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The
Yeast
of
Yerushalaim

A Devotional Bible Study
On The Early Church As Described
In the New Testament from Acts to Revelation

by

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Some Bibles like *The Thompson Chain-Reference Bible*  
have maps at the back of the book  
that may give the reader a better understanding  
of the locality and the topography of places.

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Preface

Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to salt and leaven. Both emphasize the hidden work of the kingdom to improve society from the inside out.

This book studies the spreading of the yeast of the gospel by the early church as described by the Acts and the letters of the apostles. It started at Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified, resurrected, and taken into heaven. After the outpouring of the Holy Spirit the message spread from Jerusalem throughout the Roman Empire. Jerusalem is pronounced “Yerushalaim” in Hebrew.

The Yeast of Yerushalaim takes the reader on a page-per-day tour through the expansion of the church in the first century. The doctrinal and practical aspects of the gospel as explained in the letters of church leaders are studied in their historical setting. This historical information is mainly found in Acts, but vital pieces also show up in the letters (epistles). Understanding when, why, and in what circumstances the letters were written make their content more sensible and real, linked to real life and real people.

Although the early church is sometimes hailed as the ideal church, the reader may be shocked by the many problems they experienced. However, when we discover that they were ordinary people of flesh and blood like ourselves, we can better identify with them. People who have been searching in vain for a perfect church may realize that it does not exist. They can find fellowship and fulfillment among fellow imperfect believers who are the church of Christ on earth.

The imperfection of the early church, though, is not held up as the norm. The writers of the New Testament explain the content and the implications of the gospel clearly. The church can never stop striving for improvement.

It is amazing to see how viciously Satan, the father of lies, attacked the early church with false doctrine. Most of Paul’s letters were written to fight false doctrine in churches he had planted. He defended the one true gospel vigorously and reiterated that there is no other gospel.

The New Testament ends with visions of the triumphant church in heaven. One day we will reach a point, by God’s grace alone, where there will be no more sin nor all the nasty consequences of sin. It ends with Jerusalem, not the old one but the new one. The yeast of Yerushalaim leads to perfect eternity.

The book of Revelation holds up the two possible destinies of man and admonishes people to make the right choice. The awful reality of the end-time disasters calls sinners to think about their lives and to make peace with God while there is still time. The Bible ends on the high note of a powerful call to repentance and acceptance of eternal life as a gift from Jesus Christ.

“And the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come!’ And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely” (Rev. 22:17).

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The Yeast of Yerushalaim



This book  
is dedicated to  
the one true God,  
who revealed Himself  
as Father, Son, & Holy Spirit.

## 1. The Yeast permeates the dough.

“Yeast” has a positive and negative meaning in Scripture, like the “old” and the “new” self of Christians (Eph. 4:22-23, Col. 3:9-10). When the old self dominates, we can be very nasty; when the new self is in charge, we can accomplish much good in life. God wants us to be good yeast with a good influence.

January 1  
~~~  
Matt. 13:33

Yeast was forbidden for Israel only during the week long Feast of Unleavened Bread that followed Passover. The unleavened bread reminded them of their hasty exit from Egypt, and it urged them to remove sin from their lives as they removed leaven from their homes (Ex. 12:15-20). During Pentecost, leavened bread was offered to show gratitude for the grain harvests (Lev. 23:17).

Jesus used both meanings of yeast in His teaching. He warned His disciples against the bad yeast (teachings) of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt. 16:5-12). The apostle Paul connected with this negative meaning of yeast when he said that a little yeast affects the whole dough (1 Cor. 5:6-8).

However, the positive function of yeast was immortalized by Christ’s short parable about a well-known kitchen activity. He said, “*The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough*” (Matt. 13:33, NIV). **The kingdom of heaven is like yeast.** There can be no doubt that yeast or leaven in this case has a positive meaning.

What did Jesus mean? The fermentation of the yeast creates small bubbles in the dough and makes it spongy. When baked, the soft texture of the leavened bread makes it delicious food. Without the influence of the yeast, the dough will become an inedible, sticky lump when baked. To prevent this from happening when unleavened bread is baked, it is rolled into thin discs, which become crispy biscuits (matza) in the oven.

Before His ascension, Jesus told His disciples that they would be empowered by the Holy Spirit to spread the gospel over the world (Acts 1:8). This statement explained the parable of the yeast. As the yeast is dispersed through the dough and changes its structure in a positive way, so Christians have to be dispersed through each society to spread the gospel and to change views, attitudes, and behaviors by their beneficial influence.

From grassroots level to governing bodies, Christians can have a positive effect by their integrity, wisdom, advice, and example. This good yeast of the early church started its work in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit came to dwell in every Christian. From there, the yeast of Yerushalaim spread over the entire world.

A prayer: God, make me good yeast in Your kingdom.

A thought: Do I reach others with the yeast of the gospel?

2. Jerusalem

The city of God

January 2

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Acts 1:4-8

The name Jerusalem, like yeast, is used in both a positive and negative sense in the Bible, showing again that Christians can either fulfill their intended purpose or they can fail to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. God honored Jerusalem with His presence, but He didn't hesitate to destroy it when it became unfaithful to Him.

In Hebrew the name of the Holy City is pronounced as Yerushalaim.* It is mentioned in Genesis 14 when Abraham gave a tenth of the loot to Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem. Both these sages believed in one supreme God and called Him "The Most High." So four thousand years ago God had already chosen Jerusalem as His "home" on earth. A thousand years later king David conquered the city for Israel and bought the land where the temple was later built by Solomon. God showed His presence by fire from heaven (2 Chron. 3:1, 7:1).

The prophets loathed the people of Jerusalem for their unfaithfulness to God, while the psalmists described their yearning for the city where they could worship the true God in a special way. With His triumphant entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, Jesus wept over the city's coming destruction.

And yet, it was at Jerusalem that the Messiah paid the sin debt of humanity and where He rose from the dead. He ascended to heaven from the Mount of Olives near Jerusalem, and that is where He will return (Zech. 14:4, Acts 1:11). He sent the Holy Spirit into His followers while they were in Jerusalem.

The yeast of God's kingdom would be dispersed in the world, beginning at Jerusalem (Acts 1:8) and spreading from there to the remotest places on earth. Wherever a new church has been planted, there the yeast of Yerushalaim has come to do its wholesome work.

In this context, Jerusalem is a symbol. It represents the church. Both the church (Eph. 5:22-33) and the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2, 9) are depicted as the bride of Christ. She is the woman in the parable that works the yeast into the dough. Likewise, the church enriches society with a positive influence. She can only do that if she allows the Spirit to work through her, allowing the sap of the vine to flow through the branches (John 15).

The "Yeast of Yerushalaim" is the power of God flowing through the church to the world. We see the early church performing this task when we read the Acts of the Apostles, their letters to congregations, and the Revelation that God gave to the church through the apostle John.

A prayer: Help me to mix the yeast well with the dough.

A thought: Do I represent the good or the bad Jerusalem?

* Variations of the name exist: Yerushalajim, Yerushalam.

3. Whose Acts? Perspectives on the book of Acts

Internal evidence in the book of Acts, as well as external confirmation by early writers, agree that Luke, the “beloved physician” (Col. 4:14) and companion of the apostle Paul, was the author of the book that forms a bridge between the gospels and the rest of the New Testament.

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|--------------------------------|
| January 3
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Luke 1:1-4 |
|--------------------------------|

While the gospels merely describe episodes regarding the words and deeds of Jesus and those around Him—almost without any interpretation—the book of Acts starts off by explaining the meaning of Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and ascension. The letters of the apostles proceed with this process of interpreting the gospel to the church.

The Acts of the Apostles is an anecdotal record of the actions of the Holy Spirit in and through the first church till about 63 A.D. It shows typical things that happened, without recording all events. Although the spotlight is mainly on the apostles Peter and Paul, Luke’s book gives a lively account of about seventy-five individuals and their actions at about fifty-five historic places. Luke describes real people in real-life situations.

Luke did give some short summaries, though, to indicate the general trend of certain periods. In this vein, he pointed to the rapid growth of the church (Acts 2:41, 47, 4:4, 6:7), the spreading of the gospel by refugees (8:1, 4-6, 11:19-21), the power of God’s Word (Acts 4:13, 33, 5:16, 13:49, 19:20), times of persecution and of peace (Acts 8:1, 9:31), and periods of extensive teaching in a specific region (Acts 11:26, 18:11, 19:10, 28:30-31).

The main sections of the book can be linked to the last words the disciples heard from the lips of Jesus: “*You shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth*” (Acts 1:8). Chapters 1-7 describe events in Jerusalem; chapters 8-12 focus on developments in Judea and Samaria, as far as Damascus and Antioch; and chapters 13-28 show how the gospel was spreading throughout the entire Roman empire.

As the facts were presented, the focus gradually shifted from Peter to Paul, and from a mainly Jewish church to a mainly Gentile church. The Acts shows how the yeast of Christ’s gospel was dispersed by believers from Jerusalem to Rome. “Hill top after hill top is caught by the rising sun, until they flame like beacon fires from the capital of Judaism to the capital of Paganism” (Scroggie, p. 71).

The Acts paints the historical context in which the letters of the apostles to the churches were written. The letters should be studied against this background.

*A prayer: Lord, inspire us to evangelize as the first church did.
A thought: Would I have felt at home in the first church?*

4. The Holy Spirit and the early church

January 4
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Acts 2:1-13

Christians could only be “yeast” to society if they were empowered by God’s Spirit. Luke underlines this truth in his recording of the activities of the early church. He refers to the Holy Spirit fifty-six times in the book of Acts.

The eternal God has revealed Himself in three eternal Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the beginning, God’s Spirit hovered over creation (Gen. 1:2). God withdrew His Spirit from mankind because of sin (Gen. 6:3). However, He empowered individuals by His Spirit to accomplish their tasks (Num. 11:17, Judges 6:34, 1 Sam. 16:13). When the Son of God became a human being, He was anointed by the Spirit for His task (Acts 10:38). The prayer of Moses that all God’s people would be filled by God’s Spirit (Num. 11:29) became a promise through the prophet Joel (2:28-32). It became a reality ten days after Christ’s ascension when the Spirit came to baptize believers into one body (the church) and to dwell in them permanently (Acts 1:5, 11:16, 1 Cor. 12:13).

The first change the Holy Spirit brought about in believers was power, the replacement of fearful silence with bold testimony. Just as the Spirit had spoken through Joel, David, and Isaiah (Acts 2:16, 25, 34, 28:25), so He now spoke through the early church (Acts 1:8, 2:4, 4:31). The Holy Spirit can never accept the muting of the church by anyone. Peter emphasized that God gave the Holy Spirit to those who obey Him (Acts 5:32). The early church spread the gospel in spite of vicious efforts to silence it (Acts 4:18-20).

The message of the church was understood by people from different nations (Acts 2:8), because salvation in Christ was for the Gentiles as well as the Jews (Acts 2:17, 10:45, 15:7-11). The gospel started in Jerusalem and eventually reached Rome.

Luke stressed that the Spirit guided and instructed believers. The Spirit told Philip to go to the Ethiopian, and when the man was baptized, the Spirit took Philip elsewhere (Acts 8:29, 39). The Spirit urged Peter to go with the men Cornelius had sent (Acts 10:19-20, 11:12). Paul’s mission work was initiated by the Spirit in the church of Antioch (Acts 13:2-4). The Spirit showed them where to go and where not to go (Acts 16:6-7). The church council in Jerusalem was led by the Spirit to release Gentile Christians from Jewish Law (Acts 15:28). The Spirit appointed elders over God’s flock (Acts 20:28).

The Spirit was received as a gift from God (Acts 2:38). The terms *filled with* and *full of* the Spirit are often used (Acts 2:4, 4:8, 31, 7:55, 11:24, 13:9). Spirit-filled people had love, faith, wisdom, joy, and courage (Acts 2:42-47, 6:3, 5, 9:31, 13:52). Paul described the gifts and fruit of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12-13, Gal. 5:22).

*A prayer: Holy Spirit, fill me that I may bring the good news with love.*

*A thought: The more I surrender to the Spirit, the more He fills me.*

## 5. Enlightenment

### New insight into God's Word

On the second missionary journey, Luke met Paul in Troas and became a Christian. Subtly, Luke brings that to our attention by writing in first person plural (Acts 16:10-17). On Paul's third journey, Luke joined Paul in Philippi and proceeded with him to Jerusalem, where Paul was arrested. For the two years Paul was jailed in Samaria, Luke stayed in Israel and gathered information from eyewitnesses for his two books, known as the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles.

January 5

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Acts 1:1-3
1:20-22
2:16-21

The ascension of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit were covered in my book *The Yoke of Yeshua*. However, Luke added some important notes in Acts 1 and 2 that should not escape our attention. One of them is the new insight into God's Word given to the early church by God's Spirit.

During those forty days from Jesus' resurrection to His ascension, He talked to the apostles about *the kingdom of God* (Acts 1:3). He had started His ministry three years before with the same focus when He proclaimed, "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel*" (Mark 1:15). All that Jesus had said and done—the whole plan of salvation—was for the benefit of the kingdom of God. In His model prayer, Jesus links the glory of God's name to the coming of His kingdom (Luke 11:2).

Peter demonstrated the fruits of Jesus' teaching by quoting extensively from Scripture at the election of Matthias and on the day of Pentecost. He showed that the treason of Judas was predicted in the Psalms, and that the need to replace him with someone else was also a scriptural principle.

When the followers of Jesus were filled by the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, they delivered a powerful message in many languages to the pilgrims in Jerusalem. Peter addressed the crowd and quoted from the prophet Joel to explain what was happening. Long ago God promised to lay His Spirit on young and old to testify about the great deeds of the Almighty.

Peter also quoted from the Psalms to show that Jesus' death and resurrection were foretold as well. He emphasized that they witnessed Jesus' raising from the dead—a sure sign that He was the Messiah.

The Spirit of Truth guided them into the truth of Scripture as Jesus had promised (John 16:13). They discovered the truth of the Old Testament while the New Testament was taking shape among them. The actions of the early church would become part of God's Word through Luke's writing.

A prayer: Lord, reveal Your Word to me.

A thought: The Spirit can't reveal the Word to me if I don't study it.

6. Quality Time with God and with each other

January 6

~ ~ ~

Acts 1:14

4:31-37

Members of the early church lived close to God and to each other. They worked, ate, and prayed together daily. God spoke to them through His Word, and they spoke to Him through prayer. The Holy Spirit was active in both their Bible study and prayer (Acts 4:31, 2 Pet. 1:21, Rom. 8:26).

Jesus said they had to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-5). They didn't see this waiting as sitting around passively until something happened—they got actively involved in prayer. At one of these prayer meetings, the Holy Spirit came on them in power. Their talking with God led to talking with people. They shared the good news of salvation with people in Jerusalem, and three thousand accepted Christ as their Savior on the day of Pentecost. Soon another two thousand, including many priests, made the same commitment (Acts 2:41, 47, 4:4, 6:7).

The atmosphere of fellowship, care, and helpfulness among the followers of Christ demonstrated another fruit of the Holy Spirit—love. The apostle Paul later showed that the Spirit gave special gifts to individual believers, but that the main gift He gave to all believers was love (1 Cor. 12-13, Gal. 5:22, Romans 5:5). After all, the Great Commandment is to love God and neighbor. The Spirit enabled believers to obey this command. Sharing and loving played an important part in the church's outreach to society. Peter said to the lame man, "*What I do have I give you.*" He healed the man in the name of Jesus (Acts 3:6).

While believers of the early church spent quality time with each other and with God, their enemies tried their best to discredit church leaders and to sow doubts about their faith. The enemies did not hesitate to use even jail and torture to reach their destructive goals.

This persecution drove believers closer to God and to each other. They came together to give each other moral support and to unite their hearts in prayer. As they cried out to God, He filled them with His Spirit again and empowered them to share the gospel with others with even more fervor.

Luke emphasized several times that believers were united *with one accord* in prayer and fellowship (Acts 1:14, 2:1, 2:46, 4:24). Previously, the disciples had quarreled on more than one occasion about who of them was the greatest. Spirit-filled people can both lead and follow, depending on the guidance of the Spirit. The believers accepted the leadership of the apostles, especially the leading role of Peter and John in the beginning.

A prayer: Lord, I want quality time with You and with fellow believers.

A thought: Have I neglected quality time as an expression of love?

7. Who Killed Christ? The human and divine perspectives

Jews have been wrongly labeled as “Christ killers” for twenty centuries and have consequently suffered cruel persecution. If the persecutors had read their Bibles properly, this would not have happened. The prophecies of the Old Testament, as well as the records of the New Testament, clearly show that the Messiah had to suffer to complete God’s plan of salvation.

January 7
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Acts 2:22-24

When Abraham symbolically sacrificed his son, Isaac, on Mount Moriah, he portrayed what God would do to his Son, Jesus, at the same spot (Gen 22:2, 2 Chron. 3:1). Abraham’s comforting words to Isaac became a prophecy about God’s Son: “*God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering*” (Gen. 22:8).

Isaiah stressed His suffering in our place: “*He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed*” (Is. 53:5).

Referring to His crucifixion, Jesus said, “*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son*” (John 3:16). God send His Son to the cross. Jesus fulfilled His Father’s wish by His own choice, for He said of His life, “*No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of Myself*” (John 10:18).

After His resurrection, Jesus showed His disciples that Scripture foretold His suffering (Luke 24:26-27, 44-46). Such was the justice and love of God: He let His Son pay man’s sin debt rather than leaving sin unpunished or leaving man unsaved.

Having been coached by Jesus in this truth, Peter confirmed it in various speeches to the Jews (Acts 2:23, 3:18, 4:11, 5:31). Jesus’ death was not an unfortunate mishap but part of God’s eternal plan of salvation (Eph. 1:4) that He had announced thousands of years before in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:15).

However, God still held those accountable who had a share in His Son’s death—just as He had held those nations accountable that He had used to punish Israel. The small group of Jewish leaders who condemned and assaulted Jesus, their supporters who shouted for crucifixion at His trial, the judge who declared Him innocent and then sentenced Him to death, the soldiers who flogged and crucified Him—all of them were guilty of injustice and cruelty to the innocent Son of God. But He had to suffer hell in our place to free us from hell.

Jesus prayed that His Father would forgive them. That prayer was answered on Pentecost when three thousand people in Jerusalem repented and accepted Jesus as their Savior. As all people have a part in Jesus’ death, they are all guilty until they have asked and received God’s forgiveness.

*A prayer: Lord, my sins helped to hammer You to the cross. Have mercy on me.  
A thought: Such a sacrifice deserves my utmost and my all.*

## 8. He Lives!

### The importance of the resurrection

January 8  
~~~~  
Acts 2:22-39

