

Before the amusing doctor jokes begin, let me inform you the ancient Greeks were making doctor jokes 500 years before the Romans, and the Romans 2,000 years before you were born. Yet, whenever a Roman needed health care, they called for a doctor trained in Greece, like I was. We were the best.<sup>1</sup>

Something else... people often want to know whether I was a slave, since many Greek doctors were slaves. Some people even believe I was Paul's slave. Had I wanted you to know if I was a slave, I would have mentioned it in at least one of the two books I've written. You can know this much for certain, my dear friend Paul and I were both slaves....voluntary slaves of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The day before I learned about Jesus, my beliefs were based on Greek mythology and religions. All useless. So, my life... hopeless. In those days, none of the world's religions, except Judaism and Christianity, had anything to do with morality. The purpose of the other religions was to appease the gods and figure out what they wanted in order for cities and people to be prosperous.

That is one of the reasons the world had such a hard time accepting Christianity. Since the beginning of time, the basic human desires and needs were fulfilled whenever you wanted, if you had enough money and they were available, and nobody thought it immoral to do so. In fact, we thought it often pleased the gods to do many things Christians considered immoral. Deep down, I knew the gods didn't exist. What did exist...was a mystery. Probably propelled me to become a doctor in the first place. I love a good mystery.

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<sup>1</sup> Colossians 4:10-14

In one day, my life changed entirely. I met Paul, and he showed me a God that deep down I had hoped existed. I soon believed in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus, was baptized and received the Holy Spirit. I had hope for eternal life with God Almighty.<sup>2</sup>

That rascal Paul wormed his way into my heart. I learned to love him more deeply than anyone but Jesus. I was his friend and companion until the end of his life.<sup>3</sup> I thought I was pretty smart, I'm Greek! But Paul...that guy was amazing...However, even he would admit that I usually beat him in the games of Latrones and Knucklebones. He spent too much time as a child with that boring Rabbi Gamaliel<sup>4</sup> to learn how to play board games well. And, he couldn't bluff at all, he was so committed to telling the exact truth all the time.

He could have been a rich businessman. Instead he became a traveling preacher. Don't think Paul was poor though. He never had much money, but he acquired a wealth of valuable scrolls and parchments.<sup>5</sup> Wonder what happened to those after he died? Let's just say Paul found a way to entice me to write a book on Jesus and the book of the history of the early church.

Paul knew I had access to all of the important Christians who were still alive, he had introduced me to them. But he also knew I would need access to information that he had written down through the years and access to Scriptures that weren't available to most people. He had watched me do examinations, he knew I was meticulous, acquiring every scrap of information I could before making a medical pronouncement.

Most valuable scrolls were made of parchments, which were stitched together pieces of animal skins. Cheaper writings were done on papyrus, which was not nearly as durable. Paper was not available in Israel until almost a thousand years after my time. Which brings me to Julius Caesar, who died about a hundred years before I met Paul.

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<sup>2</sup> The Bible does not say when Luke met Paul or when Luke became a Christian.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Timothy 4:11

<sup>4</sup> Acts 22:3

<sup>5</sup> 2 Timothy 4:13

Julius Caesar was Rome's first dictator. That title was a play on words. A dictator is a political official who tells people what to do, but the title was derived from someone who tells scribes what to write down by dictating to them. Julius Caesar was famous for being able to dictate multiple letters at the same time to multiple scribes. Scribes were important because they took dictation on cheap papyrus or old parchments, and then smoothed the language and copied it onto more expensive parchments and scrolls. A good scribe was invaluable.

Paul dictated many of his letters. He would pace around and say what he had to say while one of his assistants copied it down, often in shorthand. Then the assistant would write it out on expensive material, and after Paul approved it, the letter would be sent. I'm not saying I was the world's best scribe, or that I ever took dictation from Paul, but if you infer such a thing, that would be reasonable.

I spent years writing about and listening to the stories of important Christians. I combined them to make up the Bible books known as *Luke* and *Acts*.<sup>6</sup> So, when you are reading those books, you are hearing the echoes of the personal stories of reliable witnesses, as well as hearing my own eye witness account. You see, I traveled with Paul for many years, but that part of my story will have to wait.

Many experts think I may be a literary genius. Humbling really, and that's where I differ from most Greeks, who are well known braggarts. The experts point out that the Greek phrasing in some of my passages is of the highest quality. Some of them quibble a bit that I use too many medical terms, I am a doctor.

It was imperative that I wrote *Luke* and *Acts* well, because I wrote them to my friend and benefactor, Theophilus.<sup>7</sup> I knew if he liked the books, he would have his copyists make more copies than I could ever afford to do. You can only imagine how expensive... hand copying such lengthy scrolls.

Not everybody in the world has read my first book, but hundreds of millions of people have. It's even attained the title of *Gospel of Luke*. I would not have

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 1-3

<sup>7</sup> Luke 1:3, Acts 1:1

named it after me, but I'm not entirely surprised that others found it useful to do so. Anyway, that book is about the life of Jesus. I cleverly fit his entire story onto just one scroll.<sup>8</sup> Granted, the scroll was as long as was practical, but I had a lot to write about.

Since Theophilus loved my first book, and since Paul really wanted me to write a follow-up, I ended up writing a second book, that my fans fondly call "*The Acts of the Apostles*," or to my real fans, "*Acts*." It also is so long that it barely fits on one scroll, but that just shows how creative I can be if needed. I know some people think that *Acts* ends so abruptly, that I just quit when I ran out of room on the scroll, but that simply shows they don't understand the importance of having a concise ending to a well-written story.

*Acts* covers the period from the Ascension of Jesus in about 30 AD until Paul's first imprisonment in Rome in about 60 AD. It spans the times of Emperors Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. Nero was one of the most evil emperors of ancient Rome. A great fire broke out near the Circus Maximus in 64 AD. Most of the structures in Rome were wood, the fire was out of control. It burned for six days, consuming much of the city. Nero supposedly cavorted around during the burning. According to one historian, Nero blamed the fire on the early Christians and started the first persecution of them. There is reason to doubt the veracity of that historian's claim, but it happened after the period I covered in the *Book of Acts*, so you won't know what I think happened.

At the close of the *Gospel of Luke*, I left my readers in suspense. To many, the ascension of Jesus was the end of the story. But the really insightful readers understood that the ascension of Christ only signaled that the Holy Spirit was coming to the believers, although they were not exactly sure what that was going to mean.

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<sup>8</sup> Viola, pg. 85. A typical sheet of papyrus was about the size of an 8 ½" by 11" sheet of our paper. A scroll of those had a maximum length of about 35 feet, or about 50 pages.

The book of *Acts* opens with a Big Reveal. The resurrected Jesus appeared to more than 500 believers over forty days,<sup>9</sup> and opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.<sup>10</sup> Toward the end of that 40 days, Jesus announced again that his kingdom would not be a physical kingdom, he revealed the importance of the Holy Spirit, and reiterated that his followers were to spread the kingdom to the ends of the earth. And then, Jesus ascended into Heaven to be at the right hand of God the Father. It was also clearly revealed, *for the very first time*, that Jesus would be coming back again! Imagine the amazement of the apostles! They couldn't wait to be witnesses, but Jesus had told them to go wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came to empower them.

The apostles, Jesus' half-brothers, and the believers all had hope again – a hope strong enough to drive their future actions. They finally understood that the Kingdom of Jesus was not a physical kingdom where Israel was going to overthrow Rome. They were not going to be rulers sitting in luxury next to an earthly king but servants of Jesus for the rest of their lives. It was a harsh reality, especially for the apostle Simon the Zealot, but a trade they all were happy to make...once they had the Holy Spirit.

I hated to follow up such an exciting series of events with a long, and rather dull tone. Peter felt it necessary to replace Judas with another person so there would still be twelve apostles. I tell about that event in excruciating detail, although the replacement, Matthias, is never mentioned again. But, most of the other apostles are never mentioned again in the Bible either.<sup>11</sup> I think Paul always liked that story of Matthias because it was proof that there were apostles outside of the original twelve. I always liked the story because the Christians were tossing lots for the very last time since their future decisions would be decided by the Holy Spirit.

When we finally get past the story of Matthias, we come to one of the most exciting stories in the entire Bible! Jesus had promised his followers that the Holy Spirit would come, but they had no idea what to expect. Jesus was usually so

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<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:3-6, Acts 1:3

<sup>10</sup> Luke 24:45

<sup>11</sup> Acts 1:13 is the last time most of the apostles are mentioned in the Bible.

understated that they probably expected Holy Spirit to come through the door dressed as a poor person or an orphan. What they didn't expect? A tornado in their house! Flames of fire landing over them without burning them! The ability to speak in languages they had never learned! This Holy Spirit was a gift beyond anything they could have imagined. And it was the birth of the Church! (this excitement carries him into his thought segue)

You already know two thousand years of the story of Christianity! Envious! But through the haze of all of that information, you probably don't understand how we saw things when Christianity first started.

From the time of Adam, God started revealing himself to people. God promised Abraham that he and his descendants would inherit the land of Israel. God revealed to Moses that the Israelites were to be his people, if and only if, they obeyed his laws and commandments. What many people misunderstand is that the Old Testament Jews were not trying to go to heaven by being righteous. They had no concept of heaven. In fact, the concept of going to heaven as you think about it was not specifically talked about in the Old Testament. The Old Testament Jews were just trying to be God's people and inherit the land.

In the *Gospel of Luke*, Jesus revealed that God the Father sent him from heaven so that all people, not just the Jews, could be reconciled to God. He showed that all people can have eternal life, starting now and ending with eternity in God's presence, if they believe in Jesus and obey his commandments. In *Acts*, stories were told that people receive the Holy Spirit when they repent and are baptized, that the Holy Spirit empowers both Jews and non-Jews to believe and obey Jesus, and about the importance of the church. But it was decades until all of that was clear to the early believers!

Who could have guessed? The mystery that **God is building his kingdom by growing individual churches through empowering individual believers like you.** **And** it is up to each of you to keep building his kingdom. That mystery revealed in Acts is as true today as it was when I wrote it. (overcome with emotion) I love a good mystery! (pauses, an idea hits him) The book of Acts ... the first great mystery novel.

Ever heard of the The Big Fisherman? A novel, then later a movie with three academy award nominations? It's probably why the world thinks of me as being "big" and a "fisherman". I was a fisherman by trade, but I've always thought of myself as about average physically, which for a Galilean man in the first century was only 5'3" - 140 pounds.

My brother Andrew was the true fisherman in our family. Like the very first fish finder radar. If there were fish to be caught, he could tell you where and how deep to throw the nets. My partner, John, was like a concert musician with the nets. We had three kinds of nets and he was a master with all of them. James, James, James. That boy was unbelievable with numbers. The last time we fished together, we had the biggest catch in the history of our little company. He just looked at it and said, "There's 153 big fish. Throw the little ones back." And he was exactly right.<sup>1</sup>

Me, I was the sailor. I could feel the wind before it came up. I always had my sails prepared exactly right, so we always beat the other boats to the places we wanted to fish. When the wind filled the sails, I would just about explode with joy and energy. I felt like I was made - for those moments.

What do you think it felt like to be the first person filled with the Holy Spirit when Jesus sent him back to empower us? Like being a glass that is filled with water? (he simply shakes his head chuckles, then leans in to make the point) It was as if I was a giant sail, and the Spirit ... filling me so full that I just exploded with joy and power. The first thing I thought of was, "In both Greek and Hebrew, the word "spirit" means wind!" Why didn't I expect to feel like this when Jesus promised to send the Spirit to baptize us? Guess I was expecting water, not wind.

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<sup>1</sup> John 21:11

I witnessed some amazing days in my time spent with Jesus of Nazareth... life-changing... I was fishing on the sea of Galilee when he called me to fish for men, I was there when he walked on the water, I was there on top of the mountain when he was transfigured and had a conversation with Moses and Elijah. I was there when he prayed in the garden, when he died on the cross... and I was a witness to his resurrection! But one day was different than all of those!

Early in the morning on Pentecost, only a few days after the ascension of Jesus, many of us were worshiping together. We were praising God and a sound overwhelmed us... as powerful as a tornado. When the promised Spirit came upon us, it was like we had flames of fire all over us. We rushed around, speaking in other languages and accosting everyone to tell them about Jesus. Many of the people around us thought we, the apostles, were drunk even though it was only 9:00 in the morning.<sup>2</sup>

(he sighs, as his mood changes, his voice lowers) The entire time I was with Jesus, I kept a question in my own heart, too embarrassed to ask. It became my secret. I wanted to know, "Why me? Why did you take an average fisherman... on a little lake... in the middle of nowhere... why spend so much of your time and love on him? I'm a nobody...(he chuckles) a loser; I never deserved even a glance. What do you see in me, why do you love me so? Why... me?" When the Spirit filled me, I knew the answer. Jesus never saw me...he saw who I would be when empowered by the Spirit.

What happened next would have put Abraham Lincoln, Billy Graham, or Winston Churchill to shame. Through me, the Spirit delivered the most powerful sermon ever given. For the very first time, the whole Gospel was preached in the power of God's Spirit. For the very first time, people were offered salvation. For the very first time, people repented, were baptized and received the Holy Spirit. For the very first time, the existence of the church was revealed. It gives me chills every time I think about that day.

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 2:13-15



Have you ever read the little book by the prophet Joel? In it, God gave a preview of the future, but it wasn't until Pentecost happened that we understood it. God said from the day of the Lord onward, that his people would have the Holy Spirit poured out on them. Through my sermon, the Spirit revealed that the outpouring would happen for all those who believe in Jesus, repent, and are baptized.<sup>3</sup>

Three thousand people were saved that first day. Every day after that we taught, and spent time with each other. The Lord continued to add to our church every day. You can only imagine the jealousy of the Jewish leaders and the admiration of the townspeople as they saw us growing in numbers, sharing our possessions with each other as we treated one another like brothers and sisters. We were so bold that we just met in the Temple courts right in front of everyone, including the Jewish leaders.<sup>4</sup>

The Spirit was very careful to tend our flock by confirming our work with miracles— such as my healing a man who had been lame from birth. This really confounded the Jewish leaders. They wanted us to stop talking about Jesus, but the miracle spoke for itself to both them and the people.

But it was probably more meaningful that the Spirit confirmed our work by giving us powerful words to speak. Healing the lame man gave us opportunity to speak to all of the crowd nearby. By that time, we had about five thousand full-time believers in Jerusalem. Even so, the Jewish leaders grabbed John and me to threaten us to stop talking about Jesus and his resurrection. We preached the gospel so powerfully to them that they couldn't do anything but listen to us, argue among themselves, and let us go with some empty threats.<sup>5</sup>

It was clear to the believers, the people of Jerusalem and the Jewish leaders that the Holy Spirit had filled us with the power to share the Gospel and grow God's kingdom. We were beginning to understand why Jesus was so anxious to send the Holy Spirit to help us.

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 2:16-39

<sup>4</sup> Acts 2:41-47

<sup>5</sup> Acts 3, 4

I usually try to skip this next story, it's painful. One of my claims to fame is that I once was the world's biggest hypocrite. There is no other way to describe a man who three times denied Jesus, a fact I'm reminded of every time I hear a rooster crow. I know that my Lord specifically forgave me,<sup>6</sup> but that does not negate the fact that I once was the world's biggest hypocrite. I don't use that word lightly. The word was mostly used to describe Greek actors who pretended to be someone they were not. Jesus made the word famous because he accused his enemies, the Pharisees, of being hypocrites.

I mentioned before that the Holy Spirit protected the early church by confirming its validity through miracles and powerful preaching. He also protected the church from potentially destructive new members. Our new church members shared many of their goods in common. One way that happened was for property owners to sell what they owned, and then share the money with the rest of the believers as they had need. A few of our brothers and sisters were easily led into jealousy of the members who received recognition for sharing so generously.

One of our couples, Ananias and Sapphira, conspired together to sell some land and then give *some* of the proceeds to the church, while pretending that the amount they gave was *all* of what they had received. They did not commit a sin by giving less than they received because it was theirs to start with, they committed a grave sin by lying to Holy Spirit. Because of their sin... and hypocrisy, they were both killed by the Spirit. Because of the Spirit's harsh response great fear and respect seized the whole church and everyone who heard the story.<sup>7</sup> It's painful for me to tell (he pauses, shifts uncomfortably) I was the one who had to reveal their hypocrisy and announce their sentences of death.

The Holy Spirit acted more and more powerfully in our early church. All of the apostles healed people and performed many signs and wonders. Crowds gathered up the sick and demon-tormented people they knew, and all of them were

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<sup>6</sup> John 21:15-19

<sup>7</sup> Acts 5:1-11

healed. The Spirit acted so powerfully that even people who were touched by my shadow were healed. (shakes his head) This, of course, made the Jewish leaders crazy with jealousy. They arrested all of the apostles and put us in jail. But in the night, an angel of the Lord came and released us.<sup>8</sup>

(he shakes his head and remembers) The fury of the leaders the next morning when they sent to the jail for us —. The jail doors were locked, but we were gone! They thought they were angry before, but they exploded when they found that we were outside in the Temple yard preaching about Jesus just as the angel had instructed us. Talk about a slap in the face! And, when they called us in to put us on trial, we just preached to them again! Finally, Gamaliel, the finest teacher in Israel, gave them good advice. He said that if our actions were not of God, we would fail and go away. However, if our actions were of God, that they would be fighting God if they tried to stop us. They couldn't just give up that easily though, they flogged us and threatened us to make us stop preaching. However, that just encouraged us to do more for the Lord.<sup>9</sup>

(he yawns) I'm just about ready to quit talking. I don't have the stamina that I had as a younger man. I don't want to take the time to tell you about all the other healings I was empowered to do, or even about the time I raised a woman from the dead. But let me tell you one last story. You know that I was a Jew. Not a very educated Jew, but a Jew, and I was dedicated to the laws of Moses. When Christianity first started, all of its new members were Jewish. We considered Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law, so we continued to practice Judaism as best we could while also being Christians. We had no idea that Christianity would someday be offered to people who were not Jewish?! Oy! (he leans in) That illusion ended several years after Pentecost. Not a few weeks or months like some people visualize, but maybe ten years later!

One afternoon in Joppa, I was giving the prayers of a happy man. All of a sudden, a large sheet of unclean animals came into my view, with God's voice telling me to kill and eat. I was revolted. I said, "I will never do such a thing as eat unclean

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<sup>8</sup> Acts 5:12-19

<sup>9</sup> Acts 5:21-42

food.” God told me not to call anything unclean that he had made clean. That same thing happened twice more. I had learned when things happen in threes, I should pay attention. In my heart, I knew I had done many unclean things in my life. Then, the Holy Spirit told me some people were coming to my house, and I should go with them. By now, you can guess that I didn’t even bother to wait for a knock on the door. I just went downstairs.

The people at the door asked me to come to meet their master, Cornelius, a Roman army commander. Of course, I did so because of the command of the Holy Spirit. Fortunately, the Holy Spirit had me take along some of the brothers from Joppa as witnesses. Long story short, I went the thirty miles north to Caesarea and preached the Gospel to Cornelius and his household and his friends, and they all received the gift of the Holy Spirit. With that sign in place, I baptized them. It was the first conversion of Gentiles, and was the beginning of a new phase of the church.

Oh, the explaining I had to do back in Jerusalem. The matter was so important that my word wasn’t enough, but I fortunately had six witnesses from Joppa. There was no denying what the Holy Spirit wanted, and we had learned better than to argue with Him! From now on, Christianity was available to everyone, not just the Jews.<sup>10</sup>

You cannot even guess the bind that put me in. Here I was living in Jerusalem with the Jews, and I wanted to get along with them so that I would continue to have the opportunity to bring them to the Lord. If I behaved as a Gentile, they would not be able to associate with me. I, and many of the other believers, decided to continue to follow the laws of Moses as much as we could, while preaching the Good News to all of those around us. In our minds, Christianity was still an offshoot of Judaism. In that respect we would find that we were in error.

But we did pray for God to send someone to preach to the Gentiles. We just didn’t know that the price of having that someone would be the life of one of my favorite friends.

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<sup>10</sup> Acts 10, 11:1-18

I wish I had been there to watch the Word of God spread around the world. Instead, because of me, the Jewish leaders spread Christianity instead of ending it like they wanted to do. Why the Lord chose a small town guy like me to fulfill such a noble purpose is still a wonder to me. *He definitely has a sense of humor.*

I grew up a typical Jewish boy in a *small* town in Greece. A very small town. nothing to do except learn the Scriptures and argue them with the old rabbi. Before I was twelve, I knew the Old Testament like the back of my hand. Characters in the Scriptures were as real to me as my own family. hair color, eye color, little facial expressions and speech patterns of everybody from Adam to Zechariah son of Berekiah, even if those things were true only in my own imagination.

All of the other Jewish families saved money for their sons as marriage dowries. My family saved money for me to go to Passover in Jerusalem. Apparently, marriage for me was a hopeless cause. On my twentieth birthday they finally saved enough to send me to Jerusalem, but not enough for me to return. I think they assumed I would just live there in the Temple yard like Simeon and Anna once did.

I fully expected the Temple to be like a little heaven – it was Jerusalem... at Passover! I expected to see hundreds of rabbis in front of small groups of quiet students discussing the intricacies of Scripture interpretation. Instead, total chaos. Money changers shouting, sheep bleating, thousands of Jewish families milling around eating and yelling at each other. And the Treasury officials extorting money from the people. I even saw the Temple guards haul some poor, bloody guy across the Temple yard. It made me want to vomit.

I wandered around Jerusalem and the Temple yard for the next seven weeks, hoping to find someone who was interested in finding the heart of God. I wanted to find someone who loved God with all their heart, soul, and strength.<sup>1</sup> I wanted to find David, but kept finding Saul. Hopeless. I was heartbroken. Then, one morning, early, about 9:00, I heard shouting. Crazy shouting.

