

OUTLINE AND INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION

THE BOOK OF ACTS

The Holy Spirit has given us in the New Testament four accounts of Jesus' ministry but only one book on the early years of the Church. It is called the Acts of the Apostles, but in fact it tells us only selected things about a few of the apostles. What about John, who gave us five of the New Testament books? What about Matthew, who wrote one gospel? What about Andrew, Thomas, Bartholomew, James the Younger, Simon the Zealot, Judas son of James, and Matthias? Acts is even silent on the last fifteen years or so of Peter's ministry.

If Acts is not a complete history of the Church's first three decades, then what is it? Our first clue is that it is the second of a two-volume work. An early convert to Christianity named Luke wrote a gospel and Acts to a person named Theophilus. Read the following verses and record what you learn:

Luke 1:1-4 _____

Acts 1:1 _____

Luke was the "beloved physician" of the Apostle Paul. Read Colossians 4:14 and record what you learn: _____

Luke traveled with Paul on part of his second missionary journey. Some years later, Luke went from Philippi to Jerusalem with Paul, and when Paul was arrested there, Luke accompanied him on his harrowing journey to Rome. We surmise these facts from the way Luke changed from the third person ("they") to the first ("we") in parts of Acts (16:10-17, 20:5-21:18, 27:1-28:16).

We don't know whether Luke was a Gentile, a gentile convert to Judaism, or a Jew before he became a Christian. His writings show that he was steeped in the urban, gentile, Greek-speaking culture of the Roman Empire; Luke 1:1-4 is written in the literary Greek of the educated elite, and Acts describes gentile kings, philosophers, and legal details accurately. On the other hand, Luke was also well versed in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament that Jews all over the Empire used.

About Theophilus we can only speculate. His name means "lover of God," but it was a common Greek name and was probably not made up by Luke. In Luke's day, people often wrote for and dedicated their works to wealthy patrons, who helped pay for publishing the books. Theophilus was probably an educated gentile aristocrat, either a new convert or an interested pagan. Luke may have wanted to help confirm this man

and others like him in the faith by showing that it rested on firm historical foundations and the power of God.

WHEN WAS ACTS WRITTEN?

The earliest would be about 62 AD, where chapter 28 leaves off abruptly. However, Luke seems to be looking back on those events from at least some distance. But, on the other hand, the book gives no hint of the deaths of Paul, Peter, or James, nor of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, nor even of Paul's letters. Would a book written after 90 AD partly about Paul have ignored his letters, which were so influential by then?

Most scholars who think Acts is an accurate account by Luke (as opposed to fiction) guess that the book was written over some time and finished somewhere around 70 AD.

Other books called the Acts of John, the Acts of Peter and Paul, the Acts of Thomas, etc. were written during the Church's first two centuries, but the Church as a whole judged these to be largely fictional and not inspired by God.

OVERVIEW

(1:1-6:7) The earliest church in Jerusalem: preaching for Jews, common life among Jewish Christians, worship at the Temple and synagogues, opposition from other Jews. Concludes with a resolved disagreement between Greek- and Aramaic-speaking believers.

(6:8-9:31) The first geographical expansion: Greek-speaking Jewish Christians ("Hellenists") bring the gospel to Jews, Samaritans (semi-Jews), and a convert to Judaism. The martyrdom of Stephen (a Hellenist) causes the expansion, and the conversion of Paul (a Jew from outside Palestine) partly results from the expansion.

(9:32-12:24) The first expansion to the Gentiles: To make this breakthrough, God uses Peter (an Aramaic-speaking Jew, a "Hebrew") rather than the Hellenists. The Hellenists begin evangelizing Gentiles in Antioch.

(12:25-16:5) The first geographical expansion into the Gentile world: Paul leads. When the Church decides that Gentile Christians need not live as Jews, the Gentile mission is free to explode. Opposition is still mainly Jewish.

(16:6-19:20) Paul's westward expansion reaches Europe. Jews continue to reject the gospel, and Gentiles continue to accept it. However, success with some Gentiles produces opposition from others.

(19:21-28:31) Paul reaches Rome with the gospel. Paul suffers many trials patiently while innocent of wrongdoing.

THEME: Church beginnings

EXPLANATION: Acts is the history of how Christianity was founded and organized and solved its problems. The community of believers began by faith in the risen Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, who enabled them to witness, to love, and to serve.

IMPORTANCE: New churches are continually being founded. By faith in Jesus Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit, the church can be a vibrant agent for change. As we face new problems, Acts gives important remedies for solving them.

THEME: Holy Spirit

EXPLANATION: The church did not start or grow by its own power or enthusiasm. The disciples were empowered by God's Holy Spirit. He was the promised Counselor and Guide sent when Jesus went to heaven.

IMPORTANCE: The Holy Spirit's work demonstrated that Christianity was supernatural. Thus the church became more Holy Spirit-conscious than problem-conscious. By faith, any believer can claim the Holy Spirit's power to do Christ's work.

THEME: Church growth

EXPLANATION: Acts presents the history of a dynamic, growing community of believers from Jerusalem to Syria, Africa, Asia, and Europe. In the first century, Christianity

spread from believing Jews to non-Jews in 39 cities and 30 countries, islands, or provinces.

IMPORTANCE: When the Holy Spirit works, there is movement, excitement, and growth. He gives us the motivation, energy, and ability to get the gospel to the whole world. How are you fitting into God's plan for expanding Christianity? What is your place in this movement?

THEME: Witnessing

EXPLANATION: Peter, John, Philip, Paul, Barnabas, and thousands more witnessed to their new faith in Christ. By personal testimony, preaching, or defense before authorities, they told the story with boldness and courage to groups of all sizes.

IMPORTANCE: We are God's people, chosen to be part of his plan to reach the world. In love and by faith, we can have the Holy Spirit's help as we witness or preach. Witnessing is also beneficial to us because it strengthens our faith as we confront those who challenge it.

THEME: Opposition

EXPLANATION: Through imprisonment, beatings, plots, and riots, Christians were persecuted by both Jews and Gentiles. But the opposition became a catalyst for the spread of Christianity. Growth during times of oppression showed that Christianity was not the work of humans, but of God.

IMPORTANCE: God can work through any opposition. When severe treatment from hostile unbelievers comes, realize that it has come because you have been a faithful witness and you have looked for the opportunity to present the Good News about Christ. Seize the opportunities that opposition brings.

TIMELINE

Jesus crucified; Pentecost; church begun A.D. 33

Stephen martyred; Paul's conversion 35

Paul returns to Tarsus 38

Barnabas goes to find Paul 43

James martyred; Peter in prison 44

Paul's first missionary journey 46-48

Jerusalem Council 50

Paul's second missionary journey 50-52

Paul's third missionary journey 53-57

Nero becomes emperor 54

Paul imprisoned in Caesarea 57-59

Paul's journey to Rome 59

Paul released from prison 62

Paul martyred 67?

Rome destroys Jerusalem 70

THE CHURCH BEGINS

The book of Acts begins where the Gospels leave off, reporting on the actions of the apostles and the work of the Holy Spirit. Beginning in Jerusalem, the church is established and grows rapidly, then faces intense persecution, which drives the believers out into the surrounding areas. Through this dispersion, Samaritans and Gentiles hear the Good News and believe.

The book of Acts continues the story Luke began in his Gospel, covering the 30 years after Jesus was taken up into heaven. During that short time the church was established, and the gospel of salvation was taken throughout the world, even to the capital of the Roman empire. Those preaching the gospel, though ordinary people with human frailties and limitations, were empowered by the Holy Spirit to take the Good News "all over the world" (17:6). Throughout the book of Acts we learn about the nature of the church and how we today are also to go about turning our world upside down.

Luke's former book was the Gospel of Luke; that book was also addressed to Theophilus, whose name means "one who loves God."

Luke 1-11 is the bridge between the events recorded in the Gospels and the events marking the beginning of the church. Jesus spent 40 days teaching his disciples, and they were changed drastically. Before, they had argued with each other, deserted their Lord, and one (Peter) even lied about knowing Jesus. Here, in a series of meetings with the living, resurrected Christ, the disciples had many questions answered. They became convinced about the resurrection, learned about the kingdom of God, and learned about their power source--the Holy Spirit.

Luke says that the disciples were eyewitnesses to all that had happened to Jesus Christ--his life before his crucifixion ("suffering"), and the 40 days after his resurrection as he taught them more about the kingdom of God. Today there are still people who doubt Jesus' resurrection. But Jesus appeared to the disciples on many occasions after his resurrection, proving that he was alive. Look at the change the resurrection made in the disciples' lives. At Jesus' death, they scattered--they were disillusioned, and they feared for their lives. After seeing the resurrected Christ, they were fearless and risked everything to spread the Good News about him around the world. They faced imprisonment, beatings, rejection, and martyrdom, yet they never compromised their mission.

These men would not have risked their lives for something they knew was a fraud. They knew Jesus was raised from the dead, and the early church was fired with their enthusiasm to tell others. It is important to know this so we can have confidence in their testimony. Twenty centuries later we can still be confident that our faith is based on fact.

Jesus explained that with his coming, the kingdom of God was inaugurated. When he returned to heaven, God's kingdom would remain in the hearts of all believers through the presence of the Holy Spirit. But the kingdom of God will not be fully realized until Jesus Christ comes again to judge all people and remove all evil from the world. Before that time, believers are to work to spread God's kingdom across the world. The book of Acts records how this work was begun. This study is pertinent because we must finish what the early church started.

The 'Trinity' is a description of the unique relationship of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. If Jesus had stayed on earth, his physical presence would have limited the spread of the gospel, because physically he could be in only one place at a time. After Christ was taken up into heaven, he would be spiritually present everywhere through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was sent so that God would be with and within his followers after Christ returned to heaven. The Spirit would comfort them, guide them to know his truth, remind them of Jesus' words, give them the right words to say, and fill them with power.

Compare with John 14-16 and record what you learn: _____

At Pentecost (2:1-4) the Holy Spirit was made available to all who believed in Jesus.

(1) The Spirit marks the beginning of the Christian experience. We cannot belong to Christ without his Spirit

Read the following verses and record what you learn:

Romans 8:9 _____

1 Corinthians 6:17 _____

Galatians 4:6,7 _____

1 Corinthians 12:13 _____

We cannot be united to Christ without his Spirit; we cannot be adopted as his children without his Spirit; be in the body of Christ except by baptism in the Spirit.

(2) The Spirit is the power of our new lives. He begins a lifelong process of change as we become more like Christ. Read the following verses and record what you learn:

Galatians 3:3 _____

Philippians 1:6 _____

When we receive Christ by faith, we begin an immediate personal relationship with God. The Holy Spirit works in us to help us become like Christ.

(3) The Spirit unites the Christian community in Christ. The Holy Spirit can be experienced by all believers, and works through all believers. Read the following verses and record what you learn:

Ephesians 2:19-22 _____

1 Corinthians 12:11 _____

Ephesians 4:4 _____

CHART: A JOURNEY THROUGH THE BOOK OF ACTS

Beginning with a brief summary of Jesus' last days on earth with his disciples, his ascension, and the selection of a replacement for Judas Iscariot, Luke moves quickly to his subject--the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church. Pentecost, highlighted by the filling of the Holy Spirit (2:1-13) and Peter's powerful sermon (2:14-42), was the beginning. Then the Jerusalem church grew daily through the bold witness of Peter and John and the love of the believers (2:43-4:37). The infant church was not without problems, however, with external opposition (resulting in imprisonment, beatings, and death) and internal deceit and complaining. Greek-speaking Jewish believers were appointed to help with the administration of the church to free the apostles to preach. Stephen and Philip were among the first deacons, and Stephen became the church's first martyr (5:1-8:3).

Instead of stopping Christianity, opposition and persecution served as catalysts for its spread because the believers took the message with them wherever they fled (8:4). Soon there were converts throughout Samaria and even in Ethiopia (8:5-40).

At this point, Luke introduces us to a bright young Jew, zealous for the law and intent on ridding Judaism of the Jesus heresy. But on the way to Damascus to capture believers, Saul was converted when he was confronted in person by the risen Christ (9:1-9). Through the ministry of Ananias and the sponsorship of Barnabas, Saul (Paul) was welcomed into the fellowship and then sent to Tarsus for safety (9:10-30).

Meanwhile, the church continued to thrive throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. Luke recounts Peter's preaching and how Peter healed Aeneas in Lydda and Dorcas in Joppa (9:31-43). While in Joppa, Peter learned through a vision that he could take the gospel to the "unclean" Gentiles. Peter understood, and he faithfully shared the truth with Cornelius, whose entire household became believers (chapter 10). This was startling news to the Jerusalem church; but when Peter told his story, they praised God for his plan for all people to hear the Good News (11:1-18). This pushed the church into even wider circles as the message was preached to Greeks in Antioch, where Barnabas went to encourage the believers and find Saul (11:20-26).

To please the Jewish leaders, Herod joined in the persecution of the Jerusalem church, killing James (John's brother) and imprisoning Peter. But God freed Peter, and Peter walked from prison to a prayer meeting on his behalf at John Mark's house (chapter 12).

Here Luke shifts the focus to Paul's ministry. Commissioned by the Antioch church for a missionary tour (13:1-3), Paul and Barnabas took the gospel to Cyprus and south Galatia with great success (13:4-14:28). But the Jewish-Gentile controversy still smoldered, and with so many Gentiles responding to Christ, the controversy threatened to divide the church. So a council met in Jerusalem to rule on the relationship of Gentile Christians to the Old Testament laws. After hearing both sides, James (Jesus' brother and the leader of the Jerusalem church) resolved the issue and sent messengers to the churches with the decision (15:1-31).

After the council, Paul and Silas preached in Antioch. Then they left for Syria and Cilicia as Barnabas and Mark sailed for Cyprus (15:36-41). On this second missionary journey, Paul and Silas traveled throughout Macedonia and Achaia, establishing churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth, and Ephesus before returning to Antioch (16:1-18:21). Luke also tells of the ministry of Apollos (18:24-28).

On Paul's third missionary trip he traveled through Galatia, Phrygia, Macedonia, and Achaia, encouraging and teaching the believers (19:1-21:9). During this time, he felt compelled to go to Jerusalem; and although he was warned by Agabus and others of impending imprisonment (21:10-12), he continued his journey in that direction.

While in Jerusalem, Paul was accosted in the temple by an angry mob and taken into protective custody by the Roman commander (21:17-22:29). Now we see Paul as a prisoner and on trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin (23:1-9), Governor Felix (23:23-24:27), and Festus and Agrippa (25:1-26:32). In each case, Paul gave a strong and clear witness for his Lord.

Because Paul appealed to Caesar, however, he was sent to Rome for the final hearing of his case. But on the way the ship was destroyed in a storm, and the sailors and prisoners had to swim ashore. Even in this circumstance Paul shared his faith (27:1-28:10). Eventually the journey continued and Paul arrived in Rome, where he was held under house arrest while awaiting trial (28:11-31).

Luke ends Acts abruptly with the encouraging word that Paul had freedom in his captivity to talk to visitors and guards: "boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ" (28:31).

During the years of Jesus' ministry on earth, the disciples continually wondered about his kingdom. When would it come? What would their role be? In the traditional view, the Messiah would be an earthly conqueror who would free Israel from Rome. But the kingdom Jesus spoke about was first of all a 'spiritual' kingdom established in the hearts

and lives of believers. Compare with Luke 17:21 and record what you learn: _____

God's presence and power dwell in believers in the person of the Holy Spirit.

Like other Jews, the disciples chafed under their Roman rulers. They wanted Jesus to free Israel from Roman power and then become their king. Jesus replied that God the Father sets the timetable for all events--worldwide, national, and personal. If you want changes that God isn't making immediately, don't become impatient. Instead, trust God's timetable.

Power from the Holy Spirit is not limited to strength beyond the ordinary--that power also involves courage, boldness, confidence, insight, ability, and authority. The disciples would need all these gifts to fulfill their mission. If you believe in Jesus Christ, you can experience the power of the Holy Spirit in your life.

Jesus promised the disciples that they would receive power to witness after they received the Holy Spirit. Notice the progression:

- (1) they would receive the Holy Spirit,**
- (2) He would give them power, and**
- (3) they would witness with extraordinary results. Often we try to reverse the order and witness by our own power and authority. Witnessing is not showing what we can do for God. It is showing and telling what God has done for us.**

Jesus had instructed his disciples to witness to people of all nations about him. Read Matthew 28:19, 20 and record what you learn: _____

Compare with Luke 24:49 _____

But they were told to wait first for the Holy Spirit. God has important work for you to do for him, but you must do it by the power of the Holy Spirit. We often like to get on with the job, even if it means running ahead of God. But waiting is sometimes part of God's plan. Are you waiting and listening for God's complete instructions, or are you running ahead of his plans? We need God's timing and power to be truly effective.

The gospel was to spread, geographically, from Jerusalem, into Judea and Samaria, and finally to the whole world. It would begin with the devout Jews in Jerusalem and Samaria, spread to the mixed race in Samaria, and finally be offered to the Gentiles in the uttermost parts of the earth. God's gospel has not reached its final destination if

someone in your family, your workplace, your school, or your community hasn't heard about Jesus Christ. Make sure that you are contributing in some way to the ever-widening circle of God's loving message.

It was important for the disciples to see Jesus taken up into heaven, His ascension. Then they knew without a doubt that he was God and that his home was in heaven.

After 40 days with his disciples, Jesus returned to heaven. The two men dressed in white were angels who proclaimed to the disciples that one day Jesus would return in the same way he went--bodily and visibly. History is not haphazard or cyclical; it is moving toward a specific point--the return of Jesus to judge and rule over the earth. We should be ready for his sudden return, not by standing around "looking into the sky," but by working hard to share the gospel so that others will be able to share in God's great blessings.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:2 and record what you learn: _____

After Christ was taken up into heaven, the disciples immediately returned to Jerusalem and had a prayer meeting. Jesus had said they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit in a few days, so they waited and prayed. When you face a difficult task, an important decision, or a baffling dilemma, don't rush into the work and just hope it comes out the way it should. Instead, your first step should be to pray for the Holy Spirit's power and guidance.

A "Zealot" could mean anyone zealous for the Jewish law. The Zealots may have been a radical political party working for the violent overthrow of Roman rule in Israel.

At this time, Jesus' brothers were with the disciples. During Jesus' lifetime, they did not believe he was the Messiah, but his resurrection must have convinced them. Jesus' special appearance to James, one of his brothers, may have been an especially significant event in their conversion.

Read the following verses and record what you learn:

John 7:5 _____

1 Corinthians 15:7 _____

This was the first church business meeting. The small group of 11 had already grown to more than 120. The main order of business was to appoint a new disciple, or apostle, as the 12 were now called. While the apostles waited, they were doing what they could--praying, seeking God's guidance, and getting organized. Waiting for God to work does not mean sitting around doing nothing. We must do what we can, while we can, as long as we don't run ahead of God.

How could someone who had been with Jesus daily betray him? Judas received the same calling and teaching as everyone else. But he chose to reject Christ's warning as well as his offers of mercy. Judas hardened his heart and joined in the plot with Jesus' enemies to put him to death. Judas remained unrepentant to the end, and he finally committed suicide. Although Jesus predicted this would happen, it was Judas's choice. Those privileged to be 'close' to the truth are not necessarily 'committed' to the truth.

Matthew says that Judas hanged himself (Matthew 27:5); Acts says that he fell. The traditional explanation is that when Judas hanged himself, the rope or branch broke, Judas fell, and his body burst open.

There were many who consistently followed Jesus throughout his ministry on earth. The 12 disciples were his inner circle, but others shared the disciples' deep love for and commitment to Jesus. The apostles had to choose a replacement for Judas Iscariot. They outlined specific criteria for making the choice. When the "finalists" had been chosen, the apostles prayed, asking God to guide the selection process. This gives us a good example of how to proceed when we are making important decisions. Set up criteria consistent with the Bible, examine the alternatives, and pray for wisdom and guidance to reach a wise decision.

The disciples became 'apostles.' 'Disciple' means follower or learner, and 'apostle' means messenger or missionary. These men now had the special assignment of spreading the Good News of Jesus' death and resurrection.

THE PENTECOST EXPERIENCE

Held 50 days after Passover, Pentecost was also called the Feast of Weeks. It was one of three major annual feasts (Deut. 16:16), a festival of thanksgiving for the harvested crops. Jesus was crucified at Passover time, and he ascended 40 days after his resurrection. The Holy Spirit came 50 days after the resurrection, ten days after the ascension. Jews of many nations gathered in Jerusalem for this festival. Thus Peter's speech in 2:14 was given to an international audience, and it resulted in a worldwide harvest of new believers--the first converts to Christianity.

Acts 2:3 and 4 were a fulfillment of John the Baptist's words about the Holy Spirit's baptizing with fire and of the prophet Joel's words about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Read Luke 3:16 and Joel 2:28, 29 and record what you learn: _____

Why tongues of fire? Tongues symbolize speech and the communication of the gospel. Fire symbolizes God's purifying presence, which burns away the undesirable elements of our lives and sets our hearts aflame to ignite the lives of others. On Mount Sinai, God confirmed the validity of the Old Testament law with fire from heaven.

Read Exodus 19:16-18 and record what you learn: _____

At Pentecost, God confirmed the validity of the Holy Spirit's ministry by sending fire. At Mount Sinai, fire had come down on one place; at Pentecost, fire came down on many believers, symbolizing that God's presence is now available to all who believe in him.

God made his presence known to this group of believers in a spectacular way--violent wind, fire, and his Holy Spirit. Would you like God to reveal himself to you in such recognizable ways? He may do so, but be wary of forcing your expectations on God. In 1 Kings 19:10-13, Elijah also needed a message from God. There was a great wind, then an earthquake, and finally a fire. But God's message came in a "gentle whisper." God may use dramatic methods to work in your life--or he may speak in gentle whispers. Wait patiently and always listen. Read the section from 1 Kings and record what you learn: _____

These people literally spoke in other languages--a miraculous attention-getter for the international crowd gathered in town for the feast. All the nationalities represented recognized their own languages being spoken. But more than miraculous speaking drew

people's attention; they saw and heard the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The apostles continued to minister in the power of the Holy Spirit wherever they went.

