

The Bible Page—Introduction to Acts and Acts 1

We will study Acts of the Apostles as our next set of Bible Pages. It is a very important book in the New Testament, yet sometimes unfamiliar to some. It is used for many of the readings for Masses in the Easter season. As we rejoice in our new spiritual lives during this season we also reflect on the lives of the early Christians shortly after the Resurrection.

The author of Acts is Luke, the same person who is strongly believed to have written the third Gospel. This has been the tradition since the second century, as many authors such as Irenaeus tell us. Luke was a Gentile physician (Colossians 4:14) and showed genuine concern for the sick in his writings. He was born in Antioch, had an excellent Greek writing style, was aware of Old Testament writings, and was a careful historian. He was a traveling associate of Paul (2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24) as evidenced by the “we” passages in Acts (16:10-17, 20:5-15, 21:1-18, 27:1-28:16). Acts 1:1 mentions his first book, the Gospel of Luke.

Biblical scholars are not in agreement concerning the date when Acts was written. Some say it was late, in the 80’s, others say early, in the 60’s. The early date would be around 63 after Paul’s imprisonment in Rome in 60-62 and is based on what is not included in Acts, such as the Rome fire in 64, the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul in 64-67, and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70. Some say Luke planned a third book to cover these momentous occasions in the early Church, though we have no proof of this intention. Much of the history of this period is also written by the Jewish scholar Josephus in *Jewish Antiquities*, written 20 years later.

Chapters 1-12 in Acts cover the early days of the Church and highlight the work of Peter as the appointed leader of this newborn Church. Chapters 13-28 follow the work of Paul as he expands the Church with all of his travels. There are many parallels of Peter and Paul (speeches, miracles, refusing worship of themselves, raising the dead, delivery from prison). There is much history, but we must remember that Acts, like all historical books of the Bible, still has as its primary purpose the teaching of religious truth, faith, and morality, not history.

Chapter 1 of Acts opens with a reference to Theophilus, who probably was an educated Christian of the upper class and may have been a “publisher” of the book, helping to finance the spread of copies of the manuscript. Interestingly his name means “beloved of God” in Greek. Luke says that 40 days occurred between the Resurrection and the Ascension of Jesus into heaven, a preparation time for the disciples. Recall that “40” is an important biblical number: Noah spent 40 days in the ark, Moses spent 40 days on Mt. Sinai, the Israelites spent 40 years in the desert before entering the Promised Land, and Jesus went 40 days in the desert to prepare for his public ministry. Now the Church must spread from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth as narrated in Acts 1:8. As Jesus leaves his earthly life, he says in this verse that he will send us the Holy Spirit. We see parallels here with Moses leaving before Joshua takes over his leadership (Deuteronomy 34:9) and Elijah leaving before Elisha begins his work (2 Kings 2:9-11). Acts has been called the “Gospel of the Holy Spirit” because of its emphasis on the “Third Person of the Blessed Trinity.” Two men in white garments at the Ascension (Acts 1:10) recall two men in shining garments at Jesus’ tomb (Lk 24:4) and Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration (Lk 9:30).

The early gathering of the disciples after the Ascension is outlined in 1:13-14. As with all lists of Apostles (Mt 10:2, Mk 3:16, Lk 6:14) this one has Peter named first as head of the new Church. Mary is still present and this is her last appearance in the New Testament. “Brothers” (Greek *adelphoi*) here can mean cousins or other relatives, or even just followers. Paul calls his community brothers often in his letters. Mary had no other children besides Jesus. She has perpetual virginity (CCC 499-501). The demise of Judas is described a little differently in Acts than in Matthew (Mt 27:3-10) but it still talks about the Field of Blood. It is important that the first group of Apostles be successors of the twelve tribes of Israel, so they replace Judas. Although we might be surprised now about the selection by drawing lots (1:26), note that they prayed over their decision first (1:24-25). Now they are ready for the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost!

For next week, read Acts 2.

Acts 2

Pentecost is considered the birthday of the Church, and well it should be. Before Jesus came it was also a Jewish feast day, sometimes called the Feast of Weeks, celebrating the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai and the harvesting of the spring wheat crop 50 days after Passover. Our Pentecost celebrates the giving of the new law of the Spirit—written on the hearts of believers—not the old law. The Passover was one of three feasts requiring travel to Jerusalem for devout Jews. That is why so many people from different lands were present in the city.

As the scene for the descent of the Holy Spirit begins we see many signs of the Holy Spirit's presence, including wind and fire, recalling the descent of God on Mt. Sinai (Exod 19:16-19, CCC 696-697). Then we see a gift of tongues given to the Apostles. The crowds gathered from many lands and languages could understand the Apostles talking in their own Aramaic tongue. This symbolizes the spread of the Church and its worldwide mission, gathering together all peoples. To understand this happening completely we must refer to Gen 11:1-9. This comprehension by all despite many tongues is the reverse of the punishment caused by the building of the Tower of Babel. Because of their pride in building the tower the people could not understand each other despite their speaking the same language. This gift of tongues is not to be confused with another gift of tongues in the early Church (1 Cor 14).

Next we read Peter's Pentecost speech (2:14-41). This is the first of six longer discourses in Acts and it shows the primacy of Peter in the Church. Peter begins by quoting the prophet Joel (3:1-5) who refers to the pouring out of the Spirit bestowed on those acting as God's agents and the working of signs and wonders before the great and splendid day of the Lord comes again. "Signs and wonders" is a phrase used very often in Acts. Peter's message is simple—Jesus is the Messiah. In Acts 2:34 Peter quotes David writing in Ps 110:1—"The LORD (God the Father) said to my Lord (the Messiah, Jesus)." Jesus is even greater than David, although he is the Son of David, but David calls him "my Lord." Jesus is the Son of God also. In 2:33 we have a Trinitarian formula, since Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Father are all mentioned. So we must all repent, be baptized, and receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit (2:38). Peter must have been an inspiring speaker since 3,000 were baptized that day (2:41). We see other places in Acts where large numbers were baptized (4:4, 6:7, 21:20). Even those far off (2:39), the Gentiles, were converted.

Acts 2 closes with an important portrait of the early Church (2:42-47). Other similar passages (4:32-35, 5:12-16) give us an accurate picture of those days. The four major activities of the Church (2:42) were the teaching by the Apostles, the sharing of the communal life, the breaking of the bread (Eucharist), and prayer (CCC 1329, 2624). The sharing of possessions (2:45) is a characteristic of the early Church that is documented in many places in Paul's writings (Gal 2:10, 1 Cor 16:1-4, 2 Cor 8:1-9:15, Rom 15:25-31, Phil 4:15-20), as well as in early non-Scriptural writings such as the *Letter of Barnabas* and the *Didache*. They still met in the Temple (2:46), which stood until A.D. 70, whereupon it was destroyed. There were no larger churches built until the third century; the breaking of the bread (2:46) occurred in their homes. So the Church begins to flourish, develop, and spread throughout the Roman Empire as we continue with the work of Peter and the Apostles and the help of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer to the Holy Spirit: Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful. And kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And you shall renew the face of the earth. Let us pray: O God, by the light of the Holy Spirit you have taught the hearts of your faithful. In the same Spirit, help us to know what is truly right and always to rejoice in your consolation. We ask this through Christ, Our Lord. Amen.

