

## Introducing Acts

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." - Acts 1:8*

### ***Acts—Luke's Sequel:***

Luke, the physician wrote two books of the New Testament. The Gospel of Luke is about the life of Jesus Christ. The book of Acts is about the spread of the church. In fact in the first century, Luke and Acts were together in one volume. It probably wasn't until the second century that Luke was put with the other three gospels and Acts received its current title.

### ***Luke—What do we know?***

Luke is mentioned three times in the New Testament:

- Colossians 4:10-14—Paul calls him a physician
- Philemon 23-24—Paul calls Luke a “fellow worker”
- 2 Timothy 4:11—Luke is the only one left with Paul to help him while in prison

Luke is the only Gentile author in the New Testament, writing a total of 28% of the New Testament (Luke—14% & Acts 14%). Ironically, Luke is said to have emphasized Jesus' Jewish roots more than any of the other gospels.

### ***Purpose—Why was Acts written?***

It was written to Theophilus (“lover of God”) to inform him about “all that Jesus began to do and to teach...” (Acts 1:1). It was probably written mostly to Jewish Christians for three reasons:

- 1—To show that the gospel was not an attack on the Jews or the Law.
- 2—To keep Christian Jews from falling away from Christianity as non-Christian Jews persecute the church.
- 3—To show that the gospel spread across the civilized world within one generation.

### ***Given a Mission (Acts 1:4-9)***

*What did Jesus tell his disciples to do?*

- Stay in Jerusalem and wait for the Holy Spirit

*Where are they to be witnesses at?*

- Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Luke has given the gospel story a twist. In the Gospel of Luke, Luke follows just over 30 years of Jesus' life beginning with Jesus' birth in light of the **Roman** leaders who were in power at the time (Herod—Luke 1:5, Augustus—Luke 2:1, and Tiberius—Luke 3:1). From there he wrote about Jesus' ministry in **Galilee**, then in **Judea**, then in **Samaria**, and eventually in **Jerusalem** where Jesus was crucified. In Acts Luke writes about the next 30 years. Only this time the order is flipped as the disciples start where Jesus left off—in **Jerusalem**. From there they will move to **Judea**, then to **Samaria**, and finally into the whole **Roman** world.

The apostles are told to start where they are and progressively work their way further and further out. It is like saying, “you will be my witnesses in your neighborhood, and in all of St. Petersburg and Pinellas County, to all of Florida and eventually to the whole world.

*What does that tell us about where evangelism begins?*

- It begins with the people we know and grows from there.
- We don't have to go to some far off country. We first go to those we are closest to.

### ***Guaranteed Success—3 ways***

**Read Acts 1:1-3**—*What is the first thing that guarantees their success in reaching the whole world?*

- Jesus has triumphed over death itself and now he offers life to the world.

*How do you think actually having experienced the risen Jesus would make evangelism easier to do?*

- It is easier to talk about things you actually saw—Jesus death, burial and resurrection.

**Read John 20:24-29**—Jesus is talking about us! *Even though we haven't seen Jesus or touched his nail scars, does Jesus also expect us to be witnesses today? Why?*

- We have the testimony of the apostles.
- We have seen God make a difference in our lives and the lives of others.

The second thing that guarantees their success is that God is the driving force by His Spirit. *How does power from the Holy Spirit guarantee success?*

- It is not up to their own strength or our own strength. It is up to God's.
- The kingdom is not initiated by man but by God.

*How does taking the focus off of our own power, ability, or intelligence and relying on God's power make our mission easier?*

- We don't have to do it all alone
- We don't have to have all the right answers.

Often we think that effective evangelism is based on our ability and so we avoid it fearing failure. In Acts, it is clear that it is God's ability and power that assures us of success. We are just His instruments.

We often avoid the term "witness" because some religious groups have twisted it or overused it but that is no reason to throw out a perfectly biblical word. *What is the role of a witness and how does that relate to evangelism?*

- A witness tells what they know.
- We tell people about Jesus as we know through the Bible
- We tell people about the difference Jesus has made in our lives.

**Read Acts 1:9-11**—*What is the third thing that guarantees this mission will be successful?*

- Jesus is going to return and make good on God's promises.

These two men, presumably angels, remind the apostles that Jesus is not gone forever. He is coming back. Luke 24:52 tells us, "Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy." *What kind of joy do we have knowing that Jesus is coming back for us and how should that encourage us to reach the lost?*

There is no better place to start our story than with all the power of God as Father (1:7), Son (1:1-9), and Holy Spirit (1:8) all coming together to change the whole world. God has invested a lot into saving the world and He calls each of us to be witnesses to the world announcing that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. In just 30 years these men changed the world because it was by God's power and not their own. *How can God use you to do the seemingly impossible?*

**Close the session with prayer that God could use us more effectively to be his witnesses to a dying world. Pray that God will give us courage and boldness to reach the lost.**

## Cut to the Heart

*"When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'"*  
Acts 2:37

**Icebreaker:** *What has God done in your life to get your attention?*

### Acts 2:1-4

*What three things marked the coming of the Holy Spirit on the apostles?*

- Violent wind
- Tongues of fire
- Speaking in tongues

As we talked about last week, the start of the church is a God-initiated event and comes through His power and not our own.

### Acts 2:5-13

*Why were so many Jews from all over the world gathered in Jerusalem at this time?*

- They were there to celebrate the Day of Pentecost, which was a time to celebrate the harvest 50 days after the Passover.

God meets us on our level. He speaks our language and uses words we can understand. It was clear that these untrained fishermen couldn't have known these languages on their own. This was a miracle. It got their attention and prompted the crowd to ask, "What does this mean?"

### Acts 2:14-24

Peter preaches to them Jesus Christ. Peter says they already know about miraculous things Jesus did before his crucifixion. *How would they have known about these things?*

- They may have been in Jerusalem at the time.
- It had only been 7 weeks since Jesus' death and the town was probably still talking about it.

*Why was it important that Peter could mention that there were witnesses that what Peter was saying was true?*

- They couldn't deny what Peter was saying.
- Peter wasn't making these things up.

Notice how Peter says God handed Jesus over to "you" and "you" put him to death...*Had all of these people participated in Jesus' crucifixion?*

- There may have been a couple who shouted "Crucify him" but not all of them.
- Ultimately it was our sin that put Jesus on the cross and we are all responsible for that.

*In what way do we all share in the guilt of Jesus' crucifixion?* **Romans 3:23 & 6:23**

Peter continues to appeal to scripture because he knows that is what they understand. *Why is it important to start with where people are and show them God from what they already understand?*

- We can't expect people to be someone they are not. We need to get to know people well enough to know how they need to hear the message of Jesus.
- Opening the Old Testament to convince people today may not work as well for some people but that is what Peter's audience needed to hear to be convinced.

### Acts 2:36-37

Peter's words are shocking. They have killed God's chosen. They have crucified the Messiah! Little wonder why they are cut to the heart. They had been convinced that Jesus was a blasphemer and a criminal and they had him killed. Now they understand that he is the Son of God. *What thoughts would you have if you just realized you killed the Son of God?*

- That would be upsetting and terrifying

Before people can ask "What shall we do?" they have to be cut to the heart. They have to be convinced that they are guilty and in need of reconciliation with God. People need to know that no matter how good they seem, their life is totally upside down without Jesus.

*Why has it become easy to be calloused to the message of Jesus Christ?*

- We hear it so often it seems normal.

*Is it normal for perfect God to come to earth and die for sinful people?* Of course not.

*How can you help soften the hearts of those you come into contact with on a daily basis?*

- By really living for Jesus, even when it is tough
- By loving those people like Jesus would
- By being there for them when their life is hard.
- Many other ways

### Acts 2:38-41

What was the answer to their question? They needed to be made right with God. *What two things does Peter say they need to do to be right with God?*

- The first is repentance— *what does it mean to repent?* - it is a total life change. We turn from walking the wrong way to walking with God.
- Second is baptism. In Romans 6 Paul tells us that through baptism we are connected with Christ in his death and we die to our sins as we are lowered into the water. As we are raised back out we are connected with Christ in his resurrection. We receive the promised Holy Spirit and have the hope of a future resurrection because just like Jesus, death can no longer have a hold on us.

Today many say if you accept the message of Jesus you pray a prayer that is not found anywhere in the Bible. That is not what the early church did. Next week we will learn that there is more to being a Christian than just being baptized. There is an entire Christian community that we become a part of.

*What things in your life harden your heart toward the message of Jesus?*

*Are there things you are still holding on to that interfere with your relationship with God?*

If the people who killed Jesus can be pardoned, so can we. There is no one bad enough that God won't take them back. [If there are non-Christians you can let them know that the group is there to support them. You may want to ask if anyone tonight was cut to the heart and wants to be made right with God through repentance if they are a Christian or repentance and baptism if they are not yet a Christian.]

## The First Church

*"They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people."  
Acts 2:46*

**Icebreaker**—*What do you look forward to the most about being with other Christians?*

Last week we talked about how 3000 people were cut to the heart and responded with repentance and baptism following Peter's sermon at Pentecost. Today we are going to have a look at the rest of the story. Our Christian walk is not finished once we are baptized. It has only just begun. Baptism is the gunshot at the beginning of the race. It is the marker of our spiritual renewal into a new creation, holy and devoted to God.

Imagine if you went on a long journey to another country. While you were gone you heard a message about the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ and you became a Christian. Instead of going home, you stayed to learn more and to grow in your relationship with other Christians. Without a home, without your belongings, without many changes of clothes, you would be dependent on your new family to provide you with many things.

### Acts 2:42-47

*When you look at the first century church, what words come to mind that would describe them?*

- Selfless/sacrificial
- Kind
- Devoted
- Joyful

*How does Luke describe their hearts during this time?*

- Glad and sincere

*What do you think made them so happy?*

- They just found out that they killed the Son of God and that they still had hope from God!
- Their sins had been forgiven. Wouldn't that make you glad?
- We have just as much to be joyful about today!

*How often do we forget about the joy that we should have as Christians because of what God has done through Christ?*

*How can the joy of being a Christian influence our daily lives?*

- It should be evident to the people around us that we are different
- Our whole attitude about life can be one of joy because no matter what we are saved.

*What would you think about a grumpy group of Christians if you were a non-Christian?*

- You wouldn't want anything to do with them.