In Acts 2:9 and 10 lists lands from which Jews came to the festivals in Jerusalem. These Jews were not living in Palestine because they had been dispersed throughout the world through captivities and persecutions. Very likely, some of the Jews who responded to Peter's message returned to their homelands with God's Good News of salvation. Thus God prepared the way for the spread of the gospel. As you read Acts, you will see how the way was often prepared for Paul and other messengers by people who became believers at Pentecost. The church at Rome, for example, was probably begun by such Jewish believers.

Peter had been an unstable leader during Jesus' ministry, letting his bravado be his downfall, even denying that he knew Jesus (John 18:15-18, 25-27). But Christ had forgiven and restored him (John 21). This was a new Peter, humble but bold. His confidence came from the Holy Spirit, who made him a powerful and dynamic speaker. Peter tells the people why they should listen to the testimony of the believers: because the Old Testament prophecies had been entirely fulfilled in Jesus (2:14-21), because Jesus is the Messiah (2:25-36), and because the risen Christ could change their lives (2:37-40).

Peter answered accusations that they were all drunk (2:13) by saying it was much too early in the day for that.

Not everything mentioned in Joel 2:28, 29 was happening that particular morning. The "last days" include all the days between Christ's first and second comings, and is another way of saying "from now on." "The great and glorious day of the Lord" (2:20) denotes the whole Christian age. Even Moses yearned for the Lord to put his Spirit on everyone. Read Numbers 11:29 and record what you learn: _____

Everything that happened to Jesus was under God's control. His plans were never disrupted by the Roman government or the Jewish officials. This was especially comforting to those facing oppression during the time of the early Christian church.

Peter began with a public proclamation of the resurrection at a time when it could be verified by many witnesses. This was a powerful statement, because many of the people listening to Peter's words had been in Jerusalem 50 days earlier at Passover and may have seen or heard about the crucifixion and resurrection of this "great teacher." Jesus' resurrection was the ultimate sign that what he said about himself was true. Without the resurrection, we would have no reason to believe in Jesus. Read 1 Corinthians 15:14 And record what you learn: _____

Peter quoted from Psalm 16:8-11--a psalm written by David. He explained that David was not writing about himself, because David died and was buried (2:29). Instead, he wrote as a prophet (2:30) who spoke of the Messiah who would be resurrected. The audience understood "decay" (2:27) to mean the grave. The emphasis here is that Jesus' body was 'not' left to decay but was in fact resurrected and glorified.

After Peter's powerful, Spirit-filled message, the people were deeply moved and asked, "What shall we do?" This is the basic question we must ask. It is not enough to be sorry for our sins--we must let God forgive them, and then we must live like forgiven people. Has God spoken to you through his Word or through the words of another believer? Like Peter's audience, ask God what you should do, and then obey.

About 3,000 people became new believers when Peter preached the Good News about Christ. These new Christians were united with the other believers, taught by the apostles, and included in the prayer meetings and fellowship. New believers in Christ need to be in groups where they can learn God's Word, pray, and mature in the faith. If you have just begun a relationship with Christ, seek out other believers for fellowship, prayer, and teaching. This is the way to grow.

"Breaking of bread" refers to communion services that were celebrated in remembrance of Jesus and were patterned after the Last Supper that Jesus had with his disciples before his death (Matthew 26:26-29).

Recognizing the other believers as brothers and sisters in the family of God, the Christians in Jerusalem shared all they had so that all could benefit from God's gifts. It is tempting--especially if we have material wealth--to cut ourselves off from one another, each taking care of his or her own interests, each providing for and enjoying his or her own little piece of the world. But as part of God's spiritual family, it is our responsibility to help one another in every way possible. God's family works best when its members work together.

A common misconception about the first Christians (who were mostly Jews) was that they rejected the Jewish religion. But these believers saw Jesus' message and resurrection as the fulfillment of everything they knew and believed from the Old Testament. The Jewish believers at first did not separate from the rest of the Jewish community. They still went to the temple and synagogues for worship and instruction in the Scriptures. But their belief in Jesus created great friction with Jews who didn't believe that Jesus was the Messiah. Thus, believing Jews were forced to meet in private homes for communion, prayer, and teaching about Christ. By the end of the first century, many of these Jewish believers were excommunicated from their synagogues.

A healthy Christian community attracts people to Christ. The Jerusalem church's zeal for worship and brotherly love was contagious. A healthy, loving church will grow in numbers. What are you doing to make our church the kind of place that will attract others to Christ?

BEGINNING MINISTRY

The Jews observed three times of prayer--morning (9:00 a.m.), afternoon (3:00 p.m.), and evening (sunset). At these times devout Jews and Gentiles who believed in God often went to the temple to pray. As Chapter 3 opens, Peter and John were going to the temple at 3:00 p.m.

The gate called Beautiful was an entrance to the temple, not to the city. It was one of the favored entrances, and many people passed through it on their way to worship. The crippled man was begging where he would be seen by the most people. Giving money to such beggars was considered praiseworthy in the Jewish religion. So the beggar wisely placed himself where pious people might see him on their way to worship at the temple.

The crippled man asked for money, but Peter gave him something much better--the use of his legs. We often ask God to solve a small problem, but he wants to give us a whole new life and help for 'all' our problems. When we ask God for help, he may say, "I've got something even better for you." Ask God for what you want, but don't be surprised when he gives you what you really 'need.

The beggar was healed "In the name of Jesus Christ." This means "by the authority of Jesus Christ." The apostles were doing this healing through the Holy Spirit's power, not their own. In his excitement, the formerly crippled man began to jump and walk around. He also praised God! And then others were also awed by God's power. Don't forget to thank people who help you, but also remember to praise God for his care and protection.

Solomon's Colonnade was a large covered porch or entrance with columns. Seeing that he had an audience, Peter capitalized on the opportunity to share Jesus Christ. He clearly presented his message by telling

- (1) who Jesus is,**
- (2) how the Jews had rejected him,**
- (3) why their rejection was fatal, and**
- (4) what they needed to do to change the situation**

Peter told the crowd that they still had a choice; God still offered them the opportunity to believe and receive Jesus as their Messiah and as their Lord. Displays of God's mercy and grace, such as the healing of this crippled man, often create teachable moments. Pray to have courage like Peter to see these opportunities and to use them to speak up for Christ.

In Jonh 19:1-16 we read the account of Jesus' arrest and trial. Read these verses and record what you learn: _____

Pilate had decided to release Jesus, but the people had clamored to have Barabbas, a murderer, released instead. When Peter said "You handed him over to be killed," he meant it literally. Jesus' trial and death had occurred right there in Jerusalem only weeks earlier. It wasn't an event of the distant past--most of these people had heard about it, and some may very well have taken part in condemning Jesus.

The religious leaders thought they had put an end to Jesus when they crucified him. But their confidence was shaken when Peter told them that Jesus was alive again and that this time they could not harm him. Peter's message emphasized that

(1) the people and their religious leaders killed Jesus (3:17)
(2) God brought him back to life, and
(3) the apostles were witnesses to this fact.

After pointing out the sin and injustice of these leaders, Peter showed the significance of the resurrection, God's triumph and power over death.

Jesus, not the apostles, received the glory for the healing of the crippled man. In those days a man's name represented his character; it stood for his authority and power. By using Jesus' name, Peter showed who gave him the authority and power to heal. The apostles did not emphasize what 'they' could do, but what God could do through them. Jesus' name is not to be used as magic--it must be used in faith. When we pray in Jesus' name, we must remember that it is Christ himself, not merely the sound of his name, who gives our prayers their power.

These prophecies quoted in 3:18 are found in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 50:6 and Isaiah 53. Peter was explaining the kind of Messiah God had sent to earth. The Jews expected a great ruler, not a suffering servant. John the Baptist had prepared the way for Jesus by preaching repentance. The apostles' message of salvation also included the call to repentance--acknowledging personal sin and turning away from it. Many people want the benefits of being identified with Christ without admitting their own disobedience and turning from sin. The key to forgiveness is confessing your sin and turning from it.

When we repent, God promises not only to wipe out our sins, but to bring spiritual refreshment. Repentance may at first seem painful because it is hard to give up certain sins. But God will give you a better way. As Hosea promised, "Let us acknowledge the LORD; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth" (Hosea 6:3). Do you feel a need to be refreshed? Read 1 John 1:9 and record what you learn about confession of sin: _____

The time when God will "restore everything" refers to the second coming, the Last Judgment, and the removal of sin from the world.

Most Jews thought that Joshua was this prophet predicted by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15. Peter was saying that the prophet was Jesus Christ. Peter wanted to show them that their long-awaited Messiah had come! He and all the apostles were calling the Jewish nation to realize what they had done to their Messiah, to repent, and to believe. From this point on in Acts, we see many Jews rejecting the gospel. So the message went also to the Gentiles, many of whom were open to receive Jesus.

The prophet Samuel lived during the transition between the judges and the kings of Israel, and he was seen as the first in a succession of prophets. He anointed David king, founding David's royal line, from which the Messiah eventually came. All the prophets pointed to a future Messiah. God promised Abraham that he would bless the world through Abraham's descendants, the Jewish race (Genesis 12:3), from which the Messiah would come. God intended the Jewish nation to be a separate and holy nation that would teach the world about God, introduce the Messiah, and then carry on his work in the world. After the days of Solomon, the nation gave up its mission to tell the world about God. Here too, in apostolic times as well as in the time Jesus spent on earth, Israel rejected its Messiah.

THE BURDEN OF MINISTRY

The priests described in 4:1 may have been chief priests, who had special influence and were often close relatives of the high priests. The captain of the temple guard was the leader of the guards who were set around the temple to ensure order. The Sadducees were members of a small but powerful Jewish religious sect that did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. They were the religious leaders who stood to gain financially by cooperating with the Romans. Most of those who engineered and carried out Jesus' arrest and crucifixion were from these three groups.

Peter and John spoke to the people during the afternoon prayer time. The Sadducees moved in quickly to investigate. Because they did not believe in the resurrection, they were understandably disturbed with what the apostles were saying. Peter and John were refuting one of their fundamental beliefs and thus threatening their authority as religious teachers. Even though the nation was under Roman rule, the Sadducees had almost unlimited power over the temple grounds. Thus they were able to arrest Peter and John for no other reason than teaching something that contradicted their beliefs.

Not often will sharing the gospel send us to jail as it did Peter and John. Still, we run risks in trying to win others to Christ. We might be willing to face a night in jail if it would bring 5,000 people to Christ, but shouldn't we also be willing to suffer for the sake of even one? What do you risk in witnessing--rejection, persecution? Whatever the risks, realize that nothing done for God is ever wasted.

These rulers, elders, and teachers of the law made up the Jewish council--the same council that had condemned Jesus to death. It had 70 members plus the current high priest, who presided over the group. The Sadducees held a majority in this ruling group. These were the wealthy, intellectual, and powerful men of Jerusalem. Jesus' followers stood before this council just as he had.

Read Luke 22:66 and record what you learn: _____

Annas had been deposed as high priest by the Romans, who then appointed Caiaphas, Annas's son-in-law, in his place. But because the Jews considered the office of high priest a lifetime position, they still called Annas by that title and gave him respect and authority within the council. Annas and Caiaphas had played significant roles in Jesus' trial. Read John 18:24, 28 and record what you learn: _____

It did not please them that the man they thought they had sacrificed for the good of the nation (John 11:49-51) had followers who were just as persistent and who promised to be just as troublesome as he was.

The council asked Peter and John:

1. by what power they had healed the man (3:6, 7)
2. and by what authority they preached (3:12-26)

The actions and words of Peter and John threatened these religious leaders who, for the most part, were more interested in their reputations and positions than in God. Through the help of the Holy Spirit Peter spoke boldly before the council, actually putting the council on trial by showing them that the One they had crucified had risen again. Instead of being defensive, the apostles went on the offensive, boldly speaking out for God and presenting the gospel to these leaders.

Acts 4:11 is the capstone of Peter's speech. The capstone unites the two sides of an arch and holds it together. Peter said that the Jews rejected Jesus, but now Christ has become the capstone of the church. Without him there would be no church, because it wouldn't be able to stand.

Read the following verses and record your findings:

Psalm 118:22 _____

Mark 12:10 _____

1 Peter 2:7 _____

Many people react negatively to the fact that there is no other name than that of Jesus to call on for salvation. Yet this is not something the church decided; it is the specific teaching of Jesus himself (John 14:6). If God designated Jesus to be the Savior of the world, no one else can be his equal. Christians are to be open-minded on many issues, but not on how we are saved from sin. No other religious teacher could die for our sins; no other religious teacher came to earth as God's only Son; no other religious teacher rose from the dead. Our focus should be on Jesus, whom God offered as the way to have an eternal relationship with himself. There is no other name or way!

Knowing that Peter and John were unschooled, the council was amazed at what being with Jesus had done for them. A changed life convinces people of Christ's power. One of your greatest testimonies is the difference others see in your life and attitudes since you have believed in Christ.

Although the evidence was overwhelming and irrefutable (changed lives and a healed man), the religious leaders refused to believe in Christ and continued to try to suppress the truth. Don't be surprised if some people reject you and your positive witness for Christ. When minds are closed, even the clearest presentation of the facts can't open them. But don't give up either. Pray for those people and continue to spread the gospel.

We sometimes may be afraid to share our faith in Christ because people might feel uncomfortable and might reject us. But Peter and John's zeal for the Lord was so strong that they could not keep quiet, even when threatened. If your courage to witness for God has weakened, pray that your boldness may increase. Remember Jesus' promise, "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven."

Read Matthew 10:32 and record what you learn: _____

Notice finally how the believers prayed. First they praised God; then they told God their specific problem and asked for his help. They did not ask God to remove the problem, but to help them deal with it. This is a model for us to follow when we pray. We may ask God to remove our problems, and he may choose to do so. But we must recognize that often he will leave the problem in place and give us the strength and courage to deal with it.

Acts 4:27 mentions Herod. This Herod was Herod Antipas, appointed by the Romans to rule over the territory of Galilee. Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor over Judea. He bowed to pressure from the crowd and sentenced Jesus to death. God is the sovereign Lord of all events who rules history to fulfill his purpose. What his will determines, his power carries out. No army, government, or council can stand in God's way.

Boldness, however, is not reckless impulsiveness. Boldness requires courage to press on through our fears and do what we know is right. How can we be more bold? Like the disciples, we need to pray with others for that courage. To gain boldness, you can

- (1) pray for the power of the Holy Spirit to give you courage**
- (2) look for opportunities in your family and neighborhood to talk about Christ**
- (3) realize that rejection, social discomfort, and embarrassment are not necessarily persecution**
- (4) start where you are by being bolder in small ways.**

Differences of opinion are inevitable among human personalities and can actually be helpful, if handled well. But spiritual unity is essential--loyalty, commitment, and love for God and his Word. Without spiritual unity, the church could not survive. Paul wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians to urge the church in Corinth toward greater unity.

None of these Christians felt that what they had was their own, and so they were able to give and share, eliminating poverty among them. They would not let a brother or sister suffer when others had plenty. How do you feel about your possessions? We should adopt the attitude that everything we have comes from God, and we are only sharing what is already his.

The early church was able to share possessions and property as a result of the unity brought by the Holy Spirit working in and through the believers' lives. This way of living is different from communism because

(1) the sharing was voluntary

(2) it didn't involve 'all' private property, but only as much as was needed

(3) it was not a membership requirement in order to be a part of the church.

The spiritual unity and generosity of these early believers attracted others to them. This organizational structure is not a Biblical command, but it offers vital principles for us to follow.

PROFILE: BARNABAS

Every group needs an "encourager," because everyone needs encouragement at one time or another. However, the value of encouragement is often missed because it tends to be private rather than public. In fact, people most need encouragement when they feel most alone. A man named Joseph was such an encourager that he earned the nickname "Son of Encouragement," or Barnabas, from the Jerusalem Christians.

Barnabas was drawn to people he could encourage, and he was a great help to those around him. It is delightful that wherever Barnabas encouraged Christians, non-Christians flocked to become believers!

Barnabas's actions were crucial to the early church. In a way, we can thank him for most of the New Testament. God used his relationship with Paul at one point and with Mark at another to keep these two men going when either might have failed. Barnabas did wonders with encouragement!

When Paul arrived in Jerusalem for the first time following his conversion, the local Christians were understandably reluctant to welcome him. They thought his story was a trick to capture more Christians. Only Barnabas proved willing to risk his life to meet with Paul and then convince the others that their former enemy was now a vibrant believer in Jesus. We can only wonder what might have happened to Paul without Barnabas.

It was Barnabas who encouraged Mark to go with him and Paul to Antioch. Mark joined them on their first missionary journey, but decided during the trip to return home. Later, Barnabas wanted to invite Mark to join them for another journey, but Paul would not agree. As a result, the partners went separate ways, Barnabas with Mark and Paul with Silas. This actually doubled the missionary effort. Barnabas's patient encouragement was confirmed by Mark's eventual effective ministry. Paul and Mark were later reunited in missionary efforts.

As Barnabas's life shows, we are rarely in a situation where there isn't someone we can encourage. Our tendency, however, is to criticize instead. It may be important at times to point out someone's shortcomings, but before we have the right to do this, we must build that person's trust through encouragement. Are you prepared to encourage those with whom you come in contact today?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- One of the first to sell possessions to help the Christians in Jerusalem
- First to travel with Paul as a missionary team
- Was an encourager, as his nickname shows, and thus one of the most quietly influential people in the early days of Christianity
- Called an apostle, although not one of the original 12

Weakness and mistake:

- With Peter, temporarily stayed aloof from Gentile believers until Paul corrected him

Lessons from his life:

- Encouragement is one of the most effective ways to help
- Sooner or later, true obedience to God will involve risk
- There is always someone who needs encouragement

Vital statistics:

- Where: Cyprus, Jerusalem, Antioch
- Occupations: Missionary, teacher
- Relatives: Aunt: Mary. Cousin: John Mark
- Contemporaries: Peter, Silas, Paul, Herod Agrippa I

Key verses: "When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord" (Acts 11:23, 24).

Barnabas's story is told in Acts 4:36, 37; 9:27-15:39. He is also mentioned in 1 Corinthians 9:6; Galatians 2:1, 9, 13; Colossians 4:10.

Acts 4:36 tells us that Barnabas (Joseph) was a respected leader of the church. He was a Levite by birth, a member of the Jewish tribe that carried out temple duties. But his family had moved to Cyprus, so Barnabas didn't serve in the temple. He traveled with Paul on Paul's first missionary journey.

PROBLEMS IN MINISTRY

In Acts 5:1-8:3 we see both internal and external problems facing the early church. Inside, there was dishonesty (5:1-11) and administrative headaches (6:1-7). Outside, the church was being pressured by persecution. While church leaders were careful and sensitive in dealing with the internal problems, there was not much they could do to prevent the external pressures. Through it all, the leaders kept their focus on what was most important--spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Even after the Holy Spirit had come, the believers were not immune to Satan's temptations. Although Satan was defeated by Christ at the cross, he was still actively trying to make the believers stumble--as he does today.

Read Ephesians 6:12 and 1 Peter 5:8 and record what you learn: _____

Satan's overthrow is inevitable, but it will not occur until the last days, when Christ returns to judge the world. Read Revelation 20:10 and record what you learn: _____

The sin Ananias and Sapphira committed was not stinginess or holding back part of the money--it was their choice whether or not to sell the land and how much to give. Their sin was lying to God and God's people--saying they gave the whole amount but holding back some for themselves and trying to make themselves appear more generous than they really were. This act was judged harshly because dishonesty, greed, and covetousness are destructive in a church, preventing the Holy Spirit from working effectively. All lying is bad, but when we lie to try to deceive God and his people about our relationship with him, we destroy our testimony about Christ.

God's judgment on Ananias and Sapphira produced shock and fear among the believers, making them realize how seriously God regards sin in the church. Solomon's Colonnade was part of the temple complex built by King Herod the Great in an attempt to strengthen his relationship with the Jews. A colonnade is an entrance or porch supported by columns. Jesus taught and performed miracles in the temple many times. When the apostles went to the temple, they were undoubtedly in close proximity to the same religious leaders who had conspired to put Jesus to death.

Although many people greatly respected the apostles, they did not dare join them in the temple or work beside them. Some may have been afraid to face the same kind of persecution the apostles had just faced (4:17), while others may have feared a similar fate as the one that fell on Ananias and Sapphira.

What makes Christianity attractive? It is easy to be drawn to churches because of programs, good speakers, size, beautiful facilities, or fellowship. People were attracted

to the early church by expressions of God's power at work, the generosity, sincerity, honesty, and unity of the members, and the character of the leaders. Have our standards slipped? God wants to add believers to his 'church,' not just newer and better programs or larger and fancier facilities.

People who passed within Peter's shadow were healed, not by Peter's shadow, but by God's power working through Peter. What did these miraculous healings do for the early church?

(1) They attracted new believers.

(2) They confirmed the truth of the apostles' teaching.

(3) They demonstrated that the power of the Messiah who had been crucified and risen was now with his followers.

The religious leaders were jealous--Peter and the apostles were already commanding more respect than they had ever received. The difference, however, was that the religious leaders demanded respect and reverence for themselves; the apostles' goal was to bring respect and reverence to God. The apostles were respected not because they demanded it, but because they deserved it.

The apostles experienced power to do miracles, great boldness in preaching, and God's presence in their lives, yet they were not free from hatred and persecution. They were arrested, put in jail, beaten, and slandered by community leaders. Faith in God does not make troubles disappear; it makes troubles appear less frightening because it puts them in the right perspective. Don't expect everyone to react favorably when you share something as dynamic as your faith in Christ. Some will be jealous, afraid, or threatened. Expect some negative reactions, and remember that you must be more concerned about serving God than about the reactions of people (see 5:29).

The "full assembly of the elders of Israel" refers to the entire group, the 70 men of the council (also called the Sanhedrin). This was going to be no small trial. The religious leaders would do anything to stop these apostles from challenging their authority, threatening their secure position, and exposing their hypocritical motives to the people.

The temple at daybreak was a busy place. Many people stopped at the temple to pray and worship at sunrise. The apostles were already there, ready to tell them the good news of new life in Jesus Christ.

Suppose someone threatened to kill you if you didn't stop talking about God. You might be tempted to keep quiet. But after being threatened by powerful leaders, arrested, jailed, and miraculously released, the apostles went back to preaching. This was nothing less than God's power working through them (4:13)! When we are convinced of the

truth of Christ's resurrection and have experienced the presence and power of his Holy Spirit, we can have the confidence to speak out for Christ.

