THE BOOK OF ACTS

# The King's Unstoppable Crew

*Acts, Unfiltered*

*For teens who think they've heard it all*

**BILL McLEOD**

*Papa Bill Books*

The King's Unstoppable Crew: The Book of Acts, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

**AI Disclosure.** This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

# Before You Start

If you've read the Gospel books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. It's not leaving now.

And honestly, Acts might be the best fit for it yet. The Gospels are about what Jesus did. Acts is about what Jesus' followers did next, and a lot of them were young, untrained, and not very impressive by the world's standards. Fishermen. A former tax collector. A teenager who fell asleep during a sermon and fell out of a window. People who knew they didn't know it all, but who knew Jesus, and who had the Holy Spirit. That turned out to be enough to change the world.

Acts was written by Luke, the same careful researcher who wrote the Gospel of Luke. He even addresses it to the same person, Theophilus. Luke's Gospel ends with Jesus going up to heaven. Acts begins there and keeps going. In fact, Luke says his first book was about what Jesus "began to do and to teach." Acts is what Jesus keeps doing, now through His people and by His Spirit.

The story moves fast and covers about thirty years. It starts with about 120 believers in an upstairs room in Jerusalem and ends with Paul, under house arrest in Rome, the capital of the world, still telling anyone who would listen about Jesus. In between there are riots, shipwrecks, prison breaks, a sorcerer, a snakebite, a church meeting that changed history, and one very long sermon.

The book follows a simple map that Jesus gives in the first chapter: Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria, then the ends of the earth. Peter is the main character in the first half. Paul, a man who once hunted Christians, takes over in the second half. Luke is there for some of it; you'll notice when the story suddenly switches to "we."

So here's the challenge. Acts isn't a museum. It's an unfinished story. It doesn't really have an ending, and that's on purpose. The same Spirit who filled those first believers is still at work, and the story is still being written. As you read, ask yourself where you fit in it.

## How This Book Works

This book walks through all 28 chapters of Acts, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of Acts. Each one tells what happened, adds background about the world the first Christians lived in (Roman roads and cities, synagogues and temples, Jewish and Greek culture, Roman law and prisons), and points out what Luke wants you to notice.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and sometimes a Try This challenge.

One more thing: this book is a guide, not a replacement. Keep a Bible open next to it and read each chapter of Acts for yourself. The people in Berea checked the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul

said was true. Do the same with me. Don’t take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

# A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the whole book of Acts, all 28 chapters, in order. I have worked to stay faithful to the text: no invented events, no rewritten dialogue that changes the meaning. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV); elsewhere I paraphrase and explain. Historical background is included where it helps the story make sense, and I've tried to stay with what's well established rather than speculation.

Acts is especially good for this age group because it shows ordinary people, many of them young, living out their faith in public, under pressure, and often at great cost. I've emphasized the work of the Holy Spirit, the courage of the first believers, the way the good news crossed every barrier of race, culture, and class, and the honest picture Acts gives of a church that sometimes argued and failed. The hard parts are here too, including the deaths of Stephen and James, told truthfully but without graphic excess.

Where the NIV notes that some verses are missing from the earliest manuscripts (Acts 8:37, 15:34, 24:7, and 28:29), I've said so briefly, so that students aren't surprised when they see those notes in their own Bibles.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will see that the story of Acts isn't over, and that the same Spirit who turned frightened fishermen into bold witnesses wants to do the same in them.

*Grace and peace,*

**Bill McLeod**

*Papa Bill Books*

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CHAPTER 1

# Wait for It

*Acts 1*

Luke starts his second book the way he started his first: with a note to Theophilus. In my former book, he says, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach. Notice the word "began." The Gospel was only the beginning. Acts is the sequel, and Jesus is still the main character. He's just working through His people now.

After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His followers over a period of forty days and gave them many convincing proofs that He was alive. He talked with them about the kingdom of God. Then He gave them a strange instruction: don't leave Jerusalem. Wait for the gift the Father promised. John baptized with water, but in a few days you'll be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Luke's Second Volume**
>
> Acts was written by Luke, the doctor and careful researcher who wrote the Gospel of Luke. Together the two books make up more than a quarter of the New Testament. Acts covers roughly AD 30 to the early 60s, from Jesus' ascension to Paul's imprisonment in Rome. Luke traveled with Paul for parts of the story, which is why some sections suddenly switch from "they" to "we." For the parts he didn't see, Luke had access to people who did, including Paul, Philip, and James the brother of Jesus.

The disciples still have one question on their minds. Lord, are You at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? They're still

hoping for a political revolution. Jesus says it's not for them to know the times or dates the Father has set. Then He gives them their mission, and it's the outline for the whole book: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Jerusalem is home. Judea is the region around it. Samaria is the neighbor nobody liked. The ends of the earth is everyone else. Watch the story move outward in exactly that order.

After He said this, Jesus was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight. They're standing there staring at the sky when two men dressed in white appear beside them. "Men of Galilee… why do you stand here looking into the sky?" This same Jesus will come back the same way you saw Him go.

That's a good question for Christians in any century. Jesus is coming back, but that's not a reason to stand around staring at the sky. There's work to do.

They go back to Jerusalem, to the upstairs room where they were staying. Luke lists the eleven apostles by name. Along with them are the women, Mary the mother of Jesus, and His brothers, the same brothers who didn't believe in Him back in John 7. Something changed their minds. The resurrection will do that.

"They all joined together constantly in prayer." That's what they did while they waited. They didn't plan a strategy or build a brand. They prayed.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Waiting**
>
> Waiting is hard, especially when you've been given a huge mission. The disciples had just been told to reach the whole world, and their first

> instruction was to sit still for ten days. In Acts, prayer comes before almost every major move of God. The disciples had learned that from Jesus, who in Luke's Gospel prayed before every big moment of His life.

In those days, about 120 believers are gathered, and Peter stands up to speak. The group needs to replace Judas. Peter tells them what happened to Judas: he bought a field with the money he got for betraying Jesus, and there he died a gruesome death. The field became known as the Field of Blood. Peter quotes the Psalms: let someone else take his place of leadership.

The replacement has to be someone who was with them the whole time, from John's baptism until the ascension, so he can be a witness to the resurrection. They propose two men, Joseph called Barsabbas and Matthias. They pray, asking the Lord, who knows everyone's heart, to show them His choice. Then they cast lots, and the lot falls to Matthias.

Casting lots sounds like flipping a coin, but it was a practice used in the Old Testament to seek God's decision. Interestingly, this is the last time the Bible mentions believers making a decision this way. After the Holy Spirit comes in the next chapter, they're guided in a different way.

We never hear about Matthias again. Or Joseph Barsabbas, who wasn't chosen. Being faithful doesn't always mean being famous.

**KEY VERSE**

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

**Acts 1:8 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. Jesus gave His followers a mission and then told them to wait. Why do you think waiting and praying came first?
2. The angels asked why they were standing there looking at the sky. What's the difference between hoping for Jesus' return and just waiting around?
3. Using Jesus' map, what's your "Jerusalem," your "Judea," your "Samaria," and your "ends of the earth"?

CHAPTER 2

# Wind and Fire

*Acts 2*

When the day of Pentecost arrives, all the believers are together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind comes from heaven and fills the whole house. They see what seem to be tongues of fire that separate and rest on each of them. All of them are filled with the Holy Spirit and begin to speak in other languages as the Spirit enables them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Pentecost**
>
> Pentecost, also called the Festival of Weeks, came fifty days after Passover. It was a harvest festival, and by Jesus' time many Jews also connected it with God giving the law at Mount Sinai. Jewish pilgrims came to Jerusalem from all over the Roman world and beyond. That's why the city was packed with people who spoke different languages. Jesus died at Passover; the Spirit came at Pentecost. The first harvest of believers came in on a harvest festival.

Jerusalem is full of devout Jews from every nation under heaven. When they hear the sound, a crowd gathers, and they're bewildered, because each one hears the believers speaking in his own native language. Aren't all these men Galileans? How is it that each of us hears them in our own language? Luke lists the places they're from, from Persia to Rome to North Africa. It's like a roll call of the known world.

Remember the Tower of Babel in Genesis, where God scattered people by confusing their languages? Pentecost is like Babel in reverse. God uses many languages to bring people together around Jesus.

Some are amazed and ask, What does this mean? Others laugh it off: They've had too much wine.

Then Peter stands up with the Eleven and raises his voice. Remember, this is the same Peter who, less than two months earlier, denied knowing Jesus to a servant girl. Now he's preaching to thousands. These people aren't drunk, he says. It's only nine in the morning. This is what the prophet Joel predicted: God would pour out His Spirit on all people. Sons and daughters would prophesy. Young men would see visions. Old men would dream dreams. Even servants, both men and women. "And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Then Peter preaches Jesus. Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God with miracles and signs. He was handed over by God's deliberate plan, and you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross. "But God raised him from the dead." Death couldn't keep its hold on Him.

Peter quotes David in the Psalms, and points out that David died and was buried, and his tomb is right here in Jerusalem. David was talking about the Messiah. God has raised this Jesus to life, "and we are all witnesses of it." Exalted to the right hand of God, He has poured out what you now see and hear. "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."

The crowd is cut to the heart. They ask Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

Peter tells them: Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you, your children, and all who are far off, everyone the Lord our God will call.

About three thousand people accept the message and are baptized that day.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Three Thousand**
>
> Some people have wondered where you could baptize three thousand people in Jerusalem in one day. Archaeologists have found dozens of Jewish ritual immersion pools, called mikvaot, near the temple's southern steps, where worshipers washed before entering. There was plenty of water nearby. Some scholars also note a sad contrast: in Exodus 32, about three thousand people died after the golden calf incident at Sinai. At Pentecost, three thousand people received new life.

Then Luke gives us a snapshot of the first church. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Everyone is filled with awe at the signs the apostles perform. The believers share everything. They sell property and possessions to give to anyone in need. Every day they meet together in the temple courts and break bread in their homes, eating together with glad and sincere hearts. And the Lord adds to their number daily those who are being saved.

It's not a perfect church. You'll see that soon. But it's a picture of what happens when the Spirit moves: people learn, eat together, pray together, take care of each other, and others keep wanting to join.

**KEY VERSE**

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*

**Acts 2:42 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. Peter went from denying Jesus to preaching to thousands. What made the difference?
2. Joel said God's Spirit would be poured out on sons and daughters, young and old. What does that mean for teenagers?
3. Look at the four things the first church devoted itself to. Which one is strongest in your life? Which one is weakest?

CHAPTER 3

# Silver or Gold

*Acts 3*

One afternoon at about three o'clock, the time of prayer, Peter and John are going up to the temple. A man who has been lame from birth is being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he's put every day to beg from people going into the temple courts.

He's more than forty years old, Luke tells us later. Every day of his life, someone carried him to the same spot, and he asked strangers for spare change. He's probably been there when Jesus walked through those same gates.

When he sees Peter and John about to enter, he asks them for money. Peter looks straight at him, as does John. Then Peter says, "Look at us!" The man gives them his attention, expecting a few coins.

Then Peter says, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Taking him by the right hand, Peter helps him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles become strong.

Luke the doctor notices the feet and ankles. And then the man doesn't just walk. He jumps to his feet and goes into the temple courts with them, walking and jumping and praising God.

**BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Temple Courts**

The temple in Jerusalem sat on a huge platform surrounded by courtyards. The outermost was the Court of the Gentiles, open to everyone. Further in were the Court of Women and the Court of Israel, open only to Jewish worshipers. People with certain disabilities were often kept from fully participating in temple worship. Solomon's Colonnade, where the crowd gathers in this chapter, was a long covered porch on the east side of the temple courts.

For the first time in his life, the man goes inside the temple. He couldn't walk in before. Now he's dancing in.

All the people see him and recognize him as the man who used to sit begging at the gate. They're filled with wonder and come running to Solomon's Colonnade.

Peter sees the crowd and uses the moment. Why does this surprise you? Why stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we made this man walk? It's God who did it. He has glorified His servant Jesus. Then Peter is blunt. You handed Him over to be killed. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be released to you. "You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead." We're witnesses of this.

It's faith in Jesus' name that has completely healed this man, as you can all see.

Then Peter's tone softens. I know you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what the prophets said, that the Messiah would suffer. "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord."

Wiped out. Like erasing a whiteboard. And "times of refreshing." Repentance isn't only about feeling bad. It's about being refreshed.

Peter ends by reminding them who they are. You are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with Abraham, when He said that all peoples on earth would be blessed through his offspring. When God raised up His servant, He sent Him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.

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**KEY VERSE**

*Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk."*

**Acts 3:6 (NIV)**

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## REAL TALK

1. The man expected money and got something much better. When have you asked God for something small when He wanted to give you something bigger?
2. Peter said, "What I do have I give you." What do you have, besides money, that you could give someone this week?
3. Peter described repentance as sins being wiped out and times of refreshing. How does that change the way you think about turning to God?

