



# **Acts**

***The Message Spreads***

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*“Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?”*  
Acts 8:30b-31a

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## Acts Intro | The Acts of Jesus Continued?

What is it about a superhero origin story that captures the imagination of the world and takes the box office by storm? Maybe it's because the powerful message of superhero origin stories is that ordinary people just like us can do extraordinary things. We see ourselves in that story and get sucked into it. It places us into the story.

The book of Acts is the origin story of the church. And if we're a part of the church, we're also a part of that story. Therefore, this book is also your origin story!

What if you didn't know what happened between Jesus's resurrection and the book of Romans? Who is Paul? And why should I care?

Let's read verse 1 to hear why it was written:

**“In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach”** (Acts 1:1).

That's Luke, the author, talking—the same author of the Gospel of Luke. In fact, this is part two, or *Luke: The Sequel*.

When Luke, a physician who came to faith on Paul's second missionary journey and joined him as a missionary companion in Troas, had time on his hands—most likely in prison chained to Paul—he began to compose a history of how the church started from a small band of disciples to become a movement. Not just a small movement, but one that, according to a quote from the Pharisees in the early pages of Acts, “turned the world upside down.” And it did!

Notice that he says:

**“All that Jesus BEGAN to do and teach”** (Acts 1:1).

Jesus isn't done working, and He's not done speaking. He's going to act and speak through His followers as they become filled with the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit works powerfully through them.

What the disciples did after Jesus ascended into heaven kicked off a movement that eventually led to you hearing about Him. The good news they spread eventually made its way to you.

You're a link in this chain. You'll hear the good news of the gospel.

That's why the book was never finished—because the story is still being told... through you.

That's why it trails off in chapter 28 with no final summary. Paul gets to Rome, the epicenter of the world at that time. And if the old saying that "All roads lead to Rome" was true, then equally, all roads led out from it too. The good news of the gospel was just beginning its travels.

Let's jump into the beginning of our origin story—the story of the church, where we see Jesus meeting with His disciples.

**"In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach, until the day He was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles He had chosen. After His suffering, He presented Himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that He was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:1–3).**

Wow, Jesus appeared to them for forty days! I wonder what He was saying to them. I'm pretty sure it was explaining much they didn't understand and readying them for their journey.

But there's ONE conversation Luke allows us to eavesdrop on:

**"On one occasion, while He was eating with them, He gave them this command: 'Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift My Father promised, which you have heard Me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 1:4–5).**

This is a BIG event. It's key to everything else that follows.

Skip to verse 8 when Jesus gives them their mission:

**“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).**

The Holy Spirit was going to drop like a bomb in Jerusalem. From that epicenter, the force of the blast would blow the gospel from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. That’s quite an impact crater.

That verse actually gives us an outline of the book of Acts. Luke traces the geographic spread of the gospel from its humble beginnings in Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

Their witness in Jerusalem is found in chapters 1 through 7. Chapter 8 covers their witness of Jesus spreading to Judea and Samaria through others. And from chapter 9, the book begins to swing outward to the ends of the earth—and it does so by focusing on a man called Saul of Tarsus, later renamed Paul.

He becomes the missionary who changes the good news of the gospel from being a sect of Judaism that claims Jesus is the Messiah, to a global faith that proclaims Jesus is the Savior of the world.

Which it did.

In fact, consider this surprising statistic. In AD 100, there were as few as 25,000 Christians in the world. By AD 310, there were over 20 million Christians.

But when Jesus tells them it’ll reach the ends of the earth, I don’t know about you, but if I’m standing there, it sounds like an impossible task.

And left to ourselves, it is *Mission Impossible*. But that’s why Jesus mentions the Holy Spirit empowering them. They had witnessed the impossible. They had seen Jesus raised from the dead by the power of the

Holy Spirit. And here, Jesus was promising that the same power would help them accomplish the impossible.

**“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you”**

**“And you will be My witnesses” (Acts 1:8).**

So He not only gives them the mission, He gives them the power to accomplish the mission. And He still does today.

This is how Jesus continues to act through His people—through the Holy Spirit empowering each of us. I love the fact that Jesus doesn’t say, “You’ll be My evangelists,” because I’m a terrible evangelist. But I can be a witness. I can testify to who Jesus is in my life and what He’s done for me. We can all witness to His power in us.

Throughout Acts, you’ll witness the followers of Jesus waiting for the power of the Holy Spirit in chapter 1, receiving it in chapter 2, leading thousands to Jesus, healing and working miracles in chapter 3, and being empowered with death-defying boldness in chapter 4 to keep Jesus’s witness alive and spreading.

Sadly, you’ll also witness church corruption in chapter 5 and how the church deals with it. In chapter 6, you’ll meet the first martyr—a witness who is killed for Jesus. From there, the persecution gets real bad, but it causes the gospel to spread outward into the world, as it’s no longer safe to stay in Jerusalem.

The Word of God spreads northward to Antioch, where the first missionary church plant puts down roots. And from there, Paul’s three missionary journeys take up the rest of the book as the Word continues to spread—to Rome.

Interestingly, that’s how Luke measures progress in this book: by the spread of the Word of God and the disciples made. No matter how the church may define success today, Luke linked success to the Great Commission—Jesus’s missional mandate to preach the good news of the kingdom and make disciples.

Therefore, Luke summarizes his stories with these types of statements:

**“So the Word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith”** (Acts 6:7).

**“Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers”** (Acts 9:31).

**“But the Word of God continued to spread and flourish”** (Acts 12:24).

**“So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers”** (Acts 16:5).

**“In this way the Word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power”** (Acts 19:20).

Finally, the book ends with this powerful summary of Paul:

**“He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!”** (Acts 28:31).

Paul spoke boldly and with power as a witness of who Jesus was and what He did. And God was speaking powerfully through them.

We said this book was an origin story, but the apostles operated like superheroes. Not like Superman, but ordinary people like Captain America—who made up for personal weakness with heart and courage.

Or heroes like Peter Parker—just a punk kid like anyone else, but gifted with a superpower that allowed him to do special things.

Make no mistake, this book is filled with ordinary people just like you and me. But when the wind of the Holy Spirit blew through them, there was no stopping them. They were ready to die. They were bold and fearless.

Ordinary people doing extraordinary things. That’s the stuff heroes are made of.

Wherever God’s people went, God was said to be speaking, and His Word spread. And it’s no different for you.

This is a book about how God uses unlikely heroes to accomplish His will. Maybe you've read some of the Old Testament—about Gideon starting a freedom revolution, a teenager named David running at a massive warrior named Goliath, and a refugee captive named Daniel surviving a lion's den—and thought, "Wow, I want God to use me like that!"

You may not be called to do any of those things. But you are called to be Jesus's witness where you are. And by studying the book of Acts, you'll learn from people just like you—people who were out of their depth, facing an impossible mission—yet relied on the power of the Holy Spirit to empower them and make their witness powerful.

The same Jesus who continued to speak and act then is the same Jesus who will continue to speak and act through you.

This is the origin story of the church. So embrace it today as your origin story, and continue to be a part of that story as it writes itself through your life—allowing the Holy Spirit to fill you and use you to testify of Jesus and share the good news with others.

So that Jesus is still speaking and acting... through you!

I look forward to learning together how to be a greater witness for Jesus, and how to accomplish this mission as we read through Acts on our journey... Through the Word.



## Acts 1 | You Will Receive Power

Welcome back to Acts Chapter 1, where we find out that waiting is the hardest thing to do.

It really is, isn't it?

Do you remember how hard it was to wait as a kid for Christmas morning? Trying to fall asleep on Christmas Eve, knowing that a room full of presents would magically appear before you woke up?

Let's join the disciples on the Sea of Galilee. Despite their excitement about spending time with the resurrected Jesus, and being ready to tell the world all about Him, they're about to be told to wait before they go.

They've returned to their old trade of fishing—partly to feed themselves, but also because Jesus has been meeting with them there for 40 days, prepping them for their mission.

Let's eavesdrop on their conversation in verse 3:

**“He presented Himself alive to them after His suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while He was eating with them, He gave them this command: ‘Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift My Father promised, which you have heard Me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit’”** (Acts 1:3–5).

Wait... did He just say wait?

They were champing at the bit! They'd just witnessed the Creator of the universe prove that He was God—that He was the most powerful being in existence. Death was nothing to Him. And rather than run into the streets and shout from the rooftops, He wanted them to wait?

**“Wait for the gift My Father promised”** (Acts 1:4).

What gift? What had the Father promised to give them?

To be honest, they didn't understand what Jesus meant. It went right over their heads. So they interrupted Him and asked:

**“Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”** (Acts 1:6).

Maybe they thought the promise of the Father was to restore Israel to power. As Jews in a Roman world, they lived as second-class citizens in their own land. God had promised the Messiah would set them free—and although Jesus had freed them from sin, they were still expecting Him to restore the nation.

But that wasn't the power Jesus was speaking of. He was talking about the power of the Holy Spirit.

Note Jesus's response:

**“It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by His own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth”** (Acts 1:7–8).

Notice how Jesus sidesteps their question. “It is not for you to know...” He tells them they're on a need-to-know basis, and they don't need to know when God will conquer the world. Instead, they need to hear about the power to help save it.

Look at verse 8 again:

**“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth”** (Acts 1:8).

They wanted kingdom restoration. Jesus was talking about kingdom expansion.

To paraphrase what Jesus is saying: “Boys, the end of the world is the Father’s business. Kingdom restoration is none of your business... but from now on, kingdom expansion is your only business.”

And that business was going to start in Jerusalem, spread to Judea, then Samaria, and eventually to the ends of the earth.

They needed to go—but for that, they were going to need some power. Some gas in the tank!

**“You will receive power”** (Acts 1:8).

That is what the Father had promised.

If you’ve ever played a sport or run track, you know the importance of having a power boost to push you beyond your limits. Maybe you ate the right food, got good sleep, and on race day, that extra energy kicked in.

Now contrast that with a day when you’re running on junk food and no sleep. When the gun fires, it feels like you’re running underwater.

The disciples knew Jesus as the risen Lord—but they didn’t yet know the power that raised Him. Even after spending three years with Jesus, they still weren’t ready to take on the world.

**“After He said this, He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as He was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ‘Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven’”** (Acts 1:9–11).

Imagine being there. Jesus didn’t answer your question but instead told you to wait. Then He begins to lift off the ground. At first, it feels like He’s just demonstrating His power—but then He keeps going, until a cloud hides Him.

Nobody says, “That’s it. Show’s over.” You’ve never seen this before, so you just stand there, jaw open, stunned.

Suddenly, two angels appear next to you. With amused smiles, they say:

**“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).**

Cheeky angels.

The disciples get the message. Show’s over. Time to stop looking upward and start focusing outward. There’s work to do.

But first—they head to Jerusalem and wait for this empowering.

**“They all joined together constantly in prayer” (Acts 1:14).**

Waiting doesn’t mean doing nothing. It means waiting on God.

And we’ll have to wait until the next chapter to see what that power looks like. But to quote a friend of mine: “You can’t be an Acts 2 church of power until you’re first an Acts 1 church of prayer.”

Before we move on, there was one other area where the disciples were waiting on God—and it was a sensitive subject. They had to tackle the issue of Judas, one of their own, who betrayed Jesus and then hung himself.

They needed a 12th apostle. The word *apostle* means “sent-out one,” and there were 12 apostles to represent the 12 tribes of Israel. Jesus had chosen the original twelve, but now that He had ascended, it was up to them to choose.

So Peter lays out the qualifications:

**“Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up**

**from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection” (Acts 1:21–22).**

Let’s review that:

- He had to have witnessed Jesus’s ministry from the beginning.
- He had to be a witness to the resurrection.

So they came up with two men who fit the criteria. Then they prayed and read verse 26:

**“Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles” (Acts 1:26).**

Wait... they did what? Cast lots? Like throwing dice?

I know—it sounds weird, right? Kind of like a game of “eenie, meenie, miney, mo.”

But they probably figured: God will choose better than we will.

This was their first major decision as the early church, and they didn’t want to screw it up. Maybe they figured, “If we roll for it, God can choose through the roll.”

It’s not the most glorious moment in church history, but it shows something important: these guys were new. They were still figuring it out—just like you and me.

And that’s okay.

Isn’t it great that God knows we can’t handle this huge mission on our own—and still entrusts it to a bunch of knuckleheads like us? Because He knows the Holy Spirit will provide the power we lack.

To sum up, Acts Chapter 1 is all about depending on God 100%, whether it’s for mission, power, or decisions.

Something we can all learn from.

Well, that power is coming in the next chapter...

But you'll have to wait until next time on our journey—Through the Word.

## Acts 2 | Part 1: What Happened Next...

Welcome back to Through the Word! I'm your host, Peyton Jones, and we're diving into Acts Chapter 2—a chapter that is all about power.

Spy movies and video games like *Spy Hunter* always depict a James Bond-type car kitted out with nitrous boosters. Push the red button and the car rockets forward with jet propulsion.

If only life were that easy. Sometimes we feel like we need a red button just to give us more power. Maybe you've struggled to share your faith with someone and wished for a nitrous tank to give you a boost.

If you're Tim "The Tool Man" Taylor, you can never have enough of it. Auuuwww auuuwhhh awwwuuugghhhh!

Well, I have good news. The Holy Spirit has a secret spy button—and this chapter promises it's for all of us!

Catching up with the disciples, let's remember—they've been praying for ten days. Just like Jesus told them to. But what happens next, nobody expected. Luke jumps straight into the action in verse 1:

**“When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:1–4).**

The Holy Spirit pushes the red button, giving the disciples that power boost, and kicking off the mission like a wind out of nowhere.

Imagine you're in the room praying. You're focused on what one of the other 119 people around you are saying. But then a strange humming whisper turns into a full-blown gale.

You crack open your eyes. Others are doing the same. Then suddenly, you see something you've never seen before—tongues of fire. It's like flames over each person's head... and they're moving. Fiery tongues.

There's deep symbolism here that will unfold in the next few minutes—but we'll come back to that.

What you feel inside is something different. Something new. And when you open your mouth to speak, you hear yourself—but in another language.

**“And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4).**

First, you're filled with the Holy Spirit.

People had been filled with the Holy Spirit before—like Mary, Zechariah, Elizabeth—and it always meant being overwhelmed by Him.

But this is different.

This is an empowering. It reminds you of stories from the Old Testament—of King David, or Samson in battle—when the Spirit came upon them so they could perform mighty deeds.

But this time, it's as if the Holy Spirit is filling them from the inside out—and coming upon them as well.

You remember what Jesus said ten days ago: “Not many days from now you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

When you were baptized in water, it meant to be fully immersed or saturated completely.

Now you're being baptized with fire. You're consumed by the Holy Spirit, overwhelmed and overjoyed—and all you can do is break out in praise to God.

This is what the wild man of the Jordan, John the Baptist, shouted at Jesus's baptism:



**“I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with fire”** (Luke 3:16).

That day, Jesus walked up out of the water, and the Holy Spirit appeared as a dove, anointing Him for ministry. Because Jesus was God, the dove seemed fitting—a sign of peace, grace, and gentle power.

But now, in the upper room, the Holy Spirit was anointing the disciples. And Jesus had promised this would be the beginning of kingdom expansion:

**“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”** (Acts 1:8).

No wonder the symbol was fire.

Fire reminds us of God’s presence. Remember Moses and the burning bush? That fire called one man to set a nation free. But now, this fire would set nations free.

The fire of the Holy Spirit was meant to spread outward from Jerusalem. Because when wind hits wildfire... it spreads.

That’s what those fiery tongues were all about.

**“They all began to speak in other tongues”** (Acts 2:4).

Now it makes sense. The fiery tongues dancing on each head matched the foreign languages pouring from every mouth. Their tongues would be set on fire—and the wind would blow on that flame, sending the gospel to the nations with force!

That’s why Luke lists everyone who was present in verses 9–11:

**“Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs”** (Acts 2:9–11).

The only barrier was language—but the Holy Spirit removed that barrier.

Let's back up a bit to verse 5:

**“Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken”** (Acts 2:5–6).

Luke says the crowd came together “at the sound.” But he doesn’t say where. Were the disciples in the temple courts? In the house? Did they go outside? We don’t know.

But when people followed the noise, they couldn’t make sense of what they heard. How could they understand the same speaker in multiple languages?

**“Utterly amazed, they asked: ‘Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?’”** (Acts 2:7–8).

So two miracles were happening at once.

First, as we saw in verse 4:

**“They were all speaking in other tongues”** (Acts 2:4).

They weren’t speaking gibberish. These were real languages.

Second, everyone heard them in their own language.

**“Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?”** (Acts 2:8).

The divided tongues of fire symbolized the miracle: speaking many languages at once. When they said “Hi,” Texans heard “Howdy,” the French heard “Bonjour,” and the punk rockers heard “Oi!”

It must have been amazing. The crowd was amazed. I think even the apostles were amazed.

The Holy Spirit had pressed that secret spy button. Turbo boost activated. This was the power Jesus promised—the power that made them witnesses.

And they were just getting started. But what happened next... nobody expected.

We'll have to wait for that as we continue Acts Chapter 2, next time on our journey... Through the Word.

## Acts 2 | Part 2: The Conviction

Hey, Through the Word—Peyton Jones here. Today, we're picking up in part two of Acts chapter 2, where Peter convicts an entire crowd of people of a crime they committed.

Have you ever watched a crime show and been amazed how the detectives pull together evidence—facts, timestamps, testimonies—and reconstruct the scene, finally leading to a conviction? Well, the same thing is about to happen in this chapter.

So let's jump back into Acts 2.

Before we do, remember: the Holy Spirit dropped like a bomb in Jerusalem, baptizing the apostles with power. With this anointing—what Jesus called “power from on high”—they spread out like gospel shrapnel, preaching and embedding themselves in the community.

