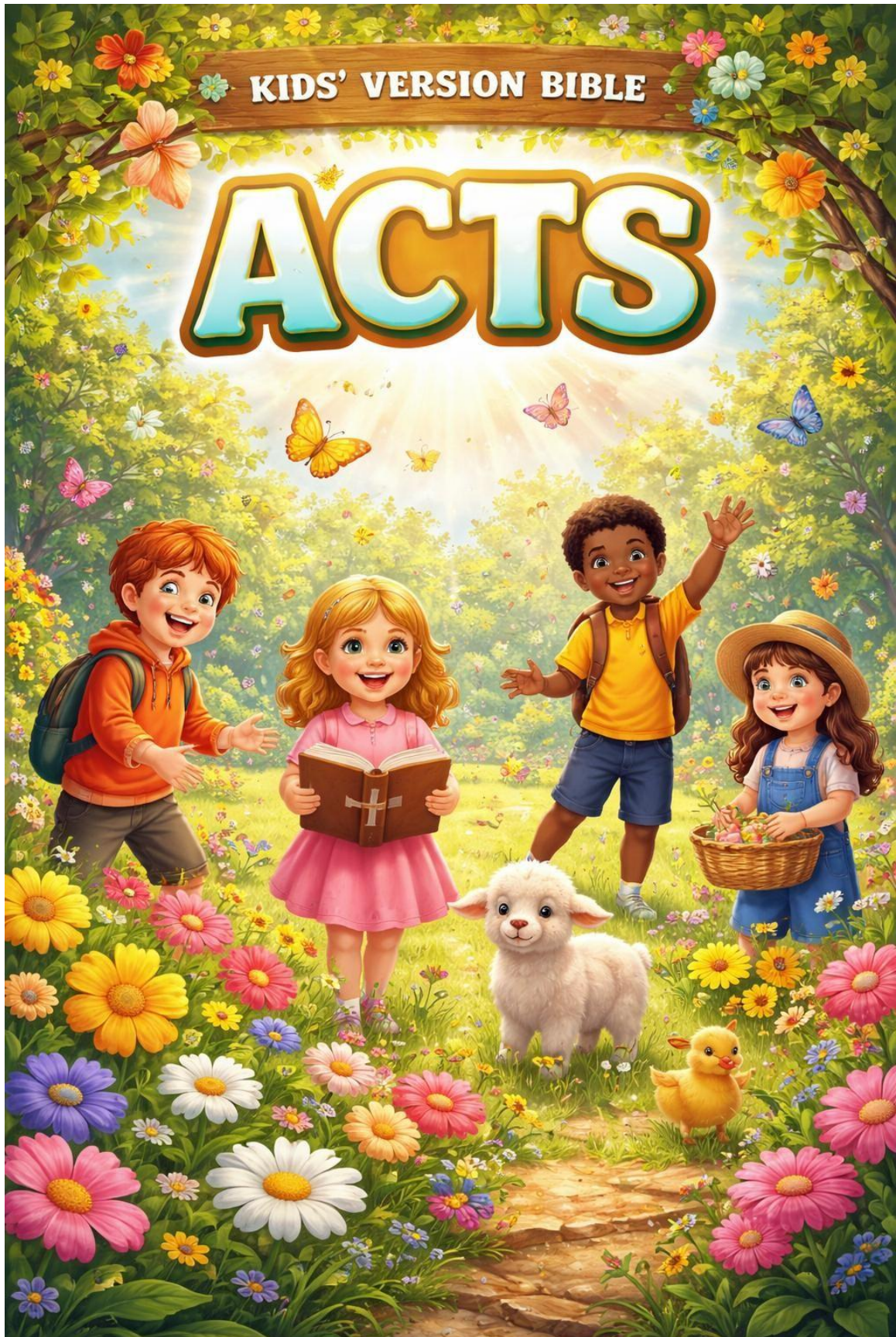




ACTS

28 CHAPTERS

Originated from KJV Bible

ACTS 1

Dear Theophilus,

In my first letter, I wrote to you about everything Jesus started doing and teaching—right from the very beginning up until the day he was taken back up to heaven. Before he left, he gave special instructions through the Holy Spirit to the special friends, or apostles, he had chosen.

For forty days after he suffered and died, Jesus showed them repeatedly that he was truly alive. He appeared to them many times and talked excitedly with them about God's wonderful kingdom.

One day, while they were all eating together, Jesus told them, "Don't leave Jerusalem yet. Wait here for the special gift my Father promised, the one I told you about. John washed people with water, but in just a few days, you are going to be filled with a mighty wave of the Holy Spirit!"

As they sat together, the disciples asked him, "Lord, is this the moment you are finally going to fix Israel and make it a free kingdom again?"

Jesus smiled and answered, "Only the Father decides the dates and times for those things—that's His secret. But I promise you will receive incredible power when the Holy Spirit comes down upon you. Then you will be my joyful helpers and tell everyone about me—starting right here in Jerusalem, across Judea, up into Samaria, and even to the farthest corners of the earth!"

Right after he finished saying this, while they were all staring wide-eyed, Jesus began to float up into the sky! A soft, bright cloud wrapped around him and gently carried him completely out of their sight.

The disciples stood frozen, craning their necks and staring straight up into the empty blue sky. Suddenly, two men wearing clothes as bright as lightning flashed right beside them.

"Hey there, men of Galilee!" the angels said with a smile. "Why are you just standing here staring up at the clouds? This exact same Jesus, who just left you and went into heaven, is going to come back someday in the exact same way you just saw him leave!"

With that, the disciples hurried back down from the Mount of Olives—about a short Sunday walk away—and went straight to Jerusalem. They climbed the stairs to the upstairs room where they were staying.

Gathered in that cozy room were Peter, James, John, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas the brother of James. They were joined by several faithful women, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Jesus' own brothers. Every single day, they met together in that room, joining their hearts and voices in continuous prayer.

A few days later, Peter stood up right in the middle of the group—there were about 120 believers gathered—and spoke up.

"Friends," Peter said, "long ago, the Holy Spirit spoke through King David about Judas—the man who guided the mob that arrested Jesus. We all know what happened. Judas used to be one of us and

shared in this very ministry. But with the dirty money he got for his wicked crime, he bought a field. There, he fell headlong, his body burst open, and everyone in Jerusalem heard about it. That is why they named that field *Aceldama*, which means 'The Field of Blood.'

"As it says in the book of Psalms: *'Let his home become empty, with no one living in it, and let someone else take his place of leadership.'*

"So, we need to choose a replacement. It must be someone who has been with us the entire time the Lord Jesus traveled around with us—starting from the day John baptized him all the way up to the day Jesus was taken up to heaven. This new person will join us as a passionate witness of Jesus coming back to life."

So, they put forward two fantastic candidates: Joseph (who was called Barsabas or Justus) and Matthias.

Then they all prayed together: "Lord, you know the secret thoughts of every single person's heart. Show us clearly which one of these two you have chosen to step into this important job, the leadership and teamwork that Judas threw away when he went his own way."

They drew lots to see whose name would be picked—and the slip of paper with Matthias's name on it was chosen! At once, Matthias was added to the team, joining the eleven apostles to continue the great adventure.

ACTS 2

When the joyful day of Pentecost finally arrived, all the followers were spending time together in the exact same room, sharing the same great mood.

Suddenly, a massive sound roared down from the sky like a giant, rushing hurricane, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

Right after that, glowing, flickering shapes that looked like little flames of fire hovered in the air and gently landed on top of every single person there.

Instantly, they were all filled with God's special power, and they began bursting out in brand-new languages, talking just as the Holy Spirit gave them the words to say.

At that exact time, there were deeply religious Jewish people living in Jerusalem who had traveled in from every single country under the sun.

When word of this wild event leaked out, a massive crowd swarmed in, and everyone was totally baffled because every single person heard the believers speaking in their own native hometown language.

They were completely blown away, staring at each other in shock and whispering, "Wait a minute, aren't all these loudspeakers from Galilee?"

"So how on earth are we all hearing them speak fluently in the very languages we grew up speaking?"

"We've got Parthians, Medes, Elamites, folks from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, and the province of Asia,"

"Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, the parts of Libya near Cyrene, visitors straight from Rome, homegrown Jews, and even converts,"

"Cretans, and Arabs—yet we are all sitting here listening to them shout out the incredible, wonderful works of God in our own native tongues!"

Everyone was totally stunned and scratching their heads, asking one another, "Okay, what on earth is going on here?"

Meanwhile, a few skeptics in the crowd sneered and joked, "Aw, these guys are just totally wasted on cheap morning wine!"

Stepping right up with the other eleven apostles, Peter raised his voice above the noise and called out to the crowd, "Listen up, people of Judea and everyone currently living in Jerusalem—let me make something crystal clear for you, so pay attention:"

"These guys aren't drunk like you're guessing, especially since it's only nine o'clock in the morning!"

"No, what you're seeing right now is actually what the ancient prophet Joel talked about long ago:"

"God says: *In the last days, I will pour out my Spirit on every single person. Your sons and daughters will speak for God, your young people will see amazing visions, and your old folks will dream special dreams.*"

" Yes, even on my everyday workers, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will speak my truth."

" And I will put mind-blowing wonders up in the sky and crazy signs down on the earth: blood, fire, and thick clouds of smoke."

" The sun will turn pitch-black, and the moon will glow blood-red, right before that huge, awesome day of the Lord arrives."

" And here is the best part: absolutely anyone who calls out on the name of the Lord will be rescued and saved."

"Fellow Israelites, listen to these facts: Jesus of Nazareth was a man clearly approved by God among you through the insane miracles, wonders, and signs that God performed right through Him, as you yourselves witnessed with your own eyes."

"Even though He was handed over according to God's exact master plan and foreknowledge, you guys used wicked men to nail Him to a cross and kill Him."

"But God stepped in, raised Him back to life, and snapped the terrifying chains of death because it was simply impossible for death to keep its grip on Him."

"King David actually wrote about Him, saying: *I always kept the Lord right in front of me, because He is at my right hand so I will never be shaken.*"

" That's why my heart is bursting with joy and my tongue is singing; even my body will rest safely with hope."

" Because you won't abandon my soul to the dark grave, and you won't let your Holy One rot away."

" You have shown me the secret paths of life, and you will completely fill me with happiness just by being with me."

"My friends, let me speak very plainly to you about our ancestor David: he died, was buried, and his tomb is still sitting right here with us to this very day."

"Since he was a prophet and knew God had promised him with an oath that one of his own descendants would sit on his royal throne,"

"David looked ahead into the future and talked about the resurrection of Christ—that His soul wouldn't be left in the grave, and His body wouldn't decay."

"God has brought this exact same Jesus back to life, and every single one of us is an eyewitness to it."

"Now that He has been lifted up to the place of honor at God's right hand and has received the promised Holy Spirit from the Father, He has poured out what you are currently seeing and hearing."

"After all, David never physically went up into heaven, but he did say: *The Lord said to my Master, "Sit here at my right hand, "*

" Until I make all your enemies a footstool for your feet."

"So let the whole family of Israel know this as an absolute fact: God has made this exact same Jesus—the one you nailed to a cross—both the ultimate Master and the promised Savior!"

When the crowd heard this, it hit them right in the gut. They felt deeply convinced and cried out to Peter and the rest of the crew, "Friends, what do we need to do right now?"

Peter answered them loud and clear, "Turn your lives around, and let every single one of you get baptized in the name of Jesus Christ to wipe the slate clean of your mistakes. If you do, you will receive the free gift of the Holy Spirit."

"Because this amazing promise belongs to you, to your kids, and to all those people far away—yes, to as many as the Lord our God decides to call."

"With many more strong words, he kept urging and encouraging them, pleading, 'Rescue yourselves from this mixed-up, messed-up generation!'"

Those who gladly took his message to heart got baptized at once. And amazingly, on that exact same day, about three thousand people joined their community!

From then on, they stuck closely together, learning the apostles' teachings, hanging out in fellowship, sharing meals by breaking bread together, and praying constantly.

A healthy sense of awe and wonder rested on everyone, and the apostles performed many cool miracles and signs.

All the believers lived like a tight-knit family, sharing everything they owned in common.

Whenever someone was in need, they would happily sell off their extra property, splitting the money so that everybody had enough.

Every single day, they spent time together with happy hearts in the temple courts, shared simple meals from house to house, and ate their food with pure joy.

They constantly praised God and were well-liked by everyone in the city. And day after day, the Lord kept growing their growing family with new people who were being saved.

ACTS 3

One afternoon around three o'clock, Peter and John walked up to the big temple together for the afternoon prayer time.

Down by the grand entrance—a gorgeous gateway known as the Beautiful Gate—a man who had been unable to walk since the day he was born was being carried by friends. Every single day, they dropped him off right there so he could ask people walking into the temple for a little spare change.

As Peter and John drew near, the man spotted them and called out, hoping for a handout.

Peter stopped, locked eyes with him, and said, "Look right at us!"

The man stared back, buzzing with excitement, thinking they were about to toss him a coin.

Instead, Peter smiled and said, "I don't carry gold or silver, but I'll give you what I *do* have. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, get up and walk!"

Right away, Peter reached down, grabbed his right hand, and hoisted him up. In a split second, the man's ankles and feet grew strong and sturdy!

He sprang straight up, took a few steps, and started jumping for joy. Strutting and leaping right beside Peter and John, he bounded straight into the temple courts, shouting praises to God at the top of his lungs.

Everyone in the temple turned and stared. They could not believe their eyes! They recognized him instantly as the guy who used to sit begging at the Beautiful Gate. People were completely mind-blown and filled with total wonder at what had just happened.

As the newly healed man clung tightly to Peter and John in a porch area called Solomon's Colonnade, a massive crowd of stunned people came sprinting over.

When Peter saw the huge, staring crowd, he spoke up: "Hey, Israel! Why are you acting so shocked? Why are you staring at John and me as if we had some sort of magical power or holy strength to make this guy walk?

"It was the God of our ancestors—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—who brought ultimate glory to His special servant, Jesus. He is the very one you handed over to the authorities and rejected right in front of Pilate, even though Pilate wanted to let Him go free.

