# A HARMONY OF THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS — CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

*The Acts of the Apostles, Chapters 10–18: The Gentile Mission, the Jerusalem Council, and Paul's First and Second Missionary Journeys*

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## Table of Contents

## Preface: Continuation of Acts

Chapter twenty-three continues the Acts of the Apostles through chapters 10–18, covering the most decisive period in the expansion of the early church. Three narrative movements dominate this section.

The first is Peter's conversion of the Roman centurion Cornelius — the decisive crossing of the boundary between Jewish and Gentile Christianity, confirmed by the Spirit's outpouring on Gentile believers before they are baptized. This event, narrated twice in Acts (chapters 10 and 11), is the theological hinge on which the entire Gentile mission turns.

The second is the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 — the first formal assembly of the church convened to address a theological dispute, determining whether Gentile believers must be circumcised and keep the Mosaic law. The council's decision establishes the principle that will animate Paul's entire missionary career: salvation is by grace through faith, and the Gentiles are full heirs of the covenant without the requirement of circumcision.

The third is Paul's first and second missionary journeys — the systematic planting of churches across Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece, bringing the gospel from Antioch to Corinth and establishing the communities to which Paul's letters will later be addressed.

Each section is identified by its source: **[Acts]** throughout.

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## Part Twenty-Two: The Gentile Mission and the Spread of the Gospel

### Section 245 — Cornelius and Peter: The Gentiles Receive the Spirit [Acts 10:1–48]

Now there was a certain man in Caesarea, Cornelius by name, a centurion of the band called the Italian band, a devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, who gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always.

He saw in a vision openly, as it were about the ninth hour of the day, an angel of God coming in unto him, and saying to him, Cornelius. And he, fastening his eyes upon him, and being affrighted, said, What is it, Lord? And he said unto him, Thy prayers and thine alms are gone up for a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa, and fetch one Simon, who is surnamed Peter.

Now on the morrow, as they were on their journey, and drew nigh unto the city, Peter went up upon the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour: and he became hungry, and desired to eat: but while they made ready, he fell into a trance; and he beholdeth the heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending, as it were a great sheet, let down by four corners upon the earth: wherein were all manner of fourfooted beasts and creeping things of the earth and birds of the heaven.

And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill and eat. But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common and unclean. And a voice came unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, make not thou common. And this was done thrice: and straightway the vessel was received up into heaven.

Now while Peter was much perplexed in himself what the vision which he had seen might mean, behold, the men that were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood before the gate.

So Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him.

The word which he sent unto the children of Israel, preaching good tidings of peace by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all) — that saying ye yourselves know, which was published throughout all Judaea, beginning from Galilee, after the baptism which John preached; even Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all things which he did both in the country of the Jews, and in Jerusalem; whom also they slew, hanging him on a tree. Him God raised up the third day, and gave him to be made manifest, not to all the people, but unto witnesses that were chosen before of God, even to us, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he charged us to preach unto the people, and to testify that this is he who is ordained of God to be the Judge of the living and the dead. To him bear all the prophets witness, that through his name every one that believeth on him shall receive remission of sins.

While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Spirit fell on all them that heard the word. And they of the circumcision that believed were amazed, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Then answered Peter, Can any man forbid the water, that these should not be baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

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## Section 246 — Peter's Defense Before Jerusalem [Acts 11:1–18]

Now the apostles and the brethren that were in Judaea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.

And when Peter was come up to Jerusalem, they that were of the circumcision contended with him, saying, Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them.

But Peter began, and expounded the matter unto them in order.

When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then to the Gentiles also hath God granted repentance unto life.

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## Section 247 — The Church at Antioch; Barnabas and Saul [Acts 11:19–30]

They therefore that were scattered abroad upon the tribulation that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, and Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the word to none save only to Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus.

And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number that believed turned unto the Lord.

And the report concerning them came to the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem: and they sent forth Barnabas as far as Antioch: who, when he was come, and had seen the grace of God, was glad; and he exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord: for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord.

And Barnabas went forth to Tarsus to seek for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that even for a whole year they were gathered together with the church, and taught much people; and that the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.

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## Section 248 — The First Missionary Journey: Cyprus and Galatia [Acts 13:1–52]

Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers, Barnabas, and Symeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen the foster-brother of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

And as they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

So they, being sent forth by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia; and from thence they sailed to Cyprus.

And when they were at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews.

Now it came to pass in Iconium that they entered together into the synagogue of the Jews, and so spake that a great multitude both of Jews and of Greeks believed.