CHAPTER 4

# No Other Name

*Acts 4*

While Peter and John are still speaking to the crowd, the priests, the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees come up to them. They're greatly disturbed, because the apostles are teaching that Jesus rose from the dead. Remember, the Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection at all. They seize Peter and John and put them in jail overnight.

But it's too late. Many who heard the message believe, and the number of men who believe grows to about five thousand.

The next day the rulers, the elders, and the teachers of the law meet in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest is there, and Caiaphas, and other members of the high priest's family. These are the same men who handed Jesus over to Pilate just a couple of months earlier. Now Peter and John are standing in front of them.

They ask, By what power or what name did you do this?

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Sanhedrin**
>
> The Sanhedrin was the highest Jewish council in Jerusalem, with about seventy members plus the high priest. It included chief priests, elders, and teachers of the law, both Sadducees and Pharisees. Under Roman rule, it had authority over religious matters and many local affairs, though it generally

> couldn't carry out executions without Roman approval. It's the same council that put Jesus on trial.

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, answers them. If we're being questioned today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame, then know this: it is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

The council is stunned. "When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus."

That's one of the best compliments in the Bible. They didn't have degrees. They weren't trained speakers. But it was obvious they'd been with Jesus.

The leaders can't deny the miracle. The healed man is standing right there. So they send Peter and John out and discuss what to do. Everyone in Jerusalem knows about the miracle, and we can't deny it. But to stop this from spreading any further, we have to warn them to stop speaking in this name.

They call them back and command them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. Peter and John reply, Which is right in God's eyes, to listen to you or to Him? You be the judges. "As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

The council threatens them more and lets them go. They can't decide how to punish them, because all the people are praising God for what happened.

When Peter and John are released, they go back to their own people and report everything. And the believers' response is remarkable. They don't complain. They don't plan a protest. They pray. They praise God as Sovereign Lord who made heaven and earth, quote a psalm about nations raging against God's Anointed One, and then ask for something surprising. Not safety. Boldness. Lord, consider their threats and enable Your servants to speak Your word with great boldness.

After they pray, the place where they're meeting is shaken. They're all filled with the Holy Spirit and speak the word of God boldly.

Luke gives another snapshot of the church. All the believers are one in heart and mind. No one claims that any of their possessions are their own. There are no needy persons among them, because those who own land or houses sell them and bring the money to the apostles to be distributed to anyone who has need.

He introduces one man in particular: Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles call Barnabas, which means "son of encouragement." He sells a field and brings the money. Keep an eye on Barnabas. He's going to matter.

**KEY VERSE**

*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.*

**Acts 4:12 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. People could tell Peter and John "had been with Jesus." What would make people notice that about you?
2. Peter and John said they couldn't stop speaking about what they'd seen and heard. What has God done in your life that you could talk about?
3. When the church was threatened, they prayed for boldness, not safety. What would you pray for if you were in their situation?

CHAPTER 5

# Lies and Lockdowns

*Acts 5*

After the generosity of Barnabas, Luke tells us about a couple who wanted the same reputation without the same heart.

A man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sells a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge, he keeps back part of the money for himself and brings the rest to the apostles, as if it were the full price.

Peter confronts him. Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit? The land was yours before you sold it. The money was yours after you sold it. You didn't have to give any of it. "You have not lied just to human beings but to God." When Ananias hears this, he falls down and dies. Great fear seizes everyone who hears about it.

About three hours later, his wife comes in, not knowing what happened. Peter asks her if this was the price they got for the land. She says yes. Peter asks how they could agree to test the Spirit of the Lord. She falls down at his feet and dies too.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Why So Severe?**
>
> This story is hard to read, and it should be. Ananias and Sapphira weren't punished for keeping some money. Peter says plainly that it was theirs to keep. They were punished for lying to God, pretending to be more generous

> than they were in order to look spiritual. At the very beginning of the church, God showed that He takes hypocrisy seriously. It's similar to stories in the Old Testament, when God judged sin severely at the start of something new, such as Achan at the beginning of the conquest of Canaan.

Great fear seizes the whole church and everyone who hears about these events. It's the first time Luke uses the word "church" in Acts.

The apostles perform many signs and wonders among the people. People even carry the sick into the streets and lay them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passes by. Crowds gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick, and all of them are healed.

The high priest and the Sadducees are filled with jealousy. They arrest the apostles and put them in the public jail. But during the night an angel of the Lord opens the doors of the jail and brings them out. Go, stand in the temple courts, he says, and tell the people all about this new life.

At daybreak, they do exactly that.

Meanwhile, the high priest calls together the full assembly of the elders of Israel and sends for the apostles. The officers go to the jail and come back with the report: The jail was securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors. But when we opened them, we found no one inside. While everyone is puzzled, someone comes in and says, The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people!

You can almost hear the council members groan.

The officers bring the apostles back, carefully, without force, because they're afraid the people will stone them. The high priest says, We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name. Yet you've

filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.

Peter and the other apostles reply: "We must obey God rather than human beings!" Then Peter preaches the gospel to the council again. God raised Jesus from the dead, whom you killed by hanging Him on a cross. God exalted Him as Prince and Savior, to bring repentance and forgiveness. We are witnesses, and so is the Holy Spirit.

The council is furious and wants to put them to death. But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law honored by all the people, stands up and orders the apostles to be put outside for a little while. Then he gives the council some advice. He reminds them of other movements that rose and fell. Leave these men alone. If their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you won't be able to stop them. You'll only find yourselves fighting against God.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Gamaliel**
>
> Gamaliel was one of the most respected Jewish teachers of his time. Later Jewish writings remember him as a great rabbi. One of his students was a young Pharisee from Tarsus named Saul, who will show up in chapter 7 and later become the apostle Paul. Gamaliel's advice wasn't faith in Jesus, but it was wise, and it bought the apostles time.

His speech persuades them. They call the apostles in, have them flogged, order them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

And here's how the apostles respond to being beaten: they leave the council "rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name." Day after day, in the temple courts

and from house to house, they never stop teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

**KEY VERSE**

*Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than human beings!"*

**Acts 5:29 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. Ananias and Sapphira wanted to look more generous than they were. Where are you tempted to look more spiritual than you are?
2. Peter said, "We must obey God rather than human beings." When might you face a choice between those two?
3. The apostles rejoiced after being beaten for Jesus. Why do you think they reacted that way?

CHAPTER 6

# Table Trouble

*Acts 6*

The church is growing fast, and growth brings problems. The Hellenistic Jews among the believers complain against the Hebraic Jews, because their widows are being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Hellenists and Hebrews**
> In the first century, many Jewish people lived outside Israel, scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Many of them spoke Greek as their first language and followed some Greek customs. They were called Hellenists, from the Greek word for Greece. Some moved back to Jerusalem, especially in old age. Jews who had grown up in Israel usually spoke Aramaic and were sometimes suspicious of Greek-speaking Jews. Both groups were in the early church, and the tension between them came with them.

This is the first recorded conflict inside the church. It's a cultural divide: the Greek-speaking widows feel they're being treated as second-class. In a church of thousands, someone was getting left out.

The Twelve gather all the disciples together. It wouldn't be right, they say, for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. So choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We'll turn this

responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.

They're not saying serving food is beneath them. They're saying the job is important enough to deserve full attention from qualified people. And the qualifications aren't business skills. They're "full of the Spirit and wisdom." Even for organizing a food program.

This proposal pleases the whole group. They choose seven men. Look at their names: Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a convert to Judaism from Antioch. Every one of them has a Greek name. The church chose people from the group that felt overlooked to fix the problem. That's wisdom.

The apostles pray and lay their hands on them. And the result? "So the word of God spread." The number of disciples in Jerusalem increases rapidly, and a large number of priests become obedient to the faith.

Solving the problem well didn't distract from the mission. It fueled it.

Then Luke zooms in on one of the seven: Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, who performs great wonders and signs among the people. He was chosen to help with food distribution, and God uses him for much more.

Opposition comes from members of a synagogue for freed slaves, with people from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia. They argue with Stephen, but they can't stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gives him as he speaks. So they do what people often do when they lose an argument. They secretly persuade some men to lie. We heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.

They stir up the people, the elders, and the teachers of the law. They seize Stephen and bring him before the Sanhedrin. They produce false witnesses who say this man never stops speaking against the temple and the law. We've heard him say that Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Cilicia**
>
> One of the synagogues that argued with Stephen included Jews from Cilicia, a region in what is now southern Turkey. The main city of Cilicia was Tarsus. Acts later tells us that Saul, the future apostle Paul, was from Tarsus. It's quite possible that Saul was one of the men who debated Stephen and lost.

All who are sitting in the Sanhedrin look intently at Stephen. And they see that his face is like the face of an angel.

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**KEY VERSE**

*and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.*

**Acts 6:4 (NIV)**

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## REAL TALK

1. The first church conflict was about some people being overlooked. Who gets overlooked in your youth group or school?
2. The church chose people from the group that felt left out to solve the problem. Why was that a wise choice?
3. Stephen was chosen to serve food, and God used him for far more. How might God use you in a "small" role?

CHAPTER 7

# The First Martyr

*Acts 7*

The high priest asks Stephen, Are these charges true? And Stephen answers with the longest speech in Acts.

It's a history lesson. He starts with Abraham, whom God called out of Mesopotamia, before he ever lived in the land of Israel. He tells about Joseph, whose brothers were jealous and sold him as a slave into Egypt, but God was with him. He tells about Moses, who was raised in Pharaoh's palace, tried to help his people, and was rejected by them. He tells about Israel in the wilderness, who refused to obey Moses and turned back to Egypt in their hearts, and made a golden calf.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Stephen's Point**
>
> Stephen was accused of speaking against the temple and the law. His speech answers both charges in a surprising way. He shows that God met His people long before there was a temple: with Abraham in Mesopotamia, with Joseph in Egypt, with Moses at a burning bush in the desert. God isn't confined to one building. And he shows a pattern in Israel's history: again and again, God sent deliverers, like Joseph and Moses, and the people rejected them at first.

Then Stephen talks about the tabernacle in the wilderness and the temple Solomon built. "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands." He quotes Isaiah: heaven is God's

throne and earth is His footstool. What kind of house could you build for Him?

And then he turns the whole speech on the council. You stiff-necked people! You're just like your ancestors. You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors didn't persecute? They killed the ones who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered Him. You received the law that was given through angels, but you haven't obeyed it.

He's not on trial anymore. They are.

When the members of the Sanhedrin hear this, they're furious and gnash their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looks up to heaven and sees the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look... I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

Elsewhere, the Bible usually describes Jesus as seated at God's right hand. Here He is standing. Many readers see it as Jesus rising to welcome His servant, or standing as a witness in Stephen's defense. Earthly judges are condemning Stephen. Heaven's judge is standing up for him.

At this, they cover their ears, yell at the top of their voices, and rush at him. They drag him out of the city and begin to stone him. The witnesses lay their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Saul**
>
> This is the first time we meet Saul. He was a Jew from Tarsus, a Roman citizen, a Pharisee trained under Gamaliel, and fiercely devoted to the law. Luke calls him a "young man," which in that culture could mean anyone from his late teens to his thirties. Holding the coats of the people stoning Stephen meant he approved. In a couple of chapters, his life will be turned completely upside down.

While they're stoning him, Stephen prays, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he falls on his knees and cries out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he has said this, he falls asleep.

Do those prayers sound familiar? On the cross, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them," and "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Stephen died the way his Lord died. Praying for his enemies. Trusting God with his life. Luke says he "fell asleep." For followers of Jesus, death isn't the end. It's like falling asleep and waking up somewhere better.

Stephen was the first follower of Jesus killed for his faith. The Greek word for "witness" is martys, and because so many witnesses died for their testimony, it's where we get the English word "martyr."

And the young man holding the coats was watching the whole time. Some early Christians believed Stephen's prayer for his killers was answered in a way no one expected. One of them became the greatest missionary the church has ever known.

**KEY VERSE**

*While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."*

**Acts 7:59–60 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. Stephen told the council that God doesn't live in buildings made by human hands. Where do you tend to think God "lives"? Where can you meet Him?
2. Stephen prayed for the people killing him, just as Jesus did. What would it take for you to pray for someone who is hurting you?
3. Saul watched Stephen die. How do you think that moment stayed with him?

CHAPTER 8

# Scattered Seeds

*Acts 8*

On the day Stephen dies, a great persecution breaks out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles are scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Saul begins to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he drags off both men and women and puts them in prison.

It looks like a disaster. But look what Luke says next: "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went." Remember Jesus' map in chapter 1? Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria. The church wasn't moving out on its own, so persecution pushed it out. What looked like an attack became a launch.

Philip, another of the seven chosen to serve food, goes down to a city in Samaria and proclaims the Messiah there. Remember how Jews and Samaritans felt about each other. Jesus had once told a story about a good Samaritan, and James and John had once wanted to call down fire on a Samaritan village. Now the gospel is crossing that line.

