



Acts

Prepared by Allen Browne

Version 2024-06-20



**RIVERVIEW
CHURCH**

Prepared by Allen Browne for Riverview Church, 2024.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from
The New International Version © Zondervan, 2011.

For information on Riverview Church, visit:

<https://www.riverviewchurch.com.au/>

Contents

Acts 1–4: Jesus establishes his kingdom.....	5
Acts 1: The king promises Holy Spirit power for his kingdom	5
Acts 2: The Holy Spirit empowers the community of the Christ	8
Acts 3: Jesus' authority will heal the world	11
Acts 4: Jesus' authority is threatening for people in power.....	13
Reflection	16
 Acts 5–8: Judea and Samaria under Christ.....	 17
Acts 5: Representing Christ's leadership.....	17
Acts 6: Sharing his authority to care.....	20
Acts 7: Stephen dies like his Lord.....	21
Acts 8: Philip spreads the good news.....	23
Reflection	25
 Acts 9–12: Christ's kingdom extends to gentiles	 27
Acts 9: Saul meets the resurrected Lord.....	27
Acts 10: Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit.....	30
Acts 11: Antioch: the first "Christians"	32
Acts 12: Herod's death	34
Reflection	37
 Acts 13–16: First Missionary journey.....	 39
Acts 13: Antioch sends Barnabas and Saul/Paul	39
Acts 14: Galatia.....	42
Acts 15: Jerusalem council	45
Acts 16: Philippi.....	48
Reflection	51
 Acts 17–20: Second & third missionary journeys	 53
Acts 17: Greece	53
Acts 18: Corinth.....	56
Acts 19: Ephesus.....	58
Acts 20: Travelling back through Greece, Troas and Ephesus.....	61
Reflection	63
 Acts 21–24: Paul's arrest and trials.....	 65
Acts 21: Suffering in Jerusalem.....	65
Acts 22: Conflict with Jewish and Roman authorities	67
Acts 23: Safer in Jerusalem or Caesarea?	69
Acts 24: Trial before Felix.....	71

Reflection	72
Acts 25–28: Paul takes the gospel to Rome.....	73
Acts 25: Paul on trial before Festus.....	73
Acts 26: Paul's trial before Agrippa.....	75
Acts 27: Shipwrecked on the way to Rome	78
Acts 28: Proclaiming King Jesus in Caesar's city.....	79
Reflection	82

Acts 1–4: Jesus establishes his kingdom

Welcome to *The Acts of the Apostles*. We're glad you're here, desiring to learn from Scripture about how the Holy Spirit continues Jesus' ministry in the world.

There are 28 chapters in Acts, so we plan to cover 4 chapters each night for 7 weeks. It'd love to take the time to explore with the same depth Craig Kenner did with his commentary¹ where he devoted more than 1000 pages to Acts 1–2. Unfortunately, we need to cover Acts 1–2 before the break tonight. Realistically, we won't be able to address many of the important questions this text raises.

If you want something beyond the course notes, you might buy:

- Tom Wright, *Acts for Everyone* (2 volumes) SPCK, 2008.

Please do ask questions and share your insights as time permits. If there are things you didn't get to raise in our time together, you're very welcome to email me directly:

allen.browne@riverview.church

Any questions before we begin?

Acts 1: The king promises Holy Spirit power for his kingdom

This book begins with 120 people in Jerusalem who've seen Jesus alive after his crucifixion. It ends 30 years later, with tens of thousands of Christ-followers across Judea, Samaria, Ethiopia, Syria, Turkey, Greece, and Rome. In the centuries that follow, the good news of Jesus liberating the world spreads to the rest of the globe.

Acts is volume two of Luke's Gospel. Luke dedicated his Gospel to someone named *Theophilus*, a name meaning "one who loves God" (Luke 1:4). Acts is the sequel:

Acts 1:1-2 (NIV)

¹ In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.

All that Jesus began to do and teach is now becoming reality in the community under his leadership. His people implement his leadership because he gave the Holy Spirit anointing that he had (as the Christ) to the ambassadors he appointed, ambassadors who continue what he started.

The Gospels describe who Jesus was and what he did. Acts answers the follow-up question: Who are we and what are we doing? Acts gives us our identity and mission.

We are the community that comes to life in Christ, the kingdom raised up in the king. Epistles are instructions for God's community. Acts is the living reality. For all of us who learn best by following a practical example, Acts is our book.

Six weeks with Jesus (1:3-8)

Between his resurrection and his ascension, Jesus had forty days to finish training his apostles. What should he focus on? Which class would you go to?

¹ Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (4 volumes), Baker Academic, 2014-2015.

- a) How to plant a church
- b) How to convince people to believe
- c) The life hereafter in light of Jesus' death and resurrection
- d) How the atonement provides justification
- e) The believer's identity and purpose
- f) Other?

What topic did Jesus chose?

Acts 1:3 (NIV)

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.

What on earth is that? Why is that important? Is it crucial to Acts? To our mission? Is this still important at the end? (Check the final verse of Acts.)

.....

As we make our way through Acts, listen for the **gospel** as the apostles present it. The good news is Jesus. He is *the Christ* (the anointed ruler), the one whom God *raised up* (resurrected) as *Lord of all* (our global leader). The kingdom of God is the gospel they proclaimed: it's the relationship between king and kingdom.

The king issued this command:

Acts 1:4-5 (NIV)

⁴ 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. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

Why is Holy Spirit so crucial after Jesus had gone? What does *baptized with the Spirit* mean? What does it have to do with John the Baptist?² When had Jesus told them about this? When were they immersed in the Spirit? What difference did he make?

.....

Jesus is the opposite of earthly rulers. Earthly rulers do whatever it takes to keep their power, as Israel's history showed. The Christ pours out his anointing on his people, empowering us all to function as his kingdom.

Flooding the whole community with Holy Spirit empowerment radically reshapes the world under God's authority. The Spirit who breathed life into Jesus' dead body breathes life into a world that died when it disconnected from God, raising us up as the community that comes to life in him.

Holy Spirit brings such a racial reshaping of the world under Jesus' kingship that it's pointless to try to change the world without him. But right now, without the Spirit's help, the disciples can't imagine how Jesus will serve as their king, overturning the oppression Israel had suffered for centuries:

² The phrase comes from John: Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5; 11:16; (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Acts 1:6–8 (paraphrased)

Disciples: “Now you’re alive, is this the time when you will take a throne in Jerusalem, restoring Israel as a kingdom like it was in David’s day?”

Jesus: “You’re asking, ‘*When?*’ That’s the wrong question. The kingdom is my Father’s authority. The kingdom arrives with the Holy Spirit in you [plural]. With the Spirit in you, just like my Father promised, you will be the living evidence of my kingship. The kingdom arrives progressively: starting in the capital, incorporating both parts of the fallen kingdom (Judah and Samaria), and extending to the extremities of the earth.”

What the king promised is exactly how the kingdom grows in Acts:

- Beginning in Jerusalem (Acts 1–5)
- Encompassing the divided fallen kingdoms of Judea and Samaria (Acts 6–9)
- Including gentiles and the rest of the world in his reign (Acts 10–28).

By the end of Acts, the kingdom of the Christ is being announced in Rome, under the Emperor’s nose. As dangerous as that sounds, Paul is *announcing the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ [ruler Jesus the Anointed] with all boldness, unhindered* (Acts 28:31).

Jesus’ ascension (Acts 1:9–11)

Acts 1:9–11 (Tom Wright’s translation)³

⁹As Jesus said this, he was lifted up while they were watching, and a **cloud** took him out of their sight. ¹⁰They were gazing into heaven as he disappeared. Then, lo and behold, two men appeared, dressed in white, standing beside them.

¹¹‘Galileans,’ they said, ‘why are you standing here staring into heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you saw him go into heaven.’

Can you think of any other accounts of God’s presence in a cloud? (Exodus 13:21–22; Luke 9:34–35) Where has Jesus gone? (Acts 7:56)

.....

We call this his *ascension*. He’s not an irrelevant character, written out of the book. He has ascended the throne, sharing in heaven’s reign over the earth. The Son of Man has regained the dominion God gave humans in the beginning (Genesis 1:26–28). God has taken power from the beasts that claim to run his world, giving it all to the human heir—not with earthly armies but with the clouds of heaven’s hosts. Heaven’s reign now extends to all the nations of the earth. It can never be destroyed (Daniel 7:9–14).

But the disciples feared they’d lost Jesus. They needed heavenly messengers to explain that one day Jesus’ kingship would be fully and visibly here on earth. That will be the full expression of heaven’s reign over the earth in God’s anointed.

³ Tom Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1–12* (London: SPCK, 2008), 10.

Without Jesus or the Spirit (1:12-26)

For ten days they're in limbo, with neither Jesus nor the Spirit. Jesus told them to wait (verse 4). They spend much of the time waiting on God in prayer (verses 12-14).

While Jesus is back, Judas is not. As Peter reads the Psalms, he concludes they need to replace Judas. They choose two candidates, pray, and cast lots. *The lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles (1:26).*

What do you make of that? Did God want them to choose a replacement, or was Jesus planning to appoint another apostle later? Why include this story about casting lots immediately before the Holy Spirit's coming?

Acts 2: The Holy Spirit empowers the community of the Christ



Carl G. Rasmussen, *Zondervan Atlas of the Bible*, (Zondervan, 2010), 218

Holy Spirit empowerment (2:1-13)

Seven weeks after Passover comes *the Festival of Weeks* (Deuteronomy 16:9-16). It's called *Pentecost* in Greek, meaning 50 (days). The Jews were spread across the whole Mediterranean area, so people came from everywhere for the festival:

Acts 2:1–4 (NIV)

¹ When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.

² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

What does *tongues* mean? (Compare verse 11.) Why did the Holy Spirit empower them to speak languages they'd never learnt?

Acts 2:6–12 (NIV)

⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? ... ¹⁰ We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" ¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

According to Genesis 11, God divided the world into language groups. At Babel, people were building a city to rule the world, with a tower that claimed to have brought the power of the gods into their hands. God stopped them: *the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth* (Genesis 11:9).

Now people came to Jerusalem from all over the world. What *confused* them was they could understand each other!⁴ "*What does this mean?*" It means God was reversing Babel! Instead of uniting in rebellion against God's authority, the world was being united under God's reign in Christ. The king raised up by God has ascended the throne, and he is drawing all people back under heaven's governance.

So what is the Holy Spirit saying to all these people in their own tongues? *The wonders of God* (verse 11) refers to the astounding way God reinstated his reign: not through force, but through raising up his son when the rebels killed him, installing his Christ as Lord of all, and extending an amnesty to all who give him allegiance.

That's the message as Peter goes on to deliver in the power of the Spirit.

The gospel of the Christ (2:14-36)

Peter's message draws this conclusion:

Acts 2:36 (NIV)

³⁶ "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."

How did God make Jesus *both Lord and Anointed Ruler*? What does this mean for those who shouted, "Crucify him!" just six weeks ago? (Luke 23:21) What is the evidence that God overruled them and installed his king?

.....

Peter presents Jesus as fulfilling the Scriptures:

- **Joel 2:28-32** (in Acts 2:17-21): The enthroned Christ has poured out the Spirit on the whole community, so everyone is declaring how God has shaken the powers and brought *the day of the Lord* (i.e. God's reign). So now, *everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*.

⁴ *Bewildered* (NIV) is συγχέω, the same Greek word used in the Septuagint of Genesis 11:7, 9.

- **Psalm 16:8-11** (in Acts 2:25-28): The Psalm is David's voice, but since then David has died and the Davidic kingship died. That kingship has come back to life because the king has come back to life.
- **Psalm 110:1** (in Acts 2: 34-35): God has restored the throne to David's Lord. He is now reigning, while God is bringing all his enemies under his feet.

So what is the gospel as the Holy Spirit presented it through Peter?

.....

.....

The kingdom of the Christ (2:37-47)

Those who believed Peter's gospel asked how to respond (verse 37).

Why these two responses? Why are they significant? (verses 38)

1.
2.

To those who responded to the gospel, Peter promised *the gift of the Holy Spirit* (verses 38-39). Is the Holy Spirit the gift? Or does Peter mean a particular gift (such as tongues or salvation). What do you think?

.....

3000 people now recognize God's *Anointed* as earth's *Lord* (Peter's words, verse 36).

This is often described as the day the **church** was born. That's right, but the church isn't the goal. The church is the present expression of the kingdom, recognizing and embodying his kingship over the earth. His kingship is what rescues the world. Pentecost was the first-fruits festival of the harvest to come. That's what the church is in the present.

So how did this early church embody Christ's reign in his world?

What did they do that embodied his kingship?

- What held them together? How did they stay focused on what the king wants? (verse 42)
.....
- What did they do that's unlike the way people live who don't recognize Christ as king? How did embodying the message enhance credibility? (verses 43-45)
.....
- In what settings did they gather to communicate their message? Why the emphasis on unity and togetherness rather than personal piety? (verses 46-47)
.....

Do these emphases apply to us? How can we credibly embody Jesus' reign today in Australia when our culture is quite cynical about the church?

.....

.....

Hopefully you understand that Jesus' kingship is not imposed. No one was asked to sell their houses. This is a voluntary response to the king who said that those who'd been missing out (the poor) would receive the kingdom under his reign (Matthew 5:3).

Acts 3: Jesus' authority will heal the world

Restoring a crippled person (3:1-10)

Jerusalem had no Centrelink or NDIS. Those who could not work were reliant on people's generosity. The temple was a good spot to ask for daily help.

To the guy who'd been lame from birth, Peter said, "By the authority of King Jesus from Nazareth, walk!" The walking man becomes living evidence of Jesus' authority in Jerusalem to set right what's wrong.

What about healing today? Have you experienced healing, or seen friends healed?

.....

When God' heals, it's life-changing. But people in our culture don't respond the same way. We're aware of germs and viruses and genetic mutations. We have MRI machines and nuclear medicine. Many in our culture think healing is superstition.

In 2017, several Christian groups engaged McCrindle Research to learn about community attitudes to faith and belief in Australia. Among many questions, they asked Australians what attracted them to faith and what repelled them. They found:

The greatest attraction to investigating spirituality and religion is seeing people who live out genuine faith. Second is experiencing personal trauma or significant life change.

The top repellents (which somewhat or strongly repel) are:

1. Hearing from public figures and celebrities who are examples of that faith (75%)
2. Miraculous stories of people being healed or supernatural occurrences (65%)⁵

What do you make of that? Does it match your experience of how people respond?

.....

The other interesting thing about this case is that there's nothing to suggest the lame man had faith to be healed. Afterwards he was walking and leaping and praising God. Do you think we should use spiritual gifts for people who don't know God yet?

⁵ Mark McCrindle, *Faith and Belief in Australia* (Baulkham Hills, NSW: McCrindle Research, 2017), 26.

The good news of Jesus' authority (3:11-26)

Peter addresses the crowd that gathers in Solomon's Colonnade to see this man walking:

Acts 3:13-15 (my translation)

¹³ “The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers has honoured his servant Jesus—the one you betrayed and disowned into Pilate's presence, when he'd judged Jesus be set free. ¹⁴ The one who was holy and right you disowned. You asked for a man who was a murderer to be given to you. ¹⁵ The source of life you killed, the one God raised from the dead as we are witnesses.”



Model of Solomon's Colonnade (Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

Peter contrasts God's reign with how the rebellion controls people:

- The rebellion against God *dishonoured, betrayed, and disowned* the one who—even by the standard of human empires—did not deserve death. The rebellion prefers Barabbas over a leader who does right. Rejecting the source of life holds us in the death's grip.
- The heavenly sovereign *honoured* his servant Jesus. God's authority is not established by giving death to his enemies, but by giving life to his Servant when the rebels tried to do away with him.

Peter's comments put his audience on the wrong side: identified with the rebellion against God. What now?

Acts 3:17-21 (NIV)

¹⁷ “Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. ¹⁸ But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. ¹⁹ Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, ²⁰ and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. ²¹ Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.

Peter does not say, “God is angry with you, and someone has to pay. But it's okay: God took out his anger on Jesus at the cross. He's feeling much better now, so you're off the hook.” That's actually an ancient pagan view of God.⁶

Peter says, *you acted in ignorance*, i.e. you and your temple leaders did not know that Jesus was God's anointed ruler when you betrayed him and organized his crucifixion (verse 17). But God was not caught unaware: he had already told you his Anointed ruler would enter into Israel's suffering and death for his people (verse 18).