When Jesus was crucified, His followers were devastated. To them, death was death. The promising life of their friend and master had been cut short, and their hopes and dreams had been dashed.

The resurrection of Jesus transformed all that somber despair into jubilant praises: “He lives! Jesus is alive and has appeared to us!” He explained to them why He had to suffer and die.

And when His Spirit filled them, they understood even better how His life, death, resurrection, and ascension all fitted together. The tide turned for them when they realized that Jesus had conquered death. The paramount importance of the resurrection was reflected in their testimony right away (compare 1 Cor. 15).

Peter gave a prominent place to the resurrection in his speeches to the people and to the leaders. On the day of Pentecost he announced to the crowd that God had raised Jesus up, “*having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it*” (Acts 2:24). When David said that God would not allow His Holy One to see corruption (Ps. 16:10), the reference was not applicable to David but to Christ: “*This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses*” (Acts 2:32).

After the healing of the lame man, Peter accused the people in the temple of killing the Messiah “*whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses*” (Acts 3:15). To the Jewish council Peter pointed out that the lame man had been healed in the name of Jesus Christ “*whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead*” (Acts 4:10). When the council forbade them to proclaim Jesus, Peter and John retorted that they would rather obey God than man, “*For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard*” (Acts 4:20 NIV).

Later they were arrested and jailed, but an angel led them out of prison. When the embarrassed council repudiated them for continuing to proclaim Jesus as Christ, they once again witnessed to the council that “*The God of our fathers raised up Jesus who you murdered*” (Acts 5:30).

This was another characteristic of the first church: They daily lived in the presence of the main beacons of salvation. The cross on Calvary, the empty tomb, the good-bye on the Mount of Olives, the outpouring of the Spirit on them in the temple—they lived among these places where all these great things had happened recently.

About twenty years later, the apostle Paul still emphasized in His speeches and letters the importance of the resurrection (Acts 17:31, Phil. 3:10, 1 Cor. 15).

A prayer: Living Savior, raise me up from spiritual death.

A thought: Christ's resurrection assures new life, here and hereafter.

9. Using Opportunities

They adapted their plans to grab opportunities.

The early church started off well. The Holy Spirit dwelled in their hearts, their powerful testimony was backed by powerful miracles, their numbers increased rapidly, there was a wonderful atmosphere of love and fellowship among them, and they settled into their new beliefs and lifestyle.

January 9
~ ~ ~
Acts 3:1-12

However, since most of them were Jews, they continued with their Jewish customs. So we find Peter and John on their way to the temple to pray at 3:00 p.m., a regular prayer hour. Suddenly their plans were changed by unexpected opportunities. The Spirit convinced them to make a short diversion.

They healed the lame man in the name of Jesus and continued with him into the temple court. The man was jumping with joy because he had received something of much greater value than silver or gold.

That led to another diversion. Instead of praying, they started preaching. The healed man attracted the attention of the people in the temple. When they learned that Peter and John had healed the beggar who had been sitting at the temple gate for decades, the people got excited and started to ask questions. That gave the apostles an opportunity to address the crowd and to tell them the good news of salvation in Christ.

Peter and John never got to their prayer meeting that day. The diversions of healing and preaching were followed by the first persecution. That night they slept in jail—probably sharing the good news with inmates and guards.

To be productive, we should neither get fixated on one thing nor get distracted by many things. When inflexible, we cannot change course easily when new opportunities suddenly arise. However, when we are too flexible, we are easily distracted by minor issues and lose focus of what really matters.

Peter and John were focused on their principle job—to spread the gospel; therefore, they could change their plans when opportunities for that main job opened up.

God gives us many opportunities every day to do something meaningful for Him, for a person, for an animal, or for the environment. These chances usually do not last long. We have to train our eyes and ears to spot such opportunities and to grab them instantly.

When you see someone in distress, you have to act swiftly but not impulsively lest you become a victim yourself. Training in first aid and rescue will sharpen your common sense and expand your repertoire of possible quick actions in emergencies. Likewise, you need to be prepared to respond immediately and fully to the opportunities God gives you.

A prayer: Help me to notice and grab opportunities for Your kingdom.

A thought: Do I look out for opportunities to help?

10. The Bible in a Nutshell

Biblical perspective over the ages

January 10
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Acts 3:11-26

On Pentecost, Peter quoted the prophets to explain the effect of the Spirit on believers. He alluded to the resurrection and ascension in the Psalms to show that Jesus was the promised Messiah. His sermon concluded with a call to repentance and to acceptance of Jesus as Savior. Three thousand complied.

After the healing of the lame man in the temple, Peter addressed the puzzled and excited crowd in Solomon's Colonnade. He explained that he and John did not have magic power—the lame man was healed in the name of Jesus. Then he connected them to the God they knew from Scripture, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The God of their fathers fulfilled the promise He had given to Moses about a special Prophet, called Messiah by Daniel (Deut. 18:15-19, Dan. 9:25-26). The apostles did not advocate a new religion; they pointed to the fulfilled prophecies of the Jewish religion.

Though it was part of God's plan of salvation that the Messiah would die to pay the sin debt of believers, the people of Jerusalem were accomplices to His murder. They had done this in ignorance, and now God was giving them the chance to repent and be reconciled with Him. If they would do that, times of spiritual renewal and refreshing would dawn on them. As God's chosen people, they were privileged to hear this message first. When they carried the good news to others, God's promise to Abraham would become a reality, namely that all nations would be blessed through his Seed.

Christ would stay at the right hand of God until the time is ripe for the renewal of the whole creation (Rom. 8:19-22). Without many words, Peter led them from the miracle of healing to Abraham and Moses in the distant past to the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension in the recent past, and eventually to the return of Christ in the future. An additional two thousand people responded positively to Peter's message and accepted Jesus as their Savior (Acts 4:4).

Each tiny detail in God's Word is important but has to be understood in context. God revealed His will gradually and progressively to His people. Perspective over the entire revelation is important for understanding smaller parts of it. Then we can use Scripture to explain Scripture, instead of ending up in contradictory viewpoints.

The apostles saw the church as branching from the stem of Israel, as Isaiah (11:1, 2, 10) had predicted. The apostle Paul said that the Gentiles were like wild olive branches grafted onto the olive tree of Israel (Rom. 11:17-24).

*A prayer: Your Word is one truth, from Genesis to Revelation.*

*A thought: The Old and New Testaments are like two halves of one apple.*

## 11. Views Influence Behavior

Is the focus on self, others, or God?

Just when Peter was proclaiming the resurrection of Christ, the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection, arrived. They were annoyed that the followers of the rejected Messiah dared to advocate on the Temple Mount the very thing they so strongly denied. It could not be tolerated.

January 11  
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Acts 4:1-24

The Sadducees were rich and influential. They had the temple guards arrest the apostles and jail them for the night. The Sadducees showed their power by this operation. They thought they had safeguarded their own interests for the time being, but the news of the miracle and Peter's words spread fast and the church gained two thousand more followers.

The hearing of the apostles by the Jewish council the next day was another pompous charade of big egos. Annas, a former high priest, had been deposed by the Romans but was still addressed as high priest because he called the shots for Caiaphas, his son-in-law, the present puppet high priest. When all the important people had been seated, the crucial question was put to the accused: In whose name had they performed the miracle? They were not interested in truth but in winning a game. They knew Peter said the beggar had been healed in the name of Jesus. Forcing the apostles to repeat that in court would make them accomplices of Jesus, who had been executed for blasphemy and treason.

In contrast with the glamorous attire of the VIPs, the apostles were simply clothed. Their greatness of character, though, towered above their small-minded accusers. Peter exposed their malice by pointing to the purpose of the meeting—to judge them for benevolence to a lame beggar! For heaven's sake!

He then reiterated that the miracle happened in the name of Jesus, who had been murdered by the council. He was the stone rejected by the builders but who actually was the capstone or cornerstone (Ps. 118:22). Jesus was the only Savior provided by the God they presumed to serve.

In an effort to keep up the appearance of control, they sent the apostles out so they could discuss their precarious position. Their focus was not on God's will but on their own popularity—what the people were thinking of the miracle, of the apostles, and of the leaders. Their fear of public reaction made them hold back. They sent the apostles away with the feeble command not to speak in the name of this Jesus who did good things to the disabled. Can you believe it?

Peter and John placed priorities in the right order by stating their position clearly. They would rather obey God than man. It was impossible for them not to speak of what they had witnessed about Christ.

A prayer: Father, Your name, kingdom, and will come first.

A thought: What is good in God's eyes has priority over personal preference.

12. One Savior

The uniqueness of Christ

January 12

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Acts 4:12

Christianity has been criticized for its “exclusivity.” It has even been accused of instigating hate against other religions by proclaiming Jesus Christ as the only Savior, thus implying that other religions are inadequate.

However, all religions present themselves as *the* way to God, thus viewing other religions as less efficient. The critics of Christianity should be fair and accuse all religions of exclusivity. Who would follow a religion that advocates itself as good but not the best? No business would advertise its goods and services as such, not even when it knows that it is not the best in the field.

Christianity bases its claim to be the only way on its Holy Book—just as other religions do. Hebrew Scripture is part of the Christian Bible and is known as the Old Testament. In that part of God’s revelation, He made it abundantly clear that there is only one true God; therefore, His Ten Commandments begin by denouncing all other gods.

If God is the Most High, then logically there can be no other being equal to Him or higher than He is. He declared to Israel unambiguously, “*Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one!*” (Deut. 6:4). The ten plagues in Egypt were meant to wipe out the ideas about idols in the minds of Egyptians and Hebrews (Ex. 7:5, 12:12). By the prophets, God mocked the idols as mere products of imagination (Is. 44). God felt so strongly about His unique and sovereign position that He sent His chosen people into exile for not recognizing Him as the one and only true God.

The true God proceeded with His revelation in the New Testament as He had promised by the prophets. There are two groups of prophecies about the Messiah. One group speaks about the suffering of the Messiah with His first coming, and the other group speaks about His glory with His second coming. Sometimes the two are mentioned in the same breath: “*The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone*” (Ps. 118:22).

The Messiah presented Himself as the only way to God: “*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me*” (John 14:6). He repeated this fact on more than one occasion (Matt. 11:27, John 10:9, 11). There is no room for misunderstanding. He proved that by rising from death as predicted (Ps. 16:10) and by ascending to the right hand of the Father as predicted (Ps. 110:1). Those who knew Him personally testified that He is who He claimed to be (John 1:14, 18, 1 John 1:1-3). Paul saw the glorified Christ and proclaimed Him as the only Mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5).

A prayer: Jesus, I accept You as my only Lord and Savior.

A thought: Can man force God to change His plan of salvation?

13. Prayer and Practice

Trust and love for God and neighbor

The reaction of the apostles and the church to hostile opposition shows us what to do in similar circumstances. The leaders reported to the church, who took the matter in prayer to God. Having been empowered by the Holy Spirit, they proceeded to serve each other and outsiders. Their prayers led to power and service.

January 13
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Acts 4:23-37

That is the wide angle; now let us zoom in to see more detail. The apostles would be treated later with severe insults and injuries, but this time they were sent off with commands and threats only. The highest legal and religious council of their nation had intervened to stop their activities as followers of Christ. They had to put the matter before their fellow believers and before their God and Savior.

When they received this bad news, believers united their hearts in earnest prayer. As they prayed, God fixed their attention on the second psalm, which predicted that some people would rebel against God and His Messiah (Anointed One). When they quoted Scripture in their prayers, they were not reminding God what Scripture says—God was reminding them.