"You turned your backs on the Holy and Righteous One, begged for a killer to be released instead, and took the life of the Author of life Himself! But guess what? God raised Him right back up from the dead, and we are living proof of it.

"It is faith in the name of Jesus that has made this man strong—the very man you see standing right here. That faith has completely healed him right in front of all your eyes.

"Now, my friends, I know you and your leaders acted out of pure ignorance. But God was using that to fulfill everything His prophets wrote long ago—that the Christ would have to suffer.

"So, change your hearts and turn back to God so your sins can be wiped completely clean. Then, wonderful times of spiritual refreshment will flood down from the Lord.

"He will send Jesus back to you—the one who was promised all along. Heaven must hold Him until the wonderful day when God makes everything right again, just like His holy prophets promised since the very beginning of the world.

"Moses even told our ancestors, 'The Lord your God will raise up a prophet just like me from among your own people. You must listen to everything He tells you.' And anyone who refuses to listen to that prophet will be cut off from God's people.

"In fact, every single prophet from Samuel onward has talked about these exact days we are living in right now.

"You are the spiritual kids of those prophets, and you belong to the special promise God made to our ancestors when He told Abraham, 'Through your family, every single family on earth will be blessed.'

"So, for you kids first, God raised up His special Son Jesus and sent Him to bless you—by turning every last one of you away from your bad choices."

ACTS 4

While Peter and John were still talking to the big crowd, some angry religious leaders—including the Temple guards and the Sadducees—stomped over to them. These leaders were super annoyed because the disciples were telling everyone that Jesus had come back to life! Since it was already getting dark, the guards grabbed Peter and John and threw them in a holding cell for the night. But even behind bars, their message spread like wildfire, and the number of believers shot up to about five thousand!

The very next morning, the big-boss rulers, elders, religious teachers, and even the High Priest Annas and Caiaphas all gathered in Jerusalem. They dragged Peter and John right into the middle of the room and demanded, "By what magic power, or whose name, did you pull off this stunt?"

Energized and filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter stepped up. "Leaders and elders of Israel!" he said. "If you are putting us on trial today for doing a kind favor for a disabled man, you and everyone else in Israel need to know the truth: This man is standing here completely healed because of Jesus Christ of Nazareth—the very one you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead! Jesus is the cornerstone you builders threw in the trash, but He became the most important brick in the building. There is zero rescue anywhere else, because Jesus is the only name under heaven given to save us!"

The council stared in amazement. They could see that Peter and John were ordinary guys with no fancy schooling, but then it clicked—these men had spent time hanging out with Jesus! And

since the healed man was standing right there next to them, the council could not think of a single thing to argue.

They ordered Peter and John to step outside so the leaders could whisper among themselves. "What on earth are we going to do with these guys?" they panicked. "Everyone in Jerusalem knows about this huge miracle, and we can't pretend it didn't happen! But to keep this story from blowing up any further, let's threaten them so they never mention this name to another soul."

So, they called the apostles back in and slapped them with a strict warning: *Do not speak or teach about Jesus ever again.*

Peter and John looked right back at them and replied, "You decide what is fair in God's eyes—should we obey you, or should we obey God? Because we cannot stop talking about the amazing things we have seen and heard!"

The leaders threatened them even more, but since the crowds were cheering for God over the amazing healing—and the healed man was already over forty years old—they could not figure out a way to punish them without starting a riot. So, they let them go.

As soon as they were free, Peter and John dashed back to their friends and told them everything the high priests had said. When the group heard the news, they all prayed together in a loud, unified voice:

"Master, You made the heavens, the earth, the ocean, and everything in them! Through your servant David, you said the nations would rage and the world's rulers would gang up against the Lord and His Chosen One. And that is exactly what happened in this city!

Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Roman soldiers, and the people of Israel all teamed up against Your holy servant Jesus. But they only did what Your power and plan had already mapped out for them to do. Now, Lord, look at their threats! Give us, Your servants, the courage to speak Your word boldly while You stretch out Your hand to heal people and perform mind-blowing miracles through the name of Jesus!"

As soon as they finished praying, the whole building shook! Every single one of them was instantly filled with the Holy Spirit, and they started preaching God's message with total fearlessness.

Back in the community, all the believers shared one big heart and soul. Not a single person hoarded their stuff or claimed their possessions were just for them; instead, they shared everything like a big family. The apostles kept telling people about Jesus rising from the dead, and God's wonderful kindness was super-obvious on all of them. Nobody in the group ever went without, because anyone who owned extra land or houses sold them, brought the cash, and dropped it at the apostles' feet so it could be handed out to anyone who needed help.

For example, there was a guy named Joses—whom the apostles nicknamed Barnabas, which means "Son of Encouragement." He was a Levite originally from Cyprus who owned a piece of land; he sold it, brought the money, and laid it right at the apostles' feet.

ACTS 5

Once upon a time, a man named Ananias and his wife Sapphira sold a piece of land. They wanted everyone to think they were super generous, so they decided to give some of the money to the apostles. But secretly, they kept a sizable chunk of the cash for themselves!

When Ananias walked up and handed over the money, Peter looked right at him and said, "Ananias, why did you let greed trick you into lying to the Holy Spirit? Before you sold the land, it was yours. After you sold it, the money was yours to keep. You did not just lie to people—you lied to God!"

As soon as Ananias heard those words, he collapsed and passed away. Everyone who heard about it was filled with awe and a little bit of nervous wonder. Some young men gently wrapped him up, carried him outside, and buried him.

About three hours later, Sapphira walked in, having no idea what had just happened.

Peter looked at her and asked, "Tell me, did you guys sell the land for this exact price?"

"Yes, exactly that much," she replied proudly.

Peter shook his head. "Why did you both plan to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen—the footsteps of the men who just buried your husband are at the door, and they are about to carry you out, too."

Instantly, Sapphira dropped to the floor and passed away. The young men came back inside, found her gone, and buried her right next to her husband. A wave of holy fear swept through the whole community.

Meanwhile, God was doing amazing things through the apostles. They performed incredible miracles, and everyone gathered safely on Solomon's Porch. Even though outsiders were a bit afraid to get too close, the people deeply respected the believers. More people—men and women alike—joined the family of faith every single day!

The excitement grew so big that people began carrying sick friends and family members out into the streets on mats and beds, just hoping that Peter's shadow might brush against them as he walked by, bringing healing. Crowds poured in from the towns all around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those troubled by dark spirits, and every single person was healed.

This drove the High Priest and his friends, the Sadducees, crazy with jealousy. They threw the apostles into the public jail.

But God was not finished yet! During the middle of the night, an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, led them out, and said, "Go straight to the temple, stand up in front of everyone, and tell them all about this new life!"

Early the next morning, the apostles did just that—they went right back to teaching in the temple. Meanwhile, the High Priest called a massive meeting of the Israelite senate and sent guards to the prison to drag the prisoners in.

When the guards arrived, they came running back, completely confused. "The jail was locked tight with guards standing right outside the doors!" they gasped. "But when we unlocked it, nobody was inside!"

The High Priest and the temple leaders scratched their heads, wondering what was going on. Just then, someone ran up with shocking news: "Uh, remember those guys you locked up? They are standing in the temple right now, teaching the crowds!"

The captain and his officers rushed over and gently brought the apostles back—they had to be super careful not to use force because they were afraid the angry crowd might start throwing stones at them!

When the apostles stood before the council, the High Priest demanded, "Didn't we strictly command you to stop teaching in that name? Instead, you have flooded Jerusalem with your crazy ideas and are trying to blame us for this man's death!"

Peter and the other apostles looked right back at them and answered bravely, "We must obey God rather than men. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus—the same Jesus you hung on a cross and killed! God has lifted Him up to His right hand as our Prince and Savior, offering a fresh start and forgiveness of sins to everyone. We are witnesses to all of this, and so is the Holy Ghost, whom God gives to those who obey Him."

Hearing that made the leaders furious enough to chew glass; they started plotting how to kill the apostles.

Then, a wise and respected teacher of the law named Gamaliel stood up in the council. He asked for the apostles to be stepped outside for a moment.

"Men of Israel," Gamaliel warned, "be very careful what you plan to do with these guys. Remember Theudas? He went around claiming he was important, and about four hundred people followed him. But he was killed, and his whole group vanished into thin air. After him came Judas of Galilee during the census, who drew a huge crowd, but he died too, and his followers scattered.

"So here is my advice: leave these men alone. Let them go! If their little plan or movement is just human, it will fizzle out and disappear. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop it—and you might just find yourselves fighting against God Himself!"

The council agreed with him. They called the apostles back in, gave them a beating, and strictly ordered them never to speak in Jesus' name again before finally letting them go.

Did the apostles run away scared? Nope! They walked right out of the council chambers with huge smiles, overjoyed that they were considered worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus. And every single day, whether in the grand temple or in cozy living rooms, they never stopped teaching and preaching the Good News about Jesus Christ!

ACTS 6

As Jesus' followers grew into a massive crowd, a big argument broke out. The Greek-speaking believers complained that their widows were being ignored during the daily food handouts.

So, the twelve main leaders gathered everyone together and announced, "It's not a good idea for us to stop preaching God's message just to hand out food. Instead, friends, find seven respected men among you who are wise and full of the Holy Spirit. We will put them in charge of this important job, while we focus completely on praying and sharing God's word."

Everyone loved this smart plan! They quickly chose seven great men: Stephen (who had amazing faith and was full of the Holy Spirit), Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas (a newcomer from Antioch). They brought these men to the apostles, who prayed over them and placed their hands on them to bless their new job.

Because of this, God's message spread even faster. The community of believers in Jerusalem grew huge, and even a large group of religious priests decided to follow the faith.

Meanwhile, Stephen was doing incredible, jaw-dropping miracles and wonders among the people, completely fueled by faith and God's power.

This made some local men—from a group called the synagogue of the Libertines, along with folks from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia—very jealous. They started arguing with Stephen, but they were

no match for him. Stephen spoke with such incredible wisdom and spirit that they could not argue back or defeat his logic.

Frustrated, they secretly paid men to lie, saying, "We heard him trash-talking Moses and God!"

They raised ordinary citizens, the elders, and the religious teachers. Suddenly, a mob rushed Stephen, grabbed him, and dragged him right in front of the high council.

They brought in more fake witnesses who lied, shouting, "This guy never stops bad-mouthing this holy temple and God's rules! We heard him claim that this Jesus from Nazareth is going to tear down this building and completely change the traditions that Moses gave us!"

As everyone on the council stared straight at Stephen, they were completely shocked—his face was glowing, looking just like the face of an angel.

ACTS 7

"Are these stories really true?" asked the big leader.

Standing up tall, Stephen replied, "Friends and elders, listen to how it all began! Long ago, before our great ancestor Abraham even had a home in Haran, God appeared to him in a distant land called Mesopotamia and said, 'Leave your family and your homeland, and go to a wonderful country I will show you.'

So, Abraham packed up and moved to Haran. After his father passed away, God guided him to this very land where we now live. Even though Abraham did not own so much as a patch of dirt here, God promised to give this entire land to him and his future family—long before he even had any children!

God also warned Abraham that his family would one day move to a foreign land, where people would treat them unkindly and make them slaves for four hundred years. But God promised, 'I will punish the nation that makes them slaves, and afterward, they will come out of there and worship me right here in this place.'

God gave Abraham a special sign called circumcision, and soon Abraham had a son named Isaac, who later had Jacob, who became the father of our twelve great grandfathers—the patriarchs.

Those twelve brothers grew jealous of their brother Joseph and sold him as a slave to Egypt. But God was right there with Joseph through every hard moment! He gave Joseph such incredible wisdom and charm that the King of Egypt made him the supreme governor over the whole country and his royal household.

Soon, a terrible famine hit both Egypt and Canaan, making life extremely hard, and our ancestors ran out of food. When Jacob heard there was grain in Egypt, he sent our grandfathers there on the first trip. On their second visit, Joseph finally revealed his identity to his brothers, and the Pharaoh met Joseph's family for the first time.

Then Joseph invited his father, Jacob, and all seventy-five of his relatives to join him in Egypt. That is where Jacob and our ancestors eventually passed away. Later, their bodies were brought back and

buried in the special tomb that Abraham had purchased with silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

As the time approached for God's promise to Abraham to come true, our people multiplied rapidly in Egypt. But eventually, a brand-new king came to power who did not remember Joseph at all. This king tricked our people and treated our ancestors so cruelly that they were forced to abandon their newborn babies outside just to let them die.

During this scary time, a baby boy named Moses was born. He was wonderfully handsome, and his parents hid him at home for three months. When they finally had to let him go, Pharaoh's own daughter found him floating in the river and adopted him as her very own son.

Moses grew up learning all the incredible wisdom of the Egyptians, and he became a powerful leader in both his words and actions. When he turned forty, he decided to visit his own people, the children of Israel. Seeing an Egyptian beating one of our men, Moses rushed to his rescue, beat up the Egyptian, and set the man free. He thought his fellow Israelites would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they just did not get it.

The very next day, Moses stumbled upon two Israelites fighting and tried to make peace between them. 'Sirs, you are brothers!' he said. 'Why are you hurting each other?'

But the man who was in the wrong shoved Moses away and snapped, 'Who appointed you as our ruler and judge? Are you going to kill me today just like you killed that Egyptian yesterday?'

Hearing those words, a terrified Moses fled the country and escaped to the land of Midian, where he settled down and raised two sons.

Forty long years later, out in the wild desert near Mount Sinai, an angel of the Lord appeared to Moses inside a bush that was blazing with a bright, crackling fire. Moses stared in amazement and stepped closer to get a better look, when suddenly the voice of the Lord boomed out: 'I am the God of your ancestors—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob!'

Trembling with fear, Moses covered his eyes, too afraid to look.

Then the Lord told him, 'Take off your sandals because you are standing on holy ground! I have seen the terrible suffering of my people in Egypt, I have heard their sad cries, and I have come down to rescue them. Now go—I am sending you back to Egypt!'

Yes, this same Moses whom they had rejected by asking, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?' was the very person God sent back as a mighty rescuer, guided by the angel in the burning bush. Moses led our people out of Egypt after performing incredible miracles and wonders right through the Red Sea and for forty years in the desert!