If we are going to be like the early church then we need to be a people of joy and of sacrifice. Their joy was expressed through certain activities that we find in the early church. *What do we find these Christians doing together?*

- Studying the apostles' teaching
- Fellowship
- Table fellowship
- Common possessions
- Giving
- Daily meetings
- Worship

*How connected do you feel with others at church?*

*How connected would you feel if you were with the church almost every day?*

*Which of these things do we still practice and which of these things are not really practiced today?*

**Still practiced:**

- Study of the apostles' teaching
- Fellowship
- Table fellowship
- Worship

**Not practiced:**

- Common possessions
- Daily meetings

Why don't we practice several of these things like they did. *Should we in some way, shape or form? Why/Why not?*

- We don't always exhibit the same level of sacrifice that they did. These two things are very inconvenient. We often let our schedules get in the way and don't like for others to have a say in how we spend our money. Many of us have forgotten that it is not really all ours to begin with. We are just stewards of it.
- You may say it is hard to do with 500 people. They did it with 3000+
- We can still find ways to help each other and to find more ways to spend time with each other.

*What level of sacrifice were these new Christians willing to endure for each other?*

- Time each day in fellowship and study
- Selling possessions and giving to each other

*When have you seen the church or church members really sacrifice to help others?*

Donny Dillon used to say that we often see church as a "got to" instead of a "get to." Because of the grace and mercy of God we get to be here. We are very blessed to be in the family of God and that should show to others through the joy we have in our lives and in the time we spend with each other. Church is not a burden when you think about all that God has done to bring us together. We get to be here and we should love being here with God and with each other.

*What difference is there when people come together to give to each other than everyone coming together to get from each other?*

- One is selfish and one is selfless. One build up and one tears down.

*What would church be like if we all came with a giving attitude?*

*Which of these things that the early church did challenges you the most?*

*What can you do to help make the church more like the early church?*

## Filled with Amazement

*"When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him."*

*Acts 3:9-10*

**Icebreaker**—*What is the most amazing thing you have ever seen God do?*

In John 14:12 Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you, all who have faith in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father..."

At Pentecost, Peter's sermon led to more disciples than during all of Jesus' ministry. We learned that the believers were in awe at the wonders performed by the apostles. Acts 3 & 4 records even more amazement as the power of God is displayed through the apostles.

### Acts 3:1-10

*What did the beggar expect to receive?*

- Money

*What do Peter and John offer him?*

- They offer him healing.

*What is the reaction of the crowds to this miracle?*

- They are filled with wonder and amazement

*How would you have reacted if you saw a lame man you had passed by every day get up and walk?*

Peter, who now has the attention of the crowd and some religious leaders, preaches to them about the power of God, their responsibility for the death of Jesus Christ, and their need for repentance. *How well do you think that sat with the religious leaders standing nearby?*

- Not well, they had Peter and John arrested and put on trial!

*How would you have felt speaking to a crowd and seeing some familiar faces from Jesus' trial staring back at you?*

In this trial we find another group of people who are filled with amazement. Let's listen in to part of their trial

### Acts 4:7-13

*Why was the Sanhedrin amazed at what they saw in Peter and John?*

- They were amazed because these men taught with authority and with wisdom but had not been through formal education.

*How is it refreshing that God can use the simple to humble the wise?*

- You don't have to have all the best training in the world to talk about Jesus. You just have to be willing.
- Our message is not about our power, ability, or education but about our submission to what God is doing in our lives.

*What impact had Jesus had on their lives?*

- They had been transformed from ordinary fishermen to passionate advocates for Christ.
- They were bold in the face of serious opposition.

The people they faced were not “light weights.” These men had significantly influenced the death of Jesus only months prior and now the apostles find themselves under trial as well. *How would it be difficult to find boldness under those circumstances?*

After being told not to speak or teach any more in the name of Jesus they are released.

### **Acts 4:23-31**

Not only did they have the support of God but they had the support of each other. *What two things do the Christians pray for in Acts 4:29-30?*

- Boldness and more healings, signs, and wonders

*How is that a difficult thing to pray in light of what had just happened?*

- They had just been warned not to do those things again.

### **Application**

*How does opposition often increase our faith?*

*In what areas could the church today use more boldness?*

*What does it take for us to become more bold in our faith and in proclaiming it to others?*

Leaders: Ask for prayer requests for areas in their lives that they could use more boldness. Spend some time praying for boldness and for us to continue telling the story of Jesus to the lost all around us.



# Ananias & Sapphira: Giving Gone Wrong

Acts 5:1-11

**Icebreaker**—*When is a time you were tricked and how did that feel?*

We keep reading about victory after victory in the early church—mass conversions, miracles, and bold preaching. Acts 4 ends with another generous act on the part of Barnabas that sets the stage for this week's lesson.

## Acts 4:36-37

In the spirit of Acts 2:44-45 when the disciples were selling their possessions and giving to those who had need, Barnabas sold a field and gave the money to the church. This act of generosity was encouraging to the early church as people were giving up so much to support each other. However, anything God can use for good, Satan can try to use for evil. Probably having seen or heard of this act by Barnabas and the attention that was gained for it, Ananias and Sapphira come up with a plan.

## Acts 5:1-4

*What was wrong about what Ananias and Sapphira did with the money?*

- They presented it as if it were the total amount to make their giving seem more sacrificial and make themselves look good.

*Peter said, "What made you think of doing such a thing?" What do you think drove them to act like that?*

- They probably wanted attention and affirmation from others.
- They wanted a pat on the back.

When we help others it should be out of a loving heart that is focused on someone else and their needs and not about what we can get out of it or how it will make us look. **Read Matthew 6:1-4** *Why is it hypocritical to announce our giving to others?*

- Because we should not give in order to receive. When you give expecting to get something in return (praise, attention, etc) that is not done through a spirit of generosity but out of a spirit of selfishness and greed and that is hypocritical.

## Acts 5:5-11

They paid the price with their lives for their sinful attitudes. While God had claimed victory in the lives of thousands to this point in Acts, Satan has been successful with these two. But just as Satan turned giving, which is normally a good thing, into something used for evil, God used this event to build the church. *How did God use these events to strengthen the church?*

- The people were filled with fear.

*How do you balance a reverent fear of God with a healthy love for God?*

- There is a lot to respect and fear about God as he is the ultimate determination of our eternity.
- God also has consequences for immoral acts that may not always be as direct as in this story but are just as real.
- We talk so much about how God loves us that we need to remember there is also a proper respect and fear of the Lord that we need to remember.

*What would you have expected Peter to say to someone who had just sinned?*

- You might expect that he would call on them to repent just as he had done with those who had sinned in Acts 2.

*Why did this sin result in something so different?*

- Just as God started the church through his own power and spirit in miraculous ways, so he sends a warning to his church in a miraculous way that gave the church a healthy respect for God.
- God is protecting his church and reminding them that holiness is essential.

God does not want us to be terrified of him but he does want the best for us and living holy lives is always the best for us. Some times we need to be reminded that the fear of the Lord can be a powerful force to lead us to holiness.

## **Application**

*Why is it challenging to live obedient to God even though he often doesn't immediately punish us for our sins?*

*How has Satan tempted you to take a good thing and turn it into something sinful?*

*How can a healthy respect and fear of God help us grow closer to him?*

*In what healthy ways can we give back to God?*

# Dealing With Persecution

Acts 5:17-42

**Icebreaker**—*What is the most opposition you have ever faced about your beliefs?*

## Acts 5:17-18

Just as Satan tried to discourage the church by tempting Ananias and Sapphira, he will try to discourage the church by threatening its leaders.

*It says they were jealous of the apostles, where does jealousy usually come from?*

- A focus on self and an unwillingness for anyone else to get what you want. In this case, attention.

## Acts 5:19-26

With the jail still locked up tight and guards still at the doors, the guards find the apostles out teaching and preaching in the temple courts! Remember these same officials who are now persecuting the apostles were some of the same people who had a hand in the death of Jesus for making these same claims—that Jesus is the son of God.

*What would your reaction have been to what the angel said after you had just been arrested and told not to do that?*

- It might make you a little nervous to go right back out there but you would also know that it was God's will for you to do that.

*What do most prisoners do when they break out of prison?*

- They hide and try not to get caught immediately.

*How did the apostles respond to the persecution of imprisonment?*

- They went out the very next morning preaching and teaching, risking more punishment.

Dealing with persecution requires a great trust in God and a boldness that we are living for him.

## Acts 5:27-32

Peter and the other apostles appeal to a higher authority. *Whose authority do they appeal to?*

- God's.

*When was a time in your life you were faced with a decision to please men or to please God?*

*How tempting would it have been for Peter have agreed with them and just asked for forgiveness later?*

- That might have been really tempting but that was not God's will.

The early church faced the question of what to do with people who denied Jesus in order to save their life from persecution only later to ask for forgiveness. While we don't face that kind of persecution in America, we still have a daily decision of how public we are about our faith and how we act around believers and unbelievers.

*If the apostles were called to stand up for their faith in the midst of persecutions and threats of death how much more are we called to talk about Jesus when we do not face the same level of persecution?*

*What is the most your belief in Christ has ever cost you?/How did you get through that situation?*

*What does persecution look like today and how can that be discouraging?*

When dealing with persecution it is important to make sure our focus is on God and not on gaining glory or attention for ourselves—the martyr complex.

### **Acts 5:38-42**

Unlike the trial in chapter 4, this trial does result in some punishment. *Why is it a challenge to see flogging as a blessing? Why were the apostles able to see it as a blessing?*

- They had learned much from Jesus.
- They could have easily been on trial with Jesus and suffered his same fate.

*If you were in the Sanhedrin, what would you think about these men who rejoiced even in suffering?*

- You may feel like you were losing—even though punished these men rejoice.
- It may anger you.

Just like with Ananias and Sapphira, what was intended to do harm turned into something good. *What good did this punishment result in?*

- Rejoicing
- More teaching and preaching
- Solidarity of the Christians.

Dealing with persecution means we realize there is a bigger picture of victory and that helps us rejoice

### **Application**

*What do you want to remember the next time you are challenged or hurt for your faith in Christ?*

*How does this story inspire us to have more boldness in dealing with the world?*

*How can we better put God first no matter what in our own lives?*

*How does this story inspire us to help support each other in tough times?*

# Called to Service

Acts 6:1-7

**Icebreaker:** *Have you ever been expected to do something that you could never accomplish on your own?*

During the first five chapters of Acts the church has grown by leaps and bounds. There finally comes a point in time when the 12 apostles can no longer meet all the needs of the church on their own.

## Acts 6:1-4

Some people have a really hard time saying “No” to opportunities to help others. *How did the apostles use this as an opportunity to equip others for ministry?*

- By delegating this responsibility to others, they helped those men mature in their faith.

*What was the criteria for those who were chosen?*

- They were men
- They were full of the Spirit
- They were wise.

