



# “Why Persecutest Thou Me?”

Acts 6-12

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## Introduction

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In these chapters, Luke both returns to some themes from his gospel and continues the narration of his “table of contents” in Act 1:8 of taking the gospel to the Jews, the Samaritans, and then the world. The themes surface in several accounts. First, Stephen’s arrest, trial, and stoning echo back to Jesus’ crucifixion in many ways, including Stephen’s final words. Peter’s healings hark back to Jesus’ ministry with his many healings, especially raising the dead. Philip’s preaching to the Ethiopian reminds us of Jesus on the road to Emmaus, opening the scriptures to the two disciples.

As for taking the gospel out to the world, these are the key chapters that broaden the missionary reach, including Peter’s revelation that directed the work to go to the Gentiles. Most importantly for the rest of Acts, here we encounter Saul, who will become the apostle Paul, taking the good news throughout the Roman Empire to Jew and Gentile alike.

An overall outline for the book of Acts is as follows (with this week’s lesson material in bold):

- The Ascension (1:1-11)
- **In Jerusalem and Judea (1:12 – 6:7)**
- **From Jerusalem to Antioch (6:8 – 12:23)**
- In Syria and Galatia (12:24 – 15:35)
  - First journey (13:1 – 14:28)
  - Jerusalem Conference (15:1-35)
- In Western Asia and Europe (15:36 – 21:14)
  - Second journey (15:36 – 18:22)
  - Third journey (18:23 – 21:14)
- Paul’s Imprisonment (21:15 – 28:31)

## In Jerusalem and Judea (1:12 – 6:7)

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Most of this section was covered in the last lesson, with the exception of the first few verses in chapter 6 relating to the call of the Seven, discussed below.

### Seven called to serve – Acts 6:1-7

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**6:1 *a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews.*** It appears that some of the widows among the Hellenist converts (Jews with a Greek cultural background, from outside of Palestine) were being neglected in some way. Rabbinic literature discusses the program of a daily allocation of food to widows among the Jews, and it is supposed that the early Saints were doing something similar. The high proportion of Greek female names among the ossuaries in the Jerusalem area implies that women from outside of Palestine went there after being widowed.<sup>1</sup>

**6:1 *neglected in the daily ministrations.*** “Ministration” is *diakonia*, implying a temporal service associated with meals. It is a related term to the one from which we get ‘deacon,’ a priesthood office with temporal responsibilities in the Church today. For this reason, some believe this section represents the creation of the office of deacon in the early church, which could be, though in this case they had a specific calling to perform this particular service to

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds*, 2:262.

care for the widows. They also had authority to preach and baptize (Acts 8:12, 38) but not confer the gift of the Holy Ghost (Acts 8:14-17), indicating that their authority was more like a priest today.

Church officers were added as needed and as directed by the Spirit, just as the organization of the Church unfolded in our dispensation today over a period of several years. During Jesus' time, the New Testament only mentions apostles and seventies (Matthew 10:2; Luke 10:1), but by Paul's day there were apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, bishops, deacons, elders, and perhaps more (see Acts 14:23; Ephesians 4:11-14; 1 Timothy 3:1-10).

**6:2 *the twelve called the multitude.*** The apostles called a council together to resolve the problem, with only the presupposition that they should focus on the spiritual needs of the church, not the temporal. This is reflected in their determination not to "serve tables," which might be better understood as "running a good program" (NLT) or "to give out food" (NJB).

**6:3 *look ye out among you seven men.*** Peter didn't attempt to lay blame to anyone, but did set out to solve the problem. Their proposal that seven Hellenist (Grecian) men should be chosen to oversee the temporal affairs of these widows was met with approval by the gathered council. In other words, he proposed empowering seven men from the community of the widows to serve them.

**6:5 *the saying pleased the whole multitude.*** The disciples supported Peter's suggestion and nominated seven men, who the apostles approved and set apart (v. 6). Except for Stephen and Philip, we know nothing else about these men. Their names are all Greek, indicating that they were probably not from Jerusalem. One, Nicolas, is called a "proselyte," meaning he was a convert to Judaism who had been circumcised, baptized, and offered a sacrifice in the temple. Such converts were treated (almost) like any other Jew.

**6:7 *the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem.*** This is Luke's summary verse of section 1, the gospel being taken to the Jews at Jerusalem. Luke notes especially that "a great company of priests" joined the church, meaning those holding the Levitical priesthood and serving in the temple. Perhaps some of them were converts of John the Baptist, a priest himself, who now fulfilled their discipleship to John by following Jesus.

## From Jerusalem to Antioch (6:8 – 12:23)

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### Stephen's arrest, trial, and death (Acts 6:8 – 8:4)

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#### Arrest of Stephen – Acts 6:8-15

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Stephen became the first martyr of the young church—after Jesus. And Luke will tie the two deaths together by showing how the pattern of Stephen's trial and death matched that of Jesus in many ways.

**6:8 *Stephen.*** His name in Greek is *Stephanos* meaning 'wreath' or 'crown.' This is the laurel wreath, the crown of victory given to successful athletes in games. It is common name in Greek but is wonderfully symbolic of what happens to him. Great "faith and power" are attributed to him, such that he "did great wonders and miracles," though such activities are not listed.

**6:9 *the synagogue of the Libertines.*** It is impossible to tell from Luke's grammar if he means one synagogue where all these various people worshipped or several synagogues. Regardless, excavations in the Ophel (the city of David, south of the temple mount) turned up a 1st century inscription in Greek and the remains of a synagogue that could well have been that of the Libertines (Arnold, 2:264-265). The word *Libertinos* indicates freed slaves, indicating they may have been Jewish slaves who had been freed and returned to Jerusalem, or descendants from such people. The places listed as their original homes were Cyrene (modern Libya), Alexandria (Egypt), Cilicia (eastern Turkey, Saul's home town), and Asia (western Turkey).

**6:10 *they were not able to resist.*** The Jews of the synagogue couldn't refute or stand up to Stephen's words, so wise and Spirit-infused were they.

6:11 **heard him speak blasphemous words.** Wanting to silence Stephen, and unable to do so publicly (v. 10), they quieted persuaded some men to go to the authorities and charge him with blasphemy.

6:12 **caught him, and brought him to the council.** With their witnesses testifying to Stephen's guilt, the leaders of the Jews had Stephen arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin.

6:13 **false witnesses.** Luke was careful to tell us they were speaking falsely, but it doesn't mean they were lying. They may have been accurately reporting Stephen's message, as it sounds similar to what Jesus would have said (with the notable exception that Jesus said the temple would be destroyed, though not by him, v. 14 and Matthew 26:60-62). Their assertion that these words were blasphemous was their false speaking.

6:15 **the face of an angel.** Angels' faces are described as bright, glowing, full of light. Moses had the same experience after communing with the Lord (Exodus 34:29-35). So they saw Stephen transformed, surely to their surprise. Perhaps it was this event that silenced the council long enough for Stephen to deliver his lengthy sermon before them.

### Stephen's Speech – Acts 7:1-53

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Stephen's long speech (the longest in Acts) in his own defense can be summarized as follows:

- God spoke to Abraham in Mesopotamia, even before he was circumcised (2-8).
- Joseph was sold into Egypt to save his family, even though they were disobedient (9-16).
- God spoke to Moses in the desert, who delivered the people, even though they were wicked (17-43).
- The Lord provided a tabernacle in the wilderness (44-46),
- And a temple under Solomon (47).
- But God, who created all things, does not dwell only in man-made houses (48-50).
- You (the leaders of the Jews) are just like your wicked forefathers and killed the Just One, Jesus; you received the law from angels (messengers from God) and have not kept it (51-53).

