

THE TEAM THAT TURNED  
THINGS TOPSY-TURVY



# TIPPING POINT



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BOOK TITLE

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The Team That Turned Things Topsy-Turvy

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# DEDICATION

To the teens who, like the early believers in Acts, have boldly embraced the call to follow Jesus.

Your unwavering faith, courageous service, and passionate pursuit of Christ inspire a new generation to live out the Gospel with conviction and love.

May your lives continue to reflect the power of the Holy Spirit, and may this work encourage you to persevere in your mission.

*"Don't let anyone think less of you because you are young. Be an example to all believers in what you say, in the way you live, in your love, your faith, and your purity."*  
— 1 Timothy 4:12

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# Preface

Dr. Luke here: You might remember me from my first bestseller about my buddy Jesus. Well, buckle up because this sequel, *Tipping Point*, is LITERALLY fire! 🔥

Jesus went back to heaven (epic exit), but he didn't leave us hanging. The squad got this crazy power-up called the Holy Spirit, and things got INSANE. I'm talking languages they never studied, healing people with just their shadows, and breaking out of prison WITHOUT EVEN TRYING.

My main man Peter started off all "I don't know her" about Jesus, but now he's standing up to authorities like, "I literally cannot stop talking about this." And then there's this guy Saul, who was totally our nemesis until Jesus blinded him on the road and gave him the ultimate character redemption arc (we call him Paul now).

This isn't your grandma's church story (no offense to grandmas). We've got shipwrecks, snake bites, miracles, jailbreaks, and the most awkward committee meeting ever about whether guys need to get circumcised to join our crew (spoiler: they don't, thank goodness).

This is the story of how a small group of Jesus-followers completely flipped the world upside down.

WARNING: reading this might make you want to do something crazy... like love your enemies or share everything you own.

Don't say I didn't warn you.





# Chapter 1

## **LUKE'S INTRO: "Previously, on Jesus..."**

Luke here—you know, the doctor who hangs with Paul?

So I already sent you that first book about Jesus (hope you got it—ancient mail system, am I right?). That one covered all the mind-blowing stuff Jesus did and taught until the day he made his dramatic exit to heaven.

Let me catch you up real quick: After the whole crucifixion thing (still gives me chills), Jesus kept popping up EVERYWHERE for forty days! And no, this wasn't some "I think I saw Elvis at the market" situation. He literally ate with people, let Thomas poke his wounds (awkward but effective), and basically made sure everyone knew he wasn't a ghost.

During these surprise appearances, Jesus wouldn't shut up about "the Kingdom of God." Seriously, it was his favorite topic. Then during this one dinner, he dropped this bombshell:

*"Guys, don't leave Jerusalem yet. My Father's sending you a gift—and no, it's not a fruit basket. Remember when I mentioned the Holy Spirit? Yeah, that's happening SOON."*

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The guys immediately started buzzing with questions. "So is this when you kick out the Romans? Are we getting our kingdom back? Is it revolution time?" they kept asking, practically bouncing in their seats.

Jesus just gave them that look—you know the one—and said, "You don't need to know the Father's schedule. It's above your pay grade. But here's what you DO need to know: You're getting supernatural power when the Holy Spirit arrives, and then you'll be telling my story EVERYWHERE—Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and literally to the ends of the earth."

And then? The craziest exit EVER. Mid-conversation, Jesus just started... floating upward. Not even a "See ya later" or a smoke bomb—just straight up into the clouds while everyone stood there with their jaws on the ground. As they were all standing there, necks craned, probably getting major muscle cramps, two guys in pristine white robes appeared out of nowhere.

"Uh, what are you all staring at?" they asked. "Jesus is gone, but don't worry—he'll be back the same way someday. Maybe go do what he told you instead of developing neck problems?"

So that's the setup. Now I'll let Peter take over, since he was actually there for what happened next...

### **"When Everything Went Crazy," Peter's Story**

So there we were, standing on the Mount of Olives with major whiplash, watching our friend and teacher literally float into the sky. I mean, how do you process that? One minute we're having a conversation, the next he's getting smaller and smaller until—poof—he's gone.

"Did that just happen?" John whispered.

"Yep," I said, still staring upward.

"So... what now?" asked Thomas, ever the practical one. I remembered Jesus' words: "Wait in Jerusalem." So that's exactly what we did.

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The walk back to the city was only about half a mile, but it felt like a hundred. Everyone was silent, processing. We went straight to our hideout—this upstairs room where we'd been crashing.

"Alright, roll call!" I shouted, trying to sound more confident than I felt. "We've got John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, the other James—not to be confused with the first James—Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James... not to be confused with the other Judas who... well, you know."

Awkward silence.

"Too soon?" I asked.

Mary, Jesus' mom, shot me a look. "Way too soon, Peter." We ended up with quite the crowd in that room—about 120 of us squeezed in there like sardines. Jesus' family was there too, which was cool considering they used to think he was losing his mind. Nothing like a resurrection to change your perspective, I guess.

So we prayed. A LOT. Day after day. I'm talking serious, focused prayer—not the "bless this food" kind but the "we have no idea what we're doing so please help us" kind.

After about a week of this, I couldn't take it anymore. I stood up suddenly, knocking over Andrew's water cup.

"Sorry, bro," I said as he scrambled to clean it up. "But I've been thinking..."

Everyone groaned. My "thinking" usually leads to trouble. "No, hear me out! We've got a problem. We're supposed to be the Twelve, right? Jesus picked twelve of us for a reason. But now with Judas... gone... we're only eleven. The math doesn't work!"

"What happened to Judas anyway?" someone from the back called out.

I grimaced. "Trust me, you don't want the details. Let's

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just say he bought a field with his blood money, had a nasty fall, and... exploded."

"EWWW!" several voices called out.

"I said no details!" I shot back. "Anyway, the locals are calling it 'Akeldama' now—'Field of Blood.' Fitting, right? But here's my point—King David predicted this whole mess in the Psalms! He wrote, 'Let his place be empty' AND 'Let someone else take his job.' So clearly, we need a replacement apostle!"

"And how exactly do we pick one?" Mary asked. "It's not like Jesus left instructions for this particular situation."

I thought for a moment. "We need someone who's been with us from the beginning—from John's baptism all the way through seeing the resurrected Jesus. They need to know the whole story."

After some debate, we narrowed it down to two guys: Joseph (who everyone called Barsabbas or sometimes Justus—dude had more nicknames than a rapper) and Matthias.

Both stood up, looking awkward as everyone stared at them.

"No pressure, but one of you is about to join the most wanted list in Jerusalem," I joked. Nobody laughed.

"So... how do we choose?" John asked. "Vote?"

"Rock-paper-scissors?" suggested Thomas.

"I have an idea," I said. "We pray, and then draw lots."

"Draw lots?" Andrew raised an eyebrow. "You mean like... holy gambling?"

"It's not gambling if God controls the outcome!" I responded.

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So we prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's hearts better than we do. Show us which of these guys you've already chosen to replace Mr. Betrayal-and-Explosion."

We drew the lots, and... Matthias won! The poor guy looked like he might pass out as everyone crowded around to congratulate him. Barsabbas was being a good sport, patting him on the back, but you could tell he was thinking, "Dodged a bullet there."

"Welcome to the team," I told Matthias. "Hope you're ready for whatever's coming next, because according to Jesus, it's going to be big."

Little did I know just HOW big it would be. But that's a story for another chapter.

## Chapter 2

Hey there! I'm Luke, and I've got a wild story to share about my buddy Peter. Trust me, this is a game-changer.

It's the day of Pentecost, and we're all hanging out together, debating who makes the best hummus in Jerusalem, worrying about the Romans getting us, and praying when suddenly, out of nowhere, this massive sound like a hurricane fills the room. We're talking "hold onto your sandals" kind of wind. Then, as if that's not enough, these flickering flames appear and hover over each of us. Yeah, you heard that right—fire on our heads, but no one's getting burned. Next thing we know, we're all speaking different languages we didn't even know we knew!

Now, let me pass the story over to Peter. He can tell you what happened next.

### **Peter Tells His Story:**

So, picture this: we're all hanging out in Jerusalem, and suddenly, this massive wind sweeps through the place. Flames—yes, actual flames—appear above our heads, but weirdly, nobody's hair catches fire. Next thing we know, we're all speaking in languages we've never even studied.

Crazy, right?

Now, the crowd outside starts gathering, and they're totally baffled. Some smart aleck shouts, "They've had too much wine!"

Seriously? It's like 9 AM! So, I step up and say, "Listen up, folks! We're not drunk. What you're witnessing is exactly what the prophet Joel talked about."

The prophet Joel said, **"In the last days:" God says, "I'll pour out my Spirit on everyone. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, and your old men will have dreams."**

In other words, God's Spirit is for everyone—guys, girls, young, old. No exceptions.

Then I continue, "People of Israel, hear me out. Jesus of Nazareth was endorsed by God through miracles and wonders, which you all saw. But you handed Him over to be killed. However, death couldn't hold Him—God raised Him back to life!"

King David even spoke about this ages ago: **"I saw the Lord always before me. Because He's at my right hand, I won't be shaken. Therefore, my heart is glad, and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest in hope."**

David wasn't talking about himself here. He was looking ahead to the Messiah's resurrection, saying that God wouldn't leave Him among the dead.

So, here's the deal: Jesus is alive, and we've all seen it. He's the one David was talking about. And now, He's poured out the Holy Spirit, which is what you're seeing and hearing today.

The crowd, realizing they've made a huge mistake, asks, "What should we do?"

I went on to tell them about Jesus of Nazareth, a man

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endorsed by God through miracles and wonders. I reminded them how he was handed over and crucified, but God raised him from the dead because death couldn't keep its hold on him. King David even spoke about this, saying, 'You will not abandon my soul to Hades or let your Holy One see corruption.'

The crowd was cut to the heart. They asked us, "Brothers, what should we do?" I told them, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you'll receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." That day, about three thousand people accepted the message and were baptized.

From then on, we all devoted ourselves to teaching, fellowship, sharing meals, and prayer. Miracles were happening left and right, and we shared everything we had with each other. It was the start of something incredible—a community united in love and purpose. And that's just the beginning!



## Chapter 3

One afternoon, John and me decided to head over to the temple for the three o'clock prayer session. As we got near the Beautiful Gate—a spot as grand as it sounds—we saw a guy being carried in. This poor fellow had never been able to walk, and friends lugged him to the temple's gate every day to beg from the people coming to worship. When we were near enough, this guy spots us and, like a begger who'd done this for years, shouts, "Alms for the needy!"

We locked eyes with him, and I said, "Hey, look at us!" He turns, expecting a coin or two. But instead, I tell him, "I have no money for you, but I'll give you something else. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, get up and walk!"

At first he just looked at me, like he didn't understand, then I grabbed his right hand and pulled him to his feet. Instantly, his ankles become strong. He doesn't just stand—he jumps up and down, skips and walks all around, and all the time, praising God like he's in a praise group.

The three of us go through the temple gate. It's the first time this guy had been inside because cripples aren't permitted, so he doesn't know how to act. He keeps

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jumping and shouting praises to God. His healing was so complete; it was as if he'd been an athlete all his life! It was a bit embarrassing: all the jumping, yelling, and singing at the top of his voice! But he was stupid-happy!

Everyone recognized him as the same beggar who had been sitting at the entrance for years, and they stood there with their jaws practically on the floor. The guy stayed close to us as people rushed over to talk to him where we stood at Solomon's Colonnade. Everyone was amazed and asked tons of questions.

"How did you get the gimp to get up?"

"Are you you sure this is the same dude who has been begging all this time?"

"What's going to happen, now? He can't beg anymore?"

"Why are you gawking at us as if we made this man walk by some magic power? I asked. "We didn't do this on our own. It was the God you all worship—the same God who also raised Jesus after you handed Him over to the Romans to be killed and then disowned Him... even though Pilate had decided to let Him go. You dissed the Messiah and chose a murderer to be released instead. How stupid! You had the One who gives life killed, but He was came back from the dead on the third day... We were witnesses. This guy you see here was made strong by Jesus' name. He has completely healed him, as you can all see with your own eyes."

"It was stupid the way you and your leaders acted. But this is what God meant when He told the prophets that the Messiah would suffer. So, now, you need to turn to God and ask Him to wipe your sins away. And while you're at it, pray for a revival."

As I think back on it, it's clear that even though we didn't have any money, we had something better—the power of Jesus' name. Coin couldn't cure the crippled chap, but his trust in Christ caused considerable change. *(I wonder if this should be the title for my book.)*

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But this story proves that people often need more than what they ask for.

## Chapter 4

While John and me were telling a group of folks about Jesus, the priests, the captain of the Temple guard, and some of the Sadducees got upset, especially the part about bringing him back to life, so they arrested us. And, since it was late, they threw us in a holding cell til morning.

But lots of the people got their message and started believing, so now, our group was about 5,000 people.

The next day the court for religious law met with Annas, the high priest, along with Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and some of the relatives of the high priest.

“Who gave you permission to do this?” they demanded.

“Do what?” I asked, “Are we being questioned because we’ve done a good deed for a crippled begger? I suppose you want to know how he was healed... Well, let me make it very clear to y’all, this guy was healed by the powerful name of Jesus Christ, the Nazarene, the man you had crucified. The one God raised three days later.”

I pointed at the scroll and said, “In the Scriptures, it says, ‘The stone that you builders rejected has now become the

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cornerstone.' No one else has been given that power. No other name in the world can save anyone!"

"What?" some of the members of the group gasped when they saw the way we answered. "We thought these were ordinary blokes with no theological training. But, come to think of it, they did spend a lot of time with Jesus. Maybe that's where they learned to talk like this."

"Hey! We can see the cripple who was healed standing right here!" another added. "Everyone else can see him too, and they all know he was crippled all his life."

There was nothing the council could do so they ordered us to get out while they decided what to do next.

"What are we going to do with these guys?" they asked. "Everybody knows about it. Now, how do we keep them from preaching?"

"Let's give them a warning and tell them not to tell anyone else about Jesus again."

"Yeah! That worked so well last time... Not!"

"It might, if we whip them!"

So they called us back in and commanded, "You are never, to tell anyone about Jesus again. Never, ever!"

But I proclaimed, "Who do you people think God wants us to obey? You or Him? It's a no brainer. We'll keep talking about what happened to Jesus. There is nothing you can do about it!"

"You better not!" Annas threatened.

The arguing went back and forth for a while, but the leaders finally let them go because they didn't know how to punish us without starting a riot.

"People are praising God because of the miracle of the healing." explained one man.

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As soon as we were out of the room, we dashed to our buds and explained what happened.

The whole group shouted, sang, and prayed. *"The Creator God spoke a long time ago through King David, 'Why were the nations so angry? Why did they waste their time with useless plans? The kings of the earth prepared for battle; the rulers gathered together against the Lord and against the Messiah.'*

"Fact!" John said. "It happened in this very city! Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate the governor, the Gentiles."

Then I had a prayer, "You, God, set up everything. Now, they are threatening us. Give us brave hearts to tell everyone. May miracles be done through Jesus' name."

Just as my prayer ended, the meeting place shook like the tail of an excited dog, everyone was filled with God's Spirit, and we all started preaching.

Later, the church folks decided whats-your-is-mine-and-mine-is-yours so we all shared everything like a bunch of hippies. Me and John and the other apostles kept telling the resurrection story, and God kept blessing us. There were no needy people in the group, because members sold the stuff they owned and brought the cash to the apostles for those who needed stuff.

A Levite from Cyprus, Joseph, nicknamed '*Barnabas the Encourager*,' even sold some land and brought all the cash to the group. Everyone praised him for his giving, but one couple got jealous!

## Chapter 5

This guy named Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, sold a piece of land, and the husband brought me part of the money, claiming it was the entire amount, like Barnabas had done. But they they decided to keep part of the money for themselves.

“Ananias,” I told him. “You let the devil into your soul! You lied and kept some of the money for yourself, didn’t you? The property was yours to sell or not sell, whatever you wanted. After selling it, the cash was yours to keep or give to the church. But you tried to pull a fast one to make yourself look good. You lied to God!”

Ananias didn’t say a word. He just dropped dead and terrified everyone. So I had some teens wrapped him in a sheet, take him out, and bury him.

Three hours later, wife Sapphira came in, all smiles. No one had told her what had happened.

“Was this the price you and your husband received for your property?” I asked.