In fact, this is the exact same Moses who told the people of Israel, 'God will raise up a prophet from among your own people, just like me—make sure you listen to him!' He was the one standing with our ancestors and the angel on Mount Sinai, receiving life-changing words from God to pass down to us.

Even so, our ancestors refused to listen to Moses. They pushed him away and wished in their hearts that they were back in Egypt. They

told Aaron, 'Make us some new gods to lead us, because we have no idea what happened to this Moses who brought us out of Egypt!'

So, they molded a golden calf, offered sacrifices to the silly idol, and threw a party to celebrate something they had made with their own hands! Because of that, God turned away from them and let them worship the stars in the sky—just like it is written in the books of the ancient prophets: *'Did you really bring me sacrifices and offerings for forty years out in the wild desert, Israel? No, instead you carried around the tent of the false god Moloch and the star-idol of Remphan—statues you made just to worship them! Because of that, I will send you far away into exile, past Babylon.'***

While our ancestors traveled through the wilderness, they carried the special Tent of the Testimony with them, exactly as God had commanded Moses to build it according to the pattern he had been shown. Later, the next generation of our ancestors brought that tent in with Joshua when they captured the land from the nations God drove out before them. It stayed there all the way until the days of King David.

David found favor with God and asked if he could build a permanent house for the God of Jacob, but it was his son Solomon who finally built the temple. However, the Most High God does not live inside buildings made by human hands! As the prophet wrote:

*'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house could you build for me? Where is my place of rest? Didn't my hands make all these things?'***

"You stubborn people!" Stephen suddenly shouted, his eyes flashing. "You are just like your ancestors—you always fight against

the Holy Spirit! Which of the prophets did your father mistreat? They even killed the ones who predicted the coming of the Righteous One—and now you yourselves have become His betrayers and murderers! You received God's special law through angels, yet you have not even bothered to obey it!"

When the leaders heard these bold words, they turned furious, gritting their teeth and glaring at him with pure hatred.

But Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight up into the open sky, and saw the glorious light of God. He saw Jesus standing right beside God's throne and cried out, "Look! I see the heavens wide open, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

At that, the angry crowd screamed at the top of their lungs, plugged their ears so they would not have to listen, and all rushed at him together. They dragged him right out of the city gates and began throwing heavy stones at him to kill him. The men who threw the stones left their heavy coats lying on the ground at the feet of a young man named Saul.

While the stones rained down, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, please receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and shouted with a loud voice, "Lord, please don't hold this terrible sin against them!"

And with those peaceful words, he gently passed away.

ACTS 8

Saul gave a thumb-up to Stephen's tragic execution, sparking a massive wave of bullying against the young church in Jerusalem. Believers fled in every direction across Judea and Samaria, though the brave apostles stayed behind. Meanwhile, compassionate friends gave Stephen a proper burial, mourning him deeply.

As for Saul, he acted like a rampaging monster, busting into homes and dragging away men and women to lock them in prison cells.

Yet, wherever the scattered believers traveled, they joyfully shared the good news about Jesus. Philip, for instance, journeyed down to the city of Samaria and began telling everyone about Christ. The crowds hung on his every word, completely captivated by the amazing miracles they witnessed. Screaming evil spirits fled from people, and many who were paralyzed or disabled were totally healed. The entire city was filled with an electric, joyful buzz!

However, a local celebrity named Simon had been dazzling the Samaritans with magic tricks for a long time, convincing everyone that he was someone super important. From the youngest to the oldest, people looked up to him, whispering, "This man possesses the great power of God!"

But when Philip arrived and shared the truth about God's kingdom and Jesus Christ, everything changed. People believed, and both men and women were baptized. Even Simon was amazed! After getting baptized himself, Simon stuck close to Philip, staring in

wide-eyed wonder at the incredible signs and miracles happening all around.

Back in Jerusalem, the apostles heard that Samaria had embraced God's message, so they dispatched Peter and John to check it out. When the two leaders arrived, they prayed that the new believers would receive the Holy Spirit. Up until then, the Spirit had not fallen on any of them yet—they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. As soon as Peter and John laid their hands on them, the believers received the Holy Spirit.

Watching this, Simon thought he could buy spiritual superpowers. He pulled out his wallet and offered the apostles cash, saying, "Give me this ability too, so anyone I touch can receive the Holy Spirit!"

Peter glared at him and snapped, "To heck with your money! How dare you think you can buy God's gift? You have zero part in this, because your heart is totally crooked before God. Drop the wickedness, say you are sorry, and beg God to forgive this greedy plot. I can see you are trapped in bitter jealousy and shackled by sin!"

Terrified, Simon stammered, "Please! Pray to the Lord for me so none of these awful things happen to me!"

After finishing their mission of preaching and testifying, Peter and John headed back to Jerusalem, stopping to share the gospel in several Samaritan villages along the way.

Suddenly, an angel of God appeared to Philip with a travel tip: "Get up and head south down the lonely desert road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza."

Philip packed up and went. Out on the road, he spotted a high-ranking official from Ethiopia—a powerful treasurer serving Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians. He had traveled all the way to Jerusalem to worship and was now bouncing along in his chariot, reading aloud from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

The Spirit nudged Philip, "Hurry up and catch that chariot!"

Philip sprinted over, heard the man reading Isaiah, and called out, "Do you understand what you're reading?"

The official sighed, "How can I, unless someone explains it to me?" He invited Philip to hop up and sit beside him.

The passage he was reading said: *"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, silent as a lamb before its shearer. He was treated unfairly and had no justice. Who can even speak of his descendants? For his life was snatched from the earth."*

The official turned to Philip and asked, "Please tell me, who is the prophet talking about? Is he talking about himself, or someone else?"

Right away, Philip started with that exact scripture and began telling him the wonderful news about Jesus.

As they rolled down the road, they came across some water. The official shouted, "Look, water! Is there anything stopping me from getting baptized right now?"

Philip smiled and replied, "If you believe with all your heart, you can."

The official beamed, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God!"

He yelled for the chariot to halt. Both Philip and the official waded right into the water, and Philip baptized him. The moment they stepped out, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly whisked Philip away in a flash! The official could not see him anymore, but he happily continued his journey home with a singing heart.

Meanwhile, Philip magically popped up in Azotus, and as he traveled north, he preached the good news in every single town until he reached Caesarea.

ACTS 9

Long ago, a man named Saul was incredibly angry with the friends of Jesus. He went to the religious leaders and asked for special letters to take to the city of Damascus. His plan was to find anyone—whether men or women—who followed Jesus, tie them up, and drag them back to prison in Jerusalem.

As Saul traveled down the road, getting closer to Damascus, a sudden flash of bright light from the sky blinded him, and he tumbled to the ground.

Then he heard a voice calling out, "Saul, Saul, why are you fighting against me?"

Trembling and confused, Saul asked, "Who are you, Lord?"

The voice answered, "I am Jesus, the very one you are hurting!"

"Lord, what do you want me to do?" Saul asked.

Jesus told him, "Get up and go into the city. Someone there will tell you what to do next."

The men traveling with Saul stood there frozen in shock. They heard a sound, but they could not see anyone. When Saul picked himself up from the ground and opened his eyes, everything was pitch black—he could not see a thing! So, his friends had to take him by the hand and lead him the rest of the way into Damascus. For three whole days, Saul sat in the dark without eating or drinking a single thing.

In that same city lived a follower of Jesus named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, saying, "Ananias!"

"Here I am, Lord," he answered.

The Lord told him, "Get up and go to Straight Street. Ask at the house of Judas for a man named Saul from Tarsus. Right now, he is praying, and he has already seen a vision of a man named Ananias coming to place hands on him so he can see again."

Ananias gulped and said, "Lord, I've heard terrible things about this man! Everyone is talking about how much harm he did to your followers in Jerusalem, and he came here with permission from the priests to arrest everyone who prays to your name!"

But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! He is my chosen tool to take my message to kings, rulers, and the people of Israel. I am going to show him how much he will suffer for my name."

So, Ananias went straight to the house, laid his hands on Saul, and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus—the one who appeared to you on

the road—sent me so that you can see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Instantly, something like tiny fish scales fell from Saul's eyes. He could see! He got right up and was baptized. After eating some food, his strength returned, and he spent the next few days with the believers in Damascus.

Without wasting any time, Saul started going to the synagogues, boldly preaching that Jesus truly is the Son of God.

Everyone who heard him was completely shocked. They whispered, "Wait, isn't this the guy who hunted down Jesus's followers in Jerusalem? Didn't he come all the way here just to arrest us?"

But Saul only grew bolder and stronger, baffling the local religious leaders by proving that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

After a while, some people plotted to kill him, watching the city gates day and night to catch him. But Saul found out about their sneaky plan. So, in the middle of the night, his friends helped him escape by lowering him in a large basket right through an opening in the city wall!

When Saul arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to hang out with the disciples, but they were terrified of him. They did not believe he had really changed.

Then a kind man named Barnabas stepped in. He took Saul to the apostles and explained the whole story: how Saul had seen the Lord on the road, how Jesus had spoken to him, and how bravely he had preached in Jesus's name in Damascus. From then on, Saul stayed

with them, moving freely around Jerusalem and boldly preaching about Jesus.

Eventually, some people tried to kill him again, so the believers safely escorted him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

During this time, the churches across Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed a peaceful season. They grew stronger in their faith, encouraged by the Holy Spirit, and more people joined them.

Meanwhile, Peter was traveling everywhere visiting different towns, and he came to see the believers living in Lydda. There, he met a man named Aeneas who had been paralyzed and stuck in bed for eight years.

Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you! Get up and make your bed."

And just like that, Aeneas jumped right up! Everyone living in Lydda and the nearby town of Saron saw him walking around and decided to follow the Lord.

Not far away, in a town called Joppa, there was a kind follower of Jesus named Tabitha (also known as Dorcas). She spent all her time doing charitable deeds and helping poor people. But tragically, she got sick and died. Her friends washed her body and laid her in an upstairs room.

Hearing that Peter was visiting nearby Lydda, the believers instantly sent two men to beg him, "Please, come to us right away!"

Peter hurried back with them. When he arrived at the upstairs room, all the grieving widows stood around him crying, holding up the

clothes and coats that Dorcas had made for them while she was still alive.

Peter gently asked everyone to leave the room. He knelt and prayed, then turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, arise."

She opened her eyes! When she saw Peter, she sat right up. Peter reached out his hand, helped her to her feet, and called the believers and widows back into the room to see her alive and well.

Word of this miracle spread across Joppa, and many people put their trust in the Lord. Peter ended up staying in Joppa for quite a long time, living with a man named Simon who worked as a tanner.

ACTS 10

Long ago, in a sunny seaside town called Caesarea, there lived a brave Roman army captain named Cornelius. Even though he was a soldier, Cornelius had a wonderfully kind heart. He loved God deeply, shared his home with a faithful family, gave generously to people in need, and prayed every single day.

One afternoon, right around three o'clock, Cornelius had an amazing vision. A glowing angel appeared right in front of him and called out, "Cornelius!"

Startled and wide-eyed, Cornelius whispered, "What is it, sir?"

The angel smiled and said, "God has heard your prayers and seen your kindness. Now, I want you to send some men to the town of Joppa to find a man named Simon Peter. He is staying at a leather-

worker's house right by the ocean, and he will tell you what to do next."

As soon as the angel vanished, Cornelius called two of his trusted servants and a very loyal soldier. He told them everything that had happened and sent them off to Joppa immediately.

The next day, as the travelers were getting close to their destination, Peter went up to the flat roof of his host's house to pray around noon. He was feeling quite hungry and was looking forward to lunch! While his meal was being prepared, Peter drifted into a daydream-like trance.

Suddenly, the sky seemed to open, and a giant sheet lowered toward the earth by its four corners. Inside the sheet were all kinds of animals, wild beasts, creeping bugs, and birds.

A voice boomed from above, "Get up, Peter! Kill something and eat it."

"Oh, no way, Lord!" Peter protested. "I have never eaten anything that isn't pure or allowed."

The voice replied warmly, "Never call something unclean if God has made it clean."

This strange event happened three times before the giant sheet zipped right back up into the clouds. While Peter sat scratching his head, wondering what the vision meant, the messengers sent by Cornelius finally arrived at the front gate. They knocked and asked if Simon Peter was staying there.

Right at that moment, the Spirit whispered to Peter in his mind, "Hey, three men are looking for you downstairs. Go on down and join them without any worries, because I sent them."

Peter hurried downstairs and opened the door. "I'm the guy you're looking for," he said. "What brings you here?"

The men answered, "Cornelius, a wonderful Roman captain who loves God and is respected by everyone, was told by a holy angel to invite you to his house so he could hear what you have to say."

Peter warmly invited them in for the night. The next morning, Peter and a few friends from Joppa packed their bags and traveled back with the messengers.

When they finally walked into Caesarea the following day, Cornelius was waiting for them with a whole roomful of family and close friends. As Peter stepped through the doorway, Cornelius ran forward and bowed down at his feet in awe.

Peter quickly pulled him up, laughing a little. "Get up! I'm just an ordinary person, the same as you."

Walking inside, Peter saw the large crowd gathered. He looked at them and said, "You all know it's usually against our customs for a Jewish person to visit or hang out with people from other nations. But God showed me something incredible: I should never look at any person as unclean or unwanted. That is why I came here immediately when you called. So, tell me, why did you send it to me?"

Cornelius smiled. "Four days ago, I was fasting and praying in my house at this exact time, when a man in shining clothes suddenly

appeared before me. He said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayers. Send someone to Joppa to fetch Simon Peter, who is staying by the sea.' So, I sent it to you right away, and how wonderful that you came! Now, all of us are gathered here before God, ready to listen to everything He has commanded you to tell us."

Peter took a deep breath and began to speak. "Now I truly understand that God doesn't play favorites! Anyone, no matter where they are from, who respects God and tries to do the right thing is welcomed by Him."

Then Peter shared the amazing story of Jesus of Nazareth—how He went everywhere doing charitable deeds, healing people who were hurting, and showing that God was with Him. Peter explained how people had treated Jesus unfairly, but how God brought Him back to life three days later, letting His closest friends eat and drink with Him again. "He told us to tell the whole world that Jesus is the appointed judge of everyone, living and dead," Peter finished. "And every prophet agrees that anyone who believes in Him receives complete forgiveness for their mistakes!"

