



# BIBLE IN A YEAR 2020



## Summary

If you liked the story of Jesus, you'll love the sequel. The author of Luke's gospel continues his account to show what happened after Jesus' physical presence was swapped for an outpouring of his Spirit. This changes everything, including the minds of believers, and empowers the church to be Jesus' body across the earth.

Is this the story of a perfect church? You'll have to read it to see. There are certainly lots of things we can learn from how this church lived. But we will also see the roots of some long-standing disagreements, the constant challenge of change, and how the people who followed Jesus the most closely kept encountering stretches and surprises.

So if we are looking for a picture of how faith-filled life should look today, this might not give us all the answers, but it is a great starting point for a life-changing journey God wants for us.

**Bern Leckie**

# Wednesday September 2: Acts 1-2

## Is this the end or just the beginning?

Every day we're reading, listening to or watching part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

## What did I like about today's reading?

I love that Luke starts with the end, of the Gospel story at least. This is the sequel! After showing us Jesus, his life, and teaching, and the incredible power behind his words, this set of stories answers some big questions anyone who starts to follow Jesus is likely to have.

“What should we do?” is an obvious one, but there is more. “What difference does the Holy Spirit make?” is one of the biggest questions nobody has before they start to follow Jesus, but everybody should have when they do. We'll see lots of examples.

We'll see in Acts that before anyone came up with the term “Christian”, life following Jesus was known as “The Way”. I still think that might be the best term, because Jesus didn't call people into our culture but into a new way of life they would learn on the way, as they went. Acts shows us how many times followers and leaders had to change their thinking to keep up with the kingdom that God was starting to reveal and unfold, in and around them.

I love the explosive pictures of this in the first chapters. Look at how the disciples change as they start to heal wounds of betrayal, begin to be blessed by the Spirit and emerge from hiding into an incredible display of God's power which showed what life ahead could be like. It's full of promise and potential for people who would “repent” – change their minds – and embark on a lifelong journey of transformation. I love how many people responded with hope and faith, and how they soon found practical ways to express love and commitment.

For me, the biggest question which has emerged in my faith journey has probably been “Where is this Way taking us?”, and I think Acts is all about that. I used to read it as if it were a picture of our destination, a pure church close to Christ. But gradually I've come to believe that if that were the case, the story (and the rest of the New Testament) wouldn't be like it is, revealing tensions, arguments, difficult issues being wrestled with throughout and, most importantly, people whose minds carried on being changed by the Holy Spirit. You'll need to decide for yourself – is this a story of where we need to stop, or where we need to start?

## What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God's presence was clearly visible to anyone who could see Jesus, but when his Spirit came, God could live in believers, changing us from the inside out rather just the external guidance of teaching and laws. Thanks to the Spirit, God's power can be seen through people who follow and obey Jesus (call him Lord). God gifts forgiveness and the Spirit to every believer.

## What am I going to do differently as a result?

Thank God freshly for the new life he has given me and the journey he has put me on.

## Who am I going to share this with?

Some of the other people I share this journey with, including family and friends at church.

# Saturday September 5: Acts 3-4

This way keeps pointing towards Jesus

Today Bern Leckie writes:

## What did I like about today's reading?

I love how watching Jesus' freshly empowered followers at work is just like watching Jesus. Can you imagine how people felt about this? I'm thinking about the people who had so much hope in Jesus, brought their biggest problems and vulnerabilities to him believing that God's kingdom could be coming and good news for them. When they saw Jesus die, wouldn't that shake them? When they heard he lived again, could they dare to believe?

Only a few got to see Jesus again in the flesh, but here is his power. It's unmistakable.

I'm also loving how Peter reacts when the crowd are noticing miracles. If you were Peter, after all you'd been through and learned on the journey with Jesus, wouldn't you be tempted to take at least a bit of the credit? What he does instead is remarkable. He flat out denies that anything has happened by his own power or godliness. Instead, "it is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed" the man who needed it.

It's all about Jesus. Remarkable because he is clearly not there in the flesh. Even more so because he is fresh in people's minds as the person they demanded be killed for blaspheming God. What mix of emotions would you feel if you had been in that crowd shouting, but now started to believe that Jesus was right, and you were wrong? It would be worse than realising you'd mixed up your answers in a history test, right? Maybe I wouldn't know what to think about anything now. If I got stuff like that so wrong, maybe the problem isn't stuff but me. Many did realise that and turned to Jesus for a change of mind, a new way of life.