“Yes,” she grinned, “Sure enough! That’s the full price, all right.”

“Why did you two think you could trick God?” I demanded. “The boys who buried your husband are just coming in the door, and they will haul you away, too.”

Just like Ananias, she didn’t say another word. She just fell to the floor, dead. The same boys carried her out and buried her beside her husband. That’s why our church

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has a graveyard.

Needless to say, great fear gripped everyone when they heard what happened. They were all like, “Don’t ever lie to that pastor!”

But it wasn’t me. It was God they had lied to!

The beginning of the church wasn’t all about people dropping dead. There were lots of healings, too, and when the believers met at Solomon’s Colonnade, no one joined us. However, the townspeople respected our church, and lots of them joined us as a result of the miracles. People often laid on the sidewalks where I walked, because they thought my shadow might fall across them and bless them as I went by. Bunches of people came from around Jerusalem, bringing sick and disturbed friends, and many did get better.

The high priest, his officials, and the Sadducees, got jealous so they arrested us again, putting us in jail. But an angel came that night, opened the gates of the jail, and ushered us out.

“Go back to the Temple,” he told us, “and give the people the message of life!”

So the next morning, we were teaching people at the Temple, like the angel said.

When the high priest and his officials got to the court, that day, they called for the high council—the full assembly of the town leaders and sent for us to be brought from the jail for a trial.

But when the guards got to the jail, we not there. So they went back to the council and reported, “The jail was all locked up. Guards standing outside. No one was in the cells!”

The priests were totally confused. Then someone burst in with this news. “The guys you had arrested and put in jail are up in the Temple, teaching people!”



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"Where will this end?" the captain of the guard asked and went with his men to re-arrested us. But they didn't force us because they were afraid the people would stone them.

When we got to court, the high priest shouted, "We gave you strict orders to never ever teach about that man! But, no! Just look what you've done. You filled are filling the whole city with your teaching about Jesus, and you are trying to make it look like we were responsible for his death!"

"We told you we would obey God rather than you. Jesus rose from the dead after you killed him by hanging him on a cross. God put Him in the place of honor, as Prince and Savior. God let that happen so you would repent and be forgiven. We were there and saw what happened. And the Holy Spirit has been given to us who obey him!" I told them.

The council grew furious and would have killws us, but Gamaliel, a respected expert in religious law stood up and ordered, "Send the prisoners outside the council chamber for a while."

"Listen, take care what you are planning to do to these men!" Gamaliel warned. "Awhile back there was a guy named Theudas, who pretended to be important... But he wasn't. Then about four hundred men joined him, but when he got killed, all his followers scattered and the whole movement came to nothing."

Gamaliel looked around, then added, During the census, there was Judas of Galilee who got people to follow him. But he got killed, too, and all his followers were took off." "My advice is, leave these guys alone." he added. "Let them go. If they are planning and doing these things on their own, it will come to nothing, just like the ones I mentioned. But if their movement is from God, you won't be able to stop it. You might find yourselves fighting against God!"

Sine he was the most respected lawyer of the council,

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they accepted his advice and called us back. They had us flogged and ordered us to never, ever again speak about Jesus, and let us go.

I tell you, we hightailed it out of there thankful that God had let us suffer for Jesus. And we continued preaching God's message in the Temple as well as house to house: "Jesus is the Messiah!"

And there isn't a thing they can do about it.

## Chapter 6

Let me tell you about one of those growing pain moments we had in the early days of our Jesus movement. I mean, we were just figuring things out, you know?

So picture this: our little group wasn't so little anymore. We were growing like crazy! Which was awesome, but also...kinda chaotic.

One day, I'm sitting with John enjoying some bread when this group of Greek-speaking Jews comes stomping up to us. And they were NOT happy.

"Peter! John!" one of them called out. "We need to talk about the food distribution."

I sighed. Food distribution was becoming a daily headache.

"What's the problem now?" I asked.

The man crossed his arms. "The widows from our Greek-speaking community are being overlooked when food is handed out. Every. Single. Day." The others nodded vigorously behind him.

"Seriously?" I looked at John, who shrugged. "We didn't realize this was happening."

"Well, it is," said a woman at the back. "My sister hasn't received her share in three days. Meanwhile, the Jerusalem widows get plenty!"

Okay, so we had a problem. A big one. When you've got hungry people feeling neglected, that's never good.

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So I called an emergency meeting with the other eleven apostles. Matthew was particularly concerned.

"We can't have divisions starting," he said. "That's not what Jesus taught us."

"Agreed," I said. "But here's the other problem—we're spending so much time managing food distribution that we barely have time to teach and preach anymore!"

James scratched his beard. "Something's gotta give."

The next day, we gathered everybody together. And I mean EVERYBODY. The courtyard was packed with followers.

I stood up on a stone bench so everyone could hear me. "Friends! Thanks for coming. We have an issue that needs addressing."

"It's about the food, isn't it?" someone shouted.

"Yes," I nodded. "But it's also about something bigger. Look, the twelve of us can't do everything. We're spending so much time handing out bread that we're not sharing the bread of life—God's Word!"

John stepped up beside me. "It's not right that we should give up preaching to hand out food."

"So what's your solution?" a skeptical voice called out.

I smiled. "We need your help! Choose seven people from among you—good people, respected people, wise people filled with the Holy Spirit. We'll put them in charge of the food distribution and making sure it's FAIR." I emphasized that last word while looking directly at the Greek-speaking section.

"And what will you do?" someone asked.

"What we're supposed to do," I replied. "We'll devote ourselves to prayer and teaching God's Word."

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There was a murmur of conversation, and then something amazing happened—everyone started nodding. They liked the idea!

A man named Stephen was the first one selected. Let me tell you about Stephen—this guy radiated faith. When he prayed, you felt like heaven was listening. The Spirit practically glowed around him.

"I'm willing to serve," he said simply.

After him came Philip, who had this infectious enthusiasm. Then Prochorus, who was incredibly organized (perfect for food distribution!), Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas from Antioch.

"Nicholas isn't even originally Jewish!" somebody whispered a bit too loudly.

"Exactly!" I replied with a grin. "That's the point! Our community includes everyone now."

We brought these seven men forward, and the twelve of us gathered around them in a circle.

We placed our hands on their shoulders and prayed. I still remember the feeling—like electricity running through us. The Holy Spirit was definitely approving this decision.

"Lord," I prayed, "give these men wisdom to serve fairly and love deeply. Help them remember that when they're handling bread, they're handling hearts too."

After we made this change, our Jesus movement exploded! The Word spread faster than ever. Our community in Jerusalem grew so quickly we could barely keep up. Even some of the religious leaders—the same guys who used to roll their eyes at us—started believing!

Stephen, especially, became a powerhouse. He wasn't just handling food distribution; he was performing amazing miracles among the people. The Holy Spirit worked through him in incredible ways.

But not everyone was thrilled about our success. A group from the synagogue of the Freedmen (as they called themselves) started arguing with Stephen.

"Your theology is all wrong!" they'd challenge.

But, oh man, you should have seen Stephen in these debates. The Spirit gave him such wisdom that these educated scholars couldn't win a single argument against him!

"How does he know so much?" I overheard one of them complain. "He's making us look foolish!"

Since they couldn't beat him fair and square, they resorted to dirty tactics.

"We need to discredit him," they whispered among themselves. Then they bribed some guys to spread rumors.

"Stephen speaks against Moses and God!" these liars claimed. "We heard him ourselves!"

Before we knew it, the religious leaders seized Stephen and dragged him before the Sanhedrin—the supreme council. The same guys who had tried Jesus.

"This man constantly speaks against the holy Temple and the Law!" the accusers claimed. "He says Jesus will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us!"

I tried to intervene, but the guards blocked me. All I could do was watch from the back of the room.

But Stephen? He wasn't afraid. As everyone in the council stared at him, something incredible happened. His face... it transformed. It shone with a peaceful radiance, like an angel's face.

Even the accusers fell silent for a moment, taken aback by what they saw.

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Stephen found his purpose not when I gave him a title but when we recognized the Holy Spirit already at work in him.

And that's the lesson I want you to take away: Don't try to do everything yourself. Find people with different talents. Share the load. Because when everyone contributes what they're best at, that's when amazing things happen.

When we learned to delegate and trust others with important work, our message reached more people than ever before. And isn't that what it's all about?

## Chapter 7

Stephen was one of those seven young men we chose to handle the food distribution? Well, he ended up doing WAY more than just handing out bread.

So, Stephen got dragged before the Sanhedrin—that's our big religious court with all the important religious leaders sitting in a semicircle, looking down at you. Talk about intimidating!

The high priest, with his fancy robes and serious expression, looked Stephen right in the eye and asked, "Are these charges true? Are you speaking against our holy Temple and the Law of Moses?"

Now, most people would be trembling at this point. I mean, I've been in that hot seat before, and let me tell you—it's nerve-wracking! But not Stephen. The guy took a deep breath and launched into what I can only describe as the most epic history lesson ever.

"Brothers and fathers, listen up!" he began. His voice was steady and strong. "Our story didn't start with this Temple. It started with Abraham, way back in Mesopotamia."

I was watching from the back of the room, thinking, "Interesting strategy, Stephen. Start with something they can't argue with."

"God appeared to Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia," Stephen continued, "before he even moved to Haran. God told him, 'Leave your family and homeland and go to a land I'll show you'."



One of the older Sanhedrin members nodded. So far, so good.

"So Abraham left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After his father died, God brought him here to this land where you're now living."

Stephen was pacing now, really getting into his history lesson.

"But here's the interesting part—God didn't give Abraham any land to own, not even enough to set his foot on! Yet God promised the land would belong to his descendants, even though Abraham didn't have any children yet!"

I noticed some of the council members shifting uncomfortably. They knew their history, but they weren't used to hearing it told with such... passion.

Stephen kept going, "God told Abraham that his descendants would be strangers in a foreign land—that they'd be enslaved and mistreated for 400 years! But God also said, 'I will punish the nation that enslaves them, and afterward they will come out and worship me in this place.'"

He went on to talk about Abraham becoming the father of Isaac, Isaac becoming the father of Jacob, and Jacob becoming the father of our twelve patriarchs. Standard stuff, but the way Stephen told it made it sound like he was there watching it all happen.

Then he got to the Joseph story—my personal favorite.

"The patriarchs were jealous of their brother Joseph and sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him!" Stephen's eyes were lit up now. "God rescued him from all his troubles and gave him wisdom that impressed Pharaoh, who made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace."

A younger Sanhedrin member whispered something to his neighbor. I couldn't hear what they said, but their

expressions weren't friendly.

Stephen didn't even pause. "Then a famine struck Egypt and Canaan. There was terrible suffering, and our ancestors couldn't find food. When Jacob heard there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers on their first visit. On their second visit, Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family."

I noticed Stephen was smartly connecting all these dots of our history, building toward something.

"Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our ancestors died. Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor."

Stephen's pace quickened as he moved through the story of Moses. "As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, our people in Egypt had greatly increased in numbers. Then a new king who didn't know about Joseph came to power. He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed them, forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so they would die."

Some of the elders were nodding now. Everyone knew this story.

"At that time Moses was born—and he was no ordinary child." Stephen smiled a little here. "For three months he was cared for in his parents' home. When he was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him and raised him as her own son. Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action."

Then Stephen dropped in a detail that many people forget: "When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his own people, the Israelites."

"Forty!" I thought. "Moses was middle-aged when he finally connected with his roots!" I always found that

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encouraging—it's never too late to find your purpose.

Stephen continued, "He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. Moses thought his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they didn't."

There were some uncomfortable coughs in the room. This part of the story doesn't make Moses look like the perfect hero, and Stephen wasn't sugar-coating it.

"The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, 'Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?'" Stephen's voice took on a different tone as he quoted the Israeli who was in the wrong: "'Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?'"

Stephen shook his head. "When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons."

Then Stephen's eyes lit up. "After forty years later—FORTY YEARS, folks!—an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush near Mount Sinai. When he saw this, he was amazed. As he went over for a closer look, he heard the Lord's voice: 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'."

Stephen gestured dramatically. "Moses trembled with fear and didn't dare to look!"

I noticed the high priest leaning forward now, clearly wondering where Stephen was going with all this.

"Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt'."

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Stephen's voice grew stronger. "This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, 'Who made you ruler and judge?' He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush."

Now I could see where Stephen was heading, and apparently so could the Sanhedrin—they were starting to look uncomfortable.

"Moses led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and for forty years in the wilderness. This is the Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.'"

Stephen was on a roll now. "This is the Moses who was with our assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai and with our ancestors, and he received living words to pass on to us."

Then Stephen's tone changed slightly. "But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. They told Aaron, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don't know what has happened to him!'"

Several council members were shifting uncomfortably. Stephen wasn't just telling history—he was making a point about rejection.

"That was when they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made. But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon, and stars."

Stephen started quoting from the prophets, his voice rising: "'Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel? You have taken up the tabernacle of Molek and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship. Therefore I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.'"

## TIPPING POINT

The tension in the room was so thick you could cut it with a knife. But Stephen kept going.

"Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. Moses built it as God directed him. After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them."

Stephen's eyes scanned the room. "It remained in the land until the time of David, who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for him."

Then Stephen dropped the bombshell: "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says, 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?'"

And then—oh boy—Stephen went from history teacher to prosecutor in the blink of an eye.

He pointed at the council members. "You stiff-necked people! You are just like your ancestors: you always resist the Holy Spirit!"

I winced. Things were about to get ugly.

"Was there ever a prophet your ancestors didn't persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it!"

The council members were furious. I could see them grinding their teeth, their faces red with rage.

But Stephen? He was looking up, his face glowing with this incredible peace. It was like he wasn't even in the room anymore.

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"Look!" he shouted, pointing upward. "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

That did it. The council members covered their ears and started yelling at the top of their lungs. They all rushed at Stephen, dragged him out of the city, and started picking up stones.

I tried to push through the crowd to help him, but there were too many people. All I could do was watch in horror as they began throwing the stones at him.

I noticed a young man named Saul standing nearby, watching over the coats of those throwing the stones. He looked pleased with what was happening. (Little did I know that this Saul would later become our brother Paul—but that's a story for another day!)

As the stones hit him, Stephen fell to his knees. But instead of crying out in pain or cursing his attackers, he prayed, his voice carrying over the shouting crowd: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

Then—and this is the part that still gives me goosebumps—he fell to his knees and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

And then... he was gone.

I stood there in shock, tears streaming down my face. Stephen's last words echoed Jesus' words on the cross. Even in death, he followed our Master's example of forgiveness.

That day, I learned what real courage looks like. It's not just about being brave enough to speak the truth—it's about loving your enemies even when they're hurting you.

Stephen's story teaches us that sometimes standing up for what you believe might cost you everything. But when you're filled with the Holy Spirit, you can face even death with peace and forgiveness in your heart.

## Chapter 8

"This is SO not how I planned to spend my summer," Philip muttered to himself as he caught his breath outside the city gates. He looked back at Jerusalem, smoke rising from parts of the city. "The apostles are staying? They're either super brave or completely bonkers."

A few days later, Philip found himself entering Samaria—a place most of his Jewish friends avoided like week-old fish.

"You know what's weird?" Philip said to a fellow believer as they walked into the city. "This whole persecution thing is actually spreading our message faster than before."

His friend laughed. "Yeah, Saul's basically our unwitting marketing manager."

Philip felt a strange tugging in his spirit. "I think I'm supposed to stay here," he told his friend. "Something's telling me this is where I need to be."

"In Samaria? Seriously?" His friend raised an eyebrow. "Well, good luck with that. These people and our people aren't exactly besties."

The city was buzzing about some magician named Simon who had everyone convinced he was practically a god.

"They call me THE GREAT POWER!" Simon announced to his audience, making colorful smoke appear from his hands. "Behold my awesomeness!"

The crowd oohed and aahed.

#### TIPPING POINT

Philip just rolled his eyes. "*Dude's got an ego bigger than King Herod's palace,*" he whispered to himself.

But when Philip started preaching about Jesus, performing real miracles, and healing people, the crowd quickly shifted their attention.

One day, a paralyzed girl was brought to Philip.

"Can you really help her?" her desperate mother asked.

Philip smiled kindly. "I can't—but I know someone who can." He prayed over the girl, and immediately her legs strengthened.