In light of God's answer, they beseeched Him to grant them the power to continue spreading the gospel and to back them up with miracles. They were filled by the Spirit and spoke with boldness to people. The apostles who had seen Christ after His resurrection gave powerful testimony about this crucial event to insiders and outsiders.

Within this context, it is mentioned that the church members looked out for each other's needs and that they made considerable sacrifices to ensure that nobody suffered lack of basic supplies. When they discovered weaknesses in the system, they rectified them immediately (Acts 6:1-7).

Many followed the example of Barnabas ("son of comfort") by selling property and handing the proceeds over to the apostles, who then distributed it according to individual needs. Christian charity followed in the steps of Mosaic Law by providing for the needy (Deut. 15:7-18). Christians are inspired by the example and teachings of Jesus. What we do for the needy will be seen as done to Him personally: "*I was hungry and you gave me food*" (Matt. 25:35).

Their contact with God, through the Bible and prayer, enabled them to handle the problem of animosity from the outside and the need of security on the inside. This recipe has stood the test of time—pray as if everything depends on God; work as if everything depends on you. Prayer and practice are like the two rails for a train—it can only make progress when both are in place.

*A prayer: Lord, help me to be faithful in both prayer and practice.*

*A thought: Which one of the two have I neglected?*

## 14. God's Holiness and Love

Do we accept both?

January 14

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Acts 5:1-11

For many ages, harsh punishment was commonplace. During the past century, though, human rights have become crucial in many countries, leading to humane treatment of offenders. Consequently, we find it hard to understand and to explain harsh punishment in the Bible such as two church members executed by God for lying. If God had continued with this policy, the church could have become extinct long ago.

God's Word both reveals and conceals truth—just as the parables of Jesus do (Mat. 13:10-15). The meaning of many prophecies became clear with Christ's first coming, but there are still numerous unsolved mysteries in the Bible. In God's own timing, these too will be revealed to us.

The Bible tells us that God started new eras with harsh punishment for offenders to make a point, then didn't continue that discipline. Adam, Eve, and humanity lost Paradise for just one mistake (Gen. 3). Three thousand Israelites died when they broke the Ten Commandments the first time by making the golden calf (Ex. 32). The first person who broke the Sabbath Law was stoned to death (Num. 15:32-36). The first person who stole from the Lord in the Promised Land was stoned to death with his family (Josh. 7). Likewise, the first people in the early church who tried to cheat the Lord with dishonesty and hypocrisy dropped dead on the spot. Why?

We find it hard to reconcile such treatment of "Christians" with the God of love who gave His Son to save sinners. There seems to be discrepancy between John 3:16 and Acts 5. Maybe we have over-emphasized God's love and under-emphasized His holiness to such an extent that any manifestation of His holiness is incomprehensible and unacceptable to our skewed value system. Therefore, the mere idea of eternal punishment in hell is unthinkable for many people. The fact that God does not prevent all natural or man-made disasters has brought many to the point where they don't believe anymore that there is a God of love.

Wait a minute! Are they not omitting some factors from the equation? Let's review the facts. God gave humans a perfect habitat. They spoiled it with deliberate sin. God disciplined them, but kept on reaching out to them. He progressively revealed His will to man in His evolving Word. Eventually, God put their sin debt on His Son so that they could be forgiven and saved. In His holiness, He could not leave sin unpunished; in His love, He could not leave man unsaved. He has never compromised either His holiness or His love. God did not confuse the two; we did.

*A prayer: Father, calibrate my values with Your objective norm.*

*A thought: I want to remain open and honest with my Friend and Savior.*

## 15. Success and Animosity Christ and Satan

The sad story of two dishonest members of the early church is boxed in between two success stories of the same church. Their communication and charity were directed toward each other, as well as toward non-Christians.

January 15  
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Acts 5:12-18

Solomon's Porch became the regular meeting place of the early church. Maybe they loved that part of the temple court because Jesus had taught there (John 10:23). It is also probable that the Holy Spirit came on them at that spot, which Luke calls *the house* (Acts 2:2)—the same word Isaiah uses for the temple (Is. 6:1, 4). Luke uses the same phrase in Acts 2:1 and 5:12, "*they were all with one accord*," in a place that he identifies as Solomon's Porch. If they had received the Spirit in the *upper room* (Acts 1:13), all the pilgrims listed in Acts 2 would not have been present to hear them speak in different tongues. Peter's speech on Pentecost to a large crowd would be more feasible in Solomon's Porch, the place Luke identified as the spot where he gave his second speech (Acts 3:11).

While believers enjoyed fellowship in Solomon's Porch (or Colonnade), outsiders reacted to them in contrasting ways. Most held them in high esteem. Some did not dare to join them; others streamed to them in large numbers, either to join them or to bring their sick to them for healing. It had started with the lame man at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; now people came from all over Judea with their sick and demon-possessed, "*and they were all healed*."

The Jewish authorities could not tolerate the fast expansion of the new movement. Instead of rejoicing with those who had been healed, they maliciously persecuted the benefactors. They arrested all the apostles and locked them up in jail. The religious leaders thought they could restrain the church by force. Many others have tried that in the past twenty centuries, only to find that persecution empowers the church.

These human moves and counter-moves were only reflections of the spiritual war going on between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. Satan tried to paralyze the church either by persecution from outside or by weakness from the inside. Ananias and Sapphira fell victim to his devious enticement. The Jewish leaders unknowingly became his willing assistants.

In spite of all Satan's wicked plans and plots, the words of Jesus became reality: "*I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it*" (Matt. 16:18). Luke said that his gospel tells what Jesus *began* to do; therefore, the book of Acts tells what Jesus continued to do—to build His church. Slowly but surely the yeast of Yerushalaim was transforming society.

A prayer: Lord, with You I am on the winning side.

A thought: Satan and the world have limited powers.

16. The Crucial Choice

For or against God

January 16

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Acts 5:19-33

The repercussions of the crisis were quite humorous, though deadly serious. An angel freed the apostles from prison during the night and told them to continue teaching in the temple about the new life. They gladly obeyed.

While the apostles taught the people, the Jewish leaders assembled and sent the temple guards to fetch the culprits from prison. The guards and the council were shocked and puzzled to learn that the apostles had disappeared in spite of the prison's locks and guards. They were still searching their minds for a reasonable explanation for what had happened when a late-comer arrived out of breath with the news that their prisoners were teaching in the temple! What! They were outraged over the insult. "Go and get them!" the high priest told the guard. "But treat them gently; we don't want an uproar of the people." Like politicians, they always kept public support in mind.

When the smiling apostles were brought before the embarrassed council, the high priest scolded them for disobeying the commands of the council. In view of all the recent miracles on the apostles' side, an apology from the council would have been more appropriate. However, the council tried to keep their pose of control. The high priest also accused them of inciting public condemnation for the execution of Jesus, thus framing the council for shedding innocent blood. The suppressed fears of the council began to show.

Peter acted as spokesman for the apostles. He repeated the words with which they had left the council on their previous standoff: They had to obey God rather than man. Then he restated the basic facts about the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. He showed that through Christ repentance and forgiveness are possible for Israel, as well as a new life through the indwelling Holy Spirit for those who obey God.

Having the Jesus-people preach their faith to the council in the council hall infuriated the members. "How dare they teach us, the teachers of Israel!" they steamed beneath their glamorous garments. The necks of the apostles were, figuratively speaking, already on the block.

One is struck by the spectrum of emotions exhibited in this passage. On the one end, God is calmly proceeding with the expansion of His kingdom by His Spirit and by His church. On the other extreme, the vicious hatred of the leaders is ready to explode into cruel persecution. And sandwiched between the two are the amused yet apprehensive apostles, not knowing what to expect next from either their great God or from their small enemies.

A prayer: Lord, keep me calmly on Your side.

A thought: Are my leaders on God's side?

17. Saved By Wisdom

God uses friend and foe as instruments.

When Peter had spoken, the hall was soon buzzing with earnest discussion among members. Gamaliel, the respected Pharisee professor, saw the gestures and heard the tone of discussion around him. He realized that most of the members were ready to use brutal force to squash this movement. He decided to intervene and stood up to speak. The chair gavelled the meeting to silence and gave Gamaliel the floor.

January 17
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Acts 5:33-42

Calmly and clearly the wise and learned man urged the council to proceed with caution. He illustrated his viewpoint by referring to events known to council members. They knew that in the history of Israel many rebel leaders had come and gone without accomplishing much. If a movement was not from God, it did not last. The same would happen to the Jesus-people if they were not inspired by God. The council need not stain their hands with the blood of these people. And if it may later become clear that this movement was from God, then the council could not be accused of fighting against God.

The council members sensed the wisdom of the wait and see approach. To do nothing is always the easiest way. Nonetheless, they could not let the apostles go without spilling some of their pent up anger on them. They had them lashed to rub in the command not to speak in the name of Jesus again.

God used Gamaliel to save their necks, and the guards to bruise their skins. The rough treatment instilled gratitude in the apostles—gratitude that their lives had been spared, gratitude that God granted them the chance to testify, gratitude for the privilege of suffering for Jesus, who had suffered so much for them.

In obedience to God, they just proceeded as usual: telling the good news of salvation in Christ everywhere, to small groups in houses or to large groups in the temple. The religious leaders had not achieved anything, except to make the church more determined to fulfill its purpose.

It is astounding to see how God used friend and foe to reach His goals. He used the church to spread the gospel, the angel to free the apostles, the animosity of the leaders to empower the church, the wisdom of Gamaliel to prevent casualties, and the humor of the apostles to nurse their wounds.

Eventually most of the apostles would die as martyrs. God would not give them a soft ride. Jesus' warnings about persecution (Matt. 10) would become reality. From the human perspective, it would be sad. From God's perspective, He was promoting them to be with Him in heaven. Paul said it this way: "*To live is Christ, and to die is gain*" (Phil. 1:21).

A prayer: Jesus, make me willing to suffer for Your sake.

A thought: The gospel heals some and offends others.

18. The First Deacons

Sharing the load

January 18

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Acts 6

As God did not refrain from exposing sin in Israel, so He did not refrain from revealing it in the church. In spite of all the good work the early church was doing, the believers became guilty of discrimination. That some widows were neglected in the church's charity was not a mere oversight—it ran along clear cultural lines.

Some Jews who had grown up in Greek-speaking countries had returned to Israel. They were easily identified by their language and accent. They kept to themselves and had their own synagogues. They were treated with some prejudice by “pure” Jews who had lived in Israel all their lives. Some widows from these Hellenistic Jews became Christians. Unfortunately, the Jewish prejudice against them followed them into the church. They were neglected in the daily distribution of food. They complained about that.

The apostles identified the problem and called a church meeting. They proposed a plan to solve the problem. They suggested that the church choose seven Spirit-filled men to take charge of the serving of the tables, thus enabling the apostles to give their full attention to the preaching of the gospel. With that proposal the apostles admitted that the mistake happened because it had become impossible for them to do everything and to care for everybody. The load had to be shared. Some should do charity while the apostles preach the gospel.

The church supported them and chose seven men. Although their office did not have a name yet, it became known as *diakonos* or deacon, derived from the Greek word for “serve” in Acts 6:2. When Paul wrote his letters to Timothy thirty years later, this office was well established in church organization.

The Greek first names of the deacons show that they were probably Greek-speaking Jews themselves who had been chosen to address the problems of the widows from their own community. Steven's clash with non-Christian Hellenists supports the possibility that they might have been chosen with the secondary motive of bringing the gospel to Hellenist Jews because they spoke their language.

Two deacons, Steven and Philip, became quite active in spreading the gospel among people of foreign tongue. It is not clear why the non-Christian Hellenists picked a fight with Steven. They might have been angry about the neglect of Hellenistic widows by the church. Maybe they wanted to improve their acceptance by Hebrew-speaking Jews by siding with them against the Christians. Whatever the motive, they dragged Steven to the Jewish council and fabricated false testimony against him.

A prayer: Lord, help me overcome Satan's attacks from outside and from within.

A thought: Do I try to understand the feelings of foreigners?

19. The Message of History

The leaders get a look into the mirror.

The high priest allowed Stephen to defend himself. Jesus had promised that when His followers would be brought to court, the Holy Spirit would speak through them (Matt. 10:19-20). The main content of Stephen's speech was about Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and Israel's idolatry. What was the Spirit saying through Stephen?

January 19
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Acts 7:1-54

He subtly showed the Jewish leaders their main mistakes. They embraced the old traditions and feared the new insights of the Jesus-people. They focused on the physical temple but neglected spiritual contact with God.

How different it was with Abraham and Moses! God sent them on unknown paths, and they obeyed in faith. They were not afraid of the new because God was going with them.

God appeared to them without the help of a temple. Abraham built altars and worshiped God as he moved through Canaan. Moses met God at a burning bush. When Solomon dedicated the temple, he said that the heavens are too small to contain God—how much less a building made by man (2 Chron. 6:18).

Joseph and Moses were both rejected by their own people but later saved those people. Likewise, Jesus was rejected by the leaders, though He was the Prophet announced by Moses to whom Israel should have listened (Deut. 18:15).

In his speech Stephen repeatedly identified himself with Israel of the past and of the present by speaking of *our fathers* and by addressing the council as *brothers*. By reciting the history of Israel, he showed that he was a good Jew who knew the history of his people. The few places where his facts differed from the Hebrew Scriptures can be ascribed to the fact that as a Hellenistic Jew, he quoted from the Greek translation of the Old Testament as well as from Jewish tradition.

As Stephen proceeded, the message embedded in the history he held up to the council became increasingly clear. The patriarchs rejected Joseph, and their descendants rejected Moses. In the Promised Land, Israel rejected God by serving idols. Likewise, they eventually rejected the Messiah who was sent for their redemption. Stephen admonished them to learn from past mistakes.

The council did not interrupt Stephen when he recited Israel's history. Maybe they thought they could trap him on some mistakes. However, when he openly accused them of murdering their Messiah, they refused to listen any further.

The usual dignified council members suddenly became a raging lynching mob. They grabbed and manhandled Stephen as they dragged him out of the city for an illegal execution.

*A prayer: Holy Spirit, give me the right words when I am falsely accused.*

*A thought: Where has my country wronged God's kingdom?*

## 20. The Blood of the Martyrs is the seed of the church.

January 20  
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Acts 7:54 - 8:3

When Stephen concluded his speech by accusing the council that they were following in the footsteps of their ancestors, he was willing and ready to follow in the footsteps of his Lord and Savior.

Instead of focusing on the angry faces and hating eyes of his executioners, he focused on Jesus. He saw Him standing in glory at the right hand of God, and Stephen described what he saw.

To them, he was now adding blasphemy to his insults. They rushed at him with curses and condemnation. As they dragged him out of town, they assaulted him physically and verbally. They either forgot about the Roman law that prohibited them from executing a person, or they thought they would apologize to the governor later.

They got ready for the gruesome act of stoning by removing their coats and leaving these in care of a Pharisee student named Saul of Tarsus. Now we know why Luke could give such a detailed account of Stephen's defense and death—he got it from Saul, who was an eyewitness.