Of course, you don't have to be a man to serve in the kingdom of God. There are many responsibilities available to both men and women. *How can responsibility in serving others lead to spiritual maturity?*

- Serving others stretches us and helps us grow in our faith.
- Serving others teaches us to be leaders and how to handle responsibility in spiritual matters.

The apostles did not take sides or blame anyone for the problem. They did not even appoint the people themselves but let the Christians exercise some judgment in the matter.

*Why is it easy to rely on the elders and ministers to take care of everything?*

- We may have learned by example that they take care of everything.
- We may feel like they know the Bible better than we do.
- They may have been a Christian longer

*Why is it important for all Christians to be involved in some kind of ministry or service?*

- It shows that we are growing.
- It increases our faith.
- It makes use of our talents.

## Acts 6:5-7

- Laid their hands on them
- Prayed for them

These things were primarily associated with three things:

- Commissioning someone for a duty
- Presenting a sacrifice before God (notice the rest of chapter 6-7 is about Stephen, one of these seven men, and his death)
- Saying a blessing over someone

*How well do these three things fit what is happening in Acts 6?*

The call is not just for these seven or for the twelve apostles. The call is for all of God's people to be involved in service. We are called to be invested in His church. That takes time and energy. It takes putting others ahead of ourselves and notice that even though these men did not teach or preach, their ministry still resulted in the spreading of the word of God and a large number of people being saved (**Acts 6:7**). Even though you might not preach or teach, you still have a purpose in the kingdom of God that results in saving the lost.

**Application:**

*What do you feel like your purpose or ministry is within the church?*

*How has God used you in the past to serve and minister to others?*

The Christian life is a life of service. When only a few choose to be serious about that it puts a strain on the church. But when each one is willing to do their part the church thrives and grows as God intended.

*What can you do to be more active in service to others?*

Our LIFE groups are coming to a close for the summer. It is important that we be reminded that our participation in the church does lead to people being reached and lives being saved.

**Do not read this to the group:**

Life leaders encourage your group members to be a part of Sunday worship both AM and PM. Encourage them to serve others. Encourage them to be a part of something bigger than themselves and invest themselves in things that will last forever. You may even want to give an example of a way that you are going to be of more service to God this summer to spur them on to love and good works. God bless you for all you have done this year!

# Stand Up for Jesus

Stephen shares his faith amidst opposition...

September 9, 2007

**Icebreaker:** *Have you ever faced persecution that resulted in something good?*

Before the summer break we saw the church begin at Pentecost, grow by the thousands to the point that the religious leaders could no longer ignore it. Christians began facing persecution by the Pharisees yet the church continued to grow. In today's chapter the persecution has reached a boiling point that will have unexpected consequences.

## Acts 6:8-15

Even though Stephen was doing God's will he met opposition. *Have you ever tried really hard to do what is right but people got upset with you anyway?*

*What two accusations did the false witnesses say about Stephen?*

- He spoke against this holy place—the temple
- He spoke against the law—The Law of Moses

The question comes to Stephen in **Acts 7:1** - “Are these charges true?”

Stephen's answer makes it clear that he is not at odds with the temple or the Law of Moses. He is at odds with their failure to believe in Jesus as Lord.

- 7:37-38—he shows his respect for the Law of Moses calling it “living words”
- 7:46-47—he shows his respect for the temple of God

But Stephen does more than defend himself, he goes on the offensive in **7:51-53**. Stephen is saying that they are the ones who have not listened to the law of Moses. *What things does Stephen accuse the Pharisees of?*

- They were calloused
- Resist the Holy Spirit
- They had killed the Messiah!

*What makes this a bold thing to say?*

- Stephen's life was in their hands.

Stephen was living the commission even though it wasn't easy. *When have you faced opposition to sharing your faith? What did you do?*

The Sanhedrin could have listened and believed Stephen's words. Instead they rejected his teaching and insisted on his death. *Why is it often hard to change our minds and admit we were wrong?*

## Acts 7:54-60

*What differences are there between the expressions and attitude of the Sanhedrin and that of Stephen?*

- Sanhedrin—angry, snarled faces
- Stephen—calm and peaceful

Stephen becomes the first Christian martyr. The reason was because the Sanhedrin was bound up in their own traditions and by their own pride. *How can pride be harmful to our effectiveness in living the commission?*

*How do you think Stephen was able to stand up to these men the way that he did?*

- Stephen stood up for Jesus because he had a relationship with Jesus. He knew scripture. He knew the Lord. *How can we stand up for Jesus today if our relationship with him is weak and we don't know much about scripture?*

*What can we learn from Stephen about how to stand up for our faith in Christ?*

We can learn from the Sanhedrin as well as Stephen. There are times in life when we are in the wrong and we are faced with making a change. Like the Sanhedrin we are faced with a decision to admit we are wrong and accept what is right.

*If you were a Christian at this time and heard about Stephen's death, would it make you want to share your faith more or less? Why?*

## Acts 8:1-4

*What good thing resulted from Stephen's death?*

- the church scattered and grew throughout the world.

Because the church is God's church, no harm can be so great that it brings an end to the church. God has bigger plans.

### **Application:**

*What settings do you spend time in that are hostile to Christianity?*

*How can you be a better witness for Christ in those places?*

*How can we better encourage each other to be strong at these difficult times?*

### **Prayer & Fellowship**

Pray that we can find opportunities to share our faith even in the difficult times and places.



# Evangelism: Partnering with God

Stepping through the open door

September 16, 2007

**Icebreaker:** When was a time in your life you had to depend on God's leading?

After the Christians scattered following Stephens' death Luke records in Acts 8 that the church spread. The message of Jesus Christ was being heard in places further and further from Jerusalem.

## Acts 8:26-33

It was certainly not by accident that Stephen ran into this Ethiopian who was on his way home from worshipping in Jerusalem. *How did God arrange the meeting between Stephen and the Ethiopian official?*

- *God directed Philip by sending an angel.*

It was also not an accident what this Ethiopian was reading. *What was the Ethiopian reading from? And what chapter?*

- From the book of Isaiah 53

*Why is it significant that he was reading from Isaiah 53?*

- Because it was a prophesy about Jesus.

God leaves little to coincidence. He orchestrates these events perfectly. He opens all the doors for this man to hear about Jesus Christ. That leaves the rest up to Philip. If Philip doesn't decide to approach this man he would have no hope of being a Christian. The same is true for us. God can open all the doors and set the stage but if we aren't willing to share the Gospel, people have little to no hope of becoming Christians.

*How does evangelism require partnering with God?*

- God opens doors and we step through them.
- God can even prepare someone's heart for the message.
- We have to be ready to do our small part.

*Just as God prepared Philip and the Ethiopian for this encounter, how do you feel God has uniquely equipped you to share your faith with others?*

- This could be through life experiences that help them relate to others.

At this time people didn't read silently, they read out loud. Hearing what this man was reading, Philip saw an open door and started a conversation with this man. Initiating the conversation is often the hardest moment in talking to someone about Christ.

*When have you been in Philip's shoes, looking for an opportunity to help someone learn about Jesus?*

### **Acts 8:34-35**

It does not say that Philip explained a bunch of complicated doctrine to him or that he helped him understand the omnipresence of God. He just told him the good news about Jesus. *How would you summarize "the Gospel?"*

- The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.
- How those events give us new life.

### **Acts 8:36-40**

Many have taught that baptism is an optional act done after we are saved. Every person in the book of Acts who becomes a Christian does so through baptism. Baptism is the response in faith to God through Jesus Christ. Once this Ethiopian official heard the gospel it was his desire to be baptized. If baptism was optional, Philip could have said, "Why do you need to do that, you are already saved." But he didn't. Jesus commanded that they go and teach and baptize so that is what they did and that is what we are to do. He was baptized and went on his way rejoicing.

*How is being baptized like the shot at the beginning of the race?*

- It marks off a new period of our life where we start living for God rather than for self.

*What is it about being baptized that makes us rejoice?*

- We are grateful that God forgives our sins.
- We are happy to be part of the family of God.

*How should these moments of rejoicing encourage us to tell more people about Jesus?*

### **Application:**

*What can you do to see the opportunities to reach the lost that God sends your way?*

*Can you think of anyone you could talk to this week about their relationship with God in order to encourage them?*

*How can this LIFE group be a place the lost can come to know Jesus?*

### **Prayer:**

Make sure to include in the prayer that we can be better ambassadors for Christ and that we will see the open doors God presents us with and step through them to tell more people about Jesus.

# Saul: A Change of Heart

September 23, 2007

**Icebreaker:** *When did you think you were doing the right thing but it ended up hurting someone else?*

## Acts 9:1-2

Saul was zealous for God and for the Law. When the Christians scattered from Jerusalem, he followed. He was doing this in the name of the Lord. Little did he know his purposes were running counter to God's. It is possible to do something with great zeal and still be mistaken.

*What charge do you think Saul may have brought against the Christians he found in Damascus?*

- Probably the same charges brought against Stephen—speaking against God and the temple.

## Acts 9:3-9

*Whose voice does Saul hear according to Acts 9:17?*

- Jesus' voice

As far as we know, Saul had never met Jesus before. *How is it possible that Jesus says Saul is persecuting Him rather than His people?*

- Jesus is personally connected to his church. You hurt the church, you hurt Christ himself.

*What does that have to tell us about how we should treat the church today in our speech and actions?*

- We need to avoid putting down God's church because when we do so we are putting down Christ.

Blind and helpless. Saul follows the orders of Christ and is led into the city. There is quite a change in his demeanor from crusader for the Law to helpless and led by the hand into the city. *Why does God often have to humble us before we can be used most effectively?*

## Acts 9:10-19

In the story of Philip and the Ethiopian we saw how well God orchestrated the events. Now in this story we see God behind the scenes once again readying Saul for his life as a Christian. God certainly must have a sense of humor. God has a way of using the most unlikely of people for his service.

*Why would Ananias be reluctant to go and show God's grace to Saul?*

- He knew it was dangerous.

*When was a time in your life you knew you were supposed to risk something for God? How did it turn out?*

After regaining his sight, Saul was filled with the Holy Spirit and was baptized! He had come full circle. God certainly had Saul's attention but now he has Saul's heart as well. God has to have our attention and our heart before he is ready to send us out to do his work. Notice the next verses...