Crowds pay close attention to Philip. Impure spirits come out of many people, and many who are paralyzed or lame are healed. "So there was great joy in that city."

**BACKGROUND CHECK** **Samaria**

Samaria was the region between Judea in the south and Galilee in the north. Samaritans were descendants of Israelites who had intermarried with other peoples after the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom in 722 BC. They had their own temple and their own version of the five books of Moses. Jews and Samaritans had been enemies for centuries. For the gospel to be welcomed in Samaria was a huge step, and the apostles in Jerusalem sent Peter and John to see it for themselves.

A man named Simon has been practicing sorcery in that city for a long time, amazing everyone. People call him the Great Power of God. But when the people believe Philip's message about the kingdom of God and Jesus, they're baptized, both men and women. Even Simon believes and is baptized, and he follows Philip everywhere, astonished by the signs he sees.

When the apostles hear that Samaria has accepted the word of God, they send Peter and John. The two pray for the new believers to receive the Holy Spirit, because the Spirit hasn't yet come on any of them. Then Peter and John place their hands on them, and they receive the Holy Spirit.

Why the delay? Many Bible teachers think God was making sure the Samaritan believers were fully connected to the Jerusalem church, so there wouldn't be two rival churches the way there had been two rival temples. The same Spirit came on Samaritans that had come on Jews at Pentecost.

When Simon sees this, he offers the apostles money. Give me this ability too. Peter's answer is fierce: May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! Your heart isn't right before God. Repent and pray. Simon asks Peter to pray for him.

Then an angel tells Philip to go south to the desert road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza. So he starts out, and on his way he meets an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home he's sitting in his chariot reading the prophet Isaiah.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Ethiopian**
>
> "Ethiopia" in the ancient world usually referred to the kingdom of Kush, south of Egypt, in what is now Sudan. Its queens were often called by the title Candace. This official was probably a Gentile who worshiped Israel's God. As a eunuch, he would have been barred by the law from entering the inner courts of the temple. He traveled perhaps a thousand miles to worship, and still had to stand at a distance. The book of Isaiah he was reading includes a promise in chapter 56 that God would welcome eunuchs who held fast to His covenant.

The Spirit tells Philip to go to that chariot and stay near it. Philip runs up and hears the man reading Isaiah aloud, which was how people usually read. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asks. "How can I," he says, "unless someone explains it to me?" He invites Philip to come up and sit with him.

He's reading the passage from Isaiah 53 about one who was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and who did not open His mouth. Who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else? Then Philip begins with that very passage of Scripture and tells him the good news about Jesus.

As they travel along the road, they come to some water, and the eunuch says, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" They both go down into the water, and Philip baptizes him. When they come up out of the water, the Spirit of the

Lord suddenly takes Philip away, and the eunuch doesn't see him again, "but went on his way rejoicing."

If you look closely at your NIV, you'll notice that verse 37 is missing, with a footnote. Some later manuscripts add a short confession of faith by the eunuch before his baptism. The earliest manuscripts don't have it, so the NIV leaves it in a note. It doesn't change the story. He believed and was baptized either way.

The man who had to stand outside the temple went home with the good news. Now the gospel is heading toward the ends of the earth.

**KEY VERSE**

*Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.*

**Acts 8:4 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. Persecution scattered the believers, and the gospel spread. Has something hard in your life ever led to something good?
2. Simon thought he could buy God's power. In what ways do people today try to get God's blessings without God?
3. The Ethiopian said he couldn't understand unless someone explained it to him. Who has helped you understand the Bible? Who could you help?

CHAPTER 9

# The Hunter Becomes the Hunted

*Acts 9*

Meanwhile, Saul is still "breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples." He goes to the high priest and asks for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he finds any followers of the Way there, men or women, he can take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

The Way. That's what the first believers called their faith. Jesus had said, I am the way.

As Saul nears Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashes around him. He falls to the ground and hears a voice: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asks. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

Notice what Jesus says. Not, Why do you persecute My followers? Why do you persecute me? When someone hurts a follower of Jesus, Jesus takes it personally.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Damascus**
>
> Damascus, in Syria, is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. It was about 150 miles north of Jerusalem, a journey of roughly a week. It had a large Jewish population and several synagogues. The fact that Saul wanted to hunt believers that far away shows how quickly the faith was spreading, and how determined he was to stop it.

Jesus tells him to get up, go into the city, and he'll be told what to do. The men traveling with Saul stand there speechless. They hear the sound but don't see anyone. Saul gets up from the ground, but when he opens his eyes, he can't see anything. So they lead him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he's blind, and he doesn't eat or drink anything.

The man who came to drag people out of their homes has to be led by the hand.

In Damascus there's a disciple named Ananias. (Not the Ananias from chapter 5.) The Lord calls to him in a vision and tells him to go to a house on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, who is praying.

Ananias is not excited. Lord, I've heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to Your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority to arrest all who call on Your name. In other words: Lord, are You sure You have the right address?

But the Lord says to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel." And He adds that He will show Saul how much he must suffer for His name.

So Ananias goes. He places his hands on Saul and says, "Brother Saul." The first words a Christian says to the man who came to arrest Christians are "Brother Saul." Ananias tells him that Jesus, who appeared to him on the road, has sent him so that Saul may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Immediately, something like scales falls from Saul's eyes, and he can see again. He gets up and is baptized, and after eating some food, he regains his strength.

Ananias appears in only this one chapter of the Bible. But without his courage, we might not have half the New Testament.

Saul spends several days with the disciples in Damascus. And at once he begins to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. Everyone is astonished. Isn't he the man who caused havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? Saul grows more and more powerful and baffles the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

After many days, some Jewish leaders conspire to kill him. Day and night they watch the city gates. But his followers take him by night and lower him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

When Saul comes to Jerusalem, he tries to join the disciples, but they're all afraid of him, not believing he really is a disciple. Can you blame them? But Barnabas, the son of encouragement, takes him and brings him to the apostles. He tells them how Saul saw the Lord on the road and preached fearlessly in Damascus. Barnabas vouches for him. Now Saul moves freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord, until there's a plot against his life there too, and the believers send him off to Tarsus.

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoys a time of peace. It's strengthened, encouraged by the Holy Spirit, and grows in numbers.

Luke turns back to Peter, who is traveling around the country. In Lydda, he finds a man named Aeneas, paralyzed and bedridden for eight years. Peter says, Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and roll up your mat. Immediately he gets up. In nearby Joppa, a disciple named Tabitha, also called Dorcas, who was always doing good and helping the poor, becomes sick and dies. The believers

send for Peter. When he arrives, the widows show him the clothing she had made for them. Peter sends them all out, kneels down, prays, and says, "Tabitha, get up." She opens her eyes and sits up. Many people in Joppa believe in the Lord.

Peter stays in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon. Tanners worked with the skins of dead animals, which made them ceremonially unclean in the eyes of many. Peter is already crossing some lines. The next chapter will push him across a much bigger one.

**KEY VERSE**

*But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel."*

**Acts 9:15 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. Jesus told Saul, "Why do you persecute me?" What does it mean that Jesus takes it personally when His followers are hurt?
2. Ananias was afraid to go to Saul but went anyway. Who would be the hardest person for you to call "brother" or "sister"?
3. Barnabas vouched for Saul when no one else would. Who needs someone to stand up for them in your world?

**TRY THIS** *Is there someone you've written off as someone who would never follow Jesus? Pray for them by name every day this week.*

CHAPTER 10

# No Favorites

*Acts 10*

At Caesarea, a city on the coast, there's a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He's a Roman officer, a Gentile. But he and all his family are devout and God-fearing. He gives generously to those in need and prays to God regularly.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **God-Fearers**
>
> In many cities of the Roman Empire, some Gentiles were attracted to the Jewish faith. They worshiped the God of Israel, prayed, gave to the poor, and attended synagogue, but they didn't fully convert by being circumcised and keeping the entire law. Jewish writers sometimes called them "God-fearers." Even so, most Jews would not eat in a Gentile's home or invite Gentiles into theirs, because of food laws and concerns about ritual purity.

One afternoon at about three o'clock, Cornelius has a vision. An angel tells him that his prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter, staying with Simon the tanner by the sea. Cornelius sends two servants and a devout soldier.

About noon the following day, as they're approaching the city, Peter goes up on the roof to pray. He gets hungry and wants something to eat, and while the meal is being prepared, he falls into a trance. He

sees heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contains all kinds of four-footed animals, reptiles, and birds. Then a voice tells him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

Peter is horrified. "Surely not, Lord!" I have never eaten anything impure or unclean. The voice speaks to him a second time: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." This happens three times. Three times, just like his three denials. Peter needs things repeated.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Clean and Unclean**
>
> The law of Moses divided animals into clean and unclean. Clean animals, like cows and sheep, could be eaten. Unclean animals, like pigs, camels, and many birds and reptiles, could not. These food laws were one of the main things that marked Jewish people as different from the nations around them. For a faithful Jew like Peter, eating unclean food was unthinkable. The vision wasn't only about food. It was about people.

While Peter is wondering what it means, the men from Cornelius find the house and stop at the gate. The Spirit tells Peter that three men are looking for him; go with them, and don't hesitate, for I have sent them. Peter invites them in to be his guests. The next day he goes with them.

When Peter arrives at Cornelius's house the following day, Cornelius has called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter enters, Cornelius falls at his feet in reverence. Peter makes him get up: Stand up, I am only a man myself.

Then Peter says to the gathering, You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. He finally gets the point of the vision.

Cornelius explains his vision. Then Peter begins to speak. “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.”

He tells them the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, “who is Lord of all.” He tells how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how He went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil. They killed Him by hanging Him on a cross, but God raised Him from the dead on the third day. All the prophets testify about Him, that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name.

While Peter is still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit comes on all who hear the message.

Peter doesn’t even finish his sermon. God interrupts him. The Jewish believers who came with Peter are astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit has been poured out even on Gentiles. They hear them speaking in tongues and praising God, just like at Pentecost.

Peter says, Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have. So he orders that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

This is sometimes called the Gentile Pentecost. Jews in chapter 2, Samaritans in chapter 8, and now Gentiles in chapter 10. The wall is coming down.

**KEY VERSE**

*I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.*

**Acts 10:34–35 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. Peter had to be told three times before he understood. Why do you think it's so hard for people to let go of prejudices?
2. Are there people you subconsciously treat as "unclean," people you'd rather not sit with or talk to?
3. God interrupted Peter's sermon to pour out His Spirit. What does that tell you about who's really in charge of the mission?

CHAPTER 11

# Called Christians

*Acts 11*

News travels fast. The apostles and believers throughout Judea hear that the Gentiles also have received the word of God. When Peter goes up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticize him. You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.

Notice that they don't say, How wonderful that Gentiles believed! They say, You ate with them.

Peter doesn't get defensive. He starts from the beginning and tells them everything, exactly as it happened: the vision, the sheet, the voice, the three men, the Spirit telling him to go, and the Holy Spirit coming on Cornelius's household just as on us at the beginning. Then he says, So if God gave them the same gift He gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, "who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?"

When they hear this, they have no further objections and praise God, saying, So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.

That's how good disagreements end. Not with someone winning, but with everyone praising God.

**BACKGROUND CHECK** **Antioch**

Antioch in Syria was the third-largest city in the Roman Empire, after Rome and Alexandria, with perhaps a quarter million people or more. It was a crossroads of trade and cultures, with a large Jewish community and many Gentiles from all over the world. It was also known for its luxury and loose morals. Antioch would become the home base for the church's mission to the Gentiles, and the starting point for Paul's journeys.

Meanwhile, some of the believers scattered by the persecution after Stephen's death have traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. But some of them, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, go to Antioch and begin to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand is with them, and a great number of people believe and turn to the Lord.

Notice that the first major Gentile church wasn't started by an apostle. It was started by ordinary believers whose names we don't even know.

When news of this reaches the church in Jerusalem, they send Barnabas to Antioch. Good choice. When he arrives and sees what the grace of God has done, he's glad and encourages them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. Luke describes him as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith." And a great number of people are brought to the Lord.

Then Barnabas does something wise. The work is too big for him alone, so he goes to Tarsus to look for Saul. It had been years since Saul was sent home. When he finds him, he brings him to Antioch. For a whole year Barnabas and Saul meet with the church and teach great numbers of people.

"The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch."

**BACKGROUND CHECK** **"Christians"**

The word "Christian" means something like "Christ's people" or "Christ-followers." It was probably a nickname given by outsiders in Antioch, maybe even as a joke. Believers usually called themselves disciples, brothers and sisters, saints, or followers of the Way. The term "Christian" appears only three times in the New Testament: here, in Acts 26 when King Agrippa uses it, and in 1 Peter 4. A name the world used to label them became the name followers of Jesus have carried ever since.

The people of Antioch couldn't figure out what to call this new group. They weren't just a Jewish sect, because Gentiles were in it. They weren't a Greek religion either. They talked about Christ so much that the nickname stuck.