For stoning they didn't use pebbles. They used rocks light enough to throw but heavy enough to inflict fatal injury to the head. The first stone hit Stephen while he was still on his feet. He cried out loud to Jesus to receive his spirit, just as Jesus had done on the cross. When the second stone hit him in the head, he fell on his knees and prayed, as Jesus had done on the cross, that God would forgive his executioners. The third stone knocked him unconscious. The lynching mob kept on crushing his head until they were sure he was dead.

When the mob had left, leaving Stephen's body like the carcass of an animal, some of the Christian community came and buried him. His death was deeply mourned by the early church. They realized that some day they might have to pay the same price for their faith.

The open persecution of the church came sooner than they had expected. Saul of Tarsus tried to silence his guilty conscience by launching an all-out assault on the church. Now many others were arrested and jailed.

From the human viewpoint, it looked as if God had forsaken the church. However, God's thoughts are not like ours (Isaiah 55:8-9). He did not want His church to remain sitting in a cozy group in Jerusalem. The yeast of God's kingdom had to be dispersed into the dough of the entire world. He used the persecution to scatter believers into all directions, as far as Damascus and Antioch. Without knowing it, Saul was already serving the church.

A prayer: Lord, I am willing to live and to die for You.

A thought: Do I pray for my enemies?

21. Working New Fields

The gospel breaks through boundaries.

When a community faces real and imminent danger, some flee while others stay put in the hope that the storm will pass. The apostles stayed in Jerusalem to support the church. Others, like the deacon Philip, moved to small remote towns.

January 21
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Acts 8:1-25

Philip did not try to keep his whereabouts a secret, though. He openly brought the gospel to the people of Samaria. The Holy Spirit was slowly but surely leading the mainly Jewish church in the direction of the Gentiles. He had given them that hint on Pentecost when non-Jews who had been converted to Judaism accepted the Christian faith. The conversion of Hellenistic Jews also pointed in that direction. Now Philip was spreading the gospel among Samaritans, who were of mixed origin. The miracles of healing done by Philip convinced them to accept Jesus as Savior. Jesus' Great Commission was moving forward: "*You shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria...*" (Acts 1:8).

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard of Philip's successful campaign in Samaria, they sent Peter and John to evaluate this new development. They soon learned that believers in Samaria had not yet received the Holy Spirit. The apostles laid their hands on them and then they were filled by the Spirit. Their faith in Christ had been generated by the Spirit (Eph. 2:8, 1 Cor. 12:3, 13). Now they were *filled* by the Spirit (compare John 20:22, Acts 2:4, 19:1-6).

One of the converts was a man known as Simon the Magician. In the past he had amazed Samaritans with his magic, but now he was amazed at the miracles performed by Philip, and even more so by the work of the Spirit associated with the apostles. He thought they had superior magical powers and he was willing to pay for their secret. Peter strongly reprimanded Simon for his wrong views. Simon had to learn that there was a vast difference between the miracles of the Holy Spirit and the magic of evil spirits.

On their way back to Jerusalem, the apostles brought the gospel to Samaritan villages. The yeast was spreading.

The early church was flexible enough to use new opportunities and methods but preservative enough to maintain the original gospel. In the past twenty centuries, churches have had to face this choice repeatedly—how to adapt to new times and new challenges without compromising the gospel.

Factors like culture and technology demand that we adapt our methods. Sometimes churches cling too long to irrelevant traditions, but sometimes churches go to the other extreme and water down the gospel in their effort to please people. We should adapt our methods but maintain the original gospel.

*A prayer: Make me faithful to the gospel while I explore new terrain.*

*A thought: Do I cling to the past, or do I rush into the future?*

## 22. Mission Africa

### Expanding horizons

January 22

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Acts 8:26-40

Sometimes the shepherd has to leave the flock and go after one lost sheep (Luke 15:4). Philip was called away from the crowds of Samaria to a lonely traveler on a deserted road. Having been directed by an angel of the Lord, Philip did not argue about the strange assignment. He immediately obeyed.

Coming from the north, he was about to intersect the southwest bound Gaza road when a horse carriage approached on that road from Jerusalem. On the Spirit's command, Philip ran to the carriage and kept up with it. Philip later learned that the black man on the cart was the minister of finance from Ethiopia. He was a eunuch, a castrated slave who had risen to this high position.

He had come all the way to worship in Jerusalem, where he bought a Greek translation of the Isaiah scroll. Now we know why Philip, the Greek-speaking Jewish Christian, had been chosen for the job. The Lord would use his language skills to communicate with an African who also happened to understand Greek. God prepared both of them for this encounter.

The man read aloud from the Isaiah scroll—that part which was later marked as Isaiah 53. When Philip asked the man if he understood what he was reading, the man admitted that he did not. He invited Philip to ride with him and explain Scripture to him. The Spirit used Philip's testimony to open the man's mind and heart for the good news of Jesus Christ. God had already provided the baptismal water on that desert road by a rare thunderstorm a day or two before. After his conversion and baptism this official proceeded joyfully on his way, while Philip preached the gospel to every village on his return journey to the north.

Another prophecy of Isaiah had wonderfully come true. The Law of Moses prohibited eunuchs from serving as priests (Lev. 21:17-23) or to convert to Judaism (Deut. 23:1). King Solomon prayed at the dedication of the first temple that God would hear foreigners who would come to pray at the temple (1 Kings 8:41-43). God answered through Isaiah and Jesus, "*My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations*" (Is. 56:7, Mark 11:17). A time would come when even eunuchs would be welcomed in the temple (Is. 56:3-5). Solomon's prayer and Isaiah's prophecy became a wonderful reality for the eunuch from Ethiopia. He carried the gospel from Jerusalem to Africa.

The chain of God's provisions is revealed in this passage. He had prepared Philip and the Ethiopian over the years for this crucial meeting. God's timing was perfect—at the right moment, the paths of Philip and the Ethiopian converged at the point where God had set up the interview.

*A prayer: Lord, use me at the moment and place You have prepared.*

*A thought: Am I alert to God-given opportunities?*

## 23. The Chief Sinner

### The background of a conceited man

Saul of Tarsus (Acts 21:39) was born to Jewish parents of the *diaspora*, those scattered to many countries after the exile. They were Roman citizens, so Saul shared in that right on ground of his birth (Acts 22:27-28). He had a sister who later lived in Jerusalem (Acts 23:16). Saul's family stuck to Jewish traditions regarding language and customs. Saul could speak both Greek and Hebrew (Acts 17:22-23, 22:2), and he regarded himself as a pure Hebrew (Phil. 3:5). His parents sent him to Jerusalem before age thirteen to be educated in Pharisee law; thus he could say that he was "*brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel*" (Acts 22:3).

January 23

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Acts 8:1-3

In spite of the strict Pharisee laws he observed, the young Saul found it difficult to control his sinful desires. He admitted to the Ephesian church that he too had succumbed to the lusts of the flesh in the past (Eph. 2:3). He described to the Christians in Rome the inner conflicts he had as a Pharisee and as a Christian, "*For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do*" (Rom. 7:15 NIV).

A guilty conscience usually makes one more critical of others. Saul's vicious persecution of Christians might have been fueled by his defenses against his own guilt feelings. Like Augustine and Luther, he found that the more one tries to reach perfection by one's own power, the more one fails and the more one is engulfed in guilt and shame.

The fact that the Christians seemed to have what he could not find might have increased his hatred for them. He destroyed the church, as an angry bear mauls the person who threatens her cubs. He admitted that he not only arrested and jailed people, but "*when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them*" (Acts 26:10). Saul watched Stephen's execution and condoned it. After that he became more active in the persecution. He had a hand in the death of many Christian martyrs. This haunted him all his life; he saw himself as the chief sinner (1 Tim. 1:13-15). Though he tried to put up a brave face, he did not have inner peace about his aggression toward the church. When Christ confronted Saul later, He described Saul's inner conflict by saying, "*It is hard for you to kick against the goads*" (Acts 9:5). This metaphor describes the futile resistance of a young ox in the training process, fighting in vain against his master.

Although Saul had made many detours in his early life, God had been preparing this lively young "ox" for the yoke of Yeshua. With his language skills and Pharisee training, he would become God's chosen instrument to free the gospel from the constraints of Judaism. He would mix the yeast of Yerushalaim with the dough of the whole Roman empire.

*A prayer: Prepare me today for my task of tomorrow.*

*A thought: Do my guilt feelings make me obnoxious?*

## 24. The Confrontation

### Saul, why are you persecuting Me?

January 24

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Acts 9:1-7

The rebirth of Saul's heart and the transformation of his life were so dramatic and so crucial to the early church that Luke describes it three times. Saul probably gave his personal testimony to others on many occasions as well. The outpouring of God's grace on him, the chief sinner, remained his peak experience.

The news that the fleeing Christians were spreading the gospel wherever they went must have frustrated and infuriated the persecutors. In his zeal to wipe this movement out, Saul got permission to follow the refugees on their way to the north. His plan was to arrest as many of them as possible in Damascus and to bring them in chains to Jerusalem, hoping that this public display would deter others from joining their ranks.

He didn't realize the stupidity of opposing Jesus, to whom all authority in heaven and on earth had been given (Matt. 28:18). Arrogantly, Saul and his fellow enforcers approached Damascus at noon. Suddenly a light—much brighter than the midday sun—shone on them. For a moment, they stood frozen ... and then fell terrified to the ground. A voice spoke from above, as deafening as close-by thunder, "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?*" The others heard the noise but didn't understand it (see John 12:28-29). But Saul did. He asked with a trembling voice, "*Who are You, Lord?*"

Deep inside, Saul knew it was the Lord speaking to him. He had thought he knew the Lord. But now the Lord said that he was persecuting the Lord. Who was this Person? Who are You really, Lord?

Then came the shock of his life: "*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*" Maybe it was at this moment that he saw the glorified Christ (Acts 9:17, 22:14, 26:19, 1 Cor. 9:1, 15:8). At that moment of truth, his heart was reborn by the Spirit. Although his physical eyes were blinded, his spirit saw everything in a totally new perspective. Saul had thought he was serving the Lord by persecuting the church. Now he learned in trembling fear that by hurting the church he was insulting the Lord. The church belonged to God. God had opened the curtains of his mind. He saw a new life before him, a life of service to the Lord Jesus; therefore he asked, "*Lord, what do You want me to do?*"

It is one of the most important questions in life. By underscoring *You*, we give God full control; by stressing *me*, we seek God's will for ourselves; by emphasizing *do*, we express the need to be involved practically.

God didn't answer Saul's question. He sent him into Damascus and into the church. There he would discover the purpose of his life.

A prayer: Lord, what do You want me to do?

A thought: Am I kicking against the goads?

25. The Chosen Vessel

To bear the Name before Gentiles

The arrogant persecutor who had come to Damascus to arrest others was arrested by Christ. For three days he sat as if in a dark dungeon. He now saw the execution of Stephen and others in a new light. He was devoured by remorse. God speaks to His children through His Word and Spirit, by circumstances, and through fellow believers. During those three days of darkness and fasting, the Spirit used Saul's knowledge of the Old Testament to give him new insight into old passages. He had seen the glorified Christ and had heard His voice. He started to discover the real purpose of his life.

January 25
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Acts 9:8-19

While Saul was praying he saw in a vision a man called Ananias laying his hands on him and giving back his sight. However, God still had to convince this Ananias to visit the man who was feared by all Christians. They had heard of Saul's mission to Damascus and dreaded the consequences. God convinced Ananias that He had changed Saul completely—Saul was God's chosen vessel to carry the gospel to the Gentiles.

Apprehensively, Ananias went to the given address on Straight Street. Cautiously, he stated the reason for his visit to the dangerous enemy. In spite of his fears, Ananias proceeded with his task and laid his trembling hands on Saul's head. Pieces of skin fell from Saul's eyes—like a snake shedding its old skin—and then he could see again. He greeted Ananias with gratitude for his bravery and obedience. Ananias confirmed what Saul had been thinking—God would use him as missionary to the Gentiles.

First, Saul's own conversion was confirmed by baptism among fellow Christians. Now he was formally one of the flock. He and the disciples shared their stories with each other. Soon the news spread far and wide that the main persecutor of the church had become a believer himself. Saul had been the chief inciter of hatred against the church, so after his conversion the persecution abated, and the church experienced a time of peace (Acts 9:31).

God can quickly change a crisis into an opportunity. He overturned the vicious plans of His enemies and rubbed salt into their wounds by winning over the captain of their team to God's side. This victory gave the scattered believers time to settle the church in the new areas they had infiltrated. The one plant in Jerusalem had scattered its seeds and many new plants had shot up. The yeast of Yerushalaim was permeating the dough. Saul of Tarsus would become Paul the missionary. He would take the yeast much farther. He started to use his Roman name on the island of Cyprus (lesson 37).

*A prayer: Lord, lead me step by step so that I can fulfill the purpose of my life.*

*A thought: Am I receptive to God's guidance through Christian friends?*

## 26. The Fervent Advocate

becomes a humbled refugee.

January 26

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Acts 9:20-30

Saul had been a zealous Pharisee; he now became a passionate Christian. After his baptism, he visited the synagogue in Damascus and proved to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God.

However, Saul felt the need to take some time to meditate in isolation on what had happened to him. As Jesus had gone to the wilderness of Judea after His baptism, so Saul now went to an unidentified place in the Arabian desert. Galatians 1:15-17 fits in between verses 22 and 23 of Acts 9. Saul does not give details about his time in Arabia, but we can accept that the former Pharisee would have read and thought about the Old Testament from the Christian perspective. He did not receive his insight into the gospel from people, but from God. Eventually, he became the most prominent Christian theologian of the first century by explaining the gospel to the church of all times.

He probably returned to Damascus after about a year and ministered to the church in Damascus for approximately two years. That would fit in with the transfer of Damascus to king Aretas by the new emperor (2 Cor. 11:32).

As a former devoted Pharisee who had seen the light, he continued to witness to the Jews of that city. His Scripture knowledge and reasoning overwhelmed them, so they resorted to an old tactic—kill the messenger if you can't refute the message. They were outraged at the audacity of the traitor to prove them wrong in their own synagogue. They convinced the local authorities to help arrest this dangerous instigator of unrest. All the city gates were guarded. Saul's Christian friends helped him to escape under cover of darkness by letting him down over the city wall by rope and basket.

The man who had made refugees of many Christians had now become a refugee himself. The fierce persecutor hid like a scared mouse in a basket, and when he reached the ground he slipped away into the night. Thanks to God's protection, he reached Jerusalem undetected. The man who had destroyed the security of believers now sought safety with them. They refused because they viewed him with total distrust and suspicion.

For three years, Barnabas, "the son of comfort," had been receiving information about Saul's new life in Damascus. Now he took Saul to Peter and James and convinced them that Saul was indeed one of them. Saul stayed with them for two weeks, probably gathering as much information as possible from these men who had lived with Jesus. Then the enemies found out about his whereabouts and he had to flee again, this time back to Tarsus.