A strange looking man was speaking to the gathered crowd. It was so weird. I could hear him in both Hebrew and Greek at the same time, using the Greek dialect of my home village! I was mesmerized. He talked about the Scriptures and prophecies, everything that I had always argued about finally made sense. When he explained about Jesus, instantly, I understood. All of it. I shouted with the others, "What must I do to be saved?" In a daze, I was led to the huge pools<sup>2</sup> just south of the Southern Steps of the Temple. Three thousand of us were baptized that day.

In the early days, we Christians were quite a family. We devoted ourselves to the teaching of the apostles, to fellowshiping with each other, eating and taking communion together, and to prayer. I found the holy life that I had hoped to find in Jerusalem. We were focused on making disciples, it was the mission Jesus had given us. Soon, there were five thousand of us. People were drawn to us because they found our lives so attractive.

You can't imagine what it was like to live a life completely devoted to God with a large group of people who were also completely devoted to God. I was at home with my family for the first time in my life. And many others felt just like me.

The Holy Spirit filled me, which was easy because I had been empty of hope and self. I was so full of the Holy Spirit that I could do great wonders and signs. These drew people to the Gospel. The Holy Spirit put words into my mouth that were so powerful nobody could argue against me. The apostles and believers even recognized how powerful the Holy Spirit was in me, and appointed me to be one of the seven who were supposed to serve the early church by distributing food

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<sup>1</sup> Deut. 6:5

<sup>2</sup> These pools can still be seen today

fairly among the widows of the different ethnic groups. Unfortunately, this service didn't last very long.

At sunrise one morning, the Lord revealed to me why my parents didn't look for my bride, and why I didn't need a return ticket to go home. I was about to go home, but not to my small town in Greece. And all I needed to do to go home was be faithful and trust him. My reward was not only everlasting life with Jesus, but I would become the catalyst for the Gospel to be spread around the world. Not bad for a boy from a backwater Greek village.

The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem were jealous of the growth of the early church, and were angry that they could not refute our preaching. One day, I was preaching in the Synagogue of the Freedmen, where former slaves and foreigners worshiped. Again, many of the Jews tried to refute my teaching, but they could not withstand the wisdom that the Spirit gave me. So, they stirred up the people and leaders against me by making false accusations.

The Jewish leaders made up charges against me, much like the ones they used against Jesus. The Temple guards arrested me and hauled me before the Sanhedrin. False witnesses accused me of blasphemy and of threatening the Temple and Moses. They were probably surprised when the Holy Spirit did not choose for me to respond with silence like my Lord Jesus did. They probably were even more surprised when my face went radioactive and started shining like the face of an angel. The high priest must have become catatonic when he asked a simple question and I responded with an entire history of the Jewish people.

My childhood training kicked into such a high gear that my old Greek Rabbi would have been proud for once. I went from Abraham to Joseph to Moses, and gave them the Spirit's interpretation of the history of the Jewish people. They were probably bored because I was preaching to the choir, when the Spirit surprised even me. Through his power, I accused them and their ancestors of murder, of resisting the Holy Spirit, and of disobeying the law.

I thought I used to make my old rabbi pull out his hair, but you should have seen the Sanhedrin go berserk. They gnashed their teeth, covered their ears, and yelled at me. And that is when I learned a lesson from them.

Apparently after the debacle with Jesus, the Jewish leaders had come to terms with the local Roman authorities. The Romans implicitly gave the Sanhedrin full authority to inflict any punishment on the Hebrews as long as an offense concerned a non-Roman citizen. This offense was against the sanctity of the Temple, and no civil disturbance was made.

Using this power, they grabbed me and dragged me out of the city ...and stoned me. I tried my hardest to imitate the Lord as I died by saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Do not hold this sin against them." Then, Bam!! I was in the presence of my Lord. Talk about going home! That was so much better than ending up in a dirty little Greek village with a crabby old rabbi and a whiney wife.

I want to point out something about my death that most people don't notice. Jesus usually sits at the right hand of God the Father, but when he knew that I was coming to him, Jesus stood up to wait. That's a phenomenal reward for being the first martyr!

After my death, a great persecution was started by the Jews in Jerusalem against the church there, even though many of their actions were completely illegal by Roman law. Many of our Christian leaders were forced to flee to other countries. The Jewish leaders didn't know it, but they were infecting the world with Christianity.

This persecution of the Jews forced the dispersion of the Christians, eventually including the apostles, but that really only set the stage. The real catalyst was that the dispersed Christians wanted to make disciples. They wanted to follow the direct command of Jesus to take the Gospel to the whole world and make disciples. Part of their story was telling my story. The more they were persecuted, the more heroes were made. You see the same thing in religious and political movements in your modern world.



The desire to make disciples may seem normal to you, but Christianity was the first religion that made a distinct effort to spread. None of the other religions, including that of the Jews, had made an effort to grow. It was something that the world had never seen, and most political and religious leaders didn't know how to respond.

Plus, God had been preparing the world for the Gospel to be spread quickly. First, the Romans had built a huge highway system throughout the empire. One of the main reasons for the good roads was so that the military could move quickly in all kinds of weather. The American President Dwight Eisenhower used that same logic when he started America's interstate highway system in 1956. And, just like that highway system, the Roman system caused a huge economic boom in the Empire and improved communication. Most importantly, it allowed our missionaries and dispersed Christians to travel quickly and safely.

Second, there was peace throughout the countries of the Roman Empire. The early church was born in a unique time. There was peace throughout the Roman Empire. For just about the first time in history, a traveler could go long distances without inordinate worry about bandits or foreign armies. This time of peace was so unusual that it received its own name, the Pax Romana. It started about twenty years before Jesus was born, and lasted about 150 years after the Church was born.

A third factor in the spread of Christianity was the Greek language. Greek was a common language used throughout the Roman Empire. Virtually everybody of importance spoke Greek. That is one reason that all of the books of the New Testament were written in Greek. A preacher could go almost anywhere in the Roman Empire and preach in Greek, and he would be understood. What a masterful provision God made for an Empire where people spoke multitudes of different languages.

A fourth factor in the spread of Christianity probably won't fit with what you have heard in the past. For the most part, Rome was tolerant of all religions throughout the Empire. The Jews knew this more than anybody else. They had special privileges, including exclusion from the military, just because of their religious

beliefs. The early persecution of the church was caused by the Jews, not the Romans. The Romans eventually became irritated at the Christians because they would not worship the Emperor or engage in certain community activities, but mostly the Romans didn't even know Christianity existed until the church was well established.

Some people have wondered why God didn't just miraculously save me, as he had saved Peter and the other apostles. Even the apostles had the same question. But in God's most mysterious ways, he knew that my death would spread the Gospel, just as their continued preaching would. But that wasn't the last surprise God had in mind about spreading Christianity.

Just before I died, I saw the witnesses against me laying down their coats at the feet of a young man from Tarsus, a city located in modern day Turkey. I could not hate him, because I felt so sorry for him. He was opposed to the Lord Jesus Christ, and that is a fight you don't want to pick. Little did I know it while I was dying, but that young man and I would spark the growth of Christianity around the world.

He listened so well to me in front of the Sanhedrin that he later quoted almost my entire speech to Dr. Luke so he could write the seventh chapter of Acts. He even quoted me himself in another passage written by Dr. Luke in Acts 17:24.<sup>3</sup>

A dead Greek, a live Turk, and an ascended Jew changing the world together through the power of the Holy Spirit. Like I said, God definitely has a sense of humor.

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 17:24

My name is Philip. Not Philip the Apostle, but Philip the Evangelist, and Philip the Father of Four Daughters. If anybody needs a good bride, I know just where you can find one.

You can tell by my name, I am Greek. My name means “lover of horses.” Whenever the Romans drove their chariots through our town, I took every opportunity to feed and care for their horses. Chariot horses were not the large horses that you have, but were much smaller, almost the size of your ponies. But we were much smaller people than you.

Like a good Jew, I was in Jerusalem during many Passover feasts and other religious ceremonies. The most special feast day was the day the early church started. I first heard the Gospel from Peter on that Pentecost day, and I became completely converted. For the first time in my life I had the hope of eternal life. I was baptized, and Peter laid his hands on me. I became full of the Holy Spirit, and I have remained full ever since that time.

The early church was an experience not to be repeated. It was...one big happy family. We shared the things we owned, nobody had too much, and nobody had too little. We were concerned with growing our church congregation, so nobody really cared about useless stuff. We were filled with the hope that Jesus would be coming back any day, so stuff had no value. We were sending our treasures to Heaven, not stacking up dusty, rusty old junk. I guess if you had the hope as strongly as we had, you wouldn't be so attracted to having so much stuff either.

As the months went by, the daily cares of life began to bog down the ministry of the apostles and those of us who were sharing the Gospel. Then a crisis arose – some of my fellow Greek Jews began to complain that their widows weren't being

fed as well as the Hebrew Jewish widows. This issue sounds like a minor issue to you, but it was only a symptom of a much larger problem.

Since the time of Moses, the Jews had insulated themselves from all other societies. Even in the time of *Acts*, the Jews were allowed to run their society as long as they paid taxes to the Romans and didn't cause civil disturbances. The Jews had the unique privilege in the Empire of not having to provide soldiers to Rome. Since the Jews were segregated from Roman society, they were not allowed to join the Roman trade guilds, so Jews had to develop specific vocational skills or become traveling traders.

On an individual level, Jews were tied very closely to their families, and secondarily to their local social group as represented by their town or synagogue. Traveling Jews and poor Jews were taken care of by Jewish communities and individuals. The religious leaders were taken care of by the taxes, sacrifices and offerings which came from individual Jews throughout the world.

From the very first, it was unclear how much of this social structure would remain available to the Jewish Christians. The euphoria of Pentecost! The early growth of the church! They passed, and the Christians had to start replacing the Jewish social structure with their own.

At first, this problem was overcome by people selling what they had and sharing with each other, but that was a short-term solution. As the Christians separated more and more from the Jews, they needed to replace the whole social structure of taking care of families, traveling Christians, poor Christians, and their religious leaders, all while moving to different communities and replacing their old jobs.

That would have been complicated enough, but we Jews were separated into many groups. There were the Jews living in Israel who spoke Hebrew<sup>1</sup> as their native language. Another group were Jews living in other countries who spoke Greek as their common language. Since the early church was located mainly in Jerusalem, the first group had quite a natural advantage over the second.

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<sup>1</sup> Very likely many of the Jews in Israel spoke Aramaic as their native language.

The apostles determined that their evangelical, teaching and healing ministries were far too important to pay attention to less important worldly matters which would undoubtedly require an increasing amount of effort. So, they had the church find a solution to the unequal treatment of those two groups. The believers chose six men and me, who were all full of the Holy Spirit, to administer God's grace in matters like food distribution. One aspect of the church's wisdom was to appoint all seven to be Greeks, not Israelites. We became known as 'the Magnificent Seven'.

Nah, but we were known as the Seven. I don't want to brag, but not all of us were equally popular and well-known. If we had been a rock band we would have been named Stephen, Philip and the Fab Five.

It was the Fab Five who ended up doing most of the hard work and they went unrecognized by history, like most of the Christians who do the hard work without recognition. Stephen's story... you know he didn't live very long. After his death, I was soon forced to leave town to avoid deadly persecution from the Jerusalem Jews. That left the Fab Five to do all the hard work.

I left Jerusalem to go to Samaria and spread the Gospel. Although Paul gets all of the good publicity for taking the Gospel to the Gentiles, I took the Gospel to the Samaritans long before. I shouldn't be too proud about it, Jesus had been to Samaria a decade before me and had laid a solid foundation for my work.

The Samaritans were considered to be partly Jewish since they were descendants of the original tribes of Israel who had intermarried with other peoples or had other religious differences. Samaritans were somewhere far below Jews on the good guy list, but still somewhat above the Gentiles. Unless Jesus had told his story about the Good Samaritan, and personally converted an entire Samaritan village, I doubt we early Christians would have considered the Samaritans much different than the Gentiles. You might remember, my friends James and John

wanted to call down fire on one of their villages just because they were unfriendly.<sup>2</sup>

I left Jerusalem to go to Samaria to spread the Gospel. I was blown away by what happened next. I suddenly had powers like Peter. I could cast out demons, do miracles, heal people of all kinds of physical diseases and ailments. It was crazy, I was a rock star. People listened closely to everything I said, accepted Jesus as their savior and were baptized. Such joy in Samaria. It was so nutty that even the apostles in Jerusalem heard about it, and sent Peter and John to check it out.

Before they arrived, I converted a former sorcerer named Simon. Simon was used to being the center of attention, and badly wanted to be his old famous self. When he saw Peter lay hands on someone and give them the gift of the Holy Spirit, Simon the Sorcerer spotted his big chance. He offered Peter a lot of money to give him the ability to lay hands on people so they could receive the Holy Spirit. In Simon's former life, that was what sorcerers did. Peter was incensed at Simon and condemned him for offering the bribe. Simon had the wisdom to quickly repent, and he was forgiven.

Peter and John laid their hands on the new Samaritan believers and they received the Holy Spirit. When Peter and John were satisfied that the Samaritans really had been converted, they went back to the big city, Jerusalem, and continued their ministry there, but they did preach to the Samaritans on the way back. So, between them and me, we had started fulfilling Jesus' commandment to go to Judea and Samaria and spread the Gospel.<sup>3</sup> It was now time to fulfill the rest of the commandment by going to the ends of the earth. I didn't know it at the time, but I was going to be a big part of that story

So maybe, my story isn't all that exciting, and you are probably wondering why Dr. Luke bothered to have me tell it. It's the next event in my life that got my name in the bright lights. In fact, I would probably would have gotten big offers to be a late-night TV preacher if there had been such a thing. I was in the middle of

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 9:54

<sup>3</sup> Acts 1:8

doing some of my every day miraculous healing when the Holy Spirit told me to “hurry down to the road going south out of Jerusalem.” You tell me how I was going to “hurry” all those miles south. I don’t even remember the trip it seemed to go by so fast.

The next thing I knew, I was on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza when I saw this royal chariot coming my way. Now, when I say royal chariot, it wasn’t just one little rig with a horse in front, it was an entire group of chariots. I found out later, this parade was there to accompany the treasurer of the country of Ethiopia. People that important don’t travel alone.

The Spirit tells me to run up and talk to the guy in the fancy chariot. Now, I don’t talk back to the Spirit, but I was wondering how he planned to protect me from all the horses and soldiers. I ran toward the chariots, I began to call to the horses to slow down. As always, horses listened to my voice and slowed down and stopped, to the dismay of their drivers. The soldiers were so caught up in the chaos that I ran up unchallenged to the guy in the biggest chariot, and began to chat him up just like he was my long-lost friend.

“Hey, whatcha reading,” I say. “Isaiah,” he says.

“Do you understand it,” I say. “Are you kidding, nobody understands Isaiah,” he says.

“I do,” I say. “Then jump in, and tell me what I’m reading,” he says. And, I did.

I got in, the horses started behaving perfectly and the chariots went down the road as before. I explained how the passage in Isaiah talked about Jesus, I told him the Good News. The guy was a quick study, as you would expect from his high position, and he completely understood what I explained to him. He even gloated a little that he was the first Ethiopian to understand Isaiah.

Here we are in the middle of the desert, I’m speaking Ethiopian like a native, we are talking about being baptized while there isn’t any water within twenty miles.

Just like a comedian, the Spirit says to me, “Ask him if he wants to be baptized.” And I do, and he says, “Yes.”

What happens? There’s a pool of water by the road. We climb down and I baptize him. He becomes full of the Holy Spirit and starts rejoicing as he climbs back in his chariot and goes on his way.

This has been made into a cute story that kids love. But most of you miss two important things about it. First, the Ethiopian was a eunuch, which meant that he could not enter into an assembly of the Lord.<sup>4</sup> He had come all the way to Jerusalem to learn about God, but he was still an outsider. In fact, that was one reason why nobody had ever explained Isaiah to him. He was probably surprised that I would baptize him, because the Jewish leaders had surely refused him for baptism as a proselyte because he could not be circumcised. Once he became a Christian, he was fully accepted by God and a community for the first time in his life. No wonder he rejoiced.

Second, although he was probably a God-believer and followed some of the laws of Moses, he was not fully Jewish. Just like with the Samaritans, I was making believers of people who were outside of the Jewish community.

Have you ever driven for a hundred miles and can’t remember making the drive? Well, that’s not like what happened next. One moment I’m standing next to a dripping wet Ethiopian, and the next moment I am thirty miles away in Azota, the old Philistine city, formerly named Ashdod. Sci fi needs a transporter beam, the Holy Spirit did it in an instant.

What do you think Philip the Evangelist does next? That’s right, I evangelized all the cities as I walked north. I had some pretty good success, too, since many of the people became long-term Christians.

When I got to the port city of Caesarea, the Holy Spirit told me to make my home there. I had to stop somewhere. Under Herod, Caesarea had become the only

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<sup>4</sup> Deut. 23:1



deep-water port in Israel, and God knew that Paul and other evangelists would need me there to help them in coming years as they began their missionary journeys.

What does an Evangelist do while waiting for Paul to be converted and other missionaries to begin their work? Right, or at least partially right. I evangelized, and ... and, I made babies. I eventually had those four daughters I told you about. But I must tell you something about them. Of course, they are beautiful, just like their mother, and, they will make wonderful wives in case you know of anybody who needs a good wife. But they also are full of the Holy Spirit (pauses and leans in) and they prophesy.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Acts 21:8

I've done some unthinkable things in my life.

[pause and smile]

And I encourage you to do some of them, too.

All you have to do to accomplish unthinkable things is ... change the way you think!

To the Jews of my time, it was unthinkable to sell your land if you owned any. It was land you likely inherited from your ancestors, and was land you were to pass down to your descendants. Family land was so sacred that it was supposed to be given back to its original owners in the Jubilee year. Many of your ancestors were probably buried on your land, and you were probably going to be buried there, too. As a faithful Jew, I knew there would never be a circumstance under which I would sell my land.

But that was before I watched Peter heal the crippled man. Before I heard Peter preach the Gospel. Before I repented and was baptized. Before I received the Holy Spirit. Before my new brothers and sisters in our little church were starving because they would rather preach the gospel and be faithful Christians than keep their jobs. That was before Jesus became everything to me, and before he caused the Laws of Moses to become null and void because he fulfilled them.<sup>1</sup>

When the Holy Spirit told me to sell the land of my ancestors, I did it without hesitation. I sold it in one day. God made sure I got a fair price and got it quickly. I

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<sup>1</sup> Mat. 5:17

took the full amount and gave it to the apostles to do with as they thought best. I tried to give it in secret as Jesus commanded,<sup>2</sup> but the apostles wanted to use me as an example to encourage the others as Jesus also commanded.<sup>3</sup> Although almost all of the people were encouraged, there were some who were jealous and acted inappropriately.

That was my first lesson in completely obeying the Holy Spirit ...acting in total honesty. From then, my entire life became oriented to that honesty. Ananias and Sapphira, they did the exact opposite, and the Holy Spirit punished them with death.<sup>4</sup>

It was the land sale that earned my nickname. My real name is Joseph, but the apostles started calling me Barnabas, which means “Son of Encouragement.” Later in my life, some people began calling me an “apostle” which really encouraged me.<sup>5</sup>

I was an integral part of the growth of the early church in Jerusalem, but I was always a bit of an outsider since I was a native of the island of Cyprus, instead of a Jerusalem insider. Little did I know that my knowledge of the world outside of Jerusalem, and my desire to encourage people, would cause me to do more unthinkable things.

Jews from Jerusalem seldom left town. I was familiar with places like Cyprus, Antioch, Caesarea, Damascus and Jerusalem.. important cities... critical stops on important trading routes.

One day, I got a message from my dear friend, Ananias of Damascus. He had been led by the Holy Spirit to affirm to me about the conversion of Saul and how Saul was now preaching the Gospel in a very powerful way. Ananias begged me to accept Saul and encourage him. He told me that one of the reasons the Holy Spirit

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<sup>2</sup> Mat. 6:3-4

<sup>3</sup> Mat. 5:16

<sup>4</sup> Acts 5:1-11

<sup>5</sup> Acts 14:4

had given me authority and a good reputation was for such a time as this. It was only later that I learned Ananias might have had an ulterior motive for sending Saul away from Damascus.

At this point let me ask for a little grace. For the rest of this story, I want to use Saul's Roman name of Paul, even though it would be on our first missionary journey to Cyprus before this change would actually take root.

Anyway, I did the unthinkable again. I vouched for a man who had previously murdered some of the friends and family members of my Jerusalem church. I used up all the points and influence I had accrued, but it turned out to be a small price to pay. I believe that Paul's short time in Jerusalem was a big part of launching him as the greatest preacher and defender of the Gospel. That short time in Jerusalem built the foundation for my relationship with the man who I would travel and preach with for many years. Unfortunately, Paul offended some people in Jerusalem so badly that they threatened to kill him. We had to rush him off to Caesarea, and then on to his home town of Tarsus.

Did you know that the Holy Spirit promised me that I would be known as a Child of God? He told me, "Barnabas, you know that peacemakers are going to be called children of God.<sup>6</sup> Your job is to make peace for Paul as much as possible, and I promise you will have plenty of opportunity to earn your new title." The Holy Spirit must have been grinning when he said that. Paul was a piece of work. Stronger than garlic he was. More tactless than a mirror, and I don't mean one of those "through the glass darkly" kind of mirrors.<sup>7</sup>

From the very first day, I started making peace for Paul, and I never finished doing so. It was like he loved to make caustic remarks and offend people with his brilliance. Whenever I tried to calm him down or get him to back off a bit, Saul would just look at me and say, "Barney, Barney, you are just a little thorn in the flesh that the Lord gave me. These people need to hear the truth." If it hadn't been for me, he would've been flogged and jailed many more times than he was.