During this time, some prophets come down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, Agabus, stands up and predicts through the Spirit that a severe famine will spread over the entire Roman world. Luke notes that it happened during the reign of Claudius. The disciples in Antioch, each according to their ability, decide to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. They send their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

A mostly Gentile church sending money to help a Jewish church. That's what it looks like when the wall comes down.

**KEY VERSE**

*The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.*

**Acts 11:26 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. The Jerusalem believers' first reaction was, "You ate with them." What reactions do Christians sometimes have when unexpected people come to faith?
2. Ordinary, unnamed believers started the church in Antioch. What does that tell you about what God can do through you?
3. People in Antioch called the believers "Christians" because they talked about Christ so much. What would people call you, based on what you talk about most?

CHAPTER 12

# The Prayer Meeting

*Acts 12*

Around this time, King Herod arrests some who belong to the church, intending to persecute them. He has James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.

James was one of the inner three, with Peter and John. He had been at the transfiguration. He had asked Jesus for a seat at His right hand. Jesus had told him he would drink the same cup. And now he becomes the first of the twelve apostles to die for his faith. Luke tells us in one sentence.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Herod Agrippa I**
>
> This Herod is Herod Agrippa I, a grandson of Herod the Great, the king who tried to kill baby Jesus. He was a friend of the Roman emperors and ruled over a territory roughly the size of his grandfather's kingdom from AD 41 to 44. To keep the Jewish leaders happy, he cracked down on the church. The Jewish historian Josephus also describes his sudden death in Caesarea, in a way that closely matches Luke's account.

When Herod sees that this pleases the Jewish leaders, he proceeds to seize Peter also. It's during the Festival of Unleavened Bread, around Passover, the same time of year Jesus was arrested. Herod puts Peter in prison, guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. He plans to bring him out for public trial after the festival.

"So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him."

The night before his trial, Peter is sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries are standing guard at the entrance. Think about that. He's facing execution in the morning, and he's asleep. James is already dead. Peter has every reason to be awake and terrified. But he's sleeping like someone at peace.

Suddenly an angel of the Lord appears, and a light shines in the cell. The angel strikes Peter on the side to wake him up. Not a gentle tap. Quick, get up! The chains fall off Peter's wrists. The angel tells him to put on his clothes and sandals. Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.

Peter follows him out, but he has no idea that what's happening is real. He thinks he's seeing a vision. They pass the first and second guards and come to the iron gate leading to the city. It opens for them by itself. They walk the length of one street, and suddenly the angel leaves him.

Then Peter comes to himself and says, Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent His angel and rescued me.

He goes to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. (That's the same Mark who would later write the Gospel of Mark.) Many people have gathered there and are praying. For him. Right now.

Peter knocks at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda comes to answer the door. When she recognizes Peter's voice, she's so overjoyed that she runs back without opening it and exclaims, "Peter is at the door!"

They tell her she's out of her mind. When she keeps insisting, they say, It must be his angel. Meanwhile, Peter keeps on knocking.

This might be the funniest scene in the Bible. The church is praying for Peter to be released. God releases Peter. Peter shows up at the prayer meeting. And they don't believe it. They leave him standing outside, knocking, while they argue with the servant girl.

When they finally open the door and see him, they're astonished. Peter motions with his hand for them to be quiet and describes how the Lord brought him out of prison. Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this, he says, and then he leaves for another place. (This James is Jesus' brother, who had become a leader in the Jerusalem church.)

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Answered Prayer**
>
> It's encouraging that the believers' faith wasn't perfect. They prayed earnestly, but when God answered, they could hardly believe it. God answered anyway. You don't have to have flawless faith for God to hear your prayers. You just have to pray. At the same time, it's worth noticing that God didn't rescue James. Acts is honest that faithful prayer doesn't always lead to the outcome we want. Both stories are in the same chapter.

In the morning, there's no small commotion among the soldiers over what has become of Peter. Herod has a thorough search made and, when he doesn't find him, cross-examines the guards and orders their execution.

Later, in Caesarea, Herod puts on his royal robes, sits on his throne, and gives a public speech. The people shout, This is the voice of a god, not of a man! Immediately, because Herod does not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord strikes him down, and he is eaten by worms and dies.

The king who tried to destroy the church is dead. "But the word of God continued to spread and flourish."

**KEY VERSE**

*So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.*

**Acts 12:5 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. Peter slept the night before his trial. Where does that kind of peace come from?
2. The church prayed for Peter's release and then didn't believe it when he showed up. Have you ever prayed for something without really expecting God to answer?
3. God rescued Peter but not James. How do you hold on to faith when prayers don't turn out the way you hoped?

CHAPTER 13

# Sent Out

*Acts 13*

In the church at Antioch there are prophets and teachers. Luke names them, and the list is a picture of the church itself: Barnabas, a Jewish Levite from Cyprus; Simeon called Niger, which means "black," probably from Africa; Lucius of Cyrene, in North Africa; Manaen, who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch; and Saul, a former Pharisee from Tarsus. Different races. Different classes. One church.

While they're worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit says, Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. So after they have fasted and prayed, they place their hands on them and send them off.

Notice who the church sends: its two best teachers. They don't keep the best for themselves.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Paul's Journeys**
>
> Acts describes three main missionary journeys by Paul, plus his final trip to Rome as a prisoner. The first journey, in chapters 13 and 14, took him and Barnabas to the island of Cyprus and then to cities in the region of Galatia, in what is now central Turkey. They traveled by ship and on foot, often on Roman roads. A missionary journey wasn't a quick trip. The first one probably took a year or two.

They sail to Cyprus, Barnabas's home island, and travel across it, preaching in the synagogues. John Mark goes with them as their helper. At Paphos, they meet a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who is an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul wants to hear the word of God, but the sorcerer opposes them and tries to turn the proconsul from the faith.

Then Luke says, "Then Saul, who was also called Paul." From here on, Luke uses his Roman name, Paul. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Paul looks straight at the sorcerer and calls him a child of the devil and an enemy of everything right. The hand of the Lord is against you, Paul says. You're going to be blind for a time. Immediately mist and darkness come over him, and he gropes about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand.

Remember who else was struck blind and had to be led by the hand? Paul knows exactly what that's like. When the proconsul sees what happened, he believes, amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

From Paphos, Paul and his companions sail to the mainland. There, John Mark leaves them and goes back to Jerusalem. Luke doesn't say why. But it will cause a big problem later.

They come to Pisidian Antioch, a different Antioch, and on the Sabbath they go into the synagogue. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue leaders invite them to speak. Paul stands up and gives the first sermon of his that Luke records.

Like Stephen, he walks through Israel's history: God chose their ancestors, brought them out of Egypt, gave them the land, gave them judges and kings. Then He raised up David, a man after His

own heart. From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as He promised.

The people of Jerusalem and their rulers didn't recognize Jesus, Paul says, and they asked Pilate to have Him executed. "But God raised him from the dead," and for many days He was seen by those who had traveled with Him. Through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through Him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you couldn't obtain under the law of Moses.

As Paul and Barnabas are leaving the synagogue, the people invite them to speak further about these things the next Sabbath. On the next Sabbath, almost the whole city gathers to hear the word of the Lord.

When the Jewish leaders see the crowds, they're filled with jealousy and heap abuse on Paul. Then Paul and Barnabas answer boldly. We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and don't consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. They quote Isaiah, the Lord's command to be a light for the Gentiles, bringing salvation to the ends of the earth.

When the Gentiles hear this, they're glad and honor the word of the Lord. And all who were appointed for eternal life believe. The word of the Lord spreads through the whole region.

But the leaders stir up the prominent women and the leading men of the city, and they stir up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, expelling them from their region. So they shake the dust off their feet as a warning and go on to Iconium. "And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit."

**KEY VERSE**

*For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'"*

**Acts 13:47 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. The church in Antioch sent its two best leaders away. What would it look like for your church or group to give away its best?
2. Look at the list of leaders in Antioch. How diverse is your circle of friends? What could you learn from people who are different from you?
3. John Mark quit partway through the trip. Have you ever quit something God called you to? What happened next?

CHAPTER 14

# Gods and Stones

*Acts 14*

At Iconium, Paul and Barnabas go into the synagogue as usual. They speak so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believe. But some who refuse to believe stir up the other Gentiles and poison their minds against the believers. Paul and Barnabas stay there a considerable time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirms the message of His grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders.

The city is divided. Some side with the Jewish leaders, others with the apostles. When they learn of a plot to mistreat and stone them, they flee to the cities of Lystra and Derbe.

In Lystra there's a man who is lame, who has never walked. He's been that way from birth. He listens to Paul as he's speaking. Paul looks directly at him, sees that he has faith to be healed, and calls out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumps up and begins to walk.

Sound familiar? It's almost exactly like Peter's first miracle in Acts 3. Luke is showing that the same Spirit is working through Paul as through Peter.

**BACKGROUND CHECK** **Zeus and Hermes in Lystra**

Lystra was a small Roman colony in a region where people spoke a local language called Lycaonian. A local legend told of a time when Zeus, king of the Greek gods, and Hermes, his messenger, visited the region disguised as humans. Everyone turned them away except an elderly couple, who were rewarded. The rest of the people were destroyed. The people of Lystra may have been determined not to make the same mistake twice.

When the crowd sees what Paul has done, they shout in the Lycaonian language, The gods have come down to us in human form! They call Barnabas Zeus, and Paul they call Hermes, because he's the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple is just outside the city, brings bulls and wreaths to the city gates, because he and the crowd want to offer sacrifices to them.

Paul and Barnabas don't understand the language at first. When they realize what's happening, they tear their clothes, a sign of horror, and rush out into the crowd. Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We're bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them.

Notice that Paul doesn't quote the Old Testament here. These people have never read it. Instead, he starts with creation. God has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons. He provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy. He meets people where they are.

Even with these words, they have difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.

Then some Jewish opponents arrive from Antioch and Iconium and win the crowd over. The same people who wanted to worship Paul

now stone him and drag him outside the city, thinking he's dead. That's how fast a crowd can turn.

But after the disciples gather around him, he gets up and goes back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas leave for Derbe.

Years later, Paul writes to the Corinthians about being stoned once. This was that time. And it's possible that a young man in Lystra named Timothy watched this happen. In chapter 16, we'll meet Timothy, from Lystra, and he'll become one of Paul's closest companions.

They preach the gospel in Derbe and win a large number of disciples. Then they do something surprising. Instead of heading home the easy way, they turn around and go back through Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, the very cities where they'd been attacked. They go back to strengthen the new disciples and encourage them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they say.

They don't promise the new believers an easy life. They tell them the truth. Following Jesus will be hard. It's worth it.

Paul and Barnabas appoint elders for them in each church, and with prayer and fasting, commit them to the Lord. Then they sail back to Antioch, where they had been sent out. They gather the church together and report all that God has done through them and how He has opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they stay there a long time with the disciples.

**KEY VERSE**

*strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.*

**Acts 14:22 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. The crowd went from worshiping Paul to stoning him. Why is it dangerous to depend on what crowds think of you?
2. Paul started with creation when talking to people who didn't know the Bible. How could you talk about God with a friend who has never read the Bible?
3. Paul and Barnabas told new believers honestly that following Jesus would be hard. Why is it important to be honest about that?

CHAPTER 15

# The Big Meeting

*Acts 15*

Some men come down from Judea to Antioch and start teaching the believers: Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.

That might sound like a minor rule. It wasn't. Circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with Abraham, and keeping the law of Moses was what it meant to be part of God's people. These teachers were saying that Gentiles had to become Jewish first before they could really belong to Jesus. Jesus plus the law.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Circumcision and the Law**
>
> In Genesis 17, God commanded Abraham and his male descendants to be circumcised as a sign of His covenant. For two thousand years, it marked Jewish men as belonging to God's people. Along with Sabbath-keeping and food laws, it was one of the clearest boundary markers between Jews and Gentiles. For an adult Gentile man in the ancient world, being circumcised was also painful and risky. The question in Acts 15 was whether these markers were required for salvation in Christ.

Paul and Barnabas get into a sharp dispute and debate with them. So the church sends Paul and Barnabas, along with some other believers, up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. On the way, they tell the believers in Phoenicia and

Samaria how the Gentiles have been converted, and the news makes them very glad.

In Jerusalem, some believers who belong to the party of the Pharisees stand up and say the Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses. The apostles and elders meet to consider the question.

After much discussion, Peter gets up. He reminds them how God chose him to take the message to Cornelius's household. God, who knows the heart, showed that He accepted the Gentiles by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as He did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for He purified their hearts by faith. Why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentile believers a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? "No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

Notice how he says it. Not that they are saved just as we are. We are saved just as they are. The Jewish believers don't have an advantage. Everyone comes the same way. By grace.