*A prayer: In the valley of death I need not fear for You are with me.*

*A thought: Can my faith withstand rejection by friend and foe?*

## 27. Making Friends and Enemies

Personal friendship overcomes group prejudice.

Let us study Saul's visit to Jerusalem in more detail. In spite of his three-year ministry in the church of Damascus, Saul's reputation as vicious persecutor had not diminished in Jerusalem. They did not have television, phones, and faxes, so Saul's new life was not obvious to people outside Damascus. Rumors about his conversion that trickled down to Jerusalem were discarded with suspicion and disbelief. Would you easily trust former terrorists if they suddenly presented themselves as Christians?

January 27  
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Acts 9:26-31

When Saul sneaked into Jerusalem with the hope of finding the same forgiving attitude among Christians that he had enjoyed in Damascus, he was rudely brought back to the realities of human nature. They shut the door in his face. "Can't blame you," he thought, knowing how much grief he had caused these people only three years before.

However, God had made provision for this situation. Maybe Barnabas had visited to Damascus, as he would later visit Antioch. He heard Saul tell his story and he saw Saul's ministry in the church of Damascus. When he got word that Saul was in Jerusalem, he welcomed him and introduced him to the Christian community. Barnabas's assurance and Saul's testimony convinced them that he was indeed a changed person. Then they glorified God for His infinite mercy bestowed on Saul (Gal. 1:22-24).

After he had been accepted by the Jerusalem church, Saul worked with them openly. As he had done in Damascus, he started to preach the gospel to the Jews, knowing that it was a dangerous undertaking. However, it was Saul's conviction that in every place the gospel should be brought to the Jews first (Rom. 1:16). On his missionary journeys he always went first to the local synagogue. When they rejected the gospel, he turned to the Gentiles.

His stay in Jerusalem was cut short by increasing hostility from the Hellenistic Jews. The Lord told him in a vision to flee from Jerusalem (Acts 22:17-21). Saul's former zeal as Pharisee would not open doors for him to the Jews; on the contrary, they hated him more for that, branding him a traitor. The Lord commanded him to depart right away and to go to the Gentiles. The church in Jerusalem assisted him in getting away safely.

After this brief visit with Peter and James (the brother of Jesus), Saul was on the run again. He returned to the place of his birth, Tarsus in Cilicia, in the hope that he might find old friends where he had grown up. Years later, Barnabas found him still there, ministering in spite of adversities.

A prayer: Lord, I know You will provide step by step as I serve You.

A thought: Do I sometimes question God's assignments for me?

28. Fruitful in Obscurity

Saul's silent years in Syria and Cilicia

January 28

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Acts 9:30-31

2 Cor. 11:23 -  
12:5

Luke does not give a complete history of the early church but shows typical events that took place. In the preceding lessons we saw that Luke omitted some detail about Saul's activities in Damascus, an omission that was filled in by Paul in his letter to the Galatians. The same omission occurred with regard to Saul's eleven-year ministry in Syria and Cilicia, a time to which Paul referred in his second letter to the Corinthians. (At this point, I use the name "Paul" when referring to his letters.)

While Luke says Saul returned to Tarsus, Paul expands the area to Syria and Cilicia (Gal. 1:21). Tarsus might have been his hometown from where he visited the surrounding areas. Luke does refer later to *brothers* and *churches* in Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15:23, 41), though he has not described their origin. Luke makes the same passing remark about churches in Judea and Galilee that were built up by "*walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit*" (Acts 9:31).

By *fear* of the Lord, the Bible means reverence and awe for the *holiness* of the Almighty. This fear should be accompanied by the *comfort* of the Spirit, who assures us that we are God's children, thanks to God's *love and grace*. Recognizing both God's holiness and love, they grew and multiplied.

During those "silent" years of Saul's life, he was planting and nursing new churches in the regions of Syria and Cilicia and teaching the people to walk in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Spirit. Years later, some members of the church in Corinth questioned Paul's apostleship. One of his defenses was to tell them what he had suffered for his faith (2 Cor. 11). He mentioned several shipwrecks and floggings that Luke did not include in the book of Acts. These probably occurred in this period when Saul ministered in Syria and Cilicia.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, he also referred to a vision he had fourteen years back. That places this vision in the time he was in Syria and Cilicia. In the vision he was taken to heaven where he had experiences beyond description. Paul believed that God used his infirmities to keep him from becoming haughty about this glorious vision.

Saul did not become inactive in those silent years, but only little of it was recorded. Most people do their part without much recognition, yet it is these uncelebrated workers who are really the salt of the earth. In Saul's obscure years, God was preparing him in hard and glorious ways for his great task as missionary and theologian.

*A prayer: Here I am, Lord. Use me as You see fit.*

*A thought: Am I fruitful in my obscurity?*

## 29. Expanding the boundaries

### Opening the way to the Gentiles

While Saul had his silent years in the Tarsus region, Luke moved the spotlight back to Peter. The leader apostle had helped open up Samaria for the gospel. Now he would help to unlock the way to the Gentiles.

Philip had already brought in an Ethiopian. Peter would bring in the first Roman officer and help make the mission to the Gentiles official church policy. God used two miracles to create an atmosphere of awareness and expectation along the west coast of Israel.

In Lydda, Peter met a certain Aeneas, who had been bedridden for eight years. He was paralyzed and could do little for himself or for others. Peter healed him in the name of Jesus. The first thing Aeneas did was to make his bed, tidy up his room, and start looking after himself and others again.

The news spread quickly by word of mouth in that region. When a young woman in the neighboring Joppa died, her friends sent for Peter. The deceased was called Dorcas or Tabitha. These Greek and Aramaic names mean *gazelle*. In contrast with Aeneas before his healing, Tabitha did a lot for other people, especially for poor widows.

When Peter arrived, the sobbing widows showed him some of the clothes Tabitha had made for them. Peter asked to be alone with the dead. While he prayed, the Spirit revealed to him that he had to bring Tabitha back to life. When he told her to get up, she did, and Peter presented her to the astonished mourners, who changed to jubilant well-wishers pretty fast. This even greater miracle shook up the whole region and led to many conversions to Christianity.

Peter lodged with Simon the tanner, who lived at the shore in Joppa. There Peter was prepared for his main task in that region. Probably shortly after the raising of Tabitha, Peter had a vision. Luke describes this vision twice to emphasize its importance (Acts 10 and 11). It was near lunch time, and Peter was quite hungry while he waited on the flat roof of the house for the meal to be prepared.

Then he saw in a vision a large sheet, bound at the four corners, lowered from heaven. The sheet was filled with all kinds of unclean animals that were forbidden as food for Jews. A voice told Peter to slaughter and eat some of the animals. He flatly refused. He did not want to transgress God's law. Then the voice said, "*What God has cleansed you must not call common.*"

After the vision, Peter still didn't have a clue what it meant. God used what happened next to open his eyes for the mission to the Gentiles.

*A prayer: Guide me step by step in the right direction.*

*A thought: God will prepare me in time for the tasks ahead.*

January 29 ~~~ Acts 9:32-43 10:9-16 11:5-10
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## 30. The Value of Repetition

The breakthrough to the Gentiles is highlighted.

January 30

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Acts 10:1-8

17-33

Peter was still wondering what the meaning of the vision could be when three men knocked at the front door. The Spirit revealed to Peter that he had to go with these men without doubting God's goal and method. He invited them to stay over for the night. They had plenty of time to discuss the recent experiences of Cornelius and Peter.

Luke tells the story of Cornelius and the angel three times to accentuate its importance. Luke was acquainted with the Jewish custom of emphasizing by repetition. In the Law of Moses important matters like the Ten Commandments, the Tabernacle and its contents, the yearly feasts, the sacrifices, the cities of refuge, and the sins of Israel since the Exodus had been repeated.

In the Psalms certain phrases like *hallelujah* are often repeated. Psalm 136 repeats twenty-six times, "*For His mercy endures for ever.*" The cherubs in Isaiah's vision stressed God's holiness by repeating "*Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts*" (Is. 6). Jesus emphasized by saying, "*Truly, truly, I say to you.*" The life of Jesus is told four times in the New Testament.

Likewise, Luke stressed by repetition that the gospel was meant for all people, not for the Jews only. As a companion of Paul, the missionary to the Gentiles, Luke's mind was deeply imprinted with this truth. However, Luke showed that this Great Commission was given by Jesus (Acts 1:8) and that it was introduced to the church by Peter, the leader apostle.

The angel did not bring the gospel to Cornelius. Neither did he ask Cornelius to go to Peter. No, Peter had to come to Cornelius, enter his house, preach the gospel to all Gentiles in his house, and see the results for himself—in order to **break the taboo** about the Gentiles.

To prepare Peter for this huge step away from exclusive Judaism, God had given him the vision and the command, "*What God has cleansed, you must not call common.*" Peter was so convinced about this truth that he repeated it to Cornelius and to the Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 11).

Cornelius was a *God-fearing* person, Luke's term for converts to Judaism. Cornelius served God with what he had. God decided it was time to give him His full blessing through His Son. Cornelius did not earn his salvation by living a good life. He sought God because God was working in his heart. Jesus made it very clear that no one can come to Him unless the Father is drawing that person (John 6:37). No one is saved by obeying the Law because no one can (Gal. 2:21, 5:4).

We are saved by grace and faith, which are gifts of God (Eph. 2:8-9).

*A prayer: Lord, you have broken down the wall of separation (Eph. 2:14-18).*

*A thought: I have to detect and overcome my prejudices.*

## 31. In Your Seed

all nations will be blessed.

The trip on foot to Caesarea, north of Joppa, took another two days. On the fourth day after Cornelius had seen the angel, his messengers were back, bringing with them Peter and a few other Christians. Cornelius was so overjoyed that he knelt before Peter, who quickly assured him that he, Peter, was just an ordinary person.

January 31  
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Acts 10:24-48

The centurion whose slave Jesus healed in Capernaum was aware of the Jewish custom not to enter the house of non-Jews; therefore, he insisted that Jesus need not come to his house—He could only say the word. Maybe Cornelius showed the same sensitivity for Jewish customs and wanted to call his family and friends outside. Peter, however, wanted to proceed with the course the Spirit had shown him. He explained to Cornelius why he as a Christian Jew no longer had any objection to entering the house of a Gentile.

Peter showed further courtesy by enquiring about Cornelius's motivation to send for him. He knew the reason already, but he wanted to hear it from Cornelius himself. Cornelius knew that Peter knew, but he nonetheless enjoyed telling the story himself. Western cultures are in such a hurry that we often take shortcuts that may rob us of valuable interaction and information. Wise counselors allow their clients to take their time to reveal their needs.

When the introductions and briefings were done, Peter again confirmed that the gospel is for all nations. He followed with a brief overview of the life, death, resurrection, and forgiveness of the Savior, Jesus Christ. While he was still speaking, the Holy Spirit came on Cornelius and all who were with him.

They began to speak in foreign tongues—just as the 120 disciples had on Pentecost. The Spirit gave them this specific gift to show that there was absolutely no difference between Jew and Gentile in the church. The work of the Holy Spirit convinced Peter that these new converts had to be baptized. They proceeded with that immediately.

The church would debate this issue for years to come. However, they would not question the fact that Gentiles can become Christians. They realized that God's promises to Abraham and to the prophets were being fulfilled: "*In your Seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed*" (Gen. 12:3, 22:18, Isaiah 49:6, 56:7).

In spite of debates about the Gentiles and the Law of Moses, the crucial milestone had been reached. The door to taking the gospel to the Gentiles had been opened. The last part of Jesus' Great Commission—to *the ends of the earth*—was becoming a reality.

A prayer: Let Your kingdom come to all people.

A thought: I will support missions and the distribution of Bibles.

32. An Informed Decision

Peter reports to the church.

February 1

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Acts 11:1-18

A car needs power to propel, breaks to slow down, steering to direct, and a driver to control the process. In the church we also need visionaries to move us forward, the wise to caution against impulsive decisions, leaders to direct, and Christ, the head of the church, to control these processes.

After Peter had taken a giant step forward in Caesarea, the conservative brothers in Jerusalem applied the breaks on a move that was far too fast for them. They were still stuck in the old paradigm of the Torah. After all, since they had neither seen Peter's vision nor heard the voice he had heard, Peter had to bring them up to speed regarding Christ's direction and goals.

Luke could have summarized the visions of Peter and Cornelius as well as what happened in Cornelius's house, but for the sake of emphasis by repetition, he repeated the whole story. In this way, he also showed that Peter had given them all the detail so that they could make an informed decision.

The visions showed that God was working on both sides simultaneously. He was directing Cornelius to Peter in such a way that Cornelius's family and friends could share in the blessing too. God spoke to Peter in such a way that he had to overcome his prejudice in practice and enter a Roman house.

If the two had met halfway, the crucial point would not have been made. Then Cornelius would just have been another Ethiopian who disappeared over the horizon, and the church would not have been any wiser.

The two processes merged into one crowning experience when the Holy Spirit fell on these Gentile believers just as He had fallen on Jewish believers on Pentecost. Peter had supplied irrefutable proof to the Jerusalem critics, and they had nothing more to say than to express their amazement about God's grace and to glorify Him for that.

God had been pointing Israel to the Gentiles since He had called Abram and had promised him that all nations would be blessed through him. Jesus had done the same by commanding them to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19) and to be His witnesses to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8). The Spirit urged them in the same direction by the conversion of many foreigners on Pentecost, and by the conversion of the Hellenists, the Samaritans, and the Ethiopian. Saul was saved and called as missionary to the Gentiles.

With the Cornelius episode, the church got the message and made it official church policy. The church was becoming a light to the nations.

*A prayer: Help me to move forward, slowly but surely.*

*A thought: Where is my emphasis—on the past, the present, or the future?*

### 33. Your Kingdom Come

The yeast of Yerushalaim reaches Antioch.

In the first seven chapters of Acts, Luke has shown how the church in Jerusalem came into existence and how it functioned initially. In the next five chapters (8-12), Luke focuses on the dramatic expansion of the church to other regions as a result of persecution. He shows how these developments affected Peter (in Judea and Samaria) and Saul (in Damascus and Tarsus). The Spirit convinced both of them that the gospel had to be taken to the Gentiles too.

February 2 ~~~ Acts 11:19-26
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In Acts 11, Luke tells how the gospel reached Antioch, the third largest city in the empire after Rome and Alexandria. Soon the church in this Gentile city would become the center from where the gospel would be carried to Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy.

Greek-speaking believers from Cyprus and Cyrene told the gospel to Greeks in Antioch. The reception was amazing—many accepted Christ as their Savior. Apparently without knowing about the effect of Cornelius on church policy in Jerusalem, ordinary believers in Antioch crossed the barrier between Jews and Gentiles and were bringing in a great harvest for the Lord.

The apostles in Jerusalem were not surprised by this development. They had been prepared by Peter's experience with Cornelius. However, to ensure that the gospel was purely preserved, they sent Barnabas to Antioch to assist the new church in staying on track. This attitude of the apostles may seem somewhat patronizing, but in those early development phases of the church, it was realistic. Creeds and conduct codes had not yet been formulated. However, in view of Satan's continuous efforts to harm the church, it is essential for the well-being of the church of all times that congregations stay in touch and help each other to maintain a healthy church.