"I...I can feel my toes!" she exclaimed, standing up shakily. Within moments, she was jumping up and down. Simon watched from the back of the crowd, his jaw practically hitting the floor.

Later, Simon approached Philip. "Okay, I've gotta know your secret. That was next-level stuff back there."

"It's not me," Philip shrugged. "It's Jesus."

"Jesus?" Simon frowned. "Is that like a special magic word or something?"

Philip laughed. "Not exactly. Let me explain..."

To everyone's surprise, Simon himself decided to get baptized. He followed Philip everywhere like an obsessed fan.

"Dude, personal space," Philip joked one day when he turned around to find Simon inches behind him.

"Sorry," Simon grinned sheepishly. "It's just—I've never seen real power like this before."

When Peter and John arrived from Jerusalem, they gathered the new believers together.



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"Who's that?" Simon whispered to Philip, pointing at Peter.

"That's the guy who used to hang out with Jesus. Like, his actual friend."

"No way! Can I get his autograph?"

Philip snorted. "Maybe focus on the spiritual stuff first?"

As Peter and John laid hands on people, the Holy Spirit came upon them in powerful ways. Some spoke in languages they'd never learned; others prophesied.

Simon's eyes widened. He rushed over to Peter, pulling out a bag of coins.

"How much?" Simon asked eagerly.

Peter looked confused. "How much for what?"

"For that power! The hand thing! I want to be able to do that too. I'll pay top dollar!"

The crowd went silent. Philip facepalmed, and his face turned stormy. "You think you can BUY God's gift with money?! Your heart is totally in the wrong place, man!"

Simon paled. "I—I didn't mean—"

"You need to seriously rethink your life choices," Peter continued. "This isn't a magic trick or a side hustle. This is sacred."

Looking genuinely frightened, Simon stuffed his money away. "Please pray for me," he begged. "I don't want anything bad to happen because of this."

After Peter and John left, Philip felt that strange tugging again.

A voice in his head (which he was pretty sure was God's) said, *Go south to the desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza.*

#### TIPPING POINT

"The desert road? Now?" Philip groaned. "Couldn't you send me somewhere with, I don't know, water and shade?"

But he went anyway.

The sun beat down mercilessly as Philip trudged along the dusty road.

"Next time I'll ask for more specific directions," he muttered, wiping sweat from his forehead.

About lunchtime, he heard the rumbling of wheels. An elaborate chariot approached, accompanied by several guards. Through the curtains, Philip could see a richly dressed man reading a scroll.

The same voice spoke to Philip: *Go to that chariot.*

"You want me to what now?" Philip whispered. "That guy looks super important, and I'm just a sweaty teenager in dusty clothes."

But something compelled him to run toward the chariot. As he got closer, he could hear the man reading aloud from Isaiah. Philip jogged alongside.

"Umm, excuse me!" Philip called out. "I don't mean to be weird, but do you understand what you're reading?"

The officer looked up, surprised to see a teenager running beside him.

"How can I possibly understand without someone explaining it?" The man smiled. "You're either very brave or slightly crazy to run up to my chariot like this. I like that. Hop in!"

The Ethiopian official introduced himself as the treasurer for the Kandake, the Ethiopian queen.

"So you manage the queen's TickTock account?" Philip joked.

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The official laughed. "No, her actual treasury. All her money and wealth."

"That's way cooler," Philip admitted.

The man pointed to the scroll. "I've been to Jerusalem to worship and find out more about the religion of the Jews. I bought this scripture. But there's this part about someone being led like a sheep to slaughter—who is the prophet talking about?"

Philip took a deep breath. "Well, it's actually the perfect setup for the greatest story ever told."

For the next hour, Philip explained how Jesus fulfilled the prophecies.

The Ethiopian listened intently, occasionally interrupting with thoughtful questions.

"So this Jesus—he died for everyone? Even people like me from Ethiopia?"

"Absolutely," Philip nodded. "Everyone means everyone."

"Even..." the man hesitated, "eunuchs like me? In the temple, they wouldn't let me into the inner courts because of what I am."

Philip smiled gently. "With Jesus, there are no outsiders. You're not defined by what you lack but by who God says you are."

Tears formed in the official's eyes. "All my life I've been told I'm not enough. That I don't fully belong anywhere."

"In God's family, you're not just enough—you're wanted," Philip said.

Suddenly, the Ethiopian pointed excitedly. "Look! Water! Can I be baptized right now?"

The chariot screeched to a halt beside an oasis and we

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waded into the water together.

"This is going to sound weird," Philip said, "but getting dunked is kind of like the original spiritual refresh button."

After the baptism, the strangest thing happened. One second Philip was there, and the next—*poof*—he was gone, whisked away by God's Spirit.

The Ethiopian looked around, confused but smiling. "Now THAT'S an exit!" he laughed, feeling lighter than he had in years.

Philip suddenly found himself in Azotus, miles away. "Whoa!" he exclaimed, looking around. "That was the weirdest experience ever! Like divine teleportation!"

A passerby gave him a strange look.

Philip just smiled. "You had to be there."

As he caught his breath, Philip realized something important: the message of Jesus wasn't just for people who looked like him or came from his background. It was for everyone—former sorcerers, foreign officials, and regular teenagers like himself.

"Well," Philip said to himself as he set off toward the next town, "I guess this is my life now—random divine assignments and supernatural Uber rides." He laughed to himself. "And honestly? I wouldn't trade it for anything."

As the sun set behind him, Philip walked toward Caesarea, wondering what adventure God had planned next.

## Chapter 9

I'm not trying to be dramatic here, but I REALLY hated these Jesus followers. Like, with the burning passion of a thousand suns. Think of your most annoying classmate, multiply that by infinity, and that's how these "Way" people made me feel.

"I'm going to end this whole Jesus movement," I muttered to myself as I marched up the steps to the high priest's mansion. My sandals slapped against the stone, matching the rhythm of my anger.

The guards at the entrance gave me a nod. I was kind of a big deal in Jerusalem—top of my class, studying under the legendary Gamaliel, and now the go-to guy for crushing this religious rebellion.

"Saul of Tarsus, to see the high priest," I announced, brushing dust off my robe.

The high priest looked up from his scrolls when I entered. "Ah, Saul. Still on your crusade against these... what do they call themselves?"

"Followers of 'the Way,'" I rolled my eyes so hard I nearly strained something. "And yes, I need official letters to the synagogues in Damascus. I've heard the movement is spreading there, and I want permission to arrest anyone involved—men, women, whoever. We'll drag them back to Jerusalem in chains and make an example of them."

The high priest nodded approvingly. "Your zeal for our traditions is commendable, young man."

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"Thanks. I've made hating Christians my whole personality at this point," I said with a smirk.

### **Saul's Trip to Damascus**

A few days later, I was on the road to Damascus with my squad. We were like a religious SWAT team, only we wore sandals and carried scrolls.

"So what's the plan when we get there?" asked Levi, the newest member of my persecution posse.

"Simple," I replied, kicking a stone as we walked. "Find the Christians, arrest them, chain them up, and bring them back for trial. It's basically catch and release, except the release part is into a prison cell." I high-fived Ezra, my right-hand guy.

We were about an hour outside Damascus when it happened. I'm talking about the most extraordinary divine intervention in history.

BOOM! A light brighter than anything I'd ever seen exploded around me. It wasn't like regular sunshine—this was like being inside lightning.

"AHHHHH!" I screamed (in a very manly way, obviously) as I face-planted into the dirt.

Then came the voice. Not in my head—an actual voice from heaven.

"SAUL! SAUL! WHY ARE YOU BEING SO MEAN TO ME?" I was eating dust and completely freaking out. "Who ARE you, lord?" I managed to sputter. I wasn't calling him "Lord" like I thought he was God—it was more like calling someone "sir" when you're terrified.

"I AM JESUS, THE ONE YOU ARE PERSECUTING!"

Well. This was awkward.

The voice continued, "NOW GET UP AND GO INTO THE

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CITY, AND YOU'LL BE TOLD WHAT TO DO NEXT."

My friends were standing there with their mouths hanging open. They heard the voice but didn't see anyone.

I tried to stand up, brushing dirt from my clothes. "Guys? A little help here?" I opened my eyes, but—plot twist—I couldn't see ANYTHING.

"Uh, Saul? Your eyes look weird," Ezra said nervously.

"What do you mean 'weird'? And why is everything dark?" "You're... blind," Levi whispered.

"BLIND?! Are you kidding me right now?!" I waved my hands in front of my face. Nothing. "Someone just grab my hand and get me to Damascus!"

So there I was—Mr. Big Shot Christian-Hunter—being led by the hand like a child. Talk about a humbling experience.

For three whole days, I sat in darkness in some guy named Judas's house. (Not THAT Judas—different one.) I didn't eat. I didn't drink. I just sat there thinking about my life choices and how I'd been trying to destroy the guy who just spoke to me from heaven.

### **Ananias**

Meanwhile, across town, this dude named Ananias was having his own divine encounter.

God: "Yo, Ananias!"

Ananias: "Yes, Lord?"

God: "I need you to go to Straight Street, to Judas's house. There's a guy there named Saul from Tarsus."

Ananias: *chokes on his breakfast* "THE Saul? The Christian-hunter Saul? The 'I'm-going-to-throw-you-all-in-

prison' Saul?"

God: "That's the one. He's praying right now. I showed him a vision of you coming to heal his blindness."

Ananias: "Um, no disrespect, Lord, but this guy is literally FAMOUS for hurting Christians. Everyone's talking about the terrible things he did in Jerusalem! He has official paperwork to arrest us!"

God: "Go anyway. I've chosen Saul for something special. He's going to take my message everywhere—to non-Jews, to kings, to Israelites. And FYI, he's going to suffer a lot for me, so there's that."

Ananias: *deep sigh* "Fine. But if this is a trap, I'm going to be super annoyed when I get to heaven."

### **Back at Judas's house**

I was having the world's worst staycation when I heard a knock at the door. Then footsteps were coming toward me.

"So... you're Saul," said a hesitant voice.

"Who wants to know?" I asked, turning toward the sound.  
"I'm Ananias. Jesus sent me."

I perked up. "You got a message from the road-light-voice Jesus too?"

"Something like that," Ananias said. I could practically hear him rolling his eyes. "He told me to come lay hands on you so you can see again. And something about filling you with the Holy Spirit."

Before I could respond with something snarky, I felt his hands on my head.

"Brother Saul," he said, and I almost laughed at the 'brother' part. Like, dude, I was literally coming to arrest you three days ago. "The Lord Jesus, who appeared to you



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on the road, has sent me so you can see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

The weirdest sensation followed—and something scaly fell from my eyes. Suddenly, light flooded in, and I could see Ananias's concerned face watching me.

"I CAN SEE!" I shouted, looking around the room like a kid in a candy store. "Dude! This is... this is..." For once in my life, I was speechless.

"Yeah, yeah, it's a miracle," Ananias said, trying not to smile. "So... are you still planning to arrest us all, or...?"

I shook my head. "No! Everything's different now. I need to get baptized. Like, immediately."

Ananias raised an eyebrow. "Talk about a career change."

### **After I got baptized**

I finally ate something. Three days of fasting had left me HANGRY.

"This is the best bread I've ever had," I mumbled with my mouth full.

"It's just regular bread," said one of the believers watching me cautiously.

"Yeah, but it tastes better when you're not planning mass arrests anymore," I replied with a grin.

It didn't take long for me to start talking about Jesus. Like, I went from "arrest all Christians" to "let me tell you about Jesus" in less time than it takes to lace up sandals.

I marched right into the synagogue where I was SUPPOSED to be identifying Christians for arrest.

"JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD!" I announced loudly.

The crowd did a collective double-take. "Wait... aren't you

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Saul?" asked a confused rabbi.

"Yep!"

"The same Saul who caused chaos in Jerusalem, arresting Christians?"

"The very same!"

"And didn't you come here specifically to arrest more believers?"

I shrugged. "Plans change. Let me tell you about this crazy light from heaven..."

The Jews in Damascus were NOT happy with my new TED Talk. I kept proving Jesus was the Messiah, and they kept getting angrier.

Eventually, I overheard two guys whispering.

"We should just kill him," one said.

"Agreed. We'll watch the city gates. He can't leave without us catching him."

I rolled my eyes. "I can HEAR you guys. I'm standing right here."

That night, my new Christian buddies were like, "So, we have a plan to get you out of the city."

"Cool, what is it?"

"We're going to put you in a basket and lower you down the city wall."

I stared at them. "A basket? I'm a grown man!"

"It's either the basket or getting stabbed at the city gate. Your choice."

"...Get me the basket."

So there I was, the great Saul of Tarsus, former Christian-hunter extraordinaire, being lowered down a wall in a basket like a shipment of overripe fruit.

"If my rabbi could see me now," I muttered as I bumped against the wall.

### **When I finally made it to Jerusalem**

I tried to join the Christian crew there, but they were like, "Yeah, right. Nice try, Christian-hunter."

"But I've changed!" I protested as they slammed doors in my face.

Thankfully, this cool guy named Barnabas believed me. He took me to meet the apostles.

"This is Saul," Barnabas announced.

"THE Saul?" asked Peter, reaching for what was probably a weapon.

"Yep! But he's cool now. Jesus blinded him on the road to Damascus, then sent Ananias to heal him. Now he's all about preaching Jesus. It's legit."

The apostles looked skeptical.

"Look," I said, "I know this is weird. Yesterday's villain is today's preacher. But I'm telling you, Jesus rearranged my entire life. And now I can't shut up about him."

Slowly, they accepted me. I started preaching all over Jerusalem, which led to—surprise!—more people wanting to kill me.

"Do people try to murder you guys this often?" I asked Peter after another narrow escape.

"Welcome to the team," he replied dryly.

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Eventually, the believers were like, "Dude, you're a trouble magnet. We're sending you back to your hometown, Tarsus, before you get us all killed."

And that's how I—former valedictorian of Persecuting Christians University, became Christianity's most unlikely spokesperson. Talk about a career change. One day I'm arranging arrests; the next I'm being lowered down city walls in a basket to escape murder plots.

Life comes at you fast when Jesus is involved.

## Chapter 10

Yo, what's up? I'm Cornelius, a Roman army captain based in Caesarea. People call me a "centurion," which basically means I'm in charge of about 100 soldiers. I work with the Italian Regiment.

So here's the deal—I'm not Jewish, but I've been really into their God lately. My whole family and I pray all the time, and I give money to people who need it. I'm trying my best to be a good person, you know?

So there I was, around 3 PM on a totally normal day, when BOOM! This angel appears in my house! Not gonna lie, I nearly jumped out of my skin.

"Cornelius!" the angel said.

"Uh... present?" I answered, staring at him like he was an alien. I mean, what do you say to an ACTUAL ANGEL?

The angel just smiled. "God has noticed your prayers and how you help people. He wants you to send some men to Joppa to find a guy named Simon Peter. He's staying with another Simon—a tanner who lives by the sea."

And just like that—poof! The angel disappeared.

I was like, "Did that really just happen?" But I knew it did. So I called two of my servants and one of my super-religious soldiers and was like, "You're not gonna believe this, but..." I told them everything and sent them off to Joppa.

### **Peter's Story**

Hey, I'm Peter, one of Jesus's main disciples. These days I've been traveling around, telling people about Jesus.

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And I was crashing at this guy Simon's place in Joppa. He's a tanner, which means he works with animal hides. Not the best-smelling job, but hey, free lodging!

Around noon the next day, I was STARVING. Like, my stomach was making dinosaur noises while everyone was preparing lunch. I decided to go up on the roof to pray and get some fresh air.

Then the weirdest thing happened—I fell into this trance and saw the sky open up. This giant sheet came down with all kinds of animals on it. And I mean ALL kinds—the clean ones Jews are allowed to eat AND the unclean ones we're definitely NOT supposed to touch.

Then this voice said, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat whatever you want!"

I was like, "Absolutely not! I've never eaten anything unclean or impure in my life! I'm a good Jewish boy, thank you very much."

The voice replied, "Don't call anything impure that God has made clean."

This happened THREE TIMES. Like, seriously? Did God think I didn't hear Him the first two times?

Well, come to think of it, I denied Jesus three times, and when He met with us after His resurrection, He asked me if I loved Him three times. Yeah, I guess it takes repeating for me to get it.

But, while I was still scratching my head trying to figure out what this bizarre vision meant, these three guys showed up at the door downstairs. Perfect timing, right?