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 5:9

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12

My career as Paul's peacemaker started simply enough. We Christians in Jerusalem started hearing of the success the scattered Jewish Christians were having in sharing the Gospel. Some of them from my own home of Cyprus had gone to Antioch to share the Word with the Gentiles and were building a flourishing church. Even though Peter had already convinced us it was time to convert Gentiles, we Jewish Christians were still wary.

So, my friends in Jerusalem sent me to find out what was going on. The Lord was blessing the Gospel work tremendously in Antioch, so I just pitched in and helped them grow the church even more. The church in Antioch was the first place we believers started being called "Christians,"<sup>8</sup> as derogatory as it was favorable originally.

The early Christians acquired several names, some of which are not fit to print. The name Christian was meant to mean "little Christs" or "Christ's people." The other popular name was "The Way."<sup>9</sup> That name derived from Jesus' revelation that he was the way, the truth, and the life, and nobody could come to the Father except through him.<sup>10</sup> The Romans could easily relate because their very first highway was called the Appian Way. Another name we had was "Nazarenes,"<sup>11</sup> in reference to the home of Jesus.

Antioch. There were actually at least sixteen cities named Antioch, named after Antiochus, the son of one successor to Alexander the Great. This Antioch was known as Syrian Antioch or Antioch on the Orontes. It was one of the great cities of the Roman Empire in my time. So major that it was just called Antioch, while the other cities were designated with other names. The city is located on the southern edge of modern day Turkey, about 300 miles from Jerusalem.

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<sup>8</sup> Acts 11:26

<sup>9</sup> Acts 24:14

<sup>10</sup> John 14:6

<sup>11</sup> Acts 24:5

I helped establish the church in Antioch along with some of my friends from Cyprus.<sup>12</sup> For many decades, the church in Antioch was second only to the church in Jerusalem. It played a major role in sending out missionaries and in determining church doctrine. Antioch was an important part of the Christians' understanding that Christ was going to grow his kingdom through his body, the church. *ekklesia*, the Greek word for church, means an assembly. Antioch was the first place that proved the assembly of believers were a community of those who trust in Jesus Christ and gather to express their beliefs, without regard to whether they were Jews or Gentiles. It was the cradle of Gentile Christianity.

Here is the crazy part. The church community is supposed to reflect the community that is found among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is to reflect God's divine nature. They planned the church in eternity past, and we got to see it come into existence.<sup>13</sup>

One last thing... about Antioch. When Paul stayed there, he stayed in the house of Simon and his two sons, Rufus and Alexander.<sup>14</sup> Simon was from Libya, a country in Northern Africa. Simon got to do something that made him famous for all time. He carried the cross for Jesus! He later became a leader in the church at Antioch.<sup>15</sup> You can only imagine the visits he and Paul had.

One day, the Spirit says to me, "Why don't you go find Paul in his hometown of Tarsus, Barney. It's only about 125 miles away from Antioch, Tarsus is a nice place to visit this time of year, and you need the exercise." Sounded good to me, so I went. It was fairly simple to find Paul... he was preaching everywhere and causing havoc. The believers in Tarsus were more than happy for me to take him back to Antioch with me.

We stayed in Antioch for over a year together, and Paul learned a little bit about how to preach in such a way that it would both inform people and encourage

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<sup>12</sup> Acts 11:20-21

<sup>13</sup> Ephesians 3:9-11, 2 Timothy 1:9

<sup>14</sup> Mark 15:21

<sup>15</sup> Acts 13:1-2

them. But, after a year, the believers in Antioch thought it was a good idea for Paul and me to take a contribution back to the Jerusalem church that was suffering from a famine in Israel. Now, I'm not questioning their pure hearts about wanting to help the church in Jerusalem, but they made the contribution amount big enough that Paul felt compelled to leave.

And, while I'm not belittling their gratefulness for the contribution, it wasn't very long before the church at Jerusalem concluded we had finished our mission there, and they sent us back to Antioch. Paul still had some pretty sharp edges and could wear out a welcome pretty quickly.

This happened at Antioch again in only a few months. With the approval of the Holy Spirit, the Christians at Antioch soon decided that Paul and I should be set apart for a long missionary journey, which they were more than happy to fund. Again, I would never question the motives of my friends at Antioch, but their laying on of hands for us felt every bit like a push!<sup>16</sup>

My biggest job of peacekeeping had to do with Paul and Peter. They loved the same God, and they loved each other, but they fought like brothers. If Paul saw something one way, Peter saw it another. And they had no problem fighting it out. Finally, they figured out that Paul should be concerned solely with the Gentiles, and Peter with the Jews. After that, things were smoother.

One surprising thing was that neither Peter nor Paul was worried about being the top apostle. They both knew that Christ was so far at the top that they were both his slaves. Even so, at the end of his life, Peter couldn't help but give Paul a little love tap. Peter wrote, "Paul's letters contain some things that are hard to understand."<sup>17</sup> What he meant was, "Paul, I love you, but you are making it too hard for the rest of us. Festus was right, your great learning is driving you crazy... and me!"<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Acts 13:3

<sup>17</sup> 2 Peter 3:16

<sup>18</sup> Acts 26:24

Peter and Paul didn't contend for importance, but I should mention myself in that regard. You might not have noticed, but from the very first, I was held in higher regard by the believers than Paul. Sometimes I was called an apostle. In fact, Paul was considered to be my apprentice by most people, and that relationship lasted many years. Even Dr. Luke acknowledged that fact by mentioning my name first whenever Paul and I were together. That is, until we were in the middle of the first missionary journey at Psidian Antioch. Then everything changed. It became clear that Paul had taken leadership, and I was now the supporting cast. It was a bittersweet moment for the Son of Encouragement... but I get to be named a Child of God...see, change the way you think.



My name is John Mark, although many people just call me Mark. I'm not quite sure why Luke chose me to tell my story. My name only appears a few times in the book of *Acts*. Some of those times are not very flattering...but true.

Perhaps the good doctor chose me because I was the Forrest Gump of my time. My life wasn't like a box of chocolates, I never tasted shrimp, and I never played ping pong. But, I was around the most important people at the most critical times of the early church. And, I did help Doctor Luke in a unique way.

I wouldn't say that I grew up rich and spoiled. But if you said it, I might not deny it. We did have a big house where many people could meet, and we did have servants. My mother and my cousin, Barnabas, and I spent time with every apostle and every important Christian who came through Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> Peter often complained that I was "under his feet every time he turned around", but nobody loved me like Peter. In fact, he thought of me as his own son.<sup>2</sup>

She won't admit it, but I think my mother asked Cousin Barnabas to take me on one of his journeys in hopes it would help me grow up and be a real man. I never knew him to turn down his favorite cousin, so I guess he was just waiting until a convenient trip came along. When he and Paul brought

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<sup>1</sup> Col. 4:10

<sup>2</sup> 1 Peter 5:13

a contribution from Antioch to the church in Jerusalem, I think my mother finally got her way.

I don't think Paul was excited about it, but when Barnabas and Paul left Jerusalem, I was with them.<sup>3</sup> At that point in time, Barnabas was the leader of their evangelical team. My mother probably didn't know our team would soon be aboard a dangerous, leaky old boat. The trip with Barnabas was much harder and more dangerous than I ever dreamed, not glamorous at all. I missed my mother and my life back in Jerusalem.

We arrived in Cyprus, and I expected that my cousin and I would spend a few weeks visiting relatives. Many of them had stayed in my house in Jerusalem whenever they attended the special feast days. Growing up, each Passover was a big family reunion. We had family in from Cyprus and other lands as well. When there were tens of thousands of visitors in a small city like Jerusalem, every room was needed, and many people still had to camp outside the city gates.

Once our team got to Cyprus, Paul and Barnabas spent all of their time teaching in the synagogues and in the streets. I was uncomfortable being around those poor strangers, especially those afflicted with terrible diseases. As we traveled across Cyprus, things got worse, not better.

We finally crossed the whole island on the rough Roman Road, and ended at Paphos, the home of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. He was widely known as an intelligent man. I was so excited when he sent for us, because I wanted to learn from him.

In Jerusalem, we Jews were not allowed to have close contact with Romans, and they certainly were not excited to have close contact with us. I wanted

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 12:25

to learn more about the Roman Empire. I wanted to hear about faraway places and exotic people. I wanted to learn in an atmosphere where the Jewish leaders would not be a danger to me. From his point of view, I wanted to understand Roman politics and why we Jews were such a problem.

Barnabas and Paul entered the chambers of Sergius Paulus, with me following behind as their assistant. Instead of the things that most interested me, Sergius Paulus wanted to hear the Word of God, which is exactly what Barnabas and Paul wanted to talk about. They began to tell about Jesus, and it quickly became clear that Sergius Paulus was intrigued, and even began to believe. And that was when chaos began.

The attendant of Sergius Paulus was a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, or Elymas the Sorcerer. Through his evil actions, he soon attained a lot of influence over the Roman proconsul, and had attained wealth by doing so. He quickly saw the end of his good deal, and began to oppose Barnabas and Paul.

Paul, full of the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right!" Paul went on to condemn him and ended with this curse, "The hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be so blind that you won't see the sun." Immediately he was blind... he needed someone to lead him by the hand.

Needless to say, Sergius Paulus believed in the Lord, because he was amazed at the teaching of Barnabas and Paul, and understood that their miracle was real. I was pleased that Sergius Paulus became a believer, but sad I never got to have a long conversation with him.

By the time we left Cyprus, I had just about had my fill of everything. Then, instead of my cousin, Barnabas, being the clear leader, it became clear that

Paul was taking over leadership. The events with Sergius Paulus had turned the tide. I was so disillusioned, I just packed it in. I got on a boat and bought passage back to Israel. I abandoned Barnabas and Paul when they needed me the most.

By the time I got to Jerusalem, I realized what a coward I had been and how humiliated I would be in front of Christians who had already been withstanding intense persecution from the Jews. Like a little spoiled brat, I sneaked into my house and hid out in my room.

But Peter was not going to let me off so easily. The next day he came knocking at my door. I refused to answer, he said, "Little boy, I'm going to knock once more, and if you don't open the door, I will kick it down." I knew he would, I opened the door and waited for him to start cussing at me like the uncouth fisherman he was.

He came in, sat by me on the bed, and started... crying. His big hands shaking, he couldn't even talk for probably ten minutes but it seemed like an hour. He said, "John Mark, let me tell you about the time I abandoned Jesus." He went on to tell me the story about denying the Lord three times. I had heard the story many times, but this time he added some details that broke my heart.

Peter told about the last time he saw Jesus on the banks of the Sea of Galilee and how Jesus asked him if Peter loved him, three times. His voice broke when he told me the whole story of offering only a second-rate love to Jesus.<sup>4</sup> Then, his voice became joyful ...he knew Jesus had forgiven him completely when the Holy Spirit came to him on Pentecost. He said that Jesus doesn't see me as John Mark, but as John Mark empowered by the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>4</sup> John 21:15-19

Peter told me that someday, someday, I would be mature enough to go on a missionary journey with Barnabas and Paul again. That Paul was extraordinarily tough, but if I proved to be faithful, he would forgive me and allow me to work alongside him. Peter had respect and admiration for Paul that was unsurpassed, and his prediction gave me great hope.

Then he said the most important thing to me that anybody has ever said to me, he said. "John Mark, you needed to fail at this so you would be humble enough to do the work the Holy Spirit has in mind for you... to do something extraordinary." He said The Holy Spirit had given me time and talent and resources The biggest gift was being with all of the people who were around Jesus and the people who-were important in the Sanhedrin. He told me that God blessed my family with money not so I could be comfortable, but that was my ticket to be around those people.

Peter said, "Your task is to start writing the very first account of the life of Jesus." He said he wished it was going to be called The Gospel According to Peter, but instead, he said "It will be named after you...The Gospel According to Mark."

For the next year, I wrote that story of Jesus' life. It was actually a fairly simple task. My family had access to the best writing materials and teachers in the Temple. Every day, well-known Christians dropped by our house and told me their histories. Most important, though, were the nearly daily visits from Peter. Peter had experienced Jesus for three years and knew everything about him. John used to call himself, "the one whom Jesus loved." Now, I would never call John a liar, but I bet Jesus loved Peter equally as much. I also bet that Peter made Jesus laugh much more than John did.

After a few years, and several re-writes, Peter was satisfied with what we had written. It was frustrating to me, though, because I knew so many more

stories that I wanted to include. "shorter was better than longer," he said, so I stopped when he was happy.

That's how the good Doctor Luke and I became even better friends. When he began looking for resources for his first book, my little scroll was one of the first things he encountered. I'm pleased he found it to be of help, and I'm pleased that his book was more detailed and told more about Jesus' life than mine did.

When Luke started his second book, I was curious to see how he would treat my small part in it. He treated me very fairly in the first part of *Acts*. I was a spoiled brat, and he portrayed me with great generosity. When Barnabas wanted to include me on another journey, Paul refused to take me. Their disagreement caused Barnabas and Paul to split, and that made me sad. Barnabas would take me on his evangelical trip, and Paul would take Silas.

What I didn't understand at that time was that Barnabas would need to spend extra time in my training, time that Paul did not have. Barnabas spent an extraordinary amount of time teaching me how to treat other people with compassion and kindness, showing me how to teach the Gospel in an encouraging way, helping me become a useful assistant. Not his assistant, but how to be a useful assistant to Paul. Barnabas was the most humble man I ever met, and he needed to teach me humility...a quality not common to rich young people.

Although Luke did not disclose the final outcome in *Acts*, it turned out that Barnabas and the Holy Spirit succeeded in my training. Paul finally allowed me to work with him. Eventually he even found me to be valuable to him. In fact, next to Timothy and Titus, I became his favorite assistant and I was

faithful to him to the end of his life.<sup>5</sup> One of the biggest perks of the job was that I got to spend much time with Luke. That is how we first became friends.

We all have our little secrets. One of mine? People have speculated that I was the rich young ruler in the story Jesus told<sup>6</sup>. Many people have speculated that I am the young man who fled naked the night Jesus was arrested.<sup>7</sup> The undeniable answers are this...I am the rich young ruler, and I am that young man. But you probably are, too. Almost all of us have blessings that we are loathe to give up, even if they have no value when compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup> Almost all of us have fled when it was time to take up the cause of Christ. It took Barnabas a few years to encourage me to value things correctly and to be courageous. So, my parting encouragement to you is this... the Holy Spirit will empower you to have the right values and to be courageous in the cause of Christ if you allow him to.

Peter always laughed at helping Paul without him knowing it, but my training with Paul helped me become a better assistant for Peter, too. You didn't think an old Galilean fisherman could write two insightful letters in perfect Greek without a little help, did you?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Col. 4:10, Phil. 1:24, 2 Timothy 4:11

<sup>6</sup> Luke 18:18-20

<sup>7</sup> Mark 14:50-51

<sup>8</sup> Phil. 3:8

<sup>9</sup> 1 Peter 5:13

Luke and I were so close, he knew me and my story as well as he knew any of the others he interviewed. To many people, only humans are real and talk to one another. But many of the people in *Acts*, like Luke, perceived of me as being just as real, and just as tangible, as any of their other friends.

Many who read the New Testament refer to me as an “it.” I think this comes from many Bible translators using “*the* Holy Spirit” which makes me sound more like a thing than a person. Actually, the Bible should translate the words as “the Holy Spirit” sometimes, and “Holy Spirit” other times. Try using “Holy Spirit” sometime and see if that makes me seem more of a real person in your own mind. After all, nobody would call you “the Kyle” or “the Jessica.”

The naming issue interests me because the New Testament refers to the masculine forms of God the Father, and God the Son. So, there has been a natural association by many people to refer to me in the masculine context as well. Jesus sometimes referred to me as “he”, as in “he will testify about me.”<sup>1</sup>

One way to think about me is to think of wind or air, which is what I am named after. Like the air that fills your lungs, I indwell both men and women to go where I want; to go where I am needed; and, to think and act as God...not a mere man or woman.

I multi-task better than any woman, but most certainly better than any man. I act where and when I want, as I am needed and invited. My home includes an indwelling in each Christian.

Only one thing amazes Jesus and me – the choices of human beings. Everything else in the universe makes perfect sense. Jesus was usually amazed at how some

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<sup>1</sup> John 15:26



people made choices based on their faith or lack of faith. Me, I just stand amazed at so many of their choices.

Before the beginning of time, we were sure that Jesus was going to have to come to earth to save mankind from their sins. We knew that he would eventually have to sacrifice his life in order to make that happen. Me, I was still amazed that the Jewish leaders would kill their only hope of redemption, the Messiah they had been waiting on for so long. The Father was not amazed and Jesus was not amazed, but I was.

But I was not amazed that Jesus sent me back to empower the first Christians. We had been planning for that to happen for eons. You can't begin to imagine how some of those conversations went. Not with words, like humans, but imagine a conversation going something like this. Jesus said to me, "You just have to go do for the believers what I did for them when I was alive, but you have it easier. You only have to live inside of them. You don't even have to have your own body. You just live inside the ones they already have. And, you get to give them special gifts and powers that I wasn't allowed to give them." Now don't get me wrong, but that kind of creeped me out at the time.

Think "creepers on your Facebook page", now imagine how I think you feel if I go creeping around inside your soul and mind. So, I'm like a polite guest. When you want me around, you have to invite me to be an active part of your life. When you don't want me around, just ignore me and I will usually not bother you.

The first apostles were not sure what to make of it when Jesus told them I was coming back to replace him. He didn't give them a whole lot of information, so they had to piece together clues like: the Holy Spirit will be a counselor, comforter, and advocate.<sup>2</sup> With what Jesus told them, they probably thought I was a camp counselor or a good lawyer. Jesus always did like to make the truth a really good surprise.

On Pentecost, I thought it would be interesting to empower the apostles in a way they did not expect. I blew into their presence like a tornado and gave them the

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<sup>2</sup> John 16:7-13

power to speak in any language their listener could understand. Just for a little extra theater, I used the first holograms, flames of fire all over their bodies. They jumped up, wouldn't you, and began preaching to everybody nearby. I wasn't amazed that they used their new power to preach the Gospel. It's what Jesus had been training them to do. I just had to give them a little power boost.

From then on, I gave the apostles whatever kind of power boost they needed to keep sharing the Gospel and to start establishing the early church. Luke wrote about some of the more dramatic actions of the apostles—healing blind people, healing lame people, raising dead people, and escaping from jails. Those were certainly attention grabbers and helped jumpstart the growth of Christianity. When you want to establish your authority, there is nothing like healing blindness or raising someone from the dead. Sometimes to be even more dramatic, I would let Peter's shadow or Paul's handkerchief do the healing.<sup>3</sup> That got the attention of everybody!

For the long-term term growth of the kingdom, there were many other things I did that were more amazing. When any of the believers needed to remember the Gospel, and have the wherewithal to teach it, I made that happen. Once I did that with such power that the Sanhedrin was shocked that some lowly fishermen could talk like they had PhD's. Or, like with Philip, sometimes I would just put people in the right place at the right time to share the Gospel. I have continued to do both of those things with believers, especially when they ask me to do so.

More amazing than that? The seven types of fruit that I give to believers today who are willing to act for the benefit of the Kingdom. The fruit of the supernatural ability to love all people, especially the ones that are tough to love. I don't give them the ability to love in the way Hollywood promotes, but with unconditional, obedient love that God commands. I empower people to bless and want blessings for anybody who needs it, even for their enemies. With this fruit, the hated can love those who hate, the neglected can love those who neglect. I give this fruit of love to anyone who wants it badly enough to use it.

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 5:15, 19:12

I give the fruit of joy. Not the gift of happiness, especially the kinds of happiness that the world promotes. I give the type of joy that allows you to be thankful when times are tough, that allows you to see the sunset in your mind when your eyes are blind, the kind of joy that sees the good in people, the kind of joy that allows you to share Jesus because he made you joyful.

I give the fruit of peace. In this world you will have tribulation, but you can have peace in your heart because you know Jesus has overcome the world, and you are on his winning side.<sup>4</sup> In this crazy, chaotic, pressure-paced world, most people are seeking a little peace. You can have the peace you want if you ask for this gift from me. With this fruit you can also be a peacemaker. We so value peacemaking that anybody who is a peacemaker gets the special title of “Child of God.”<sup>5</sup>

Patience and kindness are twofer fruits. If I give you the fruit of love, you also get the fruit of patience and kindness because love is patient and kind.<sup>6</sup> These are fruit that Jesus demonstrated so well and so often. If you had been him, can you imagine how many times you would’ve wanted to punch one of the apostles, or strike the Pharisees with leprosy or lameness or any of the other things. God is so patient that he wants everyone to go to heaven so badly that he allowed Jesus to be sacrificed. Loving and patient people are kind.

I give the fruit of goodness and self-control, twin fruits. It takes immense self-control to maintain your goodness and withstand the temptations of the world. And it takes goodness to want to have that kind of self-control.

Do you know why children were so attracted to Jesus, why so many of the poor and mistreated wanted to be around him? He was gentle. Gentleness, one of those gifts that Jesus so often exhibited can be yours for the asking.

Lastly, I give the gift of faithfulness. I started demonstrating this so powerfully in Acts. As believers acted faithfully, I empowered them more and more. And, with time, the miraculous powers were not needed so much, but faithfulness was

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<sup>4</sup> John 16:33

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 5:9

<sup>6</sup> 1 Cor 13:4-5

needed more and more. Faithfulness was needed to endure persecution from the Jews, and as persecution from the Romans increased. Faithfulness needed when false teachers promoted harmful ideas. And faithfulness was going to be needed when Jesus did not return to earth as soon as people expected and wanted.

