valuable to see how the stories in Acts connect with the rest of the New Testament. For example, later, Peter will compose a letter to Jewish people who had been driven across the Roman Empire, potentially some of the same ones he preached to here. When Peter speaks of "suffering grief in all kinds of trials" (1 Peter 1:6), he speaks from lived experience. This letter, addressed to "exiles scattered," was likely composed following the events of Acts 8:1.

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- There's an implicit challenge to our modern, Western way of life wrapped up in these verses. *I believe our church is excellent at this*. Not only do we help anyone in our congregation, but we also help people in our community weekly. However, this doesn't mean we can't still grow in this grace (Acts 4:33). What would our lives look like if we completely let go of a sense of personal ownership (Acts 4:32)? What's the difference between ownership and stewardship?

If Acts had a soundtrack, we'd start to hear some dark, ominous music as we enter Chapter 5. Up to this point, despite opposition from outside, *inside* the church has been sunshine and rainbows. The church is growing, everyone is sharing everything, and the Gospel is being spread. The problem wasn't that Ananias and Sapphira didn't give the full amount of the land. In fact, they weren't obligated to sell it or provide *any* of the proceeds to the church. They were trying to purchase glory for themselves at a discount. Sadly, today, there's no shortage of people who will prey on the faith of desperate people for personal gain. This harms Jesus's reputation, and, as Peter does here, it should be called out (Acts 5:3, 9). It begs the question: where are we tempted to *appear* more virtuous than we are being?

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Notes:

- Luke is setting up an important literary contrast here. To this point, the church has been “filled” with the Spirit (Acts 4:31). Here we see the opposition of spiritual forces. Ananias is “filled” with Satan (Acts 5:3). If you’re familiar with the story of Achan (Joshua 7), there are some interesting parallels. Both events directly follow a high point, involve secret sin, pose a threat to the community, and both need to be dealt with dramatically.

If you're starting to see a pattern, good. That means you're reading the story correctly. The apostles (all of them, this time) get arrested... again. They're miraculously released and immediately go preach in the temple courts. There's a comical scene where the Sanhedrin (the religious council) tries to retrieve them from prison, and they can't find them. Ironically, they're in the most public place in all of Jerusalem, doing precisely what got them arrested in the first place! It's an exposure of the complete impotence of the religious elite to do *anything* to stop this movement. There's a short scene where a wise member of the Sanhedrin, Gamaliel, points out the obvious. If this movement is from God, we don't want to be in the way; if it's not, it'll die out on its own (Acts 5:34-39).

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Notes:

- The apostles were flogged, warned, and released. Instead of questioning God as to why they were experiencing suffering, Luke highlights that they were “rejoicing” (Acts 5:41). They understood this suffering as a kind of privilege. We have no need to court opposition like the “rage-bait” seen on social media today, but sometimes the right enemies can be an indication you’re on the right track.

Acts 6 is a real-time response to a developing problem in the new church. The “sharing everything” mentality of Acts 2:42-46 evidently grew into a “daily distribution” of food for widows in the church (Acts 6:1). Jewish Christians who primarily spoke Greek felt that their widows were being overlooked by Jewish Christians who primarily spoke Hebrew. We sometimes mistakenly think of the early church as a perfect, unchanging entity. In fact, many modern churches claim to be returning to the pattern of the “early church.” However, the early church was constantly changing, solving problems and adapting to its circumstances. It’s better to be faithfully flexible than to be dogmatic. This is the first indication of an organizational structure beyond Jesus and the Apostles.

Notes:

- Luke often names people who have relatively minor roles in the story. Philip and Stephen will have major roles in upcoming chapters, but the other five, like Matthias earlier, are never heard from again. Why does he do this? One reason is that by naming these characters, Luke grounds the story in historical reliability. Scholars believe that Luke wrote Acts only a decade or two after the events it describes.* There’s a good chance that people could read Acts and then literally talk to some of the people who are named!

*Bock, Darrell L. *A Theology of Luke and Acts: God’s Promised Program, Realized for All Nations*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2012.

The bad guys are at it again. Things start as an argument, escalate into accusations, and end in an arrest. It's an age-old tactic: when you don't have the truth, you have to resort to violence. Instead of the apostles, this time their target is the newly appointed deacon, Stephen. The accusations are part of a deliberate misinformation campaign. In fact, it's the same charge leveled at Jesus: that Jesus was going to destroy the temple and do away with the traditions (Luke 23:2). One has to wonder how they thought Jesus was going to accomplish this feat, given that they believed he was dead.

Notes:

- Did you notice where Stephen's opposition came from? It was opposition from Jewish leaders visiting from *outside* Israel (Acts 6:9)? The implication is that people who had witnessed the events of Acts 2 returned home and shared the wild things they'd seen. This may have prompted the leaders of those synagogues to travel to Jerusalem to trace the source of these stories.
- This section concludes with a strange line about Stephen's face being "like the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15). At first glance, it might sound like Luke is saying Stephen looked sweet, soft, and beautiful, but remember that, in the Bible, angels are generally terrifying (Joshua 5:13-14; Judges 6:11-22; Matthew 28:2-4). This detail may be a clever literary device that will pay off at the end of the next chapter, when Stephen accuses the Sanhedrin of being like their forefathers, who ignored the angels who revealed God's truth (Acts 7:53).

If chapter seven reads like a history lesson, that's because it is. Get this: Stephen walks the most well-educated religious elite on the planet through a retelling of the Old Testament like they're 5th graders. Why? He wants them to see they're on the *wrong* side of history. But don't skim; Stephen carefully selects and emphasizes the elements he wants this group to notice. For example, Stephen highlights the jealousy of Joseph's brothers, or he emphasizes Israel's rejection of God during the golden calf incident. He is not so subtly saying, "Don't you see yourselves in these stories? You're doing *exactly* what they did!"