The Holy Spirit nudged me and said, "Three men are looking for you. Don't hesitate to go with them, because I sent them."

So I went downstairs and was like, "Hey, I'm the guy you're looking for. What's up?"

They said, "Our boss, Cornelius, a Roman centurion, was told by an angel to invite you to his house to hear what you have to say."

A ROMAN wanted to hear me talk about Jesus? That

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was... unexpected. Romans and Jews don't exactly hang out together. But after that sheet vision, I figured God was trying to tell me something important.

I invited them to stay overnight, and the next day we headed to Caesarea together.

### **Cornelius Tells His Story**

I'd been counting down the hours until Peter arrived. I even invited all my relatives and close friends over—I mean, if an angel tells you someone has a message from God, you want everyone you care about to hear it too, right?

When Peter finally showed up, I was so excited I literally fell at his feet!

Peter quickly pulled me up and said, "Whoa, dude! Stand up! I'm just a regular human being like you."

As we went inside, Peter looked around at all the people I'd gathered and said, "You know, it's against Jewish law for me to hang out in a Gentile's house. But God just showed me I shouldn't call anyone impure or unclean. So here I am! Why did you send for me?"

I told him my whole angel story and finished with, "Now we're all here, ready to listen to whatever God has told you to tell us."

### **Back to Peter Again**

Looking around at Cornelius and his non-Jewish friends and family, everything suddenly clicked. The vision with the sheet and animals wasn't actually about food—it was about PEOPLE!

"I now realize that God doesn't play favorites," I told them. "He accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what's right. You've probably heard about the message God sent to Israel—the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what's been happening throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after John preached about baptism..."

I gave them the whole Jesus story—how he went around doing good and healing people, how he was killed by

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hanging on a cross, and how God raised him from the dead on the third day. I explained how Jesus appeared to us afterward and told us to spread the message that he is the one appointed by God as judge of the living and the dead. Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

And, you're not going to believe this, but while I was still talking, the Holy Spirit came on all of them—just like what happened to us at Pentecost! They started speaking in languages they didn't know and praising God.

My Jewish friends who had come with me were SHOCKED. Their jaws literally dropped when they saw that God had given his Holy Spirit to non-Jews too!

I turned to my friends and said, "Can anyone object to these people being baptized with water? They've received the Holy Spirit just like we did!"

So I baptized them all in the name of Jesus Christ right then and there. Afterward, they invited me to stay with them for a few days. How could I say no? God was clearly doing something new here!

### **The Aftermath**

When I got back to Jerusalem, some of the Jewish believers criticized me. "Why did you go to Pagans and eat with them?" they demanded.

I was like, "Sit down, guys. You're not gonna believe this story..." And I told them everything that had happened, step by step.

When I finished, they had no more objections. Instead, they praised God, saying, "So God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life!"

And that, my friends, is how God showed us that the good news about Jesus is for EVERYONE—not just the Jewish people. Pretty mind-blowing, right?



# Chapter 11

## **Peter's Side of the Story**

It's your boy Peter here. So I just got back to Jerusalem after this wild experience in Caesarea, and you wouldn't believe the drama waiting for me. The Jerusalem crew was all up in my face like, "We heard you were hanging with Gentiles and even EATING with them! What's that about?!"

I was like, "Guys, chill. Let me explain what happened." So I broke it down for them step by step:

"Look, I was just minding my business, praying in Joppa, when I had this crazy vision. I saw something like a giant sheet coming down from heaven with all these animals on it. Then this voice was all, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat'.

And I was like, 'No way! I've never eaten anything unclean before. That's not how we roll!' But then the voice said something that blew my mind: 'Don't call anything impure that God has made clean.' This happened THREE TIMES, guys. Not once, not twice, but three

times! Then the whole thing disappeared back into heaven.

Right after that, these three dudes showed up at the house where I was staying. The Spirit told me to go with them without hesitation. Six brothers here came with me, and we went to this guy Cornelius's house. He told us how an angel appeared to him and told him to send for me, saying I'd bring a message that would save him and his household.

So I started speaking, and BAM! The Holy Spirit came on them just like it did on us at the beginning. I remembered what the Lord said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If God gave them the same gift as he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think I could stand in God's way?"

When the Jerusalem crew heard this, they shut up real quick. Then they started praising God, saying, "So God has granted even the Gentiles repentance that leads to life!" Talk about a plot twist!

### **The Church in Antioch: Barnabas's Report**

Hey there! Barnabas here. So after Stephen was killed, some serious persecution broke out in Jerusalem, and believers scattered everywhere. Some went to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, but they were only sharing the message with fellow Jews.

But then something incredible happened! Some of these believers from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch and started preaching to the Greeks too! And let me tell you, the Lord's hand was with them in a major way. A huge number of Greeks believed and turned to the Lord.

Word got back to the church in Jerusalem, and they were like, "Barnabas, we need you to check this out." So they sent me to Antioch. When I arrived and saw what God's grace was doing, I was PUMPED! I encouraged them all to stay true to the Lord with all their hearts.

Between you and me, I'm a pretty decent guy—full of the Holy Spirit and faith. And during my time there, a significant number of people were brought to the Lord.

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But I realized I needed backup.

So I went to Tarsus to look for Saul. When I found him, I brought him back to Antioch. For a whole year, we met with the church and taught tons of people. Oh, and fun fact—it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called "Christians." That name's gonna stick, mark my words!

### **Agabus's Prophecy and The Relief Mission**

During this time, some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and predicted by the Spirit that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This actually happened when Claudius was emperor—just saying!)

The disciples in Antioch immediately decided to help out our brothers and sisters living in Judea. Everyone gave according to what they could afford. They sent their gift to the elders by none other than Barnabas and Saul.

That's how we roll in the early church—we take care of each other, no matter what!

## Chapter 12

### **Peter's Prison Break**

So there I was, locked up in prison AGAIN. I'm Peter, by the way.

King Herod was on a total power trip. He had already executed James (John's brother), and when he saw how much that pleased the Jewish leaders, he decided to come after me next. Talk about trying way too hard to be popular!

So here's my situation: I'm chained between TWO guards, with MORE guards outside the door. Herod wasn't taking any chances. The Passover festival was happening, so my trial was scheduled for after that. Meanwhile, I'm just chilling in maximum security.

Back at Mary's house (that's John Mark's mom), my friends were having this intense prayer meeting for me. They were literally praying non-stop. Squad goals, am I right?

So it's the night before my trial, and I'm somehow managing to sleep despite being chained up. Suddenly—BOOM—this blinding light fills the cell, and an angel is

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standing there! The angel smacks me on the side (rude much?) and I wake up.

"Quick, get up!" the angel says.

I'm still half asleep like, "Umm, what's happening right now?"

The chains literally FALL OFF my wrists! The angel's giving me instructions like I'm supposed to be fully functional at whatever ridiculous hour this is.

"Get dressed. Put on your sandals. Wrap your cloak around you. Follow me."

So I'm following this angel, but honestly? I thought I was dreaming or hallucinating. We walked right past the guards (who apparently needed to level up their guarding skills), and then we get to this massive iron gate leading to the city.

The gate? Opens BY ITSELF. We're talking serious supernatural stuff here.

We walk down the street, and then suddenly—poof!—the angel disappears.

That's when reality hit me. "Wait, this actually happened? I'm not dreaming?" I finally realized that God had sent an angel to rescue me from Herod and whatever the Jewish leaders had planned for me.

I headed straight to Mary's house where everyone was still praying. I knocked on the outer gate, and this servant girl named Rhoda came to answer.

When she heard my voice, she COMPLETELY FREAKED OUT. Like, instead of opening the gate, she ran back inside screaming, "PETER'S AT THE GATE! PETER'S AT THE GATE!"

My friends inside? Total skeptics.

"Girl, you're out of your mind," they told her.

"NO! IT'S REALLY HIM!" Rhoda insisted.

Someone suggested, "Maybe it's his angel?" (Whatever that means.)

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Meanwhile, I'm still outside KNOCKING. When they finally opened up and saw me, they went ballistic.

I had to wave my arms like, "GUYS! Chill! Let me explain!"

I told them the whole story and asked them to pass the message to James (Jesus' brother, not the one Herod killed) and the others. Then I bounced to another location because, you know, FUGITIVE STATUS.

The next morning? CHAOS at the prison. The guards were losing their minds trying to figure out what happened to me. Herod ordered a massive manhunt, and when they couldn't find me, he had the guards executed. (I feel terrible about that part.)

After this fiasco, Herod left Jerusalem and went to Caesarea for a while.

### **Herod's Epic Fail as told by Rhoda**

So I wasn't there for this next part, but everyone was talking about what happened to King Herod.

Apparently, Herod was super mad at the people of Tyre and Sidon for some reason. They managed to make friends with Blastus, who was like Herod's personal assistant, and arranged for a peace meeting because their cities depended on food from Herod's territory.

On the day of this big meeting, Herod showed up in his most extra royal outfit, sat on his throne, and gave this pompous speech. The people started shouting, "This is the voice of a god, not a man!"

Herod, being the narcissist he was, totally ate it up instead of giving God the credit. Big mistake. HUGE.

Right then and there, an angel struck him down. He got some disgusting disease where worms literally ate him alive from the inside out. I know, GROSS, right? But that's what happens when you try to steal God's glory.

Meanwhile, our movement kept growing. The word of God was spreading like crazy.

Barnabas and Saul finished their mission in Jerusalem and returned to Antioch, bringing John Mark with them.

Things were about to get even more interesting from there!

## Chapter 13

### **Barnabas Tells Part of the Story**

So there we were in Antioch, just hanging out at church with the usual crew - prophets, teachers, you know the drill. There was me (Barnabas), Simeon (we call him Niger), Lucius from Cyrene, Manaen (who grew up with Herod the tetrarch - talk about awkward family dinners), and, of course, Saul.

We were fasting and worshipping - as you do - when suddenly the Holy Spirit drops this bombshell: "Set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work I've called them to do."

I nearly choked. Like, excuse me? A special mission? From God Himself? No pressure or anything!

Everyone laid hands on us, prayed, and then basically said, "Well, off you go!" Thanks, guys, real helpful. So Saul and I headed out, directed by the Holy Spirit to Seleucia, and from there we sailed to Cyprus. Cyprus is

my hometown, so I was like, "I know a guy who knows a guy," which always helps.

When we reached Salamis, we started preaching in the Jewish synagogues. We brought along my cousin John Mark as our assistant. Poor kid was basically our pack mule, but hey, we all gotta start somewhere, right?

## **Saul Becomes Paul**

We traveled across the whole island until we reached Paphos. That's where things got interesting. We met this Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, also called Elymas. He was basically the right-hand man to the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, who was actually a pretty intelligent guy.

Sergius wanted to hear what we had to say about God, but Elymas kept trying to shut us down. He was obviously afraid of losing his influence over the proconsul.

That's when I felt something snap inside me. Filled with the Holy Spirit, I looked Elymas dead in the eyes and said, "You're full of deceit and fraud, you son of the devil! You enemy of everything right! Will you never stop perverting the Lord's ways?"

I was on a roll, so I kept going. "Now the Lord's hand is against you. You're going blind, not seeing the sun for a while."

Immediately, everything went dark for him. He started groping around, begging for someone to lead him by the hand. Talk about instant karma!

When the proconsul saw what happened, his jaw dropped. He became a believer right then and there. Not gonna lie, it felt pretty awesome.

Oh, and by the way, from this point on, I'm going by Paul, not Saul. New mission, new name, new me!

## **Paul Explains**

After that whole drama in Paphos, we set sail and landed in Perga in Pamphylia. That's when John Mark bailed on us. Seriously, dude? We're just getting started! He headed back to Jerusalem, probably missing his mom's



cooking or something.

Barnabas and I pushed on from Perga to Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath, we went to the synagogue and took a seat. After the usual readings from the Law and Prophets, the synagogue leaders were like, "Hey, you guys want to say something encouraging to the people?"

Um, YES! Talk about an open invitation!

I stood up, motioned with my hand (I've been practicing this move; it looks super authoritative), and launched into my speech:

"Fellow Israelites and you God-fearing Gentiles, listen up! Let me give you the highlight reel of our history."

I gave them the whole backstory - Egypt, the wilderness, the promised land, the judges, Samuel, Saul, and then David. Then I dropped the bombshell: "From David's descendants, God has brought Israel the Savior Jesus, just as He promised!"

I explained about John the Baptist, how Jesus was condemned despite being innocent, and how God raised Him from the dead. I backed everything up with Scripture quotes (always come prepared, kids).

"So listen up," I concluded. "Through Jesus, forgiveness of sins is available to everyone who believes. You can be justified in a way that the law of Moses could never do!"

The crowd went wild! Okay, not exactly wild, but they definitely wanted us to come back next week. As we were leaving, tons of Jews and devout converts followed us, and we encouraged them to keep trusting in God's grace.

### **Barnabas Finishes This Part of the Story**

The next Sabbath was INSANE. Almost the entire city showed up to hear us! But when the Jewish leaders saw the crowds, they got super jealous. Green is definitely not their color.

They started contradicting everything Paul said and threw in some insults for good measure. Real mature, guys.

But Paul and I didn't back down. We told them straight

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up: "We had to speak God's word to you Jews first. But since you reject it and don't consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, guess what? We're taking this message to the Gentiles!"

The Gentiles were pumped when they heard this. They were honoring the word of the Lord, and all who were appointed for eternal life became believers.

The word of the Lord spread through the whole region, which only made the Jewish leaders angrier. They stirred up persecution against us and kicked us out of their region.

So what did we do? We shook the dust off our feet as a protest and headed to Iconium. Despite all the drama, the disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit. Because when God's got your back, even the haters can't bring you down!

## Chapter 14

### **Paul's Adventures in Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe**

So there I was with my buddy Barnabas in Iconium, ready to tell people about Jesus. We headed straight to the Jewish synagogue because that's our go-to move in new cities. I'm not gonna lie – we crushed it that day! We spoke so well that a ton of Jews and Greeks decided to follow Jesus.

But of course, there's always that group that just can't handle someone else getting attention. Some of the Jews who weren't buying what we were selling started stirring up trouble. They poisoned people's minds against us. Like, seriously? Can't a guy preach the good news without drama?

We weren't about to back down, though. We stayed there quite a while, speaking boldly for the Lord. And get this—God had our backs! He confirmed our message by enabling us to perform miraculous signs and wonders. It was EPIC.

The whole city ended up divided—some people sided with the Jews who were hating on us, and others were totally Team Apostle. Classic small-town drama, am I right?

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Then we got word that both Gentiles and Jews, along with their leaders, were planning to attack us and stone us. Not cool, guys. NOT. COOL. So we did what any sensible person would do—we got out of there and fled to Lystra and Derbe and continued preaching there instead.

In Lystra, I noticed this guy sitting there who'd been lame from birth. Never walked a day in his life. As I was speaking, I could tell he was really listening and had faith to be healed. So I looked straight at him and said in a loud voice, "Stand up on your feet!"

And guys? HE JUMPED UP AND STARTED WALKING! No physical therapy, no practice—just boom! Walking like he'd been doing it his whole life!

When the crowd saw what I'd done, they went absolutely bonkers. They started shouting in their local language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" They thought Barnabas was Zeus (I mean, he does have that distinguished look), and they decided I was Hermes because I was the main speaker. Talk about mistaken identity!

The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to us. SACRIFICES. TO US. When Barnabas and I realized what was happening, we were mortified! We tore our clothes and rushed into the crowd, shouting:

"People! What are you doing? We're just humans like you! We're here to tell you to turn from these worthless things to the living God who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way, but he's always shown himself through kindness – giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons, providing you with plenty of food and filling your hearts with joy."

Even with these words, we barely stopped them from sacrificing to us. Like, it was a close call. These people were COMMITTED to their mistaken god theory.

But then some Jews from Antioch and Iconium showed up and won the crowd over. These guys were basically

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stalking us at this point. The crowd did a complete 180°—they went from wanting to worship us to wanting to kill us! They stoned me and dragged me outside the city, thinking I was dead.

Plot twist: I wasn't! When the disciples gathered around me, I got up and went back into the city. The look on everyone's faces—priceless! The next day, Barnabas and I left for Derbe.

We preached the good news in Derbe too and won a large number of disciples. Then, because we're either super brave or slightly crazy (you decide), we returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch. Yes, the very places where people just tried to KILL us.