Stephen used first person (us, we) in most of the account, demonstrating by historical events they all knew that Israel was less than faithful to God in many events in the past. Then he answered the charge against him about declaring the coming destruction of the temple (reminding them that God doesn't really dwell there), then shifted the pronouns to second person (you) and compared the Jewish leaders to the wickedness among their ancestors.

Note that Stephen quoted scripture several times (at least twenty-two verses from Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and Amos) and refers to even more. When he did quote, he did so using the Greek Septuagint (LXX), which differs in some respects from the KJV, based on the Masoretic Text. Stephen had many scriptures memorized and quoted them freely and exactly to his purpose.

7:1 **Are these things so?** The high priest's question to Stephen was about the words of the witnesses: 'do their words represent what you really taught?' He will answer this question with a journey through their history and scriptures, but gets to it at the end.

7:2 **The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham.** This appearance and charge (v. 3) are not recorded in our current Old Testament during the period of Abraham's life that Stephen mentioned ("before he dwelt at Charron" or Haran), but it was restored to the world in the book of Abraham (Abraham 1:16-19; 2:1-5).

7:3 **Get thee out of thy country.** This is from Genesis 12:1, the first encounter Abraham had with the Lord, as recorded in Genesis.

7:4 **this land, wherein ye now dwell.** Abraham went from Haran to Canaan, which is broadly where the Jews lived at this time (Genesis 12:5-6).

7:5 **gave him none inheritance in it.** Abraham did not possess land in Canaan, except the grave where he laid his wife later in life (Genesis 23:1-20).

7:6 **four hundred years**. Genesis 15:13 is the passage being quoted, which indeed says 400 years. Exodus 12:40 states that it was 430 years. This points to either two different textual traditions for the length of their stay, a different interpretation of the starting date, or that Genesis is rounding off, much like the Lord's statement that the coming of Christ to the Nephites was six hundred years from when Lehi left Jerusalem (1 Nephi 10:4; 19:8; 2 Nephi 25:19; 3 Nephi 1:1).

7:7 **they shall come forth, and serve me**. Stephen quoted Genesis 15:14 and perhaps Exodus 3:12.

7:9 **the patriarchs**. This refers to Joseph's brothers—Judah, Rueben, Levi, etc.—who sold him into slavery.

7:10 **delivered him out of all his afflictions**. The story of Joseph's afflictions and blessings are given in Genesis 39-41.

7:11 **there came a dearth over all the land**. A "dearth" or famine was the reason Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to get food, during which travels Joseph finally revealed himself to his family (Genesis 42-45).

7:14 **threescore and fifteen souls**. This verse especially show how Stephen quoted from the LXX. Acts says Jacob's family was 75 souls, the same number given in Genesis 46:27 LXX. The Masoretic (Hebrew) text, from which we get our KJV Old Testament puts the number at 66 (see Genesis 46:26) or 70 (Genesis 46:27, which takes the 66 from the previous verse and adds Joseph, his two sons, and Jacob).

7:16 **carried over into Sychem**. Technically, only Joseph was buried in Shechem, in the tomb purchased by his father, Jacob (Genesis 33:18-20). Shechem was in the land of Samaria in New Testament times. But the story of Jacob's burial in the cave of Machpelah, which Abraham purchased to bury Sarah, is told in Genesis 50:2-13.

7:18 **another king arose**. Stephen quoted Exodus 1:8.

7:19 **The same dealt subtilly with our kindred**. "Subtilly" is better translated "craftily" or "treacherously" or even "deceitfully." The new Pharaoh began to treat them as slaves.

7:20 **Moses was born, and was exceeding fair**. Genesis 2:2 says that he was "goodly" (Hebrew tov), which can mean pleasing, desirable, lovely, joyous, or friendly.

7:21 **Pharaoh's daughter took him up**. See Exodus 2:5-6 for this story.

7:23 **when he was full forty years old**. Exodus doesn't give his age (it just says, "in those days," see Exodus 2:11) but does talk about going to see his brethren, which would mean both men and women in slavery. Forty as a number often meant 'a long time' without reference to a specific period of time.

7:24 **avenged him that was oppressed**. Stephen interprets the story in Exodus 2:11-12 that the Hebrew man being beaten needed avenging, which the Exodus story emphasizes that Moses knew it was wrong for him to do it ("he looked this way and that way" to make sure he was unobserved before killing the man).

7:25 **they understood not**. Exodus 2:13-14 gives the impression that they were mocking Moses, while Stephen portrays their rejection of him as them not understanding that God would deliver them by Moses' hand.

7:27 **Who made thee a ruler**. Moses was first rejected by the Israelites when he was trying to help them, forcing him to flee Pharaoh's court for his life. This is reversed later in his life after a divine call (7:35).

7:29 **he begat two sons**. In the story of Moses before he led the tribes out of Egypt, he only had one son (Exodus 2:22) but the second son came later (Exodus 18:3-4).

7:30 **an angel of the Lord in a flame of fire**. See Exodus 3:2. Both texts (Acts and Exodus) say it is an angel that appears, though it is shortly God speaking to him (Exodus 3:4).

7:32 **I am the God of thy fathers**. This starts a quotation from Exodus 3:5-8, 10, though the verse order is changed in Acts from the Exodus account.

7:35 ***This Moses whom they refused . . . did God send to be a ruler and a deliverer.*** Stephen began to get to the point of his recitation of Israelite history: just as Moses was rejected by the people he was sent to save, so another was rejected in their day who had the power to save.

7:37 ***A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up.*** Quoting Deuteronomy 18:15, Stephen took advantage of the clear authority of Moses, that he had just established, to note that this was the very man who prophesied that another prophet would come among them one day, sent by God.

7:38 ***the lively oracles.*** Or, “living words” (NIV), meaning words of revelation and commandments from God which Moses received.

7:39 ***thrust him from them.*** Moses was again rejected by wicked Israel when they made a calf to worship instead.

7:40 ***Make us gods to go before us.*** The cry of the children of Israel to Aaron to make them something tangible to worship is recorded in Exodus 32:1, 23.

7:42 ***God turned, and gave them up to worship the host of heaven.*** Or, ‘God turned away from them and let them worship the objects in the heavens—the sun, moon, and stars.

7:42 ***O ye house of Israel.*** This begins a quote from Amos 5:25-27, more pronounced in the LXX.

7:43 ***your god Remphan.*** Or, ‘Raiphan,’ thought to be the Egyptian name for the Roman god Saturn.

7:44 ***the tabernacle in the wilderness.*** Moses was commanded to build and instructed on the details of this portable temple in the wilderness.

7:45 ***brought in with Jesus.*** Stephen was speaking of Joshua, the successor to Moses who brought the tabernacle into the Promised Land (Joshua 3:14-17). His name in Hebrew is Yehoshua, which becomes Yeshua in Aramaic and Jesus in Greek. Thus Joshua (Hebrew) and Jesus (Greek) are the same name.

7:46 ***who found favour before God.*** Speaking of David, who wanted to build a temple but was not permitted to do so, leaving it for his son, Solomon (v. 47; 2 Samuel 7:2-13).

7:48 ***the most High dwelleth not in temples.*** Stephen quoted Isaiah 66:1-2 in verses 49-50, to establish that God lived in heaven, not in an earthly building.

7:51 ***as your fathers did, so do ye.*** This was Stephen’s main message, why he told all those stories—he was giving examples from the scriptures of unfaithful Israel rejecting God’s messengers, and likening them to those examples. This was his defense to the question of were the things he was saying about Jesus true?

