



# WITNESSES

A SERMON SERIES THROUGH THE BOOK OF ACTS

MONDAY, APRIL 25

Read: **All of Acts Chapter 1**

The book of Acts, also known as the Acts of the Apostles, records the early development of the New Testament Church. It is written by Luke, the beloved physician who also wrote the Gospel of Luke. Acts is a careful account of what happened after the ascension of Jesus into heaven.

But, the book of Acts is more than just a history book of the establishment of the church. It is also a display of the power and authority of the Holy Spirit who will empower the Apostles with extraordinary gifts, signs and wonders that can only be attributed to God alone.

Acts begins with a small remnant of Jesus' followers, namely the 11 remaining disciples, who will multiply into Christ's kingdom upon the earth that we know as the Church. The book begins with the disciples being commanded to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit that descends upon them in chapter 2 on the day of Pentecost. At Pentecost the gospel is supernaturally proclaimed in multiple languages through the gift of tongues. The small remnant of believers present at the beginning of the book quickly multiplies into the thousands with numbers being added daily as people believe the good news.

The signs and wonders continue as the church grows. With the proclamation and reception of the good news comes persecution, a key theme throughout the book of Acts. Yet, it is "*through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God* (Acts 14:22) and we see that continue through the very end of the book.

Persecution leads to a scattering of believers throughout Jerusalem, all of Judea and Samaria and ultimately throughout the whole earth. But, persecution also leads to proclamation of the gospel and people being saved, a direct fulfillment of Jesus' promise in Acts 1:8. Among the persecutors is a man named Saul who is confronted by a revelation of Jesus in chapter 9 that provides for us not only the climax of the book of Acts, but clarification of the Great Commission as Saul becomes Paul, an Apostle to the gentiles.

As Paul, a Roman citizen, is arrested, he's taken to Rome as a prisoner. Paul welcomes this opportunity to share the gospel, yet the book of Acts does not record the specific outcome of that hearing.

While the book of Acts records the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, it's clear from other places in the New Testament that Paul had his sights set on going to Spain which at the time represented the western most extremity of civilization. Writing to the Romans in Romans 15:24, Paul said, *"I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain."* It's doubtful Paul ever made it. That work, as well as the continuing mission of the church remains for us. In the concluding words of Paul in Acts 28:28, *"Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen."*

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What supernatural manifestations of the Holy Spirit have you witnessed in your life and in the life of Charis Community Church?
2. Charis belongs to a church planting network known as Acts 29, yet notice that the book of Acts is only 28 chapters long. The implication being that the story Luke recorded for us in the book of Acts is still being written today and we are the next chapter. What chapters would you record in your personal journey? What are your key events and mile marker moments?
3. Charis members Caleb and Carina Beaty, along with their three daughters Miriam, Acacia and Talitha are in Spain doing the work that Paul hoped to start in his missionary journeys. How can you encourage and support the Beaty family today in their important mission? In what ways is their mission our / your mission?
4. In what ways have you personally experienced rejection, even persecution for your faith and witness for Christ?

TUESDAY, APRIL 26

Read: **Acts 1:1-2**

The book of Acts is written by Luke, the same person who wrote the gospel of Luke. In terms of bulk Luke is the biggest contributor of the New Testament through these two books. In the first two verses of Acts, it's clear that the book of Acts is a continuation of where Luke left off in his gospel account. Just as Luke's gospel provides for us an historical record of the life of Jesus, the book of Acts provides us with the same for the work of the Holy Spirit in establishing the New Testament church.

Both books are addressed to the same person, Theophilus. Not much is known of this person from the New Testament accounts. What is clear is that Luke tried to provide Theophilus an *"orderly account... concerning the things that have been taught"* (Luke 1:3, 4). He's doing the same in the book of Acts.

Now would be a good time to pause and reflect on the process of inspiration of Scripture and what exactly we mean when we say that the Bible is the word of God.

Some confuse this process with dictation. Sometimes the Scripture is indeed dictation, a direct quote from the mouth of God. But, that's not the end of the process. Luke provides for us a process of historical accuracy that involves fact checking, corroborating evidence, and personal experience. All are grounded in specific time periods with specific individuals who could verify what is recorded. In other words, the Bible is not a fairytale with no corroborating evidence or archeological proof. The end result is a trustworthy document that is the Word of God.

It may come as a surprise, but the Gospel accounts as well as the book of Acts are some of the last material to be compiled in the New Testament. Prior to their writings, the church relied on the Logia of Jesus which was an oral tradition recited in worship settings that the church used to try to preserve the teachings of Jesus. This Logia was obviously written down to preserve its authenticity. As the early Christians experienced the delay in Christ's return, they realized the need to assemble an "orderly account" that Luke provides for us so that the ministry of Jesus is preserved for us in sacred Scripture. The other gospel writers also attest to the accuracy of the Logia by using a similar process of compiling it as Luke. The differences in emphasis among the Gospel writers does not contradict the accuracy of God's word, it confirms it.

Moreover, much of the New Testament letters written by Paul and others to specific churches were circular letters, meaning they were to be read in other churches. In the book of Acts, Luke provides for us a detailed account of how many of those churches started.

As the book of Acts records supernatural manifestations of the Holy Spirit, it's important to understand that those revelations are grounded in historical reality. They did indeed happen and we have living proof.

Likewise, we today are living proof in our personal and corporate experience with Christ to the authenticity of the Scriptural revelation.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What is your process for verifying truth?
2. How is the process that Luke followed in compiling the book of Luke and Acts good news to you?
3. What living proof do you have that the message of the Bible is true?

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 27

Read: **Acts 1:1-5**

Waiting is hard. Waiting on God is even harder.

Jesus had told his disciples, multiple times, that he would suffer, die and on the third day be raised to life again. He also told them that he would depart from them after he had risen and that it was to the disciples' advantage that he do so (see John 16:5 – 15). Jesus would send the “helper” or the Holy Spirit who would empower them to do the work Jesus had left for them to do.

The disciples in Acts chapter 1 are experiencing the fulfillment of Jesus' earlier words to them through the waiting process. We know from these verses that Jesus was with his disciples for 40 days after his resurrection but, in Acts 1 he's about to leave them. Jesus has ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait for the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

The use of the word baptism for the work of the Holy Spirit is significant. The term baptism means to immerse. In other words, the Holy Spirit is to direct every part of our being. This work of the Holy Spirit is further described as the sealing of the Holy Spirit in Ephesians 1:11 – 14. The work of the Holy Spirit is a finished transaction that none can annul. We've been baptized and sealed in Christ by the Holy Spirit. We've been elected by the Father, redeemed by the Son, Jesus Christ and sealed in the Holy Spirit.

How the disciples receive the Holy Spirit in Acts 1 is contingent upon the ascension of Christ into heaven. It is different for us who are in Christ following Christ's ascension. As the righteousness of Christ is imputed in us through faith, we are baptized and sealed in the Holy Spirit as our guarantee (Romans 8:9). The New Testament teaching is clear that our receiving Christ and the Holy Spirit are simultaneous.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How is receiving the Holy Spirit when you received Christ good news to you?
2. What personal struggles do you have with waiting and what role does the Holy Spirit play in that process?
3. What personal experiences do you have with the Holy Spirit working in your life in your obedience to Christ?

THURSDAY, APRIL 28

Read: **Acts 1:6-11**

The specific function, indeed the role of the Holy Spirit is clarified in today's reading from Jesus himself. The disciples will be given power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them to do the specific work Jesus has called them to do (Acts 1:8).

That work is to be Christ's witnesses here on this earth. It is a further elaboration of the Great Commission given in Matthew 28:18, 19 and Mark 16:15. When all is said and done, nothing else matters in life. The disciples cannot do this on their own and neither can we. Like the disciples in Acts chapter 1, we need the power of the Holy Spirit.

But, Jesus also provides a very specific model for how the power of the Holy Spirit is to work in our role as his witnesses. For the disciples it was to begin in their immediate context of Jerusalem. It was then to spread to their neighboring borders, specifically Judea and Samaria and then ultimately to the ends of the earth. As such this model provides a geographical outline of the book of Acts.

To put this in a context that we can better understand, we are to be Christ's witnesses first in Bloomington / Normal where God has placed us, but from there it moves out to McLean county and central Illinois. This is why Pastor Jon and his family are currently exploring places to engage a church planting ministry in Central Illinois in the next year. It's also why the Beaty family is in Europe today, as this call includes "*the end of the earth*" (1:8). *The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and whose who dwell therein*" (Psalm 24:1). No square inch is excluded in our call to be Christ's witnesses.

Unfortunately, the disciples are distracted in their mission, confusing their call to be Christ's witnesses with interpreting the signs of their times. They mistake it for Jesus "*restoring the kingdom to Israel*" (vs. 6). The disciples have misplaced their mission "*with looking into heaven*" when they should be at work on earth. "*This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven*" (vs. 11).

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. In what ways are you distracted in your mission to be Christ's witness in your specific surroundings?
2. In your mission do you focus more on your immediate surroundings or the world at large? How does one shape the other?
3. How does the hope of Christ's return impact your role as Christ's witness?

## FRIDAY, APRIL 29

Read: **Acts 1:12-20**

Today's verses provide a model for how we wait on God. For the disciples it involved being "*with one accord, devoting themselves to prayer*" (vs. 14). This remnant of Christ followers was not just limited to the disciples. It also included "*women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers*" (vs. 14). All told they numbered about 120 people.

Peter understands that everything that is happening to them is in accord to the fulfillment of Scripture, including the betrayal and death of Judas. Peter quotes specific passages of Scripture to confirm what has happened and what they are currently experiencing.

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. In what ways do the Scriptures interpret your past and inform your present circumstances?
2. Peter's citation of specific Scriptures shows a prior understanding, even memorization of Scripture. What are some specific Scriptures you have memorized or need to memorize?
3. How specifically do you supplement your individual prayer life with corporate prayer similar to the 120 present in the Upper Room after the ascension of Jesus?

## SATURDAY, APRIL 30

Read: **Acts 1:21-26**

One of the first items of business that the disciples must attend to as they wait for the baptism of the Holy Spirit is to appoint a replacement for Judas who betrayed Christ.

The six verses for today's reading provide instruction into what exactly an Apostle in the New Testament is. He is one who is a witness to Christ's resurrection (vs. 22). As the disciples decide upon a replacement for Judas, two men who fit the requirements of an Apostle are presented as possible choices, Justas and Matthias. The process of deciding involves two things, prayer and the casting of lots.

The practice of prayer is obvious, if not self-explanatory. The casting of lots in verse 26 is more complicated. It is certainly not unprecedented in Scripture, harkening back to the Urim and Thummim that priests used in the Old Testament. It's important to note this practice in Acts 1 preceded the baptism of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2. We see no other use of this practice in Scripture after the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

## **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How do you go about making important decisions in your life? What role does the Holy Spirit play and how do you bring other believers into your decision making process?
2. How do you confirm the Holy Spirit's calling or direction in your life?
3. What important role does an Apostle play in the establishment of the Church? Why would being an eyewitness to the resurrection of Jesus be an important qualification?

## Acts Chapter 2

MONDAY, MAY 2

Read: **All of Acts Chapter 2**

Acts chapter two records the spectacular events of Pentecost and it's what most consider the start of the New Testament Church. The day was marked with signs and wonders that were a direct fulfillment of Jesus' promises in Acts chapter 1 of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the accompanying power the disciples would receive.

As such, this chapter provides us with a model of a healthy church that includes a bold proclamation of the gospel that results in souls being saved. This transformation is confirmed through the ordinance of baptism, association with a fellowship of fellow believers (church), and a benevolent lifestyle.

TUESDAY, MAY 3

Read: **Acts 2:1-13**

Acts chapter two begins with the arrival of the day of Pentecost. Many people associate this day with the events that follow in Acts 2, but it's important also to understand that Pentecost has its roots in the Old Testament. The observance of Pentecost is also known as the feast of weeks because it was celebrated seven weeks after the Passover.

What is significant about the observance of the Passover and Pentecost, is that Jesus defines and fulfills what these prescribed observances were all about. Old Testament saints who celebrated these events were looking ahead to the work of Christ. Just as Christ became our Passover lamb (John 1:29, 1 Corinthians 7:5), so the Holy Spirit is defined through the events of Pentecost. The prescribed feasts in the Old Testament were often marked by a rereading of the Law of God. The Law came to Moses at Mt. Sinai through the power of the Spirit. The people in Acts chapter 2 are about to see a similar revelation in the events that follow in Acts chapter 2.

In direct fulfillment of Jesus' promise to his disciples in Acts 1:4, 5, the Holy Spirit comes to the disciples *"from heaven[with] a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were staying "* (2:2).

The baptism of the Holy Spirit is confirmed by tongues of fire that appeared and rested upon the disciples. The use of the word tongues is significant. It implies the emphasis of our witness which is proclamation. Since this occurred on Pentecost, a connection is made to the giving of the Law. In other words, our witness is a direct proclamation of the Holy Spirit. It is the truth of the gospel.



In accordance with the providence of God, there were in Jerusalem at this day, Jews. They were no doubt there to celebrate Pentecost. However, this was an extraordinary group of people, representing “every nation under heaven” (vs. 5). This is another direct fulfillment of Jesus’ promise from Acts 1:8. What follows with this crowd is they all hear the gospel message proclaimed to them in their native tongue. “*we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God*” (vs. 11). The utterances from the tongues of these men are more than mere babbling. It is a discernable language that attests to “*the mighty works of God*” (vs. 11).

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. How does the sign of tongues at Pentecost define your mission as Christ’s witness?
2. What manifestations of the power of the Holy Spirit have you personally seen in your own life?
3. Can you think of times when mere babbling has been confused with the proclamation of the Gospel?

WEDNESDAY, MAY 4

Read: **Acts 2:14-21**

Beginning in verse 14 of Acts 2, Peter puts all the supernatural manifestations of the Holy Spirit in their proper context. He does so by quoting specific passages of Scripture from the Old Testament. Thus, the Bible is the source of everything we do or proclaim as Christ’s witnesses. On the one hand, what is happening in Acts 2 is something new. On the other hand, the newness of Acts chapter 2 is solidly rooted and grounded in God’s revelation from the very beginning. Thus, it should be understood as a continuation of God’s ongoing progressive revelation to those in covenant relationship with him.

The first Old Testament passage Peter goes to is Joel chapter 2. While many unbelievers suppose people to be drunk as they try to understand what’s going on, Peter sees it as living proof of the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy.

Peter’s correlation of the events of Pentecost to the book of Joel is fascinating. The Day of the Lord is a common theme throughout Joel’s prophecy. Joel 2, which Peter quotes from, calls for the alarm to be sounded throughout Zion. “*For the Day of the Lord is great and very awesome; who can endure it?*” (2:11). Readers of the Old Testament should recognize this day not just as one final cataclysmic event which it ultimately is, but also as God’s continuing hand of discipline upon his people in order to get them to return to him, “*for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster*” (2:13). Peter’s understanding of this passage from Joel is that it is the latter. Peter is establishing from the book of Joel a pattern for gospel-centered living of the ongoing process of repentance and faith. “*And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved*” (Acts 2:21).

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. How do you see Christ in the Old Testament?
2. What other revelations from the Old Testament prophets help you to understand Christ as the fulfillment of it?
3. Joel proclaims the Day of the Lord. Yet, Peter understood this day as both here and now and not yet. Clearly, Peter is looking for that final day of Christ's second return. How does this future event inform your walk with Christ?

THURSDAY, MAY 5

Read: **Acts 2:22-28**

Peter correlates all of what is happening around him to Jesus being the true fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. Notice, Peter holds everyone guilty for the crucifixion of Christ. Clearly, it was not just the Romans who were "lawless men." Jesus's blood is also on our hands. We acknowledge this important truth through our repentance and faith.

But Peter does not stop in his correlation of what is happening with the book of Joel. As further proof, beginning in Acts 2:25 Peter appeals to the Old Testament a second time by reciting Psalm 16. Just as David, the writer of Psalm 16, understood that God would not abandon him to Hades, so too God has not abandoned people now on the day of Pentecost. The deliverance David waited for in Psalm 16 is now upon the people in Acts 2.

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. Do you see yourself just as guilty for the crucifixion of Jesus as the Romans who hung Jesus on the Cross?
2. How do you see Jesus through the Psalms? Read all of Psalm 16. How does this inform your walk with Christ?
3. The Gospel message is a message of salvation. God will "*not abandon my soul to Hades*" (Acts 2:27). How does this rescue inform your life with Christ?

## FRIDAY, MAY 6

Read: **Acts 2:29-41**

Peter continues and the third passage he looks to for guidance and proclamation is Psalm 110, another fascinating passage. Psalm 110 records David's ascension to the throne as King of Israel. However, David's own authority is understood in Psalm 110 as being under the authority of a heavenly king. The Gospel writers understood Jesus to be the Son of David. Yet, Peter clarifies this for us through his understanding of Psalm 110. Jesus is not inferior to David. It's not David who sits at God's right hand. It is Jesus. *"Let all the house of Israel, therefore, know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, Jesus whom you crucified"* (2:36).

So then, what should our response to all this be? It is the same for us as it was for the people present on the Day of Pentecost, *"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"* (2:38).

## SATURDAY, MAY 7

Read: **Acts 2:42-47**

"And they all lived happily ever after" or that's the way we like to see so many stories end. Acts chapter two ends with an idealistic standard of what life in the church is. The disciples in verses 42–47 are living out common characteristics of church life that we should also be emulating.

They include:

- Following the apostles' teaching
- Fellowship, the breaking of the bread, and prayers
- A sense of awe and worship for what God is doing among us
- Holding all things in common
- Caring for the needs of those around us

When these things are followed the Lord adds to our numbers.

There will no doubt be hard times ahead for the church and the book of Acts does not sugarcoat them. But, in these five verses, we have the idealistic standard that we should all in Christ be committed to following and making it not only our own experience but the experience of others in our church family.

Just as Genesis 1 and 2 record life before the fall of man into sin, so too Acts 2:42–47 present God's intention for the church. It's not that sin has disappeared in Acts 2, it's that our rescuer has come and we have been saved, we are being saved and we will be saved. In the process, we're part of the church in which this process is fleshed out in our lives.

Praise God today for his marvelous rescue of us in Christ.

## **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. In what ways does your church experience mirror Acts 2:42–47?
2. In what ways is it different?
3. Do you see yourself as an active participant in the life of your church or a casual observer?
4. What practical applications can you make from this passage to follow up on the command to repent and believe the gospel?

## Acts Chapter 3

MONDAY, MAY 9

Read: **All of Acts Chapter 3**

In Acts chapter 3, the Apostles confront long-standing problems and traditions through the filter of the gospel. Whereas the previous chapter of Acts records the beginning of the church on the day of Pentecost, it's clear the Apostles had no intentions of starting something new. At least not at the beginning of this chapter. Whatever the church would become or has become, from the Apostle's perspective, the church has its origins in eternity past.

However, as old traditions and practices are viewed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, change will become necessary. Jesus said, *"But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him"* (John 4:24). Thus, faith in Jesus and his gospel message will redefine worship as the disciples have known it in the past. These truths collide in Acts chapter 3.

While this chapter includes the miracle of Peter and John healing a lame beggar, the main character in this chapter is Jesus. He is making all things new and that will include the worship Peter and John and the rest of the disciples have known in the past.

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What things do you do out of habit or tradition without thinking of why you do them?
2. What does it mean to worship the Father in spirit and in truth?
3. How has the gospel redefined cultural traditions in your life?

TUESDAY, MAY 10

Read: **Acts 3:1**

Today's reading is just one verse, but it's an important and often overlooked verse in the book of Acts. While the Bible does not specifically say how long a timeframe is between the events of Acts 2 and Acts 3:1, what's clear is that Peter and John had no intentions of discontinuing worship in the temple in Jerusalem. They are headed to the temple for the scheduled time of prayer, *"the ninth hour."*

On the one hand, this is business as usual for Peter and John. On the other hand, everything has changed as Jesus brings clarity and definition to these practices of the disciples from the past. Pentecost was no doubt something new with the beginnings of the church. At the same time,

Pentecost is rooted and grounded in the past and it's best understood in terms of God's progressive revelation. It's all about Jesus and the promised Holy Spirit.

This verse is also instructional regarding our daily walk with Jesus. Our life in Christ includes mile marker moments or "mountain top experiences." No doubt Pentecost was one such event for the disciples. But, the reality is those moments are few with many ordinary days in between. That's what this day started off to be for Peter and John in Acts 3: 1. They were headed for the traditional worship in the temple. That might be considered boring or watered down in comparison to Pentecost. But, with the intervention of the Holy Spirit, this ordinary day in the life of Peter and John will be transformed into something extraordinary.

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. With the help of the Holy Spirit, how do you make today count for eternity?
2. How does Jesus redefine and transform your worship of God the Father?
3. In what ways does the Old Testament help you in your worship of Jesus?
4. What evidences of the Holy Spirit do you see in your worship of God? What role does the Holy Spirit play in your daily life?

WEDNESDAY, MAY 11

Read: **Acts 3:1-10**

The ten verses of Scripture from today's reading in Acts 3 are power-packed verses. There's a lot going on.

As has already been noted, Peter and John started their day with a trip to the temple to pray during the "ninth hour." They had every intention of continuing the practices of their past. Only now, they have the Holy Spirit to guide them in their worship. Now, they have the resurrected Jesus, seated at the Father's right hand. Now, they have a clearer understanding of past revelations. They've lived through Pentecost and they'll never be the same.

The first thing Peter and John encounter is "*a man lame from birth being carried*" (3:2). People are carrying this man to the "*Beautiful gate*" so that he can "*ask alms of those entering the temple*" When this man sees Peter and John he asks them for alms, another way of saying that he is a beggar asking people for money.

This passage does not say how long this man had been at the temple gates asking for money, but what we do know is that this was a common practice at the temple in Jerusalem. No doubt people like

this man were probably an annoyance, certainly a distraction to many people who came to the temple to worship like Peter and John. Perhaps people gave these people alms just out of guilt or as a way to try to make these people go away. Or, perhaps people just ignored them and went through the temple gates, unconcerned with their condition.

The first thing Peter and John do is to seek to establish eye contact in verse 4 with the lame beggar. Once they have eye contact with the lame beggar, verse 5 says that he expected Peter and John to give him something. *“But Peter said, ‘I have no silver or gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!’”* Peter then takes hold of the man and he begins to walk. The lame beggar goes into the temple with Peter and John to worship and the crowds around them are amazed.

Several important observations from this passage.

First, is the issue of beggars. Our life in Christ is one of receiving, not begging. We live in a needy world and we are a needy people. We desperately need our Lord’s intervention in our lives, but we do not need to beg and plead for it. Grace is freely given to us. God extends it to us out of a sense of his fullness, not his emptiness (John 1:16). God needs nothing from us, but through Christ, he freely gives us all things (Romans 8:32). Our job is to ask, not beg, manipulate or control.

Secondly, when we encounter beggars, we often approach them out of fear or guilt. We often don’t know what to do. Other times we respond out of guilt and toss them money (alms). But, reread Peter’s response in this situation, *“I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you.”* What Peter had was Jesus and those who have him are not poor nor are they beggars. They are rich and possess all things even when their pockets are empty or they’re in the midst of suffering or hardship.

Finally, God made the lame walk again. God intervened and when he does God’s people should be *“filled with wonder and amazement.”*

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How do you respond when you encounter beggars?
2. Do you view yourself and your walk with Jesus as one who receives or one who has to beg, manipulate or control?
3. Read Psalm 50 and pay careful attention to verses 10 through 12. Our God possesses all things. He needs nothing from us but chooses to use us anyway. He’s also generous and freely extends his grace toward us.
4. Compare Psalm 50 with 2 Corinthians 8:9. How does the example of Jesus influence our response to a needy world?
5. What evidences of God’s grace do you see in your life?

THURSDAY, MAY 12

Read: **Acts 3:11-16**

Peter's healing of the lame beggar created quite a ruckus in and around the temple and the scheduled ninth-hour prayer time. Verse 11 tells us that people were "*utterly astounded*" and ran to Peter and John to see what was going on.

Peter used this occasion to preach the gospel in an area of the temple courts known as Solomon's portico. This particular area of the temple was open to both Jews and gentiles and it's the perfect setting for Peter's sermon.

Peter makes clear that what just happened to the lame beggar is not of his own doing. It's not from Peter's own piety or power that this has happened. Rather, it is a witness or testimony to the power of Jesus Christ. When Jesus was among his disciples he would perform miracles in order to demonstrate his power and authenticate his message. The Apostles are doing the same and this is the first instance of it in the book of Acts.

Jesus said, "*An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign*" (Matthew 12:29). But, the only sign we need or the only sign that should matter to us is that of Jesus Christ crucified and risen. That's exactly what Peter points to in this chapter. He holds his audience accountable for the death of Jesus. Indeed, Peter was culpable as well. We all are. It's a truth we have to come to terms with as we turn to Jesus in saving faith. We're sinners, responsible for the death of Jesus. But, Jesus heals and restores sinners. This lame beggar is but one example of many. I am one too and so are you. We're also witnesses of Jesus' transforming power.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Just as the lame beggar was made to walk again, so too, did Jesus perform miracles of his transforming power in each and every one of us. What are some examples of this in your life?
2. What are the quiet moments in your life of transforming power that were not preceded by the supernatural miracle like we see in Acts chapter 3?
3. Who killed Jesus? Do you see yourself responsible for his death? Do you see your sin as what held Jesus on the Cross?



FRIDAY, MAY 13

Read: **Acts 3:17-26**

In these verses, Peter points out that we act in ignorance when we sin. What he's saying is that we don't understand the Scriptures. While what Peter and the people in the book of Acts are experiencing with the Holy Spirit is indeed new, it is rooted in a proper understanding of the past. It was revealed by the prophets that Christ would suffer. All that is happening in the book of Acts is the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures.

The writer of Hebrews, poses perhaps the most succinct and most important question in all of Scripture: *"How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?"*

That is the central question for all of us and it's what Peter poses to the crowd in Solomon's portico. Our only hope, our only valid response is to repent.

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What is your testimony? Have you turned from your sin and turned to Christ for salvation?
2. You are a witness just as the crowd in Acts 3, and just as Peter and John were to the lame beggar? Who can you share your testimony with this week?
3. Where do you see Jesus in the prophets and other Old Testament writings?

SATURDAY, MAY 14

Read: **Acts 3:19-21**

Let's end our time this week in Acts chapter 3 by going back today and rereading and refocusing on one long sentence that comprises three verses of the chapter:

*"Repent, therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago" (Acts 3:19 – 21).*

In English, we would say that this is a run-on sentence. Indeed, the Bible is filled with many such grammatical constructions. This particular sentence begins with the imperative to repent. For some, the word repent is offensive. For most of us, it's at the very least confusing. But, for those of us in Christ, a proper understanding of repentance is essential to our life in Christ.

Martin Luther said that all of life is “*repentance and faith*,” but what does this mean? These verses in Acts 3 help gain a better understanding of it. The command to repent in verse 19 is followed with the instruction to “*turn back*.” Repentance involves turning away from something and moving toward something else. Often repentance is confused with confession, but confession is a step in the process of repentance. We’re instructed to confess our sins (1 John 1: 9). In other words, we’re to agree with God about our sin. This is the beginning of repentance, not the end. Repentance begins with confession and is followed by us turning from sin. What we are turning toward is “*the Christ, appointed for you, Jesus*.”

We must understand that in Christ, we are forgiven and free. When we repent of sin and turn to Jesus, we are free from the penalty and power of sin. We are *restored* and as this sentence in Acts 3 so beautifully promises, we are refreshed: “*that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord*.”

This is not a one-time decision for us in Christ. It should be a regular practice of every Christian. As this sentence in Acts 3 makes clear, this has always been God’s intention. It’s what he “*spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago*.” In Christ, God is in the process of restoring all things to the perfect peace of his original creation. We get there through repentance.

So many Christians live depressing, lonely, and defeated lives. We need to heed the promise of God’s word in Acts 3 that comes from repentance and faith in Jesus, “*that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord*.”

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How have you confused confession with repentance? Have you confessed sin without “*turning back*” to the Lord?
2. Is your refusal, reluctance, or confusion about repentance keeping you from times of refreshment with the Lord?
3. What is a specific sin you need to repent of?

# Acts Chapter 4-5:16

MONDAY, MAY 16

Read: **Acts chapter 4 through 5:16**

The healing of the lame beggar by Peter and John in Acts chapter 3 proved to be quite controversial among the religious establishment. Whereas chapter 3, started with Peter and John wanting to continue worship in the temple by observing the appointed “hour of prayer,” Acts chapter 4 begins a dramatic break in temple worship for those who believe the gospel. The central issue is Jesus. The religious establishment at the temple is opposed to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Paul would later write to the Corinthians that *“if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain”* (1 Corinthians 15:14). This truth is established in Acts chapter 4. The religious establishment refuses to accept the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, signaling a dramatic break in worship for the Apostles with the old and the beginning of something new.

Belief in the resurrection leads to Peter and John being arrested. Nonetheless, many people not only hear their defense of the gospel but believe the good news, *“the number of men came to about five thousand”* (Acts 4:4). This confirms the central theme of the book of Acts that *“through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God”* (Acts 14:22). This leads to the Apostles praying for boldness to continue proclaiming the truth of the gospel in spite of opposition.

The followers of Jesus continue their practice of holding all things in common that we first see at the end of Acts chapter 2. This leads to Barnabas selling a field and giving the proceeds to the Apostles to further their ministry. Such generosity is prompted by the Holy Spirit. It cannot be faked. Though that does not stop others from trying. The tragic death of Ananias and Sapphira for their deceitfulness is aimed at curtailing any future deceitful acts of worship. Jesus performed miracles to demonstrate his power and to authenticate his message. The same is true for the Apostles which is why God takes such a strong stand against Ananias and Sapphira. Since the gospel is true, believers cannot worship *“in spirit and in truth”* (John 4:24) by continuing what Ananias and Sapphira attempted to do.

The gospel continues to advance through bold proclamation accompanied by signs and wonders through the apostles and trials and persecution.

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What parts of your worship have been controversial to “religious” people?
2. Based on the reading of Acts 4 through Acts 5:16, how would you define authentic worship?
3. How does this section of the book of Acts clarify what the gospel message is and isn’t?

TUESDAY, MAY 17

Read: **Acts 4:1-22**

In the New Testament, there are primarily three groups of leaders among the Jews: the Priests, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees. Jesus encountered all three during his ministry, but his primary source of contention was with the Pharisees. Jesus repeatedly had harsh words for their religiosity that was often void of compassion or a relationship with the living God they claimed to follow. Jesus' main contention against the Pharisees is that they valued rules over relationships.

However, the focus of the opposition against the Apostles in Acts 4, is not the Pharisees, but the Priests and Sadducees. Priests have always played an important role in Israel's economy. In Acts 4 the apostles encounter the Priests at the temple courts in Jerusalem, although their jurisdiction also included other locations throughout Israel. The temple court is also where the Apostles encounter the Sadducees. Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees were an upper-class sect who were more secular than the Pharisees.

The main difference between the Pharisees and Sadducees is belief in the supernatural. The Pharisees believed in the supernatural, even some form of a resurrection from the dead. The Sadducees did not. The miracle of the lame beggar being healed confounded the Sadducees' rejection of anything supernatural. They were forced to acknowledge among themselves, "*that a notable sign has been performed*" through Peter and John and they "*cannot deny it*" (4:15). But, what is even more confounding to the Sadducees is Peter and John's "*proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead*" (vs. 2). As far as the Sadducees were concerned Jesus was still dead and in their system of belief they preferred it remained that way. Thus, belief in the resurrection is central to the gospel message as Peter and John clarify in today's reading.

Central to Peter and John's gospel presentation is a living Savior. Though Jesus died, he has risen and his followers proclaim that God is not dead. Jesus is unlike any other religious leader. All others are dead. The people in the temple, especially the Priests and Sadducees should have understood this. These truths are rooted and grounded in Old Testament promises that are now being fulfilled.

Peter's bold proclamation in verse 11, that "*this Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone*" is Peter's interpretation of Isaiah chapter 28. Isaiah is addressing the northern kingdom of Israel and Jerusalem about the threat of an impending Assyrian invasion that will result in great trial, persecution, and even judgment from God. Yet, even still Isaiah 28: 5 speaks of a remnant of God's people that will persevere. Peter and John are seeing that remnant through those who believe their gospel message. Isaiah 28:16 says that God "*has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: Whoever believes will not be in haste.*"

That precious cornerstone is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. "*And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must*

*be saved*" (Acts 4:12). The Sadducees cannot deny what they have seen, but their hearts are hardened to what they've heard through Peter and John. They've been ordered "*not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus*" (vs.18), a charge the Apostles and followers of Jesus cannot follow.

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. To what degree does the reality of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead inform your understanding of the gospel?
2. "Christless Christianity" or a form of Christianity that denies the living Jesus, resurrected from the dead, is just another religion that will not save. You can't have Christianity without the resurrected Jesus. But, the bigger question is can you have Judaism without Jesus either? How do you understand the Apostles' references to Old Testament revelation?
3. Isaiah 28 which is alluded to in Acts 4:11 speaks of a remnant in Zion. Do you view your life in Christ as part of this remnant that perseveres through trial and persecution?
4. What signs from God have you seen or experienced that authenticate the truth of the gospel message?
5. What laws of man interfere or conflict with your faith in Jesus? When you have had to obey God instead of man?

WEDNESDAY, MAY 18

Read: **Acts 4:23-31**

The arrest of Peter and John and the questioning from the religious authorities about the gospel message could not curtail the witness of the Apostles and the early followers of Jesus. If anything, it only further emboldened them. After Peter and John were released, the first thing they did was find their friends, report what happened, and then pray for boldness in their witness.

Their prayer beginning in Acts 4:24 is from Psalm 2. This is an Old Testament passage that warns of the spiritual warfare of those who oppose the Sovereign Lord. It provides context for what is happening in these chapters. The believers gathered for prayer also understand that although the battle is intense it is limited only to what the Sovereign Lord allows. Though Herod, Pontius Pilate, and rulers of the Gentiles were responsible for the order of crucifixion of Jesus, it was all from the hand of God and part of a plan that had been *Predestined to take place*" (vs. 28).

God moves among his people through their prayers. Verse 31 says that the place where they were meeting was shaken, "*and they were filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of god with boldness.*"

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. How do you view opposition to the gospel messages? What Scriptural passages help you to put it into context.
2. Read Psalm 2. A section of it is prayed by the Apostles in today's reading. What does this passage say about spiritual warfare?
3. How do you reconcile a sovereign God who allows believers to endure trials and persecution?
4. Is prayer your first response to opposition to the gospel or your last resort?

THURSDAY, MAY 19

Read: **Acts 4:32-37**

Today's reading continues a common theme throughout the book of Acts of believers holding all things in common. Such unity can only come through oneness in doctrine. A correct understanding of who Jesus is and what he wants from us as his followers is foundational to our life in Christ. It's also a product of the power of the Holy Spirit at work in believers in Christ.

Again, the resurrection of Jesus is central to their gospel witness. Without it, Jesus is not a living savior and there is no salvation at all. *"There was not a needy person among them"* (vs. 34). Through a pooling of resources, all needs were met in the church.

Today's passage is the first reference to a key figure in the New Testament church, the man named Barnabas, whose name means son of encouragement. A fitting title for this individual that we'll learn more about as we continue our study of the book of Acts. Barnabas sells his field and gives the proceeds of the sale to the church to continue its mission.

