



THRU the **BIBLE**

with *J. Vernon McGee*

ACTS

BIBLE COMPANION



HISTORY

READ THIS FIRST

This Bible Companion is a summary of Dr. J. Vernon McGee's teaching of the book of Acts heard on **THRU the BIBLE**. These summarized lessons get to the heart of Bible passages and are intended to stir your own thinking, prayer, and study.



Begin with prayer. Dr. McGee said, "We are living in the day of the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the day of grace, when the Spirit of God takes the things of Christ and reveals them to us." Before you start each lesson, ask the Lord to use it to grow you up in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as He is revealed in that section. Dr. McGee said, "This is the secret of life and of Christian living."



As you study, read the Bible passage first. Invite God to open your eyes and deepen your understanding of His Word. That's a request God loves to answer!



If you want to listen to Dr. McGee's complete teaching on any specific passage, go to TTB.org/Acts (or any book of the Bible). The corresponding audio messages are listed at the top of the summaries. You can also use this Bible Companion to follow along and take notes while you listen to Dr. McGee teach a book of the Bible on the radio or online.



After every lesson, several questions are listed for your personal consideration or, if you're reading this as a group, for your discussion. Ask the Spirit to help you take to heart what He wants to show you.

LET THE WORD OF CHRIST DWELL IN YOU
RICHLY IN ALL WISDOM AND TEACHING....

COLOSSIANS 3:16^A

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LESSON 1

THE FIFTH GOSPEL



Begin with prayer



Read **Acts 1:1-26**



Listen at [TTB.org/Acts](https://www.TTB.org/Acts) to **Acts 1:1-3** and **Acts 1:3-26**

The book of Acts, sometimes called the fifth Gospel, is a continuation of the four Gospels. Matthew concludes with the Resurrection, Mark with the Ascension, Luke with the promise of the Holy Spirit, and John with the promise of the Second Coming. If you poured all four Gospels into a funnel, they would come down into this first chapter of Acts. Acts also confirms the great missionary commission that all Gospels record: *“Take this good news to the world!”*

Acts also builds the bridge between the Gospels and the Epistles. We first meet Peter in the Gospels, and now we see his mission work in the first part of Acts, with Paul’s ministry emphasized in the second part. Although we don’t have a complete record of these two men’s ministries, we do know who they are and what they’re doing. Just imagine—Dr. Luke, the author of Acts, likely got together with Peter and Paul many times and had wonderful talks about how God was at work in their separate mission fields.

Acts also furnishes a ladder on which we can place the Epistles. Read Acts and the various letters together and you get early church history along with the personal relationships and struggles each of the letters address.

What one verse summarizes Acts? A promise from Jesus Himself as He ascends to heaven:

“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” –Acts 1:8

The first seven chapters record the Holy Spirit’s work through the apostles in Jerusalem. Chapters 8 through 12 record His work through the apostles in Judea and Samaria. And the rest of Acts follows the apostles to the end of the earth.

But the book isn’t complete! The narrative of the church is a continuing story. Perhaps Dr. Luke is today in glory writing the next chapters?! Perhaps he is recording what we do for Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Although the Lord left the earth, He only has moved His headquarters to the right hand of the Father. Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit (John 1:33; 7:37-39; 14:16-17; 20:22; Acts 1:8) to be the great power of this age, and He did. Right now His Spirit lives in us, His believers.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the church, the body of Christ. It’s a brand-new institution at the beginning of Acts and, early on, operated at a high spiritual level unlike in any other time. Today, when something in the body of Christ brings honor and glory to the Lord Jesus Christ, that’s proof of His Spirit working through us.

Acts records tremendous growth of the church in those first several hundred years. By the end of the first century alone, millions followed the Lord Jesus Christ. Dr. Luke mentions 110 people by name, in addition to multitudes and crowds.

What was it that got everyone’s attention? Jesus’ resurrection—the center of all gospel preaching. In the early church the resurrection of Jesus Christ was the heart of the message, and no sermon was preached without it. It was Peter’s theme on the Day of Pentecost. He explained the phenomenon taking place that day was because of Jesus, now in heaven at the right hand of God and who had sent His Holy Spirit into the world. It was Paul’s theme everywhere he went. In the early church, *“He is risen!”* was proclaimed everywhere; every day—not just Easter—was a day to proclaim the Resurrection.

When Luke wrote his Gospel, his purpose was to tell “all that Jesus began both to do and teach” (v. 1), and in the book of Acts, he records what Jesus *continues* to do and to teach through His Spirit. And today, the Lord is still at it—and He promises to continue until He takes His own out of the world.

After His resurrection but before He returned to heaven, Jesus is recorded to have appeared ten times. When the risen Jesus meets with the apostles, He tells them something amazing is going to happen to them. In a few days they will be baptized with the Holy Spirit, as He had previously told them.

When the disciples saw Jesus, they wondered if now was the time He was going to restore the Kingdom. Remember the Old Testament was all they knew. Their hope was that the Messiah would establish the Kingdom upon this earth. “*That is still to come,*” Jesus said. First, He would call out a people to His name, the church. We will not know the times or the seasons when He will come again and restore the Kingdom—the Father has put those in His own power.

Our commission instead is to be His witness. We should make Him the center attraction. This directive is not only to the church as a body but it is also a very personal command to each believer—personally, privately. Our business is to get the Word of God out to the world. The Lord wants people to be saved. This is our part in His great commission.

In order to get this gospel out, we need power. He promises to be with us through His Spirit and move through us personally, through His church, and through every ministry. Our only choice is whether we permit Him to be powerful.

Jesus said we are to take our testimony, our witness of Him, to the end of the earth. This global reach is His idea. He has told us if we love Him to keep His commandments. This command is for us personally; we can’t pass it off and say, “The church is doing it, so I don’t need to get involved.” What are you doing to take Jesus Christ to the world?

Jesus extended this challenge to us and then took off into the sky—what an amazing, significant miracle the Lord did to close this ministry season. What kind of a cloud received Him? Was it a puffy white one we’re used to seeing? No, this was the same kind of shekinah glory cloud that had filled the tabernacle. When Jesus was born into this world, He was wrapped in swaddling clothes. When He left this earth, He was wrapped in glory clouds. This is the way He returned to the Father’s right hand.

While the apostles watched Jesus leave, two angels who looked like men stood with them. They said this same glorified Jesus who took off at that place will come back to that place.

What do you think they talked about as they made their way back to the upper room? We can only guess what a wonderful time they had. Mary, Jesus' mother, was there. Her reputation has been cleared now that everyone knew Jesus was the Son of God and virgin-born, as she had claimed. The apostles and other believers (about 120 total) were all unified, with a beautiful sense of oneness, of prayer, and of waiting in this time capsule between Jesus' ascension into heaven and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

**NEXT: What four things will the Spirit do for
His church when He comes?**

LESSON 1



FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. The book of Acts is a continuing story. What do you think of the idea that Dr. Luke is writing the next chapters today, perhaps recording what we do for Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit?

2. What one verse describes the whole mission of the book of Acts?
Did it happen yet?

3. What one event got everyone's attention?

HINT: IT'S THE CENTER OF ALL GOSPEL PREACHING, THEN AND NOW.

4. Describe some proofs that we are operating in the Spirit's power rather than our own. What's different?

5. Dr. McGee asked a good question: "What do you think the disciples talked about as they made their way back to the upper room after Jesus returned to heaven?" Let your study of God's Word inform your imagination. What could they have been talking about?

LESSON 2

WHEN THE HOLY SPIRIT CAME



Begin with prayer



Read **Acts 1:26–2:47**



Listen at [TTB.org/Acts](https://www.TTB.org/Acts) to **Acts 1:26–2:13** and **Acts 2:14-47**

Fifty days after Jesus Christ rose from the dead, His followers were all together in one place, celebrating the Day of Pentecost.

From Leviticus we understand that God's people celebrated seven feast days, each symbolizing a characteristic of our relationship with God. On the night Jesus was betrayed, Jesus celebrated Passover with His disciples and re-established this feast day for remembering His death and resurrection. (See 1 Corinthians 5:7; 11:23-26.)

When Jesus rose again three days later, the Feast of Firstfruits was being remembered, appropriately since Firstfruits speaks of the *resurrection* of Jesus Christ—it completes the picture.

Another feast, the Passover, was fulfilled by Jesus' death. His death completes the meaning and purpose for which Passover was originally founded.

Now, in the book of Acts, we witness another feast being fulfilled. The Day of Pentecost included the sacrifice of a meal offering; it was fulfilled the day the church came into existence, when the Holy Spirit called a people out of this world to form the body of Christ, the church. By faith, Israel had been celebrating Pentecost for generations; now what they anticipated has happened.

Five minutes *before* the Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost there was no church. Five minutes *after* the Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost there was a church.

What Bethlehem was to the birth of Christ, Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost was to the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit became incarnate, which means He identified people as in Christ as His body here on this earth. (See 1 Corinthians 12:13.)

No one could see the Holy Spirit, but He made His presence known by what people saw and heard. They heard a sound from heaven *like* a rushing mighty wind. The sound was so strong, it filled the house where they gathered. They also saw tongues that looked *like* fire resting on each of them. It wasn't fire, but it looked like fire. On the day the Holy Spirit came to the church, baptizing them into the body of Christ, they saw and heard something spectacular.

Just as the Feast of Pentecost in the Old Testament followed 50 days after the Feast of the Firstfruits, so 50 days after the Lord Jesus arose from the dead the Holy Spirit came to call out a body of believers.

As these things happened, Acts says they were "filled with the Holy Spirit," which the Lord Himself said would happen (Acts 1:4-5). Before He left the earth, Jesus said just as John baptized with water, you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit in a few days. This baptism proves His Spirit's ministry to believers in this church age. The Spirit does four things in believers' lives. In order:

First, He regenerates us. He gives us new life when we are born again (John 3:5).

Secondly, He indwells us. God's Spirit now lives in us (Romans 8:9).

Next, the Holy Spirit seals us into an eternal relationship with God (Ephesians 1:13-14, 4:30). God guarantees our salvation. His Spirit is proof of His promise to save us and to keep saving us until the day of redemption.

Finally, the Holy Spirit *baptizes* us. This baptism places every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13). God does this; we don't need to ask for it, nor is it an experience.

Here it is in one sentence: When the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost, it was an act of God whereby the believer in Jesus Christ is indwelt by the Spirit of God, sealed unto the day of redemption, and placed into the church, the body of Christ, by the baptism of the Spirit.

The *experience* of the Day of Pentecost came from the *filling* of the Holy Spirit (different from the baptism of the Holy Spirit). The same happens today. We are filled by the Holy Spirit for service. Being filled by the Holy Spirit is the only thing God asks us to ask for on a regular basis (Ephesians 5:18).

Let's now put this event in context. When the Holy Spirit filled believers, there were many worshippers from out of town in the room. This happened on one of the biggest feast days of the year, the Feast of Pentecost. People were visiting Jerusalem from all corners of the Roman Empire. They spoke dozens of different languages. The apostles were from Galilee. They couldn't speak these other languages, but they are speaking them now. When the worshippers heard their own language spoken, even their own dialect, they were confused. At first they thought these apostles were drunk, but then they realized this was a work of God.

This was the birthday of the church, a day which can never be repeated. Just as we cannot repeat Bethlehem, neither can we repeat Pentecost. There is now a church because the Holy Spirit has come. He indwells believers and fills us with His love, power, and blessing for service. Thank God, He is in the world, convicting the world, restraining evil in the world. We don't have to seek Him; He is living in us who know the Lord Jesus Christ. Oh, how we need the power of the Holy Spirit today.

Before we go on, we need to recognize who that first congregation was. In that day, Jerusalem was entirely a Jewish city. The church was born in Jerusalem, then it moved out to Judea, then Samaria, and then to the uttermost parts of the earth. And that is how the church has grown, even to this day. In the Old Testament, the world went to Jerusalem to worship. Now the church is commanded to leave Jerusalem and take this message to the ends of the earth.

THE FIRST SERMON OF THE CHURCH AGE

As the Holy Spirit filled the disciples and the crowd heard the good news in their own language, some accused the disciples of being drunk (even at nine in the morning).

But Peter, standing with the eleven other disciples, steps up. "*Listen up, men of Israel.*"

And who did he bring up? Jesus.

“You remember Him? The One who did miracles, wonders, and signs? (Jesus did all three but for different purposes, all to draw the attention of those listening.) The One who according to God’s plan, came to us. The One who was betrayed by you when you took the law into your own hands and you nailed Him to a cross”

Nothing that happened to Jesus was contrary to God’s program. Nothing took God by surprise. But this doesn’t release people from their responsibility.

Who is responsible for the crucifixion of Christ? The Jewish religious rulers Peter spoke to right here were the ones who began the movement. They were largely to blame. They moved upon the crowds to create a mob frenzy. They manipulated the Roman government to execute Jesus. Remember, He was crucified on a Roman cross. Peter points his finger at his fellow Israelites.

But it’s no use arguing about who was responsible for Jesus’ death back then. With the perspective of history, we can see we all are responsible for His death. It was for our sins that He died. Jesus Himself said, *“No one takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own free will”* (John 10:17-18).

With clarity and courage, Peter speaks now to the men who were directly involved in the crucifixion plot. *“You took Jesus,”* he said, *“whom God made Master and Messiah, and you pinned Him to a cross.”*

Wouldn’t you have liked to be there in that moment? But that wasn’t even the best part. Peter then gets to the most important part of his message. He goes on speaking of Jesus, *“whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death”* (2:24). Peter preaches the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The first sermon ever preached in the church age was an Easter sermon. In fact, every sermon in the early church was an Easter sermon.

Now Peter says to the crowd that everything happening there that day—the miracle of hearing their own languages spoken by Galileans—has taken place because Jesus was raised from the dead. Jesus, now at the right hand of God, is still working in the world.

Peter’s simple message, the resurrection of Jesus Christ—that Christ died for their sins, but He rose again—brought conviction to the crowd.

This original audience had the Word of God, they had heard the message, they knew the prophecies. But even though they had a God-given religion, they were going along in one direction, away from God. Peter tells them now to repent—turn around and come God’s way.

Peter says to them, “*Repent, and be baptized.*” Water baptism would be the evidence that they had repented, that they had come to Christ and had put their trust in Him.

Peter says to them, “*Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Rather than bringing a sacrifice to be offered in the temple, this will be an evidence that you have trusted Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins*” (2:37-38). Their baptism would be a testimony to Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

What a gift! And that’s not all. Anyone who believes, who puts his trust in Jesus Christ, will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The crowd was overwhelmed with joy and believed what Peter said, and more than three thousand people responded in faith. These were genuinely born again believers.

How can you identify a real church? Acts 2:42 describes four marks of a church:

First, *they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ teaching*. The mark of a church is not the height of the steeple nor the sound of the bell. It is not whether the pulpit is stationed in the middle or the chancel is divided. The important issue is whether or not they teach correct doctrine; this is one of the fingerprints of the visible church.