The open-minded Barnabas—who always saw the best in others—was glad to observe the vigor of the new Gentile church in Antioch. However, he was not so focused on the positive that he did not notice the needs. He realized that the church in Antioch needed a leader with a firm background in both Jewish and Greek cultures to address the issues arising from the cultural setting in which this church had to operate. Being full of the Spirit, Barnabas knew who the right person for the job was—Saul of Tarsus!

Barnabas went to Tarsus, convinced Saul to come to Antioch, and they ministered in Antioch for a year. Because of their focus on Christ, people started to call believers *Christians* (Christ-people), a name by which the followers of Christ ever since identified themselves humbly, but gratefully.

*A prayer: Lord, I want to be a Christian deep in my heart.*

*A thought: Do I focus on the weaknesses or on the potential of others?*

## 34. Mustard Seeds

Small beginnings may have great outcomes.

February 3

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Acts 11:27-12:4

Luke skillfully interjects seemingly insignificant facts on which he later builds important developments. A prayer meeting (Acts 1:14) precedes Pentecost, Peter's speech, and a mass conversion (Acts 2). The hour of prayer merged with a lame beggar (Acts 3:1-3), and from the ensuing healing emerged interactions with the public and with the Jewish leaders, eventually leading to the conversion and healing of many (Acts 3-5). The needs of a few widows (Acts 6:1) led to the office of deacon and to the powerful testimony of two deacons, one to the Sanhedrin and one to the Samaritans (Acts 7-8).

A young man called Saul, a casual bystander at a stoning (Acts 7:58), later advanced to chief persecutor and ravished the church, but inadvertently also accelerated its expansion as the refugees spread the gospel as far as they went. After the persecutor met Jesus, he became Jesus' chief advocate and missionary and spread the gospel over the entire empire.

At the end of chapters 11 and 12, Luke again inserts small events which later would have enormous consequences. When a drought became a famine it gave the Gentile "daughter" church in Antioch the opportunity to give tangible help to the Jewish "mother" church in Jerusalem. Barnabas and Saul took the gift to them, and when they returned to Antioch, they brought with them a young man, John Mark, who would later have a tremendous influence on the church.

With this treatment of historic events, Luke showed that God's mustard seeds repeatedly became trees in which "birds" found shelter (Luke 13:18-19). Many of God's great works have small beginnings. He is in control; He makes the right things happen at the right time; He steers the right people in the right direction; on God's time, He reaches His goals.

The benevolence of the church in Antioch contrasts sharply with the malice of king Herod toward the church in Jerusalem. He executed the apostle James, one of the privileged three whom Jesus had taken with Him on special occasions. James was the first apostle who paid with his life for loving Jesus. When Herod saw that the execution pleased the Jewish leaders, he arrested Peter with the idea to have him executed as well.

The time of peace for the church—about eleven years since Saul had been converted—was suddenly interrupted by an egoistic, people-pleasing king. Both democratic and autocratic politicians need people to keep them in power. They have to keep those supporters happy. The policies of the church, however, should be based on God's Word, not on popularity.

A prayer: Make me faithful in planting Your mustard seeds.

A thought: Are my actions driven by God's Word or by people pleasing?

35. Applause vs. Blessing

A shrewd king is outwitted by an angel.

King Herod Agrippa I, who murdered the apostle James, was the grandson of Herod the Great, who had murdered the children of Bethlehem shortly after the birth of Jesus. Agrippa I followed in his grandpa's footsteps in more than one way. Herod the Great pleased Caesar and thus got rule over all Israel. As an Edomite, he also tried to please the Jews by making expensive improvements to the temple. Likewise, Agrippa I, a friend of Caesar Caligula since youth, was given rule over all of Israel. He also tried to please the Jews by observing their traditions in Jerusalem. In Samaria, however, he indulged in the extravagances of Roman culture. Paul would later be judged by Agrippa II, the son of Agrippa I.

February 4
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Acts 12

Agrippa I knew that the Jewish leaders hated the Christians. To please these Jews, he decided to persecute the Christians. He kicked off by killing the apostle James and jailing Peter.

He probably knew that on two previous occasions the apostles had inexplicably disappeared from prison. Of course, he did not believe the story that angels had freed them overnight. To prevent a repetition of such a miraculous escape, he posted a group of four soldiers for each of the four night watches to guard Peter. Peter was chained to one soldier on his left and to one on his right. The other two soldiers stood guard outside the locked cell door. The king thought nobody could breach that security.

Psalm 2 says that God laughs at those world leaders who want to break free from God's laws or "chains." In Acts 12 God shows how easy it is to break His children free from the chains of world leaders. The soldiers all fell into a deep sleep. The chains fell from Peter's wrists and ankles like melted butter. The locked doors opened automatically. The angel had to wake Peter up and tell him to fasten his clothes and follow. Peter was dumbfounded and thought he was seeing a vision. When the angel had led him out and had left, he started to realize that once again God had sent an angel to free him.

A group of Christians were praying for his release at the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark—a regular meeting place for Christians. They probably hoped that God would convince the king to set Peter free. Because of their expectations, they at first could not believe that God had answered their prayers in a much more glorious way than they could have imagined.

Peter escaped jail in God's protection, while the king died of a mysterious illness—a curse on his self-glorification. Luke depicts the disgrace of the evil king and then proceeds with God's grace through His church.

A prayer: I'd rather be Your humble servant than the world's hero.

A thought: Do my weak expectations blind me from God's better provisions?

36. Messengers for the Gospel

The responsibilities of churches and missionaries

February 5

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Acts 13:1-4

Luke now comes to the main part of his book, which tells how the Holy Spirit made the church reach out to the Gentiles on a large scale. The Ethiopian man and Cornelius pointed in this direction, but they were individuals who had already accepted the Jewish faith.

The Antioch Christians were the real first fruits of the Gentiles to glorify God. The Spirit would inspire them to launch the first full-scale mission to Jews and Gentiles in the rest of the Roman Empire.

The Spirit inspired the church of Antioch by *prophets* and *teachers*. These offices had not yet been clearly demarcated. Deacons preached and elders did charity (Acts 8:5, 11:30). Paul and Peter wrote in their letters that all believers are prophets, priests, and kings (1 Cor. 14:31, 1 Pet. 2:9). When Paul said that God gave “*first apostles, second prophets, third teachers*” (1 Cor. 12:28), he was not describing a hierarchy; he was just listing the gifts of the Spirit. Paul himself was an apostle, a prophet, and a teacher. When he prophesied, he brought new messages from God to the local church. When he taught, he explained old messages from the gospel and the Old Testament to the local church. The same person sometimes prophesied and sometimes taught.

Maybe the five men named by Luke served as prophets and as teachers. They fervently ministered to the church in Antioch. Apparently, these men, as well as their congregation, were in a period of fasting and prayer, earnestly seeking God’s guidance, when the Spirit spoke through a prophet, “*Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.*” Verses 3 and 4 emphasize that they were sent out by a church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This new impetus was not just a good feeling on a beautiful spring morning; it was a solemn yet joyful repetition of Christ’s Great Commission by the Spirit to the church. All believers have to spread the good news of salvation in Christ—that is their prophetic task—but the Spirit calls specific people, backed by the church, to be missionaries to certain areas. Basically, it is the Spirit and the church performing the mission through representatives. Missionaries are ambassadors of God and the church.

Therefore, the church laid their hands on Saul and Barnabas, a symbolic gesture illustrating that, in spirit, they were going with them and that they would carry them in their prayers. And that’s why Saul and Barnabas had to come back and report to the church what they had been doing in the name of the church and in the name of God.

A prayer: Lord, please sent out more workers into Your harvest fields.

A thought: Do I diligently support my representatives in the mission field?

37. Christ vs. Satan

A major victory for Christianity

If your Bible has a map of Paul's journeys at the back, please consult it to get a general idea of the area.

Barnabas and Saul were the official representatives of the Antioch church. Luke remarks, by the way, that John Mark accompanied them as an assistant.

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| February 6
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Acts 13:4-12 |
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Antioch was situated on the River Orontes about fifteen miles east of the harbor Seleucia. Saul and company could have covered the distance on foot or by boat. From Seleucia they sailed west to Salamis on the island Cyprus. Maybe Barnabas wanted to start their mission in his home country (Acts 4:36). They could be of help to the Christians who were already there (Acts 11:19-20), and they could make new disciples too. They started in the synagogues of Salamis. To have more than one synagogue, the city must have had a large Jewish population. Apparently, nothing negative or positive happened there or on the way to Paphos on the west coast of Cyprus.

In Paphos a major showdown took place between Christ and Satan, between church and world. The Roman governor, Sergius Paulus, summoned Saul and Barnabas to him to explain their mission and message. The governor was on guard against anything that could disturb the peace. When Saul and Barnabas conveyed the good news of Jesus Christ to him, they were fiercely opposed by a Jewish sorcerer called Bar-Jesus, or Son of Yeshua. At that moment, Saul was filled by the Spirit to rebuke and punish this false prophet. He exposed him as *son of the devil*, someone who replaced God's righteous ways with his own deceit. Saul announced God's judgment on this perverted Jew. Like Saul on the Damascus road, the sorcerer was blinded for a time, enabling him to think about his ways.

Having heard the gospel and seeing its power over evil, the governor came to faith in Christ. Imagine—the governor of the city known for its devotion to the Greek goddess of erotic love became a Christian! The false prophet who presented himself as *son of Jesus* was exposed as *son of the devil* and eliminated and punished in a dramatic way. Two great victories for Christ!

From this point onward, Luke replaces the Hebrew name Saul with the Roman name Paul. Because they lived in two cultures, it was not strange to have two names. For instance, Simon also called Peter, John also called Mark, Jesus also called Christ, and Saul also called Paul. It is unlikely that Saul took the name from the governor Sergius Paulus because the student usually took the name of the teacher and not vice versa. Luke introduces the name Paul at the very moment that the Holy Spirit made Paul leader and spokesman.

A prayer: Holy Spirit, fill me so that I can say the right thing at the right time.

A thought: Do I speak up when God's Word is suppressed or ridiculed?

38. Leader or Follower?

Group needs vs. personal needs

February 7
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Acts 13:13-15

Without discussing the matter, Luke gives us a hint that a change of leadership occurred in the three-man mission. Before Paphos, Luke referred to Barnabas and Saul; now he talks about *Paul and his party*. Although Barnabas was probably older than Paul, he seemed softer of temperament. He was a peacemaker and a bridge builder. Barnabas had convinced the church in Jerusalem to accept Saul, the former persecutor, as fellow believer. When he realized that the church in Antioch needed a strong leader, he convinced Saul of Tarsus to take the job.

When Paul showed strong leadership in Paphos, Barnabas silently stepped back and allowed Paul to take the lead, a role for which he was well equipped. So when Paul suggested they visit Paul's homeland, Barnabas concurred. After all, they had just crossed through Cyprus, Barnabas's homeland.

They arrived in Perga in Pamphylia, north of Cyprus. The hot and moist plains were infested with malaria. Paul might have caught the disease and wanted to move to the higher and cooler Pisidia. The problem was the steep road ahead of them that was known for its dangerous streams and robbers.

With Paul sick and Barnabas not so young, guess who would have to carry the heaviest backpack? Mark might have had seconds thoughts about Paul's leadership too, or he could have been worried about his mother in Jerusalem. Whatever the reason might have been, Mark was an adult in his early thirties and surely had the right to make his own decisions. However, his decision to go home at this point was tough on Paul and Barnabas.

Pisidia was part of, or next to, Galatia. Paul later wrote to the churches in that area that it was because of illness that he preached the gospel to them the first time (Gal. 4:13-14). It is feasible that this piece of history explains why they did not preach the gospel in Perga, but proceeded to Antioch in Pisidia. It may also explain why Paul later distrusted Mark for letting him down in a crisis.

Luke does not refer to Paul's illness. We have seen, though, that Luke did skip certain facts not deemed essential for his story, facts filled in by the letters of Paul. Luke proceeds with the experiences of Paul and Barnabas in Antioch in Pisidia, which is a different place than Antioch in Syria from where they had departed on the first missionary journey.

As usual, they went to the synagogue first. The Jews in the Diaspora were glad to receive teachers from Jerusalem, the mother city of their faith. After the reading of the Torah and Prophets, they asked Paul and Barnabas to speak.

*A prayer: Lord, show me when to lead and when to follow.*

*A thought: When do I put group needs first, and when personal needs?*

## 39. Gospel and Bigotry

### Reaching out vs. closing ranks

In his teaching to the Jews in Antioch, Pisidia, Paul used the same approach Peter and Steven had used when they addressed the Jews in Jerusalem. They all began with the history and the prophecies of the Old Testament, then showed how the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus related to that background; in conclusion, they appealed to the audience to accept and believe the gospel as the fulfillment of the Old Testament.

February 8  
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Acts 13:16-52

The initial response to Paul's message was quite positive. The Gentiles requested that he address them too on the next Sabbath. Some Jews and converts to Judaism had discussions with Paul and Barnabas to learn more about Jesus. However, some of the conservative Jews probably also had their meetings during the week to raise their concerns.

When a crowd, which included Gentiles, assembled at the synagogue the next Sabbath, the orthodox Jews aired their complaints. The debate heated up and the opposing Jews accused the apostles of grave heresy. These Jews could not free themselves from exclusive Judaism, which saw Israel as God's favorite and the Gentiles as rejected by God. They convinced some influential citizens to support their bigotry, and together they expelled Paul and Barnabas from the city.

The apostles told them boldly that the gospel is for the Gentiles too. As the Jews reject God's grace in Christ, the apostles would continue their mission with the Gentiles. They shook the dust from their feet and left for the next city.

As they went, the Spirit gave them insight into what had happened. God knows who belongs to Him (John 10:27-28). Only those who had been reborn by the Spirit accepted the gospel in faith. They believed that Yeshua was the Messiah promised by God in the Old Testament. They also experienced the joy of the Spirit in spite of the rejection of the orthodox Jews.

Paul and Barnabas had to leave in such a hurry that they did not have time to have elders elected. They would attend to that on their return journey. In the meantime, the young church had to survive and grow on their own, guided by the Spirit and by the prayers of their rejected leaders.

When we compare the early church with the settled and over-organized churches of today, we know that they had to go without many of our means and methods, yet they had something that we often miss out on—the intimate guidance and empowering of the Holy Spirit. Sadly, it did not stay that way. From the fifteenth century till today, Christianity had been replaced by Islam in that whole region. Nothing can be taken for granted.

A prayer: Lord, thank You that You called and saved me. Keep me faithful.

A thought: Do I have the essence of Christianity or only the paraphernalia?

40. Standing Your Ground against mind-poisoning

February 9

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Acts 14:1-7

Paul and Barnabas followed their old strategy in Iconium, preaching the gospel first to the Jews in their synagogue. Initially, they had a good reception. A great number of both Jews and converts to Judaism believed the message.