The whole assembly becomes silent as they listen to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

Then James speaks. This is James, the brother of Jesus, now a leader of the Jerusalem church, the same brother who once didn't believe in Him. James quotes the prophet Amos, who foretold that God would rebuild David's fallen tent so that the rest of humanity, including all the Gentiles, might seek the Lord. So James concludes: we shouldn't make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.

But he suggests they write to the Gentile believers asking them to avoid a few things: food polluted by idols, sexual immorality, the meat of strangled animals, and blood. These weren't requirements for salvation. They were ways for Gentile believers to avoid practices that were tied to pagan temple worship or deeply offensive to their Jewish brothers and sisters, so the two groups could share a table.

**BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why This Meeting Matters**

The Jerusalem Council, as it's often called, may be the most important church meeting in history. If the leaders had decided that Gentiles had to become Jewish to follow Jesus, Christianity might have remained a small Jewish sect. Instead, they affirmed that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus alone, for everyone. That's why billions of non-Jewish people around the world follow Jesus today. Paul's letter to the Galatians deals with the same issue.

The apostles and elders, with the whole church, decide to send their letter to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, along with two leaders, Judas called Barsabbas and Silas. The letter includes a remarkable phrase: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" not to burden the Gentiles with anything beyond these requirements.

When the people in Antioch read the letter, they're glad for its encouraging message. Judas and Silas, who are prophets themselves, encourage and strengthen the believers.

Then, sadly, the chapter ends with a conflict between friends. Some time later, Paul says to Barnabas, Let's go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached. Barnabas wants to take John Mark with them. But Paul doesn't think it's wise to take him, because Mark had deserted them on the first trip.

"They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company." Barnabas takes Mark and sails for Cyprus. Paul chooses Silas and leaves, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord.

Luke doesn't tell us who was right. Paul had a point; the mission was dangerous, and Mark had quit before. Barnabas, true to his name, gave Mark a second chance. And here's the good news: years later, Paul writes that Mark is helpful to him in his ministry. The friendship was restored. Barnabas's second chance worked. And instead of one missionary team, there were two.

You may have noticed that verse 34 is missing in your NIV, with a footnote. Some later manuscripts add a line saying that Silas decided to stay in Antioch, probably to explain why he was still there in verse 40. The earliest manuscripts don't include it.

**KEY VERSE**

*No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.*

**Acts 15:11 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. The teachers from Judea added a requirement to salvation. What things do people today sometimes add to faith in Jesus?
2. The church settled a huge disagreement by listening, sharing what God had done, and searching the Scriptures. How could that help in conflicts you face?
3. Paul and Barnabas split over John Mark, but the story had a good ending. Is there a broken friendship in your life that could be restored?

CHAPTER 16

# Midnight Songs

*Acts 16*

Paul comes to Derbe and then to Lystra, the town where he'd been stoned. A disciple named Timothy lives there. His mother is a Jewish believer, and his father is a Greek. The believers at Lystra and Iconium speak well of him. Paul wants to take him along on the journey.

Timothy was probably a teenager or in his early twenties. Years later, Paul writes to him, Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young.

Paul and his companions travel through the region of Phrygia and Galatia. They try to go into the province of Asia, but they're "kept by the Holy Spirit" from preaching there. They try to enter Bithynia, but "the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to." Closed door after closed door.

During the night, Paul has a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, Come over to Macedonia and help us. After Paul has seen the vision, Luke writes, "we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia." That's the first "we" in Acts. Luke has joined the team.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Into Europe**
>
> Macedonia was a Roman province in what is now northern Greece. When Paul crossed the Aegean Sea from Troas to Macedonia, the gospel arrived in

> Europe for the first time in Acts. Philippi was a Roman colony, settled by retired Roman soldiers, and proud of its Roman status and laws. It apparently didn't have enough Jewish men to form a synagogue, which required ten, so the few Jewish women and God-fearers met by the river to pray.

They sail to Philippi, the leading city of that district of Macedonia. On the Sabbath, they go outside the city gate to the river, where they expect to find a place of prayer. They sit down and begin to speak to the women who have gathered there.

One of them is a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She's a worshiper of God. The Lord opens her heart to respond to Paul's message. She and the members of her household are baptized, and she invites them to stay at her house. The first convert in Europe that Luke tells us about is a businesswoman.

Then they meet a very different woman. A female slave who has a spirit by which she predicts the future. She earns a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. She follows Paul and the rest, shouting, These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved. She keeps this up for many days.

What she's saying is true, but it's coming from the wrong source. Finally Paul becomes so annoyed that he turns around and says to the spirit, In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her! At that moment the spirit leaves her.

Her owners realize their hope of making money is gone. They don't care that she's free. They care that their profits are gone. They seize Paul and Silas and drag them to the marketplace before the authorities. These men are Jews, and they're throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept.

The crowd joins the attack. The magistrates order them to be stripped and beaten with rods. After they've been severely flogged, they're thrown into prison, and the jailer is ordered to guard them carefully. He puts them in the inner cell and fastens their feet in the stocks.

Then this: "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them."

Their backs are bleeding. Their feet are locked in the stocks. It's the middle of the night in a dark, filthy cell. And they're singing. The other prisoners are listening. Of course they are. Who sings in a place like that?

Suddenly there's such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison are shaken. At once all the prison doors fly open, and everyone's chains come loose.

The jailer wakes up, sees the prison doors open, and draws his sword to kill himself, because he thinks the prisoners have escaped. Under Roman law, a guard who lost his prisoners could face the same punishment they would have received. But Paul shouts, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

The jailer calls for lights, rushes in, and falls trembling before Paul and Silas. He brings them out and asks, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

They reply, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." Then they speak the word of the Lord to him and to everyone in his house. At that hour of the night, the jailer takes them and washes their wounds. Then immediately he and all his household are baptized. He brings them into his house and sets

a meal before them, and he's filled with joy because he has come to believe in God, he and his whole household.

The man who locked their feet in the stocks is now washing their wounds and cooking them dinner.

In the morning, the magistrates send officers to release them quietly. But Paul says, They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out. Beating a Roman citizen without a trial was illegal. The magistrates are alarmed, come to apologize, and escort them out.

Paul wasn't being petty. By insisting on being publicly cleared, he protected the new believers in Philippi, who would otherwise be associated with criminals. After visiting Lydia's house and encouraging the believers, they leave.

**KEY VERSE**

*They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household."*

**Acts 16:31 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. The Spirit closed several doors before opening the one to Macedonia. Have you ever experienced a closed door that led somewhere better?
2. Paul and Silas sang in prison at midnight. What would it look like for you to worship God in a dark moment?
3. The jailer's whole life changed in one night. What do you think made him ask, "What must I do to be saved?"

**TRY THIS** *The next time you're having a bad day, put on a worship song or sing one, even quietly, and notice how it affects you.*

CHAPTER 17

# The Unknown God

*Acts 17*

Paul and his companions travel to Thessalonica, where there's a synagogue. As his custom is, Paul goes in, and on three Sabbath days he reasons with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah, he says.

Some of the Jews are persuaded and join Paul and Silas, as do a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women. But other Jewish leaders become jealous. They round up some bad characters from the marketplace, form a mob, and start a riot in the city. Not finding Paul and Silas, they drag a believer named Jason before the city officials, shouting, "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here."

Older translations say these men "have turned the world upside down." That's quite a reputation for a handful of traveling preachers.

That night the believers send Paul and Silas away to Berea. And the Bereans are different. They're more noble than those in Thessalonica, Luke says, because they receive the message with great eagerness "and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."

That's what Luke praises them for. Not for accepting everything Paul said. For checking it. Eagerness plus investigation is a great combination. As a result, many of them believe.

But the troublemakers from Thessalonica follow Paul to Berea and stir up the crowds there too. The believers send Paul to the coast, and his escorts bring him to Athens.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Athens**
>
> By Paul's time, Athens was no longer a political power, but it was still the most famous center of philosophy and learning in the world. It was the city of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. It was also full of temples, statues, and altars to countless gods. The Areopagus, meaning "Hill of Ares," was both a rocky hill near the Acropolis and the name of a respected council that met to judge matters of religion and morals. Two major schools of philosophy were the Epicureans, who taught that the gods were distant and pleasure was the highest good, and the Stoics, who believed in a divine reason running through everything and valued self-control.

While Paul is waiting in Athens, he's greatly distressed to see that the city is full of idols. So he reasons in the synagogue with the Jews and God-fearers, and in the marketplace day by day with whoever happens to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers begin to debate with him. Some of them ask, What is this babbler trying to say? Others say he seems to be advocating foreign gods, because Paul is preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

They take him to a meeting of the Areopagus. May we know what this new teaching is? Luke adds a wry comment: all the Athenians and foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.

Paul stands up in the meeting. His sermon is a masterclass in talking to people who don't share your starting point.

He begins with something positive. People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. As I walked around, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship, and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

Then he tells them about the God who made the world and everything in it, who is Lord of heaven and earth and doesn't live in temples built by human hands. He isn't served by human hands, as if He needed anything. He Himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.

From one man He made all the nations, Paul says, and He determined their times and places. "God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us." Then Paul quotes two Greek poets the Athenians knew: In Him we live and move and have our being, and We are His offspring.

Paul doesn't quote Isaiah or Moses to people who have never read them. He quotes their own poets, then points them to the truth.

Since we're God's offspring, Paul says, we shouldn't think He's like gold or silver or stone, an image made by human design. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent. He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising Him from the dead.

When they hear about the resurrection, some of them sneer. But others say, We want to hear you again on this subject. And a few

become followers of Paul and believe. Among them are Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

It wasn't a huge revival. Some laughed. Some wanted to think more. A few believed. That's often how it goes when you talk about Jesus with skeptical, educated people. Paul did his part faithfully and left the results to God.

**KEY VERSE**

*God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.*

**Acts 17:27 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. The Bereans were praised for checking Paul's teaching against Scripture. How can you be both open and careful when you hear teaching about God?
2. Paul found common ground with the Athenians before telling them about Jesus. What common ground could you find with friends who don't believe?
3. Some sneered, some wanted to hear more, and a few believed. How do you handle it when people react differently to your faith?

CHAPTER 18

# Don’t Be Silent

*Acts 18*

Paul leaves Athens and goes to Corinth. There he meets a Jewish couple named Aquila and Priscilla, recently arrived from Italy because the emperor Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul goes to see them, and because he’s a tentmaker as they are, he stays and works with them. Every Sabbath he reasons in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

**BACKGROUND CHECK** **Corinth**

Corinth was a busy, wealthy port city, on a narrow strip of land between two seas, which made it a hub of trade between east and west. It was famous for its temples, its athletic games, and its reputation for immorality. In fact, the Greeks used a word based on “Corinth” to mean living immorally. Archaeologists have found an inscription in Delphi that dates Gallio’s term as proconsul in Corinth to about AD 51 or 52, which helps historians date Paul’s visit and his other journeys.

Paul was the greatest missionary in the early church, and he supported himself by sewing tents. He didn’t think working a regular job was beneath him. Later, he wrote that he did it so no one could say he was preaching for money.

When Silas and Timothy come from Macedonia, Paul devotes himself exclusively to preaching, testifying that Jesus is the Messiah. When the Jewish leaders oppose him and become abusive,

Paul shakes out his clothes in protest and says, Your blood be on your own heads. From now on I will go to the Gentiles. He leaves the synagogue and goes next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believe in the Lord. And many of the Corinthians who hear Paul believe and are baptized.

Then one night the Lord speaks to Paul in a vision. “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.”

Why would Paul need to hear “Do not be afraid”? Because he was afraid. He’d been beaten in Philippi, chased out of Thessalonica and Berea, and laughed at in Athens. Later he wrote to the Corinthians that he came to them “in weakness with great fear and trembling.” Even the apostle Paul got scared. God didn’t tell him he was wrong to feel afraid. He told him He was with him.

So Paul stays in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.

While Gallio is proconsul of Achaia, some Jewish leaders bring Paul to court. This man is persuading people to worship God in ways contrary to the law. Before Paul can even speak, Gallio dismisses the case. If this were about a crime, I’d listen. But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law, settle the matter yourselves. He refuses to be a judge of such things and has them ejected from the court.

This ruling matters. A Roman official decides that the Christian faith is an internal Jewish matter, not a crime against Rome. For a while, that gives Paul and the believers some legal protection.

Paul stays on in Corinth for some time, then sails for Syria with Priscilla and Aquila. In Ephesus, he leaves them and goes on. Then he travels back through Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples. This is the start of his third journey.

Meanwhile, a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, comes to Ephesus. He's a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He speaks with great fervor and teaches about Jesus accurately, though he knows only the baptism of John. He begins to speak boldly in the synagogue.

When Priscilla and Aquila hear him, they invite him to their home and explain to him the way of God more adequately.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Priscilla and Aquila**
>
> Priscilla, also called Prisca, and her husband Aquila are mentioned six times in the New Testament. In four of those six mentions, Priscilla's name comes first, which was unusual in that culture and may suggest she was the more prominent of the two in ministry. They hosted churches in their homes in Ephesus and Rome, risked their lives for Paul, and together taught one of the greatest preachers of the early church. They were tentmakers and teachers, side by side.