Secondly, *fellowship*. A real church shares together in the things of Christ.

The third, *breaking of bread*. More than just going through the ritual of the Lord’s Supper, a true church connects their remembrance of Jesus’ death and resurrection to their fellowship with Him.

The fourth, *prayers*. The greatest asset of any church is prayer. Never can a church be spiritually strong without this declaration of dependence on God.

NEXT: What happened when the apostles did miracles ...

4. What did Dr. McGee mean when, talking about Peter's first sermon, he said that "every sermon in the early church was an Easter sermon"?

5. What makes up a real church according to Acts 2:42?
Name and describe the four things it does.

LESSON 3

OBEY GOD RATHER THAN MAN



Begin with prayer



Read **Acts 3–5**



Listen at [TTB.org/Acts](https://www.TTB.org/Acts) to **Acts 3**, **Acts 4**, and **Acts 5**

As we pick up our study in Acts 3, great things have been happening in Jerusalem over the recent few weeks. Jesus' followers witnessed His crucifixion, His resurrection, His ascension, and the Day of Pentecost. They're amazed and asking, "*Is this the beginning of the Kingdom?*" The church, made up only of Jews, had to wonder.

Even after the Day of Pentecost, Peter and John still went to the temple to pray. On this day at the gate called Beautiful leading into the temple, a handicapped man begging at the gate as he had every day for decades, saw the two apostles and asked for a handout.

Peter said, "Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk" (3:6).

And Peter took him by the hand, and helped him up; immediately the lame man's feet and ankle bones got strong. (We get details like this because Luke, a doctor, wrote this book.) The man got up and walked and jumped around and praised God. He led everyone in being amazed at the miracle.

But more was happening here than just a miracle—Peter is offering the Kingdom to the nation Israel. Every good Jew knew that in the Kingdom, the lame shall leap, according to Isaiah 35:6. Many caught the significance of

this miracle and knew this could actually be the beginning of the Kingdom. The Messiah had been crucified, raised from the dead, ascended to heaven, and seated at God's right hand. If they would receive Him, He would come again to establish His Kingdom. This is the gospel going out to Jerusalem—and this will be the final opportunity.

If they will turn to God, all the prophecies of the Old Testament can be fulfilled. Peter reminded them what had just happened over the last couple weeks—what they had all seen take place. He asked them, *“Why do you stare like I did this in my own power? You know whose power did this? Jesus’ power! The one you betrayed, and denied, and killed. Well, you might have killed Him, but God raised Him from the dead—and there are plenty of witnesses! This man was cured in Jesus’ name.”*

There he goes again—Simon Peter will never preach a sermon without mentioning the Resurrection.

Peter's reminder of what they had done to Jesus was an invitation to repentance. But tragically, the nation Israel did not accept Jesus Christ. If they looked just a little down the road, they would have known they were on the verge of great judgment. In less than 40 years, the Roman general Titus and his army destroyed Jerusalem, killing over a million people, with the rest sold into slavery throughout the Roman Empire. Judgment did come to the nation Israel.

But here at the gate called Beautiful, they are given their final chance to accept the Messiah. Because they refused to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, later the apostle Paul will take Jesus to the Gentiles. What might have happened if Israel had turned to God? We can only speculate. They didn't turn to Him. God is never surprised by what we do. He always works things out according to His plan and purpose.

THE FIRST PERSECUTION OF THE CHURCH

But some did believe. On Temple Mount, Peter preached to a large audience about who Jesus is and what really happened with His death, resurrection, and ascension, and over five thousand men believed (plus their wives and families). A whole multitude turned to Jesus Christ that day.

All this attention stirred up the religious leaders, and before the day was over, they arrested Peter and John and tossed them in prison. On what grounds? The preaching of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

If you remember, it was the Pharisees who arrested and put Jesus to death. They were Jesus' enemies as He lived on earth. Apparently quite a few Pharisees were saved, among them were Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, and Saul of Tarsus. Very soon after the church was born, the Pharisee sect of Judaism disappeared from the scene.

The Sadducees, on the other hand, didn't believe in resurrection and now became the church's enemy because the church is founded on Jesus' resurrection. The Sadducees denied anything supernatural, including the Word of God. They hated the message of the Cross, that Jesus is a mighty Savior who came to earth, denounced sin, died on the cross for our sins, and then rose again in mighty power. When the apostles preached it, the Sadducees had them arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin.

We have met this crowd before. The Sanhedrin was controlled by Annas and Caiaphas, who condemned Jesus to die. They asked Peter and John by whose power and by what name they healed the lame man and preached their sermons.

Up to this time, every time Peter opened his mouth, he put his foot in it. But now he is filled with the Holy Spirit, and asks a searching question: *"Are we on trial for the good deed we did for the sick man?"*

Then he went on, *"We did this miracle in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, who you crucified, and who God raised from the dead"* (4:9-10).

The Sanhedrin had rejected Jesus, but salvation comes no other way, through no other name than His. We can be saved only by Jesus, our resurrected Lord and Savior.

Peter's message amazed the Sanhedrin. They knew Peter; they had last seen him weeks ago with Jesus—or rather running away from Jesus. Now he is bold and confident. They knew he had no training in Scripture or formal education, so what had happened to him? The only conclusion was that Peter had been with Jesus.

Although their hard hearts were not moved by Peter's sermon, they couldn't deny a miracle has taken place. Many people today say if they saw a miracle, they would believe. But that's not true. People's disbelief is not a problem of the mind, it is the condition of the heart.

When Peter and John were released, they called the church together and gave their report. The church responded with faith and, together with one heart, they asked God for boldness to continue sharing His Word. They didn't pray for the persecution to cease, but for the courage to endure it. They asked for power and for boldness to speak.

One of the early church leaders, Barnabas, was a true man of God. He'll later travel with Paul on his missionary journey into difficult areas. Here in the beginning days, Barnabas gave a generous contribution to the church, and everyone was talking about it. This inspired a couple, Ananias and Sapphira, to do the same. They sold some land and gave the money to the church. Secretly, they kept part of the income for themselves, but offered the rest to the apostles for church work. Now there's nothing wrong with keeping some of the money for themselves; their problem/sin was that they lied about it. They said they were laying all on the altar when actually they kept part of it for themselves.

Peter confronted Ananias and asked why he was lying to God. Ananias, overwhelmed by fear and guilt, dropped over dead. God took Ananias' life. (If you can give life, you have the right to take it away.) Later, Sapphira told the same story. She lied, and she died.

God disciplines His church. This is His universe. We are God's creatures. We breathe His air. We use bodies He has given to us. He can take our bodies any time He wishes. This godly discipline in the church put a healthy respect for God in people.

Even then, miracles were happening in the young church and people were still being saved. God had given the apostles sign gifts to demonstrate that they spoke with His authority. They healed on demand and emptied hospitals and received everyone who came to them for help. Today we have a written New Testament as our authority. No one in the church since then has had those sign gifts. This was the power of the early church.

By 300 A.D., millions in the Roman Empire had turned to Christ.

THE SECOND PERSECUTION

When the apostles exercised these special sign gifts, they really stirred up the Sadducees. The religious leaders arrested the apostles a second time and put them into prison.

But they didn't stay there. During the night, an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. *"Go, stand in the temple courts,"* he said, *"and tell the people all about this new life in Christ"* (5:20).

So, at daybreak, the apostles went to the temple courts as they were told to do and began to teach the people.

Meanwhile, back in court, the Sanhedrin (like the Supreme Court) sent for the apostles from prison. But when the guards showed up at their cell, they found it locked and empty.

Remember Jesus' resurrection? The stone wasn't rolled away to let Jesus out; the stone was moved to let those on the outside come in. The same thing happened here. The doors did not need to be opened to let the apostles out; they were out long before the doors were unlocked.

Then someone came and said, *"Look! The men you put in prison are standing in the temple courts teaching the people."* And many were listening. Jesus had said the gospel was to go out, first in Jerusalem. Now we see it happening.

They sent the guards to escort the apostles back to the Sanhedrin. As they stood before the court, the Chief Priests said, *"Didn't we give you strict orders not to teach in Jesus' name? And here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are trying your best to blame us for the death of this man."*

Then Peter and the other apostles answered, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (5:29).

The apostles were doing what their Lord and Master had told them to do. Believers are commanded to obey civil authority—except when it comes in conflict with the commandment of God.

Peter clearly and directly sums up the amazing truth:

"The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him." –Acts 5:30-32

This is still the message to the nation Israel today.

When the religious leaders heard Peter's speech, they were furious and immediately began to plot how to kill the apostles. Then a respected Pharisee, Gamaliel, an outstanding man, stood up and asked for a private audience with the council. He wants the apostles excused so he can give some wise advice to the Sanhedrin.

Gamaliel reminds the court of men in the past who started uprisings and had a following, but after they were killed, their followers disbanded. Now he advises them that the same thing will happen to Jesus and His followers if they are not from God.

"Let's stay away from the apostles and let them alone; for if this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it— unless you want to fight against God" (5:38-39).

The council thought this was a good plan, but just to be hateful, they beat the apostles and told them never to talk about Jesus again. Then they let them go.

If these men were innocent, they should have let them go. If these men were guilty, they should have been punished. Beating them and then letting them go was a sorry subterfuge. They should have listened to Gamaliel a little more carefully.

So the apostles left the prison, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for Jesus' name. These apostles were marvelous men. They were glad to suffer for the Lord Jesus and continued to teach and to preach Jesus Christ every day in the temple and in every house. What is the gospel? It is a Person! It is Jesus Christ.

Do you have Him today? You either do or you don't. You either trust Him, or you don't. Either He is your Savior, or you do not have a Savior. That is the gospel. The apostles did not stop telling everyone and anyone about the beautiful name of Jesus Christ.

**NEXT: Meet a man you'll never forget—
Stephen, the first one to die for Jesus.**

4. What stirred up the Jewish religious leaders who eventually had Peter and John thrown into prison? On what charge?

5. Agree or disagree: “Many people today say if they saw a miracle, they would believe. But that’s not true. People’s disbelief is not a problem of the mind, it is the condition of the heart.”

6. Why do you think God dealt with Ananias and Sapphira’s lie so quickly and decisively?

7. Even after they were thrown in jail again, physically beaten, then released with a warning, what did the apostles continue to do? Why?

8. How does Acts 5 make you feel about being a Christian?

*Being filled by the
Holy Spirit*

IS THE ONLY THING
GOD ASKS US TO ASK FOR
ON A REGULAR BASIS.



THRU the BIBLE

LESSON 4

WHEN THE CHURCH WAS YOUNG



Begin with prayer



Read **Acts 6–7**



Listen at [TTB.org/Acts](https://www.TTB.org/Acts) to **Acts 6:1–7:3** and **Acts 7**

The early days of the church was a unique and wonderful season. They had tremendous power, because they relied on the Holy Spirit. Only when they reverted to their former ways did they suffer.

The church now was about 25,000 people. For a while, they successfully lived in a form of communal living—that is, until selfishness stuck its head into their body. First there was Ananias and Sapphira’s situation, and now we learn of murmuring between two groups of Jews: the Hellenists who spoke Greek and followed a Greek culture, and the Hebrews in Jerusalem who closely followed the Mosaic Law. Naturally, a misunderstanding developed. The Hellenists, a minority group, felt neglected and demanded their widows be given equal consideration with the Hebrews. This communal form of living wasn’t working as well as they would have liked.

They needed some hands-on organization to take care of their own. So, the church leaders appointed seven men to handle the need, allowing the apostles to devote their time to prayer and studying the Word. This new ministry role of deacon would handle the logistics associated with the church. These men had to have unquestionable honesty and to not be filled with wine but “filled with the Holy Spirit” (see Ephesians 5:18). They also needed to be wise and able to look at things from a spiritual point of view.

Stephen was a great example of this kind of man. Wise, with true conviction, Stephen also was full of faith—both saving faith and also serving faith. He did many great wonders and miracles. He obviously had been given the sign gifts, proving he acted with God’s authority. Other men, Philip (whom we’ll meet again), Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas were outstanding men in the early church—spiritual men with the gift of service.

The apostles put their hands on the deacon’s heads, signifying they would be partners with them, together in representing the corporate body of believers.

All the while, the Word of God went out and many people responded in faith, including many priests who once served in the temple. Perhaps they witnessed the veil separating the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies being torn in two the moment Jesus died. Many of them must have turned to Christ after that experience.

All of this upheaval stirred trouble with the Sanhedrin. Because Stephen is a strong witness to the gospel, he catches the Sadducees’ attention. They hate what was happening in the church. So, they stir up trouble. At first, they twist what he says and try to argue him down. But they were no match for Stephen’s wisdom and spirit. Finally, they paid witnesses to lie and frame Stephen before the Sanhedrin.

While Stephen stood in court, even in spite of all the drama, they see something marvelous in his face—he looked like an angel. When he is given a chance to defend himself, Stephen never mentions the charges against him and makes no attempt to clear himself. Instead, he rehearses the history of the nation Israel and describes how they resisted and rebelled against God. Of course, then as now, God always had a remnant, a few who believed. With unselfish courage, Stephen then charges the council with betraying and murdering Jesus. That, of course, stirs up their bitter hatred of everything related to Jesus.

Here’s an overview of Stephen’s speech.

First, he begins by calling them *brothers* and the older men, *fathers*. As a young man, he shows them respect.

Stephen starts his story with Abraham in Mesopotamia, down in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley. There God called Abraham to leave his hometown by faith and He promises him a child, and a land. Abraham had neither one, but he believed God.

Stephen then continues the narrative with Joseph's brothers, who sold Joseph into Egypt because of their hatred and envy. But God overruled and used Joseph to save them. Stephen's story reflects the Spirit's interpretation of the Old Testament—remarkable!

Next, Stephen comes to another epoch in Jewish history—their deliverance out of Egypt through Moses. Stephen shows them that at first the children of Israel refused to follow Moses and how Moses struggled with them all the way.

Moses had all the advantage of that day, being raised as the son of Pharaoh's daughter in a highly developed culture. He was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. He was outstanding. Yet he was not prepared. All the learning of the world of that day did not equip him to lead God's people. All the wisdom that men have today is not enough for them to understand the Word of God. It is too difficult. Why? Because as a natural man we can't receive the things of the Spirit of God.

So, after 40 years of learning in Egypt, God put him out into the desert. There God gave him his B.D. degree, his Backside of the Desert degree, and prepared him to become the deliverer. Moses wanted to deliver the children of Israel, but he wasn't prepared for it, nor were the people prepared for him. They resisted his leadership. Then *God* called him to be the deliverer.

God told Moses, "I have heard their groaning" (7:34). He saw their need. That was the reason He delivered them. He loved them (and us) in spite of our unloveliness.

Now Stephen goes on to describe the wilderness experience. Israel in the wilderness was a called-out group. They were called out of Egypt, by God, for a particular purpose. But in their hearts, Israel did not go back to Egypt in a physical, material sense. But in their hearts they went back to Egypt many, many times. In the same way, we go back to our sins of the world and sins of the flesh today.

