



A Bible Reading Plan for the Book of Acts

April 1-June 3

Mountain Brook Baptist Church
www.mbbc.org



Acts

ABOUT PROJECT 119

Project 119 is a Bible reading initiative of Mountain Brook Baptist Church. Our hope is that every member of our church family would be encouraged in his or her relationship with Jesus Christ through the regular reading of God's Word.

This reading plan will guide you through the book of Acts. The plan provides you a devotional thought and Scripture reading for each day of the week. On the weekends, we suggest that you re-read the Scripture passages that you have been working through during the past week.

To receive email updates when devotionals are added to the blog, go to www.mbbc.org/blog, click on "Subscribe to Mountain Brook Blog by Email" and follow the instructions. To learn more about Project 119 and to access previous plans, visit www.mbbc.org/project119.

INTRODUCTION

The book of Acts is unlike anything else we have in the New Testament, isn't it? It's not quite like a gospel, and it's definitely not written in the epistolary style of the Pauline letters. The book combines a recording of the history of the early church with speeches, accounts of miraculous events, and action-packed scenes of persecution and triumph. The full title of the book of Acts is actually "The Acts of the Apostles," which is appropriate because, in some ways, Acts gives us the history of the early church through the faithful witness of several significant apostles. For instance, in the book of Acts, we meet the first Christian martyr, Stephen, and the former persecutor of the church turned apostle, Paul, whose writings make up much of the New Testament.

The book of Acts actually began as a letter, written by the gospel writer Luke, to Theophilus. (Luke had also written the gospel of Luke to Theophilus.) It's likely that the letter was written in the 60s, possibly in 62 AD. And Luke didn't write as a third-party observer; many scholars believe that the references to "we" in the second half of Acts are references to Luke and that he was one of Paul's companions at some point on his journeys.

But Acts isn't just about the acts of these apostles. Ultimately, Acts tells us the story of the Holy Spirit, poured out on the apostles on the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, labored through the Lord's human instruments, and we see the gospel proclaimed despite intense opposition. Acts is the story of the early church, which, by the power of God, overcame persecution and danger. And in Acts, we see the gospel go forth—to the Jews, to the Gentiles, and ultimately, to the ends of the earth. Our hope and prayer is that, as you begin this Acts study during the Easter season, you would be encouraged by this reminder of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, and that you would be convicted to boldly share the gospel wherever you go, for His glory.



Acts

WEEK ONE: ACTS 1-3 DOUG DORTCH

Monday, April 2 | Acts 1:1-11

“The Story Continues”

The book of Acts is the original “church history.” It recounts the movement of the Christian witness “from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Written by Luke, the author of the third gospel, Acts continues Luke’s account of the Jesus story by emphasizing the unshakeable confidence believers in Christ possess as they point toward the good future God has for them in the power of His Holy Spirit.

Acts is addressed to Theophilus (“lover of God”), most likely a pseudonym for a high-ranking Roman official who had come to faith in Jesus Christ. The astute reader will notice that while Luke mentions a beginning, located in the earthly ministry of Jesus, the fact of His impending ascension will mean that the gospel will have no ending. It will instead be a story that continues through the ministry of the church, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Luke starts out his “second volume” of the Jesus story by assuring his readers that the first followers of Jesus were not deluded souls. They were certain of the resurrection because of how Jesus had offered them proofs of Himself over a forty-day period, a significant number in the Bible. All of Jesus’ resurrection appearances over this time centered on “the kingdom of God,” which was perceived by the Romans to be a direct threat to their power in the first century world.

Whereas other gospels have the disciples going to Galilee after Jesus’ crucifixion, Luke describes a different tradition, one that has them remaining in Jerusalem until they receive the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. In his gospel, Luke had called Jesus’ instructions “power from on high” (Luke 24:49).

The disciples now want a timetable, a not-so-strange request. Their concern is for a kingdom that will bring deliverance from Roman domination. But Jesus refuses their request. The only sign he will give them is the gift of the Holy Spirit, which he calls “power (*dynamis*=*dynamite*) from on high.” Then Jesus is taken up into heaven, a manifestation of a divine work reminiscent of the Transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36). Two angels appear next, even as on Easter (Luke 24:4), who call the disciples to the work of continuing witness to Jesus. This manner of witness is to be the primary mission of the church until Jesus returns.

We stand in the tradition of believers who have been commissioned to bear witness to the risen and ascended Jesus, who sits at the right hand of God. In the same way as did the first disciples, so do we receive assurance that we have committed our way to Him who towers over all rulers and authorities. As we faithfully speak and live, we carry forth the story of Jesus so that others may receive the gift of the Holy



Acts

Spirit and know the same confidence as we. There is no other reason for the church to exist. Anything less is a forfeiture of our high calling.

Tuesday, April 3 | Acts 1:12-26

“Next Man Up”

Our reading of Scripture tells us that the number twelve was significant to God’s plan of salvation. The Old Testament tells the story of the twelve tribes of Israel, while the gospels recount the twelve disciples of Jesus. Now, however, Judas is no longer with the group and someone else must be chosen to take his place.

Of course, the eleven remaining disciples are not alone. They have been joined by 120 other believers at the Mount of Olives, a place of divine revelation. They have gathered in obedience to Jesus’ command to stay in the city until they are “armed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). How interesting that Jesus’ first command to His disciples, post-Easter, was “to wait.”

The presence of women among the 120 is a sign that everyone has a place in Christ’s church. There is room for everyone, as long as everyone is together in “mind and spirit.”

Simon Peter assumes a leadership role in the early chapters of Acts. His role will later give way to Paul in the Gentile churches and to James in the Jerusalem church. Still, he is a central figure in the book of Acts, as we will see on the Day of Pentecost.

Peter’s speech deals with the necessity of replacing Judas so that prophetic texts might be fulfilled. The one requirement is that the person chosen to take Judas’ place must have been with the group of believers “the whole time.”

The group calls out two men, Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias, but they are reluctant to make the final decision themselves. Instead, they trust the omniscience of God and the way of providence. The casting of lots was an accepted way of determining God’s direction, though one that would diminish soon after the experience of Pentecost. However, here it confirms the selection of Matthias so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled.

In some ways Matthias is an “every man” disciple. All of us who come after him find ourselves responsible for participating in the mission of Jesus, becoming witnesses to His resurrection and trusting our future to the direction of God. As we do, we become a part of the New Israel that forms around our testimony to the risen Jesus so that we take our place alongside other faithful followers in proclaiming the good news “to the ends of the earth.”



Acts

Wednesday, April 4 | Acts 2

“Speaking So That All May Hear”

There is perhaps no more misinterpreted chapter in the Bible than Acts 2. While many view the miracle of Pentecost as the gift of strange tongues on the part of the disciples, the greater miracle was that these “unlearned men” spoke in languages that enabled everyone gathered for the Festival of Pentecost to hear the Jesus story. The “ends of the earth” had come to Jerusalem, and the power of the Holy Spirit enabled the first believers to be ready to help them understand the gospel message.

The Day of Pentecost was a part of three great observances in Jewish life: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Pentecost was a commemoration of the first fruits of the harvest season and a celebration of God’s faithfulness to provide for His people. The background of the festival was significant in that God was again about to pour out His abundant resources upon His people through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The sound heard that day was “like a mighty rushing wind.” The word for spirit can be translated as wind. While it may have sounded much like a tornado, the descent of the Holy Spirit was by no means a destructive force. It did not tear down; instead, it built up, filling the entire house.

The fire that appeared upon the disciples represents the power of God. It was a “baptism” in fulfillment of the preaching of John the Baptist (Luke 3:16). Note that the experience was universal to the church. No one was left out. There is no such thing as a believer bereft of the Holy Spirit.

The “filling” of the Holy Spirit represents complete obedience to the leadership of God’s presence. As an expression of their obedience, each of the believers began to speak in unknown tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. The difference between this form of unknown speech and what we read about in 1 Corinthians 12 is that in this context everyone was able to hear the gospel message in his own language. In fact, the crowd that had gathered for the Feast of Pentecost from all around the world was astounded that such uncouth people could produce such speech. Clearly, they were unaware of the true source of the miracle, a show of ignorance that Peter would soon address.

Peter’s response comprises the first sermon in the book of Acts. Pay attention to the apologetic character of the message. This experience was a fulfillment of prophecy (Joel 2:28). Moreover, it was the sign of the dawning of a new day. From now on, the church’s preaching would be established upon the outline of Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension. The message would touch people everywhere; no one is beyond the pale of salvation.

Peter’s preaching bore fruit! Through the power of the Holy Spirit many were led to respond. The 3,000 that accepted the message and were baptized gave clear evidence as to the tremendous work that only God could make happen in a single day.



Acts

The result was a remarkable gathering of faithful people who were quick to do what they could to build upon their common experience with the Spirit. Such unity gave way to ongoing worship and witness, building up the church both in numbers and spiritual strength.

Of course, God can still make such a miracle happen. All that is required is that we believers be together and open to the Holy Spirit, speaking from our experience and trusting the Spirit to interpret our witness so that salvation may come to all who will hear, receive, and believe.

Thursday, April 5 | Acts 3:1-10

“Giving What We Have”

The early believers considered themselves faithful Jews. Although they had undergone a unique “baptism” by the Holy Spirit, they had not to this point made a connection that they were anything other than what they had always been. Part of the Jewish devotional life is the offering of prayers three times a day: 9 a.m., 12 p.m., and 3 p.m. As Peter and John are participating in this devotional practice, they encounter a man handicapped from birth in no control over his destiny. He is truly a symbol of crippled humanity.

The man sees nothing extraordinary about Peter and John. He sees them as two men going to temple prayers and as potential donors to the cause for which he pleads.

As he makes his plea, Peter and John instruct him to look their way. Probably he had been going through his spill for charity, having had his lines down pat and not expecting anything special. As he looks in the direction of the disciples, he thinks his request for charity is about to be honored. Little does he know the blessing he is about to receive.

When Peter tells him that he has no money, we can imagine that the crippled man’s heart must have sunk. But when Peter tells him that he has something to give him that the man never thought possible, “in the name of Jesus” he rises (hint of resurrection?) and walks.

The enthusiasm of the man, now healed, is impossible to contain. People around them pay attention because of the witness of someone newly changed. There is no mistaking how something extraordinary has taken place in this man’s life, solely because Peter and John have given what they have in their possession, the power of the risen Jesus.