So your response must be to quit the rebellion and turn back to God (*repent*). God will then *wipe out your sins*, i.e. the way you dishonoured his Son, betrayed him to his

⁶ See: Tom Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*. (London: SPCK, 2016) 125–142.

enemies, and arranged his crucifixion. By receiving (instead of rejecting) the ruler God has appointed for you, you now invite his reign, so God can *send the Messiah who has been anointed for you, namely Jesus*.

Jesus is already reigning, seated at the right hand of God in heaven, while earth is still in the process of accepting his reign. That's not complete yet, even after 2000 years. But the time will come when God restores everything in his earthly realm, just as he always promised (verse 21).

Is that how you understand Peter's good news?

Acts 4: Jesus' authority is threatening for people in power

The outlawed name (4:1-21)

Peter's message was controversial. If Jesus was God's anointed ruler for his people, what did that say about the temple leaders who arranged his crucifixion? If God overturned their judgement and raised him up after they killed him, and gave him the kingship, what happens to their authority? Their group (Sadducees) didn't even believe resurrection was possible.

Peter and John are undermining their power, turning public opinion against them:

Acts 4:1-4 (NIV)

¹ 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.

² They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. ³ They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. ⁴ But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.

Peter doesn't back down from proclaiming Jesus' authority:

Acts 4:9-12 (NIV)

⁹ "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,

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ Jesus is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the corner-stone.' [Psalm 118:22] ¹² Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

What does Peter mean by *salvation* in verse 12? Is this God's rescue of the world from the powers of evil and death, into the leadership of God's anointed? Is this how you understand salvation?

Peter's on trial. This is not a good defence if he wants to get off. Something else is happening. Holy Spirit was empowering Peter to present evidence of Jesus' authority, just like Jesus said: *The Spirit of truth ... will testify about me. And you also must testify about me* (John 15:26-27).

No one else can rescue humanity. Not the high priest. Not Caesar. There is no other name to be recognized as the God-appointed ruler and rescuer of all people (v. 12).

The Sanhedrin is shocked, but *they could not decide how to punish them because all the people were praising God for what had happened* (verse 21).

Talking to the real authority (4:22-31)

After being held by these hostile authorities, Peter, John, and their community speak to the real authority that runs the world.

Acts 4:23-31 (NIV)

²³ 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.

²⁴ 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. ²⁵ 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?

²⁶ The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.’ [Psalm 2:1-2]

²⁷ 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. ²⁸ They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. ²⁹ Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.

³⁰ Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

³¹ 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.

What can we learn about prayer here?

.....

They address God as the sovereign authority over the whole creation (verse 24). They recall how the rebellion against God's authority has always caused suffering for God's people. Psalm 2 asked why the nations rage and plot to take God's power into their own hands, why earth's rulers join forces against *the Lord and his anointed*, i.e. the Davidic king anointed to represent the LORD's reign on earth.

The reign of God's anointed lasted only about 400 years before Babylon invaded. They'd waited another 600 years for the LORD's anointed. When he came, the rulers conspired together to put him to death: Herod (ruler of Galilee) and Pilate (ruler of Judea). But it wasn't just the foreign powers: the Jewish leaders and high priests colluded with the rulers of the nations to get rid of God's anointed (verse 27).

The rebellion comes as no surprise to God: he'd been dealing with this for centuries (verse 28). It's no surprise to the disciples either when they are arrested by the rebels at the temple and commanded *to speak no longer to anyone in this name* (verse 17).

They'd gone to the temple to pray (3:1). Now they bypass the temple and go directly to God through the Spirit. The temple rejected God's authority, but God is enthroned over all creation.

The bottom line of their prayer is for God to:

- a) deal with those who threaten his authority in his people
- b) empower them to boldly declare what God has decreed (verse 29)
- c) affirm them as agents of the authority of his devoted servant Jesus (verse 30).

God responds. The building shakes as a sign that God is shaking things up. The prophets spoke of God shaking the powers (e.g. Haggai 2:6-7, 21), with the ultimate goal of placing his anointed in power. That's the authority they've asked to represent.

Living as the community of the king (4:32-37)

So how do they live as the kingdom of King Jesus? This is how:

Acts 4:32–37 (NIV)

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.

³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

³⁶ Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

What do you make of this view of communal ownership where *no one claimed that any of their possessions was their own*? (verse 32) Our culture says, "Possession is nine tenths of the law." Maybe possession is nine tenths of the problem?

In the Law God gave Israel, he said:

Deuteronomy 15:4-5 (NIV)

⁴ There need be no poor people among you ... ⁵ if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands.

In Christ's reign, *there were no needy people among them* (verse 34). What heaven intended for the earth (God's will) was being done on earth as it is in heaven.

How do you envision the world operating when it's implementing God's reign?

.....

How practical is it to live like this now, while selfish people are still accumulating wealth? Won't we be at a disadvantage if we live unselfishly? What should we do?

.....

Reflection

Think back over Acts 1–4. What stands out as significant for you?

.....

What is still unclear?

.....

What was their message, the gospel they proclaimed?

.....

.....

What do we need to prioritize differently?

.....

.....

If Jesus as our God-anointed resurrected king, how do we engage with the political rulers of our day? Is this approach (from Michael Bird and Tom Wright) helpful?

The early church inherited the anti-pagan and anti-imperial perspective of its Jewish heritage. The kingship of God, and his Messiah, was set up against the empires of the world. Jesus was crucified by a second-tier Roman official in a backwater province, killed like a lowly slave, brutally executed like a murderous brigand. But God had raised Jesus from the dead, undoing what Pilate and Herod had done to him, robbing death of its finality, and testifying to the goodness of God's power and the power of God's goodness. Death was the tyrant's ultimate weapon to terrify and enslave, yet God's power and promise of resurrection meant that the tyrant's weapon had been disarmed. Beyond that, God the Father had appointed Jesus as the Son of God in power, Messiah and Lord, and Jesus would return to judge the world with true justice. One day, empires as the world has known them will be no more.⁷

.....

.....

.....

In preparation for next week, please read Acts 5–8. Watch for what characterizes the gospel community as it spreads beyond Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria.

⁷ Michael F. Bird and N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Powers: Christian Political Witness in an Age of Totalitarian Terror and Dysfunctional Democracies* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2024), 22–23.

Acts 5–8: Judea and Samaria under Christ

Last week we saw how the resurrected, ascended king empowered all his people to declare his kingship and live as his kingdom (Acts 1–2).

When they used Jesus' authority, they upset those in power in Jerusalem. It didn't stop them: they kept declaring Jesus' kingship and living like everyone in the kingdom mattered to the king (Acts 3–4).

Any questions or thoughts on Acts 1–4 before we continue?

Acts 5: Representing Christ's leadership

Pretence to gain approval (5:1-11)

Ananias and Sapphira made a tragic choice. Do you know their story?

Chapter 4 ended with the believers living as a community where *no one claimed any of their possessions was their own* (4:32). The Holy Spirit was leading them to live like Jesus. He claimed nothing as his own, not even his life! Together they embody Christ's leadership: *with great power his apostles were giving evidence of the resurrection of Master Jesus whose great generosity was on them all* (4:33).

Barnabas—the guy who later travels with Paul—sets the example:

Acts 4:36-37 (NIV)

³⁶ Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

That's positive peer pressure, encouraging others to live unselfishly. But peer pressure can be a problem: it works by gaining the group's approval:

Acts 5:1-2 (NIV)

¹ Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. ² 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.

Peter calls them out:

Acts 5:3-4 (NIV)

³ 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? ⁴ 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.”

The problem is the pretence. They present as if motivated by the Holy Spirit, but they're actually motivated by seeking honour. The Holy Spirit reveals their mixed motives, so the deception won't permeate the community.

When is it right to confront someone publicly like this? (Compare 1 Timothy 5:20.)

The outcome is tragic. *When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died* (verse 5). When Sapphira came in and collaborated his story, she also died (verse 10). *Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events* (verse 11).

Your thoughts? How would you react if something like this happened in our church?

.....

In the early days of the Sinai covenant, two of Aaron's sons died because they presented an offering to the LORD using fire from elsewhere. **Nadab and Abihu** died for dishonouring God. God insisted, *"Among those who approach me, I will be proved holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honoured"* (Leviticus 10:3).

Ananias and Sapphira died for presenting a deceptive offering, one intended to benefit themselves by deceiving the Holy Spirit and the community. It's terrifying:

Acts 5:5, 10-11 (NIV)

⁵ When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. ...

¹⁰ At that moment, [Sapphira] fell down at his feet and died. ... ¹¹ Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

In the new covenant, we're all priests representing God's character. Men and women, we're all equally accountable.

Embodying Jesus' kingship (5:12-16)

In Acts 5:11, Luke introduces the word *church* for the first time. It's a strange word to choose. Greek had words for religious gatherings, political gatherings, and general purpose meetings. The word for a religious gathering in a Jewish setting was "synagogue" (*synagōgē*). But early Christians described themselves as an *ekklēsia*.



An *ekklēsia* was a political gathering (Acts 19:32, 39, 41). In Athenian democracy, the *ekklēsia* was the assembly that gathered to make the city's decisions. In the Jewish story, the *ekklēsia* was the assembly under God's leadership in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 9:10; Acts 7:38), and later the assembly that gathered around the king (1 Chronicles 13:2-4; 29:1, 10, 20; 2 Chronicles 6:3, 12-13).

Why did Christians choose this word? And how could they use it for something that was not a meeting in one location? Sometimes it's *the ekklēsia throughout Judea and Galilee and Samaria* (Acts 9:31).

The *ekklēsia* seems to be the gathering around King Jesus. It's located in him rather than any one geographical setting. The church (*ekklēsia*) is community that embodies and honours the government of God's Messiah.

The **apostles** are therefore the ambassadors sent to declare the king's authority. They enact his reign as the community where *no one claimed that any of their possessions was their own* (4:32). They implement his reign over the earth with *signs and wonders*—miraculous interventions that point people to his caring governance (5:12).

In honouring the king like this, *they were highly regarded by the people* (5:13). Isn't that what Ananias and Sapphira craved and tried to gain through trickery?

The community of King Jesus is not something you join for its benefits. The gospel is not a commodity to be marketed. The good news is that Jesus Christ is Lord, so it costs you everything. It requires you to trust his leadership. That's what it means to *believe in the Lord*:

Acts 5:13-14 (NIV)

¹³ No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. ¹⁴ Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.

He refocuses us from personal gain to divine kingship, so he can change the world through us (verses 15-16).

Jesus' authority is a threat to those in power (5:17-42)

If God has given the kingship to Jesus, his authority is a threat to those who claim to be in power. If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar and the temple leaders are not.

Many die in wars as nations and rulers fight to assert their power. Many who proclaim Jesus as Lord have been killed by rulers and churches asserting their authority in the last 2000 years. It's a life-and-death issue.

But just like our Leader, we don't fight back. God calls humanity to recognize his Anointed, but he doesn't force his king on the world. God gives life:

Acts 5:17-20 (Tom Wright's translation)

¹⁷ Then the high priest got up, and all who were with him, namely the group called the 'Sadducees'. They were filled with righteous indignation, ¹⁸ and seized the apostles and put them in the public jail. ¹⁹ But an angel of the Lord came in the night, opened the prison doors, and brought them out.

²⁰ 'Go and take your stand in the Temple', he said, 'and speak all the words of this **Life** to the people.'

Sadducees don't believe in life after death. But next morning Jesus' messengers are back like their resurrected king. They're telling everybody all the words of *Life*.

How do you stop that? They were furious and wanted to put them to **death** (verse 33).

Acts 5:34-39 (NIV)

³⁴ But a Pharisee named **Gamaliel**, a teacher of the law, ... ³⁵ addressed the Sanhedrin: "...³⁸ Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. ³⁹ But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

Given his background in God's Law and the way God had released the apostles from the Sanhedrin's jail, Gamaliel warns that *fighting against God* would be futile. He was also Paul's tutor (Acts 22:3).

Acts 5:40-42 (NIV)

⁴⁰ They ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

⁴¹ The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. ⁴² 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.

So what is the gospel, according to the apostles?

.....

.....

.....

Acts 6: Sharing his authority to care***Everyone cared for (6:1-7)***

Acts 6:1 (NIV)

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.

In a culture where women can't work, a widow with no extended family had few options. There are many thousands of believers now (4:4), and they're enacting Jesus' kingship by caring for each other.

The majority of Jews were still living outside Palestine. These are the *Hellenistic* (Greek-speaking) Jews who discovered Jesus as the Christ at festivals like Pentecost and then stayed. They feel they're not being treated as well as the locals.

How do the apostles address this issue? How do they ensure everyone's needs are met, without trying to do it all themselves? What is their calling? (verses 3-4).

.....

Everyone involved (6:8-15)

Jesus authorized his apostles with his authority. They're mediators between heaven and earth, appealing to heaven for people, and declaring heaven's message for earth (verse 4).

That's why God performed signs and wonders through the apostles (2:43; 3:6; 5:12-16). How does that change as the apostles share their authority with others? (6:8; 8:6; 9:17).

.....

So, it's no longer just the apostles who are viewed as the enemy. What accusations are levelled against Stephen? (6:11-14)

.....

Moses delivered God's Law at Sinai, so *blasphemy against Moses and God* (verse 11) would be claiming that Jesus has authority to establish a different covenant kingdom. His authority declared, "You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you ..." (Matthew 5:21, 27, 33, 38, 43). Do you see any other similarities between the accusations against Jesus and Stephen? (Matthew 26:60-61)

.....

.....

The question is, which group represents heaven's authority?
Who looks like heaven's messenger here? (verse 15)

Acts 7: Stephen dies like his Lord

Stephen summarizes the story of God's people (7:1-53)

Stephen acknowledges the Sanhedrin as family (7:2), finding common ground with them in the family story. It starts with Abraham: his trust in what God promised, and the sufferings the patriarchs endured (verses 2-8).

One of Jacob's sons was rejected, handed over to a foreign power because the brothers were jealous. They tried to get rid of him, but **Joseph** received the authority his father intended (verses 9-10). Joseph used that authority to save the family as they joined him (verses 11-16). Is Stephen saying this story is still playing out with Jesus?

Israel's story has always been the life-versus-death struggle:

- God increased Jacob's family, while Pharaoh decreed death (verses 17-19).
- God gave **Moses** life, keeping him alive in Pharaoh's household (verses 20-22).
- Moses tried killing to get justice for his people, but they rejected him, leaving him vulnerable to Pharaoh (23-29).
- Only when Moses met God at the flaming bush was Moses ready to enact God's sovereign authority: returning to the jaws of death to save the very people who had rejected him (verses 30-36).
- *Words of life* come to us in what Moses received from God. And Moses said God would send *another prophet like me* (verses 37-38, Deuteronomy 18:15).

But when God provided this new "Moses" would God's people follow? While Moses was up the mountain hearing from God, the Israelites stopped following his leadership and made a god to suit themselves (verses 39-41).

That's the issue that ultimately caused Israel to fall. They gave themselves to the nations and their gods. That's why God sent them into exile (verses 42-43).

And that's when the temple fell. The tabernacle was *a dwelling place for the God of Jacob* to live among his people. Then Solomon built a temple, knowing it could not contain the Most High (1 Kings 8:27). Like Isaiah 66:1-2 says, God's reign reaches beyond any humanly constructed temple (verses 44-50).

So, it's no surprise when those who run the temple do not represent God's authority. It was like that in Jeremiah's day when God overturned the first temple. They had a history of killing the prophets who promised *the one who would do right*.

This is exactly how Jesus confronted the temple leaders who rejected his authority (Matthew 23:33–24:30). Stephen accuses the temple leaders of *betraying and murdering* the one who did right for his people (verses 51-53).

Stephen dies for his king (7:54-60)

Stephen knows they're threatening death, but he won't be diverted from declaring Jesus' authority:

Acts 7:55-56 (NIV)

⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

⁵⁶ "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

How do you understand this revelation the Holy Spirit gave Stephen?
What does it mean to say Jesus has this position at God's right hand?
Why does Stephen call Jesus *the son of man*?

.....

The first to die for proclaiming Jesus as king is not one of the twelve. The apostles rejoiced that they'd been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name (5:41), but Stephen is the first to be killed to silence the message that Jesus reigns.

Even as Stephen receives death from his enemies, he's following his life-giving Lord:

Luke 23:46 Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

Acts 7:59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

Luke 23:34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Acts 7:60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

Many murders follow Stephen's: killings by temple authorities, Roman authorities, church authorities, and other religions that give death to their enemies.