### **Acts 9:19-22**

*What would you think if the world's leading atheist suddenly started proclaiming Jesus was the Son of God? Would you trust him?*

Saul had come to take captives in Damascus but God ended up taking captive of Saul. First there were some obstacles to overcome to get him heading in the right direction. *What obstacles have you faced in your life to earnestly pursuing God's purpose?*

Saul immediately started preaching and teaching Jesus. We have seen some people get intense about reaching the lost when they first become a Christian. *Why do you think new Christians have so much energy and zeal for God?*

*Why is it easy to let that fade over time?*

*How can we re-energize our walk with God and our mission for others?*

### **Acts 9:31**

*What did the church experience that it had not had for some time?*

- Peace

#### **Application:**

*How can you use the example of Ananias to encourage you to reach out to those who may not be your first choice?*

*How can you better direct your zeal in ways that can be used for God?*

*Who are the Saul's in your life and what will it take for them to be reached?*

*What would it take for you to more fully give your heart to God today?*

# The Gospel to All Nations

September 30, 2007

**Icebreaker:** *Aside from those with different religious beliefs, what group of people would you not want to be associated with?"*

Acts 10 marks a turning point in the book of Acts. A hint to what is about to happen was given last week in Acts 9:15. *Who does God say Paul will spread the Gospel too?*

- The Gentiles

*Why would that be surprising?*

- They were considered unclean and Jews or Jewish Christians believed they were not to fellowship with the Gentiles.
- The Jews believed that in order to fellowship with Gentiles the Gentile males had to be circumcised and obey the law.
- Up to this point the Gentiles had been excluded from the church.

## Acts 10:1-8

*What four positive things does it say about Cornelius and his family?*

- Devout, God-fearing, gave generously, and prayed to God regularly.

*How obedient was Cornelius to the angel of God?*

## Acts 10:9-20

Unlike Cornelius who does not question or waiver, Peter has some doubts about his vision. *Why does Peter have more questions and concerns about his heavenly command than Cornelius did?*

- Cornelius had no religious baggage or preconceived ideas.
- Peter knew that this command went against much of what he had been taught about God what makes someone a child of God.

*What reason does Peter give why he should not eat the animals?*

- The animals were unclean according to the Law and were not to be eaten.
- He was not supposed to have contact with unclean things.

*What message is God sending Peter by telling him to eat animals that he had previously seen as unclean?*

- He was getting him ready to accept Cornelius and the Gentiles even though they too had been seen as unclean under the law.

Peter goes to Cornelius' house. He recognizes the lesson God was trying to teach him about going to

the Gentiles—**Acts 10:28 & 10:34-35**. He preaches the Gospel of Christ to them. If there was any uncertainty about whether or not God had fully accepted the Gentiles it was shattered in **10:44-46**.

*What did God do to show his acceptance of these Gentiles?*

- He sent his Holy Spirit on these Gentiles just as he had done the Jews earlier.
- The Gentiles began speaking in tongues just as the Christian Jews who had received God's Spirit had done.

God was showing Peter that he was not playing favorites. He is going to accept people from all nations into his kingdom even though it would not be popular with the Jews. Signs of the Spirit were there for Peter to see that if God had accepted them he must as well.

*How did Peter learn that God does not always do things just like we think he will?*

*What barriers do we have that divide people today?*

*How can that be used by Satan to harm the church?*

We are challenged to see people as God sees them and to accept whom God accepts. Whether it is race, socio-economic status, or any of a number of other social barriers that separate people, we are called to love them as God loves them and to accept others even if they are not like ourselves. It was not easy for Peter and it may not always be easy for us but it is the way God intends for it to be.

### **Acts 10:47-48**

Peter orders that they be baptized. He could have said, "They have already received the Spirit so what good is baptism?" But he didn't say that. Cornelius and his household were baptized marking the very first Gentiles to become Christians. *Why was baptism still a necessary part of their conversion to Christianity?*

We are all called to tell others about Jesus. Like Peter we may face many obstacles. Our culture may tell us that we should not associate with different groups but we do anyway. *Why?*

- Because who God has accepted we cannot reject.

The Gospel is to go into all nations. The only thing that can keep that from happening is ourselves. If we are unwilling to accept people who are not like ourselves we will miss out on God-given opportunities to spread the Gospel of Christ.

### **Application:**

*What barriers and walls have blocked you from reaching out to others?*

*How can we overcome obstacles that have kept us from reaching the lost?*

*What steps can we take to see people the way God sees them rather than the way our world sees them?*

# Prison Break - Celebrating God's Deliverance

October 14, 2007

**Icebreaker:** *What is the first thought that would run through your head if you woke up only to see an angel standing over you?*

## Acts 12:1-5

Herod Agrippa was a shrewd ruler. The Jews he ruled over hated him intensely. In order to keep stability he would often find ways to gain their favor. As we have seen many of the non-Christian Jews had a difficult time accepting Christianity and even fought against the church, as Saul had done in the last lesson. Persecuting the church helped Herod gain political stability.

*Who does Herod arrest and what does he have done to him?*

- The apostle James—he has him executed
- This is the first apostle to be martyred.

Next Herod has Peter arrested during the Passover week. *Who had also been arrested during the week of Passover?*

- Jesus

*If you were a Christian in the Jerusalem church, how would you have responded to Peter's arrest following the execution of James?*

- You would be scared
- You would probably pray

It is important to remember that God can answer our prayers in ways we could have never anticipated. God didn't need to use the legal system and an innocent verdict to get Peter out of prison. God just let him walk right out.

## Acts 12:6-11

*What does this story have to teach us about the providence and power of God over human authority?*

Most people don't often find themselves in physical prisons but many of us are suffering from prisons that are not built with human hands. Whether it be an addiction, a recurring sin, or an unhealthy relationship with a co-worker or family member we also need God's power to help us find freedom from the things that enslave our lives.

## Eph 3:12



*Through Christ we can approach God with what two things?*

- Freedom and confidence

Prisoners usually don't have very much of either of those two things. *How does Christ give us freedom and confidence?*

*In what way does God offer us freedom from the prisons we face on a spiritual level?*

- He has already paid the price for our freedom through the death of his son on the cross
- The resurrection also provides freedom because we know that when we are baptized we have been raised to walk in newness of life.

We have to remember that the battle has already been won. When we face obstacles and the spiritual prison of sin in our lives it is surrendering to an enemy that has already been defeated.

*Why must we fully rely on God's power and not our own to release us from the captivity we face on a daily basis?*

- We do not have the power to gain the victory. Only God does. So we trust him to rescue us.

### **Acts 12:12-19**

*How would it build your faith to have your prayers for Peter's release interrupted by Peter himself knocking on the door?*

*Have you ever found out that God was busy answering your prayer at the moment you prayed it?*

*What prisons has God released you from and how can that build your faith and the faith of those in a similar circumstance?*

Notice that Peter wants the news spread of how he had been released by God's power. *Why would Peter want others to hear about his release?*

- First because they cared about Peter and would want to hear the good news of his release
- Also because hearing such stories builds our faith and helps us if we encounter something similar.

*How can sharing our stories of God's deliverance help us grow closer to God and each other?*

Persecution is still alive and well today. Go to [www.persecution.com](http://www.persecution.com) to see the Voice of the Martyrs website and learn about people we can pray for who are being persecuted for their faith in Christ.

### **Application:**

*What do you want to remember the next time you suffer for your faith?*

*What prisons do you need released from and how can this group help you through it?*

I hope this is a time our groups can do some sharing about the struggles we face as we realize that God can take care of it and also that we need each other to get through it.



# Set Apart for God's Work

Acts 13-14

**Icebreaker:** Would it be easier for you to talk to about Jesus to someone in your hometown or someone in another country? Why?

When we last saw Paul and Barnabas in Acts 11 they were preaching the gospel in Antioch and converted many souls to Christ. This week's chapters pick up where Luke left off. In this week's lesson we will follow Paul and Barnabas as they travel follow God's leading and work through opposition.

## Acts 13:1-3

*What were the Christians at Antioch doing prior to the Holy Spirit setting apart Barnabas and Paul (also called Saul)?*

- They were fasting and worshipping the Lord.

It is no accident that God made his will known to them while they were focused on God through fasting and worship. When we do things like fasting, prayer and worship that are in tune with the Spirit we will be more in tune with God's will for our lives.

*What did they do following the message from the Holy Spirit?*

- Continued to fast and they also prayed.
- Then they sent Saul and Barnabas off.

They travel to Cyprus where they preached about Jesus in the synagogues.

## Acts 13:6-12

*Who do Paul and Barnabas get opposition from in Paphos?*

- A false prophet named Bar-Jesus.

*How did God respond to the opposition?*

- The Holy Spirit gave Saul the words and the power to boldly speak out against Bar-Jesus.

*How does this situation assure us that when you do God's will you can trust he will provide?*

- When we are serving God's purposes, God will provide what we need even during opposition.

From there they travel to Pisidian Antioch where they are asked to speak in the synagogue. Paul starts all the way back with their ancestors and the exodus. He works them through the Old Testament proving that Jesus was the Christ.

*When speaking to someone about Christ, why is it important to start with what they already know?*

- These Jews already knew the Old Testament.
- You can start with where they are at and go from there instead of starting from scratch.

### Acts 13:44-49

*Who turned against Paul and Barnabas this time? Why?*

- The Jews because they were jealous.
- They are doing God's will and face rejection by religious people. *How is that possible?*

*What good came out of that opposition?*

- The Gentiles in the area came to believe in Christ.

From Pisidian Antioch Paul and Barnabas traveled to Iconium. Once again they face opposition and once again God confirms their message through signs and wonders. *After undergoing so much opposition could miraculous signs and wonders have built up Paul and Barnabas' faith as much as it did their audience?*

- After facing so much opposition many people would need reassured that this was still God's desire

### Acts 14:8-20

In Lystra the opposition gets really tough. *Who comes back to persecute them even though they have gone to a different city?*

- The angry Jews from Iconium come to Lystra persuade the crowd and have Paul stoned.

Notice what Paul and Barnabas are doing in the very next verse (14:21) - they are back to preaching Jesus!

*How could someone be so zealous for their message that they would still preach it even though they might be killed for it?*

- If they know it is the truth
- If they know that life and death depend on whether or not it gets preached.

*How is the message of Christ something that should be preached no matter what the consequences?*

- It is a message that gives life to those who hear it and turn to God.

In the beginning of this lesson we saw how God set apart Barnabas and Paul for the work of spreading the gospel and they faced opposition at every step. When you do the right thing the path does not always become easier. It may become harder.