However, like hyena follow leopard and cheetah to steal their prey, so Satan's helpers follow close on the heels of God's workers to destroy their good work. The hostile Jews from Antioch followed the apostles over long distances to throw a spanner in the works (Acts 14:19). Most likely they did it not only in Lystra, but in Iconium as well. Paul told Luke later, "*The unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren*" (Acts 14:2).

Because Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel to Jew and Gentile, the unbelieving Jews stirred up the unbelieving Gentiles to cause trouble in the church, where believing Jews and Gentiles were brothers and sisters. They tried to poison their minds with lies and half-truths.

Satan always falls back on old tactics that served him well in the past. If threats from the outside do not work, he tries to bring discord on the inside of the church. He was quite successful through the ages to harm the church through disagreements on both trivial and crucial matters. Satan is an expert in poisoning the mind with doubt, anger, indignation, bitterness, and egoism.

The apostles saw through the evil tactics. Instead of running, they stayed a long time, speaking boldly and doing signs of healing by trusting in the Lord. God backed up His Word of grace with deeds of grace—while the enemies were instigating mean and negative attitudes. There are times to flee for safety's sake and times to stand your ground in spite of opposition.

The city was divided in their views. Some supported the church; some opposed them as a result of anti-propaganda and intimidation. Eventually, the aggressive side resorted to violence. They could not win the argument and decided to use force. As was the case in Antioch (Pisidia), they now got the city authority involved too. Once again, imminent danger became a reality. The apostles escaped to the next town, called Lystra.

From the time they had left Perga, they had been exposed to grave danger. They did not have any encounters with robbers in the mountains, but hostile, unbelieving Jews made life very unpleasant and dangerous for them. In Lystra, insult would turn to injury. Yet, it was precisely there where God had something beautiful in store for Paul.

A prayer: Make me steadfast amid adversity.

A thought: How does hostility affect me?

41. God or Devil?

The gains of our losses

Apparently there was no synagogue in Lystra. Jews probably avoided the town because of its flourishing pagan culture. Paul and Barnabas might have spoken to groups of people on street or in the marketplace (Acts 17:17).

February 10
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Acts 14:8-20

While Paul was addressing one of these groups, the Spirit told him to heal a man who had been crippled from his birth. The man was possibly a well-known beggar. The attention of these heathens was quickly aroused when the lame man began to walk and jump with joy. They suddenly viewed the apostles in a new light—they had to be gods in human form! When the priest of the local Zeus temple heard what had happened, he grabbed the opportunity to fire up the religious feelings of the inhabitants.

Paul had been talking to them in Greek, their official language. In the excitement that followed the miracle, the people started shouting and babbling in their local dialect. When people swept Paul and Barnabas along to the temple and the priest prepared a sacrifice to them, they realized that they were being seen and treated as gods. People thought that the older Barnabas was Zeus and that Paul, being the spokesman, was Hermes, the messenger of Zeus.

Paul stopped the ceremony by telling the people that he and Barnabas were not gods, only messengers from the true God who had been caring for the people for their entire lives, although they had not known Him. When these superstitious people could not fit them into their known religious structure, they must have been rather confused. The hostile Jews from Antioch and Iconium who had arrived in the meantime saw an opportunity to turn the crowd against the apostles. If Paul and Barnabas were not gods how else could they have done such a miracle? By the power of the devil, of course! The Pharisees had accused Jesus of the same sin.

The adoration of the crowd turned into rage. They stoned Paul right there for sorcery. Thinking he was dead, they dragged him out of town. Now we read about those who had come to faith in Christ. They surrounded Paul in prayer. He regained consciousness, and they nursed his wounds.

Among them was a young man called Timothy. When Paul revisited Lystra five years later, he persuaded Timothy to join him on his second journey (Acts 16:1-3). In his second letter to Timothy, Paul said that Timothy was aware of his tribulations “*which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra,*” the same sequence of events used by Luke (2 Tim. 3:11). Paul’s short-term pain led to a huge long-term gain for the church (2 Cor. 4:17).

*A prayer: Lord, Your bookkeeping never ends with a shortfall.*

*A thought: My windfalls are God-given provisions.*

## 42. Follow-up Is Crucial

God's kingdom overrides personal needs.

February 11

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Acts 14:21-28

Realizing that their way in Lystra was blocked for the moment, Paul and Barnabas moved on to Derbe. God gave them a break. They preached the gospel to this town without any negative incident “*and made many disciples.*” Even in the Bible, the bad news often overshadows the good news. We have to make sure, though, that we don't miss those casual remarks about the “normal” activities in the kingdom of God—when the salt of the earth and the light of the world are fulfilling their intended purposes.

It would have been quite understandable if Paul had proceeded from Derbe to his hometown, Tarsus, and from there to Antioch in Syria. Instead, in order to help the young churches get on their feet, they returned to all those cities where they had been persecuted. God's kingdom had priority over their personal needs. In His grace, God allowed them to complete this labor of love without running into trouble with enemies again.

They concentrated on five important issues with these follow-up visits. They empowered “*the souls of the disciples,*” stimulating their spiritual and emotional growth by “*exhorting them to continue in the faith.*” This would have included further teaching on the gospel and on the Old Testament from which the New had emerged. The new believers were also made aware of the consequences of believing and of not believing. They could carry the cross of persecution on the narrow way and so reach heaven, or they could take the easy, broad way and end up in hell.

The fourth item on the list was to appoint elders who could help them to stick together, to guard against false doctrine, and to grow in knowledge and in dedication. The main firewall against the tricks of the devil was their prayer life. The apostles taught them by example to fast occasionally from normal activities so that they could experience quality time with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then the needs and opportunities of God's kingdom would remain first priority, and the seed of the Word would not get stifled by everyday concerns (Matt. 13:20-23).

The apostles returned to Perga in Pamphylia. Researchers think that it was already late autumn and malaria was less of a threat. On this trip they took time to preach the gospel in Pamphylia too. God said that His Word will never return empty to Him (Is. 55:11); therefore, we can assume that they made disciples in Perga too, as “normally” as they had done in Derbe. Then they returned to the church in Antioch (Syria) that had sent them on this mission. The church rejoiced in their safe return and in the fruit of the work.

*A prayer: Lord, quality time with You is my spiritual breathing.*

*A thought: Do I follow up on the seeds I have planted?*

### 43. Jews and Gentiles Are they two classes of Christians?

At this point in the development of the church, a large harvest of Jews and Gentiles had been brought in. The unity between Jews and Gentiles had to be settled.

The Jews of the Diaspora lived among the Gentiles and mixed with them in public places, but they had kept apart when it came to religion and family life. Now in the church they were suddenly brought together in one great family. To associate or to separate—that was the question.

Apparently the new churches in Gentile areas had no problem with this question. However, in Jerusalem, the center of Judaism, some of the Pharisees who had become Christians believed that Christianity should remain part of Judaism. To prove that, they thought Gentile Christians should observe the Torah, including circumcision. These “Christian” Pharisees possibly thought that this would make Christianity more acceptable to the Jews.

Some of them infiltrated the church in Antioch to see to what extent Gentile Christians neglected the Torah. This was bad yeast from Jerusalem. Paul saw them as “spies” whose aim was to rob the church of the gospel of grace, which professed that people are saved by faith in Christ alone. Though Paul was lenient regarding non-essential customs (1 Cor. 9:19-23), he stood his ground firmly to defend crucial truth of Christianity. He and Barnabas vigorously opposed these “false brothers” because they saw that these people were undermining the faith of the whole church in Antioch.

Two things happened that convinced Paul to risk going to Jerusalem and putting this matter before the apostles. First, God told him to do so in a revelation (Gal. 2:2). Second, the Antioch church decided that it had to be done (Acts 15:2-3). Though the “spies” tried to discredit Paul and Barnabas because of their diversion from Judaism, the church in Antioch stood with their pastors and delegated them with a few others to represent the Antioch church over this matter in Jerusalem.

Paul and Barnabas used the tour to inform congregations on the way about their work among the Gentiles. Everywhere they were received with open arms. Believers rejoiced and praised God when they heard of the rapid expansion of the church through the mission work of the Antioch church.

The same hearty welcome awaited them in Jerusalem. The apostles were glad to see each other again and to hear from one another what had expired since they had parted. Paul used these informal visits to discuss the problem with the leaders and to plan the best way to resolve the matter (Acts 15:4, Gal. 2:6-9).

*A prayer: Help us to preserve the gospel simply and purely.*

*A thought: In what ways do we practice unfair discrimination?*

February 12

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Acts 15:1-2

Gal. 2:1-5

## 44. Truth and Compassion

### Principle and practice

February 13

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Acts 15:5-21

The apostles in Jerusalem decided to discuss the issue in a meeting of the apostles and the elders in Jerusalem. When all sides of the problem had been duly debated, an informed decision could be made and an official resolution could be sent out that would stand the test of time.

Those who advocated that Gentile Christians had to uphold the Torah, just as Jewish Christians did, got their opportunity to state their case. They made salvation dependent on keeping the Law of Moses.

Peter reminded the gathering of his experience with Cornelius. His vision, as well as the gift of the Spirit to Gentile believers, confirmed that all people, Jews and Gentiles, were saved by faith in Jesus alone, not by keeping Jewish Law. God had treated them equally; the church should do the same.

Paul and Silas followed Peter's example by telling what God had done through them to the Gentiles. Because there was not yet New Testament Scripture to use as point of reference, they had to look at what God had been doing recently through His Son and His Spirit. The fact that God had been saving Gentiles by faith alone, confirmed by the gift of the Spirit, was irrefutable proof to Paul and Barnabas that God Himself had not made the keeping of the Law a precondition for the salvation of the Gentiles.

James, the brother of Jesus, showed that the Old Testament referred to the salvation of the Gentiles often. He quoted Amos 9:11-12 from the Greek translation of the Old Testament to make his point. He then proposed a compromise resolution. On the one hand, they should not expect Gentile Christians to uphold the Torah; on the other hand, they should suggest to Gentile Christians that refraining from four things would make their social integration with Jewish Christians easier, four things that were bad for all.

Idolatry and immorality were against Christ. However, food that was first dedicated to false gods in an immoral setup and then sold to the public might taint the conscience of both Gentile and Jew (1 Cor. 8 and 9). The eating of blood, including strangled animals whose blood was not drained out, was abhorrent for Jews and unhealthy for Gentiles. If Gentile Christians would avoid these kinds of food, socializing with Jewish Christians would be much easier.

Here was a motion that upheld the crucial principle of salvation by faith alone, yet also showed sensitivity for the feelings of fellow believers. They spoke the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) as guided by the Holy Spirit.

*A prayer: Help us to be full of truth and grace as Jesus was (John 1:14).*

*A thought: Do I listen patiently to all sides in a dispute?*

## 45. Rain After Fire

### Proceeding with constructive work

The meeting of apostles and elders in Jerusalem followed due process. They facilitated proper discussion of the problem by all parties; their resolution satisfied both mind and heart by defining the principle while respecting the feelings. They completed their business with a written statement that was delivered in person. They replaced the bad yeast with the good yeast of Jerusalem.

February 14 ~~~ Acts 15:22-35
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Paul made another deal with the apostles. They probably discussed it at their informal socializing before the official meeting, but left the decision for later so as not to prejudice the official meeting. However, after the decision about the Gentiles and the Law had been made, Paul and the Jerusalem leaders (Peter, John, and James) agreed that Paul would focus on the Gentiles and Peter on the Jews in their future evangelistic campaigns.

Paul knew that the two decisions (regarding the Law and his mission to the Gentiles) were the main victories, and that those regarding food were only appeasement of the legalistic Jewish Christians. Therefore, he did not even mention the latter when he wrote to the churches in Galatia. Though Paul was focused on truth, he was not a cold intellectual. He respected Jewish feelings when he circumcised Timothy (Acts 16).

When Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, bringing with them Judas, Silas, and Mark, they read the letter from Jerusalem to the congregation. The Gentile Christians rejoiced that they had not been forced to obey the Torah. Out of gratitude and consideration for Jewish Christians, they surely would have complied to the requests regarding eating habits.

Judas and Silas were prophets. They served the church in Antioch eagerly with their gifts. They enjoyed it so much that when it was time to return to Jerusalem, Silas decided to stay on. In view of coming developments, God needed Silas to accompany Paul on the next trip. Paul and Barnabas resumed their work in Antioch. Now that the issue about Gentiles and the Torah had been resolved, they could give their attention to more constructive aspects of church building instead of battling heresies and controversies.

Nevertheless, the meeting in Jerusalem about 50 AD was a major milestone in the history and theology of the church. It established the difference between Judaism and Christianity. It also cleared the air from nasty bigotry and it facilitated equality and mutual acceptance among Christians from various cultural backgrounds.

*A prayer: Lord, You care for Your church and Your creation.*

*A thought: I will use my gifts constructively in God's kingdom.*

## 46. Paul Rebukes Peter

for not doing what he believes.

February 15

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Gal. 2:11-21

Satan and his demons never relent; therefore, God's people should never relax their vigil (Eph. 6:10-20). After all the good that had happened in the church of Antioch, Satan staged an event that cast a dark shadow over doctrine and relationships in this dynamic church.

Before Paul started to make plans for his second missionary journey, the apostle Peter visited the church of Antioch. For a time he freely mixed with and ate with Gentile Christians in accordance with the Jerusalem decree.

However, when some conservative Jewish Christians arrived from Jerusalem, Peter changed his behavior. He stopped mixing with the Gentile Christians over meal times and chose the guests from Jerusalem as table partners. This behavior was totally unacceptable to Paul.

Luke did not include this incident in his book. Paul deals with it in his letter to the Galatians without telling us Peter's view on the matter. At the Jerusalem meeting, Peter had made a strong case that both Jews and Gentiles are saved by faith in Christ and not by keeping the Law.

Now Paul had to use exactly the same argument to show him that he was not practicing what he was preaching. Because Peter's example rubbed off on others, including Barnabas, Paul confronted Peter "*before them all.*" This approach might have been seen as undiplomatic and controlling behavior. Maybe a personal, brotherly discussion could have reached the same goal without ill feelings.

Paul says nothing about Peter's reaction. Maybe he realized he was out of line and apologized. Maybe his behavior was not even as intentional as Paul saw it—Peter could have been discussing matters of the Jerusalem church with these brothers from Jerusalem. Whatever the case may be, Peter did not hold a grudge against Paul, for in his own letter to the church years later he spoke of "*our beloved brother Paul*" (2 Pet. 3:15).

This episode might have hurt Barnabas's feelings more than Peter's. His feelings showed when he and Paul started planning their next journey.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul uses this incident to warn them not to fall back into Judaism. He explains to them, clearly and strongly, that nobody can be saved by keeping the Law because it is impossible for human nature to keep the entire Law perfectly—though Paul once thought, before his conversion, that he could do it (Phil. 3:6). He reiterates that both Jews and Gentiles are saved by faith in Christ alone. No other conditions should be added to that.

*A prayer: Lord, make me humble in my zeal.*

*A thought: Sometimes we win the argument but lose the person.*

## 47. Paul and Barnabas disagree and disengage.

After the peace had been restored in the church of Antioch, the work continued as usual. After a year or so, Paul and Barnabas agreed that it was time for them to revisit the churches they had planted on their first journey. They agreed on the goal, not on the method. Barnabas wanted to give Mark, his cousin (Col. 4:10), another chance, but Paul didn't trust the man who had dropped them on their first journey.