Later in first century, John saw a vision of *the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They cried out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord ..."* (Revelation 6:9-10). They were told to wait; others would be *killed just as they had been*.

What does it say about how Jesus serves as king in a world where people fight for power? What does it say about our vulnerability as we serve him?

.....

Following Jesus is a choice between Life and Death.

Acts 8: Philip spreads the good news

A young man named Saul was in the mob that murdered Stephen. He wasn't throwing the stones, but he was *holding their coats* (7:58). *He approved of their killing him* (8:1).

To Saul, the claim that Jesus is Lord undermined the temple authorities, the faith as he understood it. He devoted himself to stamping out the community that gathers around King Jesus, to prevent the claims of Jesus' kingship taking root:

Acts 8:3 (NIV)

Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

We'll come back to Saul next week (Acts 9), but please notice how Jesus' followers respond. Rather than fight back, they leave their homes and go elsewhere.

And what do you think they take with them?

Acts 8:4 (NIV)

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

Samaria receives the good news (8:1-8)

Like Stephen, Philip was part of the team the apostles shared their authority with (6:5). He went north to Samaria, between Judea and Galilee.

In the days of the divided kingdom, Samaria was capital of Israel (the northern nation). It fell to Assyria, and was repopulated with people from elsewhere (2 Kings 17:24).

God had promised to restore his protection over them through a descendant of King David: *"I will restore David's fallen shelter"* (Amos 9:11). *Afterward the Israelites will return to seek the LORD their God and David their king* (Hosea 3:5).

That was more than 700 years earlier. Imagine what it meant when someone arrived declaring the anointed king had come, enacting his liberating reign:

Acts 8:5-8 (NIV)

⁵ Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. ⁶ When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. ⁷ For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralysed or lame were healed. ⁸ So there was great joy in that city.



What was *the gospel* as Philip proclaimed it? There are two phrases in **verse 12**:

-
-

Do Philip's two phrases mean essentially the same thing?

Is this how you understand the gospel?

How did people respond to the gospel? Why this response? Why emphasize that *both men and women* became citizens of God's reign in his anointed?

.....

Samaritans joining the kingdom of the Jewish Messiah was unexpected, even though God had promised to reunite both parts of the divided kingdom under a Davidic king (Ezekiel 37:15-28), and Jesus said his kingdom would spread from Jerusalem to *all Judea and Samaria* (Acts 1:8).

The apostles came to check out this unusual development:

Acts 8:14-17 (NIV)

¹⁴ When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. ¹⁵ When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶ because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Peter and John see that Christ's kingship has been extended to Samaritans as well as Jews, to women as well as men. Every citizen of Jesus' reign participates in his anointing as king, so they pray for that anointing on these Samaritans also.

Dealing with trickery (8:9-25)

There's at least one person who wants divine power for his own benefit.

Simon the sorcerer lives for people's accolades (verse 10). He buys his magic tricks:

Acts 8:18-22 (NIV)

¹⁸ When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money ¹⁹ and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

²⁰ Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! ²¹ You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God.

²² 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. ²³ For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."

Why does Peter curse him with *perishing* along with his money? (verse 20)

Is it wrong to sell people the gospel as something to benefit themselves?

How do we address the issue of mixed motives?

.....

.....

An Ethiopian government official receives the good news (8:26-40)

God directs Philip to speak to an Ethiopian: *an important official in charge of all the treasure of the Kandake, the Ethiopian queen* (verse 27).

This is a big step beyond the Samaritans who had some connection to the Jewish king if you went back 900 years. But an Ethiopian? That's a completely different ethnic group.

The guy is reading Isaiah as he's chauffeured home. He's up to what we call Isaiah 53, a passage about *a sheep being led to the slaughter, someone whose life was taken from the earth*. He's not sure whether Isaiah was telling his own story or someone else's. *Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the gospel about Jesus* (verse 35).

The guy wants to be baptized as a follower of Jesus. "*What could stand in the way?*" he asks (verse 36). For one thing, he's a gentile. For another, he works for another ruler. And when he went to Jerusalem to worship he was very aware that under the Sinai covenant, no eunuch *could enter the ekklesia of the Lord* (Deuteronomy 23:1).

None of these barriers matter now. Together, they went into the water, and Philip baptized him (verse 38). They never see each other again, but the good news of the Christ is on the way to Africa.

Philip is "found" at Azotus, the old Philistine town of Ashdod (verse 40). There's no hint on how he got there. Philip works his way north, *gospelling in all the towns until he came to Caesarea* in the northern region near Mount Carmel.

Reflection

What questions do you have over Acts 5–8?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

How is the kingdom of Christ spreading? Who is included?

.....

.....

.....

.....

Every attempt to stop the proclamation of Jesus' authority has failed:

- *If it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God (5:39)*
- Outlawing speaking in Jesus' name and locking up his apostles didn't work. The temple authorities were *at a loss, wondering what this might lead to (5:24)*.
- Saul's mission to *destroy the church by dragging off men and women to put them in prison* did not work (8:3). It ended up spreading the message of Jesus' kingship beyond Jerusalem. You can't put a fire out by spreading it in the grass.

By Acts 8, the message of Jesus' kingship has spread to both parts of the divided kingdom of Israel: Judea and Samaria. It's even started to spread beyond to the borders, into a foreign nation, gentile territory in Africa.

What else inspired you in Acts 5–8?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

In preparation for next week, please read Acts 9–12. Meditate on how Christ brings his enemies under his authority, even people from the nations who had not previously been God's people.

Acts 9–12: Christ's kingdom extends to gentiles

Any questions from the first eight chapters before we continue?

Acts 9: Saul meets the resurrected Lord

An enemy meets God's Anointed (9:1-19)

Saul was in the crowd that stoned Stephen (7:58), *approving of their killing him* (8:1).

To Saul, this Jesus cult was a threat to Judaism, undermining Jewish tradition that had survived through centuries of struggle. Their identity went all the way back to the Law and the Prophets. That's why Saul was zealous to eliminate this threat:

Acts 9:1-2 (NIV)

¹ Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ² 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.

Saul operated with the temple's authority. He was pursuing Jews who'd fled the country because of the pressure on these Jesus-followers (8:1). Saul had the paperwork to get them extradited back to Jerusalem to face the authorities.

On the road, in gentile territory, Saul faced an authority he did not anticipate:

Acts 9 ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

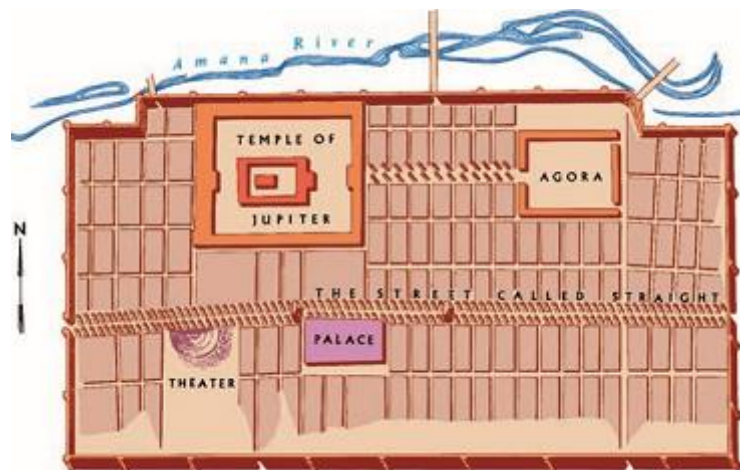
Jesus is still suffering? In heaven? Did you ever consider how our Lord still participates in our sufferings?

Persecute (*diōkō*) can have another sense as well. It can mean to hound someone, to harass them, or chase them. Jesus asks, "Why are you *pursuing* me?"

Acts 9 ⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

This is too much for Saul to process. As far as he knew, Jesus was dead, crucified by the very people whose authority Saul represents. If Jesus is speaking to him then Jesus is alive, raised up by God as Messiah (anointed ruler).

Saul is discovering Jesus' authority in Syria. Jesus' reign extends to the nations. And Saul is his enemy, aligned with the temple authorities who arranged Jesus' execution.



"Damascus in the time of Saul," *Understanding the New Testament: An Introductory Atlas*, (Carta Jerusalem, 2019), 32.

A few moments ago, Saul was so sure of himself he would imprison any who saw things differently. Now he's seen Jesus' authority, and he can see nothing else:

Acts 9 ⁷ The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸ 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. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

The believers in Damascus knew Saul was coming. Maybe some left town. No one wanted Saul to find them.

Acts 9:10–19 (NIV)

¹⁰ In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias.

The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

¹¹ The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.

¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

¹³ "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem.

¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

Jesus could have told Paul what to do. Instead, he involves Ananias. Between Saul and Ananias there is hatred and fear. The gospel (the good news that Jesus is king) reconciles us with God **and** with each other. The gospel is never a private decision—"just between you and God." The gospel calls for a world-transforming commitment to our God-appointed king.

The Lord insists Ananias deliver this prophetic message:

Acts 9:15-16 (my translation)

¹⁵ The Master said to him, "Go! for to me this one is a chosen carrier to bear [the authority entrusted to] my name before both the nations with their kings and Israel's descendants. ¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

This is different. Previously, Jesus appointed twelve to proclaim heaven's reign arriving in him, but he restricted them to *the decimated sheep of Israel's household*. The nations had overpowered God's nation, scattering Israel among the nations as sheep without a leader (Matthew 9:35–10:7).

Now God has raised up his Christ (anointed leader) over Israel and the nations. King Jesus commissions Saul to bear the authority entrusted to his name. The trouble is that the *nations* already have self-appointed *kings*. If Saul proclaims Jesus as our heaven-appointed ruler, he will suffer the same way Jesus did (Acts 17:7).

It takes time for Saul to digest the commission his Lord gave him through Ananias, but Saul does become the emissary of King Jesus to the nations. That's how he describes himself: *apostle to the gentiles* (Romans 11:13; Galatians 2:8; 1 Timothy 2:7).

Israel is included, of course. Jesus is God's anointed Messiah for Israel and the nations. For centuries, Jews had wondered how God would get the nations under control in order to restore his nation. The concept of the nations being included in the Messiah's reign was a *mystery* that had eluded everyone (Ephesians 3:6). That's the message King Jesus now entrusted to Saul. This is how God saves the world.

The chapter began with Saul *breathing out death threats* against the followers of the God-appointed ruler (9:1). Now King Jesus' most vocal opponent has seen him alive, raised up and enthroned by God. This revelation transforms Saul from enemy to ambassador. The one who caused such suffering for the Lord now participates in the suffering of his Lord: *there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him* (verse 23).

Saul becomes the apostle Paul. The enemy who breathed death threats against Christ's people writes these words to describe how the Christ will save the world:

1 Corinthians 15:25-26 (my translation)

It is necessary for him to be king until all his enemies have been placed under his feet, and the last enemy to be abolished is death.

The community of the king (9:20-43)

Saul joins the Damascus disciples, *proclaiming in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God* (verse 20). There's another attempt on his life (verse 24).

The Jerusalem disciples don't trust him, until Barnabas sides with Saul (verse 27).

After a third attempt on his life, they send him back home to Tarsus (verses 29-30).

Now that King Jesus has dealt with their most vociferous opponent, life is easier for the community under his leadership:

Acts 9:31 (NIV)

³¹ Then the church [*ekklēsia*] 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.

When the *ekklēsia* was first established in Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit led them to *sell property and possessions to give to anyone in need* (2:45), so *there were no needy persons among them* (4:34). Now this is happening right across the *ekklēsia* under Jesus' leadership. This example is from the port of Joppa (Tel Aviv-Yafo today):

Acts 9:36 (NIV)

In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor.

The community embodies Christ's leadership by caring for those who are unable to take care of themselves (the poor). Tabitha Dorcas is such an example of what it means to be a human that they ask Peter to come and see the impact of her life when she dies. Peter prays, and God restores her to life (verse 40).

That's how Peter came to be in Joppa (9:43) when an army officer from Caesarea summoned him (10:1).

Any thoughts on Acts 9? What strikes you about Saul's encounter with his king?

Acts 10: Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit

What God calls clean (10:1-23)

Peter's praying while waiting for lunch. He sees a vision:

Acts 10:11–16 (NIV)

¹¹ He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. ¹³ Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

¹⁴ "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

It's hard to overstate how strange this was for Peter. The distinctives that separated Israel from the nations were their ethnicity, circumcision, observance of the Sabbath and festivals, and the kosher food laws. When a foreign ruler tried to force the Jews to drop these practices and sacrificed a pig in the temple, he caused a riot (160s BC). Peter would never eat food that violated Torah laws.

In fact, Peter would have been thoroughly confused that God had unclean creatures in heaven. Why would heaven be invaded by unclean animals and reptiles? Was this Peter's hunger pains talking, or was God really telling him to eat what was unclean? You can hear the confusion in his answer: "Certainly not, Lord!"

Peter is still trying to figure out what this means when soldiers turn up at the gate. It was never a good day when Roman soldiers came looking for you. These guys are from the Italian Guard, protecting the coastline. They've been sent to escort Peter to Caesarea to answer questions. Should he escape while he can?

The Spirit who had just confused Peter with that vision now tells him, "*Get up. Go downstairs. Don't hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them*" (verse 20).

Peter faces his inquisitors. They tell him their boss is a Roman army officer named



Carta's New Century Handbook and Atlas of the Bible (2015), 240.

Cornelius. He submits to Israel's God, and he had a visit from an angel telling him to ask for Peter in Joppa (verse 22, as in verses 1-8).

Normally, Peter would be very reticent to enter a gentile's house or accept his hospitality. But God just told Peter three times, "*Do not call anything unclean that God has made clean*" (verse 15).

The gospel according to Peter (10:24-43)

Peter goes (verse 23). It's so out of character he needs to explain himself:

Acts 10:28–29 (NIV)

²⁸ 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. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?"

Cornelius appeals to the highest authority: a message from an angel (verse 30).

So Peter needs to summarize the message of Jesus for someone without a Jewish background. Peter's Holy Spirit inspired message for Jews was outstanding (2:14-38), but his gospel presentation here is even better for a wider audience:

Acts 10:36–43 (NIV)

³⁶ "You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷ You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

³⁹ "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.

⁴¹ He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Is this how you understand the gospel message? What did Peter say?

Would you present the gospel in Australia like this? What would be the same?

What would be different?

.....

.....

.....

Can gentiles be a temple for the Holy Spirit? (10:44-48)

Peter was still talking when God stepped in and changed everything. *Holy Spirit had been poured out even on gentiles*. It's like Pentecost all over again, but this time it's non-Jewish believers who are proclaiming what God has done in Christ in languages they had never learned (verse 46).

For Peter's companions, this was incongruous. Peter should never have gone into the home of a gentile, and Holy Spirit certainly should not have made his home in them.

Only circumcised males were accepted into the covenant family (Genesis 17:9-14). Uncircumcised, unclean gentiles were not fit receptacles for God's Holy Spirit (v. 45). Peter now understood his vision: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (verse 15). Baptism is the only cleansing ceremony they need (verse 48).

These Roman soldiers are not becoming part of the Sinai covenant. They're not asked to be circumcised as if they were becoming Jews. They are part of the new covenant established when God raised up his anointed, giving him authority over all nations. They're asked to identify with the death, burial, and resurrection of their king.

What God has made clean, the Jewish community cannot treat as impure. God solved the problem of the nations crushing God's nation by including the nations in the kingdom of the Messiah:

Ephesians 2:19-22 (my translation)

¹⁹ You non-Jews are no longer foreigners and aliens but equal citizens, included in the holy people, with a place in God's households ...

²² co-assembled into God's dwelling-place by the Spirit.

Acts 11: Antioch: the first "Christians"***Reaction in Jerusalem (11:1-18)***

When Peter returned to Jerusalem, the Jewish believers censured him:

"You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them" (11:3).

In Jewish tradition, it was more honourable to die than eat with gentiles. This story from around 160 BC is in the Apocrypha (the extra books in the Catholic Bible):

2 Maccabees 6:18-20 (English Standard Version—Catholic Edition)

¹⁸ Eleazar, one of the scribes in high position, a man now advanced in age and of noble presence, was being forced to open his mouth to eat swine's flesh. ¹⁹ But he, welcoming death with honour rather than life with pollution, went up to the rack of his own accord, spitting out the flesh, ²⁰ as men ought to go who have the courage to refuse things that it is not right to taste, even for the natural love of life.