We went back to strengthen the disciples and encourage them to remain true to the faith. We told them, "Look, becoming a believer doesn't mean life gets easier. In fact, we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." I mean, I'd just been stoned and left for dead, so I knew what I was talking about!

In each church, we appointed elders and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord. Think of it like setting up student council, but for churches.

After going through Pisidia, we came into Pamphylia, preached in Perga, and then went down to Attalia. From there, we sailed back to Antioch, where we'd been committed to God's grace for the work we had now completed.

When we arrived, we gathered the church together and reported everything God had done through us and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. Then we stayed there a long time with the disciples.

And that, my friends, is how you spread the good news—one adventure at a time! Never a dull moment when you're following Jesus, that's for sure.

## Chapter 15

### **Paul Reports About the Council at Jerusalem**

So there I was, back in Antioch with Barnabas, finally catching our breath after our first missionary journey. We'd established churches in several cities, appointed leaders, and seen tons of Gentiles come to faith in Jesus. Life was good, you know?

Then THESE guys show up from Judea.

"Um, excuse me," one of them announces during our gathering, looking all superior. "We couldn't help but notice you're letting these Gentiles into the church without circumcision? That's not how this works."

I exchange glances with Barnabas. Here we go again.

"Unless you're circumcised according to Moses' custom," another adds, "you literally cannot be saved."

The room erupts. Our Gentile believers look horrified (understandably—we're talking about adult circumcision here), and everyone starts arguing. I stand up and basically have to shout to be heard.

"Look, this is NOT what the gospel is about! Faith in Jesus is what saves, not some physical procedure!"

It gets heated. REALLY heated. Finally, the church decides to send me, Barnabas, and some others to

Jerusalem to get this sorted out with the apostles and elders once and for all.

## **The Journey to Jerusalem**

As we travel south through Phoenicia and Samaria, we stop at churches along the way, telling them all about the Gentiles coming to faith. Everyone's super excited—except when we mention the circumcision drama. Then they all get this look like, "Yikes, good luck with that one."

When we finally reach Jerusalem, the church welcomes us warmly, but it doesn't take long before certain Pharisee believers stand up with their objections.

"It is necessary to circumcise them and order them to keep the Law of Moses," they insist.

I roll my eyes so hard I think I strain something.

## **Peter's Moment**

The room is packed for what's basically the first church council ever. After a TON of debate (and I mean a TON), Peter finally stands up. Everyone quiets down—he's still got that authority thing going on.

"Friends," he begins, "you know that God chose me to be the one through whom the Gentiles would first hear the gospel and believe. And God, who knows everyone's heart, showed acceptance of them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just like He did with us. He made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith."

He's on a roll now, pacing a little.

"So why are we trying to place this burden on them that neither we nor our ancestors could bear? We believe we're saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they are."

BOOM. The room goes silent. I want to high-five him so bad.

## **My Turn to Speak**

Barnabas and I get up next. I tell them about all the signs and wonders God did among the Gentiles through us. The

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miraculous healings, the transformed lives, the joy and faith despite persecution. It's pretty clear God's been working without requiring circumcision first.

### **James Makes the Call**

When we finish, James (Jesus' brother and the leader of the Jerusalem church) stands up. He's got this intense, respected vibe about him.

"Brothers, listen to me," he says, stroking his beard thoughtfully. "Peter has described how God first included the Gentiles in His plan. And this agrees with the words of the prophets."

He quotes from Amos about rebuilding David's fallen tent and how people from all nations who bear God's name will seek the Lord.

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

I glance at Barnabas with a smile. This is actually happening! The church is getting it right!

### **The Letter**

The apostles and elders, together with the whole church, choose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas to go with Barnabas and me back to Antioch. They write this letter:

*"The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings!*

*We've heard that some of our group went out without our authorization and threw you into confusion with their teachings. So we all agreed to send chosen representatives along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul—men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*Therefore, we're sending Judas and Silas to confirm*



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*this by word of mouth: The Holy Spirit and we have decided not to burden you with anything beyond these essentials:*

- 1. Abstain from food sacrificed to idols,*
- 2. Don't eat anything with blood in it, meat from strangled animals*
- 3. Stay away from sexual immorality.*

*You will do well to avoid these things.*

*Farewell!"*

### **Back to Antioch**

When we get back to Antioch and read the letter to the gathered believers, they're PUMPED. There's cheering and hugging, and I'm pretty sure I see a few guys giving the "whew, dodged that knife" gesture when they think no one's looking.

Judas and Silas—who are also prophets—say a lot of encouraging things to strengthen the believers. After spending some time there, they're sent off with our blessing to return to Jerusalem, while Barnabas and I stay in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord.

### **The Breakup**

Everything's going great until I suggest to Barnabas, "Hey, let's go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached and see how they're doing."

Barnabas is totally down, but he wants to bring John Mark along. This is the same Mark who DITCHED us in Pamphylia during our first journey. Not cool.

"No way," I tell him firmly. "He abandoned us once; I'm not taking that risk again."

We have this HUGE argument. Like, awkwardly intense. It ends with us going our separate ways—Barnabas takes Mark and sails to Cyprus, while I choose Silas as my new travel buddy.

The church sends us off with their blessing, and we head

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through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. Not exactly how I expected things to go down with my old friend Barnabas, but God has a way of working things out in the end.

And that's how the church solved its first major theological crisis. Not with fists or division, but with discussion, Scripture, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Plus, I got a cool new traveling companion out of the deal. Missionary journey 2.0, here we come!

## Chapter 16

Paul's Wild Missionary Journey as told by Paul himself

So there I was, back on the road again. After that whole big Jerusalem council drama (long story), Barnabas and I had a falling out over my cousin Mark. I know, I know—family drama, am I right? Anyway, I ended up picking Silas as my new travel buddy. Solid guy, great singer.

We were revisiting all these churches we'd planted earlier when we hit Lystra. That's where I met this young guy named Timothy. His mom was Jewish, his dad was Greek, and everybody in town was like, "This kid's legit, Paul." I thought, "Perfect addition to the squad!" But there was one small issue—he wasn't circumcised. Awkward conversation? Yes. Necessary? Also yes. The Jewish communities we'd be visiting would freak if they found out, so Timothy took one for the team. Mad respect.

So there we were, the three of us, delivering the news about what the apostles and elders had decided in Jerusalem. Churches were growing stronger daily—mission accomplished!

**When God Closes One Door... And Another Door...  
And Another Door...**

We had this whole plan to preach in the province of Asia, but the Holy Spirit was like, "Nope!" So we tried to go to Bithynia instead, but the Spirit of Jesus said, "Also nope!" Talk about divine GPS recalculating! We ended up in

Troas, wondering what was next.

That night, I had this wild vision. Some Macedonian dude was standing there practically begging, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" Not exactly subtle, God. Message received.

We immediately booked passage to Macedonia, convinced God wanted us there. That's when our crew expanded to include Luke—you know, the doctor who's writing all this down. (Thanks for making me look good, Luke!)

### **Philippi: Prison Break and a Baptism Party**

First stop: Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of Macedonia. There was no synagogue there, but we found some women praying by the river on the Sabbath. One of them was Lydia, this successful businesswoman who sold purple cloth (fancy stuff!).

As I'm sharing about Jesus, Lydia's listening intently, and then—BAM—God opens her heart! She and her whole household got baptized, and she insisted we stay at her place: "If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come stay at my house." Talk about hospitality! How could we say no to that?

### **The Exorcism That Landed Us in Jail**

So here's where things got crazy. This slave girl kept following us around for days, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved!"

Now, you'd think that's helpful advertising, right? Wrong. Super annoying after the first 47 times, plus she had this spirit enabling her to predict the future, which her owners were exploiting for profit. Not cool.

Finally, I'd had enough. I turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to come out of her!" And just like that—poof!—the spirit left.

Her owners were FURIOUS. No more fortune-telling, no more money! They dragged Silas and me before the magistrates: "These men are Jews, disturbing our city and advocating customs unlawful for us Romans!"

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Before we could even defend ourselves, the crowd joined in the attack. The magistrates ordered us stripped and beaten with rods. Let me tell you, that hurt. Like, a lot. Then they threw us in prison, with our feet in stocks. Talk about a bad day at work.

### **Midnight Praise Party**

So there we were, at midnight, beaten and locked up. Most people would be crying or sleeping, but what were Silas and I doing? Praying and singing hymns! The other prisoners thought we were nuts, but they were listening.

Suddenly—BOOM!—a violent earthquake! The prison foundations shook, ALL the doors flew open, and EVERYONE'S chains came loose. Divine jailbreak, anyone?

The jailer woke up, saw the doors open, and freaked out. He pulled out his sword to kill himself (Roman jailers who lost prisoners basically signed their own death warrants).

I shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We're all here!"

The jailer called for lights, rushed in, and fell trembling before us. "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" he asked.

Talk about a career change! From "lock 'em up" to "save my soul" in 60 seconds.

"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household," we told him.

That very hour, he washed our wounds, and we baptized him and his entire family. Then he brought us into his house and set a meal before us. My man was REJOICING that he had come to believe in God. Best midnight snack ever!

### **If You're a Roman Citizen, They Can't Just Beat You**

Morning came, and the magistrates sent officers saying, "Release those men."

But I was like, "Hold up! They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. Now they want to get rid of us quietly? I don't think so! Let them come themselves and escort us out!"

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You should have seen the magistrates' faces when they heard we were Roman citizens. They were TERRIFIED. Beating a Roman citizen without trial? Major offense. They came and apologized and begged us to leave the city.

Before we left, we stopped by Lydia's house to meet with the believers and encourage them. Then we hit the road again, on to the next adventure.

And that, my friends, is how we started the first church in Europe. Not exactly how I planned it—but God's GPS never fails, even when the route includes prison cells and earthquakes!

## Chapter 17

### **Paul's Excellent Adventure**

So there I was in Thessalonica with my buddy Silas, after that whole prison-break-by-earthquake situation in Philippi (long story; maybe I'll tell you another time). As usual, my first stop was the local synagogue. I mean, that's kind of my thing - find a new city, head to the synagogue, and drop some Jesus knowledge.

For three Sabbaths straight, I was there explaining how the Scriptures pointed to Jesus being the Messiah. "Look," I told them, "the prophecies clearly show that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. And this Jesus I'm telling you about? He's totally the one!"

Some of the Jews were convinced and joined us. Plus, we got a bunch of God-fearing Greeks and some prominent women too. Not to brag, but we were kind of a big deal.

But then, as usual, the haters showed up.

Some jealous Jews rounded up a bunch of troublemakers from the marketplace (you know the type - guys with nothing better to do than cause problems). Next thing you know, they're forming a mob and storming Jason's house looking for us.

"WHERE ARE THOSE TROUBLEMAKERS?" they shouted, practically foaming at the mouth.

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When they couldn't find us, they dragged poor Jason and some other believers before the city officials.

"These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here too!" they screamed. "And Jason has welcomed them! They're all defying Caesar's decrees, saying there's another king called Jesus!"

The officials made Jason post bond before letting them go. Talk about unfair! The guy just let us crash at his place, and suddenly he's funding the city treasury.

### **Midnight Escape to Berea**

That night, the believers sent Silas and me to Berea. Sneaking out of town in the middle of the night - classic missionary life, am I right?

The Jews in Berea were actually pretty cool. Instead of immediately freaking out, they examined the Scriptures daily to see if what I was saying was true. Respect.

"This is fascinating," one guy told me after service. "I've read these passages my whole life, but I never saw how they connected to the Messiah before!"

Many of them believed, along with quite a few prominent Greek women and men. Our Berean church plant was off to a great start!

But guess what? Those troublemakers from Thessalonica found out where we were and came to stir up crowds in Berea too. Seriously, don't these people have jobs?

"Oh great, here come the fun police," Silas muttered when we spotted them entering town.

The believers immediately sent me away to the coast, while Silas and Timothy stayed behind. I had an escort take me all the way to Athens. Talk about VIP treatment!

"We'll come join you as soon as possible," Timothy promised as we said goodbye.

### **Athens: Philosopher Showdown**

So there I was in Athens, waiting for my friends and checking out the city. Let me tell you, this place was FILLED with idols. Like, seriously, you couldn't walk



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three feet without bumping into a statue of some "god."

It really bothered me. I started reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks, and I even went to the marketplace daily to debate whoever would listen.

Some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers decided to engage with me. Fancy guys with fancy beards who loved to hear themselves talk.

"What is this babbler trying to say?" one sneered.

"He seems to be advocating for foreign gods," another said, rolling his eyes.

They brought me to the Areopagus, which is this place where they discuss new ideas. Picture a bunch of philosophy bros sitting around saying, "Actually..." a lot.

"May we know what this new teaching is that you're presenting?" they asked. "You're bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean."

I stood up in the middle of the Areopagus and took a deep breath. This was my moment.

"People of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every way. As I was walking around looking at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: 'To an Unknown God.' So what you worship as unknown—this is what I'm telling you about!"

I had their attention now, so I continued, "The God who made the world and everything in it doesn't live in temples made by human hands. He's not served by human hands, as if He needed anything, since He Himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else."

One philosopher raised an eyebrow, intrigued.

"From one man He made every nation to live on the face of the earth and determined their appointed times and boundaries. He did this so that they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us."

I quoted their own poets: "'For in Him we live and move and have our being,' as even some of your own poets have

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said, 'For we are also His offspring.'"

"Since we are God's offspring, we shouldn't think the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image fashioned by human art and imagination. God now commands all people everywhere to repent, because He has set a day when He is going to judge the world in righteousness by the Man He has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising Him from the dead."

When I mentioned the resurrection, some of them started snickering. Others said, "We'd like to hear about this again sometime," which is philosophy-speak for "thanks but no thanks."

But I didn't care about the haters because a few people joined me and believed! Including this guy named Dionysius, who was an Areopagite (pretty important dude), and a woman named Damaris, plus several others.

As I left the Areopagus, I couldn't help but smile. Sure, most of them thought I was nuts, but seeds were planted. Sometimes that's all you can do - plant the seeds and let God handle the growth.

Next stop: Corinth. What adventures await me there?

## Chapter 18

### **Corinthian Adventures, as told by Paul himself**

So there I was, just leaving Athens after my whole Mars Hill speech thing. Let me tell you, philosophers are a tough crowd. I decided it was time for a change of scenery, so I headed to Corinth. New city, new people to tell about Jesus, same old me with my tent-making skills.

When I got to Corinth, I met this cool couple, Aquila and Priscilla. They were Jewish, like me, and get this—they made tents too! Talk about a divine connection. They'd recently moved from Italy because Emperor Claudius had this brilliant idea to kick all Jews out of Rome. Real nice guy, that Claudius.

"So, you're a tentmaker too?" Aquila asked when we first met. "Yep! Been stitching since I was a kid," I replied. "Mind if I crash with you guys, and maybe we can work together?" "Our tent is your tent," Priscilla said with a smile.

So I moved in with them, and we became the dream team of tent-making. During the week, we'd be all business with our needles and canvas. But every Sabbath? That was my time to shine at the synagogue. I'd get up there and try to convince both Jews and Greeks that Jesus was the real deal.

When my buddies Silas and Timothy finally caught up with me from Macedonia, I decided to go full-time with

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my preaching. I was like, "Sorry, tents, it's not you, it's me. I've got a higher calling."

But you know how it goes—not everyone's a fan. Some of the Jews started trash-talking and basically told me to get lost. I was so done with their attitude that I literally shook the dust from my clothes right in front of them.

"Fine! I've tried my best with you guys," I told them. "If you don't want salvation, that's on you. I'm taking this message to the Gentiles, where it'll be appreciated!"

So I went next door to this guy Titius Justus's house. Plot twist—his house was right next to the synagogue! Talk about passive-aggressive real estate choices, am I right? The best part was that Crispus, the synagogue leader, actually believed in Jesus along with his whole family. Plus, a bunch of Corinthians were getting baptized left and right. It was like a holy flash mob!

One night, I had this intense dream where God was like, "Paul, buddy, don't be scared. Keep preaching. Nobody's going to jump you here. I've got your back, and there are tons of people in this city who are going to believe."

So I stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching God's word. It was going pretty well until the local Jews ganged up on me and dragged me to court before this Roman proconsul named Gallio.

They were all, "This guy is teaching people to worship God in ways that break our laws!"