The people to whom we are called to minister are often unaware of their real needs and that we possess the power to meet those needs. But when we offer what we have, our experience with the risen Jesus, the authority of the Lord Christ is brought to bear in ways that create “wonder and amazement” at what only Jesus could make possible.



Acts

Friday, April 6 | Acts 3:11-26

“Pay Attention to What’s at Stake”

You’ve heard the expression, “Ignorance is bliss.” That expression is from a poem by the eighteenth-century English poet Thomas Gray. The full line reads: “Where ignorance is bliss/’Tis folly to be wise.” As the poet looks out at folk frolicking through life as if they have not a care in the world, he resents their carefree attitude before realizing that soon enough life will come calling in all its harshness, as it always does. So, in the meantime, he reasons, let them revel in their ignorance; for now, what they know will not hurt them.

But can we really let folk revel in their ignorance? Not when there is too much at stake for them not to know the error of their ways.

In this section of Acts, Peter is speaking to the crowd of onlookers who have just witnessed the healing of the crippled beggar, who had prior to his healing known nothing but shame. Now, the crowd sees the man on his feet, walking and jumping, and praising God for the healing Peter had brought about in Jesus’ name. The crowd thinks that Peter and John have performed this miracle in their own power, which gives Peter the opportunity to set the record straight and inform them of what’s at stake.

Peter begins by taking on the spiritual ignorance of the people. But rather than chiding them for not knowing the truth, Peter informs them that God has used their lack of knowledge to bring to fulfillment prophecies regarding the Messiah. After carefully explaining to the crowd the significance of Jesus’ suffering, he calls them to repent so that “times of refreshing may come.”

Peter’s sermon points the people to how God’s redemptive purposes were to begin with the Jews, but would soon be extended to people everywhere. The fulfillment of the promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:3) would through the preaching of the good news of Jesus result in a message of salvation that would go beyond Israel to all who would turn from their own way to His way.

While it’s a sad truth that the people who ought to understand the gospel are the ones who end up understanding it the least, that reality should motivate us to help them see what’s at stake in their response. Ignorance to Jesus is a sin that God may forgive for a season. But now comes the time when salvation is made possible for all who obey Jesus’ teaching and destruction is the end for those who insist on going their own way. When we help people see the consequences of their response to Jesus, some will understand the truth, turn from their rebellion, and find the salvation that God has sent Jesus (and us through our witness) to help everyone know.



Acts

Saturday, April 7-Sunday, April 8 | Acts 1-3

Reread Acts 1-3 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.



Acts

WEEK TWO: ACTS 4-6 HAYDEN WALKER

Monday, April 9 | Acts 4:1-22

There are a few perfumes or colognes that I always closely identify with family or friends. One of those is Sunflowers, which my beloved friend Pam always wore when I was growing up. She has always felt like a blend of an aunt and friend to me, and I love being with her. After spending time with Pam, I would go about my other activities, but the Sunflowers fragrance would continue to waft to my nose. It was as if her presence lingered with me. In fact, I could usually tell if my mom had spent time with Pam because she would have a hint of that Sunflowers sweetness.

Our passage today from Acts includes the account of Peter and John before the Jewish Council. They were arrested as they preached the good news. While before the council, Peter testified about Jesus and the resurrection (Acts 4:8-12).

Though these were common, uneducated men (Acts 4:13) the educated authority figures could tell something was different about them as they spoke. They could tell that Peter and John had been with Jesus (Acts 4:13). The “fragrance” of Christ lingered upon them (2 Corinthians 2:14-17). Their boldness in testifying about Jesus was astonishing to the council. Peter and John did not have to work up the nerve to share their faith: it poured out of them. They couldn’t keep themselves from talking about what Christ had done (Acts 4:20). They had so closely communed with Jesus that others could sense His distinctive impact upon them. Even in His absence, Jesus’ scent remained with them.

Is the same true for you? Could others tell by your demeanor, business practices, even by the way that you drive that you are a person who is different because you’ve been with Jesus? Does the scent of His character linger upon you beyond your quiet time? Spend time in prayer today, seeking the One who can transform you from the inside out.

Tuesday, April 10 | Acts 4:23-31

After Peter and John were charged by the Jewish council to keep quiet about Jesus (Acts 4:18), they were released. Their response to the experience is recorded here in Acts 4:23-31. They returned to fellow believers and shared what just happened: the arrest, the inquiry, the testimony, and the threats (Acts 4:1-22). Imagine with me for a moment if things had gone differently in verse 24, as Peter and John shared their account to the fellowship. What if the text read, “When they heard it, they quieted their voices and disassembled.” There wouldn’t be much left to write in the book of Acts.

Instead of responding in fear, the followers of Jesus acted in faith. They heard the threats (Acts 4:21), but they were not intimidated by them. Neither did they rely on their own strength and wisdom to stand firm against the opposition. Fear and self-reliance will never impart spiritual strength. These early believers knew this, and so they turned to the fount of power—God himself—through prayer (Acts 4:24-30).



Acts

This prayer acknowledged that a real threat existed: the same people who crucified Jesus were now persecuting His followers (Acts 4:27). However, instead of praying for these threats to disappear, they prayed for boldness to continue preaching Christ (Acts 4:29).

So often, when I face a challenging situation, my gut reaction is one of fear or self-reliance. The example of the disciples in this passage encourages me to seek boldness, strength, and power from the Holy Spirit alone. I am encouraged to be “joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer” (Romans 12:12). May the boldness of Jesus fill your heart today, no matter what you are facing!

Wednesday, April 11 | Acts 4:32-5:16

There are a few stories in the Bible that leave us with wide eyes. The story of Ananias and Sapphira has always been one of those stories for me. If you haven't already read today's passage, I encourage you to pause here and read it before continuing.

Interesting, isn't it? A couple sold their property, and gave a portion of the proceeds to the apostles, and God struck them both dead. However, that summary misses a major point of the passage. It leaves out the fact that the couple brought death upon themselves through deception. Their act was more than just greediness or a lie, it was collusion and scheming. They wanted to appear very holy and generous. They wanted to give the appearance that they were filled with the Holy Spirit, but Acts 5:3 reveals that their hearts were instead filled by Satan.

This “filling” by Satan is in stark contrast to the description of the community filled by the Holy Spirit in Acts 4:32-37. In fact, verses 34-35 sound a lot like Acts 2:44-45. This is the picture of the generous fellowship, sharing everything in common with one another. This sort of generosity was not compulsory; it was the reflection of their mutual love for one another.

We must note that verse 32 explains that this unison among believers encompassed “the full number of those who believed.” Every single Christian to this point in time shared an ethos of love and generosity. So the story of Ananias and Sapphira is about much more than their greediness and deceit: it is the first time that Satan got a foothold within the church.

Since the deaths of this wicked couple, there has been deceit and abuse from within the church walls. It seems that almost weekly another scandal is revealed, and someone who professed their devotion to the church has been deceptive. We must be honest in assessing our own hearts, and pray diligently that the Holy Spirit would fill God's church and vanquish Satan's schemes from the sheep.

Thursday, April 12 | Acts 5:17-42

Have you ever been caught in a situation in which two different authority figures gave you two very different sets of instructions? In that scenario, what did you choose to do? Perhaps it was an easy choice, but maybe your decision carried consequences which were unpleasant.



Acts

In our reading today, the apostles faced opposing commands. In Acts 5:19-20, as he freed them from prison, the angel of the Lord commanded the apostles to preach Christ. In Acts 5:28 and 5:40, the apostles were strictly instructed by the Jewish council not to speak about Jesus. (This followed a previous charge to keep silent about Christ in Acts 4:18.) These instructions were directly opposed to each other. How would the apostles choose what to do?

We learn that there really was no dilemma for them: they got to the temple at daybreak in order to continue preaching (Acts 5:21). There was no delay, no concern over the consequences they might face for disobeying the Jewish authority. They knew that prison was a very real possibility as well as physical persecution. In fact, their testimony made the Jewish leaders so angry they wanted to kill the apostles (Acts 5:33). What made the choice to continue in the path of faithfulness easy for the disciples? They determined that it was more important to obey God than man (Acts 5:32), for God was their supreme authority, over even the religious and political leaders of their day.

The same is true for us in the twenty-first century. We must all decide whom we will follow, whom we will obey on a daily basis. When faced with an unethical business practice, will we buck the system and model Christ in the workplace? Even in challenging circumstances, will we remain faithful in our relationships? Will we cower when an opportunity to share our faith arises, or speak with boldness? If our faithfulness to Christ results in challenges, may our eyes be so fixed on Jesus that we can respond as the apostles did, and rejoice to be “counted worthy to suffer dishonor” for Jesus’ name (Acts 5:41).

Friday, April 13 | Acts 6

When someone becomes a member at Mountain Brook Baptist Church, Dr. Dortch communicates five expressions of membership to which new members commit. These expressions are: attendance, small group involvement, service, giving, and inviting. It is this approach to church membership that makes our body of believers more than just a gathering on Sunday mornings. We commit to caring for one another as we are the manifestation of Christ’s body on earth. The church is different than a club; each member of the body of Christ attends to the needs of others. Like Christ, we are not here to be served, but to serve (Mark 10:45)!

This is not a new approach to church life. In fact, this is the pattern that we watch unfolding in the early church as we study the book of Acts. In today’s chapter, we read about the appointment of seven men to serve the Greek widows. The apostles could not possibly do it all. They had the responsibilities of prayer and to the ministry of the word (Acts 6:4), and needed others to step up to serve in other ways.

Many Greek (Hellenistic) widows in the community of believers were being inadvertently neglected. The apostles needed faithful believers to step up to the plate for kingdom service. The seven men chosen did important work which led to conversions, even conversions of “a great many of the priests” (Acts 6:7)!



Acts

This should encourage us as members of Christ's church to faithfully serve where God has planted us. We are all gifted differently; perhaps preaching is not your gift, but maybe God is calling you to serve in other ways as he called these seven men in Acts 6. How we are called to serve may vary, but as believers and members of Christ's church, and Mountain Brook Baptist Church, we are called to serve in some way. Ask God in prayer how you might best use your gifts to serve the kingdom.

Saturday, April 14-Sunday, April 15 | Acts 4-6

Reread Acts 4-6 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.