### Application

*What service do you feel God could use you in and what steps would it take to get more involved in it?*

*What can we learn from Paul and Barnabas about how to deal with facing opposition when we are doing what is right?*

*How can you encourage someone who has stopped working for God due to discouragement?*

# Tradition Gets Trumped

## Acts 15

**Icebreaker:** Would you make a good jury member? Why or why not?

### **Some Background:**

We saw last week that many more Gentiles were becoming Christians. Jesus said this would happen in Acts in 1:8. There was just one problem. The way these Gentiles were joining the family of God was not how some Jews thought it was supposed to be. All their lives they had been taught that to be a part of God's people the males had to be circumcised. Some Jewish Christians went to the cities where Paul and Barnabas had converted Gentiles and taught that the Gentiles had to be circumcised to be Christians.

### **Acts 15:1-11**

*Who did Paul and Barnabas go to for advice?*

- The apostles and elders in Jerusalem.

The church in Jerusalem was the oldest of the churches and had elders with the most experience. Jerusalem was also the home of several of the apostles.

*Who supported the idea that Gentiles had to first be circumcised and obey the law before becoming a Christian?*

- Some Christians who were Pharisees

Peter, who was the first to convert Gentiles gives some testimony. *What does Peter say was the sign that God had accepted the Gentiles?*

- God had given them his Holy Spirit.

**Romans 2:28-29**—"A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God."

God has always been after people's hearts.

*In verse 11 Peter says both Jew and Gentile are saved by what?*

- Grace

Jesus came and fulfilled the law. Through Jesus comes grace and truth (John 1:14). Jesus came to circumcise the hearts of mankind. What Jesus did is not skin deep. He came to change the heart. Peter says that is exactly what he saw God do through grace to these Gentiles.

### **Acts 15:12-18**

Next Paul and Barnabas give their testimony about what God had done among the Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas

mention what two things that God did among the Gentiles?

- Signs and wonders—all apart from the Gentiles being circumcised.

James the half-brother of Jesus is the next to speak. *What does James point them back to?*

- Scripture to show that even in the Old Testament God said that this would happen.

*Why is it important to turn to scripture when trying to make decisions?*

- Because it is the word of God. It has authority over the opinions of people.

God does not always do things the way we expect him to do it. Our preconceived ideas of the way things should work is not always accurate. It is important to differentiate what is tradition and what is scripture. Many churches have made a big deal out of things that are never found in scripture.

*Why is it important to realize God doesn't always do things the way we think he will?*

- God is bigger and wiser than we are.
- His plans are bigger than us.
- It is humbling.

**Isaiah 55:9**—"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

*When have things not gone your way and you later found out it worked out better than if God had done things your way?*

### **Acts 15:19-21**

The verdict—they were not to quench the zeal of these new Gentile converts by placing on them the burden of circumcision or requiring them to obey all of the law. Instead they gave a couple of rules for them to follow. These four regulations were regulations required under the law of any Gentile living among God's people.

*Why is it important for new converts to have some guidelines?*

- When you come out of the world you may not know the right decisions to make in some situations.
- However, requiring things that scripture does not require can be burdensome.

*How is it possible to quench a new Christian's zeal by giving them rules and regulations that are not found in scripture?*

- Living the Christian life can be hard enough without a whole bunch of man made rules on your shoulders on top of everything else.

### **Application**

*How can you appreciate God's grace in the lives of Christians you are not on the best terms with?*

# Evangelism & Relying on God

## Acts 16

**Icebreaker:** *When was the most scared you have ever been?*

Tonight's lesson will be the start of Paul's "Second Missionary Journey." It will start in Jerusalem (Acts 15) and in a couple of weeks it will end in Jerusalem (Acts 21). When he arrives back in Jerusalem in 6 chapters Paul will be arrested and stand trial that will eventually lead to Paul being sent to Rome where he is executed. Little does Paul know as he leaves Jerusalem at the end of Acts 15 that his return will be his last.

### Acts 15:36-41

*Why did Paul and Barnabas decide to go back to the churches they had previously planted?*

- They wanted to strengthen and encourage them.

Sometimes we give people more attention before they are baptized than afterward. Paul and Barnabas show us that follow up is essential to healthy Christianity. It also shows how much they cared about those they had converted. They couldn't just hop on a plane and be there in a couple of hours. This journey would be long and difficult.

*Has anyone ever gone out of their way to help you mature spiritually? How?*

### Acts 16:6-10 [get ready for some tough words!]

Again and again we see the importance of God working through his Holy Spirit to put people in the places they are supposed to be. *Who are a few of the people we have seen that happen to so far in Acts?*

- Philip and the Ethiopian
- Peter and Cornelius
- Saul and Ananias

The team has split. Barnabas and John Mark head south to the island of Cyprus. Paul, Silas, Timothy, and probably Luke decide to work in modern-day Turkey. God sends Paul a vision in the night. *What did he see?*

- A man from Macedonia (just north of Greece) asking them to come and help

We will see that more good will come out of these two groups than by one group on its own. The same is true about our LIFE groups. There will come a point in time when a LIFE group will become two groups. *What can be difficult about that?*

*What blessings can come out of that?*

- We will be able to include more people and get more accomplished for the kingdom.
- It is a sign that we are growing.

*How quickly do Paul and company respond to the vision?*

- At once they began traveling westward to Macedonia.

We may not have visions of people calling us to preach, *but have you ever felt strongly like there was someone you really needed to talk to about Christ? How did you respond?*

Next they went to Philippi. Later, after Paul's return to Jerusalem, his arrest and being put in chains, he would write a letter back to those he met in Philippi (Philippians 1:13).

### **Acts 16:13-15**

*What three things came together to bring Lydia to Christ?*

- Paul's preaching
- God's working
- Lydia's listening

The effectiveness of evangelism is based only to a very small degree on how well we present it. It is based to a greater degree on the fact that God is in the business of opening people's hearts to respond to the message. Because of that evangelism should always go hand in hand with prayer as we realize our dependence on God for a harvest. *How does understanding that take a lot of the pressure off of getting evangelism "right?"*

### **Acts 16:16-25**

Not everyone in Philippi appreciated Paul and Silas' message. *What realization caused the owners of the fortune-teller to turn on them?*

- When they realized they weren't going to make any more money.

*What punishment was inflicted upon them?*

- Stripped, beaten with rods and thrown in prison.

*How did Paul and Silas respond?*

- They prayed and worshiped God even from within the prison.

*Would it be hard for you to worship God after you were following his calling and ended up beaten and in jail?*

*Why do you think Paul and Silas kept such a good attitude in such a difficult time?*

Sometimes what God does doesn't make sense right away. You have to wait patiently to see why God put you through the tough times to see how it makes sense. Paul and Silas are about to see what good will come out of it.

### **Acts 16:26-34**

*After all the harm that came to Paul and Silas what good came out of the whole event?*

- A second household had been converted in Philippi.

Just like with Lydia's conversion, God initiates the conversion of this jailor by causing the earthquake. Evangelism requires that we rely on God and not on self.

### **Application**

*How could you lean more on God and less on self when it comes to evangelism?*

*In what areas of your life could you use more gratitude even though things aren't perfect?*

# Religion & Relationship

## Acts 17

**Icebreaker:** *What do you do in your spare time?*

Following their mission into Macedonia, Paul went south into Greece to wait on Silas and Timothy. Athens was a center of cultural and economic influence. One could not walk the streets of Athens without noticing the prominent displays and promotion of a wide assortment of false “gods.” To be a part of ancient society, one was expected to pay homage to the gods to bring favor on the family and the society at large. Paul has seen what real deity is all about back on the road to Damascus. Compared to Christ the idols of Athens were laughable at best.

### Acts 17:16-21

*What two places did Paul spend time reasoning with the people of Athens?*

- Synagogues & Marketplace

*What level of interest did his audience have in his message?*

- Some were belligerent
- Some wanted to know more/were curious

Luke says these Athenians did nothing but sit around and talk about the newest ideas. *Is there a difference between knowing just to know something and knowing something so you can apply it to your life?*

- Some Bible scholars don't believe in God—head knowledge is not enough.
- Faith has to come in at some point

We can philosophize all day in our Bible classes and LIFE groups but until we make application and our lives change it has done little good. When the Word of God takes root in our lives it should grow and change us.

### Acts 17:22-31

*Which of their altars does Paul bring up?*

- “Altar to an unknown God”

*Is it possible to worship something or someone you know little about?*

- It is nearly impossible—that is “just in case” kind of worship. Just in case there is a god out there I better say some prayers.

*Why is it important that we know God before we worship him?*

- So we can know what to praise him for
- So our hearts will appreciate him for who he is and what he has done

*How valuable are religious actions without a relationship with God?*

Paul proceeds to teach them a few things about the one, true God. Paul is saying it did not take all of these little gods to build the world and to create mankind. It was all done by the one true God. *Why did God do all that he has done (17:27)?*

- So that we would seek and find Him—the result would be eternal life.

Matthew 7:7-8 says that if you ask you will receive, if you seek you will find, and if you knock God will open the door.

*What does it mean to seek God...sit around and philosophize about him or something else?*

- Seeking God is more than just having the right opinions. Seeking God requires an attitude of humility and surrender. Normally seeking is about finding where something is. Seeking God is finding out more about who he is and is about developing a relationship with Him.

Paul says that they are the offspring of God and that God wants them to repent because there is more to life than the cradle to the grave. *What sign does Paul point to says there is more to life than meets the eye?*

- The resurrection of Jesus Christ

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the bedrock of our faith. It is the dividing line between those who accept and reject the message. Some people want to say Jesus was a good teacher but that he was not God. That doesn't cut it. Paul says that the time of judgment is coming and we must repent to get our lives in line with the will of God and mend our relationship with Him because one day we too will be raised from the dead.

*How does the thought of your future resurrection motivate you toward holy living?*

- It motivates some through fear
- It motivates others through hope
- Hope is the more healthy response but fear is okay for a time until we mature beyond it.

### **Acts 17:32-33**

*What was the reaction of the people of Athens?*

- Some believed and some did not

We are faced with the same thing today. Some people may sneer at the message but it still must be preached because the same message will turn the hearts of others toward God. There are many religious people out there who have yet to build a relationship with God—they are going through the motions without really thinking about what they are doing or who they are worshipping. Let us make sure our worship is founded in a relationship and that we encourage others to do the same.

### **Application**

*What is something you can do to make the message of Christ more understandable to your non-Christian friends?*

*What will help you persevere in telling others about God and Christ even though some people may sneer at you and reject the message?*

Paul seemed to have some down time because he was waiting on Silas and Timothy to arrive. *How could you use your spare time this week to make the difference in someone else's life?*

**Pray that we can be difference makers in our spheres of influence and that by our lives and words we can help those who do not know God understand God more clearly through us.**



# Balancing Boldness & Wisdom

Acts 18-19

**Icebreaker:** *Where is one place you have always wanted to travel to?*

Upon leaving Athens Paul travels throughout Greece and Turkey spreading the message of the Gospel. He travels to three places that he later writes letters back to—Corinth (18:1), Ephesus (18:19), and Galatia (18:23). In Acts 19 Paul returns to Ephesus to spread the Gospel.