I was about to defend myself when Gallio basically rolled his eyes and said to them, "Look, if this was about actual crime, I'd listen. But this is just you guys arguing about words and names and your own religious laws. Handle it yourselves. I'm not judging these kinds of disputes."

Then he had them all thrown out of court! Meanwhile, the crowd grabbed Sosthenes, the new synagogue leader, and beat him up right in front of the court. And Gallio? He just pretended not to notice. Talk about workplace drama!

After hanging around for a while longer, I said goodbye to the believers and sailed for Syria with Priscilla and Aquila. Before we left Cenchreae, I got a haircut because

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of this vow I'd made. Very spiritual stuff, but also, my hair was getting way too long for Mediterranean summer heat.

We landed at Ephesus, and I left Priscilla and Aquila there while I went to check out the synagogue. The Jews there actually asked me to stay longer, but I was like, "Sorry, I've got places to be! I'll come back if God wants me to." So I set sail from Ephesus.

When I landed at Caesarea, I went up to Jerusalem to say hi to the church there, then headed to Antioch. After spending some time there, I hit the road again, going through Galatia and Phrygia, encouraging all the believers. Road trip ministry is my thing.

Now, while I was doing my thing, there was this other guy named Apollos who showed up in Ephesus. He was from Alexandria—super smart, knew his scriptures, and was on fire for the Lord. But here's the thing—he only knew about John's baptism, not the full Jesus story.

So he started preaching boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they were like, "Dude, you're close, but let us fill in some gaps." They took him aside and explained things better.

When Apollos decided to go to Achaia, the believers wrote ahead, basically saying, "This guy's legit; please welcome him." When he got there, he was a huge help to the believers and publicly shut down the arguments of the Jews, proving from Scripture that Jesus is the Christ.

So that's my Corinthian adventure! Just another chapter in the wild life of an apostle. Never a dull moment when you're following Jesus, trust me.

## Chapter 19

### **Paul's Wild Time in Ephesus**

So there I was in Ephesus, this massive city in Asia Minor. I'd just finished trekking through the hill country and was honestly ready for a shower and a nap. But God had other plans—as usual!

On my first day in town, I bump into this group of about twelve guys who call themselves "disciples." I'm thinking, "Great! Fellow believers!" So I ask them the usual icebreaker:

"So, did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"

They look at me like I just asked if they've ever been to the moon.

"The Holy what?" one of them says, scratching his head.

Okay, weird. "What baptism did you receive?" I ask.

"John's baptism," they all nod proudly.

I try not to facepalm. "Guys, guys, guys. John's baptism was just the warm-up act! That was about repentance—turning away from sin. John himself said someone greater was coming after him. That someone was Jesus!"

I can see the lightbulbs going off over their heads. Next thing you know, they're getting baptized in the name of Jesus. When I lay my hands on them, the Holy Spirit shows up BIG TIME. They start speaking in languages

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they never learned and prophesying. It was like a mini-Pentecost right there in Ephesus!

For the next three months, I'm at the synagogue regularly, debating about God's kingdom. Some people are totally into it, but others? Let's just say if eye-rolling burned calories, they'd be super fit. The hardcore skeptics started trash-talking "the Way" (that's what people call our Jesus movement) in front of everyone.

So I'm thinking, "I need a new venue." This guy Tyrannus (yes, that's his actual name—poor dude probably got teased a lot as a kid) lets me use his lecture hall. For TWO YEARS I've been teaching there daily. Between the locals and travelers passing through, pretty much everyone in the province of Asia heard the message.

Now here's where it gets really wild. God was working through me in ways that blew my mind. People were bringing handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched my skin to the sick, and BOOM—diseases gone, evil spirits out! I'm not gonna lie, it felt pretty cool, but I kept reminding myself it was God's power, not mine.

Then these seven brothers—the sons of this Jewish chief priest named Sceva—decided they wanted in on the action. They'd seen me cast out demons by invoking Jesus' name, so they tried to copycat.

They're standing over this demon-possessed guy saying, "In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, we command you to come out!"

The demon literally laughs at them and says—I am NOT making this up—"Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are YOU guys?"

Then the possessed man LEAPS on them, beats them up, and tears their clothes off! These seven grown men ran out of the house naked, bloody, and thoroughly humiliated.

Word spread FAST. Everyone in Ephesus, Jews and Greeks alike, was talking about it. People realized the name of Jesus wasn't some magic word you could throw around—it carried real authority that demanded respect.

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Many new believers started coming forward, publicly confessing the sketchy stuff they'd been involved in. A bunch who had practiced sorcery brought their spell books and scrolls and burned them in front of everyone. We calculated the value—fifty thousand drachmas! That's like several million dollars today!

The message about Jesus was spreading like wildfire, but then—drama alert—a silversmith named Demetrius stirred up trouble. He made silver shrines of Artemis (the local goddess with the temple that everyone's obsessed with) and realized our message was bad for business.

He calls a meeting with his fellow silversmiths: "Gentlemen, you know we make good money from this business. But this Paul guy is convincing people that handmade gods aren't real gods at all! Not only is our trade in danger, but the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited!"

They get so worked up they start shouting, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" The whole city goes into an uproar. People grab my travel companions, Gaius and Aristarchus, and drag them to the theater.

I wanted to go address the crowd, but the believers wouldn't let me. Even some friendly officials sent word: "Dude, do NOT go into that theater unless you have a death wish."

Meanwhile, the theater is absolute chaos. Most people don't even know why they're there, and everyone's shouting different things. It's like the world's worst flash mob.

The Jews push this guy Alexander forward to explain, but when the crowd realizes he's Jewish, they drown him out by chanting "*Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!*" for TWO SOLID HOURS. (Talk about needing throat lozenges after that!)

Finally, the city clerk gets everyone to shut up. "People of Ephesus! Who doesn't know our city is the guardian of Artemis's temple? These men haven't robbed temples or blasphemed our goddess. If Demetrius has a case, there are courts and proconsuls. Take it up legally! You could



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be charged with rioting over this unofficial meeting."

After that mic drop, he dismissed the assembly.

Crisis averted! But it was clear my time in Ephesus was coming to an end. I gathered the disciples, encouraged them one last time, and headed off to Macedonia for another day in the life of an apostle!

# Chapter

# 20

## **Goodbye, Macedonia! Hello, Greece!**

So after that whole riot situation in Ephesus finally calmed down (drama, am I right?), I decided it was time to move on. I called all the believers together for one last pep talk, gave them some massive hugs, and headed out to Macedonia.

I spent a few months traveling through those regions, dropping wisdom bombs and encouraging everyone I met. Not gonna lie, it was pretty awesome seeing how fired up people got about Jesus! Eventually, I made it to Greece, where I chilled for about three months.

But then—because my life is never simple—I found out some Jewish leaders were plotting against me. Again. 🙄 I was about to sail to Syria but had to completely change my plans and go back through Macedonia instead. Talk about a detour!

## **Squad Goals**

My travel crew was epic! We had,

- Sopater from Berea (total brain)
- Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica (the dynamic duo)
- Gaius from Derbe (always has snacks)
- Timothy (my right-hand man)

- Tychicus and Trophimus from Asia (navigation experts)

They went ahead and waited for me in Troas while I finished some business. After the Festival of Unleavened Bread, I sailed from Philippi and caught up with them five days later. We ended up staying in Troas for a week.

### **The All-Night Sermon (and That One Guy Who Couldn't Stay Awake)**

On Sunday night, we all got together to share a meal and talk about God. I knew I was leaving the next day, so I might have gotten a little carried away with my goodbye speech. Okay, I was straight-up preaching until midnight! The room was packed and lit up with lamps everywhere.

There was this young guy named Eutychus sitting in the window (probably trying to get some fresh air because it was getting STUFFY in there). Poor dude started nodding off while I was talking—which, fair enough, it was super late—but then he fell into a deep sleep and FELL OUT THE WINDOW!

From the third story, you guys!

Everyone rushed down in a panic, and when they picked him up, he wasn't breathing. I ran down, threw myself on him, and wrapped my arms around him.

"Don't freak out!" I told everyone. "He's alive!"

Talk about a miracle! We all went back upstairs, shared communion, and—I'm not even kidding—I kept talking until sunrise. I really need to work on my sermon length! But hey, Eutychus was fine, and everyone was so relieved.

### **Island Hopping and Heart-to-Hearts**

The next day, the crew sailed ahead to Assos while I decided to go by land (sometimes you just need to walk and clear your head, you know?). We met up in Assos, then sailed to Mitylene, then near Chios, then to Samos, and finally to Miletus. I decided to sail past Ephesus because I was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem by Pentecost if possible.

But I really wanted to see my Ephesian friends one last time, so I sent a message from Miletus asking the church

elders to come meet me.

## **The Tearful Goodbye**

When they arrived, I got real with them.

"Look, you guys know how I've lived among you from day one. It hasn't always been easy—there were tears, trials, and those constant plots against me. But I never held back anything that would help you. I've preached everywhere, to everyone, telling both Jews and Greeks to turn to God and have faith in Jesus.

"Now I feel this spiritual pull toward Jerusalem. I don't know exactly what's waiting for me there, except that the Holy Spirit keeps warning me that prison and hardships are coming. But honestly? I don't care what happens to me as long as I finish what Jesus asked me to do—to tell everyone about God's amazing grace.

"I know this is goodbye. None of you will see my face again."

I looked around at all their faces, feeling my throat tighten.

"I've done my best. I've told you everything God wanted me to. Now it's your turn. Watch over yourselves and all the believers. Be shepherds for God's church that Jesus bought with his own blood.

"After I leave, I know some people will come in like savage wolves, not sparing the flock. Some will twist the truth to draw followers after themselves. So stay alert! Remember how for three years, I never stopped warning each of you, day and night, sometimes through tears?

"Now I'm entrusting you to God and his grace-filled message that can build you up and give you the inheritance among all those who are holy. And you know I never wanted anyone's money or clothes—these hands of mine worked hard to provide for myself and my companions. I showed you that we must work hard to help the weak, remembering what Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

## **Waterworks Central**

When I finished speaking, I knelt down with all of them and prayed. Then came the waterworks—everyone was crying their eyes out as they hugged me and kissed me goodbye. What hurt them most was knowing they'd never see me again.

Then they walked with me to the ship, and it was honestly one of the hardest goodbyes I've ever had to say.

# Chapter 21

## **Paul's Wild Road Trip to Jerusalem**

So, there I was—Paul—saying goodbye to my buddies in Ephesus. Not gonna lie, it was pretty emotional. We had this big group hug and everything. Everyone was crying because they thought they'd never see my face again. Talk about dramatic, right?

Anyway, we finally peeled ourselves away from each other and set sail. We went straight to Cos, then Rhodes, and then to Patara. Think of it as an ancient Mediterranean cruise, except with way fewer buffets and no pool deck.

At Patara, we found another ship heading to Phoenicia, so we hopped on. We sailed past Cyprus (didn't stop for souvenirs, unfortunately) and landed in Tyre. The ship needed to unload cargo there, so we had a week to kill.

## **In Tyre**

We found some local Christians in Tyre who were totally cool and let us crash at their place. But then things got weird. They started telling me through the Holy Spirit, "Dude, Paul, don't go to Jerusalem! Bad vibes!"

But I was like, "Thanks for the warning, but I've got to go. It's kind of my thing."

After a week, we had to leave. And get this—the ENTIRE church, plus wives and kids, walked us all the way to the beach! We had this impromptu prayer service right there

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on the sand. I'm not making this up.

From Tyre, we sailed to Ptolemais, hung out with the Christians there for a day, and then headed to Caesarea, where we stayed with Philip the evangelist. Remember him? The guy's got four unmarried daughters who can prophesy. Talk about an intimidating family dinner conversation—five people who can tell you what you're going to do before you do it!

### **The Belt Incident**

While we were chilling at Philip's place, this prophet named Agabus showed up from Judea. And he doesn't just tell me what's going to happen—he has to make a whole production out of it.

He grabs MY OWN BELT, ties up his hands and feet with it (weird flex, but okay), and announces, "The Holy Spirit says: 'This is how the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and hand him over to the Gentiles.'"

Everyone freaked out. My travel buddies and the local Christians started begging me, "Paul, please don't go to Jerusalem! Did you not see what he just did with your belt?!"

I had to say, "Why are you all crying and breaking my heart? I'm ready not just to be tied up but to die in Jerusalem for Jesus!"

When they realized I wasn't going to change my mind (stubborn? me?), they were like, "Fine, whatever God wants." Classic passive-aggressive move, but I appreciated them caring.

### **Road Trip to Jerusalem: The Final Stretch**

A few days later, we packed up and headed for Jerusalem. Some Christians from Caesarea came with us and arranged for us to stay with this really old-school believer named Mnason from Cyprus.

When we finally got to Jerusalem, the believers welcomed us like we were celebrities or something. It was pretty awesome.

## **The Jerusalem Situation**

The next day, I went to see James and all the elders. I gave them the full rundown of what God had been doing among the Gentiles. They were impressed and praised God, but then things got awkward.

James was like, "So, Paul... there's something you should know. Thousands of Jewish believers here are SUPER zealous for the law, and they've heard some rumors about you."

I was like, "What rumors?"

He explained, "They think you're telling Jews living among Gentiles to ditch Moses' customs, stop circumcising their kids, the whole nine yards."

I started sweating. "That's not exactly—"

James interrupted, "Here's what you're gonna do. We've got four guys who made a vow. Take them, go through the purification ritual with them, pay for their head-shaving ceremony, and everyone will know those rumors are fake news."

James continued, "As for the Gentile believers, we've already sent them a letter saying they only need to avoid idol food, blood, strangled meat, and sexual immorality."

What could I say? "Sure, James. Whatever you think best."

## **Temple Trouble**

So the next day, I took the guys and went through the purification rituals. I announced in the temple when our purification would be complete and when we'd offer sacrifices. Everything was going according to plan.

But then, when the seven days were almost up, some Jews from Asia spotted me in the temple. These guys had a vendetta against me from way back. They started shouting, "HELP! This is the guy who teaches everyone everywhere against our people, our law, and this place! And he even brought Greeks into the temple and defiled it!"

For the record, they had seen me in the city with Trophimus the Ephesian earlier and ASSUMED I brought



him into the temple. Epic misunderstanding.

The whole city went nuts. A mob formed, dragged me out of the temple, and immediately closed the doors behind me. They were trying to kill me right there on the spot! Not cool, guys. Not cool at all.

### **Saved by the Romans (Never Thought I'd Say That)**

News reached the Roman commander that Jerusalem was in chaos. He immediately rushed down with officers and soldiers. When the crowd saw the Romans coming, they stopped beating me. Talk about perfect timing!

The commander came over, arrested me, and ordered me to be bound with two chains. Then he tried to figure out what was happening, but everyone in the crowd was screaming different things. It was total chaos.

Since he couldn't get any straight answers because of the uproar, he ordered the soldiers to take me to the barracks. When we got to the steps, the crowd became so violent that the soldiers had to actually CARRY me! The whole mob was following, screaming, "Away with him!"

As they were about to take me into the barracks, I said to the commander in Greek, "Mind if I say something to you?"

Surprised, he responded, "You speak Greek? Aren't you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led 4,000 terrorists into the wilderness?"

I replied, "Um, no. I'm a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of an important city. Please let me speak to the people."

With his permission, I stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. When they all quieted down, I began to address them in Aramaic.

But that's a story for the next chapter...

## Chapter 22

### **My Epic Courtyard Speech when I Tried to Explain Myself to an Angry Mob**

So there I was, standing on the steps of the barracks with soldiers holding me up. Behind me, the Roman commander who had just saved me from being torn apart by a crowd. In front of me, hundreds of angry faces. Not exactly my ideal speaking venue, but hey, when life gives you lemons...

I raised my hand for silence, and surprisingly, the crowd actually quieted down. I guess they weren't expecting me to address them in their own language.

"Listen up, fellow Jews!" I called out in Aramaic. The moment they heard me speaking their language, they got even quieter. Score one for linguistic skills!

"I'm Paul, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but I grew up right here in Jerusalem. And before you ask—yes, I studied under Gamaliel. Full scholarship, rigorous training in every detail of the Law. I was just as zealous for God as all of you are today. Trust me, I get it."

I scanned the crowd, remembering how I used to be one of them.