Notice how they correct him: privately, at home, over a meal. They don't call him out in public. They don't embarrass him. They invite him in and help him understand. And Apollos, a gifted, famous speaker, is humble enough to learn from a tentmaking couple.

When Apollos wants to go to Achaia, the believers encourage him and write to the disciples there to welcome him. When he arrives, he's a great help to those who by grace had believed. He vigorously refutes his opponents in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah.

**KEY VERSE**

*One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent."*

**Acts 18:9 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. Even Paul was afraid. What are you afraid of when it comes to talking about your faith?
2. Paul worked a regular job while doing ministry. How can you serve God through your schoolwork or job?
3. Priscilla and Aquila corrected Apollos privately and kindly. How do you respond when someone corrects you? How do you correct others?

CHAPTER 19

# Riot in Ephesus

*Acts 19*

While Apollos is in Corinth, Paul takes the road through the interior and arrives at Ephesus. There he finds some disciples and asks them, Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? They answer, No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.

They had been baptized with John's baptism. Paul explains that John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, and John told people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus. On hearing this, they're baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul places his hands on them, the Holy Spirit comes on them, and they speak in tongues and prophesy. There are about twelve men in all.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Ephesus**
>
> Ephesus was one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire and the most important city in the province of Asia, in what is now western Turkey. It had a huge theater that could hold about 25,000 people, and it was home to the Temple of Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Ephesus was also known for magic. Scrolls of spells and incantations were so associated with the city that people called them "Ephesian writings."

Paul goes into the synagogue and speaks boldly there for three months. When some refuse to believe and publicly malign the Way, he leaves them and takes the disciples with him. He has discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This goes on for two years, "so

that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord."

That's probably when churches started in cities like Colossae, Laodicea, and the other cities mentioned in the book of Revelation. Paul stayed in one place, and people who came through Ephesus took the message home with them.

God does extraordinary miracles through Paul. Even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him are taken to the sick, and their illnesses are cured.

Then some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits try to use the name of the Lord Jesus like a magic formula. In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out. Seven sons of a Jewish chief priest named Sceva are doing this. One day the evil spirit answers them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?" Then the man with the evil spirit jumps on them and overpowers them all. They run out of the house naked and bleeding.

The name of Jesus isn't a magic word. It belongs to a person, and it's only powerful for people who actually belong to Him.

When this becomes known to everyone in Ephesus, they're all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus is held in high honor. Many of those who believe now come and openly confess what they've done. A number who had practiced sorcery bring their scrolls together and burn them publicly. When they calculate the value of the scrolls, the total comes to fifty thousand drachmas. A drachma was about a day's wage. That's more than 130 years of wages, going up in smoke.

"In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power."

Real repentance costs something. These people didn't just stop using their spell books. They burned them, so they could never go back.

After all this, Paul decides to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. After I have been there, he says, I must visit Rome also.

About that time, there arises a great disturbance about the Way. A silversmith named Demetrius, who makes silver shrines of Artemis, brings in a lot of business for the craftsmen. He calls them together with workers in related trades. You know we get a good income from this business, he says. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all. There's danger that our trade will lose its good name, and that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited.

Notice the order of his concerns. First money. Then religion.

When they hear this, they're furious and begin shouting, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" Soon the whole city is in an uproar. The people seize two of Paul's traveling companions and rush into the theater together. Paul wants to appear before the crowd, but the disciples won't let him. Even some officials of the province, who are Paul's friends, send him a message begging him not to go into the theater.

"The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there." For about two hours they keep shouting, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

That might be the most accurate description of a mob ever written. Most of them didn't even know why they were there.

Finally the city clerk quiets the crowd. Everyone knows Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of Artemis, he says, so there's no need to riot. These men haven't robbed temples or blasphemed our goddess. If Demetrius has a complaint, the courts are open. As it is, we're in danger of being charged with rioting. Then he dismisses the assembly.

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**KEY VERSE**

*In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.*

**Acts 19:20 (NIV)**

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## REAL TALK

1. The sons of Sceva tried to use Jesus' name without knowing Him. What's the difference between using Jesus' name and actually belonging to Him?
2. The new believers burned their expensive scrolls so they couldn't go back. Is there anything in your life you need to get rid of completely?
3. Most of the mob didn't know why they were there. When have you gone along with a crowd without really knowing why?

CHAPTER 20

# The Long Goodbye

*Acts 20*

When the uproar ends, Paul sends for the disciples, encourages them, says goodbye, and sets out for Macedonia. He travels through that area, speaking many words of encouragement, and finally arrives in Greece, where he stays three months. Because some Jewish leaders plot against him just as he's about to sail for Syria, he decides to go back through Macedonia. Luke lists seven men from different churches traveling with him. Then "we" sail from Philippi to Troas.

On the first day of the week, they come together to break bread. Paul speaks to the people, and because he intends to leave the next day, he keeps on talking until midnight.

There are many lamps in the upstairs room where they're meeting. Oil lamps make a room warm and stuffy. Seated in a window is a young man named Eutychus. He's sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talks on and on. When he's sound asleep, he falls from the third story to the ground and is picked up dead.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Eutychus**
>
> Luke calls Eutychus a "young man," and later uses a word that can mean a boy or young servant. He was probably a teenager. His name means "lucky" or "fortunate," which turns out to be appropriate. The meeting was on "the first day of the week," Sunday, which is one of the earliest signs that

> Christians were gathering for worship on the day Jesus rose from the dead. Many of them were servants or laborers who had worked all day before coming to church at night.

So if you've ever fallen asleep during a sermon, you're in biblical company. Though hopefully not in a window.

Paul goes down, throws himself on the young man, and puts his arms around him. Don't be alarmed, he says. He's alive! Then Paul goes upstairs again, breaks bread, and eats. And after talking until daylight, he leaves. The people take the young man home alive and are greatly comforted.

Paul talked until midnight, a boy died and was raised, and then Paul kept talking until sunrise. That's some church service.

Paul is in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost. So he decides to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia. But from Miletus, he sends to Ephesus for the elders of the church.

When they arrive, he gives them a farewell speech. It's the only speech in Acts that Paul gives to Christian leaders, and it's deeply personal.

You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, he says. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, in spite of severe testing. I didn't hesitate to preach anything that would be helpful to you, publicly and from house to house. Now, compelled by the Spirit, I'm going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.

"However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me." The task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.

Then he tells them something that breaks their hearts. None of you will ever see me again.

He gives them a charge. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which He bought with His own blood. He warns them that savage wolves will come in among them and will not spare the flock. Even from their own number, men will arise and distort the truth to draw away disciples. So be on your guard!

He reminds them that he never wanted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. He worked with his own hands to supply his own needs and the needs of his companions. In everything, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus Himself said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Saying Only in Acts**
>
> "It is more blessed to give than to receive" is one of the most famous sayings of Jesus. But it doesn't appear in any of the four Gospels. It's found only here, in Paul's speech. John wrote at the end of his Gospel that Jesus did many other things that weren't written down. This is one example of a saying of Jesus that was remembered and passed on in the early church and recorded by Luke.

When Paul has finished speaking, he kneels down with all of them and prays. They all weep as they embrace him and kiss him. What grieves them most is his statement that they will never see his face again. Then they walk with him to the ship.

**KEY VERSE**

*However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.*

**Acts 20:24 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. Eutychus fell asleep in church and nearly lost his life. What helps you stay engaged when it's hard to pay attention?
2. Paul said his only aim was to finish the race God gave him. What would it look like for you to live with that kind of focus?
3. Jesus said it is more blessed to give than to receive. When have you found that to be true?

CHAPTER 21

# Ready to Die

*Acts 21*

After tearing themselves away from the Ephesian elders, Paul and his companions sail along the coast. At Tyre they find disciples and stay with them seven days. Through the Spirit these disciples urge Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. When it's time to leave, all of them, including wives and children, walk with them out of the city, and they kneel on the beach to pray before saying goodbye.

They reach Caesarea and stay at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the seven from Acts 6. He has four unmarried daughters who prophesy. Remember Joel's prophecy at Pentecost about sons and daughters prophesying? Here it is.

While they're there, a prophet named Agabus comes down from Judea. The same Agabus who predicted the famine back in chapter 11. He takes Paul's belt, ties his own hands and feet with it, and says, The Holy Spirit says, In this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Warnings and Guidance**

It can seem confusing that believers "through the Spirit" urged Paul not to go to Jerusalem, while Paul said he was compelled by the Spirit to go. Many Bible teachers understand it this way: the Spirit revealed to many people that suffering was waiting for Paul in Jerusalem. The believers, out of love,

> concluded that he shouldn't go. Paul understood the same warning as preparation, not prohibition. The Spirit told them what would happen; Paul chose to go anyway.

When the believers hear this, everyone, including Luke, pleads with Paul not to go. Then Paul answers, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." When he won't be dissuaded, they give up and say, "The Lord's will be done."

That's the prayer Jesus prayed in Gethsemane. Not My will, but Yours. Paul's friends pray it too, through their tears.

When they arrive in Jerusalem, the believers receive them warmly. The next day Paul and the others go to see James, and all the elders are present. Paul reports in detail what God has done among the Gentiles through his ministry. When they hear this, they praise God.

Then they tell Paul there's a problem. Thousands of Jewish believers here are zealous for the law, and they've been told that you teach Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, to stop circumcising their children, and to abandon Jewish customs. That wasn't true. Paul taught that Gentiles didn't need to keep the law for salvation, not that Jews had to stop.

So the elders suggest a plan. Four men among them have taken a vow. Join them in their purification rites and pay their expenses. Then everyone will know there's no truth in these reports. Paul agrees. He's willing to set aside his own freedom to keep peace and avoid giving offense. He later wrote that to the Jews he became like a Jew, to win the Jews.

When the seven days are nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia see Paul at the temple. They stir up the whole crowd and

seize him, shouting that this is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place. They had seen a Gentile from Ephesus with Paul in the city earlier and assumed Paul had brought him into the temple.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Temple Warning**
>
> A low stone barrier separated the outer Court of the Gentiles from the inner courts of the temple. Signs posted along it, in Greek and Latin, warned Gentiles not to go any further on pain of death. One of these warning stones was discovered in 1871 and is now in a museum in Istanbul. Another fragment was found later. The Romans allowed the Jewish authorities to enforce this rule, even with execution. That's why the accusation against Paul was so dangerous.

The whole city is aroused, and people come running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they drag him from the temple, and immediately the gates are shut. While they're trying to kill him, news reaches the commander of the Roman troops that all Jerusalem is in an uproar. He takes some officers and soldiers and runs down to the crowd. When the rioters see the commander and his soldiers, they stop beating Paul.

The commander arrests him and orders him bound with two chains, just as Agabus predicted. The crowd is shouting so many different things that the commander can't figure out what happened. As the soldiers carry Paul up the steps to the barracks, the mob behind is shouting, "Get rid of him!"

At the top of the steps, Paul asks the commander in Greek if he can say something. The commander is surprised; he'd assumed Paul was an Egyptian rebel who had started a revolt. Paul says he's a Jew from Tarsus, a citizen of no ordinary city, and asks for permission to

speak to the people. The commander agrees, and Paul stands on the steps, motions to the crowd, and when they're all silent, he begins to speak to them in Aramaic.

Beaten, bound, bleeding, and surrounded by people who just tried to kill him, Paul asks for the microphone.

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**KEY VERSE**

*Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."*

**Acts 21:13 (NIV)**

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## REAL TALK

1. Paul's friends loved him and begged him not to go. When is it hard to tell the difference between good advice and God's direction?
2. Paul was willing to give up some of his freedom to keep peace with other believers. When might you need to do that?
3. Paul's first move after being beaten was to ask to speak to the crowd. What does that tell you about him?

CHAPTER 22

# My Story

*Acts 22*

Paul stands on the barracks steps and begins: Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense. When the crowd hears him speaking in Aramaic, their own language, they become very quiet.

And Paul doesn't give them an argument. He tells them his story.

I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison. The high priest and the whole council can testify about me.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Telling Your Story**
>
> Acts tells the story of Paul's conversion three times: in chapter 9, when it happens; here in chapter 22, when Paul tells it to a hostile crowd in Jerusalem; and in chapter 26, when he tells it to a king. Each version emphasizes slightly different details for a different audience, the way you might tell the same story differently to your grandmother and to your friends. Paul's personal testimony was one of his most powerful tools. No one could argue with what had happened to him.

Then he tells them about the road to Damascus. About noon, a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and

heard a voice saying, Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute Me? Who are You, Lord? I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.

He tells them about Ananias, whom he describes as a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. He tells them what Ananias said: God has chosen you to know His will and to see the Righteous One. You will be His witness to all people of what you have seen and heard. “And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.”