While Peter was still speaking, a sudden wave of God's Spirit swept over everyone listening in the room!

Peter's Jewish friends who had traveled with him were completely shocked. Their jaws dropped because they realized the wonderful gift of God's Spirit was not just for them—it was being poured out on people from every background! They could hear the new believers happily praising God in different languages.

Peter smiled and said, "Can anyone argue against baptizing these people with water now that they've received the Holy Spirit just like we did?"

So, he happily commanded that they all be baptized in the name of Jesus. Afterward, they begged Peter and his friends to stay and visit for a few more days, celebrating their new friendship together.

ACTS 11

News quickly spread across Judea that people who were not Jewish were also listening to God's message.

When Peter finally made it back to Jerusalem, some believers who strictly followed Jewish customs immediately started arguing with him.

"Why did you go into the homes of outsiders and eat dinner with them?" they demanded.

So, Peter calmly explained the whole story from the very beginning.

"I was in the city of Joppa praying," Peter told them, "and while in a trance, I saw a strange vision. A large sheet was being lowered from the sky by its four corners, and it landed right in front of me. When I looked closely inside it, I saw all kinds of animals—four-legged beasts, wild creatures, creeping bugs, and birds. Then a voice spoke to me from above, saying, 'Get up, Peter, kill something and eat it.'

"No way, Lord!" I answered. 'I have never let anything unclean touch my lips.'

"But the voice replied from heaven, 'Don't you dare call anything unclean that God has made clean.'

"This happened three times before the whole thing was pulled back up into the clouds. Right at that exact moment, three men sent from Caesarea arrived at the house where I was staying. The Holy Spirit told me to go with them without having any doubts. Six of our brothers went with me, and we walked right into a man's house. He told us how an angel had appeared to him, saying, 'Send men to Joppa and bring back Simon Peter. He will tell you how you and your whole family can be saved.'

"Well, as soon as I started speaking to them, the Holy Spirit fell on them, just like He did on us when this all first started. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' Since God gave them the exact same gift He gave us when we trusted in the Lord Jesus, who was I to try and block God?"

When the critics heard this, they stopped arguing. Their anger turned to praise, and they glorified God, saying, "So God has given even to non-Jewish people the chance to turn to Him and live!"

Meanwhile, some believers had fled far away because of the trouble that happened around Stephen. They traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, but they only shared the message with Jewish people. However, a few men from Cyprus and Cyrene traveled to Antioch and began preaching the good news about the Lord Jesus to the Greek-speaking outsiders as well. The power of the Lord was with them, and a massive crowd believed and turned to the Lord.

When the church in Jerusalem heard about this, they sent Barnabas all the way to Antioch. When he arrived and saw how God was blessing the people, he was thrilled. He encouraged them all to stay true to the Lord with all their hearts, because Barnabas was a profoundly good man, filled with the Holy Spirit and strong faith. Because of his leadership, even more people joined the Lord.

After that, Barnabas left for Tarsus to look for Saul. Once he found him, he brought him back to Antioch. For an entire year, the two of them met with the church and taught huge crowds of people. In fact, it was in Antioch that the followers of Jesus were first called "Christians."

Around that same time, some prophets traveled from Jerusalem down to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and predicted through the Spirit that a terrible famine was coming over the entire Roman world—which happened during the reign of Emperor Claudius. The disciples in Antioch decided to help their brothers living in Judea, each giving as much as they could afford. They collected the relief fund and sent it safely to the church elders in Judea using Barnabas and Saul as their delivery team.

ACTS 12

Word got out across Judea in a flash: people who were not Jewish were starting to listen to God's message, too!

When Peter finally made it back to Jerusalem, some believers who were super strict about Jewish rules immediately cornered him.

"Why on earth did you go into the homes of outsiders and eat dinner with them?" they demanded.

So, Peter calmly walked them through the whole story from the very beginning.

"I was chilling in the city of Joppa, praying," Peter told them.

"Suddenly, I had a wild vision while in a trance. A giant sheet was being lowered from the sky by its four corners, and it landed right at my feet. When I peeked inside, my jaw dropped—it was packed with every kind of animal you can imagine: four-legged beasts, wild creatures, creepy-crawlies, and birds. Then a booming voice spoke to me from above, saying, 'Get up, Peter, hunt something down and eat it.'

"No way, Lord!" I shot back. 'I've never let anything yucky or unclean touch my lips.'

"But the voice fired right back from heaven, 'Don't you dare call anything unclean that God has made clean!'

"This whole thing happened three times before the sheet zipped back up into the clouds. And get this—right at that exact second, three guys sent from Caesarea pounded on the door of the house where I was staying. The Holy Spirit whispered to me, *Go with them, no questions asked*. So, six of our Christian brothers and I hit the road and walked right into a stranger's house. The homeowner told us how an angel had appeared to him, saying, 'Send men to Joppa and bring back Simon Peter. He will tell you how you and your whole family can be rescued.'

"Well, the second I opened my mouth to talk to them, *BAM!* The Holy Spirit fell on them, just like He did on us back at Pentecost. Then it hit me—I remembered what Jesus had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' Listen, if God handed them the exact same awesome gift He gave us when we trusted in Jesus, who was I to try and stand in God's way?"

When the critics heard that, all the arguing stopped. Their angry scowls melted into cheers as they praised God, shouting, "No way! God has opened the door for non-Jewish people to turn to Him and live, too!"

Meanwhile, back when the trouble started over Stephen, some believers had packed their bags and scattered far away. They traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, but they only whispered the message to fellow Jews. However, a brave few from Cyprus and Cyrene rolled into Antioch and started boldly preaching the good news about Jesus to the Greek-speaking outsiders, too. The Lord's awesome power backed them up, and a massive wave of people believed and turned to God.

When the main church in Jerusalem caught wind of this, they sent Barnabas on a long road trip all the way to Antioch. When he arrived and saw how amazingly God was working, his heart did a happy dance. He cheered them all on to stick close to the Lord with everything they had. See, Barnabas was an awesome guy—totally packed with the Holy Spirit and unshakeable faith. Because of his great leadership, even more people joined the family of God.

After that, Barnabas took a detour to Tarsus to hunt down Saul. Once he tracked him down, he brought him back to Antioch. For a

whole solid year, the dynamic duo hung out with the church and taught huge crowds of people. In fact, it was right there in Antioch that Jesus' followers were first nicknamed "Christians."

Around that same time, a few traveling prophets journeyed from Jerusalem down to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and—supercharged by the Spirit—predicted that a mega-famine was about to sweep across the entire Roman world (which happened later while Claudius was emperor). The disciples in Antioch did not just sit around; they decided to pitch in and help their brothers and sisters living in Judea. Everyone gave whatever they could scrape together. They packed up the relief fund and sent it safely to the church leaders in Judea, trusting Barnabas and Saul to deliver the goods.

ACTS 13

Once upon a time, in the busy and colorful city of Antioch, the church was packed with amazing teachers and special leaders. Among them were Barnabas, a man named Simeon (who went by Niger), Lucius from Cyrene, Manaen (who had grown up playing with the king, Herod), and a man named Saul.

One day, while the group was praying and fasting together to listen closely to God, the Holy Spirit whispered, "Set apart Barnabas and Saul for a very special mission that I have chosen just for them."

So, the church family gathered around. After more praying and fasting, they placed their hands on Barnabas and Saul to bless them and sent them off on their big adventure.

Guided all the way by the Holy Spirit, the two friends hiked down to the coast to the town of Seleucia, and from there they hopped on a boat and sailed across the blue sea to the beautiful island of Cyprus.

When they landed at the port city of Salamis, they went straight to the Jewish meeting places to share God's wonderful message. They even had a helpful young man named John traveling right along with them.

They walked across the entire island until they reached the town of Paphos. There, they ran into a tricky man named Barjesus—a Jewish sorcerer who pretended to be a prophet but only told lies.

This sorcerer was spending time together with the island's governor, a very smart and thoughtful man named Sergius Paulus. The governor had heard about Barnabas and Saul and was very eager to hear the true message about God.

However, the tricky sorcerer (whose name was also called Elymas) tried his hardest to block the path. He argued with the missionaries, desperate to keep the governor from believing in God.

Suddenly, Saul—who was also known by the name Paul—was filled with the Holy Spirit. He looked straight into the sorcerer's eyes with a powerful gaze and said, "You are full of tricks and sneaky plans! You child of the devil, and enemy of everything that is good! Will you never stop twisting the straight and wonderful ways of the Lord?"

Look now! The hand of the Lord is against you, and you are going to be blind, unable to see the sun for a little while."

Instantly, a heavy, dark mist fell over the sorcerer. He stumbled around in circles, helplessly searching for someone to grab his hand and lead him around!

When the governor saw what had just happened, his jaw dropped. He was completely amazed by the power of God's message, and at once, he believed.

After leaving Paphos, Paul and his crew sailed over to Perga in Pamphylia. But here, their helper John decided to head back home to Jerusalem.

Paul and the others kept traveling until they reached Antioch in Pisidia. On the Sabbath, they walked into the local meeting house and sat down with the people.

After the leaders finished reading aloud from the holy books of the law and the prophets, they looked over at Paul and Barnabas and called out, "Friends, if you have an encouraging word for the people here, please stand up and speak!"

Paul stood tall, held up his hand to quiet the crowd, and began to speak: "Men of Israel, and all of you who truly respect God, listen closely! The God of our people chose our ancestors and made them great when they were strangers living in Egypt. With a mighty and powerful arm, He led them right out of that place! For forty whole years in the wild desert, He patiently put up with their stubbornness. Then, after knocking down seven wicked nations in the land of Canaan, He handed out their land as gifts by throwing lots.

"For about four hundred and fifty years, He gave them judges to help guide them, all the way until the days of Samuel the prophet. But then the people decided they wanted a king like other nations. So, God gave them Saul, the son of Kish from the tribe of Benjamin, to rule for forty years. When that time was up, God gently removed him and raised up David to be their king! God even gave a wonderful compliment about David, saying, *'I have found David, the son of Jesse, a man who truly loves My heart and will do everything I want him to do.'*

"And guess what? From David's family tree, just as He promised, God has brought a wonderful Savior to Israel—Jesus! Before Jesus arrived, John traveled all over preaching a message about turning away from wrong choices and starting fresh through baptism. As John finished his work, he would tell the crowds, *'Who do you think I am? I am not the promised one. But someone is coming right after me, and I am not even worthy to untie the sandals on his feet!'*

"My friends, children of Abraham, and all of you who fear God: this wonderful message of rescue has been sent straight to you! The people living in Jerusalem and their leaders did not recognize Jesus. They did not understand the words of the prophets that are read every single Sabbath. But by condemning him to death, they accidentally made those very prophecies come true! Even though they could not find a single fair reason to put him to death, they begged Pilate to have him killed anyway.

"Once they had finished doing everything the ancient writings predicted, they took him down from the wooden cross and laid him safely in a tomb. But God woke him up from the dead! For many

days afterward, Jesus appeared alive to the friends who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. Today, those friends are his official witnesses to everyone!

"And we have amazing, good news to share with you! The ancient promise that God made to our ancestors has now come true for us, their children, because He raised Jesus back to life. It is just like it says in the second Psalm: *'You are my Son; today I have become your Father.'* And regarding the fact that God raised him from the dead so he would never decay, He also promised: *'I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.'* In another place it explains: *'You will not let your Holy One rot in the grave.'*

"Now, King David served God's purpose for his own lifetime, and then he peacefully passed away, was buried with his ancestors, and his body did decay. But the one whom God raised back to life—Jesus—did *not* decay at all!

"So, listen closely, my friends: through this amazing man Jesus, the forgiveness of sins is being announced to you! Everyone who believes in him is made completely right and clean freedom that the old law of Moses could never give you.

"So be very careful! Make sure you do not let the warning spoken by the prophets happen to you: *'Look, you scoffers! Be amazed and disappear! For I am going to do something incredible in your days, something you will not believe at all, even if someone explains it to every detail.'*"

When Paul finished talking, the people began to step outside. But the crowd loved what they heard, and many people—both Jews and kind foreigners who had joined the faith—followed Paul and

Barnabas down the street. The two teachers warmly encouraged them to keep trusting in God's wonderful kindness.

By the time the next Sabbath rolled around, the entire city showed up to hear the word of God!

But when some of the local religious leaders saw the massive ocean of people, they turned green with jealousy. They began to shout angry insults, arguing against everything Paul was saying and making fun of God.

Without missing a beat, Paul and Barnabas spoke up with fearless courage. "It was necessary for God's message to be spoken to you first," they said. "But since you are pushing it away and deciding for yourselves that you don't want eternal life, watch this—we are now turning to the people of other nations! For the Lord commanded us with these words: *'I have made you bright light for the nations, so that my rescue can reach the very ends of the earth.'*"

When the people from other nations heard this, their faces lit up with joy! They cheered and praised the message of the Lord, and all those who were ready for eternal life chose to believe.

Soon, the word of the Lord was buzzing through the entire countryside like wildfire!

However, the upset leaders stirred up some important, wealthy people in the town, turning them against Paul and Barnabas. They started a big fuss and chased the two missionaries right out of town.

Unfazed, Paul and Barnabas simply brushed the dust off their sandals as a warning sign and cheerfully packed their bags for the next town, Iconium.

And the best part? The new believers left behind in the city were not sad at all—instead, their hearts were overflowing with pure joy and the glowing power of the Holy Spirit!

ACTS 14

Once upon a time in a busy city called Iconium, two good friends named Paul and Barnabas went into a big gathering place to talk about God. They spoke with such kindness and excitement that a huge crowd of people, both locals and visitors, decided to believe their wonderful message.

Not everyone was happy, though. Some people who did not believe them got very grumpy and stirred up the townspeople, making everyone suspicious and angry at their friends.

Even so, Paul and Barnabas did not run away. They stayed in Iconium for a long time, speaking bravely about the Lord. To show the people that their message was true, God gave them the power to do amazing miracles with their own hands.