But that is a big ask, and clearly not everyone was ready for that. The Sadducees didn't believe in life after death and so would struggle the most with the idea that Jesus could be resurrected or promising eternal life to followers. I love how the confrontation between their beliefs and the emerging facts brought a Spirit-filled Peter to bring a very Jesus-like spanner to undo their opposition. The Sadducees couldn't defend their beliefs and were left trying to remove speech about Jesus from the lips of people whose minds he had changed and inspired. Good luck with that! This was the beginning of a Jesus-centred movement.

## What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God's power is awesome, even when expressed in seemingly small ways like one man's faith for healing. The Spirit doesn't just work miracles like this, but also works through inspiring credit and praise to bring attention back to Jesus, so others can find new life themselves.

## What am I going to do differently as a result?

Reflect on how well I let the Spirit speak through me to credit Jesus and not just settle for people thinking I might be some sort of nice person in my own strength. (As if!)

## Who am I going to share this with?

I called myself "a Jesus follower" rather than a Christian the other day. That seemed right! I'm going to look for more chances to point to how I see Jesus in work and school relationships.

# Wednesday September 9: Acts 5-6

Don't go this way without knowing the risks

Today Bern Leckie writes:

## What did I like about today's reading?

I love that in the earliest days of the church, people were amazed by the work of the Holy Spirit. It was like Jesus was not only among them, but that his followers were his arms, legs and body. You could look at that body of believers and see Jesus, almost in the flesh.

I think this is important to bear in mind when the scary stuff starts happening in this passage. It's a new life that Jesus called followers into, in which the Spirit would flow through them and people could know God, and no-one had to earn their place by being good. Everyone had turned to Jesus for forgiveness and grace. That much is free, but Jesus never said there was no cost to being a follower. Bringing their whole selves, expecting massive personal change and possibly physical risk, as Jesus had suffered, were all part of the package.

I always find the cautionary tale of Ananias and Sapphira to be sobering. It makes me double check – when Jesus told that one guy to sell all his stuff, do we have to as well? Not according to this, or the rest of Acts. People pooled possessions freely, but were not forced, and many carried on businesses or offered hospitality from their own homes. Ananias and Sapphira were not punished for keeping stuff, but for lying about it. But it's so severe! Why?

The way I read the story, Peter didn't decide they should die and kill them. He confronted Ananias with his sin and God did the rest. Maybe Peter was shocked, maybe not, but he must have known what to expect when Sapphira joined her husband in the lie. I don't know about you, but I'm shocked! Is that what we should expect too? (How do I need to correct things!?)

## What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

This story doesn't draw a line to connect us with Ananias and Sapphira. But it does remind me that God is holy and, just as people in the Old Testament were warned they would die if they violated holy ground, when God acts in total purity and light, there is no room for darkness. This is definitely a warning to us not to lie to God, but also maybe a prompt for us not to kid ourselves that we are holier than we are. Do we want God to be seen working through us? Great! Then expect God to challenge and change us, and for us to feel the need for this.

The rest of this passage reminds me of how powerful and practical it is for God to work through people. It can bring healing, miracles, even efficient admin – hallelujah!

God also brings faithful followers into risk, as Jesus warned, maybe even prison or worse. This isn't punishment for faith but a demonstration of how he made our lives and purposes far, far bigger than our comfort zones. What God can do with faithful people can change the world.

## What am I going to do differently as a result?

Reflect with God on whether he is prompting me to change anything and, if so, change it!

## Who am I going to share this with?

My family and others I follow Jesus with. If there's anyone I owe something to, them too!

# Saturday September 12: Acts 7-8

This way is surprising as God pushes outwards

Today Bern Leckie writes:

## What did I like about today's reading?

What does “church going well” look like to you? If an image came to mind of a growing, gathered group of people enjoying fun and miracles in an otherwise stable and predictable environment, I’m guessing the last six months have been a big challenge for you. Me too! It also looked like the way the church might have been going from the first chapters of Acts.

But God is shaking things up here. I love these pictures of God clearly moving, speaking, acting in surprising, attention grabbing ways. There is a cost, though. Stephen pays the ultimate price for letting God speak through him without holding back. It’s meant to be shocking, I think, but it’s more than tragic. It’s a turning point for the church who have to get moving.

I’m often struck by how God uses faithful people in a crisis. In this instance, as people are forced out of a big central gathering, there are all of these new and life-changing encounters, some with crowds, some personal, in places they might not have ventured for a while.