"I didn't just dislike followers of the Way—I persecuted them to death! I arrested both men and women and threw them in prison. The high priest and council of elders can vouch for me! They even gave me letters to take to Damascus so I could arrest Christians there and bring

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them back to Jerusalem for punishment."

Some of the faces in the crowd seemed to soften slightly. They were following my story, at least.

"But then... something happened on my way to Damascus. Around noon—brightest part of the day—this light from heaven suddenly flashed around me. Not just any light. We're talking brighter-than-the-sun bright! I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'"

I could see some eye-rolling in the audience. Fair enough—I wouldn't have believed it either before it happened to me.

"So I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he replied, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, the one you're persecuting.' My travel buddies saw the light but couldn't understand the voice. I was like, 'What should I do now?' And the Lord said, 'Get up and go to Damascus. Someone there will tell you everything you need to do.'"

I gestured dramatically with my hands. "The light was so bright I was literally blinded! My friends had to lead me by the hand into Damascus like I was a toddler learning to walk."

Some nervous laughter rippled through the crowd.

"In Damascus, there was this man named Ananias—super devout, well-respected by all the Jews living there. He came to me and said, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And just like that—boom!—I could see again! Talk about instant healing!"

I paused, making eye contact with people in the crowd.

"Then Ananias told me, 'The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One, and to hear his voice. You will be his witness to everyone about what you've seen and heard. So what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized, and wash away your sins by calling on his name!'"

I decided to skip ahead to the part about my return to Jerusalem.

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"Later, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking to me: 'Hurry! Leave Jerusalem immediately because they won't accept your testimony about me.'"

I could see the crowd getting restless again.

"I argued with him! I was like, 'Lord, these people know I went from synagogue to synagogue imprisoning and beating those who believed in you. And when the blood of your witness Stephen was shed, I was standing there giving my approval, even watching the coats of those who were killing him!'"

The mention of Stephen's death caused some murmuring. Tough crowd.

"But the Lord said to me, 'Go! I'm sending you far away to the Gentiles.'"

And that's when everything went south.

The crowd had been relatively chill until I mentioned the G-word: Gentiles. They instantly erupted: "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!"

They started throwing their cloaks around and tossing dust into the air like they were at some kind of angry mob convention. Drama queens, am I right?

The commander, probably thinking "what is even happening right now?", ordered me to be taken into the barracks. He decided a good flogging would get me to explain why everyone was so upset with me. Super logical plan there, buddy.

As they stretched me out to be flogged, I glanced at the centurion standing there and casually dropped: "Um, is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been convicted?"

You should have seen the centurion's face! He rushed to the commander, whispering urgently, "Sir, this guy's a Roman citizen. Maybe we shouldn't, you know, illegally torture him?"

The commander came over looking slightly panicked. "Tell me, are you really a Roman citizen?"

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"Sure am," I replied.

"I had to pay a fortune for my citizenship," he said, probably trying to catch me in a lie.

I couldn't help but smirk a little. "Well, I was born a citizen."

Suddenly everyone who had been preparing to flog me backed away like I had a contagious disease. The commander looked like he might pass out, realizing he had nearly flogged a Roman citizen without trial.

The next day, still determined to figure out what I was being accused of, the commander ordered the chief priests and Sanhedrin to gather, and brought me to stand before them.

And that's where this chapter of my crazy journey ends. Trust me, it only gets more interesting from here...

## Chapter 23

### **Paul's Before the Sanhedrin**

So there I was, standing before the Sanhedrin—aka the Jewish Supreme Court—with all these important religious dudes staring me down. Talk about pressure! But hey, I'm Paul. I've been through worse.

"Members of the Sanhedrin, my brothers," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "I've lived my whole life in good conscience before God up to this day."

Before I could even finish my awesome opening statement, the high priest Ananias ordered someone to slap me across the face. SERIOUSLY?!

"God will slap YOU, you whitewashed wall!" I snapped back. Okay, not my finest moment, but come on! "You sit there judging me according to the law, but you break the law by commanding me to be hit?"

The people standing nearby looked shocked. "Dude, that's the high priest you're talking to!" one of them gasped.

I immediately backpedaled. "Sorry, bros. I didn't realize he was the high priest. The scripture does say, 'Don't speak evil about a ruler of your people.'"

Mental note: Get my eyes checked when this is all over.

Then I had a total lightbulb moment. I looked around the room and noticed something important—the council was

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split between Pharisees (super strict rule-followers who believe in resurrection) and Sadducees and don't believe in resurrection, angels.

"Hey everyone! I'm on trial because I'm a Pharisee, and I believe in the resurrection of the dead!" I announced loudly.

BOOM! Total chaos! The Pharisees and Sadducees started arguing with each other instead of ganging up on me.

Some Pharisees even stood up for me, shouting, "We find nothing wrong with this guy! What if a spirit or angel spoke to him? You never know!"

The argument got so heated that the commander was afraid they might literally tear me to pieces. He ordered his soldiers to take me back to the barracks. Score one for quick thinking!

That night, as I tried to fall asleep in my cell, the Lord suddenly appeared beside me.

"Keep up the good work, Paul," He said. "Just as you've been My witness in Jerusalem, you must also be My witness in Rome."

I was like, "Rome? THE Rome? Okay, then..."

The next morning, I overheard some scary stuff. More than forty Jewish zealots had taken an oath not to eat or drink until they killed me. Talk about extreme dieting! They approached the chief priests and elders with their plan.

"We've made this solemn oath to kill Paul," they said. "So you guys need to tell the commander to bring Paul down tomorrow for more questioning, and we'll ambush him on the way."

Yikes! Fortunately, my nephew (my sister's son) overheard their plot and rushed to tell me.

I called one of the centurions over. "Take this young man to the commander. He has something important to tell him."

So the centurion took my nephew to the commander.

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Commander Lysias listened to my nephew's story about the ambush and then said, "Don't tell anyone that you've reported this to me."

Then Lysias called two of his centurions. "Get ready 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen, and 200 spearmen to go to Caesarea at 9 PM tonight. Provide mounts for Paul to ride, and take him safely to Governor Felix."

The commander even wrote a letter to Felix explaining everything:

*"Dear Most Excellent Governor Felix, This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them when I came with my troops and rescued him. I learned he is a Roman citizen. I wanted to know why they were accusing him, so I brought him before their Sanhedrin. I found that the accusation had to do with questions about their law, but there was no charge against him deserving death or imprisonment. When I was informed of a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once and ordered his accusers to present their case against him before you. Best regards,*

*Commander Claudius Lysias"*

That night, the soldiers took me as far as Antipatris. The next day, the horsemen continued with me to Caesarea while the soldiers returned to the barracks. When we arrived, the horsemen delivered the letter to Governor Felix and presented me to him.

Felix read the letter and asked, "Which province are you from?"

"Cilicia," I replied.

"I will hear your case when your accusers get here," Felix said and ordered me to be kept in Herod's palace.

And that's how I went from nearly being torn apart by an angry mob to being protected by hundreds of Roman soldiers. God works in mysterious ways—sometimes through Roman military escorts!

I wonder what's going to happen next... Rome, here I come (eventually)!



## Chapter 24

### **Paul tells About the Epic Drama in Felix's Court**

I was, stuck in Caesarea for FIVE WHOLE DAYS. After being shipped off like some kind of criminal, the high priest, Ananias, finally shows up with some elders and this lawyer dude named Tertullus. Talk about taking your sweet time, right?

When I got called into the courtroom, Tertullus started laying it on thick for Governor Felix. I'm rolling my eyes so hard they might fall out of my head.

"Most excellent Felix," he starts, sounding like he's auditioning for a school play, "we are SO grateful for the peace you've brought and all the AMAZING reforms! We don't want to waste your PRECIOUS time..."

*Gag me with a spoon.* This guy is really sucking up.

Then he gets to the accusations: "We found this man Paul. He's like, THE WORST. A troublemaker, starts riots everywhere, leads this weird Nazarene cult, and—get this—he tried to desecrate the temple! We were gonna

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handle it ourselves, but Commander Lysias TOTALLY overstepped and took him away from us."

Felix motions for me to speak. Finally!

"Look, Governor," I say, trying not to sound as annoyed as I feel, "I only arrived in Jerusalem TWELVE DAYS ago to worship. TWELVE. Not exactly enough time to start a revolution. Did they catch me arguing with anyone in the temple? Leading a mob? Stirring up crowds in the synagogues? No? That's what I thought."

I straighten my shoulders. "I'll admit I follow 'the Way' which they call a cult, but I worship the same God as my ancestors. I believe everything in the Law and the Prophets. I have the same hope as these guys—that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. I always try to keep my conscience clear before God and people."

"Truth is, I came to Jerusalem bringing gifts for the poor and to make offerings. Some Jews from Asia found me in the temple after I'd gone through the purification rites. I wasn't causing any trouble! Those guys should be here making their accusations if they have anything against me!"

I point at the Jewish leaders. "Or ask these dudes right here what crime I committed when I stood before the Sanhedrin—other than shouting about being on trial for believing in the resurrection, which divided the Pharisees and Sadducees because they disagree on that."

Felix seemed pretty knowledgeable about the Way, surprisingly. He adjourned the court but ordered the commander to keep me under guard, though with some freedoms. My friends could visit and take care of me. Not exactly five-star accommodations, but better than a dungeon, I guess.

A few days later, Felix showed up with his wife Drusilla, who's Jewish. He sent for me, wanting to hear more about faith in Christ Jesus. I talked about righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment.

Felix got SUPER uncomfortable. I could see him squirming in his seat. "That's enough for now," he said,

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looking like he'd seen a ghost. "When I find a convenient time, I'll send for you again."

What he was REALLY hoping for was that I'd slip him some cash under the table as a bribe. Spoiler alert: I didn't. So he kept me in prison for TWO WHOLE YEARS. TWO YEARS, people! Talk about a grudge.

Finally, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but he left me in prison to keep the Jewish leaders happy. Politics, am I right?

So that's where I am now. Still waiting. Still faithful. Still wondering what God has planned next in this crazy journey.

And between you and me, prison food is THE WORST.

## Chapter 24

### **Paul's Journal - Day 731 of Being Stuck in Prison**

#### **Prison Break...or Not?**

Okay, so here's the deal. I've been stuck in this Caesarea prison for TWO WHOLE YEARS. Two years! That's like, what, 24 months of the same boring walls, the same boring food, and the same boring guards asking me the same boring questions. All because Felix, the governor, couldn't make up his mind about my case and then just... left? Like, dude, I'm still here!

But finally—FINALLY—something is happening! This new guy, Festus (yes, that's actually his name, try not to laugh), has taken over as governor. Three days after arriving, he headed up to Jerusalem. I wasn't there, obviously, but I heard all about it from the guards.

Apparently, as soon as Festus set foot in Jerusalem, all the Jewish leaders were like, "Hey, remember that Paul guy? Yeah, we still want him dead." They begged Festus to transfer me back to Jerusalem for "trial." And by "trial," I mean "ambush on the road to murder me." Subtle, guys. Real subtle.

But get this—Festus actually said NO! He was like, "Look,

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Paul's in Caesarea, and I'm heading back there soon anyway. Send your top people, and we'll handle it there." Score one for the new guy!

### **A Few Days Later**

Oh, my... Today was INTENSE.

Festus took his seat in the court, looking all official and stuff. I was brought in, and suddenly all these Jewish leaders from Jerusalem were surrounding me, hurling accusations left and right.

"He disrespects the temple!" "He's against the law!" "He's stirring up trouble everywhere!" "He doesn't rewind his scrolls before returning them!"

Okay, maybe not that last one, but you get the idea. The problem? They had ZERO evidence. None. Zilch. Nada.

So I stood my ground. "I've done nothing wrong against the Jewish law, the temple, or the emperor," I told them. Simple as that.

Then Festus, trying to score some political points with the Jerusalem crowd, asked me, "So, Paul, you cool with going to Jerusalem and being tried there?"

Um, NO. Hard pass. I've been down this road before, and I know exactly what would happen. So I pulled out my Roman citizen card.

"Look, I'm standing before Caesar's court, where I should be tried. I haven't done anything wrong to the Jewish people, as you very well know. If I'm guilty of anything deserving death, I'm ready to die. But if these charges are bogus—which they are—no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!"

You should have seen Festus's face! He was NOT expecting that. He huddled with his advisors for a hot minute, then came back looking slightly annoyed.

"Fine. You've appealed to Caesar, to Caesar you will go."

### **A Few Days Later...Again**

Just when I thought things might calm down, we get some royal drama up in here. King Agrippa and his sister

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Bernice arrived to pay their respects to the new governor. Festus, probably desperate for some advice, told Agrippa all about my case.

"So I've got this prisoner Felix left behind," Festus explained. "The Jewish leaders want him condemned, but that's not how we Romans roll. We don't just hand people over without a proper trial."

He continued, "But here's the weird part—when they accused him, it wasn't about any crimes I was expecting. It was all religious stuff about some dead guy named Jesus who Paul claims is alive."

I can just imagine Festus throwing his hands up: "I was like, 'Do you want to go to Jerusalem for trial?' And then he goes and appeals to the emperor! Now I'm stuck sending him to Rome, but I don't even know what to write about him!"

Agrippa, probably intrigued by all this drama, said, "I'd like to hear this man myself."

Festus, looking relieved, replied, "Great! You can hear him tomorrow!"

### **So here I am**

I'm about to speak before actual royalty tomorrow. King Agrippa, Bernice, Festus, military tribunes, prominent citizens—basically everyone who's anyone in Caesarea.

You know what? Bring it on. This might be my biggest audience yet to tell about Jesus. Sometimes God works in mysterious ways...like using two years in prison and a bunch of false accusations to spread the good news.

Stay tuned for tomorrow's episode of "Paul's Roman Adventure: The Never-Ending Legal Drama!"

## Chapter 26

### **Paul Before Agrippa: Most Awkward Royal Court Ever**

So there I was, standing in front of King Agrippa and his sister Bernice. Talk about pressure! The room was packed with military commanders and important people from the city. Everyone was staring at me like I was the weirdest exhibit at the Roman circus.

Festus, the governor who couldn't decide what to do with me, had arranged this whole thing. He was like that teacher who calls on another teacher when they don't know the answer. "King Agrippa will figure out what to write to Caesar about this guy!"

Agrippa looked at me and said, "Alright Paul, you have permission to speak for yourself."

I took a deep breath, stretched out my hand dramatically (gotta make an impression, right?), and began my defense:

"I consider myself fortunate, King Agrippa, that I get to

defend myself before you today. Especially since you're familiar with all the Jewish customs and controversies. So please, be patient with me."

### **The "Before" Picture**

"So, about my life story... Every Jew knows I grew up as a hardcore Pharisee - think 'religious rule-follower extraordinaire.' If they're being honest, they'll tell you I was Pharisee-ing better than most Pharisees! I was so dedicated that I thought I should do everything possible to oppose Jesus of Nazareth.

"And that's exactly what I did in Jerusalem. With the blessing of the chief priests, I threw many believers in prison. When they were condemned to death, I was the one enthusiastically voting against them. I would go from synagogue to synagogue, trying to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even chased them to foreign cities!

"Not exactly my proudest life chapter, just saying."

### **The Road Trip That Changed Everything**

"So picture this: I'm on my way to Damascus, armed with authority from the chief priests, ready to arrest more believers. It's around noon, blazing hot, when suddenly—BOOM!—a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, flashes around me and my travel buddies. We all hit the dirt!

"Then I hear a voice speaking to me in Aramaic: 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It's painful for you to keep kicking against the goads.'

"I'm lying there, face in the dust, completely terrified. 'Who are you, Lord?' I ask.

"'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' he answers. 'But get up and stand on your feet. I've appeared to you for a reason: to appoint you as a servant and witness. You'll testify about what you've seen and what I'll show you. I'll rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I'm sending you to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light, from Satan's power to God, so they can receive forgiveness and a place among those made holy



by faith in me.'

"Talk about a career change! One minute I'm Persecutor-in-Chief, the next I'm getting a divine job offer I literally couldn't refuse."

### **The Aftermath**

"So, King Agrippa, what was I supposed to do? Ghost Jesus? I wasn't about to ignore a vision from heaven! I started preaching first in Damascus, then Jerusalem, then throughout Judea, and finally to the Gentiles. My message has been consistent: 'Repent, turn to God, and prove your repentance by your deeds.'