Next week read Acts 3 and 4.

Acts 3-4

Acts 3 begins with the apostolic leaders Peter and John going to the Temple for prayer. Seeing a man lame from birth, Peter heals him in the name of Jesus. The Apostles will perform many miracles in Jesus' name throughout Acts, continuing the work Jesus did through his earthly lifetime. The cured man leaping (3:8) recalls a prophecy of Isaiah (Is 35:6) that the lame will leap. The man then joins the Apostles in the temple and praises God.

The first speech of Peter, in Acts 2, was for all the people gathered in Jerusalem from many lands, both Jews and Gentiles, for the feast of Pentecost. In Acts 3 Peter addresses mainly the Jews and reviews with them their history as God's Chosen People. In the first part of the speech (3:12-16) he explains the miracle they just witnessed and makes clear that it came through faith in Jesus. "The God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob" (3:13) is the wording spoken to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:6). Jesus is called "servant" because this identifies him as the "Suffering Servant" of the Lord as prophesied by Isaiah (Is 52:13-53:12). Jesus is also referred to as the "Author of Life" (3:15) because he created the world with the Father (Jn 1:1-4, Heb 1:2) and is the source of our salvation.

The second part of Peter's speech (3:17-26) urges all who hear to repent and have their sins forgiven (3:19). Though they acted out of ignorance (3:17), they did not heed the prophets who said the Messiah would suffer (3:18). They must share responsibility with all of us because we have all sinned. We must turn from our evil ways (3:26).

Acts 4 sets a stage for disagreements between the growing Church and the Jewish leaders, including the Sadducees who did not believe in any resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:6-8, Lk 20:27-40). Despite these quarrels the Church is expanding rapidly to over 5,000 (4:4). Peter takes the position of leadership in addressing the Sanhedrin and, filled with the Holy Spirit (4:8), he again credits the name of Jesus for healing the lame man, the same Jesus that they recently crucified, "whom God raised from the dead" (4:10). In reading this verse we must remember that "The divine power and operation of the Father and the Son is one and the same; hence it follows that Christ rose by the power of the Father and by his own power" (St. Thomas Aquinas).

Peter quotes Ps 118:22 where it says "The stone (Jesus) which the builders (Jewish leaders) rejected has become the cornerstone." There is no salvation through anyone but Jesus (4:12). We will see throughout Acts that the name of Jesus is invoked to heal the sick, perform signs and wonders, drive out demons, and administer Baptism.

The Sanhedrin was perplexed as to how to stop this new faith. They thought that Peter and John, being fishermen by trade, were not educated enough to lead people in the faith, but they could not deny this miracle had happened. So they decided to warn them not to use the name of Jesus again. But in a remarkable witness Peter and John said it was impossible for them not to speak about Jesus (4:20).

They continue on their mission with a beautiful prayer (4:24-30) that includes a quote from Ps 2:1-2. The psalm originally mentions kings and princes, which they see as Herod and Pontius Pilate, both of whom took part in the condemnation of Jesus. They ask for grace from Jesus and the Holy Spirit to continue in their evangelization.

Acts 4 concludes with a second picture of life in the early Christian community (4:32-37) similar to 2:42-47, including unity of spirit, sharing of possessions, and complete trust in the leadership of the Apostles. Barnabas, whom we will see later as a trusted companion of Paul on his journeys, is introduced when he sells his property and donates the money to the Church.

For next week read Acts 5 and 6.

Acts 5-6

At the end of Acts 4 we saw the Church “of one heart and mind” and united in its faith. Barnabas was introduced as one who brought the money from his sold field to the feet of the Apostles to share with all. In complete contrast we have immediately after that the story of Ananias and Sapphira. They sold a piece of their property and gave some to the Church but secretly kept a portion back. For this they died. At first we might think this is unreasonable, but in fact, their punishment happened not because they didn’t share everything, but because they deceived the community and pretended that they handed all the money over. It is said in 5:3 that they lied to the Holy Spirit. It also says in 5:4 that they lied to God. This juxtaposition hints at the personhood and divinity of the Holy Spirit, defined by the First Council of Constantinople in 381 as the third Divine Person of the Trinity, coequal with the Father and the Son (CCC 255, 266).

Many signs and wonders were done by the Apostles. Luke often says that both men and women (5:14) became disciples, emphasizing that both genders followed the Apostles into the Church. The high priest and Sadducees became jealous, put them in jail, and brought them before the Sanhedrin. With angelic intervention, which occurs many times in Acts, they are miraculously released from prison and go right back to preaching in public despite the orders given to them not to teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter says in reply “We must obey God rather than men” (5:29). This is the justification for civil disobedience when human law contradicts the law of God. That is why it is important for us to be aware of civil laws and political discussions which may be at odds with the moral law. We must speak out when this conflict does exist and do our part in changing the law with our courageous involvement, our vote, and our prayers (see Wis 6:1-4; Mk 7:8-13; CCC 450, 2242).

The Pharisee Gamaliel is introduced here, an honored teacher of the law. Though some of the Jewish leaders want to stop the preaching in the name of Jesus, Gamaliel urges them to leave the Apostles alone. If their faith is of men only, it will fail; if it is from God, they will not be able to stop it anyway (5:38-39). So they beat the Apostles, charge them not to speak again in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The Apostles rejoice that they can suffer for Jesus’ name and they continue preaching that Jesus is the Christ both in the Temple and in their homes.

Acts 6 narrates the appointment of the first seven deacons of the Church. The earliest members of the Church were almost all Jews. Some were Greek-speaking, the Hellenists, who may have been from all over the Roman Empire. They used the Greek Septuagint translation of the Scriptures. Some were Hebrews who spoke Aramaic and were natives of the Palestine area. They read the Hebrew Scriptures. Tensions and discrimination arose especially at some widows who were vulnerable and depended on others. So the disciples picked seven men to help the Twelve “serve at table” (6:2) while the Twelve could concentrate on prayer and ministry of the word. These seven men weren’t just waiters. As we’ll see they also preached and baptized. The seven names given are of Greek origin, so they were probably chosen to help the Hellenists. They were ordained ministers because the Apostles “prayed and laid hands on them” (6:6). The Greek word for “service” is *diakonia*, so these and other duties are most closely associated with our present-day deacons. This is the first instance of sacred ordination reported in Acts (see also 1 Tim 4:14, 5:22; 2 Tim 1:6).