7:52 ***they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One.*** Their ancestors killed the prophets, Stephen said, who spoke of the coming of the “Just One.”

7:52 ***ye have been now the betrayers and murderers.*** They were just like their fathers who killed the prophets; they were those who betrayed and killed the “Just One.”

7:53 ***received the law by the disposition of angels.*** The Jewish people of the day had received the gospel by heavenly messengers, Stephen said—perhaps not themselves, but their ancestors, such as the ones Stephen just mentioned. Stephen’s repeated use of angels as the bearers of the Law of Moses speaks to its inferiority, while the good news of Jesus came from the Son of Man himself. His basis may have been Deuteronomy 33:2 LXX, which speaks of angels on God’s right hand.

## [The stoning of Stephen – Acts 7:54 – 8:1a](#)

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7:54 ***they were cut to the heart.*** We might think this means his words humbled them, but the Greek term means ‘enraged.’

7:55 **saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand.** Stephen saw Jesus in the position of favor and blessing, on the right hand of the Father. Others have written about Christ in the same way (Luke 22:69; Acts 2:33; Romans 8:34; Hebrews 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22; Moroni 7:27; 9:26; D&C 76:23; Joseph Smith-Matthew 1:1).

7:57 **ran upon him with one accord.** Hearing his speech which condemned their rejection of Jesus infuriated them. But when Stephen said that he was experiencing an open vision of Jesus on God's right hand spurred them to action. This was blasphemy to them, and merited the ultimate punishment.

7:58 **cast him out of the city, and stoned him.** According to Rabbinic literature, stoning consisted of multiple steps which Luke didn't cover in detail because his readers already knew this. See also Leviticus 24:14.

- Two witnesses testified of the crime.
- The person was taken to a cliff at least the height of two men outside the city.
- The person was stripped naked (usually leaving a loincloth).
- The first witness (or both, if needed) pushed the person off the cliff backwards.
- If the fall didn't kill the person, the second witness dropped a large stone on his chest.
- If the person was still alive, all others would throw stones at him until he was dead.
- Once confirmed dead, the person's body was hung on a tree to curse him (not crucifixion but hanging by a rope, typically around the chest or bound hands).

7:58 **at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.** This is where we meet the future apostle to the Gentiles, he being a party to Stephen's stoning. He was probably a junior member or staff assistant of the Sanhedrin. "A young man" means he was under forty. Since Saul was from Cilicia, a region noted to have attended the synagogue where Stephen spoke, it's possible that had heard him speak prior to this trial.

7:59 **saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.** Jesus said a similar phrase, quoting Psalm 31:5, as he completed his suffering on the cross.

7:60 **lay not this sin to their charge.** Like Jesus, Stephen was falsely accused, improperly tried, executed as an innocent man, sought his spirit to be received in heaven, and forgave his killers (among other parallels). Luke meant to tell his readers that persecution went with conversion, but that like Jesus, we are eventually triumphant.

7:60 **when he had said this, he fell asleep.** Meaning, he died.

8:1a **Saul was consenting unto his death.** Saul watched the cloaks of the witnesses during the stoning, but that could have just been his assignment. Luke is clear here that he also agreed with the decision to stone Stephen. This statement prepares us for a Saul even more engaged later in persecuting Christians.

### [Saul's early persecution – Acts 8:1b-3](#)

8:1 **great persecution . . . they were all scattered.** Saul was very involved and perhaps a leader of this great persecution, arresting men and women. As a result, the followers of Jesus left Jerusalem in droves, though in Acts 15 there still seems to be a large enough group left to hold a conference. Ironically, this action of scattering Christians caused the word to spread even more rapidly as they fanned out across the area, preaching Jesus everywhere they went (v. 4).

8:2 **devout men carried Stephen.** Though their names are not given, it is easy to imagine the other members of the group of seven being involved, as well as perhaps Peter and other leaders of the Church there in Jerusalem.

8:3 **he made havoc of the church.** Saul's actions were devastating to the members of the church in Jerusalem. Likely aided by temple police under the command of the Sanhedrin, he went into people's home, arrested them for being Christians, and hauled them off to prison, which would not mean a nice cell and three meals a day. "Prison" in those days meant harsh treatment and probably horrid conditions. Saul spoke of this period in his own letters, writing that "I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it" (Galatians 1:13 NRSV). He also called himself "a persecutor of the church" (Philippians 3:6 NASB).

## Philip and Simon (Acts 8:4-40)

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### Philip teaches in Samaria – Acts 8:4-13

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8:4 **went every where preaching the word.** Luke presents this notion but leaves us hanging here for a while with this verse so he can deal with other issues. Eventually, he will pick up this thread and complete his thought (11:19). The interlude, though, sets us up for Peter's encounter with Cornelius and Saul's entire mission.

8:5 **Philip went down to the city of Samaria.** Luke did not tell us who gave Philip his charge, but Jesus himself taught Samaritans (John 4), so there was ample precedent for this. Herod had rebuilt the city of Samaria and renamed it Sebastos (meaning 'venerable' and referring to Caesar), but Luke used the traditional Jewish name.<sup>2</sup>

8:6 **gave heed unto those things which Philip spake.** The people of Samaria responded well, motivated to listen by Philip's words and miracles (v. 7), which resulted in "great joy in that city" (v. 8).

8:7 **that were lame, were healed.** Philip's miracles were a sign of the truthfulness of his words, and many believed. It was also remarkable that he did them though apparently holding only the Aaronic Priesthood. "And yet Philip, magnifying his calling, casts out devils, commands the lame to leap and the sick to rise from their beds of affliction. Miracles are wrought by the power of faith, and a righteous man need not hold the Melchizedek Priesthood to have a power and influence with his creator. As Joseph Smith said, 'If a priest understands his duty, his calling, and ministry, and preaches by the Holy Ghost, his enjoyment is as great as if he were one of the Presidency.'"<sup>3</sup>

8:9 **a certain man, called Simon.** Yet another Simon in the New Testament. This one was a magician who made his living doing magic cures. Early church legends equated him with Simon Magus ('sorcerer'), a Gnostic heretic, but there is nothing in the New Testament to make that connection.

8:10 **This man is the great power of God.** Before Philip's coming, the people had been deceived by Simon's magic, attributing great power to him.

8:12 **they were baptized.** These are the first recorded non-Jewish baptisms.

8:13 **he continued with Philip.** Simon was also baptized, confessing his faith in Philip's teachings. But he also followed Philip everywhere he went, which we'll see shortly was to try and determine Philip's secret to what Simon perceived as magic.

### Peter and John confront Simon – Acts 8:14-25

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8:14 **they sent unto them Peter and John.** The church leadership in Jerusalem seems to have been caught by surprise by news of baptisms in Samaria. They determined to send Peter and John to investigate.

8:15 **that they might receive the Holy Ghost.** The manifestation of the Holy Ghost seems to have been a typical part of conversions in the early church, after people were baptized.

8:17 **they received the Holy Ghost.** Philip either didn't have the priesthood to confer the gift of the Holy Ghost (he held the Aaronic Priesthood only) or he was not authorized in some way to perform that ordinance. Either way, Peter and John performed the confirmations for those who were previously baptized by Philip.

8:18 **he offered them money.** Simon saw the power the apostles had to confer this gift and wanted it for himself (v. 19), though probably in order to increase his own income.

8:20 **Thy money perish with thee.** Simon's request was immediately and forcefully refused by Peter.

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<sup>2</sup> Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds*, 2:279.