Notes:

- As you read Stephen's version of Hebrew history, where do you see him emphasizing specific angles or events for his hostile audience?

Predictably, Stephen's pointed history lesson is *not* received well. To be fair, he gets pretty personal toward the end, where he accuses them of being just like their forefathers, who kept murdering God's prophets. The speech begs us to see ourselves in it. *Where do we fail to see God at work in the world? Where do we ignore His call to repentance?* Stephen becomes the first follower of Jesus to be killed for his faith, but it sparked a wildfire of faith spreading across the known world.

Notes:

- Luke ends this section by drawing our attention to a figure off to the side who is watching the coats of the men killing Stephen, a young man named Saul (Acts 7:58), whom we're more familiar with in the Greek version of his name, Paul.
- Luke writes that the Sanhedrin "gnashed their teeth" at Stephen. It's an expression of rage. Jesus often used it to describe the emotional experience of hell. Instead of pain and fear, maybe Jesus was saying that hell is full of people who are raging at God?

Stephen's murder is like blood in the water for pent-up resentment against this young Jesus movement. A historic persecution breaks out, and the church scatters. Remember reading Peter's words, these Christians in 1 Peter? Instead of stamping faith out, the unintended consequence is that Christianity leaves the borders of Jerusalem. Christians escape Israel and, as they do, the message of Jesus and his resurrection spreads, first to the Samaritans through Philip (remember him from the last chapter?). What looks like defeat becomes a catalyst for the expansion of the Kingdom of God.

Notes:

- Since today's reading is a bit shorter, it might be insightful to dig into Jesus's words in Matthew 24 and Mark 13. Jesus may have prophesied this "great persecution" (Acts 8:1) in those passages. These prophecies can be confusing. Jesus talks about the "coming of the Son of Man," and we naturally interpret that as Jesus' second coming. However, in the context of these passages, Jesus is referring to events surrounding the destruction of the temple, which occurred in 70 AD. Also, notice the linguistic similarities between Matthew 24:40,41 and Acts 8:3. Jesus seems to have been warning his followers about the events that would begin in Acts 8.

There's a brief pause in the story of how the Gospel is spreading, and Luke zeroes in on a magician named Simon. There are echoes of Ananias and Sapphira in this story (Acts 5); humans attempting to commodify Jesus for their own glory and gain. Peter rebukes him in the strongest possible terms (Acts 8:20-23).

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Notes:

- Throughout Acts, we get incidental glimpses of how the Spirit works. For example, there was a distinction between being baptized and having the Spirit poured out on them (Acts 8:16). Luke zeros in on this interesting detail about the Spirit being “given at the laying on of the apostles’ hands” (Acts 8:18). There was something unique about what the apostles were doing, so much so that Simon tried to purchase this power. It seems that, with two exceptions (Acts 2, when the Spirit first came upon the Jews, and Acts 10, when the Spirit first came upon the Gentiles), the miraculous gifts were something passed on specifically through the apostles (Acts 8:18; Acts 19:6; Romans 1:11). This is not a hard and fast rule, and of course, the Spirit can and does work miraculously today. However, there does seem to be something special about the public and spectacular way in which the Spirit showed up to establish the church.

This is the “twist” of the book of Acts. Saul, seemingly the greatest threat to Christianity, will become its greatest advocate. On one hand, it’s hard to overstate the seismic shift in Saul’s life (Luke would not begin referring to him by his Greek name, Paul, until chapter 13). On the other hand, God took Saul, who was already monomaniacal and dedicated to God, and focused those *same* attributes on building rather than destroying the church. Jesus changed Saul completely, and Saul is exactly who he always was. In fact, Saul would later claim to have *always* acted in good conscience, even when he was persecuting the church (Acts 26:9; Phil. 3:6).

Notes:

- Remember back in Acts 1, where the eleven apostles, minus Judas, appointed Matthias as the twelfth? It sure seems like God already had Judas's replacement lined up (Acts 9:15), but the eleven could never have guessed who He had in mind.
- Throughout the book of Acts, you'll come across three retellings of this event: Here and Acts 22:3-26 and Acts 26:9-18.
- Note that Jesus claims Paul is persecuting him (Acts 9:5). That's how closely Jesus identifies with the church. That should make us stop and think about how we are treating our fellow Christians.

On a couple of occasions, Saul would explain his personal perspective on his call to be an apostle. It's fascinating to read Luke's account and then read about Saul's inner thoughts.

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If Saul's conversion felt drastic to him, it must have felt like whiplash for the Christians in Damascus. Saul went from "murderous threats" (Acts 9:1) to preaching that "Jesus is the Son of God" in less than a week! The Christians there are understandably suspicious (Acts 9:26), and the religious authorities in Damascus want to kill him (Acts 9:23). In a dramatic rescue, Saul is sent back to Jerusalem. We were introduced to Barnabas earlier (Acts 4:36), but he's about to play a crucial role in advocating for Saul among the nervous Christian population of Jerusalem. We're not told why Barnabas is so confident that Paul is not working deep undercover in an anti-Christian sting operation, but whatever Barnabas did, it worked. Of course, it takes no time at all for Saul to get the Jerusalem religious leaders feeling homicidal, so they send him back to his hometown of Tarsus.

Notes:

- It's pretty fascinating that Saul was *so* steeped in Jewish literature that once it was "unlocked" for him, he could immediately out-argue (Acts 9:22) the religious elite.
- Saul's hometown of Tarsus is *still* a metropolis on the coast of Southern Turkey, with a population of 350,732 (as of December 2025, larger than St. Paul, MN).