This is what I want you to remember about Luke's book of *Acts*. The early believers were faithful to grow the kingdom against all sorts of opposition. I empowered them to do so. Through my empowerment, you can be faithful to do the same.

I was born with the name “Saul” in honor of Israel’s first king, and shared his erratic temper. Later, my friends called me by my Roman name, Paul, to help differentiate my life as the man who persecuted Christians from the man who led people to become Christians. My close friend and publicity agent, Barnabas, claims he led the campaign for the name change. He could change people’s minds about anything.

I look at you and am full of envy. Not because you are good-looking, which you are. Not because you smell good, which you do. Not because you have many earthly goods, which you have. I envy you because.... eyeglasses. Invented in the 13th century, unfortunately for me. As was common, my eyesight started failing in my early thirties. I had to start having people read to me and write for me. The scrolls were too precious to waste on my increasingly large handwriting.<sup>1</sup> Good thing I memorized much of the Old Testament as a young man so I didn’t have to own my own copies.

You don’t really know very much about me up to the point of my failing eyesight. I have not established any churches yet, have not written any letters or books yet, and have not gone through the unpleasant maturing processes of beatings, starvation, and rejection. I have made a lot of progress, but Barnabas assures me that I have plenty of work left to do.

A Roman citizen born in the city of Tarsus, I was sent to Israel at an early age to study with Gamaliel. I wanted the intellectual challenge, but probably I was too young to leave my family. No matter how hard I tried, it wasn’t enough to please my parents. No matter how smart I was, I wasn’t smart enough to please my teachers. No matter how much I followed the laws of Moses and the Pharisees, it

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 6:11

wasn't enough to satisfy God. A vicious cycle of effort and anger and low self-esteem. Maybe you've experienced a cycle like that. I was the angriest young man in Israel.

That's why the Christians were such perfect targets. They seemingly broke the laws of Moses and blasphemed God, so I had absolute justification for taking out my anger on them. The more I persecuted the Christians, the more famous I became, the more my anger was fed. Vicious acts of violence resulted in fame and righteousness. I perfected the art of having Christians respond to my questions in such a way that they were seemingly blaspheming God, which made them subject to capital punishment. Christians all over the world began to fear me. Me! They all began to fear me! For the first time in my life, the harder I tried, the more approval I got... from my peers.

There is another thing in your lives that I envy, Country music. We had music, but nothing like that. I was looking for love in all the wrong places, and didn't even know it. Then, I saw the light. Literally. Upon receiving approval of the High Priest, I went on my way to Damascus in Syria to hunt down the Christians there. I was in a hurry, so I figured my companions and I could travel the 200 miles in less than ten days. The closer to Damascus, the angrier I got. Those blaspheming Christians were spreading like wildfire in dry summer.

Near the outskirts of Damascus, Whammo! A light hit me with such intensity I was knocked to my knees.<sup>2</sup> Then the kindest, most gentle voice, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" I knew...I knew in a heartbeat that the Christians were right... and I was wrong. Then, I said the stupidest thing ever, "Who are you, Lord?" The voice got even more gentle and kind, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

My companions led me into town, I was blind for three days and didn't eat or drink a thing. I just prayed. I didn't know it then, but the Lord was preparing me for the next step. He had been preparing me all of my life. Across town, another

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 9:1-4

man, Ananias, was being prepared. Not Ananias the husband of Sapphira who was killed by the Holy Spirit, or Ananias the High Priest, but Ananias of Damascus, a disciple of Jesus.

In a vision, the Lord told Ananias to go to Straight Street and ask for Saul of Tarsus, for Saul had seen a vision of a man named Ananias who would come place hands on him and restore his sight. Ananias was terrified. He questioned the Lord, he did not want to come. Then the Lord declared my entire future to Ananias. He said, "This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Ananias came to the house, laid hands on me. I was filled with the Holy Spirit, and something like scales fell from my eyes, and I could see again. I was immediately baptized and the Lord began to show me how much I was going to suffer on his behalf. OK with me, since I was now his slave, and slaves take on the identity of their masters.<sup>3</sup>

Remember how the apostles got to spend three years with Jesus? The Holy Spirit decided I needed to do the same thing before starting my career as a preacher. And, He probably wanted my reputation as a persecutor to fade. The Holy Spirit led me into the desert and, just like the first apostles, I got three years of revelation straight from Jesus.<sup>4</sup> For the first time, I understood how the Old Testament Scriptures were pointing toward Jesus and how all men could be reconciled to God. I learned that salvation came through faith and grace, not by following the law. It was... such a time of peace and comfort that I wanted to stay forever. But Jesus had an entirely different plan in mind.

I went back to Damascus and began sharing the Gospel. After three years with Jesus, I understood the Scriptures in an entirely new way. And I already knew how to debate with the finest rabbis in the world. I could destroy anybody who

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 9:5-19

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 1:11-24

wanted to argue with me. It made those Jews in Damascus so mad that they tried to kill me. How deliciously ironic that the Christians that I had come to kill had to lower me down through the city walls in a basket to escape the angry Jews.<sup>5</sup> Some probably thought they should just let the Jews stone me... like I did Stephen.

I returned to Jerusalem because I needed to meet the other apostles and start making amends. I got to spend fifteen days with Peter.<sup>6</sup> We developed a lifetime friendship, but also learned our personalities clashed a bit. He thought I was an arrogant educated Pharisee, and I thought he was blunt to a fault. We were both right, at least at that point in time. I also got to meet James the brother of Jesus, a man who had a crushing amount of humility, compassion and obedience. He must have learned that from his parents...just like his brother.

The Christians there were afraid of me, but for some unknown reason, a leader of the church, Barnabas, vouched for me, and they slowly accepted me. I've always thought that Ananias used his influence with Barnabas to get him to vouch for me, but neither one of them will admit it. From that time on, Barnabas took me under his wing.

It wasn't too long until I made the Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem so angry with my preaching and devastating arguments about Jesus that they threatened to kill me. One time I was at the Temple, and the Lord appeared to me while I was in a trance and told me to leave Jerusalem immediately, and that he was sending me faraway to the Gentiles.<sup>7</sup>

I'm no mathematician, but it seemed like a pattern was beginning to develop. So, the Christians sent me to Philip at Caesarea, who sent me on to my hometown of Tarsus, where there were far fewer Jews. Once I was out of the way, the church in Jerusalem had several years of peace and continued growth.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Acts 9:19-25

<sup>6</sup> Galatians 1:18-19

<sup>7</sup> Acts 22:17-21

<sup>8</sup> Acts 9:26-31



I spent most of the next few years evangelizing by myself in the areas of Syria and Cilicia, but my caustic personality was a constant hindrance. Rough edges still needed smoothing. One day, I was enjoying a glass of cold lemonade at my house in Tarsus, when a knock came on my door. Barnabas, my old friend and mentor, was standing there, and was ready for me to come join him in Antioch. I think Barnabas was just trying to encourage me when he said the believers in Antioch were anxious for me to come join them. I knew I didn't have the most touchy-feely persona, but I was ready to start working with Barnabas again, and practicing on the people in Antioch seemed like a good idea.

With Barnabas running interference for me, I got to stay in Antioch a whole year before the Christians were ready to send me to Jerusalem. Based on a prophecy from Agabas of an upcoming famine, the brothers in Antioch generously chose for Barnabas and me to take a contribution to Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup> Besides, I needed to get to Jerusalem to improve my friendships with the apostles and James, and get their approval for my plans to evangelize Gentiles throughout Asia.

Barnabas and I took my new young assistant, Titus, to Jerusalem. This was during the famine of Claudius and the people of Israel were suffering greatly. It is from the famine that this time period can be dated to about sixteen years after Jesus' resurrection. In Jerusalem, as we discussed the evangelization of the Gentiles, we agreed that the new Christians did not have to follow the laws of Moses. As an example, Titus was not required to be circumcised, to his great relief. Peter and the remaining apostles gave their approval to evangelize the Gentiles, and sent me back to Antioch with instructions to do the very things I wanted to do anyway.<sup>10</sup> Barnabas brought his nephew, John Mark, with us. Our hope was he would learn from Titus about how to be a faithful assistant, although John Mark seemed like a spoiled rich kid to me.

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<sup>9</sup> Acts 11:22-30

<sup>10</sup> Gal. 2:1-10

I am hesitant to take John Mark on this upcoming journey, but I owe Barnabas so much that I am not complaining. Well, not complaining out loud. I am pouting a little. Jesus wants me to evangelize the Gentiles, and I am ready to go!

When I think of how Luke will write about my story...being a doctor, I'm sure he will make things look orderly. And as a Christian, he will show us as the good guys in white hats who always win in the end. Victors get to write history, and we Christians are far from being victors at this point in time.

The Romans hardly know we Christians exist. Israel is just a tiny speck of the Roman Empire, and the Jews are just an unimportant irritant to the Romans. In Jerusalem and in the rest of Israel, Judaism is the only important thing. All of our lives as Jews revolve around following the laws of Moses in the best ways we know.

To the Jews, the Christians are the worst kinds of blasphemers. They completely misrepresent the character of God, and worship a human as if he were God. It is nearly impossible for any of the common people to understand, but the Jewish leaders have an additional problem. If the Christian are right, then the Jewish leaders are wrong. This not only represents a theological problem, but is a threat against the authority, and the wealth, of the leaders.

The more the Christians grow in numbers and in reputation, the more Judaism is threatened. Whether in Israel or in other countries, the arguments are growing angrier and more confused. The early arguments are boiling down to one basic question:

Will non-Jewish people be allowed to become Christians if they don't follow the laws of Moses? When the Holy Spirit made it clear that non-Jewish people should become Christians, he didn't make it clear if they did or didn't have to follow the laws of Moses. This is critically important, because if the Gentile Christians don't have to follow the laws of Moses, it is increasingly obvious that the Jewish Christians don't need to follow them either.

It has been more than fifteen years since Pentecost, and the Jews have persecuted the Christians in Israel and in other locations. It is a chaotic and unsure time for all of us. We don't know it yet, but ultimately, the questions will disappear for a very unexpected reason, at least unexpected by the Jews. We Christians will be well prepared for it because Jesus had told us to expect it.<sup>11</sup>

In 70 AD, the Romans will completely destroy the Temple in Jerusalem and expel the Jews that they don't kill. When the Jews cannot sacrifice or celebrate at the Temple, their system of worship will have to be completely modified. Without the income of the Temple, the Jewish leaders will lose all of their economic power to control the people or threaten the Romans.

At the same time, the Christians will be growing quickly in numbers and economic power. It will be almost overnight that the persecution from the Jews stops. That will be the good news. The bad news will be that the Romans will soon start taking notice of the Christians and begin persecuting them. But that happens many years after the ending of Dr. Luke's second book.

This catches you up to the time when Barnabas and I start on our first long missionary journey to the Gentiles. What a trip it will be!

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew 24:2

Barnabas:

About sixteen years after the resurrection of Jesus, Paul and I were with the church at Antioch worshiping and fasting. This was shortly after Paul and I returned from taking famine relief from the Antioch church to Jerusalem. We believed we had received approval in Jerusalem from the apostles and James to continue our work evangelizing the Gentiles, and we were anxious to do so. In retrospect, maybe we hadn't really gotten a green light, but a yellow light.

The Holy Spirit said that the church at Antioch should set Paul and me apart for his work. None of us were sure what he meant by that, but the brothers placed hands on us, and then sent us and John Mark on our way.<sup>1</sup> We didn't know where we were going, didn't know we would be gone about a year and a half.

From Antioch, the Holy Spirit led us a dozen miles down to Seleucia, and from there we sailed about 90 miles to the east end of the island of the island referred to as Kittim in the Old Testament. The Island of Cyprus! Ah, to be back on my home island, so many friends and relatives! We arrived at the city of Salamis where we proclaimed the Word of God. The city had an extensive population of Jews, as attested by the multiple synagogues.<sup>2</sup> This set a pattern of us sharing the good news to "the Jew first, then for the

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 13:1-3

<sup>2</sup> Acts. 13:5

Gentile”<sup>3</sup> as Paul would later write. We knew there were already Christians on the island because they had previously traveled to Antioch to share the Gospel.<sup>4</sup>

We traveled another hundred miles through the island on a Roman road until we arrived at the west coast city of Paphos. In Paphos, we met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Elymas, or Bar-Jesus. Being a sorcerer was not allowed by the Law of Moses, but the local Jews didn’t care enough to do anything about it.<sup>5</sup> Elymas was the attendant of the Roman proconsul, Sergius Paulus, so he did have some local authority.<sup>6</sup>

Sergius Paulus heard Paul preach and explain the Scriptures, and he became a believer. Since Elymas knew that was the end of his good deal, he tried to turn Sergius Paulus from the faith. Paul, full of the Holy Spirit, rebuked Elymas - made him go blind. This made Sergius Paulus even more of a believer.

Sergius Paulus had us to dinner one night and told us about his relatives who lived near Pisidia, in the province of Galatia.<sup>7</sup> He was hopeful we would go to them and tell them about the Lord Jesus. The Holy Spirit indicated that was where we should go next.

From Paphos, we sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, a Roman province on the south coast of Asia Minor. It was there that one of the saddest things in my life happened. John Mark decided to abandon us and go back to Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup> He made his excuses, and it broke my heart, he might never

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 1:16

<sup>4</sup> Acts 11:20

<sup>5</sup> Deut. 18:9-13

<sup>6</sup> Acts 13:4-9

<sup>7</sup> Viola, page 74

<sup>8</sup> Acts 13:13

grow up to be a real man! I could tell John Mark did not have the same level of trust in the Holy Spirit that Paul and I had, and that broke my heart, too.

It is easy for you to judge John Mark for wimping out, but travel in our time was difficult, incredibly hazardous, and we had reached an especially treacherous place. We didn't have fancy cars, paved highways or jet planes.

When we traveled by foot, which was most of the time, we could only make 15-20 miles per day, and that is if a Roman road was available. We were getting ready to travel on a new road called Sebaste that had only recently been built. Sometimes we would have a donkey carry our supplies, food, and water; but, often we did so ourselves. Bandits and robbers were a constant hazard on many roads, and they would physically harm you, as well as take your belongings. Only a few places to lodge were on the roads, and those few that existed were usually more like dirty brothels with bad food. We often spent the night outdoors.

Weather was a constant concern. Hot in the summer, cold in the winter, windy, and unpredictable. We had arrived in Perga in the late summer of 46 AD<sup>9</sup>, just before the autumn winds hit and sailing became treacherous. The area around Perga was low-lying, and many people contracted malaria there. Many scholars believe Paul contracted malaria at that place.<sup>10</sup> That was bad enough, but in the distance loomed the massive Taurus Mountains, and the autumn weather would soon be a hazard. We were getting ready to enter a dangerous, and unknown phase of our trip. Even I was apprehensive.

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Walker, *In the Steps of Saint Paul*, page 66

<sup>10</sup> Galatians 4:13-15

Paul did not want to hear any of John Mark's excuses or reasons. He was so angry he wouldn't even say goodbye to him. I had some cross words with Paul, and it soon became apparent that Paul now considered himself the leader of our group. I acquiesced because my judgement about John Mark was seemingly faulty, and because Paul was demonstrating his faith more and more powerfully.

Paul: I was on a mission for the Holy Spirit. I didn't have time to coddle someone who wasn't fully committed to our cause. It seemed to me that John Mark should go back to Jerusalem and bother Peter instead of me. My mind was set on going to Pisidian Antioch to meet the relatives of Sergius Paulus. I didn't tell Barnabas at the time, but I was getting very sick and was worried about traveling.<sup>11</sup> We were going to cross the Taurus Mountains, very dangerous. I knew the going would be tough for a hundred miles.

I admit I may have had some ulterior motives for evangelizing in the places we did. First, unlike Cyprus, this territory had not been evangelized by anyone else. Second, I was a little concerned that the Christians in Jerusalem were not excited about us evangelizing the Gentiles, so I wanted to present them with a finished product that they could not deny.

What I did not think about was that John Mark might unwittingly relay information about our trip to the church in Jerusalem, so some of them would already be moving to thwart our work.

We crossed the Taurus Mountains, and were nearly to the huge Roman province of Galatia. We first entered the city of Antioch near Pisidia, one of sixteen cities named after Antiochus, the son of one successor to Alexander the Great. It is different from Antioch of Syria that we had left from to start the journey.

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<sup>11</sup> Galatians 4:13-15

We attended the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, our normal first action. As was the custom, after the Law and the Prophets were read, the synagogue rulers asked visitors for any words they had to offer.<sup>12</sup> I am sure they were expecting a polite greeting from Jerusalem when I stood up. Instead, they got a history of the Jews that would rival the one Stephen gave to the Sanhedrin..(he leans in) and that's where I got the idea.

The Jews were very interested in what we had to say. Many of them became believers in Jesus. In the coming weeks, we continued to share the Gospel and made many more became believers. But some Jews became antagonistic, especially because we were treating the Gentiles as if they were equal to the Jews. It got so bad that the city leaders finally expelled us from the region. After shaking the dust from our feet, as Jesus advised<sup>13</sup>, we moved on, content in the knowledge that the church in Pisidian Antioch was firmly established. More exciting, even though the believers were mostly Gentiles, they were full of the Holy Spirit.

Many synagogues had a number of Gentiles who stayed on the fringes of Judaism. They were attracted to monotheism and other practices, but did not want to strictly follow the laws of Moses, especially getting circumcised. That practice was abhorrent to most ethnic groups, besides being very painful. These Gentiles were known as "God-fearers". I specifically addressed them in Acts 13.

When these God-fearers converted to Christianity, the Jews lost their status and authority over them. Further, it offered the God-fearers a way to salvation without going through the rituals of becoming Jews. It was

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<sup>12</sup> Acts 13:15

<sup>13</sup> Luke 9:5



probably the conversion of the God-fearers that really made the Jews angry. However, it made the God-fearers glad.<sup>14</sup>

Now that you know about God-fearers, you can better understand the pattern of teaching that we used in Pisidian Antioch, and would use for the next twenty years. First, we would go to the synagogue in a town and teach the Jews. With their background in the Old Testament, it was simple for them to comprehend the basic messages about God, and Jesus being the Messiah. From there, it was a small leap to teach them the entire Gospel message. Because we were at the synagogues, we could access many of the God-fearers. Then, through the God-fearers we had an approach to other Gentiles. Of course, the Holy Spirit would often open avenues to preach more directly to the Gentiles.

After leaving Pisidian Antioch, we traveled 90 miles on the newly built Via Sebaste, and arrived in Iconium. We continued our pattern of going to the synagogue first, but the Jews continued their pattern of opposing us and persecuting us. They hatched a plot to stone us, which was against the law, but we heard about it and left the region. Once again, we left behind many believers in the Lord Jesus.

We continued about 20 miles on the Via Sebaste and arrived in the Roman colony of Lystra. One family really stood out among the disciples we made there. A Jewish mother and grandmother, Eunice and Lois. They had a measure of faith that we had seldom seen.<sup>15</sup> They became such fervent believers that we would begin receiving letters from them giving us updates on the status of the churches in Galatia.

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<sup>14</sup> Acts 13:48

<sup>15</sup> 2 Timothy 1:5, 3:11

In Lystra, we saw a man who had been lame since birth. I looked at him intently, the Spirit revealed that the man had faith to be healed. I told him - "Stand on your feet," he jumped up and began to walk. Remembering the persecution Jesus got for healing a man lame from birth, I was a little concerned about what would happen. To say I was surprised about what happened next would be an understatement.

The people were so impressed that they started calling Barnabas and me by the names of Roman Gods! The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to offer sacrifices to us. The crowd was speaking in the Lycaonian language, but we figured out what was happening ...Barnabas and I went crazy. We tore our clothes and pled with them to understand that we were ordinary men like them, except we were empowered by Jesus and the Holy Spirit. - (he pauses, ponders) I didn't understand the psychology of disappointed crowds.

The same Jews we had angered in Iconium and Pisidian Antioch stirred up the disappointed crowd and turned them against us. Instead of wanting to sacrifice to us, the crowd decided they wanted to sacrifice us. They stoned me and left me for dead outside of the city. But, the Spirit had future plans for me. When the disciples gathered around me and prayed, I came to life. I went to Derbe, the next city, 60 miles away!

Barnabas:

Think about that. Paul was stoned and left for dead by people who meant to kill him, and it appeared they had succeeded...even to me. Certainly, he must have had broken bones and damage to his internal organs. Yet, he was healed and ready to immediately travel. What a miracle!

Paul:

Now you know why the disciples call him Son of Encouragement. But, come to think of it, why didn't the people of Lystra stone him instead of me? We

hadn't been there long enough for them to like him better, like all the other places we traveled. The Christians in Galatia would forever remember what I had suffered to bring them the Gospel<sup>16</sup>.

In Derbe, Barnabas and I made more disciples, but we did not get to stay long. The Holy Spirit revealed that our journey in Galatia was at an end. He knew that we had to start back in order to get to Antioch before the bad autumn weather prevented our sailing. We knew that we had been blessed so much in working among the Galatians that the Lord had clearly shown that our future work was to be among the Gentiles, not the Jews.

Barnabas and I back-tracked from Derbe to Lystra to Iconium to Pisidian Antioch. We strengthened the believers in those churches and appointed elders, and left them with instructions to avoid false teaching, especially from the Jews. We were very concerned that these Gentiles were living in poverty surrounded by false idols, didn't have the Old Testament like the Jews, and the New Testament had not yet been written. If we had known that it would be two or three years before we would return, we would have been even more concerned about the false teachers who were Christians.

