

Day 322

Jesus Dies on the Cross and is Buried

Matthew 27.39 – 66; Mark 15.23 – 28, 39 – 45; Luke 23.32 – 56; John 19.19 – 37

The cross is a disgustingly simple contraption. Two lengths of wood, lashed together, the victim nailed through wrists and ankles to it, given only a stub of wood to push against below the feet (a *suppedaneum* – from Latin *sub* = under, *pedes*=feet) to allow breath as long as energy remains. It is all that is worst about mankind, summed up in cruel planks of timber, but all that is most awesome in God, summed up in two bleeding, outstretched arms.

The cross was sometimes a single pole of wood, on which the victim was hung with his hands above his head. It could also be a Y-shape. Since Jesus was given a cross to carry, it is likely this was a cross-bar to be affixed to a pole.

Whilst most artistic images of Jesus on the cross depict His modesty preserved with a loincloth, Seneca the Younger in his 'To Marcia on Consolation' suggests that the crucified were hanged nude on the cross, to increase humiliation. They also would have to urinate or defecate in full view of the public, adding to the degradation. We should in no wise romanticise this foul means of inflicting death.

Mk.15.23,25,27-28;Lk.23.32-34a (mirrored in Mt.27.33-34,38;Jn.19.18) Jesus is not alone in facing these next tortured hours. Two criminals are also racked on the beams, and lifted up, dropped into place with a bone-wrenching thud.

Jesus in the midst of His anguish demonstrates the heart of covenant – self-sacrifice, self-giving to one's own detriment. He calls out for the Father's forgiveness for the sin against Him now; they cannot know what they are involved in. For them, this is just another routine execution; for Jesus, this is the pouring out of His blood of the New Covenant, with Him as the torn offering through whom passes the God of Covenant Himself.

He refuses the only chance of pain relief, myrrhed wine; He has to experience the full depth of suffering to know what man goes through, to be able to redeem the worst man suffers – He is, quite literally, in *excruciating* (meaning, from the cross) agony . It is the morning watch when they crucify Him.

Jn.19.19-22 Pilate has not spared the Jews his irony; above Jesus, in the three languages of the day, Aramaic, Latin and Greek is written;

ישוע נסרײא מלכא יהודין *Yeshua Nasraya Malka Yehudin*

Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων *Ieesóus o Nazaraíos o Bhasilévs ton Ioudaíon*

Iesus Nazarenus rex Iudaeorum

This is the title which the vain Herods have claimed for themselves, the title which in many ways the Jews despise. It is the title under which the Magi sought the child Jesus,

in Matthew 2.2, provoking the tyrant ruler to such violence against the innocents of Bethlehem. Now, Jesus suffers under this title-board.

The leading priests, insensed at what Pilate has written, mocking their sensibilities, request that he adds ‘allegedly’ to the inscription. ‘*Quod scripsi, scripsi*’ says Pilate – ‘What I have written, I have written.’ (Greek ὁ γέγραφα, γέγραφα - *o yéghrapha, yéghrapha*)

Jn.19.23-24 (mirrored in Mt.27.35-36, Mk.15.24, Lk.23.34b) The degradation of Jesus continues; as He hangs in agony on the cross, He can see the soldiers dicing for his underwear, a seamless garment. There is a terrible finality in this action – what has been close to his skin is no longer needed. His next clothing will be the shroud, the bands of death. The words of Psalm 22.18 are being played out before His eyes, ‘They cast lots for my clothes.’

Mt.27.39 -44, Lk.23.35-37 (mirrored in Mk.15.29-32) Jesus is railed at by the mob who have come to see that God’s law is kept. They are watching a false messiah defeated, in their estimation, who will go the way of all the other false messiahs. He can’t even save Himself from the cross. And in those words, Jesus hears again the temptation of satan in the desert – ‘If you are the Son of God...’ – Jesus could act by taking His power, by consuming the mockers around Him with fire.. But this is not the Father’s cup.

Lk.23.39-43 To add to the abuse, one of the criminals dying beside Him calls on Him to save His own life and theirs. Surely this would be merciful? But the other victim shuts up the first criminal, reminding him that this is an innocent man. In his despair, the thief reaches out for the only hope left to him, the hope that Jesus has a path beyond death for him to walk. ‘Remember me when You come to Your Kingdom, Jesus.’ ‘You will be with me in paradise today’ says Jesus.

Are Jesus words just comforting platitude? Or does He mean that today, this broken, sinful man will walk with Christ beyond mortal life into an existence of Edenic joy? The outrageous hope is that Jesus is promising what He alone has to give, merely on the basis of a cry for mercy.

Jn.19.25-27 *Stabat mater*; the mother was standing. Here is the mother of God, Mary, whose flesh has been woven into the man now hanging before her in agony, the sword piercing her soul also, as Simeon had promised in Lk.2.35. With her are Mary, Clopas’ wife (could she have been one of the two, as she walked to Emmaus with her husband in Lk. 24.18, to whom Jesus reveals Himself?) and Mary Magdalene. The women are near, as at the beginning. Of all His men, Jesus sees only John, whose modesty will not let himself be named in this account, other than as the one who has experienced the selfless love of Christ. In His pain, Jesus still reaches out in compassion. His words to His mother indicate that Joseph is no longer around, and Jesus as her firstborn is responsible for her care and wellbeing. He entrusts her to His closest confidant, to John the Beloved, who from then on takes on the responsibility Jesus would have had toward her as eldest son. There is such humanity and tenderness in this action.

Mt.27.45-47 (mirrored in Mk.15.33-35, Lk.23.44-45a) In the watch after noon, darkness comes over the place, storm clouds hand heavy over Calvary. Jesus, very God of very

God, now experiences the inner abyss of separation which sinners go through without God. He feels totally forsaken, totally abandoned, for the only time in eternity. The Father cannot save Him from the human condition, from the horror of death closing in. Jesus has to share this with us, to redeem us from it.

He cries, then, in the words of Psalm 22.2, but in His own Aramaic mother-tongue;

אֵלִי אֵלִי לָמָּה שְׁבָחָתָנִי
Éli Éli lamá shebháktani ?
My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Those standing near mistake ‘Eli’ for a call on ‘Eliyahu’ – Elijah; maybe something is going to happen now? Maybe Elijah will come to the rescue in his chariot of fire?

Jn.19.28-29;Mt.27.48-49 (mirrored in Mk.15.36) Jesus is conscious of the Scriptures and their pointing to this moment, when all is come to completion. He originally said no to the analgesic, but He now asks for it, not for His relief, but to bow before the words of God. He has in mind most likely Psalm 69.21 – ‘they gave me vinegar to drink for my thirst.’

Jesus is shown the small mercy of a spongeful of the mixture, and then He is left to see whether His rescuer will come.

Jn.19.30, Lk.23.46 (mirrored in Mt.27.50; Mk.15.37) Having sucked at the sponge, Jesus says ‘It is complete’ (Greek τετέλεσται tetélestai – the sense of the Greek perfect tense here is that it has been completed, and will remain so in perpetuity.) He has accomplished what He came to do.

He then draws in His last anguished breath, pushing Himself up on the nails in hands and feet to cry ‘Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit.’ Even in the sense of abandonment and despair He feels, Jesus still commits Himself in faith to His Father, as all men and women must at the last moment. His head drops, and He surrenders His life, now still, butchered and broken by man’s self-righteous lust for vengeance.