Saul's exploits will dominate the second half of the book of Acts, but for now, the focus shifts back to Peter. The church is growing rapidly, and Peter is trying to keep up. He visits believers in two small towns along the coast of Israel (both of which are now part of the Tel Aviv Metro area). This section feels like parts of the Gospels where Jesus healed people right and left to validate his message. Luke, in his subtle way, seems to be saying, "See, even though he's gone, Jesus is *still* working through the Spirit." As theologian Scot McKnight writes, Peter "extends the mission of Jesus." We may or may not witness the miraculous on this level, but we can still play a role in caring for the poor, the sick, and the marginalized and, in so doing, "extend" the mission of Jesus (Matthew 25:31-46).

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Notes:

- We've mentioned this before, but it's worth revisiting. Often in the Gospels, we don't get people's names. Luke approaches this more like an investigative journalist (Luke 1:3). If you're making things up, you try to avoid corroborating details. Instead, Luke mentions Aeneas and Tabitha/Dorcas by name and tells us where they lived. Luke's readers could potentially track these people down and ask them for their first-hand accounts of these events.

Chapter 10 introduces us to a crucial event in the life of the church. Up to this point, Christianity wasn't a distinct religion but rather a sect within the larger umbrella of Judaism. Before Chapter 8, the Jesus followers still met at the temple courts (Acts 2:46). The apostles still kept the daily Jewish prayer schedule (Acts 3:1). It's likely they all still thought of themselves as Jewish, with the important distinction that they believed the Messiah had come. Chapter 10 marks a turning point. We're introduced to Cornelius, a centurion, a *Roman* centurion. He is a good man and God fearing (Acts 10:2), but he's neither Jewish nor a convert to Judaism. It's here that this movement within Judaism starts to become something different and distinct as it opens its doors to people who do not practice the Jewish religion. It's going to take a direct message from God to make it happen (Acts 10:19).

Notes:

- The vision Peter has of unclean animals is fascinating on all kinds of levels. Imagine changing a practice or discipline you'd kept your entire life? Or being told that something you'd always been taught was wrong, was no longer wrong? The practice of keeping kosher was so ingrained in Jewish thinking that it took a literal act of God to change Peter's mind. Of course, as we'll read, the vision wasn't specifically about food at all. We don't know if Peter ever broke his kosher diet. We *do* know that this issue later became a point of contention between him and Paul (Galatians 2:11-14). Old habits are hard to break.

This section operates like a mini Acts Chapter Two. There are so many parallels; Peter's preaching. The Spirit appears. Other languages are spoken. Baptisms. In Acts 2, the Spirit was poured out on the Jewish believers; here, the Spirit is poured out on *non-Jewish* believers (Acts 10:44-46). Peter makes a declaration that may seem obvious to us, but would have been earthshaking then: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right" (Acts 10:34-35).

Notes:

- Just as Jesus had promised, Peter would be given the keys to open the Kingdom, first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. Acts 2 and Acts 10 are crucial moments in which the Kingdom breaks into the world.
- The careful reader might wonder why the Spirit is poured out *before* Cornelius and his family are baptized (Acts 10:27). It could raise questions like, does this mean that the command in Acts 2:38, where Peter commands baptism and then the filling of the Spirit, *doesn't* apply, or that baptism isn't part of the process of responding to God? It's essential to keep in mind that Acts 2 and Acts 10 are both major acts of God moving toward man, first the Jews (Acts 2) and then the Gentiles (Acts 10). But these passages aren't normative for how man moves toward God (Acts 8:12-13; Acts 8:16-17; Acts 8:36-38; Acts 9:18; Acts 16:15; Acts 16:33; Acts 18:8; Acts 19:3-5).

The door allowing non-Jews into the Jesus movement had been cracked open, and a trickle of Gentile believers had been showing up. However, the primary target of mission work was still primarily fellow Jewish people, but things were about to change drastically. Antioch becomes the location of the first church comprised primarily of non-Jewish Jesus followers. Going from a few dozen Jewish followers of Jesus to a multi-ethnic movement of tens of thousands in a short span of time must have been dizzying. How do we respond to change and growth in our church? Do we welcome it? Are we skeptical? Nervous?

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Notes:

- The word “Christian” gets coined in this new, Gentile church in Antioch. It was likely first used as a pejorative. Tacitus would later use it negatively to describe “a class hated for their abominations.” (*Tacitus, Annals Book 15, Chapter 44*). The fact that Luke brings it up here is another example of the pattern of Christianity redeeming things intended for evil.
- Luke also includes a bit of context about a collection that would be taken up for Christians in Jerusalem struggling with famine. It may not seem like much, but this collection would play a big role in Saul’s later missionary work and letters (1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8-9).

Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem, just as the church is experiencing explosive growth *beyond* the borders of Israel, Luke reminds us that terrible things are happening in Jerusalem. He only briefly notes that James, an apostle and brother of John, has been murdered by King Agrippa, a petty politician attempting to curry favor with the masses (Acts 12:3). Now Peter is arrested, inevitably destined for the same fate, except that God has other plans. There are echoes of chapter 5 here. Once again, even using the threat of death, the powers that be are completely powerless to stop what God is doing.

Notes:

- The level of detail here suggests that Luke literally heard this story from Peter. Notice that we get a glimpse inside what Peter was thinking (Acts 12:9, 12). Plus, the humorous detail about how the Christians did not believe Peter was actually at the door has all the tell-tale signs of an anecdote that has been shared over and over again.
- Why does James's death only get one verse (Acts 12:2)? Wasn't he worth more? Luke isn't trying to write a biography of the apostle but of the movement of the Spirit as the church spread across the world. It's not that James's death isn't important, but that James, nor any of the apostles, is the central focus.