The apostles knew their priorities. While we should try to live at peace with everyone, conflict with the world and its authorities is sometimes inevitable for a Christian. There will be situations where you cannot obey both God and man. Then you must obey God and trust his Word. Let Jesus' words in Luke 6:22 encourage you: "Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man."

Read the following verses and record what you learn:

Romans 12:18 _____

John 15:18 _____

Luke 6:22 _____

The Pharisees were the other major party in the Jewish council with the Sadducees (5:17). The Pharisees were the strict keepers of the law--not only God's law, but hundreds of other rules they had added to God's law. They were careful about outward purity, but many had hearts full of impure motives. Jesus confronted the Pharisees often during his ministry on earth.

Gamaliel was an unexpected ally for the apostles, although he probably did not support their teachings. He was a distinguished member of the council and a teacher. While Gamaliel may have saved the apostles' lives, his real intentions probably were to prevent a division in the council and to avoid arousing the Romans. The apostles were popular among the people, and killing them might start a riot. Gamaliel's advice to the council gave the apostles some breathing room to continue their work. The council decided to wait, hoping that this would all fade away harmlessly. They couldn't have been more wrong. Ironically, Paul, later one of the greatest apostles, was one of Gamaliel's students. Read Acts 22:3 and record what you learn: _____

Gamaliel presented some sound advice about reacting to religious movements. Unless disciples in these groups endorse obviously dangerous doctrines or practices, it is often wiser to be tolerant rather than repressive. Sometimes only time will tell if they are merely the work of humans or if God is trying to say something through them. The next time a group promotes differing religious ideas, consider Gamaliel's advice, just in case you "find yourselves fighting against God."

Peter and John were warned repeatedly not to preach, but they continued in spite of the threats. We, too, should live as Christ has asked us to, sharing our faith no matter what the cost. We may not be beaten or thrown in jail, but we may be ridiculed, ostracized,

or slandered. To what extent are you willing to suffer for the sake of sharing the gospel with others?

Have you ever thought of persecution as a blessing, as something worth rejoicing about? This beating suffered by Peter and John was the first time any of the apostles had been physically abused for their faith. These men knew how Jesus had suffered, and they praised God that he had allowed them to be persecuted like their Lord. If you are mocked or persecuted for your faith, it isn't because you're doing something wrong, but because God has counted you "worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name."

Home Bible studies are not new. As the believers needed to grow in their new faith, home Bible studies met their needs, as well as serving as a means to introduce new people to the Christian faith. During later times of persecution, meeting in homes became the primary method of passing on Bible knowledge. Christians throughout the world still use this approach when under persecution and as a way to build up believers.

THE STONING OF STEPHEN

When we read the descriptions of the early church--the miracles, the sharing and generosity, the fellowship--we may wish we could have been a part of this "perfect" church. In reality, the early church had problems just as we do today. No church has ever been or will ever be perfect until Christ and his followers are united at his second coming. All churches have problems. If your church's shortcomings distress you, ask yourself: "Would a perfect church allow me to be a member?" Then do what you can to make your church better. A church does not have to be perfect to be faithful.

Another internal problem developed in the early church. The Hebraic Jews, native Jewish Christians, spoke Aramaic, a Semitic language. The Grecian Jews, Greek-speaking Christians, were probably Jews from other lands who were converted at Pentecost. The Greek-speaking Christians complained that their widows were being unfairly treated. This favoritism was probably not intentional, but was more likely caused by the language barrier. To correct the situation, the apostles put seven respected Greek-speaking men in charge of the food distribution program. This solved the problem and allowed the apostles to keep their focus on teaching and preaching the Good News about Jesus.

"The Twelve" are the 11 original disciples and Matthias, who was chosen to replace Judas Iscariot (1:26). As the early church increased in size, so did its needs. One great need was to organize the distribution of food to the poor. The apostles needed to focus on preaching, so they chose others to administer the food program. Each person has a vital part to play in the life of the church. Read 1 Corinthians 12 and record what you learn: _____

If you are in a position of leadership and find yourself overwhelmed by responsibilities, determine 'your' God-given abilities and priorities and then find others to help. If you are not in leadership, you have gifts that can be used by God in various areas of the church's ministry. Offer these gifts in service to him.

This administrative task was not taken lightly. Notice the requirements for the men who were to handle the food program: full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. People who carry heavy responsibilities and work closely with others should have these qualities. We must look for spiritually mature and wise men and women to lead our churches.

The apostle's priorities were correct. The ministry of the Word should never be neglected because of administrative burdens. Pastors should not try, or be expected to try, to do everything. Instead, the work of the church should be spread out among its members.

Around the world, the gospel has most often taken root in places prepared by the blood of martyrs. Before people can 'give' their lives for the gospel, however, they must first 'live' their lives for the gospel. One way God trains his servants is to place them in insignificant positions. Their desire to serve Christ is translated into the reality of serving others. Stephen was an effective administrator and messenger before becoming a martyr.

Stephen was named among the managers of food distribution in the early church. Long before violent persecution broke out against Christians, there was already social ostracism. Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah were usually cut off from their families. As a result, the believers depended on each other for support. The sharing of homes, food, and resources was both a practical and necessary mark of the early church. Eventually, the number of believers made it necessary to organize the sharing. People were being overlooked. There were complaints. Those chosen to help manage were chosen for their integrity, wisdom, and sensitivity to God.

Stephen, besides being a good administrator, was also a powerful speaker. When confronted in the temple by various antagonistic groups, Stephen's logic in responding was convincing. This is clear from the defense he made before the council. He presented a summary of the Jews' own history and made powerful applications that stung his listeners. During his defense Stephen must have known he was speaking his own death sentence. Members of the council could not stand to have their evil motives exposed. They stoned him to death while he prayed for their forgiveness. His final words show how much like Jesus he had become in a short time. His death had a lasting impact on young Saul (Paul) of Tarsus, who would move from being a violent persecutor of Christians to being one of the greatest champions of the gospel the church has known.

Stephen's life is a continual challenge to all Christians. Because he was the first to die for the faith, his sacrifice raises questions: How many risks do we take in being Jesus' followers? Would we be willing to die for him? Are we really willing to live for him?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- One of seven leaders chosen to supervise food distribution to the needy in the early church
- Known for his spiritual qualities of faith, wisdom, grace, and power, and for the Spirit's presence in his life
- Outstanding leader, teacher, and debater
- First to give his life for the gospel

Lessons from his life:

- Striving for excellence in small assignments prepares one for greater responsibilities
- Real understanding of God always leads to practical and compassionate actions toward people

Vital statistics:

- Church responsibilities: Deacon--distributing food to the needy
- Contemporaries: Paul, Caiaphas, Gamaliel, the apostles

Spiritual leadership is serious business and must not be taken lightly by the church or its leaders. In the early church, the chosen men were ordained or commissioned (set apart by prayer and laying on of hands) by the apostles. Laying hands on someone, an ancient Jewish practice, was a way to set a person apart for special service.

Read Numbers 27:23 and Deuteronomy 34:9 and record what you learn: _____

Jesus had told the apostles that they were to witness first in Jerusalem (1:8). In a short time, their message had infiltrated the entire city and all levels of society. Even some priests were being converted, an obvious violation of the wishes of the council that would endanger their position.

The word of God spread like ripples on a pond where, from a single center, each wave touches the next, spreading wider and farther. The gospel still spreads this way today. You don't have to change the world single-handedly--it is enough just to be part of the wave, touching those around you, who in turn will touch others until all have felt the movement. Don't ever feel that your part is insignificant or unimportant.

The most important prerequisite for any kind of Christian service is to be filled with faith and the power of the Holy Spirit. By the Spirit's power, Stephen was a wise servant (6:3), miracle worker (6:8), and evangelist (6:10). By the Spirit's power, you can also exercise the gifts God has given you.

The Freedmen was either a group of Jewish slaves who had been freed by Rome and had formed their own synagogue in Jerusalem or a group who were known for their "free thinking" with regard to the Jewish Law. It is possible that Paul attended this synagogue since he was from Tarsus, one of the principle cities in Cilicia.

These men lied about Stephen, causing him to be arrested and brought before the Jewish council. The Sadducees, the dominant party in the council, accepted and studied only the writings of Moses (Genesis through Deuteronomy). In their view, to speak blasphemy against Moses was a crime. But from Stephen's speech (chapter 7), we learn that this accusation was false. Stephen based his review of Israel's history on Moses' writings.

When Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin (the council of religious leaders), the accusation against him was the same that the religious leaders had used against Jesus.

Read Matthew 26:59-61 and record what you learn: _____

The group falsely accused Stephen of wanting to change Moses' customs, because they knew that the Sadducees, who controlled the council, believed 'only' in Moses' laws.

This high priest was probably Caiaphas, the same man who had earlier questioned and condemned Jesus. Review John 18:24 for more information: _____

Stephen launched into a long speech about Israel's relationship with God. From Old Testament history he showed that the Jews had constantly rejected God's message and his prophets, and that this council had rejected the Messiah, God's Son. He made three main points:

- (1) Israel's history is the history of God's acts in the world**
- (2) people worshiped God long before there was a temple, because God does not live in a temple**
- (3) Jesus' death was just one more example of Israel's rebellion against and rejection of God.**

Stephen didn't really defend himself. Instead, he took the offensive, seizing the opportunity to summarize his teaching about Jesus. Stephen was accusing these religious leaders of failing to obey God's laws--the laws they prided themselves in following so meticulously. This was the same accusation that Jesus had leveled against them. When we witness for Christ, we don't need to be on the defensive. Instead we can simply share our faith.

Circumcision was a sign of the promise or covenant made between God, Abraham, and the entire nation of Israel. Read Genesis 17:9-13 and discuss what Stephen meant when he accused the Jewish leaders of having an "uncircumcised heart." _____

Because Stephen's speech summarized Israel's history, he summarized how this covenant fared during that time. Stephen pointed out that God always had kept his side of the promise, but Israel had failed again and again to uphold its end. Although the Jews in Stephen's day still circumcised their baby boys, they failed to obey God. The people's hearts were far from God. Their lack of faith and lack of obedience meant that they had failed to keep their part of the covenant.

Stephen's review of Jewish history gives a clear testimony of God's faithfulness and sovereignty. Despite the continued failures of his chosen people and the swirling world events, God was working out his plan. When faced by a confusing array of circumstances, remember that:

- (1) God is in control--nothing surprises him;**
- (2) this world is not all there is--it will pass away, but God is eternal;**
- (3) God is just, and he will make things right--punishing the wicked and rewarding the faithful;**

(4) God wants to use you (like Joseph, Moses, and Stephen) to make a difference in the world.

The Jews originally thought this "prophet" was Joshua. But Moses was prophesying about the coming Messiah. Read Deutonomy 18:15 and record what you learn: _____

Peter also quoted this verse in referring to the Messiah (3:22).

Stephen used the word "ekklesia" (translated "assembly") to describe the congregation or people of God in the desert. This word means "called out ones" and was used by the first-century Christians to describe their own community or "assembly." Stephen's point was that the giving of the law through Moses to the Jews was the sign of the covenant. By 'obedience,' then, would they continue to be God's covenant people. But because they disobeyed (7:39), they broke the covenant and forfeited their right to be the chosen people.

From Galatians 3:19 and Hebrews 2:2, it appears that God had given the law to Moses through angels. Exodus 31:18 says God wrote the Ten Commandments himself ("inscribed by the finger of God"). Apparently God used angelic messengers as mediators to deliver his law to Moses. During the apostolic period, the general Jewish belief was that God had a council of angels who assisted Him in decision making and carrying out work. There is nothing, however, in scripture to indicate that God ever needs or requests assistance in making His decisions.

The 'heavenly bodies' refers to their practice of worshiping deities associated with stars and planets. In Acts 7:43, Stephen gave more details of the idolatry referred to in 7:40. These were idols worshiped by Israel during their desert wanderings (Exodus 32:4). Molech was the god associated with child sacrifice, and Rephan was an Egyptian god. Amos also names Assyrian deities worshiped by Israel. Read Amos 5:25-27 and record what you learn: _____

Stephen had been accused of speaking against the temple (6:13). Although he recognized the importance of the temple, he knew that it was not more important than God. God is not limited; he doesn't live only in a house of worship, but wherever hearts of faith are open to receive him. Read the following verses and record what you learn: Isaiah 66:1, 2 _____

Solomon knew this when he prayed at the dedication of the temple (2 Chronicles 6:18).

Many prophets were persecuted and killed: Uriah (Jeremiah 26:20-23); Jeremiah (Jeremiah 38:1-6); Isaiah (tradition says he was killed by King Manasseh; see 2 Kings

21:16); Amos (Amos 7:10-13); Zechariah (not the author of the Bible book, but the son of Jehoiada the priest, 2 Chronicles 24:20-22); Elijah (1 Kings 19:1, 2).

Jesus also told a parable about how the Jews had constantly rejected God's messages and persecuted his messengers (Luke 20:9-19). The Righteous One refers to the Messiah.

Stephen saw the glory of God, and Jesus the Messiah standing at God's right hand. Stephen's words are similar to Jesus' words spoken before the council (Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69). Stephen's vision supported Jesus' claim and angered the Jewish leaders who had condemned Jesus to death for blasphemy. They would not tolerate Stephen's words, so they dragged him out and killed him. People may not kill us for witnessing about Christ, but they will let us know they don't want to hear the truth and will often try to silence us. Keep honoring God in your conduct and words; though many may turn against you and your message, some will follow Christ. Remember, Stephen's death made a profound impact on Paul, who later became the world's greatest missionary. Even those who oppose you now may later turn to Christ.

Saul, also called Paul, is the great missionary who wrote many of the letters in the New Testament. Saul was his Hebrew name; Paul, his Greek name, was used as he began his ministry to the Gentiles. When Luke introduces him, Paul was hating and persecuting Jesus' followers. This is a great contrast to the Paul about whom Luke will write for most of the rest of the book of Acts--a devoted follower of Christ and a gifted gospel preacher. Paul was uniquely qualified to talk to the Jews about Jesus because he had once persecuted those who believed in Jesus, and he understood how the opposition felt. Paul is a powerful example of how no one is impossible for God to reach and change.

The penalty for blasphemy, speaking irreverently about God, was death by stoning (Leviticus 24:14). The religious leaders, who were furious, had Stephen stoned without a trial. They did not understand that Stephen's words were true, because they were not seeking the truth. They only wanted support for their own views.

As Stephen died, he spoke words very similar to Jesus' words on the cross (Luke 23:34). The early believers were glad to suffer as Jesus had suffered because that meant they were counted worthy (5:41). Stephen was ready to suffer like Jesus, even to the point of asking forgiveness for his murderers. Such a forgiving response comes only from the Holy Spirit. The Spirit can also help us respond as Stephen did with love for our enemies (Luke 6:27). How would you react if someone hurt you because of what you believed?

THE EFFECTS OF STEPHEN'S DEATH

Stephen's death was not in vain. Below are some of the events that were by-products (either directly or indirectly) of the persecution that began with Stephen's martyrdom.

[1.] Philip's evangelistic tour (Acts 8:4-40)

[2.] Paul's (Saul's) conversion (Acts 9:1-30)

[3.] Peter's missionary tour (Acts 9:32-11:18)

[4.] The church in Antioch in Syria founded (Acts 11:19-26)

Persecution forced the Christians out of Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria--thus fulfilling the second part of Jesus' command (see 1:8). The persecution helped spread the gospel. God would bring great results from the believers' suffering.

THE CHURCH SCATTERED

Persecution forced the believers out of their homes in Jerusalem, and along with them went the gospel. Sometimes we have to become uncomfortable before we'll move. We may not want to experience it, but discomfort may be the best thing for us because God may be working through our hurts. When you are tempted to complain about uncomfortable or painful circumstances, stop and ask if God might be preparing you for a special task.

MISSIONARIES OF THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THEIR JOURNEYS

Name	Journey's Purpose	Scripture Reference in Acts
Philip	One of the first to preach the gospel outside Jerusalem	8:4-40
Peter and John	Visited new Samaritan believers to encourage them	8:14-25
Paul (journey to Damascus)	Set out to capture Christians but was captured by Christ	9:1-25
Peter	Led by God to one of the first Gentile families to become Christians--Cornelius's family	9:32-10:48
Barnabas	Went to Antioch as an encourager; traveled on to Troas to bring Paul back to Jerusalem from Antioch	11:25-30
Barnabas, Paul, John Mark	Left Antioch for Cyprus, Pamphylia, and Galatia on the first missionary journey	13:1-14:28
Barnabas and John Mark	After a break with Paul, they left Antioch for Cyprus	15:36-41
Paul, Silas, Timothy, Luke	Left Antioch to revisit churches in Galatia; traveled to Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia on a second missionary journey	15:36-18:22

Apollos	Left Alexandria for Ephesus; learned the complete gospel story from Priscilla and Aquila; preached in Athens and Corinth	18:24-28
Paul, Timothy, Erastus	Third major missionary journey revisiting churches in Galatia, Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia	18:23; 19:1-21:14

The Philip mentioned in this section of Acts is not the apostle Philip (see John 1:43, 44), but a Greek-speaking Jew, "full of the Spirit and wisdom" (6:3), who was one of the seven deacons chosen to help with the food distribution program in the church.

The Romans had divided Israel into three main regions--Galilee in the north, Samaria in the middle, and Judea in the south. The city of Samaria (in the region of Samaria) had been the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel in the days of the divided kingdom, before it was conquered by Assyria in 722 B.C. During that war, the Assyrian king took many captives, leaving only the poorest people in the land and resettling it with foreigners. These foreigners intermarried with the Jews who were left, and the mixed race became known as Samaritans. The Samaritans were considered half-breeds by the "pure" Jews in the southern kingdom of Judah, and there was intense hatred between the two groups. But Jesus himself went into Samaria (John 4), and he commanded his followers to spread the gospel there (1:8).

Jesus encountered and drove out many demons during his ministry on earth. Demons, or evil spirits, are ruled by Satan. Most scholars believe that they are fallen angels who joined Satan in his rebellion against God, and who can cause a person to be mute, deaf, blind, or insane. Demons also tempt people to sin. Although they can be powerful, they are not able to read our minds and cannot be everywhere at once. Demons are real and active, but Jesus has authority over them; and he gave this authority to his followers. Although Satan is allowed to work in our world, God is in complete control. He can drive demons out and end their destructive work in people's lives. Eventually Satan and his demons will be thrown into the lake of fire, forever ending their evil work in the world (Rev. 20:10).

In the days of the early church, sorcerers and magicians were numerous and influential. They worked wonders, performed healings and exorcisms, and practiced astrology. Their wonders may simply have been magic tricks, or the sorcerers may have been empowered by Satan. Read the following verses and record what you learn:

Matthew 24:24 _____

Simon had done so many wonders that some even thought that he was the Messiah; but his powers did not come from God.

Peter and John were sent to Samaria to find out whether or not the Samaritans were truly becoming believers. The Jewish Christians, even the apostles, were still unsure whether Gentiles and half-Jews could receive the Holy Spirit. It wasn't until Peter's experience with Cornelius (we will discuss this when we study chapter 10) that the apostles became fully convinced that the Holy Spirit was for all people. It was John who had asked Jesus if they should call fire down from heaven to burn up a Samaritan village that refused to welcome them. Read this encounter in Luke 9:51-55 and record what you learn: _____

Here he and Peter went to the Samaritans to pray with them.

This was a crucial moment for the spread of the gospel and for the growth of the church. Peter and John had to go to Samaria to help keep this new group of believers from becoming separated from other believers. When Peter and John saw the Lord working in these people, they were assured that the Holy Spirit worked through 'all' believers--Gentiles and mixed races as well as "pure" Jews.

Many scholars believe that God chose to have a dramatic filling of his Spirit as a sign at this special moment in history. This was a special event. The pouring out of the Spirit would happen again with Cornelius and his family (10:44-47), a sign that the uncircumcised Gentiles could receive the gospel.

"Everything has a price" seems to be true in our world of bribes, wealth, and materialism. Simon thought he could buy the Holy Spirit's power, but Peter harshly rebuked him. The only way to receive God's power is to do what Peter told Simon to do--turn from sin, ask God for forgiveness, and be filled with his Spirit. No amount of money can buy salvation, forgiveness of sin, or God's power. These are only gained by repentance and belief in Christ as Savior.

The last time a parent or friend rebuked you, were you hurt, angry, or defensive? Learn a lesson from Simon and his reaction to what Peter told him. He exclaimed, "Pray to the Lord for me." If you are rebuked for a serious mistake, it is for your good. Admit your error, repent quickly, and ask for prayer.

Philip was having a successful preaching ministry to great crowds in Samaria (8:5-8), but he obediently left that ministry to travel on a desert road. Because Philip went where God sent him, Ethiopia was opened up to the gospel. Follow God's leading, even

if it seems like a demotion. At first you may not understand his plans, but the results will prove that God's way is right.

Ethiopia was located in Africa south of Egypt. The eunuch was obviously very dedicated to God because he had traveled such a long distance to worship in Jerusalem. The Jews had contact with Ethiopia (known as Cush) in ancient days, so this man may have been a Gentile convert to Judaism. Many trace the Ethiopian connection to the Jews back to Solomon's alliance with the Queen of Sheba. Because he was in charge of the treasury of Ethiopia, this man's conversion brought Christianity into the power structures of another government. This is the beginning of the witness "to the ends of the earth" See the prophecy in Isaiah 56:3-5 for words about foreigners and eunuchs:

Philip found the Ethiopian man reading Scripture. Taking advantage of this opportunity to explain the gospel, Philip asked the man if he understood what he was reading.
Philip:

- (1) followed the Spirit's leading**
- (2) began the discussion from where the man was (immersed in the prophecies of Isaiah), and**
- (3) explained how Jesus Christ fulfilled Isaiah's prophecies. When we share the gospel, we should start where the other person's concerns are focused. Then we can bring the gospel to bear on those concerns.**

The eunuch asked Philip to explain a passage of Scripture that he did not understand. When we have trouble understanding the Bible, we should ask others to help us. We must never let our insecurity or pride get in the way of understanding God's Word. Some think that the Old Testament is not relevant today, but Philip led this man to faith in Jesus Christ by using the Old Testament. Jesus Christ is found in the pages of both the Old and New Testaments. God's entire Word is applicable to all people in all ages. Don't avoid or neglect to use the Old Testament. It too is God's Word.

Baptism was a sign of identification with Christ and with the Christian community. Although there were no witnesses besides Philip, it was still important for the eunuch to take this step.