<sup>3</sup> *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 112, quoted in McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 2:81.



8:21 **thy heart is not right.** By the same Spirit that Peter gave to people by laying on of hands, he discerned that Simon was acting out of a selfish motive. Peter challenged him to repent and hope that the thought of his heart could be forgiven (v. 22).

8:23 **gall of bitterness.** Literally, ‘poison of bitterness.’ Peter meant that he was full of the bitter poison of envy because he was “in the bond of iniquity”—he was captive to sin. The phrase likely originated from Deuteronomy 29:18 and was used five times in the Book of Mormon.<sup>4</sup>

8:24 **Pray ye to the Lord for me.** Simon, perhaps truly humbled, asked Peter to pray for him to avoid the punishments that Peter had just declared for him.

8:25 **preached the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans.** Peter and John took this opportunity to preach throughout Samaria on their return trip to Jerusalem. This activity increased the hatred against them from the leaders of the Jews. This is the last recorded activity of John in the book of Acts.

## The Ethiopian eunuch – Acts 8:26-40

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8:26 **the angel of the Lord spake unto Philip.** Perhaps this is how Philip was steered toward Samaria in the first place. Now, an angel directed him to south toward Egypt, down to Gaza, which is in the desert.

8:27 **a man of Ethiopia, an eunuch of great authority.** We don’t know his name, but he was an important government official in charge of the treasury. Ethiopia was the nation south of Egypt, at the headwaters of the Nile, called Cush in the Old Testament. That he was a eunuch implied his service and profession, and doesn’t necessarily mean that he was castrated.<sup>5</sup>

8:27 **Candace queen of the Ethiopians.** *Kandakē* was not a single person but the word for ‘queen’ in Ethiopia, much like Pharaoh was a title for the king of Egypt.<sup>6</sup> This may have been queen Amanitere (AD 25-41) of Meroe.

8:27 **come to Jerusalem for to worship.** The round trip would require up to four months. Though not stated in the text, this plus the fact that he was reading Isaiah indicates that this man was either a proselyte (a convert to Judaism who had probably come for Passover or another feast<sup>0</sup> or a god-fearer (someone who believed in Judaism but was not circumcised). If the former, then he would be considered a Jew converting to Christianity. If the latter, he was technically the first Gentile convert recorded in Acts. Because Peter’s baptism of Cornelius in chapter 10-11 is recounted as the first Gentile convert in the text, that argues that he was a proselyte, and thus a eunuch in name (by his position) and not that he was castrated (which would make being a proselyte impossible; see Deuteronomy 23:1).

8:28 **sitting in his chariot.** This means he was not moving but his chariot was parked, perhaps to rest the animals; reading would be quite challenging, if not impossible, in a moving chariot.

8:29 **join thyself to his chariot.** Or, ‘Go up next to him.’

8:30 **read the prophet Esaias.** The man was reading from the Greek version of Isaiah 53, as indicated in verses 32-33. That he even had a scroll of Isaiah shows his wealth and position as normally these would only be in synagogues or the most wealthy believers.

8:30 **Understandest thou what thou readest?** This wonderful exchange showed the humility of the Ethiopian, who responded, “How can I, except some man should guide me?” (v. 31). It is a response that many of us can sympathize with as we attempt to study Isaiah, making us appreciate even more the helps that we have through the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine & Covenants, and the teachings of Joseph Smith and other prophets. Surely, many men and women guide us today.

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<sup>4</sup> Mosiah 27:29; Alma 36:18; 41:11; Mormon 8:31; Moroni 8:14.

<sup>5</sup> Fitzmyer, *The Acts*, 412.

<sup>6</sup> *Fausset’s Bible Dictionary*, “Candace”; Brown, *An Introduction*, 297.

8:32-33 The quote is from Isaiah 5:7-8 LXX.

8:34 **of himself, or of some other man?** The eunuch was confused by the words and didn't understand if Isaiah was speaking of himself or another person.

8:35 **preached unto him Jesus.** It literally says in Greek, 'declared the good news [the gospel] of Jesus.'

8:36 **what doeth hinder me to be baptized?** The 'good news' of Jesus clearly included a discussion about covenants and baptism, because when they saw water, the Ethiopian asked to be immersed.

8:37 **If thou believest.** This verse is not in the earliest manuscripts and was likely added later to include a confession of belief on the part of the Ethiopian.

8:38 **went down both into the water.** In the Gaza area of southern Palestine was the road leading to Africa. Much of it was dry, desert-like. The water source is unknown—it may have been a river, the ocean, or a pool of some kind. But near modern Tel El-Hesi is a river deep enough to perform a baptism, and some scholars believe this was where Philip baptized the man from Ethiopia.<sup>7</sup>

8:39 **the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip.** Elijah had the same experience (1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 2:16), as did Jesus (JST Matthew 4:5, 8) and Nephi (Helaman 10:16-17).

8:40 **found at Azotus.** "Azotus" was Ashdod in the Old Testament, along the coast in the former territory of the Philistines, about twenty-two miles north of Gaza.

8:40 **he came to Caesarea.** "Caesarea" was further north along the coast and the Via Maris, the Roman capital of the province. Philip appeared to settle in Caesarea; Luke and Paul found him and his four daughters there about twenty years later (Acts 21:8).

## Saul (9:1-31)

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### Saul's conversion – Acts 9:1-22

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9:1 **Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter.** Luke picked up the thread of the story again about Saul, which he introduced in 8:1-3.

9:2 **letters to Damascus to the synagogues.** These were letters of introduction from Caiaphas, the high priest, to the Jewish elders at Damascus, so Paul would be received by them in his mission to persecute Christians. In the letters, Caiaphas would have authorized extradition of Jerusalem residents who had moved to Damascus because of the persecution. Such authority was granted Jewish leaders by Roman authorities to handle rebellion and uprisings. That the authority was invoked shows the desperation felt by the leaders.

9:2 **to the synagogues.** With a Jewish population in the thousands, there were several synagogues in Damascus.

9:2 **if he found any of this way.** "Way" should be capitalized as it was how early Christians referred to themselves—followers of The Way, no doubt from John 14:6 and other similar references. They don't use the title "Christians" until later (11:26).

9:3 **he came near Damascus.** Damascus was a large city in Syria, about sixty miles north of the Galilee region.

9:3 **there shined around about him a light from heaven.** Luke gave us three accounts of this vision, each one a little different and thus adding to our knowledge of the encounter. The other two are in Acts 22 and 28. Paul also gave small hints about it in several of his letters, but never a full description like this.

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<sup>7</sup> Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 177.

9:4 **Saul, Saul.** The double repetition of his name would be an instant clue to the Pharisaic Saul that this was a communication from God. His first reaction may have been to expect praise for his good work rounding up these renegade and apostate followers of Jesus, but the next phrase would have quickly reset that expectation.

9:5 **Who art thou, Lord?** *Kyrios* in Greek is a title of respect that has also come to be used specifically for Jesus, equivalent to *Adonai* or YHWH in the Old Testament. We would probably translate it ‘sir’ most of the time today, and that is surely Saul’s meaning in v. 5. He wasn’t certain who this shining being before him was, but showed him respect. He also possibly feared that it might be Jesus because of the opening phrase: “why persecutest thou me?” (9:4).

9:5 **it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.** ‘It is hard for you to kick against the ox goad.’ An ox goad was a pointed stick used to prod the animal along. The tough skin of an ox meant that the goad didn’t hurt them, but if the animal tried to kick the stick, the pointy end could harm the soft underside of his foot. This phrase is not in the oldest manuscripts and was not likely in the original, though it is in the oldest copies of Acts 26:14. From that we can conclude that it was a harmonization by a later scribe.