But here in chapter 2, at the epicenter, Peter gives the sermon of his lifetime, and at the end of the chapter we'll read the impact it had.

Let's reset the stage. People thought the apostles were drunk because they were filled with joy and praising Jesus. In response to the crowd hearing their own languages, we read:

**“Utterly amazed, they asked: ‘Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?’”**

(Acts 2:7–8)

Some mocked, saying, “They’ve had too much wine.” Or, in modern terms: “Go home, Peter. You’re drunk.”

But Peter steps up and says, “We’re not drunk—it’s only nine in the morning!”

Then he adds: But I’ll tell you what is open—the heavens.

Peter launches into a full-blown sermon and quotes the prophet Joel:

**“And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on My male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out My Spirit, and they shall prophesy. And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”**

(Acts 2:17–21)

Now, I don't know about you, but this probably wouldn't have been my go-to passage. Joel's a lesser-known prophet who talked about locusts. But buried in that book is this powerful promise: God will pour out His Spirit on all flesh in the last days.

Peter says, “This is that moment.”

And it's not just for him. He tells them: “This promise is for you. For your children. For everyone God calls.” Did you catch the different people groups? Young, old, male, female, rich, poor—all would receive the Spirit.

They would prophesy, see visions, speak with boldness, and operate in supernatural gifting.

This is what Jesus meant when He said:

**“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses.”**

(Acts 1:8)

Peter is saying these gifts are meant to help us become witnesses of Jesus.

We may not all be evangelists, but we can all be witnesses. Sometimes that just means using the gifts God gave you.

Your gifts are how Jesus puts on a “you suit.” It’s how He reveals Himself to the world—through the unique combination of gifts He’s placed in your life.

And Peter? He had the gift of gab.

He preaches a powerful sermon—somehow in the native languages of everyone present—and with a tongue set on fire by the Spirit, Peter delivers the home-run sermon of his life.

**“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves know...”**

(Acts 2:22)

Let’s pause. This is important.

Peter says, “You just witnessed a miracle today. But you missed all the ones Jesus did before this.”

This was their second chance.

Peter doesn’t hold back. Like a detective, he walks them through their offenses like Columbo at the end of the mystery. First, they ignored His miracles. Then, they put Him to death. And now, standing there trying to process what’s happening, Peter drops the final piece of the puzzle.

**“This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says:**

**‘The Lord said to my Lord,  
Sit at My right hand,  
until I make Your enemies Your footstool.’”**

(Acts 2:32–35)

Then Peter drops the hammer:

**“Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.”**  
(Acts 2:36)

Boom. Talk about bold.

But why bring up King David?

David was Israel’s greatest king—warrior, poet, prophet. And Peter’s audience knew that God had promised a Savior would come through David’s line. That’s why the Messiah was often called the Son of David.

But this Messiah wouldn’t reign from David’s old throne—He would sit at the right hand of God.

And now Peter makes it clear: Jesus was that Messiah. And you crucified Him.

They’re caught at the crime scene in Jerusalem. The jig is up. They realize they’ve been caught red-handed. The blood is on their hands.

And it destroys them.

**“Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’”**  
(Acts 2:37)

I remember feeling the same desperation when I first heard that Jesus was coming back. I was 14. That night, I went to bed clutching a Gideon Bible and a wooden cross, praying Jesus wouldn’t come back and judge me before I was ready.

That’s the conviction of the Holy Spirit.

Peter doesn’t say, “Raise your hand there in the back—God sees you.”

This was serious.

**“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off—everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself.”**

(Acts 2:38–39)

To repent means to change your mind. It’s where we get the word *metanoia*—a crisis moment, an unmaking.

They needed to change their mind not just about what they’d done—but about who Jesus is.

And to show the world they’d made that change, they got baptized.

Publicly.

Baptism was a death sentence in Jerusalem. You only did it if you meant it. It was a way of saying, “I’m with Jesus now.” Kind of like marriage: I like Jesus so much, I put a ring on it.

And 3,000 people did.

**“So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.”**

(Acts 2:41)

Peter might have been the most shocked of them all. But the most amazing conversion... is our own.

That God would forgive us.

Join us next time as we continue the journey—one chapter at a time.

And remember, faith comes by hearing... and hearing Through the Word.



## Acts 3 | Would You Just Look at That!

Hello friends, and welcome back to Through the Word. My name is Peyton Jones, and I'll be your guide on our journey through Acts chapter 3, where we learn where to look to see God working.

I'm sure you've been at a stop light or in a parking lot where someone is begging, holding up a cardboard sign asking for spare change or a helping hand. It's uncomfortable sometimes, and so, you might look away, pretend to fiddle with the radio, or even look ahead into the distance and try not to blink.

In our story today, Peter refuses to pass by a resident beggar who has been camped outside the Temple gate and become such a fixture, he's easy to miss.

**One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!” So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them (Acts 3:1–5).**

Peter says, “Look at me.”

Like many beggars, this man's shame has him looking down at the ground. He's the object of pity and scorn—people feeling all the same emotions toward him that people do today. “Why doesn't he get a job. Lazy bum.” But Peter knows he has worth. Peter wanted him to know that Jesus saw him—not just another beggar, but someone who was loved and worth human dignity.

**Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's**

**feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him (Acts 3:6–10).**

Man, I love the little details like his “feet and ankles becoming strong.” So strong that he doesn’t just walk. He JUMPS to his feet and starts worshipping.

This is such a contrast to his SITTING at the gate. And although we never catch his name, everyone knew who he was because he’d become such a fixture. In Laguna Beach, California, there’s a statue on a street corner where a homeless man nicknamed “The Greeter” has been memorialized. Like the “Greeter,” this beggar at the gate was so well-known, it stopped the people who used to pass by, averting their gaze, in their very tracks. They stood rooted at the gate now, their eyes looking to Peter and John in excitement.

Peter didn’t have silver or gold for the man, but he had a miracle. Now, to those standing looking on, he has a message:

**When Peter saw this, he said to them: “Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?” (Acts 3:12).**

Wait! Did you catch that?

First, Peter tells the man born lame, “Look at us,” but now he’s telling the crowd, “Don’t look at us!!!”

Look to Jesus!

And that’s exactly what the rest of the chapter does through Peter’s sermon. It points us to Jesus. Let’s jump back in at verse 13:

**The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see (Acts 3:13–16).**

If you've ever seen a movie where a person grabs another person's head and makes them look at something gruesome, Peter has just made them face four inconvenient truths:

- The God of your heroes validated Jesus with miracles (verse 13)
- You handed Him over to be killed, and when Pilate was going to let Him go, you pressured him into murdering Jesus anyways
- You disowned the Holy One, choosing a murderer instead
- You killed the Author of Life... whoa... that's some wordsmithing there

"You killed the author of life"—but God raised Him from the dead. All of us witnessed this. God just healed a man in front of you.

You can see where this is going. He's going to confront them with, "Now, what are you going to do about it?"

But first, he eases the bitter pill with a bit of sugar coating:

**"Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what He had foretold through all the prophets, saying that His Messiah would suffer.**

**Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that He may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus” (Acts 3:17–20).**

And there it is, the call to action. He’s made them look at what they did, but now, he’s making them look at God for forgiveness.

That’s why he uses the word *repent*. It means to turn around and look the other direction. It literally means a change of mind.

It was a very Jewish message, and from verses 21 to 26, Peter connects Jesus to the prophets, claiming He’s the Messiah, and the one Moses foretold. In fact, all the prophets foretold Him. And they did.

But in verse 25, Peter goes back to the time when Abraham was first called to follow God:

**“And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, ‘Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.’ When God raised up His servant, He sent Him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways” (Acts 3:25–26).**

Imagine you’re there, and you’re a Jew. You thought you were going to heaven because you were born a Jew. But here, Peter is calling you out of your wicked ways, just as he called Abraham, a pagan, to leave all he knew and trust a God he barely knew.

God had promised to bless Abraham. In fact, way back in Genesis, He’d called Abraham to follow Him, promising, “I will bless you, and you will become a blessing, and through you all the world will be blessed.” Abraham didn’t know then that the language of blessing went all the way back to Genesis 3, when God had promised that there would be someone who would come through their lineage—a ruler who would be born. A Savior.

He would bless them and set them free—not from the oppression of worldly tyrants, but from the tyranny of sin that lived in their hearts.

My friend, God wants to bless you. Jesus is the greatest blessing you'll ever know.

It may be hard to look at Jesus, who took the curse of God for all of our sins. We've all had to look—like this crowd did—at what our sins and rebellion did to Jesus. But despite it all, Jesus came to bless us.

Now that is a God worth looking at!

And all you have to do to receive that blessing is to look at Him. Repent, change your mind, and follow His call.

## Acts 4 | Can't Stop, Won't Stop!

Hey Through the Word, Peyton Jones here, and I'll be your guide today on our journey through the Word, as we jump back into chapter 4—where the apostles had to dance to the tune of *can't stop, won't stop* when it came to preaching Jesus. It was about to get them into a heap of deep trouble.

My first day preaching to students during the lunch hour on campus, the Dean had told me that if I ever set foot there again, I'd be hauled away in a police car. So I got on my knees and prayed, "God, I'll go to jail to reach those kids, but I'd rather not have a criminal record. So if You want me to keep reaching these kids with the gospel, please either tell me to stop, prevent me from being seen there, or make me really good at playing harmonica."

But what about you? Would you preach the gospel if it meant you'd go to jail? Would you have that kind of courage? What if it was in the shadow of someone recently being executed for it?

That was the situation for the apostles, when their preaching started causing a stir in Jerusalem—not long after Jesus had just been crucified Himself for preaching the gospel.

Let's jump into verse 1 to see what the apostles did when confronted with their worst fears:

**"The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand."**

(Acts 4:1–4)

Okay, one night in jail? That's not too serious. Being locked up in the clinker overnight is marginally passable before you're considered a felon. But they couldn't stop—not when their preaching had now caused 5,000 men to believe (not counting the women and children).

**“The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest’s family. They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: ‘By what power or what name did you do this?’”**

(Acts 4:5–7)

What would you answer here?

If your chief concern was for your safety, you might say something like, “Please sir, it was a mistake. I plead temporary insanity!” Or, “We’ve learned our lesson... we won’t do it again.”

But more than their concern for their own skin was their concern for the souls of others.

**“Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: ‘Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.**

**Jesus is:**

**‘the stone you builders rejected,  
which has become the cornerstone.’**

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

(Acts 4:8–12)

Boom! What a mic drop. You killed Jesus. God raised Him from the dead.

You might think I'm on the wrong side of the law—but you're on the wrong side of God!

Wow.

Just put yourself in the shoes of these religious leaders. What a problem they've got on their hands! I mean, what do you do when all your pomp and authority doesn't scare the people you're trying to warn?

**“When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.”**

(Acts 4:13)

I just have to stop there for a second.

This verse has been very personal to me over the years. The man who led me to Jesus pulled this verse out and said, “No matter what people say about you for being a Christian, this is the best compliment they can ever pay you: ‘They took note that these men had been with Jesus.’” Then he asked me, “Peyton, do you think that other people can see that in you?”

Listener, I'll ask you the same. Do people take note that we've been with Jesus? Can they tell?

If they can, there's not much they can do to stand against it. In fact, in verse 14, we're told there was nothing they could say.

**“But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. ‘What are we going to do with these men?’ they asked. ‘Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it.**

**But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name.’”**

(Acts 4:14–17)



**“Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, ‘Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to Him? You be the judges!**

**As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.’”**

(Acts 4:18–20)

**“After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.”**

(Acts 4:21–22)

What a dilemma for these religious teachers. What to do?

They couldn’t stop the miracles. They couldn’t shut the disciples up. And they couldn’t stop people from believing.

But the apostles still knew that they too were in over their heads. They were being threatened with beatings, imprisonment, and death.

Like my story of heading onto the high school campus, none of that sounded good. Like me, they were scared. What to do?

They prayed:

**“On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God.**

**‘Sovereign Lord,’ they said, ‘You made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of Your servant, our father David:**

**“Why do the nations rage  
and the peoples plot in vain?**

**The kings of the earth rise up**

**and the rulers band together  
against the Lord  
and against His Anointed One.”**

**Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed.**

**They did what Your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.**

**Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable Your servants to speak Your word with great boldness.**

**Stretch out Your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.”**

(Acts 4:23–30)

**“After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.”**

(Acts 4:31)

The building shook. At Pentecost, a howling gale filled the room. This time, God shows His power with an earthquake.

But they were filled with the Holy Spirit again. It was a top-up. An emboldening. And they felt a courage like they'd never felt before and they *“spoke the word of God boldly.”*

The result?

The believers became so sold out for mission, that many of them sold their fields and abundance of possessions and gave it toward missions.

The worse the persecution got, the more the church leaned into the mission Jesus had trusted them with. They were all in.

Back to my story... I continued to go onto that high school campus for two more years. I was 19 when I started, and that Dean had been my Dean.

She'd persecuted me when I'd been a student there, and so that was nothing new.

But like Luke records here, the Lord added to the number of people being saved.

I never again got caught, or even seen by that Dean. In fact, I got a little cocky and started parking in the teacher's parking space after a while. The security guards would wave at me, greet me by name, and I preached the gospel boldly and saw souls saved.

All because I prayed in the face of threats and persecution, but relied on God's power instead of my own courage.

## Acts 5 | The Fear of Man or the Fear of God?

I have to be honest—this is NOT my favorite chapter in the Bible.

That's because it involves corruption and lying in the church, and I run from that stuff. Can't stand it. You probably can't either.

But I'm glad the apostles didn't run from it. They confronted it. And I'm also glad this story is in the Bible—because it reminds us that corruption isn't new. People are people, and they've always been people.

And we can learn something here about how to handle those who lie or take advantage of others in the name of God.

Kill them... kill them all...

Okay, that's a bit much. But let's be real: the bodies hit the floor in this chapter. So brace yourself for impact.

**“Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. Then Peter said, ‘Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God.’”**

(Acts 5:1–4)

**“When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.”**

(Acts 5:5–6)

If you've ever told someone to "drop dead," you probably didn't expect it to actually happen. Peter just told him the truth: "You didn't lie to us. You lied to God."

The issue wasn't keeping the money. Peter says, "It was yours." The issue was pretending—putting on a show of generosity. He could've just said, "Here's part of it," and that would've been fine. But instead, he wanted the praise without the sacrifice.

It's hard to say why God struck him down and not others. But the result was that great fear seized the church.

Remember the show *Fear Factor*? It tested people's fear of insects, heights, or eating frogs. Everyone has different fears. And in this passage, we see what Ananias and Sapphira were missing: the fear of God.

Now, there's a wrong kind of fear that makes you run from God, and a good kind that makes you run to Him. That kind of fear is reverence—a love that says, "I don't want to hurt God or walk outside His will." Lying to God is not loving God.

As 1 John says, *"Perfect love drives out fear."*

When we walk in God's love, we not only obey Him—we also shrink back from sin.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch...

**"About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, 'Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?'**

**'Yes,' she said, 'that is the price.'**

**Peter said to her, 'How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.'"**

**(Acts 5:7–9)**

Thump. Another body hits the floor.

But from verses 12 to 16, we're reminded that this was a season of extraordinary miracles—and when God moves like that, He also confronts corruption with equal intensity.

**“The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon’s Colonnade. No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter’s shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed.”**

(Acts 5:12–16)

Okay, all this gospel ruckus was bound to cause a stir.

People being healed, saved, and delivered. Peter’s shadow passing over people. Dogs and cats living together. Total chaos.

So of course the religious leaders try to shut it down:

**“Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. ‘Go, stand in the temple courts,’ he said, ‘and tell the people all about this new life.’ At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people.”**

(Acts 5:17–21)

More pandemonium. The guards report the apostles missing. And the high priest (who I always imagine sounding like John Cleese) is furious.

“Didn’t we tell you NOT to teach in the name of Jesus?”

But Peter's response is anything but funny. It's powerful—and rooted in the fear of God.

**“Peter and the other apostles replied: ‘We must obey God rather than human beings! The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging Him on a cross. God exalted Him to His own right hand as Prince and Savior that He might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.’”**

(Acts 5:29–32)

That sets them off.

**“When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death.”**

(Acts 5:33)

Peter just keeps showing up like a bad penny. It must've felt like a game of *Whac-a-Mole* for these leaders—slam him down, and he pops back up somewhere else.

Just as they're about to go nuclear, a voice of reason rises:

**“But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. Then he addressed them: ‘Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago Theudas appeared... he was killed, and all his followers were dispersed... After him, Judas the Galilean appeared... He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.’”**

(Acts 5:34–39)

That line—*“you’ll only find yourselves fighting against God”*—gives them pause.

They take Gamaliel’s advice... sort of.

**“His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.”**

(Acts 5:40)

Classic. Beat them just for good measure. You know, to feel better.

But somehow, the apostles feel better too.

**“The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.”**

(Acts 5:41–42)

They never stopped.

They didn’t fear the Pharisees—because they feared the Lord.

And that’s just another way of saying: They loved Him... and wanted everyone else to love Him too.

They never stopped.

And neither should we.



## Acts 6 | Stephen's Comet

One of the most tragic things about living on planet Earth is watching brilliant and talented people die young.

Comedians, rock stars, rappers, and actors have been lost before their prime due to poor life choices, bad health, or tragic accidents. Every generation mourns the loss of shining stars who burned out like comets—bright, yet brief. Jeff Buckley, who popularized Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah*, died at 29. Ronnie Van Zandt, lead singer of Lynyrd Skynyrd and voice behind *Freebird*, also died at 29. Kurt Cobain died at 27, shocking the world.