"That's it. That's why the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. But God has helped me to this very day, so I stand here testifying to both small and great. I'm not saying anything beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Messiah would suffer and be the first to rise from the dead, bringing light to Jews and Gentiles."

### **The Awkward Ending**

As I was getting to the good part of my defense, Festus interrupts me. Rude much?

"PAUL, YOU'RE OUT OF YOUR MIND!" he shouts. "Your great learning has driven you insane!"

I kept my cool. "I am not insane, most excellent Festus. What I'm saying is true and reasonable. King Agrippa knows about these things, which is why I can speak freely to him. None of this happened in a corner—it wasn't a secret."

Then I looked straight at Agrippa. "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do!"

Talk about putting someone on the spot! Agrippa shifted uncomfortably and said, "Do you think you can persuade me to become a Christian in such a short time?"

I couldn't help smiling. "Whether it takes a short or long time, I pray to God that not only you but everyone listening today may become what I am—except for these chains, of course." I rattled my chains for dramatic effect.

## TIPPING POINT

A little prison humor never hurts.

Agrippa, Festus, Bernice, and all their entourage got up to leave. On their way out, I overheard them saying, "This man hasn't done anything deserving death or imprisonment."

And Agrippa said to Festus, "He could have been set free if he hadn't appealed to Caesar."

So yeah, that's how I ended up on a boat to Rome. All because I couldn't keep my mouth shut about Jesus. But honestly? Worth it.

## Chapter 27

### **Paul's Worst Cruise Ever**

So there I was, prisoner Paul, about to embark on the worst Mediterranean cruise of all time. No buffet, no pool deck, just me and a bunch of other prisoners being shipped off to Rome to face trial before Caesar. Not exactly the vacation package I'd signed up for.

Our travel agent—I mean, the centurion in charge—was named Julius, a surprisingly decent guy for someone whose job was basically "prisoner babysitter." He even let me visit some friends when we docked at Sidon. First stop: not terrible.

We boarded this Alexandrian ship at Myra (after a quick vessel change—our first ship was moving slower than my grandmother). Captain Anonymous seemed confident enough, but I had this sinking feeling. And not just because I get seasick.

The winds were being total jerks. We barely crawled along the coast of Crete. When we finally reached a place

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called Fair Havens, I stood up during dinner and cleared my throat.

"Guys, I don't want to be *that* passenger, but if we sail now, this trip is going to end with all our stuff at the bottom of the sea. Also, possibly us."

The captain and the ship's owner exchanged looks like I'd suggested the earth was flat. Julius, our centurion, sided with them. I mean, Fair Havens wasn't exactly a five-star port to spend winter in, but at least it wasn't, you know, DEADLY.

But no one listens to the prisoner with the direct line to God. Typical.

When a gentle south wind started blowing, everyone was like "See, Paul? You worry too much!" They pulled up anchor, thinking we'd have smooth sailing to Phoenix.

Narrator: They would not have smooth sailing to Phoenix.

Before you could say "I told you so," this massive storm—like, hurricane-level nightmare—slammed into us. They called it a "northeaster," which sounds way too cute for what it actually was.

The sailors were frantically trying to secure the ship, running around like teenagers who just found out there's a pop quiz. They passed ropes under the hull, lowered the sea anchor, and basically did everything except the one thing I suggested: NOT SAILING.

Day after day, this storm kept pounding us. It was so dark we couldn't see the sun or stars. The sailors started throwing cargo overboard, which is never a good sign. Then they threw the ship's tackle overboard too. At this point, I'm thinking, "What's next? The passengers?"

After two weeks of this—two weeks of no food, no sleep, and everyone basically accepting death—I stood up again.

"Remember when I said we shouldn't sail? Yeah, that was a thing. BUT, good news: an angel of my God appeared to me last night and said none of us will die. The ship? Total loss. But us? We're going to make it. Oh, and we're going to run aground on some island."

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The sailors looked at me like I was either a prophet or had finally lost my mind from hunger. Maybe both.

On the fourteenth night, around midnight, the sailors sensed we were approaching land. They started taking depth soundings, and sure enough, the water was getting shallower. Fearing we'd crash into rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight.

Then I caught some sailors trying to sneak away in the lifeboat, pretending they were "laying out anchors from the bow." Yeah, right.

I turned to Julius. "If these guys leave, we're all doomed."

Julius trusted me by now (amazing what two weeks of accurate predictions will do). The soldiers cut the ropes to the lifeboat and let it drift away. No escape plan for anyone—we're all in this together!

As dawn approached, I convinced everyone to eat something. "It's been two weeks, and none of you have had a proper meal. You're going to need strength to survive what's coming. Not one hair on your heads will perish."

I grabbed some bread, gave thanks to God right there in front of everyone, and started eating. Suddenly, 276 very hungry people perked up and joined me for the most appreciated meal of their lives.

After everyone had eaten, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea. When daylight came, nobody recognized the land, but they spotted a bay with a sandy beach. Perfect landing spot—if "landing" means "controlled shipwreck."

The plan: cut the anchors, loosen the ropes to the rudders, raise the foresail, and make a beach run. What could go wrong?

Everything. The ship struck a sandbar and got stuck. The bow wedged in and wouldn't move, while the stern was being smashed to pieces by the waves.

The soldiers—being soldiers—wanted to kill all the prisoners to prevent escapes. I know, charming, right? But Julius, wanting to spare my life (I was growing on

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him), stopped them. Instead, he ordered everyone who could swim to jump overboard and head for shore. The rest grabbed planks and ship debris to float on.

And you know what? Every single one of us—all 276—reached land safely. Exactly as I'd said. We later found out we'd landed on Malta, which turned out to be full of unusually kind people who didn't immediately try to rob or kill us. A nice change of pace.

So that's the story of how I survived the cruise from Hades, predicted a shipwreck, and got everyone safely to shore through the biggest storm ever. And Julius? Pretty sure he's leaving a five-star review for my prophecy skills on TripAdvisor.

## Chapter 28

### Shipwrecked!

So there we were, total shipwreck survivors washing up on some random island. Not exactly how I planned to visit Malta, but hey—travel plans in the first century are *super* flexible.

"We're alive!" I shouted, probably a bit too enthusiastically while spitting out seawater. The locals were already gathering on the beach, staring at us like we were the weirdest thing they'd seen all year. To be fair, 276 drenched, shivering people stumbling onto your beach is pretty unusual.

The Maltese people were absolute legends. They built this massive bonfire to warm us up, which was exactly what we needed after that nightmare swim through the stormy sea. I was helping gather firewood—trying to be useful, you know?—when WHAM! This snake jumps out and latches onto my hand!

"Dude!" one of the locals shouted, pointing at my hand. "That's a deadly viper! You're toast!"

Everyone was just standing there, waiting for me to drop dead. Awkward. I just shook the snake off into the fire and kept talking like nothing happened. Their faces were priceless.

"He must be a murderer," I heard someone whisper. "Justice is catching up with him even though he escaped

the sea!"

Five minutes later, I was still not dead, still gathering sticks. Their tune completely changed.

"He must be a god!" they decided. Um, no. Definitely not, but thanks for the hospitality upgrade!

The head honcho of the island, Publius, invited us to crash at his place. Talk about VIP treatment! His dad was super sick with fever and dysentery (gross, I know), so I prayed for him and—boom!—healed! Word travels fast on a small island, and soon sick people were coming from everywhere.

"Paul! My arthritis!" "Paul! My migraines!" "Paul! My brother can't stop talking about his boring rock collection!"

Okay, maybe not that last one. I can heal sickness, not personality quirks. But we spent three months there, and it was honestly pretty awesome—except for the whole "being a prisoner" thing. The locals loved us so much they loaded us with supplies when we finally left.

When spring came, we boarded another Alexandrian ship (I know what you're thinking—and yes, I was nervous too after the last ship disaster). This one had the twin gods Castor and Pollux as its figurehead. I just shook my head. These Roman gods weren't exactly helpful during our last voyage, but whatever.

We made stops at Syracuse (three days—barely enough time for decent pizza), then Rhegium, and finally Puteoli, where we found some fellow Christians! They begged us to stay a week, and the centurion Julius—who'd become pretty chill with me by this point—was like, "Sure, whatever, Paul."

News traveled ahead that we were coming to Rome, and believers came out to meet us at the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns. Seeing their faces gave me such a boost! Like getting a second wind after running twenty miles.

Once in Rome, I got the royal treatment of... house arrest. Still, it was way better than regular prison. I had my own rented house with just one guard. Social distancing,



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ancient Roman style!

Three days after arriving, I invited the local Jewish leaders over.

"So, guys," I said, casually adjusting my chains, "just wanted to clear the air. I'm not here because I did anything against our people or customs. The Romans actually wanted to release me because I was innocent, but the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem made such a fuss that I had to appeal to Caesar."

They looked confused. "We haven't received any letters about you from Judea, and nobody has said anything bad about you. But we've heard about this 'sect' everywhere, and people are pretty divided about it. We want to hear what you think."

We scheduled a full-day meeting, and WAY more people showed up than I expected. From morning till evening, I explained everything about Jesus, using the Law of Moses and the Prophets as my evidence. Some were convinced; others weren't buying it. Classic mixed reaction—story of my life.

As they were arguing among themselves, I couldn't help but quote Isaiah: "You will keep on hearing but never understand; you will keep on seeing but never perceive..."

Not the most diplomatic exit line, but sometimes the truth hurts.

For the next two years, I stayed in that house, welcoming everyone who came to see me. I proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about Jesus with complete boldness and absolutely no hinderances. Even in chains, God's word can't be stopped!

And that's where my story pauses... for now. But trust me, God wasn't finished with me yet!

*#ShipwreckedButStillPreaching*

*#HouseArrestCantstopGod #SnakeBitten #RomanTour*

# Paul's Journey Beyond Acts

## **The Ultimate Faith Adventure**

"Dude, this is like, the WORST vacation EVER," Timothy groaned, rubbing his chafed wrists as the guard unlocked their cell.

Paul looked up with that annoying half-smile he always wore when things went sideways. "What? You're not enjoying the premium Roman accommodations? I hear prison cells are totally trending this season."

Timothy rolled his eyes. "Yeah, super Instagram-worthy. #blessed #prisonlife #romans."

Paul laughed despite the serious situation. The year was 62 AD, and Paul had just spent two years under house arrest in Rome. But surprisingly, the Romans had actually released him! Most prisoners weren't that lucky.

"So what's the plan now?" Timothy asked, helping Paul gather his few possessions. "Please tell me it involves actual beds and food that wasn't prepared by someone actively trying to poison us."

"Well," Paul said, stroking his beard thoughtfully, "remember all those churches we started? I'm thinking road trip!"

Timothy groaned. "Another one? My feet are still blistered from the last one!"

## **The Post-Acts Adventures Begin**

After his release from the Roman imprisonment described at the end of Acts, Paul embarked on a fourth missionary journey. Historical accounts suggest he made good on his earlier promise to visit Spain.

"SPAIN?!" Timothy nearly choked. "That's literally on the other side of the known world!"

"Exactly!" Paul grinned. "Think of all the people who haven't heard about Jesus yet! Besides, I hear they have excellent olives."

"You and your olives," Timothy muttered. "Fine, but I'm bringing extra sandals this time."

After Spain, Paul traveled east again, visiting churches he had founded during his previous journeys. He stopped in Crete, where he left his companion Titus to organize the new believers.

"You're leaving me HERE?" Titus asked incredulously, watching Paul's ship prepare to depart.

"Just for a little while," Paul shouted from the boat. "The Cretans need leadership!"

"They need THERAPY!" Titus called back. "Yesterday one of them tried to convince me Zeus was just Jesus with a spelling error!"

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Paul's journey continued to Ephesus, Philippi, and other locations throughout Macedonia and Asia Minor. During this time, he wrote several of his letters that would later become books of the New Testament.

### **The Final Arrest**

Around 67 AD, the political situation in Rome deteriorated dramatically. Emperor Nero, looking for someone to blame for a devastating fire that had destroyed much of Rome, had turned against the Christians.

"So... I've got bad news and worse news," Luke said, entering Paul's temporary lodging in Troas.

Paul looked up from the parchment he was writing on. "Hit me with it."

"Nero's basically gone full super-villain," Luke explained. "He's blaming Christians for the fire in Rome, using them as human torches in his garden, and—"

"And the worse news?" Paul interrupted.

"They're looking for you specifically. Apparently, you're on some sort of 'Most Wanted' list."

Paul nodded calmly. "Well, at least I finally made it to the top of something."

Despite the danger, Paul refused to hide. When Roman authorities finally arrested him again, he stood tall.

"Paul of Tarsus," the centurion announced formally, "you

are under arrest for crimes against Rome."

"Wow, déjà vu much?" Paul quipped. "We really need to stop meeting like this."

Timothy stepped forward. "I'm coming too!"

The centurion pushed him back. "Only the old man."

"I'm NOT old," Paul protested. "I'm chronologically gifted."

### **The Final Days**

Unlike his first Roman imprisonment, which was relatively comfortable house arrest, this second imprisonment was brutal. Paul was held in the infamous Mamertine Prison—essentially a dark, damp hole in the ground.

"Not exactly five-star accommodations this time," Paul remarked to Luke during one of his rare permitted visits.

"Can I bring you anything?" Luke asked, pained by his friend's condition.

"My cloak from Troas would be nice. And those scrolls I left. Oh, and maybe one of those fancy Roman espressos everyone's talking about."

"Espressos haven't been invented yet, Paul."

"Right. Future thing. Sometimes I get confused."

During this final imprisonment, Paul wrote his last letter—2 Timothy—knowing his execution was imminent:

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"Listen, Timothy," Paul dictated to a scribe, "I need you to know something. I've fought the good fight, I've finished the race, I've kept the faith."

"That sounds... really final," Timothy said, voice breaking.

"Well, yeah. Not gonna sugarcoat it. Nero's not exactly known for his mercy. But here's the thing—" Paul leaned forward, eyes intense. "What we've done? It's just the beginning. This message about Jesus? It's gonna outlast Rome itself."

"How can you be so sure?" Timothy asked.

Paul smiled. "Just a hunch. Also, Luke's writing everything down, so there's that."

### **The Ultimate Witness**

In approximately 67-68 AD, historical tradition tells us that Paul was beheaded by Roman authorities under Nero's persecution. As a Roman citizen, he was granted the "mercy" of a quick death by the sword rather than crucifixion.

On his final day, according to tradition, Paul was led outside the city walls to the execution site.

"Any last words?" the executioner asked, sounding bored.

Paul looked at the small group of believers who had risked their lives to witness his final moments. He winked.

"Yeah, actually. Tell Nero I forgive him. And remind the

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others—the story isn't over. It's just getting started."

Then with remarkable calm, the man who had once been Christianity's greatest enemy, who became its greatest missionary, who had been shipwrecked three times, beaten, stoned, imprisoned repeatedly, and traveled thousands of miles on foot—knelt down.

The sword fell.

But Paul's legacy? That was just getting started.

As Timothy would later tell new believers: "You think YOUR youth pastor has cool stories? Let me tell you about this guy I knew named Paul..."

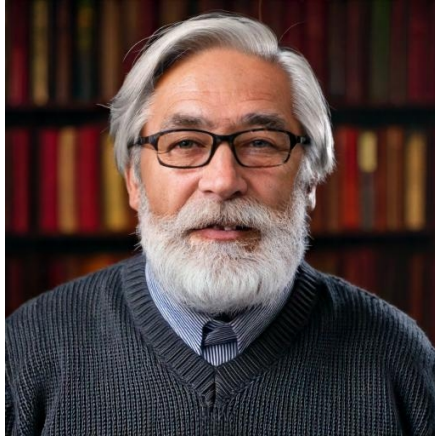
Paul's contribution to Christianity was immense. He wrote 13 letters that became books of the New Testament—almost half of the entire New Testament. His theological insights formed the foundation of Christian thought for centuries to come.

More importantly, his example of persistence, courage, and unwavering faith continues to inspire believers around the world, more than 1,950 years after his death.

As one modern historian put it: "Paul wasn't just ahead of his time. He was timeless."

Or as Timothy might have said: "The guy was straight-up legendary."

## TIPPING POINT



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Now retired, he resides in Lancaster County, PA, where he works as an educational innovator and micro-school consultant as well as teaching creative writing for *Homeschool Companion*, a virtual high school.

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