Mt.27.51 -53 (mirrored in Mk.15.38, Lk.23.45b) At this moment, several things happen at once. The separating curtain in the Temple, hung between the holy place where the priests would offer daily prayer and incense, and the holy of holies, where the High Priest would go only once a year to the ark of the covenant, is torn from top to bottom. God is on the loose; there is now no need for separation, for Jesus has paid the full debt.

There is an earthquake, and graves crack open, and the bodies of many who have died in hope and faith come prematurely to resurrection at the power of Christ’s death! They are seen by many in Jerusalem, called here by Matthew ἡ ἁγία πόλις *ee ayhéea pólis*, the holy city.

Mt.27.54-56; Mk.15.39-41;Lk.23.47-49 The Roman soldiers are shaken by the elemental outbreak of empathy in the creation around them, and their leader, the centurion, in his Roman manner, confesses that this must be the offspring of a god. At the cross, then, a Gentile centurion confesses some sort of faith in Jesus – not long after this, another

centurion at Caesarea will be filled with the Holy Spirit. Perhaps Cornelius even knew this man in charge of the crucifixion?

The women keep their watch, at a distance now, those who have followed Him, provided for Him and served Him practically since the early days in Galilee. The men who have seen this death, beat their breasts in a sign of mourning, presumably with mixed levels of sincerity. Elijah has not come. A man is dead. A life is extinguished. They depart. Jesus' friends and the women however, ready to serve the necessities of the burial, wait on.

Jn.19.31-37 As one who was close to the cross, John has an account which others lack of what went on immediately after Jesus' death. Crucifixion could take days to accomplish the end of a victim, but this is Passover, and a special Sabbath is approaching with the sun's descent in the sky. To hasten the death of criminals at such times, soldiers were practiced in breaking the leg bones of the crucified, (*crurifragium*) preventing them from pushing up on the *suppedaneum*, the small ledge sometimes provided, or on the nails through the ankles, bringing on rapid suffocation. This they do to the two criminals with Jesus, but when they come to Christ, He is dead. To ensure no mistakes, since Roman soldiers allowing crucifixion victims to escape were subject to their punishment, a spear is driven up into the chest of Jesus' corpse, releasing clot and plasma, a sure *post-mortem* indicator. Even at the last, when Jesus cannot control the actions of His execution, the soldiers are fulfilling the Scriptures.

Mk.15.42-45 (mirrored in Mt.27.57- 58; Lk.23.50-52; Jn.19.38a) Crucifixion victims would often have been thrown on the waste heap, unburied. The Sabbath is now fast approaching, and in a move of great boldness, Joseph of Arimathea, one of the Sanhedrin, and expectant for God's direct rule to come soon, requests Pilate's permission to bury Jesus' body. Pilate, doubting such a quick death, has the facts checked out, and finding this to be the case, releases the corpse to Joseph.

Mt.27.59-60;Jn.19.38b – 42 (mirrored in Mk.15.46;Lk.23.53-54) There is a great poignancy in the scene now presented, of two of the Council of the Jews, Joseph and Nicodemus, being the ones who carry the Lord's remains to the tomb of Joseph nearby. They are making themselves ritually unclean for the feast, but their devotion is to the great Teacher they highly regarded. They wrap him in cloths, spiced and myrrhed, lay Him in the grave, and roll a great stone across, hurrying to rest as the sun goes down on this, the most significant day in human history.

Lk.23.55-56 (mirrored in Mt.27.61, Mk.15.47) The women go with Joseph and Nicodemus to see where He is laid. They need to see to His funeral rites, but the three first stars are appearing, and they may not go on the Sabbath. They rest, in accordance with the law. Jesus rests also, in the grave.

Mt.27.62-66. Next morning, the Jewish leaders are worried that some trick will be played to continue the claims of Jesus, knowing that He promised to rise again from death. They therefore request Pilate to seal the tomb and guard it, to which he agrees. There will be no more trouble from Jesus of Nazareth.

Day 323

Jesus' Resurrection and Ascension

Matthew 28.1 – 20; Mark 16.1 – 20; Luke 24.1 – 53; John 20.1- 21.25; Acts 1.6 – 26

The event of Jesus Christ's resurrection is inseparable from His death on the cross. If Christ is not risen from the dead, says Paul in 1 Corinthians 15.17, 'your faith is in vain, and you are still in your sins.' The resurrection is the acquittal of the sinner, it is the walking free from the courtroom of death. The promise of the New Testament is that if we die with Him, we will also rise with Him.

Mt.28.2-4 An earthquake shakes the ground, and an angel displaces the stone from across the entrance to Jesus' tomb. The guards watching on Pilate's orders are terrified and faint at the sight.

Mk.16.1-4 (mirrored in Mt.28.1, Lk.24.1-3, Jn.20.1) The women who have prepared the anointing spices and ointments for Jesus' corpse wonder how they are going to move the stone to get to the corpse. When they arrive, they find there is no need.

Mk.16.5-7 (mirrored in Mt.28.5-7) As they go into the tomb, to look at the ledge on which the body would be laid, a man in white is sitting there. The women are told by the messenger that Jesus is risen, and is going to Galilee to meet His friends, as He promised to do.

Lk.24.4-8 Luke recounts two men in white appearing to speak to the women. They are petrified, but the angels confirm that Jesus has risen as He said He would – at last, the women remember that Jesus did say such things when He was alive. They begin to understand.

Mk.16.8 The women run from the tomb, scared out of their wits, saying nothing.

Jn.20.2 Mary Magdalene finds Peter and John and tells them that the Lord has been taken away, and they don't know where He now is.

Jn.20.3 – 10 (mirrored in Lk.24.12) Peter and John run to the empty tomb, and John gets there first. He hesitates outside, but then Simon Peter, ever the fearless one, pushes past and sees the graveclothes, neatly folded. John then comes in, and on the strength of what he sees, believes Jesus is risen, even though He hasn't grasped yet the promises from the Old Covenant of this history-shaking event.

One of the things which commends to the reader the integrity of the text here is the way in which the writers communicate their own slowness to accept what they are seeing. The disciples do not look wonderful in these accounts, neither are they meant to. They are telling the story of their own grappling with an unimaginable truth before them.

Mk.16.9; Jn.20.11-17 The first person to see Jesus alive is a woman. Women were not accepted as valid witnesses in courts of Law. It is Jesus' decisive endorsement of the new freedom of Eve's daughters which He brings that He comes first, not to Simon or John, but to this weeping woman at the tomb entrance.

Mary sees the angels, but the wonder of them does not eclipse her grief. Her Master's body is gone, He cannot receive those last ritual services which loved ones give the deceased. Her eyes full of tears, she turns around from looking into the tomb, and a figure is perhaps silhouetted against the bright sun, the face not yet discernable. He asks whom she seeks. Mary assumes him to be the gardener, and appeals for his help to find the Lord's remains.

'Miryam' the man's voice says, her name in Aramaic, the name of the great prophetess of the Exodus, Moses' beloved sister, the name so well known in Israel. But the voice is full of tenderness, and she knows Him in a moment. 'Rabboni!', Aramaic for, 'my Master', and she reaches out to embrace Him.