Jesus said, *"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field"* (Matthew 13:44). That's exactly what Barnabas did. He understood the words of Jesus that *"for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"* (Matthew 6:21).

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What is your most valued possession?
2. How do you respond to people in need in your church family?
3. Who is a Barnabas in your life, "a son of encouragement." Are you such a person to anyone in your church?

FRIDAY, MAY 20

Read: **Acts 5:1-11**

The tragic story of Ananias and Sapphira helps authenticate the gospel message. The gospel message will not advance through false witnesses. Ananias and his wife Sapphira also sold a piece of property, just like Barnabas did. But, where Barnabas laid all the money at the apostles' feet, Acts 5:2 says that Ananias kept back a portion of the proceeds for himself.

Several things need to be clarified from this complicated passage. First, Ananias and Sapphira did not have to sell their property. Acts 5:4 makes this point very clear, *"While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own?"* Secondly, the sin Ananias and Sapphira committed was not in keeping a portion of the proceeds to themselves. They were free to do that. *"After it was sold, was it not at your disposal?"* (5:4). Their sin is clearly about their dishonesty or more specifically trying to pass off their sale as being what Barnabas' act of generosity was.

We need to park on this passage and meditate long and hard. God has not saved us for us to fake our life in Christ. Who were is very clear to God and it should be clear to us and others in the church. We're sinners saved by grace. We need not hide this truth by claiming to be something we are not. Ananias' lie in front of the church results in his instant death. Later when his wife Sapphira is confronted with the truth about the sale of their property, she too utters the same lie as her husband and suffers the same fate. The two of them clearly corroborated in their false narrative to the church.

All of this underscores the truth of all that we teach, practice, say, and do in the church. *"And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things"* (Acts 5:11).

*"Sanctify them in the truth: your word is truth"* (John 17:17).

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What false narratives do you follow in your life with Christ?
2. How does this tragic story help to authenticate the gospel message?
3. What is the motivation for your good deeds? Do you do things to make yourself look good or to try to emulate others? Or, are your deeds a prompting of the Holy Spirit?

SATURDAY, MAY 21

Read: **Acts 5:12-16**

Today's reading is a summary statement of what happened in the church after the death of Ananias and Sapphira. *"None of the rest dared join them.. (vs. 13).* This is a somewhat complicated verse, but what it's really saying is that no one can follow Christ unless he's been born again of the Spirit of the Living God. *"He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit"* (Titus 3:5).

Acts 5:14 is helpful, *"And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women."* The gospel message is bearing fruit and growing in the book of Acts through signs and wonders that serve to authenticate the message.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What is something that put "the fear of God in you" that helped to authenticate the truth of the gospel in your life?
2. What about times when your life in Christ is not accompanied by signs and wonders? What evidences of truth do you go to during those times?
3. What signs and wonders, evidences of the Holy Spirit, do you see at Charis Community Church?



## Acts Chapter 5:17-42

MONDAY, MAY 23

Read: **All of Acts 5:17-42**

As the gospel advances through signs and wonders performed by the Apostles and confirmed by their followers, the religious establishment becomes jealous. No doubt this is due to the large numbers of people who are following the Apostles and their teaching. People are leaving the traditional temple worship of the Jewish faith and becoming followers of Jesus.

This results in the Apostles being arrested a second time by the Priests and Sadducees and being placed in prison. Verse 17 says this was out of jealousy. An angel of the Lord intervenes and opens the prison doors commanding the Apostles to return to the temple courts and continue to speak the gospel message.

This miracle release greatly perplexes the religious leaders. With the prison guards totally unable to explain the Apostle's release, the religious leaders are once again confronted with another miracle of God. Fearing a riot on their hands, they bring the Apostles forward for questioning. The Apostles are again warned not to teach in the name of Jesus.

Peter once again offers a defense on behalf of the Apostles and their followers, *"We must obey God rather than men"* (vs. 29). As the religious leaders try to stop the spread of the gospel, they are advised by an older Pharisee named Gamaliel who is held in high esteem. Gamaliel proposes that if this movement is from God then there is no way they will be able to stop it. If it is just a product of man, then it will surely die out just as other similar movements have. The religious leaders follow Gamaliel's advice and let the Apostles go after they beat them, warning them to no longer speak in the name of Jesus.

As the Apostles are released, they rejoice that they *"were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name [of Jesus]"* (vs. 41). This encounter with the religious establishment only increases the resolve of the Apostles and their followers.

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What personal experience do you have with people being opposed to you sharing the gospel? Did it scare you off or did it embolden you?
2. Can you recall a time when you had to obey God rather than man?
3. What laws of man are opposed to God?
4. How do you go about discerning if something is the product of man or of God?
5. How do you respond when God's plans seem to be failing and the plans of men seem to be succeeding?

TUESDAY, MAY 24

Read: **Acts 5:17-21**

Isolating the five verses in today's reading to focus on a couple of very important points.

First, beginning in verse 17, we're introduced once again to the Priests and Sadducees in the temple courts. This group is led by the high priest and all of them are opposed to the Apostle's message. The reason for the opposition is clearly stated in verse 17. They are "*filled with jealousy.*" This probably has to do with the fact that the Apostles have a growing following. No doubt a movement as large and growing as the early Christian community has caught their attention.

In Exodus chapter 34, God renews his covenant with Israel. Verse 14 says, "*for you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.*" This is a complicated verse, particularly in our contemporary context that views jealousy as a bad thing. Because God is without sin, God's jealousy is in response to idolatry. God's jealousy is righteous and holy. God is jealous for a relationship with his people because he's redeemed them. Idolatry is an insult to God from our ingratitude of what God has done for us. But, this is not the type of jealousy the Priests and Sadducees have in Acts chapter 5.

Their jealousy is toward the Apostles directly and the following they are gaining every day. It's not that the Priests and Sadducees see it as a threat against God, they view it as a threat against their leadership and their own personal esteem. Ironically, the jealousy the Priests and Sadducees have is in direct revolt to the jealousy of God for his redeemed people.

As Acts chapter 5 deals with the things that are of God and the things that are of man and the Apostles need to obey God over man, one of the clearest distinguishing indicators is whose glory are we jealous for? The Priests and Sadducees are jealous for their own glory and maintaining their own power.

As the Apostles are once again put in prison, the angel of the Lord intervenes and sets them free. He commands them to return to the temple courts and to speak "*all the words of this life*" (vs. 20).

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What things in life make you jealous?
2. Can you think of a time when you were jealous for your own glory rather than God's glory?
3. What do you think of sharing the gospel being described as "*speaking the words of this life*" in verse 20?

WEDNESDAY, MAY 25

Read: **Acts 5:21-26**

There are certain verses of the Bible that are candidates for the biggest understatement in the Bible. Acts 5:24 has to be one of those verses.

The Priests and Sadducees have just placed the Apostles in prison again for their refusal to stop speaking in Jesus' name. The high priest calls for a meeting with the council of priests and the senate as to what they're going to do with the Apostles whom they've put in prison. However, when they call for the Apostles, they're not in prison, they've been miraculously released and they are once again preaching in the temple square. Acts 5:24 says the priests "*were greatly perplexed.*" Truly one of the greatest understatements of the Bible. Not only did this miracle deliverance from prison perplex them it also had to be embarrassing, if not defeating. Seems nothing this group of religious leaders does can stop the spread of the gospel. What a powerful testimony of the grace of God to so clearly demonstrate the power of the gospel to this group of religious leaders. Unfortunately, rather than repenting of their sin, the religious leaders' hearts are hardened all the more.

The Apostles will get a hearing and the gospel message continues to bear fruit and grow. The gospel grows in the midst of great opposition.

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. Read Colossians 1:5. This is a promise of the gospel bearing fruit and increasing. Where or how have you personally seen or experienced this truth as we see it in Acts 5?
2. What things has God used to perplex you? How has God used these things to get your attention, repent and believe?
3. Do you find today's reading funny? How might the humor of the situation have helped the Apostles in their cause of taking the gospel to the whole world?

THURSDAY, MAY 26

Read: **Acts 5:27-32**

Today's reading poses the question, who really killed Jesus? Every time Peter and John appear before the religious leaders, their gospel presentation includes the inescapable truth that the religious leaders were responsible for the crucifying Jesus (Acts, 2:23, 3:15, 4:10). Unfortunately, they did not act alone. While the Jews ordered the crucifixion, the Romans carried it out.

But, all these accusations miss the point. If we accuse others of crucifying Jesus, without seeing our own sin as the culprit, then we misunderstand the gospel message. In the words of a popular worship song, *“it was my sin that held him there, until it was accomplished. His dying breath has brought me life, I know that I’m forgiven.”* If this truth is offensive to us, it’s the offensiveness of the Cross.

It is offensive to the religious leaders. As the apostles appear before them once again, the religious leaders make clear the apostles have violated their orders not to teach in the name of Jesus. However, they go even further in the accusations of the apostles. In Acts 5:28, they know that the apostles intend once again *“to bring this man’s blood upon them.”*

Jesus made the same claims against the religious leaders when he was on trial. In response, the people said at Jesus’ trial, *“His blood be upon us and on our children”* (Matthew 27:25). Indeed, it is! People are speaking more than they know or understand in Matthew 27:25 just as the religious leaders are in Acts chapter 5. It’s a central truth of the gospel. Our sin killed Jesus and his blood is upon us. The very thing we are guilty of (the death of Jesus) is the very thing that grants us life.

The second thing we must not miss from today’s reading is that repentance is a gift from God. As Peter explains that he must obey God’s orders to preach the gospel over the orders of the religious leaders, this time in his gospel presentation he explains that the crucifixion ultimately exalted Jesus as *“leader and Savior.”* But, more importantly, *“to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins”* (vs. 31).

Nobody likes being told to repent. Yet, as we read earlier, repentance brings about times of refreshment (Acts 3:20). The refreshment is the gift of repentance that we’ve been given by God. Our God stands ready to forgive, restore, renew and yes, bring about times of refreshment in our life. Brothers and sisters, rejoice that you’re forgiven and free in Jesus Christ. Repent and believe the good news.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Who killed Jesus?
2. How do you view the word repent?
3. Do you see repentance as a gift, an evidence of God’s grace?
4. Why is God’s invitation to repent met with such resentment on our part, or just like the religious leaders in today’s reading?

FRIDAY, MAY 27

Read: **Acts 5:33-42**

The religious leaders' inability to stop the Apostles and their following from speaking the truth of the gospel produced some irrational behaviors with the religious leaders. Peter as the main spokesperson for the Apostles continues to speak the truth uncompromised. In Acts 5: 33 we're told that the religious leaders were "*enraged and wanted to kill them.*" However, a respected Rabbi named Gamaliel steps in, and fortunately, cooler heads prevailed.

Gamaliel is "*a teacher of the law and held in honor by all the people*" (vs. 34). We know from Acts 22:3 that he was a teacher to the Apostle Paul. He's the type of person people want to hear from. From Gamaliel's point of view, the religious leaders are overreacting to the situation at hand. He believes it's best that they take a wait-and-see approach and see if the Christian message is just a passing fad or if there's something to it. He reminds the religious leaders of two similar situations. The first was with a man named Theudas (vs. 36) who had a following of about 400 people. He was killed and those who followed him were scattered. The second man Gamaliel reminds the leaders of was a man named Judas who revolted over the census and paid taxes to the Romans. He too died and his followers were scattered (vs. 37). Gamaliel's advice is to leave the Apostles and their followers alone. "*If this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God*" (vs. 38, 39).

As is the case so many times in the Bible, Gamaliel spoke more than he knew. Down through the ages, no man has been able to stop the Gospel message. Those who do are found opposing God. For those who do encounter opposition to the gospel message, our response should be the same as the Apostles and their followers. We should rejoice "*that we are counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name*" of Jesus (vs. 41). We need to keep on doing what we should already be doing, "*And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus*" (vs. 42)

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What things have stopped you from speaking the truth of Jesus?
2. Who is someone like Gamaliel in your life? Someone, you respect and would probably follow his advice like the religious leaders did with Gamaliel?
3. What's a situation in your life in which you had to take a wait-and-see approach to whether someone was a product of man or if something really was of God? How did that turn out? Do you think Gamaliel's advice is wise?
4. Can you think of someone like Gamaliel who is wise and respected, yet fails to embrace the truth of the gospel? How do you engage someone like this with the gospel?

## Acts Chapter 6

MONDAY, MAY 30

Read: **All of Acts Chapter 6**

As the church continues to grow in numbers opposition and difficulty are the norm, not the exception to a growing ministry. Up until Acts chapter 6, the opposition was from those outside the church, mostly the religious leaders stationed in and around the temple courts in Jerusalem. Their opposition is specifically directed toward the message of Jesus, him crucified and resurrected.

Acts chapter 6 records the first schism from within the church. It has to do with Greek widows who are being neglected in the daily distribution of food. As far as we can tell this chapter is the first recorded instance of hostility from within the church. It is also, as far as we can tell, the origin of the office of the deacon in the New Testament church as seven men are appointed to fill the role of administering the daily distribution of food to the widows.

One of these men is a man named Stephen, *“a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit...”* (Acts 6: 5). All of chapter seven is devoted to this man as he will become the very first martyr of the Christian faith.

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. How do you view problems in ministry when they arise?
2. What can we learn from the apostle’s example of how they handled the problem presented by the Hellenists and their widow being neglected in the daily distribution?
3. What can we learn from the example of Stephen? Why was he seized?

TUESDAY, MAY 31

Read: **Acts 6:1-7**

Today’s reading records the very first instance of difficulty or opposition from within the church. Up until this point, all opposition had come from outside the church from Jewish leaders.

A complaint is presented from the Hellenists. These are Greek believers and what we can learn from this is that the church transcends all racial and ethnic barriers. Perhaps this instance with the Hellenist widows being neglected in the daily distribution represents racial tension in the church. Perhaps, the Hebrews gave preferential treatment to their own widows. Whatever the case, the daily distribution that these widows were a part of shows the church continuing in their ministry of caring for the needs

of their people. The daily distribution represents something of a food pantry or the church actually feeding the hungry and needy.

The apostles do not ignore this need. They appoint seven men “*full of the Spirit and of wisdom*” to address this need in the church. As far as we can tell these seven men whom the apostles appoint to this task is the first instance of the church office of deacon. It is distinct from the office of elder which at this point is being fulfilled by the apostles.

What the apostles do in appointing the seven men to address this need within the church is exactly what we’re instructed to do in Ephesians 4: 11, 12. It is equipping the saints to do the work ministry within the church.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How do you handle complaints you have with Charis?
2. Do you believe the Hellenists responded appropriately with their “complaint?”
3. Read Ephesians 4: 11, 12. Where and how can you personally put this into action at Charis? What are you currently doing at Charis that you need to equip someone else to do?

**WEDNESDAY, JUNE 1**

Read: **Acts 6:4**

Today’s reading is only one verse, but it is arguably one of the most important verses in the New Testament about how church ministry is supposed to be conducted. It’s also instructive for each individual Christian as to what the Christian life looks like, and how it works.

It must be noted that the apostles are not unconcerned with the need the Hellenists present. What they understand is that if they fulfill this need it is going to take them away from what they see as their ultimate priority, *prayer, and ministry of the word.*” Their commitment to these two tasks is of primary importance to them. So much so, that they are unwilling to neglect this at the expense of other important matters in the church. They, therefore, appoint seven men to fulfill this task.

A devotion to prayer and the ministry of the word is not exclusive to the apostles. It should be a daily part of the life of every believer of Christ. Yet, we’re often distracted in these spiritual disciplines that are vital to our life in Christ. The apostles take great steps to guard themselves from this happening to them. It is the key function of being a witness for Christ.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What does your time in prayer and God’s word look like?

2. How might you receive help in these areas from your church?
3. What steps do you take, similar to the apostles, to guard your time in prayer and in God's word?
4. Do you have a plan to read through all of the Bible?

**THURSDAY, JUNE 2**

Read: **Acts 6:8-15**

As Stephen is appointed as one of the seven men to address the needs of the Hellenist widows in the beginning verses of Acts 6, he becomes a prime target in the opposition of the Jewish leaders against the church.

The opposition comes in verse 9 from the synagogue of the Freedmen, the Cyrenians, the Alexandrians, and others from Cilicia and Asia.

The synagogue of the Freedmen represents a group of Jews who have been freed from slavery. This probably traces back to the days of exile when certain Jews were sold into slavery. Their location appears to be in the North African region and they probably are Greek-speaking at this point. Their presence in Jerusalem is questionable, but no doubt it was centered around the temple. They, along with the Jewish leaders are opposed to the Christian message.

This group of Jews cannot withstand the wisdom and the Spirit of Stephen. They, therefore, instigate others to bring false accusations against him that ultimately results in Stephen being seized by the Jewish leaders.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What opposition have you personally faced toward your witness of Jesus?
2. Have you ever been falsely accused as Stephen was?
3. What do you think is meant by the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen spoke in this passage?



FRIDAY, JUNE 3

Read: **Acts 6:18**

Another day of just one verse! However, Acts 6: 18 is a very important verse in our understanding of our life in Christ. We're told in this verse that when Stephen is seized, everyone in the Council saw his face *"like the face of an angel."*

This verse is not only a description of Stephen's witness toward those who oppose his message, it's also true of believers in Christ. Sadly, it's a reality of our life in Christ that is often either overlooked or not understood at all.

Second Corinthians 3: 18 is helpful in us better understanding what's going on with Stephen: *"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."*

The issue here is not so much how other people see us as it is how God sees us. When we come to saving faith in Christ, the Scriptures tell us that we are born again. We've moved from death to life (Ephesians 2: 1). All of this is due to the regeneration of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3: 5). As such we now have direct access to God. Our heavenly Father is pleased to look upon the finished work of Christ and pardon you and me. As such God no longer looks on us through our sin because we've been forgiven. He looks at us through Jesus. God is perfectly pleased with us because he is perfectly pleased with his son Jesus.

Not only is Stephen's face like that of an angel, so is yours in Christ. Celebrate that today by giving thanks to God for the finished work of Christ.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How do you think others see you?
2. How do you think God sees you right now?
3. Do you believe you have direct access to God?

# Acts Chapter 7

MONDAY, JUNE 6

Read: **All of Acts Chapter 7**

We begin with one question for Stephen from the high priest: “Are these things so?” What follows for the majority of the chapter is Stephen’s lengthy defense of this radical gospel – a reiteration of the history of Israel. There have been those who have been critical of his response, saying it is a rambling speech and relating facts of which his hearers were already aware. And it is the longest speech in the book of Acts. But here’s where we have to keep in mind the purpose of this response. While he was indeed relating facts from the Old Testament the Sanhedrin were familiar with, he was bringing forth lessons they had never learned or noticed.

The speech has six main parts: (1) God and Abraham (v. 2b-8); (2) God and Joseph (v. 9-16); (3) God and Moses (v. 17-43); (4) God, the tabernacle, and the temple (v. 44-50); (5) a condemnation of Israel and the severe need for her salvation (v. 51-53); and (6) an illumination of Jesus’ identity (v. 56).

The whole point of Stephen’s historical account was to point out to the Sanhedrin that the death of Jesus by Jewish leaders corresponded to the Old Testament pattern of rejecting God as well as His messengers. This had been the example lived throughout Israel’s history! In fact, the very messenger the Jewish leaders crucified was the One God’s messengers in the Old Testament had predicted would come.

Stephen’s death comes at the end of the chapter when the Jewish leaders are not willing to listen to anything more from him. It includes two prayers in vs. 59 and 60. What’s so interesting about these is that the first is Stephen’s prayer to Jesus for himself, and the second, is his prayer to Jesus for those who are killing him.

Stephen is the first witness in the church who was martyred for his confession of faith in Christ. As we study Luke’s treatment of Stephen, we see he was a man full of the Holy Spirit (6:3) who was willing to serve at tables (6:1-6), unafraid to share the gospel message (7:2-56), unmoved by those against him (6:11-14), unwilling to compromise what he believed in (7:51-53), and willing to die for those convictions (7:57-60). And what Luke wants us to see in him most of all is the working of the Holy Spirit in his life (6:10; 7:55).

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What conviction would you be willing to die for? Could you really stand in the power of the Holy Spirit? Why or why not?
2. What do you learn from the example of Stephen’s speech? How well do you know the Old Testament story?
3. How would you explain the Old Testament to someone who has never been exposed to it?

TUESDAY, JUNE 7

Read: **Acts 7:2-8**

What is important to recognize in Stephen's explanation to the Jewish leaders is that God is the main character and focus. It was at God's initiative that Abraham was led to "the land that I will show you." It was God who appeared, spoke, sent, promised, judged, and rescued.

Stephen begins his speech by referring to his judges as "brothers and fathers." They should share a common faith and heritage. He goes on to describe God's revelation to Abraham. Take note that he uses the expression "the God of glory," a title that only occurs in Psalm 29:3, a Psalm that gives a majestic description of God in His power. The concept of God's glory is linked to the tabernacle and temple, so we begin to see how Stephen is challenging his hearers' interpretation of that tradition. This will be clearer by the end of Stephen's discourse (vs. 44-53). God spoke to Abraham while he was in Mesopotamia (cf. Gen. 15:7) and called him to go to a place he would show him.

In vs. 4-5, Abraham settles in Haran until God "removed him" to the land where the Jewish people and their leaders live now. They are the inheritance of the promise made to Abraham, even when Abraham had no heir at the time. That's the contrast between God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17), and Abraham's reality. Ultimately, God's history of salvation is dependent upon God's promise and not on human realities.

Vs. 6-7 speak of Israel's time in Egypt, which Stephen develops in connection with the call of Moses (vs. 18-34). God's judgment on Egypt and His prediction of the end of Israel's sojourn there would come after 400 years. Even though Exodus 12:40 speaks of a time frame of 430 years, rabbinic tradition by Stephen's time speaks of 400 years from the birth of Abraham's son, Isaac, to the exodus from Egypt.

After the exodus, Israel would "worship me in this place," that is, the Promised Land, and the temple in Jerusalem in particular.

Finally, in vs. 8, Stephen identifies the promises made to Abraham as a covenant, with circumcision as the outward sign of that covenant. Isaac, Jacob, and then the twelve patriarchs are merely mentioned, as Stephen is focused on relating the fulfillment of God's promises. This is the establishment of the nation that would become Israel.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What is Stephen claiming about Abraham's migration?
2. Was it easy for Abraham to believe God? Why or why not?
3. Why do you think it was important for Stephen to review this history in such detail? Could you recount Israel's history to someone who has never heard?

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 8

Read: **Acts 7:9-16**

Joseph's story is recounted here, and the first thing the reader should take note of is that "God was with him," even as his brothers sold him into Egypt. Stephen is making a case for the worship of God not having to take place in a literal temple, which he has been accused of speaking against (6:13). Joseph did not need to go to a temple to be close to God. There was no temple! And yet, God was with him.

Another point Stephen is making is that it was the patriarchs themselves (Joseph's eleven brothers) who, in their jealousy, sold Joseph into slavery. Now jealousy is the very thing that has been a factor in the opposition of the Jewish leaders against Peter and the apostles (5:17). Stephen points to jealousy as the destructive effect in the early life of the nation.

God rescued Joseph out of all his "afflictions," (see Gen. 39-41), and then endowed him with "wisdom and favor" before Pharaoh who in return makes him ruler over Egypt. Only God could orchestrate that!

When a famine hits Egypt and Canaan (v. 11), it has a profound effect on Joseph's brothers and families, who find themselves without food. Jacob hears there is grain in Egypt, so he sends his remaining sons to obtain some (v. 12). The point Stephen is making is that just as Joseph was rejected by his own people but empowered by God to save them, so Jesus was also rejected by his own, but through His death and resurrection brings eternal salvation to those who will believe.

It's on their second visit that Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers and sends for the remainder of his family (75 persons) to come to Egypt (vs. 13-14). Now the patriarchs themselves are in a foreign land, again showing Stephen's Jewish listeners that God's activities are not to be limited to sacred places.

In vs. 15-16, Jacob dies and is buried in Shechem, located back in the Promised Land. However, by Stephen's time, Shechem was in Samaritan territory at the foot of Mt. Gerizim. Again, this reinforces the idea that God's fulfillment of His promises is not focused exclusively on Jerusalem or Judea.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How do you know that God is "with you"? When do you sense the Spirit of God working in your life?
2. When have you seen jealousy cause damage in a church or a relationship? How do we combat feelings of jealousy?
3. What are you learning about God so far in this chapter?

THURSDAY, JUNE 9

Read: **Acts 7:17-43**

Stephen presents the life of Moses in these verses in terms of three 40-year phases (vs. 23, 30, 36). He spends the majority of his speech on Moses for several reasons. First of all, he had been accused of blaspheming Moses and the law (6:11, 13). Secondly, he will again point out the Jewish people's rejection of the "savior" God sends to bring them out of Egypt. This will serve to highlight the present situation of the Jewish leaders who have rejected Jesus Christ.

After being adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, Moses was raised as an Egyptian but knew he was born a Hebrew. At age 40, he decided to visit his brothers, "the children of Israel" (v. 23). The Greek word for "visit" has more in mind than just a friendly outing; the intention here is that Moses will help them. Verse 25 is striking because it has no parallel in the Old Testament exodus account. "He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand." Again, this misunderstanding anticipates the reaction of many in Israel to Jesus.

Moses left Egypt and became an exile in Midian after he knew he had been seen killing an Egyptian who was mistreating a Hebrew slave. The next 40 years of his life are spent there until an angel appears to him in the burning bush at the base of Mt. Sinai. God spoke to him and gives him new directives to return to Egypt to deliver the people of Israel.

The final 40-year segment of Moses' life begins in vs. 36. Stephen's emphasis on "this Moses" in vs. 35-37 draws a parallel with Jesus. God had sent Moses as "both ruler and redeemer" who will be rejected in the wilderness after he leads them out in power through the Red Sea. The people instead turn to idols and "in their hearts, they turned to Egypt" (vs. 39-41). Throughout Israel's history, the people reject God's agents of deliverance.

Stephen recalls Deuteronomy 18:15 in vs. 37. God had promised a successor to Moses whom the people must obey. Peter had already applied this verse to Jesus in 3:22-23! Again, Stephen's point is that Jesus is the promised successor to Moses because He brings redemption and salvation.

Vs. 38 is important because it shows that Stephen believes the law given at Mt. Sinai (which he was falsely accused of blaspheming), contained living words from God even though the people would not obey them (vs. 39).

God's judgment comes down on the people in vs. 42-43 and these verses are a reference back to Amos 5:25-27. The consequences of their choices will ultimately lead them into captivity in Babylon.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What is Israel's continuing pattern of belief?
2. How have we rejected God's leading?
3. It is obvious that the Holy Spirit was working and speaking through Stephen. When have you experienced the Spirit's leading?

FRIDAY, JUNE 10

Read: **Acts 7:44-50**

Stephen relates a brief history of the conquest of the Promised Land, which highlights the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham about possessing the land and worshipping Him “in this place” (v. 7). After driving the nations out of the land, the Israelites continued to worship at the tabernacle “until the days of David” (v. 45). It is Solomon, not David, who builds the temple, and Stephen does not degrade either place of worship, something else he has been falsely accused of doing.

Solomon brought the ark of the covenant as well as the tent of meeting into the temple (I Kings 8:4), signifying that the worship traditions carried out during the 40 years of wilderness wanderings would now be centered in the temple.

Solomon himself, in his prayer of dedication, acknowledged that heaven is God’s dwelling place, and even “heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!” (I Kings 8:27). Stephen reiterates this point when he says in vs. 48, “Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands...”

The issue in this chapter is not whether the tabernacle or the temple is the proper place to worship God. The issue is what is true and what is false about the very presence of God. He cannot be contained. He is not limited to a building made with hands. The Jews have misunderstood worship as taking place in the temple while failing to see that God has created all things (v. 50), and thus demands full obedience and submission to His ways. This includes the sending of His Son, Jesus.

Stephen reaches the pinnacle of his speech in vs. 51-53. He calls the Jewish leaders and the people “stiff-necked,” which is the exact word God uses for the Israelites after the incident with the golden calf (Ex. 3:3, 5). Even Moses recognized that this was an ongoing trait of the Israelites (Deut. 9:6, 27).

When Stephen calls them “uncircumcised in heart and ears,” he is referring to the fact that the very significance of their covenant relationship has not penetrated their hearts. They are the same as uncircumcised pagans who do not have the ears to hear the truth. They continue to “resist the Holy Spirit” just as their forefathers did. Since the Holy Spirit had been sent among them at the time of the exodus (Isaiah 63:9-14), this shows consistent behavior for hundreds of years.

Finally, Stephen accuses his hearers of betraying and murdering the “Righteous One,” Jesus Christ, who was the fulfillment of the law, and who had come to redeem the people.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How have believers confined the worship of God to one place?
2. In what ways were the Jewish leaders of Stephen’s day just like their forefathers?
3. Of what did Stephen accuse his hearers?
4. How can we “resist the Holy Spirit” today?

SATURDAY, JUNE 11

Read: **Acts 7:54-59**

Though some have called Stephen's speech "rambling," it is actually a brilliant recall of the nation's history. It points out new insights into the character of the people and their leaders and parallels them to the leaders of Stephen's day. Needless to say, these leaders have a bitter reaction to his words. They are outraged at the accusations Stephen has made against them. Even in their rage, Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, has a vision of heaven and Jesus sitting at the right hand of God (v. 56).

Stephen is a faithful witness! He has seen the resurrected Christ, standing next to the God the Father, and relates the vision to his accusers. He calls Jesus the "Son of Man," which the Jewish leaders would recognize as the title Jesus used most about Himself. When we understand the significance of this vision as it was related to those who had crucified Jesus, we can begin to understand why in vs. 57, they "stopped their ears." Since Jesus had been condemned by the Jews and crucified only a short time ago, the Jewish leaders would have regarded as blasphemy the very proposition that Jesus could be seen in God's presence, sharing His glory!

They cover their ears because they think Stephen has blasphemed and an uncontrollable act of violence occurs. He is taken out of the city and is stoned, while a young man named Saul (who would later be Paul) watches the robes of those participants (v. 58).

Stephen's last words are a prayer, first for himself to be assured of God's presence: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (v. 59). Second, for those who are his murderers: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And with that, Stephen died, becoming the first witness of the church who died for his confession of faith in Jesus.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How can each of us be a faithful witness to what Jesus has done for us? What are some practical examples of witnessing?
2. Who are the Jewish leaders really angry at? Remember, Stephen was only the messenger.
3. The key to Stephen's power in this chapter is the Holy Spirit. How can each of us be filled with the Spirit's power?

## Acts Chapter 8

MONDAY, JUNE 13

Read: **Acts 8:1-25**

The book of Acts traces the movement of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome as the Apostle Paul will later stand trial in Rome for his preaching. Much of this movement is the result of the scattering of believers through persecution. As the Apostles and their followers preach the gospel message they encounter opposition. Opposition leads to persecution. But, instead of stopping the flow of gospel witness, the preaching increases through persecution. The scattering of believers leads to the gospel not remaining in Jerusalem, but being spread to the uttermost parts of the world. It is a direct fulfillment of Jesus' words in Acts 1:8, 9: *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."*

This week's readings from the first half of Acts 8 begin the migration of the gospel to the neighboring regions of Judea and Samaria. It was sparked by the stoning of Stephen in Acts chapter 7. While the believers of Jesus leave Jerusalem to the surrounding regions of Judea and Samaria, the Apostles remain in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). The Jerusalem church then becomes the central hub of gospel ministry in the early church. They are a sending church that affirms the authenticity of the gospel going into all the world.

A key figure in Acts 8 is Philip who is first introduced to us in Acts 6 as a coworker with Stephen. Rather, than retreating after the stoning of Stephen, Philip is emboldened to pick up where Stephen left off. He plays a key role in taking the gospel to the Samaritans, the transformation of Simon the magician, and explaining the gospel to an Ethiopian eunuch.

Thus, the gospel is for everyone, *"to the Jew first and also to the Greek"* (Romans 1:16).

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. How have you personally responded when you are insulted or discriminated against for your faith in the gospel message? How has this affected your witness? Has it emboldened you or has it shut you up?
2. What personal examples in your life experience have you seen where greater persecution led to increased witness and furtherance of the gospel message?
3. What has God used in your life to move you further down the road as Christ's witness?



TUESDAY, JUNE 14

Read: **Acts 8:1**

Stopping today's reading with just one verse, Acts 8:1: *"And Saul approved of his execution."* This verse ties Acts chapter 8 to the previous chapter and the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr of the Christian faith. Those who stoned Stephen, *"laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul"* (Acts 7:58), indicating that Saul was the leading instigator of this persecution.

Who is this man Saul? As we continue to read the book of Acts and the rest of the New Testament we will come to know this man as the Apostle Paul who becomes a new creation in Christ in Acts chapter 9. We know a lot about him as a significant figure in the New Testament and as his role as an Apostle to the Gentiles. But, what about Paul before he was saved and was simply known as Saul?

Acts 7 and 8 provide helpful information. In these chapters, Saul (Paul) is a persecutor of the church. In Philippians 3:4 – 6, Paul traces his own journey as a former persecutor of the church to a leading witness for Christ: *"If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, <sup>[a]</sup> blameless."*

From this passage as well as others in the New Testament Paul put his trust squarely on Christ and Christ alone. What's also significant is that as a former persecutor of the church, Paul was able to receive and live in the forgiveness that was his in Christ. He knew that he was forgiven and free in Christ. Philippians chapter 3 is also helpful in this regard. Paul said, *"Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."* Philippians 3:15 reminds us that this is how mature Christians view themselves, forgiven and free in Christ Jesus.

One of the greatest testimonies of the Apostle Paul is found in 1 Timothy 1:12 – 17:

*"<sup>12</sup> I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, <sup>13</sup> though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, <sup>14</sup> and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup> The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. <sup>16</sup> But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. <sup>17</sup> To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. Who do you personally consider to be the least likely person you know to believe the gospel message?
2. What does your witness to that person look like?
3. How do you view your past with respect to the radical transformation of faith in the gospel message? Do you see yourself as forgiven and free in Christ as Paul or do you live a life of guilt for past sins?
4. What is your biggest area of victory over past sins in Christ?
5. 1 Timothy 1:12- 17 is Paul's testimony. What's yours?

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 15

Read: **Acts 8:1-3**

Today's reading is a reminder of the opposition that exists in any gospel-centered mission. As believers, we should not retreat in the midst of opposition, but follow the example of the believers in Acts 8:1-3 following the stoning of Stephen.

Besides Saul being a leading instigator of this, we see that with the stoning of Stephen, there is widespread persecution directed against the whole church. This leads to a scattering of believers that ultimately results in a furtherance of the gospel witness. The Apostles, however, remain in Jerusalem. It's not that they refuse to go forth and scatter. It's that they see their responsibility to continue their witness in Jerusalem as others go forth into the world in their place.

Verse 2 shows that the believers were not living in denial or repressing their emotions about what had happened to Stephen. *"Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him."* This verse is a testament to the seriousness of gospel-centered witness. We *"rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep"* (Romans 12:15).

Saul imposes a very serious threat to the early church and gospel-centered witness as we see in verse 3. What do you do about people like this? No doubt the early church prayed about it and saw a major intervention from God.

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. Who or what do you see as your most serious threat to a Gospel-centered witness?
2. How do you respond to this threat?

3. What raw emotions such as the grief from the men who buried Stephen hinder you in your witness for Christ? Do you experience those emotions as the believers in Acts 8 did or do you repress them?