Why was Philip suddenly transported to a different city? This miraculous sign showed the urgency of bringing the Gentiles to belief in Christ. Azotus is Ashdod, one of the ancient Philistine capitals. Philip probably lived in Caesarea for the next 20 years (21:8).

PAUL'S CONVERSION

Saul (later called Paul) was so zealous for his Jewish beliefs that he began a persecution campaign against anyone who believed in Christ ("who belonged to the Way"). Why would the Jews in Jerusalem want to persecute Christians as far away as Damascus?

There are several possibilities:

- (1) to seize the Christians who had fled**
- (2) to prevent the spread of Christianity to other major cities**
- (3) to keep the Christians from causing any trouble with Rome**
- (4) to advance Saul's career and build his reputation as a true Pharisee, zealous for the law**
- (5) to unify the factions of Judaism by giving them a common enemy.**

As Saul traveled to Damascus, pursuing Christians, he was confronted by the risen Christ and brought face to face with the truth of the gospel. Sometimes God breaks into a life in a spectacular manner, and sometimes conversion is a quiet experience. Beware of people who insist that you must have a particular type of conversion experience. The right way to come to faith in Jesus is whatever way God brings 'you.

Damascus, a key commercial city, was located about 175 miles northeast of Jerusalem in the Roman province of Syria. Several trade routes linked Damascus to other cities throughout the Roman world. Saul may have thought that by stamping out Christianity in Damascus, he could prevent its spread to other areas.

Paul refers to this Damascus Road experience as the start of his new life in Christ. Read the following verses and record what you learn:

1 Corinthians 9:1 and 15:8 _____

Galatians 1:15, 16 _____

At the center of this wonderful experience was Jesus Christ. Paul did not see a vision; he saw the risen Christ himself (9:17). Paul acknowledged Jesus as Lord, confessed his own sin, surrendered his life to Christ, and resolved to obey him. True conversion comes from a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and leads to a new life in relationship with him. Saul thought he was pursuing heretics, but he was persecuting Jesus himself. Anyone who persecutes believers today is also guilty of persecuting Jesus because believers are the body of Christ on earth. Read Matthew 25:40-45 and record what you learn: _____

"Not him, Lord; that's impossible. He could never become a Christian!" In essence, that's what Ananias said when God told him of Saul's conversion. After all, Saul had pursued believers to their death. Despite these understandable feelings, Ananias obeyed God and ministered to Saul. We must not limit God--he can do anything. We must obey and follow God's leading, even when he leads us to difficult people and places.

Faith in Christ brings great blessings but often great suffering too. Paul would suffer for his faith. God calls us to commitment, not to comfort. He promises to be with us 'through' suffering and hardship, not to spare us from them.

Read 2 Corinthians 11:23-27 and record what you learn: _____

Ananias found Saul, as he had been instructed, and greeted him as "Brother Saul." Ananias feared this meeting because Saul had come to Damascus to capture the believers and take them as prisoners to Jerusalem (9:2). But in obedience to the Holy Spirit, Ananias greeted Saul lovingly. It is not always easy to show love to others, especially when we are afraid of them or doubt their motives. Nevertheless, we must follow Ananias's example, showing loving acceptance to other believers.

Although there is no mention of a special filling of the Holy Spirit for Saul, his changed life and subsequent accomplishments bear strong witness to the Holy Spirit's presence and power in his life. Immediately after receiving his sight and spending some time with the believers in Damascus, Saul went to the synagogue to tell the Jews about Jesus Christ. Some Christians counsel new believers to wait until they are thoroughly grounded in their faith before attempting to share the gospel. Saul took time alone to learn about Jesus before beginning his worldwide ministry, but he did not wait to witness. Although we should not rush into a ministry unprepared, we do not need to wait before telling others what has happened to us.

Saul's arguments were powerful because he was a brilliant scholar. But what was more convincing was his changed life. People knew that what he taught was real because they could see the evidence in the way he lived. It is important to know what the Bible teaches and how to defend the faith, but your words should be backed up with a changed life.

According to Galatians 1:17, 18, Paul left Damascus and traveled to Arabia, the desert region just southeast of Damascus, where he lived for three years. It is unclear whether his three-year stay occurred between Acts 9 verses 22 and 23, or between verses 25 and 26. Some commentators say that "many days" could mean a long period of time. They suggest that when Paul returned to Damascus, the governor under Aretas ordered his arrest, in an effort to keep peace with influential Jews. Read 2 Corinthians 11:32 and record your insights: _____

The other possibility is that Paul's night escape occurred during his first stay in Damascus, just after his conversion, when the Pharisees were especially upset over his defection from their ranks. He would have fled to Arabia to spend time alone with God and to let the Jewish religious leaders cool down. Regardless of which theory is correct, there was a period of at least three years between Paul's conversion (9:3-6) and his trip to Jerusalem (9:26).

It is difficult to change your reputation, and Saul had a terrible reputation with the Christians. But Barnabas, a Jewish convert (mentioned in 4:36), became the bridge between Saul and the apostles. New Christians (especially those with tarnished reputations) need sponsors, people who will come alongside, encourage, teach, and introduce them to other believers. Find ways that you can become a Barnabas to new believers.

Galatians 1:18, 19 explains that Paul was in Jerusalem only 15 days and that he met only with Peter and James. Read these verses and record your insights: _____

In these short sentences we can see two characteristics of Paul, even as a new believer in Christ: He was bold, and he stirred up controversy. These would characterize Paul's ministry the rest of his life!

Saul's visit to Tarsus helped quiet conflicts with the Jews and allowed him time to prove his commitment. After Saul, the most zealous persecutor, was converted, the church enjoyed a brief time of peace.

The important harbor city of Joppa sits 125 feet above sea level overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. Joppa was the town into which the cedars of Lebanon had been floated to be shipped to Jerusalem and used in the temple construction (2 Chronicles 2:16; Ezra 3:7). The prophet Jonah left the port of Joppa on his ill-fated trip (Jonah 1:3).

Acts 9:36-42 records the enormous impact Dorcas made on her community by "always doing good and helping the poor," by making robes and other clothing (9:39). When she died, the room was filled with mourners, very likely many of the people she had helped. And when she was brought back to life, the news raced through the town. God uses great preachers like Peter and Paul, but he also uses those who have gifts of kindness like Dorcas. Rather than wishing you had other gifts, make good use of the gifts God has given you.

In Joppa, Peter stayed at the home of Simon, a tanner. Tanners made animal hides into leather. It is significant that Peter was at Simon's house, because tanning involved

contact with dead animals, and Jewish law considered it an "unclean" job. Peter was already beginning to break down his prejudice against people who were not of his kind and customs that did not adhere to Jewish religious traditions.

PETER'S MINISTRY TO THE GENTILES

The early days of Christianity were exciting as God's Spirit moved and people's lives were changed. Converts were pouring in from surprising backgrounds. Even the dreaded Saul (Paul) became a Christian, and non-Jews were responding to the Good News about Jesus. Among the first of these was the Roman centurion, Cornelius.

Because of frequent outbreaks of violence, Roman soldiers had to be stationed to keep peace throughout Israel. But most Romans, hated as conquerors, did not get along well in the nation. As an army officer, Cornelius was in a difficult position. He represented Rome, but his home was in Caesarea. During his years in Israel, he had himself been conquered by the God of Israel. He had a reputation as a godly man who put his faith into action, and he was respected by the Jews.

Four significant aspects of Cornelius's character are noted in Acts. He actively sought God, he revered God, he was generous in meeting other people's needs, and he prayed. God told him to send for Peter, because Peter would give him more knowledge about the God he was already seeking to please.

When Peter entered Cornelius's home, Peter broke a whole list of Jewish rules. Peter confessed he wasn't comfortable, but here was an eager audience and he couldn't hold back his message. He had no sooner started sharing the gospel when God gave overwhelming approval by filling that Roman family with his Holy Spirit. Peter saw he had no choice but to baptize them and welcome them as equals in the growing Christian church. Another step had been taken in carrying the gospel to the whole world.

Cornelius is a welcome example of God's willingness to use extraordinary means to reach those who desire to know him. He does not play favorites, and he does not hide from those who want to find him. God sent his Son because he loves the whole world--and that includes Peter, Cornelius, and you.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- A godly and generous Roman
- Although an officer in the occupying army, he seems to have been well-respected by the Jews
- He responded to God and encouraged his family to do the same
- His conversion helped the young church realize that the Good News was for all people, both Jews and Gentiles

Lessons from his life:

- God reaches those who want to know him
- The gospel is open to all people

- There are people everywhere to believe
- When we are willing to seek the truth and be obedient to the light God gives us, God will reward us richly

Vital statistics:

- Where: Caesarea
- Occupation: Roman centurion
- Contemporaries: Peter, Philip, the apostles

This Caesarea, sometimes called Palestinian Caesarea, or Caesarea Maritime, was located on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, 32 miles north of Joppa. The largest and most important port city on the Mediterranean in Palestine, it served as the capital of the Roman province of Judea. This was the first city to have Gentile Christians and a non-Jewish church.

This Roman officer was a 'centurion,' a commander of 100 soldiers. Although stationed in Caesarea, Cornelius would probably return soon to Rome. Thus his conversion was a major stepping-stone for spreading the gospel to the empire's capital city.

"What will happen to the heathen who have never heard about Christ?" This question is often asked about God's justice. Cornelius wasn't a believer in Christ, but he was seeking God, and he was reverent and generous. Therefore God sent Peter to tell Cornelius about Christ. Cornelius is an example that God "rewards those who earnestly seek him."

Read Hebrews 11:6 and record your findings: _____

God saw Cornelius's sincere faith. His prayers and generous giving were a "memorial offering before God," a sacrificial offering to the Lord.

According to Jewish law, certain foods were forbidden to be eaten (see Leviticus 11). The food laws made it difficult for Jews to eat with Gentiles without risking defilement. In fact, the Gentiles themselves were often seen as "unclean." Peter's vision meant that he should not look upon the Gentiles as inferior people whom God would not redeem. Before having the vision, Peter would have thought that a Gentile Roman officer could not accept Christ. Afterward, he understood that it was his responsibility to go with the messengers into a Gentile home and tell Cornelius the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Perhaps the greatest barrier to the spread of the gospel in the first century was the Jewish-Gentile conflict. Most of the early believers were Jewish, and to them it was scandalous even to think of associating with Gentiles. But God told Peter to take the gospel to a Roman, and Peter obeyed despite his background and personal feelings. Later Peter struggled with this again.

Read Galatians 2:11-14 and record what you learn: _____

God was making it clear that the Good News of Christ is for everyone! We should not allow any barrier--language, culture, prejudice, geography, economic level, or educational level--to keep us from telling others about Christ.

In every nation there are hearts restless for God, ready to receive the gospel--but someone must take it to them. Seeking God is not enough--people must find him. How then shall seekers find God without someone to point the way? Is God asking you to show someone the way to him? Read Romans 10:14, 15 _____

Peter's brief and powerful sermon found in Acts 10:37-43 contains a concise statement of the gospel: Jesus' perfect life of servanthood; his death on the cross; his resurrection, personally witnessed and experienced by Peter; Jesus' fulfillment of the Scriptures; and the necessity of personal faith in him. A sermon or witness for Christ does not need to be long to be effective. It should be Spirit-led and should center on Christ, the way and the truth and the life.

Read two examples of prophets testifying about Jesus and his forgiveness of sins in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 and Ezekiel 36:25, 26 _____

Cornelius and Peter were very different people. Cornelius was wealthy, a Gentile, and a military man. Peter was a Jewish fisherman turned preacher. But God's plan included both of them. In Cornelius's house that day, a new chapter in Christian history was written as a Jewish Christian leader and a Gentile Christian convert each discovered something significant about God at work in the other person. Cornelius needed Peter and his gospel to know the way to salvation. Peter needed Cornelius and his salvation experience to know that Gentiles were included in God's plan. You and another believer may also need each other to understand how God works!

Cornelius wanted Peter to stay with him for several days. He was a new believer and realized his need for teaching and fellowship. Are you as eager to learn more about Christ? Recognize your need to be with more mature Christians, to learn from them.

A group rose up in Jerusalem (called Judaizers) who believed that Gentiles could be saved, but only if they followed all the Jewish laws and traditions--in essence, if they became Jews. God chose the Jews and taught them his laws so they could bring the message of salvation to 'all' people (see Genesis 12:3; Psalm 22:27; Isaiah 42:4; 49:6; 56:3-7; 60:1-3; Jeremiah 16:19-21; Zech. 2:11; Malachi 1:11; Romans 15:9-12).

When Peter brought the news of Cornelius's conversion back to Jerusalem, the believers were shocked that Peter had eaten with Gentiles. After they heard the whole story, however, they praised God (11:18). Their reactions teach us how to handle disagreements with other Christians. Before judging the behavior of fellow believers, it is important to hear them out. The Holy Spirit may have something important to teach us through them.

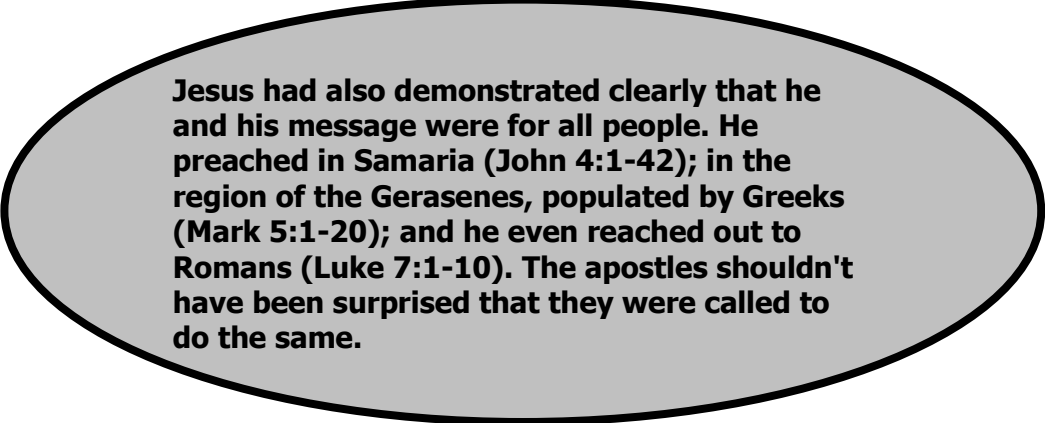
God had promised throughout Scripture that he would reach the nations.

Read His general promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3; 18:18 _____

Also read His specific promise in Malachi 1:11: _____

This was an extremely difficult truth for Jews, even Jewish believers, to accept. The Jewish believers understood how certain prophecies were fulfilled in Christ, but they overlooked other Old Testament teachings.

Peter's defense for eating with Gentiles was a simple restatement of what happened. He brought six witnesses with him to back him up, and then he quoted Jesus' promise about the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 11:16). These Gentiles' lives had been changed, and that was all the evidence Peter and the other believers needed. Changed lives are an equally powerful evidence today.



Jesus had also demonstrated clearly that he and his message were for all people. He preached in Samaria (John 4:1-42); in the region of the Gerasenes, populated by Greeks (Mark 5:1-20); and he even reached out to Romans (Luke 7:1-10). The apostles shouldn't have been surprised that they were called to do the same.

The intellectual questions ended and the theological discussion stopped with the report that God had given the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles. This was a turning point for the early church. They had to accept those whom God had chosen, even if they were Gentiles. But joy over the conversion of Gentiles was not unanimous. This continued to be a struggle for some Jewish Christians throughout the first century.

When the church accepted Peter's testimony that the gospel was also for Gentiles, Christianity exploded into Gentile areas, and large numbers became believers. The seeds of this missionary work had been sown after Stephen's death when many believing Jews were persecuted and scattered, settling in faraway cities and spreading the gospel. It was in Antioch that Christianity was launched on its worldwide mission and where the believers aggressively preached to the Gentiles (non-Jews who did not worship God). Philip had preached in Samaria, but the Samaritans were part Jewish (8:5); Peter preached to Cornelius, but he already worshiped God (10:2). Believers who were scattered after the outbreak of persecution in Jerusalem spread the gospel to other Jews in the lands to which they fled. At this time, the believers began actively sharing the Good News with Gentiles.

With the exception of Jerusalem, Antioch of Syria played a more important role in the early church than any other city. After Rome and Alexandria, Antioch was the largest city in the Roman world. In Antioch, the first Gentile church was founded, and there the believers were first called Christians (11:26). Paul used the city as his home base during his missionary journeys. Antioch was the center of worship for several pagan cults that promoted much sexual immorality and other forms of evil common to pagan religions. It was also a vital commercial center--the gateway to the eastern world. Antioch was a key city both to Rome and to the early church.

Barnabas gives us a wonderful example of how to help new Christians as he ministered to the church at Antioch. He demonstrated strong faith; he ministered joyfully with kindness and encouragement; he taught new believers further lessons about God. Remember Barnabas when you see new believers, and think of ways to help them grow in their faith.

Saul had been sent to his home in Tarsus for protection after his conversion caused an uproar among the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem (9:26-30). He stayed there for several years before Barnabas brought him to help the church at Antioch.

The young church at Antioch was a curious mixture of Jews (who spoke Greek or Aramaic) and Gentiles. It is significant that this is the first place where the believers were called Christians (or "Christ-ones"), because all they had in common was Christ--not race, culture, or even language. Christ can cross all boundaries and unify all people.

Barnabas and Saul stayed at Antioch for a full year, teaching the new believers. They could have left for other cities, but they saw the importance of follow-through and training. Have you helped someone believe in God? Spend time teaching and encouraging that person. Are you a new believer? Remember, you are just beginning your Christian life. Your faith needs to grow and mature through consistent Bible study and teaching.

Prophets were found not only in the Old Testament, but also in the early church. Their role was to present God's will to the people and to instruct them in God's Word. Sometimes, like Agabus, they also had the gift of predicting the future.

There were serious food shortages during the reign of the Roman emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54) because of a drought that had extended across much of the Roman empire for many years. It is significant that the church in Antioch assisted the church in Jerusalem. The daughter church had grown enough to be able to help the established church. The people of Antioch were motivated to give generously because they cared about the needs of others. This is the "cheerful" giving that the Bible commends .

Read 2 Corinthians 9:7: _____

Elders were appointed to manage the affairs of the congregation. At this point, not much is known about their responsibilities, but it appears that their main role was to respond to the believers' needs.

HEROD AGRIPPA I

For good or evil, families have lasting and powerful influence on their children. Traits and qualities are passed on to the next generation, and often the mistakes and sins of the parents are repeated by the children. Four generations of the Herod family are mentioned in the Bible. Each leader left his evil mark: Herod the Great murdered Bethlehem's children; Herod Antipas was involved in Jesus' trial and John the Baptist's execution; Herod Agrippa I murdered the apostle James; and Herod Agrippa II was one of Paul's judges.

Herod Agrippa I related fairly well to his Jewish subjects. Because he had a Jewish grandmother of royal blood (Mariamne), he was grudgingly accepted by the people. Although as a youth he had been temporarily imprisoned by the emperor Tiberias, he was now trusted by Rome and got along well with the emperors Caligula and Claudius.

An unexpected opportunity for Herod to gain new favor with the Jews was created by the Christian movement. Gentiles began to be accepted into the church in large numbers. Many Jews had been tolerating this new movement as a sect within Judaism, but its rapid growth alarmed them. Persecution of Christians was revived, and even the apostles were not spared. James was killed, and Peter was thrown into prison.

But soon, Herod made a fatal error. During a visit to Caesarea, the people called him a god, and he accepted their praise. Herod was immediately struck with a painful disease, and he died within a week.

Like his grandfather, uncle, and son after him, Herod Agrippa I came close to the truth but missed it. Because religion was important only as an aspect of politics, he had no reverence and no qualms about taking praise that only God should receive. His mistake is a common one. Whenever we are proud of our own abilities and accomplishments, not recognizing them as gifts from God, we repeat Herod's sin.

Herod Agrippa:

- ❖ **Arranged the murder of the apostle James**
- ❖ **Imprisoned Peter with plans to execute him**
- ❖ **Allowed the people to praise him as a god**

Key verse: "Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died" (Acts 12:23).

Herod Agrippa I's story is told in Acts 12:1-23.

The King Herod of Acts 12 was Herod Agrippa I, the son of Aristobulus and grandson of Herod the Great. His sister was Herodias, who was responsible for the death of John the Baptist. Read Mark 6:17-28 and record this story: _____

Herod Agrippa I was partly Jewish. The Romans had appointed him to rule over most of Palestine, including the territories of Galilee, Perea, Judea, and Samaria. He persecuted the Christians in order to please the Jewish leaders who opposed them, hoping that would solidify his position. Agrippa I died suddenly in A.D. 44 (see 12:20-23). His death was also recorded by the historian Josephus.

James and John were two of the original 12 disciples who followed Jesus. They had asked Jesus for special recognition in his kingdom (Mark 10:35-40). Jesus said that to be a part of his kingdom would mean suffering with Jesus (drink from the same cup--Mark 10:38, 39). James and John did indeed suffer--Herod executed James, and later John was exiled (see Revelation 1:9).

Why did God allow James to die and yet miraculously save Peter? Life is full of difficult questions like this. Why is one child physically disabled and another child athletically gifted? Why do people die seemingly before realizing their potential? These are questions we cannot possibly answer in this life because we do not see all that God sees. He has chosen to allow evil in this world for a time. But we can trust God's leading because he has promised to destroy all evil eventually. In the meantime, we know that God will help us use our suffering to strengthen us and glorify him.

Acts 12:3 records the fact that Peter was arrested during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the week-long festival directly following Passover. This was a strategic move, since more Jews were in the city than usual, and Herod could impress the most people.

Herod's plan undoubtedly was to execute Peter, but the believers were praying for Peter's safety. The earnest prayer of the church significantly affected the outcome of these events. God sent an angel to rescue Peter. Angels are God's messengers. They are divinely created beings with supernatural powers, and they sometimes take on human appearance in order to talk to people. Angels should not be worshiped, because they are not divine. They are God's servants, just as we are.

John Mark's story is told in Acts 12:23-13:13 and 15:36-39. He is also mentioned in Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24; 1 Peter 5:13. Read these verses and record what you learn about the young man also known as Mark, the author of the gospel: _____

John Mark wrote the Gospel of Mark. His mother's house was large enough to accommodate a meeting of many believers. An upstairs room in this house may have been the location of Jesus' last supper with his disciples; however, most believe that meal to have been in the Essene section and it is unlikely that a woman would have lived in that area.