It's here that Luke will switch from using Saul's Hebrew name and start calling him by his Roman name, Paul. Since Paul was a Roman citizen, it's likely that he's always used this name for legal purposes. The reason for the switch here is probably because of Paul's emphasis on reaching the Roman world. It's common for missionaries, even today, to take on a name that is more familiar to the people with whom they're trying to connect. The narrative will remain focused on Paul through the end of the book. However, Acts is not about Paul, Peter, or anyone else. Notice how often the Spirit plays a central role in these stories. "The Holy Spirit *said*..." (Acts 13:2), "The Holy Spirit *sent*..." (Acts 13:4), "The Holy Spirit *filled*..." (Acts 13:9, 52). The stories are detailed and vivid, filled with drama, conflict, and action. They deserve to be read carefully. However, it's important that we don't lose sight of the fact that the main character is God.

Notes:

- When Paul strikes Bar-Jesus with temporary blindness, it directly mirrors Paul's own experience on the Damascus road, where he was blinded and had to be led by the hand into the city. God's judgment can *also* be redemptive. Paul's blindness preceded his spiritual sight; Bar-Jesus's blindness might have been intended as an opportunity for repentance rather than just punishment.
- Also, we miss some wordplay here. Bar-Jesus means "Son of Joseph," but Paul calls him a "Son of Satan" (Acts 13:10). It's also interesting to note that the Spirit *prompted* Paul to call him that. Evidently, the fruit of the Spirit isn't only nice things like love, joy, and peace.

You should start to see patterns in some of these stories. Paul customizes his approach to his audience, to be sure, but he still uses some tried-and-true methods. For example, he almost always goes to the synagogue when he's in a new place (Acts 13:14). Presumably, he's thinking that people who were expecting the Messiah might be more receptive to the message that the Messiah has come. In today's reading, you're just getting half of Paul's message. This is possibly Paul's "stump" speech to new Jewish audiences. Notice how Paul shows them that Jesus isn't a change of God's plan but a fulfillment of it.

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Notes:

- As we have seen before with Peter and Stephen, their sermons involve a retelling of Hebrew history. However, you can see some of what they're setting up. Paul emphasizes the kings, particularly Saul and David. Why do you think Paul zeroes in on kings before he introduces this crowd to Jesus?

Imagine you were a Jewish believer. You *know* the stories of the Old Testament by heart. You've heard the prophecies of the Messiah. You *long* for a day when you can freely have your sins forgiven through temple worship. What would you hear in Paul's message? Pay special attention to verses 38 and 39. This message resonated so deeply that the next Sabbath, "almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord" (Acts 13:44). What were they longing to hear? What problem was Paul offering them a solution for?

Notes:

- Once again, the message of the Gospel stirred up "jealousy" (Acts 13:44), and Paul and Barnabas were expelled from the city. What a contrast to how receptive the Gentiles were (Acts 13:48). Shouldn't the local Jewish population be glad that people are interested in the things of God? What about the tremendous response Paul gets makes the local Jews jealous?

Some of these details are so easy to gloss over. For instance, notice the word “elders” in verse 23. Paul makes a giant U-turn on his church-planting journey through the Eastern Mediterranean region. He revisits all the churches he’d just planted; this time, with the intention of establishing healthy leadership in each of them. Led by the Spirit, Paul knows these churches need people to keep these young groups of believers on track.

The concept of “elder” is pretty ancient. Initially, these were the men of the village who, through reputation and experience, had earned a place of influence in a community (Exodus 3:16; Numbers 11:16-30; Ruth 4:1-12; 2 Kings 23:1). By the time of Jesus, the role of Elder had become a more formal leadership role (Matthew 16:21; Mark 14:53; Luke 9:22). Early Christian communities inherited the concept but reshape it in the pattern of Jesus. These were not to be heavy-handed superiors, but, like Jesus, humble shepherds (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). It’s fascinating to see the development of church organization happening in real time.

Notes:

- Today’s reading assignment is shorter. It would be a good use of your time to dig into some of the other verses referenced above, especially Timothy and Titus. Where do you see opportunities for developing these characteristics in yourself? Who do you know who has the qualities described here?

Tensions are simmering just below the surface in the young church. Some people are demanding that all Christians, including Gentiles, scrupulously follow the Torah, including the command to be circumcised. Others, including Paul, Barnabas, and Peter, are just as adamant that this expectation would be a violation of the grace by which we're all saved and attempting to earn salvation through rule-keeping. Plus, it would strongly discourage anyone from joining the church. Imagine if you had to have a very sensitive surgery to become a Christian? Acts 15 is a church meeting in Jerusalem to attempt to settle the question once and for all: does God want us to continue enforcing the law, or are we truly saved by grace? Both sides are considered. Finally, James (likely the brother of Jesus) gets up and makes one of the most profound statements concerning the mission of Jesus. "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God" (Acts 15:19).

Notes:

- It's not hard to see both sides of the argument. The Torah has been so central, so crucial to Hebrew life for thousands of years. How is it possible that we're abandoning it just to let some Gentiles into the club? What the pro-torah group couldn't see is that God wasn't doing away with the law; rather, it had been *fulfilled* in Christ (Matthew 5:17). To continue to keep the law would be like keeping the training wheels on long after you learned to balance.