Peter recounts the story, focusing on the revelation God gave him:

"Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (verse 9)

God made these gentiles the dwelling place for his Holy Spirit, so:

"Who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?" (verse 17).

The Jerusalem believers begin to realize that God has changed the markers that identify his people:

Acts 11:18 (NIV)

¹⁸ 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."

The Jew/gentile problem is so deep-rooted that it continued to raise its head. We'll see more of this in Acts 15 and Paul's letters (Galatians; Romans 9–11).

It's still an issue in some quarters today. In the early days, Jews like Saul used their power to harm Christ-followers. When Christians gained power (the so-called Holy Roman Empire), they sometimes hated Jews as "Christ-killers." That attitude persisted into modern times when a "Christian" nation (Germany) tried to exterminate Jews.

So, how should Christians regard Jews? Are Jews "godless" and "enemies" as Martin Luther labelled them in his lectures on the Psalms? Or are the Jews God's chosen people, more precious and significant than other nations? How do we take the right attitude?

Christians beyond Jerusalem (11:19-30)

While doing life with gentiles was a big deal for Jerusalem Jews, it was less of an issue for diaspora Jews (those scattered among the nations). They lived in gentile communities, rubbing shoulders with them every day. They couldn't help talking about Jesus with their neighbours:

Acts 11:19–21 (NIV)

¹⁹ Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews.

²⁰ 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. ²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.



Standard Bible Atlas. (2006) 33.

Antioch in northern Syria therefore becomes a hub for Christianity in the gentile world. Jerusalem responds by sending **Barnabas** the encourager (4:36), the guy who accepted Saul and introduced him to the Jerusalem church (9:27).

Remember, they'd sent **Saul** home to Tarsus for his own safety (9:30). Barnabas chases him up (11:25). Together, they taught *a great number of people* (verse 26).

Up to this point, the followers of Jesus have been regarded as an untrustworthy sect of Judaism, a “way” that doesn’t match what others of their faith are doing (9:2). In this Syrian city they get a new name: **Christians** (11:26). They’re not just Jews. They’re identifiable as the people who are always on about the anointed ruler, the Christ.

So this is how King Jesus brings heaven’s reign back to the earth. Jesus’ vision was: *“You will be the evidence of my expanding reign: in the capital, in Judea and Samaria (both parts of the fallen kingdom), and to the ends of the earth.”* (1:8 paraphrased).

There’s no Jewish kingdom and gentile kingdom. Together, Jews and gentiles live in the Messiah’s reign, as one family under God.

One of them (Agabus) hears from God about *a severe famine that would spread over the entire Roman world ... during the reign of Claudius* [AD 41–54] (verse 28). The kingdom of the Christ has an opportunity to provide support for and express family solidarity with their Jewish roots:

Acts 11:29 (NIV)

²⁹ The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea.

How important do you think it is to the “Christian” message for us to engage in practical support and solidarity with people who are struggling? Central, or incidental?

.....

.....

.....

Acts 12: Herod's death

Who is king now? (12:1-5)

For the first eleven chapters of Acts, persecution came from the Jerusalem temple. It reacted to claims that the resurrected Jesus was king. But now the faith has spread to Antioch and beyond. The Roman rulers begin to treat Jesus as a threat.

Rulers do whatever it takes to remain popular with the people. That’s how democracy works, but it’s true of other forms of rule too:

Acts 12:1–3 (NIV)

¹ It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. ² He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. ³ 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.

Four fishermen were among those Jesus chose as apostles: Peter and Andrew, James and John. James is the first to be put to death by the state. It must have brought back memories for Peter to be captured at Passover time, like his Lord.

Every once in a while I see a social media post promising, “God saved Daniel from the lions, and he will save your family from everything that comes against you.” Anyone who says that does not understand the cross. Jesus was crucified, and he told them to expect the same treatment: “Take up your cross and follow me.” Nearly all the apostles died for their Lord over the next 40 years.

How do you process what happened to James, the sufferings Christians face?

.....

.....

Who saves from oppression? (12:6-17)

We can't expect the world to treat us better than it treated our Lord, but we do have the privilege of calling on a higher authority:

Acts 12:5-11 (NIV)

⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.

⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.”

I love how Peter was so sleepy that the heavenly messenger had to spell out every step of the process. Peter believes he's still asleep ... until he finds himself standing alone outside Herod's prison and has to figure out where to go.

Why did God rescue Peter, but not James? Have you ever wondered why some prayers are answered and others are not? What do you do with that?

.....

.....

.....

Peter joins the group that's been praying for him (verses 12-17).

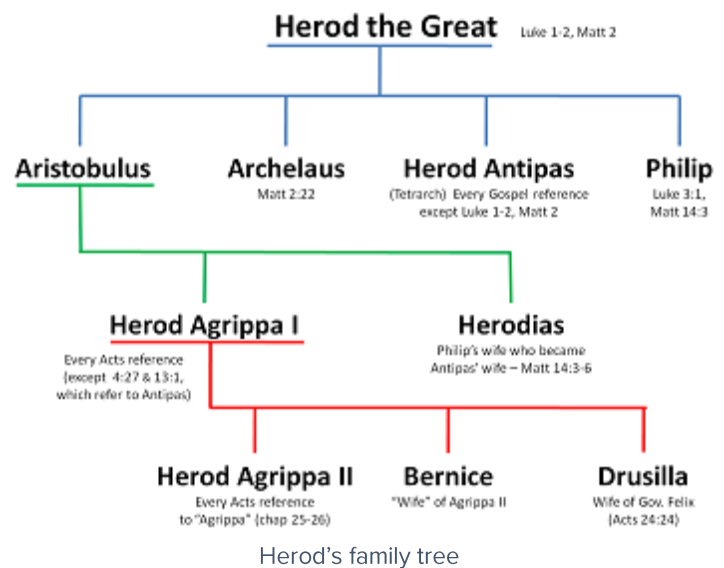
Can you guess what happened to the guards who lost their prisoner? (verses 18-19).

Whose reign lasts? (12:18-25)

The *King Herod* of Acts 12:1 is Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great who killed the babies of Bethlehem to eliminate “the king of the Jews” (Matthew 2).

Now God has given dominion of the earth to King Jesus, but Herod Agrippa is killing and imprisoning those who proclaim Jesus reign in order to protect his power.

This is the rebellion that has dominated human history since in the beginning. God made us in his image, giving us dominion over his creation (Genesis 1:26-28). We rebelled, trying to take *the knowledge of good and evil* for ourselves to be *like gods* (Genesis 3:5). Instead, rebellion made us mortal (Genesis 3:19), and we wield the power of death (Genesis 4:8). We hunt for power, as Babylon and Assyria did to Israel in Old Testament times (Genesis 10:8-12).



That's why Jesus was crucified. The heir of humanity (*Son of Man*) was a threat to the temple leaders and Caesar (Luke 22:66–23:2). Now, Herod Agrippa, like his grandfather, must get rid of those who proclaim Jesus as God's anointed ruler for the world (the *Christ*). Herod's claim to power is his attempt to take God's place. He wants people to worship them, and he accepts their worship:

Acts 12:21-23 (NIV)

²¹ On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. ²² They shouted, “This is the voice of a god, not of a man.”

²³ 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.

Mortal human rulers versus our eternal heavenly sovereign: that's a regular motif in Scripture (e.g. Psalms 56:4; 82:7; 90:3; 103:15; 118:6, 9; Isaiah 31:3; 51:2; Ezekiel 28:9). God shows the Jewish people that the Roman ruler they've allied with is a blasphemer.

Most people in Scripture are not mentioned by historians, but we know Herod died in AD 44. Here's how Jewish historian Josephus described his death:

Josephus, *Antiquities* 19.344–350 (*Works of Josephus*, 1987, 523-524)

He ... came into the theatre early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him; (345) and presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another (though not for his good), **that he was a god**; and they added, “Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature.” (346) Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery. ...

A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner. (347) He therefore looked upon his friends, and said, "I whom you call a god, am commanded presently to depart this life; while Providence thus reproofs the lying words you just now said to me; and I, who was by you called immortal, am immediately to be hurried away by death. ... (350) And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life, being in the fifty-fourth year of his age, and in the seventh year of his reign.

But this isn't unique to Herod. Tyrants protect their power by killing or imprisoning their enemies. It's what Saul was doing (Acts 8:1). It's what Nebuchadnezzar tried to do to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel 3). It's what Darius tried to do to Daniel (Daniel 6). It's what Antiochus IV tried to do to Jerusalem in 160s BC (Daniel 11).

The death of Antiochus IV is described in the Apocrypha (in the Catholic Bible):

2 Maccabees 9:9, 12 (ESV-CE)

⁹ And so the ungodly man's body swarmed with worms, and while he was still living in anguish and pain, his flesh rotted away, and because of his stench the whole army felt revulsion at his decay. ... ¹² When he could not endure his own stench, he uttered these words: "It is right to be subject to God, and no mortal should think that he is equal to God."

At issue is the question, **who rules the world?** The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar? The Persian king Darius? The Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV? The Roman king Herod?

Well, they're all dead. Their kingdoms all fall. Earth has only one enduring ruler, only one kingdom that will never fall. God's proclamation of his Christ as our Lord will not fail. Despite Herod's ignominious death, *the word of God continued to spread and flourish* (verse 24).

Reflection

What stands out for you as you reflect on Acts 9–12?

.....

.....

.....

Consider what transformed Saul on the road to Damascus. People sometimes imagine Saul having a crisis of conscience, struggling with guilt as the reason for his conversion. But it doesn't seem to be a sense of failure that overwhelmed him. He thought he was right and everyone else was wrong (compare Philippians 3:5-6). So what was it that transformed him? What did he become aware of that changed his life? How does this inform the way we present the gospel message to people?

.....

.....

Why did Cornelius' conversion make such a seismic shift for the Jerusalem church? If your faith experience has been mostly in one particular stream of the church (Pentecostal, Evangelical, mainstream, ...) how does Acts 10-11 affect what you consider the right way to worship God and express your Christian faith?

.....

.....

.....

Had you noticed before how persecution takes a new direction in Acts 12? Previously it came from the Jewish temple authorities. Now that the kingship of Jesus is extending beyond Jerusalem to other parts of the empire, it's the Roman authorities who want to silence this message. What does this say about the way Christians live in the wider community, and particularly in relation to the power of the state?

.....

.....

.....

For next week, please read Acts 13–16. As the gospel spreads to Europe, it raises questions that are so relevant for us today.

Acts 13–16: First Missionary journey

Last week we saw the resurrected Christ reveal his authority to Saul, commissioning him as his apostle to the gentiles (Acts 9). Then a Roman officer (Cornelius) and his people became part of the community where the Holy Spirit has taken up residence, much to the astonishment of Peter and the Jerusalem church (Acts 10–11).

Any questions or thoughts on previous chapters before we move on?

Acts 13: Antioch sends Barnabas and Saul/Paul

Tonight we'll see Saul of Tarsus setting out on his first missionary journey as Paul the apostle. In the region we call Türkiye, Barnabas and Paul proclaimed the good news that Jesus is God's anointed ruler for all people.

Commissioning Barnabas and Saul (13:1-3)

Antioch in northern Syria was a thriving church. It's where followers of the heaven-anointed king (the *Christ*) were first called *Christians* (11:26).

In this church were *prophets and teachers* (13:1). Prophets hear what the heavenly king is saying to his earthly realm. Teachers help people find their place in the on-going story of God in the world.

Acts 13:2–3 (NIV)

² While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas

and Saul for the work to which I have called them."³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

What strikes you about how the Holy Spirit was leading this church?

- How did Holy Spirit speak to the church? Why did they need to hear this if Holy Spirit had already spoken to Barnabas and Saul?
- What's the significance of *placing their hands on them*? (See also Acts 8:17; 9:12, 17; 12:17; 19:6; 28:8.) What responsibility was the Antioch Church taking on by *sending* Barnabas and Saul?



"Paul's first missionary journey." Zondervan Atlas of the Bible, (Zondervan, 2010), 225.

- This is the only time Acts describes the church *worshipping*. Why isn't this a bigger theme? What were they offering to their Lord as worship?
- *Prayer* is everywhere in Acts, but the only other reference to *fasting* is 14:23. Why did they fast twice here? Is there anyone they might have given their food to (compare Isaiah 58)?

Cyprus (13:4-12)

On the island of Cyprus, they attempted to share the good news of King Jesus with a government official, but *a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet* (verse 6) interfered:

Acts 13:9–12 (NIV)

⁹ Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, ¹⁰ “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? ¹¹ 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.”

Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. ¹² When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

Do you think Paul may have remembered his own blindness for three days when he first saw Jesus? (9:8-9) Have you ever heard of anyone else doing this? (2 Kings 6:18). When would you do something like this?

Did you notice the switch from *Saul* to *Paul* in verse 9? Just as people from Asia sometimes take on an English name when they come to Australia, people in the Roman Empire sometimes had a Jewish name and a Greek one (e.g. Tabitha Dorcas in 9:36). Paul now uses his Greek name Paul, rather than his Jewish name Saul.

Antioch in Pisidia (13:13-52)

There's another Antioch in a region of southern Türkiye called Pisidia. We refer to this one as Pisidian Antioch (verse 14) to distinguish it from Syrian Antioch.

Luke gives us an outstanding summary of the message Paul proclaims. His audience consists of *fellow Israelites and you gentiles who worship God* (verse 16), so he starts with the Jewish story:

- The exodus founded Israel as God's nation (verses 17-19).
- Judges implemented God's reign until they asked for a king (verses 20-22).
- From King David, God has brought to Israel the Saviour he promised, Jesus the great king proclaimed by the prophet John (verses 23-25).
- Paul is now announcing the divine rescue to those who fear God across the world, for the Jerusalem rulers wrongly condemned and executed him (26-29).
- God raised him up from the dead, fulfilling his promises to his people (30-31).

The resurrection of the Davidic kingship is what God had promised:

- Psalm 2:7 proclaims the Davidic king as Son of the heavenly sovereign (verse 33);
- Isaiah 55:3 proclaims the restoration of the David kingship after it fell (verse 34);
- Psalm 16:10 proclaims God's promise to preserve David's kingship (verse 35);
- Habakkuk 1:5 proclaims God's methods as astounding, difficult to believe (v. 41).

Here's the heart of Paul's message:

Acts 13:38-39 (my translation)

³⁸ So, let it be it known to you men, my family, that through him, to you release from sins is announced, ³⁹ even from all that prevented you being set right in the Torah of Moses.

How do you understand the gospel as Paul proclaimed it in Acts 13:16-41?

.....

.....

.....

Many believed (verse 42). Others reacted out of fear of losing their power (verse 45). Paul now turns to those who had never been part of God's covenant people (verse 46).

Acts 13:46-48 (NIV)

⁴⁶ 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.

⁴⁷ 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." [Isaiah 49:6]

⁴⁸ When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

This becomes the pattern of Paul's approach: speak to his own people first, and then go to the gentiles.

All who were appointed for eternal life: does this phrase (in verse 48) imply that God chooses which individuals are to be saved, and consequently which individuals to are damned? There has been considerable debate on this topic for the last 500 years.

But *appointed for eternal life* need not be about individuals. It could be describing what God has opened up for us in Christ for both Jews and gentiles. People have choice: Jews can *reject* it, treating themselves as not worthy of eternal life (verse 46), and gentiles can trust the one appointed for eternal life (verse 48).

The notion of election in Luke is not worked out in the sense of a predestination of the individual. "Ordained to eternal life" is a Jewish expression.⁸

⁸ Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles*, Hermeneia, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 106.

Acts 14: Galatia

Iconium (14:1-7)

Today, Iconium is called Konya. It's Türkiye's fourth largest town. In New Testament times, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe were part of the Roman province called **Galatia** (see map on page 39). Paul later wrote a letter to the Galatians.

What they did and how people responded is a pattern wherever they go:

Acts 14:1-7 (NIV)

¹ 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. ² But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the other Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. ³ 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.

⁴ The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. ⁵ There was a plot afoot among both Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. ⁶ But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, ⁷ where they continued to preach the gospel.

What's the pattern of ministry they follow? Who do they speak to first?

Why do some people believe and others react? Is that what we can expect too?

Lystra (14:8-20)

Misunderstandings occur when what's said and what's heard don't match. A word like "God" can mean different things to different people.