It’s not all uncontrolled and chaotic. I love how Philip being “scattered” into Samaria leads to miracles and new believers, but Peter and John plan the follow up. I really love how Philip didn’t have to be the perfect preacher for God to use him for amazing stuff. As he is part of God’s bigger church body, he can trust that the follow up team can see from a different angle and cover anything which got missed (like receiving the Holy Spirit!)

I also love how Philip is emboldened by his experience and ends up following God’s prompt to share the gospel with the Ethiopian Chancellor of the Exchequer, in his motorcade. Like you do! God isn’t just opening an opportunity here but also minds, hearts, baptism for people from noticeably different cultures and ways for this movement of Jesus to reach the world.

## What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

While the image we might have of a church going well probably includes a lively gathering, some of God’s most spectacular work is away from the meetings, in the moments when someone will simply listen to and obey God’s guidance.

God uses all kinds of people, from the most extrovert chatters to the most introvert planners to accomplish his work together. He can make us uncomfortable in the movements we have to make, but he always keeps his people connected, whether gathered or scattered.

## What am I going to do differently as a result?

Listen harder to discern God’s guidance in the coming days as we form new plans for what we do in church gatherings and time between gatherings. Am I letting God use me as much as he wants to in my community and networks of contacts? That strikes me as more important than forming an image of “ideal church” right now based on anything I’ve experienced before.

## Who am I going to share this with?

My family and others at church as we talk about gatherings and community groups.

## **Wednesday September 16: Acts 9-10**

This way leads to changing your mind. Today Bern Leckie writes:

### **What did I like about today's reading?**

So, you think you know what you think about stuff? Are you sure? A walk with Jesus might be a bit of a challenge, then. Didn't we see that in the gospels? And we aren't just talking about "sinners" who everyone knows needs to change their lives. No, Jesus invited everyone, from the most religious to the least, to change their mind ("repent") and believe.

What I love about today's passage is that it shows two huge examples of this from people who had every right to think, in their own heads, that they didn't need to change their minds.

Saul's change of mind is famous and astonishing. He loved God so much that he went out of his way to pursue the enemies of rightness, even to death. But look at how Jesus himself intervenes! Saul, and many around him, thought he was so right, but what mattered was what God thought, and Saul needed a revelation to understand that. Amazingly, God knew how Saul's life could be turned around with this, and shockingly the chief persecutor would become a leading proclaimer of the gospel throughout the world, beyond the Jewish people.

But I'm even more amazed by what happened next to Peter. Hadn't he spent years with Jesus already? Shouldn't he have known what's what? Why did he need to change his mind at this point? If you've followed Peter's progress through the gospels and Acts, you will have seen him learn a lot. He is someone I can relate to! He thinks he's got it all sorted, then God shows him why Jesus' call to "repent" was not a one-time thing, and not necessarily related to sin either. Peter hadn't sinned here, but God had something to share which changed his mind.

This reminds me of why my mind changed about the purpose of this book. I used to think it was a blueprint for an ideal church, close to Christ. But what page is that? At what point in this mind-changing journey is God saying, "Here! Do exactly what they are doing, that's it!" There are lots of great examples of things I would love to see and do, and it makes me want to put faith into practice. But I believe this book is here to show us that, just when we think we've got it all sorted, we should expect God to nudge and progress us along the way with Jesus, moving us closer to his kingdom, shifting our perspectives, changing our minds.

### **What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?**

God can reveal things which change the views of unbelievers and believers too. He has a huge kingdom plan which none of us have fully grasped yet. Following Jesus is the best way to know it, but he leads us on lifelong journeys during which he keeps growing our understanding, showing us things which can change our minds, if we let him.

### **What am I going to do differently as a result?**

I need to reflect on what God is showing me, through prayer, scripture, life experience and processing with other Christians. Where does my mind need to change? Prompted by Mal's weekend talk, I'm praying about how God can help me change how I process things which get me stressed or angry, for example. I'm also looking forward to considering God from fresh perspectives on "The Gold of the Gospel" course, starting tonight.

### **Who am I going to share this with?**

People on the Gold course and others I'm following Jesus with.

# Saturday September 19: Acts 11-12

This way? No way. Way!\*

Today Bern Leckie writes:

## What did I like about today's reading?

(\*Pardon the Wayne's World reference. Got to keep it current for the kids.)