Acts

WEEK THREE: ACTS 7:1-9:31 TIM SANDERLIN

Monday, April 16 | Acts 7:1-53

Often,, we do not say what we truly feel, or what we came to say. Extenuating circumstances and fear can cloud our judgement on communicating what needs to be spoken. This takes hold of me the most when I'm saying something that may not be widely accepted, and I will be the one to take the brunt of the push-back. It's easy for us to justify slinking back at times to continue on living the way we have been; whether it be a hard discussion with your children, sharing your feelings with your spouse, confronting your boss, or telling a brother or sister in Christ where they are not allowing the gospel to affect their life, we can easily give an explanation for why we did not say what needed to be said. As we look at the stories of believers that lived and died for name of Jesus Christ, we see that they seldom withdrew from sticky situations, and never ignored speaking the truth in love.

In Acts 7:1-53 we see Stephen, "a man full of God's grace and power," being brought before the Sanhedrin Council. Stephen knows what is a stake here, and it not social discomfort—is the very life that he lives. So we see Stephen walk the members of the Sanhedrin through the story of their Israelite ancestors, starting all the way back with Abraham; from Abraham to the Exodus of Egypt, on to the time of David, Stephen reminds the council of the events they all know so well. Why does he do this? To relate to them? To appeal to them so they will have pity on him? Certainly not. He does this to jog their memory of how, time and time again, the Israelites have not heeded the words of the prophets and have gone their own way.

Stephen, in verses 51-53, does not hold back. He comes to say what the Lord would have him say, forsaking the consequences. Stephen speaks with authority and with abandon. He knows that his life is at stake, but he also recognizes the value of the lives of his audience. If Stephen does not try to warn the men before him of the error of their ways, these lukewarm leaders may never know the full love of Christ. And so, without any restraint, Stephen says what he must.

Lord, may we seek first Your Kingdom, and speak Your truth in love and with Your authority, no matter the cost. Let our lives be transformed by the people in Acts who would stop at nothing to preach Your gospel. Lord, let that be us. Amen.

Tuesday, April 17 | Acts 7:54-8:3

I have always understood the word "martyr" to mean "someone who dies for something they believe in." What a noble thing to die for something bigger than yourself! While this is exactly what the very first Christian martyr, Stephen, does in this passage, that is not the entire definition of the word.

The word martyr actually comes from the Greek and the fuller scope of the definition is "witness." Why would we call someone who dies for their faith, like Stephen, simply "a witness?" This is because Stephen is a witness to the fact that he believes what he is living and dying for is not simply a nice set of ideals, a



Acts

comforting religious presence, or a righteous set of rules—Stephen is saying the truth of Jesus Christ is more true than life itself. He believes, with such compelling faith, that the God that he serves is worth dying for. Dying for the His namesake is worth more than life.

We have no doubt that this was the truth that Stephen felt as he offered up his life as sacrifice! But Stephen is a witness on more than one account! When he speaks his peace and they decide he must be stoned (Acts 7:54-58), Stephen *witnesses* something divine: the heavens open and Stephen witnesses Jesus standing next to the throne of God. As Stephen's fate is decided here on earth, he is shown the promise of the next life and that his victory over death, in Jesus Christ, is at hand.

We may look at the life of Stephen and say that when we die we want to experience something similar: feeling the Holy Spirit wash over us, seeing the heavens open wide, and “fall asleep” as Stephen does in verse 60. But what we should realize, while we still have breath in our lungs, is that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, these things are promised to us now! The veil has been torn and heaven was opened when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and the Holy and Almighty Spirit abiding within us in that of the Living God's.

Lord, we pray that while we live in this world we would live as Your children, freed from slavery. We pray that we would not wait until the end of this life to commit it You, but to live every day we have left for Your name and for the furthering of the gospel. Let us be Your witnesses to a watching world. Amen.

Wednesday, April 18 | Acts 8:4-25

So many times in the Word of God we see people come such a long way from their old self to their new self, just to be weighed down by the ways of the world again. We see people with genuine conversions to faith, but they do not fully understand how this grace thing works right away. Here, in Acts 8:9-25, we see another example of this.

After the stoning of Stephen, Christians are scattered amongst all the tribes and nations because they know the good news must be told. Philip has been sent out to proclaim Christ in Samaria. This is a tricky area to preach in because of the history between the Jews and the Samaritans, but we see early on in this chapter that the Lord is doing working miracles and changing the hearts of the people. Among those saved is a man named Simon, formerly known as “Simon the Sorcerer.” Peter and John heard about all of the new believers, came to them, laid hands on them, and prayed that they would receive the Holy Spirit.

If you read verse 13, we can know that Simon, who was recently in complete opposition of the Lord, has had a genuine revelation of Christ! Praise the Lord that every heart can be changed! But after Simon saw how lives are being changed when they received the Holy Spirit, he said he wants some of what they were having, and he offered to purchase it. (Acts 8:18-19) Simon had an encounter with the Lord, yes. But the ways of this world that he was so very comfortable with continued to be his bartering system. Although he



Acts

accepted with his heart that the grace of Christ is the thing that allows us to experience His goodness and blessing, his head still thought he had to buy the favor of the Lord. We are sorely mistaken if we think we can purchase the presence of the Lord, or the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

We so often times let our “old self,” as Paul describes it in Romans, creep back in and convince us that the approval of the Lord is something that can be earned, bought, or secured through our works. Nothing but the blood of Jesus has paid our ransom and made us sons and daughters of the King.

Lord, when our old self, the ones of this world, creeps back in and deceives us, please comfort us and renew our minds. May we preach gospel back to ourselves daily to remind us that You are the only way, truth, and life. Amen.

Thursday, April 19 | Acts 8:26-40

What does it sound like to hear from the Holy Spirit? Is it a nudge in the right direction? A whisper in our ear? Or something made keenly aware to us? At times, it would be easiest if the Lord would just use words and tell us what He would have us to do! We don't know exactly how the Holy Spirit spoke to Philip, but when he felt the call to stand by a chariot, he ran.

In Acts 8:26-40 we look into the scene of Philip walking to Caesarea, but then he is called by the Holy Spirit to deviate from this path and stand next to a horse and buggy. Philip obeyed without delay.

It is important for us to know that the Holy Spirit is not a “conscience” or “angel on your shoulder” telling us the difference between right and wrong. The Holy Spirit absolutely aids us in our discernment and keeps us from sinning at times! But the Holy Spirit is also so much more. The Holy Spirit is the part of the Trinity that intercedes on our behalf, groans for us in prayer, comforts us when chaos ensues, and gives us the words to say when we have none. The Holy Spirit is our Companion. God promises that the Holy Spirit will do so much more than just tell you right and wrong, because God Himself is concerned with much more than mere morality.

As we look into this story, we really see Philip and the Spirit of the Lord walking from one mission field to the next. The Holy Spirit then makes Philip aware that on the road to the next destination, God has laid an opportunity before him. Philip puts aside the agenda and follows the Spirit into a setting where he is able to share the gospel and a soul is saved!

We, living where we live, have some of the busiest itineraries in the western world. And most of our itineraries are filled with godly things! But when is the last time we just sat in a coffee shop and said “Lord, lead me to someone who may not know You.” Or stayed late at work to talk to a custodian we've never met? It can be easy to overlook and drown out the Holy Spirit with our holy schedules, but here we are reminded the road that we walk on is crowded with people who need to hear the gospel.



Acts

Lord, slow our hearts and our routines. Lead us by Your Spirit, our Companion, to the ones around us who need You. May our days be centered around Your mission first before our schedules. Teach us to lean on Your Spirit moment by moment for direction. Amen.

Friday, April 20 | Acts 9:1-31

Paul has got to have the one of the most incredible testimonies known to man. One day he is persecuting those who love God, the next he is writing letters to churches all over the world, encouraging them to “fight the good fight of faith” (1 Timothy 6:12). One day he is holding the garments of the men stoning Stephen, giving them approval, and the next he is imprisoned for the exact same truth. Persecutor to apostle: this story of Paul having the scales fall from his eyes and him being filled with the Holy Spirit is one of great hope for us Christians, because it is our story as well!

When we look back and see ourselves before Christ, we normally wouldn’t say we were in the same state as Saul was. Chances are, we were not actively hurting believers or persecuting anyone. If you are like me, I would have just considered myself to be “indifferent,” or on “neither side of the coin.” The reason that this conversion of Saul is one of such hope for us is that it is actually our story as well.

When it comes to the “sides of salvation,” the Bible makes it clear that we are either those who are reconciled to God or those who are in opposition to Him. While we would never really consider this to be our story, Romans 5:10 reminds us that we were enemies of God. If we do not stand with Jesus Christ beside the throne of God, then we stand with Saul the Oppressor as he approves of Stephen’s stoning.

This sounds grim, I know! But we must know the bad news before we can grasp the good news. Saul’s history as one who was an adversary of the Lord is sadly our history too. But so is the salvation, repentance, and redirection of his life! And we know that the future God had in store for Paul far outweighed his past. The old is gone, the new has come!

“For while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” Romans 5:10.

Lord, let us not dwell on the follies of our past when we were considered Your foes. Help us to rejoice in our adoption into Your family! Let this remind us of ourselves before You saved us, and remind us that no one is beyond Your grace. Not even us. Amen

Saturday, April 21-Sunday, April 22 | Acts 7:1-9:31

Reread Acts 7:1-9:31 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.



Acts

WEEK FOUR: ACTS 9:32-12:25 MARY SPLAWN

Monday, April 23 | Acts 9:32-43

The book of Acts is fun to read. It has so much action and intrigue! I am often amazed at the work of God in the lives of the first Christians, one of whom was the most unlikely of protagonists (Paul).

As the disciples seek to do the will of God, exciting ministry ensues. And, intense suffering comes as well. As the good news about Jesus spreads throughout the world, the veil of darkness is pulled back. Jesus' love and grace are revealed.

Even today, the same is true. The gospel changes people. As we read about how Jesus changes lives in the first century, we will pray for that same gospel transformation in the twenty-first century. This week, each devotional will be a prayer that incorporates truths about God's character and love that we see displayed in Scripture. As we pray, may our eyes be fixed on Jesus and His saving grace!

This prayer is based on Acts 9:32-43.

Lord Jesus, We begin this week grateful for the amazing grace that You have displayed for us, and the ongoing work that You are doing in our hearts and our world. We thank You for the book of Acts and how it prompts us to think on Your love. The stories of Aeneas and of Dorcas remind us that You are the body healer and soul redeemer.

Often times, we want to take credit for the good that You do in us. Help us instead to take our cues from Peter who got it right in this instance. Instead of receiving glory for healing, he gives credit where credit is due and states to Aeneas, "Jesus Christ heals you."

Would You work powerfully in and through us as You did in and through Peter? As we trust in You and follow Your footsteps to share the gospel message, we pray that many would turn to You Lord.