THURSDAY, JUNE 16

Read: **Acts 8:4-8**

Today's reading gives us further insight into the life of Philip. He is first introduced to us in Acts 6:5 as one of the seven chosen to serve tables. This is the first reference to the office of deacon in the New Testament and it also shows that Philip served in this role with Stephen, the first martyr of the Christian faith.

Rather than retreating to isolation out of fear of further persecution following the death of Stephen, there is widespread migration of the believers in fulfillment of Jesus' words in Acts 1:8, 9. The first region to witness this migration is Samaria, just as Acts 1:8, 9 had promised.

Samaria and their people known as Samaritans had a long-standing relationship of hostility to the Jews in Jerusalem. Samaria was the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel that split away from the southern kingdom, comprised mostly of the tribe of Judah. The background for this event is found in the Old Testament in 1 Kings 12. Eventually, this section of Israel will be carried into exile by the Assyrians. Many who remained sought asylum in Jerusalem. But, once the region of Samaria was later resettled, they had intermarried with other cultures. The Jewish establishment considered them a mixed race.

Jesus often ministered to Samaritans. His encounter with the woman at the well in John chapter 4 is the most prominent example. However, through the gospel accounts, there are evidences in which the Samaritan's believe and their faith is a severe contrast to the unbelief of the Jews. There are no doubt racial overtones the Scriptures are making in highlighting these contrasts.

In addition to the hostility between Jews and Samaritans, another significant factor in Philip's witness to the Samaritans is their proximity to Jerusalem. Acts 1:8, 9 provides keen insight into how the gospel spreads. It first starts in our homes and with our immediate families. But, then it spreads to nearby areas where we live. Ultimately, it goes into the uttermost parts of the earth.

We see this pattern in the New Testament, not only here in Acts 8 with the introduction of the gospel into Samaria, but also in 1 Thessalonians 1:8 with the church in Thessalonica. As Paul preached the gospel to them in Acts 17, amid much opposition, many believed and a church was born in Thessalonica. But, as 1 Thessalonians 1:8 will attest, the witness of the Thessalonians spread out to their neighboring regions of Macedonia and Achaia.

And so it is with us. This time next year, Pastor Jon and his family will be leaving us at Charis to plant a church in neighboring Metamora, in the next county over, Woodford County. Charis also has missionaries, Caleb and Carina Beaty in Madrid, Spain. Why? It is a direct fulfillment of the pattern of witnesses for Christ, first established by Jesus in Acts 1:8, 9.

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What people groups are you intentionally or unintentionally hostile toward? Who are the Samaritans in your life?
2. What neighboring communities is God calling you to take the Gospel to?
3. Does fear of persecution or rejection embolden you in your gospel witness or does it scare you off?
4. Examine the Biblical pattern of the spread of the Gospel in Acts 1:8, 9, and 1 Thessalonians 1:8. What does this look like in the specific place God has you currently living?

FRIDAY, JUNE 17

Read: **Acts 8:9-25**

Philip's encounter with Simon the magician in Samaria raises many complicated questions. Was his profession of faith in Christ authentic? Why did the apostles who are in Jerusalem send Peter and John so that the believers would receive the Holy Spirit? Isn't the Holy Spirit received simultaneously with Christ as Savior? What about Simon's sin and verse 24? Was Simon's statement in verse 24 real repentance or just nothing more than a hope that nothing bad would happen to him from his sin? These questions combined make this one of the more complicated passages of the New Testament.

As Philip proclaims the gospel in Samaria, he meets a man named Simon who "*previously practiced magic in the city*" (vs. 9). He obviously was famous as many others paid considerable attention to him as he saw himself as being someone great. His dabbling in magic is confused with the power that the apostles have displayed from the Holy Spirit as signs and wonders that authenticate the gospel message. Yet, Acts 8:13 indicates that as the Samaritans hear and believe the gospel message, Simon himself appears to have believed and was even baptized. He follows Philip and as he witnesses the signs and wonders Philip performs, "*he was amazed*" (vs. 13).

Even though Simon sees the manifestations of the Holy Spirit through Philip as something that he had never seen before, that did not stop him from trying to duplicate those same signs and wonders. The confusion that Simon seems to exhibit is that he appears to believe that faith in Christ can be obtained by faking it or just going through the motions.

In the meantime, word reaches the apostles in Jerusalem that many of the people of Samaria believe. The apostles in turn send Peter and John to confirm what they have heard and to pray for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (vs. 17). Verse 17 has been the subject of confusion for many when a believer in Christ receives the Holy Spirit. A basic tenant of Reformed theology is that regeneration precedes faith. In other words, it is the Holy Spirit that produces faith in a believer to receive Christ. This is the process of regeneration best described in Titus 3:5.

There is nothing in this passage that would refute this tenant of our faith. This is supported by the words used to describe their faith. The Samaritans "*believed Philip*" and they were baptized (vs. 12). Acts 8:14 says, "*they received the word of God.*" It is not the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit that is lacking in this passage. It is instead the external manifestations of the Holy Spirit accompanied by signs and wonders that come through the arrival of the apostles, Peter and John.

When Peter and John arrive they, "*prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit*" (vs. 15). Peter and John lay hands on the Samaritan believers and they receive the Holy Spirit.

Why was the Holy Spirit withheld until Peter and John arrived? Many insist that this text is proof that one can receive Christ as Savior and not possess the Holy Spirit. This is known as a "second blessing" that ignores important Scriptural teaching such as Roman 8:9, that "*anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.*" The events of Acts 8 on the surface seem to contradict this, but through closer examination, they do not.

We must remember that this is a transitional time in the development of the church. It does not appear through the belief of the Samaritan believers that they lacked the Holy Spirit. Rather what was missing was the outward manifestations of the signs and wonders of the Holy Spirit that came when Peter and John arrived. In this sense, the signs and wonders present in Samaria by the arrival of Peter and John served as a second Pentecost for the believers at Samaria. This event served to unite both Jews and Samaritans by the same gospel. Samaritans, being long-standing enemies of the Jews needed to understand that salvation is indeed from the Jews (John 4:22). This manifestation of the Holy Spirit from Peter and John served to provide unity within the church through the gospel message. There are not two separate gospels, but one gospel that is both for Jews and Samaritans as well as everyone else, including us.

It would be a great mistake to interpret this incident at Samaria as normative for all subsequent believers. What is normative for us all is 2 Corinthians 5:17, "*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come.*" This is the miracle of regeneration of the Holy Spirit that every believer in Christ should not take for granted or miss. It is all we need as far as signs and wonders of our faith. Jesus said, "*An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the gospel*" (Matthew 12:39, 40). This is the sign of the gospel authenticated by the resurrection of Jesus.

This appears to be the problem with Simon the magician. He's looking for a sign, believing that the gospel can be obtained simply by going through the motions of outward visible signs. Believers in Christ are to imitate the righteousness of Christ, but the righteousness of Christ is not obtained by imitating Christ. It is imputed in us and received by faith. That's what Simon did not understand and tragically, it's what a lot of people even today fail to understand.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What does authentic faith in the gospel look like? What can we learn from Simon's example?
2. In what ways have you or do you try to fake the gospel?
3. What signs and wonders from your regeneration in Christ have you missed? Have you failed to understand the miracle of regeneration by looking for signs other than what's been given to you?

**MONDAY, JUNE 20**

Read: **Acts 8:26-40**

This week's reading is a much shorter passage of Scripture than in past weeks. It is the story of Philip and his encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. A lot is going on in this short passage of Scripture so we would do well to take our time and carefully move through this passage.

The story first represents the fulfillment of Jesus' promise in Acts 1:8, 9 that the witness for the gospel of Jesus Christ will ultimately reach the entire earth. Previously, in Acts 8, we saw how the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7 would lead to the scattering of witnesses and the gospel migrating to Judea and Samaria. Through the witness of Philip at the beginning of chapter 8, the gospel did indeed reach Samaria. Beginning in Acts 8:26, the gospel is beginning to move to the uttermost parts of the earth as Philip witnesses to an Ethiopian.

Secondly, the passage reveals the importance of the gospel in the Old Testament. Philip takes advantage of the Ethiopian's reading of Isaiah (from the Old Testament) to share the gospel with him. This shows us that the gospel is throughout all of Scripture. The Old Testament bears witness to the finished work of Christ and the greatness of our salvation.

Finally, as the Ethiopian asks to be baptized, we see the importance of this church ordinance in the life of every believer. He did not ask to be baptized in order to be saved. He asked to be baptized because he was saved and Philip baptizing him was confirmation of his salvation.

The chapter concludes with Philip moving forward with his gospel witness to Azotus until he reaches Caesarea which will be a leading region for gospel-centered witness in the book of Acts.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What is your view of the Old Testament? How and where have you been able to see the gospel presented in the Old Testament?
2. What people do you know who are religious but lost? In other words, they may know a little bit about the Scriptures but they are unable to put all the pieces together to understand the complete picture of the gospel. How can you help them to understand?
3. What are your views on baptism? Have you personally neglected this Biblical command? Is there someone in your family or in close proximity who needs to be baptized? How could you help with that?

TUESDAY, JUNE 21

Read: **Acts 8:26**

Every believer in Christ has been commissioned as a witness for Christ. Through the great commission issued by Jesus in Matthew 28:19, 20 we are expected to take the gospel message to all nations. This commission is reiterated in Mark 16:15 – 17 and again, before ascending into heaven Jesus repeats it in Acts 1:8, 9.

This general call to go into all the world is very clear, but we might argue that it's short on specifics. It does not tell us as individuals specifically where to go. How do we make those decisions? Philip's call is very specific. An angel of the Lord tells him to head south, toward Gaza. The angel even tells Philip the specific road he's to travel on.

This is a very clear and unmistakable revelation that's not difficult to understand. But, it can and does raise some serious questions as to how all this works for us today in 2022. Can we and do we receive as clear a direction from the Lord as Philip does in Acts 8? The answer is a resounding yes! At the same time, it's important to analyze both the similarities and dissimilarities of our calling as Christ's witnesses.

All this raises questions as to how God speaks to us. The Scriptures are God's word to us. They speak clearly to us about God's specific will for our lives. There's no question from the Scriptures that we are to be Christ's witnesses to the world. But, sometimes we can get so caught up in specifics that we miss the general call to go into all the world. It's important to note the example of Philip. He was faithful to the general calling to be Christ's witness and it was after this initial step of faith in Acts 8: 4, 5 that Philip receives the very specific call to *"go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza"* (Acts 8:26).

The clear message from Acts 8:26 is that as we are faithful to obey the general revelation given to us as Philip did, God will be faithful to give us the specific details as we go. That's an important word for us today because oftentimes, we'd prefer to have it the other way around. But, the words of Jesus are very clear, *"Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful in a very little, you shall have authority over ten cities"* (Luke 19:17).

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Has your desire for specific information such as location and specific people interfered with your general call to be Christ's witness?
2. What times in your own life has Jesus filled in the details for you as you went along in your obedience to him?
3. Do you have any examples in your own life of what you'd consider "divine appointments"?



WEDNESDAY, JUNE 22

Read: **Acts 8:27**

There is one detail about the Ethiopian Philip meets that should not be neglected and at the same time should not be overstated. Acts 8:27 says this man is a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians.

A eunuch is a castrated male and it was not uncommon in Bible times as people were sold into slavery to have this done to them. The practice was common as slaves entered the service of royalty as this man in Acts 8 has with Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This would prevent any sexual relations from occurring in their service in the king or queen's court.

Jesus addressed the subject of eunuchs in Matthew 19:12: *"For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it."* While it is uncertain which category this particular Ethiopian fell into, the important consideration of verse 27 is why Luke, the author of the book of Acts included this detail. He could have simply stated that this man was a court official of Queen Candace and left it at that. But, Luke chose to include this detail in this story in Acts 8, probably to make an important point about the gospel.

It's possible the Ethiopian identified as a Jew through his reading of the book of Isaiah. However, as a eunuch, Jewish law did not permit this man to enter the temple square in Jerusalem (Leviticus 21:18-21; Deuteronomy 23:1). He could possibly worship from a distance in the court of the gentiles, but his status as a eunuch would prevent him from entering the assembly.

The gospel changes all that which is why Luke probably thought it important to include this detail about this man. A key component of our salvation through Christ is, among other things, that we've been granted access to God. Romans 5:1,2 make this very clear: *"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him, we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God."*

At Charis we refer to these truths in our welcoming statement that we greet you with just about every Sunday morning at Charis: *Whoever you are, wherever you've been, whatever you've done, we have good news for you.* That good news is found in the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ who has broken down all barriers and walls of hostility and given us access to God through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Who do you tend to overlook, look down upon or simply refuse to share the gospel with who is different than you?

2. Philip did not look at the Ethiopian eunuch as someone beyond the reach of the gospel. Are there certain people you see as being beyond the reach of the gospel?
3. Do you see yourself in relation to other believers in Christ as having equal access to God through the blood of Jesus Christ?

THURSDAY, JUNE 23

Read: **Acts 8:27-29**

Philip meeting an Ethiopian provides some important considerations about our role as witnesses for Christ. It's important to note that as Philip is commanded by an angel in verse 26, to head south on a specific road (the desert road), headed toward Gaza, the specific destination the Lord has given to Philip is not Ethiopia. His encounter with the Ethiopian is unrelated to the specific destination the angel has directed Philip to go. As we read the rest of chapter 8, it appears the destination the angel has for Philip is Caesarea which will become a key region for future ministry work in the book of Acts.

In other words, what we might interpret as a distraction is really a divine appointment. There are no such things as chance encounters in the sovereign decrees of God. To quote the late Corrie Ten Boom, "the more I pray, the more *coincidence* happens."

Philip was able to reach an Ethiopian without going to Ethiopia. That's an important pattern in the book of Acts. It was evident in Acts chapter 2 on the Day of Pentecost when each person there heard the gospel presented in their native tongue. Once they returned to their native land they no doubt proclaimed the gospel message to others in their region.

The world today is really at our doorsteps. Just look around our community or our own neighborhoods and we'll find people from other countries and cultures not our own. As we are faithful to witness to them, we in turn can reach them without ever going to their country.

The Ethiopian that Philip met on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza would never be the same after his encounter with Philip. In fact, this chapter implies the two never saw each other again. No doubt as the Ethiopian returned home, he shared the gospel with many in his country. Philip didn't need to go there. Instead, he would head for Caesarea (vs. 40) as the Ethiopian would take the gospel to Ethiopia.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What countries and cultures are represented in your neighborhood, workplace, or school that are different than yours? What efforts have you made to share the gospel with these people?
2. What examples have you personally seen in your own life that could easily be interpreted as interruptions that were actually divine appointments?

FRIDAY, JUNE 24

Read: **Acts 8:30-35**

Philip's meeting the Ethiopian is not by chance. It's not a distraction or an inconvenience. It is a divine appointment. As Philip approaches the chariot, the Ethiopian just happens to be reading from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah.

We know the four New Testament books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as the gospel accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Even though it is in the Old Testament and written some 700 years before the advent of Christ, many consider the book of Isaiah to be the fifth gospel. That certainly was the case with Philip in Acts chapter 8. His interaction with the Ethiopian underscores the importance of the book of Isaiah and our need to understand what it says. Perhaps no other Old Testament book provides us with as much revelation into the birth, life, death, and resurrection of our Savior Jesus. Isaiah also provides important revelation of the future return of Christ and his plan for the restoration of all things.

A key theme throughout the book of Isaiah is the concept of a servant and our understanding of who that servant is and what he does. There are at least four key passages in the book of Isaiah known as servant songs in which the concept of a servant is understood. Those passages in Isaiah are Isaiah 42:1-9, Isaiah 49:1-13, Isaiah 50:4-11, and Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12.

The specific identity of the servant in these passages can at times be confusing. Sometimes the servant is Isaiah himself as is the case in Isaiah 20 where Isaiah the servant is instructed by God to walk naked and barefoot among his people as a sign of judgment against Egypt and Cush. Other times, the servant in Isaiah refers to the nation Israel and its mission to be a light among other nations pointing people to God. Other times as in the case of Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12, the servant is unmistakably the coming messiah who will redeem his people. We know this servant as Christ.

Our understanding of the servant in the book of Isaiah is clarified in Acts 8. It is most definitely Christ, but it is also Philip who serves Christ by clarifying the gospel for the Ethiopian. In the broader sense, the servant is the church whom Philip represents. Our call to servanthood as Christ's witnesses is not given in isolation. It's given to the church.

The Ethiopian was reading from Isaiah 53, specifically verses 7 and 8: *"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation, he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."* No doubt this refers to Christ, but the Ethiopian is unable to make this connection in his reading of Isaiah. Philip asks the Ethiopian if he understands what he's reading and the Ethiopian's response is a haunting reminder of our role as God's servants, *"how can I unless someone guides me?"*

Philip does just that. He can guide the Ethiopian through the Scriptures to understand that the one referred to in Isaiah 53:7, 8 is Christ. Philip's explanation to the Ethiopian in Acts 8:35 is very similar to

what Jesus says to the two disciples on the Emmaus road in Luke 24:13-35. Just as Jesus explained the gospel message by *beginning with Moses and all the Prophets,*” so too Philip in Acts 8:35 interprets the gospel through Isaiah the prophet for the Ethiopian.

With these Scriptures playing such a key role in the early churches’ understanding of the gospel message, it’s important that we understand these Old Testament books as well and include them in our explanations to people, like the Ethiopian, who needed explanation.

Why not include Isaiah in your summer Bible reading plan and then try to share the gospel through the words of Isaiah?

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What Old Testament Scriptures do you have difficulty understanding and need explanation? Where might you turn for help in better understanding these passages?
2. Who do you know like the Ethiopian who knows a little bit about the Scriptures yet lacks understanding of what the gospel is? How might you help this person to better understand what the gospel is?
3. The Ethiopian shows that we must be careful to always point everything back to the gospel. It’s what the Scriptures are all about. How do you see Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection in what you read from the Scriptures?
4. How have you incorporated Old Testament books into your Bible reading to become more familiar with them?

**SATURDAY, JUNE 25**

Read: **Acts 8:36-40**

As a sign of his belief in the finished work of Christ, the Ethiopian asks Philip to baptize him, “*See here is water! What prevents me from being baptized*” (vs. 37). His question is instructive for us on several levels.

First, it emphasizes the importance of the word of God in our role as witnesses. The gospel message that Philip presented to the Ethiopian did not come out of thin air. Rather, it came straight from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. We must use Scripture to explain the gospel to others in our role as witnesses. Hebrews 4:12 emphasizes the power of the written word: *For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*”

Secondly, sharing the gospel is a matter of meeting people where they are and taking them to where they need to go. Philip is able to meet the Ethiopian where he's at, in the book of Isaiah, and his inability to understand it. He then takes the next step of explaining to the Ethiopian what he's reading from the book of Isaiah. Through the power of the Holy Spirit in God's written word, the Ethiopian believes.

The first thing the Ethiopian requests from Philip is to be baptized. This underscores not only the importance of obedience to God's commands but also the importance of our two church ordinances of communion and baptism. Baptism is not necessary for salvation, but if we just stop there we've set the bar of the Christian life too low. That same rationale could be used to justify just about any sin.

Baptism is important because it illustrates the message of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As Philip and the Ethiopian go down into the water and the Ethiopian goes underwater that simple act represents the death of Jesus and our identification with it. We are buried in the likeness of Christ's death (Galatians 2:20). As Philip raises the Ethiopian out of the water, that simple act represents the resurrection and our movement from death to life. As people who were formally dead in trespasses and sin (Ephesians 2:1), in Christ, we've been brought from death to life. We've been brought out of darkness to the light of Christ. All of this is through our identification of the resurrection of Jesus. In baptism, as we are brought out of the water, we're illustrating that we've been raised in the hope of Christ's resurrection.

Brothers and sisters, don't overlook this important ordinance of our faith. Don't water it down (no pun intended). It's important that we publicly identify in the life, death, and resurrection through believer's baptism.

If you've neglected this important ordinance in your life, please know that Charis is committed to doing everything possible to see that you can observe it. It is not an inconvenience for us, it is a celebration. *"See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?"*

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What is your view of the ordinance of believer's baptism?
2. Have you neglected the ordinance of baptism in your life or in the life of a believing child? What hindrances do you see to observing it?
3. What other areas in your life other than baptism have you neglected?

# Acts Chapter 9

MONDAY, JUNE 27

Read: **All of Acts Chapter 9**

This chapter will continue to tell the beginnings of the mission to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles. In the previous chapter we read of Philip's mission to the Samaritans, and his encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch (8:4-40). In this pivotal chapter, we will see the sudden conversion of Saul, who will go on to write most of our New Testament.

The majority of the chapter concerns Saul, but we are reintroduced to Peter at its end. The chapter can be divided into 5 parts: Saul meets the ascended Christ (vs. 1-9); Saul's acceptance into the persecuted church (vs. 10-19a); Saul preaches in Damascus (vs. 19b-25); Saul debates with the Greek-speaking Jews (vs. 26-31); and Peter's pastoral ministry (vs. 32-43).

We first read of Saul in chapter 7, where he witnessed the stoning of Stephen. Saul was a Pharisee-trained young man from Tarsus, the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia. Chapter 8 tells us that he "approved of his [Stephen's] execution." The great persecution of the church in Jerusalem began, and Saul played a big role as he went from house to house searching for believers in Christ who he could condemn to prison and to death. He was a man on a mission to destroy the very memory of Jesus. As a result, believers scattered all over the regions of Judea and Samaria, and as far as Syrian Antioch, not too far from Tarsus, taking the gospel message with them.

When Saul realized his persecution has caused Jesus' followers – and their beliefs – to spread, he received authorization to follow them. He eventually went as far north as Damascus to arrest believers and bring them back to Jerusalem to stand trial. It is on this road to Damascus that his conversion happened, and Jesus Himself appeared to him. The stage will be set for Saul to spread the saving news of Jesus to "the end of the earth" under the Greek version of his name: Paul.

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What is unique about Saul's conversion experience?
2. Can you think of a time when you have been confronted by God about some aspect of your life?
3. God would completely transform Saul. How can God's transforming power be evident in your life in 2022?

TUESDAY, JUNE 28

Read: **Acts 9:1-9**

Saul takes the initiative to take the persecution of Jesus's followers beyond Jerusalem. He approaches the high priest to receive permission to go to the synagogues in Damascus to search for men and women who might have scattered there to escape oppression. He plans to arrest believers and send them to prison or death for their belief in Jesus as the Messiah. He asks the high priest for “letters” to the synagogues authorizing him to take prisoner anyone belonging to “the Way.” The term “the Way” comes from Isaiah 40:3, “A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord...’” referring to the way the Lord would travel when he came to restore Israel. It’s used here in Acts as a designation for believers in Jesus Christ and their teaching that God was indeed restoring Israel – through Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah Isaiah prophesied about.

Verse 3 tells us that as he was approaching the city, a light from heaven shone around him. We’re to understand that this light was very bright and not just shining, but flashing. Now, the appearance of a brilliant light is a feature of theophanies in the Bible. A theophany is a visible manifestation of God, and in this case, it’s Jesus Himself who appears. Later references in Acts tell us that Saul actually saw Jesus (22:14-15; 26:16).

Saul falls to the ground and hears Jesus’ voice say, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” It’s understood from these words that by persecuting the followers of Jesus, Saul is persecuting Jesus Himself.

In vs. 5-6, the identity of the voice from heaven is revealed. It is Jesus. He gives Saul instructions to continue into the city and wait until he is told what to do. Verse 7 tells us that his traveling companions heard the same voice but did not see anything. In fact, they were struck speechless!

Verses 8-9 tell us that Saul got up and although his eyes were open, he was blind and had to be led into the city. He can’t see for three days, during which he neither eats nor drinks. His blindness is more than just physical: there is a spiritual element to it. Before he can be a light to the nations, he must be converted from his spiritual blindness to who Jesus Christ really is.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What do you learn about the authority of Jesus Christ in these verses?
2. What do you learn about salvation being by “grace alone?”
3. Relate your conversion experience to someone who has not heard.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 29

Read: **Acts 9:10-19a**

We are introduced to a man in Damascus named Ananias who was a follower of Jesus. When the Lord speaks to him in a vision, he replies that he is willing to do whatever the Lord commands. Verse 15 of this chapter will tell us that the Lord whom he sees and hears is the risen Jesus. Jesus gives him directions to go into the city to a certain street, and a certain house of a man named Judas. There he will find the man from Tarsus whose name is Saul.

In verses 11-12 we read that Saul is there praying. He's already been given a vision of Ananias coming in and laying hands on him so that he can receive his sight. We can almost imagine what Saul would be praying about as he lay there blind in the house of a man that he had probably never met. These prayers might have been expressions of remorse for working against Jesus or regret for having been involved in the punishment of Stephen who had been martyred. We can understand in vs. 13-14 that Ananias is apprehensive about this command to go. He's already heard about Saul and the persecution of believers in Jerusalem. His hesitancy is legitimate! Saul's reputation has gone before him.

The fact that Ananias objects to the mission the Lord sends him on shows how very dangerous believers thought Saul was. Followers of Jesus had probably fled from Jerusalem and had come to Damascus with reports of Saul's persecutions of believers there. So Jesus repeats his directive in verse 15. Ananias is commanded to go and lay hands on this man Saul so that he can regain his eyesight.

Then Jesus makes three statements that describe Saul's coming missionary commission: 1) Saul is a chosen instrument in Jesus' hands; 2) Saul's purpose and work will be to proclaim the message of Jesus as Israel's Messiah; 3) Saul will also suffer as he proclaims Jesus before Gentiles and Jews.

Ananias obeys. He finds the house of Judas and goes in and lays his hands on Saul, telling him that the Lord has sent him that he might regain his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. What's interesting here in verse 17 is that Ananias addresses Saul as "brother." This probably suggests that he believes Saul has already converted to belief in Christ and that he now belongs to the group of followers of Jesus. In vs. 18-19 we're told that upon the laying of hands, immediately scales fall from Saul's eyes and he can see again. He is now prepared for his mission and just as the eunuch was baptized in chapter 8, Saul is also baptized.

Luke is obviously impressed with the story of Saul's conversion because three times he relates it in the book of Acts. His conversion experience was indeed unique, and here Luke illustrates the sovereignty of God to bring about faith in Christ in a way that is suitable to the situation of each individual.



## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. Who took the initiative in Saul's conversion? Read Galatians 1:15-16. Why did God do this?
2. Relate how God worked in your own life to cause you to come to Christ for salvation.
3. What characteristics or personal gifts can get in the way of seeing the need for forgiveness?

THURSDAY, JUNE 30

Read: **Acts 9:19b-25**

This part of the chapter could be renamed, "The Great Escape." But before we get to that verse, we must see what is going on in the city of Damascus as a result of Saul's conversion to belief in Christ as the Son of God.

Saul doesn't waste any time beginning the mission that the Lord has given him. He stays with the disciples in Damascus for several days and goes into the synagogues and preaches that Jesus is God's Son. We can only imagine the reception the believers had when they heard from the former persecutor! He was making the rounds of all the different synagogues in Damascus telling the Jews there that Jesus, the man from Nazareth who was executed by crucifixion during the Passover feast years earlier had been raised from the dead. Now, not all the Jews hearing this message were believers in Christ but they had heard of Saul's initial mission to their city where he was to capture believers and bring them back before the chief priests in Jerusalem for imprisonment or even death.

None of this astonishment swayed Saul in proclaiming his message. He was not intimidated by the hostile reaction of the Jews. Verse 22 tells us that he grew stronger - not just in physical strength but no doubt strengthened by the Holy Spirit to preach the message. This verse also says that he "confounded" the Jews. The imperfect tense of the verb "confound," shows us that this preaching in Damascus went on for some time. He "proved" that Jesus was the Christ, possibly using his own testimony under the authority of the Holy Spirit who gave him a powerful message and effective rhetoric. And faced with these arguments his hearers were amazed, but not enough to turn to Christ as Savior.

In vs. 23-25 we see that the Jews eventually become so hostile towards Saul that they plot to kill him. This happened after a considerable amount of time had passed, possibly almost three years (see Gal. 1:17-18). However, Saul hears of this conspiracy and learns that those who are against him are watching the gates of the city day and night in order to kill him. The Christians in Damascus help him escape in a basket from a window in the wall. In summary, Saul has now been introduced as a bold preacher, who is empowered by the Holy Spirit to fulfill the mission the Lord Jesus has given him.

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. Why is the Holy Spirit's enablement so important in ministry?
2. How can a believer learn to depend on the Spirit's promptings throughout the day?
3. What kinds of arguments can you utilize when "proving" that Jesus is the Son of God?

FRIDAY, JULY 1

Read: **Acts 9:26-31**

One of the major lessons we learn from the book of Acts is that the persecution of the church ultimately leads to growth and multiplication. This is because God rules over persecution and suffering. In his sovereignty, God made the persecution of believers in the early church serve his mission. By this time in Acts, we see that believers were "scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria" (8:1). Jesus had foretold this in Acts 1:8 where he told his disciples that the coming of the Holy Spirit would empower missions in Jerusalem and beyond – even to the "end of the earth."

After escaping from Damascus, Saul returns to Jerusalem where the disciples there did not want to receive him as one of their own. He had probably been gone for some three years but they still did not trust him. Could it really be that he had undergone such an amazing transformation? Could it really be that he was a follower of Jesus? We already learned about a man named Barnabas back in chapter 4 where he was called the son of encouragement. He took Saul before the disciples and gave witness to the genuineness of Saul's experience; how he had met the Lord on the road to Damascus and had been converted. Barnabas also reported of Saul's preaching in Damascus in Jesus' name. As a result, the disciples there accepted Saul as a Christian and welcomed him as a fellow believer and partner in the gospel.

In verses 28-30 we see Saul moving "in and out" among the believers in Jerusalem and preaching boldly. However, not everyone approved of his message. He argued against the Hellenists there which resulted in another plot to kill him. Now the Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jews who were probably the same ones who had debated with Stephen three years earlier (Acts 7). They had radically opposed Stephen's message, citing it as blasphemy. And now, the man they thought was their biggest advocate had suddenly become their biggest threat. Since they had been successful in stopping Stephen's ministry by killing him, they plotted the same against Saul.

Verse 29 tells us that the believers in Jerusalem learned of this new plot against his life and brought him to Caesarea. Caesarea was a city northwest of Jerusalem on the harbor approximately 70 miles away. From there they sent him off to Tarsus the capital of Cilicia, on the southern coast of what is

now modern-day Turkey. Tarsus was also Saul's hometown. Luke is silent about what Saul did there, but we can assume that he continued his evangelism efforts.

Verse 31 tells us that during this time the church had peace and continued to grow. No longer relegated to Jerusalem, believers were being "built up" and "walking in the fear of the Lord" throughout all Judea and Galilee, and Samaria. The Holy Spirit was giving peace and comfort to those who had previously walked in fear of their persecutors. And the church was growing.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How has God used suffering in your life to accomplish his will?
2. When was the last time the gospel was such good news to you that you couldn't help sharing with others?
3. What keeps us from the same boldness in our witness that Saul had?

**SATURDAY, JULY 2**

Read: **Acts 9:32-43**

Luke has already told his readers of the growth of the church outside of Jerusalem, and now he speaks again of Peter's missionary work in the cities on the coastal plain. Peter's mission started in Judea, but in these verses we see him moving to first Lydda and then Joppa. He is moving further and further away from Jerusalem into Gentile territory where two miracles will take place.

First, in verses 32-35 we have the healing of a man named Aeneas. Aeneas lived in Lydda which was about a day's journey from Jerusalem towards the coastal town of Joppa. Aeneas was paralyzed and had not been able to get out of bed for some eight years. While he is not identified specifically as a disciple, the fact that Peter was visiting the believers who lived in this town suggests that he was one of them.

Peter's word of healing has three parts: 1) He tells him that Jesus, Israel's Messiah is at that very moment healing him; 2) he commands Aeneas to get up, which is an order that only God's power could make possible; and 3) he commands him to make his bed, which is a consequence of his healing. He will no longer need anyone else to do this for him. The miracle is instantaneous, and Aeneas is healed. Verse 35 tells us of the effect this had on all who saw him healed – many turned to Jesus as Lord.

The second miracle is related in vs. 36-43. Verse 36 tells us about a disciple who lived in Joppa. Her name was Tabitha, or Dorcas (her Greek name). Luke makes sure to tell us that she was "full of good

works and acts of charity.” She had a ministry to the needy and was most likely a woman of means. It is also possible that the local body of believers met in her house. In verses 37-38 Luke tells us that she had become ill and had, in fact, died. In preparation for burial, her body had been washed and laid out in an upstairs room. When the disciples in Joppa heard that Peter was in nearby Lydda, they sent men with the request that he come right away.

We are not sure entirely what they expected Peter to be able to do at this point, but he moved quickly to the place of mourning and was taken to the upstairs room where Tabitha’s body was laid out. He finds a group of mourners who show him clothing that Tabitha had made while she was still with them. Peter sends them all out of the room and this miracle will occur in private.

It's important for us to see that Peter gets down on his knees and begins to pray, no doubt asking for God's help and empowerment to raise Tabitha from the dead. He then speaks to her in verse 40 and orders her to get up. The miracle is instantaneous! She opens her eyes, looks at Peter, and sits up in bed.

Verses 41 through 43 tell us the result of this miracle. Peter helps her up and calls to the others to see her alive. No doubt news like this spread quickly and scripture tells us that as a result many believed in the Lord. Peter would stay on in Joppa for many days with Simon, a tanner, setting the stage for chapter 10.

We take note that both of these miracles followed an example previously set by Jesus, who healed a paralytic in Mark 2:11 and raised Jairus’ daughter in Mark 5:41. These miracles were also achieved by the power of Jesus – telling Aeneas that Jesus was the one healing him, and before addressing Tabitha, getting down on his knees to pray. In addition, both miracles resulted in the spread and acceptance of the gospel message as many believed in the Lord.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What do you learn about Peter from these two miracle stories?
2. What do you learn about the power of God and dependence on him for everyday living?
3. What do you learn about the centrality of Jesus in ministry work?

## Acts Chapter 10

MONDAY, JULY 4

Read: **All of Acts 10 through Acts 11:18**

Acts chapter 10 serves as a transitional chapter in the book of Acts. What is happening in the opening chapters of the book of Acts is that gospel-centered Christianity is on the move. With each succeeding chapter of the book of Acts, the gospel is branching out from a small sect of Jews who believe the gospel, to a broader and broader audience of people from other nations, ethnicities, cultures, and religions. There is a movement of the gospel moving away from its Jewish roots and becoming more inclusive of other people. This is a setup from the Lord for the gospel to go into all of the world as proof that the gospel message is for everyone.

As the gospel expands and moves further away from its Jewish roots of the apostles and their followers in Jerusalem, the apostles must grapple with what to do with their Jewish traditions and practices. As God reveals in Acts 10 and 11, where they stand in the way or where they are a hindrance to the gospel message going forth, believers in Christ have a responsibility to abandon them for the sake of the gospel.

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What traditions, cultural heritage, or personal preferences do you have that might be a hindrance in your gospel witness?
2. What traditions, cultural heritage, or personal preferences do you have that are good and help you in communicating the gospel to others?
3. What is the most challenging part of Acts 10 – Acts 11:18 for you?

TUESDAY, JULY 5

Read: **Acts 10:1-8**

Acts chapter 10 is a series of visions God gives to help clarify what the gospel is and what it isn't. The first of these visions is given to a gentile named Cornelius. He is a Roman Centurion and part of the Italian cohort. Cornelius however, is also a god fearer (vs. 2). What this means is that Cornelius is a gentile who is trying to practice Judaism. However, whatever Cornelius is looking for in Judaism has no saving power. He is not saved. He needs to hear the gospel message and his vision involves him sending men to the city of Joppa where the apostle Peter and a man named Simon, the tanner are located. Cornelius' men are to find them and bring them to Cornelius so that Simon and Peter can share the gospel with Cornelius and his people.