He calls her to stop, for in the process of His resurrection, He has a prior obligation to fulfil, to see His Father, to honour the One whose love has kept Him through death, and now unleashed the new order of life.

Mt.28.8-10 The women who are hurrying away in fear tinged with joy from the tomb now also encounter Jesus. He greets them, and this time they are able to bow and embrace His feet in a sign of worship. He sends them to the men to point them to a meeting in Galilee.

Mt.28.11- 15 When news gets to the Jewish authorities that the body is gone, they hush everything up, still racked with fear at the intervention of the Romans in the fragile Jewish situation. They pay the soldiers handsomely to change the story and put it around that Jesus' followers have stolen the body, which becomes the propaganda feed bled into the city over the next weeks.

Lk.24.9-11 (mirrored in Mk.16.10-11, Jn.20.18) The women tell their news to the disciples, how they have encountered the risen Christ. The disciples reject their story. The men are slow of heart to accept the reality and accuse the women of speaking nonsense. (Greek λήρος *léeros*, 'twaddle', idle tales.)

Lk.24.13-27 (mirrored in Mk.16.12) Luke gives the details of an encounter which Mark mentions in passing, of two of the followers of Jesus, Cleopas and one other – possibly his wife, who had been at the cross, though this is uncertain – walking to their home village of Emmaus, about seven miles north-west of Jerusalem. They were going over and over what had happened, all the events, including the recent disappearance of the corpse and angelic appearances. They haven't heard that Jesus has appeared to anyone, though.

Now a stranger draws near, and begins to engage them in conversation on the road. They explain in response to His question all they know, and the mystifying events of this day. At their puzzlement, the fellow traveller shakes up their uncertainty, and begins to speak from the Scriptures of the promise of Messiah, how Moses and the prophets were looking

for this day, pointing forward to the reality that Christ would be a suffering servant, and would come into glory only through pain.

They are near the village, and the light is fading. The traveller is going on, but they persuade Him to join them for supper. As they come to blessing of bread, the usual action of the host at table, the guest takes it and speaks the blessing, the blessing they know so well – ‘*Blessed are you, Lord God, King of the Universe, who brings forth food from the earth*’. This break with tradition startles them, and then perhaps they see the marks in the hands holding the bread, or His shadowy face breaks into brightness. Whatever happens, their eyes are opened, they realise. But Jesus is gone. Now it makes sense, this joy and fire in their hearts which they felt when they were listening to Him on the road!

Lk.24.33-35, Jn.20.19 (mirrored in Mk.16.13) Even though darkness is now falling, they leave the supper table and rush back the seven miles to Jerusalem, as fast as they can, to where the disciples are locked in an upstairs room, waiting for the knock on the door of the authorities, come to arrest them for their assumed part in alleged grave-desecration and robbery.

By the time they arrive, the Lord has appeared to Peter as well, and they add their story to the growing body of evidence of people’s encounters with the One who called Himself ‘the Resurrection and the Life.’

Lk.24.36-44 (Mk.16.14;Jn.20.20) As they are speaking, Jesus is among them. It does not say that He walked through a wall or a door, like some ethereal spirit. There is now no separation for Him between the seen and the unseen, heaven has broken into earth in Him. Thus, He ‘materialises’, or becomes visible to those whose sight is still veiled to the unseen realm.

He speaks ‘shalom’ to them, the common greeting of the day, but the shock of His appearance in the room, with the doors locked is too much. They are cowering from Him, believing He must be a ghost. Yet Jesus is at pains to show them He is flesh and bone, as they are. He then shows them His hands and feet – hands and feet which still carry the marks of the cruel wounds of Calvary. This is paramount. In the risen, spiritual body of Jesus Christ, in all its glory and transformed power, He still carries the ‘stigmata’, the covenant scars of the cross.

Perhaps this scares them even more – the sight of the risen Christ, still with bloody marks on Him, it is overwhelming. They are astounded, yet also beside themselves with joy, and cannot believe, cannot give themselves to an assessment of their eyesight which leads to their acceptance of this event as hard fact.

Jesus now does something so simple, so ordinary, and yet so profound. He takes a piece of the fish left from their supper (Luke, the man of detail, even gives us the manner of its cooking – it is ‘baked fish’!) and He eats it. The simple fact – He is here, He is real, He eats fish! This is all what He spoke to them of before His death.

Jn.20.21-23 With the Father’s glory now released to all mankind through the power of the cross and the resurrection, Jesus is able to bring His friends first peace and purpose through His breathing on them with His gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is on His

breath, He has His Father's eyes. He gives them the authority to forgive, as He has done – the joy and gift of speaking salvation and rescue to any to whom they speak in His Name. This is not the full release of their empowering, which will come some weeks later; it is the deep visitation of God the Spirit to their inmost being which will enable them to know God is their *Abba*, Daddy.

Jn.20.24-25. Thomas, the Twin, is not there at this seminal encounter. When he returns, he is appalled at the sick joke he is being told about this mass hallucination. Therefore, he replies with an equally sick challenge to their integrity. The only way he will believe what they are saying is if he can stick his fingers into the brutal wounds in Christ's body.

Jn.20.26-29 A week later, they are in the same place, with the doors locked, and Jesus returns, this time confronting Thomas's doubt, inviting him to fulfil his morbid intention. Thomas is abashed and can only worship – ‘ὁ Κύριός μου καὶ ὁ Θεός μου *o Kýrios mou kai o Theós mou* – my Lord and my God' Jesus does not correct him, nor reject the title. He simply blesses those who will not have the privilege of seeing those wounds with their own eyes before they believe on Him and entrust themselves to their Lord and God.

Jn.21.1-14 The scene shifts to Galilee; they are back home, back in familiar territory. They would return to Jerusalem later for the feast of *Shavuot*, Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks. But for now, there is time to fish. After all they have experienced, perhaps they are wondering what they should do now. This is their livelihood; Jesus is no longer with them. Maybe they should just go back to what they know.

They work all night, going to their usual haunts on the lake, but catch nothing. As the dawn comes up, they hear a voice – ‘How's the fishing?’ ‘Nothing doing!’ ‘Try the other side..’ They have been here before, recorded by Luke in 5.4ff. They try it – and they have to leave the net in the water, because the amount of fish is too great. They tow it to shore, dragging behind the boat!

Peter now knows who it is who is calling to them – Jesus is waiting with a breakfast of fish on the beach! And He invites them to bring some of the one hundred and fifty three fish they have just caught, as well.

They have had experience before with fish and bread, and Jesus.

Jn.21.15-17 A scene now ensues which is deeply moving. Peter is painfully aware of the way he let Jesus down in the courtyard of the High Priest's house. Jesus now confronts him, and asks Peter, ‘Do you love (ἀγαπάω *agapáo*) me, Peter?’ Peter is filled with doubt, doubt in his own integrity. How can he confess that he loves Jesus wholeheartedly, selflessly, as God loves. He replies, ‘We are friends, Lord’ (Greek φιλέω *philéo*), not using the same word back in John's Greek version.

Jesus then affirms Peter – Jesus' plans have not changed, He is still to be on Jesus' team.

A second time, the same exchange takes place, and the words used are the same.