And it came to pass at Lystra, that a certain man sat, impotent in his feet, a cripple from his mother's womb, who never had walked. The same heard Paul speaking: who, fastening his eyes upon him, and seeing that he had faith to be made whole, said with a loud voice, Stand upright on thy feet. And he leaped up and walked.

And when the multitudes saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voice, saying in the speech of Lycaonia, The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men. And they called Barnabas, Jupiter; and Paul, Mercury, because he was the chief speaker.

And the priests of Jupiter whose temple was before the city, brought oxen and garlands unto the gates, and would have done sacrifice with the multitudes. But when the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, heard of it, they rent their garments, and sprang forth among the multitude, crying out and saying, Sirs, why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you, and bring you good tidings, that ye should turn from these vain things unto the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that in them is.

And they returned to Lystra, and to Iconium, and to Antioch, confirming the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God.

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## Section 249 — The Jerusalem Council [Acts 15:1–35]

And certain men came down from Judaea and taught the brethren, saying, Except ye be circumcised after the custom of Moses, ye cannot be saved.

And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and questioning with them, the brethren appointed that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.

And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church and the apostles and the elders, and they rehearsed all things that God had done with them.

But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees who believed, saying, It is needful to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses.

And the apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider of this matter.

And when there had been much questioning, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Brethren, ye know that a good while ago God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel, and believe. And God, who knoweth the heart, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Spirit, even as he did unto us; and he made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Now therefore why make ye trial of God, that ye should

put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in like manner as they.

And after they held their peace, Barnabas and Paul rehearsed what signs and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles through them.

And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Brethren, hearken unto me: Symeon hath rehearsed how first God visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written,

*After these things I will return, And I will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen; And I will build again the ruins thereof, And I will set it up: That the residue of men may seek after the Lord, And all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called.*

Wherefore my judgment is, that we trouble not them that from among the Gentiles turn to God; but that we write unto them, that they abstain from the pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from what is strangled, and from blood.

Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men out of their company, and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; and they wrote thus by them:

The apostles and the elder brethren unto the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greeting: Forasmuch as we have heard that certain who went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls; to whom we gave no commandment; it seemed good unto us, having come to one accord, to choose out men and send them unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that ye abstain from things sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication; from which if ye keep yourselves, it shall be well with you. Fare ye well.

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## Section 250 — The Second Missionary Journey Begins: The Call to Macedonia [Acts 16:1–15]

And he came also to Derbe and to Lystra: and behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewess that believed; but his father was a Greek.

And as they went on their way through the cities, they delivered them the decrees to keep which had been ordained of the apostles and elders that were at Jerusalem.

And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden of the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; and when they were come over against Mysia, they assayed to go into Bithynia; and the Spirit of Jesus suffered them not.

And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: There was a man of Macedonia standing, beseeching him, and saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us.

And when he had seen the vision, straightway we sought to go forth into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel unto them.

And we made a straight course to Samothrace, and the day following to Neapolis; and from thence to Philippi, which is a city of Macedonia, the first of the district, a Roman colony: and we were in this city tarrying certain days.

And on the sabbath day we went forth without the gate by a river side, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down, and spake unto the women that were come together. And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple of the city of Thyatira, one that worshipped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened to give heed unto the things which were spoken by Paul. And when she was baptized, and her household, she besought us, saying, If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there.

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## Section 251 — The Philippian Jailer [Acts 16:16–40]

And it came to pass, as we were going to the place of prayer, that a certain maid having a spirit of divination met us, who brought her masters much gain by soothsaying.

The same following after Paul and us cried out, saying, These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim unto you the way of salvation.

And Paul, being sore troubled, turned and said to the spirit, I charge thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And it came out that very hour.

But when her masters saw that the hope of their gain was gone, they laid hold on Paul and Silas, and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers.

And the multitude rose up together against them: and the magistrates rent their garments off them, and commanded to beat them with rods. And when they had laid many stripes upon them, they cast them into prison, charging the jailor to keep them safely: who, having received such a charge, cast them into the inner prison, and made their feet fast in the stocks.

But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns unto God, and the prisoners were listening to them; and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison-house were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed.

And the jailor, being roused out of sleep and seeing the prison doors open, drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped.

But Paul cried with a loud voice, saying, Do thyself no harm: for we are all here.

And he called for lights and sprang in, and, trembling for fear, fell down before Paul and Silas, and brought them out and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?