When Moses was on the mountain with God, the people's hearts returned to Egypt. They created the golden calf to worship. Moses (and later Joshua) pleaded with the people to choose God and turn from their idols. Stephen points out that Israel has always been rebellious.

Next Stephen jumps to David and Solomon building God a house—the temple. Yet even then, Stephen rehearses how Israel had been stiff-necked. They wouldn't listen to God any more than their ancestors through the years had listened to God.

In this masterful speech, Stephen reminds the Sanhedrin of Israel's deliverance out of Egypt. God made Moses the deliverer, but the children of Israel refused to obey him. The wilderness experience was a series of rebellions against God, brought to a climax when they made a golden calf. A plague of idolatry broke out again in the land and resulted in the Babylonian captivity. Stephen concludes with Joshua, who led them into the land, and Jesus, who made the way to heaven.

When the Sadducees heard Stephen say these things, they went crazy mad. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, hardly noticed—he only had eyes for God. He said, *“Oh! I see heaven wide open and the Son of Man standing at God's side!”* God opened heaven for Stephen to see Jesus in a place of honor at God's right hand (see Hebrews 1:3). Jesus is standing, ready to receive His first martyr.

The crowd rushed Stephen, carried him out of the city, and began to stone him. They also gave their coats to a young man named Saul to hold. Two young men—Stephen and Saul of Tarsus—both remarkable, are together here for the first time, the only time, the last time. They stand on the opposite sides of the Cross. They both were used by the Holy Spirit to shape the course of the early church.

Saul, a young Pharisee, thought he had everything. But when Stephen said he saw the heavens open, Saul didn't see a thing; at the time, he thought it was foolish. But Saul/Paul never forgot what it was like to witness Stephen dying for the Lord. Stephen prepared Saul for that day in the near future when the Lord Jesus appeared to him on the Damascus road.

As they stoned Stephen, the young deacon calls out to Jesus saying, “Receive my spirit!” and, “Lord, don't hold this sin against them” (7:59-60). Does that remind you of anyone?

Stephen goes into the presence of Jesus Christ, standing there to meet him. Stephen is the first martyr of the church, the first of millions to give up his life for the highest cause in history.

NEXT: The day Paul met Jesus.

LESSON 5

THE GOSPEL TRAVELS



Begin with prayer



Read **Acts 8–9**



Listen at [TTB.org/Acts](https://www.TTB.org/Acts) to **Acts 8:1-26**, **Acts 8:27–9:12**, and **Acts 9:13-38**

In Acts 1:8, Jesus gave us a plan to reach the world with the gospel. To Jerusalem first, then to Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. Through the Holy Spirit now, God is using two men who, counter to their culture, believed in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Remember Stephen, the faithful deacon, whom they murdered? In the crowd that day killing Stephen stood Saul of Tarsus. Saul likely led the whole cheering section. He hated Christians, and specifically this bold, confident Stephen. But as the rocks pummeled him and he died, Stephen's face captivated Saul. He looked into the heavens and saw the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. Young Saul looked up—but didn't see anything. Perhaps God used Stephen that day to prepare Saul for the Lord's bright appearance to him on the Damascus road not long in the future.

Saul now becomes the chief persecutor of the church. The record says he "made havoc of the church," going into people's homes and hauling men and women to prison because they trusted Jesus. But instead of hindering the church's mission, this persecution set it on fire! Jesus' followers were all settled in Jerusalem, but now, because of Saul's terror, they moved out of their comfort zone and into the world. They went everywhere preaching the word.

NEXT, GOD USES PHILIP

As the gospel traveled outside of Jerusalem to Samaria, God used another deacon to witness for Jesus. Philip had served alongside Stephen in the Jerusalem church. He could perform miracles, heal the sick, and raise the dead. These gifts marked him as an apostle, having God's authority. Not everyone had these gifts—only those who were in leadership, those who were taking the Word of God to the world. There came the day when the sign gifts disappeared when Scripture was complete and established. From then on, the credentials of a true man of God was correct doctrine rather than sign gifts.

Philip was received well in Samaria and the gospel brings great joy.

Because the church is growing very fast, some who join the church didn't actually believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. They were along for the ride, seeing how they could benefit from this new work of the Spirit.

One of those profiteers was Simon, who used sorcery to set himself up as someone great. People thought he acted in God's power and was, in a way, like a god. But when Phillip preached the gospel in Jesus' name, many people saw God's real power and believed. When Simon witnessed the sweeping revival hitting Samaria, he said he believed too and was baptized. He watched Phillip do all kinds of miracles and wanted to do them, too. But Simon didn't really believe in Jesus Christ. He wasn't born again. Like many even today, he may have understood the gospel, but he didn't genuinely believe.

When the apostles heard about what God was doing in Samaria, they sent Peter and John to check it out. In addition to many true believers, they also discovered some people who had not been born again. They may have gone through an outward ceremony, but they were not Christians. So Peter and John again shared the good news, and many believed in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Peter and John laid their hands on these new believers, and the Spirit of God entered into them. Now Simon saw that something amazing happened when they laid hands on people, and he wanted part of the action.

"What's your price?" he asked. Simon thought the Spirit's power was up for sale, and he wanted to add it to his act. Peter saw clearly Simon was only interested in money and his heart wasn't right with God. Peter warned him that because of his wickedness he would suffer terrible things. But Simon doesn't ask to be saved, he just wants to escape the consequences.

When Saul persecuted the church from the outside, it didn't hurt the church. The Christians scattered and the gospel traveled even farther. But when people on the inside professed to be believers when they were not, it hurt the church. The enemy gets in and does damage when we leave the door open for him.

First only in Jerusalem and later in Samaria, the gospel now begins its journey to the ends of the earth.

In telling us how God moved His Word out to the world, take note of the people groups. God focuses on including the entire human family that divided into three human cultures after Noah's flood. Ham, Shem, and Japheth were Noah's sons, representatives of the three divisions of the human family.

Acts 8 tells of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, a son of Ham.

Acts 9 tells of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, a son of Shem.

Acts 10 tells of the conversion of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, a son of Japheth.

In each of these examples, we learn that a true conversion includes three factors:

1. A true conversion is the *work of the Holy Spirit*. The Holy Spirit took Phillip to Samaria where a great spiritual awakening happened. Then He moved Phillip south to Gaza, and again God prepared the Ethiopian eunuch's heart and also prepared the messenger. God's Spirit must lead the way. We should talk to the Lord about the individual before we talk to the individual about the Lord. It's not simply that we need the Holy Spirit to lead us, we need God's Spirit to go ahead of us and prepare the way, then call us to where He already is at work.
2. A true conversion uses *the Word of God*. God's Spirit takes the things of Christ and reveals it to someone. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17).
3. A true conversion involves *us*. The Spirit of God uses the man and woman of God to deliver the Word of God to produce a son of God, one who is born again. Let's see now how that happens

PHILIP AND THE ETHIOPIAN

After Samaria, God called Philip to go south to what we know today as the Gaza strip along the Mediterranean Sea. In the day, this road was an ancient trade route to Egypt and Ethiopia. When Philip gets there, he finds God has made his appointment for him.

On his way from Jerusalem, a high-ranking dignitary from Ethiopia rode in his chariot reading from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. As the Secretary of the Treasury, he had attendants around him, including a private chauffeur and other minor dignitaries. He had just been to Jerusalem to worship, but was leaving the city still in the dark. He was reading the prophet Isaiah, but didn't understand what it meant.

God's Spirit prompted Philip to approach the official along the road. (The Spirit leads, using His Word, delivered by His child.) Philip is a hitchhiker. When he hears what the man is reading, he asks, *"Do you understand what you are reading there?"* The Ethiopian doesn't; so he stops his caravan and invites Philip to ride with him.

"How can I understand this unless someone guides me?" the official asks. He then quotes Isaiah 53:7-8. In context, note he had just read about Jesus, the man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, the one who bore our griefs and carried our sorrows, who was wounded for our sins, and by whose stripes we are healed. *"Who is this talking about?"* the Ethiopian asks.

And Philip is given a marvelous place to begin. When the Spirit of God leads, how wonderfully everything opens up! Philip then makes the same Scripture clear and preaches to him about Jesus.

The Holy Spirit uses the Word of God and the official believes Jesus Christ is the Son of God. As they traveled, they came to a small body of water and the official wants to be baptized. *"You can be,"* Philip says, *"if you believe in the name of Jesus Christ."*

So the official commands the chariot to stop, and he and Philip go down into the water where Philip baptizes him. And just as they walk out of the water, the Spirit snatches Philip away.

The Ethiopian's chariot also rides off the pages of Scripture, but we do have a hint of what happened to him. Did you know that the first great church was in northern Africa? Apparently, the Ethiopian went "on his way rejoicing" (8:39), and through his witness and his influence back home, the early church was born and thrived in North Africa.

And what about Philip? He went preaching the gospel up the coast to Caesarea. The Ethiopian carries the gospel down to Africa and now Philip carries it up the coast to Caesarea. The gospel is moving out in every direction.

THE DAY PAUL MET JESUS

The Ethiopian met Jesus in a chariot, but the apostle Paul met Jesus in the dirt.

When Stephen was murdered, persecution broke out in Jerusalem, and the church scattered and went underground.

The religious leaders in Jerusalem thought they dealt with this new group called Christians, but not Saul of Tarsus! He hated Jesus Christ and wanted to exterminate His followers. He heard a group of them had run off to Damascus and wanted to go after them. He intended to ferret them out, arrest and/or kill them anywhere they went.

On the way to Damascus, suddenly there shone a bright light from heaven. Saul fell to the ground and was the only one who heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

Saul answered, "Who are you, Lord?"

And the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (9:4-5).

Saul was possibly the most brilliant man of his day. He was a Hebrew scholar, trained in the details of the Jewish religion, but he didn't know the Lord Jesus Christ. "Who are you, Lord?" Friend, to know *Him* is life, but Saul didn't know Him.

Saul is right down in the dust on that Damascus road. He immediately responds to the Lord Jesus, and the one who did everything he could against Him, now calls Him "Lord." And he's willing to do whatever the Lord asks of him. He has been completely changed.

But when Saul got up, he was blind. His men took him by the hand to Damascus, and Saul spent three days without sight and didn't eat or drink. He wasn't sure what just happened to him, but he's going to soon find out. When our resurrected Lord appeared to Saul personally, the Spirit of God opened his eyes spiritually and closed them physically so that he might see the Lord Jesus.

Saul of Tarsus, a brilliant young man, now sits in darkness and confusion. The Spirit of God goes to another man, Ananias, and sends him over to Saul of Tarsus. Ananias reminds the Lord of the evil Saul had done to the saints in Jerusalem, but God tells him not to argue and to go to Saul. *“I’ve called Saul to go to the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel,”* He says.

God states two reasons for calling Saul. First, though he was not a “witness” like the apostles were, Saul was to bear the name of Jesus. That is the same call we have today—to bear the name of Jesus.

Later when Paul took the gospel to a city, he began in the Jewish synagogue. He goes to the Jews first, and from there he reaches the Gentiles.

Second, the Lord said He will show Saul what great things he will suffer for His name’s sake. Saul is chosen to suffer for Jesus Christ, perhaps more than anyone else ever has.

Did God use a human instrument to reach Saul? Although not present at the time, the Lord used Stephen to reach Saul. These two young men met only once, and that was when Saul stood with those who killed him. Stephen looked up into the heavens and said, *“I see heaven open and Jesus standing there!”* (see Acts 7:56). When Saul looked at Stephen’s face, he knew Stephen actually saw something. He probably wished he could have a vision of God, too. And he did on the Damascus road when Jesus Christ revealed Himself to him.

Now, speaking of Saul, he was still confused, sitting in solitary blindness, praying. Ananias obeyed God and went to the house where Saul sat in darkness. He put his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (9:17).

No sooner did Ananias say this than something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes and he could see again!

What a change! He is still Saul of Tarsus, but now he is *Brother* Saul. He’s not the enemy; he’s a brother. Any person who loves the Lord Jesus Christ is a brother to any other believer.

Saul gets his physical sight back, and he is filled with the Holy Spirit for service. He then is baptized with water as a sign and seal of his conversion. The water had nothing to do with his salvation. Finally, he sat down with the followers of Jesus in Damascus and enjoyed a hearty meal.

To everyone's surprise, Saul of Tarsus began to witness immediately. Why? Because he is filled with the Holy Spirit. He began to preach "Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God" (9:20). The man who came to terrorize them now is preaching to them that Jesus Christ is the Messiah. Amazing!

Saul was a brilliant man, and the Jews couldn't match his arguments. Soon, when they couldn't win by argument, they decided to kill him. Saul's friends heard of the plot and helped Paul escape by lowering him over the city wall in a basket.

Back in Jerusalem, Saul tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him. They didn't trust him one bit but thought "a conversion story" was Saul's strategy to trick them.

But Barnabas, one of the leaders in Jerusalem, stood up for Saul in the Jerusalem church. Barnabas, whose name means the "son of encouragement," puts his arms around Saul and believed his story. How we still need people who will put their arms around some new Christian and help that new Christian along.

With Barnabas as Saul's sponsor, Saul is accepted into the assembly at Jerusalem and joins forces with the Jerusalem church. But soon, another plot rose to kill Saul, and the church in Jerusalem gets him out of town. Saul goes to his hometown, Tarsus, probably to tell his family about Jesus Christ.

Meanwhile, the church continues to grow and the gospel travels outward.

**NEXT: So what's the real difference
between Jews and Gentiles?**

LESSON 6

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN JEWS AND GENTILES



Begin with prayer



Read **Acts 10–11**



Listen at [TTB.org/Acts](https://www.TTB.org/Acts) to **Acts 9:39–10:28** and **Acts 10:29–11:30**

How did the gospel go from only Jewish believers to the rest of the world? We'll see that transition happen now as Peter takes the gospel, reluctantly, to a Gentile.

His name was Cornelius, and he was the first Gentile to hear the gospel from Peter. Later Peter passes from the scene, and history continues with the apostle Paul's ministry to the Gentiles. Peter opens this door by going to Cornelius' house and presenting salvation through Jesus Christ to his household. It sounds easy enough, but it was a huge paradigm shift for Peter, a Jew, to enter a Gentile's home. This was just the first of major changes.

Cornelius, a Roman centurion, lived in Caesarea (where Pilate lived). His rank of centurion tells us he commanded a hundred soldiers in the Roman army. Cornelius feared God and was a devout man. If he lived today, we might say Cornelius attended church on special occasions, but was not actually a Christian. Mostly because he had never heard the gospel. But Cornelius was generous to charities and he prayed, though he didn't really know too much about prayer. Some might call him "a seeker." He needed more light—and wanted it.

Wherever there is a man who seeks after God as Cornelius did, that man is going to hear the gospel of the grace of God. God will see that he gets it. God will enable him to hear the gospel even though the barriers seem insurmountable.