The third time, a subtle change happens, which is not captured in the English. Jesus asks Peter, ‘Are we friends, Peter?’ (Greek φιλεῖς με *philées me?*) This is what grieves Peter, that the third time, Jesus has questioned their friendship. Peter expresses his pain, that Jesus should question him this way – Jesus already knows what went on in the courtyard, and despite that, He also knows that Peter loves Him.

Jn.21.18-19 Jesus recommissions Peter, restoring him fully, but warning that he will not always wriggle out of the tough choices; one day he will be led away to suffer for Jesus, and will not back off – Peter will die for Jesus yet.

Jn.21.20-24 There is then a hint of the jealousy between the disciples resurfacing. After all, John was also there in the courtyard with him, he saw what happened. How can Jesus be restoring Peter, and not say anything to John? But Jesus takes Peter’s eyes off John and tells him to leave that to Jesus. Because of this, a rumour goes around that John is key to Jesus’ plans, that he will not die, but will see Jesus’ return – and indeed, John does seem to have lived the longest of the disciples. And this is the one who is writing this encounter and knows the truth of it.

Jesus Last Instructions and Ascension

Mt.28.16-20; Mk.16.15- 18 *It is worth mentioning that older manuscripts of the New Testament do not have Mark 16.9 -20. It may be because the end of the scroll or codex was damaged, or because the earlier editions didn’t have the proper ending.*

Jesus sends the disciples out as His emissaries, with the promise of new power. Mark mentions the gifts of healing, languages and victory over evil which will accompany them, and Matthew has Jesus calling for His team to instruct and form others in His ways, to become also His disciples. They are to baptise in water, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a new formulation for this resurrection age.

Lk.24.45-49 Jesus also gives them new insight into Scripture and its light shed on all they have witnessed with Him. He also promises that a new power will come upon them, which the Father will pour out upon them. They are to wait to receive this power, and beginning in Jerusalem, they are to take the news of this new age through Judea, Samaria and to the furthest nations.

Lk.24.50,51; Acts 1.6-11 (mirrored in Mk.16.19) They appear to be at this point back in Jerusalem, and going out to the top of the Mount of Olives, Jesus is taken from their sight in a mist, and ascends to the unseen realm, to the Father. As He fades from their sight, two men tell them He will be back again, in the same way they have seen Him go.

Lk.24.52-53; Acts 1.12-14 They return to Jerusalem, full of joy, and go to the upstairs room where they have been staying, and where they will now wait. The disciples and the women are together.

Acts 1.15-22 At this point, on a practical level, Peter suggests to the one hundred and twenty of them now gathered that a replacement be chosen for Judas Iscariot. This action

is something of a puzzle, since there is no clue that Jesus has requested this. However, they go through the process of drawing lots, to replace the lost man, who, in his hanging, must have fallen and split open, a ghastly end for this the sad follower.

Peter draws his inspiration for this replacement from Psalm 109.8, and of Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias, Matthias is chosen and he becomes an apostle. What is perhaps of note is that Matthias is not of any note, and is not mentioned again in the Scriptures after his election. Some would suggest that the true inheritor of Judas' place was Paul, later in the story.

Mk.16.20 Mark's account ends where Luke's Acts begin – the disciples are about to fulfil the call of Jesus to go and be His agents of transformation everywhere.

Jn.20.30-31, 21.25 John's codicil is to note that not everything Jesus did in His years of ministry could be recorded – it is just too much. But what John has written has the express purpose of leading the reader to faith in the Incarnate Word with whom he began.

Day 324

The Coming of the Holy Spirit

Acts 1.1-5; Acts 2.1-47

Acts 1.1-5 Luke, the beloved physician opens volume two of his account of the breaking out of the direct rule of God into the earth in the person of Jesus Christ with a greeting to the reader, Theophilus, reminding him that Jesus ascended to His Father, after instructing them *through the Holy Spirit* – this is of note. Even after His resurrection from the dead, Jesus is still operating in close communion with God in Trinity. What days they must have been, to have heard the teaching of the Son of God on the direct rule of the Lord in the power of the Spirit! Perhaps it was during this period that the five hundred referred to in Peter's letter saw Jesus at one time.

The other thing of note is that in His resurrection body, Jesus can still sit and eat with His friends! Jesus at this meal instructs them again to wait until they have received the promised gift of the Father of which He has already spoken to them, the immersion, the plunging into the river of God, the living water of the Holy Spirit of which Jesus spoke in John 7.37.

Acts 2.1-4 Fifty days after the Passover comes the feast of Weeks (Hebrew שָׁבֻעוֹת *Shavu'ot*) called in Greek, Pentecost (Greek Πεντηκοστής *Pentecostées*) from the word for fifty, being fifty days from Passover.

Pentecost is a Jewish early harvest festival, when the firstfruits are brought to the Temple for thanksgiving. It is another of the great gathering festivals, so thousands of faithful Jews have again travelled to the holy city to honour the Lord God for His covenanted goodness in provision. It is on the fiftieth day, when the feast has fully come round, that the promise of the Father is released.

As they are gathered, then, a sound comes, like a wind, (Greek φερομένη πνοή βία *pheroménee pnoée bhiáia* – a driving wind, violent) and the house is filled. Then, as John spoke of the immersion in fire, flames appear on their heads as a sign of this encounter with God.

Then something happens which recalls an event not seen since Genesis, since Babel. Those gathered open their mouths, impelled by the inrushing Holy Spirit, and speak; but they are speaking languages not known to one another. It is important to note what they are speaking. The people who come running to listen to this outburst under their windows hear the noise, and in the midst hear them speaking in their own languages, declaring the greatness and works of God, praising Him and praying to Him. Babel was a means of God confusing the people. Here, Babel is reversed, people hear and perceive God's praise in the midst of seeming confusion.

Perhaps this is almost as much as 'gift of hearing' as a gift of tongues. This ecstatic expression of language becomes a mark of the activity of the Holy Spirit among the early believers, received later by those in Cornelius' house in Acts 10 and in Ephesus in Acts 19.

It is also a sign of the further fulfilment of God's promise to bless the nations of the earth. The vast majority of those gathered in Jerusalem are Jews, but they come from all over the known world. They speak other languages, they know other cultures. This is not a Hebrew or Greek experience, this is for all tongues, tribes and nations. God has placed in people in places where He can fulfil the Abrahamic promise. They will become a truly sent, missional people from this day.

Acts 2.5-13 These Jews from many nations gather at the commotion coming from the upper room. There is a general confusion at what is happening. Some cynics accuse those making such a noise of being drunk.

Acts 2.14-16 Now, Peter comes out, with the disciples around him. This is a bold step indeed, for it is only six weeks since the crucifixion of Jesus for blasphemy and sedition. Now, Peter is about to speak in His name. He tells the crowd that they cannot be drunk, for the taverns are not in business yet, it is only nine o'clock in the morning! This is the fulfilment of the word to Joel in Joel 2.28-32, the outpouring of and immersion in the Holy Spirit on 'all flesh' – with no regard to age, status or gender.