From Pisidian Antioch we went to Perga, and then down to Attalia, where we sailed back to Antioch where the journey had started. We gathered the church together and told them how powerfully God had opened the door to the Gentiles. The brothers welcomed us back, and we looked forward to a long time of peace. Unfortunately, peace was not going to last long.

I started receiving letters and hearing rumors that there was dissension among the Galatian churches. Many of the Jewish Christians, especially some who were representing themselves as being from James<sup>17</sup>, were

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<sup>16</sup> Galatians 6:17

<sup>17</sup> Galatians 2:12

stridently insisting that all new Christians, including the new Galatian Christians, should follow the laws of Moses, especially having men undergo circumcision! These Jewish Christians were spiritually imprisoning these new Gentile Christians with unnecessary and counterproductive restrictions. The freedom we had promised the new believers was being taken away.

I fired off a long letter to my Galatian friends and began writing to ask the other apostles and Christian leaders for a meeting to discuss this rising danger. We Christians were overcoming the persecution of the Jewish leaders, but I was now uncertain whether we could withstand the teaching of our own Jewish brothers! Or, if we could overcome some of the actions of Peter.

I was not one of the original apostles of Jesus. (James hobbles in and slowly sits down clearly favoring his knees as he does. It's slightly uncomfortable to watch.)

Are you looking at my knees? Most people do. The little kids call me "Camel Knees" (rubs his knees) misshapen and callused just like those of a camel. I think it's a little joke that my older brother, Jesus, is playing on me.<sup>1</sup> I had all those years to talk to him face-to-face and didn't do it. Now I spend hours on my knees in prayer while I talk to Him.

I have other nick-names, too. James the Brother of Jesus, James the Just, and who knows what else. One of the reasons people give me names is to distinguish me from James the Son of Zebedee, one of the original apostles. That James was a very close friend of mine, but he was the first of the apostles to be martyred, by Herod Agrippa I.<sup>2</sup> People also want to distinguish me from James the Son of Alphaeus, another original apostle.

When Luke decided to write the story of Jesus and the early church, he came to me to verify some information and stories that hadn't been recorded. I gave him some good ones, but you'll have to read Luke's first book to learn the amazing things that my mother, Mary, told him. When she convinced him about the way she got pregnant with Jesus?... mindblowing. It's not often you see a doctor come to believe something like that enough that he puts his reputation on the line by writing about it.<sup>3</sup>

You might not think Luke and I have much in common. Educated Greek doctor. Uneducated Jewish carpenter. Handsome, not so handsome. Him well-dressed. I

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 1:19

<sup>2</sup> Acts 12:2

<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:26-38

dress like the poor man I am. But Luke and I have something very important in common. Something he has in common with Paul. And, we three have it in common with many other dedicated followers of Jesus. It is this – even though we have the right to call ourselves friends of Jesus, we all call ourselves his slaves. While it is common for Christians of your time to wear a sign of the cross, we would more likely wear awl-punched holes in our ears that signify we love our owner and his church family.<sup>4</sup>

You see an old, bent-over man with camel’s knees...known for being wise and gentle, but it wasn’t always this way. Growing up, I had to work in our family’s carpentry and construction business. Jesus ran the business for most of my early life. When he was about thirty, he went away to preach. So, he turned the business over to me and my brothers so we could continue to provide for our mother and sisters.

Jesus was an excellent carpenter, but too compassionate to be a good businessman. Business was booming in the nearby town of Sepphoris because the Romans had a huge restoration project going on there. All of the brothers could have moved the five miles to live there, and made a very good living. But Jesus thought it was much more important to keep away from the bad influences there, take care of our mother and sisters, and give away what we could to the few people in Nazareth who were poorer than we were.

Plus, Jesus was always talking to God. He had Bible interpretations at the synagogue that drove the old rabbis crazy. Frankly, many of our family and townspeople were almost glad when he decided to move to Capernaum and start preaching. In fact, it wasn’t many months before he came back to Nazareth and offended our synagogue leaders so much that they tried to kill him.<sup>5</sup>

Later, we found out he was going around Galilee acting like a crazy man in his teachings and healings. He was saying things that the Jewish leaders found blasphemous, and we were afraid they would kill him. We went as a family to

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus 21:5-6

<sup>5</sup> Luke 4:28-29

calm him down and bring him home, he quietly renounced us and sent us away.<sup>6</sup> Every day we prayed that Yahweh would bring him to his senses, and he would quit bringing embarrassment and danger to our family and community.

After a year or two, my brothers and I went to convince him to go to Jerusalem and reveal himself as the Messiah... at one of the major feasts. We thought he was possessed or crazy, and we hoped the priests there could heal him. Little did we know that Jesus was the only one in Israel who was truth, and there was nothing about him that needed to be healed.

From Luke's first book, you know Jesus' life story, so let's move ahead to his resurrection. After Jesus was resurrected, he showed himself to over five hundred people, and then, he paid me the highest honor...he made a special appearance to me!<sup>7</sup> ME! It gives me the shivers just to think of it. I was sitting there trying to comprehend all the rumors I was hearing, and then BAM! Jesus is sitting next to me. I couldn't quit crying and apologizing for not believing in him. But he just gave me a hug, instantly I understood all he had been saying and doing his entire life. He had been preparing me for my whole life, and it came together (he snaps) like that.

Nothing had made sense until that point, in a flash I understood everything. Have you ever felt like that? It still shakes me to the core when I think about it.

I went back to Jerusalem, the apostles immediately accepted me as one of their own. I think Jesus told them to give me some slack since I was his little brother. After Stephen was killed by the Jewish leaders, our band began to be persecuted. Peter and the other apostles were singled out because they were so closely identified with Jesus, so they began to leave Jerusalem one-by-one. Pretty soon, I was about the only leader left because none of the Jews had ever heard of me. Sneaky plan by the Holy Spirit, I think.

From there, two things happened that greatly defined who I am today. The first had to do with the Jerusalem church. The early church took off like a bottle

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 8:19

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:7

rocket. We shared everything we owned, and we grew at a tremendous rate. When persecution hit the church, many of the members scattered to other nations, which caused the spread of the Gospel much faster than we could have ever imagined.

As so often happens, those who moved away from Jerusalem were the most economically well-off among us. The poor, widows, orphans, and I were left behind. Our poverty turned deadly when the famine hit. It was during the time of Emperor Claudius, in 45 AD when it hit with a vengeance, and it lasted three years. During this time, I began to see the wisdom in having churches work together and have compassion for other Christians around the world. If it hadn't been for the collections that the church at Antioch took up on our behalf, many of us would have starved to death. That's what it took for me to understand that faith without action is actually no faith at all.<sup>8</sup>

The second defining event... a split began developing among the Christians over whether they should or shouldn't follow the tenants of the Old Testament and the Laws of Moses. It was clear from Peter's interaction with Cornelius and other Gentiles, and from the results of the first trip of Paul and Barnabas that God wanted all non-Jews to become Christians. What wasn't clear was whether Christianity would be a sect of the Jews, or whether the Jews would be a sect of Christianity! It was almost twenty years after the death of Jesus, and the church was at a crossroads that would define its future.

This disagreement came to crisis because of a dinner invitation. Peter was in Antioch celebrating the results of Paul and Barnabas' first missionary trip. The reports were so encouraging that I sent some of our Jerusalem brothers who were former Pharisees to verify the reports. However, when they arrived, they began teaching that non-Jews who became Christians should be circumcised and follow the laws of Moses. Peter was persuaded by their teaching and began to quit eating with the new non-Jewish Christians. Even Barnabas was persuaded to do the same. This, of course, made the impatient Paul go crazy, so he confronted Peter about it.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> James 2:17

<sup>9</sup> Galatians 2:11-14



Understanding the long-term importance of the matter, the brothers in Antioch wisely decided to send Paul, Barnabas and the former Pharisees back to Jerusalem to have the Jerusalem Church leaders give their opinion.

You have probably never heard a room full of rabbis argue over a minor detail in the law, like how many steps can a man take on the Sabbath before it becomes work. They can talk over something like that for years. You can only imagine how long and detailed the discussion was over this major turning point in the development of the church.

What made the issue so complicated was the interplay between the religious and cultural aspects of the question. This was not a question of good people versus bad people, or right people versus wrong people. It was mostly a question of how people understood the ways culture should interact with religion. Looking back over the last two thousand years, you have the perspective of seeing how this has been an issue nearly everywhere the Gospel has been spread.

Peter started turning the tide when he gave his point of view. We all knew that it was his actions in Antioch that had stirred the pot. But we also knew of his encounter with Cornelius. You should have heard Paul and Barnabas argue their case. For the first time in Paul's life, he led with his heart, not with his mind. And for the first time in his life, he won over the hearts of everyone in the room.

From personal experience, we all knew the impossibility of new Christians following the Jewish laws. Even the Jews couldn't consistently follow the laws. We had another case to consider that many people don't think about. There were many God-fearers who hung around the synagogues and Temple area. These people were non-Jews who loved God and wanted to be obedient to him, but they did not want to convert to Judaism to do it. They proved that Christianity would not grow very much if conversion to Judaism was required of new Christians.

We all yearned for the freedom of Christ and hated the futility of the Law. Plus, both Jesus and the Holy Spirit had revealed to us that the Temple would soon be destroyed, and Judaism and its laws would nearly disappear. So, even if the Spirit

hadn't revealed it so vividly, it was logical that the Jesus-following Jews would soon become a sect, and a quickly diminishing sect, of Christianity.

After hearing from all sides,<sup>10</sup> everyone deferred to my judgment in the case, which is why I attained the nickname, James the Just. I laid down three specifics: Christians should abstain from food that had been offered to idols, abstain from the meat of strangled animals and from blood, and abstain from sexual immorality. The former Pharisees were appeased because they had satisfied their need to have rules, Paul was thrilled because he understood the long-term importance of my ruling.

In reality, this judgment made it easy for Gentiles to come to the Lord, gave them the opportunity to lead righteous lives, and showed everyone that Christians are saved by grace through faith, not by keeping the laws of Moses. It became perfectly clear that salvation and holiness came through the Gospel only, not the Gospel plus the laws of Moses. This provided the foundation for church unity that would be needed for the growth of Christianity for all time.

I was pretty proud of myself for solving such a thorny problem. Then, the Holy Spirit brought me to my calloused knees. He reminded me that Jesus had predicted the destruction of the Temple and of Jerusalem. He told me it was to occur forty years after Jesus' resurrection... we were half way to that time! Then he asked, "If you are so smart, how should I grow the church for the next twenty years so that the world-wide body of Christ will continue to grow after the church in Jerusalem is destroyed and all the apostles are dead?" I had no answer.

Late in my life, our church members encouraged me to write down some of the lessons I had learned as the leader of the Jerusalem church. I understand that through the centuries other Christians leaders didn't like my little letter. In particular, Martin Luther. He was offended by some of my writings, but he was a shining example of doing much of what I wrote about.

It only takes a few minutes to read my little letter, but let me give you the highlights to speed your reading and understanding. First, God is God, and you

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<sup>10</sup> Acts 15, Galatians 2:8-10

are not. Second, don't have any gods before God, including your job, your hobbies or your sex life. Third, if you help the poor and helpless, you please God. Fourth, trust your love and compassion instead of highly theoretical religious conclusions.

That's about it. Thank you for your patience with the rambling words of an old man with funny knees. But you know what? This old man played as a little boy with Jesus, looked into the same mother's eyes as Jesus, and got special forgiveness...from Jesus. Wouldn't you be willing to have camel's knees to have experienced those things?

Philip:

I live in Caesarea with my four daughters. If you're wondering why God chose for me and my lovely daughters to live in Caesarea, you probably think it is so my girls could find nice husbands and give me a lot of grandbabies. So far, that doesn't appear to be the case since they are still blessing their mother and me with their daily presence. At least four daughters don't eat as much as four sons would. (long pause, leans in) And, they prophesy.

I believe God placed us here in Caesarea so we could help the many missionaries who were leaving Israel to spread the Gospel. It's probably not obvious why Caesarea would be that critical, so let me tell you about my hometown. Although the Bible doesn't give a lot of information about Caesarea, you can easily infer its importance to the Christian movement and many of its key characters when you read the book of Acts.

Since the beginning of recorded time, the primary trade route across Israel was The Way of the Sea, or the Via Maris. This trade route linked Egypt with Syria, and then on to the rest of the world, the most important route across the Fertile Crescent. The route came from the Sinai in Egypt, up the west coast of Israel, cut across the Jezreel Valley near Nazareth, to Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee, around the north edge of the Sea of Galilee, up to Hazor, then across to Damascus. Near Damascus it linked up with the King's Highway trade route, the very route that Moses wanted to take across Edom and Moab. The Via Maris was specifically placed to avoid the dangerous swamps on the west coast of Israel and those east of Hazor. Those swamps no longer exist.

Why didn't ancient traders just put their goods on big ships and use ports along Israel's coast? They would have loved to, but it was not possible. A huge amount

of sand is continually dumped into the Mediterranean Sea from rivers in Northern Africa, especially Egypt. The water currents push the sand up the coast of Israel, so that there are no natural deep-water ports on the southeast side of the Mediterranean Sea. The story of Jonah? Yes, there are some shallow water ports, like Joppa, but there are not any natural deep-water ports.

And that is why King Herod the Great got incredibly rich. Mentally unstable, but one of the best builders of all time. Herod the Great built the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, a palace on Masada, moved a mountain and built a palace on it at Herodium, and had many other major building projects. I believe his greatest project was Caesarea, sometimes known as Caesarea Maritima, Caesarea-by-the-Sea.

Herod and his engineers invented a type of cement that would set underwater. Then, they constructed some huge sea walls and created the deep-water port of Caesarea. For the first time, large ships could dock in Israel. In fact, the harbor was so large that 100 ships could dock there at a time. Since Herod now controlled the Via Maris trade route, he made a fortune. Virtually all ship travel and shipping commerce moving through Israel had to come through Caesarea.

Caesarea was built about twenty years before the birth of Jesus. Herod built a beautiful palace, and a huge marble-clad city arose where nothing had been before. He built a magnificent aqueduct all the way from Mount Carmel to service the city. The remnants of that aqueduct and city will still be seen two thousand years later.

Visitors to the site of Caesarea today are awed by the huge semi-circular theater. Originally, it was marble-clad and was quite a wonder. Ironically, one of Herod's arrogant grandsons died in Caesarea, possibly in this marble theater, when God struck him with worms.<sup>1</sup>

The Romans highly preferred living in Caesarea over anywhere else in Israel, especially Jerusalem. They hated the 70-mile uphill walk to Jerusalem where the

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 12:23

Jews were hateful and rebellious. It was much more pleasant to live by the beautiful sea, with the added benefit of being able to get to Rome much quicker. Very few people could swim in those days, but they still loved the stunning nearby beach.

Traveling on the sea in my time was much different than taking a cruise in modern times. Our ships were primarily used to transport goods, not people. If you wanted to take a voyage, you were probably going to travel on a merchant ship or a cargo ship. The bigger the ship, the safer you would be. You paid the captain whatever price he asked, and that entitled you to try to find a place to lie on the deck. The more travelers, the less space you had. If a diplomat or soldier needed to get somewhere, you might even lose your place entirely. You were required to bring your own food and water. You probably brought some rope, too. That way, if a storm came up you might be able to find a way to tie yourself down instead of being washed overboard to a sure death.

Ships of that time were at the mercy of the winds and currents. Sailing during the winter was nearly suicidal, and sailing near the winter season was dangerous. One part of the year the prevailing wind blew you one way, and in another part of the year the wind blew you the other way. The pagans believed the winds were predictable *until* their gods changed their minds, in which case they went whichever way the gods wanted them to go. That's one reason all sailors and travelers were superstitious. And a reason there are now hundreds of thousands of shipwrecks at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea.

At its largest, Caesarea had a population of 125,000 but it had a relatively small amount of Jews and Christians. Because we lived in Caesarea, we were able to give travelers the very best tips, some food and water, and a place to rest. We were also able to make friends with some of the important people of the town, and evangelize them whenever possible. Remember the story of Cornelius the Centurion that Peter told? Cornelius was from Caesarea, probably a God-fearer, so you might guess that he could have been a good friend of mine.

Sailors were extraordinarily superstitious, never starting a trip unless the weather was good, omens in their favor, the day's date was favorable, and the captain or

owner of the ship felt lucky. Departures were sometimes delayed for days waiting for all these things to align.

When men are fearful for their lives, they often take refuge in learning more about the gods... or God. Sharing the Gospel with a huge number of sailors, travelers, and soldiers was simple for me. Rather than have me travel to meet new people, God made the new people travel to meet me. A good gig for an evangelist, huh? And, my girls had a beach nearby.

Paul came through Caesarea soon after he became a Christian, it was a critical city for Paul and other early missionaries as time went by. Caesarea was the place where Paul was imprisoned... for two years... before he went to Rome. During those two years, I loved to visit Paul in prison and help him write letters to people and churches he loved so much.

If you could have seen the political games that we played while Paul was in prison. Through our many relationships with the common staff people and servants, my girls and I knew every detail of what was going on with Felix, Festus, and Herod Agrippa. We knew every question that was going to be asked before it was asked. We even influenced some of their thought processes by influencing their advisors.

One of the nice things about Caesarea was that its jail cell did not have a cellar. Now, I'm not telling you that being in jail was a vacation, but Paul could enjoy the sea breeze while watching the ships come and go in the harbor. I've often thought that his metaphors about spiritual warfare were derived from watching the soldiers drill in formation outside his cell in Caesarea. He could see they always drilled in groups, demonstrating that spiritual warfare was to be fought as a church body, not just as individual believers.

After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, Caesarea became the provincial capital of the Judaea Province and one of the colonies for Roman military veterans. It remained an important center for Christianity long after my life. The famous Christian author, Origen, lived there and wrote some of his most important works. Some suspect the Nicene Creed originated in Caesarea.

Eusebius, the brilliant church historian, was bishop of Caesarea in the fourth century.

The harbor was used for hundreds of years, but earthquakes, tsunamis, and sand drift slowly destroyed its use. The city was critical in the Crusades, but other ports increasingly became more important. By 1265 AD The city was abandoned.

By the way, my Caesarea is not the same as Caesarea Philippi, which is near Mount Hermon, on the far north edge of Israel. Caesarea Philippi was visited by Jesus and is the place where Peter first confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, and where Jesus gave the keys to the kingdom to Peter. Also, where Jesus changed Peter's name from Simon to Peter. Caesarea Philippi is a beautiful place, but not nearly as beautiful as my Caesarea Maritima.

When you were a child, you learned to detest the evil King Herod. He deceived the wise men who were trying to find the baby Jesus. And when God led the wise men to go home a different way, Herod became so enraged that he killed all of the baby boys in Bethlehem who were younger than two years of age.<sup>2</sup> That horrific scene has been depicted in songs, art and used as a proof of the validity of prophetic Scripture. Herod's irrational actions were clearly the sign of a deranged mind, which would prove to become even more deranged.

Here is the irony. Only a few years before the birth of Jesus, Herod finished building the deep-water port of Caesarea. It is through that port the Gospel about Jesus would be so effectively spread to the rest of the world. It is at that port where I would be able to evangelize so effectively. It was at that port where Paul influenced so many people, wrote some of his most important letters, and was enabled to go to Rome in a capacity where he could influence people in very important positions.

Not only that, but when Herod built the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, he added the Antonio Fortress to it so the Romans could keep peace in the city, but live a secluded life that didn't arouse the resentment of the Jews. When Paul came to

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 2



the Temple after his third missionary journey, he was arrested on vague charges. However, Paul, the man who wrote much of the New Testament surely would have died at the Temple that day if the soldiers hadn't rushed from the Antonia Fortress to rescue him, and bring him to Caesarea a short while later.

Without his knowledge, King Herod helped ensure the Word of God spread throughout the world and throughout the ages. So, wasn't he one of the most effective evangelists in the history of Christianity? And maybe why God chose for me to live here. To see it all. Along with my four daughters...my four lovely daughters...May they find husbands... And have grand babies.

Paul:

After the Council at Jerusalem, Barnabas, Silas, Barsabbas and I returned to Antioch where we taught and preached the Word of God. The letter from the church at Jerusalem was the critical piece of authority we needed to continue evangelizing the Gentiles while refuting those circumcision-supporting Jewish Christians completely. However, I continued to hear rumors that those Jewish Christians were causing problems in the cities where we went on our first missionary journey. I decided we should return to the cities where we had established churches, and extend our mission reach.

After much prayer, I told Barnabas that he and I should leave soon. For the first time, my close friend and I had a sharp disagreement and decided to part ways. What I didn't know was that I was going to be on this trip for more than two years, and I would miss him greatly. I probably endured some unnecessary beatings because he wasn't there to help me (he sighs and shakes his head).

Barnabas:

I wanted to take John Mark with us...give him a second chance! He had been faithful in Jerusalem under Peter's tutelage, so I believed he was ready to be tested again. Paul was still upset that John Mark had deserted us on our first trip, and did not want to give him another chance. So, I decided to take John Mark and go back to my home island of Cyprus. Paul chose to take Silas in my place. Only time would tell if John Mark would ever mature. I truly hated to part with Paul, but the Holy Spirit reminded me that this way there would be two mission trips instead of just one. And it would give Paul the opportunity to train Silas.

When you read *Acts*, you might notice that this is the last time I am mentioned. You could infer that I had done my job in getting Paul trained so I was not longer

important. However, you could also infer that my work with Paul was complete and now it was time for me to concentrate on training John Mark. You can be assured that the Holy Spirit had not spent so much time and effort training me that he was going to let me become useless.