The church at this time—and for the first eight years—was exclusively Jewish. But God is now going to open the door of the gospel to the Gentiles. The Jews in Jerusalem are surprised, but they recognize God’s hand in it. Even more surprising, God uses Peter, one of the greatest extremists of the day, to open the door to the Gentiles. Eventually, Paul will be the great missionary to the Gentiles, but God is training him right now out in the desert of Arabia.

Do you see the Holy Spirit directing every move? He directs all genuine Christian work. No other work amounts to anything. The Holy Spirit had to work in both the heart of the Gentile and the Jew to bring the gospel to the gentile world.

Now while Cornelius is praying in Caesarea, an angel of God appears to him in a vision and tells him to find Peter in Joppa, staying with Simon, the tanner by the seaside. Immediately, Cornelius sends two servants and a soldier to fetch Peter.

While Cornelius’ men are on their way south, God needs to prepare Peter. Peter didn’t have the same deep background or training that Paul had. All that happens is Peter got really hungry and, as he prayed, he fell into a trance. God opened the heavens to him and showed him a sheet coming down, filled with all kinds of animals. Then God said, “Rise, Peter; kill, and eat” (10:13).

But Peter, a good Jew, said, “*No, Lord, I’ve never so much as tasted food that wasn’t clean (as in, kosher).*”

Then the voice says, “*You can eat anything because God has said so.*”

Peter is still living sincerely and honestly under the Mosaic system. He’s not eating anything ceremonially unclean. In this vision, the Lord teaches him he is no longer under the Law and is free to eat anything; what you eat will not change your relationship with the Lord.

The Spirit in the vision also said that three men will come looking for him and it was OK to go with them. God has sent them. After the vision disappeared, Peter sat there wondering what it was all about. Then he heard a knock on the door. Three men stood there, inviting Peter to come with them to Cornelius’ house.

The next day, Peter and Cornelius' men and some men from Joppa walk to Caesarea. Meanwhile, Cornelius gets his family and friends together to wait. When Peter and the others arrive, Cornelius first celebrates, then gets down on the floor and kisses Peter's feet and worships him.

Now you know Peter would have none of that. He says, *"Stand up! I'm just a man like you!"*

Peter confided in him that previously it would have been wrong for a Jew to enter a Gentile's home, but God told him He had changed the rules. And by faith, Peter stepped into the house. What a step that was! It was the first time Peter had ever been in a gentile house. He's still a little baffled at God's command to go there. He doesn't immediately tell them about Jesus. In fact, he asks Cornelius why he wanted to see him.

Really, he should have asked God. Praying is the finest kind of evangelism. We begin by praying for someone. Then we need to ask God to lead us. Don't just go to someone in your own strength and in the power of the flesh—that's certain failure. Let God be the one to lead you.

Cornelius tells him, *"I really don't know why I sent for you, except God told me to do it. You must have some message for me."*

Then Peter almost explodes with the good news of Jesus Christ. He tells them about what He saw Jesus do in the power of the Holy Spirit, how He taught and healed and did miracles. Peter presents the facts about Jesus Christ, assuming they already knew some of it. Very clearly, he tells them our Jesus was crucified on a tree and rose to life again on the third day. Not everyone saw him, Peter said. God picked the eyewitnesses. *"But we saw Him; in fact, we were there to eat and drink with Him after He came back from the dead,"* Peter said.

Every time a sermon is preached in Acts, Jesus' resurrection is emphasized. That is the very heart of the gospel. Jesus Christ died, He was buried, He rose again from the dead. Those are the historical facts. Your relationship to a risen Savior determines your eternal destiny (see Romans 4:25).

In spite of all of Peter's weaknesses and faults, he preached the gospel. Here it is: Jesus Christ died, He has risen, and whoever believes in Him will be forgiven of their sins. If we do not tell people that message, we are not telling them the gospel.

When Cornelius and his household heard the gospel, they believed it and the Holy Spirit came upon them. This incident has been called the gentile Pentecost. Peter and the other Jews were astonished that Gentiles should receive the Holy Spirit. This outpouring of the Holy Spirit proves the Holy Spirit has been given to the Gentiles and they are saved, just like the Jews, through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Up until this event, a great barrier existed between Jew and Gentile. Jews couldn't believe Gentiles could be saved—even though the Lord had told them this would happen.

People from every race now will hear and respond to the gospel, just as we've seen representatives of each race come to Jesus: The Ethiopian official was a son of Ham, Saul of Tarsus was a son of Shem, and Cornelius was a son of Japheth. In each instance the Holy Spirit moved, using a man of God and the Word of God.

WHEN JERUSALEM HEARS THE NEWS ...

When the Jews in Jerusalem hear the news that Gentiles have believed the Word of God, it didn't bring them any joy. They demand Peter explain what happened—and why he broke Jewish law and entered a Gentile's home and ate with them. Why would he do such a terrible thing?

If we would have talked with Peter a month before this event, he would have agreed with them. In fact, even now, Peter apologizes and says he didn't want to do this but God's Spirit led him the whole way. He then told them the whole story, including that when he baptized them, the Holy Spirit came upon them and gave irrefutable evidence that Gentiles are now in the body of believers.

Gratefully, when the Jewish followers of Jesus heard how God had moved, they had no more objections. Obviously, this was of God ... so they praised God and glorified Him. This was a great day—the door had been opened to the Gentiles!

The stage is now set for the gospel to move out to the ends of the earth. Up until now, the gospel was preached only to Jews. But now we hear that people in Antioch, in modern-day Turkey, heard about the Lord Jesus and many believed and turned to the Lord.

When the Jerusalem church heard about this, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. He was thrilled by how God was working and helped them understand their new relationship with Him. Soon, the center of the gospel movement shifts from Jerusalem to Antioch.

Barnabas became the pastor of the church there. He began by exhorting—preaching and teaching—and the congregation grew in maturity and in number. Soon, Barnabas needed an assistant pastor, and he knew where to get a good one: Tarsus. Barnabas went to get Saul. Together for a year, they served the church in Antioch, where the followers of Jesus were first called Christians.

Around this time, as history testifies, the world experienced a great famine, especially felt in Jerusalem. The church in Jerusalem needed help, so the Antioch church, from a bond of love, quickly responds and sends funds. How wonderful that Saul, who once relentlessly persecuted that church, now brings them *relief*.

That is the way Christianity ought to be.

**NEXT: How difficult times helped to spread
the gospel to the ends of the world.**

4. Every time a sermon is preached in Acts, Jesus' _____ is emphasized. That is the very heart of the gospel. Your relationship to a *risen* Savior determines your eternal destiny (see Romans 4:25).

5. When the gospel moved out to the ends of the earth, many people in Turkey, especially in the city of Antioch, believed. Who planted a church there? Who was the assistant pastor? And what were followers of Jesus called here for the first time?

*Praying
is the finest kind of
evangelism.*



THRU the BIBLE

LESSON 7

HOW THE GOSPEL SPREAD



Begin with prayer



Read **Acts 12–14**



Listen at [TTB.org/Acts](https://www.TTB.org/Acts) to **Acts 12**, **Acts 13**, and **Acts 14**

As the church grows, a dark cloud of persecution hovers over them from Herod Agrippa, grandson of Herod the Great, who tried to kill Jesus as a baby. Agrippa now carries out a brutal persecution of anyone following Christ. But as often happens in difficult times, the church grows in strength and number and the Word of God multiplies.

Thirty years have passed since Jesus ascended into heaven from the Mount of Olives. Agrippa brutally killed James, John's brother, with a sword—now the second martyr recorded, though likely by now many others have died for their faith in Jesus Christ. Agrippa took Peter captive, too, but miraculously, Peter is saved.

Why would God do that? James dies a horrible death and Peter gets to go free. Here is an example of God's sovereign will moving in the church. Life and death are in His hands. This is His universe, not ours—His church, not ours. This is His story being written.

To hear Peter's account of how he was rescued clearly shows God's hand, even His sense of humor. While in Agrippa's prison, Peter is guarded by *four quaternions*—16 soldiers. Looks like they suspected someone would try to deliver Peter.

The local church earnestly prayed around the clock for God to protect Peter. Meanwhile, Peter slept, chained to two soldiers. What a wonderful confidence in God he must have had to sleep in such a dismal situation. Then in the night, light flooded the prison cell and an angel woke Peter and got him up. The chains fell off his wrists. The angel said, *“Get dressed. Put on your sandals, and let’s go.”*

Peter followed him, but he thought the whole thing was a dream. He would have walked out without his shoes! The angel led him past the squads of guards and the iron gate opened on its own to the street.

The Roman guards probably expected something like this was going to happen. When the Lord Jesus rose from the grave, it was a real embarrassment to them. Nothing like that was going to happen to them again, so they more than doubled the guard.

All this time the church in Jerusalem is praying through the night for Peter, asking God for his release from prison. As soon as Peter is out of danger, the angel disappears and Peter is on his own. He realized finally he wasn’t dreaming—*God has delivered him!*

The first thing Peter does is go to John Mark’s mother’s house where the church was meeting. When he knocked on the door, a young girl named Rhoda answered it and asked who was knocking. These were dangerous days—it was important to know before you opened the door. She immediately recognized Peter’s voice. She was so excited, she ran back to tell everyone—leaving Peter still outside!

When she tells them Peter is at the door, they tell her she is crazy. *“No,”* she tells them, *“Peter is at the gate.”*

“Well, did you see him?”

“No, I didn’t open the gate, but I heard him and I know his voice.”

“Oh,” they say, *“it’s his spirit.”* They think Peter is dead, that Herod killed him, and his spirit was at the door. The church is praying for Peter to be delivered, but when it happens, they don’t believe it.

Isn’t that same thing true of us so many times? When we do have an answer to our prayer, we rejoice and talk about it as if it was a surprise. To be honest, we really didn’t expect an answer. Yet God heard and answered our prayer. How gracious He is!

“Now Peter continued knocking” (12:16). That’s just like Peter. Nobody is opening the door because they don’t believe their prayers have been answered, and Peter wants in!

Finally, they opened the door and they couldn’t believe their eyes; their prayers had been answered!

As morning dawned, there was quite a stir back at the prison. When the soldiers realized Peter was gone, they called out half the army. They may have done a house-to-house search. But Peter had left town.

When Herod called for Peter and heard what happened, he executed the soldiers guarding Peter. He didn’t believe any of it was an act of God. Then he left town for a vacation in coastal Caesarea where the Roman rulers liked to stay.

But God holds Herod responsible for the light He has given him. In all of his dealings, Herod was pompous and lifted up by pride. He is like a miniature of Antichrist, and he loved to hear the people hail him as a deity.

But God had enough of Herod’s pride. On a day when he put on his best robes and preened himself on the throne, Herod refused once again to give God any credit for anything. He let people call him a god. And God judged him on the spot.

An angel knocked Herod down and his insides spilled out, oozing with maggots. Herod died soon after in fearful agony. God will not share His glory with anyone.

Just when you’d think all this persecution would destroy the church, instead the ministry of God’s Word kept multiplying. Persecution didn’t hurt the church at all.

Now that the gospel has spread to Judea and Samaria, Barnabas and Saul leave Jerusalem (they had been there to deliver the love offering) and returned to Antioch with John Mark.

THE FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY

(ACTS 13–14)

Up until now, the Holy Spirit at work through the apostles took the gospel to the Jews in Jerusalem, then to Samaria. Gentiles now are following Jesus as Savior. Now the gospel moves out officially—on its way to the ends of the earth.

Jesus' command to be His witness wasn't a command to the church as a corporate body but to us individually. In this surge of the gospel beyond boundaries, Saul's name changes to Paul as he becomes the leader and chief spokesman, and Peter disappears from the scene. God had used him mightily. Now Paul is the principal person God will use.

Paul begins his journey with Barnabas, sent out from the church in Antioch. They laid their hands on these two missionaries as a way of declaring partnership with Paul and Barnabas in getting out the Word of God. They will minister at home while Paul and Barnabas go to the regions beyond. Even more importantly, they are all being led by the Holy Spirit of God.

Paul and Barnabas start their journey at the seacoast town of Seleucia and sail from there. They brought John Mark with them and made it their habit to visit the local synagogue first in every town.

Their ministry success varies town by town. In some, we don't hear of any fruit. In other places, they encountered satanic opposition. When they confront the demonic world, Paul fervently denounces it. He uses the sign gifts to prove they came in God's authority and dominates the sorcerer by his message of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. People who had been in spiritual darkness now believes and is astonished at the doctrine they hear taught.

These were amazing but difficult days, full of resistance, dangers, and hardships. As they traveled on, John Mark decided missionary life was not for him and returned to Jerusalem. Later we learn he actually deserted. Paul refuses to take John Mark on another missionary journey, and it caused such a rift between him and Barnabas that they separated.

God gave John Mark another chance. He doesn't throw us overboard because of our failure. Later on Paul was big enough to admit he had been wrong, and when he was close to his death, Paul actually asked John Mark to come to him (2 Timothy 4:11). This is the John Mark who wrote the Gospel of Mark. He made good. Thank God for second (and third and fourth) chances!

When Paul and Barnabas arrived in Antioch of Pisidia, they follow their pattern of visiting the synagogue first. It was customary that visitors from Jerusalem were invited to say something. Paul took advantage of this opportunity and preached one of the great sermons, his first recorded one. Paul did the same as Stephen and recounted Israel's history in context of presenting to Jews the Lord Jesus as Messiah and Savior and how He

fulfilled prophecy. Always at the core of every sermon preached in the New Testament is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Then, Paul asks them for a decision to believe on the Lord Jesus. He urges them not to reject the message.

Paul must have stirred their interest because people were talking about his message as they left the synagogue. Some Gentiles asked to hear the same message. The next Sabbath Day almost the entire city showed up to hear Paul preach. Of course, this stirred up some of the religious rulers who opposed Paul and Barnabas and forced them to leave town. But the disciples shook the dust off their feet and went on their way, filled with joy at the many who believed in Jesus Christ.

Here is the recurring pattern. The gospel is preached to the Jews first; they reject it; so Paul then turns to the Gentiles with the good news.

Next they traveled to Galatia in the heartland of Asia Minor and faced one of the hardest mission fields. First to Iconium, but when they didn't get a good reception there, they went to Lystra and Derbe. In Lystra they healed a crippled man who had never walked. He had faith to be healed, and so they told him to get up and walk—and he leaped up and walked!

Paul and Barnabas' gift of healing proved their message was from God. It was their credentials. When the people at Lystra saw what Paul and Barnabas did, they shouted the gods had come down to them. The pagan priests brought garlands and sacrifice and were ready to worship them.

But Paul and Barnabas rush in among them, shouting, "*We are human beings like you are!*" (Like Philip said to Cornelius earlier.) Paul tried to turn their attention to the living God who is the Creator and away from their heathen idols and Greek mythology. But then the crowd turned on them, stirred up by some unbelieving Jews from Antioch and Iconium. They stoned Paul and left him for dead.