## Acts 19:1-7

*What did Paul ask if they had received?*

- The Holy Spirit

*What was their answer?*

- They had not even heard of the Holy Spirit. They had only had John's baptism.

Paul teaches them that John's baptism pointed to something greater—the one coming after him, that is Jesus. John's baptism was to ready people for Jesus. Jesus' baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit makes us a new creation.

*Why is it important to recognize that we receive the Holy Spirit when we are baptized?*

- We are not just getting wet—there really is something important happening between ourselves and God.
- God is interested in us enough to be present with us each and every day of our lives.

## Acts 19:8-17

Through miraculous signs and wonders God made it known to the people in Ephesus that Paul's message was true. Hearing that people in Ephesus had evil spirits, it is no wonder that when Paul later wrote back to them, maybe even to some of those he had healed, he said the following—**Ephesians 2:1-3**.

As we see with the evil spirits and the sons of Sceva, Ephesus was a place that was famous for magic and calling on the name of various gods and spirits for power. In **Ephesians 1:19-22** Paul reminds them of just how powerful and authoritative Christ is.

*What comfort do you find in being reminded that Christ is more powerful than anything the world or even Satan himself can throw at you?*

## Acts 19:18-22

It has often been said that secrets have a lot of power. They can break down marriages and families. They can also hinder our relationship with God. Notice that the people of Ephesus exposed their secret and shameful ways and burned the bridges to the past godlessness by destroying what had kept them from relying on God's power.

*How much boldness and wisdom did it take to rid their lives of magic?*

We are often asked to sacrifice for the kingdom. Monetary values has little to do with what we choose to sacrifice. Instead, we have to decide to put behind us anything that can hinder our relationship with God.

### **Hebrews 12:1-3**

*What have you had to throw off that you knew had kept your relationship with God from being all that it could be?*

*What focal point does Hebrews say we fix our eyes on in order to run our race better?*

- Jesus who is the author and perfecter of our faith. He has blazed the trail ahead of us so that we can follow in his steps.

*Why is it hard to follow Jesus if your eyes are fixed on something else?*

When we decide to turn from sin and follow God, Satan is usually right there to oppose it. Satan had a stranglehold on the hearts of the people of Ephesus for so long he wasn't going to go down without a fight.

### **Acts 19:23-34**

*Why does this group of men reject the message of Jesus?*

- They are threatened financially—They can see that their industry will have hard times financially if people start believing Artemis is not a real “god.”
- They are threatened religiously—They also feel like Artemis will lose honor if people turn to Jesus.
- They are bold in their approach but their boldness is not balanced by wisdom about what was true—that Artemis was fake and Jesus Christ is real.

*What excuses do people today make for not believing in Jesus?*

### **Acts 19:37-20:1**

The story ends with the crowd dispersed and Paul on his way to Macedonia. We see from this ending that boldness takes wisdom. Paul could have gone out there to defend himself. He probably could have spoken more eloquent and convincing words than this city clerk did. On the council of his friends (19:31) he decided to stay back and not face the crowd.

*How do you know when it is appropriate to be bold and take risks and when to take a back seat and wait?*

- It takes prayer and a healthy relationship with God to make those decisions.

*The Sons of Sceva earlier in the chapter had boldness without wisdom and what happened to them?*

- They were beaten by a man with an evil spirit.

Developing the kind of relationship with God that knows when to be bold and when to refrain takes time and experience. It also takes a tremendous amount of trust.

### **Application**

*What areas of your life could use to take more risks for Christ?*

*What areas of your life could use more wisdom?*

# Farewell's Don't Have to Last Forever

## Acts 20

**Icebreaker:** *What is the hardest part about saying “Goodbye”?*

Following the riot in Ephesus Paul traveled through Macedonia, Greece and then back through Macedonia. At Troas they stopped and spent some time with the Christians there. Paul delivered a message that went very late into the night.

### Acts 20:7-12

*What had they met together to do?*

- Break bread—Lord’s Supper
- For an occasion to hear Paul speak

Some believe that the crowded room full of many burning lamps may have made the room stuffy enough for Eutychus to take his seat on the window sill. If Luke the physician was present with them there would be no doubt that Eutychus had actually been killed, which assures us that this was a miracle and not explained by anything else.

*Besides the obvious warning not to fall asleep during one of Jim’s sermons, what other lessons can we learn from these early Christians who spent the entire night together in fellowship, breaking bread, and listening to Paul?*

- We should desire to spend time with each other, studying God’s word, and breaking bread.
- Tight schedules often need to be loosened to get our spiritual needs met.

### Acts 20:16-31

*Where was Paul on his way to?*

- Jerusalem

*What does he expect to happen there?*

- He will be imprisoned and face persecution

Paul knew the Ephesian Christians well. He spent three years there on his previous trip. Evidently the church grew large enough and mature enough in that time to have elders. Paul never expected to see them again and now tells them goodbye. He gives them instructions but he also gives them a warning.

*What instructions does Paul give them? (20:28)*

- To be shepherds and to keep watch over the flock.

*What warning does Paul give them? (20:29-31)*

- False teachers will come in and lead some astray

*What did Paul say was his only aim? (20:24)*

- To finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus had given him—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.

Before we can run the race we have to understand our task. As Christians we have the same purpose as Paul—to testify to the world about the good news of God’s grace through Jesus Christ. We call that evangelism. Notice how closely Paul links finishing the race with completing the task. It makes evangelism all the more important when we realize how big a part it is in our completing the life God gave us to live.

*How can you testify to the good news of God’s grace this week?*

Eutychus’ death gives us an insight into what was happening with Paul and these elders—while Paul’s departure would result in death, that would not be the final chapter. Paul would have life again. Saying goodbye is not as hard when you know God will one day reunite. But it still is not easy.

*If you were never going to see a loved one every again what would you want to tell them?*

### **Acts 20:36-38**

Notice the importance of prayer in this sending off on Paul’s final journey. By praying for each other, Paul is entrusting that God will take care of his church and the church is entrusting that God will take care of his apostle. In the end it will all work out according to God’s plan but the departure is still difficult.

Paul got on that ship even though he knew it would lead him to his death. *What enables a man to board a ship with that in mind?*

- Fully trusting and relying on God.

### **Application**

*What tasks do you think God would like to see you accomplish before you die?*

*What trials are you facing that need the prayers of your brothers and sisters?*

**Prayer**—Pray for three things in particular:

- 1— Any prayer requests
- 2— The tasks that God has set before your group members
- 3— The trials that groups members are undergoing

# Don't Judge Too Quickly

## Acts 21

**Icebreaker:** *When do you tend to “jump to conclusions”?*

After leaving the Ephesian elders Paul began his journey to Jerusalem. Meeting with several groups of Christians on his way he ran into a prophet named Agabus who prophesied about what would happen to Paul in Jerusalem.

### Acts 21:10-15

Luke says Agabus, “came down from Judea.” Judea was in the hill country and Caesarea where Paul was staying was on the coast of the Mediterranean. He literally “came down” the hill to Caesarea to see Paul.

*What did Agabus do with Paul’s belt and what did it mean?*

- He tied his own hands and feet up with it and told Paul the same would happen to him in Jerusalem.
- Paul would be handed over to the Gentiles. This fit with Paul’s plan to go to Rome, the Gentile capital of the world (Acts 19:21).

*How did the Christians there respond to this prophesy?*

- They wept and begged Paul not to go.

*What did Paul say he was ready to do for the name of Jesus?*

- Even be killed

Paul, the former persecutor of the church is now himself facing death for the name of Jesus Christ.

### 2 Tim 4:6-8

Paul knew there was more to life than the here and now. All that mattered to him was following the will of God and bringing honor to the name of Christ. Remember Paul’s words from last week in **Acts 20:24**.

*How do we bring honor to Christ today?*

*Do you think that in your lifetime being a Christian will have more risks than it does today? How so?*

*What did Paul say was his only aim? (20:24)*

- To finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus had given him—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.

### Acts 21:17-26

One of Luke’s big points in Acts is that the Christians were not in violation of the law but that Christ had ful-

filled the law. Paul taught that there was a righteousness that came apart from the law and circumcision—that came instead through faith in Jesus Christ. That was confusing to the Jews who believed circumcision was to be done forever to anyone before they could be a part of the people of God.

Paul goes to great lengths to assure the Jews that he is doing what James described, “living obedient to the law.” (21:24). In other words, Paul was not opposed to the law, he just understood the law in a new way because of what Christ had done. Because of his love for his fellow Jews he took part in the custom of purification even though he knew that real purification came through Christ.

*Why is it important that we do our best not to offend our brothers and sisters in Christ when we have differing views on something?*

- We will not agree on everything but we need to have an attitude of love and respect when we do disagree.

### **Acts 21:27-36**

*What three charges did they shout against Paul when they grabbed him?*

- That Paul was teaching against God
- That he was teaching against the temple
- That he had brought Greeks/Gentiles into the temple

They were mistaken on all three. *Why is it important that you make sure you understand a situation before you confront someone or talk to them about something?*

- We need to give people the benefit of the doubt.
- We need to be careful that we don't say or think things that are not true
- We don't need to hold something against someone without making sure we understood the situation correctly.

*What did this misunderstanding result in for Paul?*

- A beating, an arrest, and ultimately his life.

*How dangerous can it be when we make judgments too quickly, before weighing out the facts?*

### **Application**

*Is there anyone you have misunderstood that needs to be resolved? How can you go about that?*

*What areas of your life would hold you back from a trip to Jerusalem? In other words—are there things in your life that you need to give over to Christ's lordship?*

It is so important that we take our Christianity seriously. Paul was willing to live his life for Christ even if it cost him his life. *How does that challenge you to live more for Christ today?*

# The Importance of Testimony

December 16, 2007

**Icebreaker:** *What is your favorite story?*

Last week Paul had been beaten by the Jews and arrested by the Romans because of confusion of Paul's stance on the law. In chapter 22 he finally gets to defend himself.

## Acts 21:37-22:2

*What language did Paul speak to the crowd in?*

- Aramaic

Aramaic was the language of the Jews in Palestine. You have to admire the brilliance of Paul as he was able to deliver his messages to various cultures in ways that best opened them up to really give Paul their ear. Paul is about to give his first of five speeches that he will deliver in Jerusalem and Caesarea to defend himself of false charges concerning his view of the law.