Paul:

It broke my heart to part from Barnabas, but the Holy Spirit told me to do it. But it wasn't all bad news. Silas was a Roman citizen, which turned out to be helpful.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, he seemed to always be preoccupied with food.

Silas:

(we cut to Silas..he seems sucker punched by the accusation of food focus. So unfair.)

Hey....Come on.

Paul:

Silas and I started our overland trip, and encouraged the churches in Syria and Cilicia as we traveled toward the province of Galatia. Arriving in the town of Derbe, we had a joyful reunion with the church, and then we went to nearby Lystra. Everywhere we went, we shared the letter from James and the Jerusalem church, explaining the freedom that was being extended to people everywhere. It had been almost two years since we had seen our friends, and everyone was so happy to be reunited and to hear the good news from Jerusalem.

These were some of the same places Barnabas and I had established churches on our first trip. However, once we left Galatia, we left familiar territory.

In Lystra, we had a tearful reunion with Eunice and Lois, and got to meet Eunice's incredible young son, Timothy. Eunice, was Jewish but Timothy's father was Greek. Timothy had an excellent reputation, and seemed like he had a bright future as a missionary. The problem was – we were going to areas where there were many Jews, and Timothy wanted to be effective with them. We did not ask him, but...

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 16:37

Silas:

Timothy chose to be circumcised, (he lets this sink in)

Paul:

That way he could share his powerful testimony with the Jews in their synagogues. He truly became all things to all people so that he could share the Gospel more effectively.

We traveled through Phrygia and Galatia encouraging and strengthening the churches. For reasons known only to him, the Holy Spirit kept us from going on to preach in the province of Asia or the province of Bythynia. So, we skirted the area and were led to the coastal town of Troas. Shortly after we arrived, Silas started getting sick. We were at a little sea-side inn, and I think he ate some oysters in a month that didn't have an "R."

Silas:

Funny...real funny.

Paul:

A kindly Greek doctor sitting nearby came over, gave him a home remedy... made him throw up...outside of course. We repaid the doctor by buying his meal and telling him about Jesus. He believed, and wanted to join us. You've - met him.

Silas:

Luuuuuke. Thank God, for Dr Luke.

Paul:

While in Troas, I had a vision of a man in Macedonia begging us to come there and help them. Macedonia is now known as the northern region of Greece. Without any delay, the four of us boarded a ship and sailed straight to Samothrace.

Silas:

As we passed the Sanctuary of the Great Gods, we saw the most beautiful brown-tinted marble statue of a winged woman who represented a victory of the Macedonians. Thousands of years later on, that statue will be the Louvre museum in Paris and still regarded as one of the finest statues ever created.

Paul:

From Samothrace, we traveled to Neopolis, and then to Philippi, a Roman colony named by Philip II, the father of Alexander the Great. Philip II wanted to own the city because of its nearby gold mines and its key location on an important trade route.

Silas:

Philippi was one of the great cities of Macedonia. It was where a key battle of Octavian and Mark Antony sealed the end of the Roman Republic and ensured the future of the Roman Empire. We started traveling on the Via Egnatia, or the Egnatian Way. It was the most direct route from Rome to the East.<sup>2</sup> A large, marble-covered military road,

Paul:

Once again, the Roman roads helped spread the Gospel.

Philippi was the first place in Europe I preached. It was also the first time I preached somewhere without starting in a synagogue... Just by the riverside. There was a rich woman, Lydia, from Thyatira who sold purple cloth. She was a God-fearer, but became a believer in Jesus, along with her entire household.

Silas:

She had a huge house, and graciously provided a wonderful place for us to stay, and eat.

Paul:

Lydia's story was a little unusual. She was a self-made woman in a system dominated by men. Very wealthy. She had a special talent - dealing with purple

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<sup>2</sup> Viola, page 95

dye. Might not sound like much to you, but purple cloth was incredibly expensive, and in high demand because only Roman royalty and Roman senators could wear it. The dye came from sea snails found in a few places around the Mediterranean Sea. Each snail produced only a tiny drop of the dye, so millions of snails were killed every year just to dye a small amount of purple cloth. The final purple color was actually... a blue... indigo, like your blue jeans.

Philippi was another point on a growing trend of my ability to be persecuted. Silas had not been warned sufficiently of how dangerous it was to be associated with me. Once on our way to pray somewhere, a demon-possessed slave girl started following us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God." It was charming for the first day or two, but finally she wore on my nerves enough that I cast out the demon by the powerful name of Jesus Christ.

Casting out demons usually makes people happy, not this time. The slave girl had been able to tell fortunes, and her owners lost a very valuable asset when the demon left. This infuriated them.

Silas:

They seized Paul and me, dragged us before the town magistrates and made false accusations!

Paul:

The crowd joined the attack, so the magistrates had us stripped, beaten, and thrown into jail. The jailer was commanded to be very careful to guard us, so he placed us in the inner jail and put our feet in stocks. Oh, the ugly eye that Silas gave me! His hands were in stocks, or he might have done worse to me.

Silas:

Paul had promised me a nice sea voyage and some good Greek food, and instead I found my body all whipped and bloody. And the jail food was so awful I got heartburn and couldn't sleep. So, I decided to sing some hymns and pray, even though it was late... after midnight. What more could they do to punish us? Suddenly, there was an earthquake so violent that the doors opened and everybody's chains came off. I jumped up to escape, but the ever-surprising Paul

said, “Stay still, we are about to save some souls.” I’m thinking, we could save our own souls, but I had learned not to cross Paul...(he leans in to tell us off the record, shakes his head and whispers) temper, temper!

Paul:

With an attitude like that, you can see why I was wishing to have Barnabas back to encourage me. Anyway, the jailer came down, saw the door was open and got ready to kill himself. Escaped prisoners cause punishment far worse than suicide. I shouted, “Don’t harm yourself”, we were all still in jail. He called for lights and found we were all there, he fell on his knees and asked how he could be saved, he must have heard us singing and praying. We said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.” So, he did and they were. He cleaned us up, served us a meal. The food was so good that “sensitive Silas” didn’t even get heartburn.

Silas:

(Silas rolls his eyes as if he has heard the last remark) The next morning, the magistrates told our new jailor friend that he could release us, but Paul threw them a curveball.

Paul:

“We are Roman citizens!”

Silas:

They had beaten us without a trial. That was something that could cause them not only to lose their jobs, but to be severely punished under Roman law. They personally came and escorted us out of jail, and begged us to leave their city.

Paul:

So, we did ...after stopping by Lydia’s house and encouraging all of the Philippian believers. Lydia convinced me to leave Luke in Philippi to help strengthen the church. Also, I think some of her employees had gotten sick from the purple dye, and she was hoping Luke could help.

Silas:

(in the same way he yelled his name before when Luke came to the rescue)

Luuuuuuuke!

We left behind a small church in their care along with Clement, Euodia, and Syntyche, the other leaders<sup>3</sup>-

Paul

From there, Silas, Timothy and I traveled about 90 miles southwest on the Egnatian Way to the town of Thessalonica, the capital and the largest city of Macedonia. We stayed there for several weeks preaching in their synagogue. While there, our friends in Philippi sent us gifts to allow us to evangelize full-time.<sup>4</sup> Many of the Jews and Greeks, as well as several prominent women, became believers.

Can't say I was shocked that the Jews in town were jealous, starting rumors about us, the city officials recommended we leave. So as not to cause any more harm to the believers, especially our new friend Jason, Silas and I left in the night. We left Timothy behind to help strengthen the church, they needed to learn how to overcome their bad habits. I asked Timothy to join us in Berea as soon as he could. By avoiding more trouble in Thessalonica, Silas couldn't complain about another little beating or bad jail food.

Silas:

No, but I did twist my ankle... as we *walked* toward Berea... in the middle of the night. Three days and 60 miles later, we got there, and I'm not ashamed to say, I wanted a nice Greek meal of cucumbers and onions on pita bread, but guess what Paul wants to do? We go straight to the synagogue and talk about Jesus. I keep thinking, "this Paul guy doesn't learn very fast," and has zero appreciation for good food. Anyway, things were going well because the Bereans actually searched the Scriptures to see if we were speaking the truth to them.

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<sup>3</sup> Philippians 4:2-3

<sup>4</sup> Phil. 4:15-16



Little did we know that the angry Jews from Thessalonica had followed us, and started causing trouble. They especially attacked Paul, so the new believers in Berea hustled Paul off to Athens, but let Timothy and me stay. Praise the Lord, I finally got to have some good Greek food and sleep in peace. Timothy didn't say anything critical of Paul, but I'm pretty sure he was glad to have a break... from the chaos Paul was always causing.

Paul:

(it's Paul's turn to be in the hot seat. He lifts his hands and looks around as if to say "what?")

Silas:

I'm not saying that Paul misled me in any way about this trip, but promises of good food and peaceful sleep had not come true quite as often as I had hoped. I was beginning to think that Barnabas had made a wise choice of going to the sunny island of Cyprus instead of spending his time keeping Paul out of jail. If I ever have to choose between my good friends Paul and Peter,<sup>5</sup> I hope it does not come down to food as the final incentive. Paul never thinks about food, but Peter's wife can do a kosher meal better than anybody.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Peter 5:12

<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:5

Paul

I was happy to be headed to Athens and away from Silas, Luke and Timothy for a while. As a young man, I had studied Athens and its philosophers and had always wanted to see the famous city.

I left the city of Berea and the province of Macedonia, and entered into the province of Greece. A few hard days of walking later, I found a shell of the Athens I had read about in its Golden Age. It had been almost four hundred years since the great builders and philosophers had done things nobody had ever done or thought. The Acropolis was covered with run down temples and buildings. Even the Parthenon, the most beautiful building ever created, was shabby. The Romans had been stealing Greek marble, statues, and ideas for more than a hundred years and the Greeks were helpless in stopping them. The city had shrunk to only 10,000 inhabitants.

I climbed the steep Acropolis to look down on the city. On its Areopagus, the rocky outcrop known as Mars Hill, I looked down at a dying city and its people. All of them, living in the distant past with long-dead ideas and philosophies. Such emptiness, and hopelessness I nearly cried. Behind me was the top of the Acropolis with its many temples, including the giant Parthenon, dedicated to the city's patron goddess, Athena. In front of me was the Agora with its rows of shops and statues. I descended to the market place, and saw something that broke my heart: an altar dedicated to The Unknown God. The Athenians were so clueless, and just so they could cover all the bases they had an altar to The Unknown God.

More than five centuries before my time, Greece and Macedonia were not countries, but an area with many city-states and small kingdoms. Athens, Sparta, Thebes ...Corinth. These city-states constantly fought against each other, and against other enemies in other countries.

In order to improve the chances of winning wars and growing economically, each area created their own gods that they worshiped. Eventually, they ended up with a very comprehensive set of myths concerning these so-called gods. You have probably heard of many of the Greek gods: Zeus, Poseidon, Athena, Aphrodite... Nike. the Romans would revise the Greek myths and change the names of the gods, but they essentially continued the same pagan worship.

The purpose of religion for the Greeks and Romans was to improve the prosperity of their city-states and their families. Their religious celebrations often included drunkenness and prostitution. They had no concept of a religion that was used to worship a true God and to act in a holy and pure way. Instead, they used philosophy to modify peoples' thoughts and behaviors.

I taught in the synagogue and on the streets of Athens, and was confronted with the same old philosophies and laws that had been argued and found wanting for hundreds of years. Stoicism, Epicureanism... Cynicism had all failed their followers. As I proclaimed the Good News of our resurrected Lord, I found many people who were relieved to finally hear a message of hope and life.

At one point, I was invited to speak before the Areopagus Council. This group of men "presided over cases of murder, sacrilege, and arson."<sup>1</sup> I presumed that I could have been convicted of sacrilege and punished by

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<sup>1</sup> A quote from a sign currently on the Areopagus.

being shoved over the edge. However, the Council was convinced of my sincerity and beliefs, and allowed me to stay and teach in Athens. My speech to them was based on natural theology instead of Old Testament Scriptures. Even from that point of view, the truth of Jesus was so obvious that many who heard the Gospel became believers.

Perhaps you find many people are ignorant of the Old and New Testament. If so, study my speech in Athens and use it as a guide for using nature, popular writers, and other common information to convince people of the truth of Jesus and God. You should become all things to all people in order to win them to Christ.<sup>2</sup>

In the end, many in the audience wanted to hear more about Jesus, though I suspect many of them just wanted to hear about a new and interesting philosophy. In the end, many people heard the Word, but only a few became believers.

They took their sweet time about it, but Silas and Timothy finally joined me in Athens. Based on their stories, I decided it was prudent to send them back to Thessalonica to strengthen the church there. They had proven their mettle and I knew I could trust them to do what was needed. And, Silas was wearing me out -wanting to taste the latest Greek food in Athen's Agora.

After a few weeks, when my work at Athens came to an end, the Holy Spirit led me on a fifty mile walk to Corinth. The land and sea views were astounding. The Aegean Sea, I don't think I've ever seen anything prettier than seeing the blue sky and clouds reflecting off that island-studded water.

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 9:22

Two hundred years before my time, Corinth and Rome were vying for control of the area. Rome defeated Corinth and totally destroyed it in 146 BC. The Romans hauled away unimaginable amounts of wealth and art from the city. A hundred years later the Romans rebuilt the city in a slightly different place and made it the provincial capital of Greece. Like Athens and the rest of Greece, Corinth was just a shell of what it had been in its prime, although in my time Corinth was a much bigger and more important city than Athens.

Corinth controlled the Isthmus of Corinth that allowed travelers to avoid sailing around the dangerous Peloponnese Peninsula. It had a port on either side of the Isthmus. People always wants to dig a four-mile long canal across the Isthmus, but it wasn't until the 1800's that somebody did it. Unfortunately, that canal was built too small and couldn't accommodate larger shipping vessels, so it was almost instantly useless.

As a seaport city, there were some rough characters in Corinth, with entertainments of all kinds readily available. Corinth was also famous for its Temple of Aphrodite, which was little more than a brothel for the priests and priestesses that worked there. No city in the Roman Empire needed the Gospel more than Corinth.

Corinth, was where I met Aquila and Priscilla, a Jewish couple who had been expelled from Rome because of the Emperor Claudius' order for all Jews to leave Rome.<sup>3</sup> We were all tentmakers and they offered to let me live with them because they thought we might help each other. Soon, they became believers. They became some of my best pupils because they loved the Scriptures and God wholeheartedly. I worked with them and evangelized others whenever I could take time off to do so. It was a refreshing time for me. Working with my hands, I was able to quit worrying about all the

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 18:2

churches we had established, and gave my body time to heal from all the beatings.

Silas and Timothy joined me at Corinth with special gifts from the believers in Macedonia and Greece, and I became financially able to devote all my time to teaching. They brought a good report from Thessalonica, but it was apparent that the believers needed to hear some... *words* from me.<sup>4</sup>

I wrote one letter to the Thessalonians and reminded them that they needed to work and stay pure until Christ came back.<sup>5</sup> Like many Greeks and Romans, the Thessalonians were very free in sexual matters, and had to be continually reminded to stay pure. Later, I had to write another letter to them to clarify more things and to correct some of their beliefs about the Second Coming. They were sincere, but they had been greatly influenced by the pagan world around them, and were always looking for loopholes so they could lead undisciplined lives.

After a while, the Jews in Corinth became so contentious that I decided to concentrate all of my efforts on the Gentiles. We stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, and we made an incredible number of friends and believers. Our little church family often met in the home of Gaius. I specifically remember that Crispus and Sosthenes, leaders of the synagogue became believers, as well as Erastus. One of the few people I personally baptized, Stephanas, became a believer and later became an effective church leader.<sup>6</sup>

We sometimes had a little excitement at Corinth, such as the time the Jews tried to have us expelled from the city. The case came before Gallio, who was the brother of the famous Roman philosopher, Seneca. Gallio heard the

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Thess. 3:6, 2 Cor. 11:9, Phil. 4:14-15

<sup>5</sup> 1 Thess. 1:1

<sup>6</sup> 1 Cor. 1:16, 16:15

case, and immediately dismissed it because no Roman law had been broken. He was so irritated with the Jews that he ejected everyone from court. An argument broke out among the Jews, and the words escalated into a violent beating for the synagogue leader, Sosthenes. Rather than break up the fight, Gallio showed no concern whatever. Silas could not contain his smile. Finally, he was not the one taking the beating.

I didn't know it at the time, but part of the reason the Holy Spirit had us stay so long in Corinth was to train Priscilla and Aquila to be great evangelists. Their style of teaching was much more peaceful than mine, and, admittedly, for many people it was more effective.

When my time in Corinth was over, the Holy Spirit decided that Priscilla, Aquila and I should sail to Ephesus in the province of Asia, modern day Turkey. It was in Ephesus that Priscilla and Aquila began to show their value to the Lord. A very powerful preacher named Apollos came from Alexandria to tell people about the Good News. Unfortunately, he was only aware of the baptism of John, so was teaching inaccurately. Unlike the way I would have done it, they quietly invited Apollos into their home and explained the baptism of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. From then on, Apollos became such a powerful preacher that nobody could refute him.

The Holy Spirit decided that I needed to end this journey, so I left Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus for them to continue their teaching, and I went to Caesarea, Jerusalem, and back to my home base at Antioch. Once again, the Spirit was acting in an unpredictable manner and was setting up for long-term growth of the Kingdom.

Reading my missionary account from a distance of two thousand years, it may seem disjointed. Most people see the Bible as people, letters and single point events that don't connect very well. If you ask ten people what year I was in Corinth the first time, I bet few of them could place it within

ten years. (he answers his own question) Spring of 51 AD to the spring of 52 AD when Gallio was proconsul. Scholars still aren't sure whether I started or ended my tenure in Corinth during that time, so they can't date it exactly. Which is important, because that is one of the key exact dating points of my entire career that Luke gives you. He always liked to be a bit mysterious.

People also tend to separate my letters from my life and from the lives of those I knew. The story of my life is the story of meeting people, developing relationships, and dealing with churches throughout much of the Roman Empire. Real people with the same problems you have today.

Much of my ministry depended on developing close relationships with many, many people. The man who was once the angriest person in Israel learned how to make friends and influence people. I was the Jewish Dale Carnegie. (He lets that sink in...then bursts and laughs at his own joke.) God has such a sense of humor. (Paul continues to ad lib on this as he laughs at himself.)



“Timid Timothy”? Is it timid to volunteer to be circumcised as a teenager so that you could witness about Jesus to people whom you’ve never met? Most of you get nervous thinking that someday you might have to knock on a door to tell someone about Jesus. Some of you won’t even talk to your close friends about Jesus. Much less a complete stranger. Timid.... Please! **TOUGH TIMOTHY!** Now there is a nickname!

I shouldn’t let it get me so riled up. I’m used to the name calling. My father was a Greek, my Mother a Jew, but I grew up a Galatian, in the Roman colony of Lystra, ...which is Turkey. So, you can imagine the hurtful names I was called just for being who I was. It didn’t help that my dad left me when I was young. I was raised by a mother and grandmother, who later became Christians. Their influence led me to become a believer as well. So, now I was seen as a half-Greek, half-Jew, Roman citizen, Christian who was trying to proclaim the news of Jesus. Could it get any worse? But I tell you this, the Lord had bigger plans for me than a life in the small town of Lystra.

I couldn’t wait to get out of that town. I would often daydream about Greece, thinking if I could just get there I would finally be accepted as one of their own. Perhaps even find my long-lost father, but that was just a pipe dream. Until one day, Paul and Silas came through our town and asked me to join them. They told me that the brothers from Lystra and Iconium spoke well of me, and that I was the man for the job. I was excited to go with them. My mom was even excited for me, which I couldn’t believe. She was always so protective me. She constantly worried about my sensitive stomach issues.<sup>1</sup> I was really going to miss her.

I’d hoped that leaving was going to be as easy as packing a sack lunch and saying “PEACE!” But Paul mentioned we would be evangelizing to Jews, many of whom

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Timothy 5:23

would be offended that I was an uncircumcised Jew. I knew where this was going. My mother, being Jewish, wanted me circumcised at birth, but my Greek father saw it as an abomination. I only had one choice if I was to join Paul and Silas, *and* preach to the Jews. So, I asked to be circumcised. I didn't die from the pain, but I now understand how just two of Joseph's brothers could kill all of the adult male Shechemites three days after the Shechemites were circumcised.<sup>2</sup>

After I healed, I set off with Paul and Silas. The first few weeks I was in awe as we traveled the countryside of Phrygia and Galatia. We journeyed west towards the Aegean Sea. I would occasionally hear Paul mumble about the Holy Spirit not allowing us to preach in the places he wanted to go. Come to think of it, he must not have wanted to go to Troas because that's where we ended up.

The seaside town of Troas was where I first met Dr. Luke. He loved hearing the gospel, and for the first time, he had hope of eternal life. He wanted to hear more, so he joined us. I wanted to learn more about Greece and medicine, so I was thrilled, and... my stomach was a little sensitive.

During the night, Paul had a vision. He spoke of a man from Macedonia standing and begging him "come over to Macedonia and help us". So, on the basis of that vision, we boarded a boat and headed to Philippi, a city in Macedonia,

In Philippi, on the Sabbath, "as we went down to the river to pray" we met the nicest lady, Lydia. Paul began to preach the good news, and I saw the Lord working on her heart. She gave her life to Christ that day through baptism. But not only was she saved but her entire household was baptized as well. WHAT A DAY! What a wonderful woman Lydia was, and what a wonderful hostess. She invited us to stay with her while we were in Philippi. We were grateful and agreed to do so.