Soon, the whole city was split right down the middle: half the people sided with the grumpy leaders, and the other half cheered for the apostles. When Paul and Barnabas found out that a mean group was plotting to attack them and throw heavy stones at them, they quickly packed up and escaped to the towns of Lystra, Derbe, and the countryside around them. And everywhere they went, they kept sharing the good news.

In Lystra, there was a man who had never been able to walk a single step since the day he was born. As he sat listening to Paul speak, Paul looked right at him and saw in his eyes that the man honestly believed he could be healed.

"Stand up straight on your feet!" Paul called out in a loud, joyful voice.

Right away, the man jumped up and started walking and leaping around!

When the local crowd saw what had just happened, their jaws dropped. They started shouting in their own native language, "Quick! The gods have come down to visit us in human bodies!"

Because Barnabas was big and quiet, they decided he must be the king of the gods, Jupiter. And because Paul did all the talking, they named him Mercurius, the messenger god.

Before long, the local priest of Jupiter rushed to the city gates leading a parade with decorated oxen and flower garlands, ready to throw a massive party and offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas as if they were superheroes or gods.

When Paul and Barnabas realized what was happening, they were so shocked and upset that they ripped their clothes in distress. They leaped right into the middle of the cheering crowd, shouting, "Friends, why are you doing this?! We are not gods—we are just ordinary humans with feelings just like you! We are here to tell you to turn away from these silly stories and worship the living God who made the sky, the earth, the ocean, and everything in them."

They explained that even though God had let people live their own ways in the past, He never left Himself without proof of His goodness. He sent rain from the sky, grew delicious crops, and filled everyone's hearts with food and happiness. Even with all those words, it was all they could do to stop the crowd from worshipping them.

Trouble followed them, however. Some angry troublemakers traveled all the way from Antioch and Iconium just to turn the people of Lystra against Paul. They whispered lies, stirred up the mob, and threw stones at Paul until they thought he was dead, dragging his limp body outside the city walls.

But as his loyal friends gathered closely around him in a circle, praying and watching, Paul suddenly coughed, stood right back up, and walked bravely back into town! The very next day, he and Barnabas packed their bags and headed off to Derbe.

After preaching the good news in Derbe and helping many people understand the faith, the two friends did not just keep going—they bravely turned around and walked right back through Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch! They wanted to check on the new believers, encouraging them to stay strong in their friendship with God. They reminded everyone that doing wonderful things often comes with tough challenges, but it is all worth it to be part of God's wonderful kingdom.

To help the new groups of believers stay organized, Paul and Barnabas helped choose wise leaders for every church. They prayed together, went without food to focus on God (fasting), and lovingly placed the new believers into God's care.

Traveling onward, they crossed through Pisidia and arrived in Pamphylia. After preaching the word in Perga, they journeyed down to Attalia and finally hopped on a ship back to Antioch, the very place where their friends had first prayed for them and sent them out on this big adventure.

When they finally arrived home, they called the whole church family together. With big smiles and happy hearts, they told the story of all the amazing things God had done with them, especially how He had opened the door of faith to people everywhere.

And there, surrounded by their friends, Paul and Barnabas stayed happily for a long, long time.

ACTS 15

Some visitors from Judea arrived in Antioch and began telling the believers a strict rule: "If you aren't circumcised just like Moses commanded, God can't save you!"

Paul and Barnabas strongly disagreed and argued with these men. Because the debate got so heated, the local church decided that Paul, Barnabas, and a few others should travel to Jerusalem to talk things over with the apostles and church leaders.

As they journeyed through Phoenicia and Samaria, they stopped to share the exciting news that people from every background were turning to God. The believers there were overjoyed! When they finally reached Jerusalem, the whole church, along with the apostles and

elders, welcomed them warmly. Paul and Barnabas shared all the amazing things God had done through their ministry.

However, a few believers who used to belong to the Pharisees stood up and objected. "We must require these new believers to be circumcised and follow the entire law of Moses!" they insisted.

So, the apostles and elders held a big meeting to sort this out. After a lot of passionate debate, Peter stood up and said, "Friends, you know that God chose me a long time ago to bring the Good News to the Gentiles so they could believe. God, who knows everyone's thoughts, showed He accepted them just as He accepted us by giving them the Holy Ghost. He treated them just like us, cleaning their hearts through faith. So why are you testing God by putting a heavy religious burden on these new disciples—a heavy yoke that neither we nor our ancestors could ever carry? No, we believe we are saved through the wonderful grace of the Lord Jesus, and so are they!"

The whole room fell completely silent. Then they listened closely as Paul and Barnabas told story after story about the incredible miracles God had worked through them among the Gentiles.

When they finished speaking, James stepped forward. "Friends, listen to me," he said. "Simon has reminded us how God first looked favorably on the nations to gather a people for His name. This fits right in with what the prophets wrote: *'After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent... so that the rest of humanity may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who are called by my name.'* God has known His plans from the very beginning! Therefore, my advice is that we should not make things difficult for the Gentiles who are

turning to God. Instead, let us just write a polite letter telling them to avoid four things: food polluted by idols, sexual immorality, meat from strangled animals, and blood. After all, the teachings of Moses have been preached in every city and read in the synagogues every Sabbath for generations."

The apostles, the elders, and the whole church thought this was a brilliant plan. They decided to send two respected leaders from among them—Judas (called Barsabas) and Silas—along with Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch.

They sent this letter with them: *"Greetings from the apostles, elders, and brothers in Jerusalem to our Gentile brothers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. We heard that some men from our group went out and troubled you with confusing words, saying you must be circumcised and obey the law—things we never told them to do! So, we all agreed to send trusted men to you, along with our dear friends Paul and Barnabas, who have risked their very lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are sending Judas and Silas to tell you about these exact same things in person. It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us not to burden you with anything beyond these essential rules: stay away from food offered to idols, blood, strangled meat, and sexual immorality. If you avoid these things, you will do well. Farewell!"*

With the letter in hand, the team headed down to Antioch. They gathered the whole church together and handed them the message. When the people read the encouraging letter, they cheered with joy!

Judas and Silas, who were gifted speakers themselves, spent a long time encouraging and strengthening the believers with their words.

After spending some time there, the Antioch church sent them back to the apostles with a peaceful blessing. However, Silas decided to stay in Antioch.

Paul and Barnabas also stayed behind, teaching and preaching the good news of the Lord alongside many others.

After a few days, Paul suggested to Barnabas, "Let's go back and visit the believers in every town where we preached the word of the Lord, just to see how they're doing."

Barnabas agreed and wanted to bring John, also known as Mark, along with them. But Paul strongly disagreed, remembering how Mark had abandoned them back in Pamphylia instead of staying to finish the work.

The argument between Paul and Barnabas became so sharp that they decided to part ways. Barnabas took Mark and sailed off to Cyprus, while Paul chose Silas and set out on a journey. The believers in Antioch prayed for God's grace to be with Paul as he left, and he traveled through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening all the local churches along the way.

ACTS 16

Paul and his friends traveled to the towns of Derbe and Lystra, where they met a wonderful young follower named Timothy. Timothy's mother was a believer from a Jewish background, and his Greek father had passed away, but the church families in Lystra and Iconium spoke very highly of him. Wanting Timothy to join their

adventures, Paul decided to circumcise him to respect the local Jewish communities who knew his father was Greek.

As they journeyed from town to town, they shared the special rules and encouraging messages sent by the wise leaders in Jerusalem. Because of this, the growing church families became stronger in their faith and welcomed new friends every single day.

They traveled through Phrygia and Galatia, but when they tried to share God's message in Asia, the Holy Spirit gently stopped them. Trying next to enter Bithynia, the Spirit once more guided them away, so they headed down to the seaside town of Troas.

That night, Paul had an exciting dream where a man from Macedonia stood up and pleaded, "Please cross over and help us!" Convinced that God was calling them to share the good news with the people there, they immediately set sail. They stopped at Samothracia, sailed on to Neapolis the next day, and finally arrived in Philippi—a busy, important Roman colony where they stayed for a few days.

On the Sabbath, they walked outside the city gates to a peaceful riverbank where people usually gathered to pray. Sitting down, they began talking to the women who had gathered there. One of them was Lydia, a kind merchant from Thyatira who sold beautiful purple cloth. As she listened, the Lord opened her heart to pay close attention to Paul's words. After she and everyone in her household were baptized, she warmly insisted, "If you truly believe I am faithful to the Lord, please come stay at my house." She was so welcoming that they finally agreed.

One afternoon on their way to the place of prayer, they were followed by a young slave girl who had a spirit that let her tell

fortunes, making a lot of money for her owners. She trailed behind Paul and his friends, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, and they are showing us the way to be saved!"

She did this for many days until Paul, feeling deeply troubled by the distraction, turned to the spirit, and commanded in the name of Jesus Christ, "Come out of her!" At once, the spirit left.

When their owners realized their money-making machine was gone, they grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the town rulers. Standing before the magistrates, the angry owners complained, "These men are Jews causing total chaos in our city! They are teaching customs that we Romans aren't allowed to follow."

The angry crowd joined in against them, and the magistrates ordered the guards to rip off Paul and Silas's clothes and beat them with sticks. After hitting them many times, they threw the bruised missionaries deep into the prison, telling the jailer to guard them with his life. Taking his job very seriously, the jailer locked them deep inside the darkest dungeon and clamped their feet tightly into heavy wooden stocks.

Around midnight, instead of crying, Paul and Silas were praying and singing joyful songs to God, while the other prisoners listened in wonder. Suddenly, a massive earthquake shook the prison right down to its foundations! All the heavy doors flew wide open, and everyone's chains magically fell off.

The jailer woke up with a start, and when he saw the open doors, he panicked. Thinking all the prisoners had escaped, he drew his sword

to end his life. But Paul shouted at the top of his lungs, "Stop! Do not hurt yourself, we are all still right here!"

Calling for a torch, the jailer rushed inside, shaking with fear, and fell trembling at the feet of Paul and Silas. Helping them up, he asked, "Sirs, what do I need to do to be saved?"

They smiled and told him, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you and your whole family will be saved."

They spent time sharing God's word with him and everyone in his house. Right there in the middle of the night, the kind jailer washed their wounds and was baptized along with all his family members. He brought them upstairs to his home, set out a delicious meal, and celebrated with boundless joy because his whole household now believed in God.

When morning came, the magistrates sent their guards with a message: "Let those men go."

The jailer happily told Paul, "The magistrates sent word to release you. You can leave now in peace!"

But Paul firmly replied, "They beat us publicly without a trial—even though we are Roman citizens—and threw us in prison. Now they want to sneak us out quietly. Absolutely not! Let them come here themselves and walk us out."

When the guards repeated this to the magistrates, the rulers turned pale with fear, realizing they had beaten Roman citizens. They hurried over to the prison, apologized, and politely asked Paul and Silas to leave the city.

After stepping out of the prison, the two friends went straight to Lydia's house. There, they hugged the believers, gave them some encouraging words, and finally set off on their next great adventure.

ACTS 17

After traveling through Amphipolis and Apollonia, Paul and Silas finally arrived in Thessalonica, where the local Jewish community had a meeting place called a synagogue.

True to his custom, Paul went right in. For three Saturdays in a row, he talked with the people using scrolls from the Bible. He explained and proved that the Savior had to suffer, rise back to life from the dead, and that Jesus—the very one Paul was talking about—was that Savior!

Some people were convinced and joined Paul and Silas. A huge crowd of Greek believers and many important women decided to follow them too.

But the religious leaders who did not believe them became super jealous. They rounded up a rough crowd of troublemakers from the streets, started a massive riot, and rushed to Jason's house, hoping to drag Paul and Silas out to the angry mob.

When they could not find Paul and Silas, they grabbed poor Jason and a few other believers instead, dragging them right in front of the city bosses. They shouted, "These guys who are turning the whole world upside down have shown up here, too! And Jason is hiding

them! They are all breaking Caesar's laws by claiming there is a different king named Jesus!"

Hearing this put the whole city—and the leaders—on edge. After making Jason and the others pay a bail fine, the bosses finally let them go.

That very night, the believers secretly packed Paul and Silas off to a town called Berea. As soon as they got there, they headed straight to the local synagogue.

The people in Berea turned out to be much more open-minded than the crowd in Thessalonica. They eagerly listened to God's message and checked the Bible every single day to make sure what Paul was saying was true. Because of this, a whole bunch of them believed—including quite a few prominent Greek men and women.

However, when the troublemakers back in Thessalonica heard that Paul was preaching the word of God in Berea, they traveled all the way there just to stir up the crowds again.

So, the believers quickly rushed Paul away toward the coast, while Silas and Timothy stayed behind. The friends guiding Paul safely dropped him off in Athens and then hurried back with a message telling Silas and Timothy to catch up as fast as they could.

While Paul was hanging around Athens waiting for his friends, his heart ached. The entire city was completely packed with idols and statues of fake gods.

So, he started debating with the Jews and devout people in the synagogue, and every single day he would chat with whoever happened to be hanging out in the bustling marketplace.

Eventually, some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers crossed paths with him. Some sneered, "What is this chatterbox even trying to say?" Others said, "Sounds like he's promoting foreign gods"—all because Paul was sharing the good news about Jesus and coming back to life.

They took him by the arm and led him up to the Areopagus (a famous council hill), asking, "Can you explain this brand-new teaching to us? You're bringing up some really weird ideas, and we'd love to know what it all means." (The truth was the people of Athens and the visitors staying there spent all their free time doing just one thing: arguing about or listening to the newest ideas!)

So, Paul stood right in the middle of Mars' Hill and spoke up: "Men of Athens, I can see that you are extremely religious in every way. As I walked around looking at your holy sites, I even found an altar with these words carved on it: *TO AN UNKNOWN GOD*. Well, let me introduce you to the very God you have been worshiping without knowing it!

"He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since He is the Lord of heaven and earth, He does not live in man-made temples. He does not need us to wait on Him hand and foot like He is helpless; actually, He is the one who gives everyone life, breath, and everything else we have!

"From one single person, He created all the nations of humanity to live across the face of the earth. He decided beforehand exactly when they would rise and fall, and where they would live. Why? So, they would reach out and search for God, hoping to somehow bump into Him and find Him—even though He is near to any single one of

us! 'For in Him we live and move and exist,' as some of your own poets have written, 'We are truly His children.'