9:6 **Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?** This time when he used *kyrios*, it was probably in the OT sense: Lord or *Adonai*. Now that Saul knew he was talking to a God, he became even more reverent—and fearful.

9:7 **JST**

Acts 9:7 KJV	JST
And <del>the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man.</del>	And <b>they who were journeying with him saw indeed the light, and were afraid; but they heard not the voice of him who spake to him.</b>

In the other account in Acts 22:9 Luke recorded the opposite, that the other men saw the light but heard no voice. The JST harmonized this apparent contradiction, favoring the account in chapter 22.

9:8 **he saw no man.** Not only no man, but nothing at all. He was blinded after the vision, highly symbolic of his own blind persecutions of the followers of the Way.

9:9 **he was three days without sight.** Saul did not know how long his blindness would last; perhaps he believed it to be permanent (though see v. 12).

9:10 **Ananias.** He was likely the local leader—the bishop, as it were—of the disciples at Damascus. His name means something like ‘whom Yahweh has graciously given.’

9:11 **the street which is called Straight.** The street is still there today, called Darb el-Moskatim. Along this road was the Jewish quarter where Judas, Saul’s Jewish host, lived.

9:12 **seen in a vision.** Saul was blind at this point but had a vision of Ananias coming to heal him. He was fasting (v. 9) and praying (v. 11), no doubt searching his soul and repenting mightily.

9:13 **I have heard by many of this man.** Ananias didn’t exactly argue with the Lord, but he was understandably confused about being asked to bless a man whom he heard was coming to arrest and harm believers.

9:13 **thy saints at Jerusalem.** This is the first use of the term “saints” as applying to members of the church in that day. The Greek word is *hagios*, which means something made holy. We are made saints by the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

9:15 **he is a chosen vessel unto me.** How surprised Ananias must have been to hear this—the great persecutor was actually chosen by the Lord to preach to Gentiles, kings, and Jews.

9:16 **how great things he must suffer.** Saul would indeed suffer for his testimony and commitment to the Savior, including a catalog of challenges—stoning, shipwreck, beatings, imprisonment, and more (2 Corinthians 11:23-33).

9:17 **Brother Saul.** Ananias' humility and acceptance of the Lord's will is represented in his appellation of Saul as he blesses him—he calls him “brother.”

9:17 **Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way.** It is not recorded that Ananias learned of Saul's vision from the Lord nor from Saul, though we may not have the full conversation in either case. It could also be that the Spirit simply inspired him as he gave the blessing, and he thus knew of Saul's experience.

9:18 **there fell from his eyes as it had been scales.** Nothing visible was necessarily seen; the Greek term translated “as it had been” implies a metaphor, not a physical object. We might just as easily say, ‘Like having a blindfold removed, he was suddenly able to see.’ Compare 2 Nephi 30:6.

9:18 **was baptized.** Saul immediately was baptized, probably by Ananias, even before he ate (v. 19). His determination to be obedient was evident right from the start. It is not recorded when Saul received the gift of the Holy Ghost, but during his “certain days with the disciples” (v. 19), it surely happened.

9:20 **straightway he preached Christ.** Saul wasted no time and started preaching the gospel to the Jews at Damascus immediately. They couldn't believe this was the same man who came to arrest the followers of Jesus (v. 21), but he confounded them all, proving that Jesus was the Messiah from their own scriptures (v. 22). Nevertheless, this may be one of the five times when Saul was beaten, as he mentioned in 1 Corinthians 11:24.

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## Saul escapes from Damascus – Acts 9:23-25

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9:23 **after that many days were fulfilled.** Luke skipped over a significant period of time here and several events. In Paul's letters, we learn that Saul left Damascus and went into Arabia (modern Jordan) for some time, then returned to Damascus (Galatians 1:17). This period of time could have been as much as two or three years. Paul also recounted that he was not only pursued by the Jewish leadership, as Luke said here, but by the governor of the Nabateans (2 Corinthians 11:32-33), probably in a partnership to get rid of him. This pattern of persecution repeated itself many times in Paul's missionary career, but he also had great success and was loved by many converts.

9:24 **their laying await was known of Saul.** Whether his informant was a friend or a divine source, we are not told. But as they watched the gates of the city for him to leave and be arrested, his new friends hatched a plan.

9:25 **let him down by the wall in a basket.** A fellow saint probably lived in a house attached to the outer city wall, stuffed Saul in a basket, and lowered him down to avoid the guards waiting at every gate. 2 Corinthians 11:33 mentions an opening in the wall, probably a window, which detail is left out here by Luke.

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## Saul visits Jerusalem – Acts 9:26-31

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9:26 **Saul was come to Jerusalem.** This was his first visit since his conversion, about three years later (about AD 37; see Galatians 1:18-19). This was probably when he had the vision Paul spoke of in Acts 22:17-21, warning him to leave. He stayed just two weeks (Galatians 1:18).

9:26 **they were all afraid of him.** No wonder, given that the last time they had seen Saul in Jerusalem, he was busily arresting and persecuting them. With his conversion, active persecution of Christians seems to have softened a bit, because some were able to live in Jerusalem (v. 31).

9:27 **Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles.** We don't know how Barnabas knew Saul nor his conversion, but perhaps he took a trip to Damascus in the time that Saul was there teaching. What is clear is that Barnabas believed Saul and vouched for him, opening the way for him to meet with Peter and James (Galatians 1:18-19). What an encounter Saul and Peter must have had—Saul probably even stayed in Peter's house! Saul had fought against Jesus; Peter had denied knowing him at his trial. Peter had since boldly proclaimed Jesus and bore the scars of his boldness from the beating he took under the hands of the Jewish leaders. Saul perhaps also had such scars, and had also taught the good news of Christ boldly in Damascus, Arabia, and now Jerusalem. One can imagine Saul asking Peter and James every question he could think of, drinking in the knowledge of Jesus' life and teachings. But after two weeks it was time for him to leave because he had angered the Jews of Jerusalem.

9:29 **they went about to slay him.** Saul's bold preaching of Jesus, especially among his fellow "Grecians" (diaspora Jews) brought animosity toward him, such that they finally sought his life. Such hatred of Saul among Jerusalem Jews continued all his life, ultimately resulting in his arrest by Rome.

9:30 **sent him forth to Tarsus.** Because the Jews were trying to kill him in Jerusalem, the brethren sent Saul home to Tarsus via Caesarea. Here Luke left him for several years, his activities unknown, until Barnabas came looking for him. Given his pattern so far, he surely preached Christ to the residents of Tarsus and the surrounding area. It is difficult to imagine Saul doing otherwise. It's also difficult to imagine that he didn't face opposition, perhaps even another beating or two at the hands of the Tarsus synagogue leaders. It wouldn't have slowed him down.

9:31 **Then had the churches rest.** Another Lukan interlude, capturing that there were followers of Jesus throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria now, who feared the Lord (and by implication, not men) and were comforted by the Spirit in their lives. Their numbers continued to grow.

## Peter (9:32 – 11:18)

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### Peter in Lydda and Joppa – Acts 9:32-43

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Leaving Saul behind temporarily and turning back to Peter, the goals of this section seem to be: first, show the power of the priesthood that Peter (and by extension, the other apostles) had was the same as that which Christ possessed, when they worked in his name; and, second, to move Peter into a geographic position to encounter Cornelius.

9:32 **Lydda.** A town about eleven miles southeast of Joppa (modern Tel Aviv) on the road from Jerusalem, this was Lod from the Old Testament.