Often, we are antsy in our prayers, thinking we know what is best and trying to help You be God. We rush through prayer and add it to the list of things we try to multitask. Teach us from the physical action of Peter who bent down on his knees to pray for Dorcas that we too must be intentional in our prayers. We remember that You are Lord and King, worthy of all reverence and honor and praise and thanksgiving.

Help us to see ourselves in Your story of redemption today. Many in our midst need a touch as did Dorcas. We lift their names to You now.

As we bow our knees, may our spirits also humbly bow, ready and receptive to Your kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. Make us one in our hearts with You, Lord, and give us ministries of reconciliation through Your name, Amen.



Acts

For more on praying the Scriptures, read "Pray the Scriptures" by Scotty Smith <https://ligonier.org/learn/articles/pray-the-scriptures/>.

Tuesday, April 24 | Acts 10

This week, each devotional will be a prayer that incorporates truths about God's character and love that we see displayed in Scripture. This prayer is based on Acts 10.

Gracious Father, You have revealed Yourself to Your people in a myriad of ways through the pages of Scripture. You have used a burning bush, a talking donkey, a voice in the night, and visions in the middle of the day. Even now, You speak through Your Word, through Your people, and through Your Spirit who sings the truth of the gospel to our souls.

Thank You for the various means through which You use to reveal Your glory to us. Help us to listen for Your voice, to be responsive to Your Spirit's prompting our lives, and to be alert to the needs of others.

Open doors for the gospel and prepare the hearts of people so that they are receptive to the message of hope and peace found in Jesus our Lord, whom You appointed as judge of the living and the dead. Prepare our hearts, as well, as we take the gospel message into places that aren't so familiar and to people we may have formerly dismissed.

Help us to bring the good news that EVERYONE who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through His name. Help us to proclaim the truth that was heralded by the prophet Isaiah who, when speaking of Jesus, said, "He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him and by His wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:5-6).

And as we share with others, teach us to listen to the gospel for ourselves as Satan tempts us to despair and tells us of the guilt within. In moments of weakness, give us visions of Your love and grace and remind us of the wonderful act of selfless love in the cross that made an end to our sin. Help us to really take to heart the truth that our works don't earn Your love and our failures are covered by Your blood.

Thank You, Jesus, for Your presence with us today and for the perpetual peace You provide. Amen.

Take a minute to listen to the song "Before the Throne of God Above" by Charitie Lees Bancroft. The words of this song have helped me with the verbiage in this prayer.

Wednesday, April 25 | Acts 11:1-18

This week, each devotional will be a prayer that incorporates truths about God's character and love that we see displayed in Scripture. This prayer is based on Acts 11:1-18.



Acts

Lord, As we read Your Word, we know that it reads us in return. We read today of a critical spirit that rose among the circumcised believers about Peter's actions. We often stand in their fault-finding shoes, knowing it is so easy to be critical of others, especially in areas where we think we have it all together.

Holy Spirit, conform us to Christ and change our hearts so that they well up with compassion and grace. Instead of defaulting to criticism, teach us to do the harder task of seeing the good in others. Remind us that each person has been at least somewhat shaped by their circumstances and all humans carry heavy burdens which may not be visible in plain sight.

Help us to recall the principle taught by Jesus that one who has been forgiven much will love much (Luke 7:47). As we contemplate the great depth of our sin and the even greater depth of Your love which covers sin, give us overwhelming joy, gentleness toward others, and love towards You!

You have granted repentance to even us, and we praise You. Help us to extend the same grace to others, leaving unsaid things that are not kind and true and helpful for building others up.

Through Christ our Lord we pray, Amen.

Thursday, April 26 | Acts 11:19-30

This week, each devotional will be a prayer that incorporates truths about God's character and love that we see displayed in Scripture. This prayer is based on Acts 11:19-30.

Heavenly Father, As we think back on the persecution of believers in the first century, we are reminded to pray for our brothers and sisters around the world who suffer persecution today. As they seek to share the good news with those around them, give them boldness, protection, and endurance. Please provide them access to Your Holy Word and if they have been rejected by family and friends, please give them new Christian "family" to support and encourage them. In light of Your generosity to us, help us to give freely of our gifts to help them, remembering the words of our Lord Jesus who said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

Even though we may not be persecuted for our faith, we do identify with suffering. Sometimes, we cannot understand why You allow persecution and suffering in the lives of Your children, but we do cling to Your promises that You will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). Give us fortified faith in suffering that trusts in Your goodness and Your power, even if it isn't displayed in the ways we see fit. Encourage our hearts with the example from Scripture today where we see that, in light of the persecution, the gospel was spread and a great number of people believed.

When we cannot see the bigger picture, help us to trust in You as our strong tower, our righteous Father, and our constant Friend. Root in our lives the evidence of Your grace, so that we might be full of the Holy Spirit and of faith and follow in the footsteps of Christ, our namesake as Christians. Amen.



Acts

For more on how to pray for and support the persecuted church, visit The Voice of the Martyrs website (www.persecution.com or www.icommittoprayer.com) and reference the article "How to Pray for the Persecuted Church" (www.cru.org/us/en/train-and-grow/spiritual-growth/prayer/pray-for-persecuted-church.html).

Friday, April 27 | Acts 12

This week, each devotional will be a prayer that incorporates truths about God's character and love that we see displayed in Scripture. This prayer is based on Acts 12.

Powerful God, We long to see Your hand displayed in magnificent ways, as was the case with Peter's miraculous escape from prison. We can hardly imagine that the first century church anticipated such an answer to prayer as they earnestly lifted their voices to You on Peter's behalf.

To their surprise, You brought Peter out of prison and Your bondage breaking power remains the same today. We praise You because we know that Your hand is powerful and swift, Your ways are mighty and illuminating, and You are able to work in any way You see fit.

Father, teach us to recognize Your miraculous power and give us spiritual sight for the glory of Jesus Christ. Help us to meditate on His supernatural defeat of hell and death by becoming sin on our behalf, experiencing the death we deserved, and rising victoriously on the third day to become the firstborn of many who will one day be raised victoriously (2 Corinthians 5:21, Colossians 1:18, Revelation 1:5).

We praise You for this miracle of miracles in Jesus and we thank You for the times when we have seen Your breathtaking work in the here and now. Help us not to disregard Your work and claim it as our own. And, remind us to pray with expectation (Psalm 5:3), while knowing that Your will may not always entail the outcome we desire or expect.

We pray as Your church that Your glory might be manifest in our lives and in Your world, Amen.

As we close out the week, I'd like to encourage us to pray this prayer below in preparation for the corporate gatherings in our church on Sunday morning.

Come Holy Spirit,
come like a fire and burn,
come like a wind and cleanse,
convict, convert, and consecrate our hearts to our great good
and to Thy great glory, Amen.

(Prayer of Fleming Rutledge before her Lenten sermons at the Cathedral Church of the Advent on March 26 and 27, 2018, available via the Cathedral Church of the Advent's podcast).



Acts

Saturday, April 28-Sunday, April 29 | Acts 9:32-12:25

Reread Acts 9:32-12:25 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.



Acts

WEEK FIVE: ACTS 13-15 WAYNE SPLAWN

Monday, April 30 | Acts 13:1-12

I will be forever grateful to the Lord for the time I have spent at Beeson Divinity School at Samford University. It is a place God used to prepare me for ministry and I am thankful for the men and women who have helped me become a more faithful minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ. From time to time, I am reminded of particularly powerful truths my professors taught me during seminary. For example, I can vividly remember a point one of my professors made regarding the truth of Isaiah 55:11. He said, "God promised that His words would not return void; He did not make the same promise about your words." This truth about the power of God's words has stuck with me over the years.

In Acts 13:1-12, Paul begins his first missionary journey and, as an astute reader would expect at this point in the book of Acts, Paul and his fellow missionaries encounter opposition. When they arrive at Salamis, they proclaim the word of God and the proconsul wants an audience with the missionaries so he can hear their message firsthand. A magician named Elymas tries to oppose God's word by turning the proconsul against the missionaries. However, things do not turn out the way Elymas had hoped. Rather than stymying God's word, he is struck blind. And this incident leads the proconsul to believe. The man who tried to thwart God's purposes becomes the person through whom God's word powerfully advances in the life of the proconsul.

We should be encouraged by this account. It seems that we regularly hear how people are increasingly hostile to God and His word. This truth could cause us to feel discouraged, but we must not lose heart. No matter how much opposition we face, we can be certain that God's word will prevail. May we continue to faithfully rely on the power of God's word, believing that God will bring His purposes to pass in our lives and in our world.

Tuesday, May 1 | Acts 13:13-52

I really enjoy reading the sermons found in the book of Acts. Here in Acts 13:13-52, we read a sermon Paul delivered in a synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia. The leaders of the synagogue asked Paul and his companions if they had a word of encouragement for the people and Paul seized the opportunity to preach the gospel to all who had gathered that day. What do we learn about the gospel from Paul's sermon? There are at least three things we need to notice here in Acts 13.

1. The gospel is the fulfillment of all that God accomplished in the Old Testament.

As Paul begins his explanation of the work of salvation God accomplished through Jesus Christ, he reminds his audience of the work of salvation God performed by leading the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt. Paul then highlights the way God provided for the people in the wilderness, led them into the Promised Land, gave them a king in David, and prepared the way for Jesus' coming through the ministry of John the



Acts

Baptist. The work of salvation God has accomplished through Jesus was the fulfillment of all that God had done to redeem His people up to this point in history.

2. The salvation God has accomplished through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus surpasses all that came before Jesus.

The other thing that stands out in Paul's sermon is Paul's teaching that the salvation God accomplished through Jesus is superior to the redemptive works He accomplished in the past. David saw corruption and died; Jesus was raised from the dead and lives forever. God used Moses to deliver the people from bondage in Egypt, but they were enslaved to the law; Jesus freed the people from everything from which they could not be freed from the law of Moses. You and I have been given the incredible privilege of living on this side of the cross and the empty tomb. What Old Testament believers could only see in signs and shadows, we can now see fully in Jesus Christ! We need to constantly remind ourselves of the privileges we enjoy because of what Christ accomplished on our behalf.

3. Many of God's people rejected the work of redemption God accomplished through Jesus Christ.

In verse 40, Paul issues a word of warning to his audience. He implores them to not miss the work of salvation God has done in their day. Jesus was rejected by His own people and delivered over to Pilate to be crucified. Paul does not want his hearers to make the same mistake. Unfortunately, this is exactly what happened. Since they rejected God's work in Jesus, Paul turned his missionary efforts to the Gentiles.