One day they are ready to worship Paul and Barnabas as gods, and the next day they stone Paul to death. When Paul described this later (see 2 Corinthians 12:2-4), he shared he very well could have died and God raised him from the dead. The next day, miraculously, Paul was able to travel—a miracle whether or not he was actually raised from the dead.

Paul and Barnabas now retrace their journey and return to Antioch and report back how God had now definitely opened the door to Gentiles. The churches in Asia Minor are made up entirely of Gentiles. In most places the Jews rejected the gospel and the Gentiles received it.

**NEXT: Everyone realized they stood on the
threshold of a new age**

LESSON 8

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE SAVED?



Begin with prayer



Read **Acts 15**



Listen at [TTB.org/Acts](https://www.TTB.org/Acts) to **Acts 15:1-13** and **Acts 15:12-41**

Now that Paul's first missionary journey is done and the new churches in Asia Minor are 100% gentile, the church faces its first big crisis.

In the Jerusalem church, many new followers of Jesus are former Pharisees who have no intention of giving up the Mosaic system. They think in order for Gentiles to come into the church, they must also live under Moses' Law. Specifically, they say, Gentiles must be circumcised and they must not eat meat offered to idols.

The real issue, of course, is law vs. grace. *What must we do to be saved?* And it stirred up a heated debate among the people who stood at this important transition to the church age.

What is the gospel? First, the facts. The essential truth of the gospel is the death, the burial, and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. (See 1 Corinthians 15:1-5, 15-17.) The gospel hinges on these truths Paul clearly explains in Galatians 3:22. What must you do to be saved? Nothing more nor less than *believe these essentials*. (See also Galatians 2:15-16.)

Unlike today when people deny these facts about Jesus Christ, in that day, too many people witnessed Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection to deny it. More than 500 people saw the risen Christ at one time.

The question of the day, then, was how to interpret these facts. *Did Jesus die for your sins? What happened on the cross? Is the work of Christ enough to save you? Do you need to go through a ritual or anything else in order to be saved? Must you go through the Law?*

Back in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas tell the Jerusalem church all God had done on their missionary journey. *“We preached the gospel, and men and women over in the Galatian country trusted Christ. They know nothing about Moses’ Law yet they are now saved.”* And that started the debate that was called the Jerusalem Council.

To follow the arguments, keep in mind how God used three men—Peter, James, and Silas—to work this out.

Peter, a respected Jew, spoke first and summarized the argument. He reminded everyone that a good while ago, God chose that Gentiles “should hear the word of the gospel and believe” (v. 7). This is not a new insight for Peter since he said the same thing when Cornelius was saved. He had been shocked by the paradigm shift, but trusted God with it. (Though he probably still didn’t eat bacon.)

Yes, he said, Gentiles are actually saved. They are saved by grace—and not whether they eat kosher, keep the Sabbath, or are circumcised. Salvation is by grace through faith. We have freedom to do as we wish about those other things.

The Holy Spirit knows our hearts, he said. *And there is no difference between us.* We all come to salvation in Jesus Christ by grace through faith. This is always the only way of salvation. You don’t have to do anything to earn your salvation. Jesus Christ did all the work. All God asks you to do is to believe that His Son died for you.

Jews are saved exactly the same way that Gentiles are saved—because they trust Jesus Christ. We are saved by God’s grace. It was then appropriate for Paul and Barnabas to tell their amazing stories of how Gentiles heard the gospel and believed.

After the men sat down, the room was quiet. No one had anything to say. They all likely realized they stood on the threshold of a new age.

Next, James, Jesus’ half-brother, who later wrote the book of James, stands up and summarizes what they just heard and describes God’s program for the future. He said, *“Listen closely. This is important.”*

Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. –Acts 15:14

James describes the plan of God in place for today. Is He saving the whole world? No. Is God bringing in His Kingdom? No. Then what is God doing today? He is visiting the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. They become part of the church, the body of believers. We learn in Revelation that standing before the throne of God there will be those of every tribe and tongue and people and nation. The Word of God goes out to the world. There will be opposition and there will be apostasy, but the Word of God will reach the world because God is calling out a people for His name.

James sums it up—God is following a definite program. Together the Jerusalem Council concludes: Gentiles who have turned to God do not need to follow Moses' Law. Out of courtesy to their Jewish brother, however, they are asked to not eat meat that was sacrificed to idols—something Jews found very offensive—and they were to guard the morality of sex and marriage.

Once the decision was announced, the Jerusalem church sends two of their most respected leaders, Judas Barsabbas and Silas, to go with Paul and Barnabas back to their church in Antioch. The Jerusalem church wrote letters to be read to the Gentiles who had turned to God, calling them *brothers*. They assure them in this letter that no one should tell them they need to do anything but believe on the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved. Anyone who tells them they need to follow Moses' Law, or do anything else in addition to believe, is not saying that on the authority of God's Word.

The church sends Judas and Silas with Paul and Barnabas to confirm this decision. The Jerusalem believers all knew the Holy Spirit directed them in this decision.

When the four men met with the church in Antioch, the people were relieved and pleased. Judas and Silas strengthened their new friends with courage, comfort, and hope in the Lord.

When it was time to go, Silas decided to stay a little longer. He must have been excited about working with these new gentile believers, and he and Paul got along well.

About this time, Paul nudges Barnabas and says, *“Let’s go on the road again and visit our new brothers and preach the Word of God.”* Paul is genuinely concerned for the young churches. Barnabas was on board but wanted to give John Mark a second chance. But Paul remembered how John Mark had deserted them when the road got rough and didn’t want to bring him along.

Both men take a stand and don’t budge (even saints disagree). They weren’t disagreeable or ugly about it; they didn’t split the church. But they do split up. Barnabas takes Mark and sails to Cyprus and off the pages of Scripture. He brings the gospel to his home area, Cyprus, and there had a great ministry. From Cyprus, the gospel was carried to North Africa.

Paul then invites Silas to be his partner on his next missionary journey.

The church now has two great mission projects where before they had only one. Barnabas goes one direction and Paul goes another. This is God’s method: He will use both these men. Paul now has Silas with him as they head out, and the brothers in Antioch entrusted them to the grace of God.

**NEXT: Walk with Paul to some familiar places:
Philippi, Galatia, Thessalonica, and Corinth.**

4. When Paul and Barnabas were ready to hit the road again and go visit the Christians they had previously served, they got into a disagreement. What about?

5. What blessing resulted from this new direction?

LESSON 9

ON THE ROAD WITH PAUL FROM ASIA TO EUROPE



Begin with prayer



Read **Acts 16:1–18:8**



Listen at [TTB.org/Acts](https://www.TTB.org/Acts) to **Acts 15:40–16:40**, **Acts 17:1-21**, and **Acts 17:22–18:8**

It's a new day in Asia as Paul and Silas set out on the next missionary journey, traveling to familiar-sounding places: Philippi, Galatia, Thessalonica, Corinth. We'll walk along with these men when they cross from Asia over into Europe—a memorable, significant, revolutionary crossing. The gospel is spreading.

First, Paul and Silas went through Syria and Cilicia, visiting with churches Paul helped get started on his first journey. They then go north into Galatian country to visit with a church that wrestled with a transition issue. As Jews, these church members once followed Moses' Law to the letter—which included observing several practices like circumcision and dietary rules. Some false teachers told them they still needed to follow these standards or they couldn't be saved. This gave Paul the opportunity to teach what it means to be saved by grace through faith alone. And not only are we sinners *saved* by grace, but we're sinners who *live* by grace. Grace is a way *to* life and a way *of* life.

On the way to Galatia, Paul visits Lystra where he reconnects with a young man, Timothy, who he introduced to the Lord on his first missionary trip. Paul knew his mother and his grandmother. Paul invites Timothy to join him and Silas.

Paul then asks a curious thing of Timothy, whose mother was Jewish and his father a Greek. He asks Timothy to get circumcised. Earlier when Paul took Titus (an uncircumcised Gentile) to Jerusalem, Paul was adamant he didn't need to be circumcised to be a Christian. Now Paul wants to take Timothy as a fellow missionary to reach people for Christ, beginning with the Jews. He wants to remove any argument or offense, so he asks Timothy to be circumcised. It had no bearing on Timothy's salvation, but the rite was performed so Timothy's ministry with the Jews would not be hindered. (Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-20 to understand Paul's reasoning.)

The new ministry team's visit in Galatia went well. They visit the maturing churches and many people all around them turned to Christ. New churches were multiplying in number and size daily.

This region is heavily populated and central to the Greek culture. Paul likely wanted to make a big loop around Asia Minor, visiting the big commercial, political, and educational centers, but the Spirit of God had something else in mind.

The Holy Spirit forbade them to preach the Word down in Asia. *What?* Paul wanted to go there, and the Spirit of God wanted the Word of God given out, but the Spirit of God wanted Paul to go to a different place now. But where?

Paul reasoned if they couldn't go south, they would go north along the Black Sea to another large population center where many Jews lived (modern-day Turkey). But God's Spirit said no again. Not south. Not north. Since they had come from the east, the only direction left was west.

So Paul and company traveled west until they came to Troas on the coast. Where should they go now? If we asked Paul that day, "Where are you going?" he would have said, "I don't know." The *Spirit of God* is leading them, and they simply waited.

But they didn't have to wait long. One night, a man appeared to Paul in a dream. He stood on a far shore and called across the sea, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (16:9).

Macedonia is across the Aegean Sea in Europe. Paul is now in Asia. God's Spirit just gave Paul his map. Now Paul can be sure God is calling them to preach the Good News in Europe.

As this new journey unfolds, the Acts storyteller begins to say “we went.” It’s because Dr. Luke, the author of Acts, has now joined the party. Now it’s a quartet: Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Dr. Luke—quite a delegation crossed over into Europe.

IN PHILIPPI

One of their first stops was Philippi, a Roman colony and an important hub in that part of Europe. People here lived by Roman customs and spoke Latin. Paul went straight to the strategic center of town to begin to minister. The Philippian church was remarkable—wonderful saints who loved Paul and whom he deeply loved.

On their first Sabbath, Paul and company learned that just outside the city, down by the river, a prayer meeting was happening. Perhaps they’re the ones who prayed for Paul to come help them in Macedonia.

God had opened the heart of a woman named Lydia from Thyatira (Asia Minor), and she had organized this prayer meeting. She worshipped the living and true God but had very little knowledge. She will be the first one in Europe to follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

Lydia was a remarkable person—a leader to her small group and likely a wealthy businesswoman. After she was baptized, she invited Paul and his group to stay in her home.

All was going well until trouble started with a girl, possessed by a demon, who relentlessly taunted Paul’s team. The crowds loved the entertainment, but it grieved Paul. After several days Paul cast the demon out of her in Jesus’ name. This relieved the girl but made her masters furious (she was making them a lot of money). They brought charges against Paul and Silas and riled the crowds against these “outsiders.”

The crowds grabbed them, beat them, threw them in prison, and locked them in stocks. At midnight, even in such a miserable situation, Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises to God. They sang so loudly the other prisoners heard them.

And suddenly a great earthquake shook the foundations of the prison, and all the doors flew open and the stocks fell off their feet. The prison guard, seeing the doors open and assuming the prisoners escaped, drew his sword and stood ready to kill himself. But Paul cried out to him, “*We’re all still*

here!” The guard, overwhelmed, falls at their feet and asks, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (16:30). A man thinks about eternity in situations like this. He had looked into eternity and knew he was a lost man.

How can a man be saved? By believing on the Lord Jesus Christ.

The guard then took them home, washed their wounds, fed them, and rejoiced, believing in God, along with his whole house. In one night they were whipped, thrown into jail, freed by the direct intervention of God, and now they are being royally cared for in the home of these rejoicing young converts. What a day.

The prison officials released Paul and Silas, realizing that their imprisonment was illegal. They issued orders to free the prisoners and get them out of town. However, Paul objects. He says he will not leave under such circumstances. He wanted a public announcement of their innocence. He wanted to protect the new believers whom he would soon be leaving there in Philippi.

Once cleared, and with goodbyes said to Lydia and the young church, Paul and his team continue on their journey, continuing west in Macedonia, then south to Athens.

IN THESSALONICA

Paul's troupe traveled on the Via Egnatia, a major Roman road which traders and the Roman army used. Now here come some missionaries on their way to Thessalonica, a prominent city of that day and another Roman colony.

As was his pattern, Paul first went to the synagogue in a community. He met the devout Jews of the city and shares the gospel. Some believe, but most reject the gospel, and this then pushes Paul to the Gentiles. Some Gentiles believe and this is how a church forms, a local church composed of Jews and Gentiles.

For about a month, Paul teaches them the great doctrines of Scripture (which we see referenced in his later letters to them). He preaches from the Old Testament why the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was necessary. In fact, the Resurrection is the heart of every sermon given in Acts and the basis of all New Testament preaching.

And as was the pattern, some believe and others did not. We also learn many prominent women in Thessalonica came to the Lord. How wonderful! Also towns divided and turned upside down by the gospel. When Christianity penetrated that old Roman Empire, it caused a revolution—with Paul and Silas at the center of it.

IN BEREA

Paul and Silas left Thessalonica by night and didn't slow down one bit. They go to Berea on the coast. The people listen to the gospel, search the Scriptures, and many Greek men and women believe. But then a Jewish faction from Thessalonica shows up and causes a stir, hoping to run Paul out of town.

IN ATHENS

Paul leaves Berea alone and goes to Athens while Silas and Timothy go back to Thessalonica to check on the young churches.

Athens, the cultural center of the world, was filled with idolatry. Paul encountered philosophers—both the Epicureans who pushed hedonism to the max and Stoics who believe in restraint. Both groups listened to Paul talk about the new “strange gods.”

Unlike other people Paul encounter in Europe, the Athenians think they know something about religion. The hardest people in the world to reach with the Word of God and the gospel are church members who think they don't need a Savior.

Paul goes to Mars Hill where philosophers gathered and preaches one of his greatest messages (read Acts 17:22-31). He began, *“Men of Athens, I perceive you are too religious”* He saw their altars, idols, and temples. In fact, he called out an altar inscribed to the unknown god—which could imply they didn't want to leave anyone's god out or that they recognized there was a God they didn't know.

Many people recognize that behind their idolatry is a living and true God. They don't know anything about Him, nor how to approach Him, but they sense He's there.

Paul wants to talk to them about this unknown God and tell them about the God who they don't know. First, He is the God of creation. He doesn't live in a building that man made. Man lives in a universe God has made, not the other way around.

Paul then tells them, *“God doesn't need anything from you. Not your altars nor your offerings. God is on the giving end. He gives you life. He gives you breath. He has given you the sun, moon, and stars. He has given us all things.”* These Athenians worshiped the sun, but Paul says the sun is a gift God made for them.