You might be having some déjà vu at the start of chapter 11, because Peter's story sounds very familiar to anyone who recently read chapter 10. To be fair, it is an amazing story. But why is this one repeated just after it's been told? In the Bible, I've found that is sometimes what happens with the most important bits, the things we need a double take to take in.

I had been thinking how important it was that Peter changed his mind, because we're all called to a life of that when we follow Jesus. This particular mind change was mind blowing for some people, though. God's people had defined themselves by sticking to strict laws about what they could eat and what they should avoid. Keeping purity in a Jewish kitchen is still about far more than avoiding bacon sandwiches. There's a lot of work needed to remove blood from meat, for example, and keep dairy and meat separate (some use two cookers). How can God then say, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean"?

The Bible shows the church in arguments about this for a long time. You can look later in Acts or read Paul's letter to the Galatians to see how passionately people were divided over the issue of God bringing non-Jews into his kingdom, and on what terms. Shouldn't they obey his laws? I'm sure this did not cause a stir because people liked arguing. There was a genuine difference of opinion about what it meant for God to accept people. (There still is!)

I'm struck by how the two adjacent versions of Peter's story have the same conclusion, forcefully making a point. The filling of these new believers with the Holy Spirit settled the matter for Peter. This made it all about things God was doing, clearing a way for his big, surprising, mind-changing kingdom. "So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?"

## What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

This is a vital piece of guidance, a key point of this book. God does not mean to leave people paralysed by doubt and arguments as he changes people's minds on the walk with Jesus. He gives the Holy Spirit, showing where he is working, who and what he is bringing closer to him and calling "clean" where we might previously have thought "unclean".

## What am I going to do differently as a result?

I need to express my gratitude to God. For bacon sandwiches, certainly. But also that he has declared me and my family acceptable to him because of Jesus' love and grace. And with this in mind, I'm aware that Christians argue today about the boundaries concerning who and what God accepts. Those usually seem to me like arguments which are hard to settle by reference to laws, but it's better to try and discern and follow the flow of the Spirit. Where am I seeing the Spirit at work in others, producing his fruit? I want to get better at spotting this, crediting God for it and allowing God to keep renewing my mind to see things his way.

## Who am I going to share this with?

Friends who wonder if God cannot accept them because the church struggles to do so.

# Wednesday September 23: Acts 13-14

This way brings people together to work like Jesus

Every day we're reading, listening to or watching part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

## What did I like about today's reading?

Mission trip! Exciting!!! I love how God has brought together the contrasting personalities of Barnabas, son of encouragement, and Saul/Paul, whose sharpness of intellect and mastery of words as weapons will cut through substantial barriers between where they are and where God wants people to go.

I love how they were alert and obedient to the Spirit's lead, building worship, prayer and fasting into their everyday lives, and ready to go into incredibly challenging situations.

It's clear that they were working methodically, like Jesus, to bring news of God's kingdom to his Jewish people first. I'm struck by how open these people seemed to be in Pisidian Antioch, rolling out the welcome to speak and seeming enthusiastic about Paul's learned and inspired word about leadership through the ages. I might have put that down as a good preach!

But look at what God did next. This is where the truly revolutionary nature of God's kingdom gets revealed. He wasn't interested in people receiving Paul nicely and wishing him well. I think God knew something about the hearts of the people who thought that God was theirs, Paul's message was theirs (it had lots of their history, for a start), and that the messiah and coming kingdom would just be theirs too. Seeing a crowd of Gentiles eager to receive the word made the Jews "filled with jealousy", which I take to include a fear of losing something they believe to be theirs. What do you mean, he isn't just our God?

I love how the power of Jesus then gets revealed through the outpouring and work of the Holy Spirit. It's saving Gentiles, bringing them into God's family, and really annoying the Jewish leaders, who had been so nice about Paul's preaching. "The disciples were filled with joy" – they knew God's priorities here and took it overall as a win.

And that was just the start of a rocking tour of God bringing miracles around the region, just as if seeing this little body that God had assembled was like seeing Jesus himself.

## What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God makes himself visible and understandable in Jesus, and his Spirit makes Jesus visible and accessible through an empowered, responsive, obedient body of believers. By watching how this worked out with Paul and Barnabas, I can see that God's priority is not to make religious people feel better as much as it is to reach anyone who might respond to the life-changing news that hope is real, it's found in Jesus and following him changes everything.