And maybe that's why Stephen's death hits so hard.

Stephen lights up the pages of Acts 6. He testifies boldly about Jesus, fiercely confronts the crowd in Jerusalem, and burns brightly—but briefly. And in this chapter, we literally see him shine.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Let's start in verse 1:

**“In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.”**

(Acts 6:1)

Uh-oh. Trouble's brewing in the church in Jerusalem.

As numbers rise, so do tensions—this time between Hellenistic and Hebraic Jews. You didn't know there were two types? Well, Hellenistic Jews were those who lived outside Israel, like Paul (from Tarsus) or Barnabas (from Cyprus). Every year, they traveled to Jerusalem for the major feasts. The Hebraic Jews, like the original disciples, were raised in Israel.

The Hebraists viewed the Hellenists with suspicion—concerned they'd been spiritually “tainted” by foreign cultures. They spoke different

languages, had different customs, and weren't always trusted as "real Jews."

But now, in Christ, both groups were united. Still, old tensions crept back in—especially when Hellenist widows were being overlooked in the daily food distribution.

But the apostles had a solution:

**"So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, 'It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.'"**

(Acts 6:2–4)

**"This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism."**

(Acts 6:5)

**"They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them."**

(Acts 6:6)

Ethnic tension was nothing new, and the apostles didn't run from it—they faced it head on. Instead of appointing their own people, they empowered the Hellenists to choose seven of their own—wise, Spirit-filled men—to ensure justice and care.

And these weren't just good guys—they were rockstars.

Two names here will take center stage in Acts: Stephen and Philip. Both likely traveled from foreign countries to Jerusalem and were most likely saved through Peter's preaching. But now their ministry was helping the apostles continue in prayer and teaching.

This leadership move? A master stroke. And the results were immediate:

**“So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”**

(Acts 6:7)

Then, the camera zooms in on Stephen:

**“Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen... who began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.”**

(Acts 6:8–10)

It’s not the local Hebraic Jews causing the trouble—it’s the Hellenistic ones.

Why?

Because when you grew up in a Gentile land like Tarsus or Alexandria, you had to work overtime to preserve your Jewish identity. Foreign culture threatened to dilute your faith and customs, so you clung to them all the more fiercely.

When Andrea and I lived in the UK, we struggled to celebrate Thanksgiving or the Fourth of July alone. We were slowly becoming more British, which is fine when you’re American—but for Jews, cultural blending felt like betrayal. God had commanded His people to remain distinct, so for those raised outside Israel, maintaining Jewishness felt like a matter of life and death.

Now add to that the Hebraic Jews looking down on you, questioning your authenticity—and boom: you double down. These Hellenists had something to prove.

And to them, Christianity seemed like a threat.

So when these men, like Saul of Tarsus, saw the gospel spreading, they went into defensive mode. But every time they tried to argue with Stephen?

He mopped the floor with them.

**“But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.”**

(Acts 6:10)

So they resorted to Plan B: smear campaign.

**“Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, ‘We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.’ So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin.”**

(Acts 6:11–12)

**“They produced false witnesses, who testified, ‘This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.’”**

(Acts 6:13–14)

**“All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.”**

(Acts 6:15)

Here we go again. Just like Jesus.

False witnesses. Manufactured outrage. The same kangaroo court.

But verse 15 stands out like a spotlight in the courtroom.

Stephen’s face shone like an angel’s. And in the next chapter, he’ll speak about Israel’s long history of missing God’s glory—a not-so-subtle hint that God is doing something miraculous right in front of them again.

God had already been doing signs and wonders through Stephen. But this was for them—His last miracle, a visible sign to the Sanhedrin.

Stephen was shining like a star—bright, and about to go out.

But before he does, he's got one more sermon to preach.

And trust me, you don't want to miss it...

Join us next time as we turn the page to Acts 7.

## Acts 7 | The First Martyr

Welcome back to Through the Word. I'm your host, Peyton Jones, and today we'll be in the book of Acts, chapter seven, where Stephen gives the religious leaders a piece of his mind.

Have you ever really wanted to give a piece of your mind to the world? Maybe you've read something on social media or watched a political struggle unfold, and you really wanted to stick it to the man with some fiery rhetoric.

We've all had times where we just wanted to say what needed to be said. In those moments, we either blurted it out like discharging a shotgun blast, or we held it in.

In Acts chapter seven, Stephen discharges some prophetic words to the religious leaders, and although it needs to be said, these words get him killed. Nearly the entire chapter is Stephen's response to the question found in verse one:

**“Are these charges true?”**

(Acts 7:1)

The charges, by the way, were that Stephen had been publicly saying that Jesus claimed He would destroy the temple and miraculously raise it back up.

Of course, this was partially true. Jesus did say He would destroy the temple and raise it up again—but He was speaking about His body as the dwelling place of God. And He did in fact raise it back up when He miraculously rose from the dead.

But Stephen doesn't defend himself in this speech. Instead, he turns the prosecution back on his accusers. His entire speech is about how God Himself was the prize of Judaism, not the temple. God Himself had come to His people—and they had rejected Him.

Stephen takes the religious leaders in his speech on a long journey through their own religious history—where they had rejected God's prophets time and again, back when there was no temple at all.

And even though they had a temple now, they were still missing God Himself—just like they always had.

So let's trace Stephen's speech beginning in verse two:

**“To this he replied: ‘Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran.**

**‘Leave your country and your people,’ God said, ‘and go to the land I will show you.’**

**So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. He gave him no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child.**

**God spoke to him in this way: ‘For four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,’ God said, ‘and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.’”**

(Acts 7:2–7)

Okay, that's a lot of history crammed into a few verses. So what was Stephen's point here? Why is he telling them all this?

Well, Stephen wants them to know that God called a pagan and settled him in a foreign land. They were pilgrims by history, and for 400 years they did not have a place to call their own. They were slaves.

Here's the point: During this time, God didn't give them a land or a temple—because He was trying to get them to focus on Him. Not the place. Not the land. And not a building.

And afterward, the passage said:

**“They will come out of that country and worship me in this place.”**  
(Acts 7:7)

The land was just a place to worship God. But they had a nasty habit of rejecting God every time He started to work in their midst.

Let’s jump into verse nine, where Stephen introduces Joseph:

**“Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.”**  
(Acts 7:9–10)

Notice that the patriarchs—or the representatives of the 12 tribes—actually rejected God's chosen one, the savior of His own people: Joseph.

This is going to be a recurring pattern in Stephen’s speech. Each example becomes for Stephen like a boxer giving a jab—setting up for the knockout punch at the end of the chapter.

But in Joseph's story, Stephen states that they were all buried in Egypt. It wasn’t the place that mattered—it was the God who was trying to save them.

Verse 18 picks up the new story:

**“Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our ancestors by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.”**  
(Acts 7:18–19)

Let’s pause here. Nothing that Stephen is saying here is by accident. I mean, so far, the parallels are amazing.



The people of Israel were subdued by the Egyptians—just like the people in Stephen’s day were being subdued by the Romans at Jesus’ time.

But even more amazing is that the slaughter of the innocents occurred when Moses was born—just like it did at the birth of Jesus.

And both of these saviors of the Jewish people would escape these massacres. Stephen is hoping the religious leaders will understand the pattern.

Now Stephen introduces Moses:

**“At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for by his family. When he was placed outside, Pharaoh’s daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.”**

(Acts 7:20–22)

Moses was perfectly placed as the next savior of his people—to rescue them. But when he approached two Israelites fighting, they rejected him too:

**“But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, ‘Who made you ruler and judge over us?’”**

(Acts 7:27)

Again, the people reject God’s special servant.

But forty years later, God appears to Moses again—this time in a burning bush—and tells him to go back and rescue his people:

**“I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.”**

(Acts 7:34)

Stephen interjects:

**“This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, ‘Who made you ruler and judge?’ He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. He led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and for forty years in the wilderness.”**

(Acts 7:35–36)

You can hear the shock in Stephen’s words: *This is the same Moses they rejected.*

The answer to their question was: *God did.*

They just didn’t care.

**“But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.”**

(Acts 7:39)

Stephen goes on to talk about how the people not only rejected Moses—but rejected God Himself—and then started worshipping idols.

But in verse 44, he comes to the conclusion.

Stephen, like a boxer, has been jabbing and working the ribs. Now in verse 44, he summarizes all of this with an uppercut—and reintroduces the temple. Because the temple had become their idol. It had replaced God Himself.

**“But it was Solomon who built a house for him. However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says:**

**‘Heaven is my throne,  
and the earth is my footstool.**

**What kind of house will you build for me?’ says the Lord.”**

(Acts 7:47–49)

Jab, jab...

And here comes the knockout punch:

**“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”**

(Acts 7:51–53)

Wow. Them’s fighting words.

But they were the right words. And sometimes the right words lead to death.

The religious leaders were so infuriated—they threw their hands over their ears. They tore their garments. They wished they could tear Stephen to pieces.

They wished they could stop their ears from his words. But even then, as they rushed at him to take him, kill him, and stone him to death—Stephen prayed:

**“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”**

(Acts 7:59)

**“Then he fell on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’”**

(Acts 7:60)

They killed Jesus.

They killed Stephen.

But they’ll never be able to silence the message of grace that God was offering to His people.

Join us next time as we continue the journey one chapter at a time.

And remember—faith comes by hearing, and hearing Through the Word.

## Acts 8 | The Gospel Spread... On Accident

Welcome to Through the Word, I'm your host Peyton Jones, and today we'll be picking up the pieces after the stoning of Stephen.

Verse 1 closes that story with the somber statement:

**“And Saul approved of their killing him.”**

(Acts 8:1)

That verse introduces us to a new character—the villain of the story: Saul of Tarsus. A Pharisee, bent on wiping out Christians—like Darth Vader consumed with eradicating the Jedi. But like Darth Vader's story, Saul's has a redemption arc that will soon play out.

**Have you ever done something good, but it was an accident?** Like flipping a bottle in the air and having it land straight up? It wasn't your intention to do something really cool—it just happened. Well, Saul of Tarsus didn't mean to spread the gospel... he did it on accident.

Acts chapter 8 is the *Judea and Samaria* part of the gospel spreading! This chapter is a transition—from the gospel being captive in Jerusalem, to being unleashed on the ends of the earth. And it happens through persecution.

And here's the weird thing: Saul will end up becoming Paul, the greatest missionary the church has ever seen. But even before he's converted, Paul is responsible for spreading the gospel—showing that a greater force is at work here than the efforts of men.

**“On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.”**

(Acts 8:1–3)

Did you catch what happened? The church was scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

What Jesus promised would happen in Acts 1:8 is actually unfolding:

**“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”**

(Acts 1:8)

And Saul’s persecution is actually making it happen. Saul couldn’t help but spread the gospel—because God used him like a tool to get it done.

Here’s an excerpt from my book *Church Zero*:

*Picture yourself in Jerusalem at the dawn of the apostolic age, circa Acts 3. You had given up everything once you discovered God’s sacrificial lamb. Now you sat at the feet of eleven guys who were ordinary just like you, yet extraordinary. Ordinary fishermen and tradesmen, they were transformed, like you, by an encounter with Jesus of Nazareth. Their ministry was so powerful that you never wanted to leave their teaching or the warm fellowship of the community, or the fear and awe-tinged miracles that buzzed the atmosphere with supernatural power. It had all the makings of a megachurch experience: thousands of people, money to do anything they wanted, and ministry coming out of their ears. There was only one problem. The kingdom couldn’t advance in a holy huddle. God had to give them a spiritual kick up the backside. Enter Saul of Tarsus. Persecution smacked down on the church like Gallagher’s twenty-five-pound sledgehammer on a watermelon, splattering the seeds of the church to the far reaches of Asia Minor.*

And that’s exactly what happens in verse 4:

**“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he**

**performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city.”**  
(Acts 8:4–8)

It was all going well—for everyone. Unless you were an impure spirit. Then it sucked for you, because the power of Jesus was moving into places where people had been at the mercy of any power greater than themselves. But Christ had the power over disease, death, and demons.

But then, they hit a speedbump. And that speedbump went by the name of Simon the Sorcerer.

**“Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, ‘This man is rightly called the Great Power of God.’ They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery. But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.”**  
(Acts 8:9–13)

**“When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.”**  
(Acts 8:14–17)

**“When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money and said, ‘Give me also this**

**ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’”**

(Acts 8:18–19)

There are a few things money can't buy. Friendship, love, and the gifts of God.

**“Peter answered: ‘May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.’”**

(Acts 8:20–23)

Simon was captive to bitterness at having lost his charlatan gig—making money hand over fist—and captive to the sin of greed. In his mind, he was making an investment to make even more money, by turning the baptism of the Holy Spirit into a business.

But verse 18 doesn't say the apostles had the power—it says:

**“The Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands.”**

(Acts 8:18)

You can't buy a gift. God gives His gifts... freely.

But you have to hand it to Simon—he repents and asks for mercy:

**“Then Simon answered, ‘Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me.’”**

(Acts 8:24)

**“After they had further proclaimed the word of the Lord and testified about Jesus, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.”**

(Acts 8:25)



Finally, we come to the Ethiopian.

This is an amazing story. An Ethiopian official, in charge of the treasury of the Queen, went to Jerusalem to worship.

**“On his way home he was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, ‘Go to that chariot and stay near it.’**

**Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ Philip asked. ‘How can I,’ he said, ‘unless someone explains it to me?’ So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.”**

(Acts 8:28–31)

**“This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:**

**‘He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,  
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.’”**

(Acts 8:32)

The man is puzzled and asks who the prophet is talking about. Talk about shooting fish in a barrel! Sharing the gospel couldn’t have gotten any easier. But Philip not only explained how Jesus suffered for his sin—the man put his faith in Jesus right there, and was baptized.

Remember that the gospel was going to reach the ends of the earth? This was a sneak peek.

But the *next* chapter will continue Saul’s story... and **that** would be the key to taking the gospel to the rest of the world.

## Acts 9 | Saul's Conversion

Doesn't everyone like a good redemption story?

With the success of the *Star Wars* franchise, it would seem so—because *Star Wars* is a cleverly disguised redemption story masquerading as a space opera. Do you remember what you felt when Darth Vader grabbed the Emperor and threw him to his doom? In that moment, as Vader changed sides, the deepest part of our souls rejoiced—because **we**, after all, are a part of the greatest redemption story ever told... our own.

If the Bible were *Star Wars*, Saul of Tarsus would be the Darth Vader of the early church—hunting down the Jedi to extinction.

**“Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples.**

**He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus,**

**so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women,**

**he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.**

**As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.**

**He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’**

**‘Who are you, Lord?’ Saul asked.**

**‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied.**

**‘Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.’”**

**(Acts 9:1–6)**

**“The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.**

**Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing.**

**So they led him by the hand into Damascus.**

**For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.”**  
(Acts 9:7–9)

Saul, who thought he could see everything... is blind. But he heard the voice of God. And he needed a Christian to help him.

Remember: **God may be putting people into contact with you for a reason.**

After some arguing with God, Ananias agrees to find Saul and pray for him.

**“Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—  
has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”**  
(Acts 9:17)

**“Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again.  
He got up and was baptized.”**  
(Acts 9:18)

Wow. Paul is struck with blindness to show how blind he was to what God was doing—despite his incredible knowledge of the Old Testament. Until he met Jesus in a blinding flash of light and had been struck blind, he’d already been groping in the dark.

From here, Saul was unstoppable. Literally. He immediately got busy.

**“At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.**

**All those who heard him were astonished and asked,  
‘Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name?**

**And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?’**

**Yet Saul grew more and more powerful**

**and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.”**

(Acts 9:20–22)

*At once he began to preach.*

Have you ever met someone who comes to Jesus all the way—and doesn’t do anything halfway ever again? That was always going to be Paul’s story. It’s who he was.

So the Jews try and kill him, but they lower him out of the city in a basket—and the hunter becomes the prey.

But his story isn’t over.

**“When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him,  
not believing that he really was a disciple.**

**But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles.”**

(Acts 9:26–27)

Pay attention to this. Barnabas is going to play a big part in Paul’s life.

You know how you meet someone and you don’t think much of it at the time? Ask a couple how they met sometime—it’s often a fluke, or accident, that brings people together.

But there was **nothing accidental about Barnabas**. God had plans for these two. They’ll be future partners in crime—breaking into enemy territory and stealing souls for Jesus.

Paul propels himself out onto the mission field like all the tension and anger through the years is being transformed into an energizing love for Christ and others—and he runs at mission with an even greater force than he stood against the church.

Tracing Paul across the map of the Mediterranean is like watching an old Energizer Bunny commercial: *“He’s still going!”*

But the Jews want to kill him, so the apostles send him back home to Tarsus in Turkey to keep him from stirring things up too much—and to keep him alive. And as Paul sails away from Jerusalem, verse 31 tells us that the church finally gets a breather.

**“Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened.**

**Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.”**

(Acts 9:31)

But then the story switches to Peter now. He goes to Lydda and heals a man—nothing new. But then the big miracle happens...

Peter raises a little girl from the dead in a town called Joppa. The **mother of all miracles**: raising the dead.

Let’s witness the first time an apostle has worked “the big one” in verse 39:

**“Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room.**

**All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing**

**that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.**

**Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed.**

**Turning toward the dead woman, he said, ‘Tabitha, get up.’**

**She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up.**

**He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet.**

**Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive.**

**This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord.**

**Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.”**

(Acts 9:39–43)

This time, Peter gets a breather. Whew!

It's been a whirlwind of a chapter, with the gospel working its magic beyond Jerusalem. Miracles were spreading. The gospel was spreading. And the church was spreading.

And it would continue to spread throughout the entire world...

For it would be here in Joppa, during this brief rest—**taking a nap, in fact**—that Peter would receive his vision of the gospel spreading to the ends of the earth.