It's impossible to overstate what a controversial issue circumcision was in the early church. Paul writes about it in nearly half of his letters, but none more explicitly than in Galatians. It seems that this church had not only had people show up and start teaching that Gentiles must be circumcised, but the church had also bought into the false teaching. Paul had something to say about it. Specifically, note Galatians 5:12.

The leaders in Jerusalem are navigating a delicate situation. The conflict between the Judaizers (a term Paul coined to describe those bent on forcing the law of Moses on Gentiles) and everyone else. If this situation isn't handled well, it could devolve into dissension and harden into division. A communique is sent out to these new churches with a resolution. You don't have to keep the torah, but there are four expectations in this regard (Acts 15:29). Don't eat food that has been offered to idols. Don't eat blood. Don't eat the meat of strangled animals. Don't commit sexual immorality. Why these things? We're not exactly sure, and the letter itself doesn't say. It's possible that every one of them was an element of pagan worship ceremonies. This decision may have also been a sort of compromise, not requiring Gentile converts to keep the law while at the same time not completely scandalizing those of Jewish background. Unity requires both theological clarity and cultural sensitivity. It's worth noting that three of these expectations involved food. This may have simply been a way to get Jewish and Gentile Christians eating together, encouraging deeper togetherness.

Luke is definitely not trying to clean these narratives up to make everyone look shiny and happy. Case in point: Paul and a man nicknamed “the Encourager” can’t get along. At the heart of the dispute is a young man named Mark. Paul doesn’t think Mark is trustworthy, and he’ll hurt the mission. Barnabas thinks *not* bringing him will hurt Mark (Barnabas and Mark may also have been related, Colossians 4:10). You can see the dilemma. It’s not hard to imagine Paul calling Barnabas soft or Barnabas reminding Paul that he was the one who believed in Paul when everyone else was scared (Acts 9:26-27). Luke uses a Greek phrase that literally means “harsh, cutting words were exchanged” (Acts 15:39). We expect the tension to resolve and for Paul and Barnabas to hug it out, but that’s not what happens. These two, who had been such a dynamic team spreading the Gospel, split. In the narrative of Acts, Paul and Barnabas never work together again. It’s a stark reminder that these stories are about real, imperfect people with deep emotions.

Notes:

- So who was right? Paul or Barnabas? Maybe both, maybe neither. However, later in life, Paul will refer to how valuable Mark is for ministry (2 Timothy 4:11).
- Also, church history tells us that this same Mark was the author of the Gospel by that name. It may be that this rift created the opportunity for Mark to spend more time with Peter, who, according to most scholars, was the source of the content in the Gospel of Mark.

Luke has a habit of dropping in these little cameos here and there, like mini origin stories for well-known Christian leaders. It's likely that when Luke sat down to finalize his account, Timothy was a well-known leader in the church (1 Timothy 1:3). Timothy, likely just a young man here, joins Paul as he's still on his mission to bring the letter from the leaders in Jerusalem to the churches (Acts 15:22). Paul and his team are probably just going from town to town but, occasionally, the Spirit will intervene and redirect. God has a specific person He wants Paul to encounter in a town called Philippi, Lydia (Acts 16:14). A strong, healthy church will flourish in Philippi, very likely meeting in Lydia's home (Acts 16:15). There's wisdom in planning and preparation. Still, we can't be so tied to our plans that we don't listen to the Spirit. After all, the leading of the Spirit is what the book of Acts is all about.

Notes:

- Including Lydia, women played a crucial role in funding and sustaining the ministry of the gospel (Luke 8:1-3; Romans 16:1-2; Colossians 4:15). The fact that these women are named in Scripture underscores their importance, often in contrast to patriarchal norms of the day. These, and other women, were essential to the infrastructure and growth of the early church.

It's midnight, Paul and Silas are in jail, and they are...singing? I love little observations like "the other prisoners were listening to them" (Acts 16:25), as if they had much of a choice. There's an earthquake (a potential callback to Acts 2), and the prison doors are opened (Acts 16:26). Surely, God is freeing Paul and Silas, just like he did with multiple apostles already, but instead, Paul and Silas stay put. Why? Isn't it clear that God is providing a way of escape? Why doesn't Paul leave? *Because it would bring harm to the jailer* (Acts 16:28). Notice it was not the preaching or the singing but this act of self-sacrifice that prompted the jailer to ask Paul, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30). True goodness earns influence (Matthew 5:14-15)

Notes:

- This jailer's entire household believed and was baptized (Acts 16:33). How is it possible that they all had individual conversion experiences at the same time? Well, they probably didn't, not in the way we think about it. This is a clear example of how *different* the culture of the first century was from ours. People thought about themselves as part of a collective. Decisions were often made collectively rather than individually. This is hard for our modern, Western, individualized minds to understand, but it's still true in many parts of the world. The way you interacted, even with your own beliefs, was part and parcel with the other members of your household.

Years later, in a different prison, this one in Rome, Paul composed a letter to this church in Philippi. When he thought about their “partnership from the first day,” (Phil 1:5), he must’ve been thinking about being hosted by Lydia in her home (Acts 16:15). When he wrote about being in chains in Rome (Phil 1:13), he must’ve been thinking about being in chains in Philippi (Acts 16:23). Just like he knew in Philippi that God would use this confinement for His glory, the same would be true in Rome (Phil. 1:12)

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You're likely noting the similarity in people's reactions as Paul goes to new places—crowds, preaching, jealousy, violence. Wash, rinse, repeat. This is why this passage stands out. Luke contrasts the resistance of the Thessalonians to the Bereans. Luke writes, "Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." (Acts 17:11) By the way, there would end up being a healthy church in Thessalonica (1 Thess 1:1-10). However, it begs the question of how open we are to carefully accepting what new thing God might be doing among us. Being open-minded to change doesn't mean being gullible or faithless or changing after trends; it means faithfully following God wherever He leads.