God not only gives us physical things, but He gives us spiritual gifts. He is the answer to our search for god. The Athenians enjoyed their search for gods, but Paul says if they would just seek the one living and true God, if they grope for Him in the darkness, they would actually *find* Him. He doesn't play hide-and-seek with us. He's not remote; He's *near*. We live in His universe, and we can't get away from Him. We are His creation; He's not our invention.

There was a time when God shut His eyes to paganism. But now light has come into the world and with it comes responsibility. God asks men everywhere to turn to Him and repent. He has created the opportunity for us to be redeemed.

There will be a day when God will judge the world. The one who will be Judge has nail-pierced hands; He's the one who has been raised from the dead. But when Paul talked about Jesus' resurrection, the crowd mocked him. Platoism, the popular philosophy of Athens, denies a physical resurrection from the dead.

There will always be those who mock the gospel and there will also be those who believe, and this is what happened in Athens. Wherever the Word of God is preached, there will be those who will listen and believe.

AT CORINTH

Paul left Athens and went to Corinth, probably the most wicked city of the day. Anything goes here—addictions, pleasures, entertainment. Sex was a religion in Corinth. Surprisingly, Paul had one of his most effective ministries here, both on his second and third missionary journeys.

As was his pattern, Paul first found the Jewish community in Corinth and met a couple, Aquila and Priscilla, who recently left Rome. The Roman emperor Claudius kicked all Jews out of Rome as anti-Semitism rolled like a wave over the earth. They landed in Corinth and opened a shop.

One day, a Jew who had traveled all the way from Antioch walked into their lives. They got acquainted with Paul and invited him to stay with them. The first thing Paul did was introduce them to Jesus Christ. There were others from the synagogue who also turned to the Lord, but many Jews in Corinth opposed Paul.

Paul did everything he could to persuade the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah—and some did believe—but most argued with him on every point. Finally, frustrated and spent, Paul left the synagogue and turned his attention to the gentile world.

NEXT: The gospel sounded out so that everyone in Asia heard it.

4. What dramatic encounter did Paul and Silas have with the people of Philippi that landed them in jail? What happened then?

5. There are a lot of “human” stories that happen in this section of Acts. What is your favorite and why?



OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE
Lord Jesus Christ
is a love story.

If we love Him,
WE WOULDN'T DO ANYTHING TO
BREAK OUR RELATIONSHIP
with Him.



THRUtheBIBLE

LESSON 10

LOOK HOW THEY GREW!



Begin with prayer



Read **Acts 18:9–20:5**



Listen at [TTB.org/Acts](https://www.TTB.org/Acts) to **Acts 18:9–19:7** and **Acts 19:2–20:5**

In Corinth, one of the most wicked cities in the Roman Empire, Paul taught and touched many people. For 10 months, the gospel was making an inroad. But then the Jewish opposition to Paul got so intense, he considered taking the gospel only to the Gentiles. Even then, opposition grew and Paul thought maybe his time in Corinth was done.

But then the Lord Himself steps in. One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a dream and said, *“Keep it up, Paul. Don’t let anyone scare you into silence. I’m with you and no one will hurt you. I have many people in this city”* (18:9-10). So, Paul stays.

The conflict with the Jews continued to escalate to the point they drug him to the city’s Bema seat—where the community’s legal issues are heard. A judge named Gallio presided but soon realized the “law” the Jews accused Paul of breaking was Moses’ Law and not the laws of the Roman Empire. He dismissed the case, likely the first person who made a decision between church and state. If the matter concerned religion, then Gallio said they should handle it themselves. He only enforced Roman law.

Corinth was a city of freedom, including religious freedom. Paul could preach anything he wanted. *“Settle the issue yourself,”* the judge said.

ANTIOCH

When Paul got to Antioch, he faced the same issue again. *“Are we free to do things we couldn’t when we followed the Old Testament Mosaic Law?”*

We ask similar questions, not quite believing the marvelous freedom we have in the grace of God today. Some super-saints want to make laws for Christians to follow about what we can and can’t do. They forget our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ is a love story. If we love Him, we wouldn’t do anything to break our relationship with Him.

Paul now sets his sights home, back to Antioch after his second missionary journey. He sails for home with Aquila and Priscilla. On their way, they stopped in Ephesus where Aquila and Priscilla stay. Earlier on this journey, Paul wanted to go to Ephesus but the Spirit of God wouldn’t let him. Now he saw a door of opportunity open in Ephesus, but he didn’t stay long. He wanted to get to Jerusalem in time for the feasts because he knew many Jews would be attending.

He landed at Caesarea in time to get to Jerusalem and give his report. Then he went north, back to his home church in Antioch. The second missionary journey was complete.

PAUL’S THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Paul’s a missionary, and he couldn’t stay home long. He wanted to go back to Ephesus, but until he could, another great preacher, Apollos, had a ministry there. A Jew with a Greek name, Apollos was born at Alexandria in North Africa, the center of the early church movement after it moved from Jerusalem. The early church grew from here for several centuries, giving home to Athanasius, Tertullian, and Augustine, three great men of the early church.

An outstanding man and a great preacher, Apollos was well trained in the Old Testament and had a passion for the things of God. He taught the people of Ephesus everything he knew, but he knew only up to John the Baptist’s ministry. He hadn’t even heard of Jesus or the Holy Spirit.

When Aquila and Priscilla heard Apollos preach, they invited him home for dinner in order to tell him about Jesus and the gospel of the grace of God. They brought him up to date and introduced him to Jesus as his Messiah. He then went to Achaia, visiting the churches in Greece, including Corinth and Athens, preaching Jesus as the crucified and risen Savior.

PAUL IN EPHEBUS

Paul finally got to Ephesus, a longtime dream for him. He lived here two years. When he met people who said they were believers, he soon realized they had only heard about John the Baptist and had been baptized in repentance. This baptism was only meant to prepare for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now the people could turn to Christ and be saved. They did not get saved under Apollos because he didn't know about Christ. Now they received the Holy Spirit.

The moment you trust Jesus Christ as your Savior, you are regenerated by the Spirit of God, indwelt by His Spirit, sealed by His Spirit, and baptized into the body of believers by His Spirit. This happens the moment you believe and trust Jesus Christ. Paul detected this had not happened to these Ephesians, so he explains how to trust the Lord Jesus to be saved. They responded with faith to his message and many believed.

When the Holy Spirit came upon them on this occasion, twelve men spoke in other languages that could be understood by others in the great city of Ephesus. These men were now able to give the good news of Christ to the entire city. This was the beginning of a great ministry at Ephesus.

Like his pattern, Paul went to the synagogue first, and boldly taught about Jesus Christ and other things related to the Kingdom of God. Some responded in faith, but others' hearts hardened. He finally had to leave the synagogue because of the opposition. Instead, he taught daily in the school of Tyrannus. For a couple hours during the school's afternoon break, Paul preached the Word of God. For two years he taught at this center of learning and, as a result, all of Asia heard the Word of God, both Jews and Greeks.

The Word of God was growing exponentially in this season. From this epicenter, the church in Colosse and the church in Rome were born. Though he had not yet visited them, Paul founded these churches, and wrote them both letters. For two years the gospel sounded far and near so everyone in Asia heard it. Likely the seven churches of Asia Minor also were founded through Paul's preaching in Ephesus. This was Paul's most fruitful season of ministry.

Ephesus was a great religious center, with its primary focus on the temple of Diana that loomed over the city. Even so, the city was satanic to the core. God granted some special powers to Paul to combat the satanic opposition.

In the most unlikely form of divine healing, God gave power to Paul's handkerchiefs, the cloths he used to wipe sweat from his brow as he worked. In that time, many mystery religions said anything holy must be very clean and white. Instead, God chose to use Paul's dirty, sweaty handkerchiefs to heal diseases and rebuke evil spirits when people picked them up. Trouble multiplied when certain exorcists tried to copy Paul's miracles, but their attempts backfired.

Paul's miracles shook Ephesus to its very foundation and many believed, confessed, and showed it by their actions. They even burned all their expensive satanic books and art.

The name of the Lord Jesus was magnified and the Word of God grew in its impact.

As Paul's time in Ephesus drew to an end, he said he wanted to go to Rome. As he waited, he wrote a letter to the Corinthians. Timothy and Erastus delivered it, sharing it as they went with Philippi and Thessalonica, and also the churches in Athens and Corinth.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote about the satanic adversaries he faced in Ephesus. The city led in false religion in the day. The temple to Diana was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the largest Greek temple that was ever built. It was also the center of business, the bank of the day, and the center of sin and gross immorality. The image of Diana was a crude, many-breasted idol that was sold throughout the temple. It was big business, and Paul was interfering with it when he preached no god could be crafted by man's hands.

Specifically, a silversmith named Demetrius objected to Paul's teaching. He made silver statues of Diana and sold them to tourists. But Paul was wiping out his clients. Demetrius raised up a mob to kill Paul. He certainly would've been killed except for a few who spoke up for him.

A local official in Ephesus finally quieted the mob craze and urged them to appeal to the law rather than resorting to violence. If they had an issue to bring up, they should all sit down and have a meeting. If Demetrius felt like he had a case, he should bring it up. Eventually the crowd disbursed, and everyone went home.

Paul knew his ministry in Ephesus is over. He leaves Ephesus and travels back to Macedonia to visit Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, and Corinth where he reunited with old friends.

He retraced his steps and visited all the churches in Europe from his third missionary journey—and delighted in how the churches had grown.

NEXT: When did it become a practice to worship on Sunday, the first day of the week, rather than on the Sabbath (Saturday)?

LESSON 11

WHEN THINGS CHANGED



Begin with prayer



Read **Acts 20:6–21:25**



Listen at [TTB.org/Acts](https://www.TTB.org/Acts) to **Acts 20:6-38** and **Acts 21:1-25**

When did it become a practice to worship on Sunday, the first day of the week, rather than on the Sabbath (Saturday)?

The transition happened in these early days of the church. When the disciples got together to share a meal, it was on Sunday, the first day of the week. They also met on Sunday to hear Paul teach and to remember the Lord's death and resurrection—which happened on a Sunday morning. Under the old creation, the Sabbath (Saturday) was the important day, but now we celebrate a living Christ—on Sunday.

Another big change was how people followed God in so many new churches after Paul's missionary journeys. Acts primarily traces the work of Peter and Paul—Peter taking the gospel to Jews and Paul introducing Gentiles to Jesus Christ. From their ministries, many other missionaries shared the good news in the towns and countrysides of the Roman Empire. They took God's Word to the whole known world.

In one such city, Troas, Paul spent a week with the disciples and followers of the Way. On the night before he was going to leave, never to return, these early Christians filled the house listening to the Word of God. Paul preached his heart out for hours.

Around midnight, a young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the upper loft, fell asleep and then fell more than two stories to the ground. Everyone shrieked and thought for sure the young man was dead. But Paul embraced him and brought him back to life. Paul comforted everyone, got the boy something to eat, and continued preaching through the night until daybreak. This miracle alone proved Paul was Jesus' apostle and could be trusted to teach God's Word. Paul was nothing more than a humble preacher of the gospel, and these believers simply wanted to hear the Word of God. How great is that?!

AT MILETUS

In the morning, Paul and his group are on the road again. Dr. Luke and the others sailed to Assos, but Paul wanted to walk, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ to everyone he met along the way. They met up again at Miletus, the port of Ephesus, because even though Paul wanted to get to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost, he didn't want to miss meeting with the elders of the new church there.

Imagine them gathered in that harbor town, the mighty Aegean Sea behind them, the lights of Ephesus in the distance. Paul realizes this is the last time he'll be with these men, so he takes his time sharing his heart with them. He also didn't pull any punches. He has given them the whole Word of God. He laid his life on the line when the Jewish leaders opposed him. Then he says, in effect, *"Now I'm going to Jerusalem, and God's Spirit tells me chains and suffering wait for me there."*

Once before Paul had been as clearly directed by God's Spirit. In Acts 16 God put up roadblocks in Asia which directed Paul to Europe. But Paul faces no roadblocks here. Instead, the Spirit of God reveals to him he'll be walking into a hornet's nest in Jerusalem. He'll be imprisoned and will suffer if he follows the Spirit's lead. But Paul says, *"I don't count my life as something I need to save. I'm willing to lay it down for Jesus"* (20:24). He wants to bring the gift to the saints suffering in Jerusalem with his own hands.

Paul followed the Lord every step of the way. At the end of his life he wrote, *"I have completed my course."* Jerusalem was now the next step, with the finish line in sight.

Paul knew he wouldn't see these people again in this life. He took comfort that he has honestly given them God's Word and these church leaders had what they needed to make sure the church is fed. Paul also warned them

that as soon as he leaves, wolves will pounce on the church and will want to devour the sheep. Paul also warns them they would be attacked in sinister and subtle ways from the inside, like termites, eating away the foundation of the church.

"I'm putting you in God's hands," Paul said. "He'll give you whatever you need and all His grace to do His will. We can entrust our people to God, too, whenever we have to leave them" (20:32).

Paul gave them final marching orders. Like he himself had done, he told them to take care of their own basic needs and then to help the weak. He reminded them Jesus said we'd be far happier to give, rather than only get.

Then it was time to say goodbye. This was a tender meeting between Paul and the elders of the church in Ephesus. These people love Paul and he loves them. They hate to let him go, knowing they will not see him again in this life. They pray together and then bravely walk Paul to the ship back to Israel. After a tender goodbye, they hugged him and entrusted Him to God.

ON THE WAY BACK TO JERUSALEM

Paul took three missionary journeys. He returns now to Jerusalem, almost like a victory march. Along the way warnings come to him about the trouble waiting for him there. One warning came from disciples in Tyre on the coast in Phoenicia, modern Lebanon. *"Don't go there, Paul,"* they said (21:4).

Some Bible teachers think Paul made a mistake to return to Jerusalem, as these disciples warned. But God's Spirit doesn't contradict Himself. Paul is not to go up to Jerusalem unless he is prepared to make the required sacrifice. And Paul keeps saying he is willing to lay down his life for the Lord Jesus.

Paul wanted to go to Jerusalem for several reasons. First, he carried the offering from the gentile Christians to give to the suffering saints in Jerusalem. Once upon a time, Paul took the lives of the church in Jerusalem by his own hand; now he wanted to present this offering to the Jerusalem Christians with his own hands. He had been partly responsible for their state of neediness. He didn't want to send some representative to Jerusalem; he wanted to go himself.

Another reason God's Spirit compelled Paul to go to Jerusalem was hinted at when he got saved. Remember when the Lord appeared to Ananias and told him to go to Paul after his conversion?

But the Lord said to him, “Go, for [Paul] is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake.”

–Acts 9:15-16

Paul hasn’t yet stood before kings and rulers, but he knows God said he would. In the coming days, Paul will share the gospel with King Agrippa and eventually before Nero in Rome. He also reached those in Caesar’s household (Philippians 4:22). What happened to Paul didn’t hinder the gospel, it only helped it spread to the whole known world.

Finally in thinking about Paul’s decision to go to Jerusalem, Paul writes, “... *I have finished my course.*” If he had stepped out of God’s will, he would not be able to say he had done what God had asked of him.