Then he tells them something even his friends might not have known. When he returned to Jerusalem, he was praying at the temple and fell into a trance. He saw the Lord telling him to leave Jerusalem quickly, because the people there wouldn’t accept his testimony. Paul argued. Lord, they know I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in You. And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.

Paul is still haunted by Stephen. Decades later, he still mentions the coats.

Then the Lord said, Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.

The crowd has been listening up to that word. Gentiles. Then they explode. They raise their voices and shout, Rid the earth of him! He’s not fit to live! They throw off their cloaks and fling dust into the air.

The commander orders Paul taken into the barracks. He directs that Paul be flogged and interrogated to find out why the people are shouting at him like this.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Roman Citizenship**
>
> Roman citizenship was a valuable legal status. A citizen had the right to a fair trial and could not be flogged or tortured without being convicted, or crucified at all, in most cases. Citizenship could be inherited, granted as a reward, or sometimes bought with a large bribe. Paul was born a citizen, probably because his father or grandfather had received it. Claiming citizenship falsely was a serious crime, so people rarely lied about it.

As they stretch Paul out to flog him, Paul says to the centurion standing there, Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty? The centurion goes straight to the commander. What are you going to do? This man is a Roman citizen.

The commander comes and asks Paul if it's true. Yes, Paul says. The commander says he had to pay a lot of money for his citizenship. Paul replies, "But I was born a citizen." Those who were about to interrogate him withdraw immediately. The commander himself is alarmed when he realizes he has put a Roman citizen in chains.

The next day, since he wants to find out exactly why Paul is being accused, the commander releases him and orders the chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin to assemble. Then he brings Paul and has him stand before them.

**KEY VERSE**

*And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.*

**Acts 22:16 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. Paul told his story instead of starting an argument. What's your story of how you came to know God, or where you are right now?
2. Paul still remembered holding the coats at Stephen's death. How does God's forgiveness work with memories of things we regret?
3. The crowd listened until Paul said "Gentiles." What words or ideas make people stop listening today?

CHAPTER 23

# Take Courage

*Acts 23*

Paul looks straight at the Sanhedrin and says, My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day. At this the high priest Ananias orders those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth.

Paul snaps back. God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck! Those standing near Paul say, How dare you insult God's high priest? Paul replies that he didn't realize he was the high priest, and quotes the law: Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.

Some readers think Paul had poor eyesight. Others think he was being sarcastic: I didn't recognize that someone acting like this could be the high priest. Either way, Paul was human. He lost his temper, and then he backed down.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Ananias the High Priest**
>
> This Ananias (a third man with that name in Acts) was high priest from about AD 47 to 59. The historian Josephus describes him as greedy and violent, and says he stole the tithes meant for ordinary priests. He was so hated that when the Jewish revolt against Rome broke out in AD 66, rebels killed him. Paul's prediction that God would strike him came true.

Then Paul, knowing that some of the council are Sadducees and others are Pharisees, calls out: My brothers, I am a Pharisee, descended from Pharisees. I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead.

It works instantly. A dispute breaks out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly is divided. The Sadducees say there is no resurrection, no angels, and no spirits, but the Pharisees believe all these things. Some of the teachers of the law who are Pharisees stand up and argue: We find nothing wrong with this man. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?

It was clever, but it was also true. The resurrection of Jesus really was the heart of the whole issue.

The dispute becomes so violent that the commander is afraid Paul will be torn to pieces. He orders the troops to take him away by force and bring him into the barracks.

That night, alone in a Roman barracks, after being beaten by a mob and nearly torn apart by a council, Paul gets a visit. “The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, ‘Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.’”

Paul had said back in chapter 19 that he must visit Rome. Now Jesus confirms it. Paul is going to Rome. He just doesn’t know it’ll be in chains.

The next morning, more than forty men form a conspiracy and bind themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they’ve killed Paul. They go to the chief priests and elders and lay out a plan: ask the commander to bring Paul before you again, on the pretext of wanting more information, and we’ll kill him on the way.

But the son of Paul's sister hears of this plot. This is the only time the Bible mentions Paul's family. His nephew goes into the barracks and tells Paul. Paul calls one of the centurions and says, Take this young man to the commander. He has something to tell him.

**BACKGROUND CHECK** **Paul's Nephew**

We know almost nothing about Paul's family, except that his sister had a son living in Jerusalem. Luke calls him a "young man," and the commander takes him by the hand, which may suggest he was a teenager or even younger. Somehow he overheard a plot by more than forty men, and he was brave enough to walk into a Roman barracks and report it. God used a young person, whose name we don't even know, to save the life of the greatest missionary of the early church.

The commander takes the young man by the hand, draws him aside, and asks, What is it you want to tell me? He explains the plot. The commander dismisses him with a warning: Don't tell anyone you've reported this to me.

Then the commander calls two of his centurions and orders them to get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at nine that night. Provide horses for Paul so he may be taken safely to Governor Felix.

That's 470 soldiers to protect one prisoner from forty assassins. God told Paul he would testify in Rome. And He used a Roman army to make sure he got there.

The commander writes a letter to Felix explaining the situation, and the soldiers take Paul by night to Antipatris and then to Caesarea. Felix reads the letter, learns Paul is from Cilicia, and says he'll hear the case when his accusers arrive. He orders that Paul be kept under guard in Herod's palace.

**KEY VERSE**

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

**Acts 23:11 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. Paul lost his temper and then backed down. How do you handle it when you react badly in a tense moment?
2. Jesus stood near Paul on one of his worst nights. When have you sensed God near you in a hard time?
3. Paul's nephew was young and unnamed, but brave. What could you do this week that takes courage, even if no one ever knows your name?

CHAPTER 24

# The Governor Who Waited

*Acts 24*

Five days later, the high priest Ananias goes down to Caesarea with some of the elders and a lawyer named Tertullus. They bring their charges against Paul before the governor.

Tertullus opens with a speech full of flattery. We have enjoyed a long period of peace under you, Felix, and your foresight has brought about reforms in this nation. Everywhere and in every way, most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with profound gratitude.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Felix**
>
> Antonius Felix was governor of Judea from about AD 52 to 59 or 60. He was a former slave who rose to power through connections in the emperor's household. The Roman historian Tacitus wrote that Felix used the power of a king with the mind of a slave. His rule was marked by violence and unrest, the opposite of the "long period of peace" Tertullus praised. His wife Drusilla was the daughter of Herod Agrippa I, the king who executed James in Acts 12.

Then the accusation. We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He's a ringleader of the Nazarene sect and even tried to desecrate the temple.

Some verses here are numbered differently than you might expect. If you look closely, you'll see the NIV has a footnote at verses 6 through 8. Some manuscripts add a few more lines to Tertullus's

speech, which became verse 7, and the earliest manuscripts don't include them. It doesn't change the story.

The governor motions for Paul to speak. Paul doesn't use flattery. He simply says he's glad to make his defense before someone who has been a judge over the nation for a number of years. Then he lays out the facts. He arrived in Jerusalem no more than twelve days ago to worship. His accusers didn't find him arguing with anyone or stirring up a crowd in the temple, the synagogues, or anywhere else in the city. They can't prove their charges.

But I admit, Paul says, that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. He believes everything that is in accordance with the Law and the Prophets, and he has the same hope in God that they themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. "So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man."

Then Felix, who is well acquainted with the Way, adjourns the proceedings. When the commander comes, I'll decide your case. He orders the centurion to keep Paul under guard but to give him some freedom and to let his friends take care of his needs.

Several days later, Felix comes with his wife Drusilla, who is Jewish. He sends for Paul and listens to him as he speaks about faith in Christ Jesus. And Paul doesn't play it safe. As Paul talks about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix is afraid and says, That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you.

Paul talked to a corrupt governor and his wife about righteousness, self-control, and judgment. It's hard to think of three topics more

likely to make Felix uncomfortable. Felix had stolen Drusilla from her first husband. He got the point.

“When I find it convenient.” That’s one of the most dangerous phrases in the Bible. Felix felt the truth hit him, and he put it off. There’s no record that the convenient time ever came.

At the same time, he was hoping Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him. Felix listened to the gospel many times. But he was listening for money, not for truth.

When two years have passed, Felix is succeeded by Porcius Festus. Because Felix wants to grant a favor to the Jewish leaders, he leaves Paul in prison.

Two years. Paul, the tireless traveler, sits in a cell in Caesarea for two years, waiting. It’s possible that Luke, who was nearby, used some of that time to research and write his Gospel. Waiting isn’t always wasted.

**KEY VERSE**

*So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.*

**Acts 24:16 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. Tertullus used flattery; Paul used facts. Why is honesty more powerful than flattery in the long run?
2. Felix said, "When I find it convenient." What decision about God are you tempted to put off?
3. Paul waited in prison for two years. How do you handle long seasons when it feels like nothing is happening?

CHAPTER 25

# A Dead Man Named Jesus

*Acts 25*

Three days after arriving in the province, Festus goes up from Caesarea to Jerusalem. The chief priests and Jewish leaders appear before him and present their charges against Paul. Two years have passed, and they still want him dead. They ask Festus to transfer Paul to Jerusalem, planning to ambush him on the way.

Festus answers that Paul is being held at Caesarea, and he himself is going there soon. Let some of your leaders come with me and press charges there.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Festus**
>
> Porcius Festus became governor of Judea around AD 59 or 60, after Felix. Not much is known about him from outside sources, but he seems to have been a more honest and efficient governor than Felix. He died in office after only about two years. Festus's main goal, like that of most Roman governors, was to keep the peace in a difficult province and stay on good terms with the local leaders.

After about ten days, Festus goes down to Caesarea. The next day he convenes the court and orders Paul brought before him. The Jewish leaders from Jerusalem stand around him, bringing many serious charges against him that they cannot prove.

Paul makes his defense. I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar.

Festus, wishing to do the leaders a favor, asks Paul, Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?

Paul knows what that means. He'd never make it there alive. So he uses his right as a Roman citizen. I'm now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jewish leaders, as you yourself know very well. If I'm guilty of doing anything deserving death, I don't refuse to die. But if the charges are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. "I appeal to Caesar!"

After Festus confers with his council, he declares, You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Appealing to Caesar**
>
> A Roman citizen accused of a serious crime in a province could, in certain cases, appeal his case to be heard by the emperor in Rome. At this time the emperor was Nero, early in his reign, before he became infamous for persecuting Christians. By appealing, Paul removed his case from the local governor and the pressure of the Jerusalem leaders. It also guaranteed him a trip to Rome at government expense, the very place Jesus had told him he would testify.

A few days later, King Agrippa and Bernice arrive at Caesarea to pay their respects to Festus. Agrippa is Herod Agrippa II, great-grandson of Herod the Great, and Bernice is his sister. Since they're spending many days there, Festus discusses Paul's case with the king.

Festus explains that when the accusers got up to speak, they didn't charge Paul with any of the crimes he had expected. "Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive."

That's how a Roman governor summarized the gospel. A dead man named Jesus whom Paul claims is alive. He meant it as a dismissive summary, but he got it exactly right. That is the whole point.

Festus admits he was at a loss how to investigate such matters. So when Paul appealed, he ordered him held until he could send him to Caesar. Agrippa says, I would like to hear this man myself. Festus replies, Tomorrow you will hear him.

The next day Agrippa and Bernice come with great pomp and enter the audience room with the high-ranking military officers and the prominent men of the city. Picture the scene: royal robes, military uniforms, the most important people in the region. And then, at the command of Festus, Paul is brought in. In chains.

Festus explains his problem. He has nothing definite to write to the emperor about Paul. He hasn't done anything deserving death, but he appealed to the emperor. I think it is unreasonable, Festus says, to send a prisoner on to Rome without specifying the charges against him. He's hoping Agrippa, who understands Jewish matters, can help him figure out what to write.

**KEY VERSE**

*Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive.*

**Acts 25:19 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. Paul used his legal rights as a citizen. When is it right for Christians to stand up for their rights?
2. Festus summarized the gospel as a dispute about "a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive." If someone summarized your faith in one sentence, what would they say?
3. Paul was in chains in a room full of powerful people. Who do you think really had the most power in that room?

CHAPTER 26

# Almost Persuaded

*Acts 26*

Agrippa says to Paul, You have permission to speak for yourself. So Paul motions with his hand and begins his defense.

King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today, because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Paul is genuinely glad. Finally, a judge who might actually understand.

He tells his story for the third time in Acts. He grew up in Jerusalem and lived as a Pharisee, the strictest sect of our religion. And now, he says, it is because of my hope in what God promised our ancestors that I am on trial today. “Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?”

Then Paul is honest about his past. I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. He locked up many believers, cast his vote against them when they were put to death, and went from one synagogue to another to have them punished. In his obsession, he even hunted them down in foreign cities.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Agrippa II**

Herod Agrippa II was the last king from the family of Herod. He was the son of Herod Agrippa I, who executed James in Acts 12, the great-grandson of Herod

> the Great, who tried to kill baby Jesus, and the great-nephew of Herod Antipas, who executed John the Baptist. He ruled territories north and east of Galilee and had authority over the temple in Jerusalem, including appointing high priests. He knew Jewish beliefs well. Four generations of Herods had opposed Jesus and His followers. Now one of them was listening to the gospel.