"Since we are God's children, we shouldn't foolishly think that God is just a sculpture made of gold, silver, or stone carved by human hands. God overlooked people's ignorance about this in the past, but now He commands everyone everywhere to change their hearts and turn to Him. He has set a specific day when He will judge the world fairly by a special man He has chosen. And to prove it to everyone, He brought that man back to life from the dead!"

The second they heard him mention a dead person coming back to life, some of them burst out laughing and mocked him. But others said, "Let's talk about this again some other time."

So, Paul walked away from them. Even so, a few people stuck close to him and believed. Among them was Dionysius (a member of the council), a woman named Damaris, and a few others.

ACTS 18

Leaving Athens behind, Paul traveled to the bustling city of Corinth. There, he met a friendly Jewish couple named Aquila and Priscilla, who had recently had to leave Italy because Emperor Claudius ordered all Jewish people to move away.

Since Paul shared their trade in making tents, he moved in and worked alongside them. Every Saturday, Paul visited the local synagogue to talk with both Jews and Greeks, trying to help them understand the truth.

When his good friends Silas and Timothy finally arrived from Macedonia, Paul felt an extra burst of energy and boldly told everyone that Jesus was truly the promised Savior. But some people argued and said mean things, so Paul dusted off his clothes and said, "You chose not to listen, so that's on you! From now on, I'm taking this good news to the non-Jewish people."

He moved next door into the home of a man named Justus, whose house shared a wall with the synagogue. Even so, Crispus, the important leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord along with his whole family. Many other people in Corinth listened, believed, and were baptized, too!

One night, God spoke to Paul in a dream, saying, "Don't be afraid. Keep right on talking, and do not stay quiet. I am with you, and no one will hurt you, because I have many people in this city who are ready to listen." So, Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, happily teaching God's word.

Later, when a new ruler named Gallio took charge, some people stirred up trouble and dragged Paul into court. "This man is telling people to worship God in a way that breaks our laws!" they complained.

Before Paul could even speak, Gallio the judge told them off. "If this were a crime or a terrible wrong, I'd have a reason to listen to you. But since it is just a silly argument about words, names, and your own religious rules, deal with it yourselves. I am not a judge for things like that!" And he threw them right out of the courtroom.

Frustrated, the crowd grabbed Sosthenes, the new synagogue leader, and beat him up right in front of the judge—though Gallio did not seem to care at all.

After staying a while longer, Paul finally said goodbye to his friends. With Priscilla and Aquila by his side, he sailed toward Syria, stopping first at Cenchrea where he shaved his head to keep a special promise he had made to God.

When they landed in Ephesus, Paul left Aquila and Priscilla there while he went into the synagogue to chat with the people. They begged him to stay longer, but he politely said no. "I need to get to Jerusalem for the upcoming festival," he told them. "But I'll come back to see you if God wants me to."

With that, he sailed away, stopped at Caesarea to greet the church family, and traveled back to Antioch. After resting there for a bit, he journeyed through Galatia and Phrygia, encouraging all the disciples along the way.

Meanwhile, a clever and talented speaker named Apollos, who came from Alexandria, arrived in Ephesus. He knew a lot about the Lord, taught with great excitement, and shared what he knew about God—though he only knew about the baptism of John.

When Apollos began preaching boldly in the synagogue, Priscilla and Aquila heard him. They took him under their wing and gently taught him even more about God's wonderful plan.

When Apollos decided to travel to Achaia, the believers wrote letters encouraging the disciples there to welcome him warmly. Once he

arrived, he was a huge help to the believers, powerfully and publicly proving from the scriptures that Jesus was indeed the Savior.

ACTS 19

While Apollos was visiting Corinth, the apostle Paul traveled through the upper regions and finally arrived in Ephesus. There, he met a small group of about twelve believers and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed it?"

They looked confused and answered, "We haven't even heard that there *is* a Holy Spirit!"

"Then what kind of baptism did you have?" Paul asked.

"John's baptism," they replied.

Paul smiled and explained, "John baptized people to show they were sorry for their wrongdoings, but he always told them to believe in the one coming after him—Jesus."

As soon as they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit filled them, and they immediately began speaking in different languages and prophesying!

For the next three months, Paul went boldly to the local Jewish synagogue, passionately explaining and discussing God's kingdom. But when some people stubbornly refused to listen and started arguing against the Christian faith in front of everyone, Paul took the believers away from the synagogue. Instead, he began teaching daily in a lecture hall belonging to a man named Tyrannus.

He kept this up for two whole years, making sure that everyone living in the province of Asia—both Jews and Greeks—heard the message about the Lord Jesus.

God even worked extraordinary miracles through Paul. People would take handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched Paul's skin and place them on sick people; instantly, their illnesses vanished, and evil spirits fled from them!

Seeing this, some traveling Jewish exorcists decided to try using the name of Jesus to cast out evil spirits. They chanted, "I command you in the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches!"

Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva tried this trick. But the evil spirit snapped back, "I know Jesus, and I know Paul, but who on earth are you?"

Suddenly, the man possessed by the evil spirit leaped on them like a wild animal, overpowering all seven of them. Beaten, bleeding, and terrified, the brothers burst out of the house and ran away naked!

When the news spread across Ephesus to both Jews and Greeks, a wave of deep awe swept over the city, and the name of the Lord Jesus was praised above everything else. Many believers came forward, openly confessing the sad things they used to do. A large group of people who had practiced magic gathered their expensive spellbooks and burned them in a giant bonfire in the middle of town. When they added up the value of the books, it came to a staggering fifty thousand pieces of silver! Because of moments like this, God's message spread with incredible power and success.

After all this happened, Paul made up his mind to travel through Macedonia and Achaia, head to Jerusalem, and eventually visit Rome. He sent two of his helpers, Timothy, and Erastus, ahead to Macedonia, while he stayed in Asia a little longer.

Right around that time, a massive riot broke out over the new faith. It all started because of a silversmith named Demetrius, who made miniature silver shrines of the goddess Diana and made a lot of money for local craftsmen.

Demetrius called for a big meeting with his workers and fellow craftsmen. "Men," he said, "you know that our wealth comes from this business. But you can see and hear for yourselves that this guy Paul has convinced huge crowds—not just here in Ephesus, but everywhere in Asia—that handmade gods are not real gods at all! Not only is our business in danger of going under, but the temple of our great goddess Diana might lose its glory, even though all of Asia and the entire world worship her!"

Hearing this made the men furious. They started shouting at the top of their lungs, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!"

In minutes, the whole city was in total chaos. The angry mob grabbed Gaius and Aristarchus—two Macedonian travelers who were Paul's friends—and dragged them rushing wildly into the city's giant outdoor theater.

Paul wanted to run inside and face the crowd, but his disciples would not let him. Even a few high-ranking officials in the city who were his friends sent messages begging him not to risk his life by going into the theater.

Inside the theater, total confusion reigned. People were screaming different things all at once; most of the crowd did not even know why they had gathered in the first place! Some Jews pushed a man named Alexander to the front, and he waved his hand, trying to give a speech to calm the crowd down. But as soon as they realized he was a Jewish man, they all started chanting together, and for two whole hours, the theater echoed with one deafening roar: "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!"

Finally, the city clerk managed to quiet the roaring crowd. "Men of Ephesus," he shouted, "everyone knows that our city is the proud guardian of the temple of the great Diana and her sacred image that fell from the sky! Since these facts cannot be argued, you need to calm down and stop doing anything reckless. The men you have dragged in here have not stolen anything from our temples or insulted our goddess. If Demetrius and his craftsmen have a real legal complaint, the courts are open and the judges are ready to let them sue each other! But if you want to discuss other matters, it needs to be handled in a proper, official meeting. Otherwise, we risk getting into serious trouble with the Roman authorities for today's riot, and we will not have any excuse for this wild mob!"

With those sensible words, he dismissed the assembly, and the crowd slowly drifted home.

ACTS 20

Once the big riot finally quieted down, Paul gathered his friends close, gave them a warm hug, and set off for Macedonia.

As he traveled through those regions, he encouraged the believers with many uplifting words before finally arriving in Greece. He stayed there for three months. But when some people plotted against him just as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to head back through Macedonia instead.

Several friends traveled with him to Asia: Sopater from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus from Asia. These men went on ahead and waited for us in Troas. Meanwhile, the rest of us sailed away from Philippi after the Festival of Unleavened Bread, meeting up with them in Troas five days later, where we stayed for a week.

On the first day of the week, the believers gathered to share a meal, and Paul preached to them. Since he was leaving the next day, he kept talking right up until midnight! The upper room where they met was brightly lit with many lamps. A young man named Eutychus was sitting on the windowsill, growing sleepier. As Paul kept on preaching, Eutychus finally dozed off completely and tumbled right out of the third-story window. When people ran down to check on him, he was lifeless.

But Paul rushed downstairs, threw his arms around the boy, and said, "Don't worry, he's going to be fine!" Sure enough, Eutychus was alive. Paul went back upstairs, shared some food, and talked with

everyone until dawn before finally heading out. The young people brought Eutychus home alive and well, feeling immensely relieved.

The rest of us went on ahead to the ship and sailed for Assos, where we were scheduled to pick up Paul, who preferred to walk there.

When he met us in Assos, we took him aboard and sailed to Mitylene. The next day we passed Chios, arrived at Samos the day after that, stopped briefly at Trogyllium, and finally reached Miletus the following day. Paul had decided to sail right past Ephesus because he did not want to get delayed in Asia; he was rushing to try and reach Jerusalem by Pentecost, if possible.

From Miletus, however, he sent a message to Ephesus, inviting the church leaders to come meet him. When they arrived, Paul said to them:

"You know how I've lived the entire time I've been with you in Asia. I have served the Lord with complete humility, through many tears, and despite the hardships caused by people plotting against me. You know I never held back anything that could help you; I taught you publicly and from house to house, urging both Jews and Greeks to turn to God and place their faith in our Lord Jesus.

"And now, compelled by the Spirit, I'm heading to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. All I know is that the Holy Spirit warns me in city after city that prison and trouble are waiting for me. But my life is worth nothing to me unless I finish the race and complete the work the Lord Jesus gave me—to tell everyone the Good News of God's grace.

"Now I know that none of you, among whom I've traveled preaching God's kingdom, will ever see my face again. So, I declare today that I

am innocent of anyone's blood because I have declared to you the whole plan of God.

"Keep watch over yourselves and all the people the Holy Spirit has given you to shepherd—the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, vicious wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Even some of you will twist the truth to draw followers away. So be alert! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you day and night, often with tears.

"And now I entrust you to God and the message of his grace, which can build you up and give you a wonderful inheritance among all his holy people. I have never coveted anyone's silver, gold, or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have worked to provide for my own needs and for my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by working hard we must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, who said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

When Paul finished speaking, he knelt and prayed with all of them. They all wept openly, hugging Paul and kissing him goodbye, most of all because he had told them they would never see his face again. Then they walked him down to the ship.

ACTS 21

After saying goodbye to our friends, we set sail on a straight path to the island of Cos. The next day we reached Rhodes, and from there we sailed on to Patara.

Once there, we found a cargo ship heading across the sea to Phoenicia, so we hopped aboard and set off. As we sailed past Cyprus, we kept it on our left and crossed the open water straight toward Syria, finally docking at Tyre because the ship needed to unload its cargo.

We tracked down some local believers and stayed with them for a full week. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, these friends warned Paul repeatedly not to go near Jerusalem. When our week was up, we packed our bags to leave. Everyone—including the women and children—walked us all the way out of the city limits. Right there on the sandy shore, we knelt together, prayed, and said our final goodbyes before getting back on the boat while they headed home.

Finishing our voyage from Tyre, we landed at Ptolemais, greeted our fellow believers, and spent a day hanging out with them. The next morning, our travel crew moved on to Caesarea. We went straight to the home of Philip the evangelist—one of the original seven helpers—and stayed with him. He had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy.

While we were resting there for a few days, a prophet named Agabus traveled down from Judea. He walked right up to us, grabbed Paul's belt, and used it to tie up his own hands and feet. "The Holy Spirit

says this," Agabus announced. "The owner of this belt will be tied up just like this by the Jews in Jerusalem and handed over to the Gentiles!"

When we and the local believers heard that, we begged Paul with tears in our eyes not to go any further toward Jerusalem.

But Paul shook his head. "Why are you crying and breaking my heart?" he asked. "I am not only ready to be tied up, but I am ready to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus!"

Since he would not change his mind, we finally stopped arguing and said, "May the Lord's will be done."

A few days later, we packed up our gear and finally made the trek up to Jerusalem. Some believers from Caesarea came along with us, leading us to stay at the home of an old disciple named Mnason, who originally came from Cyprus.

The believers in Jerusalem were thrilled to welcome us. The very next day, Paul took us to meet with James, and all the church elders gathered around. After greeting them warmly, Paul gave a detailed report of all the amazing things God had done among the non-Jewish nations through his ministry.

When they heard the news, they praised God, but then James told him, "Brother, you can see how many thousands of Jewish people have believed, and every single one of them is deeply devoted to following God's law. But they've heard a rumor that you are teaching all the Jews living among the Gentiles to abandon Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or follow our traditional customs."

"So, what should we do?" James continued. "Word is going to spread fast that you're in town, and a huge crowd is going to gather. Here is what we suggest: We have four men here who have taken a special vow. Join them, take part in the purification ritual with them, and pay for their expenses so they can shave their heads. That way, everyone will see that the rumors are false, and that you respect and follow the law yourself. As for the Gentile believers, we've already sent them a letter deciding they don't need to follow all these rules, except to stay away from food offered to idols, blood, strangled animals, and sexual immorality."

So, the next day, Paul joined the four men, went through the purification ceremony with them, and walked right into the temple to announce when their purification period would end, and their individual offerings would be made.

Just as those seven days were ending, some Jewish opponents from Asia spotted Paul in the temple. They stirred up the entire crowd, grabbed him, and started shouting at the top of their lungs, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who goes everywhere teaching everyone against our people, our law, and this holy place! He even brought Greeks inside the temple and defiled this sacred ground!" (They had seen Trophimus, a man from Ephesus, walking with Paul in the city earlier and just assumed Paul had snuck him into the temple).