But more on that, next time on our journey Through the Word.

## Acts 10 | Those Other Guys

All of us have either been asked, or asked ourselves this question: *“What does God do with those that never heard of Jesus?”*

What does He do for them? Does He just leave them to find their way, or does He intervene for those who are truly seeking truth and answers?

You’ve already heard about God reaching Syria in chapter 8—that was specimen A. Specimen B was God reaching the Ethiopian eunuch. And of course, there are multiple examples of Jesus reaching people outside of Israel, such as the people of Caesarea, the Phoenician woman, and the woman at the well.

**God cares. For everyone.**

Acts 10 introduces us to specimen C: Cornelius.

**“At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.”**

(Acts 10:1–2)

Cornelius was devout and God-fearing, meaning he had probably been moving toward the God of Israel—finding beauty and wonder in Israel’s worship, so different from the paganism of his homeland. Being a centurion, he had wealth and power, but he also possessed a huge dose of humility. Not only did he bow himself to God, seeking Him in prayer, asking Him to reveal Himself, but he also gave to the poor and needy.

Jesus said, *“Seek and you shall find, when you seek with all your heart...”*  
In verse 3, Cornelius finds.

**“One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, ‘Cornelius!’**

**Cornelius stared at him in fear. ‘What is it, Lord?’ he asked.**

**The angel answered, ‘Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come**

**up as a memorial offering before God.”**

(Acts 10:3–4)

Whoa—did you catch that? His prayers and gifts came up as a memorial offering. In other words, Cornelius’s devotion got God’s attention. The angel is telling him: your messages have been received, and God would send a response.

What was that response? Well... he’d have to wait to hear the message Peter would bring. (*Hint: It’s the gospel*).

The angel tells Cornelius to send for Peter at his secret hideout in Joppa.

Meanwhile, in Joppa, God has to work on Peter—to get him ready for this **huge shift** where the gospel is going to go from being a scattered faith in a Jewish Savior... to going worldwide.

The ends of the earth, remember? This is it.

Peter goes up on the rooftop terrace, where there’s a comfy bed under an awning... and Peter dozes off into a lucid dream about eating things the Jewish faith forbade.

**“He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’**

**‘Surely not, Lord!’ Peter replied. ‘I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.’**

**The voice spoke to him a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’**

**This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.”**

(Acts 10:11–16)

As soon as he wakes up, a voice is shouting below: *“Is this where Peter is staying?”*



**“While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, ‘Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.’”**

(Acts 10:19–20)

So Peter goes—and prepares to eat unclean food, and welcome unclean Gentile animals into the family of God.

**“As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence.**

**But Peter made him get up. ‘Stand up,’ he said, ‘I am only a man myself.’**

**While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them: ‘You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?’”**

(Acts 10:25–29)

So Cornelius retells his story. And Peter responds:

**“Then Peter began to speak: ‘I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.’”**

(Acts 10:34–35)

If you’ve been wondering what all this *not eating certain foods* was about—in the Old Testament, God gave His people dietary restrictions to keep them from eating with Gentiles, so they wouldn’t be seduced by paganism. But now the tables have turned. **Eating with pagans would become the way to influence them with the gospel.**

Peter preaches the gospel of Christ crucified and raised from the dead—and tells them they can either be judged for their sins at the judgment day... or have their sins forgiven now.

But enter specimen D—the unpredictable factor in any equation: the Holy Spirit.

**“While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.**

**The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles.**

**For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.**

**Then Peter said, ‘Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.’**

**So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.**

**Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.”**

**(Acts 10:44–48)**

**Boom.** Heaven flings its gates wide open in a tangible way. The proof is the Holy Spirit being given to the Gentiles **just as it was to the Jews.**

This is good news. All are to be received by the apostles—because all are being received by God.

And with that, the entire book of Acts swings its view away from the Jews... and toward the Gentiles—as the gospel rides out to conquer the pagan world for the risen Lord Jesus.

## Acts 11 | The Gospel Goes Global

The old TV show *I Love Lucy* frequently got a laugh from Ricky Ricardo's exclaiming, "*Lucy, you have some 'splaining to do!*" after she'd bungled everything.

Have you ever done something so outlandish that people around you demanded, "*Explain yourself right now, mister—or young lady!*"

In Acts 11, the heading in my Bible says it all: **"Peter explains his actions."**

What had Peter done that caused such confusion?

**"The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.**

**So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said,**

**'You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.'**  
**Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story..."**

(Acts 11:1–4)

Peter tells the story about his trance and the vision from God about the sheet full of unclean animals, and Peter's tug-o-war with God.

"Eat, Peter!"

"No, Lord! I've never eaten unclean food before!"

And how the argument went on until Peter got sick of the nightmares... and woke up with a Gentile at his door who'd also had a vision from God, asking about the gospel.

Peter picks up in verse 12:

**"The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house.**

**He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say,**

**‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter.**

**He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.’**

**As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as He had come on us at the beginning.**

**Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’**

**So if God gave them the same gift He gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?”**

**(Acts 11:12–17)**

You can almost hear Peter saying, *“What else was I supposed to do?”*

The Holy Spirit baptized them with Himself—so why shouldn’t I baptize them with water?

**“When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying,**

**‘So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.’”**

**(Acts 11:18)**

I don’t know if we fully realize what a **turning point** this was in history. This, my friends, is the chapter where **Christianity goes worldwide**. Where Jesus goes global.

Prior to this, Jesus was known only as the Jewish Messiah. But this turning point proclaimed Him as the Savior of the world.

Read verse 18 again—sharing the shock and awe of the other apostles:

**“So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life!”**

**(Acts 11:18)**

Jesus had said it—quite a few times—but now they were seeing it. And things were finally clicking into place, especially in their minds.

And good thing too—because the Holy Spirit is already going on ahead of them, spreading the gospel outside of Israel, **unknownst to the apostles.**

I'd like to call this next section: **“Meanwhile, up in Antioch...”**

Verse 19:

**“Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed**

**traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews.**

**Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.**

**The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.**

**News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.”**

(Acts 11:19–22)

Uh-oh! The gospel is spreading by common, everyday people. Not the apostles. Not personalities or leaders. Just the persecuted Christians who left Jerusalem and looked for work and safety up north.

Ironically, Saul of Tarsus was a church planter **before he was even saved**—at least indirectly. Through his persecution, he actually spread the gospel.

David once penned the words:

**“Even the wrath of man will praise You...”**

(Psalm 76:10)

Those who have often tried to stamp Christianity out end up spreading it—as the boot of persecution crashes down.

But now you can see why it is strategically important that **Peter** is at the forefront of God moving into the world of the Gentiles. If this hadn't happened, the apostles probably would have never believed that God was in it.

That might seem strange to you as a New Testament Christian—because Christianity was born to spread. But Judaism was quite the opposite. All through the Old Testament, they were warned to keep themselves **separated** from pagan Gentiles, so they wouldn't become seduced by their paganism.

Those dietary laws were one of the ways they kept their distance. But now, **God was closing the distance** between Himself and the rest of the world.

Verse 23 tells us what Barnabas found:

**“When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.**

**He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch.”**

(Acts 11:23–26)

He went to Tarsus to look for Saul. Why was that his first instinct?

Well, you may remember that Barnabas was the one who brought Saul to the secret hideout of the apostles when they thought Saul's “conversion” might be a trap. Barnabas and Saul forged a powerful bond of friendship those many years ago.

But now Barnabas remembers: Saul kept talking about Jesus appearing to him—telling him he was going to be used to open the eyes of the Gentiles who were blind to who Jesus was.

At the time, they thought he was talking crazy and simply ignored him. But it all comes racing back vividly to Barnabas, who immediately thinks:

**“SAUL! He said this would happen!”**

Let's continue reading verse 26:

**“So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people.**

**The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.**

**During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.**

**One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world.**

**(This happened during the reign of Claudius.)**

**The disciples, as each one was able,**

**decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea.**

**This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.”**

**(Acts 11:26–30)**

There was a ton of money in the Gentile world. And as the famine rages, the new pagan Gentile converts began to **give money** to their poor brothers and sisters in Israel—sealing a bond between them as strong as the bond between Saul and Barnabas.

The main takeaway from this chapter is that **the Holy Spirit is a tactical genius.**

From Saul accidentally spreading the gospel...

to giving Peter the vision *before* the gospel went viral...

to injecting new money from new converts into the Christian churches in Israel...

With the Holy Spirit as the strategic advisor of the church's advance—**the world doesn't stand a chance.**

## Acts 12 | The Gospel Unchained

Have you ever felt unstoppable?

Maybe it was a winning streak at a board game, or you dominated at an athletic event, or you nailed every question in a quiz. When that happens, you can feel an energizing momentum building...

But what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object?

We'll find out in Acts chapter 12.

As we closed Acts chapter 11, the gospel was gaining momentum and spreading. The spark was becoming a fire, spreading outward to the world. But Acts 12 tells us about those trying to put that fire out.

**“It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.**

**He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.”**

(Acts 12:1–2)

Whoa. The first apostle is martyred. One of the apostles is literally stopped dead.

But Herod is just getting started.

**“When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also.**

**This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread.**

**After arresting him, he put him in prison,**

**handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each.**

**Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.**

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

(Acts 12:3–5)

The saying goes, *“If you want to stop the body, take out the head.”* But here, taking Peter out doesn't stop the church from praying.



**“But the church was earnestly praying to God for him.”**

You can try to silence the church by locking it up—but if you can’t stop it praying, you haven’t got a chance to stop anything, as we’re about to see.

**“The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers,  
bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up.  
‘Quick, get up!’ he said, and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists. Then the angel said to him, ‘Put on your clothes and sandals.’ And Peter did so.  
‘Wrap your cloak around you and follow me,’ the angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening;  
he thought he was seeing a vision.  
They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city.  
It opened for them by itself, and they went through it.  
When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.  
Then Peter came to himself and said,  
‘Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod’s clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen.’”**

(Acts 12:6–11)

I love how Peter thinks this is all a vision from God—like he’s caught up in a vivid dream, as if he’s in a movie—and only realizes it after the angel vanishes. There’s just no stopping the unstoppable force when it’s the person of the Holy Spirit.

But Peter’s not the only one who doesn’t think it’s really happening.

A servant girl named Rhoda opens the door to Peter and gets such a shock, she forgets to let him in—and runs to tell the disciples, *“Peter is at the door!”*

**“‘You’re out of your mind,’ they told her.  
When she kept insisting that it was so, they said,  
‘It must be his angel.’”**  
(Acts 12:15)

Okay—what in the heck did they mean by that?

Well, the honest answer is... nobody knows for sure. But here are a few possibilities:

Maybe they think Peter is dead, and like in a cartoon, his spirit has come out of his body to make an appearance. More likely, they think she’s mistaken and left some messenger at the door. Either way, it’s ironic—they’re praying for Peter’s release, and when it happens... they don’t believe it.

Even Peter had a hard time believing the angel was real.

Peter keeps knocking, and they finally let him in—while the soldiers back at the prison start asking, *“Who let this guy out?”*

Remember our earlier question:

**What happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object?**

Well, we’re about to find out that when that immovable object is **God**, there’s **no such thing** as immovable.

Herod is about to be moved out of the way.

In Caesarea, he invites rulers and authorities from the surrounding area and gives a speech that will cost him his life.

**“On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes,  
sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people.**

**They shouted, ‘This is the voice of a god, not of a man.’  
Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God,  
an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms  
and died.”**

(Acts 12:21–23)

I doubt the speech was impressive or truly inspired anyone. Herod was a wicked snake of a man—and everyone knew it.

But this was politics. The empty praise of the people—“*This is the voice of a god!*”—wasn’t sincere, but Herod **enjoyed** it.

So God struck him down.

And within a few days of this event, historians tell us Herod literally **pooped his guts out**. He suffered a **prolapsed rectum**, causing his intestines to fold outward—so that it looked like a bunch of worms came out of his rear end.

Translations are a tricky thing, but that’s what the phrase “eaten by worms” means.

But Herod’s intestines weren’t the only thing to spread out.

The key to the whole chapter is found in verse 24:

**“But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.”**

(Acts 12:24)

And to cap it off, the very next verse tells us how things are **really** about to get going:

**“When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission,  
they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called  
Mark.”**

(Acts 12:25)

Barnabas and Saul, back from Jerusalem—having delivered the money to the poor saints there—are ready to **go**.

And once Paul gets going, there won't be any stopping the gospel until his head is separated from his shoulders.

Because when the Holy Spirit is on the move—**nothing and no one can stop Him.**

## Acts 13 | Paul's First Missionary Journey Begins

Welcome back to Through the Word, Peyton Jones here, and I'm excited to be kicking off Paul's first missionary journey in Acts 13! Are you ready for an adventure?

In verse 2, Paul and Barnabas receive their assignment:

**“While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’**

**So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.”**

(Acts 13:2–3)

And just like that, the entire history of the world changes with those few simple words. For the rest of the book of Acts, Luke focuses on these three journeys that Paul takes.

Maybe you've set out on an adventurous road trip, the station wagon all packed up to head to Wally World. Or you're waiting to board the plane for an exciting vacation destination. Journeys get us giddy with the possibility of adventure ahead—and what an adventure it is in Acts 13, as Paul and Barnabas forge ahead into the wild blue yonder of mission.

You know those maps of Paul's journeys in the back of your Bible? The first missionary journey is covered in Acts 13 and 14. Now might be a good time to bookmark those maps and follow along as we trace Paul's steps.

But like the maps of old that bore the inscription, *“Beware all ye that enter here, for there be dragons,”* they encounter their first on the isle of Cyprus—where Barnabas was from:

**“The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus.**

**When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues.**

**John was with them as their helper.”**

(Acts 13:4–5)

This is John Mark—the author of the Gospel of Mark and, incidentally, Barnabas’s cousin.

Back to dragons:

**“They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos.**

**There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named**

**Bar-Jesus,**

**who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus.**

**The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God.**

**But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them**

**and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith.**

**Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said,**

**‘You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right!**

**You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery.**

**Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?**

**Now the hand of the Lord is against you.**

**You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun.””**

(Acts 13:6–11)

When you look up “passive-aggressive” in the dictionary, Paul’s picture won’t be there. He doesn’t mince words. And he doesn’t need to.

**“When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.”**

(Acts 13:12)

The dragon slain, and newfound treasure in a converted governor, they take leave and head out on another adventure:

**“From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia,  
where John left them to return to Jerusalem.”**  
(Acts 13:13)

That subtle comment about John Mark leaving is important. Luke wants you to note it, but he’s not ready to talk about it just yet—and so we won’t either. But tuck it away for later. From here on out, Saul becomes Paul, meaning “small” or “insignificant.” This may relate to what Paul tells us in Galatians—that he struggled with eye problems. The southern coast of Turkey was known for malaria that could cause severe eye issues. Some believe this may have been Paul’s infamous “thorn in the flesh.”

We don’t know for sure—but from here on out, he goes by Paul.

Let’s follow Barnabas and Paul as they continue their ministry into the Galatian region:

**“From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch.  
On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down.  
After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the leaders of the synagogue sent word to them, saying,  
‘Brothers, if you have a word of exhortation for the people, please speak.’”**  
(Acts 13:14–15)

**“Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said:  
‘Fellow Israelites and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me!’”**  
(Acts 13:16)

With that, Paul recounts Israel’s history, how they chose Saul instead of God’s chosen one, David. Masterfully, Paul introduces Jesus as God’s chosen one—rejected by Israel, put to death, but risen from the dead as a Savior for all who believe. He drives straight to the heart:

**“Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.**

**Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin,  
a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.  
Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you:  
'Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish,  
for I am going to do something in your days  
that you would never believe, even if someone told you.'"**  
(Acts 13:38–41)

**"As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue,  
the people invited them to speak further about these things on the  
next Sabbath."**  
(Acts 13:42)

**"On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word  
of the Lord.  
When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy.  
They began to contradict what Paul was saying and heaped abuse on  
him.  
Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly:  
'We had to speak the word of God to you first.  
Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal  
life, we now turn to the Gentiles.  
For this is what the Lord has commanded us:  
'I have made you a light for the Gentiles,  
that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'"**  
(Acts 13:44–47)

**"When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word  
of the Lord;  
and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.  
The word of the Lord spread through the whole region.  
But the Jewish leaders incited the God-fearing women of high  
standing  
and the leading men of the city.  
They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas,  
and expelled them from their region.**



**So they shook the dust off their feet as a warning to them and went to Iconium.**

**And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.”**  
(Acts 13:48–52)

Did you catch that?

Paul’s very sermon plays out in front of their eyes. The Jews reject Jesus—again. History repeats itself. But the Gentiles?

**“When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord;  
and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.”**  
(Acts 13:48)

The Jews weren’t the only chosen ones. Paul would later write to Gentile churches that they were chosen before the foundation of the world to receive the gospel. And you, my friend—whether Jew or Gentile—were also in God’s mind in eternity past.

That should fill us with the same **joy of the Holy Spirit** that Paul and Barnabas felt at the end of the chapter, as we are caught up into the same adventure they were—in a chapter filled with twists and turns, dragons and governors who believe, miracles, controversies, and everything else you’d expect from an epic tale.

Join us next time for the conclusion of this first missionary journey—on our next time together, **Through the Word**.

## Acts 14 | Paul Goes Home

### #TotallyWorthIt!

Have you ever used those words?

Those words usually mean there's been some kind of hardship or price tag you've paid. Maybe you got in trouble for a prank, or hiked a summit, and though your muscles ached, it was worth the view?

If you've ever read the letter to the Galatians, you may know that it wasn't written to one church—but many. Galatia wasn't a city; it was a region. And within that region were the towns Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. Acts 14 is the story of how God worked among the Galatians through Paul and Barnabas. But it was hard!