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What religious things have you done or do you do in search of Christ?
2. Why do you think people are attracted to religion?
3. What experiences do you have similar to Cornelius of being an outsider trying to fit into some type of a religious setting?

WEDNESDAY, JULY 6

Read: **Acts 10:9-16**

As Cornelius sends his men to Joppa to fetch Peter and Simon to come to him, the Lord provides Peter with a unique vision before Cornelius' men get to Joppa. The vision Peter receives is a sheet descending from heaven with all types of unclean animals on it. God asks Peter to do something that his Jewish religion forbids. *"Rise, Peter; kill and eat."* Peter is greatly perplexed by this vision and replies, *"By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean"* (vs. 14). God insists by revealing himself a second time to Peter, *"What God has made clean, do not call common."* This vision is such a difficult and foreign concept to Peter that God has to give it to him three times. Old habits are hard to break.

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What things have you personally had to cast aside in order for the gospel to be proclaimed by you unhindered?
2. What do you think about God having to give this vision to Peter three times? What do you conclude from that?

THURSDAY, JULY 7

Read: **Acts 10:17-33**

As Peter comes to terms with the meaning of God's vision and its implications, the men Cornelius has sent to him arrive. This helps Peter to better understand what God has revealed to him. If the gentiles are going to come to saving faith in Christ, then the baggage of religion will have to be removed in Peter's life. As Peter illustrates old habits are hard to break. Even with revelation from God, God has to give this revelation to Peter three times before it begins to sink in.

When Cornelius' men find Peter, Peter realizes that he is the man they are looking for. His newfound revelation from God is instrumental in Peter's obedience to God to leave Joppa and find Cornelius. *"God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean"* (vs. 28). This statement opens many doors for the advancement of the gospel. It's all the more significant when you think that God could have saved Cornelius in the vision that he gave him in Acts 10:1-8. But he didn't. Instead, God chose to hold off on Cornelius coming to saving faith in Christ until Peter and Simon came to him from Joppa. This proves that our witness for Christ is just as much God's work in our lives as it is the message we share. God does not need us, but he chooses to use us anyhow.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What hard truths have you had to come to terms with about the gospel?
2. Can you think of a time when you knew that God didn't need you, but he chose to use you anyhow?

FRIDAY, JULY 8

Read: **Acts 10:34-48**

So, gentiles come to saving faith in Christ. That's the unmistakable outcome of the visions that were given earlier in Acts 10. But, those visions, certainly Peter's were not an evangelism training session. They cut to deep personal long-held traditions that God had to address, things that stood in the way of Peter's witness for Christ.

The beautiful and wonderful outcome of all this is in Acts 10:34, *"So Peter opened his mouth and said, 'Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.'*" This statement should not be confused with salvation by good works, but a realization that God shows no partiality through the gospel message. What he promised in Acts 1:8, 9 is true and we are a part of it.

Cornelius and his friends are baptized, a very similar experience to the Ethiopian in Acts chapter 8. Both were baptized not to be saved but as proof that they are saved. This is the normative experience in the New Testament for new believers in Christ. *"Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"*

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Where have you wrongly believed that God is partial? What attitudes, thoughts, and traditions have hindered your witness? What do you view as "unclean"?
2. Have you as a believer been baptized? Or, have you withheld baptism from new believers you've led to Christ?

SATURDAY, JULY 9

Read: **Acts 11:1-18**

Today's reading is Peter retelling his experience with Cornelius and the gentiles coming to faith in Christ. His audience is "the circumcision party." These are Jesus Christians who believe that gentiles, if they come to faith in Christ at all, must observe the Jewish regulations. This is where Peter was too before the revelation from God in Acts chapter 10. Peter is now a changed man and retells his experience.

The most important statement from Peter's testimony is "who was I that I could stand in God's way" (vs. 17). That should cause us to think long and hard about what's in our lives that stands in God's way in our role as witnesses for Christ?

**CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What stories can you retell of times in your life when God spoke clearly and powerfully to you?
2. What things in your life have stood in God's way? What did God do to show that to you and what have you given up in order not to be a hindrance to others coming to faith?



# Acts Chapter 11

MONDAY, JULY 11

Read: **All of Acts 11:19-30**

This short passage is another section in Luke's narrative that describes the beginnings of the mission to the Gentiles. As we recall, Phillip had been sent to the Samaritans when he met an Ethiopian eunuch (ch. 8), Saul had been preaching after his conversion in Damascus, Jerusalem, and then in the province of Cilicia (ch. 9), and Peter was on mission in the cities of Joppa and Lydda on the coastal plain (ch. 9). The Gentile Cornelius and his entire family come to faith in Jesus as a result of Peter's vision to visit him (ch. 10). In light of these Gentile conversions, it is understandable that the apostles in Jerusalem were concerned about these conversion and baptism experiences. Peter retells his vision and visit to Cornelius and the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the household. The discussion in Jerusalem (11:1-18) prepares for Acts 15's Jerusalem Council, where the apostles will address the question of whether converted Gentiles must be circumcised and made to obey other stipulations of the law (15:1-29).

Now that it is understood that the Gentiles "*also*" have been granted "*repentance that leads to life,*" (vs. 18), Luke now describes the mission of Jerusalem believers in Antioch the capital of the province of Syria (11:19-30). The fact that in Antioch Gentiles come to faith in Jesus shows the fulfillment of Jesus' promise made in 1:8. The good news has been taken from Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria to the ends of the earth.

We see Barnabas for the third time in Acts. He becomes the envoy from the church in Jerusalem to Antioch. While there, he recruits Saul for the ministry in the capital of Syria.

The passage can be divided into the following parts: The planting of a new church (vs. 19-21); the mission of Barnabas in Antioch (vs. 22-24); the mission of Barnabas and Saul in Antioch (vs. 25-26); the prophecy of Agabus (vs. 27-28); and the relief efforts of the Antioch Christians (vs. 29-30).

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. How did God use the persecution of believers to spread the good news?
2. How do you respond to persecution?
3. How can we begin to see God's hand at work despite opposition?

TUESDAY, JULY 12

Read: **Acts 11:19-21**

As persecution began after Stephen's death, those who scattered began to preach the message of Jesus Christ "to no one except Jews" (vs. 19). A good Bible map will show that the gospel is moving north of Jerusalem through Samaria into Phoenicia, Antioch of Syria, and the island of Cyprus.

Phoenicia describes the narrow coastal plain that ran north of Judea, and Tyre and Sidon were its main cities. Antioch was the capital of the Roman province of Syria and about 18 miles inland and boasted a population of about 500,000, the third-largest city in the Greco-Roman world. Its ministry will become a focal point in the book of Acts. In spite of the fact that it was a grossly immoral city where ritual prostitution was part of its temple worship, the church at Antioch was destined to become the base of operations for Paul's upcoming missionary journeys. Cyprus was the largest of the Mediterranean Sea islands, and Barnabas came from its substantial Jewish community (ch. 4:36).

In all these places, Jewish Christians shared the gospel with only Jews.

However, in vs. 20 we read that other believers from Cyprus and Cyrene (modern-day Libya in north Africa) also came to Antioch and began to preach to Greek-speaking Gentiles living there. Jews from Cyrene were present at Pentecost (ch. 2:10) and Jews from Cyrene who had returned to Jerusalem worshipped in their own synagogue (ch. 6:9). In fact, it was Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross of Christ on the day he was crucified (Luke 23:26). Luke relates that they were "*preaching the Lord Jesus.*"

Not only were the Jews living in those places hearing the good news, but now also Gentiles in Antioch. And in vs. 21 we see the main character of our passage – the Lord. As many people began to believe and turn to the Lord, the reason for this new faith was that "*the hand of the Lord was with them.*" The presence of divine power is not so much a validation of their testimony as it is the actual cause of the conversion of the people in Antioch.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Why do you think Antioch had drawn those "*preaching the Lord Jesus?*"
2. What might be the impact of the gospel in this sinful city?
3. How can you pray for God to be at work in Bloomington/Normal?

WEDNESDAY, JULY 13

Read: **Acts 11:22-24**

When news of the conversions in Antioch reached the ears of the leaders in Jerusalem, there was a quick response. Earlier the Jerusalem apostles sent Peter and John to check up on Philip's ministry in Samaria. Now the Jerusalem leaders sent Barnabas all the way to Antioch, over 300 miles north, to do the same. There was some obvious concern over the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles and their inclusion in the church. This wouldn't be resolved until the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. The selection of Barnabas was not random, as he was also from Cyprus as some of those who were preaching in Antioch.

Verse 23 tells us that Barnabas witnessed "*the grace of God*" – evidence of God's working in the lives of those who believed. He recognized that the conversions of both Jews and Greeks to faith in Jesus and the effect of God's grace in the conduct of the new believers were the result of God's power. His reaction was literally "*to rejoice*" followed by a word of encouragement for the new believers there. He calls them to be "*faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.*" This "*steadfast purpose*" is an act of the will which results in the resolve to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and Israel's Messiah.

Luke is evidently impressed with Barnabas' character as verse 24 tells us that he was a "*good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.*" That he was a good man says that he had impeccable character; that he was full of the Holy Spirit shows that the Spirit was using him in mighty ways; and that he was a man of faith tells us that he trusted God in all things.

Luke ends this verse by telling his readers that "*a great many people were added to the Lord.*" What's amazing about these verses is that we see in vs. 21 that it was because of the Lord that people believed in the first place. So we have the Lord adding to the Lord! He is both the cause and end of evangelism. We can be his humble witnesses as he uses us to spread the gospel.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. When was the last time you rejoiced over someone coming to faith in Christ?
2. Would someone describe you as a "*good*" man or woman? Why or why not?
3. What should we learn about God in these verses?

THURSDAY, JULY 14

Read: **Acts 11:25-26**

In this section of our passage, we see Barnabas going to recruit Saul to help him work in the church at Antioch. Saul at this time had gone to Tarsus when he left Jerusalem where he had been preaching the gospel. By this time Saul had been a believer for about six years and had already preached the gospel in Damascus (9:20-22), Arabia (9:23), Jerusalem (9:28-29), and in the regions of Syria and Cilicia (Gal. 1:21-24). He would have been a seasoned missionary who would be able to reach out both to Jews and Greeks. He already had a calling to go to the Gentiles (vs. 9:15, 27). In addition, Saul held Roman citizenship which may also have been a factor in asking him to come to Antioch, the capital of the Roman province of Syria.

We can admire the humility of Barnabas in his willingness to share this new ministry work in Antioch. In fact, he would have had to travel over 130 miles to Tarsus overland, a journey of about eight days. Once in Tarsus, Barnabas had to “look for” Saul. He probably would have contacted his family through the Jewish community there. Holding both Tarsian and Roman citizenship, Saul’s family would be among the most prominent Jewish families in the city.

Luke tells us in verse 26 that Barnabas finds Saul and brings him to Antioch. They worked together for a whole year doing two things: 1) they met with the church and 2) they taught a great many people. If the model in Jerusalem is any indication of what the followers of Jesus did in their meetings (2:42-47), then Saul and Barnabas would have been instructing new believers in the teachings of Jesus and the significance of his death and resurrection. They would also share meals together, pray together, and receive the Lord’s Supper. The very fact that Luke tells us that the disciples there were first called Christians, places the focus on teaching and learning.

They also “*taught a great many people.*” This was in addition to the training of the disciples already in the church there. This would have been an evangelical outreach teaching unbelieving Jews and Greeks about the good news of Jesus.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Why is it important to share in the ministry of the gospel?
2. Why is follow-up with new believers so important?
3. Who is a Christian according to the Bible and what does that require?

FRIDAY, JULY 15

Read: **Acts 11:27-28**

The church is growing in Antioch and Barnabas and Saul are there preaching and teaching. Luke tells us that it was during this time that *“prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.”* Even though Jerusalem is south of Antioch they would be coming *“down”* because of Jerusalem’s higher elevation. Luke dates the arrival of a prophet named Agabus during the year that Barnabas and Saul were there.

Now prophets were important in the early church, and not relegated to the Old Testament scriptures. Luke mentions them several times in Acts – 11:27, 13:1, 15:32, and 21:9-10. Paul will list prophets as belonging to a God-ordained function of the church (I Cor. 12:28, and Eph. 4:11). New Testament prophets and prophecy were more a function of teaching or a building up of the church, and not usually a foretelling of an event such as Agabus did in these verses.

Agabus, who would prophesy again in chapter 21, prophesied that a severe famine would spread over all the world. This phrase, *“all the world,”* is used in ancient literature to refer to either the entire inhabited world or to a particular region in the world. Verse 28 tells us that this prophecy was from the Holy Spirit, so we understand that Luke wants his readers to know this was no hoax. In fact, history tells us that there were famines in Egypt, Syria, Judea, and Greece during AD 45-47, a year after Agabus visited Antioch. Luke, writing many years after the event inserts the parenthetical statement that *“this happened during the reign of Claudius.”* Claudius ruled from AD 41-54.

Central to the famine was Egypt which experienced a poor harvest in AD 45, followed by a severe grain shortage and high prices in the region. Since Egypt was the leading grain-growing region, a drought or famine there meant trouble for the poor in Judea. This will lead to a major relief effort for those suffering.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How did the church know that Agabus’ prophecy was true?
2. How would you explain the difference between Old and New Testament prophecy?

SATURDAY, JULY 16

Read: **Acts 11:29-30**

In these final verses of the chapter, the disciples in Antioch determine that due to the coming famine, everyone should give to send relief to the brothers living in Judea.

Luke writes that each gave according to his ability to give, that is, they were free to decide how much of what they owned would be contributed to the relief mission. In this practical way, they were able to express their thanksgiving for receiving the gospel message from Christians originally living in Judea. In the book of Acts, Luke does not commend any one approach of giving but gives readers several different examples of charity and generosity for one another. Paul will later urge individuals to give cheerfully in 2 Corinthians 9:7. He will stress that such giving is a ministry (vs. 9:1) that brings glory to God (vs. 9:12-13) and shows others how much the grace of God has affected them (vs. 9:14).

The combined gift was delivered to the elders by Barnabas and Saul themselves. This would have been Saul's second post-conversion visit to Jerusalem 10 years after his first (vs. 9:26-30). Most likely, the elders would have organized the distribution of what was given to the needy believers. We read at the end of chapter 12, *"And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark"* (vs. 12:25).

What we see in these verses is how needs were met across geographical and ethnic boundaries. There was a unity and oneness and caring of the whole community just as we saw back in Acts 4:32, 34a: *"Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common...there was not a needy person among them..."* What a lesson for today's churches! Too many of them want to use their resources for their own endeavors, while missions and the poor in their communities are neglected. May each of us practice self-sacrifice for the sake of those less fortunate than ourselves and may that be a great witness for Jesus Christ.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What was the motivation behind the giving to the needy in Judea?
2. How can each of us begin to model a lifestyle of self-denial?
3. Can you say that you give *"according to your ability"*? How do you know that?

# Acts Chapter 12

MONDAY, JULY 18

Read: **All of Acts 12**

This chapter has two sections – the persecution of the church in Jerusalem (vs. 1-23), and the prosperity of the church (vs. 24).

Within the main section about persecution, we read about King Herod's arrest and murder of James, the brother of John and one of the first disciples of Jesus. He then goes on to arrest Peter and put him in prison to await a trial only he can control. However, Peter experiences a miraculous liberation while the church is holding a prayer meeting for him!

King Herod dies at the hand of the angel of the Lord after the people proclaim him to be divine, and we are left with the final verse in this section which speaks of the prosperity of the church despite Herod's attempts of oppression – "But the word of God increased and multiplied."

We can break down the chapter into these five parts: 1) The execution of James and imprisonment of Peter (vs. 1-5); 2) Peter's unexpected deliverance (vs. 6-11); 3) Peter's surprise arrival at the prayer meeting (vs. 12-19); 4) Herod's arrogance and judgment (vs. 20-23), and 5) the church grows in spite of persecution (vs. 24).

Again, God is the main character as we read of his acts of intervention on behalf of Peter, and the death of Herod. We see the power of prayer and its importance as the church prays for Peter. Luke wants his readers to understand several key lessons: 1) God answers prayer despite our doubts, and 2) God can do much more than we can imagine.

## **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What is your first response when things seem difficult?
2. How does the gospel message advance today? What part can you play?
3. How can we begin to see God's hand at work despite opposition?

TUESDAY, JULY 19

Read: **Acts 12:1-5**

In these verses, we have a record of the second martyrdom of a Christian leader. The person responsible and now the new threat to the Jerusalem church was Herod Agrippa I rather than the high priest and temple authorities. Herod Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great, who reigned at the time Christ was born.

Agrippa I sought to become friends with the Pharisees and to win their favor. However, Luke wants his readers to understand how dangerous this man was because he refers to him as “Herod” and not Agrippa, helping his readers to relate to the evil Herod the Great who sought to kill the baby Jesus. Agrippa’s first move against the Christians in Jerusalem was to have James, one of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, put to death. This would fulfill the prophecy that Jesus made to his disciples in Mark 10:39: “...the cup that I drink you will drink...” referring to his upcoming suffering and death.

When Herod Agrippa sees the positive reaction of the Jews, he goes on to imprison yet another church leader, Peter. The text tells us that Peter was arrested during the feast of Unleavened Bread, which began with the Passover meal and lasted seven days. Herod intended to bring Peter out for a trial after the seven-day celebration was over. The timing of his trial will become important later on in this chapter!

That Peter was an important prisoner is shown by the four squads of soldiers that were assigned to guard him. The heavy guard is meant to make an escape impossible. However, while Peter was in prison the church in Jerusalem was praying earnestly for him. We're not told exactly what they were praying for exactly, perhaps his freedom, but more likely for a positive outcome of the trial that will soon take place. Either way, their hearts must certainly have been broken for the loss of their leader James, and now, the potential death of Peter.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How ready are you personally to face opposition or persecution for your faith? What can you do to better prepare yourself?
2. How can you best pray for your church leaders?
3. Will you commit to praying even when the situation you face seems hopeless?



WEDNESDAY, JULY 20

Read: **Acts 12:6-11**

God's miraculous intervention on Peter's behalf is on full display here. Luke first describes the conditions of Peter's imprisonment. The day Herod was to summon Peter for trial was the day following the Feast of Unleavened Bread. God's intervention happens during the night before the trial, while Peter is asleep, chained between two soldiers. There are two others guarding his prison cell. What Luke wants his readers to see here is that Peter's miraculous rescue takes place at the last possible moment! The very next day Peter was to face trial. We see again that God's timing is not necessarily ours, but he can be trusted to always work for us in the way that pleases him.

It was deep in the night - probably somewhere between 4:00 AM and 6:00 AM. Our text tells us that Peter was asleep, which shows that he had absolute trust in God. He did not know whether he would be released or whether he would face death as James had. Either way, he slept. That is, until an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone throughout the cell. The angel then struck Peter on the side and woke him up and commanded him to get up quickly and get dressed. Peter was able to obey only because at that moment the chains fell off his wrists. Two more commands follow. Peter was to put on his cloak and follow the angel out of the cell.

Now, what about the guards? They didn't notice the angel, the chains falling to the ground, or Peter getting dressed. The only thing we can ascertain from the passage is that they were possibly asleep themselves. The description of these events relates to us that this was indeed a divine rescue mission!

Luke tells us that Peter thought he was experiencing a vision and that it wasn't really happening. After passing the guards, the gate that led into the city opened for them "of its own accord" and once Peter was on the streets of the city, the angel left him. It was at that moment Peter realized that what he was experiencing was real. He gives glory to God for rescuing him from the hand of Herod and from "all that the Jewish people were expecting."

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Could you be as calm as Peter during a time of suffering? Why or why not?
2. What did the Jewish people hope would happen to Peter? To the church?
3. What do you learn about God's sovereignty here?

THURSDAY, JULY 21

Read: **Acts 12:12-19**

In the aftermath of his rescue from prison by an angel of the Lord, Peter makes his way to a house where he knows he will meet other believers and then be able to leave the city. So he goes to the House of Mary who we are told is the mother of John Mark. She was evidently a wealthy woman because the text tells us that “many were gathered” together and were praying. She would have had a large house to accommodate such a group and perhaps even the local church met there. Mark is the cousin of Barnabas and will have a role in the later missionary journeys of Barnabas and Paul.

Peter first knocks on the outer gate which is answered by a servant girl named Rhoda. She recognizes Peter's voice but does not open the gate! In her emotion, she runs back into the house to tell everyone that Peter is standing at the gate, but of course, they don't believe her, saying it is probably “his angel.” The Greek word “angel” in context can mean one of two things. Either it could be a human messenger, implying that someone had come with a message from Peter, or it is a supernatural visitor, such as a “guardian angel” (Dan. 3:28, 6:22, Matt. 18:10).

Only after Peter's continuous knocking on the door do the believers open the gate. They are astonished to see Peter himself in the flesh. After quieting the group, Peter explains what has happened and how the Lord had brought him out of prison. He tells the group to report all of this to James and the brothers. Since James can't be the apostle James the brother of John who had already been executed by Herod, he is most likely James the brother of Jesus, who will become the leader of the Jerusalem church.

We aren't told where Peter goes after he leaves the group, but probably somewhere safe where he can avoid rearrest by Herod.

We can only imagine the chaos that must have ensued in the prison when the guards awoke in the morning and found the cell empty. Herod had been intent on removing Peter and his influence from the church but now he was gone. Verses 18 and 19 tell us that Herod searched for him but did not find him. He then had the guards interviewed. Since Peter's fate would have been death, their loss of this prisoner would result in their executions. Herod then relocates from Jerusalem to Caesarea.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Why are we so surprised when God answers our prayers? Relate the last time you were.
2. What is the importance of group prayer? How often do you practice this?
3. What do you think was the result of Peter's divine rescue on the faith of these believers?

FRIDAY, JULY 22

Read: **Acts 12:20-23**

Luke has two main purposes in these verses. First, he will show the divine retribution that comes upon Herod after he so deliberately persecuted the believers in Jerusalem. Second, Luke wants the reader to see that God is much more powerful than the earthly powers that seek to destroy the church.

Luke writes of a dispute between the citizens of Tyre and Sidon and Herod. Tyre and Sidon were cities located on the coast of Phoenicia within the province of Syria, in present-day Lebanon. We're not told what the argument was about, but the situation was so serious that the leaders joined together and wanted an audience with Herod. Prior to their meeting together, they secured the support of Blastus, a court official described as the "chamberlain," much like a chief of staff. They most likely bribed him to help them work out a reconciliation. They appealed to Herod for peace because their region depended on the king's territory for their food supply, namely grain.

On the day appointed for this audience with the leaders from Tyre and Sidon, Luke tells us that Herod put on his robes, sat on his throne, and delivered a public message. The historian Josephus relates such a day where other important people were also present and all of them had the same response: Herod had "the voice of a god, and not of a man!" (vs. 22). Luke tells his readers that "immediately" an angel of the Lord struck him down (vs. 23). He was seized with tremendous internal pains ("eaten by worms"), a condition that has been identified with appendicitis, and died five days later (Josephus, *Ant. 19:346*).

Luke gives us the reason for God's punishment of Herod in vs. 23 – "because he did not give God the glory." In other words, he took the praise of men for himself and did not give God what was due only to him. This was his downfall.

So in this chapter, the opponent of the gospel is judged while a servant of the gospel is set free. God's will cannot be thwarted, and the good news will go on.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Are you ever tempted to accept undeserved praise from others?
2. What do you think was the reaction of the people at the news of Herod's death?
3. What do you learn about God in these verses?

SATURDAY, JULY 23

Read: **Acts 12:24**

“But the word of God increased and multiplied.”

This is the final verse for this week, and it quite simply sums up the results of both Peter’s rescue and Herod’s death. Despite all persecution, the church continued to expand as more people accepted the preaching of the word of God. Despite the execution of James, the good news of Jesus, Israel’s Messiah and the Savior of the world went forth. Despite the departure of Peter from Jerusalem, more and more followers of Jesus grew. Despite everything, the word and work of God increased.

Luke emphasizes again that nothing can stop the advance of God’s word proclaimed by Jesus’ witnesses. God in his sovereignty, prospered the work of his church.

But let us not forget verse 5 of this chapter which reminds us that we all have a part to play as witnesses of the gospel. The church was in earnest prayer for Peter while he was in prison. God hears the prayers of his people!

#### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How motivated would you be to attend a prayer meeting? Why or why not?
2. Is prayer only something you do when you are in trouble?
3. How can you become a better witness for the gospel?

# Acts Chapters 13&14

MONDAY, JULY 25

Read: **All of Acts 13&14**

These chapters relate Saul's first missionary journey which is a decisive turning point in Luke's narrative. These chapters and the ones following fulfill what Jesus told his disciples in the very first chapter: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (v. 8). Witnesses have already gone throughout Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and now the good news will be delivered "to the end of the earth."

Following their commissioning, Barnabas and Saul (soon to be known as Paul) begin their journey to spread the gospel on the island of Cyprus and travel to Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, and Lystra before returning to Antioch in Syria. They will face persecution in Antioch in Pisidia as they speak the name of Jesus. The Jews there become jealous and try to contradict their message and drive them out of their city. An attempted stoning will take place in Iconium, and Paul will be stoned in Lystra, almost losing his life.

When you are a witness, there will always be a choice to compromise the message of Jesus Christ. Think about what Paul and Barnabas faced as the first missionaries! We will see Paul's missionary strategy as they boldly take the message of the cross to the Gentiles.

The chapters can be broken down into these five parts: Mission and magic (13:1-12); Paul's address in Antioch (13:13-43); A light to the Gentiles (13:44-52); Persecution in Iconium and Lystra (14:1-20); and the return trip to Antioch in Syria (14:21-28)

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What do you learn about being a witness from these chapters?
2. Paul and Barnabas refused to compromise their message or water it down. How can you be so bold?
3. How can we begin to see God's hand at work despite opposition?

TUESDAY, JULY 26

Read: **Acts 13:1-12**

By this point in time, Antioch was becoming a second major center of believers after Jerusalem itself, and its leadership team included Barnabas and Saul. Luke gives us a glimpse in these verses of their regular devotional life which included fasting, prayer, and worship. What's interesting to point out in these verses is that there seems to be an act of waiting on the Lord for direction. And it was during a time of fasting and prayer that the Holy Spirit called Barnabas and Saul for a special work. When you are praying and waiting on God and a calling comes, there is nothing to do but obey! The leaders laid hands on them in an act of commissioning, and the two set off on what would be known as Paul's first missionary journey.

Barnabas and Saul's first destination was the island of Cyprus which was Barnabas' home port. Luke tells his readers that they first took the gospel to the synagogues, to the Jews. Saul, who now will be known as Paul, was not just going to be an apostle to the Gentiles, but also to the Jews and he establishes the same pattern in place after place.

In vs. 5 we are told that John Mark was there to help them in some capacity, and they eventually came to the capital of Cyprus, Paphos. It was there they met a false prophet and magician named Bar-Jesus, also known as Elymas (vs. 8). He kept company with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus who Luke calls "an intelligent man" who is evidently open to hearing the gospel. He summons Barnabas and Paul to share the word of God with him, but Elymas wants nothing of this and seeks to oppose this witness. It's then that Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, condemns him and God's judgment of blindness is upon him. Luke says immediately he was struck blind and as a result, Sergius Paulus believed "for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord" (vs. 12).

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How do you picture the scene when the Holy Spirit called Barnabas and Paul in vs. 2?
2. Relate a time when you were waiting on the Lord. What did your devotional life look like during this time?
3. When is it right to strongly confront people who oppose faith in Jesus?

WEDNESDAY, JULY 27

Read: **Acts 13:13-43**

From Paphos, Barnabas, and John Mark set sail north and came to Perga in Pamphylia. This would have been located on the southwestern Mediterranean coast of modern-day Turkey. It's at this point that Mark chooses to leave the two and go back to Jerusalem. We're not told why in this account, but later on, this would be a source of contention between Barnabas and Paul.

From Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia. As usual, they head to the synagogue on the Sabbath to hear the reading of the law and the prophets. The synagogue rulers ask them for a word of encouragement. An address by a member of the synagogue or visitor was a part of typical 1st century Sabbath observance. It would not be unusual for Paul, probably dressed as a Pharisee, to be invited to speak. His sermon in vs. 16-41 resembles Peter's earlier messages (2:22-36; 3:12-26).

He first identifies Jesus as a historic person, a descendant of David, who is thus qualified by birth to be the Savior (vs. 16-23). It is vital, of course, that Jesus is a descendant of David; this was well known in the early church, and Paul refers to it at the foundation of his gospel statement in his letter to the Romans (Rom. 1:3). It is interesting to find John the Baptist playing such a prominent role in verses 24 and 25. Paul relates that John was doing two things in particular: 1) He was getting people to repent, to turn back from everything which would hinder them from joining in the new work of God's Kingdom, and 2) He was pointing ahead to the One who was coming. Luke wants us to see that Paul is setting up a system of signposts, from David 1000 years before, to John a mere 15 or so years earlier. All these markers point to one person: Jesus the Messiah.

Paul goes on to show how prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus' announcement, his death, and his resurrection (vs. 24-37). In fact, the resurrection is the main subject of the second half of Paul's address. Paul mentions Jesus' numerous appearances over many days to the disciples who had been with him, both in Galilee and now in Jerusalem (vs. 31).

Lastly, he promises forgiveness to those who believe in Jesus (vs. 38-39) and warns that a choice now must be made (vs. 40-41). Accepting this is quite a challenge. That's why there's a warning attached, taken from Habakkuk 1:5: "...I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe even if one tells it to you." It's a warning to watch out in case you miss out!

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What things about Jesus is Paul emphasizing by recalling 3 famous quotes in verses 33, 34, and 35?
2. If you were to emphasize one central truth about the gospel, what would it be?
3. Why is it important that we understand the Old Testament and its relation to the gospel?

THURSDAY, JULY 28

Read: **Acts 13:44-52**

As a result of Paul's message, just about everyone in the city came to hear the word of the Lord the next Sabbath day (vs. 44). This stirred up jealousy in the Jews who wanted to contradict what Paul was saying. Luke wants his readers to see that there is a struggle for power and control of the people. At this point, Paul is not just speaking to Jews of the city, but also to Gentiles. This would have almost been a blasphemy to the Jewish leaders, for the promised Messiah was to come to the Jews only, and not the Gentiles.

Verse 46 says that Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, affirming the priority of proclaiming the message of Jesus, Israel's Savior, before Jewish audiences. However, they also proclaim that now the Jews have judged themselves "unworthy of eternal life" and as a result, Paul and Barnabas will turn to the Gentiles. Verse 47 is a quote from Isaiah 49:6, and Luke's readers are to see what is happening as a fulfillment of this Old Testament prophecy. The "light" referred to in this reference is the gospel message, which will now go out to the entire world – the "ends of the earth" (v. 47).

Since a way of salvation had been open to them through the gospel, the Gentiles began "rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord" (v. 48). Many came to faith in Christ, and as a result verse 49 tells us "The word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region." But even as the gospel was spreading, persecution increased at the same time. Influential citizens (some women) and Jewish leaders stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas and "drove them out of their district" (vs. 50).

After shaking the dust of the city off their feet, they two set out to Iconium. By shaking the dust off their feet, the missionaries indicated that they did not want to be associated with such unbelief and its consequences. Verse 52 tells us that despite the persecution, the disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What is the reason for the variety of responses to Paul's message mentioned in this passage?
2. What kind of opposition have you faced because of your faith? How do you usually respond to opposition? Does it make you stronger?
3. Looking back over this chapter, how many Old Testament verses did Paul quote? Why was this important?



FRIDAY, JULY 29

Read: **Acts 14:1-20**

Luke writes of Paul and Barnabas' visit to Iconium in two sections: 1) Paul and Barnabas proclaimed the gospel in the synagogue (vs. 1-4), and 2) The opposition of local Jews and Gentile city officials who force Paul and Barnabas to leave the city (vs. 5-7). The rest of this section (vs. 8-20) gives a report of Paul and Barnabas preaching at Lystra.

Paul and Barnabas arrive in Iconium and as in Antioch in Pisidia, head to the synagogue to speak. Luke again tells his readers that they spoke boldly for the Lord despite the rising opposition (vs. 3). A great number of both Jews and Gentiles believed. God also allowed them to do "signs and wonders" which was further validation of their ministry (vs. 3). It was probably because of the miracles that were being performed that the two were able to stay in Iconium for a "long time." The people must have been in such awe that the opposition against Paul and Barnabas was minimized for a time. However, the opposition eventually got so bad that Paul and Barnabas learned of a plot to stone them. In a Jewish context, death by stoning was done to false teachers for teaching blasphemy. Again, as in Antioch in Pisidia, the gospel message creates such dissension that Paul and Barnabas are forced to flee to Lystra, some 18 miles south (vs. 1-7).

Lystra was Timothy's home, who would become Paul's companion on his 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey. Luke's first report of the mission in Lystra involved Paul healing a man who had been crippled since birth. Vs. 9-10 relate that Paul stared intently at the man and spoke in a loud voice. In Greek texts, the stare and loud voice were indicators of the presence of gods, and so the two missionaries are mistaken for pagan deities. They barely succeed in keeping an enthusiastic crowd from offering sacrifices to them. Despite Paul's claims that they are men of like nature, The people continue to insist on offering sacrifices (vs. 18). But Jews who have followed them from Antioch and Iconium just to hinder their work, succeed in turning the crowd against them. Paul is stoned and left for dead but revives and continues preaching (vs. 20). The following day both he and Barnabas continue their journey to Derbe, 93 miles east of Lystra.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Singing Paul and Barnabas' courage, faith, and endurance, how are you challenged to serve the Lord more completely?
2. What is the difference between Paul's sermon in 13:17-41 and his speech in vs. 15-17 teaching you about sharing your faith with various groups of people?

SATURDAY, JULY 30

Read: **Acts 14:21-28**

Beginning in verse 21 Luke tells his readers that Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel and made many disciples in Derbe. The making of disciples would have taken teaching and much time, more than this brief reference suggests. When their work there was done, they returned to Lystra and Iconium and Antioch in Pisidia. The purpose of the return trip was to “strengthen the souls of the disciples” (vs. 22), and to leave them a word of encouragement. Again, this encouragement would involve sustained teaching, but we are not told how long they stayed in each city. Paul and Barnabas also appoint leadership for the churches and leave elders behind to oversee each congregation (vs. 23). The text tells us that they did this with prayer and fasting, committing them “to the Lord” (vs. 23). Appointing church leadership is an important task that they took very seriously.

They eventually return to Antioch in Syria, the place where they had been commissioned (13:1-3). Here, they gathered the church together and gave a report of all that God had done with them, specifically, how he had “opened the door of faith to the Gentiles” (vs. 27). No doubt this report included more details about missionary work in cities not recorded by Luke and perhaps the number of Jews and Gentiles who were converted. They might also have related the names of those in charge of the opposition against the gospel, as well as the names of those elders who were now in charge of the new churches they founded. But the biggest news was that God had given the Gentiles the opportunity to believe in the one true God and in Jesus as Savior.

And so Paul's first missionary journey is that a close. From start to finish, what Luke wants his readers to see is how God is building the church. It was the Holy Spirit who told the church in Antioch to send Barnabas and Saul, and it was the Holy Spirit who gave power to their preaching so that people believed, and churches were planted. And it was God who opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. In all of this God gets the glory.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What role could the encouragement of believers play in the church today?
2. What role did the elders of these new churches have, and what role do elders in our churches play today?
3. What do you learn about the power of God from these chapters?