February 16 ~~~ Acts 15:36-41
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Both of them were right and one of them was wrong also. Paul was right in conveying the message to Mark that a worker of Christ should be faithful and persevering. Barnabas was right that Christians should be forgiving and helpful regarding each other's failures.

However, Paul was wrong about the true character of Mark. This young Christian was not a quitter, as Paul tried to label him. He served well with Barnabas in Cyprus and with Peter in Rome (1 Pet 5:13). Later he delivered the first written gospel as Peter told it to him. Paul himself had to swallow his own words later and make positive remarks about Mark, "*my fellow worker*" (Philemon 24) who "*is useful to me for ministry*" (2 Tim. 4:11).

Christians of all times should give credit to Mark for not folding under Paul's pressure. Instead, by the grace of God and by the encouragement of Barnabas, Mark lifted up his chin and showed who he really was—in spite of rejection by a respected leader.

Maybe the discord between Paul and Barnabas was not about Mark but about Paul's leadership style. Up to this point, the calm Barnabas had given the fiery Paul space to live out his passion for Christ. The clash about eating with Gentiles could have brought Barnabas to a breaking point regarding Paul's attitude. Maybe Barnabas could not take Paul's control any more.

While the two good friends drifted apart, God probably watched them with a smile. Though their disagreement was not God's will, He would use it for His own purpose. He sent them into different directions to speed up the expansion of the church. Maybe Barnabas and Mark planted churches on Cyprus where they had not succeeded on the first journey. Paul and Silas would be led to new territories in Europe, including Macedonia, Thessalonica, Athens, and Corinth.

Though Christians should do their best to eliminate wrong attitudes, they should trust God to reach His goals in spite of human mistakes. In spite of pathetic human failures in the Old Testament, God calmly and graciously continued with His plans until His time was right to send the Messiah.

*A prayer: Make me fair and gracious in the give-and-take process.*

*A thought: Have suppressed resentments soured some of my relationships?*

## 48. Timothy Joins Paul

### Identifying and training young leaders

February 17

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Acts 16:1-5

Luke has shown us how the church worked on two fronts: It addressed internal problems that threatened its sound functioning. It also moved out to the world to make new disciples. The yeast of Yerushalaim had to change the structure of the dough where it already was, and it had to be worked into new areas where it had not been before. Paul's second missionary journey served both: Existing churches were inspired and new ones were planted.

Paul and Silas headed north to visit the churches in Cilicia that Paul had planted when he lived in Tarsus. From there they proceeded west to the churches that had been founded on the first journey by Paul and Barnabas. They presented the Jerusalem Decree to all these churches where it was received with gladness. Because a major stumbling block had been removed, the church grew faster.

In Lystra Paul was surprised by the physical and spiritual growth of Timothy. The lad had become a man. Paul had led him to Christ five years before. His mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois, who were Christians too, had taught Timothy Hebrew Scripture since his childhood (2 Tim. 1:5, 3:15). Paul was glad to learn that Timothy had a good reputation with believers in Lystra and Iconium. Paul saw the potential of this young Christian soldier and wanted to train him to conquer hearts for Christ.

There was a problem, though. Timothy was not circumcised, his father being Greek. He would not be allowed to teach in synagogues—and Paul preferred to bring the gospel to the synagogues first.

To solve the problem, he circumcised Timothy. Did it conflict with the Jerusalem Decree? Paul refused to circumcise Titus, who was a Gentile Christian (Gal. 2:3). In Paul's view, Timothy was Jewish because his mother was a Jew. The Decree did not forbid Jewish Christians from being circumcised; it said circumcision was unnecessary for Gentile Christians.

Paul was actually stretching the facts a little. In those days the father determined Jewish descent. (This custom changed in the twentieth century after the Holocaust.) When a Jew married a non-Jew in Israel, that person was regarded as "dead" by the family.

However, Jews of the Diaspora were apparently more lenient toward mixed marriages. Esther married a pagan king, and she became a national heroine. So nobody opposed Timothy's circumcision. He could now journey with Paul, speak in synagogues, and minister to both Jewish and Gentile Christians because he actually belonged to both groups.

*A prayer: Open our eyes to the potential of young believers.*

*A thought: How can we better identify and train next generation leaders?*

## 49. Closed and Open Doors

God's plans, ways, and methods are the best.

When Paul had finished the work that he had wanted to do in Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium, he was eager to set off on the next leg of his journey to *Asia*, which was probably the western part of Asia Minor, the present Turkey. He got the clear message from the Spirit—either by circumstance, prophecy, or vision—not to go west. He turned to the north but was soon stopped by the Spirit on that course as well. By closing and opening doors, the Spirit led them northwest to Troas and from there to Europe.

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Acts 16:6-10

If Paul had been guilty of controlling behavior toward Peter and Barnabas in Antioch, his ego must have been pruned by all these frustrations. To make matters even worse, his ill health started to give him problems, inhibiting his actions further in Troas. He consulted a doctor. As doctors usually do, Luke asked some questions while examining Paul, gathering lifestyle data while making conversation. Doctor Luke seemed quite interested in Paul's mission; thus, the missionary used the opportunity to convey the gospel to the physician. Apparently, both were successful—Luke saved Paul's body, and Paul save Luke's soul. In verse 10, Luke suddenly changes from *they* to *we* in his narrative.

Something else happened in Troas that helped pull Paul's spirit out of despondency. One night he had a vision of a man standing on the shore of Macedonia, northwest of Troas, pleading with Paul to come over and help them. Three centuries before, Alexander the Great of Macedonia had landed near Troas at the beginning of his conquests. Now a new conqueror was looking in the opposite direction to win Macedonia and eventually all of Europe for Christ. The dream of King Nebuchadnezzar was being fulfilled—the stone that crushed the giant statue was rolling already (Dan. 2).

Now Paul knew that God blocked his way to certain areas because He was leading him to a specific task at a specific place. His frustration turned into jubilation. Closed doors lead us to the right open door. God is merciful in His discipline: While pruning Paul's ego, He did not trample him into the mud; He prepared him for great victories that he could enjoy in humility. God's encouragements in Troas put a new bounce in Paul's step.

When we experience one disappointment after the other, we have to keep on trusting our heavenly Father to provide for us at the right time and place. After all, both the Spirit and Christ are intervening for us with the Father (Rom. 8:26-27, 32-34). Backed by such mighty prayers, our prayers are purified and amplified.

*A prayer: Father, let the closed doors lead me to the open door soon.*

*A thought: God's dream for us surpasses our own dreams by far.*

## 50. Surprises in Philippi

A rich lady and a slave girl were saved.

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Acts 16:10-18

After Paul had seen the vision, Luke said, “we sought to go forth to Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to evangelize them.” That is Luke’s description of his feelings immediately after he had become a Christian: **God has called us to evangelize.** He was part of a team.

The goal was clear—they had to evangelize, tell the good news. It seems that the group had consensus on the matter—it was not forced on them. Was Paul becoming a more democratic leader?

When they reached Philippi, there was no Macedonian man to welcome them. There was no synagogue either. After a few days of searching for contacts, they met a few women praying at the river on the Sabbath.

A few women were the first to see the risen Christ. The complaint of a few widows started the office of deacon. Now a small group of women were the first to receive the gospel on European soil. Luke refers to women more often in his gospel than the other gospel writers do. This physician noticed that Jesus gave a new place to women in His kingdom. In Christian countries, women are more emancipated than in other cultures.

One of the women, Lydia, was in the textile industry. The purple-colored clothes in which she traded were quite expensive at the time. Apparently, she was well-off, one of the upper class. She and her friends already worshiped the God of Israel on the Jewish Sabbath. The Spirit opened her mind and heart for Paul’s message, and she accepted Christ as her Lord and Savior. She and Paul spoke to her family and servants, and they too accepted Christ and were baptized.

Then she invited Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke to come and stay in her house as her guests. In this way, she and her household could learn as much as possible from these evangelists before they moved on.

Things were going too well, so Satan had to disrupt their peace. He used a slave girl who was demon-possessed. She followed the evangelists and shouted in a screaming voice that they were messengers from God who tell people the way of salvation. Though it was true, Christ’s work could not be furthered by a demon.

Paul drove the demon out of the unfortunate girl and relieved her of this cruel bondage. Maybe she followed her benefactor and became a Christian too. If so, then one of the lowest class, a slave, would have been added to the believers in Philippi. She and Lydia would then both be part of the church. Jesus welcomes people from all classes and nations.

*A prayer: Lord, thank You for the blessings You brought through women.
A thought: Jesus said, “I was thirsty and you gave me drink.”*

51. Praises in Prison

Their songs shook other prisoners.

Instead of thanking Jesus for His healing ministry, the Pharisees persecuted Him for doing good on the Sabbath. Paul got the same treatment in Philippi. He should have been thanked for saving the slave girl from the clutches of the devil; instead, the owners cared more about money than the well-being of a fellow human being. With gossip and slander, they stirred up public feelings against these Jews who had invaded their city with foreign teachings.

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Acts 16:19-26 |
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Realizing that their real objection—losing money by exorcism—would not convince the judges, they accused Paul and Silas of things that this Roman colony could not afford to tolerate for the sake of friendship with Caesar. Creating unrest, introducing new religion, and being Jews were sufficient grounds for drastic measures. Without a trial, Paul and Silas were flogged and jailed. Luke and Timothy either were not with them at the time or they were exempted because they were regarded as Greeks.

With bruised, bleeding bodies, Paul and Silas were shoved into the most secure and worst part of the prison—the dark, moist, dirty, stinking dungeon. To add extreme discomfort to their insult and injury, they were constrained in “stocks”—two wooden beams, one on top of the other, with openings between them for the ankles. Being locked up in that position made movement difficult. After an hour, a healthy body would start to ache—how much more one lacerated by flogging.

What happened next must be regarded as the gracious work of God alone. No human being could have done it by willpower. Paul and Silas started to sing hymns of praise to God. In that position and condition? Yes. The Spirit inspired them to do the impossible. As Jews, they knew many of the psalms by heart. Softly at first, then gradually louder their praises rose as their faith was revived. Instead of the usual cursing and yelling, silence fell on the prison. The other puzzled prisoners listened to the incredible sound of pious voices resounding through the austere Roman jail.

The soothing songs were suddenly interrupted by the most horrible noise—the rumbling of an earthquake, well known to inhabitants of the region. The walls did not cave in, but the doors sprang open, and the chains fell from the captives’ arms and legs. An ordinary earthquake could not do that. The third miracle was that the prisoners did not use the situation to flee.

In spite of the mean tricks of the devil, God had used the situation to stage a dramatic backdrop for the remarkable salvation of one person.

A prayer: Lord, in a split second, You can change a hopeless situation.

A thought: If I could praise God in my hardship, a miracle may happen.

52. Suicide or Salvation

A confused jailer is arrested for Christ.

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Acts 16:27-34

The jailer was assisted by Roman guards, who were replaced every three hours. Therefore, the jailer could sleep in his quarters, located either in or adjacent to the prison. The rumbling earthquake woke him up and he quickly assessed the situation. The open prison doors made him suspect the worst—the prisoners had escaped and he would be held accountable! The rule was that when a prisoner escaped, the jailer had to take his place and serve his sentence. The thought of taking the sentences of all the prisoners on himself scared the warden to death—he saw suicide as the best escape for himself.

Paul sensed what the warden's plan was and shouted, "*Do yourself no harm, for we are all here!*" If this message could reach every suicidal person, much sorrow would be prevented—don't harm yourself, for we are all here! We want to listen to you and help you to handle the seemingly unbearable.

Paul's reassuring voice gave hope to the desperate jailer—maybe the prisoners were too scared to escape. He ordered a soldier to bring a torch. When he saw the prisoners, his fear of Roman punishment was replaced by fear of the supernatural. Knowing what preceded and followed the arrest of the Jewish prisoners—the slave girl's message about salvation, the expelling of a demon, the unfair flogging, and now the earthquake—made him conclude that either gods or demons were taking revenge on him. He fell on his knees before Paul and Silas and pleaded, "*What must I do to be saved?*" He knew they had a message of salvation, but he still had no clue about its meaning.

Paul saw the opportunity and took it: "*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.*" Because the jailer knew nothing about the gospel, Paul had to use an hour or two to convey to the him and his household (which could have included children) the main facts about Jesus. What the jailer could not do—taking the sentences of all the prisoners onto himself—Jesus had done for all mankind, including the jailer.

Luke does not say right away that the jailer came to faith in Christ, first describing the man's change in behavior that showed his faith. He first nursed their wounds. After he and his household had been baptized, he took them to his house and prepared a meal for them. It was during the meal that shock and fear were replaced by the joy of salvation and fellowship. Yes, Luke says, now they realized—the evangelists and the converts—that God had brought everything together for the salvation of this household.

A prayer: All things work together for good to those who love God (Rom. 8:28).

A thought: Salvation is far better than self-destruction.

53. God's Perfect Timing

The right provision at the right moment

Many factors had to merge at the right moment to bring the jailer of Philippi into God's kingdom. From the human viewpoint, we may reason that if Paul had not been converted and led to this place at this time, the jailer might not have been saved. In the preceding days specific things happened to both Paul and to the jailer to make their paths cross in that prison that night: the slave girl's cries; Paul's reaction to her; the interaction of owners, people, and judges; the jailer's schedule for that week; and an earthquake at that time and place. God brought it all together that night to save a specific person.

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Acts 16:35-40

The fact that you are who you are—with all your genes, learning, and experience—and that you are where you are right now is not a mistake, a fluke, or a coincidence. God collected your genetic makeup from two specific people; He determined how those genes would blend and develop (Ps. 139); and He brought specific people, problems, and opportunities on your way to help shape your life—till you are who you are at this specific time and place. God shapes every day for you to know, trust, love, praise, and serve Him better. And if you fail to make the best of a God-given opportunity, He does not give up on you but continues with His creative work in you.

Paul realized that he had met the Macedonian man who had called for his help in a vision. It was time to move on. But first, a few things had to be taken care of. The judges had to be confronted for their unfair treatment, though God had used it in His plan. Paul also wanted to say goodbye to Lydia and her family and thank them for their hospitality.

Then they took the road to their next destination, maybe with limping gait and aching wounds. They were "*persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed*" and presented themselves "*as chastened, and yet not killed; as sorrowful yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich*" (2 Cor. 4:9, 6:9-10).

Apparently, Luke stayed on in Philippi as physician and as leader for the small new church. Timothy helped him for a while. The members increased and they played an active part in Paul's ministry according to his letter to them (Phil. 4:15-16). Silas accompanied Paul to Thessalonica.

They had been reassured of God's providence and care in good and bad circumstances. They knew they could do all things through Christ, who strengthened them (Phil. 4:12-13). Indeed, both some very pleasant and some very unpleasant experiences awaited them in Thessalonica.

*A prayer: All-knowing One, you sustain the entire universe.*

*A thought: God provides every step of the way.*