For Paul and Barnabas, God is the Jewish God, the creator who is sovereign over everyone. The good news is that this God is setting the world right through his Anointed (the Christ). They demonstrate this good news when they heal someone:

Acts 14:8-10 (NIV)

⁸ In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth and had never walked. ⁹ He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed ¹⁰ and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.

The people of Phrygia and Galatia had a completely different understanding of God:

Acts 14:11-13 (NIV)

¹¹ When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!"

¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. ¹³ 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.

John Stott explains what these people believed:

The supreme god Jupiter (Zeus to the Greeks) and his son Mercury (Hermes) once visited the hill country of Phrygia, disguised as mortal men. In their incognito they sought hospitality but were rebuffed a thousand times. At last, however, they were offered lodging in a tiny cottage, thatched with straw and reeds from the marsh. Here lived an elderly peasant couple called Philemon and Baucis, who entertained them out of their poverty. Later the gods rewarded them, but destroyed by flood the homes which would not take them in. It is reasonable to suppose both that the Lystran people knew this story about their neighbourhood and that, if the gods were to revisit their district, they were anxious not to suffer the same fate as the inhospitable Phrygians. Apart from the literary evidence in Ovid, two inscriptions and a stone altar have been discovered near Lystra, which indicate that Zeus and Hermes were worshipped together as local patron deities.⁹



Hermes (the messenger) and Zeus (the chief Greek god)

Australia has a couple of centuries of Christian heritage, but we can't assume people think of the one revealed in Christ when they hear the word *God*:

- “God” may mean the energy of the universe rather than a being (Buddhism).
- God may be a revelation from a different source (Mohammed for Muslims).
- God may refer to part of the cycle of life: Brama the creator, Vishnu the preserver, Shiva the destroyer (Hinduism).
- God may be *the force*, the battle with *the dark side* (for Star Wars fans).
- God may be ourselves, each with our own superpower (the Marvel universe).

Have you ever been misunderstood as you talk about God? What's your experience?

.....

The search for God is often about a search for inner peace, and there are many paths:

- Peace may come from meditation, the internal journey to escape the pain of the world and our attachment to it (Buddhism).
- Peace may come from surrender, accepting whatever happens as the will of Allah (Islam).
- Peace may come from going with the cycle of life, for karma ensures that justice comes to all in the end (Hinduism).
- Peace comes from God reconciling the world to himself and to each other in Christ (Christian view).

⁹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church & the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 230–231.

For the people of Lystra, peace came by keeping the gods happy. Take care of the gods, and they'll take care of you. If you didn't, the gods would be angry. That's why they're making these food offerings (sacrifices) to Barnabas and Paul.

So how do Barnabas and Paul respond?

Acts 14:14–18 (NIV)

¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: ¹⁵ "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. ¹⁶ In the past, he let all nations go their own way. ¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.

Paul and Barnabas wanted to say, "There's only one living God, so everything you're doing for your worthless gods is a waste of energy" (verse 15). But they did not want these people's misguided enthusiasm to turn into misguided terror.

The living God is neither domineering nor vindictive. The nations turned away from him, but he never turned away from them (verse 16). He let them go, but he continued to provide for everyone: *rain* from the heavens, *crops* in their seasons, plenty of *food* to eat, and *joy* to fill your hearts—even when you never gave him a thought (verse 17).

Is that how God treats people who don't honour him? Why don't Barnabas and Saul make these people afraid of God so they will make decisions for Christ?

.....

Interesting how people respond: If you're not a god, you must be the devil (vv. 19-20).

Return to Antioch in Syria (14:21-28)

After *making many disciples* in Derbe (verse 21), Paul and Barnabas set out for the return trip to Antioch in Syria (the church that sent them).

They revisit the churches they'd established. To *strengthen the disciples and encourage them to remain true to the faith*, they said (verse 22):

"We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,"

How is that helpful? What does it mean for us *to enter the kingdom of God*? Is this about individual salvation, or about God's reign returning to earth? Why must we *go through many hardships* for this to happen? How does this relate to Paul and Barnabas' experience? How does it relate to our experience?

.....

.....

.....

Acts 15: Jerusalem council

God is raising up a kingdom in the leadership of his Christ. This kingdom is already far more expansive than the one King David ruled as he represented God's kingship in the Sinai covenant. As well as Jews and Samaritans, Christ's kingdom includes officials from foreign governments: at least one Ethiopian, soldiers from the Italian Regiment in Caesarea, and the proconsul of Cyprus.

The *ekklesia* (church) is gathering around King Jesus in Damascus and Antioch in Syria, Antioch in Pisidia, and Iconium, Lystra and Derbe in southern Galatia. This mix of Jews and non-Jews have to figure out how to do life together as God's people.

What these Jews and gentiles have in common is an allegiance to Christ, the Jewish Messiah. What they don't have in common is a heritage from the Sinai law.

For centuries the Jewish people have been under gentile rule. To ensure they did not lose their identity, they focused on the crucial boundary markers of the covenant law:

- **circumcision:** initiating male children into the covenant community.
- **Sabbath:** no work on Sabbaths and feast days
- **kosher:** eating only with others who followed the food laws (as in Acts 11:3)
- **ethnicity:** not intermarrying with gentiles (e.g. Ezra 10)

Circumcision was the boundary marker of the covenant people even before Sinai:

Genesis 17:12, 14 (NIV)

¹² For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a **foreigner**—those who are not your offspring.
... ¹⁴ Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be **cut off** from his people; he has broken my covenant."

If the Galatians and Syrians wanted to join the Jews as part of God's covenant community, must they be circumcised?

Acts 15:1 (NIV)

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."

The Jerusalem council (15:1-18)

The Antioch church divided over this question, *in sharp dispute and debate* (verse 2). They sent delegates to Jerusalem *to see the apostles and elders about this question*.

Pharisees promoted Torah-obedience as the path to restoring the fallen kingdom (Deuteronomy 30:2-3). So, the Pharisees who followed Jesus said, "*The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses*" (15:5).

Acts 15:7–11 (NIV)

⁷ 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.

⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹ He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ 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? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

Do you recall how God showed Peter that he had chosen to include the gentiles in his people? (verse 7) If God has *purified their hearts by faith* without regard for the Jew/gentile distinction, are gentiles cleansed apart from the Law (verse 9)?

.....

Does that mean the Sinai covenant is no longer in force for Jews either? Has God established a new covenant in Christ, one that rescues both Jews and gentiles on the basis of God's generosity (grace) in providing Jesus our Lord (verses 10-11)?

.....

Barnabas and Paul recount how God miraculously confirmed their message as they called gentiles to give Christ their allegiance (faith):

Acts 15:12 (NIV)

¹² 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.

James is the final speaker. This is probably Jesus' brother, since James the apostle is dead (12:2). James summarizes what Peter said, and compares it with Scripture:

Acts 15:13-17 (NIV)

¹³ When they finished, James spoke up. “Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. ¹⁴ Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles.

¹⁵ The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

¹⁶ “‘After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent.

Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it,

¹⁷ that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,

even all the **Gentiles** who bear my name,

says the Lord, who does these things.’ [Amos 9:11-12]

If God has *chosen people from the Gentiles* (verse 14), then God's people are no longer just the descendants of Jacob. Simon Peter is right. The prophets confirm it.

Amos spoke to Israel in the time of the divided kingdom. Assyria captured Israel and settled gentiles there (2 Kings 17:24). That's why Amos said the restoration of the northern kingdom would bring gentiles under divine kingship in a son of David.

James understands the promise of Amos as fulfilled in Jesus. God raised up the fallen kingship of David when he raised Jesus out of death and gave him the throne. In him, God is restoring his kingship over the earth, including *the gentiles who bear my name*.

Gentiles are not becoming Jews (15:19-35)

James formulates a conclusion (verse 19-21). They agree, so they commit this conclusion to writing to explain their answer to the churches:

Acts 15:28-29 (NIV)

²⁸ It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: ²⁹ You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

This is nothing like the many chapters (books!) of laws God gave Israel in the Sinai covenant. It's not like the covenant God gave to Abraham for his descendants.

It's closer to the first covenant God made with humanity (Genesis 8:20–9:17). After the flood, God accepted Noah's offering, replanting the world with the blessings he gave Adam. Confronting the issue of violence, God permitted people to eat animals but not to eat blood. With a covenant, God committed to never give up on reigning over all the people of the earth, regardless of how difficult we might make it for him.

So now the Sinai covenant is no longer the basis for acceptance as God's people. With the new covenant in Christ, God fulfills **all** his previous covenants:

- his covenant with David that his son would reign forever (2 Chronicles 13:5),
- his covenant with Israel at Sinai, establishing them as God's agents to the nations (Exodus 19)
- his covenant with Abraham that identified his descendants (Genesis 15, 17)
- his covenant with all the people of the earth (Genesis 9).

Gentiles are not becoming Jews; they're not joining the Sinai covenant nation.

Jews and gentiles together are becoming citizens of a new kingdom, based on allegiance to Christ the king (faith), not obedience the Sinai Law (works).

That's the argument Paul develops in his letter to the Galatians.

Take some time to consider what this means for us.

.....

.....

Paul and Barnabas fall out (15:36-41)

So, we're all good now? Everyone is in agreement?

Unfortunately, our human struggles divide us more than theological issues do:

Acts 15:36-41 (NIV)

³⁶ 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." ³⁷ Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, ³⁸ 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.³⁹ They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus,⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord.⁴¹ He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Paul doesn't want to be encumbered with someone who couldn't cope with the pressure, when people wanted to kill them (14:5, 19).

Barnabas the encourager (4:36) wants to give John Mark another chance, like he did with Paul (9:26-27). Mark may have deserted them, but Barnabas won't desert Mark.

So who was right? Luke doesn't judge; he just reports that they went separate ways.

I like to think that Paul may have softened his stance later in life (2 Timothy 4:11).

Acts 16: Philippi

Paul and Barnabas have established the first churches beyond Syria. These new believers faced pressures from Jewish families who rejected Jesus as Messiah, from Pharisees who insist they need to become full-Jews and obey the Sinai Law, and from others who fear that the whole community will suffer if these people refuse to worship their traditional gods.

That's a lot of pressure, and someone needs to deliver the letter from the Jerusalem council (16:4). So, *Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and ... went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches* (15:39-41).



Paul's Second Missionary Journey, *Zondervan Atlas of the Bible*, (Zondervan, 2010), 228.

The gospel reaches Europe (16:1-15)

We're following Paul on his second missionary journey (16:1–18:22). As well as Silas, others join Paul, including Luke who includes himself in the "we" (from 16:10).

They revisit southern Türkiye (Cilicia, Galatia, Phrygia). Paul wants to go north to Bithynia, but *during the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."* (verse 9).

Macedonia is northern Greece, the region where Alexander the Great was born. The good news now travels to Europe for the first time.

Their first European convert was a Greek businesswoman named Lydia who already worshipped the Jewish God (verse 14). She was baptized, along with her household, and she provided hospitality for Paul and his companions (verse 15).

Who's in charge in Philippi? (16:16-24)

Philippi was proud of its status as a leading *Roman colony* (verse 12). But this city also had a dark side: people living in slavery to others and to evil powers. One of these slaves was used as a fortune-teller, *earning a great deal of money for her owners* (verse 16). The evil spirit within her was constantly distracted by Paul's presence.

Acts 16:18-21 (NIV)

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. ²⁰ They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar

²¹ by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."

By the authority of King Jesus, Paul freed someone who was doubly enslaved—possessed by slave-owners and an evil spirit. In doing so, Paul reveals what's wrong with the world held by human rulers, where the economy determines what's right.

"Why doesn't the Bible condemn slavery?" you might ask. Like Jesus, Paul spends no effort fighting the governments of this world. He just sets a slave free in Jesus' name.

Later Paul reconnects a slave with his Christian master, asking Philemon to treat Onesimus "*no longer as a slave, but better than a slave as a dear brother. ... Welcome him as you would welcome me*" (Philemon 16-17). That changes the world.

God never called us to fix the injustice of the worldly governments. God calls us to be the alternative, demonstrating life under the leadership of Christ.

Australia's legal system is based on Britain's, where *possession is nine-tenths of the law*. It's biased towards protecting ownership, not people. Possession is evil when a person or a spirit possesses another human being.

The customs of the kingdom of God are unacceptable to the wealthy and powerful whose rights the world's legal system protects (verse 21). That's why Paul and Silas are arrested, flogged, and jailed (verses 22-23). It's the conflict of two kingdoms.

Confrontation between powers (16:25-40)**Acts 16:25–26 (NIV)**

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ 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.

Does praise set the prisoner free? That's often how this text is preached, but I doubt Paul would agree. Next time he was in jail, he did not say, "Just sing praise and our chains will fall off!" That approach only leads to disillusionment.

Paul doesn't even run! God opens the door, and Paul stays? Why?

Do you remember what happened the guards when Peter was released? (12:19). Paul cares about the jailor. The guy works for the government that locks up King Jesus' servants, but Paul convinces the other prisoners to stay too. "*Don't harm yourself! We're all here!*" Paul assures the jailor (verse 28).

"*What must I do to be saved?*" the jailor asks (verse 30). Given that he was about to run himself through (verse 27), do you think he meant this literally or metaphorically?

Paul tells the jailor to give his allegiance (his trust) to Jesus as *Lord* (verse 31). "Lord" was a title Caesar claimed. Paul asked this guy—the guy who worked for Caesar's government in this leading Roman colony—to recognize someone else as Lord. Isn't that what got Paul locked up in the first place? His crime was: "*advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice*" (verse 21).

Paul gets a change of accommodation. The jailer takes Paul and Silas home, sharing his house and food with them. He washes wounds (from the beating), and Paul offers to wash the jailer too. *Immediately he and all his household were baptized* (verse 33). The Christ has turned enemies into brothers.

Next morning, the magistrates order Paul and Silas to be released (verse 35).

Acts 16:37 (NIV)

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."

Paul could have saved himself a lot of pain by playing his Roman citizenship card the previous night. He didn't, because his sufferings highlight the difference between how human rulers protect their power versus God's anointed ruler.

So why play the citizenship card now? It's a clever move. What the jailer did—taking the prisoners home to care for them—is really suspect. He'll be in trouble now. But if the magistrates have mistreated a Roman citizen, then the jailer who treated them well becomes the hero. By playing his citizenship card now, Paul turns his new brother into the hero who saved the night!

Reflection

What stands out to you from Acts 13–16?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Meditate on how Barnabas and Paul were misunderstood at Lystra (Acts 14:11). How do your friends and acquaintances understand the word “God”? What can you do to connect with people who have very different understandings of what “God” might be like?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

How is the Old Testament Law relevant to Christians today? Do we need to keep the Sinai Law that God gave Israel when he established them as a nation under his rule? Or are we under a completely different covenant now, one established in Christ that makes Jews and gentiles together the people of God? How does Acts 15 help answer that question? Are we set right with God by complying with the requirements of the Law, or by giving our allegiance to God’s Messiah (by faith)?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Why doesn't the New Testament condemn slavery? Shouldn't we highlight the injustices that are so prevalent and damaging, demanding people are treated better? Is there any point trying to fix the governments of the world? Or do we concentrate all our efforts on promoting Christ's leadership and becoming the kingdom where his reign is known in the world? What will change the world long-term?

In the words of Michael Bird and Tom Wright:

Here's the tension: when do we appeal to Caesar and submit to governing authorities, and when do we tell Caesar we must obey God rather than human authorities and pray for the government to fall into divine judgement? Can we disobey divinely instituted government? Can that disobedience even go so far as passive and active resistance?¹⁰

.....

.....

.....

.....

Please read Acts 17–20 for next week.

¹⁰ Michael F. Bird and N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Powers: Christian Political Witness in an Age of Totalitarian Terror and Dysfunctional Democracies* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2024), 107.

Acts 17–20: Second & third missionary journeys

Last week we saw how Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas to proclaim the good news of Jesus to gentiles (Acts 13), how the people of Lystra misunderstood them (Acts 14), how the church wrestled with what gentiles must do to join the covenant people (Acts 15), and how they faced jail for disrupting the Roman culture when they freed a possessed slave (Acts 16). Any questions before we continue?

Acts 17: Greece

Tonight we see Paul complete his second missionary journey, and head back to Jerusalem. We pick up the story as Paul makes the three-day walk from Philippi to Thessalonica in Macedonia.

Thessalonica (17:1-9)

Three weeks is all Paul had in Thessalonica. His message was *explaining that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead* (verse 3).