## What am I going to do differently as a result?

I've got to question my standards for deciding, "Is this going well?" I'm happy when people say nice things about stuff I've said. But how do I need to be more attentive to the Spirit's lead so that he can do much more through the body of believers that I am part of?

## Who am I going to share this with?

The people in church that I pray, worship and follow Jesus with. (Maybe we should fast too!)



# Saturday September 26: Acts 15-16

Follow the Spirit but expect major bumps on the way

Today Bern Leckie writes:

## What did I like about today's reading?

This passage reminds me what an incredible, awesome, mind-blowing thing it is to be walking with Jesus, full of wonders as the Spirit works in and around us, changing things, including our minds. It also reminds me how difficult we find change, and how close I always am (maybe you too?) to confusing closeness to God with understanding of God. I believe God lives in me! So why shouldn't I also believe that my opinions are also correct, from him, unchallengeable?

Maybe this was the problem which was so big, it nearly ripped the early church apart. Paul famously argued with the people who wanted Christians to be circumcised and follow Jewish laws, but this passage shows that those people were not outside the church body of believers. Look at chapter 15 verse 5: "Then some of the believers... stood up and said, 'The Gentiles must be circumcised...'" Believers! Not troublemakers outside the church, but people filled with the Spirit, sharing the walk with Jesus too. With this faith, their spiritual experience and a lifetime's knowledge of studying and following God's laws, why wouldn't they think they were right about this? And if they were right, why not pursue this line with passion and vigour?

But we know from the rest of the story that God has spoken to Peter, changed his mind, and turned around Saul's life into Paul's mission to Gentiles. I love how the work God has done in the least expected places helps illuminate ancient prophecy and starts changing more minds among the believers. I love how God guides leadership in the church to make commitments to inclusion which many would have found shocking and unlawful. From Paul's letters, we know this was not the end of the argument! But I love how God leads people through change.

I'm also loving how God uses these leaders' differences, even their flaws. How could there be any good in Paul and Barnabas splitting up over differences in trusting someone? For one thing, they had two mission trips instead of one! Paul's sounds incredibly fruitful, and as he had to rely on new partners, more people got to grow their ability to minister and strengthen others. I love Paul's adventures showing the power of the Spirit when in prison too. Boom!

What amazing stuff Mark missed. Do you think he regretted that forever? Who knows, but we're pretty sure that God took him on a different path with something else in mind. He is thought to be the author of the gospel story which sourced Matthew and Luke's gospels too.

## What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God advances his kingdom by changing people's minds, not just from unbelievers to believers, but within believers who learn more about the Spirit's work and intentions over time. God does not choose to make every believer identical in personality or outlook, and he takes each of us on difficult journeys. But God gets glorified on a huge scale as diverse people engage with change, move and, from many different directions, end up pointing to him.

## What am I going to do differently as a result?

Hold my opinions more lightly, look for the Spirit's work and changes more seriously.

## Who am I going to share this with?

Some people I believe the Spirit may have been drawing from the fringes into deeper faith.

# Wednesday September 30: Acts 17-18

One way to God, lots of ways to reach people with it

Every day we're reading, listening to or watching part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

## What did I like about today's reading?

Paul and co are touring a bunch of places which includes so many famous names, including ones we might recognise from his letters. I love that, despite the obvious trouble involved, we now know that thriving churches were planted in Thessalonica, Corinth, Ephesus and Galatia.

What I'm massively impressed by is the way that Paul keeps finding new ways to reach people with the gospel. He isn't running a tired "greatest hits" sort of tour on autopilot, same show every night. God is using him to connect with different people in different ways.

He clearly has a preferred method, at least to start, of landing in the synagogue and creating opportunities to share from scriptures about Jesus. We have to remember that this doesn't mean the freshly written gospel stories, but what we now call the Old Testament histories, prophecies and poems. It took revelation from God to see how these point forwards across centuries to Jesus, and required the Spirit to affirm these connections in listeners' minds. But look at the Spirit go! Even in the most resistant places there are people willing to respond.

I wonder which of these places feels the most like Bristol today? Could it be Athens, where people love to hear (and argue) about the latest ideas? Paul's talk to the Athenians always sounds impressive to me, different from his regular dive into scripture because his audience was not already familiar with the idea of one God, let alone aware of Israel's history and hopes. So Paul crafted his speech around things they did know, including nature and their own poetry, and still connected all of this to Jesus. It seems like some responded, if not many.