So, the disciples and Paul’s team with him said goodbye on the shore. They knelt down on the beach, prayed together, and hugged goodbye. By the end of the first century, millions of believers filled the Roman Empire. And Paul loved and was loved by so many.

AT CAESAREA

Now on his way south, Paul and his team walked the coastal road. Think of the believers he met on the way and the ministry opportunities they had.

They arrived next in Caesarea where they visited with Philip the evangelist, literally “one who announces good tidings.” Philip had four daughters who had the gift of prophecy. The New Testament had not been written as yet, so the gift of prophecy was needed in the early church.

As they visited with Philip in Caesarea, a prophet named Agabus came from Judea and warns Paul about the trouble he’ll face in Jerusalem. Agabus took Paul’s belt and tied himself up, hands and feet, and said, “*This is what the Holy Spirit says will happen to you in Jerusalem. And then they’ll hand you over to godless unbelievers. Please turn around. Don’t be so stubborn about going to Jerusalem*” (21:11).

The Holy Spirit reveals to Paul what will happen and asks him again if he’s willing. This prophet isn’t telling Paul anything new. He knows what’s ahead, and he not only is willing to be bound but also to die for Jesus in Jerusalem. The disciples and other believers love Paul and they’re concerned for him.

AT JERUSALEM

When Paul came to Jerusalem, the church welcomed him with open arms and gave him a glorious reception. He is a veteran missionary, bearing in his body the marks of the Lord Jesus. Paul first visits with James (Jesus' half-brother), the leader of the Jerusalem church. Paul told James and his elders how God had worked among the Gentiles and Jews in Europe and Asia. They listened with delight and gave God the glory.

Then things went a little wrong. One group twisted Paul's words and accused him of teaching that believing Jews didn't have to keep up the old traditions of Moses. Paul wasn't teaching there was a division between Jews and Gentiles—really, just the opposite. Paul taught that in Jesus, we are the same. Both Jew and Gentile are saved only and alone by the grace of God through Jesus Christ.

Now what should Paul do? The church welcomes him and gives him royal treatment. They receive the financial gift from the gentile churches. They listen to his report and rejoice in how God is saving the Gentiles. Next they tell him that thousands of Jews in Jerusalem believe in the name of Jesus Christ as their Messiah and Savior. But there's still one thing they don't understand.

There is only one church in Jesus Christ, not a Jewish church and a gentile church. A Jew who comes to Jesus Christ does not stop being a Jew. So they say to Paul, *“Look, you're from a Jew background and you want to win the Jews for Christ. Do this for us: make a vow with these four Jewish men. They have shaved their heads and are going into the temple. Would you go along with them?”* And Paul says, *“Sure.”*

Paul didn't take this vow because he was commanded to do so or thought this would benefit him spiritually. He takes this vow because he wants to win the hearts of these people. But as he knew ahead of time, there is trouble ahead.

And it didn't take long for Paul to step right into it.

NEXT: When Paul stepped into trouble.

LESSON 11



FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. When did the transition happen between gathering on Saturday vs. Sunday? Why?
2. What was so special about the young man, Eutychus?
3. Why was God's Spirit leading Paul back to Jerusalem? Why did some people tell Paul not to go? What lesson can we learn from Paul's life here?

4. Describe Paul's journey back to Jerusalem. What were some of the things that happened? Who did he meet along the way?

5. How was "grace" the dividing issue for the people back in Jerusalem? What didn't they understand?

LESSON 12

HOW THE TROUBLE BEGAN



Begin with prayer



Read **Acts 21:26–25:23**



Listen at [TTB.org/Acts](https://www.TTB.org/Acts) to **Acts 21:26–22:30**, **Acts 23**, **Acts 24**,
and **Acts 24:25–25:23**

We followed Paul back to Jerusalem and enjoyed his reunion with James and the Jerusalem church. But it doesn't take long to realize the Jews in Jerusalem—even those who believe Jesus is Messiah—are confused about how to go forward in faith.

As Paul goes to the temple with some believing Jews, trouble is stirring. The local Jews hate Paul because he is teaching you don't need to go through the Mosaic system to be saved. (You don't—you only need to believe on the name of Jesus.)

When a group saw Paul in the temple, they formed a mob and began shouting, *“Help! You Israelites, help! This man goes all over the world telling lies about us and our religion. He even brought Greeks in here and defiled this holy place”* (21:28)

Paul and Trophimus, a Greek man from Ephesus, had walked around Jerusalem the day before and the mob assumed Paul had taken him to the temple. As mobs generally do, they reacted on assumption and misinformation. Trophimus, a Gentile, would have no reason to go to the temple.

The mob swarm Paul and start to beat him. They would have killed him if a Roman captain and soldiers didn't step in. The captain didn't know Paul, so he handcuffs and arrests him, thinking he is a criminal. He asks the crowd what their problem is with Paul, but everyone shouts something different. They are so violent that the soldiers had to carry Paul out on their shoulders. Since the captain didn't learn anything from the mob, he takes Paul to the barracks to figure out the charge against him. The mob won't settle for anything less than Paul's death.

At first, the captain thinks Paul is a common criminal, then he thinks perhaps he is the instigator to an Egyptian uprising. But Paul said, *"No, I'm a Jew from Tarsus. Can I speak to the crowd?"* And the captain agrees, amazed Paul spoke in Greek to him.

The minute Paul begins to address the crowd in Hebrew, the language they love and understand, it was like a raging wind suddenly died down and the waves of a sea calmed. This man is one of them.

Paul begins respectfully telling them his personal history, beginning with the fact he had been one of them—a Pharisee. His background is a tremendous one—the best upbringing, schools, and teachers. He was such a strict Pharisee that he persecuted everyone who followed "the Way." In essence, he said, *"I know how you feel. I did the same thing."*

Paul then walks them through his experience on the road to Damascus when Jesus Himself appeared to him. He describes what it was like to be blinded for a few days. He then describes his mission to tell the Gentiles about the Lord.

"But who would believe me?" Paul said. *"I had hunted those who believed in Jesus Christ. I threw them in jail. When Stephen was murdered, I was right there, holding the coats of the murderers and cheering them on. Who would believe I now believe as he did? But Jesus told me not to argue but to take this good news to the Gentiles."*

Everyone listened intently up until the moment Paul mentions the Gentiles, then it was like he lit a fuse. The crowd erupts, demanding his death.

The captain, not understanding Hebrew, had to act fast. He didn't know what Paul said, so he bound Paul and brought him back to the barracks. Perhaps Paul would confess if he beat him.

Paul is misunderstood all around. The Jews think he brought a Gentile into the temple—he hadn't. The captain thinks he was an Egyptian who led a riot—he wasn't. Paul is a Hebrew who speaks fluent Greek—and he is a Roman citizen. To escape being flogged, Paul asks, *"Is it legal to torture a Roman citizen without a fair trial?"* (22:25).

Immediately the captain stops the interrogation. He's amazed he has a prisoner who is a Roman citizen who was born free (the captain says he had to buy his own freedom). The captain then arranges a hearing with the chief priests for the next day to find out the charges against Paul.

Paul had many assets which prepared him to be the missionary to the Roman Empire. His Greek education gave him an international worldview. His Jewish training in the Mosaic system prepared him to interpret the Law in the light of the Messiah—Jesus Christ and His redemptive death and resurrection. But not the least of his assets was his Roman citizenship, which finally opens the door for him to visit Rome.

As we go along we can see the hand of God in the life of this man. The same one who moved in the life of Paul wants to move in your life today. That is the glory and wonder of it all. In all the routine, common direction of our lives, God is moving.

Paul will now be a prisoner for the rest of his life, and we will follow his life as a prisoner for Jesus Christ.

The next morning, Paul stands before the Sanhedrin and the Jewish chief priest and council. It's clear from the start Paul will not get a fair hearing. When Paul does speak, he is struck across the mouth.

Paul is a humble man, but he doesn't stand for injustice. Paul knew the law and knew a man cannot be punished before he was judged. As a former Pharisee, he was also politically savvy. He knew the Sadducees and Pharisees were viciously divided. So when the Pharisees find out his background, they rally around and defend him.

Again, a riot breaks out and Paul's life is in danger again when this crowd nearly tears him to pieces. The captain again saves Paul from the angry Sanhedrin without understanding why they hated Paul so much.

That night in prison, the Lord Himself visits Paul. He stood by Paul in his chains and encouraged him. *"You've been a good witness for Me here in Jerusalem. Now you're going to be My witness in Rome"* (23:11). The Lord

didn't promise him it would be easy. In fact, many hardships and danger were right in front of him, leading to his martyrdom in Rome. But that's how it has been for Paul since he met Jesus on the road to Damascus.

Still the hatred the Jews felt towards Paul increased. One group of 40 men vowed not to eat or drink until they killed him. They put a plan in place. Gratefully, Paul's nephew heard about it and leaked it to Paul, who then asked the captain to follow up with his nephew. When the captain discovers the plot, he acts fast and gets Paul out of town that night.

The captain escorts Paul to Caesarea, up the coast, to appear before Felix, the Roman governor. He sends a letter along explaining the danger Paul faced in Jerusalem and that he isn't guilty of any charge worthy of death or imprisonment. When Paul is allowed to speak, he doesn't defend himself, but witnesses for Christ, just as the Lord said he would witness before governors, rulers, and kings. This is God's method. Paul is in the will of God, and God is carrying out His purpose.

IN CAESAREA

For two silent years, Paul sits in a Roman prison. We know nothing about his time there. Perhaps he chafed under it all. Perhaps it is a time of growth and peace for him; we don't know.

We do know God's hand is clearly seen and His purposes are carried out. If you're living in an in-between place right now, you can draw comfort from Paul's situation. God has not forgotten him.

Paul's two years as a prisoner in Caesarea bridged two savvy politicians—first Felix, and then Festus.

When he first appeared before Felix, Paul's accusers didn't waste time. Through a well-prepared, clever lawyer, Paul is accused of sedition, rebellion, and profaning the temple.

When it was Paul's turn to defend himself, he tells the court he is in agreement with his nation in customs, but the way in which he worships God is to them heresy. He also witnesses to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Have you noticed the Resurrection is the very center of Christianity? It has been the heart of the gospel from the beginning. "What do you think of Jesus Christ?" is always the test. Did He die for your sins? Was He raised from the dead? Paul immediately gets to the core: The Resurrection.

Paul, a gifted orator himself, asks the court if his real accusers were present. The people from the temple aren't there. *"Did I do anything evil before the Sanhedrin?"* No, it was on the simple issue of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ that Paul was on trial.

Now Felix has been hearing about "the Way," and he knows the death and resurrection of Christ is core. Paul, the expert on the topic, can tell him more about it. So Felix defers the Jews and says he wants another hearing with Paul. He commits Paul into the centurion's charge and gives him lots of liberty. Felix should have freed Paul. However, he was a clever politician and so, uncertain of his best move politically, he played for time.

BEFORE FELIX

This man Felix already knew something about the gospel, or "the Way," what we call the Christian faith, but he wants to hear Paul explain. The gospel had caused this entire conflict. Now Paul isn't defending himself, he's trying to win this man for Christ.

According to the record of that day, Felix was a freed slave who had forged his way to the front with cruelty and brutality. He was a man given to pleasure and extravagance. His wife Drusilla sat there alongside him. She was the daughter of Herod Agrippa, who had killed the apostle James; her great uncle murdered John the Baptist; and her great-grandfather slaughtered the babies in Bethlehem hoping to kill the baby Jesus.

This couple of rascals, Felix and Drusilla, are in an exalted position. They probably would never have attended a church in which the gospel was preached, nor would they have gone to hear Paul the apostle if he had come to town to preach. Yet here are these two being given this great opportunity for a private interview with the greatest preacher of the grace of God the world has ever known. God gives them a private sermon. Their palace becomes a church and their thrones become almost a mourner's bench. Oh, the wonder of the grace of God to give these two a chance! The hour of salvation struck for them. The door of the kingdom is open, and they are welcomed to enter.

Yet they did not. When Paul's words cut too close to home, Felix trembles as he listens. He sends for Paul many times, but he wants a bribe, not salvation. Eventually he dismisses Paul to come back at a more convenient season. But that time never comes for Felix just as it doesn't come for many people

who postpone receiving Christ. The truth is, the sinner will never have a convenient season to hear the gospel. Man does not set the time; God does. You cannot escape that someday you will be judged.

Felix knows there is no real charge against Paul. Either Paul is guilty and should have been put to death or not guilty and freed. Under no circumstances should he have been left in prison for two years. But Felix is a politician to the very end, and he leaves Paul in prison.

BEFORE FESTUS

Festus, the next governor, follows Felix. Each time Paul appears before a ruler, he tells with great conviction and enthusiasm about what the Lord Jesus has done for him.

Paul's enemies waste no time getting to the new governor to try to get a judgment against Paul. They ask with great conviction and enthusiasm for Paul to be brought to Jerusalem. Festus likely is aware of their previous plan to ambush and kill Paul and tells them they should come to Caesarea to bring charges.

Paul again is called on to defend himself against the Jewish ruler's accusations, but instead takes it as the perfect opportunity to present the gospel to Festus. Then Paul, realizing he is not getting justice, makes a legal appeal to Caesar. He knew he isn't going to get a fair trial with Festus, so Paul exercises his right as a Roman citizen. Going back to Jerusalem would mean death for him. He doesn't purposely make himself a martyr. And besides, two years before in his prison cell, the Lord Jesus had promised him a trip to Rome.

BEFORE KING AGRIPPA AND BERNICE

Caesarea is the Roman's beach town, a gathering place for politicians. Festus just is promoted into office as the new governor, so the king comes over for a visit and some sun. After a few days of talk, Festus shares, *"I should tell you about a prisoner we have here. It's a rather odd, unusual case. His name is Paul and he was arrested and brought here by Felix. Felix left him for me. I'd like you to hear him"* (25:14-22).

Festus is in a hot seat. The charge against Paul is treason, and for that he should die, but he has committed no crimes. Now Paul appeals to Caesar. What are you going to do with a prisoner like that? So he asks Agrippa to help him out.

Agrippa likely knew of Paul and is actually eager to hear him. He wants to know more about the charges and to hear Paul defend himself. So the king and governor arrange a meeting, yet all the while they are actually fulfilling prophecy. The Lord had said Paul would appear before kings, and now he is.

NEXT: One of the greatest sermons ever recorded.

A close-up photograph of two men sitting together and reading a Bible. The man on the right has a beard and is wearing a tan corduroy jacket over a blue and red plaid shirt. The man on the left is partially visible, wearing a blue and white checkered shirt. They are both looking down at the open Bible with focused expressions. The background is softly blurred, suggesting an indoor setting with natural light.

GOD CONTINUES
TO WRITE HIS STORY
IN THE LIVES OF THOSE
WHO BELIEVE HIM.