And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house. And they spake the word of the Lord unto him, with all that were in his house.

And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, immediately.

## Section 252 — Athens: Paul on the Areopagus [Acts 17:16–34]

Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he beheld the city full of idols.

So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with them that met him.

And certain also of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, What would this babbler say? Others, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached Jesus and the resurrection.

And they took hold of him, and brought him unto the Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new teaching is, which is spoken by thee?

And Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus, and said, Ye men of Athens, in all things I perceive that ye are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. What therefore ye worship in ignorance, this I set forth unto you.

The God that made the world and all things therein, he, being Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; neither is he served by men's hands, as though he needed anything, seeing he himself giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; and he made of one every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed seasons, and the bounds of their habitation; that they should seek God, if haply they might feel after him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us: for in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain even of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.

Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and device of man. The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked; but now he commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent: inasmuch as he hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; but others said, We will hear thee concerning this yet again.

But certain men clave unto him, and believed: among whom also was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

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## Section 253 — Corinth: A Year and a Half [Acts 18:1–17]

After these things he departed from Athens, and came to Corinth.

And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, a man of Pontus by race, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome: and he

came unto them; and because he was of the same trade, he abode with them, and they wrought; for by their trade they were tentmakers.

And he reasoned in the synagogue every sabbath, and persuaded Jews and Greeks.

But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul was constrained by the word, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.

And when they opposed themselves and blasphemed, he shook out his raiment and said unto them, Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean: from henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles.

And he departed thence, and went into the house of a certain man named Titus Justus, one that worshipped God, whose house joined hard to the synagogue. And Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his house; and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized.

And the Lord said unto Paul in the night by a vision, Be not afraid, but speak and hold not thy peace: for I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to harm thee: for I have much people in this city.

And he dwelt there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

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## Appendix: Notes on Chapter Twenty-Three

### On the Cornelius Episode as the Theological Turning Point

The conversion of Cornelius (Section 245) is the most theologically decisive episode in Acts after Pentecost, and Luke signals its importance by narrating it twice — once as the event itself (chapter 10) and once as Peter's report to Jerusalem (chapter 11). Peter's vision of the sheet containing unclean animals is not primarily about food laws; it is about people. The principle — *"What God hath cleansed, make not thou common"* — is applied immediately to his willingness to enter the house of a Gentile.

The outpouring of the Spirit on Cornelius's household before they are baptized is the critical detail. The Spirit does not wait for circumcision, nor for baptism, nor for formal admission into the Jewish covenant community. God has acted sovereignly, and Peter draws the only possible conclusion: *"Can any man forbid the water, that these should not be baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit as well as we?"* The order — Spirit, then water — reverses the expected pattern and makes the point unmistakably: the Gentiles are already inside the covenant by divine initiative. Baptism ratifies what God has already done.

Peter's summary of the gospel to Cornelius's household (Section 245) is the fullest Petrine proclamation in Acts and the closest parallel to the Synoptic Gospel narrative: Jesus of Nazareth, anointed with the Holy Spirit and power, who went about doing good and healing all oppressed of the devil, crucified on a tree, raised on the third day, appearing to chosen witnesses who ate and drank with him after the resurrection, now ordained as Judge of living and dead, through

whose name everyone who believes receives forgiveness of sins. This is a condensed Acts narrative of everything the Synoptic harmony has covered.

## On the Jerusalem Council as the First Church Council

The Jerusalem Council (Section 249) is the first formal theological assembly in church history and the model for all subsequent councils. Its structure anticipates the later ecumenical councils: a presenting controversy, formal gathering of recognized authorities, extended debate, testimony from experience (Peter's Cornelius account, Paul and Barnabas's missionary signs), scriptural argument (James's citation of Amos 9:11–12), and a formal decision communicated to the wider community in writing.

Peter's summary of the council's theological basis — *"we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in like manner as they"* — is one of the most important single sentences in Acts. It applies the Gentile principle universally: if the Gentiles are saved by grace through faith alone, then so are the Jews. The Council's decision does not merely open the door to the Gentiles; it clarifies the basis on which everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, stands before God.

James's quotation of Amos 9:11–12 — *"I will build again the tabernacle of David which is fallen"* — applied to the Gentile inclusion is a remarkable piece of scriptural reasoning. James reads the restoration of David's fallen tent as the eschatological gathering of the nations under the name of the Lord — happening now in the Gentile mission. This hermeneutical move (reading Israel's restoration promises as fulfilled in the mixed Jewish-Gentile community of believers) is the exegetical foundation of Paul's later argument in Romans 9–11.