9:33 **Aeneas.** Nothing more is known of this man who was afflicted with palsy (paralyzed) for eight years. Did Peter remember when a similar man was lowered, perhaps through his own roof, and Jesus healed him (Mark 2:4f)? His command to the man was similar: "make thy bed," probably meaning to fold it up and take it home.

9:35 **Saron.** Not a town, but the name of the region, often written Sharon. Everyone in the region heard about Peter's healing of the paralyzed man.

9:36 **Tabitha . . . Dorcas.** "Tabitha" means 'gazelle' in Aramaic; Dorcas is the same name in Greek. She was described as a very righteous woman, a disciple "full of good works."

9:38 **they sent unto him two men.** It is not clear if they sent for Peter before or after Tabitha/Dorcas died (v. 37), but probably before. With the time it took to travel, she was probably seriously ill when the men went to get Peter, but died while they were gone.

9:40 **kneeled down, and prayed.** Kneeling prayer was not common in those days. It shows Peter's humility and desire to know God's will. He got a clear answer and acted accordingly, raising Tabitha from the dead. Again, was Peter thinking of being taken into the room with just Jesus, James, John, and the parents and watching as Jesus raised Jairus' daughter from the dead (Mark 5:22f)?

9:41 **called the saints and widows, presented her alive.** She had been prepared for burial (v. 37), so like Lazarus, was probably wrapped tightly. She was able to sit up (v. 40) and even stand, but perhaps not much more until the women unwrapped her.

9:42 **many believed in the Lord.** Peter clearly took no credit for the healing but pointed everyone to Jesus, resulting in many people believing in him in that region.

9:43 **one Simon a tanner.** Since he was there, Peter stayed "many days," ending up at the home of another man named Simon. Being a tanner, his home was near the seashore (10:6) where the strong breeze could take away the powerful odors of a leather tanning business.

## Peter and Cornelius: Gentiles believe in Christ – Acts 10:1-43

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Cornelius' encounter with Peter was about AD 37. After raising Tabitha, Peter stayed at Joppa in the house of Simon the tanner. Both men had visions that brought them together, launching the church into the expansion of the good news to the Gentiles.

10:1 **Caesarea.** Caesarea Maritima was built by Herod the Great with a huge artificial harbor, the first in the ancient world. The capital of the Roman province of Judea/Palestine, it had a large number of prominent public buildings, including a hippodrome, theater, market, and temples. Wide streets ran in a grid, and the city had a sewer and water system that brought fresh water from mountain springs six miles away. At this time, the city had a population of about 50,000.<sup>8</sup>

10:1 **a centurion of the band called the Italian.** Centurions were leaders of 80-100 soldiers, and well-paid. They were Roman citizens. The Italian cohort (a group of six centuries) was stationed at Caesarea (or possibly Syria) and were later involved in putting down the Jewish revolt of A.D. 66-70 that led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

10:2 **one that feared God.** Cornelius believed in Judaism but had not been circumcised. He was a true Gentile, a 'God-fearer.'

10:3 **a vision evidently about the ninth hour.** This was the hour of prayer (about 3:00), so he was probably engaged in prayer when he had this vision. The vision was of an angel who spoke to him.

10:4 **What is it, Lord?** Cornelius was not confused, thinking the angel was Christ—this is *kyrios* as 'sir,' not 'Lord.'

10:5 **send men to Joppa.** Cornelius' prayers and good works were known by God, so the angel invited him to take the next step and call for Simon Peter to come.

10:7 **two of his household servants, and a devout soldier.** Cornelius sent two of his own slaves and a soldier of his century on this errand, people he trusted and knew could be relied on. He shared his encounter with the angel with them (v. 8) and they prepared for departure.

10:9 **On the morrow, as they went on their journey.** Joppa (modern Jaffa) was about thirty miles from Caesarea. It would take two days at a fast pace for these three men to get there, which is evidently what they did.

10:9 **Peter went up upon the housetop to pray about the sixth hour.** At about noon, Peter went to the roof to pray. People used the flat roofs of their homes like rooms, setting up working areas, beds, and eating meals there when the weather was hot. Peter would probably have had a nice view of the ocean and perhaps the sailing vessels nearby as he began to pray, probably under an awning or lattice covering to ward off the sun.

10:10 **fell into a trance.** The word is *ekstasis* from which we get ecstasy; it means to be transported (mentally) away from yourself, or a state of amazement that is a blend of fear and wonder.

10:11 **a certain vessel . . . a great sheet.** The terms here are nautical, interesting because of Peter's location. The "vessel" was actually sailing gear—tackle and ropes—and the "sheet" was a large sail. The sail was suspended at the four corners by the ropes and gear. In the vision, Peter saw a multitude of animals (v. 12), many of which were unclean for eating according to Leviticus 11. Some of the animals Peter might have seen, which the Law of Moses forbade, included camels, rabbits, pigs, eagles, rats, and lizards.

10:13 **Rise, Peter; kill, and eat.** Peter certainly knew how to kill and prepare an animal for eating, so it wasn't the task that threw him off, just the animals before him.

10:14 **I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean.** Peter was a devout Jew, and had always adhered to the Mosaic code, which did not allow the eating of certain animals for food.

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<sup>8</sup> Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds*, 2:302.

10:15 **What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.** Perhaps Peter remembered Jesus' teaching about this (Mark 7:15-16) or even teachings from the Old Testament, such as Ezekiel 36:25-28 or Zechariah 13:1 which speak of God cleansing the wicked.

10:16 **This was done thrice.** Three times Peter saw the vision of the animals. Three was a common number with Peter and other scriptural characters. It represented the divine, emphasizing that the vision came from God.

10:17 **the men . . . stood before the gate.** The timing was perfect—while Peter sat pondering the meaning of the vision, the men from Cornelius arrived, seeking him out (v. 18).

10:19 **the Spirit said unto him.** As Peter pondered the vision, the Spirit told him that three men sought him, and he should go with them, “doubting nothing” (v. 20).

10:21 **I am he whom ye seek.** Peter immediately presented himself to the men, perhaps very curious about their arrival. They were perhaps dressed like Romans (at least the soldier), not Jews, and he had to wonder about their presence and the prompting he had received about it.

10:22 **to hear words of thee.** The three men explained that Cornelius had sent them, at the command of an angel, to find Peter and bring him to Caesarea.

10:23 **certain brethren from Joppa.** Six other men joined Peter on this journey (Acts 11:12). They served as witnesses of what transpired next so that Peter's word would not stand alone.

10:24 **Cornelius waited for them, and had called together his kinsmen and near friends.** It had been four days since Cornelius' vision. Anticipating the return of his men with Peter, he called his relatives and close friends to his home and they were anxiously waiting for Peter's arrival.

10:25 **Cornelius met him, and fell down at his feet.** Given the command from the angel to hear Peter, Cornelius showed great deference and respect. What a sight it must have been to have a Roman centurion fall down before a Galilean fisherman.

10:26 **Stand up; I myself also am a man.** Peter quickly drew Cornelius up. He did not take any credit for any of the successes he had experienced, wanting to always turn everything to the Lord.

10:27 **he went in.** The encounter with Cornelius had happened outside of the home. Peter obeyed the directive from his vision and without hesitation entered the man's house (see v. 28).

10:28 **Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing . . . but God hath shewed me.** Peter and the others defiled themselves just by entering Cornelius' house, according to Jewish custom. But Peter had two days to reflect on his vision. Surely the messengers from Cornelius told him the story, and Peter now realized the meaning of his vision on the roof. To his great credit, he set aside his lifelong customs and gladly entered the house.