Peter then commends Jesus to the crowd, known to them for His miraculous ministry. He was, with God's full knowledge and in His purpose, betrayed to the 'lawless' (Greek ἀνόμοι *anómi* – those without the law, meaning either wicked, or the Gentiles), who had Him crucified. But now, Peter proclaims the truth of His resurrection, and backs it up with texts from Psalm 16.8-11. He then points this text to Jesus, and confesses to being a witness of Jesus' resurrection, as they all are. They have seen Him ascend, and He is at the Father's throne, now pouring out the Holy Spirit upon them with the signs following.

God has indeed made Jesus Lord (a title reserved to Caesar, usually, although used by the Jews of God) and Christ, Messiah.

Acts 2.37-41 In response, the crowd is moved deeply. After all, they know the travesty of Jesus' condemnation and death, and they also know the complicity in it of Rome. Many see their own fickle-heartedness in this – how can they escape the consequences of this terrible action? They cry out – ‘help us, how can we be rescued?’

Peter is ready; what he now says is the key Christ gave him; ‘Turn around, be immersed in water as a sign of the cleansing of your guilt, putting your trust in Jesus Christ as your rescuer, and you will also be immersed, filled with the Holy Spirit.’ This is a universal offer, one which has been taken up through millennia by millions.

Peter continues to exhort the crowd, and they now make their way to water, and the disciples of Jesus set to baptising three thousand new followers of the Risen Christ!

Acts 2.42-47 What shines out from this first gathering of believers is their togetherness (Greek *κοινωνία kinonía* – a commonality, a community) . Together, they have received the Holy Spirit. They now share their homes and resources with one another, and give themselves in unity to hearing and enacting the teaching of Jesus' emissaries, to community, being together, to eating together and to being with God together, listening and speaking to Him. They share what they have, and in this way, poverty is eradicated among them, as they sell to raise money for the needy.

They have gatherings in the courts of the Temple, but also come together in homes at mealtimes, full of worship and praise of God and favoured by the city around them, with more and more coming to believe in the power of the Risen Jesus of Nazareth.

At the end of this chapter is the first description of this group as ‘the church’ (Greek ἡ ἐκκλησία *ee ekklessía* – those elect, called out from among others, the instrumental assembly of God's people to mediate His kingship into the earth) to which others are being daily added.

Day 325

Jesus' People Grow and Face Opposition

Acts 3.1 – 6.7

Acts 3.1-10 It is clear from this healing of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate that the emissaries of Jesus intend to continue His powerful ministry of signs and wonders. (It is not certain which gate is referred to here, but it may be either the Nicanor or the Shushan gate).

Acts 3.11-16 As they go into the Temple, people come running to see this man whole, and Peter takes the opportunity to proclaim the direct reign of God on earth which it represents. The words are very pointed, ‘you handed him over to be killed...you disowned Him before Pilate.’ But Jesus has been raised, and this miracle is proof of the fact that Jesus is very much alive and active.

Acts 3.17-26 It is worth noting here that Peter states that those clamouring for Jesus' death were acting out of *ignorance* (Greek *ἄγνοια agnía*, literally, without knowledge.) But God has used that ignorance to fulfil His promised word through the prophets of the covenant. There is the chance to turn around, to escape the consequences of this terrible burden of guilt. Jesus is unseen now, and will be until 'the restoration of all things', but there is the opportunity to be right with God, to listen to this Prophet.

Peter then makes explicit the link with these events and the covenant with Abraham, in which the Lord promised that all nations would be blessed through Israel. Jesus has come first to His own people, giving them the means of being that vehicle of blessing to the world.

Acts 4.1-4 The religious police are on the scene. This time, they do not hesitate – they allowed Jesus to speak freely in the Temple, they are not going to tolerate His followers. Peter and John are arrested and incarcerated, even while a further two thousand people come to faith hearing their words after the miracle!

Acts 4.5-12 Peter and John appear before the High Priest Caiaphas and his father-in-law, Annas, as well as a number of others from this Aaronic family. They want to know what power they are using for this action.

The Holy Spirit fills Peter – the Spirit's filling is not a one-off event, but continuous – and He is now standing up to those whom he so feared and fled a few weeks before. He is unequivocal in his message – Jesus of Nazareth is the source of their ministry, crucified at their instigation, but now alive, and in His name alone is deliverance and rescue. They have rejected the foundation stone of God's new order.

Acts 4.13-22 The authorities are taken aback by this clarity and authority from a group of peasant people. The man healed is standing nearby, and the thousands of new believers are already telling their story around the city. They perhaps do not want to make the same mistake again, since their treatment of Jesus has rebounded on them in this outbreak of faith in the crucified as Messiah.

After conferring, they order them to stop their preaching, an order which they both immediately refuse. They are released, mainly because the authorities cannot deny what has happened, and the people are praising God for this man who has been unable to walk for four decades!

Acts 4.23-31 When Peter and John return to the community of believers, their response is not to discuss, but to seek God together. Their prayer is based around Scripture, this time Psalm 2, the great Messianic Psalm, speaking of *Meshiach*. It is also clear in their minds who is responsible for the death of Jesus – Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles and the Jews in Jerusalem. They call on the Lord for power to heal and do wonders in Jesus' name, and as a result, the Holy Spirit fills them and shakes the building, and the declaration of the kingship of God come to earth continues.

Acts 4.32-37 The togetherness of commonality continues. This is a people who have grown into mature spirituality, one which sees no importance in their individual egos, but rather, their meaning and purpose is one which joins them to others. There are no single

shining lights, rather, a blazing chandelier of witness, as they live and work together in the Lord's Name.

We meet here also, for the first time, Joseph Barnabas, a Cypriot and a Levite, the son of encouragement who will become such a key in the early ministry of Paul. (His name in Aramaic, *Bar Nabas* means the son of a prophet.) His great-heartedness leads him to sell a field and bring the proceeds to Jesus' emissaries for distribution.

Acts 5.1-11 Barnabas' action in selfless giving to the community must have been an inspiration. After all, Luke considers it important enough to mention in his account. But this also may have led to others looking for personal reputation and *cachet* through spiritual deeds. Thus a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira's knowledge also sells property, (the ownership would have been his, not hers), and brings part of the proceeds to the community. However, they connive together to make it seem that the part they have offered is all the proceeds of the sale, when Ananias has kept some back.

It is a sign of the intense purity of this early community of believers that the consequences of this deception are the deaths of both the man and his wife. It is as though God's Spirit consumes all unrighteousness. The result is fear in the church and in those around who hear. God is indeed not to be mocked!

Acts 5.12-16 The followers of Jesus continue His ministry of miracles, gathering in the Temple precincts, as people come there for prayer and healing. As they walk along the streets, people are bringing out the sick, believing that even being in the shadow of an emissary of Jesus the Christ will set them free from pain. And the movement grows, as people from out of town also come to Jerusalem for the hope of deliverance embodied in this holy people.

Acts 5.17-21a Caiaphas and the Sadducees (who deny there is any resurrection) now arrest Jesus' twelve emissaries and put them in prison. However, an angel comes and opens the doors, and tells them to go and speak out the good news again in the Temple precincts! They are arrested again, this time with no force, because the popularity of their teaching has grown so much. They are brought again, this time before the whole council, the Sanhedrin.

Acts 5.27-32 The council are furious that the group are still speaking out, against their instructions. They not only preach in Jesus' name, but they are making the Sanhedrin responsible for Jesus' death. Jesus' team replies that they can do no other, because they are obeying God, who has raised Jesus from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand, pouring out the Holy Spirit.