The whole city went wild. People came running from everywhere, dragged Paul right out of the temple, and slammed the heavy temple doors shut.

As a mob was trying to beat him to death, word rushed to the Roman commander that all of Jerusalem was in a massive riot. Without

wasting a second, the commander grabbed a bunch of soldiers and centurions and sprinted down into the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his armed soldiers, they instantly stopped beating Paul.

The commander marched up, arrested Paul, and ordered him to be bound with two heavy chains. Then he demanded to know who the prisoner was and what crime he had committed. But the crowd was screaming so many different things at once that the commander could not get a straight answer out of the chaos. So, he ordered the soldiers to carry Paul back into the fortress barracks.

When they reached the stone steps, the crowd became so violent and pushy that the soldiers had to pick Paul up and carry him to keep him safe, while the angry mob chased behind screaming, "Kill him! Get rid of him!"

Just as they were dragging him inside, Paul looked at the commander and asked politely, "May I ask you a question?"

The commander looked surprised. "You speak Greek? Aren't you that Egyptian criminal who started a massive rebellion a while ago and led four thousand dangerous fighters out into the desert?"

"No," Paul replied. "I am a Jewish man from Tarsus in Cilicia—a citizen of a very important city. Please, let me speak to the crowd."

The commander gave him permission. Paul stood on the top of the stairs and waved his hand to quiet the mob. When a sudden, heavy silence fell over the massive crowd, he began speaking to them in their own Hebrew language.

ACTS 22

"Listen to me, friends and leaders!" Paul called out.

The angry crowd quieted right down when he started speaking to them in their very own language.

"I am a Jewish man," Paul explained. "I was born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, but I grew up right here in Jerusalem. I studied under our great teacher Gamaliel, and I learned all about our ancestral laws. I was just as fired up to serve God as all of you are today.

"In fact, I used to hunt down Christians with a vengeance. I threw both men and women in prison, and I even voted to have them killed. The high priest and the whole council can back me up on that. They even gave me letters for our friends in Damascus so I could track down believers there, arrest them, and drag them back to Jerusalem to be punished.

"Well, as I was traveling to Damascus and getting close by noon, a blinding flash of light suddenly exploded from the sky all around me. I crashed to the ground and heard a voice saying, 'Saul, Saul, why are you fighting against me?'

"'Who are you, Lord?' I asked.

"And the voice answered, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, the one you are fighting.'

"The men traveling with me saw the crazy bright light and were terrified, but they didn't hear the voice speaking to me.

"'What should I do, Lord?' I asked.

"The Lord told me, 'Get up and go into Damascus. Someone there will tell you everything you have been chosen to do.'

"Since the bright light had blinded me, my friends had to hold my hand and lead me the rest of the way into Damascus.

"Soon, a man named Ananias came to see me. He was a deeply religious man who followed our law and was well-respected by all the Jews living there. He walked up, stood beside me, and said, 'Brother Saul, open your eyes and see!' At once, my sight came back, and I looked straight at him.

"Then Ananias said, 'The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know His plan, to see the Righteous One, and to hear His voice. You are going to be His star witness to everyone, telling them everything you have seen and heard. So, what are you waiting for? Get up, get baptized, wash away your sins, and call on the name of the Lord.'

"Later on, after I had returned to Jerusalem, I was praying in the temple and slipped into a trance. I saw Jesus telling me, 'Hurry! Get out of Jerusalem right now, because the people here will not believe what you say about me.'

"'But Lord,' I argued, 'they know I used to go from synagogue to synagogue, beating and locking up everyone who believed in you. When Stephen, your martyr, was killed, I was standing right there cheering it on and guarding the coats of the men who murdered him.'

"But the Lord told me, 'Go. I am sending you far away to people who are not Jewish.'

"The crowd listened to Paul up until that exact moment. Then they completely lost their minds, shouting at the top of their lungs, 'Kill him! Get rid of this trash! He does not deserve to breathe!'

"They screamed, ripped off their coats, and threw handfuls of dust up into the air.

"Seeing this, the Roman commander ordered Paul to be dragged inside the fortress. He commanded his soldiers to whip Paul so they could figure out why the crowd was acting like a pack of wild animals.

"As the soldiers were tying him up with leather straps, Paul looked at the officer standing nearby and asked, 'Is it legal for you to whip a Roman citizen without even giving him a trial?'

"When the officer heard that, he ran straight to the commander and warned him, 'You better watch what you are doing! This man is a Roman citizen!'

"The commander rushed over and asked Paul, 'Tell me, are you really a Roman?'

"'Yes, I am,' Paul answered.

"The commander shook his head. 'It cost me a fortune to buy my citizenship.'

"'Well,' Paul replied, 'I was born with mine.'

"The soldiers who were supposed to interrogate him immediately backed away. Even the commander was terrified when he realized Paul was a Roman citizen, especially since he had already tied him up in chains!

"The next day, the commander wanted to find out the real reason the Jewish leaders were accusing Paul. So, he untied him, ordered the high priests and the whole council to assemble, and brought Paul down to stand right in front of them."

ACTS 23

Paul looked right at the high-up leaders in the room and said, "Friends, I have always tried to live a good life that makes God happy, all the way up to today!"

Suddenly, the big leader, Ananias, got super angry and yelled at the men standing nearby to punch Paul right in the mouth!

Paul stared at him and shot back, "God is going to punish you, your sneaky phony! You sit there pretending to judge me by God's rules, but you break the rules yourself by having me hit!"

The guards gasped, "How dare you talk back to God's head priest!"

Paul blinked and said, "Oops, I honestly didn't know he was the head priest, guys. The Bible *does* say not to trash-talk your leaders."

Then Paul looked around the room and noticed something clever: half the men were Sadducees (who did not believe people could come back to life after dying) and the other half were Pharisees (who totally believed in miracles and life after death). So, Paul shouted out, "Hey guys! I am a Pharisee, and my dad was one too! And right now, I am on trial just because I believe people can live again after death!"

Boom! Instant chaos. The Pharisees and Sadducees started yelling and fighting with each other.

The Sadducees kept shouting, "People don't come back to life! There are no angels or ghosts!" But the Pharisees argued back, "Yes, there are!"

The room got so loud and wild that some of the Pharisee teachers stood up and yelled, "Wait! We do not find anything wrong with this guy! What if an angel or spirit really *did* talk to him? We should not fight against God!"

The shouting got so out of control that the Roman commander, Claudius Lysias, got super scared they were going to rip Paul into little pieces. He yelled to his soldiers, "Quick! Go down there, pull him away from them by force, and bring him back to the safe fort!"

That night, Jesus stood right next to Paul in the dark and whispered, "Cheer up, Paul! You spoke up for me here in Jerusalem, and you're going to do the exact same thing in Rome."

The next morning, a bunch of sneaky men got together and made a serious, creepy promise. They swore a holy oath that they would not eat or drink *anything* until they had murdered Paul!

More than forty guys joined this secret club. They snuck over to the chief priests and older leaders and said, "Hey, we swore a blood oath not to eat a single bite until Paul is dead. Here is the plan: you and the council need to lie to the Roman commander. Tell him you want to ask Paul a few more questions tomorrow. Pretend you want a better look at his case. While he's walking over here, we'll be hiding in the bushes, ready to jump out and assassinate him."

Luckily, Paul's nephew (his sister's son) overheard them plotting! He snuck into the safe fort and whispered the whole scary secret right into Paul's ear.

Paul called one of the army guards over and said, "Please take this young man to the commander. He has something super important to tell him."

The guard brought the boy to the commander. The commander smiled, took the boy by the hand, and pulled him aside to a quiet spot. "What's up, kiddo? What do you need to tell me?"

The boy bravely disclosed information: "The bad guys are going to ask you to bring Paul down to the meeting room tomorrow under the fake excuse of asking him a few more questions. *Please* do not fall for it! There are more than forty men hiding in the bushes right now, and they have sworn not to eat or drink until they have ambushed and killed Paul. They are just waiting for you to say yes."

The commander patted the boy on the shoulder and said, "Thanks, kid. Don't tell a single soul that you talked to me."

Then the commander snapped his fingers and called two of his captains. "Listen up! Get two hundred soldiers ready, plus seventy horsemen and two hundred spear-throwers. Be ready to march out at 9:00 tonight! Get some extra horses ready for Paul to ride so we can get him safely to Governor Felix."

Then the commander wrote a letter that went something like this:

"Dear Governor Felix, Some local guys grabbed this man Paul and almost beat him to death. When I found out he was a Roman citizen, I rode in with my troops and rescued him. I wanted to know what he

did wrong, so I took him to their meeting room. Turns out, he just had some weird arguments about their religious laws, but he did not do anything wrong! He certainly did not do anything that deserves prison or death. But when I found out his enemies were planning to murder him in an ambush, I rushed him straight to you. I told his accusers to go state their case in front of you. Stay awesome. — Claudius Lysias”

So, the soldiers grabbed Paul just like they were told and marched him through the dark night all the way to a town called Antipatris.

The next morning, the regular foot soldiers headed back to the fort, but the horsemen kept riding with Paul to make sure he was safe. When they finally arrived in Caesarea, they handed the letter to the governor and dropped Paul off right in front of him.

Governor Felix read the letter, looked up at Paul, and asked, "What province are you from?"

When he heard Paul was from Cilicia, Felix smiled and said, "I'll listen to your whole story as soon as your accusers get here." And he ordered the guards to lock Paul safely inside King Herod's grand palace hall until the trial.

ACTS 24

Five days later, the high priest Ananias and some Jewish leaders traveled down to Caesarea with a clever lawyer named Tertullus. They were there to officially report Paul to the governor, Felix.

When Paul was brought into the courtroom, Tertullus stepped forward to present the charges. He began with smooth flattery: "Most noble Felix, because of your leadership, our nation enjoys great peace, and your wise reforms have brought many good things to our people. We are always deeply grateful for this everywhere and. But so, I do not take up too much of your day, I kindly ask you to listen to just a few brief words of our complaint.

"Put simply, we have found this man Paul to be a total troublemaker. He stirs up rebellions among Jewish people all over the world, and he is the main ringleader of the dangerous Nazarene sect. He even tried to turn the holy temple into a place of chaos, so we arrested him and wanted to judge him according to our own laws. However, the military commander Lysias suddenly rushed in and ripped him out of our hands with great force! Lysias ordered us, his accusers, to come all the way here to present our case to you. If you question Paul yourself, you will quickly see that everything we are saying about him is true."

The other Jewish leaders nodded along in strong agreement, confirming every word.

Then the governor motioned for Paul to speak. With calm confidence, Paul addressed the room: "Governor Felix, I know you

have been a judge over this nation for many years, so I gladly speak in my own defense today. You can easily check the facts: it has only been twelve days since I traveled up to Jerusalem to worship God. Not once did they find me arguing with anyone in the temple, stirring up angry crowds, causing riots in the synagogues, or even roaming the city streets. They cannot prove one of the wild accusations they are shouting at me today!

"I will freely admit one thing, though: I worship the God of my ancestors by following 'the Way,' which these men mistakenly call a heresy. I deeply believe everything written in the Jewish law and the prophets. Just like these men do, I place my hope in God that there will be a resurrection of the dead—for both the good and the bad. Because of this hope, I work hard every day to keep my conscience completely clear before both God and everyone around me.

"After being away for several years, I finally returned to Jerusalem to bring charitable gifts and special offerings to my people. While I was peacefully completing the temple purification rituals—without any angry mobs or riots—some Jews from Asia happened to spot me. If they have a real complaint against me, they are the ones who should be standing right here before you today! Or, since those men are here right now, let them explain what crime they found me guilty of when I stood on trial before the Jewish council. The only possible mistake I made was shouting out one specific truth while standing among them: 'It is because of the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today!'"

Governor Felix already knew quite a bit about "the Way." Deciding he needed more information, he paused the trial and announced, "We

will finish this when Commander Lysias arrives from Jerusalem. Then I will make my final decision."

Felix then ordered a military officer to keep Paul under guard but gave instructions to treat him kindly: Paul was to be given some freedom, and his friends were allowed to visit him and bring him whatever he needed.

A few days later, Felix returned with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish. He sent for Paul and listened closely as the prisoner talked about faith in Christ. But as Paul passionately explained God's standards of right and wrong, self-control, and the coming judgment, Felix turned pale and trembled with fear. "That's enough for today!" Felix interrupted. "Go back to your room. When I have more free time, I will send it to you."

At the same time, Felix secretly hoped that Paul would offer him a bribe to set him free. Because of this, Felix kept sending for Paul just to chat with him, hoping money would change hands.

Two whole years passed this way, until Felix was finally replaced by a new governor named Porcius Festus. But because Felix wanted to leave the Jewish leaders happy before he stepped down, he left Paul locked in prison.

ACTS 25

Shortly after taking office as the new governor, Festus traveled from Caesarea up to Jerusalem. As soon as he arrived, the Jewish leaders swarmed him with complaints about a prisoner named Paul,

secretly begging the governor to transfer Paul to Jerusalem. They were plotting to ambush and murder him along the road.

Festus refused, telling them, "Paul is safely locked up in Caesarea, and I'm heading back there soon anyway. If your leaders want to accuse this man of a crime, they can come with me and state their case there."

After spending a little over a week in Jerusalem, Festus returned to Caesarea. The very next day, he took his seat on the judge's bench and ordered Paul to be brought in. The Jewish leaders who had traveled from Jerusalem crowded around, shouting an extensive list of serious accusations, but they could not prove one of them.

Stepping forward to defend himself, Paul stated clearly, "I have broken no laws—not our Jewish laws, not the rules of the temple, and not the laws of the Emperor Caesar."

Wanting to win favor with the Jewish leaders, Festus interrupted and asked Paul, "Would you be willing to go up to Jerusalem to stand trial before me there?"

Paul stood his ground. "I am standing right here in the Emperor's court, which is where I ought to be judged. I have done nothing wrong to the Jewish people, and you know it very well, Festus. If I am guilty of a crime worthy of death, I do not run away from punishment. But since none of their accusations are true, nobody has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!"

After consulting with his advisors, Festus replied, "You have appealed to Caesar, and to Caesar you will go!"