The chapter closes with Stephen being arrested and coming before the Sanhedrin after disputes with Jewish leaders because he spoke in the name of Jesus. The charge included blasphemy—this was serious—and death by stoning was prescribed (Lev 24:16). In next week’s Scripture passage for the “Bible Page” we will read Stephen’s enlightening speech to the council summarizing the history of the Chosen People and how they persecuted their prophets and killed the Messiah, Jesus.

For next week, read Acts 7-8.

Acts 7-8

These two chapters in Acts cover stories of two of the first seven deacons of the Church: Stephen and Philip. Acts 7 gives the discourse of Stephen and his martyrdom. He is considered the first martyr of the Church in so far as we know. Stephen's speech to the high priest and the Sanhedrin is the longest one in Acts. It is a summary of the history of Israel, divided into three periods: The Patriarchs (7:1-16), Moses (7:17-43), and the building of the Temple (7:44-50). It ends with a short section where he summarizes his arguments. From some of the details and wording one can tell that Luke takes the material from the Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint). That is what was probably read by most of Luke's community, since he wrote mainly for Gentiles converting to Christianity, utilizing the Greek language.

In his speech, Stephen does not defend himself directly. He answers his accusers with a Christian message of salvation history. The Temple and the Mosaic Law rituals have fulfilled their purpose. Stephen continues to respect these two facets of Judaism, but as a Christian he has a more universal idea of God's law; his concept of the Temple is more spiritual. Stephen shows Christ as the new Moses with emphasis on rejection, rescue, and redemption. This is also true of the story of Joseph in the Old Testament. He mentions the wisdom and mighty words and deeds of Moses which prefigure Jesus.

Stephen's speech ends with a condemnation of the "stiff-necked people" who oppose the Holy Spirit and who are just like their ancestors (7:51). They persecuted and put their prophets to death just as they recently put Jesus to death, the Righteous One (7:52). They even fail to observe their important laws.

The story of Stephen concludes with his vision of the "glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (7:55). He sees Jesus as "the Son of Man," which means that he is the long-awaited Messiah, as prophesied by Daniel (Dan 7:13-14). The "Son of Man" was the title Jesus most often used for himself. The Sanhedrin could not administer capital punishment under Roman rule, but the mob took matters into their own hands and stoned Stephen to death. At the same time we are introduced to a young man named Saul (his name is changed to Paul, soon thereafter becoming God's appointed apostle to the Gentiles) who oversees this killing. He was probably 25-30 years old at this time. The traditional date of Paul's birth is around A.D. 8-9, hence our observance of the year of St. Paul in 2008-2009. As with Jesus when he died on the cross, Stephen dies commending his soul to God (7:59, see Lk 23:46) and praying for his persecutors (7:60, see Lk 23:34).

Acts 8 tells the story of one of the first deacons, Philip, and his ministry, but begins with a short paragraph describing the viciousness of Saul's persecution of the early Church: dragging off men and women from their homes and putting them in prison. He was a vehement persecutor of the early Church (Christian movement known as "The Way"). Because of the persecution of the Christians in Jerusalem they scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, thus helping to spread the faith. Philip began preaching in Samaria. Luke wrote frequently about Samaria: the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37) and the parable of the ten lepers who are healed, where only one, a Samaritan, thanks Jesus for his cure (Lk 17:11-19).

Philip ran into Simon the Magician in Samaria. This Simon was converted and baptized along with others by Philip. When Peter and John came to Samaria they saw that the baptized also needed the Holy Spirit to come upon them, so "they laid hands on them" and they received the Holy Spirit (8:14-17). This deeper conferral of the Holy Spirit through the imposition of hands is linked with the sacrament of Confirmation, a part of the Rite of Christian Initiation. As a deacon Philip baptized, while Peter and John (both Apostles and bishops) confirmed (CCC 1288, 1313). Simon the Magician offered money to obtain these special powers of the Holy Spirit, but Peter knew his motivation and told him to pray to change the intent of his heart. Because of this episode we are introduced to the sin of simony—the buying and selling of spiritual things (CCC 2121).

As Philip continued his travels and evangelization he met on the road an Ethiopian who was studying the book of the prophet Isaiah, with the famous passage about the Suffering Servant (Is 52:13-53:12). Philip explained this passage as referring to Jesus and told him about Jesus. The Ethiopian was immediately baptized. Two lessons are taught to us in this story: the importance of sacred Scripture in preaching the "Good News" and the need for help and guidance in order to interpret some Scripture passages. In this, we look to the Catholic Church as the guardian of the deposit of faith.

For next week, read Acts 9-10.

Acts 9-10

Certainly one of the most important happenings in the early Church was the conversion of Saul. This is such a pivotal occurrence that Luke relates it three times in Acts (9:1-19, 22:3-16, 26:2-18), the last two times told by Paul himself. Paul also briefly mentions Christ's appearance to him in 1 Cor 15:8-11. Saul must have conducted a vigorous persecution of the Church if the death of Stephen and the fear of Saul by the Christians were any indication. The details of Saul's vision of Jesus remind us of the theophany of Moses on Sinai (Exod 3). The bright light, voice, and three days of blindness all point to a most dramatic encounter with Jesus. When Jesus says Saul is persecuting him, we understand that when someone persecutes the members of Christ's body, the Church, they attack Christ himself.

Ananias comes to help Saul and lays hands on him and Saul is baptized. Paul is filled with the Holy Spirit and doesn't waste time worrying about his past. He surrenders himself unconditionally and places himself at the Lord's service, ready to start anew. Paul will learn more about "The Way" of Jesus as he accepts his call, but immediately he begins doing the work of Jesus. This is a valuable lesson for us, accepting our call to do his work. Paul began work in his immediate neighborhood of Damascus proclaiming Jesus as the "Son of God" in the synagogues, the centers of Jewish fellowship, worship, and instruction in the Scriptures. He soon made enemies of those who refused to believe so he had to leave at night by being let down over the city wall in a basket. The persecutor became the persecuted. After some time Paul began traveling in his work, first to Jerusalem to meet with the other disciples, and then preaching in Caesarea and Tarsus.

Meanwhile Peter continued his work as leader of the Church. He heals a paralyzed man in Lydda and restores Tabitha to life in Joppa. This recalls the raising of the daughter of Jairus by Jesus (Mk 5:35-43). The chapter closes with an interesting note that Peter stayed for some days with Simon, a tanner (9:43). The Jews considered tanning unclean work because of contact with dead animals, but Peter accepts Simon's hospitality that anticipates his discovery in the next episode: no man is legally unclean in the Christian faith.