Let's join Paul and Barnabas on their journey:

**“At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue.**

**There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed.**

**But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the other Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.”**

(Acts 14:1–2)

As usual, Paul and Barnabas start with the Jews. But remember, this was modern-day Turkey—Paul's homeland. Paul was a product of this place, and the people here are just like he used to be—fiercely defensive of the Jewish faith. They had to be. They were trying to protect their faith in a foreign pagan land. Like Saul of Tarsus once was, they were zealous for the law of Moses. Any outside influence was seen as a threat.

Verse 2 says, *they poisoned the mind of the Gentiles against the brothers.*

So what would you do?

Paul and Barnabas just doubled down.

**“So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord,  
who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders.”**

(Acts 14:3)

Did you catch that? God confirmed the message of His grace—*enabling them to perform signs and miracles*. And the result?

**“The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles.**

**There was a plot afoot among both Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders,**

**to mistreat them and stone them, but they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country,**

**where they continued to preach the gospel.”**

(Acts 14:4–7)

Okay, Paul and Barnabas weren't ready to be dead yet. There was still work to do. So this time, they blow out of Dodge and head to the next town over—Lystra.

Let's see what happens there:

**“In Lystra there sat a man who was lame.**

**He had been that way from birth and had never walked.**

**He listened to Paul as he was speaking.**

**Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out,**

**‘Stand up on your feet!’ At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.”**

(Acts 14:8–10)

**“When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language,**

**‘The gods have come down to us in human form!’**

**Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker.**

**The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.”**

(Acts 14:11–13)

**\*\*“But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes**

**and rushed out into the crowd, shouting:**

**‘Friends, why are you doing this?**

**We too are only human, like you.**

**We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God,**

**who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them.**

**In the past, he let all nations go their own way.**

**Yet he has not left himself without testimony:**

**He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons;**

**he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.”**

**Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.”**

(Acts 14:14–18)

Okay—this is intense. The people nearly riot in favor of Paul one minute... then turn on him the next, when those same Jews from the previous town catch up and stir the crowd again. But this time—they actually stone him.

**“Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over.**

**They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead.”**

(Acts 14:19)

Stoning meant hurling a bunch of rocks at someone until you knock them out or kill them with head wounds—and then, to ensure they’re dead, you

drop a large rock on their head. They drag Paul's body outside the city and toss him aside like trash...

**“But after the disciples had gathered around him,  
he got up and went back into the city.  
The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.”**  
(Acts 14:20)

Did you catch that?

**“He got up.”**

*Zoop!* It seems to be a miracle. But that's not the real miracle. The bigger miracle is that next line:

**“He got up and went back into the city.”**

He actually went back to tell them about Jesus... more.

Can you imagine the kind of love you'd have to have for people to be willing to let them kill you—and then, after rising again, continue extending the message of love and grace to them?

Sounds like someone else we know... doesn't it?

And Paul going back into that city would have been one more miraculous sign to them—resembling the risen Christ, coming back and telling them about a Savior who conquered death by dying, and taking their punishment, to offer forgiveness of their sins.

The chapter wraps up with Paul and Barnabas backtracking through the cities of Galatia on their way to Antioch, encouraging the believers and giving their missionary update to the folks back home. But all along the way, they were...

**“...strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith.**

**‘We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,’**

**they said.”**

(Acts 14:22)

And if nothing else, Paul and Barnabas modeled that to the believers with their own lives.

It wasn't easy.

But it was **totally worth it.**

## Acts 15 | Learning to Drive

When you're learning to drive a stick shift, there's a careful balance between the accelerator and the clutch—not to mention the brake pedal. Learning to coordinate them in the right balance means you're ready to roll.

Well, the Gentiles were ready to roll, but the apostles back in Jerusalem needed them to shift gears slightly. They didn't want to hit the brakes and slow down the momentum—God was obviously moving—but there were a few issues that needed to be addressed.

So they held a council in Jerusalem to discuss just how Jewish the Gentiles needed to be if they became Christians.

Everything was coming to a head:

**“Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers:**

**‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.’”**

(Acts 15:1)

Before we talk about the subject matter, I want to clear away some confusion.

Why does it say, *“Certain people came down from Judea,”* when if you look at the map in the back of your Bible, they had to come *north*?

In those days, “up” and “down” referred to **elevation**, not direction. And to a Jew, Jerusalem was on a hill—and Judea was hill country. It may not have been the highest elevation in the world, but to them, it was the **center** of everything.

Any direction outward was considered “down,” and in the case of these Jewish believers, **Judaism** should've been the center of the universe to Gentile believers, too. These jokers were teaching that the Gentiles had to become **converted Jews** before they could become Christians. Or else—**“You cannot be saved.”**

And Paul and Barnabas weren't having any of it.

**“This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them.**

**So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers,**

**to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.**

**The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria,**

**they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad.**

**When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders,**

**to whom they reported everything God had done through them.**

**Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said,**

**‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.’”**

(Acts 15:2–5)

Now, if you've read the book of Galatians, you'll probably know that **this** is exactly what Paul was dealing with. The Galatians listened to these “certain people who came down from Jerusalem” and believed that in addition to trusting Jesus, they needed to be circumcised.

It's **Jesus AND**.

Just know—if you're trusting Jesus *and* anything else to save you, then you're not really trusting Jesus.

It doesn't matter what it is... circumcision or anything in the law at all.

(*Ahem*) If you don't know what that means... (deep breath)... forgive me, I'm getting flashbacks of teaching Galatians as a Junior High Pastor.

**Circumcision** was the removal of the foreskin on the male anatomy that marked a Jew as belonging to God. The Jews saw it as their **special**



**identity**—and if they were going to unite with the Gentiles in worship, then the Gentiles would have to make some alterations.

*(Ahem).*

**“The apostles and elders met to consider this question.**

**After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them:**

**‘Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you**

**that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.**

**God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them**

**by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us.**

**He did not discriminate between us and them,**

**for he purified their hearts by faith.**

**Now then, why do you try to test God**

**by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke**

**that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?**

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

*(Acts 15:6–11)*

**Mic. Drop.**

**“The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul**

**telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.**

**When they finished, James spoke up.”**

*(Acts 15:12–13)*

James, at this point, is leading the team in Jerusalem. His word carries some weight.

**“Brothers,” he said, “listen to me.**

**Simon has described to us how God first intervened**

to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles.

The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

‘After this I will return  
and rebuild David’s fallen tent.  
Its ruins I will rebuild,  
and I will restore it,  
that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,  
even all the Gentiles who bear my name,  
says the Lord, who does these things’—  
things known from long ago.”

(Acts 15:14–18)

“It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult  
for the Gentiles who are turning to God.  
Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain  
from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality,  
from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.”

(Acts 15:19–20)

Did you catch James pressing on the **clutch and the brake pedal** so the Gentiles could accelerate out of the turn?

- **The clutch** – *“We should not make it difficult.”*
- **The brake** – *“We should write a letter asking them to abstain...”*

Okay, the sexual immorality is a no-brainer. But the other two?  
Food sacrificed to idols? Things strangled?

These were just a **bridge too far** for the Jewish believers.

They weren’t saying Gentiles needed to observe those to be **saved**. It was more out of **consideration** for their Jewish brothers and sisters. In fact, in Romans 14, Paul unpacks that it’s *not* a problem with God to do either of those things—but for the Jews, it was just **gross**.

So Paul, as a good missionary, tells us all: “Hey, if it’s a big deal for your brother, maybe you opt for **love** over your **freedom**. After all, *love is the summation of the entire law*.”

It’s a **mature argument** meant for mature believers. But at this stage, the church in its infant stage is just trying to figure it out.

Applying the clutch and shifting gears a little means they don’t have to hit the brakes—and the gospel can **continue to rev up** throughout the Gentile world.

And be glad of that, my friends—because if this meeting didn’t go well, you and I would be acting a LOT different today.

You can thank Paul when you get to heaven... for that rare steak.

The apostles write the letter, appoint Silas and Judas Barsabbas to accompany Paul and Barnabas to take the letter back to Antioch—where it’s received with **great joy**.

*“Whew! We don’t have to do surgery on our bits!”*

From there, Silas and Judas, as amateur mailmen, take the letter all over the Gentile world—encouraging all the Gentiles with the official word from the Twelve, those closest to Jesus.

But Paul has a hunch... maybe the Galatians are in trouble.  
Maybe they’ve stopped trusting Christ.

**“Some time later Paul said to Barnabas,  
‘Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns  
where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are  
doing.’”**

(Acts 15:36)

Great plan. One problem:

**“Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them,  
but Paul did not think it wise to take him,**

**because he had deserted them in Pamphylia  
and had not continued with them in the work.  
They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company.  
Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus...”**

**(Acts 15:37–39)**

And with that—he sails straight out of the book of Acts, where we don’t hear about him again.

**“But Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the  
grace of the Lord.**

**He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”**

**(Acts 15:40–41)**

Well, I’ve got to put the brakes on today because of time—but I’ll be with you next time, **hitting the accelerator** on our journey... **Through the Word.**

## Acts 16 | Making New Friends... And Enemies

Welcome back to Through the Word. I'm your guide, Peyton Jones, and today we'll be in Acts 16, where Paul makes some new friends.

Have you ever lost a friendship you truly valued? It can be hard to lose the companionship of a friend. It hurts. And sometimes, it haunts us for years. I believe that Luke includes the rift between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15 because it deeply affected Paul. But when you lose a deep friendship, it creates a void that is often filled by new friends, and Luke picks up in chapter 16 by telling us about the new friends that Paul meets in this chapter—namely, Timothy and Luke, HIMSELF!

In verse 1, Paul goes back to the Galatian region after Silas returns from giving the decision about the Gentiles from the Jerusalem council. Let's read it:

**“Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek. The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers”** (Acts 16:1–5).

Paul picks up a new friend, the grandson of Lois and the son of Eunice, two of the women who came to faith on his first missionary journey, when Barnabas and he came through... sniff... Barnabas... Paul shakes it off. He sees something in this half-breed, son of a Jewish mother and Greek father. He had a good reputation. Verse 3: *The believers... spoke well of him*. So Paul circumcises him, something he would have never done for a Gentile, but because he's half Jewish, it's logistically useful.

So they hit the road, and the Holy Spirit seems to close doors but open windows. Verse 6:

**“Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas” (Acts 16:6–8).**

How did the Spirit forbid them? Well, nobody knows... because it doesn't tell us. It could be prophetic words—Silas was a prophet. But it could be circumstances. No ships at the harbor, or something else. They probably didn't know why. All they know is that they have to go to Troas. And it's in Troas that they have a vision, telling them where they need to go. Verse 9:

**“During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them” (Acts 16:9–10).**

Now it all starts to make sense. Someone once said, “God's providences are like Hebrew letters; they can only be read backwards.”

And in hindsight, Troas is where they picked up Luke. Did you catch that in verse 10? For the first time, Luke interjects himself: *“After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready...”*

Now, Paul has a doctor... and by how busted up he's been getting, he's gonna need one.

But Paul's not done making friends.

He arrives at the Roman colony in Greek Macedonia called Philippi, where they are immensely proud of being a Roman colony.

Let's join Paul, Timothy, Silas, and Luke there.

**“On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to**

**the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. 'If you consider me a believer in the Lord,' she said, 'come and stay at my house.' And she persuaded us" (Acts 16:13–15).**

But not everyone is a friend. Even when they seem to be saying nice things about you.

As Paul walks through the city, he's followed by a demon-possessed girl, who can seemingly read minds and tell people's fortunes.

**"She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, 'These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.' She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, 'In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!' At that moment the spirit left her" (Acts 16:17–18).**

For days, Paul ignores the evil spirit taunting them as she mockingly says, "These men are servants of God, who are here to tell you how to be saaaaaaayyyyvvved." I love how human Paul is. God uses his annoyance, as he turns around irritated and exorcises the spirit. Welp, that ended her ability to do party tricks, which ended Paul's welcome in the city. A crowd gathered against Paul and took him and his companions to the authorities to make the following claims:

**"They brought them before the magistrates and said, 'These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice'" (Acts 16:20–21).**

Paul and company are locked up, but as their bodies are beaten up and chained up, their spirits soar as they worship God.

**“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, ‘Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!’ The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ They replied, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.’ Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household” (Acts 16:25–34).**

The next day, they try to release Paul without incident.

Oooooohhhhhooooohhhh no! Paul says... Paul may have had a get-out-of-jail-free card, but he’s not done collecting his 200 dollars. They have something he needs, and because they beat and locked up a Roman citizen, their whole colony is in danger of losing its status.

So Paul cashes in on it. Verse 37:

**“But Paul said to the officers: ‘They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out.’ The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia’s house, where they**



**met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. Then they left” (Acts 16:37–40).**

With that, Paul is free. Free to walk around the city, free to visit Lydia, free to strengthen the disciples, and free to hang out with his friends just a little longer.

But Paul’s not done making friends, and building gospel partnerships—as we’ll soon see next time on our journey Through the Word.

## Acts 17 | So Much for Plan A

Welcome back to Through the Word. I'm your host, Peyton Jones, and today we will be in Acts chapter 17—going from Plan A to Plan B.

Have you ever had a trip you meticulously planned, but it went sideways and you had to shift from Plan A to Plan B? Maybe you planned your summer camping holiday, but it got derailed by a record storm front that rolled in and threatened to wash you away.

Or maybe Wally World was closed when your station wagon got there.

The events in Acts 17 were certainly not Paul's Plan A. But often, our Plan B is God's Plan A—as we'll soon see as we get started in this chapter. Let's join the boys on mission in verse 1:

**“When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. ‘This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,’ he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women. But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city” (Acts 17:1–5).**

Wait. Paul's presence caused a riot? The Archbishop of Canterbury once famously said, “Wherever I go, they throw tea parties.” Wherever Paul went, they threw a riot.

You can read more about what happens. It involves beating people in the streets and having to smuggle Paul and his companions out in the middle of the night under the cover of darkness, so that Paul can move on safely to the next town.

Well, there goes Plan A. Time for Plan B.

We'll catch up with Paul in the next town over, in verse 11. Paul goes through the town of Berea, and we're told:

**“Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men”** (Acts 17:11–12).

Did you catch that? The Bereans were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica. It means that they actually checked the Scriptures. They were open-minded. They found out that Paul was talking sense.

As a result, many came to faith.

Plan A was going so well in Berea. But then the same troublemakers who started the riot back in Thessalonica arrive in Berea, triggering an end to Plan A there too. Cue up Plan B again, boys.

So Paul sets out for the next town. But this time, Paul leaves Silas and Timothy behind to continue the work started in Berea and Thessalonica.

You see, from Berea, they can sneak back into Thessalonica and keep ministering there—and to the Bereans at the same time. This accidental strategy of Paul leaving people behind, arguably his Plan B, actually will start to become his Plan A throughout the rest of his entire ministry.

But let's pick up the story again in verse 15:

**“Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible. While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.**

**A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, ‘What is this babbler trying to say?’ Others remarked, ‘He seems to be advocating foreign gods.’ They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.**

**Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.’ (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas)” (Acts 17:15–21).**

Well, in case you ever wondered what it would be like to be a fly on the wall when Paul preached—witnessing his magnificent oratory or listening to his brilliant knowledge, an unequaled mind in action—verse 18 tells us the crowd wasn’t that impressed.

*“What is this babbler trying to say?”*

But verse 21 tells us that they so loved hearing the latest ideas, that though they were confused, they were also intrigued.

So Paul goes to the Areopagus with them. And he goes for it.

But not only does he go for it, he switches his tactics so they’ll finally understand him.

**“Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: ‘People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.**

**‘The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.**

**And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.**

**‘From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.**

**‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’**

**‘Therefore, since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.**

**‘For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead’” (Acts 17:22–31).**

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.”

**“At that, Paul left the Council. Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others” (Acts 17:32–34).**

There’s a lot to unpack here.

In fact, Paul switches his tactics up and he sets the stage. He brings them context. This unknown God—this God that you are worried you missed out on—well, you did. And I’m gonna preach Him to you now. His name is Jesus.

Giving people context so they don’t think you’re babbling is a missionary term called *contextualization*. And Paul, after all, was a missionary. So

much so that he even quotes their own poet, Aratus—a Greek philosopher who wrote a poem about Zeus.

You probably didn't realize that the very words "*For in him we live and move and have our being*" is a direct quote from that poem about Zeus himself.

He applies it to God.

And it may shock you to hear Paul quoting pagan sources—especially ones about pagan deities like Zeus—and applying them to the God of the Bible. But this is what a good missionary always does.

You know, when I was a missionary speaking to biblically illiterate people, I used everything I could from pop culture to help people understand the gospel. Whether it was *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, *The Lord of the Rings*—you name it.

You see, sometimes when people only think we're babbling—like Paul—we need to change tact a bit and speak using terms and ideas they already know.

Rockstar Bono from the band U2 did this once with an interviewer who was fascinated by his profession of faith. Bono told him:

"It's a mind-blowing concept that the God who created the universe might be looking for company, a real relationship with people. But the thing that keeps me on my knees is the difference between grace and karma."

The interviewer replied, "I haven't heard you talk about that."

Bono said:

"I really believe we've moved out of the realm of karma into the one of grace. You see, at the center of all religions is the idea of karma—you know, that what you put out comes back to you: an

eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Karma seems to be at the very heart of the universe.

“And yet, along comes this idea called grace to upend all that. Grace defies logic and reason. Love interrupts—if you like—the consequences of your actions. Which, in my case, is very good news indeed, because I’ve done a lot of stupid stuff.”

The interviewer said, “I’d be interested to hear that.”