Notes:

- There is a lot of opposition to Paul's mission work in these stories. Spiritual opposition is a reality. There often seems to be a pattern, even today. The more a person or group finds their way to Christ-likeness, the more difficulties arise. Earlier, Paul had told the churches he was planting, "We must go through many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). *This does not mean we have to instigate conflict.* There are plenty of Christians who seem to think that making people mad is a badge of honor. Christians might be bold, but we should be known by our gentleness and love (John 13:55; Philippians 4:5)

Scholars believe that Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is likely his earliest. It's fascinating to see the contrast between Paul's experience in Thessalonica and the later sentiment to the believers expressed in this letter.

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You can still go to many of the locations Luke references. You can literally stand in the Areopagus at Mars Hill where Paul preached this sermon in today's reading. We've read about Paul's typical practice of starting his mission work with fellow Jews, but this passage gives us valuable insight into how he approached sharing Jesus with Gentiles. It would be worth your time to slowly make your way through his sermon (Acts 17:22-31), and note along the way the claims Paul made and how he presented them. What did he think was crucial to share with an educated, Gentile audience? How did he substantiate his claims?

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Notes:

- In this sermon, Paul quotes two Gentile philosophers, Epimenides (6th Century BC) and Aratus (3rd Century BC). Paul quotes or alludes to pagan authors several times in his writings (1 Corinthians 15:33; Titus 1:12). These external sources don't validate the Gospel, but the Gospel can and should engage thoughtfully with the broader culture. There is common ground to be found between eternal truth and popular thought.

There are quite a few incidental references in this section that shed light on the behind-the-scenes logistics of Paul's work. An important one is the allusion to Paul's side gig: tent-making. This gave him money when there was a local host to house him and the team, like Lydia in Philippi (Acts 16:15). Plus, like here, it brought him contact with people. He met Priscilla and Aquila, who became influential members of the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 16:19). We don't often take stock of the ways faith came to and through us, but we should. Think about your faith story. How did you learn about Jesus? Who was it? How did you know them? If you came to faith through parents or a spouse, how did they come to know Jesus?

Notes:

- When Priscilla and Aquila are referenced together, she is always mentioned first. In our context, that likely wouldn't mean anything, but it certainly did in the first-century setting. The formal style would require the man to be listed first. The fact that Luke reversed the order was intentional and could indicate that Priscilla was more influential or better known.*
- Did you notice verse 9? In the book of Acts, we don't often get a glimpse of Paul's interior life. We see his actions but rarely his thoughts or feelings. Even here, it's indirect, but verse 9 may be a rare glimpse into the state of Paul's emotions. It seems that, amid the constant conflict (Acts 16:6), Paul may have been experiencing some discouragement, prompting a special encounter with the Lord. God's encouragement sounds a *lot* like what He said to another discouraged man of God (1 Kings 19:18).

*Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002)

After Paul left Corinth, the church slid into disunity (1 Corinthians 1:11). Paul knew that at the root of their division was pride. He reminds them of his early days with them, how they weren't won over by great logic or preaching, but by the power of the message of the Gospel (1 Corinthians 2:5).

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Sometimes it becomes apparent that we're only getting a fraction of the stories that shaped the early church. Here Luke introduced us to a figure named Apollos. He was a young man on fire for God; he knew about Jesus but evidently hadn't heard the full story. His knowledge centered primarily on the revival connected to John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1-12). Priscilla and Aquila (note the order again) teach him about baptism and the Spirit. Apollos immediately becomes a force for the faith (Acts 18:27, 28).

Notes:

- Even though we don't get any in-depth stories about him, Apollos was likely very well known in the first-century church. It's possible that Apollos was the young, dynamic speaker everyone wanted to hear, while they criticized Paul's lack of eloquence (1 Corinthians 1:12; 2 Corinthians 10:10)

Paul has spent significant time in various places, but the city of Ephesus has received three solid years. Too much happens to write it all down, so Luke selects several important highlights: a daily school (Acts 19:9), some wild miracles (Acts 19:11-12), a fascinating story of some men being beaten up by a demon (Acts 19:13-16), and a fortune in sorcery books being burned (Acts 19:19).

Notes:

- The Seven Sons of Sceva. The power of Jesus isn't simply in an invocation of his name or authority. In this approach, the sons were attempting to use Jesus as a power tool to accomplish their own purposes. It's like people ask God to help them win the lottery with a promise that they'll definitely use the money for good. Power in Christ is about submission, exemplified in obedience and trust. These men learn the hard way that trying to use Jesus, without a relationship with Jesus, won't accomplish anything.

Much later, Paul would compose a letter to the people of Ephesus. He must have been thinking about names and faces as dictated. He wanted them to know how to live, but first, he wanted to remind them that they're included. So many false teachers would come through telling them they were good enough or that they needed to be circumcised, that Paul wants them to feel how connected with Jesus they really are.

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Acts scholar Craig Keener estimates that Paul travelled as much as 12,000 miles on his mission trips. You see a large chunk of that in the first five verses of Acts 20. You might have skipped through the list of names in verse four, but at least notice where they were *from*. These men were from cities where Paul had planted churches. Paul moved into a city, spread the Gospel, and then immediately began recruiting people to leave their familiar lives and join him on the mission. Yes, education and experience are valuable, but the model of Acts is, well, action. Where have we been waiting until we think we're ready to do something we should be doing now?