The conversion of Cornelius in Acts 10 was another very important occurrence in early Christianity. He was a centurion and a Gentile but a man who respected Judaism, feared God, gave alms, and prayed constantly. He is led by God in conversion to Christianity. An angel appears to him to urge him to seek out Peter. God also appears to Peter and in a trance Peter sees the heavens open and a great sheet let down by four corners over the entire earth. The sheet contains all kinds of animals, including those considered by Jews to be unclean. Peter is told to slaughter and eat them and he is instructed that "What God has made clean, you are not to call profane" (10:15). We recall that Jesus revoked the Mosaic food laws when he declared all foods clean (Mk 7:18-23). Peter is further instructed to go to Cornelius and his Gentile friends. This vision meant that no man should be called unclean even though Jews previous to this time were not to associate with Gentiles. Peter's humble attitude and acceptance of the vision allows him to realize that Jewish rituals were not necessary for Christians. He does not arrive at this insight by reasoning. Virtuous obedience, not simple human logic, causes him to change his mind.

Unlike Peter's speech in Acts 3, which was for the Jews, his discourse in 10:34-43 is for Gentiles. It covers the time from John the Baptist to the Resurrection of Jesus and his commissioning of the Apostles. This includes the same period as the Gospel of Mark, which tradition describes as a summary of Peter's preaching. Mark has been called the interpreter for Peter. Finally, Acts 10 concludes with a Pentecost experience for the Gentiles. Similar to the original event in Acts 2, Peter preaches the Gospel, the Spirit descends in a dramatic way, the recipients speak in different tongues, and baptisms are performed. The Jews were amazed that the Gentiles also received the Holy Spirit, but they accepted this new mission in the Church. Although we remember Paul as the famous Apostle to the Gentiles, shown in what he will accomplish in the second part of Acts, it was Peter who initiated this outreach to the Gentiles, following the instruction of Jesus and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

For next week, read Acts 11 and 12.

Acts 11-12

In Acts 11 we see how the early Church was divided about the need for Christians coming into the faith having to obey all of the Mosaic Law. Peter reported to Jerusalem his vision about eating unclean animals and how it related to spreading the faith to the Gentiles. The leaders in Jerusalem began to understand. Later, in chapter 15, we will see the resolution of this problem at the Council of Jerusalem. In the meantime they begin to see that their mission should include the Gentiles. The Church leaders, now including Barnabas and Paul, began to preach in Antioch, the capital of the Roman province of Syria. It was the third city of the empire, after Rome and Alexandria, with a population of 500,000 and a sizable Jewish colony. The Church in Antioch became a springboard for the evangelization of the empire. Church members were first called “Christians” in Antioch and the city was the starting point for the three missionary journeys of Paul. In the period A.D. 46-49 there was a famine afflicting Greece, Syria, and Palestine (11:28). The more prosperous Antiochene community sent contributions to the “elders” or “presbyters” of Jerusalem for relief. The Greek word *presbytero* (11:30) is used more often in this period. This group becomes necessary because the Apostles as bishops could not handle all the necessary duties. The English word *priest* is derived from this Greek word and this group’s duties resemble our present-day priesthood.

Acts 12 describes the persecution of the Church by Herod. This is Herod Agrippa I who ruled Palestine from A.D. 41-44, grandson of Herod the Great, who was king during the infancy of Jesus, but not Herod Antipas, who was ruler at the death of Jesus. Herod Agrippa beheaded James, son of Zebedee, brother of John, and one of the leading Apostles, sometimes called James the Greater. James was the first Apostle to die for the faith and the only one whose death is mentioned in the New Testament.

Herod had Peter placed in prison. This was the third time he was imprisoned and the second time he was rescued by an angel (5:19, 12:7). The deliverance of Peter during Passover evokes memories of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt. Peter is brought out of bondage and rescued from the hand of his enemies during Passover by an angel of the Lord (see Exod 12). Luke mentions John Mark in 12:12. According to tradition, this Mark is the author of the Gospel bearing his name, a companion of Peter (1 Peter 5:13) and a coworker with Paul and Barnabas (Acts 12:25, 13:5, 13:13, 15:37; Col 4:10; 2 Tim 4:11; Phlm 24). His mother Mary had the house that by tradition was the upper room where Jesus celebrated the Last Supper.

Acts 12:15 contains a very interesting reference to guardian angels. When the disciples did not believe that Peter was at the gate, they said “It is his angel.” This assumes the belief that particular angels are assigned to guard and to guide particular individuals. Mt 18:10 is a reference in the Gospels to this belief, when Jesus says “their angels in heaven always look upon the face of my heavenly Father.”

Another James is named for the first time in 12:17. He is not the brother of John martyred in 12:2, and probably not the son of Alphaeus mentioned in 1:13 as one of the Twelve. This James is a relative of Jesus sometimes referred to as “the brother of the Lord.” Tradition identifies him as the first bishop of Jerusalem who assumed leadership over the Church in the city after Peter began to travel. He plays an important role in the Council of Jerusalem in A.D. 49.

We do not hear too much more of Peter in Acts after this time except for this Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). It says in 12:17 that he went to another place. The early Church historian Eusebius puts him in Rome about A.D. 42. Paul places him in Antioch soon after the Council of Jerusalem (Gal 2:11-12, Kephas or Cephas is another name for Peter). St. Jerome says that Peter was in Rome for 25 years, from 43-68. He was martyred there in the 60’s being crucified upside down during the persecution of Christians by Nero.

The death of Herod Agrippa I is well-documented in Acts and by the Jewish historian Josephus. He died in Caesarea during games. At the circus on a sunny day his garments looked like silver and he was acclaimed a god. Immediately after the king accepted this blasphemous flattery he began to feel stomach pains and was dead within five days.

For next week, read Acts 13 and 14.

Acts 13-14

These two chapters cover the period of approximately A.D. 45-49 when Paul makes his first of three major missionary journeys. Antioch in Syria became a prominent leading city for Christians because of persecution in Jerusalem and Judea. The Holy Spirit inspires various workers and especially Barnabas and Paul to spread the message throughout the Roman Empire. They prepare for the trip by worshipping the Lord (Eucharist), praying, fasting, and laying on of hands (13:2-3). This first mission of Paul takes him from Antioch to the island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean Sea and to various cities in Galatia, which were in present-day Turkey. This includes a second city named Antioch, in Pisidia, followed by the trip back to Syrian Antioch.

One thing to note about Paul's journeys is that he always begins his preaching in the synagogue. He approaches the Jews of the city first. Then he branches out to preach to the Gentiles. As they begin their work Luke emphasizes the important role of the Holy Spirit. Three times near the beginning (13:2, 4, 9) he mentions the work of the Holy Spirit on Paul and his coworkers. Paul runs into a magician by the name of Bar-Jesus, also called Elymas, who poses as a prophet. This is reminiscent of Simon the magician and his argument with Peter (8:9-24). Paul rebukes this false prophet and the Lord punishes Elymas with blindness for a time (similar to Paul himself blinded during his conversion). We don't know what happens to Elymas, but perhaps he also repented, or at least was given that chance.