10:29 **without gainsaying.** ‘Without hesitation.’

10:30 **Four days ago I was fasting.** Cornelius recounted the story of his vision, perhaps as much for the large crowd gathered to hear Peter as for Peter himself.

10:34 **Peter opened his mouth.** Peter taught them (verses 34-43) about Jesus, in what is surely a brief summary of all he actually said.

10:34 **God is no respecter of persons.** Compare Acts 15:7-11; Romans 2:11; James 2:1; 1 Peter 1:17; Moroni 8:12; Doctrine and Covenants 38:16.

### [The Holy Spirit given – Acts 10:44-48](#)

10:44 **the Holy Ghost fell on all them.** We don't know how the Jews recognized this, except for the note in verse 46 that they spoke in tongues. That could certainly be enough, but perhaps there was some kind of Day of Pentecost-

like experience, with a visible manifestation of the outpouring of the Spirit such as wind or fire. That would match Luke's pattern of mentioning an event with minimal details in order to invoke one previously encountered.

10:45 **the gift of the Holy Ghost.** We should not confuse this with the ordinance of confirmation which is receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost in the Church today. "Gift" in the New Testament (usually *dōrea*—a gift—but in Paul sometimes *charisma*—divine favor) was generally used of any blessing from God. In this context, it referred to the testimony received by the Spirit and not the gift bestowed by the laying on of hands after baptism.

Joseph Smith said, "There is a difference between the Holy Ghost and the gift of the Holy Ghost. Cornelius received the Holy Ghost before he was baptized, which was the convincing power of God unto him of the truth of the gospel, but he could not receive the gift of the Holy Ghost until after he was baptized. Had he not taken this sign—ordinance—upon him, the Holy Ghost, which convinced him of the truth of God, would have left him."<sup>9</sup>

10:46 **they heard them speak with tongues.** One of the manifestations from the Day of Pentecost; see verse 44 note above.

10:47 **Can any man forbid water.** Peter's question to his companion-witnesses was, how can we not baptize them, seeing they have received a manifestation of the Spirit, just as we did?

10:48 **be baptized in the name of the Lord.** The gathered crowd was baptized, perhaps right there in the nearby ocean. Peter stayed several more days to continue teaching and strengthening them before returning to Jerusalem.

### [Peter returns to Jerusalem – Acts 11:1-18](#)

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Back in Jerusalem, Peter and his six companions recounted their experience to a group that was at first confrontational because Peter defiled himself by entering a Gentile's house and eating with him. After telling about his vision and how the Holy Ghost witnessed to them that these Gentiles were acceptable to God, however, the confronters "held their peace, and glorified God."

11:1 **heard that the Gentiles had also received the word.** How the word got back to Jerusalem is not explained. Perhaps one of the six men who accompanied Peter was sent ahead to let other church leaders there know what had happened.

11:2 **they that were of the circumcision contended with him.** In Acts and Paul's letters, "circumcision" is used as a single-word description of those who have fully embraced the Law of Moses, especially someone born a Jew. Circumcision isn't the only sign of their obedience but it came to be recognized as a the word that could sum up that covenant relationship with God, probably because it was the outward sign that went all the way back to Abraham, pre-dating Moses.

11:3 **didst eat with them.** They were appalled that Peter would render himself unclean by going into a Gentile's home and stay with them for several days, which included taking meals with them. To eat with someone represented a relationship that went beyond casual acquaintance and included trust and interdependence.

11:4 **Peter rehearsed the matter.** The next several verses have Peter telling the story of Acts 10 over again, in summary format, including his vision and encounter with Cornelius and his household.

11:16 **Then remembered I the word of the Lord.** Peter's thoughts were not recorded in chapter 10, but he adds this insight into his thought process, that when he remembered that Jesus taught that John should baptize with water but they would baptize with the Holy Ghost, and then saw the Spirit fall on these Gentiles, that it was a sign to him that it was God's work.

11:18 **they held their peace, and glorified God.** Another great William Tyndale phrase ('held their peace'), the Greek term just means "they were silenced" (NRSV). It does not say that they embraced Peter's message. Indeed, this notion of inviting Gentiles in the covenant proved to be the most divisive issue in the early church.

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<sup>9</sup> Ehat & Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 108, quoted in Anderson, *Guide*, 6. See also *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 199.



## Growth and Persecution (11:19 – 12:23)

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### The church in Antioch – Acts 11:19-30

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Luke now picked up the thread he ended so abruptly in 8:1, telling us what happened as a result of the persecution of the Saints in Jerusalem and their subsequent scattering to locations all around the Roman Empire. There are several years between the events in the first part of this chapter and those in the second part, though the passage of time is not evident from Luke's storytelling.

11:19 **preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only.** At first the dispersed saints only shared the message of salvation in Christ with other Jews.

11:20 **they were come to Antioch.** The year was about AD 43. The location was Antioch, the third largest city in the Roman empire. Also known as Antioch on the Orontes (there are several Antiochs), it was in the province of Syria and boasted a population of perhaps 500,000 (possibly as high as 800,000), with between 30,000 and 50,000 Jews. Just a few years prior (AD 38-41), there was a great persecution against the Jews because they wouldn't worship the emperor as a god. Many were killed and their synagogues destroyed. The high priest in Jerusalem (Phineas) sent an army of 30,000 to retaliate and killed many Gentiles. The emperor Claudius intervened and ended the fighting, even beheading Phineas, but tensions remained. It was in this environment that a large number of Gentile converts joined the church, leaving behind the worship of Apollo, Zeus, Artemis, Baal, and more.<sup>10</sup>

11:20 **spoke unto the Grecians.** Grecians were probably Greek-speaking diaspora Jews, though the term could also mean that these Jews were preaching Christ to the Gentiles in the city, which would align with Peter's vision.

11:21 **a great number believed.** A large number of Jews from Antioch on the Orontes embraced the gospel taught by local missionaries.

11:22 **they sent forth Barnabas.** The leaders in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to investigate the information they had received about the large number of Gentile converts in Antioch. Being from Cyprus and not Jerusalem (Acts 4:36), he was an excellent choice as he spoke Greek fluently and had a good sense for the culture he was to encounter.

11:23 **was glad.** Barnabas' reaction was one of joy at all the people who were accepting Christ. He understood Peter's vision, now five years in the past, and accepted the spreading of the gospel to all people.

11:24 **he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost.** Being full of the Holy Spirit is a sure sign of God's acceptance, in Luke's writings. Barnabas was such a man.

11:25 **departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul.** Seeing a great opportunity to use Saul's abilities, Barnabas took the short boat ride to Tarsus "for to seek Saul," which in Greek emphasizes the difficulty of finding him. He probably had no idea where to find Saul and searched hard throughout the city before locating him. It must have been a fascinating reunion after not seeing each other for several years.

11:26 **the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.** Jesus called them his disciples. Then they referred to themselves as followers of The Way. At this time, they may not have yet called themselves *christiano* or 'followers of Christ,' but perhaps were only called that by others (see Acts 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16). Regardless, it makes sense that at Antioch they were first called this, as this was the largest gathering of saints in a Greek-speaking area, and the word would only be created in Greek, since *Christos* is Greek for Messiah/anointed one. The use of the term among the church itself doesn't appear to be common until the time of Ignatius (who was from Antioch), about AD 107.<sup>11</sup>

Luke couldn't have known it, but the disciples of Jesus were actually *not* called Christians first at Antioch. The same name in English (we don't know what it was in their language, but it translates to "Christians") was used by the saints in the Book of Mormon about 100 years earlier than at Antioch (Alma 46:13-16).