Many of us have grown up in church, and it is possible for people like us to reject the purposes of God in our lives. We may know all of the right things to say, but God is concerned with the condition of our hearts and whether we have responded to Jesus in faith. Have you repented of your sins and placed your faith in Jesus Christ, trusting Him alone for salvation? It would be tragic for those of us who are surrounded by the things of God to reject the salvation He has secured for us through Jesus.

Wednesday, May 2 | Acts 14:1-18

It would be easy for us to idolize the apostles as we read through the book of Acts. After all, they preached sermons and large numbers of people came to faith in Christ and they performed miracles that demonstrated the power and presence of God among them. If we are not careful, we will begin to believe that the apostles were able to do these mighty acts because they were exceptional followers of Christ rather than normal people like us.

In Acts 14:8-18, we read of a miracle Paul performed in the city of Lystra. Paul and Barnabas met a man who had been unable to use his feet since birth. Luke writes that Paul saw the man's faith and commanded him to stand upright. The man was miraculously healed and the people of the town respond by worshipping Paul and Barnabas. They assume the men must be gods because of the mighty works they were able to do. Paul and Barnabas did everything they could to convince the citizens of Lystra they were



Acts

ordinary people just like them and that they should direct their worship to God rather than to them because it is God who has performed this mighty act of healing.

I doubt any of us would knowingly offer worship to Paul or Barnabas. We know that God alone is worthy of our worship. However, I do think we might be tempted to believe that Paul, Barnabas, or any of the other apostles were used by God because they were special. If we buy into this line of thinking, we will then conclude that God could never do anything of worth through us. But, the truth of the matter is that God is able to accomplish mighty things through whomsoever He chooses. In fact, God delights to use weak, ordinary vessels like you and me to do extraordinary things. When God works in this way He rightly receives the honor and glory. As you continue to read through the book of Acts, ask God to be at work in your life in powerful ways. Admit your weaknesses, fears, and apprehensions, but by all means make yourself available to God. There is no telling what God might do in and through us to draw men and women to Himself so that He might be glorified through our lives.

Thursday, May 3 | Acts 14:19-28

The office supply store Staples launched a famous ad campaign a decade ago that featured an easy button. When faced with the daunting task of organizing the office, one lady tells her co-worker to simply press the easy button and everything will be taken care of in an instant. The co-worker decides to give the button a try and when he presses the button the office is instantly transformed into a tidy and organized place. Who wouldn't want an easy button if such a thing really existed? I imagine we would all purchase at least one!

Our desire for things to be easy often influences how we think about following Jesus Christ. We like for worship services and small groups to be offered at times that are most convenient for us. We try to avoid the rejection of others by not being too vocal about our faith. And, we often avoid any risks associated with faithfully following after Jesus. The problem with this approach to discipleship is that it is at odds with the picture of discipleship we read about in the Bible. In Acts 14:19-23, Paul is dragged out of the city and stoned by those who opposed his ministry. Paul and the apostles were not alone in the opposition they faced. The multitudes who made up the new churches the apostles started also faced persecution. So, as Paul made his way back through the cities he had previously visited, he encourages them to continue in the faith by reminding them that, "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Facing opposition and enduring suffering is part and parcel of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

There is no easy button that will make our pursuit of following Christ free from opposition. In fact, a lack of opposition may indicate that we are not being as faithful as Jesus desires us to be. Have you allowed your pursuit of an easy life to negatively impact your pursuit of Jesus Christ? How might God be calling you to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow after Jesus? Following Jesus will not always be easy, but any suffering we endure in this life in our pursuit of serving Jesus will certainly pale in comparison to the joy and meaning we will experience when we choose the path of faithfulness.



Acts

Friday, May 4 | Acts 15

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of the debate surrounding circumcision in the early church. In Genesis 17, God told Abraham to circumcise all males who belonged to the people of God as a sign that they were members of God's covenant people. There were some Jewish Christians in the early church who thought the requirement of circumcision was binding for Gentiles who professed faith in Jesus Christ. If they wanted to experience God's salvation and belong to God's people they needed to accept the covenant sign of circumcision.

How did the apostles respond to this argument? In Acts 15:6-11, Peter tells the Jerusalem Council that Gentiles had come to a saving knowledge of Jesus in the same way they had. That is, they were saved by grace alone through faith alone in the Lord Jesus alone. And the outward sign that they had been granted salvation through faith in Jesus Christ was they had received the promised Holy Spirit.

Most of us know in our heads that God saves us by grace through faith. However, we often allow our cultural preferences to become essential markers of who is in and who is out when it comes to the kingdom of God. One of the most helpful things I have been reminded of during mission trips over the years is the truth that the gospel transcends all cultures. Whether it was serving alongside other believers in South Africa or worshipping with Christians in India, God has allowed me to catch a glimpse of the multicultural makeup of the global church. We would do well to remember that God shows no partiality when it comes to salvation. Christians around the world enjoy different cultural expressions of our faith, but the thing that unites us is our common belief that God saves each of us by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone.

Saturday, May 5-Sunday, May 6 | Acts 13-15

Reread Acts 13-15 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.



Acts

WEEK SIX: ACTS 16-17 WAYNE SPLAWN

Monday, May 7 | Acts 16:1-15

Many of us are intimidated by the thought of sharing the gospel with others. One reason we sometimes refrain from sharing the gospel is we don't feel we are equipped to effectively share the good news of Christ with others. What if we get something wrong in our presentation? What if someone asks us a question we are not able to answer? These questions reveal we think that our success in sharing the gospel is somehow dependent on our abilities.

The story of Lydia's conversion in Acts 16:11-15 provides a helpful corrective to such concerns. When Paul arrives in Philippi, he encounters a woman named Lydia by the riverside. Paul faithfully shares the gospel with her and other women who had gathered there. Lydia responds to Paul's message in faith. Why did Lydia have this positive response? Did it have anything to do with Paul's presentation? The thing Luke chooses to highlight in Lydia's conversion is the fact that God opened Lydia's heart to hear what Paul had to say (Acts 16:14). Paul was faithful to share the gospel and God did the work of opening Lydia's heart.

As we think about bearing witness to the good news of Jesus Christ, we would do well to keep this important truth of evangelism in mind. The outcome is not dependent on our abilities to effectively share the gospel. Instead, we are called to be faithful to share the gospel with others while relying on God to open their hearts to respond to the good news in faith.

Tuesday, May 8 | Acts 16:16-40

Paul spent a lot of time in prison because of his faithful proclamation of the gospel. Here in Acts 16:16-40, we read of a time Paul was imprisoned in Philippi. I wonder how you and I would respond if we were in Paul's shoes. I imagine I would be filled with fear and would be racking my brain trying to figure out the quickest way to secure my freedom.

How did Paul and Silas respond? In verse 25, Luke tells us they spent the night praying and singing hymns to God. In choosing this response, Paul and Silas revealed their hope was in God rather than themselves. And I find it instructive to note that Luke points out the other prisoners were listening to them. We have seen the apostles bear witness to their belief in Jesus through sermons and in conversations with non-believers throughout the book of Acts, but the way they respond in the face of tragedy is also a powerful witness to their belief in God.

When we face difficulties in this life, we would do well to follow the example of Paul and Silas. Rather than worry and rely on our own abilities, let's commit to being a people who pray and worship the Lord, trusting in Him to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. And as others see us relying on the Lord in the midst of difficulties, our lives will be a powerful witness to our belief in God.



Acts

Wednesday, May 9 | Acts 17:1-9

When Herod first heard of Jesus' birth he was alarmed because the wise men told him they were looking for the one who had been born king of the Jews (Matthew 2:2-3). Herod was no doubt upset because there can only be one king in any domain. Herod was understandably worried to hear one had been born who might usurp his authority.

In Acts 17:7, the crowds who have gathered to oppose Paul and Silas (and those who have believed their message) claimed that these men were acting against the decree of Caesar by saying that there was another king named Jesus. And, though they erroneously charged these believers with insurrection, they correctly understood that there can only be one king. If the early Christians lauded Jesus as king, there would no doubt be times when their allegiance to Jesus would require them to be out of step with the decrees of Caesar.

We obviously do not have a king in America, but we still find ourselves in positions where our allegiance to Jesus will cause us to be out of step with the prevailing powers of our day. How might your loyalty to Jesus cause you to be different from those who are not followers of Christ?

Thursday, May 10 | Acts 17:10-15

One of the things that strikes me as I read through the book of Acts is how persistent the apostles were in the face of persecution. As they travel from city to city, opponents follow them in hopes of provoking locals to turn on the apostles and drive them from their city. More times than not, the apostles' opponents are successful. This was the case once again in the city of Berea. Paul and Silas reason with the Jews in the synagogue and are no doubt excited to see that many in the synagogue are initially open to considering their message. But, as was the case many times before, Jewish opponents make their way to Berea to agitate and stir up the crowds.

This makes me wonder about our own approach to suffering and our understanding of God's will. When considering whether God is leading us to do something, we often say we are looking for an open door. When we use this phrase, most of us act as if God providing an open door means things will go smoothly for us if it is indeed God's will. However, this was apparently not how the apostles understood God's will. Even in the face of repeated persecutions, imprisonments, and hardships, they pressed on in their attempts to make Jesus Christ known even to the ends of the earth. As you seek to follow God's leadership, remember that God may lead you down paths marked by difficulty and hardship, as you seek to accomplish the mission He has entrusted to you.



Acts

Friday, May 11 | Acts 17:16-34

What is the gospel message at the heart of our Christian faith? Paul succinctly answers this question in 1 Corinthians 15:1-5 where he writes:

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. (1 Corinthians 15:1-5)

The good news is that Jesus died for our sins, was buried, was raised from the dead, and appeared to those who were eyewitnesses of the resurrection. The gospel message at the heart of our faith concerns the mighty act of salvation God accomplished on our behalf through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. A Christian then, is someone who believes in the God "who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not" (Romans 4:17).

This emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus was at the heart of the message the apostles proclaimed throughout the book of Acts. I would encourage you to read back through Acts and underline every mention of Jesus' resurrection. Or, to take it a step further, I would encourage you to do the same thing while reading through the entire New Testament. You will come to see how important the resurrection is to our faith. Paul certainly focuses on the resurrection here in Acts 17:16-34. And some people in the crowd mock Paul for his belief in the resurrection. After all, as they knew all too well, people who die do not come back to life. The resurrection is a radical belief that God overcame sin, death, and hell through the resurrection of Jesus Christ and many simply find this truth unbelievable.