Bono said, “Well, that’s between me and God. But I’d be in big trouble if karma’s finally gonna be my judge. You see, grace doesn’t excuse my mistakes—but I’m holding out for grace. I’m holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the cross—all my bad karma—because I know who I am. And I hope I don’t have to depend on any good karma or religiosity.”

The Son of God who takes away the sins of the world.

The interviewer says, “I wish I could believe that.”

That response by that journalist is actually shared by the crowd who fall into three categories in verse 32:

**“When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, ‘We want to hear you again on this subject’”** (Acts 17:32).

But verse 34 says:

**“Some of them believed.”**

Be encouraged when people say, *“I want to hear more about this”*—and know that God’s Plan A for everyone is that they would believe and trust Him.

Join us next time as we continue the journey one chapter at a time. And remember, faith comes by hearing—and hearing through the Word.

## Acts 18 | Beaten and Broken

Welcome back to Through the Word. I'm Peyton Jones, and on today's journey, I'll be your guide through Acts 18—where Paul puts down some roots for a time. Eighteen months, to be exact.

So far, this is the longest he'll stay anywhere, only spending on average three to four months at a time in each town... until he hits Corinth. It will be a strategic place for Paul, because he'll make some important and lasting friendships that will catalyze mission forever.

Maybe you've had friendships that spurred you on in good things—like a study partner, or someone who helped you get physically fit, or stimulated your appetite for reading books, or just helped you be a nicer person. Looking back, you know that without them in your life, you'd not be the same person you are today.

Well, that could be said of Aquila and Priscilla, as we'll see later in the book of Acts.

**“After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks”** (Acts 18:1–4).

Let's be honest—after all the harrying from town to town, Thessalonica to Berea to Athens—Paul shows up in Corinth a little worse for wear. The apostle is harried and hunted, not quite feeling himself after having been beaten, persecuted, separated from his team, and fatigued from travel.

Paul's second missionary journey totaled nearly six months of travel: 155 days on foot and roughly twenty days at sea—roughly 2,800 miles total. Years later, Paul looks back on his arrival in Corinth, writing in 1 Corinthians 2:3:



**“I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling”** (1 Corinthians 2:3).

And Acts 17:15 told us that Paul sent a message back with his escort *“for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible”* in Corinth. Exhausted, Paul makes his way to the bustling trade city, which is known as “the seat of Achaia.”

Paul spends eighteen months here, mainly because of the life-long ministry partnership he forges during this time with Aquila and Priscilla. Jews from Rome, they were a breath of fresh air to him, and give him work for his hands, a bed to sleep in, and a place to hide out for a time. Paul couldn’t have known then how strategic this partnership would become for the spread of the gospel throughout the entire Mediterranean.

Silas and Timothy join Paul in Athens and learn the tentmaking trade so that Paul can—verse 5—devote:

**“himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah”** (Acts 18:5).

Prior to their arrival, Paul, despite his fatigue, has been going to the synagogue on the weekend, giving his day off to telling others about Jesus. In himself, Paul had nothing left to give—but the power of Christ rested upon him. As he reminded the Corinthians years later, when he was weak, he was strong. And Paul confounded the Jews in the synagogue with supernatural authority, resulting in many of them coming to faith.

**\*\***“But when they opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, ‘Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.’

Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized.

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

So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God\*\*\* (Acts 18:6–11).

This is immediately fulfilled when the Jews bring him before the local ruler and accuse him of perverting Judaism. Before Paul can even open his mouth in response, the ruler defends Paul and waves them off.

So, verse 18 tells us:

**“Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sisters and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchreae because of a vow he had taken”** (Acts 18:18).

Nazarite vow.

**“They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined. But as he left, he promised, ‘I will come back if it is God’s will.’ Then he set sail from Ephesus. When he landed at Caesarea, he went up to Jerusalem and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch.**

**After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples”** (Acts 18:19–23).

I always loved the Indiana Jones movies where Paul’s travels were traced across the map with the *Indy* theme playing in the background. Like Indy, Paul covers a lot of ground in these verses: Corinth, Ephesus, Caesarea, Jerusalem, and Antioch. Whew!

But here the story shifts to the travels of someone else—Apollous.

**“Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John.**

**He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.**

**When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers and sisters encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. When he arrived, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. For he vigorously refuted his Jewish opponents in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah” (Acts 18:24–28).**

Apollos—he was a gifted speaker. Eloquent. Young. Charismatic. And he’ll draw a loyal following in Corinth, as Paul will later chastise the Corinthians for stating, “I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, I follow Cephas...” as if they got to pick their favorite speaker.

But for now, Apollos—despite his eloquence—doesn’t even fully understand the gospel. But we’ll have to wait until the next chapter to hear more about that, on our journey Through the Word.

## Acts 19 | Paul's Wild Day

Have you ever sat back as evening fell and thought, “Man, that was a wild day!” Well, if Acts 19 was a children’s book, it would be titled *“Paul’s Wild and Wacky Day!”* because this chapter is packed with the wild, weird, and wiggy!

Don’t believe me? Let’s take a peep in verse 1:

**“While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’**

**They answered, ‘No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’**

**So Paul asked, ‘Then what baptism did you receive?’**

**‘John’s baptism,’ they replied.**

**Paul said, ‘John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.’**

**On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.**

**When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.**

**There were about twelve men in all” (Acts 19:1–7).**

Okay, Apollos has been busy making converts. The problem was, he was one of those that had heard about John the Baptist years earlier—that the Messiah *was* coming. He didn’t know that the Messiah *had* come. So when Priscilla had to explain “the way of God more accurately” to him, it was to tell him about Jesus.

Now, like two ships passing in the night, when Apollos comes down to Corinth, Paul goes up to Ephesus, and runs into Apollos’s converts, and has to tell *them* about Jesus too! No sooner are they baptized in the name of Jesus, than they’re baptized with the Holy Spirit!

But Paul goes into the synagogue and it doesn’t go well:

**“Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:8–10).**

You may have missed it, but this is it. Paul’s end game. Ephesus will be the zenith of Paul’s ministry. Paul sets up a multiplication hub that spreads the gospel all throughout Asia:

**“He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.”**

Everything that happens here is like a Taylor Swift album, with every song being a #1. As a missiologist, who has written books on planting and missions, what happens in this chapter is missional magic.

But what happens next, nobody could have expected:

**“God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them” (Acts 19:11–12).**

Okay, this wasn’t God Channel weirdness on TV, and it certainly was *unusual* for Paul, but God was working so powerfully, that some extraordinary things were happening.

Luke hones in on one demonic encounter that goes back into our account of wild, weird, and wiggy. Verse 13:

**“Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed.**

**They would say, ‘In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.’**

**Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this.**

**One day the evil spirit answered them, ‘Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?’**

**Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding” (Acts 19:13–16).**

I love this verse. As a minister who has done quite a number of exorcisms, I can tell you right now... they’re not impressed with Peyton Jones, but they’re terrified of Jesus.

**“When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor.**

**Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done.**

**A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly.**

**When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas.**

**In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power” (Acts 19:17–20).**

There it is...

The word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

That’s what the book is about, so pay attention to those verses.

You can read more about what happens next, but needless to say, all this weird, wild, and wiggy ends up hitting a crescendo in a full-scale riot in Antioch! Paul’s insistence that Jesus is the *only* way not only angers the powers that be, but it hurts the economy when those who make idols can’t make a living anymore.

So when there's some guy doing extraordinary miracles, healing, causing Jesus mayhem, and kicking up kingdom ruckus, you look over at your stone idol, or statue of the goddess Artemis, who doesn't *do anything*, and you know that you're not going to make any money.

So what do you do?

You riot!

Rioting is what people do when they feel that they've lost their power.  
So the people riot.

Listen to what the idol makers say about their "mighty goddess" Artemis:

**"There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited; and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty"** (Acts 19:27).

Robbed of her divine majesty? How pathetic. How can a deity be robbed of majesty?

Contrast that with Jesus. The Lord of Lords, the King of Kings who dwells in unapproachable light. There is none like Him... and against their raging superstition is a real power that is at work through ordinary everyday nobodies.

Perhaps that was the weirdest, wildest, wiggliest thing of all.

And believers, God wants to work through you... in your normal, ordinary life. But make no mistake—He's wild, He's untameable, and He will show His very real power to those who are ready to see it.

## Acts 20 | Mission Requires Sacrifice

Cliffhangers. Some people love 'em, some people hate 'em.

Cliffhangers can either frustrate the storytelling or build anticipation. I'll never forget waiting for what seemed like an eternity for *Return of the Jedi* to come out, where I'd finally have closure on whether or not Darth Vader was Luke's father. Sorry, spoiler alert.

Well, our last episode ended on a cliffhanger.

We saw Ephesus at a full-scale riot.

Okay, admittedly, the sequel is a little anticlimactic:

**“When the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said goodbye and set out for Macedonia. He traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece, where he stayed three months. Because some Jews had plotted against him just as he was about to sail for Syria, he decided to go back through Macedonia. He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia. These men went on ahead and waited for us at Troas. But we sailed from Philippi after the Festival of Unleavened Bread, and five days later joined the others at Troas, where we stayed seven days” (Acts 20:1–6).**

Okay, you may not realize how cool this is, but that list of names we just read in verse 4? These are all people from Paul's second missionary journey. They've trained up at Ephesus, and are ready to spread out. And Luke lists them in groups of two, just like Jesus sent the disciples out—two by two. But Luke does something else cool; he lists them by their ethnicity.

There's a lot of talk about this today, and the Bible is always ahead of its time, and here Paul is using crazy strategy to reach the lost. But despite Paul's brilliance, that didn't keep people from falling asleep listening to him.



**“On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting. Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. ‘Don’t be alarmed,’ he said. ‘He’s alive!’ Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted” (Acts 20:7–12).**

Okay, this is one for the books. There is one night where the Spirit of God anointed my preaching and I spoke for three hours, as people were riveted. It was kind of an accident, but we all knew God had turned up. But here, Paul speaks through the night, trying to cram in everything he can pass on before he’s got to leave and continue on his journey.

But Eutychus did what his mom always told him not to: “Never fall asleep in a window or you’ll fall and die!” Welp, Mom was right—but God was there. So they prayed for him, and God raised him from the dead. Be careful the next time you tell a preacher to go knock them dead; they just might.

But Paul’s *got* to get to Miletus, a little island in the middle of the Mediterranean where the Ephesians can meet him, and his presence won’t start a riot... but he doesn’t sail there. He walks.

This next verse seems like it’s going to be a throwaway verse—one of those verses that you read but don’t think much about—but it’s one of my favorite verses because it gives us a glimpse into the intimate nature of Paul and his God:

**“We went on ahead to the ship and sailed for Assos, where we were going to take Paul aboard. He had made this arrangement because he was going there on foot” (Acts 20:13).**

Luke mentions that Paul walked by himself because it's important... Paul just wants to be alone. Just him and God. Like Jesus, who he's praying to, he pulls away from the other disciples and just meets with God on his journey, pouring his heart out as he walks the coastal road along the cliffs, and listens...

He's got a big speech to give the Ephesian elders when they meet him in Miletus. And it's apparent he's hearing from God, because when he delivers his burden, it's laced with passion, potency, and prophecy. It's honestly one of my favorite passages. While you listen to Paul's speech, I challenge you to see how many sayings you could make into life verses from it.

In verse 17, he starts off by refreshing them of the life he lived among them:

**“From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church.**

**When they arrived, he said to them:**

**‘You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia.**

**I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents.**

**You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.**

**I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus”** (Acts 20:17–21).

Then he shifts to telling them that he's feeling the Spirit blowing him like a wind to Jerusalem:

**“And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.**

**I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.**

**However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given**

**me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace” (Acts 20:22–24).**

Wow... The first time I read this verse, I tried to memorize it, and make it my own. Let me repeat it:

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

It’s not a life verse to Paul; it’s his life.

He continues:

**“Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again.**

**Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of any of you.**

**For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God” (Acts 20:25–27).**

Stand with me alongside the Ephesian elders as one of them; you hear Paul say that and you’re probably wondering, what did I do? Paul seems suddenly angry and frustrated, like the wind suddenly turned, and like a dumbfounded husband, you can’t figure out what you’ve done.

But Paul’s prophesying here... That walk along the coast might have tipped Paul off to the future of Ephesus—the church that Jesus says later in *Revelation* will forsake its first love. That word will come later, from Jesus; but Paul is warning them now.

**“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.**

**Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.**

**I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.**

**Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.**

**So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears” (Acts 20:28–31).**

**“Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.**

**I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing.**

**You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions.**

**In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said:**

**‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (Acts 20:32–35).**

**“When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed.**

**They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him.**

**What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again.**

**Then they accompanied him to the ship” (Acts 20:36–38).**

And with that, Paul dries his eyes, and turns on the ship, looking at them one last time. Knowing he’ll not see them again until time is called eternity; and he sails not just out of the port, but out of the life of the Ephesian church.

I can tell you as a serial church planter, it’s one of the greatest acts of faith you can ever take... commending people into the hands of God. Handing a church you planted over to someone else.

Once, I planted a church and handed it off to this guy named Kris Langham, and he *broke* it! Just kidding—he was rad. But I’ve handed off some churches that didn’t fare well afterwards... This story touches me. It’s

never easy, but Paul's life never was. Mission requires sacrifice, obedience, and trust.

And so Paul sails forward, trusting God, with Paul's words echoing in the minds of the Ephesians, like it did off the waves of the water:

**"I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.**

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

## Acts 21 | Paul's Journey Begins

Have you ever had the feeling of sliding on ice? Even when your legs aren't working, there's a force pulling you in a direction you don't necessarily want to go?

Acts 21 begins Paul's slippery slope to Rome, and the rest of the book of Acts will continue that slide as Paul finds himself bound with chains, and bound for Rome to appeal to Caesar for crimes he didn't commit.

Speaking of going places, the chapter opens with a bunch of travel—the first-century equivalent of planes, trains, and automobiles—where Paul hustles and bustles from port to port on his way to Jerusalem, stopping in verse 7 at the docks in Caesarea:

**“We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and sisters and stayed with them for a day. Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied”** (Acts 21:7–9).

If Philip the evangelist sounds familiar, it's because you've met him before. Earlier in Acts, he was one of the deacons appointed with Stephen in Jerusalem—the same Stephen who rode in the chariot with the Ethiopian in Acts 8. But now he's taking up digs in Caesarea, married, and raising four young daughters who prophesied.

That's a lot of prophecy, but enter Agabus the prophet. Verse 10:

**“After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, ‘The Holy Spirit says, “In this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.”’**

**When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem.**

**Then Paul answered, ‘Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I**

**am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.'**

**'When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, 'The Lord's will be done'' (Acts 21:10–14).**

Call Paul stubborn if you want—"I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus"—but he's definitely committed to the cause.

I often wonder if Paul knows what he's doing here in going to Jerusalem. Does he intend to go to Rome via Jerusalem? Is it his intention to preach the gospel in the epicenter of the known world? Knowing Paul like we do, I'm sure he desires to take the sword of gospel into the belly of the beast and plunge it into the heart of Rome itself. But was it on purpose that he's intent on ignoring these prophets as they warn him of trouble if he continues on to Jerusalem?

We're not told.

But we do know this: the fastest way to get a hearing in Rome—to speak to some of the most powerful people in the world—he'd need to create a stir in Jerusalem. It was a political hotspot, like the Middle East still is today. A powder keg, waiting to blow.

And whereas most Jews would simply be executed for their shenanigans, Paul was a Roman citizen. He'd get an opportunity to explain himself.

So while you're reading this, for the next few chapters, wondering, why is Paul doing all of this? Why is he going from ruler to ruler, trial to tribunal, hearing to court case? Keep all of this in mind.

Knowing that we're on a long journey with Paul for the rest of the book of Acts, let's settle down in the aisle seat next to him and follow the beginning of Paul's journey into Rome, via Jerusalem. Verse 17:

**"When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers and sisters received us warmly.**

**The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present.**

**Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.**

**When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul:**

**‘You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law.**

**They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs.**

**What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, so do what we tell you.**

**There are four men with us who have made a vow.**

**Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved.**

**Then everyone will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law.**

**As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality’” (Acts 21:17–25).**

**“The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them.**

**Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them” (v. 26).**

So far, the plan is excellent. Show Paul to be zealous for the law, and allow him to make nice with the locals.

Except, the locals don’t want to *be* nice. And things kinda turn ugly, fast:

**“When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple.**

**They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, shouting, ‘Fellow**



**Israelites, help us!**

**This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place.**

**And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place.'**

**(They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple.)**

**The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions.**

**Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut.**

**While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar.**

**He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd.**

**When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.**

**The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains.**

**Then he asked who he was and what he had done.**

**Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another, and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks.**

**When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers.**

**The crowd that followed kept shouting, 'Get rid of him!'" (Acts 21:27–36).**

**"As the soldiers were about to take Paul into the barracks, he asked the commander, 'May I say something to you?'**

**'Do you speak Greek?' he replied. 'Aren't you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the wilderness some time ago?'**

**Paul answered, 'I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people.'**

**After receiving the commander's permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd.**

**When they were all silent, he said to them in Aramaic:" (Acts 21:37–40).**

You have to admire Paul here. He's kept his mouth shut, but he opens it strategically—in front of the governor, when there's a little bit of crowd control at play.

It may be that Paul's on a slide that he's not controlling, but there's still a strategic mind at play here in the apostle Paul—and probably a twinkle in his eye as he prepares to address the crowd.

**BUT... the chapter ends there.**

Bit of a cliffhanger, really.

But the Bible is like that sometimes.

I'll be back to slip-slide with you and the apostle Paul next time on our journey TTW.