Then Paul tells about the road to Damascus. This version includes a detail we haven't heard before. Jesus said to him, It is hard for you to kick against the goads. A goad was a pointed stick used to steer oxen. An ox that kicked against it only hurt itself. Saul had been fighting against God, and it was hurting him.

Paul also includes more of what Jesus said to him on the road. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness. I am sending you to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.

So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. He preached that people should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds. That's why the Jewish leaders seized him in the temple courts and tried to kill him. But God has helped him to this very day. He's saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen: that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, bring the message of light to His own people and to the Gentiles.

At this point Festus interrupts, shouting, You are out of your mind, Paul! Your great learning is driving you insane.

Paul answers calmly. I am not insane, most excellent Festus. What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these

things, and I can speak freely to him. I'm convinced none of this has escaped his notice, "because it was not done in a corner."

That's a great line. Jesus' death and resurrection weren't secret events. They happened in public, in Jerusalem, at Passover, with crowds watching. Anyone could check.

Then Paul turns directly to the king. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.

Agrippa is cornered. If he says yes, he'll have to deal with Paul's argument. If he says no, he'll offend his Jewish subjects. So he deflects. "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"

Paul answers, Short time or long, I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, "except for these chains."

Even in chains, Paul isn't asking to be freed. He's wishing everyone in the room could have what he has. He'd just skip the handcuffs.

The king rises, and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with them. After they leave the room, they begin saying to one another, This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment. Agrippa says to Festus, This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Almost**
>
> Older translations render Agrippa's words as "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." That phrase inspired a famous hymn about the danger of being "almost persuaded." Most modern translations, including the NIV, take Agrippa's words as a sarcastic deflection rather than a sincere near-decision. Either way, as far as we know, Agrippa never became a follower of Jesus. Hearing the truth isn't the same as responding to it.

**KEY VERSE**

*Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"*

**Acts 26:28 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. Jesus told Paul it was hard to "kick against the goads." Have you ever felt like you were fighting against God? How did it feel?
2. Paul said the events of Jesus' life were "not done in a corner." Why does it matter that Christianity is based on public, checkable events?
3. Agrippa heard the whole gospel and deflected. What are some ways people deflect when the conversation gets too close to home?

CHAPTER 27

# Shipwrecked

*Acts 27*

When it's decided that "we" would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners are handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belongs to the Imperial Regiment. Luke is with him again, along with Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica.

This chapter is one of the most detailed descriptions of an ancient sea voyage that has survived from the ancient world. Sailors and historians have studied it for centuries. Luke clearly was there, and he paid attention.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Ancient Sea Travel**
>
> Sailing on the Mediterranean was dangerous from mid-September to November and was usually avoided altogether from November to March, when storms were frequent and clouds hid the sun and stars that sailors used for navigation. Grain ships from Egypt carried wheat to Rome, which depended on these shipments to feed its huge population. These ships could be large, carrying hundreds of tons of grain and many passengers. But they had no engines and limited ability to steer in a storm.

They set out and make slow progress. At Myra, the centurion finds an Alexandrian grain ship sailing for Italy and puts them on board. Sailing gets difficult. They reach a harbor on Crete called Fair Havens. By now it's late in the season. Luke says it's after the Day of Atonement, which falls in the fall, when sailing gets dangerous.

Paul warns them: Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also. But the centurion, instead of listening to Paul, follows the advice of the pilot and the owner of the ship. Since the harbor isn't suitable to winter in, the majority decide to sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix, a better harbor on Crete.

When a gentle south wind begins to blow, they think they've gotten what they wanted. Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the Northeaster, sweeps down from the island. The ship is caught by the storm and can't head into the wind, so they give way and are driven along.

The sailors pass ropes under the ship to hold it together. They lower the sea anchor. The next day, they start throwing the cargo overboard. On the third day, they throw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. When neither sun nor stars appear for many days and the storm keeps raging, "we finally gave up all hope of being saved."

Luke, the careful historian, includes that line about himself. Everyone gave up hope. Including the Christians.

After they've gone a long time without food, Paul stands up before them. He can't resist a small "I told you so": you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete. But then he encourages them. Now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me and said, Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar, and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you. "So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me."

On the fourteenth night, the sailors sense they're approaching land. They take soundings and find the water getting shallower. Fearing they'll be dashed against the rocks, they drop four anchors from the stern and pray for daylight.

In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they're going to lower some anchors from the bow. Paul tells the centurion and the soldiers, Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved. So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it drift away.

Notice who's in charge now. The prisoner is giving orders, and the Roman soldiers are following them.

Just before dawn, Paul urges them all to eat. For the last fourteen days you've been in constant suspense and have gone without food. Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from your head. Then he takes some bread and gives thanks to God in front of them all. He breaks it and begins to eat. They're all encouraged and eat some food themselves. Altogether there are 276 people on board.

In the middle of a hurricane, on a ship about to be destroyed, Paul gives thanks for bread. And it changes the whole mood on board.

When daylight comes, they see a bay with a sandy beach and decide to run the ship aground there. But the ship strikes a sandbar and runs aground. The bow sticks fast and won't move, and the stern is broken to pieces by the pounding surf.

The soldiers plan to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping. Roman soldiers who let prisoners escape could be punished severely. But the centurion wants to spare Paul's life and keeps them from carrying out their plan. He orders

those who can swim to jump overboard first and get to land. The rest are to get there on planks or on other pieces of the ship.

"In this way everyone reached land safely." All 276. Just as God promised.

**KEY VERSE**

*So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.*

**Acts 27:25 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. The centurion listened to the experts instead of Paul. When is it hard to listen to wisdom that goes against what everyone else says?
2. Even Luke admitted they gave up hope. Have you ever felt hopeless? What helped you?
3. Paul gave thanks for bread in the middle of a storm, and it encouraged everyone. How could your attitude in a hard situation affect the people around you?

**TRY THIS** *This week, when you're in a stressful situation, stop and thank God for one specific thing, out loud if you can. See what it does for you and others.*

CHAPTER 28

# Without Hindrance

*Acts 28*

Once safely on shore, they find out that the island is called Malta. The islanders show them unusual kindness. They build a fire and welcome them all because it's raining and cold.

Paul gathers a pile of brushwood. The great apostle, a prisoner who just saved everyone's life, is helping gather firewood. As he puts it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastens itself on his hand.

When the islanders see the snake hanging from his hand, they say to each other, This man must be a murderer. Even though he escaped from the sea, the goddess Justice has not allowed him to live. But Paul shakes the snake off into the fire and suffers no ill effects.

The people expect him to swell up or suddenly fall dead. After waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they change their minds and say he's a god.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Malta**
>
> Malta is a small island south of Sicily, in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. In Paul's time it was part of the Roman Empire, and its people spoke a language descended from Phoenician. Luke calls them by a Greek word for non-Greek speakers. A bay on the island's northeast coast, traditionally called

> St. Paul's Bay, is said to be the place of the shipwreck. Paul's visit is still celebrated on Malta today.

First a murderer, then a god. Like the crowd in Lystra, the people of Malta swing from one extreme to the other. Paul is neither. He's a servant of Jesus.

Nearby is an estate belonging to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomes them to his home and shows them generous hospitality for three days. His father is sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Luke, the doctor, gives us the specific diagnosis. Paul goes in to see him, prays, places his hands on him, and heals him. When this happens, the rest of the sick on the island come and are cured. They honor Paul and his companions in many ways, and when they're ready to sail, they furnish them with the supplies they need.

After three months, they put out to sea in a ship that had wintered on the island. They land in Italy and travel overland toward Rome. Believers from Rome hear they are coming and travel as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet them, more than thirty miles. "At the sight of these people Paul thanked God and was encouraged."

Paul had written his letter to the Romans a few years earlier, saying he longed to visit them. Now he's finally here. Not the way he planned. But here.

When they get to Rome, Paul is allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him. It's a kind of house arrest.

Three days later, he calls together the local Jewish leaders. He explains his situation: he has done nothing against his people or their customs, but he was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to

the Romans. They examined him and wanted to release him, but when the Jewish leaders objected, he had to appeal to Caesar. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain.

They reply that they haven't received any letters from Judea about him. But they want to hear his views, because people everywhere are talking against this sect.

They arrange to meet Paul on a certain day, and they come in even larger numbers to the place where he's staying. From morning till evening he explains and declares to them the kingdom of God, trying to persuade them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. Some are convinced by what he says, but others won't believe.

As they leave, Paul quotes Isaiah about people who are always hearing but never understanding, always seeing but never perceiving. Then he says that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, "and they will listen!"

Your NIV will have a footnote here too. Verse 29 is missing from the earliest manuscripts. Some later manuscripts add a line saying the Jewish leaders left, arguing vigorously among themselves.

For two whole years Paul stays there in his own rented house and welcomes all who come to see him. "He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!"

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **What Happened to Paul?**
>
> Acts ends without telling us the outcome of Paul's trial. Many scholars think Luke wrote Acts during or soon after those two years in Rome, around AD 62, which would explain why he doesn't say more. Paul's letters and early church writers suggest he may have been released, traveled further, and then been

> arrested again. According to strong early tradition, he was executed in Rome under the emperor Nero, probably in the mid-60s AD. During his house arrest, Paul likely wrote some of his letters, including Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon.

And that's it. That's the last sentence of Acts. Without hindrance.

Paul is in chains, but the word of God isn't. The gospel has gone from a room in Jerusalem with 120 people to the capital of the world. From Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth, just as Jesus said in chapter 1.

But notice that Acts doesn't really end. There's no final scene, no tidy wrap-up. Luke leaves the story open. That's because it isn't finished. The same Spirit is still at work. The story of what Jesus "began to do and to teach" is still going.

And now it's your turn.

**KEY VERSE**

*He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!*

**Acts 28:31 (NIV)**

## REAL TALK

1. The people of Malta called Paul a murderer, then a god. How can you keep your identity steady when people's opinions of you swing back and forth?
2. Paul made it to Rome, but not the way he expected. When has God answered a prayer in a way you didn't plan?
3. Acts ends without an ending. If chapter 29 were being written about your life, what would you want it to say?

**TRY THIS** *Write your own "Acts 29" paragraph: one way you'd like to see God work through you in the next year. Share it with someone you trust.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

# Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through the whole book of Acts. You've seen the Spirit fall like fire, a lame man leap, a persecutor blinded and changed, prison doors swing open, and a prisoner in chains preach to kings. Again and again, the first Christians gave the same message: Jesus died, God raised Him from the dead, and everyone who turns to Him can be forgiven. Now that message has reached you.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

### 1 God made you, and He's not far away.

Paul told the philosophers in Athens that God made the world and everything in it, and that He wants people to seek Him and find Him, "though he is not far from any one of us." You weren't an accident. You were made to know Him.

### 2 We've all turned away.

In Acts, the crowds in Jerusalem, the leaders in the council, the idol makers in Ephesus, and even a man named Saul who thought he was serving God all needed to turn back to Him. So do we. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

### 3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

### 4 Jesus paid it.

Every sermon in Acts comes back to the same news. Jesus was put to death on a cross, and God raised Him from the dead. Peter told the crowd that salvation is found in no one else. Jesus took our place, and His resurrection proves death has been beaten.

> *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* **Romans 5:8 (NIV)**

### 5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

The church in Acts had a huge argument about whether new believers had to keep the whole Jewish law to be saved. Their answer was no. Peter said we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus. Salvation isn't a checklist you complete. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

### 6 Turn and trust.

When a terrified jailer asked Paul and Silas what he had to do to be saved, they told him: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." When the crowd at Pentecost asked what to do, Peter said to repent and be baptized. Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. It doesn't mean you'll never fail again. It means you belong to Him now.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. The jailer in Philippi didn't have any. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

*God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. I believe Jesus died for me and that You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Fill me with Your Holy Spirit, make me bold, and use me to tell others about You. In Jesus' name, amen.*

## If You Just Said Yes

**Tell someone.** A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. In Acts, people who believed told others almost right away. Start there.

**Read the real thing.** Read Acts straight through in a Bible, a chapter a day. Then read one of the letters Paul wrote to the churches you met in Acts, like Philippians or Ephesians.

**Find your people.** Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. The first believers devoted themselves to teaching, fellowship, sharing meals, and prayer. Ask about being baptized. In Acts, new believers were baptized right away.

**Talk to God every day.** The church in Acts prayed constantly: in homes, in the temple, in prison at midnight. Be honest. He can handle it.

## Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. King Agrippa told Paul he wasn't ready to be persuaded so quickly. The people of Berea took time to check the Scriptures for themselves. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because Acts ends without an ending. The story is still going. Don't stand on the sidelines watching it. Find out where you fit.

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

**Acts 1:8 (NIV)**