Is it possible you have lost sight of how radical our belief in the resurrection truly is? In our culture, Christianity has become so enmeshed with ethics, politics, and morality that we are in danger of losing sight of the miracle that is at the heart of our faith. Before we try to live like Christians, we must first consider whether we believe in the radical truth that God raised Jesus from the dead and that in accomplishing this work of salvation everything has changed.

Saturday, May 12-Sunday, May 13 | Acts 16-17

Reread Acts 16-17 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.



Acts

WEEK SEVEN: ACTS 18-20 ALLISON MCSWAIN

Monday, May 14 | Acts 18

"Acts of Christian Community"

One thing that sticks out to me every time I read Acts is the sheer number of names that fill this book. From the onset of the Christian church, we see that our faith is not meant to be lived alone. Christianity is not a one man or one woman endeavor. The body of Christ is full of uniquely gifted people who must work together to achieve our common goal of glorifying God. Even Paul, the great missionary and author of 23% of the words in the New Testament, lived life in community.

Paul formed new relationships with people with the intention of maintaining them. Priscilla and Aquila, a displaced couple far from home, found friendship with Paul, who stays with them. The couple ended up joining Paul in Ephesus, establishing a house church (1 Corinthians 16:19) and doing ministry alongside their Christian brothers and sisters. One can only imagine that God placed Paul in Priscilla and Aquila's lives for this purpose. This new friend would encourage the two in their faith in Christ and equip them for ministry. In this chapter we see another fellow believer, Titius Justus, open his home to Paul. Reading this, I have examined how willing I am to invite people into my living space and my personal life.

One thing we know about Paul's friendships is that many were cross-generational. Timothy, mentioned alongside Silas in today's reading, was Paul's "son" in the faith. In Paul's first letter to Timothy we see that Timothy was "young" (1 Timothy 4:12). Timothy would accompany and aid Paul in his ministry's travels, and Paul encouraged and instructed Timothy in the faith. Priscilla and Aquila likewise took Apollos under their wings, explaining to him "the way of God more accurately."

Do you have an older mentor, a spiritual father or mother pouring into you and reminding you of the ways of God? If not, I encourage you to seek someone out. Also, ask yourself if there is a younger believer in your life you can mentor. The Christian life is a communal one: we bear each other's burdens and share times of rejoicing.

Tuesday, May 15 | Acts 19:1-20

"True Repentance"

Verses 18 through 20 of our text today are both shocking and convicting. Here, Luke tells us that many new believers in Ephesus made a point to divulge, i.e. "proclaim or reveal," their sinful practices to one another. As uncomfortable as this practice is, we do find it mandated in Scripture: "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16). The practice of confessing



Acts

our sins openly is not meant to bring us guilt or shame, but to indeed heal us from them. Ask yourself, is there sin in your life you need to bring into the light (1 John 1:6-7)? Do you have an accountability partner you feel comfortable being honest with? Perhaps you need to get coffee with a trusted, believing friend and confess what you have been struggling with. However, remember first and foremost our sins must be confessed to God.

Not only did these Ephesian believers confess with their mouths, they actively repented by literally burning the things that led them into sin. They disposed of their pagan books even though the value of them all equaled 50,000 pieces of silver—roughly \$6,000,000 in today's U.S. currency! Wow! This little verse suggests that no amount of money should persuade us to be comfortable with sin—sin is that detrimental and that abhorrent to God. True repentance involves doing away with the old things of our pre-Christian lives even if they are valuable. Perhaps you may not need to burn physical possessions that lead you in to sin, but you may need to cut out unhealthy practices. You may need to set up internet restrictions or change the types of movies you watch and music you listen to. You may need to change friend groups. Ask the Lord what you need to “burn” in order to better pursue Him and His ways. When He reveals something to you, rid yourself of it so that the word of the Lord may continue “to increase and prevail mightily” in you.

Wednesday, May 16 | Acts 19:21-41

“Following the Way”

I love how Luke refers to Christianity as “the Way” (Acts 19:23). This name shows that our beliefs are the true beliefs—the only means to know God and be made right with Him. Following Jesus is not a way, it is the only Way. In today's reading we see that the Way had caused quite a stir among the Ephesian people, especially metalworkers like Demetrius who had their way of living threatened. If Ephesus converted to Christianity, thus abandoning its patron goddess Artemis, crafters of idols like Demetrius would be out of a job.

Demetrius incited a riot, claiming that this new belief system was dangerous to the established social order. He was correct. Christianity looked nothing like Roman society—it showed compassion to the poor, viewed women with respect, and called for exclusivity in worship. There is only one God, and God's kingdom is an upside-down kingdom; outcasts are accepted and those who serve, not the served ones, are the greatest.

I fear that if we are not careful, we can fall into the Ephesian trap of choosing nationalism or civic pride over the Way. We may not outwardly chant something akin to “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians,” but we may be tempted to place politics, country, or love for the status-quo over Jesus. Often, following Jesus means standing in opposition to the established social order. Often, our culture looks nothing like Jesus.

I love the boldness of Paul in the midst of this debacle—he actually wanted to go directly into the angry crowd, undoubtedly to preach the gospel. I pray that we will be as bold when choosing the Way over all



Acts

others. May we place our identity as a Christ-follower far above any identity tied to homeland or political party. Let us, in love, challenge the cultural status-quo with the truths of God's word.

Thursday, May 17 | Acts 20:1-16

"Listening in the Late Night"

I am a very scheduled, time-conscious person. I'm impatient and like the day's events to unfold on my terms. I like my early bedtime. I like my routine.

I am so impressed with the group of believers that accompanied Eutychus in listening to Paul preach. We're told that Paul "prolonged his speech until midnight." I don't know about you, but as I mentioned, I like my sleep. However, it seems as though the group gathered in the room that night recognized that Paul's message of Christ was far more important than sleep and schedules. Those people wanted to soak up every bit of God's message that they could. Time was not a factor. How convicting for me.

We see that even a fatal freak accident didn't stop these attentive believers for long. Eutychus fell to his death, but Paul, through the power of the Holy Spirit, raised him back to life. We then see that the group carried on as if nothing happened: "[Paul] conversed with them a long while, until daybreak." I think about how easily distracted I get when listening to a sermon, praying, or reading Scripture in my personal quiet time. Within seconds of opening my Bible App, I end up scrolling through Instagram. To think that these believers went from witnessing a deadly fall right back to listening to Paul astounds me.

In all reality, the most valuable thing you and I can do with our time and attention is listen to God. Join me in the challenge to let God interrupt our schedules. Perhaps you may want to start by adding ten extra minutes to your daily quiet time or by appointing a time in the afternoon solely for prayer. Make the most of every opportunity you have to hear the Lord's word proclaimed. May our passion for Him be so great that everything else pales in comparison.

Friday, May 18 | Acts 20:17-38

"Paul as a Model for the Christian Life and Witness"

Today's reading recounts Paul's farewell speech to the elders at Ephesus. For three years he had trained and disciplined this church in the way of the Lord. In Paul's final testimony at Ephesus, we see many traits and practices that the believers should imitate. Paul, after all, ultimately imitated Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1).

In verses 19 and 20, Paul noted that his time ministering to the Ephesians had not been easy. It was full of trials and tears, but he did not give up. In the face of persecution, he "did not shrink from declaring... anything that was profitable." I pray you and I can imitate this perseverance in sharing the truth. You and I



Acts

may not face persecutions like imprisonment as Paul did, but we do live in a fallen world that despises the things of God. Let us not shrink back from feeling uncomfortable, judged, or rejected when sharing the gospel.

Paul followed the Spirit's leading even when he was uncertain of the outcome. Verse 22 states that Paul did not know what awaited him in Jerusalem. He knew from past experiences that his role as a missionary was not easy—he was often "afflicted" by the locals if he preached Christ. In spite of this, he knew that's where he needed to be. Oh, that we would follow the Holy Spirit's leading even when we are afraid. Let us, like Paul, obey the Spirit's guidance no matter what. We know that His way is best even if we must suffer for a little while. The response to His "go" should always be our "yes."

Verse 24 is incredibly profound: "I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus." You may not be a vocational minister or an overseas missionary, but if you are a Christian, you have a mission to finish the course given to you by Christ. In a way, you and I have the same mission as Paul: to lead people to know, love, and follow Jesus. May the Lord help us die to self, counting our own lives as nothing, for the sake of His life-saving gospel.

Saturday, May 19-Sunday, May 20 | Acts 18-20

Reread Acts 18-20 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.



Acts

WEEK EIGHT: ACTS 21-25:12 AMY JACKSON

Monday, May 21 | Acts 21:1-36

How much of your life looks like the life of Jesus? Now, granted, Christ, the incarnation of God, didn't live in Birmingham, Alabama in 2018. He didn't have an iPhone or even access to running water. He never used electricity. But even in the span of two thousand years, I would argue that there are certain elements of our lives that could still resemble the life of Christ pretty closely: choosing to flee from sin, choosing to love others well, and choosing faithfulness to the Father above all things.

As I was preparing to write on this passage, I read a commentary which struck a chord with me: the theologian pointed out how so much of Paul's life, especially in this chapter, seems to mirror the final days of Christ. Both were determined to go to Jerusalem, even in the face of danger—even when others warned them against it. Both were bound and arrested. Both were reviled by the angry Jewish crowds (I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*). Although Paul would not be immediately executed in this particular situation, we see that he had made up his mind to take up his cross and to follow Jesus, even if that meant following Him to death.

Would I be ready to make the same statement as Paul in verse 13—"For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus"? And, would I be ready to trust the fate of those I love in the hands of God were they to be called to do the same?

Perhaps we can answer this question in the affirmative. But the further question I must ask myself is, "Am I living like this every day?" Am I putting my sin to death, choosing over and over to follow Jesus and to take up my cross, going wherever He might call—whether that means to a dangerous place around the world or to simply share His goodness with my neighbor? I think the answer to the second question is indicative of our answer to the first. Following Christ is not a one-time decision, but a daily surrender to the Father, walking in faithful obedience regardless of what the future might bring.

Lord, we confess that it is hard to die to self and to carry our crosses! Thank You for the power of the Holy Spirit working in our hearts to make us more like Jesus. Would You empower us, through His work, to take up our cross and to follow Jesus wherever He may lead? We praise You for the faithful example of saints like Paul, who made the decision to follow You daily.