# Acts Chapter 15:1-35

MONDAY, AUGUST 1

Read: **Acts 15:1-35**

This chapter in Acts is both the central chapter in its location and its theological significance. In context, this narrative is framed by Paul's first missionary journey in chapters 13 and 14, and his second missionary journey which begins at the end of this chapter.

The passage is well known as the "Jerusalem Council." Mass Gentile conversions created serious stress in the early church. Jewish Christians accepted the conversion of the Gentile, Cornelius (ch. 10), but did not consider the implications. Believers from Jerusalem were traveling to Gentile churches teaching the necessity of circumcision for these new Gentile believers. In other words, they thought it necessary to have them "become a Jew" in order to be a true Christian and be saved. The issue is so serious that Paul and Barnabas are appointed along with other believers to go to Jerusalem and to meet with the apostles and elders to talk about this question.

The significance of this debate cannot be understated. Luke wants his readers to see the relationship between the gospel and the observation of the Old Testament law. Now we as believers should strive to avoid conflict, but there are those few times when we must engage in conflict in order to stand for what is essential and true. The issue at stake during the meeting of this Jerusalem council is the gospel itself. What did the gospel require of those who were Gentiles and who were converted to faith in Christ? Was faith in Christ by grace alone, or did the believer have to conform to a certain set of rules/laws in order to really be saved? From Luke's perspective, the gospel is officially defined and defended during the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15. And this debate is as current today as it was back in the days of Paul.

This passage can be broken down into the following 5 sections: 1) The problem and the debate (vs. 1-12); 2) James' speech (vs. 13-18); 3) The decision (vs. 19-21); 4) The Council's letter (vs. 22-29); and 5) The letter's reception (vs. 30-35).

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. If you grew up in a church, what were some of the non-biblical "rules" imposed on you?
2. If you were a Gentile believer hearing that the regulation of circumcision was required, how would you feel about your new faith?
3. Is there an area of your life where you tend to be more like a Pharisee?

**TUESDAY, AUGUST 2**

Read: **Acts 15:1-12**

In verses 1-2, Luke reports that some men came down from Judea to Antioch where Paul and Barnabas had returned following their first missionary journey. These men insisted circumcision for new Gentile believers was essential for justification. They were dogmatic in their doctrine in spite of the fact they had no authority from the church in Jerusalem (vs. 24). This obviously brought Paul and Barnabas into a sharp debate with them.

What's interesting is that there is a parallel account in Galatians chapter 2 beginning at verse 11. The activity of these Judean Christians had caused Peter who was visiting Antioch to abandon his usual custom of eating with the Gentile believers (Gal. 2:12). The Galatians passage tells us that Peter feared the circumcision party who were sent by James, the leader of the church in Jerusalem. However, they were not acting with the church's authority, simply their own prejudices. By the Jewish believers removing themselves from the fellowship of Gentile believers, they were acting hypocritically (Gal. 2:13).

As a result, the church in Antioch appointed Paul and Barnabas and some others to go to Jerusalem and talk to the apostles and elders there about this question of circumcision. Verse 4 tells us that they were welcomed in Jerusalem by the three groups gathered there: the church in Jerusalem, the apostles, and the elders. However, the Pharisaic Jewish Christians stand up in the first meeting of the Jerusalem congregation with the delegation from Antioch and make two demands: Gentiles are 1) to keep circumcision and 2) to keep the law. Now Paul himself had a similar Pharisaic background but did not share their view of how Gentiles should relate to the law.

The text tells us there was "much debate" and in verses 7-12 speeches are given by Peter, and Barnabas and Paul. Peter relates how God "bore witness" and gave the new Gentile converts the Holy Spirit. He goes on to tell the Council that God "made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith" (vs. 9). By giving them the gift of the Holy Spirit, God showed there was no difference between these new Gentile saints and those who came to faith who were Jews.

Barnabas and Paul also shared their experiences and God's working among the Gentiles in vs. 12. Luke wants his reader to see that these three men were the main contributors to the debate and really determined the outcome of the conference. We see this specifically in vs. 12, where Luke writes "and all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles."

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Knowing Paul's Pharisaic background (26:5) and Peter's desire to keep the law (10:14), how would their testimony carry the day?
2. Is there some area of your life where you go back and forth trying to determine what is right?
3. What is the significance of this entire debate?

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 3

Read: **Acts 15:13-18**

In these verses, Luke records the speech of James. Now James was one of the brothers of Jesus, who had come to believe after a resurrection appearance by Jesus (I Corinthians 15:7). He would go on to write the New Testament book of James. The fact that he spoke last during the meeting of the Council suggests a seniority in the leadership of the Jerusalem church. In fact, James is referred to as a “pillar of the church” in Galatians 2:9.

James proclaims how God first visited the Gentile nations “to take from them a people for his name” (vs. 14). “For his name” means for his possession. He sets out to test Peter’s theology by seeing if it has been prophesied in the Old Testament. He turns to the prophecy of Amos 9 which speaks of God’s judgment on Israel which is not complete or permanent.

God promised to “rebuild the tent of David that has fallen” (v., 16, Amos 9:11). The “tent” refers to the restoration of the house or family of David, and so to the promised Davidic Kingdom. Christians today see this as a prophecy of the resurrection and exaltation of Christ. God promised to return and to restore Israel, rebuilding it as in the days of old. But the restoration of the Kingdom will not include Jews alone, but also “all the Gentiles who are called by my name” (vs. 17, Amos 9:12). God’s Kingdom will contain both Jews and Gentiles, so there is no need for a different gospel and there will be no need for the Gentiles to become Jews through circumcision. James says in vs. 15 that “the words of the prophets agree,” meaning that this text from Amos reflects what the prophets taught in general.

James communicates his belief that Gentile believers now belong to the true Israel - a people for his name. What James has done here through his speech is what each of us should do when we have a question about what is right or wrong. We’re to go directly to the word of God which has the answers we need.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. After reading these verses, what is your definition of the gospel?
2. If you were to emphasize one central truth about the gospel, what would it be?
3. Why is it important that we understand the Old Testament?

THURSDAY, AUGUST 4

Read: **Acts 15:19-21**

These three verses contain James' final words to the Council regarding the new Gentile believers. All obstacles to the gospel of grace should be removed and the Gentiles should be welcomed to trust in Christ alone and join the community of faith. James argues that the Gentiles should not be burdened with the issues of the law saying, "we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God" (vs. 19). Gentile believers should be recognized as brothers and sisters of the faith.

In vs. 20, James suggests a letter be written and circulated to the new Gentile converts, making an appeal to them to avoid some practices that may offend Jewish believers. James' goal here is to encourage healthy fellowship between the two groups.

The practices they are to avoid are offensive to Jews who have been scattered throughout the Roman Empire. James lists 4 such practices: Abstain from 1) food polluted by idols; 2) sexual immorality; 3) what has been strangled; and 4) blood. It is thought that most of the meat for sale throughout the Roman Empire had been offered to idols during pagan worship ceremonies. This is what made it polluted to the Jew. "What has been strangled" referred to meat that had been improperly butchered, which the Mosaic law prohibited eating in Leviticus 17:14. They also were to abstain from blood, referring to food that had been made using the blood of any animal.

Why these four prohibitions and not others? The Old Testament book of Leviticus had these same four stipulations for Gentiles living among Israel. Since the law is read every Sabbath in the synagogues (vs. 21), Gentile Christians will know why the requirements of verse 20 are being suggested. All of this was to promote unity and fellowship between Jew and Gentile believers.

As in the New Testament era, there are times when believers today should abstain from certain liberties in order to maintain peaceful social interactions with others.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What "Jesus-plus" gospels have you heard? How might this passage help you formulate a response to them?
2. Why is the use of Scripture important for mediating conflict?
3. What does this passage teach about the essentials and non-essentials of the faith?

FRIDAY, AUGUST 5

Read: **Acts 15:22-29**

The entire Council agreed with James, so the apostles, elders, and the whole church decided that some men should accompany Paul and Barnabas to Antioch to give a report on the meeting. They chose Silas (who would later accompany Paul on his 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey), and Judas Barsabbas. These two men went with Paul and Barnabas in order to confirm the letter and its message (vs. 27).

Vs. 25-26 make clear that Paul and Barnabas are very much “beloved,” and have risked their very lives for the name of Jesus. They are not in other words, to be marginalized or regarded as holding heretical or untraditional opinions concerning the circumcision issue. The letter also refers to the Gentile converts as “brothers,” making certain that it is understood that they too are members of the body of Christ even though they have not been circumcised (vs. 23).

The letter was to be taken to Antioch as well as Syria and Cilicia. The circumcision problem was evident only in Antioch at this point, but Christian communities in Syria and Cilicia were to be informed so as to prevent the same controversy in those churches.

The letter contained 3 points. First, the Council rejected the circumcision party’s insistence on circumcision as a condition for salvation. Second, the group, who would not only deliver the letter but also given oral description of the matter, had the Council’s full approval and authorization. Finally, they emphasized the Spirit-directed unanimous decision not to “lay on you no greater burden than these requirements,” that the Gentile believers abstain from four particular matters out of respect for the conscience of the Jewish believers. This would promote fellowship together, and these four stipulations were not conditions for salvation.

It should be noted that the Gentile believers were not obligated to abstain from the four stipulations made in verse 29. This was a moral appeal and recommendation to them and not a law.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What does this passage teach about one’s conscience? What freedoms might you need to limit in order not to violate the consciences of those in your small group or church body?
2. Why do you think it was necessary to send both the letter and representatives from the Jerusalem Council to communicate the decision?

SATURDAY, AUGUST 6

Read: **Acts 15:30-35**

These verses contain the aftermath of the Council's decision. Luke reports that the delegates traveled from Jerusalem back to the church at Antioch where they delivered the letter. When the letter was read before the congregation the believers "rejoiced because of its encouragement" (vs. 31). The fact that they rejoiced confirms that the four stipulations given in vs. 20 and 29 were not regarded as a burden by the Gentile Christians.

Vs. 32 tells the reader that Judas and Silas were "prophets," a description that serves two purposes: 1) they could confirm the decision of James and the other elders and apostles in Jerusalem, and 2) through their speaking and teaching in Antioch they were able to also encourage the believers there. Not the same as Old Testament prophets, they conveyed God's truth through teaching and instruction.

After a time, Silas and Judas are "sent off" (vs. 33), but Paul and Barnabas remain in Antioch to continue ministry there, along with "many others" (vs. 35). If you notice, verse 34 has been omitted from the text. It originally appeared in the King James version of the Bible, but later translations omit the verse because it is not found in the earliest manuscripts of the book of Acts but was inserted sometime later.

One of the major lessons we learn from the first 35 verses of this chapter is that conflict, debate, and the Word of God are necessary elements in the process of discerning the will of God. It is evident that God guided the debate and the decision-making process, allowing the church to flourish and fellowship together.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How often do you go to the Word to find the answer to a cultural issue? Would you say that you live under the authority of the Bible? How do you know?
2. How important was it for the early church to remain united and to have fellowship together?
3. How do you know if you are being led by the Holy Spirit as you make decisions?



## Acts Chapter 15:36-16:5

MONDAY, AUGUST 8

Read: All of **Acts 15:36-16:5**

The letter from the Jerusalem Council is ready and has been personally delivered to the believers at Antioch. It also needs to go to the two churches at Syria and Cilicia. So in our passage, we see Paul and Barnabas making decisions about where to travel next.

Preparations for the journey end in a sharp disagreement. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them again, but Paul didn't want anything to do with him because he had deserted them in Pamphylia during their first trip (13:13). Their disagreement was so serious that we will see Paul and Barnabas part and go their separate ways.

The narrative of Paul's second missionary journey which occupied him for about three years is given to us in Acts 15:36-18:23. Along the way Paul will meet a young man named Timothy who will accompany him on the journey.

We can divide this section into five parts: 1) The itinerary and disagreement (vs. 36-38); 2) Paul and Barnabas separate (vs. 39); 3) Paul and Silas (vs. 40-41); 4) Timothy (vs. 16:1-3); and 5) The church grows (16:4-5).

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What does this passage teach about relational conflict?
2. What surprises you about the separation of Paul and Barnabas?

TUESDAY, AUGUST 9

Read: **Acts 15:36-38**

By this time, Paul and Barnabas had stayed at Antioch for about two months. They had been teaching and encouraging the believers there as well as giving the report from the Jerusalem Council. It was time for them to move on. The itinerary for Paul's second missionary journey was set. Verse 36 tells us that Paul told Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are." The purpose for a return trip to these cities would probably involve relating the discussion of the Jerusalem Council as well as spending time encouraging the believers in their faith. So Barnabas agreed that they should revisit the Galatian converts. What Paul doesn't know at this point is that God is going to do far more than he can imagine, as a new journey is launched at Acts 16:6.

It's right here that Paul and Barnabas have a sharp disagreement. Barnabas wanted to take his cousin John Mark along on the return trip. Paul was against this because Mark had left them in Pamphylia on their original trip, perhaps showing he was not up for the task. Barnabas, whose name means "son of encouragement," no doubt wanted to give Mark another chance.

Are disagreements like this avoidable in Christian ministry? Did Paul have a different missionary strategy than Barnabas? While most Bible scholars shake their heads at this disagreement between ministry partners, it's interesting to understand Luke's perspective. Paul's behavior during this period is characterized in a positive manner as Luke relates Paul's activities in the coming chapters and does not give account of those of Barnabas.

What about Mark? We know that Mark ended up becoming one of Peter's disciples and would go on to write the gospel of Mark and that Paul would eventually be reconciled to him. Paul includes mention of Mark in his final greetings to the Colossians (Col. 4:10) and mentions his help in Philemon 23. Finally, towards the end of the book of 2 Timothy, Paul is setting his affairs in order and to giving his last words to Timothy who would carry on his ministry after his death. Towards the end of the book Paul gives a list of personal instructions, "Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry" (2 Tim. 4:11).

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What do you learn about reconciliation from this passage?
2. Is there someone in your life you need to be reconciled to? What will you do about this?
3. Is it ever right to disagree when it comes to matters in Christian ministry?

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 10

Read: **Acts 15:39**

In this one verse, we learn the nature of the disagreement that Paul and Barnabas had. Verse 39 refers to "a sharp disagreement." This wasn't just a difference of opinion! It was a sudden, violent outburst which gives us some idea to the intensity of the argument. We get our English word "*paroxysm*" from the Greek word used here. The dictionary defines this word as "a sudden attack or violent expression of emotion."

The argument was so bad that the two of them decided to part ways. I think we should be thankful to Luke for revealing the humanity of these two men. He doesn't just write about missionary journeys, converts, and establishment of churches, but also the rough patches that the missionaries had. This lends credibility to the entire account in the book of Luke. We can take comfort knowing that even the best of men disagree on occasion.

Both men were, in some sense, in the right. Paul might have been thinking back to what happened in Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. Mark hadn't even made it the first leg of that trip. How could he be depended upon to finish this one? Paul knew he desperately needed people he could rely on no

matter what might happen. At the same time, Barnabas could no doubt see that Mark was just a young man at the time and that he'd simply panicked on the previous journey. By this time Mark had matured a bit and perhaps grown in his own spirituality as well. So, of course, he should have a second chance.

As a result, two missionary journeys were launched rather than just one. Barnabas and Mark went to Cyprus where Barnabas was originally from, and Paul takes Silas and travels back through Syria and Cilicia.

Neither Mark nor Barnabas are seen again in the book of Acts. Luke also does not follow Peter after the Jerusalem Council (ch. 15). Paul himself would speak positively of Barnabas in I Cor. 9:6 and Col. 4:11.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How can God take a difficult situation and make something good out of it? Relate a time when he did that in your own life.
2. If you were Mark, how would you be feeling at this point?

**THURSDAY, AUGUST 11**

Read: **Acts 15:40-41**

As Paul and Barnabas go their separate ways, Paul chooses Silas to accompany him. Paul's choice of Silas was a good one: 1) he was an official representative of the Jerusalem church (15:22), 2) He was a Roman citizen (16:37), 3) He was a prophet (15:32), and 4) He was skilled in the Greek language (I Peter 5:12). As it turned out, this trip would be far more than a revisit to Syria and Cilicia, but instead a whole new venture into uncharted territory both geographical and theological. This again shows how God can take a very difficult situation and bring great good from it.

Paul and Silas leave Antioch with a commendation from those in the church. They "commended" the two "to the grace of the Lord" (vs. 41). This showed their allegiance with the church at Jerusalem, of which Silas had been a part. They journeyed to Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches on the way to southern Galatia, where the churches in Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe were located.

So what did this "strengthening" of the churches entail? This trip would not be evangelistic in nature, but rather edifying. They desired to build up the body of believers, encourage them to continue in the faith, communicate with them the report from the Jerusalem Council, and continue to spend time teaching them more about Jesus Christ. This is certainly something that should take place in every church! Not only do people need to hear the gospel message to be saved, but they need spiritual encouragement and training to persevere in their faith.

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. How can you be an encourager in your small group? What part does prayer play in this?
2. What are ways Christians can build each other up? When was the last time you did this?
3. What do you learn about the necessity of “follow-up” with new believers?

FRIDAY, AUGUST 12

Read: **Acts 16:1-3**

Paul’s 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey begins with a visit to strengthen existing congregations in Syria and Cilicia (15:41), and then Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium. This again helps us to understand Luke's view of evangelism. Not only must Paul share the gospel with unbelieving Jews and Gentiles, but there is continual pastoral oversight to the churches that he has already visited. Follow-up was necessary to see that the churches remained strong in the faith.

In these verses, we are introduced to a man named Timothy who was to play such an important role in his life and ministry. He is the son of a Jewish mother and Greek father. Timothy is described as a “disciple,” meaning that he had come to faith in Christ. According to 2 Timothy 1:5, both his mother and his grandmother were believers. Vs. 2 tells us that Timothy had a good reputation in Lystra and Iconium. Paul knew he would need additional help on this journey, so the decision is made to take Timothy along with him.

But there’s a problem! Timothy had not been circumcised as a baby. The Jews to whom Paul would be preaching the gospel would be offended if a man with a Jewish mother was uncircumcised. Paul’s usual method of ministry whenever he entered a town was to go to the Jewish synagogue. This would eliminate Timothy from ministry among the Jews, even though he was Jewish. Paul and his associates would have to be acceptable as Jews, and because Timothy's father was Greek, he hadn't had him circumcised. So Paul circumcised him - not because he needed circumcision to assure his salvation, but to remove a barrier that would have kept Timothy from ministering effectively to Jews.

For some, this seems hypocritical of Paul since he fought against the need for circumcision before the Jerusalem Council back in chapter 15. But actually, Paul was consistent in his thought and action. He will later state in I Corinthians, “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews, I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law, I became as one under the law... that I might win those under the law” (9:19-20).

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What missional lesson do we learn from Paul's decision to have Timothy circumcised?
2. What have you given up your “rights in order to better represent Christ to others?
3. From these verses, what two responsibilities does the church have?

SATURDAY, AUGUST 13

Read: **Acts 16:4-5**

As Paul, Silas, and Timothy traveled from town to town in the region of Galatia, they delivered the letter containing the decision reached by the Jerusalem Council regarding circumcision. The letter containing those decisions was addressed only to the “Gentile” believers (15:23), but Paul and Silas saw the need to make it more widely known. One reason for this must have been the disturbance caused by those who were preaching the necessity of circumcision for Gentile believers in the south Galatian churches (cf. Gal. 5:1-12).

As a result verse five tells us that the churches were strengthened in the faith and “increased in numbers daily” (vs. 5). This was because Paul and Silas verified that salvation is through faith, not works (which would include circumcision), and that served to strengthen the Galatians’ convictions and grow their congregations. The barrier to Gentile admission to the church was removed. Once again Luke makes the important point that resolution of doctrinal and practical issues in the churches promoted the work of the gospel and led to its rapid growth.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. In what ways can you contribute to the strengthening of your church?
2. What false teachings and issues of culture are rampant among even believers today? How can a believer stand under the authority of scripture in his or her everyday life?
3. What perceived obstacles stand in the way of unbelievers coming to Christ for salvation?

## Acts Chapter 16:1-10

MONDAY, AUGUST 15

Read: **All of Acts 16:1-10**

The narrative of Paul's second missionary journey which occupied him for about three years is given to us in Acts 15:36-18:23. Along the way Paul will meet a young man named Timothy who will accompany him on the journey.

In Paul's first journey, Luke focused on God's sovereignty in opening the door of faith to the Gentiles. In this second missionary journey, Luke will show the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit in directing Paul and his companions into new geographical locations. Our passage this week explains how Paul decided to preach the gospel in Macedonia. This was a strategic decision because it resulted in the spread of the church westward to the continent of Europe.

We can divide this section into five parts: 1) Timothy (vs. 16:1-3); 2) The church grows (16:4-5), 3) The Holy Spirit leads (16:6); 4) Troas (16:7-8); and 5) The Macedonian call (16:9-10).

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What do you learn about the Holy Spirit in these verses?
2. How do you know when the Holy Spirit is leading you?

TUESDAY, AUGUST 16

Read: **Acts 16:1-3**

Paul's 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey begins with a visit to strengthen existing congregations in Syria and Cilicia (15:41), and then Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium. This again helps us to understand Luke's view of evangelism. Not only must Paul share the gospel with unbelieving Jews and Gentiles, but there is continual pastoral oversight to the churches that he has already visited. Follow-up was necessary to see that the churches remained strong in the faith.

In these verses, we are introduced to a man named Timothy who was to play such an important role in his life and ministry. He is the son of a Jewish mother and Greek father. Timothy is described as a "disciple," meaning that he had come to faith in Christ. According to 2 Timothy 1:5, both his mother and his grandmother were believers. Vs. 2 tells us that Timothy had a good reputation in Lystra and Iconium. Paul knew that he would need additional help on this journey, so the decision is made to take Timothy along with him.

But there's a problem! Timothy had not been circumcised as a baby. The Jews to whom Paul would be preaching the gospel would be offended if a man with a Jewish mother was uncircumcised. Paul's usual method of ministry whenever he entered a town was to go to the Jewish synagogue. This would eliminate Timothy from ministry among the Jews, even though he was Jewish. Paul and his associates would have to be acceptable as Jews, and because Timothy's father was Greek, he hadn't had him circumcised. So Paul circumcised him - not because he needed circumcision to assure his salvation, but to remove a barrier that would have kept Timothy from ministering effectively to Jews.

For some, this seems hypocritical of Paul since he fought against the need for circumcision before the Jerusalem Council back in chapter 15. But actually, Paul was consistent in his thought and action. He will later state in I Corinthians, "For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews, I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law, I became as one under the law... that I might win those under the law" (9:19-20).

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What missional lesson do we learn from Paul's decision to have Timothy circumcised?
2. What have you given up your "rights in order to better represent Christ to others?
3. From these verses, what two responsibilities does the church have?

**WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 17**

Read: **Acts 16:4-5**

As Paul, Silas, and Timothy traveled from town to town in the region of Galatia, they delivered the letter containing the decision reached by the Jerusalem Council regarding circumcision. The letter containing those decisions was addressed only to the "Gentile" believers (15:23), but Paul and Silas saw the need to make it more widely known. One reason for this must have been the disturbance caused by those who were preaching the necessity of circumcision for Gentile believers in the south Galatian churches (cf. Gal. 5:1-12).

As a result verse five tells us that the churches were strengthened in the faith and "increased in numbers daily" (vs. 5). This was because Paul and Silas verified that salvation is through faith, not works (which would include circumcision), and that served to strengthen the Galatians' convictions and grow their congregations. The barrier to Gentile admission to the church was removed. Once again Luke makes the important point that resolution of doctrinal and practical issues in the churches promoted the work of the gospel and led to its rapid growth.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. In what ways can you contribute to the strengthening of your church?
2. What false teachings and issues of culture are rampant among even believers today? How can a believer stand under the authority of scripture in his or her everyday life?
3. What perceived obstacles stand in the way of unbelievers coming to Christ for salvation?

THURSDAY, AUGUST 18

Read: **Acts 16:6**

In this verse we see Paul, Silas, and Timothy visiting churches in southern Galatia. They are presenting a letter from the leadership of the church in Jerusalem and correcting any wrong beliefs that the local churches might have.

Phrygia and Galatia were provinces very close to the borders of Asia, so it probably seemed only natural for Paul and the other missionaries to continue their journey into that Roman province which occupied the whole western end of modern-day Turkey. Perhaps they would go first to Colosse which was about 150 miles away, and then along the coast to Asia's leading city, Ephesus. There were other places in Asia to preach the gospel. But after they revisited the churches from Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey, the Holy Spirit prevented Paul from entering. Luke does not tell us exactly how this happened, but it is obvious that God had a different plan for the missionaries. One way or another, the missionaries got the message. Ephesus and Colosse would come later, not now.

Luke tells us, that Paul and his companions were "forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia." Here we see that God's guidance is sometimes negative! Even when heavily involved in Christian ministry the Holy Spirit moves and leads in ways that seem hard to understand. So how can we understand the calling the Holy Spirit may place on our lives? It's evident that the Holy Spirit does call people to send them into his work. We are reminded of Acts 13:2 where it says, "the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'"

It is possible for us to have the guidance of the Holy Spirit at every turn of life. And while it is not God's intention that we speak to everyone we meet about the gospel, there are some to whom the Holy Spirit intends for us to speak. The secret is we must be attuned to the ways of the Spirit. How can we do this? It begins with asking for guidance. As James tells us, "let him ask in faith, with no doubting" (1:6), we should expect God to answer. And then when God's direction comes we must follow, knowing that the Holy Spirit will give us the strength and the wisdom we need each step of the way.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Relate a time when you knew the Holy Spirit was leading you.
2. How can you encourage your Gospel Community to live according to the Spirit?



FRIDAY, AUGUST 19

Read: **Acts 16:7-8**

In these verses, Luke tells his readers how Paul and his team made it to Troas. After being told by the Holy Spirit not to enter into the province of Asia, Paul and his companions headed north, setting their sights for Bithynia, a province north of Galatia along the southern coastline of the Black Sea. Again we're told that "the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them" (v. 7). Again, Luke does not tell us how this happened, but it might have been a word of prophecy, a vision, or some other phenomenon.

So, they traveled to Troas. Paul didn't set out to go to Troas! But it was the plan of the Holy Spirit to lead him there. What a great example of someone willing to lay down his will and his plans for the direction that the Holy Spirit brought him. The Spirit often guides as much by closing doors as he does by opening them.

Troas is today a small town on the northwestern edge of modern-day Turkey, located on the Aegean Sea. But in Paul's day, it was a major seaport. No doubt the team wondered what God wanted them to do since they had first thought they would be developing new churches all throughout Asia Minor.

The "Spirit of Jesus" is exactly the same as the Spirit of God, indicating that the full deity of Jesus Christ was accepted and received by the Christians at this point in time. Although not in use as much as the title "Holy Spirit," we do see it in other passages. Galatians 4:6 tells us, "And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" Paul tells his readers in Romans 8:9, "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him."

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What do you learn about the Holy Spirit in these two verses?
2. Relate a time when you put aside your own plans to follow something you knew God wanted you to do.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 20

Read: **Acts 16:9-10**

These verses contain what is known as Paul's "Macedonian Call." Luke writes that Paul had a vision during the night where a man was urging him to come to Macedonia. Macedonia was a region in northern Greece. The help that was needed there was the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. This really would be breaking new ground! Macedonia had been a world power at one time under Alexander the Great. During Paul's day, it was a Roman province, and Philippi its leading city.

Once the team concluded that it was God who had called them, they left immediately. In this case, we see that God's guidance was not negative, but positive, in opening a door for the gospel.

Here was the reason The Holy Spirit had kept them from going into Asia. God had another priority.

The reader should also take note that a new companion seems to have joined the party. Notice the "we" in verse 10. The most obvious solution is that Luke himself at this point has joined Paul and his companions.

Now, we can't expect the Holy Spirit to speak to us through visions or prophecies, but what we can understand from these verses is that God is sovereign in overruling or intervening to direct the progress of his Word and his people when necessary. God's direction comes through circumstances, through insight into the Word, and through the wise counsel of others. Certainly, this is what took place at the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey. And what happened at Troas in Acts 16 caused the gospel to go into Europe where it would eventually come into North America and even to us.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What is the significance of the city of Troas?
2. What new appreciation should we have for the gospel because of these verses?
3. Where do you have an open door for ministry now?

## Acts Chapter 16:11-40

MONDAY, AUGUST 22

Read: **All of Acts 16:11-40**

Earlier in this chapter, Paul and Silas had set out on Paul's second missionary journey and had invited Timothy to go along with them. As they traveled, Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit directed their journey, keeping them from entering Asia. Arriving at Troas, Paul had a vision of a Macedonian appealing to him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (vs. 9).

Luke writes of three characters Paul encountered in Philippi, each with a different story and background. They are examples of the kind of consequences the gospel message had going out into a Greco-Roman world.

They set sail from Troas and eventually found themselves at Philippi, where they would meet Lydia from Thyatira. Lydia would have been a well-to-do woman, a seller of purple and dyes. She would become the first European convert mentioned in the New Testament.

They also meet a demon-possessed slave girl who annoys them by following the group, crying out after them. Luke tells us how Paul cast the demon out of her, resulting in their imprisonment. However, we again see God's purpose in these unfortunate circumstances because the jailer comes to faith in Christ.

The end of the chapter sees Paul and Silas vindicated as Roman citizens, which is an important climax to the passage (vs. 37-39).

We must see the lessons in this passage! First of all, God prepares the hearts of those we are to minister to. Secondly, God is able to be our joy even in the toughest of circumstances. Finally, sometimes even in our suffering, God can be working to bring someone else to faith in Christ.

This passage can be broken down into the following five parts: 1) The conversion of Lydia and her household (vs. 11-15); 2) The fortune-teller and her masters (vs. 16-24); 3) Paul & Silas in prison (vs. 25-27); 4) The jailer and his household (vs. 28-34); and 5) Leaving Philippi peacefully (vs. 35-40).

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. Look at a Bible map and find all the places mentioned in this chapter.
2. How did the Lord open your heart to respond to the gospel? What people did he use as part of the process?
3. Where do you have an open door for ministry now? How will you take advantage of it?

TUESDAY, AUGUST 23

Read: **Acts 16:11-15**

Paul and his team left Troas and sailed across the northern part of the Aegean Sea, taking a straight course to Samothrace, a town on the northern end of the island. The following day they sailed to Neapolis, which is on the coast of Macedonia.

From Neapolis they would have taken the road to Philippi where they stayed for several days, possibly waiting for the Sabbath when they would establish contact with the Jewish community there. In verse 12, Luke tells us that Philippi was a “leading city of the district of Macedonia,” as well as “a Roman colony.” It would have had between 5,000 and 10,000 inhabitants.

As was his custom, Paul established contact with the Jewish community on the Sabbath. He knew that the Jews of Philippi assembled at the river close to the city which was a “place of prayer” (vs. 13). When there was no local synagogue, the Jewish people would meet by a river since part of worship included the use of water for cleansing rites.

As Paul and his friends sat and spoke with the women they found there, they would have explained their reason for visiting Philippi which was to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. One of the women who was listening was Lydia, a seller of purple. Luke tells us that she was a “worshipper of God” (vs. 14). Now Lydia was originally from Thyatira, a center for the dye industry. It was located in modern-day Turkey, but Lydia sold her dyes and purple cloth in Philippi.

That Lydia was a worshipper of God meant that she was a woman who although a Gentile, worshipped Israel’s God. As she listened to Paul preach at the riverside, “the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said” (vs. 14). We aren’t told if she was baptized the first day she listened to Paul, or after a time, but vs. 15 tells us that she and her household were baptized, and the authenticity of her faith is shown in her enthusiasm to have Paul and his missionary team come to stay at her house. The fact that she owned a house large enough to accommodate the group confirms to us that she was a woman of means.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What do you learn from the conversion of Lydia?
2. Where do you see the sovereignty of God in these verses?
3. Why is it important to practice hospitality to encourage Christian ministry and fellowship?

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 24

Read: **Acts 16:16-24**

Here we have another of the “we” passages in the book of Acts. Luke now includes himself in the narrative as one of the participants. He relates that as the group was going to the place of prayer, they “were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination” (vs. 16). Her owners were using her for fortunetelling, and she made them quite a bit of money.

Verses 17 and 18 tell us that the slave girl went about stalking Paul and his friends. She would follow after them calling out that they were “servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” Since we read in verse 18 that Paul grew very annoyed with this, we can ascertain that even though this girl was shouting the truth, she did it in such a way so that it was understood that she hated what she was hearing from Paul and Silas.

As a result, Paul commanded the demon to come out of her “in the name of Jesus Christ” (vs. 18). This did not please her owners, who saw they had lost their source of livelihood. Paul and Silas were dragged into the marketplace, called the “agora,” where not only business transactions took place but also where court cases could be heard.

Verses 21 and 22 recount the charges made against Paul and Silas. The owners of the slave girl told the magistrates, “They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice” (v. 21). While this was not true, the crowd soon joined in, and the magistrates ordered Paul and Silas to be beaten with rods. It should be noted that Paul did not proclaim his Roman citizenry at this time.

After the punishment was given, the two were thrown into jail, and the jailer ordered to watch them carefully. In order to do this, he put them inside the inner prison and put their feet in stocks (vs. 24).

What is so important about these verses is the setting free of the slave girl. Not only was she “owned” by men who misused her, but she was troubled by the demon who possessed her. When Paul casts out the demon, she is truly free! We can presume that she became a Christ-follower after her deliverance!

Consider the contrasts between the two women in this chapter: Lydia is wealthy; the slave girl is poor. Lydia is a high-standing member of the community; the slave girl is owned. Lydia comes to faith in Christ through a quiet sermon by the river; the slave girl is transformed in a powerful encounter. We see that Jesus Christ is Lord over all!

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What do you think would have been the impact on the crowd of the slave girl’s cries before Paul cast out her demon?
2. What do you learn about the power of God in this passage?

3. Who in your life have you doubted could respond to the gospel? Have you changed your mind after reading these verses?

**THURSDAY, AUGUST 25**

Read: **Acts 16:25-27**

After being beaten, Paul and Silas were placed in stocks in the innermost part of the prison. These stocks were made of wood and fastened to the wall. Instruments of torture, their feet could have been spread wide apart stretching their torso and causing excruciating pain. It's in this setting that we meet the third character in this chapter who will come to Christ: the Philippian jailer.

Vs. 25 tells the reader that evidently Paul and Silas can't sleep: maybe because of their wounds from the beating or the pain from the stocks. Whatever the reason they are still awake at midnight and are "praying and singing hymns to God." The hymns were most likely Old Testament psalms. As they pray and sing, Luke tells us that the other prisoners were listening to them. No doubt they were astonished to see their example of faith in the midst of suffering. Paul and Silas were singing glory to God.

Verse 26 tells us that suddenly there was a great earthquake that shook the very foundations of the prison. The doors flew open, and every prisoner's bonds were undone. The jailer himself awoke and upon seeing the prison doors wide open, drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. Losing prisoners was one of the worst things that could happen to a Roman jailer. In view of the punishment for allowing the prisoners to escape, he considered suicide a better alternative.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. If you were the jailer, what would you think of Paul and Silas singing?
2. If you were falsely accused, severely beaten, and thrown into a dark jail, would you still trust that God had called you to go to this place? Why or why not?
3. About 12 years later, Paul would write the letter to the Philippians from another prison. How could the events here be the basis for what Paul said in Philippians 4:4-7? What can you learn from his example about knowing peace and joy, even in challenging times?