## Acts 22 | The Power of Your Testimony

Welcome back to Through the Word. I'm your host, Peyton Jones, and today I'll be joining you on your journey with Paul before a hostile crowd, testifying of Jesus, on our journey through the Word!

One of the most amazing conversation pieces I've ever learned is to ask people, "So, what's your story?" Ask someone that question, and they'll blink before looking at you in disbelief. But when they're convinced that you mean it, they will pour out their hearts to tell you who they are—by telling you what their journey has made them.

We've all got a story to tell. We call it our testimony. And in Acts chapter 22, Paul tells his.

Interestingly, Luke wrote out Paul's testimony three full times in the book of Acts. This is the second time we encounter it in full after Acts chapter 9, but it won't be our last. Does that seem strange to you—that it's told three times straight? Either Luke's wrists didn't get tired when he wrote, or the Holy Spirit is trying to tell us something very important...

Your testimony is a powerful tool. They can reject your arguments, but they can't deny your story. It's yours... and it's personal. It's the gospel according to you.

Let's listen to the good news according to Paul, in verse 1:

**"Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense."**

**When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet.**

**Then Paul said:**

**'I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors.**

**I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as the high priest and all the**

**Council can themselves testify.**

**I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished” (Acts 22:1–5).**

Paul, like Cornpop, was a bad dude.

Imagine—you’re in the audience, one of those who is heated and passionate, angry at anything that’s a threat to Judaism. You’re hearing Paul’s story, and so far, he’s the good guy. Persecuting Christians? Yeah! Arresting them? Yeah! Killing them? Yeah!

But a testimony doesn’t testify until Jesus walks into the story—entrance stage left in verse 6:

**“About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me.**

**I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’**

**‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked.**

**‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied.**

**My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.**

**‘What shall I do, Lord?’ I asked.**

**‘Get up,’ the Lord said, ‘and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.’**

**My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me” (Acts 22:6–11).**

Imagine—you’re in that crowd, and up until this point, you actually like Paul. I mean, he’s got street cred. He hates people that pervert the true faith. But now he’s just told you that Jesus *is* the true faith...

Although that’s weird, you’re used to people pinning the tail on the wrong Messiah. Paul’s just mistaken. So you listen on, and hear him out as he continues his story:

**“A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there.**

**He stood beside me and said, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very moment I was able to see him.**

**Then he said: ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth.**

**You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard.**

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

**When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking to me.**

**‘Quick!’ he said. ‘Leave Jerusalem immediately, because the people here will not accept your testimony about me.’**

**‘Lord,’ I replied, ‘these people know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you.**

**And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.’**

**Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles’” (Acts 22:12–21).**

So far, everything Paul has said keeps the crowd listening. But that last sentence—that word that grates on them, the word they can’t stand, the word that causes so much animosity...

**“Gentiles.”**

It was all okay until he said that last line in verse 21:

**“Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”**

There is no mistaking it... it’s racism. The word “Gentiles” is a trigger, and as soon as Paul brings them back in, pandemonium erupts:

**“The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, ‘Rid the earth of him! He’s not fit to live!’**

**As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, the commander ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks.**

**He directed that he be flogged and interrogated in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this” (Acts 22:22–24).**

The commander couldn’t make sense of why the Jews hated Paul so much, so he thought, *There’s something he’s not telling me. I can beat it out of him.* So he turned to the ultimate tool torturers used to make prisoners confess... flogging.

**“As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, ‘Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn’t even been found guilty?’**

**When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and reported it. ‘What are you going to do?’ he asked. ‘This man is a Roman citizen.’**

**The commander went to Paul and asked, ‘Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?’**

**‘Yes, I am,’ he answered.**

**Then the commander said, ‘I had to pay a lot of money for my citizenship.’**

**‘But I was born a citizen,’ Paul replied.**

**Those who were about to interrogate him withdrew immediately.**

**The commander himself was alarmed when he realized that he had put Paul, a Roman citizen, in chains” (Acts 22:25–29).**

Being a Roman citizen was almost like having a “Get out of Jail Free” card in Monopoly. But Paul keeps that close to his chest, pulling it out only when he needs to.

Being flogged was no joke. And Paul had received this at least three times, according to his letter to the Corinthians. In fact, in Josephus’s physical description of Paul, he says he was bowlegged. That condition would have

resulted from having the flogging three times—39 lashes (40 minus one). Thirteen up the left side. Thirteen from the right side. And thirteen between the legs, ripping the tendons and causing Paul to be marked and deformed for the rest of his life.

It wasn't that Paul was afraid of another whipping.

The man who wrote to the Galatians, *"Let no one trouble me any further, for I bear on my body the marks of Christ Jesus,"* would be able to tough it out.

So why did Paul play his Roman citizen card?

Because now Paul had leverage. In verse 30, they let him go, but:

**"The commander wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews"** (Acts 22:30).

So Paul gets yet another chance to testify of Jesus—one more time—under a controlled environment. And this time, he's guaranteed to be protected by the governor. This time, he can say anything he wants.

And in the next chapter, that's exactly what he does.

But just like Luke ran out of space to tell this epic story, we've run out of time, and will have to continue our time on trial with Paul... next time on our journey Through the Word.

## Acts 23 | All Part of the Plan

Welcome back to TTW! I'm your host, Peyton Jones, and today we'll be in Acts 23, where Paul learns, *"It was all part of the plan."*

Maybe you've been kept in the dark as to what the plan actually was. Sometimes, parents will surprise kids with Disneyland trips the morning of. Or if you've ever been pranked, you know what it's like to be kept in the dark for long enough to make you really worry... but then there's that moment where you're let in on what was really going on.

Paul is about to learn what God's plan was all along as he stands in front of the Sanhedrin—the Jewish governing power that put Jesus to death.

**"Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, 'My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.'**

**At this the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth.**

**Then Paul said to him, 'God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!'**

**Those who were standing near Paul said, 'How dare you insult God's high priest!'**

**Paul replied, 'Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: "Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people"'**  
(Acts 23:1–5).

There's nothing to rattle your cages like being punched in the mouth. The second Paul opens his, it's shut for him by an angry fist. Paul's temper gets the best of him, and he pops back:

**"God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!"**



Paul was right. But that doesn't mean it wasn't wrong to say. And Paul apologizes quickly when rebuked for disrespecting the high priest—a sign of both his humility and respect for God's law.

But this momentary pause gives Paul a chance to reassess his strategy:

**“Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin,**

**‘My brothers, I am a Pharisee, descended from Pharisees. I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead.’**

**When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided**

**(The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees believe all these things).**

**There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously.**

**‘We find nothing wrong with this man,’ they said. ‘What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?’**

**The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them.**

**He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks” (Acts 23:6–10).**

Okay, we know that Paul was a master strategist. But in the face of a very hostile situation, Paul pranks the Pharisees and Sadducees, knowing there was no good outcome to the hearing he'd walked into. So, he takes a theological grenade—the resurrection of the dead—pulls the pin, and throws it into the middle of the room, knowing it would create a flashbang and smokescreen.

But now it's time for the smoke to clear for Paul, and God lets him in on the joke:

**“The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, ‘Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome’” (Acts 23:11).**

Despite the hostility, God tells him that this was all part of the plan.

God tells him, “*You must also testify in Rome.*” How encouraging!

Remember friends, when you can’t see the reason things are happening to you, there’s a chance that it’s still *all part of the plan*... at least it was in Paul’s case.

Sometimes there’s a divine conspiracy.

God is up to something.

Something secret.

And we just haven’t been let in on the plan yet.

Well, if you like conspiracies... here’s one for you:

**“The next morning some Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul.**

**More than forty men were involved in this plot.**

**They went to the chief priests and the elders and said,**

**‘We have taken a solemn oath not to eat anything until we have killed Paul.**

**Now then, you and the Sanhedrin petition the commander to bring him before you on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his case.**

**We are ready to kill him before he gets here.’**

**But when the son of Paul’s sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul.**

**Then Paul called one of the centurions and said, ‘Take this young man to the commander; he has something to tell him.’**

**So he took him to the commander” (Acts 23:12–18).**

The young man tells the commander about the danger Paul is in, and the commander acts to keep Paul safe:

**\*\*“Then he called two of his centurions and ordered them,**

**‘Get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at nine tonight.**

Provide horses for Paul so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix.’  
He wrote a letter as follows:

Claudius Lysias,  
To His Excellency, Governor Felix:  
Greetings.

This man was seized by the Jews and they were about to kill him, but I came with my troops and rescued him, for I had learned that he is a Roman citizen.

I wanted to know why they were accusing him, so I brought him to their Sanhedrin.

I found that the accusation had to do with questions about their law, but there was no charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment.

When I was informed of a plot to be carried out against the man, I sent him to you at once.

I also ordered his accusers to present to you their case against him.

So the soldiers, carrying out their orders, took Paul with them during the night and brought him as far as Antipatris.

The next day they let the cavalry go on with him, while they returned to the barracks.

When the cavalry arrived in Caesarea, they delivered the letter to the governor and handed Paul over to him.

The governor read the letter and asked what province he was from.

Learning that he was from Cilicia, he said, ‘I will hear your case when your accusers get here.’

Then he ordered that Paul be kept under guard in Herod’s palace”\*\* (Acts 23:23–35).

Wow. Talk about maneuvering chess pieces into place on the board.

We’ve seen Paul’s strategy, but now God’s strategy is in play.

Paul knows that he’s headed to Rome—because God has let him in on the secret—but now Paul knows how it’s going to turn out. He’s on his way to

Rome... via Herod's palace. He's going to keep being moved about, and through it all, Paul is chill.

Why?

Because he's been let in on the secret. He knows how the story ends.

When my wife and I read *The Hunger Games* together, she was sweating bullets trying to figure out if Katniss Everdeen would survive the games as tribute. But years later, we watched the movie with our teenage daughter, and because she hadn't read the book, she sweated through all three films, anxious for Katniss to make it.

My wife and I leaned back, grabbed the popcorn, and simply enjoyed the ride.

We had already read the book.

We knew how the story ended.

Paul was let in on the plan.

He could sit back, rest easy, and enjoy the ride—albeit a bumpy one—to Rome, where Jesus told him he'd be able to testify.

## Acts 24 | Paul's Day in Court

Everybody gets their day in court.

I remember when I first had mine.

I was a 12-year-old kid and my bike swerved out of the bike lane, causing a bumper thumper. Someone went after me—and my parents—and tried to take all we had. It was bogus, so the judge threw it out.

In Acts 24, Paul gets his day in court as well.

It too gets thrown out.

Which is kind of miraculous, because the odds were heavily stacked against Paul. Verse 1 tells us that the Jewish leaders, who wanted Paul executed, “lawyered up” for this one!

**“Five days later the high priest Ananias went down to Caesarea with some of the elders and a lawyer named Tertullus, and they brought their charges against Paul before the governor. When Paul was called in, Tertullus presented his case before Felix: ‘We have enjoyed a long period of peace under you, and your foresight has brought about reforms in this nation. Everywhere and in every way, most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with profound gratitude. But in order not to weary you further, I would request that you be kind enough to hear us briefly’” (Acts 24:1–4).**

Oh man, this Tertullus... he’s laying it on thick. Like a bag of hot air, he butters up Felix with charm and eloquence.

“Not to weary you further...I would request that you be kind enough to hear us briefly.”

In case you haven’t realized yet, this chapter is meant to be humorous at points. Paul was all about authenticity and truth, while these murderous fakes were all about deception and winning. Standing there, all Paul could do was smile... and Luke remembers how funny Paul was mimicking

Tertullus when he recalls the courtroom scene, and laughs at how much butt-kissing and boot-licking Tertullus had to do.

Tertullus isn't done blowing his hot air...verse 5:

**“We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect and even tried to desecrate the temple; so we seized him. [7] [a] By examining him yourself you will be able to learn the truth about all these charges we are bringing against him.”**

**“The other Jews joined in the accusation, asserting that these things were true” (Acts 24:5–9).**

Yes, yes, very true, very true.

I still picture Paul there, grinning to himself; amused.

I can remember being in a church meeting where the leadership split down the middle on some outreach we were doing. Half the leaders wanted this disruptive American pastor to go for turning the town upside down. The other half thought it was truly the work of the Holy Spirit. I got attacked ruthlessly for nearly 45 minutes as the moderator allowed them to list all the things wrong with Peyton Jones and his leadership.

After a while, it just became amusing... and I started to smile... which only made them more angry.

Maybe you've been in that place before, where you've stood accused, and everyone is convinced before you've even had a chance to give your defense. How do you handle it?

Verse 10, Paul answers:

**“When the governor motioned for him to speak, Paul replied: ‘I know that for a number of years you have been a judge over this nation; so I gladly make my defense. You can easily verify that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple, or stirring up a crowd**

**in the synagogues or anywhere else in the city. And they cannot prove to you the charges they are now making against me.**

**However, I admit that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, and I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.**

**After an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings. I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts doing this. There was no crowd with me, nor was I involved in any disturbance. But there are some Jews from the province of Asia, who ought to be here before you and bring charges if they have anything against me. Or these who are here should state what crime they found in me when I stood before the Sanhedrin—unless it was this one thing I shouted as I stood in their presence: ‘It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today’” (Acts 24:10–21).**

It was a good speech. And Paul takes Tertullus’s big balloon of hot air and pokes a pin right into it in verse 19: “But there are some Jews from the province of Asia, who ought to be here before you and bring charges if they have anything against me.”

Paul ends by saying, I’m here because I have a different opinion?

Verse 21: “‘It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.’”

Felix, the governor, is weighing this. The fancy hired speaker, and the simple, plain-spoken Paul.

**“Then Felix, who was well acquainted with the Way, adjourned the proceedings. ‘When Lysias the commander comes,’ he said, ‘I will decide your case.’ He ordered the centurion to keep Paul under guard**

**but to give him some freedom and permit his friends to take care of his needs” (Acts 24:22–23).**

Paul was heard, but the judgment is hanging in the air. Life is like that a lot. Things unresolved, hanging in the air with people out to get you. You really draw near to God during those times.

Obviously, Felix didn’t see Paul as the dangerous criminal they made him out to be, because he gave Paul some freedoms and permitted his friends to visit him. But his ordeal was far from over.

**“Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. As Paul talked about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, ‘That’s enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you.’ At the same time he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him” (Acts 24:24–26).**

Did you catch that? Felix, a Roman governor, like Pilate, has a Jewish wife! There’s an influence of righteousness in his life, but as a corrupt politician, he keeps hoping that Paul will offer him money. Verse 26 told us he wanted a bribe, so he talked with Paul frequently.

Maybe that’s why Paul often steered the topic of conversation to being about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come.

As he spoke about these things, verse 25 tells us: “Felix was afraid and said, ‘That’s enough!’”

Have you ever known someone who keeps bringing up your faith in Jesus, but will only go so far, and then want to stop? You can tell when it’s getting close to the heart.

Felix is trapped by his own corruption... he keeps meeting with Paul because he wants a bribe, but instead keeps getting conviction. Paul wisely knows that there’s more than one way to skin a cat, and instead of preaching the gospel of grace, he reminds Felix that there’s a judgment.



It's the same thing I do when I get those annoying telemarketing scam calls. I tell them about salvation and why they need what I have more than I need what they're selling. They eventually hang up and never call me again.

**“When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favor to the Jews, he left Paul in prison” (Acts 24:27).**

Did you catch that? Two years go by... Felix is deported and moved on, while Festus comes in as the new governor. And being the corrupt politician he was, Felix leaves Paul in prison to gain political favor...

And thus Paul, who has places to go and things to do, sits.  
And waits...

But that doesn't mean that God isn't working.

Just like he'd been working in the unseen depths of Felix's heart, so he's working in Paul's life, behind the scenes, moving things into place, pulling strings, and bending things according to his will.

Speaking of waiting... you'll have to wait to hear what happens until next time on our journey through the Word.

## Acts 25 | You Will Receive Power

What is that one thing that you can't say no to?

That irresistible thing that all anyone has to do is offer it to you, and they can lead you like the Pied Piper to do whatever they want?

Maybe it's fresh baked pie, or a frappuccino. You're a sucker for it, and everyone around you knows it. If they want you to go somewhere or do something, they dangle it in front of you like a carrot on a stick.

We call that your button. Everyone has one... you just need to know where it is... and when to push it.

Today in Acts 25, Paul finds Agrippa's button and pushes it.

Paul had just been through a bogus court case in Jerusalem, and had to be smuggled into Caesarea for his own safety. Festus, who had replaced Felix as the Roman governor in Jerusalem, comes up to Caesarea to hear Paul's case.

We're told in verse 3 that the Jewish leaders travel up to Caesarea, where Paul is being kept for his safety, for fear that the Jewish mob will kill him. Under the care of Festus, another corrupt politician like Felix before him, he's no safer there than anywhere. Festus wants to do the Jewish leaders a favor... so he tries to maneuver Paul to be tried in Jerusalem to make them happy.

**“They requested Festus, as a favor to them, to have Paul transferred to Jerusalem, for they were preparing an ambush to kill him along the way. Festus answered, ‘Paul is being held at Caesarea, and I myself am going there soon. Let some of your leaders come with me, and if the man has done anything wrong, they can press charges against him there’” (Acts 25:3–5).**

Remember that button? If Festus had a button, it's trying to manipulate others to advance himself. He's gotten to where he is by advancing himself

through scheming and playing people. In some ways, it wasn't winning—it was the game itself. Outmaneuvering others... *that* was his button.

Hey, uh Festus... good luck playing chess with God there... good luck...

If Festus can transfer Paul back down to Jerusalem, he knows Paul will never make it there. That'd be a win/win. Festus pleases the bloodthirsty Jews, advancing himself, while the Jewish leaders put Paul in a body bag. Festus is about to have that button pushed...