A few days later, King Agrippa and Queen Bernice arrived in Caesarea to welcome the new governor. After they had been visiting for several days, Festus brought Paul's case to the king.

"Felix left behind a prisoner when he stepped down," Festus explained. "When I was in Jerusalem, the chief priests and elders demanded that I condemn him. I told them that it is not Roman custom to punish a man before he faces his accusers directly and gets a chance to defend himself against the charges.

"So, when they came here, I didn't waste any time. The very next day, I sat on the judgment seat and had the man brought out. But when his accusers stood up, they did not bring any of the serious charges I expected. Instead, they argued about their own religious traditions and about some man named Jesus who died—whom Paul stubbornly insists is still alive!

"Since I was completely out of my depth with these religious debates, I asked Paul if he wanted to go to Jerusalem for trial. But Paul appealed his case to the Emperor Augustus, so I ordered him kept in custody until I can ship him off to Rome."

King Agrippa's eyes lit up. "I'd love to hear this man speak myself."

"You've got it," Festus said. "Tomorrow, you'll hear him."

The next day, King Agrippa and Bernice arrived in grand style, wearing their finest clothes and dazzling jewels, surrounded by top military commanders and the city's elite. At a wave of Festus's hand, Paul was brought into the room.

Festus stood up and addressed the crowd. "King Agrippa, and everyone here with us today, look at this man. The entire Jewish

community—both in Jerusalem and here—has mobbed me, screaming that he does not deserve to live. But I could not find a single thing he did that deserves the death penalty. And since he appealed to the Emperor, I decided to send him to Rome.

"The trouble is that I don't have any solid facts or crimes to write down in my report to the Emperor! That is why I have brought him before all of you, and especially you, King Agrippa. After we question him together, I will hopefully have something sensible to write. It makes no sense to send a prisoner to Rome without explaining what he has accused himself of doing!"

ACTS 26

King Agrippa smiled and told Paul, "Go ahead, you can share your side of the story now."

Paul raised his hand, stood tall, and began to speak: "King Agrippa, I am so glad to be standing right here in front of you today. I get to clear my name and answer all the wild accusations the Jewish leaders have made against me. And I am extra lucky because you already know so much about our people's customs and tricky questions. So please, just be patient and listen to my story.

"Every single person in Jerusalem knows what I was like when I was growing up. If they were being honest, they would tell you that I followed the strictest rules of our religion and proudly lived as a Pharisee. But now? Now I am on trial simply because I believe in the incredible promise God made to our ancestors. That is the exact

same promise our twelve tribes worship God day and night hoping to see! And yet, Your Majesty, the Jewish leaders are dragging me to court just for hoping in that very promise.

"Let me ask you a question: Why on earth does it sound so impossible to you that God can bring dead people back to life?

"I used to think the exact same way. I had to do everything in my power to fight against the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And boy, did I do it! Back in Jerusalem, I got official permission from the chief priests to throw many God-fearing believers straight into prison. When people voted to put them to death, I raised my hand right along with them. I hunted them down in every single synagogue, forced them to curse their faith, and was so furiously angry that I chased them into faraway cities just to punish them.

"Once, I was riding on the road to Damascus with a pocketful of authority from the chief priests to do more of the same. But right in the middle of the day, O King, a blinding light—brighter than the scorching sun—flashed down from the sky and surrounded me and everyone traveling with me. We all hit the dirt in terror. Then, I heard a voice speaking to me in Hebrew, saying, *'Saul, Saul, why are you fighting me? It hurts to kick against sharp sticks.'*

"I trembled and asked, *'Who are you, Lord?'* And the voice answered, *'I am Jesus, the one you are fighting.'*

"Then He told me, *'Get up and stand on your feet. I have chosen you to be my helper and a witness. You are going to tell people about what you just saw, and about the other things I will show you later. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles—the non-Jewish people—because I am sending you to them. You are*

going to open their eyes, wake them up from the dark, and pull them out of Satan's grip so they can receive God's forgiveness and get a wonderful home in heaven with all the people made clean by faith in me.'

"Well, King Agrippa, I could never disobey a heavenly vision like that! First in Damascus, then in Jerusalem, all across the countryside of Judea, and finally to people all over the world, I started shouting the good news: people need to turn away from wrong, run back to God, and show by their good choices that they really mean it.

"That is the only reason the Jewish leaders grabbed me in the temple and tried to tear me apart! But God has had my back every single second. With His mighty help, I am still standing here today, telling kids and kings, old and young, the exact same message that Moses and the prophets talked about long ago: The Messiah had to suffer, He had to be the very first to rise up from the grave, and He had to shine a brilliant light of hope to our people and to the whole world!"

Right in the middle of Paul's big speech, Festus shouted out at the top of his lungs, "Paul, you've lost your mind! You have studied way too many books, and it has made you crazy!"

Paul calmly replied, "I am not crazy, most honorable Festus. Every single word I am saying is completely true and makes total sense. King Agrippa knows all about these incredible events, which is why I can talk to him so boldly. None of this happened in some hidden dark corner—everyone knows about it! King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do!"

Agrippa looked at Paul and grinned. "You think you can talk me into becoming a Christian just like that, don't you? Almost, Paul. Almost."

Paul smiled back and said, "Whether it takes almost or all the way, I pray to God that not only you, but every single person listening to my voice today, could become just like me—minus these heavy iron chains, of course!"

As soon as he finished, King Agrippa stood up, and right beside him rose the governor, Bernice, and everyone else who had been sitting on the trial. They walked off into another room to talk in private.

"You know what?" they whispered to one another. "This man hasn't done a single thing that deserves death or prison."

Agrippa turned to Festus and shrugged. "We could have set this man free today... if only he hadn't gone and appealed his case straight to Caesar!"

ACTS 27

Once upon a time, it was decided that Paul and some other prisoners needed to take a long boat ride all the way to Italy. They were put in the care of a kind Roman officer named Julius. Along with Paul's good friend Aristarchus, they all hopped onto a merchant ship and set sailing along the coast.

The next day, the ship stopped at a city called Sidon. Julius was genuinely nice to Paul and let him get off the boat to visit his friends and get some rest.

Soon, they set sail again. But the wind was blowing straight against them, so they had to steer their ship close under the shelter of an

island called Cyprus. They sailed across the open sea near Cilicia and Pamphylia until they finally docked at Myra, a city in Lycia.

At Myra, Julius found a big ship from Alexandria that was headed straight for Italy, and he moved all of them onto it.

The journey was extremely slow. After many days of crawling through the water, the winds grew so strong and stubborn that they could barely steer past a place called Cnidus. They had to take a safer path underneath the island of Crete, passing a rocky point called Salmone.

It was a huge struggle just to get past it, but they finally reached a cozy spot called Fair Havens, near the city of Lasea.

By this time, they had spent a lot of days traveling, and the winter weather was making the sea extremely dangerous. Paul stood up and warned the crew, "Friends, I can tell that continuing this voyage right now is going to be a disaster. We are going to lose the cargo, the ship, and even our lives!"

But the Roman officer, Julius, listened to the ship's captain and owner instead of Paul. Besides, the harbor was not a wonderful place to spend the whole winter, so most of the crew wanted to keep going. They hoped to reach Phoenix—another harbor in Crete that faced southwest and northwest—just so they could cozy up there for the winter.

When a gentle south breeze started to blow, the sailors thought, "*This is our chance!*" They pulled up the anchors and sailed right along the edge of Crete.

But they celebrated too soon! Out of nowhere, a wild, roaring hurricane of a wind—called a "northeaster" smashed into them. The ship was caught helplessly in the gale, and the sailors could not steer against the howling wind. So, they just had to let the ship drift wherever the storm pushed it.

As they flew past a little island called Clauda, the crew had a terribly tough time securing the small lifeboat trailing behind them. Once they finally hauled it up onto the deck, they wrapped heavy ropes all the way around the belly of the ship to hold it together. Terrified that they might crash into the dangerous sandbanks off the coast of Africa, they lowered the sails and let the storm blow them blindly along.

The storm tossed the ship up and down like a toy. The very next day, the crew started throwing heavy cargo overboard to lighten the load. By the third day, with their own hands, they pitched the ship's extra gear and equipment into the raging sea.

For many days, they could not see the sun or the stars at all. The storm just kept pounding them relentlessly, until every single person on board gave up hope of ever surviving.

After they had gone without a decent meal for a long time, Paul stood up in the middle of the frightened crew and said, "Friends, you really should have listened to me back in Crete! We could have avoided all this damage and loss. But now, I am telling you to cheer up! Not a single person among us is going to die—only the ship will be destroyed."

Paul smiled and told them why he was so confident: "Last night, an angel from God—the God I belong to and serve—stood right beside

me. He said, 'Don't be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar. And as a gift, God has spared the lives of everyone sailing with you.' So, men, be of good cheer! I trust God, and I know it will happen exactly as He told me. However, we are going to crash onto some island."

On the fourteenth night of being tossed around in the dark sea of Adria, right around midnight, the sailors felt a strange sensation. They suspected they were getting close to land!

They dropped a weighted measuring line into the water and found it was 120 feet deep. A little farther along, they dropped it again, and it was only ninety feet deep. *Crunch time!* Fearing they might crash into hidden rocks in the dark, they dropped four heavy anchors from the back of the ship and prayed for daylight to come.

Some of the sneaky sailors decided to leave a project. They lowered the small lifeboat into the water, pretending they were going to drop more anchors from the front.

But Paul saw what they were up to and told Julius and the soldiers, "If those men don't stay in the ship, you guys won't be saved!"

Quickly, the soldiers slashed the ropes holding the lifeboat and let it drop empty into the sea.

As the first light of dawn began to creep across the sky, Paul begged everyone to eat something. "You've been waiting and worrying for fourteen days straight without eating a proper meal," he told them. "Please, eat some food now. You need your strength, and I promise you, not a single hair will fall from anyone's head."

When he finished, Paul took some bread, thanked God in front of everyone, broke it, and started eating.

Suddenly, everyone felt a wave of hope. They all smiled and started eating too. (There were 276 people in total on that ship!)

Once they were full, they lit the ship even more by dumping all the remaining wheat into the sea.

When the sun finally came up, nobody recognized the coastline. But they spotted a nice-looking bay with a sandy beach and decided, *“If we can, let’s steer the ship right up onto that shore!”*

They cut the anchors loose, untied the steering oars, hoisted the front sail to catch the wind, and made a dash for the beach.

Instead of hitting sand, the front of the ship plowed right into a shallow spot where two ocean currents met and got completely stuck! The violent waves began crashing against the back of the ship, smashing it into pieces.

The soldiers panicked and thought, *“Let’s kill the prisoners so none of them swim away and escape!”*

But Julius the officer really wanted to save Paul, so he stopped the soldiers from doing it. Instead, he ordered everyone who could swim to jump into the water first and make a run for the beach. For the rest of the crew, he told them to grab floating wooden planks or pieces of the broken ship.

And guess what? Just like Paul promised, every single person made it safely ashore!

ACTS 28

Once everyone made it safely ashore, they found out they were on an island called Malta.

The island's friendly locals welcomed the cold, wet travelers with open arms and built a huge, cozy campfire to warm them up. As Paul gathered a pile of dry sticks and tossed them onto the flames, a sleepy viper, driven out by the heat, suddenly leaped out, and latched onto his hand!

When the islanders saw the deadly snake dangling from his hand, they whispered to each other, "That man must be a killer! He survived the angry ocean, but justice won't let him live."

But Paul calmly shook the snake right into the fire and did not feel a single scratch. The villagers stared at him, expecting him to swell up or drop dead on the spot. After watching for a long time and seeing he was fine, they completely changed their minds and started shouting, "He must be a god!"

Nearby lived the island's leading man, Publius, who generously hosted the shipwrecked group for three days. Publius's father was extremely sick with a high fever and dysentery, so Paul went in, prayed, placed his hands on the man, and completely healed him. Word spread fast, and soon everyone else on the island who was sick came forward and was cured as well.

Grateful for the miracles, the islanders showered the travelers with gifts and loaded their departing ship with everything they needed.

After spending three months on the island, they finally set sail on an Alexandrian ship that had spent the winter there, which featured twin figureheads of Castor and Pollux. They stopped at Syracuse for three days, sailed around to Rhegium, and then caught a helpful south wind that brought them straight to Puteoli the very next day. There, they found some wonderful believers who begged them to stay for a week before pushing on toward Rome.

Believers in Rome heard they were coming and hiked all the way out to Appii Forum and the Three Taverns to meet them. When Paul saw his friends, he thanked God and felt a rush of courage.

Once they finally reached Rome, the guard captain took charge of the prisoners, but Paul was allowed to live on his own in a rented house with just one soldier guarding him.

Three days later, Paul called together the local Jewish leaders. When they arrived, he explained, "My brothers, even though I've done nothing against our people or the traditions of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. They wanted to let me go after questioning me because I had not done anything worthy of death. But when the religious leaders objected, I had to appeal to Caesar—not because I want to accuse my own people of anything. That is why I asked you and talked with you today. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this heavy chain."

They replied, "We haven't received any letters about you from Judea, and none of our travelers have said anything bad about you. But we are very curious to hear your thoughts, because everyone everywhere seems to be arguing against this new group."

They set a specific date, and a huge crowd squeezed into Paul's lodging. From morning until evening, he passionately explained God's kingdom and tried to convince them about Jesus by using both the Law of Moses and the writings of the prophets. Some were completely convinced by what he said, while others refused to believe.

As the disunited group started to leave, Paul shared one final thought: "The Holy Spirit spoke the absolute truth when He told your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah:

'Go to these people and say: You will hear clearly, but never utterly understand; you will look with your eyes, but never truly perceive. For the hearts of these people have grown hard, their ears are heavy, and they have squeezed their eyes shut. Otherwise, they might see, hear, understand, and turn back to me so I could heal them.'

"So, take note!" Paul declared. "God's rescue mission has now been sent to the nations, and they are going to listen!"

With that, the group left, arguing loudly among themselves.

For two whole years, Paul lived right there in his own rented home. He warmly welcomed every single person who came to see him, boldly and fearlessly teaching about God's kingdom and the Lord Jesus Christ, with no one stopping him.