**FRIDAY, AUGUST 26**

Read: **Acts 16:28-34**

A great earthquake has shaken the very foundation of the prison in Philippi where Paul and Silas have been jailed. Not only have the doors been destroyed, but the stocks holding the prisoners have become unfastened. When the jailer awakes, he sees the ruin of the prison and as a result, looks to take his own life. The loss of any prisoner, especially Paul and Silas who he was given special instructions to guard carefully will result in his own execution.

Vs. 28 tells us that at just the right moment Paul cries out, “Do no harm yourself for we are all here.” when the torches are brought, the jailer can see that not one prisoner has taken advantage of the situation to escape. Immediately the jailer comes and falls before Paul and Silas saying, “Sirs, what must I do to be ‘saved?’” (vs. 30). He might have been referring to the trouble he would encounter with the Roman authorities because his prison had been destroyed and the prisoners about to escape. While it is hard to know exactly what kind of salvation he was talking about, Paul uses this opportunity to point him to Jesus Christ.

Paul’s concise answer captures the essence of the gospel: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (vs. 31). The inclusion of the household here does not mean that if the jailer came to faith in Christ his entire family will automatically be saved. The statement means that if he believed, as well as his whole household, salvation would come to all.

After sharing the gospel with his entire household (vs. 32), the jailer washes their wounds inflicted by the stocks and the beating and sets food before them in his own home. Verse 34 tells us that “he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.”

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What did the Lord use to convert the Philippian jailer?
2. What were some signs of the jailer’s transformation?
3. If someone asked you how to be saved, how would you answer?

SATURDAY, AUGUST 27

Read: **Acts 16:35-40**

The last incident in this chapter narrates the discharge of Paul and Silas. The morning following the earthquake, the magistrates send the police to the city jail ordering the jailer to “let those men go” (vs. 35). Luke does not tell his readers the motive for the decision of the magistrates. But the jailer relates the message and tells Paul and Silas to “go in peace” (vs. 36).

But this was not good enough for Paul, because all the Roman rights that he had as a Roman citizen had been violated in his beating and imprisonment. He wanted a public apology. Of course, at this point, the magistrates had no idea that Paul indeed was a Roman citizen. But when news got back to them that they had beaten and imprisoned a citizen who now wanted a public apology they came and apologized, pleading with Paul and Silas to leave their city (vs. 39).

As they prepare to leave, Paul and Silas go to Lydia’s house where they had stayed and where the new converts had been meeting. Luke doesn’t tell his readers how long they remained, but after encouraging the believers assembled there, they leave Philippi (vs. 40).

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What can we learn about suffering from the afflictions Paul and Silas faced in Philippi?
2. What can you learn from the disciples’ experiences that will help you as you encounter challenging times?
3. What has this chapter taught you about missionary work? How can you pray more effectively for missionaries you know?



## Acts Chapter 17:1-15

MONDAY, AUGUST 29

Read: All of **Acts 17:1-15**

This passage is made up of two episodes and is the middle section of Luke's report on Paul's missionary journey in the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia (modern-day Greece). Having left Philippi, Paul advances first to Thessalonica (vs. 1-9) and later, to Berea (vs. 10-15).

What Luke tells his readers about Paul's work in Thessalonica corresponds with the information given by Paul himself in I Thessalonians, a letter written from Corinth within a few months of the foundation of the church. There he writes that the gospel was proclaimed in Thessalonica with full conviction and in the power of the Holy Spirit (I Thess. 1:5). Paul also talks about how he was treated in Philippi before arriving in Thessalonica (2:2), and how Jewish opponents forced him to leave the city (2:15-16). It is helpful to read I Thessalonians as you study this passage to have full understanding of Paul's experiences there.

Arriving in Berea, (vs., 10), Paul and Silas went to the Jewish synagogue to proclaim the gospel leading to conversion among the Berean Jews who verify their teaching through the study of the scriptures (vs. 11-12).

These two episodes the significance of the authority of scripture, the unchanging gospel of Jesus as the crucified and risen Messiah, the constant opposition to the gospel, and the unity among the followers of Jesus. It also shows two different responses to the gospel message: one that provokes jealousy, and the other that provokes deep study of the Word.

This passage can be broken down into the following 5 parts: 1) The gospel message is preached in Thessalonica (vs. 1-3); 2) Jealousy among the Jews (vs. 4-5); 3) Jason's influence (vs. 6-9); 4) The reception of the gospel in Berea (vs. 10-11); and 5) Continued opposition to the gospel message (vs. 12-15).

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. How discouraged do you think you would become if you were Paul?
2. When has your faith caused conflict?

TUESDAY, AUGUST 30

Read: **Acts 17:1-3**

Luke shares with his readers the route that Paul and Silas took to come to Thessalonica. It was called the Via Egnatia, which could be considered the “interstate” of the ancient world. The missionaries would pass through Amphipolis and Apollonia (vs. 1), both important cities in their own right. But Paul did not stop there as he was eager to get to Thessalonica which was an important seaport in his day and continues to be even today.

The first thing Paul did whenever he entered a city to preach, was to go to the nearest synagogue. This is exactly what he did when he arrived in Thessalonica. Verse 2 tells us that he was there for three consecutive Sabbaths where he encountered Jews and God-fearing Gentiles who were familiar with the Old Testament.

Paul expounded the message *“explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ’”* (vs. 3). In other words, Jesus’ suffering and death was not a tragic and unexpected event. The Old Testament had predicted both the suffering and resurrection of the Messiah. This was much the same message Jesus himself proclaimed during his public ministry. Second, Paul proved through Scripture that this Jesus who rose from the dead is indeed Israel’s promised Messiah. While we don’t know what texts Paul might have used, we do know Paul didn’t just teach facts about the Bible, he shared the person and work of Jesus Christ.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Based on Paul's example of connecting with people, how can you find points of contact that you might use in sharing your faith?
2. What events might you host in your home that might give you opportunity to talk about Jesus with others?
3. Would you say that you are intentional about sharing the gospel? Why or why not?

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 31

Read: **Acts 17:4-5**

As a result of Paul's powerful preaching, verse 4 tells us that "some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas." This included "many devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women" (vs. 4).

It seems that although some Jews believed, Paul's greatest success was with the Gentiles. The "leading women" were most likely the wives of some of the city officials.

We see this also reflected in the book of I Thessalonians. There it says, "*For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God*" (vs. 1:9). Many of the new converts in Thessalonica had been Gentile idol worshippers.

But not everyone received the message so joyfully. Luke reports on the opposition of Jews who then gather others to act against Paul and Silas. Their motivation is referred to as "jealousy." Certainly, they were jealous that Paul and Silas had the spotlight and were winning converts, but they were also very zealous for the traditional understanding of the Mosaic law. Luke tells his readers the three actions that the Jewish attackers took: 1) they formed a mob; 2) set the city in an uproar; and 3) attacked the house of Jason.

Paul and Silas had evidently received hospitality from Jason and so the Jewish mob assumed they could find them hidden there. It is quite possible that the church in Thessalonica was meeting in his home and people were being drawn from the synagogue to gather with other believers there.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What can you learn about expounding the scriptures from Paul's example in Thessalonica?
2. Take some time to read I Thessalonians. What strikes you about what Paul says regarding the Thessalonian's heart for the Word?
3. Why were some of the Jews jealous of the gospel message?

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 1

Read: **Acts 17:6-9**

The Jewish mob stormed the House of Jason, who had evidently opened his home as a gathering place for the new church. They expected to find Paul and Silas there. When they couldn't find the missionaries, they attacked Jason and other brothers and brought them out before the crowd.

They made three accusations against the Christians. First, they accused the missionaries of turning “the world upside down (vs. 6). Second, they condemned Jason for receiving them into his home. Finally, they declared that the men were acting in opposition to Caesar's decrees (vs. 7). While this last accusation was not true, it was very strategic because rebellion against Caesar was considered treason. The Jewish mob believed that in saying Jesus was King, Paul and Silas defied Caesar.

Luke wants his readers to see that this also was the same accusation made against Jesus himself in Luke 23. There it says, *“And they began to accuse him, saying, ‘We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.’ And Pilate asked him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ And he answered him, ‘You have said so’”* (vs. 2-3).

While the city officials were disturbed by the charges, they proceeded with caution. Most likely they had heard about what had happened in Philippi and did not want to see that repeated. So in this case, Jason and other members of the new Christian community were forced to post bond by the magistrates. This money would be forfeited if there were further disturbances from Paul and Silas. This meant that they would have to leave the city of Thessalonica. However, in spite of this, the Christians at Thessalonica kept on boldly proclaiming the gospel. We're told in I Thessalonians chapter 1, *“For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere...”* (vs. 8).

Paul's ministry in Thessalonica proved that people who were hostile to the gospel often acted unfairly towards the new believers. His message emphasized that Jesus was the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament. He never attempted to deceive people to become Christians. He wrote about this in I Thessalonians chapter 2, *“For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. But though we had already suffered and had been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict. For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts”* (vs. 1-4).

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How does the story of Paul's trip to Thessalonica encourage you? How does it challenge you?
2. What in Paul's attitude toward the Thessalonians resonates with you?
3. Would other people be able to tell that Jesus is your king?

## FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 2

Read: **Acts 17:10-11**

Luke tells us that the missionary team immediately sent Paul and Silas away under cover of darkness to the town of Berea, located some 45 miles southwest of Thessalonica. When they arrived there, they did what was usual, they went into the Jewish synagogue to teach.

As they shared the good news of Jesus, Luke takes special note of their enthusiasm for Paul's preaching. He commends them for their spiritual discernment. Luke describes the Jews of Berea in three ways, comparing them with the Jews at Thessalonica. They were "more noble," which does not mean that they were of a higher economic status, but they had the type of attitude ordinarily associated with well-bred people. In other words, they were open-minded and more receptive. They judged Paul's message by the standard of Scripture rather than their preconceived prejudices.

They also "received" the Word of God with "all eagerness," meaning they realized it had relevance to their own lives. They had an appetite to learn.

Third, they "daily" examined the scriptures to see if what Paul was teaching them was true. This shows that they were not gullible or unthinking in their approach.

The Bereans, then, had a teachable attitude. They had open hearts which is the first step in becoming a student of the word. They were serious about what they were learning! May we each pray that God would give us a Berean appetite for the scriptures.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Read I Peter 2:2-3. Does this describe you? Why or why not?
2. How did the Bereans study the Scriptures? Could the same be said of you?
3. What steps do you need to take to become a student of the Word?

**SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 3**

Read: **Acts 17:12-15**

As a result of Paul's preaching and the Bereans' open reception of the gospel, Luke tells his readers that "Many of them, therefore, believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men" (vs. 12). No doubt a church in Berea was born.

Unfortunately, this great movement among the Bereans was disrupted because Jews from Thessalonica traveled there in order to stir up a mob against Paul (vs. 13). The believers in Berea must have anticipated that the situation was getting too dangerous for Paul. He was at the center of the controversy and the believers there sent him off on his way to the sea, while Silas and Timothy were allowed to remain to strengthen the congregation. The journey to the sea suggests that they planned to take Paul to safety by ship. Paul arrived in Athens after a journey of over 300 miles, where he sent for the two of them to join him as soon as possible (vs. 15).

We find out in chapter 18 that Paul and Silas catch up with Paul, not in Athens, but later in Corinth (vs. 5).

What we see in this passage is that both Jew and Gentile are being converted in the cities in which Paul is preaching. However, the reaction to the gospel is always mixed. Sometimes only a few Jews come to faith; Sometimes many Jews become believers, although it is never all Jews who accept the gospel. The same is true with the Gentiles. This mixed response is not due to Paul's methods of evangelism, but to the levels of hardness in the listeners' hearts. This is why prayer is so important as we share the gospel with others! We must pray for the Holy Spirit to open hearts and cause people to be receptive to the message that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who came to die for the sins of the world.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. In light of this passage, take a few moments to pray for those who need the gospel.
2. Do you become discouraged when the gospel is rejected by others?
3. What has this entire passage this week taught you about missionary work? How can you pray more effectively for missionaries you know?

## Acts Chapter 17:16-34

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 5

Read: **Acts 17:16-34**

We come to the centerpiece of the entire book of Acts. Paul is now in Athens, having traveled from Berea where he had faced much opposition from the Jewish mob from Thessalonica. Seeing that the city is full of idols, he makes the most of every opportunity to speak with the citizens there. There is much debate about what Paul is preaching because it was “new teaching” (vs. 19).

What Luke wants his readers to see is Paul’s evangelistic versatility. He is able to present the gospel to both the Jews in the synagogue, and the pagan philosophers in the agora, or marketplace. He can adapt his methods for any audience, still presenting the same gospel message.

Luke gives us a picture of the city of Athens before following Paul to his most well-known speech at the Areopagus (also known as Mars Hill). The Areopagus exists today, in the shadow of the Acropolis. The speech he makes there before the philosophers of that city serves as an example of how Paul evangelized Gentiles who had no previous knowledge of Scripture.

The passage can be broken down in the following 5 parts: 1) What Paul saw and felt (vs. 16); 2) Paul preaches before Jews and Gentiles (vs. 17-18); 3) The invitation to appear before the Areopagus Council (vs. 19-21); 4) Paul’s speech at the Areopagus (vs. 22-31); and 5) The aftermath (vs. 32-34).

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What did Paul have to know in order to present the gospel to people who had never heard? What does this teach you about evangelism?
2. In what setting are you the most comfortable in sharing your faith? Are you prepared to share outside your comfort zone?

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 6

Read: **Acts 17:16**

Our text tells us that Paul was waiting for his companions to join him in Athens. He had left Berea alone by ship and had sent for Timothy and Silas to come to him as soon as possible.

Vs. 16 tells the reader Paul’s reaction to what he saw – he was “provoked” in spirit. In other words, he wasn’t just a little annoyed, he was irritated and angry when he saw the city was full of idols. The best way to understand the verb used here is to go back to the Old Testament. The word is used in

the Greek version of the Old Testament to describe how God feels about idolatry. Deuteronomy 9:7 says, “Remember and do not forget how you provoked the Lord your God to wrath in the wilderness...”

The Athenians worshipped many gods, but the place of highest elevation was considered the place where the most important deity dwelt. In Athens, that was the Acropolis where the goddess Athena was worshipped. Athena was the goddess of wisdom and intellectual thought, both of which were highly prized by the ancient Greeks. Her statue stood high inside the Parthenon, and her influence is still seen in the city today.

Yards away from the Parthenon was a small hill about 50 feet high and 150 yards long. The temple to Ares, the Greek god of war was built there. Ares corresponded to the Roman god of war, Mars; hence the name *Areopagus* or *Mars Hill*. But it wasn't the beauty of the architecture that struck Paul when he entered the city, it was the rampant idolatry. The phrase “full of idols” is meant to make the reader envision the city streets as being overwhelmed with them. The impact it had on Paul was visceral. He looked at the city through a Christian lens, not a worldly one and the impact was gut-wrenching. This teaches us the importance of a biblical worldview – looking at our circumstances through the lens of Scripture instead of with the eyes of the world.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How should we as Christians interact with a pluralistic society?
2. When was the last time you were “provoked” in spirit about what you saw in culture?

**WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 7**

Read: **Acts 17:17-18**

Upon seeing the prevalence of idolatry in Athens, Paul went first to the synagogue to “reason” with the Jews there. This kind of reasoning is called apologetics. Biblical apologists attempt to defend Christianity against paganism, and this is what Paul did. Besides sharing Christ with the Jews, he also went into the marketplace every day to interact with the people there, which is what Luke talks about the most in these verses.

What was different about Paul's speaking in the agora, or marketplace, was that Luke tells us that he went there “every day” (vs. 17). While there, he encountered both the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. The Epicureans were indifferent to gods, thinking them to be too far removed to be of any importance. They were known for their pursuit of happiness, or hedonism. The Stoics sought to live in harmony with the natural order and were pantheistic in their view of gods. Gods were in everything around them. Both groups of philosophers lived according to reason, which is why Paul appealed to them in this way.



Luke takes note of two of their reactions to Paul's message. Paul is first described by some as a "babbler," or someone who is always hunting for news and then spreading it around carelessly. They considered him to be without much knowledge. Others thought Paul was introducing them to yet another god that had not be yet worshipped in Athens (except by the believing Jews living there). This new god was the Jesus who, according to Paul, had been resurrected from the dead.

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What is similar in today's society that parallels Paul's experience in the marketplace?
2. How would you communicate your faith to someone who had a naturalistic approach to life?
3. Why do you think Paul spoke of the resurrection of Jesus to these philosophers?

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 8

Read: **Acts 17:19-21**

Luke does not relate to his readers just how long Paul was in Athens before they brought him to the Areopagus. The word 'Areopagus' literally means the "hill of Ares," (the Greek equivalent of Mars), so some translations have 'Mars Hill' in these verses.

The philosophers were asking Paul, "*May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?*" (vs. 19). The reason for the question was that Paul was presenting "strange things" to the Athenians, something for which he might have needed official permission. Bible scholars believe that Paul is not arrested for this but appears before the Areopagus Council to give an account for his beliefs. If his new ideas were found to be incompatible with the traditions or customs of the Athenians, Paul could have been condemned.

In the 1st century, the Council of the Areopagus seems to have been the effective government of Athens and its chief court. It could interfere in any aspect of corporate life, including education, morality, or foreign cults. Obviously, the people of Athens were very curious about what Paul had to say because verse 21 tells us that "*All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.*" Since the people loved to debate and reason over new ideas and thinking, Paul would have a unique opportunity share the message of Jesus Christ.

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. How do you respond when you are questioned by others about your faith?
2. Relate a time when you have had to defend your faith to others.
3. What part does the Holy Spirit play when it comes to sharing the message of Christ?

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 9

Read: **Acts 17:22-31**

Paul now stands in front of the Areopagus Council and addresses the men of Athens. He first points out that he is seeing the objects of worship in their city including the altars, idols, and temples that express the piety of the people. In particular he sees an altar that is dedicated to the “unknown god.” By having such an altar in the city, the Athenians were trying to honor any god inadvertently ignored by their other idols. And yet they had ignorance of the one true God. Paul says in verse 23, *“What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”*

Paul then begins to develop his argument with three negative statements which demonstrate their misunderstandings about God. The first is in verse 24, *“The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man.”* The second misunderstanding about God is found in verse 25, *“...nor is he served by human hands...”* And the third misunderstanding the Athenians have about the one true God is found in verse 29, *“We ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.”*

In vs. 26 Paul asserts that all of mankind was created by God, including where they would live (*“boundaries of their dwelling place”*), and even the different seasons of the year (*“allotted periods”*). In response, men should seek after God who is *“not far from each one of us”* (vs. 27).

Paul's concluding remarks include God's command that all people everywhere repent because judgment is coming. Paul goes on to say that God has appointed a judge who is qualified because God has raised him from the dead (vs. 31). This is an important point for it means first, that God has power over the dead; second, that God has the authority to appoint a judge; and third, that the one raised from the dead can legitimately receive the authority to judge the living and the dead.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Explain why Paul started with creation before moving to the resurrection and judgment.
2. What about Paul's speech at the Areopagus most resonates with you?
3. What context might you need to establish the basic framework of the Bible before talking about the need for repentance and faith in Christ?

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 10

Read: **Acts 17:32-34**

Some Bible scholars assert that Paul was a failure at Athens because there were so few conversions. The text tells us that some “mocked” him, and yet others wanted to hear him again another time. The big issue for the Greeks was that they did not believe in a resurrection from the dead. So Paul's reference to the resurrection of Jesus would not have been well received by many.

Verse 33 tells us that Paul left them at that time. Luke doesn't tell us what conclusion or decision that Areopagus Council made concerning Paul's teaching, but Paul was successful in the sense that the council didn't take any official action against what he had taught in the marketplace.

Luke ends his report on the missionary effort in Athens with an account of new converts (vs. 34). First, Luke says that “some men” were converted and they became disciples of Paul. He also singles out the conversion of a certain man named Dionysius who was a member of the Areopagus Council. Also, a woman named Damaris was brought to the faith, and the fact that she is mentioned by name may indicate that she played an important role in the church at Athens. Finally, Luke reports that “others” were also converted.

One of the things we must always be careful of is evaluating a missionary effort based on results. God calls us to be faithful to preach the gospel and to be a bold witness, and we are to leave the results to him.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Do you think Paul was successful in Athens? Why or why not?
2. What “idols” do we see in our contemporary world today? What should our response be?
3. What Have you learned this week about Paul's passion to spread the gospel?

# Acts Chapter 18:1-28

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 12

Read: **All of Acts 18:1-28**

Paul continues his ministry in Europe and chapter 18 finds him leaving Athens and going 46 miles west to Corinth. This city was located on a narrow isthmus of land with ports on two seas, the Adriatic, and the Aegean. Julius Caesar rebuilt Corinth after it had been destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC, and it was now a thriving commercial center. It was known for its immorality, where living a godly life was indeed a challenge.

Paul would again experience persecution as the Jews turn against him, although many of the more prominent Jews would become believers (vs. 1-8). Luke does relate to his readers how God ministered and encouraged Paul when times became tough for him (vs. 9-11). We can find hope in this chapter as we read of God's caring for Paul as his ministry work faces opposition.

The book of I Corinthians parallels with this chapter in several ways: 1) Paul preaches in Corinth to both Jews and Gentiles (vs. 4; I Cor. 1:22-25); 2) Paul meets Aquila and Priscilla (vs. 4, I Cor. 16:19); and 3) Paul knows both Crispus and Sosthenes (vs. 8 & 17; I Cor. 1:1, 14).

Luke's report of Paul's ministry in Corinth lasted 18 months (vs. 11) and is a narrative that contains people who Paul met and worked with, the political climate in the city, a vision from the Lord, and the conversion of the synagogue ruler.

The chapter can be broken down into the following 5 parts: 1) Jews together in Corinth (vs. 1-8); 2) The encouraging vision (vs. 9-11); 3) Jews and Christians in public dispute (vs. 12-17); 4) Completion of Paul's 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey (vs. 18-22); and 5) Paul in Ephesus (vs. 23-28).

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. Take the time to read first Corinthians chapter one and sum up Paul's message to the church there.
2. Read I Cor. 2:2-3. What was it about Corinth which caused Paul "fear and much trembling" (vs. 3)?

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 13

Read: **Acts 18:1-8**

Without explaining the circumstances Luke simply tells his readers that *“Paul left Athens and went to Corinth”* (vs. 1). While Athens had been known for its culture and learning, Corinth was known for its commerce and immorality. There Paul met Aquila and Priscilla who had come from Italy *“because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome”* (vs. 2). This edict banning Jews from Rome was due to the Jews making disturbances in the city and has been recorded by Roman historians.

He joined them in their tentmaking trade and stayed with them, but every Sabbath he was found in the synagogue reasoning and trying to persuade both Jews and Greeks with the gospel (vs. 4). Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia and found Paul *“occupied with the word.”* By this time he was concentrating on witnessing to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus (vs. 5). However opposition from the Jews eventually caused Paul to turn his focus to the Gentiles (vs. 6). We are told that he *“shook out his garments”* which parallels Paul’s and Barnabas’ shaking dust from their feet in Pisidian Antioch (13:51). Paul’s statement, *“Your blood be on your own heads,”* was referring to their own responsibility for the rejection of his message.

Paul then left the synagogue and relocated his ministry next door to the house of a man named Titius Justus who is described as a worshipper of God. In addition, Crispus the synagogue ruler with his family believed and were baptized. Paul mentions this baptism in I Cor. 1:14. Finally, we read in vs. 8 that *“many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized.”*

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. Relate a time when you were “occupied with the word” (vs. 5).
2. Why should the conversions in Corinth encourage us?
3. What do you think it means for a Christian to be a “tentmaker?”

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 14

Read: **Acts 18:9-11**

In these verses, Luke relates a vision in which the Lord encourages Paul to continue his missionary work in Corinth. Luke’s usage of “the Lord” is a reference to Jesus (see vs. 8). This vision has six parts: 1) it came at night – suggesting it was likely a dream; 2) Jesus tells Paul not to be afraid; 3) Paul is encouraged to continue to preach the gospel; 4) Jesus assures Paul of his continued presence; 5) Jesus promises protection; and 6) Jesus assures Paul that many more people in Corinth will believe.

What is encouraging to believers in these verses is that God knows our hearts and our emotions and is willing and able to send encouragement our way. Of particular importance is the promise Jesus gives Paul of his continued presence. Vs. 10 says, "...I am with you," which was a promise God gave in the Old Testament to Isaac (Gen. 26:24), Jacob (Gen. 28:15), the Jewish remnant returning from Babylon (Isa. 41:10), Jeremiah (Jer. 1:8, 19), the Jews rebuilding the temple (Haggai 1:13), and also given to us by Jesus (Matt. 28:20).

As believers, we don't need to fear man because God cares for us. The psalmist wrote, "*When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me? Then my enemies will turn back in the day when I call. This I know, that God is for me. In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?*" (Ps. 53:3-4; 9-11).

This was Paul's encouragement, and it should be ours as well,

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What should Christians do when experiencing weakness and fear?
2. After reading this passage, can you trust God with your demanding situations?
3. Who do you turn to first when you are fearful?

**THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 15**

Read: **Acts 18:12-17**

During the year and a half that Paul was in Corinth, Jewish opposition to the gospel flared up again. The Jews in the city charged Paul before the proconsul Gallio accusing Paul saying, "*This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law*" (vs. 13). Despite teaching in the synagogue every Sabbath, there were still Jews who were against the gospel message.

The proconsul Gallio was the governor of Achaia, a region in western Greece. He was a brother of Seneca, a philosopher of great influence in Rome. Rome did not permit the teaching of new religions. Judaism was accepted and established so it was not considered new. But the Jews who brought Paul before Gallio were saying that Christianity was a new and different religion, distinct from Judaism.

Gallio didn't see it this way. He did not want to enter into a theological debate and so instructed the Jews to settle this between themselves, saying, "*I refuse to be a judge of these things*" (vs. 15). To him Christianity was just another part of Judaism and therefore was not something to be settled in a civil court. This decision was crucial to the preaching of the gospel! It legitimized Christianity in the eyes of Roman law.

With that decision made, Gallio threw the case out of court and dismissed the Jews. This so angered them that they *“seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal”* (vs. 17). This may be the same Sosthenes referred to as a “brother” in I Corinthians 1:1, in which case the Jewish opponents were taking their frustration out on him. However, it was a relatively common name, so we can’t be sure. Sosthenes replaced Crispus who had become a Christian (vs. 8), as ruler of the synagogue. He was probably the point person of the delegation that brought the charges against Paul and so it could be that he was beaten for the way he managed that legal case.

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What do you see in these verses that speaks to God's promise made to Paul in verse 10?
2. How can you see God's hand at work in your own life during difficult circumstances?
3. Why was Gallio’s verdict so important?

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 16

Read: **Acts 18:18-22**

Paul continued his missionary work in Corinth for *“many days longer”* (vs. 18), before leaving for Syria taking with him Priscilla and Aquila. Before he got on the ship to set sail, the text tells us that *“he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow.”* This happened at Cenchreae, a Corinth harbor about 7 miles southeast of the city center. Cenchreae had a population of about 4,400, and it was during Paul's work in Corinth that a church was established there. Romans 16 tells us, *“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and myself as well”* (vs. 1,2).

Most Bible scholars assume that Paul had taken a Nazarite vow (Numbers 6:1-21). If this is true, Paul had asked God for some kind of intervention, and so during this time, he would have abstained from drinking wine, or from cutting his hair until the end of the vow at which time the hair would be cut and then burned as part of an offering to God. Sometimes these vows were made in thankfulness for past blessings or as part of a prayer for future blessings.

When Paul and his friends arrived in Ephesus, Aquila and Priscilla stayed in the city while Paul went into the synagogue to reason with the Jews there. Aquila and Priscilla asked Paul to stay longer in Ephesus, but he declined wanting to continue his journey. He landed at Caesarea and then went down to Antioch which is where he had first begun this 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey.

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. How far did Paul travel at this time? Refer to a Bible map.
2. What statement of Paul's in these verses demonstrates that he was a Spirit-filled man who always submitted his plans to God's will?

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 17

Read: **Acts 18:23-28**

Verse 23 marks the beginning of Paul's 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journey, a trip of over 1,500 miles and about four years. The text tells us that he *“went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.”* Paul revisited the disciples in those regions to encourage them in their faith.

Back in Ephesus, the reader is introduced to a Jew named Apollos. Apollos was from Alexandria, a city in Egypt that was an educational center. This would explain why he was an *“eloquent man, competent in the scriptures”* (vs. 24). However, he did not know of the coming and baptism of the Holy Spirit, being only acquainted with the baptism of John. His doctrine about Jesus was accurate but deficient. As a result, Priscilla and Aquila *“took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately”* (vs. 26). Luke doesn't give us any other details about the instruction he received from Priscilla and Aquila, but it is worth noting that this teaching and explanation was done in private. The Ephesian believers recognized his potential and wrote to the disciples in Achaia commending Apollos to them.

When Apollos arrived there, Luke tells us that he *“greatly helped those who through grace had believed”* (vs. 27). Luke is quick to point out to his readers the sovereign grace of God by which people became believers (cf. 13:48; 15:11; 16:14). Once he had a complete grasp of all that Jesus had done, Apollos became an even more effective apologist. The text tells us that he proved from the scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah (vs. 28).

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What do Paul's follow-up visits teach about the importance of follow-up discipleship and the value of the local church?
2. What can we learn about instructing leaders from the example of Aquila and Priscilla?
3. What about the ministry of Apollos most resonates with you?



# Acts Chapter 19:1-41

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 19

Read: **All of Acts 19:1-41**

Leaving Apollos in Corinth, Paul traveled to Ephesus, a major stop on his 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journey. He would remain in the city for three years. While there, he preached the gospel to disciples of John, the Jews in the synagogue, and residents of Asia in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. Again, Luke wants his readers to understand the diversity and significance of Paul's encounters with various groups as he taught that Jesus is the Messiah.

Ephesus is in modern-day Turkey and was the center for the worship of the pagan goddess of fertility, Artemis (also known as Diana). Luke's previous reference to Paul's synagogue ministry in Ephesus (18:19-21) on his 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey is picked up and further developed in 19:8-10. Paul would be able to teach in the synagogue for three months before opposition would again find him.

The worshipers of Artemis in Ephesus believed her image had fallen from heaven and was now housed in the temple there. But Paul's message of a crucified and risen Savior causes the Gentiles whose livelihood included the selling of idols devoted to Artemis to rise up against him.

In this chapter, the reader also sees more evidence that whoever has the Spirit of God belongs to the people of God. Earlier in Acts Luke focused on three other events with reference to the Holy Spirit: Pentecost (2:1-41), the ministry to the Samaritans (8:4-25), and the gospel going to the Gentile Cornelius (10:1-11:18). The main point in every instance is the role of the Spirit in the building of the kingdom of God. The giving of the Spirit through Jesus' name shows the superiority of Jesus over John the Baptist.

Another major lesson in this chapter is that being a witness for Christ may well result in others having their vested interests and thinking radically challenged. This is the kind of witness we must all be! There is a fine line between presenting the gospel in a quiet, almost ineffective way that challenges no one and the way of Paul – a loud, noisy, and socially offensive proclamation.

The chapter can be broken down into the following 5 parts: 1) Paul evangelizes the disciples of John (vs. 1-7); 2) Paul evangelizes Jews and Gentiles (vs.8-10); 3) Miracles and their impact (vs. 11-20); 4) Provoking the idolators (vs. 21-27); and 5) The riot in Ephesus (vs. 28-41).

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. How have you experienced a change in affections through conversion?
2. Describe the last time you presented the gospel to someone. How effective were you? What role did the Holy Spirit play in your message?

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20

Read: **Acts 19:1-7**

When Paul arrives in Ephesus, Luke tells his readers that he finds some disciples and asks them if they have received the Holy Spirit at the time they believed. There was something about these disciples that caused Paul to ask this question. Perhaps it was because of what he knew about Apollos (18:24-26) who taught powerfully in Ephesus but did not understand the baptism of the Holy Spirit. These disciples were the same: they knew of John's baptism, but not the baptism of Jesus.

John the Baptist's baptism was a "*baptism of repentance*" (vs. 4) and Paul confirmed that it was Jesus who fulfilled John's prediction made in Matthew 3:11, "*I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*" Although these disciples were followers of Jesus, they had yet to put their trust in Jesus the Messiah, and receive the gift of the Spirit.

What is important to see in this passage is that it is the only instance of a re-baptism recorded in the New Testament, highlighting the usual situation. Apollos had not had hands laid on him when he received the Spirit, but here Paul did just that. It is not necessary to receive a second baptism in order to receive the Holy Spirit as Scriptures teach that the Spirit is given at the moment of our salvation, and not as a secondary addition. Paul would later write to the Ephesians, "*In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit*" (1:13).

Upon receiving the Holy Spirit, the disciples began to speak in tongues and prophesied. Again, this is not the normative result but was necessary in this instance to show that Gentiles could also receive the power of the Holy Spirit just as the disciples did during Pentecost in Acts 2. Luke ends this section by relating the number of these disciples as 12. The reader should understand that this meant that a considerable number of family members would then also hear the message of Jesus and would perhaps come to faith.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Have you ever been aware of the Holy Spirit's empowering in a specific situation of ministry?
2. Before reading this passage, what was your understanding of the baptism of the Spirit?
3. With regard to the topic of baptism in the Spirit do you think that churches today have been moving toward more divisiveness or more unity on this issue?

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 21

Read: **Acts 19:8-10**

Paul now goes into the synagogue to reason and persuade the Jews to understand the kingdom of God (vs. 8). His ministry there lasted for three months, probably indicating that the Jews in Ephesus were more open to the message of Christ than previous audiences. While some of them became believers, others persisted in unbelief. They refused to accept that the kingdom of God had become a reality through Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, and by so doing rejected the only way to God.

The text says this group was “*speaking evil of the Way before the congregation*” (v. 9). The expression “*the Way*” is used to differentiate Christianity from mainline Judaism. The unbelieving Jews insulted Paul, questioned his intentions, and probably heckled those who were persuaded by his witness. As a result of this slander before the Jewish populace, Paul made the decision to leave the synagogue and distance himself from the unbelieving Jews who insulted the Christian faith. He took with him “*the disciples*,” those who had come to Christ through his 3-month ministry in the synagogue and began to teach in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (vs. 10).

For two years Paul was teaching on a daily basis, which would mean many hundreds of hours of teaching. This is why Paul’s work in Ephesus was so effective. This teaching equipped the new believers who got the word out to “*all the residents of Asia*” (vs. 10). Believers today should take advantage of regular teaching of scripture. Luke emphasizes that both Jews and Greeks heard the word of the Lord.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How do you respond when the gospel is outwardly rejected by others?
2. What might a contemporary “lecture hall of Tyrannus” ministry look like today?
3. What does this passage teach about the making of disciples through teaching? When have you sat under such teaching?

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 22

Read: **Acts 19:11-20**

Luke makes it very clear in this passage that God the Father is the author of these miracles. Paul functions as his instrument, but God is the primary actor. In fact, the power of God is so intense that even material items that touch Paul heal the sick and cast out demons. Paul is a type of Peter and Jesus, whose shadow and garments were used by God to heal people (Luke 6:18-19; Acts 5:15).