During our time in Philippi, I learned why it was a dangerous thing to travel with Paul. One day, we came across a young girl who was so annoying! Paul mentioned she had a future-telling spirit in her or something. She was loud and obnoxious. For days, she followed us around and kept repeating herself (he yells) "These men are the servants of the Most High God." At first it was cool, but after a few days I had had enough. Paul was annoyed as well because the next thing I know he turns

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 34:25

around and casts the spirit out in the name of Jesus! Cool! I turn to say thanks, when these men seized Paul and Silas, and took them to the marketplace to face the authorities. I had no idea what happened or what was going on. So, I did the only thing I could do, I went back to Lydia's house and waited.

That night my mind raced, jumping from fear to fear. What will Luke and I do now that Paul and Silas have been taken? Where will we go? Do we continue their work? Do we wait in Philippi? It was a sleepless night. One filled with prayer, hoping that my friends would be well, and trusting that's God's plan would prevail.

The next morning, to my amazement, I see Paul and Silas returning to the house. I could tell they were badly beaten, but their wounds had been washed and treated. I rushed to meet them, thanking God for keeping them safe. They told me everything about the previous night. Being beaten and then thrown in jail, a mighty earthquake the jail doors flew open, but they didn't leave. They told me of the jailer and his family giving their life to Christ. Amazing. It was a powerful story, filled with the power and greatness of God. God is good.

From there the three of us went on to Thessalonica, where Paul and Silas again taught for several weeks. There was a synagogue, and as was his custom, Paul visited there first. He must have said some things they didn't care to hear, because they rounded up some bad boys to start a riot in the city. Paul and Silas decided they'd better split, but I stayed to help the new church grow before rejoining Paul and Silas in Berea.

Berea was the next city. Same teaching, same threats. And can you believe it, the men causing all the fuss in Thessalonica showed up in Berea causing the same trouble. This time it was so dangerous that the new Christians had to rush Paul out of Macedonia and take him to Athens. Silas and I stayed behind to help the new church get established. Over the next three hundred years, Berea would become an important Roman city and a center of Christianity. I like to think that Silas and I laid a firm foundation for the church that allowed it to grow through the centuries.

It was a lot more peaceful when Paul wasn't around. I wasn't super anxious to rush off to Athens to meet up with him like Paul wanted us to do. But, I was anxious to get to Greece and start searching for my father. Paul was like my

spiritual father, and as it says in the Scriptures, a father is to discipline his son if he loves him. Paul looked after my health by making me eat and drink properly, taught me how to appoint elders and settle church matters, encouraged me to keep focused spiritually, and overcome the prejudice people had against me because I was so young. I must have learned to do a decent job because Paul would later call me his co-worker and brother.<sup>3</sup>

It only became apparent later, but Paul was continually finding promising young men that had potential as evangelists and church leaders. He was the first to recognize the importance of training local men to be future leaders. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, he almost never made a mistake in the men he chose. But I will say, with some amount of pride, that Titus and I were his favorites.

Looking back from two thousand years, the events in the New Testament seem orderly and almost pre-ordained. But for those involved? Things often seemed chaotic and we had to be completely dependent on the leading of the Holy Spirit.

We were doing something that had never been tried in the history of the world. We were purposely trying to spread a religion. Prior to us, all religions were based on particular beliefs of a community or culture. The purpose of religions had been to ensure that a particular community or culture thrived. If one culture defeated another, it meant its gods were more powerful. Many of the pagan gods were based on weather or fertility, because most ancient societies were agriculturally based. So, as you can surmise, there was not motivation to share the gods of a culture.

Except for Judaism, other religions were not concerned with morality, either. In fact, many of the things we Christians abhorred were revered and pursued in other cultures. Our values were so strange that people accused us of turning the world upside-down.<sup>4</sup>

In retrospect, we were doing some very disruptive things. Purposely trying to convince people to worship God instead of their local gods, clearly seen as

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Thess. 3:2

<sup>4</sup> Acts 17:6

something that would imperil each community, both economically and spiritually. This could also disrupt families. In cultures where community and family were prized above individual desires, we were hugely dangerous.

Our message was just as dangerous. We advocated that people behave differently than their cultures demanded. We also shared a message of eternal life. a message that no culture could compete with. We weren't trying to suddenly defeat cultures through military might, but take them over one person at a time. Making completely devoted disciples, not just shallow followers. It was a risky strategy, but history would show its validity. In 250 years, Christianity would peacefully take over the Roman Empire.

“Disruptive innovation,” a business term of today. We were the original people with disruptive innovation, making disciples for us was an entirely different action than had ever been tried. We *were* turning the world upside down.

In some ways, working with Gentiles was much easier than working with Jews. When Jews became a Christians, they became ostracized from their families and societies. Over time, we had to completely build a new social structure for the Jews. For the Gentiles, it was a little more simple. The Romans were accustomed to each culture having their own gods, so Jesus was just another god to them. New believers were not normally kicked out of their societies or families, although their lifestyles had to be adjusted.

One of the biggest challenges we faced was organizing churches. Virtually all of the religions in the Roman Empire were organized around worshiping pagan gods, which often included vast amounts of alcohol and temple prostitutes. Except for the Jews, few of us had a pre-conceived notion of what a church should be or exactly how believers should behave.

With that in mind, maybe you can have a better understanding of why Paul's letters were so detailed with instructions. How strange it would be to tell the kids in your youth group not to get drunk or have orgies? It was even stranger to

many new believers when they were told not to get drunk or have orgies.<sup>5</sup> What seems obvious to you was new information to us.

When it came to organizing churches, it was also a new experience for us. Through Paul, the Holy Spirit had to guide us in things that you might consider obvious or at least elementary. For instance, when Paul appointed elders and left town, we were left asking questions like: what is an elder, who is an elder, what do elders do, do elders get paid, can women be elders? Over time, we began to get more specific guidance, but every church struggled with the specifics of organization, and many churches came up with their own slightly different answers.

If you think about it though, things now are not much different, and you have the entire New Testament to go by, which we didn't. You have hundreds of churches, organized differently having different understandings about many of the things that mystified us. Perhaps you have learned to lean on Holy Spirit as we did in order to be obedient to God.

It's not recorded in Luke's book, of course, but I was a faithful evangelist as long as Paul was alive, and long after he died. In fact, I kind of took on Paul's ability to offend people by sharing the Gospel a little too fervently. The writer of the book of *Hebrews* mentions that I was released, (leans in and whispers) which means I had been in jail.<sup>6</sup>

Over the years, many people have speculated who wrote the book of *Hebrews*. Now, it's not my place to divulge it here and now, but if I were you, I would choose to decide it was written by one or more of these people: Paul, Barnabas, Apollos and/or Luke. I knew them very well, and any of them were capable of writing it by themselves or with one of the others. And, it probably wouldn't have hurt if they had the help of a good scribe like me.

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<sup>5</sup> Galatians 5:21

<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 13:23

As for my Greek father, I never did find him. But I did find a nice Jewish father in Paul. I never had an older brother, but I did get a spiritual brother in Titus. And, truthfully, my stomach never was sensitive. But I did enjoy the pampering it got me.

Tabitha: I am the only named woman in the New Testament who was dead, but brought back to life. One moment I am enjoying being with Jesus, and the next moment I wake-up to the face of an ugly old fisherman. Not a very good trade in my book.

Oh, the disappointment. Even though I was dead, I was alive in Christ. No pain, no stress. Just peace, rest. All the things that we long for, I had attained.

I lived in the seaport of Joppa. For hundreds of years, people from Jonah to the kings of Babylon used the port of Joppa. It was a shallow water port, but the best port on the Mediterranean Sea in that part of Israel. Then, Herod the Great built the deep-water port at Caesarea, and overnight Joppa became obsolete.

People in our town went from being prosperous dockworkers and shipping people to unemployed. The number of poor women exploded and I was surrounded by desperate families. I had to help the poor people of my community. Nobody else could do it.

I was not a wealthy woman, but I had enough money to buy roughly made material. I had learned to sew from my mother, so I started sewing robes and other clothing for the women who were poorer than me. They were so grateful for my little efforts that it broke my heart.

One day, I began to get sick. I thought it was just the cool sea mist giving me a cough, but over the next few days it got worse. One night, I just quit breathing. It was so peaceful to slip away and go to be with Jesus. Although I was happy to be gone from the troubles of the world, the other disciples were distressed and wanted me back.



In complete faith, they sent two men for Peter, who was about eleven miles away in Lydda, and asked him to come do something. I'm not sure they expected him to raise me from the dead, but I am sure they expected some kind of miracle since word had reached us how he had completely healed my friend, Aeneas, who had been paralyzed for eight years.

When Peter arrived, they took him upstairs and there was my long-dead body, already prepared for burial in my family plot. Women I had helped showed him the things I had made for them... it was kind of embarrassing. He took pity on them, and made them leave the room. Peter got on his knees and prayed. When he finished, he told me to get up, which I did, unhappily. For what was a kindness to them, was an unkindness to me. Nonetheless, I pretended to appreciate what he had done, and gave his hand a special squeeze when he presented me to the disciples.

This powerful sign from the Lord was significant in helping the church grow in that part of Israel. Peter stayed in our town for some time as he established a church there. I gave up a lot to come back, but I was happy to be of service to the Lord in a unique way.

I've always thought it was my example that helped Paul put into words his desire to be here on earth to make disciples, while having an equally powerful desire to be with the Lord. He said, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain...I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body."<sup>1</sup>

Lydia: Have you heard the story about the four sailors and the purple dye maker? Let's just say that what started out as four men looking for a place to pray ended up with them all spending the night at my house. It was all quite innocent of course, but it makes for a good opening line.

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<sup>1</sup> Phil. 1:21-24

Originally from Thyatira, Asia, I live in Philippi, Macedonia. When Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Dr. Luke sailed to Macedonia, Philippi was their first stop. I met them in at the riverbank one day when they came to pray on the Sabbath. I was a God-fearer, but didn't follow the strict traditions of the Jews. I was already there with a group of female employees. I worked in textiles, extremely expensive purple cloth. My workers and I set the dye every day by washing cloth in the river. The Greek word for baptism was the one we used for plunging our cloth into the dye or into the water.

Take a look at a Greek statue in any museum, and you will see we Greeks dress for comfort, especially when we are working. Maybe it was the way we were dressed; or perhaps the purple dye we were working with that caught their eye. Whatever, we clearly caught the attention of Luke and Timothy when they arrived to pray. Paul, ever the evangelist, seized the opportunity to begin preaching the Gospel to us, so my co-workers and I stopped to listen. After a while, we got forgot about our work completely. It didn't take long before we became believers and were baptized in the river... just as we had been baptizing our cloth a few hours earlier. I hate to admit it, but I am more than a little proud that I was the first named person to be baptized in Europe.

I invited the four of them to my house to stay, it was the hospitable thing to do. My entire household and I were baptized and received the Holy Spirit. Eventually, I turned my house into a place where our church met. From that first night, Paul was amazed at my knowledge of the world. He came to realize that we sellers of purple cloth had to be very sophisticated to work with our wealthy clients.

One subject mystified me: How would Paul be able to convince Roman and Greek men to become Christians? All of the world's religions, except for Judaism and Christianity, were about pleasing the gods, not about morality. Drinking to excess, engaging with prostitutes, and worshiping idols –ordinary, daily behavior. Not only was it not frowned upon, but that behavior was expected from men, it wasn't considered immoral. In fact, the price of these indulgences was kept low just so it could be within the regular budgets of everybody.

Additionally, over the last seventy-five years, since the time of Emperor Augustus, Roman women had become much more independent. Women had been gaining financial independence, and with that came a sure independence from men in all other matters.

It seemed to me that Paul was going to have an uphill battle to get men to change a way of life that seemed natural and right, for a life of abstinence from liquor and fornication. It also seemed that he would have an uphill battle getting newly independent women to be submissive marriage partners.

I'm pretty sure I caught Paul off-guard with my frank assessment of his task. But because Paul and I had these kinds of talks, I'm fairly sure that he was much more thoughtful concerning the worldly things he wrote about. Paul had always assumed everyone had his level of self-control. It wasn't until we talked that he began to understand he was the exception, not the rule.

The word "awareness" is often thrown around today. To raise "awareness" about certain issues – wear a ribbon. In my day, we simply talked about things for which awareness was needed. I like to think that's part of what my contribution was...to Paul, Luke and Timothy. I provided lodging in their time of need, but I helped raise awareness to their evangelistic task.

Priscilla: We only had one tiny argument our entire marriage. My husband and I were tentmakers: From the very first, we were a team. He did the heavy work of cutting and handling the skins, while I did the more delicate work of sewing the skins together...a team. More importantly, our respect and love for one another was reflected in our marriage. The argument? An itinerant preacher who came to our door unannounced!

We had lived happily in Rome, but had been forced to leave when Emperor Claudius ordered all the Jews to be expelled from the city. Aquila was from Pontus, but we chose to move to Corinth where business held more promise. We worked and lived in harmony, perfectly contented in our lives, and we worshiped God according to the laws of Moses as we had been taught by the local synagogue leaders.

When this mysterious itinerant preacher showed up, he said that he was a tent maker. He told us he could not only teach us how to make tents that would sell to foreigners, but could tell us more about the God we worshiped. My husband, ever the soft-hearted one, invited him to *live with us*. I waited until the stranger left for the night, then I gave my husband all sorts of trouble. Risk our perfect marriage... over a stranger? Seemed foolish to me.

I admit the stranger was a pretty good tent maker. He did show us some new ways to make tents that would help our business. That was nice, but it didn't change our lives. How he did change our lives was by telling us more about the Scriptures and how they revealed Jesus Christ. It wasn't long before we became believers in Jesus, were baptized and received the Holy Spirit. Because we were co-workers, we became Paul's two of best students.

But the relationship was not one-sided. We taught Paul about how a marriage should work. Before Paul met us, he had very little idea of how a good marriage was constructed. He was a child prodigy, and he had been sent away from home as a kid to study with the best rabbis in the world. Most of the rabbis were married, few of them had good marriages. Their families were typically poor, the husband was focused on learning and teaching, the wives were resentful of their circumstances, and their children were often unruly and disobedient.

We were able to model a type of Christian marriage that Paul used in his writings. If I had been disrespectful and a little too mouthy to my husband, or if he hadn't loved me as Christ loves the church, Paul may would have written his letter to the Ephesians a little differently.<sup>2</sup>

We became so adept in the Word that Holy Spirit had enough confidence in us to let us establish the church in Ephesus. Which grew to be one of the largest early churches. Some believe that the Apostle John brought the mother of Jesus there to take care of her. John wrote several letters there, and wrote the book of Revelation on a nearby island where he had been exiled.

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<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 5

One other benefit of our being adept with the Word was that we could “re-stitch” some things in people who had not fully been taught the entire gospel. Our favorite event in that regard was when we got to help Apollos, a very powerful preacher from Alexandria. When he came to Ephesus, Apollos only knew about the baptism of John and the things John taught. We met with him privately, and explained about the baptism and messages of Jesus. He was baptized, received the Holy Spirit, and began teaching even more powerfully.

Perhaps you know people or churches like Apollos? They preach the importance of repentance and good behavior, but lack the power of telling the Gospel. They are teaching a good message, but incomplete as to be damaging.

Apollos responded so well that he went to Corinth to teach and help instruct the church there. The Corinth church was a train wreck, but it would have been much worse without Apollos. He was a powerful teacher and taught a wonderful message.<sup>3</sup> In fact, many of your modern scholars think he wrote the book of Hebrews.

Aquila and I have often been asked how we were so effective in our evangelism. Many people assume that the story concerning Apollos indicates we were great theologians. Nothing could be further from the truth. We were effective because we lived a life consistent with what we believed, invited people into our house to share meals, and told people about Jesus when we had the opportunity. That led to our having a slow, but steady growth in church attendance because the disciples we made were committed to the Lord. Today's church growth experts have found the same formula to work well.<sup>4</sup>

My husband and I grew to love and appreciate Paul, but we always laughed about his awkward way with women. Whenever Aquila would bring me flowers or a tiny gift, Paul was mystified. He could preach like nobody's business, but he never

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. 3:5-6

<sup>4</sup> “The Rise of Christianity,” by Rodney Stark

understood the concept of romance. No wonder questions about Paul and marriage have endured.

Luke:

Paul was a little more pleasant to be around later on in life, so the brothers in Antioch were not so anxious to see him go away on another long missionary journey. He was about 50, they thought a little too old, and beat-up, to take off on another trip. But the Holy Spirit thought otherwise, especially if he had an excellent doctor, with him whenever possible.

In some ways, the Third Missionary Journey does not appear to be as productive as the first two. But that's only if you're looking on the surface. It seemed to us that everything was happening at once during this time period. Holy Spirit was kicking into high gear as the church was growing explosively. Five major innovations were happening:

- Paul was training at least eight men to be his successors, including Timothy, Titus, Aristarchus, and Tychicus. These men also went through Asia starting and growing such churches as the ones at Colossae, Laodicea, Smyrna, Thyatira, and Philadelphia.
- The church at Corinth was experiencing nearly every problem possible. Paul was trying to address them through letters and sending representatives back and forth. The problems at Corinth dominated much of his time and emotions. The good news was that Paul was addressing a multitude of problems that other churches would face for centuries to come.
- We were collecting a huge relief fund for the Jerusalem church from the churches throughout Asia, Macedonia, and Greece.
- We pioneered an innovative technique for starting new churches. We were growing a new church at Rome by seeding it with members from other churches, including my friends Priscilla and Aquila.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 16:3

- We were meeting influential people throughout the Roman Empire, such as Philemon and Epaphras, important to our later work.

The third journey could not have started off better. Paul got the pleasure of revisiting his old friends throughout Galatia and Phrygia, especially those in Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium. Timothy's mother was very pleased to hear that he was growing into such a fine man, and surprised that his stomach had withstood the spicy foods Silas had taught him to eat.

Then, Paul traveled through the province of Asia and arrived in the huge city of Ephesus where he would stay for almost three years. Paul had left his friends, Priscilla and Aquila, in Ephesus on the second missionary journey. They had done such good work there that Ephesus had a strong base of believers. Paul was thrilled to join forces with them again.<sup>2</sup>

As usual, Paul taught in the synagogue as long as he was welcome, which was about three months. Then he and the other disciples left there to teach in the hall of Tyrannus. Paul taught during the heat of the day. It was cheaper to rent and many of his listeners were not at work during that time. He taught for about two years there, so all of the people living in Asia had the opportunity to hear God's Word. The hall of Tyrannus was the first Bible college.

We didn't know it at the time, but the Holy Spirit was temporarily changing our evangelism strategy. Instead of us traveling to evangelize, He decided we would stay in one location and people would travel to us. Ephesus was the perfect place to do that since it was a major city with a major pagan temple where numerous visitors came. On the Second Missionary Journey, Paul had stayed in Corinth for almost a year and a half, and that had worked well, but this time he was to stay in Ephesus for almost three years.

During this time period, the many men Paul was training started going throughout the region starting and strengthening the churches. Many of the churches

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 16:19



mentioned in John's book of Revelation were started during *this* time period by *his* trainees.

The Holy Spirit worked very powerfully through Paul during this time in Ephesus. the handkerchiefs and aprons that touched him were able to cure the sick and cast out evil spirits. Some of the Jews were so jealous that they tried to cast out demons. The seven silly sons of Sceva, the high priest, tried to cast out a demon in the name of Jesus, and the demon-possessed man jumped on them and nearly beat them to death. The people in the area were filled with such fear and respect... they confessed their evil deeds and burned their magic scrolls, which were worth a huge amount of money.

The Holy Spirit put in on Paul's heart to go to Jerusalem after he revisited Macedonia and Achaia. He sent his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, on to Macedonia to prepare for his visit while he stayed in Ephesus a little longer. About that time, Paul got news from Corinth about their ongoing internal conflicts, so he sent Titus there with a very stern letter.<sup>3</sup> You should read his section about love in that letter. No doubt, Paul had really matured.<sup>4</sup> I thought, "People will still be reading this letter in two thousand years." (he gives a knowing look)

While in Ephesus, Paul got to spend time with Apollos. He had returned to Ephesus from his trip to Corinth,<sup>5</sup> and had developed into a powerful preacher that none of the Jews could argue against. It was a good thing that Aquila and Priscilla had taught him well, because they were soon to return to Rome while leaving him behind.<sup>6</sup> Nero had lifted the ban on Jews living in Rome, so it was a perfect time to let them go back and help start a church there.

We knew that Paul had been effective in Ephesus when the silversmiths caused a riot. Their income had been diminishing greatly because the newly converted

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Cor. 7:7

<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor. 13

<sup>5</sup> 1 Cor. 3:5-6, 16:12

<sup>6</sup> Romans 16:3-4, 1 Cor. 16:19

Christians no longer bought little silver statues of the pagan goddess Artemis. The Temple of Artemis was the largest building in the world, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Selling statues to the huge number of pilgrims and tourists had always been very lucrative. The silversmiths correctly attributed their loss of income to Paul and the other evangelists. Fortunately, the city clerk was much more worried about the Roman response to civil unrest than the complaints of a few business people. He ended the riot and recommended that Paul leave town. I heard that Paul winked at his traveling companions, Gaius and Aristarchus, because they'd avoided another beating. He couldn't wait to tell Silas and Barnabas.

After that uproar, Paul was told by the Holy Spirit that his time in Ephesus had come to an end. He said goodbye to his Christian friends, and traveled to the region of Macedonia by way of Troas. Their tearful farewell made Paul realize how much the Holy Spirit had changed him through the years. In only a half-dozen years, he had been transformed from the man the people in Antioch were anxious to be rid of, to the man the Ephesians hated to see go. Amazing how a few beatings and floggings can adjust your attitudes, along with help of the Holy Spirit

I got to reunite with Paul, Timothy, and Titus in the Macedonian cities of Philippi and Thessalonica. Titus gave a good report about the reception of the Corinthians to Paul's previous letters. So, Paul wrote another letter to them, and sent Titus back with it.<sup>7</sup> It was such a joy to strengthen the Macedonian churches alongside so many of my old friends.