Tuesday, May 22 | Acts 21:37-22:29

Recently, I was introduced to Arc Stories, a local organization committed to helping people learn to tell their stories through storytelling events. It's neat to see someone on stage tell a story, someone who looks very different than me and has a very different background, and to realize I have some kind of shared experience with them, regardless of how different we might seem. There's something about the human experience that helps us connect with one another through stories.



Acts

In Acts 22:1-21, after Paul was arrested, he got the chance to share his story with his Jewish audience, who had falsely accused him of bringing a Gentile into the temple. Notice how he connected with his Roman tribune by speaking to him in Greek (Acts 21:37), but when he turned to talk to the crowd, he spoke in Aramaic, the everyday language of Jews at that time (Acts 21:40).

Perhaps at first Paul seemed radical to these Jews, a dissenter who ought to be punished. But his testimony was meant to connect with them, to show them that he wasn't all that different from them. Paul shared his story with the Jewish crowd, the story of how Christ appeared to him and changed his life forever, calling him to be a witness to all he would encounter (Acts 22:15). Paul testified that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah sent from God to save His people. He confessed that he was a follower of "The Way," but Paul wanted them to understand that this way shouldn't be foreign to Jews; rather, he wanted them to understand that "Judaism, rightly understood, should culminate in faith in Jesus" (I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*). All went well, until Paul hit a nerve in verse 21, when Paul explained how God sent him to the Gentiles after the Jews of Jerusalem rejected him. Luke tells us that the people were hanging onto his every word until this point—and then they began to call for his execution!

I think Paul's example reminds us that we all have stories, and that we are called to share those stories, the stories of God's redemptive work in our lives, with others. How God might use your personal story of salvation and spiritual growth to encourage others and perhaps even bring someone to faith? And, the end of our passage reminds us that sometimes, sharing our stories may not initially go over so well! Perhaps you won't have people calling for your execution, but the message of Christianity can be hostile to the twenty-first century world which is steeped in both legalism and individualism. People don't like to hear that they are inherently sinful, unable to save themselves, and in need of a Savior, but we are also promised that God is the One who nurture, waters, and watches over the seeds of gospel testimony planted by believers.

Wednesday, May 23 | Acts 22:30-23:35

In today's passage, we see Paul appear before the Sanhedrin, the ruling Jewish judicial body, after the temple debacle. After a theological meltdown happened, the tribune rescued Paul and took him down to the barracks. Meanwhile, some Jews plotted to ambush and murder Paul—thankfully, the scheme was discovered, so when Paul was sent to testify to the governor, Felix, he traveled with a large Roman envoy for his protection.

It's easy to get lost in the details, but two significant points stuck out to me. First, note the boldness in Paul's proclamation to the Sanhedrin in verse 6: "It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial." Now, this proclamation instigated an argument, because while the Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead, the Sadducees denied it. But Paul wasn't just referencing belief in a general resurrection; he was specifically testifying to the hope that believers have that, because Jesus was raised from the dead, so we too will be raised to life. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul explains why the resurrection is essential to the hope we have as believers; without the resurrection, he says "we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:19). But take heart! Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ is coming



Acts

again—He is the firstfruits of the harvest to come, for “in Christ all shall be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22). Because Christ was raised to life, we too will experience resurrection glory.

Second, this vision of the Lord in verse 11 astonished me. If I were Paul, I would have been discouraged. He longed for his people, the Jews, to recognize the truth of the gospel. He also longed to go to the ends of the earth as a witness for the Lord, and now it seemed as if he might be stuck—or even killed—in Jerusalem. But the Lord assured Paul that he would not remain in Jerusalem—that he would also testify in Rome. Now, I’m sure this isn’t how Paul imagined going to Rome—under the authority of the Roman government as a prisoner. But we see the hand of the Lord in all of this! Had Paul not been a Roman citizen, perhaps he would have already been murdered by the Jews. His citizenship gave him favor with the tribune and protection for his travel to see Felix. We see the hand of the Lord so clearly in Paul’s life—in his background, his citizenship, his conversion, and his witness to the Lord.

The same God who was sovereign over every detail of Paul’s life is likewise sovereign over your life; praise God for this reminder! Our stories may not unfold the way we imagine, but we can see His hand and His goodness as we look back. Take heart in every season, that the Lord stands by you and desires to use you, wherever He has placed you, as His witness, for His glory.

Thursday, May 24 | Acts 24

Sometimes in stories, narrators give us very clear-cut character profiles. They use adjectives and descriptive phrases to come out and tell us what kind of people we are reading about. But sometimes, authors give us a character profile that requires a bit of research. We have to look at the context clues and the character’s actions (or often, inactions), to determine what kind of person he or she might be.

I think this is the case with Felix in Acts 24. Luke is never straightforward enough to give us a description of his character, but through our context clues and his interactions with Paul, we’re able to learn a good deal about Felix. In fact, we even learn a lot about him in verses 2-3 as Tertullus, the “spokesman” for the Jews, began laying out the case against with Paul with what my grandfather would call “a load of hogwash.” He flattered Felix, alleging that under his rule, the Jews had enjoyed peace and an era of reforms. Apparently this was mere ear-tickling; Felix wasn’t a just leader, and he was especially hated by the Jews. He often took bribes and was known for crucifying leaders of revolts and killing their followers. “Peaceful” wouldn’t be the word to describe his rule.

After Paul appealed to him, Felix determined to leave him in custody and that he would eventually decide his case after hearing from the tribune, Lysias (even though Lysias had already provided his own testimony of the events in the letter recorded in Acts 23:26-30). We also meet Felix’s wife, Drusilla, and apparently their marriage was something of a scandal. No wonder Felix responded with terror and alarm when they began meeting with Paul and heard him reason “about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment” (Acts 24:25). No doubt Felix felt conviction for his sin; but rather than repenting, notice what we



Acts

learn about him in verse 26. He sent Paul away from him but kept him in custody for two years, in hopes that Paul might bribe him with money in exchange for his release.

Here is a man who was so close—who had the mirror of truth held up to his heart and saw his sin—and here is a man who chose to reject the truth of the gospel and to believe the lie, to continue to trust in his own self-sufficiency. And lest we boast, we too could be Felix, if not for the grace at work in our hearts. Oh Lord, thank You for the opportunity to see our brokenness and our sin; help us not to turn away in disbelief or horror, but rather, help us turn our hearts to You, recognizing that You alone are sufficient for our salvation.

Friday, May 25 | Acts 25:1-12

The proverb “Time heals all wounds” may be true, but sometimes, time can also intensify wounds. Two years had passed and Felix was no longer the governor; Festus had taken up his post. Paul was still in prison. And we see that the Jews were still enraged. They wanted Paul, and they wanted him dead. And notice, it wasn’t just the zealots planning an ambush this time; members of the Sanhedrin joined in, reasoning that, if Festus transferred Paul to Jerusalem to be tried, they might be able to attack and kill him while he was en route to the city.

Festus refused to go along with this plan, but invited some of the Sanhedrin to come to Caesarea for the trial, possibly to even sit on the jury. While they had been waiting with bated breath for two years for Paul to finally be punished, the Jews couldn’t come up with any witnesses against him, and their allegations remained unproven. Luke tells us that Festus wanted to get on the good sides of the Jews, so he offered Paul the opportunity to go to Jerusalem and be tried there. Paul knew such a journey would be a death sentence for him, so he appealed to stand trial before Caesar instead.

Why did these men hate Paul so much? I think part of the issue is that Paul was once one of them. He was a “Pharisee of Pharisees.” He held the coats of those who stoned Stephen and persecuted followers of the Way, before he met Christ on the road to Damascus, where his life was forever changed. They hated the message that Paul preached: that the Old Testament, the law that they so treasured, had been fulfilled in the coming of Christ. They rejected the truth that all of the temple sacrifices point forward to the ultimate sacrifice, Jesus’ death on the cross. They refused to believe that they needed divine intervention for salvation, that their close following of the law and observance of sacrifices and temple ordinances couldn’t make them right with God. And they abhorred the fact that Paul welcomed Gentiles into the fold of this sect, declaring that they need not be circumcised to be a part of God’s kingdom. By holding such a grudge, they denied part of the law they held so dear: “You shall not hate your brother in your heart...you shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:17-18).

It’s easy to see their sin, isn’t it? But we are all tempted to hold grudges, aren’t we? We can preach about forgiveness, but it’s often easy to talk about it and much more difficult to offer it. These Jews refused to see



Acts

the truth and turned away from the gospel, but when we understand the gospel, we understand that Christ has forgiven us fully for our sins. He holds no grudges. Thanks be to God!

Saturday, May 26-Sunday, May 27 | Acts 21:1-25:12

Reread Acts 21:1-25:12 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.



Acts

WEEK NINE: ACTS 25:13-28:31 AMY JACKSON

Monday, May 28 | Acts 25:13-26:32

Have you ever noticed how people can tell stories so differently? Multiple versions of stories can be factual, but often we choose to emphasize certain things depending on our audience. One of the things I love about Acts is that, as Paul appeared before authorities, we continue hearing his testimony shared—and we learn different tidbits about Paul along the way!

In Acts 26, Paul appeared before a Jewish king named Agrippa, who ruled over several Gentile territories and who had the right to choose the high priest. When Agrippa traveled through Caesarea, the procurator, Festus, reached out to him about Paul. Festus believed Paul had “done nothing deserving death” (Acts 26:25). Perhaps Festus believed that Agrippa, who was also a Jew, might help him better understand Paul.

Paul shared his story with Agrippa in Acts 26:1-23; while we’ve heard his testimony several times at this point, two things stuck out to me. First, notice verse 14. Paul included an anecdote not mentioned in other passages regarding his conversion: the Lord said to him, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” This proverbial saying would have been well-known to the Romans; goads were sharp sticks used to prod oxen. If oxen resisted the goads by kicking at them, the drivers would use them more fiercely to keep them in line. The Lord used this image to show Paul that He was aggressively pursuing him, and that resisting God would do no good.

Why does Paul use this analogy in this particular testimony? I think Paul wanted Agrippa to see that Jews rejecting Christ were also kicking against the goads. In his testimony, Paul reminds Agrippa of his background, that he too grew up as a Jew and lived as a Pharisee. When Christ appeared to Paul, he realized that Jesus was the Messiah foretold by the prophets of old (Acts 26:22). Paul didn’t see Christianity as some foreign religion, but rather as a natural outworking of the Jewish faith: Christ was the fulfillment of all of the Old Testament promises they treasured and held so dearly.