Or maybe Bristol today is more like Corinth, a bustling port city whose strategic location brought a wide range of people together from different places and cultures. I love how God guided Paul directly in his work here, assuring him that, despite opposition, he had many people in the city. This was before Paul had stayed there and founded the famous (infamous?) church! Isn't it reassuring to know that, even when sharing about Jesus looks daunting and dangerous, it's possible because God has been working before we arrived?

## What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God gives us a role in spreading the good news about new life in his kingdom and the way we can access this through Jesus. He blesses some people like Paul to draw all the threads together and see lives converted. But he also works in other ways – perhaps directly in people's minds, but I'm sure also through simple conversations with believers who share what they have found and credit to God. He even uses people like Apollos who have to learn on the way that they don't know everything! I think this means God can use us too.

## What am I going to do differently as a result?

I don't consider myself a great evangelist, but I want to be more open to God using me to share about him with friends and neighbours, not just a "testimony" but flexibly, sensitively.

## Who am I going to share this with?

People I follow Jesus with, and hopefully quite a few more!

# **Saturday October 3: Acts 19-20**

## **We need the Spirit's power on the way**

Every day we're reading, listening to or watching part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

### **What did I like about today's reading?**

I love Paul's encounter with more disciples who were happy to believe in Jesus and God but hadn't heard of the Holy Spirit. It reminds me of the church where I grew up! To be fair, they had heard of the Spirit but only talked about him once a year, when the annual Pentecost talk was about how mysterious this "third person of the trinity" was and how maybe we should think a bit more about this. This was in the mid 1980s, shortly before a wave of the Spirit literally knocked over the people who were ready to receive, and this was just the beginning of many people finding refreshed, practical faith, renewed relationship with God, appetite to pray and read the Bible like never before, and life changes noticed by all the neighbours. But why is the Holy Spirit so important? Is it just about energising Christians with extra faith?

It's possible, as Paul found in the church and with people of other faiths, to live with passion and energy driven by belief in a special person or a local god. I'm struck by how deeply embedded Artemis was in the livelihoods, not just religious faith, of the people of Ephesus. They had every reason to resist their lives being disrupted by foreign ideas. They didn't feel a need for Paul, Jesus, the Holy Spirit or anyone else to come and make their lives complete.

So, it's worth looking at how the Spirit grabbed the attention of people who did choose to believe. Like Jesus, the Spirit dealt with illnesses. Can you imagine seeing someone healed by a hanky touching Paul? "Evil spirits" were dealt with too, which must have made a huge impact on people who saw lives changed where no-one and nothing else they knew could have helped. And I love the story of Eutychus, who died during Paul's long, late night sermon, but came back to life thanks to the intervention of the Spirit through Paul.

We can either see the Spirit as a "nice to have" (one day, when we understand), or a "must have", today, because we need what he brings, despite our lack of understanding (he can teach us later!). This passage reminds me that believers can lack the Spirit, but must not!

### **What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?**

I love how Paul's reliance on the Spirit didn't just comfort or empower him, it "compelled" him to go where he went, despite warnings of difficulties.

What compels us otherwise – our common sense? Experience? Desire for comfort? God knows we need all of that, but his Spirit can uniquely guide us through difficulties we don't know how to overcome, or to solve problems we don't know how to solve by ourselves.

The Spirit is God in us, guiding, shaping and changing us. We can't follow Jesus without him.

### **What am I going to do differently as a result?**

Not take the Spirit's power for granted, for me or other believers, and be more conscious of our need to invite and recognise the Spirit. Trust the Spirit to do what I cannot on my own!

### **Who am I going to share this with?**

Other people I follow Jesus with.

# Wednesday October 7: Acts 21-22

God's way will stretch us

Today Bern Leckie writes:

## What did I like about today's reading?

God is going to do a thing. Can you feel the energy, the tension building up to it? I love how Paul is ready to be used for God's thing, and Luke, the writer, draws us into how he and everyone else felt about it. "We and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem." Other disciples had begged the same. There's an odd detail in verse 5 of chapter 21: "Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem."

Is Paul's way set against God's way, then? Is the Spirit, who also warned about Paul's suffering to come, encouraging or opposing Paul's decision to offer himself completely for this thing that had made Paul certain that many people would never see him again?

The thing is the mission trip to end all mission trips. Well, more precisely, to end Paul's mission trips. It's the last thing we're going to discover in this book, a journey which will change many people's lives as God fires Paul like an arrow into the heart of the Roman empire. And you can't fire an arrow without building up a lot of tension first.