[illegible]

Notes:

- There are so many great details in the story of Eutychus. Paul preaches until midnight and beyond. Paul’s preaching puts someone to sleep (even to death). The name Eutychus means “good luck.” The young man’s death and resurrection barely interrupt the all-night service! What a memorable church service that must have been.

[illegible]

- Considering that these are Paul’s “final words,” at least to this group of leaders. What strikes you about what he chose to say? What are you surprised that he *didn’t* say?

The Spirit, through an interesting character named Agabus, tells Paul that the Holy Spirit says he's going to be arrested in Jerusalem. We want God to lead us into a sense of flourishing, peace, or happiness. Here, the Spirit will lead Paul into danger. Even Luke "pleaded" with Paul not to go (Acts 21:12). Yet, if we could interview Paul, he might say he *is* living a full, satisfying life. His peace isn't despite the difficulty and pain he's about to encounter; it's because he is being faithful. It is in obedience, not outcomes, that we find the kind of flourishing for which we long.

Did you notice the detail in Acts 21:4? The disciples in Tyre urged Paul not to go to Jerusalem, "through the Spirit." Yet in the last chapter, Paul told the Ephesian elders that he was "compelled by the Spirit" to go to Jerusalem (Acts 20:22). How is that possible? Jot down a few thoughts in response to that question below.

Notes:

- Philip (remember him from chapters 6 and 8?) had four daughters who prophesied. Prophecy isn't just telling the future. In Biblical vocabulary, prophecy is also bold teaching that challenges God's followers. Verses that talk about the role of women in 1 Timothy 2:11-12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 tend to dominate the conversation. It's valuable to see verses that offer nuance on this complex topic.
- Agabus shows up exactly twice in the story of Acts, both in pivotal moments (Acts 11:27-28 and here (Acts 21:10-11). Both times, Agabus drops a crucial glimpse of the future and then is gone.

The attempts to pacify the local population with purification rituals fail miserably, at least in making the non-Jesus-following Jews happy. Once again, false rumors lead to riots (nothing really changes, does it?) Paul's arrested by local Roman officials who have no clue what everyone is worked up about. However, this is the scenario Paul expected. He knew that, if he weren't immediately killed, he'd gain an audience with his fellow Jews. He convinced the local official to let him address the crowd. Paul, still bloody from having been beaten (Acts 21:32), steps outside the holding cell to where the huge, murderous crowd is waiting. He gets them to stop yelling, and he speaks.

Notes:

- Luke notes that Paul addresses the crowd in Aramaic, and as we'll see in a moment, this *really* gets their attention. Aramaic was the common language of the Hebrew people. It was a dialect similar to Hebrew that they'd adopted during their time in Babylonian captivity. Think about how similar Spanish and Italian are, and you get the idea. In crucial places in the Gospels, composed in Greek, included Aramaic words and phrases that even our English translations retain a transliteration of Aramaic (Mark 5:41; 7:34, Matthew 27:46)

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- Why did they have such a strong adverse reaction to Gentiles? Gentiles were encouraged to convert to Judaism (Exodus 12:48–49; Leviticus 17:8–9; 24:22; Numbers 15:14–16; Deuteronomy 10:19; Isaiah 56:6–7). It's very likely gentile converts living in Jerusalem. So what was the big deal? The crowd Paul is addressing saw Paul as compromising Judaism to make it more palatable to non-Jews. For them, he was actively undermining their way of life. As an occupied people, they had this as one of the last elements of cultural and national identity available to them. They saw Paul as attempting to remove the final thing that made them Jewish.

Paul gets his turn in front of the Sanhedrin. His first sentence claim earns him a slap on the face. Not a great start, but perseveres. He appeals to their commonality, belief in the resurrection, and the fact that he is a Pharisee. Isn't that interesting? He says, "I *am* a Pharisee," not I *was* (Acts 23:6). Presumably, Paul doesn't see a conflict between an identity as a Pharisee and Christian. What Paul said did work...at least with the Pharisees (Acts 23:9). The Sadducees, not so much. As has happened so many times, the situation devolves into violence. However, here Paul gets the word that he has done what God wanted him to do in Jerusalem. Now, God tells him he'll be moving into the very heart of the Empire, Rome.

God is clearly working, but notice *how*. Chance encounters. Roman officials. These things would look like chance if we didn't know that God was protecting Paul. How often are our mundane, everyday circumstances part of a divine conspiracy?

Notes:

- The Slap. Paul immediately condemns the act, calling the High Priest a "whitewashed wall." We'd probably use a term like "two-faced" or, more colloquially, "a pig with lipstick." Paul was upset that the keeper of the law was violating the law (Deuteronomy 17:6). But as soon as Paul learns that he had insulted the High Priest, even though the High Priest was in the wrong, he *immediately* apologized (Acts 23:5). It makes one wonder what Paul would think of the way we speak of our political leaders with whom we disagree?

At the risk of using this phrase too often, this passage is *fascinating*. We learn about a plot to kill Paul. We learn about Paul's extended family. Paul gets an escort of nearly 500 Roman soldiers. We get to read official Roman correspondence, probably because Luke got a look at the letter himself. This section marks the end of Paul's independence. He'll spend the next two years under Roman imprisonment and trial, and the story will occupy the remaining chapters of Acts.

Notes:

- Every time I read this passage, I wonder if these 40 men who vowed not to eat until Paul was killed kept that vow? My guess is, no. There is a Jewish legal precedent called *Hattarat Nedarim* that allows an oath to be nullified if the circumstances of the oath change drastically. Plus, according to Jesus, God's people had a habit of finding the loophole that would let them off the hook for these kinds of situations (Mark 7:10:13).