The James of Acts 12:17 was Jesus' brother, who became a leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13; Galatians 1:19). The James who was killed (12:2) was John's brother and one of the original 12 disciples. John Mark was probably Barnabas's cousin.

Read Colossians 4:10 and record what you learn: _____

His mother, Mary, often opened her home to the apostles, so John Mark would have been exposed to most of the great men and teachings of the early church. Later, John Mark joined Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, but for unknown reasons, he left them in the middle of the trip. John Mark was criticized by Paul for abandoning the mission as we will see in Acts 15:37-39, but he wrote the Gospel of Mark and was later acclaimed by Paul as a vital help in the growth of the early church:

2 Timothy 4:11 _____

In Acts 12:20, we read of the coastal cities, Tyre and Sidon, which were free and self-governing but economically dependent on Judea. We don't know why Herod had quarreled with them, but now representatives from those cities were trying to appease him through his personal servant.

THE FIRST MISSIONARY TRIP

The book of Acts focuses now on the ministry to the Gentiles and the spread of the church around the world, and Paul replaces Peter as the central figure in the book. Paul completes three missionary journeys and ends up being imprisoned in Jerusalem and transported to Rome. The book of Acts ends abruptly, showing that the history of the church is not yet complete.

Acts 13:2 records that the church set apart Barnabas and Saul to the work God had for them. To 'set apart' means to dedicate for a special purpose. We too should dedicate our pastors, missionaries, and Christian workers for their tasks. We can also dedicate ourselves to use our time, money, and talents for God's work.

This was the beginning of Paul's first missionary journey. The church was involved in sending Paul and Barnabas, but it was God's plan. Why did Paul and Barnabas go where they did?

- (1) The Holy Spirit led them**
- (2) They followed the communication routes of the Roman empire--this made travel easier**
- (3) They visited key population and cultural centers to reach as many people as possible**
- (4) They went to cities with synagogues, speaking first to the Jews in hopes that they would see Jesus as the Messiah and help spread the Good News to everyone.**

Located in the Mediterranean Sea, the island of Cyprus, with a large Jewish population, was Barnabas's home. Acts 13:4 records that their first stop was in familiar territory.

Read Acts 13:5-6 and record the events: _____

A proconsul was a high Roman official. Here he functioned as the governor of the island. Such leaders often kept private sorcerers. Bar-Jesus realized that if Sergius Paulus believed in Jesus, he would soon be out of a job.

PAUL

No person, apart from Jesus himself, shaped the history of Christianity like the apostle Paul. Even before he was a believer, his actions were significant. His frenzied persecution of Christians following Stephen's death got the church started in obeying Christ's final command to take the gospel worldwide. Paul's personal encounter with Jesus changed his life. He never lost his fierce intensity, but from then on it was channeled for the gospel.

Paul was very religious. His training under Gamaliel was the finest available. His intentions and efforts were sincere. He was a good Pharisee, who knew the Bible and sincerely believed that this Christian movement was dangerous to Judaism. Thus Paul hated the Christian faith and persecuted Christians without mercy.

Paul got permission to travel to Damascus to capture Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem. But God stopped him in his hurried tracks on the Damascus road. Paul personally met Jesus Christ, and his life was never again the same.

Until Paul's conversion, little had been done about carrying the gospel to non-Jews. Philip had preached in Samaria and to an Ethiopian man; Cornelius, a Gentile, was converted under Peter; and in Antioch in Syria, some Greeks had joined the believers. When Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem to check on this situation, he went to Tarsus to find Paul and bring him to Antioch, and together they worked among the believers there. They were then sent on a missionary journey, the first of three Paul would take, that would carry the gospel across the Roman empire.

The thorny issue of whether Gentile believers had to obey Jewish laws before they could become Christians caused many problems in the early church. Paul worked hard to convince the Jews that Gentiles were acceptable to God, but he spent even more time convincing the Gentiles that they were acceptable to God. The lives Paul touched were changed and challenged by meeting Christ through him.

God did not waste any part of Paul--his background, his training, his citizenship, his mind, or even his weaknesses. Are you willing to let God do the same for you? You will never know all he can do with you until you allow him to have all that you are!

Lessons from his life:

- ❖ The Good News is that forgiveness and eternal life are a gift of God's grace received through faith in Christ and available to all people**
- ❖ Obedience results from a relationship with God, but obedience will never create or earn that relationship**

Paul was born in Tarsus, but became a world traveler for Christ. Although trained as a Pharisee, learned the tentmaking trade as was the Jewish custom of learning trades.

Paul's story is told in Acts 7:58-28:31 and throughout his New Testament letters.

In Acts 13:9, 10 Saul is first called Paul.

Read Acts 13:10 and record the confrontation: _____

The Holy Spirit led Paul to confront Bar-Jesus with his sin. There is a time to be nice and a time to confront. John Mark is recorded as leaving the first missionary journey in Acts 13:13. No reason is given why John Mark left Paul and Barnabas. Some suggestions are:

- (1) he was homesick**
- (2) he resented the change in leadership from Barnabas (his cousin) to Paul**
- (3) he became ill (an illness that may have affected all of them--see Galatians 4:13);**
- (4) he was unable to withstand the rigors and dangers of the missionary journey**
- (5) he may have planned to go only that far but had not communicated this to Paul and Barnabas.**

Paul implicitly accused John Mark of lacking courage and commitment, refusing to take him along on another journey (see 15:37, 38). It is clear from Paul's later letters, however, that he grew to respect Mark. Read Colossians 4:10 and 2 Timothy 4:11 and record what you learn: _____

The Antioch of Acts 13:10 is Pisidian Antioch, not the Antioch of Syria where there was already a flourishing church (11:26). This Antioch, in the region of Pisidia, was a hub of good roads and trade, with a large Jewish population.

When they went to a new city to witness for Christ, Paul and Barnabas went first to the synagogue. The Jews who were there believed in God and diligently studied the Scriptures. Tragically, however, many could not accept Jesus as the promised Messiah because they had the wrong idea of what kind of Messiah he would be. He was not, as they desired, a military king who would overthrow Rome's control, but a servant king who would defeat sin in people's hearts. (Only later, when Christ returns, will he judge the nations of the world.) Paul and Barnabas did not separate themselves from the synagogues but tried to show clearly that the very Scriptures the Jews studied pointed to Jesus.

Paul's message to the Jews in the synagogue in Antioch began with an emphasis on God's covenant with Israel. This was a point of agreement, because all Jews were proud to be God's chosen people. Then Paul went on to explain how the gospel fulfilled the covenant. Some Jews found this message very difficult to embrace.

What happened in a synagogue service? First the 'Shema' was recited (this is Deuteronomy 6:4, which Jews repeated several times daily). Certain prayers were spoken; then there was a reading from the law (the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy), a reading from the prophets intending to illustrate the law, and a sermon. The synagogue leader decided who was to lead the service and give the sermon. A different person was chosen to lead each week. Since it was customary for the synagogue leader to invite visiting rabbis to speak, Paul and Barnabas usually had an open door when they first went to a synagogue.

Paul began where his listeners were and then introduced them to Christ. Because Paul was speaking to devout Jews, he began with the covenant, Abraham, David, and other familiar themes. Later, when speaking to the Greek philosophers in Athens (17:22-32), he would begin by talking about what he had observed in their city. In both cases, however, he centered the sermon around Christ and emphasized the resurrection. When you share the Good News, begin where your audience is--then tell them about Christ. The Good News of the gospel is this: that forgiveness of sins and freedom from guilt are available through faith in Christ to all people.

The Jewish leaders undoubtedly brought theological arguments against Paul and Barnabas, but Luke tells us that the real reason for their hostility was that "they were filled with jealousy." When we see others succeeding where we haven't, or receiving the affirmation we crave, it is hard to rejoice with them. Jealousy is our natural reaction. But how tragic it is when our own jealous feelings make us try to stop God's work. If a work is God's work, rejoice in it--no matter who is doing it.

Why was it necessary for the gospel to go first to the Jews? God planned that through the Jewish nation 'all' the world would come to know God (Genesis 12:3). Paul, a Jew himself, loved his people (Romans 9:1-5) and wanted to give them every opportunity to join him in proclaiming God's salvation. Unfortunately, many Jews did not recognize Jesus as Messiah, and they did not understand that God was offering salvation to anyone, Jew or Gentile, who comes to him through faith in Christ.

God had planned for Israel to be this light. Read Isaiah 49:6: _____

Through Israel came Jesus, the light of the nations (Luke 2:32). This light would spread out and enlighten the Gentiles.

Acts 13:50 gives us insight into human behavior. Instead of accepting the truth, the Jewish leaders stirred up opposition and ran Paul and Barnabas out of town. When confronted by a disturbing truth, people often turn away and refuse to listen. When God's Spirit points out needed changes in our lives, we must listen to him. Otherwise we may be pushing the truth so far away that it no longer affects us.

Often Jews would shake the dust off their feet when leaving a Gentile town, on the way back to their own land. This symbolized cleansing themselves from the contamination of those who did not worship God. For Paul and Barnabas to do this to Jews demonstrated that Jews who reject the gospel are not truly part of Israel and are no better than pagans. Jesus had told his disciples to shake from their feet the dust of any town that would not accept or listen to them.

Read Mark 6:11 and record what you learn: _____

The disciples were not to blame if the message was rejected, as long as they had faithfully presented it. When we share Christ carefully and sensitively, God does not hold us responsible for the other person's decision.

We may wish we could perform a miraculous act that would convince everyone once and for all that Jesus is the Lord. But we see here that even if we could perform a miracle, it wouldn't convince everyone. God gave these men power to do great wonders as confirmation of the message of grace, but people were still divided. Don't spend your time and energy wishing for miracles. Sow your seeds of Good News on the best ground you can find in the best way you can, and leave the convincing to the Holy Spirit.

Iconium (Acts 14:1), Lystra, and Derbe were three cities Paul visited in the southern part of the region of Galatia. Paul probably wrote a letter to these churches--the letter to the Galatians--because many Jewish Christians were claiming that non-Jewish Christians couldn't be saved unless they followed Jewish laws and customs. Paul's letter refuted this and brought the believers back to a right understanding of faith in Jesus. Read Galatians 3:3-5 and record what you learn: _____

Zeus and Hermes (also known as Jupiter and Mercury) were two popular gods in the Roman world. People from Lystra claimed that these gods had once visited their city. According to legend, no one offered them hospitality except an old couple, so Zeus and Hermes killed the rest of the people and rewarded the old couple. When the citizens of Lystra saw the miracles of Paul and Barnabas, they assumed that the gods were

revisiting them. Remembering the story of what had happened to the previous citizens, they immediately honored Paul and Barnabas and showered them with gifts.

Responding to the people of Lystra, Paul and Barnabas reminded them that God never leaves himself "without testimony." Rain and crops, for example, are evidence of his goodness. Later Paul wrote that this evidence in nature leaves people without an excuse for unbelief. Read Romans 1:20 and record what you learn: _____

Only days after the people in Lystra had thought that Paul and Barnabas were gods and wanted to offer sacrifices to them, they stoned Paul and left him for dead. That's human nature. Jesus understood how fickle crowds can be (John 2:24, 25). When many people approve of us, we feel good, but that should never cloud our thinking or affect our decisions. We should not live to please the crowd--especially in our spiritual lives. Be like Jesus. Know the nature of the crowd and don't put your trust in it. Put your trust in God alone.

Paul and Barnabas were persistent in their preaching of the Good News, considering the cost to themselves to be nothing in comparison with obedience to Christ. They had just narrowly escaped being stoned in Iconium (14:1-7), but Jews from Antioch and Iconium tracked Paul down, stoned him, and left him for dead. But Paul got up and went back into the city to preach the Good News. That's true commitment! Being a disciple of Christ calls for total commitment.

Paul and Barnabas returned to visit the believers in all the cities where they had recently been threatened and physically attacked. These men knew the dangers they faced, yet they believed that they had a responsibility to encourage the new believers. No matter how inconvenient or uncomfortable the task may seem, we must always support new believers who need our help and encouragement. It was not convenient or comfortable for Jesus to go to the cross for us!

Part of the reason that Paul and Barnabas risked their lives to return to these cities was to organize the churches' leadership. They were not just following up on a loosely knit group; they were helping the believers get organized with spiritual leaders who could help them grow. Churches grow under Spirit-led leaders, both laypersons and pastors. Pray for your church leaders and support them; and if God puts his finger on you, humbly accept the responsibility of a leadership role in your church.

Paul probably wrote his letter to the Galatians while he was staying in Antioch (A.D. 48 or 49) after completing his first missionary journey. There are several theories as to what part of Galatia Paul was addressing, but most agree that Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe were part of that region for whom the letter is intended. Galatians may have been written before the Jerusalem council (Acts 15), because in the letter the question of whether Gentile believers should be required to follow Jewish law was not yet resolved. The council met to solve that problem.

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL

The real problem for the Jewish Christians was not whether Gentiles could be saved, but whether Gentiles had to adhere to the laws of Moses. The test of following these laws was circumcision. The Jewish Christians were worried because soon there would be more Gentile than Jewish Christians. And they were afraid of weakening moral standards among believers if they did not follow Jewish laws. Paul, Barnabas, and the other church leaders believed that the Old Testament law was very important, but it was not a prerequisite to salvation. The law cannot save; only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ can a person be saved.

The delegates to the council at Jerusalem came from the churches in Jerusalem and Antioch. The conversion of Gentiles was raising an urgent question for the early church--do the Gentiles have to adhere to the laws of Moses and other Jewish traditions to be saved? One group of Jewish Christians insisted that following the law, including submitting to the rite of circumcision, was necessary for salvation. The Gentiles, however, did not think they needed to become Jewish first in order to become Christians. So Paul and Barnabas discussed this problem with the leaders of the church. The council upheld the convictions expressed by Paul and Barnabas that following the Jewish laws, including being circumcised, was not essential for salvation.

The question of whether the Gentile believers should obey the law of Moses to be saved was an important one. The controversy intensified largely due to the success of the new Gentile churches. The conservatives in the Jerusalem church were led by converted Pharisees (Acts 15:5) who preferred a legalistic religion to one based on faith alone. If the conservatives had won, the Gentiles would have been required to be circumcised and converted to Judaism. This would have seriously confined Christianity to simply being another sect within Judaism.

There is something of a "Pharisee" in each one of us. We may unwittingly mistake upholding tradition, structure, and legal requirements for obeying God. Make sure the gospel brings freedom and life to those you are trying to reach.

It is helpful to see how the churches in Antioch and Jerusalem resolved their conflict:

- (1) the church in Antioch sent a delegation to help seek a solution**
- (2) the delegates met with the church leaders to give their reports and set another date to continue the discussion**
- (3) Paul and Barnabas gave their report**
- (4) James summarized the reports and drew up the decision**
- (5) everyone agreed to abide by the decision**
- (6) the council sent a letter with delegates back to Antioch to report the decision.**

This is a wise way to handle conflicts within the church. Problems must be confronted, and all sides of the argument must be given a fair hearing. The discussion should be held in the presence of leaders who are spiritually mature and trustworthy to make wise decisions. Everyone should then abide by the decisions.

THE FIRST CHURCH CONFERENCE

Group/Position	Reasons
<p>Judaizers (some Jewish Christians)/ Gentiles must become Jewish first to be eligible for salvation</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. They were devout, practicing Jews who found it difficult to set aside a tradition of gaining merit with God by keeping the law 2. They thought grace was too easy for the Gentiles 3. They were afraid of seeming too non-Jewish in the practice of their new faith--which could lead to death 4. The demands on the Gentiles were a way of maintaining control and authority in the movement
<p>Gentile Christians/ Faith in Christ as Savior is the only requirement for salvation</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To submit to Jewish demands would be to doubt what God had already done for them by grace alone 2. They resisted exchanging a system of Jewish rituals for their pagan rituals--neither of which had power to save 3. They sought to obey Christ by baptism (rather than by circumcision) as a sign of their new faith
<p>Peter and James/ Faith is the only requirement, but there must be evidence of change by rejecting the old life-style</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. They tried to distinguish between what was true from God's Word and what was just human tradition 2. They had Christ's command to preach to all the world 3. They wanted to preserve unity 4. They saw that Christianity could never survive as just a sect within Judaism

As long as most of the first Christians were Jewish, there was little difficulty in welcoming new believers; however, Gentiles (non-Jews) began to accept Jesus' offer of salvation. The evidence in their lives and the presence of God's Spirit in them showed that God was accepting them. Some of the early Christians believed that non-Jewish Christians needed to meet certain conditions before they could be worthy to accept Christ. The issue could have destroyed the church, so a conference was called in Jerusalem and the issue was formally settled there, although it continued to be a problem for many years following. Above is an outline of the three points of view at the conference.

If the law was a yoke that the Jews could not bear, how did having the law help them throughout their history? Paul wrote that the law was a guide that pointed out their sins so they could repent and return to God and right living.

Read Galatians 3:24, 25 and record what you learn: _____

The James in the Jerusalem Council is Jesus' brother. He became the leader of the church in Jerusalem and wrote the book of James. James' judgment was that Gentile believers did not have to be circumcised, but they should stay away from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality (a common part of idol worship), and from eating meat of strangled animals and from consuming blood (reflecting the Biblical teaching that the life is in the blood--Leviticus 17:14). If Gentile Christians would abstain from these practices, they would please God and get along better with their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ. Of course, there were other actions inappropriate for believers, but the Jews were especially concerned about these four. This compromise helped the church grow unhindered by the cultural differences of Jews and Gentiles. When we share our message across cultural and economic boundaries, we must be sure that the requirements for faith we set up are God's, not people's.

The lives of the first Christian missionaries can be described with many words, but "boring" is not one of them. There were days of great excitement as men and women who had never heard of Jesus responded to the gospel. There were dangerous journeys over land and sea. Health risks and hunger were part of the daily routine. And there was open and hostile resistance to Christianity in many cities. Silas was one of the first missionaries, and he found out that serving Jesus Christ was certainly not boring!

Silas's name appears in Acts at the end of the first church council on the Jewish/Gentile problem. The majority of early Christians were Jews who realized that Jesus was the fulfillment of God's Old Testament promises to his people; however, the universal application of those promises had been overlooked.

Thus, many felt that becoming Jewish was a prerequisite to becoming a Christian. The idea that God could accept a Gentile pagan was too incredible. But Gentiles began to accept Christ as Savior, and the transformation of their lives and the presence of God's

Spirit confirmed their conversions. Some Jews were still reluctant, though, and insisted these new Christians take on various Jewish customs. The issue came to a boiling point at the Jerusalem meeting, but was peacefully resolved.

Silas was one of the representatives from Jerusalem sent with Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch with an official letter of welcome and acceptance to the Gentile Christians. Having fulfilled this mission, Silas returned to Jerusalem. Within a short time, however, he was back in Antioch at Paul's request to join him on his second missionary journey.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy began a far-ranging ministry that included some exciting adventures. Paul and Silas spent a night singing in a Philippian jail after being severely beaten. An earthquake, the loosing of their chains, and the resulting panic led to the conversion of their jailer. Later, they narrowly missed another beating in Thessalonica, prevented by an evening escape. In Berea there was more trouble, but Silas and Timothy stayed to teach the young believers while Paul traveled on to Athens. The team was finally reunited in Corinth. In each place they visited, they left behind a small group of Christians.

Silas leaves the story as suddenly as he entered it. Peter mentions him as the co-author of 1 Peter, but we do not know when he joined Peter. He was an effective believer before leaving Jerusalem, and he doubtless continued to minister after his work with Paul was completed. He took advantage of opportunities to serve God and was not discouraged by the setbacks and opposition he met along the way. Silas, though not the most famous of the early missionaries, was certainly a hero worth imitating.

Read Acts 15:25-27 and record what you learn about Silas: _____

Also read 2 Corinthians 1:19 _____

1 Thessalonians 1:1 _____

2 Thessalonians 1:1 _____

1 Peter 5:12 _____

Apostleship was not a church office but a position and function based on specific gifts. Elders were appointed to lead and manage the church. In this meeting, apostles submitted to the judgment of an elder--James, Jesus' brother.

Later Silas accompanied Paul on Paul's second missionary journey in place of Barnabas, who visited different cities with John Mark.

This letter answered their questions and brought great joy to the Gentile Christians in Antioch (15:31). Beautifully written, it appeals to the Holy Spirit's guidance and explains what is to be done as though the readers already knew it. It is helpful when believers learn to be careful not only in what they say, but also in how they say it. We may be correct in our content, but we can lose our audience by our tone of voice or by our attitude.

The debate over circumcision could have split the church, but Paul, Barnabas, and the Jews in Antioch made the right decision--they sought counsel from the church leaders and from God's Word. Our differences should be settled the same way, by seeking wise counsel and abiding by the decisions. Don't let disagreements divide you from other believers. Third-party assistance is a sound method for resolving problems and preserving unity.

Paul and Barnabas disagreed sharply over Mark. Paul didn't want to take him along because he had left them earlier. This disagreement caused the two great preachers to form two teams, opening up two missionary endeavors instead of one. God works even through conflict and disagreements. Later, Mark became vital to Paul's ministry. Read Colossians 4:10 _____

Paul's second missionary journey, this time with Silas as his partner, began approximately three years after his first one ended. The two visited many of the cities covered on Paul's first journey, plus others. This journey laid the groundwork for the church in Greece.

Silas had been involved in the Jerusalem council and was one of the two men chosen to represent the Jerusalem church by taking the letter and decision back to Antioch (15:22). Paul, from the Antioch church, chose Silas, from the Jerusalem church, and they traveled together to many cities to spread the Good News. This teamwork demonstrated the church's unity after the decision at the Jerusalem council.

THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

In Acts 15:36-39, we see that Paul and Barnabas disagreed sharply over Mark. Paul didn't want to take him along because he had left them earlier (13:13). This disagreement caused the two great preachers to form two teams, opening up two missionary endeavors instead of one. God works even through conflict and disagreements. Later, Mark became vital to Paul's ministry. Read Colossians 4:10 _____

Paul's second missionary journey, this time with Silas as his partner, began approximately three years after his first one ended. The two visited many of the cities covered on Paul's first journey, plus others. This journey laid the groundwork for the church in Greece.