This could not be any more dramatic. Rome is the biggest earthly power anyone has ever known at this time. It embraces many gods but has no room to accept a claim there is only one God. The leaders of Israel, oppressed by the Romans, still beg for their power to oppose Jesus – they know his claim to be king would be unacceptable to Caesar, who claims to be a god. We know he isn't, but he's still mighty in earthly terms, with a formidable army and control over the economy and politics of most of the known world.

So how on earth could God use this fledgling church to change that? Many have simply been waiting for Jesus to return and sort it all out. But what if God has a different plan? This is the thing. And it starts with Paul entering Jerusalem and, just like Jesus, getting arrested and brought before the Romans with a crowd shouting for his death.

But this time, there's a twist. God doesn't need Paul to be killed here. Instead, he uses Paul to tell a story which shows how Jesus, the gospel and his own life have become joined together. I love how this opportunity to share about how God changed him will change everything.

## What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God can equip and call us for incredible, unique purposes in his kingdom cause. But he also partners with us rather than forcing us to do difficult things. I think this is why we hear about people urging Paul to reconsider "through the Spirit" – God's Spirit is present in us whether we accept or push against a move or change God wants to make. God lets us feel the tension of change, such as the opposing forces of wanting to stay with good things we have now or let God radically reconfigure our future. God stretches us, deliberately, which strengthens us too.

## What am I going to do differently as a result?

Keep my mind more open to ways God may want to challenge, stretch and change it.

## Who am I going to share this with?

My family, because some practical, challenging stretches in how we use time may be here.

# **Saturday October 10: Acts 23-24**

**In dark times, can you see God guiding the way?**

Today Bern Leckie writes:

## **What did I like about today's reading?**

So, this glorious thing God is doing with Paul. It's going to change some people's minds soon and start to change politics and power later. The way ahead for Paul is to keep pointing to Jesus, and I love how he gets credited in this story directly for sharing the plan: "As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."

Given how rough Paul's reception has been so far, does that sound encouraging, or too much like a dreadful task? Jesus says, "Take courage!" so I assume he means it that way! But look at all the nonsense Paul has to put up with – getting hit, targeted for murder, falsely accused, thrown in jail and detained for years – YEARS! – by corrupt officials hoping to be bribed and playing politics over his life. How, you might well ask, is God being glorified here?

I'm reminded of dark times in my own life. During a holiday abroad, I heard that my company back home was getting into some deep politics as similar companies were buying each other up and lots of jobs were being lost. I prayed about this, had the courage to ask for just one more year in my current job, and strongly sensed God saying yes to this. Even though things were pretty stressful back home, I was massively encouraged by believing God's promise. But I hadn't been back long before I became really sick, hospitalised, hooked up to beeping machines and watched very carefully through nights when it turned out I had a blood clot on the plane, it moved to my lungs and collapsed one of them, infection set in and apparently I'd come as close as I ever had to death. But I pulled out the encouragement and promise I'd had from God – he said I'd have my job for a year, so this definitely wasn't my time to die!

Paul knows, because he believes Jesus, that he will testify in Rome. So what else matters? All the threats to stop him don't amount to anything because God keeps his promises.

I love how, in the dark details of this story, God illuminates Paul's path in so many ways. He knows what to say to set his opponents against each other. He finds help from believers and Roman authorities to avoid assassination, and through this situation, he gets brought before increasingly powerful people he never could have reached by knocking on doors.

Most of all I love how, at every turn, God has not just changed Paul's circumstances but his mind, so he has a story to share about how everyone he meets can find Jesus and change too.

## **What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?**

God's plans are bigger than we can understand! Sometimes he only shows us a step at a time, and we might see the way best as light in our dark times. But he doesn't need us worry about the complexities of the future. As we build an everyday relationship with Jesus, God shapes our hopes and builds our ability to share about our journeys of life change to help others.

## **What am I going to do differently as a result?**

Remember the power of crediting God for his life changing work in me, and his promises!

## **Who am I going to share this with?**

My family and other people I follow Jesus with.

# **Wednesday October 14: Acts 25-26**

**God's way will bring you to share your change of mind**

Today Bern Leckie writes:

## **What did I like about today's reading?**

The big thing God is doing with Paul takes some dramatic turns today. I love how much power and influence is being brought to Paul. He's in prison, so he can't go out to knock on doors anyway! But with Festus replacing Felix, who had detained Paul for years hoping for a bribe, things start moving fast.