## Acts 22:1-16

Paul realizes that this story is not just his story. It is the story of how God has worked through him to advance the kingdom of God. All Christians have a story of how God has brought them from being lost to being saved, from point A to point B. That story is powerful because it reflects how God has been working in the life of the Christian to make a difference.

*What changes had Paul experienced?*

- From persecutor to witness.
- From independent to dependent
- From blind to sight

*What changes have you experienced since you became a Christian?*

*Why is it important to relate those stories to lost people and let them see the difference God has made?*

- We are trying to get the lost to see that God will make a difference in their lives as well.
- They are stories that remind us how powerful God is
- It lets us know God is faithful.

## Acts 22:17-22

*What did the Jews in the audience object to?*

- They didn't believe that Paul should have gone to the Gentiles to convert them.

The Jews should have known better. Even the Old Testament said that God would eventually reach out to the

Gentiles (Isa 42:6-7 & 49:6). They were even told to be hospitable to the Gentiles living in their midst (Deut 10:19 & Exodus 22:21). But they didn't listen to that. They viewed the Gentiles as being under a curse because they did not bear the distinctive marks of Judaism—circumcision, dietary laws, and holy days.

*Was Paul's testimony readily accepted by his audience?*

- No!

*Will our testimony always be readily accepted by those we tell it to?*

- No

*Why is it important to share our story even though some will reject God anyway?*

- We could be planting a seed that will one day grow even if they initially say "no."
- We tell it because God has told us to (Matt 28:19ff).

When we talk to people about what God has done there is no such thing as failure. Even if they say "no" to Jesus at least a seed has been planted in their heart.

*What fears keep us from talking to others about God?*

*Why does just telling our story make it easier?*

- We know our story better than anyone else
- We know how we were converted.
- You may not know every Bible verse to point someone to but you can talk about how God has changed your life and the difference He has made.

### **Acts 22:23-30**

Imagine the confusion of the commander who has no idea what Paul just said or why the people are so angry with him. Remember, Paul was speaking in Aramaic that this commander probably had no comprehension of.

*What saved Paul from a cruel interrogation?*

- That he was a Roman citizen—he was not to be punished without a trial

*How does God provide for and protect us when we are willing to take a risk and talk to others about Christ?*

### **Application**

*Who is someone you need to talk to about Jesus?*

*How can this LIFE group support you in your goal to reach the lost people you know?*

It is important that we remember our story of conversion. It may have been many years ago and maybe we need to be reminded of what God did to us so that we will remember how important it is to go and tell others.



# The Resurrection on Trial

January 6, 2007

**Icebreaker:** *What three things would you say are worth fighting for?*

We left Paul before a crowd of angry Jews who wanted to kill him for making the claim that God told him to go and preach to the Gentiles. In Acts 23 Paul gives a speech to the Sanhedrin. The result is not much better.

## Acts 22:30-23:5

Ananias was a notorious high priest. By having Paul struck before being convicted he was violating the law of Moses. Ananias was well known for his greed, his using the temple to profit the Romans, and for using violence to get his way.

*Was Paul's response to getting slapped out of line?*

- Paul realized he wasn't supposed to talk to the high priest that way.
- At the same time they were violating and disrespecting a greater authority than themselves—God's law.

*Is it ever appropriate to get angry over important issues?*

- Jesus got angry in the temple.
- Some things should upset us. It is all how we deal with it.

## Ephesians 4:26-27

Anger is a natural, God-given emotion. Just like with any other emotion when it gets out of hand it can become sinful. *How can anger give the devil a foothold?*

- It can make us irrational
- It can influence us to say things we wished we hadn't.

Paul says it is okay to be angry. *How do you keep from sinning when you are angry?*

## Acts 23:6-11

Paul mentions the resurrection for two reasons:

1. It is the core of the message he has been sent to preach.
2. He knows that it is a hot button issue between the parties within the Sanhedrin—Pharisees and Sadducees.

The Pharisees believed in angels, spirits, and resurrection while the Sadducees did not. The argument intensifies when the Pharisees find Paul innocent, rationalizing that “a spirit or angel” may have spoken to him. That just threw fuel on the fire of the Sadducee disbelief toward such things. The focus shifted from whether or not Paul was guilty to disputing among the Pharisees and the Sadducees over the resurrection.

*Why did the commander have to rescue Paul?*

- The dispute became intense and they feared for his life.

- Also because he was a Roman citizen with certain rites. He was not allowed to be beaten before found guilty.

The resurrection is a hot-button issue even today. Christianity rises and falls on the resurrection. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, he was a liar and deceived many. If he did rise from the dead, nothing will ever be the same again. It has split families, friends, and co-workers. Your whole life depends on what you think about Jesus and the resurrection.

*What makes it hard for some people to believe Jesus rose from the dead?*

*How does the resurrection give us hope even when we are threatened with death?*

### **1 Cor 15:50-58**

Victory comes through the resurrection. *What three responses does Paul say we should have in 1 Cor 15:58?*

- Stand firm, let nothing move you, and give yourself fully to the work of the Lord.

Because Paul believed in the resurrection he was able to do all three of these things. He didn't have to fear trials or Pharisees or rulers or kings. He knew there was more to the story than death.

God gives Paul assurance at just the right time. *What happened during the night to comfort and encourage Paul?*

- The Lord told him to have courage.
- He also reminded him of his mission—to preach in Rome about the resurrection of Christ.

### **Acts 23:12-24**

As we saw before, Ananias was not afraid to use violence to get his way. God told him he would get to Rome and so the plan was foiled.

*When was a time in your life you realized that it had to be God who kept you safe in a situation?*

### **Acts 23:31-35**

Paul is on a trip that will eventually take him to Rome so that he can carry out God's plan of preaching in Rome, the capital of the entire world of their day.

*How does knowing God has a plan for you help the obstacles seem manageable?*

### **Application**

*What trials are you facing that will require God's help to get through?*

*What areas of your life could lean on God a little more?*

*How can you more fully give yourself to the work of the Lord?*

# Convenience or Commitment?

January 13, 2008

**Icebreaker:** *What is one thing you do just because it is convenient? What is one thing you do because you are committed?*

We left Paul in Caesarea awaiting trial before governor Felix. Remember the words the Lord spoke to Paul in Acts 23:11 right after he had been rescued from the angry mob, “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify in Rome.” This trial in Caesarea takes Paul one step closer to Rome. Before he can get to Rome there is work to be done—he must give his testimony concerning Jesus Christ and the resurrection of the dead.

## Acts 24:1-9

*What do the Jewish leaders and their lawyer praise to “butter up” Felix?*

- They praise him
- They praise the peace he has brought

*What accusations do they have against Paul?*

- He is violating the peace Felix has worked hard to preserve
- Troublemaker, stirs up riots, desecrated the temple (remember, they thought he had brought Gentiles in the temple).

## Acts 24:10-21

Paul tells the truth. He defends his actions and his beliefs. He comes back to the central message of his preaching—the resurrection of the dead. Paul makes it clear that our belief in the resurrection should influence the way we live. *In verse 16 what does Paul say he does because of his belief in the resurrection?*

- He tries to keep a clear conscience before God and all people.
- That even includes trying to keep a clear conscience before his accusers.

*Why is it important for Christians to maintain integrity and a clear conscience to the best of our ability?*

- We are held to a higher standard of behavior than the world.

Paul makes the point that those who rallied the crowd against him in the temple were not even present to testify. If you remember back to **Acts 21:27** it was Jews from the province of Asia who stirred up the crowd. Paul is asking where the witnesses are for Felix to cross examine.

## Acts 24:22-27

The case comes to a close for the time being and Paul is placed under house arrest. Felix, who was well acquainted with the Way (that is a name for the Christians at the time), and his wife Drusilla who was Jewish and related to Herod Agrippa were probably curious to learn more about the Christian movement. Paul talked

about the Christian movement but also mentioned some application that may have hit too close to home for Felix who had taken Drusilla to be his third wife, stealing her away from her husband when she was 16. *What three things Paul mentioned made Felix “afraid”?*

- Righteousness
- Self-control
- Judgment to come

*How does our future resurrection encourage us to live with righteousness and self-control?*

- We know that judgment awaits us
- God has called us to be holy
- Grace is essential but it doesn't make doing righteous things any less important.

*What was Felix response to Paul's message?*

- He was afraid and said he would call him when it was more convenient

The righteous thing to do is not always the most convenient. *When are times living righteously is inconvenient?*

- Telling the truth is not always convenient
- Serving others is not always convenient
- Repentance is not always convenient
- Taking up our cross and following Jesus is not always convenient

If we are waiting on Jesus to be convenient we may be waiting a long time.

*Why is commitment essential in our Christian walk?*

- There are times we have to do the tough things—we have to be committed to our cause.

The resurrection helps us be committed because we know there is more to the story than just doing the easy thing.

*What would you say to someone who said Christianity was just “too inconvenient?”*

There is a huge contrast between Paul, who was committed even to the point of death and was on trial because of his beliefs about Jesus and Felix who was looking for the easy way out.

The question for us is this, *“How are we to remain committed to Christ in a world that pushes convenience on us?”*

## **Application**

*What parts of your life need a little more commitment to Christ?*

*When have you settled for convenience over commitment?*

*Who do you know who could use some encouragement because they are at a tough spot and need to be reminded to stay strong and committed to Christ?*

# Almost Persuaded

Acts 25-26

**Icebreaker:** *What things make you emotional?*

Two years have passed since Paul was on trial before Felix in last week's lesson. The men who vowed not to eat until Paul was dead (Acts 23:12) were probably pretty hungry at this point! Paul is still in prison awaiting trial under Festus, the new ruler.

## Acts 24:27-25:12

Festus is in a lose-lose situation.

*What is the outcome of saying Paul is guilty?*

- He is condemning to death an innocent man

*What is the outcome of declaring Paul innocent?*

- The Jews in his territory will be very upset and he will “lose face.”

Instead of making a decision he just leaves Paul in prison! Paul appeals to Caesar in order to get a fair trial in Rome. Herod Agrippa and his sister (and wife!) Bernice arrive. The Herod's family tree was notorious for not having many branches. They married their relatives pretty frequently. Agrippa was very familiar with the Jewish faith. His grandfather was Herod the Great and his father was the Herod who died in Acts 12.