Those who rejected this message *formed a mob and started a riot* (verse 5):

Acts 17:6-7 (NIV)

⁶ When they did not find them [Paul and Silas], they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here,⁷ and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that **there is another king**, one called Jesus.”

So, as soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea (verse 10).

Later, Paul wrote two letters to Thessalonica. These letters, along with Galatians, are the earliest books of the New Testament to be written.

These letters are fascinating. Paul sets them straight on what to expect in the future, how Christ will return to reign as king in *the day of the Lord* (1 Thessalonians 4–5). Is that what you would focus on for new Christians?

For Paul, the gospel is the good news that God has installed his anointed (his *Christ*) to reign over the world (our *Lord*). That’s why he was accused of sedition against the existing rulers: *defying Caesar’s decrees, saying there is another king, one called Jesus* (verse 7).

Berea (18:10-15)

65 kilometres west of Thessalonica was Berea. Here the Jews *received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true* (verse 11). But the Thessalonians stirred up the Bereans (verse 13), so Paul escaped to the coast and headed for Athens (verses 14-15).



Map 23, *Standard Bible Atlas* (Standard Publishing, 2006), 36.

Athens (17:16-34)

Athens was at the heart of Greek democracy, learning, and art. But how do you introduce the gospel in such a culture?

Paul was *brought* to the Areopagus (verse 19). It was the highest court in Athens, and Paul was being asked to explain himself. His message about *Jesus and the resurrection* sounded like *advocating foreign gods* (verse 18), *bringing strange ideas* (verse 20).



Areopagus (foreground) and Parthenon, Athens. [Wikipedia](#)

Athena was the main god of Athens. The ruins of her famous temple—the Parthenon—are still atop the hill overlooking Athens, with the Areopagus part way up.

Acts 17:22-23 (NIV)

²² 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.

²³ 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.”

What does Paul have in common with these idol-worshippers? We know Paul was *greatly distressed to see the city was full of idols* (verse 16). When talking to Jews, Paul appeals to Scripture, but he can’t do that here. He tries to find common ground with them (as in 1 Corinthians 9:21).

Remember the debacle at Lystra? Lystra’s idea of a “god” was so different from Paul’s that they began worshipping him! He learned from that experience. He begins by clarifying what “God” he’s talking about.

Note what he affirms, and what he denies:

17 ²⁴ 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.

The Source of everything has authority over everyone (our Lord).

We don’t make ourselves a god; this God does not fit in man-made temples.

17 ²⁵ And He is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.

This God does not need the sacrifices (gifts) that people offer. Everything—even the breath in our lungs—is a gift from God.

17 ²⁶ 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.

Since all nations have their origin in the Creator who gave them their existence, any nation that worships a local god is missing the main one.

17 ²⁷ 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.

God allowed the nations go their own way, but his goal was always to woo them back under his leadership when they grew tired of power-through-violence. This was why God called Abraham, That was the reason for Israel's existence as a nation. The Spirit of God promised them, *"If you seek him, he will be found by you"* (2 Chronicles 15:2).

What evidence does Paul have that these Greeks are seeking God? It's in their poetry:

17 ²⁸ 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'
As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

The first line is sometimes attributed to Epimenides from Crete who lived in the 500s BC. The second line is from Aratus, a poet from Cilicia (where Paul grew up) who lived around 300 BC.¹¹

Pop songs are the poetry of our culture. Many songs simply seek the self, exploring my own emotions. But some songs take us outside ourselves, yearning for meaning and connection. What songs come to mind, songs you could use in conversations about searching for someone beyond ourselves?

.....
We find our identity as children of the cosmic sovereign, made in his image.
The trouble is that people flip that backwards, making images of God to suit us:

17 ²⁹ 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.³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

To *repent* is to turn to God, in contrast with pursuing our own gods. But how do you find this God? So far, Paul has been talking about the way God has made himself known in the world, in his creation. But ultimately we meet God in the person of Jesus Christ, the leader whom God has appointed as ruler for all peoples:

17 ³¹ 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."

What is the evidence that Jesus is the Christ, the God-appointed Lord whom all humanity should recognize? The evidence is that when the rulers of this world killed him to keep their own power, God overturned this injustice by raising him from the dead. That is how the apostles proclaim the gospel. The resurrection is the evidence that "God has made this Jesus ... both our Lord and his Messiah" (Acts 2:36).

¹¹ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT (Zondervan, 2012), 737.

But a Greek court cannot accept the notion of a god overruling an execution, raising the deceased from the dead as Lord of all. They dismiss Paul as a weirdo:

17³² 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.”

Everyone knows they won't listen to Paul again. Only a few believed (verse 33).

Acts 18: Corinth

It's now around AD 50, two decades after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension.¹² Paul leaves Athens for Corinth, 90 kilometres away.

Corinth was on the southern side of the narrow isthmus that separated the Peloponnese from the rest of Greece. Today the 6-kilometre Corinthian Canal lets ships pass east-west. In New Testament times cargo was unloaded, shipped across land, and reloaded. This east-west and north-south trade made Corinth a wealthy city.

There were many Jews in Corinth because Emperor *Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome (18:2)*. As usual, Paul began with them, *presenting evidence to the Jews that Jesus was the Anointed ruler (18:5)*.



The Corinthian Canal today

Examples of suffering (18:1-17)

As usual, Paul's message divided people. Some opposed Paul and became abusive (verse 6). Some—including the synagogue leader—placed their trust in Jesus as Lord, and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized (verse 8).

Paul had already been stoned and left for dead by his own people (14:19), and beaten by Roman officials (16:37). He needs reassurance that it's safe to stay here:

Acts 18:9–11 (NIV)

⁹ One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. ¹⁰ For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.” ¹¹ So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.

But the Jews who disagreed with Paul were zealous to stop the new movement: *people worshipping God in ways contrary to the Law as they see it (verse 13)*.

Acts 18:17 (NIV)

The crowd there turned on Sosthenes the synagogue leader and beat him in front of the proconsul; and Gallio showed no concern whatever.

Whether we're talking about family violence, communal violence, or international violence (war), violence is an attempt to control people. These violent Jews were

¹² Gallio (named in Acts 18:12) served briefly as proconsul of Achaia under Emperor Claudius in AD 52.

zealous to control how the others interacted with God, just as Paul did before he met Jesus (Acts 8:1). The proconsul lets the violence continue, treating it as their problem. Isn't that what the proconsul of Judea did with Jesus, refusing to intervene to prevent the death of an innocent man? (Matthew 27:24)

Just like their Lord, Jesus' followers must absorb the violence, bearing away the sin of the world. Violence may oppress people into submission, but only bearing away the injustice can liberate the world. No one wins wars; we can only win people.

The wisdom of how God rules makes no sense to the rulers of this world. Keeping their foot on their opponents' neck makes more sense to them (e.g. Exodus 1:10). They can't understand a king who bears in his own body the sufferings of his people, for the cross looks like weakness. That's what Paul told the Corinthians in his letter (1 Corinthians 1:18 – 2:15).

Examples of wisdom: Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos (18:18-28)

Priscilla and her husband Aquila join Paul as he begins the journey back to Jerusalem. Paul still practices Judaism: he cuts his hair as an expression of a vow (verse 18). He never gave up being a Pharisee (23:6).

Priscilla and Aquila stay in Ephesus. There they meet another Jew named Apollos from Alexandria, a city on the north coast of Egypt with a reputation for scholarship and one of the best libraries in the ancient world.

Acts 18:24–26 (NIV)

²⁴ A Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus.

He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures.

²⁵ He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. ²⁶ 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.

How amazing is that! The gospel that Jesus is Lord of all people has already made its way down to Egypt, without and involvement from Peter or Paul or the apostles. Apollos is quite the orator, and he uses his skills to proclaim Jesus as Lord.

Priscilla and Aquila don't have Apollos' education, but they've been working alongside Paul (verse 3) and they understand more about baptism. Sharing a meal (or a coffee) is a great opportunity to resolve different ways of seeing things.

Did you notice that Priscilla is the initiator here? As we saw with Paul and Barnabas, Luke is intentional with the name he puts first (verses 18, 19, and 26). Paul regarded Priscilla as his co-worker, along with her husband (Romans 16:3). The house where the Corinthian church met may have been in Aquila's name (1 Corinthians 16:19), but Paul usually puts her first (2 Timothy 4:19).

In the kingdom of God, men and women participate equally in Christ reign, just as God intended in the beginning (Genesis 1:26-28), and educated people can learn from unskilled people who've responded to God calling us to recognize his Christ:

1 Corinthians 1:26, 30 (NIV)

²⁶ Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ... ³⁰ It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.

Acts 19: Ephesus

After 18 months in Corinth (18:11), Paul visited Ephesus on his way back to Jerusalem (18:19-22). In New Testament times, Ephesus was a major port on the west coast of Türkiye. Today Ephesus is 6 kilometres inland, due to silting of the valley.

From Jerusalem, Paul set out for his **third missionary journey**. Taking the land route north to Antioch and then west through Celicia, and Galatia, he returned to Ephesus where he stayed for two years (19:10).

Ephesus (19:1-22)

The Holy Spirit guided the leaders at the Jerusalem Council (15:28) and guided Paul as he proclaimed Jesus (16:6-7). But Holy Spirit empowers the community as well:

Acts 19:1-6 (NIV)

¹ Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples ² 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.”

³ So Paul asked, “Then what baptism did you receive?”

“John’s baptism,” they replied.

⁴ 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.”

⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

⁶ When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.



Paul's third missionary journey, *Standard Bible Atlas* (2006), 37

John the Baptist called the Jewish community to prepare themselves for the coming of God's Christ. Such ritual cleansings were common in New Testament times.¹³ But baptism into Christ is different. Baptism marks our recognition of Jesus as our leader: his name carries authority (verse 5).

All who recognize that God has made his Messiah our Lord are empowered with the Spirit who anointed him (Acts 2:36-38; 10:44-48). That's why Paul expects us all to receive the Holy Spirit anointing of the Christ when we recognize Christ as Lord. Paul prays for this in other places too (Romans 1:11; 2 Timothy 1:6).

How would you summarize Paul's gospel if it's all about proclaiming God's Christ as our Lord? What was Paul trying to convince people about? (verse 8)

As the port for the region, Ephesus became the base from which the gospel spread to *the province of Asia* (verse 10). By the end of the first century there were seven cities in the province of Asia where people recognized Jesus as king—the seven churches of Revelation (1:4; 2:1–3:22).

In the two years Paul stayed there, Ephesus saw many miracles (19:11-12). The miracles are all about Jesus' authority, the power of the Christ breaking into the present.

Some Jewish exorcists tried to use Jesus' name as a magic incantation to drive away demons. It didn't end well, because they were not in submission to Christ's authority. (19:13-16).

The Ephesus riot (19:23-41)

The gospel that Jesus is king clashes with other claims to authority. Jesus' authority is unwelcome to those who want to be in power, those who prioritize economic growth, and those who call on other spiritual powers.

Ephesus was a wealthy trade city, with temples to the emperors and gods. Artemis was the main god, responsible for hunting, childbirth, and the environment. Her temple was enormous: *67 by 130 meters, ... the largest religious building in the Hellenistic world, about four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens.*¹⁴

Acts 19:23-41 (NIV)

²³ About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way.

²⁴ A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in a lot of business for the craftsmen there. ²⁵ He called them together, along with the workers in related trades, and said: "You know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business. ²⁶ And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all. ²⁷ 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 discredit-

¹³ <https://allenbrowne.blog/2016/12/16/where-did-baptism-come-from/>

¹⁴ Paul R. Trebilco, "Ephesus," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (IVP, 2023), 262.

ed; and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.”

²⁸ When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” ²⁹ Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul’s traveling companions from Macedonia, and all of them rushed into the theatre together.

This mob forms a procession from the guild hall in the centre of town to the amphitheatre overlooking the harbour. The Ephesus theatre could hold 24,000 spectators.

Jesus’ authority is not limited to the spiritual realm. It restructures everything. The good news that Jesus is our God-appointed king upsets the existing powers in every realm of life. In Ephesus, it upset the worship of Artemas, the economic system of those who made gods for the tourists, and the political powers that rely on this economic system.

Paul sees the crowd as a huge opportunity to promote Jesus’ authority.

The Jesus-followers

realize that the crowd as a mob was likely to lynch Paul:

19 ³⁰ Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. ³¹ Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theatre.

³² The **assembly** was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there.

An angry mob lumps Paul in with the other Jews who don’t like idols either:

19 ³³ The Jews in the crowd pushed Alexander to the front, and they shouted instructions to him. He motioned for silence in order to make a defence before the people. ³⁴ But when they realized he was a Jew, they all shouted in unison for about two hours:

“Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”

A city official tries to calm the riot. There’s no evidence of a crime against Artemas:

19 ³⁵ The city clerk quieted the crowd and said: “Fellow Ephesians, doesn’t all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven?



View toward the now-silted harbor from the theatre at Ephesus.
Zondervan Atlas of the Bible (Zondervan, 2010) 230.

³⁶ Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to calm down and not do anything rash. ³⁷ You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess.

³⁸ If, then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. They can press charges. ³⁹ If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal **assembly**. ⁴⁰ As it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of what happened today. In that case we would not be able to account for this commotion, since there is no reason for it.”

⁴¹ After he had said this, he dismissed the **assembly**.

The word *assembly* in verses 32, 39, and 41 is *ekklēsia*. It's the same word translated as “church.” In the Greek world it was used of a political assembly called to resolve the city's issues. But this riot is not a legal *ekklēsia*, with no power to resolve anything.

The NT writers chose this word (*ekklēsia*) to describe who we are. **The church is:**

the assembly of people who gather around King Jesus (the Christ),
declaring his leadership (Lord of all) and implementing what he wants done
in our communities by living under his leadership,
“christed” (anointed) with the Holy Spirit who raised him out of death and
brings us to life to be his corporate presence (body) in his earthly realm.

How does that definition sit with you? What part is he calling you to play?

.....
.....
.....

I guess that's what it means to love God and love people. Loving God involves recognizing, valuing, and responding to his authority over us. Loving people involves recognizing and valuing every person as our King does, caring for them as he cares.

Acts 20: Travelling back through Greece, Troas and Ephesus

Returning through Macedonia and Greece (20:1-12)

Paul is now on his way back to Jerusalem, visiting the churches of Macedonia and Greece as he goes (19:21; 20:1-2). A threat on his life prevents him sailing direct to Syria (Antioch), so he takes the long way back through Ephesus (20:3).

There's a humorous story about someone falling asleep while Paul *talked on and on* (20:9). Well, it would be humorous if the guy hadn't fallen three stories and died! Paul threw his arms around the corpse (compare 2 Kings 4:35), and restored Eutychus to life (20:10).

Paul's farewell to the elders of Ephesus (20:13-37)

Paul calls the elders of Ephesus to meet him at Miletus, about 100 km south (verse 18).

With both his lifestyle and his words, Paul has modelled what it means to be a servant of King Jesus, even in the face of tears and pressure (verse 19).

Paul's message has been that both Jews and Greeks must *turn to God* and place their *trust* in Jesus as our leader (verse 21). That's what he means by *repentance* and *faith*. Calling people to turn to God (repent) and to trust the one whom God has installed as Lord of all—that's *proclaiming the kingdom* (verse 25).

Since they will never see Paul again (verse 25), he entrusts them with responsibility to announce and enact Christ's kingship over their community:

Acts 20:28–38 (NIV)

²⁸ “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. ²⁹ I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰ Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹ So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.”

When God entrusts power to human hands, we have a history of misusing it. That's why Israel fell apart: the shepherds were eating the sheep (Ezekiel 34). That's the number one danger in churches, in communities, in nations, in the world. Our shepherd-king did not bloody the sheep for his own benefit. He redeemed the community with his own blood (verse 28).

That servant-shepherd heart is what Paul has been modelling:

20 ³³ “I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. ... ³⁵ 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.’ ”

The concluding quotation was not a proof-text to help the elders fleece the sheep. It's not recorded in the Gospels; it's a summary of the lifestyle our king embodied. The rest of the world focuses on what we can *receive*: better pay and conditions, superannuation, increasing your portfolio of shares and real estate. Jesus focused on what he could *give*: his life, so the world could be freed from slavery to evil.

That's the example Paul embodied, and he called us to embody it too. The whole community must live unselfishly if it is the kingdom expressing the life of its king.

So, did the elders hear what Paul was saying? Partly.