Festus strikes me as a politician who knows the value of making friends, and wants to do this in a hurry in his new job. But I love how Paul knows that God didn't bring him all that way to go back to Jerusalem. He's heading for Rome with the gospel and a personal story to back it up, and Festus seems to be the man who can propel him there.

But this story Paul has to share, which is also his legal defence, is amazing. What I find most unusual about it is that most defendants would have lawyers who, above all else, would try to demonstrate their good character. Even if something bad happened, if a judge could see that as a regretful, one-time mistake, running against everything else a person consistently demonstrates in their life, they would judge leniently rather than conclude the defendant was a bad person. This only works with a picture of the defendant as solid, reliable and consistent.

However, Paul tells the story of his inconsistency, how he was wrong, and how God changed his mind. What sort of defence is that? It's not a strong self-defence. It's more of a confession, and if Paul has confessed to getting so much of his life's understanding and practice wrong, why would any judge start to believe and accept him now?

The power of Paul's true story is that it doesn't point to his own goodness but to God and the way he changed Paul's mind for good. I love how it then stands as a testimony, not to get Paul out of jail, but to change the minds of everyone else in jail, including the judges! And I love how Paul seems to know that this is his purpose, not to escape the justice system but let God move him all the way through it with mind-changing truth and life-changing prophetic power.

## **What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?**

God equips faithful followers for unimaginably difficult journeys like the one Paul endured on this ultimate mission trip. He does not leave people to struggle alone to come up with a decent self-defence, but keeps the promise that Jesus made in Luke 21:12-15 – "They will... put you in prison and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. And so you will bear testimony to me. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand about how you will defend yourself. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict." As a result, "you will win life."

## **What am I going to do differently as a result?**

I want God to use me to glorify him! But I'm aware that I get in the way sometimes, wanting to appear consistent and good, unwilling to confess weakness, mistakes or changes of mind. I need less self-defence and more testimony from and about him and how he changes me.

## **Who am I going to share this with?**

I hope to have more chances to share and testify to our school community and leadership.

# Saturday October 17: Acts 27-28

God's way is full of surprises to the end

Today Bern Leckie writes:

## What did I like about today's reading?

I love how, just when I think I've got this thing God is doing with Paul, it keeps getting more exciting and surprising. We know he is literally bound for an audience with Caesar. What could go wrong?

I am struck by an image of Paul as the calm in the centre of a storm. Not everyone understood how much God was with him, flooding him with peace, power and wisdom – that's clear from the story. It's understandable: "the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship." What? He listened to professional mariners instead of the criminal suspect from a religious sect? What was he thinking!?

Of course, people did not know to listen to Paul until, to paraphrase Jesus, wisdom is proved right by the results. I love seeing how so many people's minds were changed and opened to God by recognising truth in his words at a time when it really mattered. This didn't just save everyone on the ship but brought the people of Malta from superstitions about false gods to a willingness to seek healing from the real God. Can you even count how many people changed their minds because of God's unexpected work in this story?

As we approach the end, I'm also loving two more surprises at the end of this account. One is how God has stirred Rome around Paul, rather than required Paul to go and stir up interest in God himself. I take this as an example of how mission is always God's mission rather than ours. He works ahead, above, below and around us, as well as in us. I would expect Paul to be despairing about the delays, anxious to conclude his journey, meet his objectives. But we finish with an assurance that all is well, despite years of house arrest. God works surprisingly!

And maybe the biggest surprise of all is that the story ends here, despite almost certainly being written years after the events, in a time of turmoil for the church. We know from history that Christians would suffer incredible persecution from the Romans. What, then, is the author trying to tell those suffering Christians, and what can we learn from it?

## What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God changes our minds. He starts this process as we learn about his kingdom, see his promises fulfilled in Jesus, follow Jesus to know God as Father, and receive his Spirit of healing power, love and peace. But Acts is not a story about believers finding themselves or their circumstances perfected by God. It shows that God continues to work, continues to change believers' minds, showing more of his purpose and strengthening us for surprising changes in the world. The Spirit inspired this story to end with an open door through which people would come and be changed. God's plans and words endure, but he calls us to a way of change so that, as Paul wrote to the Romans, we could "be transformed by the renewing" of our minds.

## What am I going to do differently as a result?

Remember that God still wants to strengthen me and change my mind, and ask him how.

## Who am I going to share this with?

My family and others I follow Jesus with.