Silas had been involved in the Jerusalem council and was one of the two men chosen to represent the Jerusalem church by taking the letter and decision back to Antioch (15:22). Paul, from the Antioch church, chose Silas, from the Jerusalem church, and they traveled together to many cities to spread the Good News. This teamwork demonstrated the church's unity after the decision at the Jerusalem council. Painful lessons are usually doorways to new opportunities.

Even the apostle Paul had much to learn. Shortly after his disappointing experience with John Mark, Paul recruited another eager young man, Timothy, to be his assistant. Paul's intense personality may have been too much for John Mark to handle. It could easily have created the same problem for Timothy. But Paul seems to have learned a lesson in patience from his old friend Barnabas. As a result, Timothy became a "son" to Paul.

Timothy probably became a Christian after Paul's first missionary visit to Lystra (Acts 16:1-5). Timothy already had solid Jewish training in the Scriptures from his mother and grandmother. By Paul's second visit, Timothy had grown into a respected disciple of Jesus. He did not hesitate to join Paul and Silas on their journey. His willingness to be circumcised as an adult is clearly a mark of his commitment. (Timothy's mixed Greek/Jewish background could have created problems on their missionary journeys, because many of their audiences would be made up of Jews who were concerned about the strict keeping of this tradition. Timothy's submission to the rite of circumcision helped to avoid that potential problem.)

Beyond the tensions created by his mixed racial background, Timothy seemed to struggle with a naturally timid character and a sensitivity to his youthfulness. Unfortunately, many who share Timothy's character traits are quickly written off as too great a risk to deserve much responsibility. By God's grace, Paul saw great potential in Timothy. Paul demonstrated his confidence in Timothy by entrusting him with important responsibilities. Paul sent Timothy as his personal representative to Corinth during a particularly tense time. Read 1 Corinthians 4:14-17 and record what you learn: _____

Although Timothy was apparently ineffective in that difficult mission, Paul did not give up on him. Timothy continued to travel with Paul.

Our last pictures of Timothy come from the most personal letters in the New Testament: 1 and 2 Timothy. The aging apostle Paul was near the end of his life, but his burning desire to continue his mission had not dimmed. Paul was writing to one of his closest friends--they had traveled, suffered, cried, and laughed together. They shared the intense joy of seeing people respond to the Good News and the agonies of seeing the gospel rejected and distorted. Paul left Timothy in Ephesus to oversee the young church there. Read 1 Timothy 1:3, 4 _____

He wrote to encourage Timothy and give him needed direction. These letters have provided comfort and help to countless other "Timothys" through the years. When you face a challenge that seems beyond your abilities, read 1 and 2 Timothy, and remember that others have shared your experience.

Read Philippians 2:20-22 and record Paul's opinion of Timothy: _____

Read also Romans 16:21, 1 Corinthians 4:17, 1 Corinthians 16:10,11 _____

Timothy is the first second-generation Christian mentioned in the New Testament. His mother, Eunice, and grandmother, Lois (2 Timothy 1:5), had become believers and had faithfully influenced him for the Lord. Although Timothy's father apparently was not a Christian, the faithfulness of his mother and grandmother prevailed. Never underestimate the far-reaching consequences of raising one small child to love the Lord.

Timothy and his mother, Eunice, were from Lystra. Eunice had probably heard Paul's preaching when he was there during his first missionary journey (14:6-18). Timothy was the son of a Jewish mother and Greek father--to the Jews, a half-breed like a Samaritan. So Paul asked Timothy to be circumcised to remove some of the stigma he may have had with Jewish believers. Timothy was not required to be circumcised (the Jerusalem council had decided that--chapter 15), but he voluntarily did this to overcome any barriers to his witness for Christ. Sometimes we need to go beyond the minimum requirements in order to help our audience receive our testimony.

We don't know how the Holy Spirit told Paul that he and his companions should not go into Asia. It may have been through a prophet, a vision, an inner conviction, or some other circumstance.

To know God's will does not mean we must hear his voice. He leads in different ways. When seeking God's will,

- (1) make sure your plan is in harmony with God's Word**
- (2) ask mature Christians for their advice**
- (3) check your own motives--are you seeking to do what you want or what you think God wants?**
- (4) pray for God to open and close the doors as he desires.**

The "Spirit of Jesus" is another name for the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit had closed the door twice for Paul, so Paul must have wondered which geographical direction to take in spreading the gospel. Then, in a vision (16:9), Paul was given definite direction, and he and his companions obediently traveled into Macedonia. The Holy Spirit guides us to the right places, but he also guides us away from the wrong places. As we seek God's will, it is important to know what God wants us to do and where he wants us to go, but it is equally important to know what God does not want us to do and where he does not want us to go.

The use of the pronoun 'we' in Acts 16:11 indicates that Luke, the author of the Gospel of Luke and of this book, joined Paul, Silas, and Timothy on their journey. He was an eyewitness to most of the remaining incidents in this book.

Philippi was the key city in the region of Macedonia (northern Greece today). Paul founded a church during this visit (A.D. 50-51). Later Paul wrote a letter to the church, the book of Philippians, probably from a prison in Rome (A.D. 61). The letter was personal and tender, showing Paul's deep love for and friendship with the believers there. In it he thanked them for a gift they had sent, alerted them to a coming visit by Timothy and Epaphroditus, urged the church to clear up any disunity, and encouraged the believers not to give in to persecution.

Inscribed on the arches outside the city of Philippi was a prohibition against bringing an unrecognized religion into the city; therefore, this prayer meeting was held outside the city, beside the river.

After following the Holy Spirit's leading into Macedonia, Paul made his first evangelistic contact with a small group of women. Paul never allowed gender or cultural boundaries to keep him from preaching the gospel. He preached to these women, and Lydia, an influential merchant, believed. This opened the way for ministry in that region. God often worked in and through women in the early church.

Lydia was a dealer in purple cloth, so she was probably wealthy. Purple cloth was valuable and expensive. It was often worn as a sign of nobility or royalty.

Luke highlights the stories of three individuals who became believers through Paul's ministry in Philippi:

- ❖ **Lydia, the influential businesswoman (16:14)**
- ❖ **the demon-possessed slave girl (16:16-18)**
- ❖ **the jailer (16:27-30).**

Why was Lydia's household baptized after Lydia responded in faith to the gospel? Baptism was a public sign of identification with Christ and the Christian community. Although all members of her household may not have chosen to follow Christ (we don't know), it was now a Christian home.

This girl's fortune-telling ability came from evil spirits. Fortune-telling was a common practice in Greek and Roman culture. There were many superstitious methods by which people thought they could foretell future events, from interpreting omens in nature to communicating with the spirits of the dead. This young slave girl had an evil spirit, and she made her master rich by interpreting signs and telling people their fortunes. The master was exploiting her unfortunate condition for personal gain.

What the slave girl said was true, although the source of her knowledge was a demon. Why did a demon announce the truth about Paul, and why did this annoy Paul? If Paul accepted the demon's words, he would appear to be linking the gospel with demon-related activities. This would damage his message about Christ. Truth and evil do not mix.

Acts 16:22-25 describes Paul and Silas being stripped, beaten, and placed in stocks in the inner cell. Despite this dismal situation, they praised God, praying and singing as the other prisoners listened. No matter what our circumstances, we should praise God. Others may come to Christ because of our example.

Paul and Silas, who had committed no crime and were peaceful men, were put in stocks designed for holding the most dangerous prisoners in absolute security. When Paul and Silas were freed, the jailer drew his sword to kill himself because jailers were responsible for their prisoners and would be held accountable for their escape.

Paul and Silas's reputation in Philippi was well known. When the jailer realized his own true condition and need, he risked everything to find the answer. The Christian Good News of salvation is simply expressed: Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.

Read the following verses:

Romans 10:9 _____

1 Corinthians 12:3 _____

Ephesians 2:8, 9 _____

Philippians 2:11 _____

When we recognize Jesus as Lord and trust in him with our entire life, salvation is assured to us.

Paul and Silas took the family unit seriously. So the offer of salvation was made to the jailer's entire household--family and servants. Yet it was not the jailer's faith that saved them; they all needed to come to Jesus in faith and believe in him in the same way the jailer had. Yet his entire family did believe and all were saved.

Paul refused to take his freedom and run. He wanted to teach the rulers in Philippi a lesson and to protect the other believers from the treatment he and Silas had received. The word would spread that Paul and Silas had been found innocent and freed by the leaders, expressing the truth that believers should not be persecuted--especially if they were Roman citizens.

Roman citizenship carried with it certain privileges. These Philippian authorities were alarmed because it was illegal to whip a Roman citizen. In addition, every citizen had the right to a fair trial--which Paul and Silas had not been given.

THE BOOKS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Book	App. Date	Book	App. Date
Galatians	49	Jude	65
James	49	1 Timothy	64
1, 2 Thessalonians	51/52	1 Peter	64/65
1, 2 Corinthians	55	Titus	64
Romans	57	Acts	66/68
Mark	58/60	2 Peter	66/68
Ephesians	60	2 Timothy	66/67
Colossians	60	Hebrews	68/70
Philemon	60	John	85
Philippians	61	1, 2, 3 John	85/90
Matthew	61/64	Revelation	95
Luke	61/64		
	66		

THE SECOND TRIP CHURCHES

THESSALONICA

Thessalonica was one of the wealthiest and most influential cities in Macedonia. This is the first city Paul visited where his teachings attracted a large group of socially prominent citizens. The church he planted grew quickly, but in A.D. 50-51, Paul was forced out of the city by a mob (17:5, 6, 10). Paul later sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to see how the Christians were doing. Soon afterward, Paul wrote two letters to the Thessalonian believers (1 and 2 Thessalonians), encouraging them to remain faithful and to refuse to listen to false teachers who tried to refute their beliefs.

A synagogue, a group of Jews who gathered for teaching and prayer, could be established wherever there were ten Jewish males. Paul's regular practice was to preach in synagogues as long as the Jews allowed it. Often those who weren't Jews would come to these services and hear Paul's preaching

When Paul spoke in the synagogues, he wisely began by talking about Old Testament writings and explaining how the Messiah fulfilled them, moving from the known to the unknown. This is a good strategy for us. When we witness for Christ, we should begin where people are, affirming the truth they do know, and then we can present Christ, the One who is truth.

The Jewish leaders didn't refute the theology of Paul and Silas, but they were jealous of the popularity of these itinerant preachers. Their motives for causing the riot were rooted in personal jealousy, not doctrinal purity.

We don't know much about Jason except that he evidently was the local host and sponsor of Paul and Silas; thus he took the heat for all the problems. Jason is just one of many "unsung heroes" who faithfully played their part to help spread the gospel. Because of Jason's courage, Paul and Silas were able to minister more effectively. You may not receive much attention (in fact you may receive only grief) for your service for Christ. But God wants to use you. Lives will be changed because of your courage and faithfulness.

What a reputation these early Christians had! The power of the gospel revolutionized lives, broke down all social barriers, threw open prison doors, caused people to care deeply for one another, and stirred them to worship God. Our world needs to be turned upside down, to be transformed. The gospel is not in the business of merely improving programs and encouraging good conduct, but of dynamically transforming lives.

The Jewish leaders had difficulty manufacturing an accusation that would be heard by the city government. The Romans did not care about theological disagreements between the Jews and these preachers. Treason, however, was a serious offense in the Roman

empire. Although Paul and Silas were not advocating rebellion against Roman law, their loyalty to another king sounded suspicious.

Jason posted bond--putting up cash for freedom. By doing so, he promised that the trouble would cease or his own property and possibly his own life would be taken.

BEREA

How do you evaluate sermons and teachings? The people in Berea opened the Scriptures for themselves and searched for truths to verify or disprove the message they heard. Always compare what you hear with what the Bible says. A preacher or teacher who gives God's true message will never contradict or explain away anything that is found in God's Word.

ATHENS

Athens, with its magnificent buildings and many gods, was a center for Greek culture, philosophy, and education. Philosophers and educated men were always ready to hear something new, so they invited Paul to speak to them at the meeting of the Areopagus

The Epicureans and Stoics were the dominant philosophers in Greek culture. The Epicureans believed that seeking happiness or pleasure was the primary goal of life. By contrast, the Stoics placed thinking above feeling and tried to live in harmony with nature and reason, suppressing their desire for pleasure. Thus they were very disciplined.

For a time the Council or Court (here called the Areopagus) met on a low hill in Athens near the Acropolis. As Paul stood there and spoke about the one true God, his audience could look down on the city and see the many idols representing gods that Paul knew were worthless. Paul was well prepared to speak to this group. He came from Tarsus, an educational center, and had the training and knowledge to present his beliefs clearly and persuasively. Paul was a rabbi, taught by the finest scholar of his day, Gamaliel, and he had spent much of his life thinking and reasoning through the Scriptures.

It is not enough to teach or preach with conviction. Like Paul, we must be prepared. The more we know about the Bible, what it means, and how to apply it to our lives, the more convincing our words will be. This does not mean that we should avoid presenting the gospel until we feel adequately prepared. We should work with what we know, but always want to know more in order to reach more people and answer their questions and arguments more effectively.

Paul's address is a good example of how to communicate the gospel. Paul did not begin by reciting Jewish history, as he usually did, for this would have been meaningless to his Greek audience.

- ❖ He began by building a case for the one true God, using examples they understood (17:22, 23).

Then he established common ground by emphasizing what they agreed on about God.

Read 17:24-29 _____

- ❖ Finally he moved his message to the person of Christ, centering on the resurrection (17:30, 31).

When you witness to others, you can use Paul's approach: use examples, establish common ground, and then move people toward a decision about Jesus Christ.

The Athenians had built an idol to the unknown god for fear of missing blessings or receiving punishment. Paul's opening statement to the men of Athens was about their unknown god. Paul was not endorsing this god, but using the inscription as a point of entry for his witness to the one true God.

Paul explained the one true God to these educated men of Athens; although these men were, in general, very religious, they did not know God. Today we have a "Christian" society, but to most people, God is still unknown. We need to proclaim who he is and make it clear what he did for all mankind through his Son Jesus Christ. We cannot assume that even religious people around us truly know Jesus or understand the importance of faith in him.

God is known in his creation, and he is close to every one of us. But he is not trapped in his creation--he is transcendent. God is the Creator, not the creation. This means that God is sovereign and in control, while at the same time he is close and personal

Paul did not leave his message unfinished. He confronted his listeners with Jesus' resurrection and its meaning to all people--either blessing or punishment. The Greeks had no concept of judgment. Most of them preferred worshiping many gods instead of just one, and the concept of resurrection was unbelievable and offensive to them. Paul did not hold back the truth, however, no matter what they might think of it. Paul often changed his approach to fit his audience, but he never changed his basic message.

Paul's speech received a mixed reaction: some sneered, some kept searching for more information, and a few believed. Don't hesitate to tell others about Christ because you fear that some will not believe you. Don't expect a unanimously positive response to your witnessing. Even if only a few believe, it's worth the effort.

CORINTH

Corinth was the political and commercial center of Greece, surpassing Athens in importance. It had a reputation for great wickedness and immorality. A temple to Aphrodite--goddess of love and war--had been built on the large hill behind the city. In this popular religion, people worshiped the goddess by giving money to the temple and taking part in sexual acts with male and female temple prostitutes. Paul found Corinth a

challenge and a great ministry opportunity. Later, he would write a series of letters to the Corinthians dealing in part with the problems of immorality. First and Second Corinthians are two of those letters.

AQUILA AND PRISCILLA

Some couples know how to make the most of life. They complement each other, capitalize on each other's strengths, and form an effective team. Their united efforts affect those around them. Aquila and Priscilla were such a couple. They are never mentioned separately in the Bible. In marriage and ministry, they were together.

Priscilla and Aquila met Paul in Corinth during his second missionary journey. They had just been expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius's decree against Jews. Their home was as movable as the tents they made to support themselves. They opened their home to Paul, and he joined them in tentmaking. He shared with them his wealth of spiritual wisdom.

Priscilla and Aquila made the most of their spiritual education. They listened carefully to sermons and evaluated what they heard. When they heard Apollos speak, they were impressed by his ability, but realized that his information was not complete. Instead of open confrontation, the couple quietly took Apollos home and shared with him what he needed to know. Until then, Apollos had only John the Baptist's message about Christ. Priscilla and Aquila told him about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and the reality of God's indwelling Spirit. He continued to preach powerfully--but now with the full story.

As for Priscilla and Aquila, they went on using their home as a warm place for training and worship. Back in Rome years later, they hosted one of the house churches that developed.

In an age when the focus is mostly on what happens 'between' husband and wife, Aquila and Priscilla are an example of what can happen 'through' husband and wife. Their effectiveness together speaks about their relationship with each other. Their hospitality opened the doorway of salvation to many. The Christian home is still one of the best tools for spreading the gospel. Do guests find Christ in your home?

Each Jewish boy learned a trade and tried to earn his living with it. Paul and Aquila had been trained in tentmaking, cutting and sewing the woven cloth of goats' hair into tents.

Tents were used to house soldiers, and so these tents may have been sold to the Roman army. As a tentmaker, Paul was able to go wherever God led him, carrying his livelihood with him. The word "tentmaker" in Greek was also used to describe a leather worker.

Paul told the Jews he had done all he could for them. Because they rejected Jesus as their Messiah, he would go to the Gentiles, who would be more receptive.

In a vision, Christ told Paul that he had many people in Corinth. Sometimes we can feel alone or isolated, especially when we see wickedness all around us and when we are persecuted for our faith. Usually, however, there are others in the neighborhood or community who also follow Christ.

Some who became Christians in Corinth were:

- ❖ **Phoebe (Romans 16:1--Cenchrea was the port city of Corinth),**
- ❖ **Tertius (Romans 16:22),**
- ❖ **Erastus (Romans 16:23),**
- ❖ **Quartus (Romans 16:23),**
- ❖ **Chloe (1 Corinthians 1:11),**
- ❖ **Gaius (1 Corinthians 1:14),**
- ❖ **Stephanas and his household (1 Corinthians 16:15),**
- ❖ **Fortunatus (1 Corinthians 16:17), and**
- ❖ **Achaicus (1 Corinthians 16:17).**

During the year and a half that Paul stayed in wicked Corinth, he established a church and wrote two letters to the believers in Thessalonica (the books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians). Although Paul had been in Thessalonica for only a short time (17:1-15), he commended the believers there for their loving deeds, strong faith, and endurance inspired by hope. While encouraging them to stay away from immorality, he dealt with the themes of salvation, suffering, and the second coming of Jesus Christ. Paul told them to continue to work hard while they awaited Christ's return.

In Acts 18:12, we read that Gallio was proconsul of Achaia (modern Greece) and the brother of Seneca the philosopher. He came to power in A.D. 51-52.

Paul was charged with promoting a religion not approved by Roman law. This charge amounted to treason. Paul was not encouraging obedience to a human king other than Caesar (see 17:7), nor was he speaking against the Roman empire. Instead he was speaking about Christ's eternal kingdom.

In Acts 18:14-16, we read of an important judicial decision for the spread of the gospel in the Roman empire. Judaism was a recognized religion under Roman law. As long as

Christians were seen as part of Judaism, the court refused to hear cases brought against them. If they had claimed to be a new religion, they could easily have been outlawed by the government. In effect Gallio was saying, "I don't understand all your terminology and finer points of theology. Handle the matter yourself and don't bother me."

Crispus had been the ruler of the synagogue, but he and his family were converted and joined the Christians (18:8). Sosthenes was chosen to take his place. The mob could have been Greeks venting their feelings against the Jews for causing turmoil, or the crowd may have included some Jews. In any case, they beat Sosthenes for losing the case and leaving the synagogue worse off than before. A person named Sosthenes is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1:1, and many believe this was the same man who, in time, became a convert and a companion of Paul.

The vow Paul took was probably a temporary Nazirite vow that ended with shaving of the head and offering the hair as a sacrifice

Read Numbers 6:18 and record what you learn: _____

Acts 18:22 marks the end of Paul's second missionary journey and the beginning of the third, which lasted from A.D. 53-57. Leaving the church at Antioch (his home base), Paul headed toward Ephesus, but along the way he revisited the churches in Galatia and Phrygia (18:23). The heart of this trip was a lengthy stay (two to three years) in Ephesus. Before returning to Jerusalem, he also visited believers in Macedonia and Greece.

APOLLOS

Some people have an amazing natural talent for public speaking. Some even have a great message to go along with it. When Apollos arrived in Ephesus shortly after Paul's departure, he made an immediate impact. He spoke boldly in public, interpreting and applying the Old Testament Scriptures effectively. He debated opponents of Christianity forcefully and effectively. It didn't take long for him to be noticed by Priscilla and Aquila.

The couple quickly realized that Apollos did not have the whole story. His preaching was based on the Old Testament and John the Baptist's message. He was probably urging people to repent and prepare for the coming Messiah. Priscilla and Aquila took him home with them and brought him up to date on all that had happened. As they told him of the life of Jesus, his death and resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, Apollos must have seen Scripture after Scripture become clear. He was filled with new energy and boldness now that he had the complete gospel.

Apollos next decided to travel to Achaia. His friends in Ephesus were able to send along a glowing letter of introduction. He quickly became the verbal champion of the Christians in Corinth, debating the opponents of the gospel in public. As often happens, Apollos's abilities eventually created a problem. Some of the Corinthians began to follow Apollos rather than his message. Paul had to confront the Corinthians about their divisiveness. They had been forming little groups named after their favorite preacher. Apollos left Corinth and hesitated to return. Paul wrote warmly of Apollos as a fellow minister who had "watered" the seeds of the gospel that Paul had planted in Corinth. Paul last mentions Apollos briefly to Titus. Apollos was still a traveling representative of the gospel who deserved Titus's help.

Although his natural abilities could have made him proud, Apollos proved himself willing to learn. Because Apollos did not hesitate to be a student, he became an even better teacher.

Read more about Apollos in the following verses:

1 Corinthians 1:12; 3:4-6, 22; 4:1, 6; 16:12 _____

Titus 3:13 _____

Apollos had heard only what John the Baptist had said about Jesus (see Luke 3:1-18), so his message was not the complete story. John focused on repentance from sin, the first step. But the whole message is to repent from sin and then believe in Christ. Apollos did not know about Jesus' life, crucifixion, and resurrection. Nor did he know about the coming of the Holy Spirit. Priscilla and Aquila explained the way of salvation to him.