Acts 5.33-39 At this point, the emissaries are under threat of death. But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, one of the men under whom Saul of Tarsus trained, calls for an adjournment. The accused are taken out, and Gamaliel speaks openly to the Sanhedrin of those past attempts by false messiahs to establish themselves – they all came to nothing. On the other hand, if God is working here, it is futile to resist Him, and they will end up fighting the Lord Himself.

Acts 5.40-42 The emissary team are brought back in. The Sanhedrin choose to be guided by Gamaliel's words, but Jesus' men are whipped before being let go. They are ordered to not preach in Jesus' name, but instead, they are glad to have suffered for the sake of Christ, and continue to ignore the council's prohibition, speaking out the good news of Jesus both in the Temple and in homes of the people.

Acts 6.1-7 With so many people now coming to Jesus, there is an ever-increasing burden of administration on the new community. In particular, in the sharing out of the resources, it seems that Greek Jews were being discriminated against in favour of the Aramaic-speaking Jews. But the Twelve need to give themselves to continuing the spiritual formation of this new community. They cannot get tied up in the practical disputes of the widows. Thus, the believers nominate seven men to serve, who are also Spirit-filled and reliable.

In this way, order is brought, and the Twelve are able to continue their work unhindered.

Day 326

The First Jesus Follower to Die for His Faith

Acts 6.8 – 8.1a

Acts 6.8-15 Stephen (Greek στέφανος *Stéphanos*, meaning a chaplet or a crown) is one of the seven called to administrate the distribution of the food, but it does not prevent him from being active in miraculous service of the Lord.

Opposition comes from the synagogue of the Freedmen (Greek Λιβερτινων *Libhertínon*, the Greek form of a Latin word meaning 'the freed ones') and from Jews of Cyrene, Alexandria and Asia – it is very likely that among these was one, Saul of Tarsus, which was in Cilicia, also mentioned here.

They are unable to refute Stephen's Spirit-empowered wisdom, and thus they trump up charges to get rid of him, accusing him of blasphemy and threats against the Temple. When the Council calls him, the glory of God is upon Him to such an extent that, like Moses, his face shines, as an angel's might.

Acts 7.1-9 Stephen's account of His faith starts from a key moment – from the promise to Abraham. Abraham is the pole star in terms of the unfolding promise of God to bless the nations. Stephen continues to remind the council of Isaac and Jacob and his sons, through the deliverance of Israel from Egypt – this man Stephen is no ignoramus concerning the salvation history of his people.

Stephen highlights the unbelief of Israel towards Moses, and their hardness of hearts. Israel's nature has been rebellion all the way through her history, making idols for themselves, against which the prophets inveighed. And the Temple, the great work of Solomon, is not actually the pinnacle of faith which Israel makes it out to be, since the Lord had already told His people that He does not live in man-made premises.

And true to form, even now, these descendants of their obdurate ancestors are rejecting the good news of the King who has come to set them free, and have killed Him.

Acts 7.54-8.1a As the council reacts in rage at Stephen's accusations, they go to grab him. Stephen is telling them of his seeing Jesus at the Father's right hand as they drag him outside, picking up rocks from the ground to kill him for his prophetic words. And there, in the midst of them, watching the slaughter of this holy man, is Saul of Tarsus, looking after the belongings of those venting their anger on the first martyr.

As Stephen's body is breaking beneath the hail of wrath-propelled stones, spilling the red river of his witness into the dust, he remembers the words of his dying Saviour, nailed to the cross, and calls on the Lord not to count this sin against his murderers, rendering his spirit to God as His Master has done. Saul sees the last breath of this saint of God, and is glad he is gone.

Day 327

Opposition and Multiplication

Acts 8.1b – 9.31

Acts 8.1b – 3 In a few verses, a dire situation is revealed. The church is now under attack by the authorities, and leaves only the twelve holding out in Jerusalem. The believers find shelter throughout the rest of the region. Stephen is buried and deeply mourned – worthy of note by any who would deter Christians from grieving the departure of beloved friends and family.

Saul of Tarsus, who has seen the first blood of a martyr spilt for Christ, now seeks others. He begins a systematic pogrom of what the Jews will come to call 'Nazarenes', rooting them out of their house-based assemblies, and taking them to prison. Who knows how many died there? Saul's action is an abuse (Greek *λυμαίνωμαι* *lymáinomai*, meaning to insult, to pollute) of the church.

Acts 8.4-8 An outcome of this displacement of believers is a widening of the work of the good news of Jesus. In Acts 4.4 is the use of a word *evangelízomai* (Greek *εὐαγγελίζομαι*) meaning literally 'to good news'. It is a difficult word to translate, since it is not necessarily confined to preaching or speaking, but also to being good news. The life of the believer is not just a matter of speaking, but of being the life of Christ to a community.

Philip, one of the twelve, goes to Samaria, that place held at arms' length by the Jews for so long, but which Jesus had taught them was included in His love and salvation. Miracles accompany him, and there is a great outbreak of God's glory in the city.

Acts 8.9-13 In Samaria there is a mysterious guru-figure called Simon, often called *Magus*, the magician. He is said to practice *magic* (Greek *μαγέυω* *magevon*) rather than sorcery (Greek *φαρμακεία* *pharmakeia*) and seems to have been an early Gnostic teacher, setting himself up as a type of Messianic figure, his followers known sometimes

as ‘Simonians’. He has denied Jerusalem and established Gerizim as the place of God’s favour. He certainly impresses the Samaritans, and styles himself ‘the great power’.

But as Samaria is rocked by the good news of Jesus, even Simon is baptised for the forgiveness of sins, going around watching what Philip is doing as he restores wholeness to the lives of broken people.

Acts 8.14-17 News of the Samaritan ministry of Philip has reached Jerusalem, and Peter and John are sent to look into this. Jesus has told them to be witnesses to Samaria, and has Himself been known to stay with Samaritans in John 4. Therefore, when they come to the city, Peter and John do not hold back from laying hands on the believers there to receive the Holy Spirit.

Two things are of importance here; first, the action of baptism in water was not seen as sufficient by Peter and John – believers need an impartation of the Holy Spirit in addition. This does not happen at the moment of baptism. It is therefore possible to be baptised in water in Jesus’ name, and not have the promise of the Spirit.

Secondly, the Holy Spirit is given by the laying of hands of Peter and John. This does not mean this is the only way of receiving the Spirit – after all, in Acts 2 and in Acts 10 the Spirit comes spontaneously, without the agency of men, upon believers. However, it is clear that the Holy Spirit can be imparted through prayer and hands laid on.

Acts 8.18-24 Unlike with the Acts 2 and Acts 10 reception of the Spirit, there is no mention of what phenomena accompanied the Holy Spirit’s release upon the Samaritans. However, there was something both visible and powerful, since Simon Magus, so impressed with the impartation given, offers to pay for training in this spiritual power. Peter is direct in response, uncovering the mercenary motives of Simon, calling on him to repent and turn to the Lord truly, with all his heart. Even having been baptised, Simon is still in the grip of evil powers. Simon seems to respond positively, asking for prayer out of fear of the Lord.

Acts 8.25 Peter and John return to Jerusalem, taking the opportunity to ‘good news’ in the villages en route.