Jewish exorcists, who were sons of a high priest, attempted to take advantage of the power of Jesus for their own benefit. These seven sons of Sceva misappropriate Jesus' name. They try to imitate Paul because they viewed his work as magic. But they lack power and were soon overpowered by the evil spirit who leapt out of one man and *"mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded"* (vs. 16). Spiritual power is not something to be messed around with. A greater power, the power of the Holy Spirit has arrived.

This incident had a positive result on Paul's ministry. The residents of Ephesus are filled with fear and the name of Jesus is magnified because the spirits recognize the power of Jesus, not the power of those imitating him for their own benefit. As a result, many believers confess their pagan practices and burn their books in front of everyone. Since Luke tells us that these were believers, the implication is that belief in Jesus did not automatically result in an immediate renunciation of certain practices, but it did lead to eventual repentance.

At the end of the passage, Luke includes the details about the value of the books that were burned. He does this for three purposes: 1) They viewed the word written in the books to be of less value than the word of Christ; 2) this involved a significant number of believers; and 3) this event foreshadows the way for the riot to come, as many will lose their means of employment through the name of Jesus coming to the city.

Verse 20 tells the reader that the active character in this narrative is the word of the Lord, not the disciples or the church in Ephesus. This serves as a good reminder to believers today that the power comes from the Holy Spirit's use of the word as we minister to others.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What does Paul's encounter with the sons of Sceva teach about the Holy Spirit? What does it teach about the evil one?
2. When you came to Christ, what old habits remained of which you needed to repent?
3. What does this passage teach about the necessity of humility when doing ministry work?

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 23

Read: **Acts 19:21-27**

In these verses, Luke tells the readers how Paul interrupted the Ephesian economy by affecting their silver and their idols. It is a picture for believers today of how Christianity is countercultural!

Paul makes plans to go through Macedonia and Achaia and on to Jerusalem, presumably to encourage and strengthen the churches on his way. He sends Timothy and Erastus ahead while he stays in Asia for while longer. What happens next in Ephesus is a result of Paul's ministry in the power of God's Word.

Shortly after deciding to remain in Asia, *“there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way”* (vs. 22). This disturbance began when a silversmith named Demetrius who made shrines for Artemis gathered together other idol makers and related how *“in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people saying that gods made with hands are not gods”* (vs. 26). This was a serious accusation because Artemis was known as “Queen of Heaven,” and supposedly had power and authority in heaven, on the earth, and under the earth. Her temple in Ephesus was massive, four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens, and was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. As citizens of Ephesus began to believe in Jesus, idol worship and the sale of idols would be adversely affected.

Demetrius’ argument is a clever one because he appeals to the communal and societal effect on Artemis and her great temple, not on his own greed. Again this passage teaches how the gospel sometimes comes with economic as well as spiritual effects. We should always be praying against the ways of Satan that might interrupt the gospel message from going forth.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Why were the craftsman in Ephesus upset?
2. How might the preaching of the gospel impact our cities’ social norms?

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 24

Read: **Acts 19:28-41**

Demetrius' speech is effective as the other idol makers become enraged and cry out, "*Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!*" (vs. 28). Luke tells his readers that they "rushed" into the theater dragging Gaius and Aristarchus, two of Paul's travel companions. Paul had baptized Gaius (I Cor. 1:14), and he would later host a church in his home (Rom. 16:23). Aristarchus would wind up being imprisoned with Paul (Col. 4:10; Phlm. 24). By bringing them into the theater, the mob probably meant to put them on trial. The situation is serious as Paul's supporters would not let him go in among the crowd (vs. 30).

The riot is mass confusion and Luke says, "*most of them did not know why they had come together*" (vs 32). To calm things down some of the Jews put forward Alexander who "*wanted to make a defense to the crowd*" (vs. 33). However the mob recognized him as a Jew and for two hours "*they all cried out with one voice, 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!'*" (vs. 34).

Somehow the town clerk is able to quiet the crowd and urges them not to do anything rash as Gaius and Aristarchus have not spoken against the goddess Artemis, therefore had committed no punishable crime. Whether this clerk was simply trying to calm a riot or had a favorable view of Christianity, Luke again shows that an outsider continues to drive forward the spread of the gospel message. The clerk continues telling the crowd they are in danger of being charged with rioting. After urging the crowd to bring charges before a formal court the clerk dismisses the mob.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Have you ever witnessed outright rebellion against the gospel message?
2. When have you been such a witness of the gospel to others that they have a strong reaction as the citizens of Ephesus had?
3. In what area of our culture has sin and wickedness taken such a grip as Artemis had on Ephesus?

# Acts Chapter 20

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 26

Read: **All of Acts 20**

Paul has already decided to go to Jerusalem (19:21; 20:16). Jesus himself has a corresponding journey in the book of Luke (9:51-19:45) and, Luke parallels their travels in three ways: 1) they both take a “farewell” journey; 2) they both are bound and handed over to the Gentiles (21:11; Luke 24:7); and 3) both involve following the will of God (21:14; Luke 22:42).

Paul delivers a farewell speech to the elders of Ephesus from Miletus (vs. 17). Bracketing this speech, Luke recounts detailed travel narratives (20:1-16; 21:1-15). The readers also see the success of Paul's mission to the Gentiles, as the new believers do exactly what the Jerusalem Christians did in 2:42-47 and 4:32-35: they devote themselves to teaching (20:7-12), they break bread together (20:7,11), they practice hospitality (21:4, 7-8, 10), and devote themselves to prayer (20:36).

This passage is famous for the story of Eutychus falling asleep during a sermon but Acts 20 isn't mainly about how to stay awake during corporate worship! This chapter opens and closes with the concept of encouragement, something that is widely needed in our churches today. Paul's final message to the Ephesian elders signals the end of his ministry as a free man. As he heads to Jerusalem, certain imprisonment awaits him.

The chapter can be broken down into the following 5 parts: 1) encouraging believers in Macedonia and Greece (vs. 1-6); 2) encouraging believers in Troas (vs. 7-12); 3) the example of Paul (vs. 13-27); 4) the exhortations of Paul (vs. 28-32); and 5) the prayer of Paul (vs. 33-38).

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. Why do we often fail to encourage others?
2. How can we encourage other believers based on this chapter?

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 27

Read: **Acts 20:1-6**

Now Paul turns toward Jerusalem where he will face further dangers and imprisonment. On the way he revisits churches in Macedonia, encouraging the believers there. His regular practice was to return to churches he had founded to reinforce and encourage their faith. It was during this trip through Macedonia that Paul wrote the second letter to the Corinthians. When Paul arrives in Greece where he will stay for three months, he will write the letter to the Romans.

It was also during this time that Paul would have collected offerings from the Gentile congregations in Macedonia and Greece in order to support the poorer brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. Paul tells the church in Rome that those in Macedonia and Greece were pleased to make this offering (Rom. 15:26-27), and he writes that they were “cheerful givers” (2 Cor. 9:7).

Paul does not travel alone, for his missionary team grows as he continues to travel. The men listed in verse 4 represent his missions to Berea (17:10-15), Thessalonica (17:1-9), Derbe (14:6-20), and Asia (13:1-14:28). These seven men sailed from Corinth across the Aegean Sea to Troas where they waited for Paul to arrive. Meanwhile, Paul and a few others traveled over land from Corinth to Philippi, a journey of about 450 miles, which would have taken about five weeks. Luke seems to indicate that he is among the party traveling with Paul (note the “we” in vs. 5-6).

Luke also gives us the date for Paul's departure from Philippi (vs. 6), as being after the five days of the feast of Unleavened Bread. This feast was connected to the feast of Passover, which was celebrated in AD 57 on April 7th, which left five weeks for the journey from Philippi to Jerusalem which Paul wants to reach in time for Pentecost (vs. 16).

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Why do you think Luke includes specific names and places in these verses?
2. Why would Paul want these believing men to go along for the presentation of the offering in Jerusalem?



WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 28

Read: **Acts 20:7-12**

Paul, who is now in Troas, gathered with the believers on the first day of the week. Because he was planning to leave the next day, *“he prolonged his speech until midnight”* (vs. 7). They shared a meal together, and Luke even includes the detail about the *“many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered”* (vs. 8).

Vs. 9 introduces us to Eutychus, a young man probably between 18 and 30 years old. His name means “lucky one,” and he certainly was on this night. He was sitting at the window while Paul was speaking late that night, and soon sank into a deep sleep. As a result, he fell from the window to the ground below. After the deadly fall, Paul, by the power of Jesus, was able to raise him back to life (vs. 10).

In this event we are reminded of the resuscitations of dead people by Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17; 2 Kings 4), Jesus (Luke 7, 8; John 11), and Peter (Acts 9). The resuscitation of Eutychus puts Paul in the line of the prophets from the Old Testament to Jesus and to Peter, demonstrating the life-giving power of God.

Paul returned upstairs and ate a meal, which would probably have included the Lord’s Supper. It is likely that the raising of Eutychus brought many questions and much excitement, motivating Paul to keep talking until dawn. Verse 12 relates that they were very comforted by Paul's words. In many instances, both Jews and Gentiles were infuriated by Paul's ministry. But to believers, especially Gentile believers, Paul was welcomed and loved.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What should the raising of Eutychus remind us of?
2. Why is it important to be reminded of the resurrection?
3. Why is it important to gather corporately with God's people?

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 29

Read: **Acts 20:13-27**

Luke continues to recount travels in this section of Acts 20. After Troas they go to Assos, Mytilene, Chios, Samos, and then further south on to Miletus. Luke makes mention of the fact that *“Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus”* (vs. 16). He either didn't want to go back to Ephesus because he wanted to be in Jerusalem for the day of Pentecost, or perhaps because he no longer felt welcome there. Some wonder why Luke includes all these travel details. He does so to show the geographical spread of the gospel and to show that Paul continually revisits the churches he planted.

Paul sends for the elders of Ephesus to come to him at Miletus where he gives them his farewell speech. When they arrive, Paul presents a description of his ministry that goes through the end of verse 27. He does this for a number of reasons. First, it shines a light on his own example in ministry, and second, he defends his ministry showing that he is *“innocent of the blood of all”* (vs. 27). Paul makes this second claim because he knows that although he was involved in the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7), he has been forgiven by God and has not been responsible for the death of anyone in Ephesus.

Vs. 19 states that Paul served the Lord *“with all humility and with tears and with trials.”* This is quite a statement because it shows that Paul was humble before God and others, showed caring and tenderness when needed, and exhibited courage and faithfulness when tested. He recounts the path of his ministry work, *“teaching you in public and from house to house”* (vs. 20). He then reveals that he is compelled to go to Jerusalem, despite constant warnings by the Holy Spirit that prison and hardships will face him there (vs. 23).

Paul has completed his race among them, he has served them and told them *“the whole counsel of God”* (vs. 27). If there are those who reject his message, they alone are responsible for such a decision since Paul has spoken clearly about God's salvation to both Jews and Gentiles. This is why Paul can leave, never to return.

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. How would you define “the whole counsel of God”?
2. What does this passage teach about the necessity of humility when doing ministry work?
3. How can you depend more upon the Holy Spirit to lead you each day?

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 30

Read: **Acts 20:28-32**

Paul continues his farewell speech to the elders of Ephesus and reminds them of the necessity of godly living. He exhorts them to *“Pay careful attention to yourselves into all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood”* (vs. 28). Paul calls them overseers, which is a term that describes someone who has the responsibility of guardianship. These Ephesian elders were to watch over the believing community as well as themselves. They were to take care of all members of the church, both Jew and Gentile believers.

The church is described as having been *“obtained with his own blood”* in verse 28. The blood described here is the blood of Jesus, who is God's own Son. Paul also warns that after he leaves there will be those who will infiltrate the church, *“not sparing the flock”* (vs. 29). This is a reference to false teachers who will seek to lead people away from the truth of the gospel. Here Paul is emphasizing personal accountability as well as mutual accountability. This is an important reason a church should have a plurality of elders.

After these serious warnings, Paul delivers a commendation to the elders. *“And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified”* (vs. 32). This word of assurance has two parts. First, it focuses on the Word of God which contains the message of grace that is able to grant believers a heavenly inheritance. Second, it reminds the elders that it is God himself who is the definitive watchman and protector of the church. His promises, presence, and powerful Word will bring them comfort in the years to come.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Why is it important for pastors to keep a close watch on their own lives and the lives of other pastors/elders?
2. What does this passage teach about spiritual “wolves”?
3. Explain why verse 32 is a word of comfort and assurance.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 1

Read: **Acts 20:33-38**

Even though it seems as if Paul's farewell speech could be over at verse 32, he doesn't stop there. He wants to bring up the matter of the elders' relationship with material things. Paul recognized the possibilities that elders might misuse their position for personal gain. So he gives them his own example to show that his attitude towards money and possessions reflected the influence of the teaching of Jesus (Luke 12:13-34; 16:1-15). Paul's life was a model of service. He did not ask or require money for his labor; he worked among others so as not to be a burden.

His speech concluded, Paul kneels down and prays with all of them. He has warned them and entrusted them to God, and now he calls out to God to watch over and keep these people. Luke wants his readers to see in these verses that the relationship Paul has with these Ephesian elders is not a mere friendship, it is companionship in the gospel message that overflows with true affection. The elders were most affected by the news that they would never see Paul again. They knew that Paul was heading into certain danger and no doubt they worried about him. We can imagine that as they accompanied him to the ship (vs. 38), there would have been even more tears as they realized his coming imprisonment.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What can we learn from Paul's work ethic in verses 34-35?
2. Take a moment to pray for your elders and pastors. In what specific ways might you encourage them?

## Acts Chapter 21:1-26

MONDAY, OCTOBER 3

Read: **All of Acts 21:1-26**

What is interesting in these verses is that Paul had already been portrayed as a prophet like Jesus when he was in Ephesus, but now he is portrayed like Jesus in his compulsion to go to Jerusalem. Both of them had predictions of promised suffering. In both cases the Jews were hostile; the victim was to be handed over to the Gentiles and was to suffer. But like Christ, Paul remained committed to doing God's will.

We read of the warning of Agabus who came from Judea. Although Paul would not have dismissed his warnings, they would not hinder him from his ultimate goal of arriving in Jerusalem. It is interesting to see how often Paul is surrounded by Christian friends as he does the work God has called him to do. It's a perfect example of the kind of Christian community every believer should surround himself or herself with. These believers are also quick to pray with Paul and for him (20:36, 21:5).

Two things stand out in these verses: 1) Paul is determined to go to Jerusalem no matter what lay ahead, and 2) Wherever Paul goes he finds a Christian community waiting to welcome him. Paul continues his journey to Jerusalem despite the warning of the disciples at Tyre and of Agabus at Caesarea.

This passage can be broken down into the following five parts: 1) Paul travels to Tyre (vs. 1-6); 2) Paul travels to Jerusalem (vs. 7-14); 3) Paul visits James (vs. 15-20a); 4) The concern of the elders for the Jews (vs. 20b-24); and 5) The responsibility of the Gentile believers (vs. 25-26).

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. How often do you embrace suffering? Why was suffering something Paul was willing to do?
2. What is the ongoing message to the Jewish believers?
3. Do you think Paul made the right decision to go to Jerusalem, even though godly people through the spirit urged him not to go? Why or why not?

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 4

Read: **Acts 21:1-6**

It is evident from these verses that Luke is still with Paul as they set sail for Tyre. They sailed to Cos (vs. 1), which was a small island south of Miletus, and then to Rhodes, a larger southeastern island. Closing in on Asia, they next came to Patara, where they changed ships and went on to land at Tyre. It seems the first thing they did was to seek out Christian believers whom they stayed with for seven days (vs. 4). This was possibly due to the fact that the ship had to unload its cargo and then possibly reload before continuing the trip from Tyre.

It seems that the believers at Tyre tried very hard to talk Paul out of going on to his destination in Jerusalem. Luke says, *“And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem”* (vs. 4). There seems to be a conflict in discerning the message of the Holy Spirit, but there needn't be. The Holy Spirit warns the disciples in Tyre that Paul would face affliction, but what the believers there do not understand is that the Spirit also pushes Paul toward this persecution and not away from it.

Luke writes in verse 5 that the entire group of disciples including their wives and children came to the beach with Paul upon his departure and prayed. This vivid picture of the farewell scene highlights the close bonds that develop between Paul, his companions, and the families of believers in Tyre during the week that he spent there.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How can you ascertain the leading of the Holy Spirit when views are conflicting? When have you experienced this?
2. How can you best view your circumstances and yet lean on the Holy Spirit at the same time?

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 5

Read: **Acts 21:7-14**

The verses in this passage show the journey that takes Paul and his companion south along the coastal towns of Syria along the Mediterranean. After they leave Tyre, they are on their way to Caesarea. At Caesarea, Luke slows down the narrative to recount two specific episodes.

Paul and his companions enter the house of Phillip the evangelist who had four unmarried daughters (vs. 9). The verse says that these daughters prophesied which connects with the prediction made back in chapter 2:17: *“and in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy...”* Although Luke does not tell us the prophecy, it is possible that it contained the same warning Paul has heard about continuing his journey to Jerusalem.

After staying with Phillip and his daughters for several days, Luke speaks of a prophet named Agabus who came from Judea. Judea is a region that includes Jerusalem but not Caesarea. Verse 11 says that Agabus approached Paul and took his belt from him, sat down and tied his own feet with the belt, and then his hands. He obviously then tied the knot with his teeth and upon completion, uttered a prophecy. This should remind the readers of the prophet Ezekiel and Jeremiah who also acted out their prophecies in front of others (Eze. 4:1-17; Jer. 19:1-13).

Paul’s belt is taken to symbolize his being chained as a prisoner in Jerusalem. Agabus predicts that the Jews will bind Paul, and *“deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles”* (vs. 11). This picture causes Paul's companions and the people there to again urge him not to continue his journey. But Paul says emphatically that he is ready and willing to go to Jerusalem and even be arrested or die if it should come to that. After this last statement of Paul’s in verse 13, the community of believers accept that this is the Lord's will for him.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How does this passage highlight the need for Christian friendship?
2. Why is it important to show hospitality to new believers?
3. What were Paul's friends telling him about going to Jerusalem? Do you think Paul made the right decision? Explain.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 6

Read: **Acts 21:15-20a**

After the several days mentioned in verse 10 were over, Paul and his companions got ready and went up to Jerusalem. This would have been a journey of about 60 miles and would have taken three days by foot or two days by horse. It seems as though Paul had a protective escort that brought him to the home of Mnason where he planned to stay. This was a prearranged visit with a Hellenistic Jewish Christian as the reader sees and understands he was from the island of Cyprus.

The reception in Jerusalem is mostly negative, but the narrative begins on a positive note. The believers there receive Paul and his companions warmly (vs. 17). James and all the elders who were there openly praised God for what he had done through his ministry among the Gentiles (vs. 19). Luke does not make any mention of the offering being delivered here, but that may have been because he wanted the emphasis placed on God's work among the unbelieving Gentiles. What God had done confirmed Paul's divine appointment as an apostle to the Gentiles. This should remind each of us to praise God for the victories achieved as we share the gospel with others. The psalmist says, *"My soul, bless the Lord, and do not forget all his benefits"* (103:2).

A few details Luke includes are worth noting. First, Luke makes sure to note all the elders are present. This isn't a private meeting with Paul and James but a formal assembly. Paul will have wide acceptance from the leaders in Jerusalem. The second detail supports this. Paul's report is not fundamentally about his work but God's. God is the main actor in the book of Acts!

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How do Paul and James display humility and love?
2. What pressure do James and the elders face as Paul comes to Jerusalem? How might Paul's teaching cause strict Jews to be upset?



FRIDAY, OCTOBER 7

Read: **Acts 21:20b-24**

Although Luke does not tell the readers the praise of James and the elders after hearing Paul's missionary report (vs. 20a), he relates the second portion of their response: their concerns regarding Paul's reputation and the impact this may have on the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. *"And they said to him, 'You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law'"* (vs. 20b). Luke wants his readers to remember that Paul had met the Jewish believers during his visit to Jerusalem some six years earlier, and they had argued that Gentile converts to faith in Jesus should be circumcised and ordered to keep the entire Mosaic law.

These thousands of believers now mentioned in verse 20 are described as *"zealous for the law"* and are either new believers who have come to faith during Paul's absence or Jewish believers in general who have been influenced by teachers who have promoted adherence to the law. The elders note the existence of rumors. They tell Paul that *"they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses..."* (vs. 21).

The elders want Paul to counteract the false rumors being spread about his teaching. They described the opportunity of four Jewish believers who are under a Nazarite vow. This means that they had refrained from intoxicating drink, from cutting their hair, and from defiling themselves through touching a dead body. Paul is presented with an opportunity to demonstrate his own observance of the law and his willingness to encourage others to be devoted to the law. Paul should join the men as they complete the period of their vow (vs. 24). He should purify himself and undergo a rite of purification. He should also pay the expenses for all the men. The elders hope that such an action will have two results. All the Jewish believers will know that there is nothing in the reports that people have been spreading about Paul. And they will know that Paul conforms to the observance of the law. This will help all to lay to rest the rumors by proving that Paul is observing the Old Testament law.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How would James's suggestion to Paul solve the problem for both of them?
2. How do you decide when you should compromise for the sake of others, and when you should stand for your own principles?

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 8

Read: **Acts 21:25-26**

The last part of the elders' proposal consists of a reminder about the decisions of the apostles' council and the letter that the elders had written to the Gentile believers (15:23-29). The point being made is to articulate the distinction between the behavior of the Gentile believers and the Jewish believers. Gentile Christians do not need to be concerned about circumcision and other matters of the law although they already had been instructed of the decision to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood and from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. The elders in Jerusalem are not asking the Gentile Christians to become Jews but are asking that Jewish Christians should not be made Gentile Christians which would happen if they were asked to abandon circumcision and renounce other ritual aspects of the law.

As a result, *“Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them”* (vs. 26). Paul thinks the elders' recommendation is a good one, so he follows it. He is more than willing to subject himself to Jewish law and to be all things to all people (1 Cor. 9:19-21). However, his persecution was not over. Luke is about to tell his readers again how much Paul will suffer while in Jerusalem.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Why would Paul be so concerned about completing the Nazarite vow?
2. Was Paul's participation in the vow only a tactical move? Why or why not?
3. In what ways are believers free from the law today?

# Acts Chapter 21:27-22:30

MONDAY, OCTOBER 10

Read: **All of Acts 21:27-22:30**

Paul experiences conflict when Jews from Asia see him at the temple in Jerusalem and accuse him of teaching “*everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place*” (vs. 28). Specifically, all the city becomes in an uproar against him (vs. 30). After being severely beaten, the tribune arrested him and Paul requests to speak to the people (vs. 37).

Most of chapter 22 consists of Paul's defense before the Jerusalem crowd and the ongoing problem of Jewish resistance to Paul's ministry. He will focus on his Jewish heritage, his transformation by Jesus, and his calling as an apostle to the Gentiles (22:1-16). He also will provide added information about what happened when he returned to Jerusalem and received divine guidance to leave that city (22:17-21).

When Paul refers to God's call for him to go to the Gentiles, his Jewish audience could stand no more. They demanded that Paul be put to death, but at this point, Paul claims his right as a Roman citizen (22:25).

Paul's defense of his ministry in this chapter will emphasize that he was not only a faithful Jew but called according to God's promises to Israel. In addition, his charge by God to go to the Gentiles was legitimized by the Jewish rejection of the gospel.

This passage can be divided into the following five parts: 1) Paul is seized (21:27-36); 2) Paul's two worlds (21:37-40); 3) Paul Paul's former life and encounter with Jesus (22:1-11); 4) The redirection of Paul's life (22:12-21); and 5) Paul's right as a Roman citizen (22:22-30).

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What was the false claim brought against Paul by the Jews from Asia?
2. In what modern context might Christians face hostility and false accusations? How should we respond to them?
3. Why do you think Paul insisted on going to Jerusalem when he knew he would face certain persecution?

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 11

Read: **Acts 21:27-36**

In these verses, Paul is specifically accused of defiling the Jewish temple by taking a Gentile from the Court of the Gentiles to the inner sanctuary. Of course, Paul had done no such thing. This attack was not instigated by Jews from Jerusalem, but by Jews from Asia. It is likely that they came from Ephesus and had followed Paul to Jerusalem knowing that he had a Gentile in his company. Certainly, this time they would have proof that Paul was deceitful. Luke is careful to tell his readers their thinking: *“For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple”* (vs. 29). Bringing a Gentile into the holy place of the temple was worthy of a death sentence! Gentiles were allowed only in the outer court but not into the inner recesses of the temple.

This created such a disturbance in the city that *“They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion”* (vs. 30b-31). The statement that the *“gates were shut”* has meaning because this would be the last time Paul would see the inside of the beautiful temple. In another 15 years it would be destroyed, never to be rebuilt.

These Jews were not even allowing Paul a hearing before the high priest. Instead, they sought to kill Paul but were stopped by the appearance of the tribune or commander of the Roman troops. It was evident that the number of troops was sufficient to warn them that the riot could not continue in this way.

Paul was arrested, chained, and questioned by the commander. Because of the outside rioting, Paul was literally carried into the barracks (vs. 34-35). The mob of people followed him crying out *“away with him!”* (vs. 36). This is a parallel with Jesus’ experience at his own trial (Luke 28:13).

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Why were the Jewish people enraged at Paul?
2. Compare the reaction against Paul (vs. 30-31) with that against Stephen (6:11-13) some 20 years earlier. What does this tell you about Christian/Jewish relationships in Jerusalem during this period?

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 12

Read: **Acts 21:37-40**

Paul lives in two separate worlds: he is a faithful Jew that's on mission to Gentiles, but he is also a Roman citizen from an important city. What he experiences is the same as Jesus did, as officials do not know what to do with him as the crowd cries out for his death.

It's at this point in the passage that Paul requested to talk to the commander of the troops. Paul obviously asked the question in Greek because the commander was so surprised and concluded that Paul must be an Egyptian insurrectionist since Greek was commonly spoken in Egypt.

The Egyptian in question had *"led 4000 men of the Assassins out into the wilderness"* in a revolt (vs. 38). The historian Josephus writes of this event relating that a false prophet from Egypt had come into the country and gathered 30,000 people whom he led through the desert to the Mount of Olives with the promise that the walls of Jerusalem would collapse. This would allow them to enter the city and take over, making this Egyptian the new ruler. The tribune believed at first that he had captured this Egyptian revolutionary who had managed to get away. This would have been an exciting event if it were true.

Paul is quick to correct the commander's misunderstanding and identifies himself as a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia (vs. 39). This would prove that he was not the Egyptian in question and that as a Jew, would never defile the temple. The tribune grants Paul's request and he begins to address the crowd in Hebrew.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Why do you think Paul keeps quiet about his Roman citizenry at this point?
2. What do you learn about God's protection from these verses?

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 13

Read: **Acts 22:1-11**

These verses have the second account of Paul's Damascus road experience (9:1-18; 26:13-18). This kind of repetition highlights its importance for understanding Paul's mission.

Paul begins to address the Jewish crowd in Hebrew. Luke continues to report the persecution Paul faces from his own Jewish people. He addresses them as *"brothers and fathers"* (vs. 1), showing them the proper respect. When they realize he is speaking in Hebrew they become silent, seeing that he was one of them and not a Gentile.

Paul reflects on his former life as a Jew born in Tarsus but brought up in Jerusalem (vs. 3). He tells his hearers that he was so zealous for the law, he persecuted the way to the death, *"binding and delivering to prison both men and women"* (vs. 4). The label *"the Way"* is used in a context to distinguish the Christian movement from Judaism. Luke gives more of Paul's credentials here than in the earlier account of Paul's conversion in 9:1-19., as he relates that Paul studied under Gamaliel, the famous rabbi. Gamaliel would have guided him in his studies of the scriptures and the law so that Paul would have been able to recognize and interpret it with exactness and precision.

Paul even received letters from the high priest and the Sanhedrin to function as their official agent to persecute Jesus followers in cities further away from Jerusalem and Judea. Beginning in verse 6, Paul tells of his encounter with the risen Jesus. On the journey to Damascus, he was blinded by a brilliant light and heard a voice saying *"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"* (vs. 7). Paul's response was to ask who it was that was speaking and the speaker from heaven identifies himself as *"Jesus of Nazareth"* (vs. 8). This would have been appropriate for the setting of the speech before a Jewish audience.

Paul asked for directions and Jesus tells him to *"go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do"* (vs. 10). He had to be led into the city because he had been blinded by the brilliance of the light although his traveling companions had not (vs. 11).

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What do you see in verses 7-8 that highlights the special relationship between Christ and the church?
2. How is Paul's calling similar to the callings of Moses and Isaiah? How is it different?

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 14

Read: **Acts 22:12-21**

Ananias is a witness to Paul's encounter with the risen Jesus. Luke tells us that he is a *“devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there”* (vs. 12). After pronouncing Paul healed of his temporary blindness, he explains God's choice of Paul to know his will and to be *“a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard”* (vs. 15).

He then challenges Paul to do four things: 1) Paul must *“rise”* and take action according to God's directives; 2) He must *“be baptized”* or immersed in water, which would be expressing repentance for sins; 3) He must *“wash away”* his sins as he is in need of God's forgiveness; and 4) He must call on the name of Jesus who is the *“Righteous One”* (vs. 14).

Verse 16 does not teach that salvation comes by water baptism. *“Calling on his name”* could also be translated *“having called on his name.”* Here Paul's calling on Christ's name for salvation preceded his water baptism. Because he was already cleansed spiritually by calling on the name of the Lord, the phrase *“wash away your sins”* actually refers to the symbolism of baptism. Baptism is a picture of God's inner work in our hearts, and our decision to follow Christ completely.

Paul tells his audience that he visited the temple in order to pray when he returned to Jerusalem. During this time he fell into a trance in which Jesus again appeared to him saying, *“Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me”* (vs. 18). Paul uses his response to remind his hearers of what they already knew: *“that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you”* (Jesus). Jesus then tells him to go far away to the Gentiles to spread the message of salvation (vs. 21).

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Why or why not was Paul's speech effective?
2. Do you think Paul thought that the Jews would be impressed by the radical change in his life after meeting Jesus?
3. How has your faith in Jesus redirected your life in a surprising way?

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 15

Read: **Acts 22:22-30**

The crowd had quietly listened to everything Paul had to say until he related that Jesus had sent him to minister to the Gentiles. At this point, they terminate Paul's speaking time by raising their voices and demanding his death (vs. 22). They even went so far as to throw off their clothes and toss dust in the air! (vs. 23). Paul's message that infuriated the mob was that Jews and Gentiles were equal without the law of Moses (cf. Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:11-22).

The tribune, or commander, then took measures to have Paul flogged. This kind of flogging was used only on non-citizens since it could cripple or even kill a victim. Paul, being a Roman citizen, could now claim his right as a citizen to stop the punishment (vs. 25). When the centurion charged with the flogging responsibility heard Paul's claim, he went to the tribune and told him. The tribune came back to Paul and asked for verification (vs. 27), saying that he had "*bought this citizenship for a large sum*" (vs. 28). Paul replied that he had been a citizen by birth. When the tribune hears Paul is a Roman citizen, he is shocked and afraid, partly because of Paul's identity and partly because he has already broken the law against a Roman citizen.

The next day the tribune unbound Paul and brought him before the Sanhedrin, or council (vs. 30). The tribune knew the accusations against Paul were Jewish, and the best way to understand these was to have a hearing before the Sanhedrin. If Paul were found innocent he could be released, but if the charges were valid the case could be sent to the Roman governor.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Do you think Paul should have allowed himself to be flogged instead of playing his Roman citizenship card? Explain your reasoning.
2. In this chapter, Paul told his own story instead of preaching a sermon. When do you find your story most effective and helpful to others?



# Acts Chapter 23

MONDAY, OCTOBER 17

Read: **All of Acts 23**

In this chapter, Paul addresses the Jewish council of the Sanhedrin. Dominating this section is the question of whether Paul is loyal or disloyal to Judaism. He follows in the footsteps of others who have had to appear before the council in Jerusalem: Stephen (6:12-7:57), Peter and John (4:4-23; 5:21; 27-41), and Jesus himself (Luke 22:66-71). Paul cites scripture (vs. 4-5) and invokes God's judgment on the high priest (vs. 3).

However, the scene before the Sanhedrin ends in violence and further Roman intervention (vs. 10). After Paul is taken to the barracks, the Lord appears to him and exhorts Paul to take courage (vs. 11). All of this results in the Jews forming a plot to kill him, which is spoiled when Paul's nephew hears of their plan (vs. 16). Through the cooperation of a Roman centurion and the tribune, Paul is moved by night to Caesarea to be brought to Felix the governor (vs. 17-24).

A letter from the tribune whose name is Claudius Lysias presents the essentials of the case although he discreetly omits any reference to his preparation to have Paul flogged. This was an important document as Lysias discloses that the accusations against Paul were questions about the Jewish law and nothing deserving of imprisonment or death.

When Felix learns that Paul is from Cilicia, he is determined to hear his case because that province was under his rule (vs. 33-34).

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Luke relates how the future of the gospel was at stake as Jewish forces raged against it and Roman leaders tried to maintain justice. The Romans rescued Paul from death four times as they brought him into custody until all the charges against him could be clarified and presented in court (21:32-33; 22:23-24; 23:10; 23:23ff).

The chapter can be broken down into the following 5 parts: 1) Paul and the high priest (vs. 1-5); 2) Paul and the Pharisees and Sadducees (vs. 6-10); 3) The Lord appears to Paul (vs. 11); 4) The plot against Paul (vs. 12-22); and 5) The plot is thwarted (vs. 23-35).

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. How would you be feeling right now if you were Paul?
2. What did God do to protect Paul?
3. Where specifically in this chapter do you see the sovereignty of God displayed?

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 18

Read: **Acts 23:1-5**

Paul is still in Jerusalem and now interacts with the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court. This would be an official trial. Paul opens by calling them “brothers,” addressing the members of the council as equals. He expresses that he has lived his entire life *“in all good conscience up to this day”* (vs. 1).

It's at this point that the high priest whose name is Ananias commands others to strike Paul on the mouth (vs. 2). This is completely unacceptable and unbiblical (Lev. 19:15) and shows the anger and aggression felt by Paul's Jewish opponents. It is likely that Ananias took Paul's words as a claim that he was still a good Jew even though he was now a Christian which would appear to be blasphemy to the hearing Jews.

Paul responded by rebuking the high priest, *“God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?”* (vs. 3).

By calling him a “whitewashed wall,” he was saying that outwardly the priest looked clean but inwardly he was corrupt, even dead.

Those who heard Paul's outcry informed him that Ananias was the high priest he had just insulted. Paul claims not to have known this and then quotes from Exodus 22:28 which states, *“You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people.”*

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. What sparks this exchange of insults? (See 21:21, 28)
2. Why and how does Paul show his respect and zeal for the Jewish law?

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 19

Read: **Acts 23:6-10**

Paul begins his defense by saying, *“Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial”* (vs. 6). First Paul is stating that he was in fact educated in the pharisaic tradition. Second, this statement divides the audience, and the consequence is that he receives support from the Pharisees, without endorsing everything they taught. Paul sees no hope for a fair trial and plays this tactical move. He focuses his defense on Jesus and his resurrection from the dead. This belief in the resurrection separated him from the rest of the Jews.

The Sadducees denied the resurrection as well as the existence of both angels and spirits (vs. 8), only recognizing the books of Moses as authoritative. But the Pharisees embraced these ideas and believed the resurrection was Israel's ultimate hope. At this point both the Pharisees and Sadducees became engaged in a bitter and violent argument (vs. 9). Soon a few scribes of the Pharisees stood up and said, *“We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?”* (vs. 9). What's tragic about the Pharisees is that they believed in resurrection but failed to rely on Jesus, who is himself *“the resurrection and the life”* (John 11:25).