If you're struggling to follow Paul's arrest amid the web of geopolitical complexities, don't worry. This is confusing. Paul is causing such a problem with the local *religious* authorities, who have little official power, that the actual Roman authorities have to intervene. The religious leaders attempt to reframe their theological frustration as legal charges (i.e., "inciting riots"). None of the Roman officials knows quite what to do. Letting Paul go will make the locals mad. Keeping a Roman citizen in prison is illegal. So, they do what politicians have been doing for millennia: nothing. To avoid actual responsibility, they tie everything up with endless bureaucracy. Paul languishes in prison for two years.

Notes:

- The Roman historian Tacitus records that Felix was a very unpopular governor. Here's a direct quote. Felix "practiced every kind of cruelty and lust, wielding the power of a king with the instincts of a slave." He was eventually removed from office.
- Luke keeps us in the story with fascinating details. Felix is corrupt (Acts 24:26 but curious (Acts 24:22, 24). However, the more he learned, the more he became "afraid." You get the impression that maybe he was starting to feel convicted.

Felix is out, and the newly appointed Festus lands in the middle of a political hornet's nest. Felix, his predecessor, had tanked Roman-Jewish relations. Felix decides to send Paul to Jerusalem to score some political points. Paul is trying to get to Rome (Acts 19:21; 23:11), and he knows he'll be killed if he goes to Jerusalem. So he invokes *provocatio*, a right of every citizen to have an audience with the Emperor himself in Rome. I have no doubt that Paul envisioned himself sharing the Gospel with Caesar himself. Festus is obligated to ship Paul to Rome, but since the Jewish frustrations with Paul are theological, he still needs an official legal charge. So Festus consults Agrippa, a Roman-appointed Jewish official who happened to be visiting. Paul, of course, takes the opportunity to witness to each new person he's brought before.

Notes:

- Agrippa was the son of Herod Agrippa I, who killed James (Acts 12:1-2), and grandson of Herod the Great, who wanted to kill Jesus (Matthew 2:1-8). He was technically Jewish but culturally Roman. Rome knew how important the Temple in Jerusalem was and handpicked him to oversee official Temple activities and personnel. Agrippa could appoint the next High Priest, which gave him tremendous influence in Jerusalem. The political intrigue was every bit as fascinating and corrupt as it is today.

This is officially the third time that we've heard Paul's testimony (Acts 9, 22). Once again, we get a few additional details and nuances. However, Paul's rhetorical power is worth highlighting. There are three genius points he makes. First, he points out that his message about Messiah is no different than what the Hebrew people had been looking toward for centuries (Acts 26:7). Secondly, he acknowledges that points out that for a God who can do the miraculous, believing that Jesus rose from the dead isn't that incredible (Acts 26:8). Thirdly, he makes the case that, given how homicidally angry his fellow countrymen were, it's a miracle that he's alive and standing before Agrippa at all (Acts 26:22). Agrippa concludes that, Paul might be off his rocker but he isn't guilty of anything that deserves punishment (Acts 26:24, 31). Nevertheless, he appealed to Caesar, and to Caesar he will go.

Notes:

- There's more than one way to tell the same story. There's even more than one way to tell *your* story of your next steps toward Jesus. Paul clearly does this throughout the three narratives of his conversion. He's not being dishonest; he's emphasizing what will make the story relatable and impactful to his particular audience. Stories of coming to Jesus are naturally interesting. Yes, even your story is compelling. Have you considered your testimony and what elements would make your story compelling to different audiences?

This chapter is almost entirely names of people who have played a special role in Paul's ministry. You'll recognize some names, but pay attention to what he says about each person. Paul hasn't been to Rome yet, but he's an experienced missionary building networks of partners and co-laborers who are crucial for the spread of the gospel. The action has centered on Paul, but Paul would be the first to admit that the growth of the kingdom has been a team effort.

[illegible]

The firsthand account of the shipwreck is riveting. You can practically picture the building panic. The storm is past, but they're adrift with no means of controlling the boat (Acts 27:19), and they're being driven closer and closer to land. The crew tries to secretly abandon the ship (Acts 27:30), but Paul convinces them to stay on board, confidently stating that not a single hair on their heads would be lost (Acts 27:34). Despite the chaos, Paul is calm, even pastoral (Acts 27:33-36). There are small yet surprising opportunities Paul takes to witness to the power and goodness of God (Acts 27:23, 35). Paul has even made a friend, a relationship that saved his life (Acts 27:3; 43).

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Notes:

- This entire narrative is the clearest historical account of “the reality of ancient travel.”* Luke includes precise terminology not found outside of Greco-Roman maritime travelogues and manuals. The amount of technical jargon and detail speaks to its authenticity. With all its theological insight, we can easily miss just how much the Bible offers as a historical record.

* McKnight, Scot. *Acts*. Everyday Bible Study Series. Nashville, TN: HarperChristian Resources, 2023.

When I think about the book of Acts, the image that most sticks with me is from all the way back in Chapter One. The apostles had just asked Jesus when he would “restore” the kingdom. They were probably still thinking about the kingdom in terms of borders and armies. Jesus tells them that they don’t get to know that. Instead, they should focus on being his witnesses “to the ends of the earth.” Then Jesus just disappears, like a tractor beam into the clouds. The disciples all crane their necks upward, probably trying to figure out what in the world just happened. As they’re still looking up, two men, maybe angels, appear and say, “Why are you looking up? He’s coming back the same way he left.” They don’t say it, but the subtext sure sounds like they’re saying, “He’s coming back, so get to work.” And they do.

My prayer is that our church will have the same determined spirit, the same depth of faithfulness, the same focus on unity, and the same impact on our corner of the world.