Until Paul makes his defense and outfoxes them all:

**“Then Paul made his defense: ‘I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar.’ Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, ‘Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?’ Paul answered: ‘I am now standing before Caesar’s court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!’ After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: ‘You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!’” (Acts 25:8–12).**

Paul had a button. But it was a different type of button. His button had “EJECT” printed on it in bold letters. Paul pushes the button of Roman citizenship.

You see, every Roman by law can appeal to Caesar directly, like pushing an ejector seat, saying, “I appeal to Caesar.”

Paul pushes it. He knows that Festus can't resist his offer to appeal to Caesar as a Roman citizen. But appealing to Caesar is a risky game. Caesar is often annoyed by people wasting his time, and often executes them for having the *impotence* to appeal to him directly. But Paul shows no fear in pushing that button and ejects himself safely out of danger.

But in a way, this still works for Festus. You could almost say it's a two-fer. Now Paul will go to Caesar, who will probably kill him, and he's pleased the Jews, and gotten Paul off his hands!

Festus leans back in his chair, closing his eyes in the warm Mediterranean sun, feeling proud of himself that things are working out so well for him.

But before he ships Paul out, he gets some visitors. But not just any visitors. These lookie-loos are people of import who want to peek in on this unique prisoner.

**“A few days later King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to pay their respects to Festus. Since they were spending many days there, Festus discussed Paul’s case with the king. He said: ‘There is a man here whom Felix left as a prisoner. When I went to Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews brought charges against him and asked that he be condemned. I told them that it is not the Roman custom to hand over anyone before they have faced their accusers and have had an opportunity to defend themselves against the charges. When they came here with me, I did not delay the case, but convened the court the next day and ordered the man to be brought in. When his accusers got up to speak, they did not charge him with any of the crimes I had expected. Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive. I was at a loss how to investigate such matters; so I asked if he would be willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial there on these charges. But when Paul made his appeal to be held over for the Emperor’s decision, I ordered him held until I could send him to Caesar.’ ‘I would like to hear this man myself,’ Agrippa said” (Acts 25:13–22).**

Festus can't just send him to Caesar... he's got to make it sound good. If he doesn't embellish the case and make it look like a tough case that only Caesar can answer, Festus is worried it will make Caesar think Festus can't handle smaller cases... that he's an ineffective ruler.

What to do... what to do.

Agrippa's visit comes just in time... like it was meant to be. Festus, a Roman, can quiz the Jewish King—Herod Agrippa—on why the Jews are still so upset with Paul that they want to kill him. He still doesn't completely get it. There's no crime. No violence. It's only the things that Paul says that seem to get him into trouble.

And Paul's going to keep saying them... Festus thinks, maybe I can let him say them to Agrippa.

Are you seeing a pattern? The longer Paul is locked up, the more he keeps preaching the gospel to powerful people. Hard-to-reach people. People who never got to hear the gospel before.

Paul has to be shaking his head every night, replaying the day's events every time he gets to share the gospel with yet another general, commander, governor, or king.

And King Agrippa is one bad dude. Herod Agrippa—the grandson of Herod the Great, who massacred the innocents—the one who felt directly threatened by the prophecy of Jesus when the wise men brought him word of the true King of Israel.

And here's Paul, preaching that same Jesus that caused his granddad to do the unthinkable. Paul's in prison for stating that this King Jesus rose from the dead. Agrippa too has a button, but more on that next chapter...

Festus promises to let Agrippa hear him personally... and thus begins the pageant of pomp and making things seem more important than they really are.

**“The next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high-ranking military officers and the prominent men of the city. At the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. Festus said: ‘King Agrippa, and all who are present with us, you see this man! The whole Jewish community has petitioned me**

**about him in Jerusalem and here in Caesarea, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. I found he had done nothing deserving of death, but because he made his appeal to the Emperor I decided to send him to Rome. But I have nothing definite to write to His Majesty about him. Therefore I have brought him before all of you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that as a result of this investigation I may have something to write. For I think it is unreasonable to send a prisoner on to Rome without specifying the charges against him” (Acts 25:23–27).**

Okay, I hope you smiled to yourself as you read that last bit, because it's meant to be funny. The pomp, the pageantry, the tucking in of fat tummies and striding around the room with their big boy pants jacked up high and mighty.

We heard the backroom conversation earlier where Festus needs Agrippa to help him out of his jam. He needs Agrippa to push the button for him. But Agrippa—his button is looking important in front of people.

Never forget that people are always fronting.  
Most people want to look good in front of others.

The cars, the clothes, the money, the social media.  
But it's all a front.

Everyone has that button... the thing that they really want deep down. The thing they really need. To love and be loved by God. It's not always on the surface, but hidden deep down. But when you've been around a bit, you learn to read people—and so you wait...

Just like Paul is doing until he stands in front of Agrippa. And when he does, he'll push Agrippa's buttons—and Festus's too. Just like he did Felix's.

Because there's someone else who has your number; knows how you're wired; knows you better than yourself; and yes, knows just where that button is...

The button of your deepest needs and wants...  
And He knows just how to push it.

## **Acts 26 | How Many Times?**

Welcome back to Through the Word, I'm your host Peyton Jones, and today we'll be joining Paul as he testifies before King Agrippa about Judaism, Jesus, and the resurrection.

How many licks does it take to get to the center of a Tootsie Roll Pop? That was the question a cartoon boy asked a cartoon owl on a commercial for the lollipop when I was a kid. The owl doesn't get past the third lick before chomping down on the confectionary like a crazed maniac before the narrator says, "I guess we'll never know."

Maybe you've wondered how many times someone needs to hear the gospel before it penetrates the center of their soul.

In today's chapter, we'll hear King Agrippa ask Paul a similar question about his own soul...

But first, let's reset the scene. Paul is standing before King Agrippa, King of Israel, because Festus the Roman Governor is struggling to make Paul's case sound good. Paul appealed to Caesar, and Festus has to send him to appeal to the world's most powerful man, but he's got to make it sound good or he'll get in trouble. Knowing that King Agrippa is a Jew, he asks him to help with Paul's case. So they call him into the room, asking him to give his defense. Verse 1:

**Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself."**

**So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defense:**

**"King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews, and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently.**

**"The Jewish people all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in**



**Jerusalem. They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee. And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today. This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that these Jews are accusing me. Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?" (Acts 26:1–8)**

Remember, Paul was once a Pharisee, so when he stood before the hostile Jewish leaders who wanted his head, he focused on the resurrection of the dead, knowing that it would divide them and get them to turn on themselves since it was something they debated about constantly. Keep that in mind as we listen to Paul's testimony.

**"I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord's people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities.**

**"On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' "Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?'**

**"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," the Lord replied.**

**"Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from**

**darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”** (Acts 26:9–18)

And there we end the third time that Dr. Luke writes out Paul’s testimony in full in the book of Acts. First time was in Acts 9 when it happened. Second time was a few chapters ago. So now, when we read it the third time, it should cause us to sit up and pay attention. There’s not much new here. It’s just a repeat, put a slightly different way. But it helps to answer the question, “How many times hearing the gospel before it penetrates down to the gooey center of the soul?” So far, Luke has done it to us three times.

Think about that...

Paul continues:

**“So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven.**

**First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds. That is why some Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen— that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”** (Acts 26:19–23)

Note that Paul is not just repeating his testimony. He states that he’s repeating what God kept repeating throughout the Old Testament:

**“I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen— that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”**

Remember, when sharing the gospel—either your testimony or the message itself—you don't have to be creative or clever. Sometimes, just repeating what God is repeating is enough.

But although Paul wasn't saying anything new to Agrippa, who knew the Old Testament well, to Festus Paul might as well have been saying tiny green men took him on a joyride with Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster.

**“At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.” “I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable.” (Acts 26:24–25)**

True and reasonable. I love that.

The gospel is both true—it is historically verifiable—but it's also reasonable. There's nothing of mythology in the gospels. It's all naturally supernatural. It's conceivable that God was with us in the person of Jesus, did miracles to demonstrate who he was, and fulfilled prophecy written thousands of years before. Never forget that. The unreasonable one is the person who chooses to ignore all of the evidence, reliability, and testimony of countless changed lives as a result of the gospel.

But Paul doesn't continue to address Festus. He looks right at Agrippa and in verse 26 says:

**“The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner.**

**King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.”**

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

**Paul replied, “Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.” (Acts 26:26–29)**

How many licks does it take to get to the center of a Tootsie Roll Pop?

Agrippa asks the question, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”

It's not a matter of time or exposure. Paul knows God can get to Agrippa's soul in one lick. But maybe it will take two, or three times to hear the gospel, just like Luke knows it's good for us to hear Paul's testimony three times. But for now, this is Agrippa's first time hearing it from Paul.

You can almost sense the danger that Agrippa feels himself in. Something stirred in his soul just then when Paul was talking. He's actually a bit incredulous at Paul's persuasion... but he doesn't yet realize that it's the Holy Spirit he's hearing.

And I hope you've been hearing Him today as well. Maybe God is still penetrating your soul. And if you're witnessing to others, testifying of who Jesus is, don't give up. Keep being faithful, and remember, nobody knows exactly how much time (long or short) it takes to reach somebody's soul.

Next time could be the crucial bite to the soft, gooshy, caramel center of their heart.

## Acts 27 | At the Mercy of Mercy

Who doesn't like a swashbuckling tale or a vagabonding adventure across a map?

Well, Acts 27 has it all. Storms, shipwrecks, and castaways at sea.

We've all set out to get somewhere and wound up taking unplanned detours. Acts 27 is filled with twists and turns as Paul's journey to Rome falls prey to the mercy of the wind and weather—but mercy is exactly what we find at every turn in this chapter, as we'll see.

**“When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the Imperial Regiment” (Acts 27:1).**

There's a saying, “If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans,” and it would seem like the plans of the centurion and the ship's captain were a joke. After playing trains, planes, and automobiles for weeks, Paul's captors just can't catch a break through the Mediterranean and have to keep seeking safe harbor to avoid shipwreck. Time was running out for safe travel, as winter was approaching, so Paul speaks up in verse 9:

**“Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Day of Atonement. So Paul warned them,**

**‘Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also.’ But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship. Since the harbor was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided that we should sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix and winter there. This was a harbor in Crete, facing both southwest and northwest.**

**When a gentle south wind began to blow, they saw their opportunity; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete. Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the Northeaster, swept**

**down from the island. The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along. As we passed to the lee of a small island called Cauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure, so the men hoisted it aboard. Then they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together. Because they were afraid they would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along. We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. On the third day, they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved" (Acts 27:9–20).**

Have you ever been in a place where everyone around you has lost hope?

I can remember a time when someone in one of my church plants shared a burden from God. It was nine months before the 2006 housing crash. They said, "There's a coming economic crisis. People are going to lose their jobs, homes, and marriages. But God doesn't want us to panic, but to know that He's going to bring lots of people to Himself through this tragedy. When they have nothing else, they will look to Him. He wants peace in the storm to be like a lighthouse."

In the midst of this storm, Paul stands up like a beacon of light and gives hope to the hopeless in verse 21:

**"After they had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: 'Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me and said, "Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you." So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen**

**just as he told me. Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island”** (Acts 27:21–26).

At the mercy of the elements, Paul tells them they’ve found mercy from the God who **“has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.”**

They were about to get saved from so much more than a shipwreck.

**“On the fourteenth night we were still being driven across the Adriatic Sea, when about midnight the sailors sensed they were approaching land. They took soundings and found that the water was a hundred and twenty feet deep. A short time later they took soundings again and found it was ninety feet deep. Fearing that we would be dashed against the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight. In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they were going to lower some anchors from the bow. Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, ‘Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved.’ So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it drift away”** (Acts 27:27–32).

Those no-good, low-down, dastardly sailors were trying to escape the doomed ship, but at Paul’s word, Julius the centurion cuts the lifeboats away. Already, he’s starting to show faith in the God of Paul.

But as they’ve been trying not to use their rations, Paul urges them to eat in verse 33:

**“Just before dawn Paul urged them all to eat. ‘For the last fourteen days,’ he said, ‘you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food—you haven’t eaten anything. Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head.’ After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. Altogether there were 276 of us on board. When they had eaten as much as they**

**wanted, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea”**  
(Acts 27:33–38).

See how they listen to Paul? It’s not the captain or the centurion who is in charge anymore—it’s the God Paul worships, who commands the wind and the waves. He is in charge, and they obey His commands as Paul instructs them.

Not all of them had faith at this point, but Paul’s faith is enough to carry them through... until finally they hit a hidden sandbar and the ship busts up into tiny pieces.

276 lives altogether. Many of them prisoners, and every single one of them owed Paul their lives. If not for Paul, all the prisoners would have been dead. Again.

**“The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping. But the centurion wanted to spare Paul’s life and kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land. The rest were to get there on planks or on other pieces of the ship. In this way everyone reached land safely”** (Acts 27:42–44).

God gets Paul out of a jam, and luckily, the rest were along for the ride. Paul had places to go, people to see... therefore, he was spared multiple deaths along this journey. But so were the others. They were saved from death. And some were probably saved from their sins.

But God wasn’t done showing mercy to the crew... not yet.

But you’ll have to read on to see what happens next time on our journey through the Word.



## Acts 28 | The Story Without End

They say that you form judgments about people within the first seven seconds of meeting them. We've all met someone new and tried to figure them out. Are they cool, or a jerk? Are they for God, for me, or for themselves? In Acts chapter 28, the Maltese islanders try to figure out these strange shipwrecked visitors and wonder about Paul in particular. Is he from the gods or cursed by them? But they'll need more than seven seconds to make a judgment.

Let's join the castaways around the campfire on the beach in verse 1:

**“Once safely on shore, we found out that the island was called Malta. The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold. Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and, as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to each other, ‘This man must be a murderer; for though he escaped from the sea, the goddess Justice has not allowed him to live.’ But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects. The people expected him to swell up or suddenly fall dead; but after waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god” (Acts 28:1–6).**

I'm with Indiana Jones...

“Snakes... why did it have to be snakes...”

As if being shipwrecked wasn't enough, Paul is bit by a snake—a venomous cat snake, to be exact. They still live on that island today! At first bite, the Maltese people think the gods are punishing him, but when he recovers miraculously, they think he *is* a god. Greek mythology often told of Zeus and other gods taking human form and walking among men. It probably didn't help correct their impression when Paul started healing others—except that he keeps talking about God coming in human form

years earlier, and calling Himself Jesus. Paul tells them it's *His* power at work. Verse 7:

**“There was an estate nearby that belonged to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us to his home and showed us generous hospitality for three days. His father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him. When this had happened, the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured. They honored us in many ways; and when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with the supplies we needed.**

**After three months we put out to sea in a ship that had wintered in the island—it was an Alexandrian ship with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux” (Acts 28:7–11).**

Let's jump ahead to verse 16:

**“When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him” (Acts 28:16).**

Finally... Paul gets to Rome. After a long and perilous journey, speaking to kings, governors, and being shipwrecked, Paul comes to journey's end. But his adventure isn't yet over. Paul calls the Jewish leaders to huddle up and starts fresh with them, telling them about his ordeal, and preaches Jesus to them in verse 17:

**“Three days later he called together the local Jewish leaders. When they had assembled, Paul said to them: ‘My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. They examined me and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death. The Jews objected, so I was compelled to make an appeal to Caesar. I certainly did not intend to bring any charge against my own people. For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain.’**

**They replied, ‘We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, and none of our people who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you.**

**But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect’” (Acts 28:17–22).**

The Jews didn’t write about him because they thought him dead. He was supposed to be ambushed. He was supposed to be lost at sea. He was supposed to be killed by Caesar if ever he got to Rome. But here, God’s words to Paul from chapter 25 come true: *“As you’ve testified of me in Jerusalem, so you must testify of me in Rome.”*

They agree to meet with Paul again, and testify he does in verse 23:

**“They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. He witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus. Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: ‘The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your ancestors when he said through Isaiah the prophet:**

**“Go to this people and say,  
“You will be ever hearing but never understanding;  
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.”**

**For this people’s heart has become calloused;  
they hardly hear with their ears,  
and they have closed their eyes.  
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,  
hear with their ears,  
understand with their hearts  
and turn, and I would heal them.”**

**“Therefore I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!” (Acts 28:23–28).**

And that's where it all ends...

It ends with a proclamation that the gospel is free for all. It's for the world. In the book of Acts, we've witnessed Christianity go from being a small Jewish sect about the Hebrew Messiah to becoming a worldwide invitation to come to a global Savior.

Because of what's written in the pages you've just read... I'm here, following Jesus. And so are you. Maybe you're in Africa, or India, or even Southeast Asia. Or maybe Europe or America. Either way, Christianity is the largest and fastest-growing faith in the entire world.

We owe so much to the Apostle Paul.

And about Paul, the book ends with a quaint little summary of how Paul spent two years in Rome. Verse 30:

**“For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:30–31).**

You know, scholars today don't think that Paul died in Rome at this time. In fact, they believe that the book of Acts is actually unfinished. Luke may have finished his book and thought to write again later. He may have been martyred before he caught up again, or perhaps he just never got around to it.

That said, chapter 29—and every chapter beyond—has been written through the years in the form of church history, as other brave men and women have set out to proclaim the same Jesus that Paul preached. They've taken the gospel into villages, hamlets, to hill tribes, and natives on the plains. And everywhere the gospel has spread, another chapter has been written.

Until you.

For you, my friend, are writing your own chapter. The story isn't finished as long as you're here, for God is still looking for people who will proclaim and teach about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness...

...and there's no end to what He can do through someone like that.  
Someone like you.