Acts 8.26-35 Philip is instructed by a messenger from God to go towards Gaza, on the Mediterranean, along the great highway of the sea, leading to Egypt and Africa beyond. Here he comes across a traveller, who turns out to be an Ethiopian eunuch, an official of the Queen Kandake (Greek κανδάκη *Kandakee*). The term ‘Kandake’ is one which refers to the queen-mothers of the kings of Meroe, or Kush, who had long ruled the southern part of Egypt and into Sudan and Ethiopia. They were not regents nor consorts, but rulers in their own right. This is because the Kings of Meroe are seen as gods, and cannot be involved in human affairs, hence the Queen Mother takes over. The Kandake at this time is Amantitere, ruling from AD25 to AD41.

This is not the first Ethiopian eunuch to feature in the Scriptures. In Jeremiah 38.7, a man named Ebhed-Melech helps Jeremiah. It is possible that these male officials of the Kandake have been emasculated to prevent any threat to her person. This also indicates the level of their influence in the court.

As Philip draws near the carriage, he finds the man reading from the Scriptures. This indicates that he is a proselyte Jew, or one who is seeking God. He is reading from Isaiah 53, a key passage for the understanding of Jesus' sacrifice and asks to whom these words refer. Philip is able to explain to him the good news of Jesus as a result.

Acts 8.36 -39 The eunuch is convinced that this path is for him, he wants to follow the Messiah. They pass by a pool or an oasis, and he asks for baptism – 'What hinders me?' he says. There are several possible reasons Philip could have given – first, he is a eunuch, under the law of Moses forbidden by reason of his emasculation from entering God's assembly (Lev.21.20); then, he is a Gentile, under a foreign power. But Philip does not hesitate, and he baptises this first Gentile believer in water. Philip then appears to have removed Philip by miraculous means, leaving the first African Christian to return to his homeland with joy.

Acts 8.40 Philip now finds himself in Azotus, ancient Ashdod, in the Philistine territory, and he preaches there, working his way up the coast until he reaches the Roman town of Caesarea, the headquarters of the occupying forces.

Acts 9.1-9 As Philip is sharing in the south, in the east of the region, Saul of Tarsus is on his way to Damascus with authority to arrest any Nazarenes there and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial. The sect is becoming known as 'The Way' (Greek ἡ ὁδός *ee odhós*) and Saul has papers to prove his right to cart away any who subscribe to it.

Coming towards the city, lightning engulfs him, and he is knocked over. He hears a voice asking why he is persecuting the speaker, who, when questioned, says He is Jesus, the object of Paul's pursuit. Jesus tells Saul to into the city and wait, until further instructions are given. Those with Paul have heard what has gone on, but see no one. Blinded, Saul is brought to Straight Street, where he cannot see for three days, and goes without food and drink.

Acts 9.10-16 The Lord now instructs a disciple named Ananias to go to Judas's house on Straight Street and ask for Saul of Tarsus. Ananias wonders if he is hearing right, and questions the Lord – after all, hasn't the Lord heard what a scourge this man is to the church? But the Lord tells his messenger that Saul is going to carry the good news of Jesus to Gentiles and Jews alike, though with great suffering.

Acts 9.17-19 Ananias goes to the house and meets Saul, addressing him as 'brother'. Ananias is there to pray for Saul to be filled with the Holy Spirit, laying hands on him as Peter and John did in Samaria. This time, Ananias is not an emissary, an *apóstolos* of Jesus, one of the twelve, but a regular believer.

A covering falls from Saul's eyes, and he can see. He has been filled with the Holy Spirit of God, and immediately he is baptised in water, even before he eats after his three days of fasting. This communicated the importance of baptism in the early church. Saul now stays for a few days with the believers' community in Damascus.

Acts 9.20-22 Saul is now out of the slings with the excitement of the revelation of the Son of God to him. He goes to the synagogue, and his testimony confuses the Jews, who are expecting a Saul breathing out threats, not one who comes praising Jesus as the Christ!

Acts 9.23-25 Eventually, the Jewish conservatives decide Saul is a liability to the stability of the faith, and they plot to do away with him. Saul gets wind of their plan, as they watch the comings and goings through the city gates constantly, day and night. His friends therefore offer to help him by lowering him in a large basket down from the city wall to escape the vigilantes. He makes for Jerusalem to confer with the twelve.

Acts 9.26-30 Unsurprisingly, the disciples of Jesus are very suspicious of Saul, and take him as a fraud at first. Yet Joseph Barnabas, the son of encouragement, comes alongside him in love and openness, and takes him to meet the apostles, explaining Saul's story to them all. As a result, he is able to stay in Jerusalem, and shares openly of his experience of Jesus. When the Greek-speaking Jews hear him, they want to kill him, so the team decide, for the safety of Saul and his future mission, he should be got to the sea and put on a ship back to his home region of Tarsus in Cilicia.

According to his own story written later in Galatians 1 and 2, there was a long time lapse between the move from Damascus to Jerusalem. Saul spent time, he says, even years, in Arabia, in hiding, in exile even, but in that time, he studies and trains, and emerges as one able to be the most effective envoy of Jesus of his day.

Acts 9.31 After such a time of suffering, with Saul no longer pursuing them, and the wind taken out of their detractors' sails, the church enjoys a period of peace and growth. It is of note that the term *ekklessía* here, the assembly, the church, is used to describe the whole body of believers throughout a region, that is, Judea, Galilee and Samaria, not just in one location.

Day 328

Romans Come to Christ, Herod Pursues the Church

Acts 9.32 – 12.25

Acts 9.32 – 35 At Lydda, nine miles south-east of modern Tel Aviv, and location today of Israel's main Ben Gurion airport, a paralyzed man named Aeneas is healed through Peter's prayer from eight years of inertia. The result is a coming to Christ of many in the area and the Sharon plain.

Acts 9.36-43 A follower of Jesus in Joppa, the Mediterranean port north of today's Tel Aviv, is named Tabitha (Dorcas in Greek – both words meaning *gazelle*); she dies, and is prepared for burial. When it is heard that Peter is not far away in Lydda, he is sent for, and when he arrives is shown the work which the woman has done to bless and minister to the poor, making clothes for them. When Peter has sent out the weeping widows, he prays and then calls Dorcas back to life. She rises up, to the amazement of everyone, and the news of it goes throughout the town. Peter remains in Joppa for a while in the house of a tanner named Simon.

Acts 10.1-8 The story shifts to Caesarea, the Roman base of operations in Palestine. It has been constructed as miniature Rome, with amphitheatre, forum and aqueducts, the remains of which can still be seen today. Here is a centurion, in charge of a hundred men,

called Cornelius. He is in the Italian regiment (Greek ἰταλικός *Italikós*) and is most likely therefore himself from the Italian peninsula.

The movement towards philosophical monotheism was growing as a result of the teachings of Plato and Aristotle. Not that this stopped the old gods being worshipped, but many Gentiles were drawn to Judaism because of its single Deity. Cornelius is one of these who is seeking the God of Israel, praying and giving from his heart.

One afternoon, an angel comes to him, and tells the stunned man that God has received his prayers and acts of love. He tells him to fetch Peter from Joppa, and he despatches two of his stewards (Greek οἰκέτοι *ikéti*, housekeepers) and a soldier of his command who is also a believer to take the request to Joppa for Peter to come.