Apollos was from Alexandria in Egypt, the second most important city in the Roman empire, and the home of a great university. There was a thriving Jewish population in Alexandria. Apollos was a scholar, orator, and debater; and after his knowledge about Christ was made more complete, God greatly used these gifts to strengthen and encourage the church. Reason is a powerful tool in the right hands and in the right situation. Apollos used the gift of reason to convince many in Greece of the truth of the gospel. You don't have to turn off your mind when you turn to Christ. If you have an ability in logic or debate, use it to bring others to God.

Not all the work of a minister or missionary is drudgery, setback, or suffering. Chapter 18 is triumphant, showing victories in key cities and the addition of exciting new leaders such as Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos to the church. Rejoice in the victories Christ brings, and don't let the hazards create a negative mind-set.

PAUL IN EPHESUS

Acts Chapter 19 is an account of Paul in Ephesus. Ephesus was the capital and leading business center of the Roman province of Asia (part of present-day Turkey). A hub of sea and land transportation, it ranked with Antioch in Syria and Alexandria in Egypt as one of the great cities on the Mediterranean Sea. Paul stayed in Ephesus for a little over two years. There he wrote his first letter to the Corinthians to counter several problems the church in Corinth was facing. Later, while imprisoned in Rome, Paul wrote a letter to the Ephesian church (the book of Ephesians).

John's baptism was a sign of repentance from sin only, not a sign of new life in Christ. Like Apollos (18:24-26), these Ephesian believers needed further instruction on the message and ministry of Jesus Christ. They believed in Jesus as the Messiah, but they did not understand the significance of his death and resurrection or the work of the Holy Spirit. Becoming a Christian involves turning from sin (repentance) and turning to Christ (faith). These "believers" were incomplete.

In the book of Acts, believers received the Holy Spirit in a variety of ways. Usually the Holy Spirit would fill a person as soon as he or she professed faith in Christ. Here that filling happened later because these disciples' knowledge was incomplete. God was confirming to these believers, who did not initially know about the Holy Spirit, that they were a part of the church. The Holy Spirit's filling endorsed them as believers.

Pentecost was the formal outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church. The other outpourings in the book of Acts were God's way of uniting new believers to the church. The mark of the true church is not merely right doctrine, but right actions, the true evidence of the Holy Spirit's work.

When Paul laid his hands on these disciples, they received the Holy Spirit, just as the disciples did at Pentecost, and there were outward, visible signs of the Holy Spirit's presence. This also happened when the Holy Spirit came on Gentiles. Read Acts 10:45-47 _____

Paul spoke in a lecture hall at a school. Such halls were used in the morning for teaching philosophy, but they were empty during the hot part of the day (about 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.). Because many people did not work during those hours, they would come to hear Paul's preaching.

In Acts 19:10, "The province of Asia" refers to Asia Minor or modern-day Turkey. During this time, Paul and his coworkers spread the gospel throughout the land. These Jews traveled from town to town making a living by claiming to heal and drive out demons. Often they would recite a whole list of names in their incantation to be sure of including

the right deity. Here they were trying to use Jesus' name in an effort to match Paul's power.

Many Ephesians engaged in exorcism and occult practices for profit (see 19:18, 19). The sons of Sceva were impressed by Paul's work, whose power to drive out demons came from God's Holy Spirit, not from witchcraft, and was obviously more powerful than theirs. They discovered, however, that no one can control or duplicate God's power. These men were calling on the name of Jesus without knowing the person. The power to change people comes from Christ. It cannot be tapped by reciting his name like a magic charm. God works his power only through those he chooses.

Acts 19:18, 19 reflects the fact that Ephesus was a center for black magic and other occult practices. The people cooked up magical formulas to give them wealth, happiness, and success in marriage. Superstition and sorcery were commonplace. God clearly forbids such practices

Read Deuteronomy 18:9-13 and record what you learn: _____

You cannot be a believer and hold on to the occult, black magic, or sorcery. Once you begin to dabble in these areas, it is extremely easy to become obsessed by them because Satan is very powerful. But God's power is even greater.

Read the following verses and record what you learn:

1 John 4:4 _____

Revelation 20:10 _____

If you are mixed up in the occult, learn a lesson from the Ephesians and get rid of anything that could keep you trapped in such practices.

Why did Paul say he had to go to Rome? Wherever he went, he could see Rome's influence. Paul wanted to take the message of Christ to the world's center of influence and power.

Paul mentions Timothy in more detail in the books of 1 and 2 Timothy. Erastus was a committed follower of Christ who was not only Paul's helpful assistant, but also Corinth's director of public works. Read Romans 16:23 and record what you learn: _____

"The Way" refers to those who followed the way of Christ--the Christians.

Artemis was a goddess of fertility. She was represented by a carved female figure with many breasts. A large statue of her (which was said to have come from heaven, 19:35) was in the great temple at Ephesus. That temple was one of the wonders of the ancient world. The festival of Artemis involved wild orgies and carousing. Obviously the religious and commercial life of Ephesus reflected the city's worship of this pagan deity.

When Paul preached in Ephesus, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen did not quarrel with his doctrine. Their anger boiled because his preaching threatened their profits. They made silver statues of the Ephesian goddess Artemis. The craftsmen knew that if people started believing in God and discarding the idols, their livelihood would suffer.

Demetrius's strategy for stirring up a riot was to appeal to his fellow workmen's love of money and then to encourage them to hide their greed behind the mask of patriotism and religious loyalty. The rioters couldn't see the selfish motives for their rioting--instead they saw themselves as heroes for the sake of their land and beliefs.

Paul often sought others to help him in his work. On this occasion, his traveling companions were Aristarchus (who would accompany him on other journeys; see 20:3, 4 and 27:1, 2), and Gaius (probably not the same Gaius mentioned in Romans 16:23 or 1 Corinthians 1:14).

Paul wanted to go to the theater to speak up and defend his companions, but the other believers wouldn't let him go, fearing for his safety. The officials of the province mentioned were government officials, responsible for the religious and political order of the region. Paul's message had reached all levels of society, crossing all social barriers and giving Paul friends in high places.

Read Acts 19:33, 34. The mob had become anti-Jewish as well as anti-Christian. This Alexander may have been pushed forward by the Jews as a spokesman to explain that the Jews had no part in the Christian community, and thus were not involved in the economic problem of the silversmiths. A proconsul served as a civil magistrate or governor of a Roman province.

The city of Ephesus was under the domination of the Roman empire. The main responsibility of the local city leaders was simply to maintain peace and order. If they failed to control the people, Rome would remove the appointed officials from office. The entire town could also be put under martial law, taking away many civic freedoms.

The riot in Ephesus convinced Paul that it was time to move on. But it also showed that the law still provided some protection for Christians as they challenged the worship of the goddess Artemis and the most idolatrous religion in Asia.

PAUL ARRESTED AND IMPRISONED

While in Greece, Paul spent much of his time in Corinth. From there he wrote the letter to the Romans. Although Paul had not yet been to Rome, believers had already started a church there. Paul wrote to tell the church that he planned to visit the Roman believers. The letter to the Romans is a theological essay on the meaning of faith and salvation, an explanation of the relation between Jews and Gentiles in Christ, and a list of practical guidelines for the church.

These men who were traveling with Paul represented churches that Paul had started in Asia. Each man was carrying an offering from his home church to be given to the believers in Jerusalem. By having each man deliver the gift, the gifts had a personal touch, and the unity of the believers was strengthened. This was also an effective way to teach the church about giving, because the men were able to report back to their churches the way God was working through their giving. Paul discussed this gift in one of his letters to the Corinthian church.

2 Corinthians 8:1-21 _____

Reading Acts 20:5, 6, note the use of 'us' and 'we' showing that this is where Luke again joins the group. The last 'we' was in chapter 16.

Jewish believers celebrated the Passover (which was immediately followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread) according to Moses' instructions even if they couldn't be at Jerusalem for the occasion.

Many lamps were candles in lanterns. The combination of the heat from the candles and the gathered number of people in an upstairs room probably made the room very warm. This no doubt helped Eutychus fall asleep, as well as the fact that Paul spoke for a long time. Eutychus was probably somewhere in the range of 8-14 years old.

Paul had missed attending the Passover in Jerusalem, so he was especially interested in arriving on time for Pentecost, which was 50 days after Passover. He was carrying with him gifts for the Jerusalem believers from churches in Asia and Greece. The Jerusalem church was experiencing difficult times. Paul may have been anxious to deliver this gift to the believers at Pentecost because it was a day of celebration and thanksgiving to God for his provision.

The way of the believer is not an easy road; being a Christian does not solve or remove all problems. Paul served humbly and "with tears," but he never quit, never gave up. The message of salvation was so important that he never missed an opportunity to share it. And although he preached his message in different ways to fit different audiences, the message remained the same--turning away from sin and turning to Christ

by faith. The Christian life will have its rough times, its tears, and its sorrows, as well as its joys, but we should always be ready to tell others what good things God has done for us. His blessings far outweigh life's difficulties.

"Compelled by the Spirit" could be paraphrased, "drawn irresistably by the Holy Spirit."

The Holy Spirit showed Paul that he would be imprisoned and experience suffering. Even knowing this, Paul did not shrink from fulfilling his mission. His strong character was a good example to the Ephesian elders, some of whom would also suffer for Christ.

We often feel that life is a failure unless we're getting a lot out of it: recognition, fun, money, success. But Paul considered life worth 'nothing' unless he used it for God's work. What he put 'into' life was far more important than what he got out. Which is more important to you--what you get out of life, or what you put into it?

Single-mindedness is a quality needed by anyone who wishes to do God's work. Paul was a single-minded person, and the most important goal of his life was to tell others about Christ. Read Philippians 3:7-13 _____

Paul's relationship with these believers is a beautiful example of Christian fellowship. He had cared for them and loved them, even cried over their needs. They responded with love and care for him and sorrow over his leaving. They had prayed together and comforted one another. Like Paul, you can build strong relationships with other Christians by sharing, caring, sorrowing, rejoicing, and praying with them. You will gather others around you only by giving yourself away to them.

Paul was satisfied with whatever he had, wherever he was, as long as he could do God's work. Examine your attitudes toward wealth and comfort. If you focus more on what you don't have than on what you do have, it's time to reexamine your priorities and put God's work back in first place.

Paul was a tentmaker, and he supported himself with this trade. Paul worked not in order to become rich, but to be free from being dependent on anyone. He supported himself and others who traveled with him.

Read Philippians 4:11-13 and 1 Thessalonians 2:9 _____

Did Paul disobey the Holy Spirit by going to Jerusalem? No. More likely, the Holy Spirit warned these believers about the suffering that Paul would face in Jerusalem. They drew the conclusion that he should not go there because of that danger. This is

supported by 21:10-12 where the local believers, after hearing that Paul would be turned over to the Romans, begged him to turn back.

Obviously the gift of prophecy was given to both men and women. Women actively participated in God's work.

Read Philippians 4:3 _____

Other women who prophesied include:

Miriam (Exodus 15:20)

Deborah (Judges 4:4)

Huldah (2 Kings 22:14)

Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14)

Isaiah's wife (Isaiah 8:3)

Anna (Luke 2:36-38).

Paul knew he would be imprisoned in Jerusalem. Although his friends pleaded with him to not go there, he knew that he had to because God wanted him to. No one enjoys pain, but a faithful disciple wants above all else to please God. Our desire to please God should overshadow our desire to avoid hardship and suffering. When we really want to do God's will, we must accept all that comes with it--even the pain. Then we can say with Paul, "The Lord's will be done."

The Jerusalem council (Acts 15) had settled the issue of circumcision of Gentile believers. Evidently there was a rumor that Paul had gone far beyond their decision, even forbidding Jews to circumcise their children. This, of course, was not true, and so Paul willingly submitted to Jewish custom to show that he was not working against the council's decision and that he was still Jewish in his life-style. Sometimes we must go the second mile to avoid offending others, especially when doing so would hinder God's work.

Evidently these four men had made a religious vow. Because Paul was going to participate with them in the vow (apparently he was asked to pay for some of the required expenses), he would need to take part in the purification ceremony for entering the temple.

Read this law in Numbers 6:9-20 _____

Paul submitted himself to this Jewish custom to keep peace in the Jerusalem church. Although Paul was a man of strong convictions, he was willing to compromise on non-essential points, becoming all things to all people so that he might save some.

1 Corinthians 9:19-23 _____

Often a church is split over disagreements about minor issues or traditions. Like Paul, we should remain firm on Christian essentials but flexible on non-essentials. Of course, no one should violate his or her true convictions, but sometimes we need to exercise the gift of mutual submission for the sake of the gospel.

There are two ways to think of the Jewish laws. Paul rejected one way and accepted the other.

(1) Paul rejected the idea that the Old Testament laws bring salvation to those who keep them. Our salvation is freely given by God's gracious act. We receive salvation through faith. The laws are of no value for salvation except to show us our sin.

(2) Paul accepted the view that the Old Testament laws prepare us for and teach us about the coming of Jesus Christ. Christ fulfilled the law and released us from its burden of guilt. But the law still teaches us many valuable principles and gives us guidelines for grateful living. Paul was not observing the laws in order to be saved. He was simply keeping the laws as custom to avoid offending those he wished to reach with the gospel.

These Jews knew how effective Paul's work had been in Asia. Their strategy was to discredit Paul so that his work would be weakened. Be alert when you hear accusations against God's workers. Someone may be trying to discredit them or to hinder their work. Keep an open mind and pray for the workers. They will be strengthened by your support.

Because Jerusalem was under Roman control, an uproar in the city would be investigated by Roman authorities. The commander of the troops at this time was Claudius Lysias. This commander was head of a cohort (a special group, part of a legion) of Roman soldiers. He was the senior Roman official in Jerusalem.

By speaking in Greek, Paul showed that he was a cultured, educated man and not just a common rebel starting riots in the streets. The language grabbed the commander's attention and gave Paul protection and the opportunity to give his defense.

The historian Josephus wrote of an Egyptian who led a revolt of 4,000 people in Jerusalem in A.D. 54 and then disappeared. The commander assumed that Paul was this rebel.

Paul was also probably speaking in Aramaic, the common language among Palestinian Jews. He used Aramaic not only to communicate in the language of his listeners, but also to show that he was a devout Jew and had respect for the Jewish laws and customs. Paul spoke Greek to the Roman officials and Aramaic to the Jews.

Gamaliel was the most honored rabbi of the first century. He was well known and respected as an expert on religious law and as a voice for moderation. Paul was showing his credentials as a well-educated man trained under the most respected Jewish rabbi.

By saying that at one time he was as zealous for God as any of his listeners, Paul was acknowledging their sincere motives behind their desire to kill him and recognizing that he would have done the same to Christian leaders a few years earlier. Paul always tried to establish a common point of contact with his audience before launching into a full-scale defense of Christianity. When you witness for Christ, first identify yourself with your audience. They are much more likely to listen if they feel a common bond with you.

After gaining a hearing and establishing common ground with his audience, Paul gave his testimony. He shared how he had come to faith in Christ. Sound reasoning is good, but it is also important to simply share what Christ has done in our lives. But no matter how we present the message, not everyone will accept it, as Paul knew.

These people listened intently to Paul, but the word 'Gentile' brought out all their anger and exposed their pride. They were supposed to be a light to the Gentiles, telling them about the one true God. But they had renounced that mission by becoming separatist and exclusive. God's plan, however, would not be thwarted; the Gentiles were hearing the Good News through Jewish Christians such as Paul and Peter.

BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN (22:30-23:10).

By this time the commander knew the accusations against Paul were Jewish and the best way to unearth these was to have a hearing before the Sanhedrin. If the prisoner was found innocent he could be released, but if the charges were valid the case could be remitted to the procurator, the Roman governor.

The setting for this brief trial is given here. After Paul claimed all good conscience in his ministry, the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. Ananias' response is in keeping with what is known about him from Josephus, who described him as insolent, hot-tempered, profane, and greedy. Ironically, at the beginning of Paul's ministry another Ananias helped him receive his sight.

Paul's outburst was triggered by the high priest's illegal command. How could the priest violate the Law while sitting as judge over one who supposedly had transgressed the Law? Jewish law presumed the accused to be innocent until proven guilty. Like a whitewashed wall, Ananias looked all right on the outside but was weak and deteriorating inwardly. Jesus too in His trials was struck on the mouth and challenged the legality of it. John 18:20-23 _____

Paul's statement, Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest, presents a problem. This could hardly be because of poor eyesight because Paul had "looked" at the Sanhedrin." Paul's words could be irony in which he was saying he *could* not recognize such a violent man as priest. However, the word "brothers" (v. 5) makes this interpretation improbable.

Possibly there was such confusion the high priest was not identifiable. Certainly he was not wearing his priestly garments. It is also probable Paul did not know Ananias personally because the apostle had not had contact with the Sanhedrin for many years.

At any rate, Paul recognized the position of the high priest even if he did not respect the priest as a person. In such a scene justice was impossible. Recognizing this, Paul changed his tactics completely and stated his hope in the resurrection of the dead along with the Pharisees. This immediately disrupted the proceedings because it started an argument between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. By using this clever tactic, Paul divided his enemy. Amazingly the Pharisees defended Paul, a fellow Pharisee.

Paul was in more danger in the midst of the Jews than he was in a Roman prison. So again he was brought up the steps to the army barracks at the Antonia Fortress.

The importance of the vision disclosed in 23:11 was not only in its comfort and encouragement but also in the confirmation it gave of Paul's plans to go to Rome. The gospel of Christ would literally go from Jerusalem to Rome by means of the Apostle Paul. This was the fourth vision the Lord gave Paul. The other three are recorded in Acts 9:4-6; 16:9; and 18:9-10.

The hatred for Paul was so great that the very next morning 40 fanatical Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed him. Presumably these men were later released from this oath by lawyers because Paul's circumstances changed through a dramatic series of events.

The complicity of the chief priests and elders in this plot reveals both their lack of a legitimate case against Paul and their base characters. The fanatic zeal of

the 40 men is also seen because a number of them would certainly be killed in overcoming Paul's guards, should their plan be carried out.

Paul's unnamed nephew somehow heard about the plot of the 40 and was able to get to the barracks to tell Paul and then the commander. Many unresolved questions come to mind. Was Paul's nephew a Christian? How did he secure this information? Did Paul's sister live in Jerusalem? If Paul had relatives living in Jerusalem, why did he not stay with them?

When the fortress commander heard of this plan, he cautioned Paul's nephew not to tell anyone he had reported this. The commander decided to get Paul away from this danger spot. So he made every possible provision for Paul's security in his escape.

- ❑ **First, he sent Paul in the company of more than 470 men—two... centurions... 200 soldiers (a centurion was over 100), 70 horsemen, and 200 spearmen.**

- ❑ **Second, they began the journey under cover of nightfall at 9 P.M. In addition, Caesarea would be a far more secure place, not as subject to a riot as was Jerusalem. For the third time(!) Paul left a city surreptitiously, at night (Damascus, 9:25; Thessalonica, 17:10).**

When a prisoner was forwarded to a superior, the subordinate officer was required to accompany the subject with a written statement of the case. This letter from Claudius Lysias presents the essentials of the case. The commander bent the truth in saying he rescued Paul because he actually learned from a subordinate that Paul was a Roman citizen. He also discreetly omitted any reference to his preparing to have Paul flogged.

The importance of this document is seen in 23:29 where the commander declared Paul to be innocent. Compare similar comments by Gallio (18:14-15), the city executive of Ephesus (19:40), Pharisees (23:9), Festus (25:25), and Herod Agrippa II (26:31-32).

The journey to Antipatris from Jerusalem was more than 35 miles. This must have been a forced march because they arrived by the next day. The terrain from Jerusalem to Lydda or Joppa, seven or eight miles before Antipatris, was difficult and would provide suitable cover for an ambush party.

Once the entourage was in Antipatris the soldiers were no longer needed. The remaining 27 miles to Caesarea could be traversed with less danger.

Although Tertullus bears a fairly common Latin name, he could easily be a Jewish Roman citizen like Paul.

The prosecution would always begin first, both in Roman and in Jewish trials. Tertullus begins his speech with a standard flattery to secure Felix's favor. Rhetoric manuals emphasized winning the judge's favor, and speeches before public officials always opened by praising them. Although flattery was sometimes true, this example is blatantly false. Revolutionaries had escalated under Felix's corrupt and repressive administration, bringing neither peace nor reforms. Speakers could apologize for wearying the official as if they had not really finished praising him. This was a rhetorical technique for flattering someone even beyond the limits of one's own rhetorical skills or credibility.

Compare the analogously triple charge of Luke 23:2; some historians liked to parallel different historical figures.

The text of Acts 24:7-8a is questionable. Some translations will note this. If these verses are original, they refer to a conflict over whether the Sanhedrin or the Roman commander has jurisdiction over the case; from all that we know about Felix, he would certainly side with the commander.

This verse means either that there is a cry of popular assent or that others present supporting arguments in turn; given usual proceedings in which first the accuser and then the defendant spoke, the former may be more likely.

Paul's Defense Before Felix

Paul's rhetorical skills prove as effective as, or more effective than, those of his paid accuser Tertullus. The defendant spoke after the accuser in Roman trials, as soon as he was given permission to do so. Paul also includes an attempt at winning favor, although a much more modest and believable one than that of Tertullus. Proclaiming one's confidence in the judge's fairness was an implicit statement of innocence, and other trained speakers appealed to this in court cases as well.

Paul begins with a statement of the case's facts. Paul shows himself skilled in the rhetoric of his day. He continues with a proposition or thesis. This was a standard part of ancient speeches.

Although ancient courts preferred arguments from probability over eyewitness accounts, proof was essential. For example, Herod's son Antipater, after much proof of his guilt, offered only oaths in favor of his innocence, so the Syrian legate Varus had him executed.

Roman lawyers also had defenses for those who confessed their guilt, admitting that the deed was wrong, they could claim they meant well or simply plead for pardon. But when Paul admits a deed, he does not admit that it is wrong or ask pardon for it. Instead, he creates a masterful defense.

- ❑ First, this is an issue of internal Jewish law, not a crime under Roman law, and therefore worthy neither of Roman trial nor of Roman execution at Jewish instigation.
- ❑ Further, the Christian faith springs from the Old Testament and is thus an ancient religion, which should be protected as a form of Judaism under Roman toleration.

- ❑ Confessing what was not a crime was a typical masterful rhetorical move; it would heighten one's credibility while doing nothing for the opponents' charge that the defendant had broken the law.

- ❑ Paul clearly believes that one who truly believed the hope stated in Acts 24:15 would be careful to do right before God and people. This is an implied argument from probability, a strongly favored line of argument in ancient law courts.