In Perga it is stated (13:13) that John left them. This is John Mark, cousin of Barnabas, coworker with Paul, and writer of the Gospel of Mark. No reason is given for John Mark leaving. This is discussed later in Acts (15:36-40) when Barnabas and Mark continue together and Paul and Silas go forth. But John Mark later is still a close worker of Paul and they reconcile, as shown in two letters of Paul (Col 4:10; 2 Tim 4:11). As we know even in the Church today, sometimes two people have different ideas on how best to spread the word of Christ. But love and kindness always seems to eventually resolve disagreements when two or more good Christians try to work things out.

Paul's inaugural sermon in the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia is an enlightening example of the successful evangelist. Familiar with the Scriptures, Paul reviews the history of Israel from Moses to Jesus, quoting Psalms and Isaiah. He concludes with the important message that "forgiveness of sins is being proclaimed to you" (13:38). Many Jews and converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas. On the next Sabbath they spoke more to the Gentiles, quoting Is 49:6 concerning what the Lord commanded: "I have made you a light to the Gentiles, that you may be an instrument of salvation to the ends of the earth." Some Jews became jealous of the Gentiles and persecuted Paul and Barnabas.

In Acts 14 we see a healing by Paul, parallel to the cure by Peter of a cripple earlier in Acts (3:1-10). This causes the crowd to proclaim Barnabas and Paul gods, a claim quickly rejected by the two, as Peter had earlier (10:25-26). In the meantime, the Jews persuaded the people to stone Paul, but fortunately for the faith Paul recuperated and continued his evangelizing. We are taught here that workers in the Church can indeed suffer many persecutions that come from being a Christian, but these open the way to heavenly glory, since "It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (14:22). Back in Antioch, they rejoice that God "opened the door of faith to the Gentiles" (14:27).

Near the end of this reading Luke says that they appointed, after prayer and fasting, presbyters (elders) in each church (14:23). We see even in this very early Church the importance of the local pastor to the everyday faith life of the community. By the second century the three-tiered structure of the clergy is established: bishops (Greek *episkopos*), priests (*presbyteroi*), and deacons (*diakonoi*).

For next week, read Acts 15 and 16.

Acts 15-16

Chapter 15 of Acts is one of my favorite Bible passages because it reflects so well the workings of the early Church despite some questions Church leaders had about how best to proceed with evangelization of the world. The Holy Spirit inspired them to make the proper decisions and accomplish their immediate goals.

The first Council of the Church was called in A.D. 49-50 to settle the argument about whether the Gentiles had to be circumcised and follow the Mosaic Law of the Jews before they could be accepted into the Christian community. Many leaders of the Church were present, including Peter, Paul, James, and Barnabas. After much debate Peter, as the first Pope, took the leadership role and made the pronouncement that one's faith in Jesus Christ is most important; being circumcised was not necessary. He led the doctrinal judgment by the Council. James, leader of the Jerusalem Church after Peter began his travels to Antioch and Rome, then developed a pastoral plan asking the Gentiles to avoid certain things very repugnant to the Jewish faith, so as to encourage social interaction such as eating together, and to facilitate unity.

These Mosaic dietary rituals no longer are necessary in the Church because the situation has changed since then. The Council of Florence in 1442 declared that these pastoral rules were only temporary for the early years. The binding force of the food restrictions was relaxed once the ethnic circumstances that made them necessary passed away. The rituals of the Mosaic Law were not binding; however, the moral law, including the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, and the other moral codes developed from them, must still be followed by all faithful Christians, in addition to the teachings of Jesus that come to us in the Gospels, and the rest of the inspired Scriptures. Their final decree included the important point that all this was done with the help of the Holy Spirit (15:28). You may check Gal 2:1-10 for another account of this Council written by Paul.

The material in Acts from 15:36-18:22 covers the second missionary journey of Paul, from A.D. 50-52. Paul starts from Antioch and proceeds through some of the places he visited on his first journey in the modern country of Turkey. He then crossed over into Europe for the first time and visited places now in Macedonia and Greece. Many Bibles have maps showing Paul's three missionary journeys and his fourth journey to Rome. Or you may wish to look at a Bible atlas to visualize his route more easily. Barnabas and Mark (cousins) continued their work on the island of Cyprus. Paul chose Silas (Silvanus) to minister with him, and Timothy joined them later. To avoid scandalizing the Jews, Timothy was circumcised because, although he had a Gentile father, his mother was Jewish. Beginning with 16:10-17 there are four passages in Acts (see also 20:5-15, 21:1-18, and 27:1-28:16) where Luke, the author, uses the words "we" and "us" in telling about Paul's travels. Thus we conclude that Luke was a member of the team and an eyewitness to many of these events. Paul refers to Luke in some of his letters too. As Paul enters Europe we encounter the story of Lydia. Philippi was a Roman colony in Macedonia. There Paul spoke to the women in prayer at the riverside on the Sabbath. These people were Gentiles who were attracted to Judaism. There was probably no synagogue in Philippi because there were an insufficient number of Jews. Lydia was a business woman who worshipped God. The Lord opened her heart to listen to Paul, wherein she opened her home to Paul and his companions. She and her household were then baptized and became the first converts to Christ in Europe. A couple points about this passage are noteworthy. The Apostles routinely baptized entire households, many of which probably included infants and children, as well as servants. Infant baptism was common by the second century. For other examples of whole households being baptized see Acts 16:33 and 1 Cor 1:16 (see CCC 1250-1252, 1655). We also see the important role women played in the early Church, and how people with extra finances can aid the Church and its work.

The imprisonment of Paul and Silas and their beating was not the last time Paul suffered physical abuse. He was beaten at least two more times (2 Cor 11:25). Their miraculous deliverance from jail recalls how Peter was rescued from prison by the Lord (5:19, 12:6-11). We see the second example of a whole family being baptized in 16:33 when their jailer receives the faith. We will continue on this journey with Paul into Greece next time.

For next week, read Acts 17 and 18.

Acts 17-18

These two chapters continue the second missionary journey of Paul. The year is A.D. 50. He enters a number of different places in Greece: Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth. In Thessalonica he again approaches the Jews in the synagogue first, entering “into discussions with them from the scriptures” (17:2) that the Messiah Jesus had to suffer and rise from the dead. Some Jews as well as Gentiles and prominent women were convinced and joined him, but others formed a mob. Paul and Silas, meanwhile, left for Berea. The Jews of this city were more fair-minded and “they received the word with all willingness and examined the scriptures daily” (17:11). Their example encourages us the importance of studying the Bible every day! The Thessalonians caused trouble in Berea too, so Paul moved on to Athens.