## On the Call to Macedonia

The Macedonian vision (Section 250) — *"Come over into Macedonia, and help us"* — is the moment the gospel enters Europe, and Luke marks it with a subtle narrative shift. At Acts 16:10, the narrative pronoun changes from "they" to "we": *"we sought to go forth into Macedonia."* The "we passages" in Acts (16:10–17; 20:5–21:18; 27:1–28:16) are widely understood as indicating that Luke himself was present for these sections of the journey — a traveling companion of Paul who provides firsthand eyewitness detail. The call to Macedonia and the response to it is the moment the church's first historian enters the story he is telling.

Lydia of Thyatira (Section 250) — a dealer in purple cloth, a God-fearer, whose heart the Lord opened — is the first recorded convert in Europe. The first European church begins not in a synagogue or a marketplace but beside a river outside the city, in a prayer meeting attended by women.

## On the Philippian Jailer

The midnight earthquake at Philippi (Section 251) produces the most concentrated evangelistic exchange in Acts: *"Sirs, what must I do to be saved? … Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house."* The jailer who had cast Paul and Silas into the inner prison with their feet in stocks has heard them singing hymns at midnight; when the earthquake opens every cell and loosens every bond, he expects to find his prisoners escaped and prepares to die. Paul's voice in the darkness — *"Do thyself no harm: for we are all here"* — is the first act of grace toward the man who will be baptized before dawn.

The episode illustrates a pattern that runs throughout Acts: persecution that should suppress the gospel becomes instead the occasion for its spread. Paul and Silas in prison singing hymns are more effective evangelists than Paul and Silas in freedom. The chains that should silence the message amplify it.

## On the Areopagus Speech

Paul's speech on the Areopagus (Section 252) is the most philosophically sophisticated proclamation in Acts and the model for Christian engagement with Greco-Roman intellectual culture. Unlike his synagogue sermons — which begin from Moses and the prophets — the Areopagus speech begins from creation, moves to the nature of God, draws on Greek poetry (*"For we are also his offspring"*, from Aratus and Cleanthes), and arrives at the resurrection only at the conclusion.

The unknown God inscription is Paul's rhetorical bridge: Athens has left a gap in its theology — an acknowledgment that the divine exhausts human naming — and Paul claims that gap for the God of Israel and Father of Jesus Christ. The speech demonstrates that the God who created the world cannot be contained in temples made with hands, has not left himself without witness in human experience and poetry, and has now made himself fully known in the resurrection of a specific man.

The Athenian response at the resurrection — some mock, some delay, some believe — is the characteristic threefold response to the gospel throughout Acts. Paul leaves Athens with a small church: Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others. The seeds sown on the Areopagus will grow in ways neither Paul nor Luke anticipates.

## On the Year and a Half at Corinth

The extended stay at Corinth (Section 253) — a year and six months, the longest single stay recorded in Acts before the Jerusalem imprisonment — produces the community to which Paul's two longest and most theologically complex letters will be addressed. Corinth was among the most cosmopolitan cities in the Roman world: a major commercial hub, newly rebuilt as a Roman colony, with a population drawn from across the empire and a reputation for every form of moral complexity. The church Paul plants there will become, in his letters, the testing ground for nearly every theological and ethical question the early church faces.

Aquila and Priscilla — tentmakers from Rome, expelled by Claudius's edict, who will become two of Paul's most important co-workers — are introduced here. Their home in Corinth is the base of Paul's ministry; their subsequent homes in Ephesus and Rome will become house churches. The Lord's night vision to Paul — *"Be not afraid, but speak and hold not thy peace: for I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to harm thee: for I have much people in this city"* — is both reassurance and revelation: the church at Corinth already exists in the divine purpose before a single Corinthian has believed.

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## Scripture Index — Chapter Twenty-Three

Section

Event

Acts

245

Cornelius and Peter: The Gentiles Receive the Spirit

10:1–48

246

Peter’s Defense Before Jerusalem

11:1–18

247

The Church at Antioch; Barnabas and Saul

11:19–30

248

The First Missionary Journey: Cyprus and Galatia

13:1–52

249

The Jerusalem Council

15:1–35

250

The Second Journey: Timothy; The Call to Macedonia; Lydia

16:1–15

251

The Philippian Jailer

16:16–40

252

Athens: Paul on the Areopagus

17:16–34

253

Corinth: A Year and a Half

18:1–17