THRU the BIBLE

LESSON 13

BEFORE KINGS AND MADMEN



Begin with prayer



Read **Acts 25:22–26:28**



Listen at [TTB.org/Acts](https://www.ttb.org/Acts) to **Acts 25:22–26:4** and **Acts 26:1-28**

How do you frame a heretic?

Festus, the Governor of Judea after Felix, needed help. The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem demanded Paul's death, but he didn't see that Paul had done anything wrong against the Jewish religion, or the temple, or Caesar. Paul certainly didn't deserve to be executed. But in order to keep the peace with the Jews, Festus takes Paul, in chains, to Herod Agrippa and asks him to help frame Paul of a crime worthy of sending him to Caesar in Rome.

Paul shared the message about Jesus before the mob in Jerusalem, before the captain of the guard, then before Felix (publicly, then privately many times). Now, he's stood before Festus. This had gone on like this for two years, and likely Paul was getting a little impatient. None of these men fully understood the charges against Paul. Neither did they understand the gospel.

Everyone was talking about "*the Way*." Even Festus and Agrippa likely asked each other about it. That's what led to Paul's public appearance before King Agrippa and the court. They wanted to learn firsthand from the apostle what the Way really was.

When Paul first turned in faith to Jesus Christ, God said there would be a day when he would stand before kings and rulers. Well, today is that day. This is the zenith of the apostle's entire ministry—one of the most splendid opportunities any minister ever had to preach Christ. And Paul uses it to preach one of the greatest sermons ever recorded. This isn't a court trial; Paul doesn't defend himself, but rather this is an open door for him to explain the gospel so that Agrippa would understand and turn in faith to Jesus Christ. Several hundred people fill the room, but Paul speaks only to King Agrippa, urging him to turn to Jesus Christ.

Acts 26 is drama at its finest and one of the greatest pieces of literature in history, secular or inspired. So let's picture the scene.

With great ceremony, Herod Agrippa and his wife Bernice enter the court. There was the tapestry and tinsel adorning all the prominent and prestigious celebrities of Rome. The elect and the elite, the intelligentsia and the sophisticates all turned out in full regalia. Ostentation and dignity were on display.

As the door of that great throne room swings open, in steps Paul, a prisoner chained between two guards. His appearance is unimpressive. This is the one who can speak with authority about the new *Way*. He is the one who teaches and preaches the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They will listen to him because he is an intelligent man and knows how to speak. And they will notice the light of heaven on his face. Paul, energized by the Holy Spirit, has the dynamic attraction the grace of God gives to a man. What a contrast he is to that gathered crowd of giddy nobility.

Really, even with hundreds watching on, there were just two men in the room: Agrippa and Paul. One in purple, the other in prison garb. One on a throne, the other in shackles. Agrippa is a king, but in the slavery of sin. Paul is a chained prisoner, rejoicing in the freedom of sins forgiven and liberty in Christ. Agrippa is an earthly king who could not free Paul nor himself. And Paul is an ambassador of Christ the King who set him free and who could free Agrippa from the damning effects of sin.

King Agrippa was a member of the family of Herod, the worst family mentioned in the Bible. But in spite of his background, Agrippa was intelligent, and he knew the Mosaic Law and Jewish background. Paul likewise knew the Law, but he also has met Christ. Now the Law takes on new meaning for him. His soul is flooded with a new light. Now he sees Jesus Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness. Now he knows God has

supplied what He demanded. He knows God is good and, through Christ, God is gracious. Paul wants King Agrippa to know this. A skillful passion fills Paul's soul as he pleads with Agrippa to turn to Christ.

Read his sermon for yourself in Acts 26. Paul starts with a very courteous introduction, telling Agrippa how he's glad for this opportunity. After Paul gives a simple explanation of his conduct, which was the natural outcome of his background, he tells about his life as a Pharisee, and then of his experience on the Damascus road.

Remember what Paul, then called Saul of Tarsus, was like on *that* day? He hated the name of Jesus Christ and despised the gospel. The Lord Jesus has never had an enemy more bitter and brutal. He tells Agrippa how he persecuted the church in Jerusalem and how he imprisoned many saints. He now has endured two years of prison and the same kind of abuse from the Jewish leaders. Now he knew exactly how those early Christians felt.

But then he describes what happened on the Damascus road, how the Lord Jesus ambushed him, how he fell to the ground and heard Jesus Himself speak to him. Only then did Paul/Saul realize he wasn't following God's will. He had trusted religion, but when he met Jesus Christ, he got rid of all his religion. All his titles and position and self-righteous acts, he counted as nothing. Jesus Christ, whom he had hated above everything else, became the most wonderful person in his life. It was nothing short of a revolution taking place in his life.

Then Paul describes for Festus and King Agrippa what the Lord taught him in those first days. The Lord appointed him to take this good news to the Gentiles and promised to deliver him from them. What a revealing blow since he now stands before two powerful Gentiles with whom he is now sharing the gospel.

From the beginning Paul makes it clear that *the Way* is not contrary to the Old Testament, but a fulfillment of it. But the Way also went beyond the Old Testament—*“to proclaim the message of light both to our people and to the Gentiles!”*

Paul stood now in front of a gentile king and presented the gospel: That Christ died for our sins, He was buried, and He rose again. Paul proclaims to this royal assembly that God stepped into man's history to do something for man. He demonstrated His love for us by giving us His Son.

Then, right in the middle of Paul's dynamic speech, Festus interrupts, shouting out, "*Paul, all your learning has driven you mad!*"

Paul answers him courteously, not as a madman or a fanatic, and gets right back to King Agrippa with the question: "*Do you believe the prophets?*"

"Yes," Agrippa said.

But, sadly, you may know that Jesus died for your sins and rose again—but it may mean nothing to you. Then Agrippa, from what seemed a tortured soul, admits, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian" (26:28).

Almost. Do you know you can almost be a Christian and still be lost for eternity? *Almost* will not do. Either you accept Jesus Christ as your Savior or you don't. No theologian can probe the depths of salvation and its meaning, yet it's simple enough for us to understand. Either He is your Savior or He is not your Savior. It cannot be *almost*; it must be all.

Paul answers him, "I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains" (26:29). Paul longs for them all to have a vital and personal relationship with Jesus Christ like he has. *Except for these chains*—he wouldn't wish the chains on anyone. Think about this man who had once been a proud and zealous Pharisee who a few years before bound Christians in chains and put them to death. Now everything has changed.

What caused such a transformation in Paul's life? It's simply because Jesus is alive—back from the dead. And since Jesus' resurrection, He is seated on a throne. And there is another prisoner—that's us. Either you bow to Him and accept Him as your Lord and Savior, or you will be accountable to Him someday.

Agrippa had now heard enough. They heard about the Way and heard the truth and the way to life. Agrippa then stands and leaves the room. He concludes Paul has committed no crime and would have set him free except that Paul had appealed to Caesar.

Paul longed to go to Rome—to see the followers of the Way there, to establish them in the truth. And although he's going an unexpected way, Paul now is on his way.

NEXT: The unexpected adventure continues on the open sea on the way to Rome.

4. What caused such a radical change in Paul's life?
How have you experienced the same wonder?

LESSON 14

ROME, THE UNEXPECTED WAY



Begin with prayer



Read **Acts 26:29–28:31**



Listen at [TTB.org/Acts](https://www.TTB.org/Acts) to **Acts 26:29–27:13**, **Acts 27:14-35**,
and **Acts 27:35–28:31**

God is in all of this, friend. We're following Paul to Rome on his last "missionary journey," although this time, Paul is in chains. But that doesn't stop him from sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with everyone he meets. Chains don't hinder him. "The word of God is not chained" (2 Timothy 2:9), he said, and he's glad the things happening to him are helping to take the gospel further into new territory.

Paul prayed he would one day share Jesus Christ with people in Rome. As a Roman citizen, he appealed his case to Caesar, knowing King Agrippa would then need to send him to Rome. And so now he's on his way.

Acts 27 reads like a ship's log, recording Paul's final journey to Rome. This was a prisoner's ship, likely all criminals on their way to Rome for execution. Many of them would become gladiators and would be fed to the wild beasts in the Colosseum. A constant stream of human life fed this public vice. These prisoners had no hope. What a great opportunity this gave Paul to bring the gospel to them.

The ship sailed up the coast of Israel and docked at Sidon. Julius, the Roman centurion responsible for him, allowed Paul to get off and visit with his Christian friends who refreshed and served him.

After Sidon, they sailed south, no doubt encountering strong north winds. We've traveled with Paul over this water before, hovering close to the southern coast of Asia Minor. At Myra, they changed to a ship from northern Africa sailing to Italy. Julius hoped to get them to Rome before the stormy season. Winter was already on its way, and it was downright dangerous on the open sea in winter.

Paul, a seasoned traveler, warned Julius they shouldn't sail, but the ship's captain was determined to go. Understandably, Julius believed the captain, but as events unfolded over the next days, Paul was proven right. Throughout this voyage, the captain, the soldiers, and the sailors depended on their wits alone. Paul looked to God.

These were Paul's best days. He lived his life in touch with God. He felt no confusion over where his life was going; no uncertainty, no frustration. "*This one thing I do,*" he said as he set his sight on Rome and to a certain death.

When they got to Crete, a large island off the coast of Asia Minor and Greece, the south wind blew softly, so they supposed it was a good time to sail and escape the winter storms.

Life is like that, too. We're little boats on a big sea, and most people sail by their best wits. But then a storm blows in and, with it, confusion, world chaos, and darkness. Still, most people would rather guess than put their lives in God's hands. We need people who *know* God to set the course.

Soon enough, Paul's ship is out in the Mediterranean Sea in a wild, tempestuous wind, called Euroclydon (a navigational term for a storm out of Europe). To maintain control, they threw everything they could overboard. No one thought they would make it out alive. But it was in the storm that the men heard God's voice speaking through Paul.

After two weeks of waves and wind, the Lord appeared to Paul and assured him he would make it to Rome. With this confidence, Paul encouraged the ship's crew. "*We'll lose the ship, but we won't lose any lives.*" He told them an angel of God, "to whom I belong and whom I serve" (27:23), told him not to fear. He would stand before Caesar, and God had given him the lives of all who sail with him.

“Therefore take heart, men, for I believe God that it will be just as it was told me,” he said (27:25).

So the crew hung on to Paul’s encouragement like a life preserver, and after those long 14 days, they made it across the Mediterranean to the island of Malta, just south of Sicily.

As the boat limped to land, the crew pretended to drop anchor when really they were like rats, trying to escape a sinking ship. But Paul told Julius anyone’s promise of survival was to stay with the ship. They must be saved God’s way, not their own. Would God save them or should they take matters into their own hands? Paul said, *“I believe God and if you want to survive, stay on board.”*

Finally, the centurion and the crew listened to Paul. The soldiers cut the ropes to the lifeboats. Now everyone must stay on board. Paul then urged them all to eat—for 14 days they had fasted, some out of fear, and those who believed God fasted in faith. Now they are near land and Paul, in good common sense, urged them to build up their strength so they could make it to shore.

With hope and a renewed perspective, all 276 people on board ate and were energized. They set the sail and limped the boat into shore, and ran it aground, shipwrecked. The violent waves pounded the life out of the ship.

In cases like this, soldiers usually killed their prisoners to keep them from escaping. Julius wanted to save Paul and kept the soldiers from their protocol. Instead, he ordered everyone into the sea, to swim or to drift on wreckage to the shore. And they all made it—not one life was lost, just as God had promised Paul.

THE LANDING ON MALTA

Imagine what it was like for the local people to watch hundreds of desperate sailors come off the shipwrecked boat and swim to shore. These locals graciously accepted the strangers and since it was cold and rainy, they started a big fire to help warm them up after their terrifying experience.

As they sat on the beach and the fire needed more wood, Paul gathered a bundle of sticks and threw them on the fire, but he didn’t realize a snake was in the sticks and grabbed hold of his hand.

When the locals saw the snake hanging off his hand, they superstitiously thought that meant Paul was a murderer. He had escaped the sea, but justice was catching up with him. Now his hand would certainly swell up and he would soon die of the venom.

At the time, the Roman Empire had a strong sense of justice—but no mercy. Sins could never be forgiven. If you broke the law, you paid the penalty. Under the iron heel of Rome, the world cried for mercy. Paul is carrying that message of mercy to Rome—the messages of Jesus Christ who came as the Savior from sin—so mankind might experience God’s mercy and forgiveness.

When Paul was not hurt by the snake, the locals thought Paul must instead be a god. Although they were wrong, it did lead Paul to an important relationship with Publius, the leader of the island.

Publius’ father was deathly ill with a fever and dysentery. Paul went to the old man’s room, and when he laid hands on him and prayed for God to heal him, God did. Paul now exercised his gift as an apostle. With the apostles, healing was God’s witness that the gospel they preached was from Him. Paul preached the gospel and their ability to heal was the proof that what they taught was true.

When news of the healing got around, everyone who was sick came to Paul and got healed.

THE VOYAGE CONTINUES

For three wonderful months, Paul stayed with these new friends on Malta. When the winter storms blew over, they boarded a boat bound for Italy. When they made land, many brothers and sisters in Christ met them and encouraged Paul in the Lord.

When Paul got to Rome, he had the freedom to live in a house, but was always guarded by a rotation of soldiers. Right away, Paul asked to meet with the chief of the Jews. He explained how he was innocent of any crime against them, yet he was delivered as a prisoner. He told them that all he was doing was for Israel. He’s on their side, he said, not against them.

To their credit, they listen to Paul explain. They set a date for their meeting, and a large Jewish crowd fills Paul’s home. And from morning till evening, Paul teaches them through the entire Old Testament—from the Law of Moses through the prophets, urging them to believe Jesus is Messiah, the promised Christ.

As always, there is a double response to the message. Some believe; others do not. Heartbroken, Paul compares them to Isaiah's description of people who stick their fingers in their ears so they won't have to listen and screw their eyes shut so they won't have to look.

Once he gives his Jewish community their chance to respond to the Good News about Jesus, Paul tells them he is taking the news to the Gentiles, who already are gladly receiving God's gift of salvation.

The movement of the gospel that had begun in Jerusalem now is going to the ends of the earth. This book of Acts ends with Paul preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching with all confidence, to everyone who will listen, about the Lord Jesus Christ.

But this record is not complete. The acts of the Holy Spirit continue to work today; it is not finished even in our day. The work of the church is a continuing story that will end with the Rapture of God's church. What we do today in the power of the Holy Spirit will be included in this final record.

God continues to write His story in the lives of those who believe Him even today.

4. Whenever Paul taught the gospel, there was a double response. Some believe; others will not. How have you seen this to be true today?

5. "God continues to write His story in the lives of those who believe Him even today." How has this study in Acts shown this to be true?

A photograph of two men, one Black and one white, smiling and talking to each other outdoors. They are both gesturing with their hands as if in conversation. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people and greenery.

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A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone. The phone screen displays a list of booklets from TTB.org. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a wooden table.

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