In this ancient city Paul preached in the public square as well as in the synagogue. He gave a climactic speech to the Gentiles in the Areopagus, where the council of elders met to discuss education, philosophy, and religion. Paul appealed to their pagan thoughts, quoted their own writers such as Epimenides and Aratus, and noted their altar “to an Unknown God.” Paul proclaimed the God of all “who made the world and all that is in it, the Lord of heaven and earth” (17:24, CCC 287). “He who gives to everyone life and breath and everything” (17:25) made the entire human family from one common ancestor. But God is not from “an image fashioned from gold, silver, or stone by human art and imagination” (17:29). When he proclaimed Christ as sent by God and raised from the dead, some Greeks did not accept this idea. They believed only in the immortality of the soul. They thought wrongly that the body was a prison from which the soul could be liberated. CCC 988-1014 gives us a proper explanation of the resurrection of the body and you are encouraged to read this section of the *Catechism*. Some did join Paul and became believers. There certainly is a lot of teaching in this one speech!

In Acts 18 Paul moves on to Corinth where he stayed for 1½ years. He stayed with a couple by the names of Aquila and Priscilla, who came to Corinth with an expulsion of Jews from Rome by Claudius, probably because they were becoming Christians. The Roman historian Suetonius gives as a reason the disturbances among the Jews “at the instigation of Chrestos,” meaning Jesus. Priscilla and Aquila were tentmakers by trade, the same as Paul. When the Jews again opposed him, he decided he would go to the Gentiles from then on. The Lord appeared to Paul and said “Do not be afraid” (18:9), as Jesus said to his followers many times during his lifetime on earth, and as he says to us as well. “Go on speaking, and do not be silent, for I am with you” (18:9).

This occurred when Gallio was proconsul. Archeological digs at Delphi have found an inscription that says Gallio was proconsul from A.D. 51-52 by our present calendar. This is an important dating in the chronology of Paul’s life. Paul being brought before Gallio is similar to Jesus before Pilate. Gallio was reluctant to judge over religious matters.

After some time Paul sailed back to Syria with Priscilla and Aquila to complete his second mission. In 18:18 he cut his hair “because he had taken a vow.” A haircut usually isn’t much news, but this points to the fact that Paul had taken a Nazirite vow (Num 6:1-21). It was probably a gesture of thanksgiving for God’s deliverance, and its completion involved shaving his head (see also Acts 21:23-26). Acts 18:23 starts his third missionary journey beginning in Antioch. This continues until Acts 21 so we will cover it next time. In the final verses of Acts 18 we see the camaraderie of the early Christians helping each other. Apollos, an eloquent speaker and “an authority on the scriptures” (18:24), was instructed in “The Way” and spoke about Jesus, but he needed a little lesson to more accurately relate the teaching about Jesus. Priscilla and Aquila took him aside and helped him, as we should help each other in understanding the faith. We don’t know too much about Apollos but he must have been an important leader in the Church. He also taught in Corinth (1 Cor 3:6).

For next week read Acts 19 and 20.

Acts 19-20

Paul's third missionary journey is described in Acts 18:23-21:16. The period was A.D. 53-57 and included visits throughout southern Galatia (Turkey), especially Ephesus in modern southwest Turkey, as well as Macedonia, Greece, and Jerusalem. Paul spent over two years in Ephesus, his longest time in one place. During his stay in Ephesus he wrote 1 Corinthians and the Letter to the Galatians. Ephesus was the fourth largest city of the Roman Empire and the mission center of the area. In Ephesus Paul found some disciples who were baptized only with the "baptism of repentance" of John. So Paul baptized them sacramentally in the name of Jesus (19:5) and also laid hands upon them (19:6) for reception of the Holy Spirit (Confirmation). This is very similar to what we saw in 8:16-17, where Baptism and Confirmation are shown as separate sacraments (CCC 1288, 1313). Christians had developed the practice of meeting in private houses to hear the word of God, thus avoiding any need to go to the synagogue (19:8-9).

We see at this time that God did extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul. Even the healing influence of Paul's clothing (19:12) is mentioned, similar to that of Peter (5:15-16) and Jesus (Lk 8:44-47). But when the name of Jesus is used by nonbelievers, such as the seven sons of Sceva, who had no faith in Jesus or a commitment to his teachings, they could not cast out evil spirits, who actually took control of them. St. John Chrysostom has said that "the Name does nothing unless it is spoken with faith." Ephesus was the place of one of the seven ancient wonders of the world, the temple of Artemis (Diana), associated with the ancient mother goddess of Asia Minor and a patroness of fertility. Many miniature silver idols of Artemis were being manufactured, and the silversmiths were mad at Paul for upsetting their business when he said "gods made by hands are not gods at all" (19:26). So Paul departed for Macedonia.

Acts 20 starts with the second "we" passage (20:5-15) where Luke the author presumably was present with Paul. Paul makes his final sweep through Greece before going to Jerusalem. He wrote 2 Corinthians and Romans along the way. In Acts 20:7 we see that they gathered together to break bread on the first day of the week, Sunday. This is the earliest evidence that we have of believers assembling on Sunday for catechetical instruction and sacramental worship. It was soon called the "Lord's day" (Rev 1:10) to commemorate the day Jesus rose from the dead (Lk 24:1). "From that time on down to our own day the celebration of the Eucharist has been continued so that today we encounter it everywhere in the Church with the same fundamental structure. It remains the center of the Church's life" (CCC 1343). Hearing the Sacred Scriptures (Word of God) proclaimed, followed by Apostolic preaching (20:7) leading to the Eucharistic celebration (20:11) reflects the essential structure of Christian liturgy. In 20:10 Paul brings a child back to life again, as was done by Elijah (1 Kings 17:21-22), Elisha (2 Kings 4:34), Jesus, and Peter (Acts 9:40).

Paul's speech at Miletus (about 30 miles from Ephesus) to the Ephesian presbyters acts as a farewell speech and is very moving. He always targets his audience with specifics. Recall his longer speeches to the Jews at Antioch in Pisidia in 13:16ff and to the pagans at Athens in 17:22ff. Now he is speaking with his fellow Christians following "The Way." Paul realizes that hardships await him because "in one city after another the holy Spirit has been warning me that imprisonment and hardships await me" (20:23). We should use his example of considering "life of no importance" other than to minister about the Lord Jesus and to bear witness to the Gospel (20:24). In 20:28 we see another example of the Trinity being demonstrated, with "holy Spirit," "church of God," and "his (Jesus') own blood" mentioned. Paul also describes the Church as a flock and its leaders as shepherds. He warns them (and us now!) of false disciples ("savage wolves") who come, "perverting the truth" (20:29-30). He reminds us to help our neighbors by hard work and repeats one of Jesus' sayings that "It is better to give than to receive" (20:35). Interestingly, these words of Jesus do not appear in any of the four Gospels. This points to the importance of transmission of the teachings of Jesus by the Apostles through oral tradition. The Gospels themselves give us only selections from this tradition. "There are also many other things that Jesus did, but if these were to be described individually, I do not think the whole world would contain the books that would be written" (Jn 21:25).