At the end of the first century, Ephesus was still a leading church in the region. It's the first one Jesus addressed in the revelation he gave to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Revelation 2-3). He commended them for guarding against wicked people (2:2) and for persevering in the face of hardship (2:3).

But they have not maintained the servant heart of helping the weak, of embodying a community where it’s more blessed to give than to receive. The king who holds the shining stars of his kingship in his hands (2:1) rebukes them:
“*You have forsaken the love you had at first*” (Revelation 2:4).
We cannot be a lampstand of our king if we don’t embody his servant heart (2:5).

Reflection

Consider how Paul communicated with the people of **Athens** who had no background in the Jewish Scriptures (**Acts 17:22-31**). Australia today is like that.

There was a time when an evangelist like Billy Graham could say, “The Bible says ...” and it was authoritative for most Australians. That’s no longer the case. The majority of Australians do not identity as Christians. They never attended Sunday School, and many have not ever heard of Jesus.

So, how do we communicate God to people who have no background in Scripture? What can we learn from the way Paul approached the people of Athens?

.....

.....

.....

.....

What about the way Paul communicated the good news with **Corinth** in **Acts 18**? Was there anything that stood out as helpful for us?

.....

.....

.....

.....

What about **Ephesus** in **Acts 19**? What was Paul’s message in **Ephesus**? Why did they perceive his message as so confrontational of their way of life? In what ways do people today perceive the gospel as confrontational for their way of life? How do we respond?

.....

.....

.....

.....

How do understand the role of the church in the community? What does it mean to be the *ekklēsia of the Lord*? How do we engage with that role, deliver that message, and embody the community that gathers around the king whom God raised up and enthroned over the earth? How does Paul's farewell message to the **Ephesian elders** in **Acts 20** help us to clarify our role?

.....

.....

.....

.....

Everywhere Paul goes, he proclaims the *gospel*, and the people who respond become the *church*. What is the relationship between *gospel* and *church*?

Michael Bird describes it like this in his book *Evangelical Theology* (Zondervan, 2013):

Think of the church as “the community of the gospelized”! When you magnetize a piece of metal, the metal becomes magnetic. When you sterilize a surgical tool, the tool becomes sterile. When you tenderize a piece of meat, the meat becomes tender. When a person or a church is gospelized, they ooze gospel, they bleed Jesus, they overflow with Spirit, they radiate the Father's glory. (page 705)

We are the community of the gospelized: the company of the gospel, the public face of the gospel, the hermeneutic of the gospel. The worship, mission, ethics, symbols, testimony, and spirituality of the church are shaped by what it thinks of and what it does with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is the mark and mission of the authentic church of Christ. (page 707)

If that's right, the gospel is not something we accept and then move on to other things. If the gospel is the good news that God has placed his Messiah in charge of the world (that his Christ is our Lord), then the church is the community created by the gospel of the resurrected Christ, the community that embodies his restorative power in God's world. How does the gospel shape our daily lives and relationships?

.....

.....

.....

.....

For next week, please read Acts 21–24.

Acts 21–24: Paul's arrest and trials

Last week we travelled with Paul on his second and third missionary journeys, through Thessalonica, Berea and Athens (Acts 17), Corinth (Acts 18), and Ephesus (Acts 19). As he set out for Jerusalem, we heard him deliver his farewell address to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20). Any questions or thoughts on those chapters?

If you think Acts is about how the gospel spread, **why did Luke get sidetracked in the final eight chapters?** Acts 21–28 reads more like a biography of Paul. When he reaches Jerusalem, his own people try to kill him, and the Romans arrest him. He's then a prisoner on remand for years. How does this advance the gospel?

Perhaps we need to reframe Acts as a story of Jesus' authority.

Acts begins with the resurrected Christ speaking about *the kingdom of God* (Acts 1:3). He promised his "christing" (Holy Spirit anointing) to his people, making them the evidence of his kingship that grows from the Old Testament kingdom regions to the extremities of the world (1:8).

Their gospel is that God raised up his Christ as Lord of all (2:36; 4:12; 10:36 etc.). The revelation of the resurrected king transforms an opponent like Paul into his servant: *"This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."* (Acts 9:15-16)

So, Paul's sufferings in Acts 21–28 are not irrelevant. They're part of the kingdom story. Rulers who do not recognize Jesus as Lord oppose the gospel proclamation that Jesus is king.

This confrontation of powers is integral to Luke's entire story:

- **Acts 1–8:** The gospel of King Jesus spreads in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, with resistance from the temple authorities (culminating in Stephen's death).
- **Acts 9–20:** The gospel of King Jesus spreads to the nations, with resistance from Jewish and gentile authorities in every place.
- **Acts 21–28:** Walking in Jesus' steps, Paul suffers at the hands of Jewish and gentile powers, because he proclaims and represents Jesus' kingship.

This is everywhere in Acts. Peter and John were arrested (4:1). Stephen was killed (Acts 7:57). James was executed (12:2). Silas was beaten and jailed (16:22-23). Paul suffers most because he's so vocal in proclaiming Jesus' kingship.

Your thoughts?

Acts 21: Suffering in Jerusalem

Journey to Jerusalem (21:1-16)

The theme of Paul's sufferings escalates as he heads to Jerusalem for the final time. It's similar to how Luke recounted Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem.

When the disciples first recognized *the Christ*, he told them he would be rejected by the Jerusalem authorities (Luke 9:20-21). Moses and Elijah discussed *his departure [exodus]*, which he was about to bring to fulfilment in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31). Jesus *resolutely set out for Jerusalem* (Luke 9:51). His looming death then hangs over everything Jesus says and does on his final journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9–19).

In Acts 19:21, Paul also makes the decision to go up to Jerusalem. He knows he will suffer. He's unclear if he will survive:

Acts 20:22-25 (NIV)

²² “And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am **going to Jerusalem**, not knowing what will happen to me there. ²³ I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. ...

²⁵ “Now I know that none of you ... will ever see me again.”

On the way, *the disciples ... urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem* (21:4).

When they reach the coast of Israel, the warnings escalate:

Acts 21:10-13 (NIV)

¹⁰ A prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹ ... 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.’ ”

¹² When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul **not to go up to Jerusalem**. ¹³ 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.”

Like his Lord, Paul is ready to give his life. It's what Jesus meant when he told us to take up our cross and follow him (Luke 9:23; 14:27).

Suffering in Jerusalem (21:17-40)

They reach Jerusalem (verse 17). Paul is accused of:

teaching all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children (verses 21-22).

The Jerusalem believers advise Paul and his companions to perform the temple purification rites (verse 24), so *the next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them* (verse 26).

It's not enough:

Acts 21:27–36 (NIV)

²⁷ Some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, ²⁸ shouting, “Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place.” ...

³⁰ Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple ... ³¹ 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. ...

³³ The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. ... ³⁵ The violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. ³⁶ The crowd that followed kept shouting, "Get rid of him!"

Do you hear echoes of Jesus' arrest? (Compare Luke 23:1-20.)

The Roman authorities assume Paul must be another messianic pretender, an assassin stirring people up against Rome. They identify him with *the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the wilderness* (verse 38). Josephus provides more detail: in summary, this 'Egyptian false prophet' had led a crowd ... by a circuitous route from the desert to the Mount of Olives with the promise that they would be able to seize the city.¹⁵

Many such "saviours" attempted to rescue Jerusalem by force. Luke calls them *sicarii* —dagger-men (verse 38). This is not Paul's message. Paul convinces the Roman soldiers to let him address the crowd (verse 37-40).

Acts 22: Conflict with Jewish and Roman authorities

Rejected by his own people (22:1-22)

Paul seeks common ground with his own people. Some of them would know his tutor who served on the Sanhedrin council (Acts 5:34). Some may remember Saul seeking authority to imprison anyone who followed "the Nazarene sect" as they called it (24:5).

Acts 22:2-5 (NIV)

Then Paul said, ³ "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. ⁴ I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, ⁵ 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."

So what changed his mind? Paul recounts how he met the resurrected Christ on the way to Damascus (verses 6-16, compare Acts 9:1-19).

But Paul's own people did not accept him, since they did not accept the Lord he represents (Acts 9:23).

Acts 22:17-22 (NIV)

¹⁷ "When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance ¹⁸ and saw the Lord speaking to me. 'Quick!' he said. 'Leave Jerusalem immediately, because the people here will not accept your testimony about me.'

¹⁵ Summary of *Wars* 2.261-263 and *Antiquities* 20.169-172 in James Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 289–290.

¹⁹ “ ‘Lord,’ I replied, ‘these people know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. ²⁰ 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.’

²¹ “Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’ ”

²² 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!”

What was it that upset them? They could not handle the message that God was calling **other nations** into covenant relationship in Christ the king. That’s offensive to those who consider themselves to be God’s chosen people. The mob judges him as *unfit to live* (verse 22), just as they did to Jesus (Luke 23:21).

Rescued by Rome (22:23-29)

So, the Roman government saves Paul from the people called to be God’s kingdom:

Acts 22:23-24a (NIV)

²³ As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, ²⁴ the commander ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks.

It was to save lives and limit violence that God permitted human government in the first place (Genesis 9:5-6), but it’s tragic when the world’s government system is better than the people who are supposed to be under God’s leadership.

So, is human government better? Not really. Governments give rights to their own people, but they use torture to gain information from others:

Acts 22:24b-25, 29 (NIV)

He directed that he be flogged and interrogated in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this. ²⁵ 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?” ...

²⁹ 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.

James Dunn explains the kind of torture they used:

The procedure set in motion by the centurion was a common one—to interrogate a prisoner by means of physical torture. And torture it would have been, since the Roman scourge was usually a flail with knotted cords, or possibly in a severe flagellation with pieces of metal or bone inserted into the leather straps.¹⁶

Again, Paul uses his citizenship to highlight the contrast between the rulers of this world and the ruler whom God has appointed as Lord of all.

¹⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 298.

Acts 23: Safer in Jerusalem or Caesarea?

Will God's people rescue Paul? (Acts 23:1-5)

The Roman commander could not torture one of his own citizens, so he hands Paul back to *the chief priests and the members of the Sanhedrin* (22:30). Do the leaders of God's nation do better than the Romans?

Acts 23:1-3 (NIV)

¹ Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, "My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day."

² At this the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. ³ Then Paul said to him, "God will strike, 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 offered a "not guilty" plea (verse 1). The high priest treats him as if he blasphemed. The high priest has always had the power of violence to enforce the honour of God's name (Numbers 25:7-13; Psalm 106:30). It's easy to abuse that power, as the Sanhedrin did when it handed Jesus over to be crucified.

Paul responded to violence not with violence but with an insult. *Whitewashed wall* was Ezekiel's term for the leaders who "painted over" the deep rot in the temple:

Ezekiel 13:14 (NIV)

"I will tear down the **wall** you have covered with **whitewash** and will level it to the ground so that its foundation will be laid bare. When it falls, you will be destroyed in it; and you will know that I am the LORD."

Jesus labelled the leaders *whitewashed tombs*. He could see that the power of death and decay within them was about to be unleashed against him (Matthew 23:27-35).

But on trial, Jesus did not react to insult with insult as Paul did:

John 18:22-23 (NIV)

²² When Jesus said this, one of the officials nearby slapped him in the face. "Is this the way you answer the high priest?" he demanded.

²³ "If I said something wrong," Jesus replied, "testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?"

In calling down a curse on his interrogator, Paul has violated God's Law (Ex. 22:28):

Acts 23:4-5 (NIV)

⁴ Those who were standing near Paul said, "How dare you insult God's high priest!"

⁵ 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.'"

How could Paul not know who was high priest? Ananias was appointed as high priest by Herod of Chalcis (brother of Herod Agrippa I) in AD 47. When Quadratus (governor or Syria) accused him of violence, Ananias was extradited to Rome for trial. Caesar cleared him, so Ananias continued as high priest until he was deposed in AD 59. So, who was functioning as high priest in this period? Paul may be unsure, or his words may be ironic: who appointed him, or was he behaving like a high priest?

In any case, Paul apologizes. God has not yet washed the whitewashed wall away. Since he's still in power, Paul was wrong to curse him, to react to his insult with insult.

What is clear is that Paul will get no justice from the leader of God's people. Paul is suffering as a representative of King Jesus, whom they killed.

Refocusing the trial (Acts 23:6-11)

For Sadducees, Jesus cannot be God's anointed king because he's dead. The good news in Acts is that Jesus is Lord because God raised him from the dead (Acts 1:22; 2:24, 31, 32; 3:15; 4:4, 10, 33; 5:30; 13:33, 34, 37; 17:18, 31, 32). Unlike Pharisees, Sadducees don't believe in resurrection (verse 8).

Paul shifts the focus of the trial from his own guilt/innocence to weighing up the gospel. Notice that Paul still identifies as a Pharisee:

Acts 23:6 (NIV)

⁶ 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."

The dispute turns violent:

Acts 23:10 (NIV)

¹⁰ 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.

You know the world is in trouble when its leaders must rescue us from ourselves.

The plot to kill Paul (Acts 23:12-35)

At this point, the true ruler of the world refocuses his agent on proclaiming his authority to the nations:

Acts 23:11 (NIV)

¹¹ 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."

That's encouraging. But his own people were determined to kill Paul, with the knowledge of the temple leaders, just like they did to Jesus:

Acts 23:12–16 (NIV)

¹² The next morning some Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had **killed** Paul.

¹³ More than forty men were involved in this plot. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul.

Paul's nephew informs the commander who then saves Paul's life by transferring him to Caesarea. There Paul is imprisoned in Herod's palace (verses 17-35).

Acts 24: Trial before Felix

The last five chapters of Acts focus on taking the good news of Jesus' kingship to Rome, the centre of their world. It's what our Lord always intended (23:11; 22:17-21; 9:15).

Paul's Roman trial begins with Felix, the procurator of Judah appointed by Emperor Claudius in AD 52.



Ruins of Herod's place at Caesarea. Photo: Allen Browne, 2014.

Acts 24:1, 5-6 (NIV)

¹ 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. ...

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**

⁶ and even tried to desecrate the temple; so we seized him. ...

The "anti-temple" charge keeps recurring. It's literally false: Paul performed the purification rites (21:24-29). But Paul is perceived as a threat to the temple authorities.

This conflict between the temple and the king also occupies the last eight chapters of Matthew's Gospel.¹⁷ Conflict with the temple saw the apostles arrested (5:28-29) and Stephen killed (6:14) as they proclaimed Jesus' authority.

Paul went to the temple *to worship* (verse 11), not to stir up trouble (verse 12). The problem is, "*I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect.*" (verse 14).

But how much justice can Paul expect from the Roman rulers? Josephus portrays Felix as a self-serving and deceptive leader, worse than the criminals he put to death. Felix even arranged the death of Jonathon (the high priest) before he was deposed (*Antiquities* 20:160-164).

Acts 24:22-27 (NIV)

²² Then Felix, who was well acquainted with **the Way**, adjourned the proceedings. ...

²⁴ Several days later Felix ... sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁵ 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." ²⁶ He was hoping that Paul would offer him a **bribe** ...

²⁷ When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favour to the Jews, he left Paul in prison.

¹⁷ <https://allenbrowne.blog/2022/03/16/two-powers/>

Paul is locked away, unable to proclaim King Jesus in synagogue or marketplace. He's imprisoned by a ruler who only cares only about his own power and wealth.

Next week we'll pick up the story as Paul faces trial before Festus (25), Agrippa (26), and ultimately Caesar (27-28). Or is the history of the world ultimately in God's hands?

Reflection

What do you think? Has God called us to bear the sufferings of the world like our Lord? Is Acts making us aware of the opposition to God's kingdom that has characterized God's world since the beginning? Why do you think Luke focuses on the sufferings Paul received from the Jerusalem and Roman authorities in Acts 21–28?

.....

.....

.....

.....

What do you make of the suggestion that Luke has intentionally told the story of Paul's final trip to Jerusalem in the same way he describes Jesus' final trip to Jerusalem?

.....

.....

How do you feel when you read about the Roman government rescuing Paul from the leaders of God's people? Are there lessons for us to learn here?

.....

.....

What can we learn from how Paul handled his legal trials? Are there examples to follow or avoid in the way we respond to people?

.....

.....

Imagine how frustrated Paul may have felt waiting years for Felix to release him, knowing he was after a bribe. What would you have done?

.....

.....

Please read Acts 25–28 for our final week.

Acts 25–28: Paul takes the gospel to Rome

Tonight we finish Acts, with Paul reaching Rome to present his case to Caesar.