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<sup>10</sup> Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds*, 2:316-317; Anderson, *Guide*, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds*, 2:319.

11:27 **came prophets from Jerusalem.** Today we mostly reserve the title “prophets” to those in the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve. But in the spirit of Numbers 11:29 (“would God that all the Lord’s people were prophets”), the early church used the title not in a priesthood sense but applied to anyone who manifested the gift of prophesy. In this case, several men from Jerusalem had that gift, and they came to Antioch.

11:28 **Agabus.** We meet this man here and in Acts 21:10-11 where he also prophesied correctly. Here he predicted a famine, which happened in the reign of Claudius, AD 45-47 and especially impacted Judea.

11:29 **determined to send relief.** These verses (29-30) are out of order chronologically, describing events in AD 47. Luke put them here to let us know that Agabus’ prophesy came true and that the Antioch Gentile Christians helped the saints in Jerusalem in their need. This happened during Paul’s second visit to Jerusalem. It had been many years since he was last there and the city had changed remarkably. Roman procurators are gone and Herod Agrippa I was king by edict of the emperor. Agrippa had begun a massive construction project north of the city to extend the city; the place where Jesus was crucified and Stephen was stoned were now within the city walls.

Luke didn’t mention the third visit in Acts, though Paul did in Galatians 2:1-10.

### [James, son of Zebedee, is killed – Acts 12:1-5](#)

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12:1 **Herod the king.** This was Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great and Mariamne, and the son of Aristobulus who was killed by his irrationally suspicious father when Agrippa was three years old. Agrippa was raised in Rome with Claudius who was now emperor, and Drusus, the son of the emperor Tiberius. Caligula made him king and gave him northern Palestine in AD 37. When Herod Antipas died (who killed John the Baptist and whom Jesus encountered), Agrippa got those territories, too. Finally, when Claudius became emperor in AD 41, Agrippa was made king over all of Palestine, including Judea and Jerusalem. The events described here thus happened in AD 42 or 43. Herod died in AD 44.<sup>12</sup>

12:2 **he killed James.** James (or more correctly in both Aramaic and Greek, Jacob) was the first apostle killed as a martyr. The text does not say why Agrippa killed him, why or how he had been arrested, or any other details.

12:3 **he proceeded further to take Peter.** Seeing how much James’ death pleased the Jewish leaders, Agrippa sought out and captured Peter during the Passover season (Peter was probably in Jerusalem), putting him in prison.

12:3 **to bring him forth to the people.** The meaning of the phrase in verses 4 and 6, “to bring him forth” refers to a trial, which Agrippa intended to use to have Peter killed.

12:4 **four quaternions of soldiers.** Sixteen Roman soldiers was the normal number, permitting each group of four to work a three-hour shift at night.

12:4 **Easter.** Greek *pascha*, which makes ‘Passover’ the correct word, not Easter. This was a King James’ translation choice, perhaps to help British Christian readers, unacquainted with Jewish customs, know what time of year this was happening.

12:5 **prayer was made without ceasing.** The whole church was praying for Peter’s safety. With James having just been killed, the threat was very real and imminent.

### [Peter’s miraculous escape from prison – Acts 12:6-19](#)

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12:6 **sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains.** Luke’s description of Peter is a very secure position, bound with more than one chain, lying between soldiers, with more guarding the door of his cell. They were perhaps fearful of a rescue attempt by the large Christian following.

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<sup>12</sup> Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds*, 2:324.

12:7 **he smote Peter on the side.** “Smote” sounds harsh; the better translation is touched—he was gently waking Peter up.

12:7 **his chains fell off from his hands.** Peter was miraculously delivered the night before his trial and likely execution by an angel who woke him, told him to get dressed as the guards all slept, and then escorted him right out of the prison (probably the Antonia Fortress adjacent to the temple) without anyone noticing (v. 8-10).

12:9 **wist not that it was true.** Peter at first thought he was simply seeing a vision, not that it was really happening. He was no doubt resigned to his fate at that point and could hardly believe what was happening with the angel.

12:10 **the first and the second ward.** Sounds odd to us, given that wards are geographical congregations. The better word here is “guard,” meaning that they walked right past two sets of guards without being seen.

12:10 **the iron gate.** A large and locked iron gate opened automatically, with no human being touching it. After getting Peter through the gate and down one road, the angel departed.

12:11 **Now I know of a surety.** Finally, free in the darkness of night in Jerusalem, Peter realizes that it is not a dream or vision, but his physical reality; he is free, delivered by an angel of God. This same language Sariah used when Nephi and his brothers returned from Jerusalem with the brass plates (1 Nephi 5:8).

12:12 **the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark.** This was probably the location of the “upper room” used for the last supper and other meetings of the Jerusalem saints. John Mark is traditionally the author of the gospel of Mark. He was a companion of Peter (1 Peter 5:13) as well as Paul & Barnabas (Acts 12:25).

12:13 **Peter knocked at the door of the gate.** A favorite story of many because of the humor involved, even though it was a dangerous situation. Hearing a knock, a young servant girl named Rhoda went to the outer gate of the home, realized it was Peter by his voice, then ran back into the house to tell everyone (v. 14). But she left poor Peter standing outside, and no one believed it was really him since they knew he was just about to die or was already dead (in other words, they are afraid because they thought it was actually Peter’s spirit she saw). Meanwhile, Peter continued to knock and someone else finally went to the door and let him in (v. 16). After telling them his story and asking them to inform James (the brother of Jesus; perhaps the newest apostle replacing James the brother of John?), he left for parts unknown (v. 17). He returned to Jerusalem at least one more time in Acts 15.

12:18 **there was no small stir among the soldiers.** You can imagine their disbelief when Peter is gone, somehow escaped from between two soldiers, double-chained, and past even more soldiers before mysteriously passing through a huge, locked gate.

12:19 **commanded that they should be put to death.** Peter’s life was saved but the jailors’ were not, as Herod had them killed for losing track of Peter.

### [Herod’s death – Acts 12:20-23](#)

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12:20 **Tyre and Sidon.** Herod had a dispute with these cities. They sent a group to negotiate and won over one of Agrippa’s attendants, Blastus. Luke says that peace was desired because of their dependence on Herod for their sustenance.

12:21 **upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel.** Josephus gave a fuller account of this,<sup>13</sup> saying that Agrippa appeared before the people in a robe made entirely of silver.

12:22 **the voice of a god.** As the sun reflected off Agrippa’s silver robe, Josephus explained, he had a brilliance that made the people exclaim “that he was a god.” As this was happening, he saw an owl, which he took as a bad omen, and he fell down in great pain.

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<sup>13</sup> Whiston, *Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XIX, chapter VIII, 2.

12:23 **the angel of the Lord smote him**. Agrippa suffered five days from parasites, then died, reports Josephus. Herod Agrippa was fifty-three years old. The year was AD 44.<sup>14</sup>

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### Abbreviations:

- AT – Author’s translation
- BYU – BYU New Rendition
- CJB – Complete Jewish Bible
- ESV – English Standard Version
- JST – Joseph Smith Translation
- KJV – King James Version
- LXX – Septuagint (Greek Old Testament)
- NASB – New American Standard Bible
- NIV – New International Version
- NJB – New Jerusalem Bible
- NLT – New Living Translation
- NRSV – New Revised Standard Version
- TNT – William Tyndale 1534 New Testament

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<sup>14</sup> Anderson, *Guide*, 22.

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