Sadly, Agrippa continued to kick against the goads, refusing to believe (Acts 26:28-32). We could easily judge Agrippa and the other religious leaders, but instead, we ought to ask ourselves how we might be kicking against the goads. In what areas of your life are you refusing the Lord’s leadership? Is He calling you to faith and surrender, to following Christ for the first time? Perhaps He is calling you to make a change in your lifestyle and to put a particular sin to death. Maybe He is calling you to share the good news of the gospel with a loved one. Wherever the Lord is leading, my prayer is that, like Paul, you would find yourself in a position of surrender, ready to follow Him, rather than in a position of refusal and disbelief like Agrippa.



Acts

Tuesday, May 29 | Acts 27:1-12

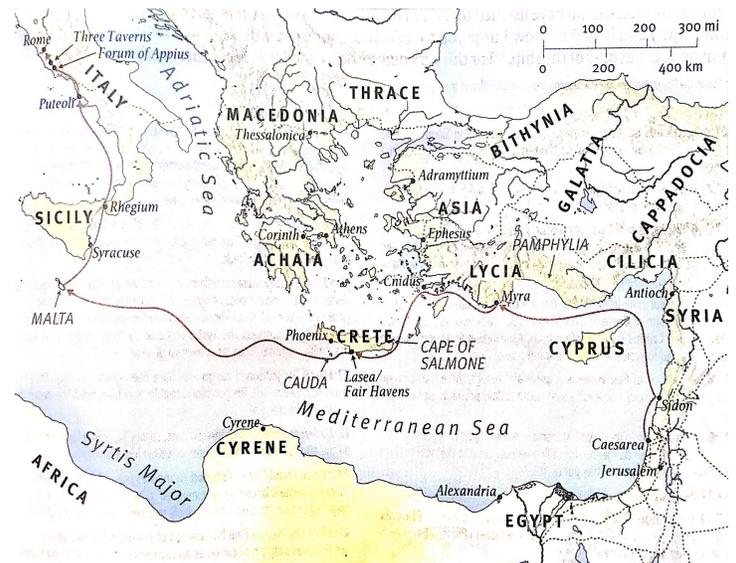
“Only when it’s dark enough can you see the stars.” Historians aren’t sure of the origins of this popular proverb (although it likely originated from Thomas Carlyle), but it was used by Martin Luther King, Jr. in his final speech before his death (“I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”). King used the quote to explain how he had seen the Lord working even in difficult and dire circumstances. And, after reading Acts 27:1-12, I think Paul would have to agree with the proverb’s sentiment.

We’ve finally entered into some action in the book of Acts; Paul has left Caesarea by ship, on his way to Rome to appear before Caesar, under the supervision of a centurion named Julius. The journey can be a bit confusing with all of the ports and cities, but take a look at the map and trace Paul’s route. One thing that the text points out to us is that the weather was less than fair. In fact, most people avoided traveling in the winter because the Mediterranean Sea conditions were so poor.

Put yourself in the shoes of Paul for a moment. You’ve been arrested against your will, held by the Romans (who can’t seem to find a reason to charge you with anything, but want to appease the bloodthirsty Jews), and now you’re put on a boat to travel to Rome. You’ve been wanting to go to Rome to share the gospel, but instead you’re on your way to appear to Caesar. The weather is terrible, and there’s even risk of the ship sinking—and when you mention this, no one seems to care (Acts 27:11).

Things aren’t good, of course. But in the darkness of the situation, in the fear and despair that Paul might have wrestled with, he also saw the kindness of God in several ways. First, Paul didn’t have to journey alone; the pronoun “we” in Acts 27:1 suggests that Luke was allowed to go with Paul, along with Aristarchus. Paul had the opportunity to travel with fellow believers. Second, we even see that the Roman centurion showed him favor and treated him kindly, allowing him to visit other friends when they had stopped at the port in Sidon, who cared for him. The presence of these dear companions likely reminded him of the presence of the Lord, who promises to never leave and never forsake those He loves.

Paul saw God’s mercy, even in his trials. It seems like an oxymoron, but in the darkness, we really are able to see the stars most clearly. In tribulation, in the darkness of despair, God’s love shines brightly and we can see His kindness and His goodness, even in the most desperate of times. I don’t know where you are today, but I am praying that, in the ebbs and flows of life, in the days of sunshine and in the days of storms, you would be able to look up and see the goodness of God.





Acts

Wednesday, May 30 | Acts 27:13-44

I'm not a meteorologist by any stretch of the imagination, but weather has always been fascinating to me. I've read some about the record-breaking nor'easters of 2018; while we don't know if this "northeaster" Paul and the crew experienced at sea was anything like the storms that wreaked havoc on the Northeast this year, I can imagine that the experience was terrifying as rain pelted the ship, the winds raged, the thunder boomed, and lightning struck while the crew was out on the sea, vulnerable and unprotected on the water. If only they had listened to Paul! As they looked up to the dark sky, without any navigational beacons, all of their hopes for being saved faded (Acts 27:20).

Paul spoke into this bleak situation and brought hope. He told the crew and prisoners that he had a vision that night, a vision of an angel of the Lord, who encouraged him and told him not to fear, because the Lord had plans for Paul to stand and testify before Caesar. This northeaster would not overtake their ship, because Paul's God was sovereign over the storms: the weather would not thwart His purposes. As we read on, we see that Paul's vision was confirmed; the Lord spared the people on the ship because they were traveling with Paul. God has a divine purpose that He was bringing to pass.

Wouldn't it be nice if life was always like this? If, when we were walking through a difficult situation, God would appear to us with an encouraging word, promising that things would work out for good? Paul had a supernatural vision from God which gave the crew hope and gave him opportunity to provide leadership on the ship, allowing everyone to get to shore on Malta safely. But, just in case we're tempted to envy Paul, remember that he was headed to testify before Caesar. It wasn't as if the Lord had just freed him from his prison sentence. Rather, God saved him so that the gospel might be declared in Rome by a man in chains.

There is much suffering in life, and we may never have a vision quite like Paul had in the midst of a trial. But we can trust in what God has told us to be true through His word. God promises to never leave and never forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). He promises that He has sent a Helper, the Holy Spirit, to help us in our weakness (John 16:1-24, Romans 8:26-28). He promises to walk with us, even in the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4), and even tells us that one day, He will swallow up death forever (Isaiah 25:6-9). Sometimes, God delivers us from suffering. And sometimes, God allows us to walk through suffering. We may not understand His purposes on this side of heaven, but like Paul, we trust that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18).

Thursday, May 31 | Acts 28:1-10

In fictional tales, shipwrecks don't always turn out well, do they? I feel like every story I've read or movie I've watched involving a shipwreck ends with the crew finding themselves on a unfamiliar island with unfriendly natives, who see the foreigners as a threat. After such a harrowing journey and subsequent shipwreck, we might expect that Paul and his company would end up in such a situation. But instead, Luke, who was with Paul on the island of Malta, reported that the natives showed them "unusual kindness" (Acts 28:2). They started a fire, welcomed the shipwrecked crew, and tended to their needs.



Acts

We see the hand of God in this shipwreck; the Lord was determined that Paul will make it to Rome unscathed. He even protected Paul after he received a serious snake bite from a viper (Acts 28:3). But perhaps God also had plans for the crew to end up in Malta so that His goodness might be made known among those people. Luke tells us that many, including the father of the Roman governor Publius, were healed. The Lord used the topsy-turvy trip and even the shipwreck to bring His witnesses among these natives for three months!

We don't have any written accounts in Acts 28 of the Maltese natives coming to faith, but it's hard to imagine that Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus could have remained there for three months without giving witness to the gospel, even as people were being healed. Jesus' miraculous physical healings, as well as the other healings in Acts, were often accompanied by the hope of spiritual healing. Even though Luke doesn't include this in his account, it's hard to imagine that Paul wasn't preaching the gospel as people were healed, because that is who he was, and his desire was to make the gospel known wherever the Lord took him.

Physical healing and spiritual healing can sometimes go hand-in-hand, and this is such a good reminder for us as we think about evangelism and missions in our community, country, and world. Our desire is to care for people holistically, providing for their physical needs while also being aware of their spiritual needs and pointing them to their ultimate need, hope in Christ. And Paul is an example for us; while there are no recorded salvations in Malta in the book of Acts, no doubt Paul's witness impacted the natives and planted seeds. We often don't know what our impact on others might be, and we may never see the fruits of our labor; our call is to be faithful to share the gospel and love others with His love wherever He has placed us.

Friday, June 1 | Acts 28:11-31

Have you ever watched a movie or read a book that had a completely unsatisfactory ending? My mother detests stories like that, and can't stand watching a movie or reading a book that ends without a resolution. At this point in Acts, we have been anticipating Paul's encounter with Caesar. After three months on the island of Malta, Paul arrived in Rome. He was still in captivity but was allowed to stay on his own, with a guard watching over him, rather than in the prison.

But where does the book of Acts leave us? We don't finish with a grand finale or eloquent defense before Caesar himself; rather, we read about Paul's appeal to the Jews (Acts 28:17-28) and their refusal to believe. The book of Acts ends us with Paul's declaration that "this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen" (Acts 28:28), and with the picture of Paul living in Rome, supporting himself, and proclaiming the gospel to all he met "with all boldness and without hindrance" (Acts 28:31).

If you're like me, you might feel a little disappointed at this cliffhanger ending! What ends up happening to Paul? Does he ever get to travel further east? I did some reading and church historians really certain about what happened next. It's possible that Paul did make it further east, and we know that Paul was eventually executed by decapitation by Nero's orders, likely in the early 60s AD. It's possible that he was freed and



Acts

later imprisoned again by the Romans before this happened, but there's little evidence of the ordering of events.

But, you see, the abrupt ending to Acts reminds us that Luke's goal wasn't to write a biography of Paul; rather, Luke was writing about the early church and their witness "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Acts isn't a biography of any particular apostle; Acts is the story of the gospel going forth.

I'm reminded too that so often we want to make everything about us, including our own stories. While we certainly have leading roles, our stories first and foremost aren't about us; they are about God. I had a professor from Beeson who often would say, "We all have our own stories, but only one story redeems our story." Acts is the tale of that story, the very true story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and how that story changes all of our stories. We don't end with all of our answers to Paul's life and death front and center: rather, we end with the gospel front and center, being preached and proclaimed by God's servant. May this be true of our own lives—that Jesus would be at the forefront of our stories!

June 2-3 | Acts 25:13-28:31

Reread Acts 25:13-28:31 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word over this week.