We saw how *Paul decided to go to Jerusalem* (19:21). He knew he'd suffer. He didn't know if he'd survive (20:22-25; 21:4, 10-13). His people tried to kill him (23:12-15). The Romans rescued him, but locked him away (23:16-35) because it pleased the people (24:27). Anything from last time before we continue?

.....

Acts 25: Paul on trial before Festus

Festus succeeded Felix as procurator of Judea, ruling AD 59–62. Josephus says Festus worked to clean up Felix's mess and capture the *sicarii*—bandits who opposed Roman rule (*Antiquities* 20.185-188).

Where should Paul be tried? (25:1-12)

Remember how desperate some were to kill Paul? (23:21) They ask for Paul to be returned to Jerusalem so they could kill him on the way (25:3). But Festus was going to Caesarea where Paul was imprisoned.

Acts 25:7-11 (NIV)

They brought many serious charges against him, but they could not prove them. ⁸ Then Paul made his defence: "I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar."

⁹ Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favour, said to Paul, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?"

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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!"

Paul recognizes two law systems:

- Jewish Law (Torah), represented by the temple authorities.
- Roman law, represented by Festus and his guards.

He pleads "not guilty" before either law system (verse 8). But if it comes to a choice, his preference is to be tried by Roman law: "*I am standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried*" (verse 10).

What? Paul recognizes the authority of Caesar rather than the authority of Jewish law? Why? Surely that flies in the face of everything the Old Testament stood for.

When God made a covenant with Israel at Sinai, they became God's nation, under God's reign, God's law. They were called to be a kingdom of God, not a kingdom of Babylon or Rome. What does Paul mean by saying that Caesar's court is where he should be tried?

It won't do to say his choice is merely motivated by fear. He is willing to die if he's guilty of a capital crime (verse 11). He chooses Caesar's court over the Jewish one.

Two questions: Is Caesar's court valid? Why is it preferable to the Jewish one?

Is Caesar's court valid? Yes, it is. This is what Paul wrote to the Romans, possibly around the time of his incarceration in Caesarea:

Romans 13:1, 4 (NIV)

¹ Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ...

⁴ For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.

Authority to punish the wrongdoer traces back to Genesis 9:1-17 where God authorized the community to take a killer's life, while promising to continue reigning over us regardless of how difficult we make it.¹⁸ It's on the basis of this authority that the nations and kingdoms arise in the Jewish story (Genesis 10).

So, when the kings of God's people misrepresent him, God removes their authority and hands them over to their enemies. Consequently, even the rulers who crushed God's people like Nebuchadnezzar or Caesar have received their authority from God (Habakkuk 1:5-6; Daniel 2:37).

But why choose Caesar's authority in preference to the temple leaders?

There was a time when Paul himself had represented the temple authority:

Acts 22:4-5 (NIV)

⁴ "I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, ⁵ 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."

On that journey, he realized the temple was misrepresenting God's authority. By aligning with the temple, Paul was continuing the persecution of the king (22:6-8).

It was the temple that had handed the king over to be crucified. That's why Paul has no confidence in the temple's authority. They continue to kill the innocent to protect their power. Wasn't that the reason God had decreed the fall of the first temple? (2 Kings 21:12–16)

The temple authority is a *whitewashed wall* (23:3). Just like the first temple (Ezekiel 13:14; Jeremiah 7:4-11) the second temple was scheduled for demolition (Luke 21:6). Within a decade, of Paul uttering these words, the second temple fell to Rome. No wonder Paul chooses Caesar over the temple authorities.

¹⁸ See <https://allenbrowne.blog/2016/06/03/human-government-a-concession-genesis-91-6/>, <https://allenbrowne.blog/2016/06/06/what-about-capital-punishment-genesis-96/>, and <https://allenbrowne.blog/2016/06/08/gods-commitment-to-reign-genesis-97-17/>.

But Caesar's authority is temporary too. Paul's faith is in King Jesus. As an ambassador of King Jesus, Paul believes Jesus' reign will ultimately extend to all nations.¹⁹

Your thoughts?

.....

.....

Paul arraigned before King Agrippa (25:12-27)

Festus passes the problem up the chain of command:

Acts 25:12 (NIV)

¹² After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared:

"You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!"

Festus receives a visit from King Agrippa II (Marcus Julius Agrippa, son of Herod Agrippa I.) (verse 13). Agrippa's interest is piqued when Festus explains Paul's case (verses 14-22). Festus invites Agrippa's help to formulate the charges against Paul for the paperwork required for his coming trial before Caesar (verses 23-27).

Acts 26: Paul's trial before Agrippa

Chosen as a servant and witness (26:1-18)

As Paul explains himself to Agrippa, we hear for the third time about Jesus confronting Saul on his way to Damascus (compare 9:3-5 and 22:7-10). It must be important, and there's more detail of what King Jesus commissioned Paul to do.

If you're interested in understanding our mission, this is definitive:

Acts 26:15-16 (my translation)

¹⁴ "All of us fell to the ground. I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, 'Saul, Saul, why are you pursuing me? It's hard for you to kick back against the [Shepherd's] prods.'

¹⁵ "I said, 'Who are you, Master?'

"The Master said, 'I am Jesus, the one you are pursuing. ¹⁶ But rise up and stand on your feet. Regarding why I've appeared to you, I selected you as a **servant** and **evidence-giver** of what you saw and what I will show you.' "

This was how Paul discovered Jesus as the heavenly ruler of God's people. Like a sheep or goat resisting the Shepherd's leading, Paul had been kicking against the rod the Shepherd used to redirect him (verse 14).

So, is Paul in trouble? Will he be punished for how he's been treating the king's people? Will Jesus arrest Paul and lock him away like Herod did when John the Baptist opposed him? No: King Jesus enlists Paul in his service.

¹⁹ See <https://allenbrowne.blog/2024/06/14/how-do-governments-fit-with-christs-authority/>

Rise up (verse 16) is the same word used for Jesus *rising* from the dead (*anistamai* in Acts 2:24, 32; 13:33, 34; 17:3, 31). The king calls Paul to rise to a new appointment.

Notice the keywords in verse 16: the **LORD** has **chosen** Paul as his **servant**, and as a **witness** in the on-going case to show the world that Jesus is raised and reigning.

Now turn to **Isaiah 43:10**. The same keywords describe God's commission for Israel: "*You are my **witnesses**," declares the **LORD**, "and my **servant** whom I have **chosen**."*

The whole point of the Abraham-project was that Israel was God's servant, a witness to the nations regarding life under God's rule.

But Israel had not been a credible witness to the nations. After all they saw and heard, they refused their heavenly sovereign, and fell into exile. Their testimony was as helpful as a blind and deaf witness who saw and heard nothing (Isaiah 42:18).

So, here's how the court case plays out in Isaiah 43:

- God presents his blind, deaf witness (43:8).
- God demands the nations that overpowered Israel show they're in the right (43:9).
- God calls his witnesses (now captive to foreign powers) to identify as his people, to trust him as their only Saviour (43:10-13).
- God promises to return them from Babylon to his authority (43:14), proving the case: "*I am the **LORD**, your Holy One, Israel's Creator, your King*" (43:15).

The whole of Isaiah 40–55 centres on the drama of the fallen servant. Since Israel was unable to fulfil their role as *the servant of the LORD* and *a light to the nations*, God bares his holy arm, taking the role of **servant to his servant**! *The servant of the LORD* joins his people in their suffering, in their death, rising to lead them to life (Isaiah 52:13–53:12).

When did God do this? In Christ, the servant of the LORD.

And now the resurrected and enthroned king shares his mission with his people. Paul is *chosen*, as a *servant*, to *give evidence* of God's kingship to the nations that are being restored to God's reign in Christ.

So this is the message Paul is called to proclaim:

Acts 26:17-18 (my translation)

¹⁷ "I am plucking you from the people and from the nations to whom I am sending you, ¹⁸ to open their eyes and to return them from darkness to light, from the authority of the Enemy into God's [governance], to carry to them release from sins and participation in being made holy by allegiance to me.' "

Verse 18 describes the salvation of the world that God had promised in Isaiah 43:11ff:

- rescue from oppression by rulers who are not God,
- opening people's eyes to see God's authority in Christ,
- rescue from darkness to light, from the authority of the Enemy into God's reign,
- release from sin's hold, to be a people made holy by trust in Messiah Jesus.

Is this how you understand the gospel?

.....

.....

.....

(To see Paul and Barnabas explicitly equating Israel's mission (as defined in Isaiah 49:6) with their own, see Acts 13:47. Isaiah's influence on Paul is clear: he quotes Isaiah 30 times in Romans and Corinthians.)

Jesus as king of kings (26:22-32)

Paul's testimony before these various leaders (the Sanhedrin, Felix, Festus, Agrippa, and ultimately Caesar) is not really about his own guilt or innocence. He's testifying about Christ's kingship. He's giving evidence to the rulers of the nations that God's anointed is Lord of all.

Acts 26:22–23 (NIV)

²² "I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—
²³ 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."

Festus interrupts, fearing Paul is insulting Agrippa's authority, trying to excuse Paul as a scholar who is so focused on his learning that he's lost his social skills (verse 24). Paul focuses back on Agrippa, appealing to what prophets like Isaiah had promised:

Acts 26:27–32 (NIV)

²⁷ "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do."
²⁸ Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"
²⁹ 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."
³⁰ The king rose, and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with them. ³¹ After they left the room, they began saying to one another, "This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment."

Agrippa judges Paul to be innocent, but it's not Agrippa's authority now Paul has appealed to Caesar (verse 32). We're now on the way to Rome.

Acts 27: Shipwrecked on the way to Rome

Sailing off to Rome (27:1-12)

Along with other prisoners, Paul is handed over to Julius, a centurion from the same regiment as Cornelius (27:1 compare 10:1). They sail up the coast to Sidon, making slow progress to Myra because the winds were against them (verses 3-5).



"Paul's Arrest and Imprisonment (59–62 CE)" in *Carta's New Century Handbook and Atlas of the Bible* (Carta Jerusalem, 2015), 248.

Paul has been on several sailing ships, but this was a tough journey. Storms come primarily in winter on the Mediterranean, as they do in Perth:

Acts 27:9-12 (NIV)

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, ¹⁰ "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."

¹¹ But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship. ¹² 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.

Luke is one of Paul's companions on the ship ("we" in verse 1). He vividly describes the *hurricane force* storm (verse 14), the attempts to save the ship (verses 17-19), and their inability to navigate with no sun or stars to reckon by:

We finally gave up all hope of being saved (verse 20).

Shipwrecked (27:23-44)

Paul affirms they will be shipwrecked, yet all of them will survive:

Acts 27:23–24 (NIV)

²³ “Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me ²⁴ 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.’ ”

When they hit a sandbar, the soldiers responsible for the prisoners acted to ensure none escaped:

Acts 27:42–44 (NIV)

⁴² The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping. ⁴³ 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. ⁴⁴ The rest were to get there on planks or on other pieces of the ship. In this way everyone reached land safely.



“Model Sidonian merchant ship (2nd century AD” in *The Sacred Bridge* (Carta Jerusalem, 2014), 379

Acts 28: Proclaiming King Jesus in Caesar's city**Paul reaches Rome (28:1-16)**

They've landed on Malta. It's good to be back on land, but there's a snake in the garden:

Acts 28:3–6 (NIV)

³ 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.

⁴ 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.”

⁵ But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects. ⁶ 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.



St Paul's Bay, Malta: traditional site of Paul's shipwreck. *Bible Atlas & Companion*, (Barbour, 2008), 160.

Again, people have a very different view of God and how his justice works.

After winter, they continue the journey to Rome (verses 11-14).

From their final port (Puteoli), news reached Rome that Paul was coming. No apostle had ever been to Rome, yet God already had people there. They knew Paul through the letter he sent them a couple of years earlier.

They walk out to meet Paul, giving him the kind of welcome Rome would provide for a visiting dignitary or an emperor returning from battle:

Acts 28:15 (NIV)

¹⁵ The brothers and sisters there had heard that we were coming, and they travelled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these people Paul thanked God and was encouraged.

Appi Forum (the Roman name) was 70 km south of Rome on the Appian Way. *Tres Tabernae* was 50 km. These people have walked a couple of days to meet Paul and accompany him to their city.²⁰



You can still walk the Appian Way today.
<https://www.charlestownroad.org/on-seeing-them/>

Paul's message to the Jewish leaders (28:17-27)

Other Jews living in Rome may be concerned if one of their own people is appealing to Caesar for the unjust treatment he received in Jerusalem. It's been less than a decade since Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome (Acts 18:2). Paul moves to reassure his people (verses 17-20).

They invite Paul to address them:

Acts 28:22-23 (NIV)

²² "We want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect."

²³ ... He witnessed [presented his evidence] 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.

What was Paul's message? Which Old Testament Scriptures would you use if you were showing that Jesus was the God-appointed ruler of God's kingdom, fulfilling everything God promised in the Law and the Prophets?

.....

²⁰ This scene provides the background for 1 Thessalonians 4:17 where we're caught up to meet our returning Lord as he comes from heaven to welcome his leadership to earth (not as we go to heaven).

Some were convinced; others were not (verse 24). When God's people don't listen to the good news that God's king has arrived for his people, what does Paul do? He proclaims this good news to the nations:

Acts 28:28 (NIV)

²⁸ “Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!”

The cliff-hanger (Acts 28:30-31)

So, what happened? How did Paul's court case end up? Did Paul give the emperor his evidence that King Jesus had been installed as Lord of all? How did Nero react? Is Paul set free to continue proclaiming Jesus' regal authority to rescue the earth?

After twenty-eight chapters, we're dying to know, but Luke doesn't tell us. According to an early Christian source (the Muratorian Canon), Paul was released from Rome and proceeded to Spain. But within a few years, Nero executed both Peter and Paul.

Did Luke not know the outcome when he finished his book?
Or did Luke intend to finish with a cliff-hanger? Here's his ending:

Acts 28:30-31 (NIV)

³⁰ For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. ³¹ He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!

Luke does know how long Paul was imprisoned, but justice doesn't come quickly. That hasn't changed. We have someone at Riverview who waited 14 years to be given a visa, and he's still waiting for his family to get their visas so they can join him again.

The same is true of Jesus' kingship. God doesn't wave a magic wand to restore justice to the earth. He calls people to recognize his Christ, and waits for us to do so. In the meantime, we suffer injustice. It's like Paul told the Antioch disciples: “*We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God*” (Acts 14:22).

While we're struggling with hardship and injustice, we look for the day when God's reign is fully here, when Jesus the Christ is Lord. The world has only one Saviour (Isaiah 43:3, 11; 45:15, 21; 49:26; 60:16; 62:11; 63:8). God raised him out of suffering and death, so he can rescue the world. “*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12).

So, Luke leaves us with this summary of the gospel Paul taught:

God's reign (*the kingdom of God*) is being restored to the earth
in the ruler (*Lord*) he has appointed, *Jesus* his anointed king (*Christ*).

Take time to meditate on that message. Is that the message we're proclaiming and embodying today?

Reflection

What are your feelings as we conclude the Book of Acts? **How has this book shaped you?** How has it changed the way you understand God and his good-news declaration that his Christ is our Lord?

.....

.....

.....

Consider the **gospel** message proclaimed in the Book of Acts: the apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 2-5), Stephen (Acts 7) and Phillip (Acts 8), Jesus addressing Saul (Acts 9), Peter addressing Cornelius (Acts 10-11), Barnabas and Paul addressing the nations (Acts 13-14), the clarification of the message (Acts 15), Paul's gospel proclamation in Asia Minor and Greece (Acts 16-21), and Paul's proclaiming Jesus' kingship before the rulers of this world (Acts 22-28). How would you summarize the gospel?

.....

.....

.....

.....

Is there something you need to do in response to what you've heard the Holy Spirit saying through the Book of Acts?

.....

.....

.....

William Tyndale's life was an amazing inspiration. He translated the Bible into English at a time when that wasn't legal, the time when the printing press was brand new. It's old English now, but you might enjoy how he translated the closing verses of Acts:

And Paul dwelt two yeres full in his lodgyng
and receaved all that came to hym
preachynge the kyngdome of God
and teachynge those thinges which concerned the Lord Jesus
with all confidence
unforboden.²¹

May our Lord inspire you as you continue the proclamation of this good news in our time.

²¹ William Tyndale, *The 1536 Tyndale Bible New Testament* (N.P., 1536), Ac 28:30–31.