The tribune, Lysias, fears that Paul will be lynched and as he can't allow a Roman citizen to be killed during a hearing, he is forced to intervene and terminate the meeting of the Sanhedrin. Paul is taken back into the barracks (vs. 10), but not in protective custody, as he is still not free to go. His hearing will continue.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Why is the resurrection central to the Christian faith?
2. Why must we emphasize the resurrection when sharing the gospel?
3. Have you ever shared the gospel in front of an unfriendly and unbelieving audience? If so, what were your biggest challenges?

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 19

Read: **Acts 23:11**

It's hard to imagine what Paul was thinking as he sat in the barracks. He was probably wondering what was going to happen to him next. But verse 11 tells us that the risen Lord whose resurrection was the center of Paul's proclamation and the main reason for the dispute with the Jewish opponents appears to Paul in a vision and speaks to him as he had before (18:9-10).

The Lord said, *"Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome."* Literally, the Lord was saying, "Keep up your courage." Paul had had courage before, and Jesus was encouraging him to continue his bold witness. The Lord also reminded Paul that he wasn't just to defend himself, he was to testify and continue to give witness about his resurrection. And God was showing him that he would guide him to his next destination – Rome. Paul's mission was not yet accomplished! God had more work for him to do.

The Lord knew Paul's situation and condition just as he knows what we face every day. No doubt Jesus' very presence comforted Paul as he can comfort us having promised to *"never leave you or forsake you"* (Heb. 13:5).

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. You may not have a vision like Paul's, but how does God speak to you today?
2. Why is it important to continually immerse yourself in scripture?
3. In what part of your life do you need to "take courage"?
4. How can you experience the reassuring presence of God on a daily basis?

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 21

Read: **Acts 23:12-22**

The day after Jesus reassured Paul through a vision in the barracks, more than 40 Jews made a plot to kill him (vs. 12). This is quite possibly the most serious situation Paul has faced thus far in his travels, and Luke is careful to tell us how large the conspiracy was (vs. 13). These men made an oath to neither eat or drink until they had killed Paul. They even went to the chief priests and elders to convince them to have the tribune bring him down under the guise that they wanted to question him further. They then planned to ambush and kill him (vs. 14-15).

This request would force the tribune Lysias to bring Paul down from the barracks to the council hall of the Sanhedrin which was probably across the outer court of the temple. The conspirators would be posted somewhere along the route, probably hiding among people. It is interesting that Luke does not record the response of the chief priests and elders, but the rest of the narrative implies that they accepted the plot against Paul's life.

God thwarts the scheme by using Paul's unnamed nephew who overhears plans of the ambush (vs. 16). This is the only mention of anyone in Paul's family in the New Testament. After hearing of the plot, he is able to enter the barracks and tell Paul, who then calls a centurion to take his nephew to the tribune. Upon questioning the nephew in private, the tribune is made aware of the details of the plot. Paul's nephew adds his urgent plea for help, *"But do not be persuaded by them, for more than 40 of their men are lying in ambush for him, who have bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they have killed him. And now they are ready, waiting for your consent"* (vs. 21).

Realizing the seriousness of the information, the tribune Lysias cautioned Paul's nephew to keep their meeting a secret. Quite likely Lysias does not want the Jews to know that he is aware of their plan. He also wants to protect Paul's nephew who would face retribution should word get out.

Luke's main point here is to show how God uses individuals to accomplish his will. God will make it possible for Paul to witness in Rome by keeping him from the hands of his enemies in a most surprising way.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How did God providentially protect Paul?
2. What do you learn about God from these verses?

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 22

Read: **Acts 23:23-35**

Paul escaped death once again. The tribune listens and believes Paul's nephew and takes immediate action. He calls for 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen, and 200 spearmen to take Paul safely to Governor Felix in Caesarea. Caesarea was a harbor city on the Mediterranean about 25 miles northwest of Samaria. It was the headquarters for Roman military forces.

Paul travels with a small army to protect him. In doing so, God's will to bring Paul to Rome is accomplished. This is a great reminder that God can use governments to achieve his purposes. Proverbs 21:1 says, *"the king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever he will."*

The tribune Lysias writes a letter to Felix testifying to Paul's innocence in the matter before the Sanhedrin. The conflict involving Paul revolved around theology and so didn't warrant death or imprisonment. He addresses Felix as *"His Excellency the governor"* (vs. 26). In Roman society there were defined levels of social order so when the tribune Lysias sent Paul to Felix he was sending him to someone very high up in the Roman hierarchy. Felix would have been a regional governor. However, both historians Josephus and Tacitus wrote that Felix was known for his brutality.

The soldiers take Paul to Antipatris the next morning under cover of night. The 70 horsemen then ride with Paul to Caesarea. Although this looked like man's plan, the sovereignty of God was on full display.

The letter contained the main facts about Paul with the omission that before he had realized Paul was a Roman, he had him put in chains and had prepared to flog him. When the letter was delivered to Felix he acted in the proper legal manner and held a preliminary interrogation. He wanted to establish Paul's status by finding out what province he was from (vs. 34). After agreeing to a hearing after Paul's accusers arrived in Caesarea, Felix commanded Paul to be guarded in Herod's praetorium (vs. 35).

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How does this chapter strengthen your faith and trust in the Lord?
2. What does Paul's life teach about living as law-abiding citizens?
3. What are the parallels between Paul's experience here and the experience of Jesus before Pilate?

## Acts Chapter 24-26

MONDAY, OCTOBER 24

Read: **All of Acts 24-26**

In Caesarea, the Jewish leaders charged Paul with crimes against Judaism (24:1-9), charges which Paul answers (24:10-13). Governor Felix keeps Paul in jail partly to please the Jews and partly hoping to receive a bribe. He and his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, were curious about Paul's teachings (23:14-26). Felix keeps Paul in jail for two years and he is succeeded by Porcius Festus (23:27).

The Jews see this as a good time to press for Paul's conviction (25:1-8) and ask Festus for a favor. They want Paul to go to Jerusalem so that they can kill him on the way. Paul appeals to Caesar (25:10) and claims the right of every Roman citizen to be tried in Rome itself, in Caesar's court. Since Festus doesn't know what to do with Paul he quickly agrees (25:10-12).

A few days later king Agrippa and Bernice arrive at Caesarea and hear about Paul's case. Agrippa decides he would like to hear from Paul and so the following day Paul is brought in before them (25:13-27). Paul's defense is in the form of his personal testimony and contains a challenge to Festus to believe (26:1-29). Although they are not persuaded, the governor and king agree that Paul is innocent (26:30-32).

These chapters can be broken down into the following five parts: 1) The trial before Felix (24:1-23); 2) The imprisonment in Caesarea under Felix (24:24-27); 3) The imprisonment in Caesarea under Festus (25:1-12); 4) Paul before Agrippa and Bernice (25:13-26:11); and 5) Paul's conversion story (26:12-32).

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. How would you be feeling right now if you were Paul? Why do you think he could remain so calm?
2. What did God do to protect Paul?
3. Where specifically in these chapters do you see the sovereignty of God displayed?

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 25

Read: **Acts 24:1-23**

Caesarea was the seat of Roman governors in the province of Judea, and since the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem did not have full authority for the prosecution of a case that could lead to a death sentence, they needed the cooperation of the Roman governor. It is evident that Paul's opponents wanted a death penalty because they had already attempted to kill Paul in the temple courts (21:27-36).

They also knew the Roman authorities were not competent to judge the religious charges against Paul which included profaning the temple at apostasy from both Jewish traditions and the law of Moses.

Their spokesman was one Tertullus who claimed that Paul was *“one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. He even tried to profane the temple but we seized him”* (vs. 5b-6). The Jews agreed with these charges and Paul began to make his defense. He begins by acknowledging Felix’s expertise as a judge with respect to the Jewish nation. He had had judicial experience for many years. He told Felix that he arrived in Jerusalem only 12 days previously and the purpose of his visit was to worship. Paul’s mention of 12 days was to show that it was hardly a sufficient time to organize a riot in the city. Paul admits that he is a follower of Jesus and confesses that he worships God *“according to the Way”* (vs. 14). He believes everything that is in the law, and everything written in the prophets and believes that there will be a resurrection of the dead (vs. 15).

Paul protests that the people who should be accusing him are Jews from the province of Asia (vs. 18), because they were eyewitnesses to his presence in the temple - not Tertullus or the Sanhedrin. If Paul is guilty of the charges against him these Jews from another province must be present in the legal proceedings against him (vs. 19). Since the eyewitnesses of the original charges against him are not present, Paul invites Ananias the high priest and the other Jewish officials to state *“what wrongdoing they found when I stood before the council”* (vs. 20). The one possible charge that they can bring is that he declared his belief in a future resurrection, which of course, divides the members (vs. 21).

Felix decides to adjourn the meeting in order to gather more facts before ruling on the case, and Paul is granted some freedom while in custody (vs. 23).

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. Paul's opponents refer to him as a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. What does this show about their view of Christianity?
2. Given what happened in Corinth (18:12-16), why would Paul want to shift the focus of the controversy to his belief in the resurrection?
3. What does Paul's defense teach us about our gospel conversations?



WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 26

Read: **Acts 24:24-27**

In this brief narrative, Luke relates the private encounter with the governor and his wife Drusilla. She was a Jew (vs. 24) and was the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa I and sister to Herod Agrippa II (25:13). She had previously been married but had committed adultery with Felix whom she later married (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.141-144). What's interesting to note was that Herod was aggressive in his opposition to Christianity back in chapter 12, but now his daughter and later his son (26:24) would actively listen to Paul's testimony about Jesus Christ.

Paul talked to Felix and Drusilla not only about faith in Christ (vs. 24) but "*about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment*" (vs. 25). "Righteousness" can be connected with justice in regard to personal behavior. Both justice and self-control were needed by someone in Felix's position. Paul appealed to their consciences to recognize their guilt and need for repentance. The day of judgment was coming, and they both needed to come to faith in Jesus as Israel's Messiah. Hearing Paul's testimony and teaching, Felix was troubled and quickly dismissed Paul, refusing to decide about his own salvation and Paul's imprisonment (vs. 25).

Felix would send for him often and speak with him, but Luke tells us that he was also hoping for bribe money from Paul (vs. 26). Luke doesn't tell us how Felix thought Paul could pay this money, but perhaps he had heard that Paul had previously collected monies for the church in Jerusalem (24:17). After two years had passed, a new governor was on his way. This would have been an ideal time for Felix to release Paul since the Jews have not brought any further witnesses to advance the case against him. But Luke tells us that he left Paul in prison "*desiring to do the Jews a favor*" (vs. 27).

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Why do you think Felix was alarmed at Paul's words?
2. When have you confronted someone with their need to repent and come to faith in Christ?
3. Why must we be more concerned about offending Christ than culture?

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 27

Read: **Acts 25:1-12**

Festus has now replaced Felix as governor of Judea. Felix was recalled to Rome to answer for his incompetent administration of the province and nothing more is written of him in scripture.

When Festus traveled to Jerusalem the chief priests and other opponents of Paul presented their case against him. They asked Festus to transfer Paul to Jerusalem, but behind this request was a plot to assassinate him on the way (vs. 2-3).

Festus is against this idea and requires the Jewish leaders to follow proper procedures and go to Caesarea to present their case against Paul there (vs. 4-5). As soon as he returned to Caesarea, Festus sends for Paul for a hearing (vs. 6). Paul's accusers have come down from Jerusalem making many serious charges which they could not prove (vs. 7). Paul argues, *"neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense"* (vs. 8). His defense was that he was an honorable Jew and not an enemy of Caesar, which would have been the most serious charge.

But instead of making a civil decision, Festus makes a political one. Verse 9 tells us that he wanted to do the Jews a favor. He asked Paul if he wishes to go to Jerusalem to answer for the Jewish charges. But since he had not committed any crimes against the Jews, he had the right to appeal to Caesar (vs. 11). Festus answers, *"To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go"* (vs. 12).

Paul was motivated by his desire to proclaim the gospel in Rome. God fulfills his purpose for Paul by protecting him from injustice and making it possible for him to travel to Rome.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Two years have passed since the trial before Felix (24:27). Why do you think the opposition to Paul by the Jewish leaders continued?
2. How do you see God's sovereignty in fulfilling his words to Paul from 23:11?

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 28

Read: **Acts 25:13-26:11**

In this section, Paul appears before King Agrippa and gives his longest and theologically most explicit speech in his own defense. Herod Agrippa II was the last ruler in the Herodian line. His father, Herod Agrippa I opposed Christianity (12:1), and his grandfather was Herod the Great (Matt. 2:1-23) who sought to kill baby Jesus.

Luke tells us that King Agrippa and his wife Bernice came to Caesarea to pay their respects to Governor Festus (25:13). Festus tells of Paul's case to the king, relating that the Jews had asked for a sentence of condemnation against him. He makes it clear that he is at a loss as to how to understand the Jewish charges since they involve *"a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive"* (25:19). Festus believes that such religious charges could only be solved in Jerusalem, but he hides the fact that he was actually wanting to do the Jews a favor. King Agrippa then decides that he wants to hear from Paul himself on the very next day (25:22).

Luke tells his readers that the following day King Agrippa and Bernice came into the audience hall with *"great pomp"* (25:23). Festus seems to be in charge of the proceedings and has Paul brought in. He tells King Agrippa that he finds Paul innocent but since Paul has appealed to Rome, he will go ahead and send him there (25:25). But he needs the kings' help to draft a report specifying all the charges brought against Paul (25:26-27).

At this point, Agrippa takes charge of the proceedings and allows Paul to speak. The fact that Luke tells his readers that Paul *"stretched out his hand and made his defense"* (26:1) shows that Paul took the stance of an orator. He begins his speech by laying out his Jewish credentials beginning with his time in Jerusalem where he lived as a Pharisee (26:4-5). Paul talks about his hope in the resurrection which was identical to the promise that God made to his chosen people (26:6). He says it is for this hope that the Jews accuse him. Then he addresses a wider audience and says, *"Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?"* (26:7-8).

He then talks about his time spent persecuting Christians and how he locked them up in prison and even cast his vote for them to die (26:10), taking his *"raging fury against them... even to foreign cities"* (26:11).

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What does Festus say to Agrippa about Paul in 25:13-22? What does he leave out?
2. Under whose authority did Paul act during this time?

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 29

Read: **Acts 26:12-32**

For the third time in the book of Acts, readers are presented with Paul's Damascus road encounter with Jesus Christ. In this account, we don't read of Ananias who ministered to Paul during the days of his blindness after the encounter. The commission Paul receives comes directly from Jesus himself. Jesus says to him, *"I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles - to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me"* (vs. 16-18).

One theme seen in these verses is that of light. Light fills the scene first as it appears to Paul on the road, and then as a spiritual light that comes from the forgiveness of sins. Paul is sent to turn their eyes from darkness to light so that men might receive the gift of salvation.

Paul says that he is not disobedient to what Jesus asked him to do as he has always proclaimed that both Jews and Gentiles must repent (vs. 19-20). Paul points to God's help in bringing him to testify *"both to small and great"* (vs. 22) telling his audience nothing beyond what Moses and the prophets said – that the Messiah, Jesus, would be resurrected and become a light for both Jew and Gentile (vs. 23).

At this point, Festus interrupts Paul's defense calling him insane but Paul brings Agrippa into the conversation asserting that the king has more knowledge than Festus does of the way Christianity was brought about. He questions Agrippa about his belief, and the king replies, *"In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?"* (vs. 27-28). Whether the king was being cynical or simply expressing surprise, Paul's hope is that everyone who hears him this day would become a believer as he is (vs. 29).

The hearing is over and the group leaves agreeing between them that Paul has done nothing to deserve death or imprisonment but because he has appealed to Caesar to Caesar he will go (vs. 30-32).

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How does Paul's speech in chapter 26 magnify the resurrection? How does it show Christ as the fulfillment of Jewish hope?
2. Explain how a person might be "kicking against the goads" (26:14).
3. What does it mean to perform deeds in keeping with repentance (26:20)?

# Acts Chapter 27

MONDAY, OCTOBER 31

Read: **All of Acts 27**

From here to the end of the book of Acts, Luke's major theme is that nothing can hinder the unfolding of God's plan. God's will for Paul was for him to go and testify in Rome of Jesus Christ. Going back to Acts 1:8 and the words of Jesus prior to his ascension, *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth,"* it would seem as though Rome would not be considered earth's end. However, from a Roman perspective, Rome was not the end of the earth, but the very center of it from which everything in the empire radiated outwards.

An additional theme is that Paul continues to act as God's prophet even while in prison. Even though the Roman court has found him innocent of all charges, Paul is still under guard as he travels. He will continue to vindicate his mission to the Gentiles and will attempt to convince the Jews of faith in Christ.

As the reader follows Paul on his final journey to Rome, take note of God's providential care over Paul and those who accompany him. A large part of the chapter takes place at sea. Now the Jews were not a seafaring race, unlike the Egyptians, Phoenicians, and Greeks. However, Paul had spent some time on the sea, putting in at ports, and watching and waiting as cargoes were loaded and unloaded. Second Corinthians 11 tells us that he had already been shipwrecked at least three times before the Acts 27 journey takes place.

The chapter can be divided into the following 5 parts: 1) Putting out to sea (vs. 1-6); 2) Paul warns of coming danger (vs. 7-12); 3) The great storm (vs. 13-26); 4) Paul's confirmation of safety for all (vs. 27-38); and 5) The shipwreck (vs. 39-44).

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever been in a life-threatening situation? How did you react to it?
2. What did God do to protect Paul?
3. Where specifically in this chapter do you see the sovereignty of God displayed?

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 1

Read: **Acts 27:1-6**

Luke implies that he is an eyewitness to these events in Paul's life as he continues the we-narrative (left off in 21:18) in verse 1: *"And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort named Julius."* The reader will be told later in verse 42 that the ship contains prisoners, probably convicted criminals being sent to Rome to be killed in gladiator games. The centurion in charge of these prisoners is named Julius. Paul is also accompanied by Aristarchus who had been mentioned in 19:29.

Their ship was a trading ship that supplied the ports along the coast of Asia (vs. 2). Even though Paul is in custody, Luke tells us that the centurion Julius *"treated Paul kindly"* and even allowed him to see his friends in Sidon who would supply his needs, probably providing food and clothing for the journey (vs. 3).

They leave Sidon and sail *"under the lee"* of Cyprus – meaning the side of the island that offered the most protection from the wind. They eventually land at the port city of Myra, which was the main port for the Alexandrian grain ships, a voyage that most likely took 15 days (vs. 4-5).

Egypt provided the majority of grain to Rome, and so it would not have been difficult for Julius the centurion to find an Alexandrian ship bound for Italy. Paul and others were put on board (vs. 6).

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. From verses 1-3, what do you know about the centurion in charge?
2. What do you learn about the importance of Christian friendship in these verses?

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 2

Read: **Acts 27:7-12**

The centurion guarding Paul has put him on another ship that is carrying grain, headed toward Italy. However, the winds at sea cause a problem as the ship is unable to land at Cnidus. So they decide to sail south of Crete and go along the coast and come to a place called Fair Havens near a settlement called Lasea (vs. 7-8). Here would be much debate and indecision about furthering the trip.

At this point Luke relates that much time has already passed and the voyage was becoming dangerous (vs. 9). He says that *“even the Fast was already over,”* referring to the Day of Atonement which would place the date between October 5 and 10 (vs. 9). According to the seafarers at the time, navigation on the Mediterranean was safe until mid-September. In fact, it was rare that any navigation would take place between November 11th and March 5th because of the many winter storms. Luke references such trouble later on in vs. 20 when he writes, *“When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days...”* referring to the invisibility of the sun and stars due to poor weather conditions.

Paul's assessment of the situation was based on his experience as a traveler and so he strongly urges the sailors to not continue the voyage (vs. 10). But the centurion in charge decided to listen to the pilot of the ship as well as the owner and the voyage would continue. The decision to sail on was made *“because the harbor was not suitable to spend the winter in.”* So the crew hoped that somehow, they could reach a harbor of Crete called Phoenix where they could spend the winter (vs. 12).

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. Can you recall a time when you were warned not to do something, but you did it anyway? What happened?
2. If you were the ship's owner or pilot, how would you react to Paul's warning about the 50-mile trip they wanted to make (vs. 10)?
3. Would you have responded any differently than the centurion did to Paul's concern?

## THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 3

Read: **Acts 27:13-26**

At first, the voyage goes smoothly. The ship sailed along Crete and soon encountered a “northeaster” which Luke describes as a “*tempestuous wind*” (vs. 14). It became obvious that the decision to leave port was a mistake. The wind was so powerful the sailors lost control of the ship and were driven along by the wind (vs. 15).

By this time they were 25 miles south near a small island called Cauda. On the southern side of the island, they found enough shelter from the wind to secure the lifeboat that was towed behind the ship. Verse 16 uses the pronoun “we,” indicating that some of the passengers may have helped the crew to do this. Soon another potential danger faced them as they began to work frantically to keep the ship from running aground on the shallows of Syrtis (vs. 17). These shallows were deadly sandbars off the coast of North Africa infamous as a graveyard for vessels. The ship was about 400 miles from where they had first set sail.

The next day the decision was made to jettison the cargo, and the third day they even “*threw the ship’s tackle overboard with their own hands*” (vs. 19). Paul’s warning back in verse 10 now looked like it was coming true. Verse 20 reads, “*when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.*” The passengers and crew lost all hope and resigned themselves to death at sea.

Luke tells his readers in verse 21 that no one had eaten for a long time. This is when Paul stood up and says for the most part “I told you so!” “*Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss.*” But Paul is quick to assure them that there would be no loss of life but only of the ship. How did he know this? An angelic messenger of God had appeared to him and had assured him that he would stand before Caesar. The messenger also said, “*God has granted you all those who sail with you*” (vs. 24). Because of this, Paul encouraged the men even as he warned them that the ship would run aground on an island.

Two things characterize Paul’s assurance: 1) he knows that he belongs to God; and 2) he has faith that God will keep his word that he would stand before Caesar. If these characterize our relationship with God, we too can have courage however dark the situation may appear.

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. Explain some ways Paul displays great spiritual and practical leadership in this story.
2. In a crisis, Paul reacted with urgent forewarnings, common sense, giving thanks, remaining calm, and persevering to the end. In comparison, how do you react to crises?



## FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 4

Read: **Acts 27:27-38**

By the 14th night, the storm had driven the ship into the Adriatic Sea off the east coast of Italy. About midnight the sailors sensed they were heading close to land and began to take soundings. They would throw a rope overboard with some kind of weight on it to try to determine how deep the water was. The first sounding was 20 fathoms, or about 120 feet, and the second 15 fathoms, or about 90 feet. Since they were so close to land, they dropped 4 anchors from the back of the boat and *“prayed for day to come”* (vs. 29). With the morning light, they could determine where they were.

At least some of the sailors were looking to escape the ship, and so under the pretense of lowering anchors from the bow of the ship they proceeded to lower a lifeboat, hoping to row to shore. Paul knew what they were doing and warned the centurion and soldiers, *“unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved”* (vs. 31). The soldiers were able to cut the ropes to the lifeboat and let it go (vs. 32).

Just before daybreak, Paul urged everyone to eat and assured them they would survive. Luke tells his readers that, *“he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat”* (vs. 35). This meal gave Paul the opportunity to display his faith in front of all the sailors, and by conducting a meal, Paul shows he is calm in the midst of the storm. All 276 on board take Paul’s advice and when they had finished eating, they threw the rest of the grain on board into the sea in order to lighten the ship (vs. 38). This decision would have been made by the ship’s captain, who was responsible for the safety of the grain cargo going to Italy. The captain concluded that if the ship crashed on the rocks in the middle of the bay no one would probably survive.

### CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. Explain how Paul gave an appropriate and clear witness on this trip. How might you apply some of these methods in your own interactions?
2. Explain some ways Paul displays great spiritual and practical leadership in this account.

**SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 5**

Read: **Acts 27:39-44**

These final verses in this chapter have the account of the shipwreck at sea. The crew was not able to identify their location when morning came because there was no harbor. But they noticed a bay with a beach and planned to run the ship aground there (vs. 39). Some of the crew proceeded to cut the ropes that held the four anchors, letting them drop into the sea. Other members of the crew loosened the ropes of the rudders. Finally, they hoisted the foresail to the wind and headed for the beach (vs. 40).

They soon struck a sandbar where the bow became stuck, but the stern was exposed to the pounding waves. It was time to escape the ship soon as it would be totally crushed. At this point, an important decision had to be made by the soldiers. In order to stay alive, they would need to swim to shore. But if any of their prisoners escaped as they were making their way to shore, the soldiers would face execution for losing them. The decision was made to kill the prisoners and leave them on board. But Julius the centurion wanted to save Paul, so he intervened. Luke writes, *“he ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land”* (vs. 43b-44).

Everyone survived just as Paul had told. God keeps his promises! He does not always promise rescue and survival in dangerous situations, but he always keeps his word. Luke’s report of Paul’s assurance to crew and passengers that they would not lose a single hair from their head (vs. 27) reminds us that God cares about every detail of our lives.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How can you begin to trust the Lord as Paul did? What changes in your life do you need to make to increase your faith?
2. How do Paul’s attitudes and actions compare with those of the sailors?
3. To what would you attribute Paul’s ability to remain calm under pressure?

# Acts Chapter 28

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 7

Read: **All of Acts 28**

In this closing chapter of the book of Acts, Paul has three encounters: 1) unbelieving pagans (vs. 1-10); 2) Christians (vs. 14-15); and 3) unbelieving Jews (vs. 17-28).

After all 276 lives were saved during the shipwreck of chapter 27, Paul's story picks up on the island of Malta. Here is where Paul will have a Gentile focus, as he becomes their guest. Some commentators refer to Paul's time on Malta as a theoxeny. A theoxeny is an account in Greek mythology where someone unknowingly shows hospitality to a god or an emissary of God. It is certainly not because Paul is divine, but because of the indwelling Holy Spirit, he carries a divine presence. The Islanders are soon convinced through a series of miracles that Paul is himself a god.

After a number of months, Paul arrives in Rome, receiving a welcome from the Christians there. The reader sees that the witness of Jesus Christ outpaces Paul! Paul has never met these believers, but their hospitality to him encourages and strengthens him.

Finally, he is able to meet with the local leaders of the Jews to deliver his defense of the wrongful accusations made against him for which he is in chains. At this point, Paul's ministry to the Jews is still his highest priority, although he has made it clear salvation is for all people. This final message to the Jews in Rome will be a turning point – salvation will now go to the Gentiles because of the spiritual blindness of the Jews and their resistance to the gospel message.

The chapter can be broken down into the following five points: 1) the winter layover in Malta (vs. 1-6); 2) the healing of the father of Publius and other Maltese people (vs. 7-10); 3) the voyage from Malta to Rome (vs. 11-16); 4) Paul before the Jewish leaders in Rome (vs. 17-22); and 5) Paul's response to Jewish rejection (vs. 23-31).

## CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:

1. What is the response to Paul's message from each group encounter?
2. Why is Christian fellowship so important?

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 8

Read: **Acts 28:1-6**

It's interesting to read that when the shipwreck was over and they were brought safely to shore (27:44), Not one of them knew where they were until the inhabitants of the island told them. They had landed on the island of Malta. Malta is about 18 miles long and eight miles wide and lies between Sicily and the African coast.

The ESV translation calls the islanders "*native people*" (vs. 2), but the actual Greek word could be translated as "barbarians." This did not mean that they were savages! They would have been referred to this way since Greek was not their speaking language and they were otherwise uncultured. Paul will say in his letter to the Romans, "*I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome*" (Rom. 1:14). In Colossians, he writes, "*here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; But Christ is all, and in all*" (Col. 3:11).

The people of Malta were not wary of the strangers who had shown up on their shore, but instead, "*showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all*" (vs. 2). They were anxious to show hospitality to Paul and the others. Since it had begun to rain, Paul helped to gather wood for a fire only to be bitten by a viper (vs. 3). The islanders then assumed that Paul must be a criminal and was receiving a form of divine justice. They watched Paul carefully as he shook the snake off into the fire and showed no ill effects from the bite. When Paul did not fall down dead, they changed their minds about their first impression of him and foolishly "*said that he was a god*" (vs. 6). What Luke wants to remind his readers is that Paul was under God's protective hand, guiding and protecting him all the way to Rome.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How do you react when faced with circumstances that are beyond your control?
2. What do you learn about the promises of God in these verses?
3. How should we respond to displays of kindness from unbelievers we encounter?

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 9

Read: **Acts 28:7-10**

Paul is still dealing with unbelieving pagans in these verses. He is still on the island of Malta and now is about to meet the chief official of the island.

There was an estate nearby that belonged to an important man whose name was Publius. He soon welcomed the survivors of the shipwreck. Since he was such a high-ranking official, he would have spent most of his time in the capital city of Melita. No doubt the shipwreck was visible from many parts of the island which probably prompted Publius to investigate what had happened. Like the earlier islanders in vs. 1-6, he *“received us and entertained us hospitably for three days”* (v. 7). It is unlikely that he hosted all 276 survivors, but more specifically Julius the centurion and his prisoners, as well as Paul's travel companions.

God then gave Paul the opportunity to demonstrate grace toward this family of unbelievers, as a healing story comes next. Publius' father was in bed sick with fever. The text also says that he had dysentery, commonly referred to as *“Malta fever,”* which was known since the 19th century to be caused by a microbe in goat's milk. Verse eight tells us that Paul visited him, prayed for him, and laid hands on him, resulting in his healing. Although this is the only place in the book of Acts where prayer and the laying on of hands are combined, prayer is especially mentioned here to show Paul's reliance on God as well as to show the unbelievers how different he was from their Greco-Roman portrayals of divinity.

God continued his healing work through Paul as, *“the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured”* (vs. 9). As a result of the miracles Paul performed, Paul and his guests were honored greatly and given what they would need for their final trip to Rome (vs. 10).

Luke wants his readers to see that even though Paul is a prisoner God continually gives him opportunities to minister to unbelieving Gentiles.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Do you look at every day as an opportunity to witness for Jesus in some way?
2. What would have motivated the islanders to supply Paul with his needs to finish his trip to Rome?

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 10

Read: **Acts 28:11-16**

Paul and his companions remain on the island of Malta for three months before finding a ship to further their trip to Rome. The departure date was probably late January or early February even though the official reopening of navigation on the Mediterranean Sea was generally March 10<sup>th</sup>. Luke tells his readers that it was a ship of Alexandria, so no doubt a grain ship. Its pilot would have been in a hurry to leave for Italy in order to get back to Alexandria in the spring. This would be a 210-mile trip.

Luke then points out an interesting detail in verse 11. The figurehead hanging on the bow was that of the “twin gods.” The Greek text is not specific, but the gods were most likely the sons of Zeus whose names were Castor and Pollux. They were the so-called deities responsible for guaranteeing the safe sailing of ships. Obviously, the one protecting this journey was God himself.

The ship stopped at Syracuse for three days and then went on to Rhegium, at the southern tip of Italy, finally reaching Puteoli, modern-day Naples (vs. 13). There, Paul was invited to stay with believers for a week, probably to rest up since the remainder of the trip would be made on foot. Again, the presence of a church in Puteoli shows the extent of the gospel impact. Since Paul had never been to Italy himself, this was not a church that he could have started.

After Paul left Puteoli, believers came from Rome and met him along the Appian Way, the major road that led into the city. The Forum (or market) of Appius was 43 miles south of Rome and on the Appian Way. Three Taverns was 10 miles north of the Forum of Appius, and 33 miles from Rome. Seeing these believers was a great encouragement to Paul, and he thanked God for them and his safe arrival. He realized that word had spread in Italy that he had arrived. His letter to the Romans had reached them three years earlier, and so Paul's reputation had preceded him (vs. 15). While there, he was treated with respect and granted limited freedom (vs. 16).

Luke wants his readers to understand how God encouraged Paul by surrounding him with believers before he came to Rome. And the rest of the chapter Paul will face unbelieving Jews, so this encouragement would have been necessary and precious to him.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Given the long delay, his shipwreck at sea, and his continuing status as a prisoner, how would Paul feel upon finally arriving in Rome?
2. At the end of this passage, Paul thanked God. Consider the ways God has provided for you in recent months and give him thanks.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 11

Read: **Acts 28:17-22**

Paul did not wait long before he summoned the local leaders of the Jews (vs. 17). He began his defense by assuring them that he was not a criminal. Jews in Jerusalem had charged that Paul was opposed to the Mosaic law, but Paul tells these leaders that he is not against Jewish customs. Even the Romans had wanted to set Paul free, finding no reason for his imprisonment (vs. 18). Paul informs them that the Jews in Jerusalem even wanted the death penalty in his case, so imprisonment for them was not enough.

He goes on to tell these Jewish leaders that *"it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain"* (vs. 20). This phrase refers to the hope that the Messiah would come and fulfill God's promises made to Israel. Paul's point was that this hope for the Messiah had already been fulfilled with the coming of Jesus of Nazareth. So he had been imprisoned only for believing that Israel's hope had already come and not because he denied any essential law of Judaism.

The leaders respond that they had not received any letter from Jerusalem outlining charges against Paul. They requested a second meeting to hear Paul's opinion on *"this sect"* (vs. 22). Calling Christianity a sect imply that they consider this new faith a movement within Judaism but with potentially dangerous beliefs.

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. Why do you think Paul was in a hurry to meet with the Jewish leaders in Rome?
2. Why wouldn't Paul have countercharges to bring against the Jews for his imprisonment?

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 12

Read: **Acts 28:23-31**

At the second scheduled meeting, many more Jewish leaders attended Paul at the house where he was under guard. For hours Luke tells his readers, *“he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets”* (vs. 23). It would have been important for Paul as he tried to persuade Jews that Jesus was the fulfillment of Israel’s messianic and kingdom expectations, to connect Jesus with the Hebrew scriptures.

Luke tells his readers that some were convinced, but most refused to believe (vs. 24). This was the same kind of response to the gospel message throughout the book of Acts (13:42-45; 17:1-5, 11-14; 19:8-10). This divided response resulted in disagreements amongst themselves causing Paul to quote Isaiah 6:9-10 where Isaiah warned his generation of divine retribution for rejecting his message. Israel rejected Isaiah’s message because their heart had *“grown dull”* (vs. 27), resulting in their lack of seeing or hearing the truth. In essence, Paul was telling the Jewish leaders of Rome that they were becoming like the Jewish people of Isaiah’s generation who came under judgment for their deliberate rejection of God’s message. This meant that they possibly would pass a point where they would never be able to return to the Lord and be spiritually restored.

Paul then pronounced that the gospel message would be sent to the Gentiles who would listen (vs. 28). The Jews’ unbelief gave Paul the opportunity to offer salvation to others. Again we see that God’s plans cannot be frustrated even by the unbelief of his chosen people.

Luke closes the book by reporting that Paul lived in Rome for two years preaching and teaching about Jesus Christ with great boldness (vs. 30-31). And so the book of Acts ends as it started with the proclamation of the kingdom of God (Acts 1:6).

### **CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:**

1. How can you be like Paul and pour your life out in service to Jesus Christ?
2. How did Paul make the most of his house arrest in Rome? What does his example teach about making the most of every ministry opportunity the Lord gives us?
3. What would it look like for you to speak about Jesus with boldness? Ask God to give you the boldness you need to be a witness for him.