For next week read Acts 21-22.

Acts 21-22

In Acts 21 Paul completes his third missionary journey and goes to Jerusalem. The third “we” passage is written by Luke. They prayed often during this trip, even kneeling on the beach (21:5) before continuing on their journey, teaching us that we can pray any time and any place. They stayed with Philip the deacon in Caesarea for awhile. Philip’s daughters are mentioned as being “gifted with prophecy” (21:9), showing that women in the early Church had important roles to play, as they also do now.

Although warned not to go to Jerusalem, Paul shows his willingness to undergo even martyrdom for the sake of Christ when he says “I am prepared not only to be bound but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (21:13). How many of us have such faith?

In Jerusalem Paul visited with James and the elders. By this time the original Twelve may have all left the city for mission fields. Rumors had reached Jerusalem that Paul forbade Jewish Christians to observe the religious traditions of Judaism, but Paul had exempted only Gentiles from circumcision and other ceremonies. Gentiles simply had to follow those few rules set down by the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). Paul did take four other men who had completed a Nazirite vow (Numbers 6:1-21) as he had done (18:18) and they purified themselves and went to the Temple to show that they were still in observance of the Law. But the “out-of-town” Jews from Asia finally seized Paul and still claimed he was teaching against the Law and bringing Greeks into the Temple. Gentiles were permitted only in the outermost court of the Temple. The charges remind us of those against Stephen (6:13). The people’s cry “Away with him!” echo the cry of the mob rejecting Jesus at his trial (Lk 23:18).

In Acts 22 Paul gives his first of five speeches in his defense, given this time to the Jews, though he is more interested in winning over his adversaries to the faith rather than escaping from them. Paul reviews his early life as a devout Jew and summarizes his persecution of the Christians. Then he relates in his own words his conversion and vision of Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). He will speak this again in 26:2-18. The details may vary, but the story is consistent, and the words of Jesus are the same each time: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (22:7). Paul calls Jesus “the Lord” twice, and Ananias uses phrases such as “the God of our ancestors” and “the Righteous One,” the same titles for God and Jesus used by Peter (3:13-14) and Stephen (7:52).

Paul tells how he was sent to the Gentiles to convert them to Christ. The Jews got mad at this. They thought they were the only Chosen People, but Paul says when he came to Jerusalem from Damascus he saw Jesus again and, even though Paul witnessed the martyrdom of Stephen, Jesus still asked him to go far away to convert the Gentiles.

As the Romans were getting ready to scourge him, Paul revealed his Roman citizenship. Roman citizens were exempt from scourging and this guaranteed him a fair judicial inquiry. This was much better timing than in Philippi, where Paul was beaten and then indicated to them that he was a Roman citizen (16:37).

With this arrest of Paul a new section of his story begins. Luke will in the next few chapters describe in detail the Apostle’s imprisonment, his trials at Jerusalem and Caesarea, and his journey to Rome to appear before the tribunal. Paul becomes no longer the missionary and founder of churches, but an imprisoned witness to the Gospel. But he will continue to proclaim Christ even in these circumstances.

For next week read Acts 23-24.

Acts 23-24

At the end of the last chapter (22:30) Paul was freed from prison by the Roman commander because he was a Roman citizen, so the commander wanted the Jewish priests and the Sanhedrin council to convene. In Acts 23 Paul gives his second speech of defense, this time to the Sanhedrin. The high priest Ananias (not the same Ananias that helped Paul recover from his conversion in Damascus) held that position from A.D. 47-59 and was a notoriously greedy and violent man. When Ananias had his attendant strike Paul, Paul said God would in return punish him for ordering this against Roman law because of his citizenship. This striking reminds us of the guard striking Jesus at his trial (Jn 18:22-24). Paul apologized for his return threat because he did not realize he was high priest, showing that he still respected the Mosaic Law where it says not to curse the ruler of the people (Exod 22:27-28). Ananias was later assassinated in the year 66.

In his speech Paul very cleverly gets the two competing groups in the council, the Sadducees and Pharisees, to argue among themselves. The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection of the body, the existence of angels and demons, and the hope of an afterlife. One way of remembering this is to say: because of this they were sad-you-see. On the other hand, the Pharisees believed in all these things. Paul revealed his background as a Pharisee and this split the court as the Pharisees went to his side. Paul's confrontation certainly is not unlike ours today, with much of our culture challenging our beliefs in "life after death" and in "punishment vs. reward in the next life." Are we not on trial every day for our hope in the resurrection? And just as with Paul, we can rely upon the Lord when he says "take courage" (23:11). In that same verse he also promises Paul that "just as you have borne witness to my cause in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness in Rome." Paul's work is not done yet.

The Jews were still mad at Paul and plotted to kill him, so Paul's nephew helped save him when he heard about this plan. He told the Roman commander Claudius Lysias, who then sent Paul to Caesarea, 60 miles away from Jerusalem and the capital of Judea. Felix, who was governor from 52-60, was a barbarous and immoral ruler. Paul was under Roman law now because of his citizenship, but he had not broken any Roman law. Nevertheless he had a "trial" under Felix.

In Acts 24 Tertullus, the prosecutor for the Jews, trumped up charges of "profaning the Temple" and "disturbing the Jews of the whole Roman Empire." Paul gives his third defense speech, this time to the Roman governor Felix. The Jews were saying that Christians were just a sect of Judaism, but Paul explains that it is much more than that; Christianity fulfills Judaism. He wanted legal religious protection of Rome just like Judaism had. Paul focuses on the hope of resurrection of the dead, the righteous and the unrighteous, saints and sinners going separate ways, as Jesus taught (Jn 5:28-29, CCC 1038).

A few days later Felix and his Jewish wife listened to Paul again. They were in an adulterous marriage, his third and her second. This scene reminds us of another leader, Herod, in an adulterous marriage with Herodias, who were challenged by another prophet, John the Baptist (Mk 6:17-20). Paul talks about faith, righteousness, self-restraint, and the coming judgment, which made Felix a little frightened. He kept Paul locked up in prison for two years after that, the maximum time in Roman law without a trial being held. So Paul had to wait around until a new governor took over, Festus, who ruled from 60-62. This story will continue in Acts 25.

We will see a couple more so-called trials but more importantly Paul's speeches and teachings in them (and Luke's writing to us). Through the hand of Luke we not only get historical facts but a good summary of the religious teachings of Paul, which we can examine in detail by reading his New Testament letters.

For next week, read Acts 25-26.