Paul went to Greece where he got to be with his friends in Athens and Corinth again. He stayed with his colleague, Gaius in Corinth.<sup>8</sup> It was on that trip that Paul wrote a letter to the believers in Rome, and sent it to them by the dependable Phoebe.<sup>9</sup> Paul desperately wanted to go to Rome, but the Holy Spirit told him that he had to go to Jerusalem first, and someday he would get to go to Rome. This

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<sup>7</sup> 2 Cor. 8:16-18

<sup>8</sup> Romans 16:23

<sup>9</sup> Romans 16:1-2

was as far west as he would get to go as a free man. The next time Paul went further west, it would be in chains.

The Corinthians had responded so well to Paul's letters and teachings that he was able to take up funds from them to share with the church in Jerusalem.<sup>10</sup> Because of threats from the Jews, he left Greece after being there only three months. He then went back through Macedonia accompanied by Timothy and many other men. Paul and I sent the others on to Troas, where we met up with them later. It had been such a thrill for Paul to encourage all of the churches which had been established throughout Greece and Macedonia.

We stayed at Troas for seven days, longer than intended. On Sunday, Paul talked and taught until after midnight. He knew it was the last time we would see many of these people. Paul gave the usual exciting and scintillating lessons, but there was this teenager, Eutychus, who fell asleep, and fell out of our third story window. When we got to him, he was dead. Paul laid on top of him and brought life back into him. Then we all went upstairs and ate, and Paul continued talking until daylight. Eutychus stayed awake!

Timothy:

We left from Troas and sailed to Miletus. Paul was anxious to reach Jerusalem before the day of Pentecost, so he wanted to avoid going to Ephesus where he knew so many people. We asked the elders of the Ephesian church to meet us near Miletus, then Paul shocked us all.

He said he would never see them again. Paul tearfully told the elders that he had faithfully preached throughout the province, and carefully instructed them to continue evangelizing and to protect their flocks from false teachings. They wept together, then prayed, then our traveling party left for the ship.(pauses) A man who had been so caustic in his dealings with everyone... these people truly loved him. Loved the man who was once a murderer.

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<sup>10</sup> 2 Cor. 8:1-9:15

What nobody knew at that time was to be a surprise. Paul wouldn't be going back to Ephesus as he said, BUT, Paul would be sending me back to Ephesus to lead the church there!<sup>11</sup>

We sailed to Tyre, where our ship unloaded its cargo. We stayed seven days, and all of the disciples tried to convince us not to go to Jerusalem. Paul could not be dissuaded so we prayed with them on the beach, boarded our ship and continued south.

From Tyre, we sailed to Ptolemais, where we were greeted by our Christian brothers and sisters. The churches at Tyre and Ptolemais had not been mentioned in *Acts* previously. These were only two of the many churches that were springing up around the Empire without anyone taking much notice.

We stayed with them one day before going to Caesarea, where we stayed at the house of Philip the Evangelist. My young companions and I were excited to meet Philip...and his four lovely daughters.

Philip:

Paul showed up in my hometown of Caesarea with a bunch of single men! Especially single men that were Christians, and were as handsome as Timothy and Titus. I only had four unmarried daughters,<sup>12</sup> but was quite ready for those four to become happy wives.

Timothy caught me up on things. The mood stayed somber over the next few days. Agabus the Prophet showed up, and it got worse. Agabus was a friend and a true prophet, it had been a decade since he had prophesied to Paul about the famine. Agabus walked over and took Paul's belt. He tied up his own hands and feet and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'" Still, Paul felt led by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem on behalf of Jesus. We all begged Paul not to go to Jerusalem, but he would not change his mind.

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<sup>11</sup> 1 Timothy 1:3

<sup>12</sup> Acts 21:9

My daughters and I sent Paul and his men on to Jerusalem under the care of some disciples of Jerusalem. I was sure somehow I would see Paul and his friends again. Agabus had made a dire prediction, but I was told by the Spirit that Paul had many more years left to be effective in growing the Kingdom.

Paul:

It felt so odd going to the Temple to perform a Jewish rite when I no longer believed in the Jewish rites. Walking into the Temple yard with my friends was like walking into a museum of outdated artifacts. Jesus had revealed how the Temple would soon be destroyed, so I knew the sacrifice system was futile. Everyone else saw beautiful gold covered stone buildings, but I envisioned Jesus' prophecy - fulfilled a decade later when Roman soldiers would throw the stones to the ground in order to steal the melted gold from the burned buildings.<sup>1</sup>

I had arrived in Jerusalem several days before, I could hardly wait to share the good news of how many non-Jews had turned to Christ, and to share the relief fund with James and the Jerusalem church. They were very grateful, but they were also very worried about how the Jewish Christians would receive me and my non-Jewish Christian friends. In an effort to appease them, James insisted I help four other Jewish men fulfill their vows. So, the five of us went to the temple to get purified, and to give notice of the date of our days of purification and offering.

Seven days later, the time of our purification was nearly over, and some of the Jews from the province of Asia saw me and stirred up the crowd against me, using false accusations about bringing non-Jews into the Temple. Men came running from all directions and they dragged me out from the Temple and began trying to kill me.

The Roman commander nearby, in the Antonia Fortress, saw the commotion and brought some officers to stop the disturbance. They arrested me, put me in chains and started to take me away. Much to the commander's surprise, I asked to speak to the crowd. They quieted down, and I told them my conversion story.

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<sup>1</sup> Which is what happened in 70 AD.

Things were going well until I mentioned the word “Gentiles.” The crowd went crazy again - they shouted for my death, threw their cloaks, tossed dust into the air.

That was the last straw for the commander, who didn’t know what was going on since he didn’t speak Aramaic, the language I was using. He took me into the fortress and ordered me to be flogged and questioned. They stretched me out for the flogging, then, I said, “I am a Roman citizen!” The centurion and the commander freaked out, it was illegal to put a Roman citizen in chains, much less flog one. My chains were removed but I was still detained.

The next morning, the commander convened the Jewish leaders and had me face them. I asserted my innocence, and the chief priest had someone strike me on the mouth. My mind flashed back to the trial of Jesus and the trial of Stephen. But the Holy Spirit had a different ending in mind for me, so I shouted, “I am a Pharisee and I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead.” This started a huge uproar between the Pharisees and the Sadducees who had a long-standing feud over the notion of resurrection. Finally, the commander took me back to the barracks. Overnight, the Lord reassured me that the trial in Jerusalem was only a vehicle to allow me to witness for him in Rome.

The Jews formed a conspiracy to kill me while I was under control of the Romans. This would have been hugely illegal, plus it would have ended the career of the Roman commander. My nephew told me about the conspiracy, and I told the commander. So, he had four hundred and seventy soldiers escort me the seventy miles to Governor Felix in Caesarea. The commander also sent a self-serving letter to the Governor explaining the basics of the situation. Upon reading the letter and learning I was from the province of Cilicia, Felix put me in the marble-clad Herod’s Palace as a prisoner. He was waiting for my accusers to come from Jerusalem.

The high priest, some elders and a high-dollar lawyer came five days later, accusing me of stirring up riots, being a ringleader of the Christians, and desecrating the Temple. I made my own defense. Rather than ever make a final judgment, Felix would call me from time to time and discuss my faith and indicate

he wanted a bribe. After two years of this, Felix was relieved of his duties but kept me in jail as a favor to the Jews.

Luke:

Felix was a rather shallow and greedy man, but he did keep Paul safe, and allowed Philip and me to feed and take care of him. Philip's contacts in the city and inside Felix's household continually gave us information that helped Paul know what was going to happen next. Paul's extemporaneous speeches may have been a little less spontaneous than many people think.

Things could have been much worse. Paul's room was near a beautiful beach, and he could watch the activities of the harbor. It gave Paul time to write very important letters to the Christians in churches he had started. It also gave Paul access to the many soldiers and Roman officials who came through the busy port city. It was this situation that allowed Paul to understand how soldiers worked together in formations, an example he used when he wrote about spiritual warfare and unity to the Ephesians.

Porcius Festus took over the duties of Felix. Immediately, he was asked by the Jewish leaders to send Paul to them in Jerusalem. They had been plotting to kill him on the trip. When Festus arrived in Caesarea, he listened to Paul explain his innocence, and then asked whether he would be willing to go to Jerusalem to stand trial. Paul knew that his life would be taken if he went to Jerusalem, so he pulled out his trump card. Paul appealed to have his case heard in person by the Emperor. Every Roman citizen had that right. Knowing this, Festus rashly agreed, "You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!". Unfortunately for Festus, he did not really understand the ramifications of his hasty decision.

Soon after, King Agrippa and his sister, arrived in Caesarea. Festus told them about Paul in a nearly truthful way. But Festus had to admit that he could not happily send a prisoner to Caesar without having very clear and convincing charges specified. King Agrippa agreed to hear the case and offer his assistance in determining the charges.



The Holy Spirit had arranged the situation so Paul would have the unusual opportunity to evangelize both Festus and Agrippa. Paul told his story and tried hard to convert both of them! Paul's speech was so powerful that Festus finally shouted, "Paul, your great learning is driving you insane!" (he erupts in laughter). I could hardly keep from laughing, we had often joked with Paul about that same thing!

King Agrippa offered Festus no solution to his problem, so Festus was forced to send him to Rome anyway. Soon, Paul, Aristarchus and some others of us boarded a ship for Rome.

Our trip started in the fall when the winds were becoming unpredictable and dangerous. Part way through the trip, our centurion found the opportunity to shift us from our small boat to a giant grain ship making its way from Alexandria to Rome. Bigger ships were safer. These grain ships from Africa were critical to Rome because they fed the entire city. But, because of the winds they could not sail in the winter.

We made it to the small port of Fair Havens on the island of Crete. The owner wanted to move to a bigger and safer port on the west coast of Crete. Paul prophesied that the trip was going to be disastrous and might cause the loss of the entire ship, cargo, and lives of the passengers, but the centurion and ship owner decided to sail on.

Before long, a hurricane force wind came up from the north. It tossed the imperiled ship for many, many days in a dangerous sea. Paul prophesied the ship would be lost but no one would die. He recommended we eat to get our strength back. Days later, the ship wrecked, all seemed lost. The soldiers were about to kill the prisoners to keep them from escaping, but the centurion spared everyone's life. All passengers got to the shore safely, true to Paul's prophecy,

It turns out we shipwrecked on the tiny island of Malta, where we were treated with kindness. The islanders began building a fire for us, when Paul was bitten by a deadly snake. He showed no ill effects, so the superstitious islanders were convinced he was a god. Paul healed many people on the island, including the

father of the chief Roman official, which got us even better treatment. After three months, the islanders took great care to send us on our way.

We departed Malta on another Alexandrian grain ship. The winds were favorable and we quickly reached the Bay of Naples where we landed at the major port city of Puteoli. Some Christians greeted us and took care of us for about a week. Then, we traveled nearly 150 miles to Rome on the Appian Way, while many other Christians joined our group.

Upon arrival in Rome we found that Paul was allowed to live by himself in private quarters, with only one soldier to guard him. The soldier was of the important Praetorian Guard, and was relieved by another soldier every four hours. In this way, Paul got to preach to virtually the entire Praetorian Guard.

Paul:

I lived in my little rented house with Aristarchus.<sup>2</sup> As was my custom, I first preached to the Jews of Rome. But when many of them were unbelieving, I told them that I would start spending my efforts on the Gentiles. For the next two years, I was unhindered in teaching the Gospel. I was fortunate to have many visitors such as Epaphras, Timothy, Tychicus, Mark, Luke, and Demas.

Epaphras brought news from Colossae and other churches. I was so thankful to hear the progress throughout Asia. I was thrilled to write a letter to the Colossians and a letter to the Ephesians. I could envision my friends as I wrote. I even thought of Lydia's and Priscilla's instructions to me when I wrote about marriage! I was fortunate to have the faithful Tychicus to deliver the letters.

One day, Onesimus, my faithful co-worker came to visit me. He finally admitted that he was a runaway slave. And not just a runaway, but a runaway from a Christian brother, Philemon. I quickly sat down and penned a letter to Philemon asking him to gift Onesimus to me so that he could be legally freed, or free Onesimus himself. To prove that both of us were sincere in our requests, I had Onesimus deliver the letter himself.

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<sup>2</sup> Col. 4:10

It was costly to provide for myself and my guests, and I had no employment or sources of income. When Epaphroditus brought a generous gift from the church at Philippi, it brought me to tears of joy.<sup>3</sup> I sent a letter of appreciation and encouragement back to that church with Epaphroditus!

Through my rotating guard, I also had the opportunity to teach many important Roman soldiers.<sup>4</sup> They thought I was a captive, but they were really my captive audience. God had arranged a way for me to evangelize the Emperor's personal body guards and many influential soldiers in the Empire.

It had been about two years since I arrived in Rome, as I sat on the porch of my rented house and thought about the previous thirty years. I remembered heading toward Damascus to hunt down and kill the Christians there. I had to try hard to imagine my old anger because it had been so long since I had felt it. It was effortless to remember the Lord coming to me in a flash of light, my blindness, and getting baptized. Those were as real to me as if they had happened that very morning.

Barnabas taking me under his wing, helping me become a part of the Christian community, while I learned to make disciples. He and I had so much excitement on that First Missionary Journey, and then successfully defending our work at the Council at Jerusalem. Two more missionary journeys filling-up the next several years. I can't even begin to name all of the disciples we made or the churches we helped start. It takes hours when I pray for them by name. I have two sons in Titus and Timothy, who both make me so proud. A few years of imprisonment and a dangerous trip to Rome, where I get special military protection while I preach the Gospel.

God took an angry young man and transformed him into a humbled old man. I wonder what God will do next?

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<sup>3</sup> Phil. 2:27

<sup>4</sup> Phil. 1:13

My name is Theophilus, and I am a Roman living in the year 62 AD. My friend, Luke, has written two very long scrolls to me, and has convinced me to read what other few written sources there are about Jesus and his teachings. He has also informed me of the state of Christianity, so I am as well informed as any Roman can be.

It's difficult to comprehend, 2000 years on, why Christianity has been so successful. You may think that the result was inevitable. In 62 AD, a little over thirty years after the death of Jesus, here is what the situation looks like. The Roman Empire consists of about 60 million people, it has life-and-death control over all of those 60 million lives. Everyone knows the Jews in Israel are on the verge of revolt, and it is certain to me that the Romans will wipe out Jerusalem and sack the Temple of its riches within a decade.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to Rome's power and population, there are maybe 10,000 Christians, and they are scattered throughout the Empire. Rome doesn't even know Christianity exists, and could easily wipe out all of the Christians in a week if the emperor chose to do so. Our emperors think nothing of killing tens of thousands of people just for fun or retribution, or out of fear of rebellion. The Christians are in far more danger than they know.

On the Christian front, the many Christians living in Israel will be treated like Jews, and probably will be wiped out, too. The leader of the Christians, Paul, is in jail. The rest of the Christians are struggling with how to behave, and false teachers are already infiltrating their ranks. Frankly, I would probably struggle to find a few

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, the First Jewish-Roman War started in 66 AD. It did result in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

thousand dedicated Christians who are capable of spreading the Gospel. It is as bleak a story as I know...and it is thirty years after the death of Jesus.

In light of that, let's reimagine the night of Jesus' betrayal, and his time in the Garden of Gethsemane. Let's start with Jesus' actual statement to God found in John 17:4 and imagine how the conversation between Jesus and the Father went. I must tell you, this is entirely from my imagination and you won't hear it anywhere else. The fact that it makes perfect sense must be a coincidence.

Jesus: "I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do."<sup>2</sup>

Father: "And just what is that work?"

Jesus: "Among other things, I have trained eleven men really well, and have a few hundred dedicated believers, and a few hundred others who still have some unbelief. Now that is done, I'm ready to be crucified to take on the sins of the world, be resurrected and come back to you. Satan will be defeated at the time of my resurrection, but he will continue to plague the Earth until the time of his final destruction. However, I'm sure my people will grow your Kingdom because I've instructed them to do so."

Father: "So, Plan "A" is for them to go make disciples. What is Plan "B.""

Jesus: "There is no Plan "B"!"

Father: "I've got an idea. There's only about a hundred million people on the entire planet. Why don't we just send a few angels to each one of them to tell them the Gospel story? If you don't like that, why don't we just give each one of them a vision so that they understand about us? Or, maybe you stay there on Earth a while longer and take away all pain and suffering, and heal everyone. You can teach all the others like you did those eleven apostles?"

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<sup>2</sup> John 17:4

Jesus: “No, stick with the plan we have had for eons. We are going to send Holy Spirit back to empower people when they become Christians. We will start some churches, and eventually write a book that tells the world about us and our plan of salvation. That will be enough to overcome Satan and the natural human desires we created those people to have. This plan will work.”

Father: “I trust you, Son, and I’ve given you all authority to choose your plan and weapons, but why don’t you think about it in the Garden for a while, see if you change your mind. I’m more than ready for you to come back and be at my right hand, but your plan seems like a slow, risky way to bring all mankind to repentance, like I want them to.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus: “It would be risky if not for the power of Holy Spirit.”

Of course, from your vantage point of two thousand years, you know Jesus’ plan to grow the Kingdom worked. But from my viewpoint, it was a longer shot than my becoming Emperor of the Roman Empire.

Back to the book of *Acts*. I hope you now fully appreciate the excellence of the book of *Acts*. I won’t tell him to his face, but Luke is a brilliant writer. His Greek is impeccable, and the way he synthesized his information and stories into one account is stunning. He is already far from modest, but he has every right to be proud of his final scroll.

Like modern scholars, you are probably wondering why he stopped his account when he did, and if there is more to the story. You probably astutely question when Paul wrote his later letters, like First and Second Timothy, and Titus. Here is why Luke stopped his account. The Holy Spirit told him to. It is that simple. He did not just run out of room on the scroll like some modern scholars say, although I tease him that he did.

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Peter 3:9

If Luke had been a Hollywood writer, he would have saved the rest of Paul's story for *Luke's Grandiose Stories - Part 3*. This is not Hollywood, and there are no reliable sources which give you a lot of solid evidence about the rest of Paul's life. Some scholars believe Paul was martyred during the reign of Nero in the spring of 68 AD. This means Paul spent another several years evangelizing and establishing churches. There are others who believe Paul was martyred shortly after the end of Acts in about 63 AD, or 65 AD.

You can rightly assume that I liked *Acts* well enough to pay for many copies of *Luke* and *Acts* to be made so they would make it through the trials and travails of time. I hope you take the opportunity to read them since they survived all that time. If you do, you will find that the two books Luke wrote to me are critical to understanding much of the New Testament.

*Acts* gives precious little information compared to the entire story that took place over more than thirty years. But, as John observed, this is information enough.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps you even realize how you have unconsciously added details in your own mind to flesh out the stories you have read all your life.

The people in the book of *Acts* were not super-heroes, just people like you. As you read the rest of the Bible, let their stories come alive as you put yourself in their shoes.

The Roman Empire consisted of many cultures, many languages, and many religions. Travel a few days in any direction, and it was highly likely that we would find ourselves in an entirely different culture. The book of *Acts* is about Christians learning to make disciples and grow churches in different cultures. Think of how Paul talked to Athenians compared to how he taught in Ephesus. To think that the New Testament is a concise rulebook about a single way to make disciples or to grow churches is a very narrow way to view it.

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<sup>4</sup> John 21:25

The vast Roman empire and the excellent highways, provided advantages. It was no accident that the vast majority of all of the early Gentile churches were started in cities on Roman highways or in Roman ports. Those types of factors helped the early church grow so quickly.

The influence of weather and geography was immense on our lives. You have cars, planes, and air conditioning to insulate you from those influences, but they had immense impact on us. Imagine walking in sandals on an uneven, rocky Roman road for fifteen miles in a blinding rain up a mountain without even the hope of a dry place to spend the night or find food, and you will just begin to understand travel in our time.

The early Christians relied desperately on Holy Spirit. His guidance and his gifts were critical in helping establish and grow churches throughout the Roman Empire. You need him just as desperately today, don't forget that. What you see in *Acts* as a complete, orderly story was not that way. Every day was a new adventure, and we thought of our lives as chaotic and dangerous. We knew Holy Spirit was in control, but most of the time He didn't give us much of a heads-up on His plans.

**The purpose of Holy Spirit is to grow Christ's world-wide church by growing local congregations through empowering individuals.** Perhaps Luke convinced you of this timeless message.

Many people read *Acts* and solely think of how Holy Spirit empowered individuals. Paul is the central character, so he gets the most attention. This is magnified since he wrote so much of the New Testament.

Paul and the others knew that they were only instruments in the hands of Holy Spirit. As Paul taught, Holy Spirit empowered people so they were better able to be church members and disciple makers.

Luke began *Acts* by quoting Jesus, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." His instructions were the exact



outline of the book of *Acts*. Luke's story started with Pentecost in Jerusalem, Stephen going to Judea and Samaria, the believers being scattered out of Israel, and the missionary journeys as the start of going "to the ends of the earth."

But the Holy Spirit knew it was not enough to make disciples of individuals. He knew that individuals could not withstand the powerful influences of Satan and his demons, or even the influences of family, friends and culture. So, Luke emphasized the importance of creating self-sustaining churches. A couple of decades after my life, when John the Apostle wrote *Revelation*, it became apparent that individuals and their churches were inevitably intertwined. So, *Acts* is maybe best thought of as a history of the establishment of churches.

Our mission is to be a disciple, make disciples, and mature disciples. This is what *Acts* is all about. Luke convinced me, and my hope is that he convinced you, too.