Acts 10.9-16 Next day, Peter is praying about midday on the roof. Luke, a man for detail, tells us that Peter had requested lunch, which was being prepared, but then he falls into a trance (Greek ἔκστασις *ékstasis*, from which English *ecstasy*, a standing away, apart from oneself). He sees a great sheet come down from above him, full of non-kosher animals, reptiles and birds. He hears a voice telling him to kill and eat, but Peter is a good Jew, and would not break the food laws. He is then told, 'Don't call what I have made unclean.' This happens three times.

Acts 10.17-23a Peter is puzzling over the meaning of this vision, when the Gentile messengers from Cornelius turn up at the door asking for him. The Holy Spirit speaks a word of knowledge to Peter, perhaps to make Peter ready for the shock of the fact of three non-Jews looking for an audience with him.

When he hears their errand, Peter invites the three men into the house to stay the night. This was a departure from Jewish custom in itself. Peter was treading new ground here.

Acts 10.23b-29 Next morning, they set out for Caesarea Maritima, thirty six miles north, along the coast. This must have been a challenge for Peter – he is going to the focus of operations of the Roman power in Judea. They arrive the next again day, and are welcomed into the house by Cornelius and his family and close friends. Cornelius tries to do homage to Peter, but Peter corrects his excessive honour. In the house are a crowd of expectant people. Peter is painfully aware that his connection with Gentiles is contaminating his ritual purity, but he is going with the Holy Spirit here. He explains, perhaps nervously, that he shouldn't even be there, but God has told him not to reject anyone.

Acts 10.30-33 Cornelius recounts his experience of a few days before; they are all eager to hear what God has given Peter to say!

Acts 10.34-43 Peter confesses the realisation that God has no racial bias, but accepts all who seek to respond to Him. Thus Peter tells them of Israel's Messiah, Jesus, of his life, death and resurrection appearances to chosen witnesses, who now proclaim Him as Saviour.

Acts 10.44-48 Suddenly, there is uproar in the room, as the Holy Spirit rushes into the listening Gentiles, and they begin to praise and worship God in other languages, while

Peter is still speaking the message to them. The Jews are astounded at what they are seeing – the Lord is breaking out of the national bounds, and blessing the nations, the Gentiles! They cannot but immerse them in water in Jesus' name, since they have been immersed in the presence of God the Spirit by sovereign intervention of the Lord. Peter then stays on in Caesarea a few days, finding his feet in the new milieu God is creating.

Acts 11.1-18 The rest of the team in Jerusalem hear of what has happened in Caesarea, and soon the word is all over Judea. When Peter comes back to Jerusalem, he is severely criticised by the conservative Jewish followers of Jesus as having broken the Law by fellowshiping with non-Jews, Romans to boot. Peter then carefully recounts all that has happened in this unfolding story of God's favour on the Gentiles, and in conclusion asserts that because the Holy Spirit has come upon the Gentiles as He did upon the Jews at Pentecost, there is no argument with God to be had.

The realisation dawns on the Jerusalem brothers that God has included the non-Jews in the promises and into life everlasting. They stop complaining, and start to praise God.

Acts 11.19-21 Coming out of the persecution following Stephan's martyrdom, believers were scattered as far afield as Cyprus and Antioch (modern Antakya) in coastal Syria. Here the believers come into contact with Greeks, and begin to share with them the good news, leading to a rapid growth in the number of Gentile believers there.

Acts 11.22-26 When the leaders at Jerusalem hear of what is happening in Syria, they send Joseph Barnabas, the son of encouragement, to investigate. He is overjoyed at the life he finds, and gives his full endorsement to the work. Then he remembers his friend, Saul of Tarsus, to whom God has given the mission to take the good news of Christ to the Gentiles. What better place for him to begin than in a church of Jewish and Gentile Jesus-followers here?

Barnabas goes and brings Saul from Tarsus, his home city, just around the bay at the north-eastern corner of the Mediterranean. No doubt, Saul's immense depth in the Scriptures as a Pharisee would have been plumbed to draw out the riches of Christ concealed in God's holy covenant writings. Together, Saul and Barnabas work for a year to bring a grounding to the new church of Antioch, where, for the first time, the followers of the Way, of Jesus are called, probably as a term of abuse initially, *Christianí* (Greek Χριστιανοί), 'little Christs.'

Acts 11.27-28 To aid the new Antioch church, prophetic ministry visits from Jerusalem, including a prophet named Agabus, who foretells a famine coming to the whole Empire, which happens in the era of Claudius, not long after.

Acts 11.29-30 As a response to the coming need, the believers in Antioch contribute to a support gift for the Jewish church, which once taken, is couriered to the leaders by Barnabas and Saul on a visit south.

Acts 12.1-5 Having had a time of peace, persecution breaks out again in 44AD as Herod Agrippa I, nephew of Herod Antipas and grandson of Herod the Great, arrests church leaders. Agrippa had been given the honour of Kingship over Judea and Samaria by

Emperor Claudius after the death of Caligula in 41AD; therefore he now had authority over Jerusalem.

In the round-up of the Nazarenes, James, that son of thunder, one of those who witnessed the transformation of the Lord on the mountain, is executed by sword. This results in popular approval, and Agrippa has Peter arrested. This must have seemed a dark day for the church. Ominously, it is the same time of year when Jesus was arrested, Passover, so Jerusalem is a seething mass of Jewish discontent once again. A show trial would add to Herod Agrippa's popularity. The church sets to serious prayer together.

Acts 12.6-11 Peter is miraculously set free, as the twelve had been before, by an angel. Peter feels as if he is in a dream while it is all happening, as he is propelled through the gates into the street, where he wakes up, realising the Lord has rescued him from Agrippa's plans.

Acts 12.12-17 Peter makes his way to the house of Mary, John Mark's mother, where the church has gathered to pray for Peter's deliverance. This is the scene of one of the most beautifully comic moments in Scripture, as Peter knocks on the door where the prayer gathering is happening, and is heard by the servant girl Rhoda. However, instead of opening the door, she runs excitedly into the meeting, telling them that Peter is at the gate! They think she has gone mad, but Peter knocks more, until the overawed crowd let him in, and hear his account of miraculous deliverance.

He asks for James, the brother of Jesus, who is emerging as leader now of the Jerusalem part of the church, to be told of his escape. Then Peter high-tails it out of Jerusalem for safety and away from Agrippa's clutches.

Acts 12.18-19a In his fury at the loss of this opportunity for glory, Herod Agrippa tries the negligent guards who let Peter escape and has them executed.

Acts 12.19b -23 In a move of political significance, the people of Lebanon (Tyre and Sidon) who have been refused food imports upon which they rely, by Agrippa, gain the favour of his chamberlain, Blastus and obtain through him an audience with Herod Agrippa. They flatter him to death, quite literally, calling him equal to a god, which leads to his rapid downfall, dying after the games in Caesarea, according to Josephus the Jewish historian of a serious intestinal condition in 44AD.

Acts 12.24-25 The good news spreads, and Barnabas and Saul return to Antioch, taking with them the young man at whose mother's house the church had met to pray, John Mark, set to become the scribe for Peter's story in Mark's gospel later.