Acts 25-26

Even after Paul spent two years in prison in Caesarea, the Jews were still hostile to him and plotting to kill him. That certainly is a lesson for us that we shouldn't hold a grudge! Festus became the governor to replace Felix. He wanted to do a favor for the Jews in giving them another chance to confront Paul.

In Paul's fourth defense he says that "I have committed no crime either against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar" (25:8). Paul knew he would not find justice with the Jews, so he appeals to Caesar. Paul takes this opportunity to go to Rome not so much for a trial but to spread the faith to the rest of the Roman Empire and to the "ends of the earth" (1:8). Festus didn't have to send him to Rome but it gets him out of a jam. Nero was the emperor in Rome from 54-68. This is probably A.D. 60.

Before this happens King Herod Agrippa II and his sister Bernice come to visit from northern Palestine. This is the fourth "King Herod" we see in Luke's Gospel and Acts. He is the great grandson of Herod the Great who ruled during Jesus' infancy. Herod Antipas was king at the death of Jesus. Herod Agrippa I appeared earlier in Acts when he killed the Apostle James, arrested Peter, and died in Acts 12:23. Herod Agrippa II was his son. In Lk 21:12-13 the meetings of Paul with Festus and Agrippa are predicted by Jesus to his Apostles: "they will have you led before kings and governors because of my name." In Acts 9:15 Jesus says that Paul will "carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites." Agrippa's role for Paul is similar to Herod Antipas' role for Jesus in Lk 23:6-12: a "show trial" with part entertainment for guests and part political maneuvering. Festus' role as governor resembles Pilate's position. Festus agrees with Paul that he knows of no crime Paul has committed.

Beginning in Acts 26 Paul gives his fifth and final defense in front of Agrippa. He spends no time on legal charges but asserts the resurrection of the dead. He tells of his conversion a second time, which is the third narrative of this formative event, in Acts 26:12-18. He emphasizes repentance and a Messiah that had to suffer, rise from the dead, and proclaim light to both Jews and Gentiles. Paul is still the missionary, trying to convert. In one way his speech is successful: Festus and Agrippa believe he has done nothing wrong. On the other hand it is unsuccessful: he gained no conversions and they decide not to set Paul free since it would offend the Jews and the emperor.

Throughout Paul's imprisonment and trials we see parallels between these appearances of Paul and, to a certain extent, what Jesus went through legally, although this is not an exact analogy. Paul did not suffer as Jesus did, and conditions and amount of time of imprisonment and trial were different (one night for Jesus, four years and many places for Paul). But it is instructive to see similarities in people and the order in which they were seen:

Jesus Appears Before	Paul Appears Before
Jews as accusers	Jews as accusers
Sanhedrin council	Sanhedrin council
Annas and Caiaphas, high priests	Ananias, high priest
Pilate, Roman governor	Felix and Festus, Roman governors
King Herod Antipas	King Herod Agrippa II
Pilate	The Romans

So Paul goes on to Rome for his final witnessing to Christ.

For next week, read Acts 27-28.

Acts 27-28

In these two chapters we conclude the epic story of the early Church and the apostolic work of Peter and Paul. Paul's journey to Rome while a captive and his early days in Rome are covered. The voyage to Rome has three phases: he takes one ship from Caesarea in Palestine to Myra in Asia Minor, then from Myra to the island of Malta in the Mediterranean Sea, and finally from Malta to Italy.

Acts 27 starts with the last of four "we" sections written by Luke. The details of this trip are so vivid that Luke must have been an eyewitness to these events. The account is an important historical document on seafaring in ancient times because of its nautical descriptions. The storm and shipwreck at sea make for a great adventure story. Paul mentions in one of his letters (2 Cor 11:25) that he was actually involved in three shipwrecks. They no doubt were more common back then. He had warned them early that there would be "severe damage and heavy loss" (27:9-10) because after the fast of the Day of Atonement had passed (late September), the sailing season drew to a close. The lesson: they should have paid attention to Paul (spiritual advisor) more than the pilot (material advisor). In the midst of the storm, when "all hope of our surviving was taken away" (27:20), Paul shows himself to be a pillar of spiritual strength. They got rid of the excess cargo in the storm, both material things on board to lighten the ship, and vices and sins to show their faith in the Lord (27:23-26). Paul helps them to not be afraid and to have a positive outlook, trusting in Divine Providence. We should do likewise when we are led through storms and shipwrecks in our lives. When Paul breaks bread and gives thanks to God with all (27:35), it was probably a regular meal because most present were pagans, but it sure reminds us of the Eucharist.

During the shipwreck all made it to the island of Malta. Paul shows that he is favored by God and is protected from the viper's bite (see Mk 16:18 where Jesus predicts this!). He also heals Publius' father and others.

Paul arrives in Rome about A.D. 61 and Christians are already there. Tradition puts Peter in Rome as early as A.D. 40-45 for his 25-year reign. Paul attempts to teach the Jews first but many refuse him. But he didn't let this failure stop him, so he goes to the Gentiles. Our failures must not stop us as well from attempting to spread the faith. Paul preaches at least two years in Rome, teaching and writing many of his letters.

What happened next? The rest of the story is not given. Or is it? Why the abrupt ending by Luke? Some Biblical scholars say Luke wrote Acts this early, but this is not believed by others. Perhaps Luke was writing later and planned a third volume. This is possible but not necessary. His purpose was not historical but theological. Luke did complete his story as outlined in Acts, witnessing "to the ends of the earth" (1:8), which in those days was considered to be Rome. Luke is silent about Paul's appearance before Caesar, but tradition has it that Paul was released and returned to his ministry. He may have traveled as far as Spain since he had expressed intentions of doing that (Rom 15:24) and Titus 1:5 tells us that Paul evangelized the island of Crete, a mission that cannot fit well into his other journeys.

There are many traditions for the last days of Peter and Paul. The tradition is both oral and written. Non-canonical writings and the early Fathers of the Church tell of their work and martyrdom sometime after Nero burns Rome in July, 64, blaming it on the Christians, and before A.D. 68. Peter was crucified upside down on Vatican hill. Paul was beheaded outside the walls of Rome. St. Peter's Basilica altar is immediately above the tomb of the Apostle Peter. The Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Wall is built over the tomb of Paul—the Apostle to the Gentiles.

I hope you've enjoyed studying the Acts of the Apostles. It is one of my favorite books of the Bible. This is the year of Luke in our Sunday liturgies during ordinary time, and we will be reading Luke for most Sunday Gospels now until Advent. I'll explain this a little more next week. Thus I thought we would take the Gospel of Luke and study it for the rest of this summer and fall. However, we'll take a couple weeks off from reading. I want to introduce you to some background material first on using the Bible in our Sunday and daily Mass readings, explain the relationships among the four Gospels, and introduce you to Luke. If you have a Bible or another book that has introductions to the four Gospels, especially Luke, you might read up a bit on those.