- ❑ Almsgiving was highly regarded in Judaism but would not impress Felix, although he would regard it as harmless. More impressive is its value as clear proof of Paul's solidarity with his people and their ancestral customs.

Paul had appeared publicly but had not spoken publicly before the riot, and the lack of eyewitnesses in such a public place refutes his opponents' argument, especially when the chief witnesses had conveniently returned to Asia after the feast. The uprising was their fault, not his. Roman magistrates would view this

as a matter of internal Jewish religious disputes, nothing on which to judge a case of Roman law.

Acts 25:1-12

Hearing Before Festus

Josephus's portrait of Festus is much more positive than his portrait of Felix or Albinus. Festus corrected disturbances and caught many of the revolutionaries. It also appears from Josephus that Festus died in office, having served in Palestine only a year or two. Extensive parallels between Jesus' hearings in Luke 23 and Paul's in Acts 25-26 indicate that Luke wishes to parallel them, as some other historians paralleled figures; his point is that Christians must follow in Jesus' footsteps.

Festus's residence would be in Caesarea, but it was politically appropriate to visit the local authorities centered in Jerusalem. Relations between Felix and the Jewish authorities had been strained; a new governor, however, meant a new chance to introduce agendas previously deferred.

They wanted Paul moved; given the frequent assaults by revolutionaries throughout the country, the priestly aristocracy would not necessarily appear to have sponsored the violence against Paul (as violent as some of their own agendas were reported to be, according to early Jewish sources). Sitting on his tribunal means that this is an official hearing.

The accusations against Jewish law and temple (Acts 21:28) would be relevant to a Roman magistrate only if Paul had violated the sanctity of the temple, a charge that had not been demonstrated. An implication of treason against Caesar, however, would be fatal.

History reports that Festus was a fairer and more cooperative governor than most who ruled Judea; he undoubtedly wishes to engender a good relationship with the provincials here. Roman citizens had the right to appeal to Caesar's tribunal, although the emperor in this period normally delegated the hearing and judging of cases to others.

Later, the governor Pliny in Bithynia executed many Christians but sent those who were citizens to Rome for trial. Noncitizen provincials had no automatic right to appeal a governor's decision, except to accuse the governor of extortion or on a capital charge.

A Roman judge normally had a council with whom to confer. Because a governor might not be learned in the law, it was important for him to have some advisors who were, although he was ultimately free to disregard their counsel. A citizen could appeal a capital sentence, but appealing before a case had been heard, as Paul does here, was less common, because it was not necessarily advantageous. Festus has reason to comply with Paul's request. The political implications of dismissing an appeal to Caesar were unpleasant, whereas the benefits of sending Paul to Rome free Festus from having to disappoint the Jerusalem leaders if his own juridical conclusions differ from theirs.

Acts 25:13-22

Festus and Agrippa II

When Agrippa I died (Acts 12:23), his son, Agrippa II, in our section for today, was only seventeen; his daughters were Berenice (sixteen), Mariamne (ten) and Drusilla (six). Agrippa II ruled a small part of Palestine and worked with the Roman administration. He was an advocate for his people but was also loyal to Rome and later struck a coin in 89 AD commemorating Rome's triumph over the Jewish rebels. Josephus's record shows that Agrippa visited Roman officials frequently, especially when they first arrived. Festus later took Agrippa's side in a dispute with the priests.

Berenice (also spelled Bernice) was Agrippa's sister. Some ancient writers maligned her close relationship with her brother Agrippa, slandering it as incestuous. Scholars are divided on the truth of the charge. Berenice later became the mistress of the Roman general Titus, who besieged Jerusalem, but once he became emperor so much scandal arose about his consorting with a Jewish woman that he was forced to ignore her; she finally left Rome brokenhearted. She was fifteen years older than Titus.

Roman law required that the accused be permitted to confront his accusers and defend himself against charges in a public hearing.

The real issue here is one of Jewish law—one not tried by Roman courts. Luke again shows the Roman impression that Christianity was part of Judaism and thus should be accorded legal toleration. As a newcomer, Festus would naturally want the counsel of Agrippa, who knew Judaism but was more sympathetic to Roman interests than the priestly aristocracy was proving to be. Agrippa had a good Greek education, and Festus might have gravitated to him as one of the few local people with whom he could talk.

PAUL IN ROME

Acts 25:23-26:1

The Hearing Before Agrippa Begins

The pomp Luke mentions here was characteristic of royal families, including Jewish ones. The “commanders” (NASB) or “officers” (NIV) are the five tribunes, Roman commanders of the five cohorts in Caesarea and each equal in rank to the one tribune in Jerusalem.

The charge against Paul is political, but all the evidence involves Jewish religion, which would be incomprehensible to Roman procurators. Agrippa II is the first official competent in both Roman and Jewish law to hear Paul’s defense; he will thus supply the evaluation for Festus’s letter to Nero.

On receiving permission from the judge (in this case, unofficially Agrippa), one could speak. Paul’s hand is stretched forth in customary rhetorical style; gestures were an important part of ancient training in public speaking.

Acts 26:2-11

Paul’s Pious Background

Standard defense speeches varied somewhat in form but had general consistency, as exhibited here: the address to the judge, the narration of events—Acts 26:4-18 and finally the proof of the case—Acts 26:19-23).

Here Paul offers the praise of the judge. Paul is able to do so honestly; Agrippa’s interest in the law was known, and his realm became a safe haven for Jewish practice after the Jewish-Roman war of 66-70.

The appeal to many potential witnesses is not unusual; it occurs even in Plato’s version of Socrates’ defense. Two of the most basic future hopes of most Jews were the resurrection of the bodies of the righteous and the restoration of the twelve tribes at the same time. Paul must counter the supposition that a resurrection is improbable by reminding his hearers of God’s power and that resurrection is rooted in the most basic Jewish hope.

“Casting a vote” could also be used of unofficial decisions; Paul himself was probably too young to belong to the Sanhedrin, but he could still have exerted influence on others’ opinions. If Paul refers to more executions than Stephen’s, members of the Sanhedrin or unofficial courts may have voted for their execution while the procurator was in Caesarea, but the executions themselves,

like Stephen's, were illegal. Thus Paul's account here paints his accusers, for whose cause he once worked, in a rather anti-Roman light.

Pliny, governor of Bithynia in the second century, noted that former Christians could easily be moved to worship the gods, but complained that genuine Christians could not be forced to do so, even on the pain of death. Pagan rulers who had earlier tried to force Jews to abandon their ancestral customs had encountered the same resistance, which pagan officials generally considered obstinate.

In Acts 26:13 Paul uses clearly Jewish language for a theophany, a revelation of God's glory. Falling down was a common response to such revelations in the Old Testament and Jewish tradition. The "heavenly voice" (which some segments of Judaism thought had replaced prophecy) was often thought to speak in Hebrew or Aramaic. "Kicking against the goads" was a Greek proverb about fighting a god, possibly originating with the classical Greek playwright Euripides. It is not cited in the other accounts of Paul's conversion, but it is appropriate in an address to Agrippa, who had an ample Greek education.

Jesus' words to Paul evoke Old Testament passages about prophets' calls and Israel's call to the Gentiles. Read Jeremiah 1:5-8 and Isaiah 42:7, 16: _____

A Roman aristocrat like Festus may dislike Paul's mission to move Gentiles to repent, but he would not understand the Jewish opposition. Agrippa II, who had pagan friends and knew well the mounting animosity of Judean Jews against Gentiles, would understand Paul all too well, and it is to him that Paul directs these words.

Paul begins marshaling evidence at this point (Acts 26:8) that the faith he represents is in continuity with the Old Testament religion tolerated by the Romans as an ancient and ethnic religion.

Undoubtedly referring to Paul's Jewish learning (Acts 26:4-5) but perhaps also to his mastery of Greco-Roman rhetoric, Festus gives the usual answer that educated Romans gave to concepts so foreign and barbarian to them as

resurrection. In Greek circles, madness was sometimes associated with prophetic inspiration, but Festus, a Roman, undoubtedly means it less charitably.

A term in Paul's reply may imply that he *is* speaking under inspiration (the same term is used in Acts only at Acts 2:4, 14). But "sober" (or "reasonable"—NIV) speech was a virtue appreciated by Romans, related to the ideas of dignity and respectability.

The charge "speaking in a corner" had long been used to deride philosophers who avoided public life. By the second century Christians were often charged with being secretive, although sometimes they were meeting secretly to avoid being arrested. Paul argues that Christian claims are public facts, dismissed or ignored by others only because of the others' bias.

In Acts 26:22-24, Paul returns to his argument from Scripture, directed toward Agrippa although incomprehensible to Festus. Record the argument here: _____

Paul is not guilty before Roman law, and this is the only conclusion to which Roman hearers could come. Nor is he offensive to Agrippa's more liberal form of Judaism, which cared nothing for revolutionaries and did not accede to the demands of the Jerusalem aristocracy.

Because Paul had used his Roman right to appeal to Caesar's tribunal, Agrippa and Festus can only refer him there with a letter specifying their own opinion. This appeal had earlier saved Paul's life (Acts 25:3), and now it provides him free passage to Rome (Acts 19:21) and a public forum for the gospel there.

Acts 27:1-8

The Voyage to Rome Begins

Greek writing had long included passages describing other lands from the vantage point of ships voyaging by their coasts, and these included genuinely historical accounts. This narrative is clearly eyewitness history; the details of the voyage, including the number of days it took to reach particular harbors given the winds mentioned, fit exactly the report of one who had undertaken such a voyage. This point was shown already in the nineteenth century by an

experienced Mediterranean mariner, James Smith, whom most subsequent commentaries follow on the nautical details.

“Augustan” was often an honorary term, and one cohort known in Syria-Palestine before and after this period bore that name. Centurions could be moved around; this one may have had his full company of eighty troops although it might be hard to fit eighty more persons on the average Mediterranean cargo ship. The “other prisoners” may have been sent for trial as Roman citizens, but a higher number of those sent normally were convicted criminals to be killed in the games for the entertainment of the Roman public.

Shippers had low status but often made large profits. Ancient Mediterranean ships were quite small by modern standards; most of them weighed less than 250 tons, although Alexandrian grain ships were much heavier, often estimated at eight hundred tons or more.

Sidon had a double harbor and was about seventy miles north of Caesarea, where they had started. The ship is opposed by the usual summer winds from the west or northwest. Thus, remaining close to the Syrian coast east of Cyprus, and northward to the south of Asia Minor, their voyage is much slower than the reverse voyage across open sea, although aided by land breezes.

Myra was two miles from its harbor. The soldiers and their prisoners might have gone on by land, but the centurion is able to find another ship.

Rome’s grain fleet dominated Mediterranean trade; ships from Alexandria, Egypt, would travel northward and then westward to bear their cargoes to Rome. This journey took from as little as fifty days to over two months, although the reverse voyage from Rome to Alexandria could take as little as nine to twelve days. The Egyptian grain ships were about 180 feet long, 45 feet wide and (at their deepest) over 40 feet deep; the fleet may have transported some 150,000 tons of Egyptian grain to Italy each year. This was the largest mercantile fleet known to Europe before the 1700s. The Alexandrian fleet was the quickest means of transportation from Syria to Rome.

Ships that sailed over against Cnidus were keeping north of Rhodes. Crete was the largest island of the Aegean Sea. It had few harbors in the north, and a north wind from the Aegean there could wreck a ship against the coast. A wind that would drive their ship toward Salmone, on the eastern end of Crete, would

be a northwesterly wind, normal for late summer. But the south coast of Crete had more harbors, and the south winds there were more gentle.

Shortly beyond Fair Havens, Crete's southern coast veers sharply northward, exposing a ship to the full harshness of a northwesterly wind blowing across the land.

Acts 27:9-19

The Crisis at Sea

The "fast" here refers to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which occurs in September or October. Sea travel became more dangerous as winter approached

Read 2 Timothy 4:21 and Titus 3:12 _____

Shipping was completely closed down from around November 10 to as late as March 10, but September 15-November 10 and March 11-May 26 were risky periods as well.

Pagans undertaking sea voyages always sacrificed to the gods and sought their protection. Bad omens, astrological interpretations or dreams sometimes prevented a ship from sailing if they were taken seriously. Before going to war Romans would check the entrails of animals, the flight of birds and other forms of divination; religious advice was always important to those contemplating a potentially risky venture. Paul would sound to them like the kind of seer who could predict the future without divination. Unlike Greeks, Romans respected divination more than this kind of prophecy.

Being a practical Roman, the centurion respects the nautical knowledge of the captain more than a Jewish prisoner's religious insights. Yet such a decision was often made more on economic than nautical grounds. Grain ships sometimes traveled together; this one is making the voyage alone and is probably one of the latest vessels of the shipping season. But the captain at best hopes to make it to a better harbor before the seas close down for the winter; he cannot hope to reach Italy this late in the year (Acts 27:9). The captain is probably also the ship owner here, but because his vessel is part of the imperial grain fleet, the centurion functions as a Roman official with greater authority than the ship owner, just as he would on land in Egypt.

Phoenix was probably a common winter harbor; its site is either in southwestern Crete or, more likely, on the north of Crete. A south wind is what they need and should have brought them to their destination within hours. But the south wind often changes suddenly to a dangerous northerly wind in this region; the conflicting air currents increase the danger.

With a favorable wind in their mainsail, these ships could cover about fifty nautical miles in daylight, or ninety miles in twenty-four hours; but they had little resistance to a powerful wind going in a direction they wished to avoid.

The only place to anchor at Cauda is also exposed to the east-northeast wind and thus could not help them. The “boat” or “lifeboat” was used for landings, to maneuver the ship for tacking and so forth. Sometimes these boats were kept on deck; at other times, as here, they were towed behind. Here, filled with water or in danger of breaking loose from the ship, it has to be brought on deck to be rescued.

Even in good weather, Alexandrian grain ships sailed northward to Asia and then westward to Italy, rather than directly northwest, because a sudden change in winds could wreck them on this shoal.

Jettisoning the bulk of the cargo is the natural step at this point; in crises like this one no distinction is made between valuable and cheap cargo. Read Jonah 1:5 _____

It would take most of the manpower on deck to lower the spar that could be nearly the ship’s own length—down to the deck. It would be secured if possible..

Pagans felt that those who died at sea never entered the realm of the dead; instead their souls wandered aimlessly forever above the waters in which they perished. Ancient people evaluated the sincerity of philosophers according to how calm they stayed under pressure. A true philosopher consistent with his teachings would remain calm in a dangerous storm at sea. It was not unusual for ancient writers in the middle of a story to report earlier events they had not yet mentioned.

Caesar was said to have claimed that a ship could not sink with him on it, but Paul’s claim is because of God’s mission and message, not because he is

personally indispensable. Various deities claimed the role of protector at sea, like Isis or the Dioscuri; but God is the true protector.

Running aground was not normally good news; Paul's advance notice of that crisis would make faith easier when the time came. The sea around Malta (Acts 28:1) is far south of what is called the "Adriatic Sea" today but was included in the "Sea of Adria" in antiquity. The rate of drift per day and the trajectory they would have followed from Cauda to avoid Syrtis has been calculated; it was exactly fourteen days to reach Malta (Acts 28:1). The soundings in Acts 27:28 indicate that they were at this point near Koura, east of Malta. They can hear the water breaking against land here, because they are only perhaps half an hour from what is now called St. Paul's Bay.

Anchors were used as brakes and were normally cast from the bow. Here they are cast from the stern, as was occasionally done if the winds would otherwise blow the ship around. Other cases are known of crew members' trying to escape a doomed ship in a small boat; these boats were not meant as lifeboats and fitted only a handful of people. By this point, Paul (whose advice was originally disregarded, perhaps as the impractical concerns of an eccentric Jewish teacher) is now in virtual command of the ship, because he has the centurion's ear.

On the next day they could have used the small boat to ferry people to land. Without it, they would have to run the whole ship aground. "Not a hair of one's head" was a proverbial expression in the Old Testament.

Read 1 Samuel 14:45; 2 Samuel 14:11; 1 Kings 1:52 _____

The meal here is done in the traditional Jewish manner: the head of the household thanked God and distributed the bread.

Large ships frequently carried several hundred people; Josephus even claimed that he had traveled aboard a ship with six hundred people. The traditional site of St. Paul's Bay on northern Malta fits all the details of the narrative. Between St. Paul's Bay and the island of Salomonetta on the northwest is a shallow channel about three hundred yards wide. The ship wedges on a sandbar there, while waves pound the immobilized rear of the vessel.

Guards were responsible for the prisoners' safe custody. They would be less liable for their charges if the prisoners "died at sea" than if they escaped. In Greco-Roman literature, someone's escape from disaster at sea could serve as evidence of that person's religious purity even before a court.

Malta (ancient Melita) was on the shipping route from Rome to Egypt, whereby empty ships would sail quickly to Alexandria to load up more cargoes. It was the stop immediately after Syracuse in Sicily.

The Maltese were of Phoenician descent, and commoners there spoke and read only Punic (the late Phoenician dialect of the Carthaginians). But Roman citizens and retired soldiers also lived there, and the island was certainly not considered culturally primitive. Anyone who did not speak Greek was called a "barbarian," and Greeks did not expect kind treatment from them.

In cold weather some snakes can look like twigs until the heat of a fire stirs them. Ancients argued in courts that their survival of troubles at sea proved their piety and hence innocence; on the importance of arguing Paul's innocence, see the introduction to Acts. In some stories, the impious escaped one form of terrible death (e.g., at sea) only to face something worse. Read Amos 5:19 _____

"Justice" was a goddess who executed the will of Fortune or the Fates; although the Maltese observers refer to some Punic deity, Luke translates their idea into the idiom of Greek poets. Several groups of Jewish catacombs dating between the second and fifth centuries A.D. have been found on the island; but if Jewish people were on the island in the first century, this narrative does not mention them.

Adam's rule over the beasts (Genesis 1:26) was cut short by the Fall, but Jewish interpreters of Isaiah 11:6-9 believed that this rule would be restored in the messianic time, and a few holy men were believed to have that power in the present age. Some Greek initiates to mystery cults may have practiced snake handling. Paul simply deals in faith with a situation thrust upon him.

Whenever similar stories were told, those who survived bites from poisonous snakes or lizards were considered holy men. Greco-Roman paganism often considered such holy men to be divine or semi-divine. The change of mind on the part of Paul's viewers could strike the ancient reader as humorous, as in some similar accounts in antiquity where a human was mistaken for a particular divinity.

Hospitality was an important virtue, especially toward people who had been shipwrecked and were stranded without possessions. Publius is the top official. He had probably received a grant of Roman citizenship. The title assigned to him here has been found in Greek and Latin inscriptions as the proper title of the island's governor.

In subsequent times the Maltese were affected by a special sickness due to a microbe in the milk of the goats there; although such organisms would have mutated over the centuries, perhaps a similar illness is in view here. The attacks are intermittent, and the sickness described here is similar to malaria.

The seas opened as early as February 8 or as late as March 10, depending on the weather; in the year in view here they seem to open toward the earlier date. Syracuse was the chief city of Sicily, with a rich Greek and Roman heritage.

Rhegium was the Italian harbor closest to Sicily. In the first century, mercantile vessels, including the Alexandrian grain fleet, put in at Puteoli just west of Naples; to have reached it in two days meant that they had made optimum time (about ninety miles a day).

The Jewish community in Puteoli had been there a long time, as had Egyptian and Phoenician cults. As the regular port receiving visitors from the East, it naturally received foreign religions as well as goods. Thus it is not surprising to find Christians there; but readers of Luke's day might be more surprised that these Christians offer hospitality to Paul's captors, who accept it from them.

In older times, isolated inns had grown into larger settlements that retained the names of the inns. One of these was the Tres Tabernae, or Three Inns, thirty-three Roman miles from Rome on the ancient and famous Appian Way. The "Market of Appius," or Appii Forum, was about forty-three miles from Rome on the same paved road.

Along the Appian Way, Paul and the others would enter Rome's Porta Capena. Paul was loosely chained by the wrist to a soldier, who would be a member of the Praetorian Guard, Caesar's elite personal guard in Rome, which consisted of nine or twelve cohorts. The Praetorian Guard was commanded by the Praetorian prefect, one of the most powerful men in Rome, who was at this time Afranius Burrus. Burrus was officially responsible for all prisoners from the provinces to be tried by Caesar's court, although the task itself was probably delegated to a lower office. Burrus later died with Nero's philosopher-tutor Seneca during Nero's purges in 62 AD.

The “leaders of the Jews” are leaders of different synagogue communities; no single body ruled over the whole Jewish community in Rome. The Jewish congregations in Rome were all autonomous, and Christians could spread their views among the various synagogues with relative freedom. The Jewish community there had also made many Roman converts and sympathizers, to the chagrin of many male Roman aristocrats. Many of these sympathizers would be happy to embrace a version of the Jewish faith that accepted them fully without circumcision.

Imprisonment and chains were used as a means of detention until trial. Even in chains, Paul continued to emphasize the continuity between the Old Testament message and his own. This point would be important to Jewish leaders and also to Roman readers, who needed to understand that the Jesus movement was rooted in an ancient religion worthy of toleration.

Unable to win their case in Judea, Paul’s accusers would have even less chance in Rome. By 62 AD, the Jewish community in Rome had an advocate with the emperor in his wife (former mistress) Poppaea Sabina—until Nero kicked her to death while she was pregnant. It is by no means clear that the Roman Jewish community was uniformly hostile to the Christian movement (Acts 28:24), but they naturally had questions, especially if their previous expulsion in Acts 18:2 was due to Christian teachings.

**Paul’s citation of Isaiah 6 climaxes a theme throughout
Acts: that most of God’s own chosen people
reject their Messiah while Gentiles accept him is not
amazing but the fulfillment of Scripture.**

At the end of two years, if no accusers had arrived and no charges had been sent against him, Paul would normally be automatically released. Paul was later arrested again and beheaded, but Luke wishes to end on a note of positive legal precedent, before the corruptions of Roman law introduced by Nero’s tyranny. A number of ancient works had sudden endings; and following the pattern of other Jewish and Christian works, but in contrast to many Greek works) Luke ends happily.

That Paul could preach under the very nose of the Praetorian Guard suggests that, before Nero instituted his persecution against Christians for political reasons, they were tolerated under Roman law. Luke’s defense of Christianity on legal and philosophical grounds paved the way for second-century defenders of Christianity and points the way for Christian lawyers, statespersons and others to work in society today.