## Acts 25:22-27

*Who seems like they are in control?*

- The pomp & circumstance of these “leaders” would make it seem like Festus and Agrippa were in control.
- The fact that they commanded Paul to be brought in would make it seem like they were in control
- Paul's chains and following orders would make it seem like he was not in control.

*Who is actually in control here?*

- God—Despite how bad things look or who is bossing who around, ultimately God is the one with control.
- God is the one who told Paul he would be going to Rome in the first place.

*How does knowing God is in control give us comfort when things get tough?*

- We know God gets the final say and that what he says is best, even though it may not seem best to us.
- Paul will ultimately go to Rome and be executed. That was God's plan and Paul submitted to it.

In chapter 26 we have one of the most important speeches in the book of Acts. Paul delivers his testimony to Herod Agrippa and goes into more religious details because he knows he is more likely than Festus to understand it. Paul basically has three point sermon on the Gospel of Christ.

**Point 1**—Good intentions does not mean something is true (**Acts 26:9-18, 25**)

- *How is it possible to think you are doing the right thing and have good intentions but turn out to be wrong?*
  - Good intentions do not define right and wrong. Just because someone intends well does not mean what they did was the right thing or what they believed was the right thing.
  - Paul though persecuting the church was the right thing and he was wrong
- *How did Paul determine what the truth about Christ was?*
  - The truth came from Christ himself.
  - John 14:6—Jesus said he is the way, the **truth**, and the life.

**Point 2**—Once we see the truth we must understand the need to accept the truth and repent of our sins (**Acts 26:17-20**)

- *How is darkness and light a lot like truth and lies?*
- *Why does God want us to turn from darkness/lies to light/truth?*
- Notice the result of that in 26:18—forgiveness of sins
- Paul says that repentance should be reflected by our deeds. *How can our deeds reflect our repentance?*
  - When we repent we should not go back to doing those same evil things.
  - When you repent you need to replace the bad habits and behaviors with good ones.

**Point 3**—God has been trying to tell us about the resurrection all along (**Acts 26:22-23**)

- *Who in the Old Testament said that the Messiah would suffer and be the first to rise from the dead?*
  - Moses and the prophets

*Didn't Lazarus and a sick girl and others rise from the dead before Jesus? Why is Jesus the real firstborn from the dead?*

- All those other people died again but Jesus did not and will not (Romans 6:10 and 1 Peter 3:18)

### **Acts 26:24-32**

*What does Agrippa think Paul is trying to do?*

- Use all that evidence and talk of repentance of ALL people to persuade him that Jesus is Lord.

*Seeing the open door, what ironic thing does Paul say he wishes?*

- That they, the rulers, could be like him, the man on trial.

*What is it about Christianity that makes a beggar on level with a king?*

- All that matters is our relationship with God and God is no respecter of persons. There are wealthy kings who are worse off than beggars because they do not know Jesus Christ.

*What obstacles could Agrippa and others in high position face that could keep them from becoming a Christian?*

### **Application:**

*Who is someone you can try to reach that may have seemed “out of your league” but maybe all you need is boldness?*

*What is the scariest part about turning from darkness and sin to light and truth in your life?*

*What open doors for evangelism can you pray God will open this week?*

# Faith Through the Storm

Acts 27:1-26

**Icebreaker:** *What makes you nervous?*

Starting in chapter 27, Luke joins the journey. We start noticing him using the word “we” regarding Paul’s journey. As you remember from an earlier lesson, Paul appealed to Caesar and now he is on a voyage to Rome.

## Acts 27:1-3

*What encouragement does Paul receive on his journey to Rome?*

- He is allowed to spend some time with the Christians of Sidon.

It is important to note how connected the Christian community was at this time. Paul must have known of their existence and they readily spent time with him and showed him love and kindness.

*Is it surprising that the Roman troops allowed Paul to do that?*

- Centurions are presented pretty well in the New Testament.
- Paul was probably under guard during that trip.

## Acts 27:4-12

Luke notes that it was after the Day of Atonement. That is significant because it shows it was far enough into the fall of the year for these waters to be extremely dangerous.

*Hadn’t God promised him he would make it to Rome? Why warn his Roman captors of the coming difficulties?*

Many times we compare storms in the Bible to figurative storms we face in life. *Paul knows a storm is coming that will threaten the lives of the people on the ship, what does he do?*

- He gives a warning that something bad is about to happen.
- He let’s them know just how serious it is going to be.

*What does that teach us about what to do if we see disaster approaching our lives or the lives of those we know?*

- We have to be bold and warn people.

*What can make it hard to warn someone about trouble that you can see brewing in their life?*

- We fear they won’t listen or they will think we are being nosy.
- They may have said, “Paul, you aren’t a sailor. What do you know?” But he warned them anyway.

*How should we respond to others when they try to warn us?*

*What things can easily blind us to our own problems?/Why can others sometimes see our problems more clearly than we can?*

- Pride, arrogance, selfishness.
- Some times we rationalize our behavior and think of all kinds of reasons it is okay but someone else may see right through it all and try to warn us for our own good.

### **Acts 27:13-26**

It is just a guess but we will probably never be in the middle of a storm in an ancient wooden ship in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. However, as was said earlier these stories can be object lessons for how we can handle the “storms” that threaten our lives and spiritual well being from time to time. We are not just talking about physical storms like illness and injury. We are also talking about spiritual storms that can threaten us.

*What are some spiritual things that can threaten our survival?*

- Sin, Satan, selfishness

Notice that when the storm hit the crew did what they could to protect the ship and the passengers. Two of the most significant actions were binding the ship with rope and throwing things overboard.

*How could these two things be paralleled in how we deal with trouble?*

- Binding the ship—We have to draw close to each other
- Throwing things overboard—We have to remove all obstacles and hindrances that keep us from getting through the storm.

*What obstacles slow our progress through the storms of life?*

*How does God reassure Paul that everything will be okay?*

It is reassuring that God sends comfort and courage even in the midst of our storms. God is faithful and he is the only one who can see us through the storms of life. There are no boats big enough to be unsinkable. There are no other captains wise enough to pilot the straights and storms of life. Only with God on our side will we survive the storms of life.

### **Application:**

*What things in your life need to be “thrown overboard?”*

*How could drawing close to other Christians help you through your difficult times?*

*How can you be an encouragement to others when they are going through their own storms?*

### **Prayer:**

Take prayer requests for the storms the members of the group are going through (physical and spiritual). Spend some time praying for those.



# From Storm to Solid Ground

Acts 27:27-28:10

**Icebreaker:** *What gives you hope?*

Last week we Paul and his companions sailed for Rome and encountered a dangerous storm. We ended with Paul giving a word from God that they must run aground on an island.

## Acts 27:27-32

They were in the storm for fourteen days when they finally neared landfall. *Why was land a mixed blessing in their situation?*

- They needed land to be safe and have something solid to stand on in the storm.
- The boat could also be dashed against the rocks and everyone drown.

*When we find ourselves in trouble in life, how do we weigh out which solutions can help us and which contain danger?*

- Paul shows us the answer—he was listening to God.
- We need to pray for discernment that God could make clear to us the hidden dangers and which options are the best.

## Acts 27:33-44

How intense the storm must have been for them to not have eaten anything for two weeks! Recognizing the need for the men to be well fed for the work ahead, Paul prayed a prayer of thanks and the prisoners and guards shared a meal together.

*What is it about storms that can pull enemies together?*

- History has shown us how the Gospel can pull people together—persecutors and the persecuted, criminals and the justice system, you name it and Christ can bridge the gap.

## Acts 28:1-10

*Right when his feet get on solid ground, safe from the storm, what happens to Paul?*

- He gets bit by a snake and the locals think he will die.

From bad to worse! From 14 days in the storm to bit by a snake. *Paul would have known this couldn't be the end because what had God told him earlier?*

- God had told him he would go all the way to Rome
- God must have told him everyone on the ship would be spared and not a hair on their heads would be hurt (27:34)

Remember what Jesus said to his disciples in Mark 16:17-18...*How is a part of this fulfilled in what happens in this story in Acts?*

- Paul is unaffected by a poisonous snake
- Paul heals Publius' father and many other from the island.

***How did God use these miracles to ready these 276 people for their next voyage?***

- The people on the island were favorable to them and gave them the supplies they needed for their voyage.

Remember, they had lost all their supplies in the sea including their grain. God provided for these 276 people by providing these miracles.

*How has God brought you a foundation through the storm?*

This life offers many “foundations” but they all have their risks and dangers. None of them last. The world says if you have enough money then you have a solid foundation or if you are popular enough or if you are promoted high enough then you have a solid foundation. What was solid is not the ground we standing on but the God we have faith in. You can land on solid ground, think you are safe and die from a snake bite. Only God can really make this life solid.

**Application:**

*How can trusting God increase your courage even when you don't know all the answers and outcomes?*

*What “impossible” things in your life still need to be given completely to God?*

Paul knew nothing to happen to him because God promised he would make it to Rome. *How does the promise of making it to heaven give us courage today?*

**Prayer:**

Pray that God would help us find a solid foundation but not in earthly things—a foundation found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

# "To the Ends of the Earth": Paul Arrives in Rome

Acts 28:11-31

**Icebreaker:** *What are you willing to stand up for?*

One of the messages we have heard over and over again in the book of Acts was the great boldness the apostles had as they proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The book of Acts ends on a note of boldness as Paul finally finds himself in Rome and is able to preach to the Jewish leaders in Rome.

## Acts 28:11-16

Again, Paul finds encouragement on his journey to Rome. It is remarkable that Paul runs into Christians on many of the stops of his journey.

*What promise had God made good on?*

- That Paul would arrive in Rome to share the gospel there as well.

God promised Paul a destination but he didn't guarantee it would be an easy trip. *How is that similar to our lives?*

## Acts 28:17-22

*Who was it who originally brought these false charges against Paul?*

- The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem

*Why would Paul be interested in explaining himself to the Jewish leaders in Rome?*

- Because he cares about them and knows they are important to God.
- Also, Paul's usual way of doing things was to go first to the Jews in an area before talking to the Gentiles (Romans 1:16 and also in Acts 19 when Paul preaches in Ephesus first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles)

## Acts 28:23-25.

Is it any wonder that Luke ends the book of Acts with Paul preaching about Jesus Christ? Notice he started with what they knew. *What did Paul use to prove Jesus was the Christ?*

- Law of Moses and the Prophets

*Why is it important to start with what people already know about God and Jesus?*

*What questions could you ask someone to find out what they already think about God and Jesus that could open a door to a conversation about their relationship with God?*

*Why is it important to teach others about Christ even though not everyone will believe?*

- Because God loves everyone.

- Because some will believe and you never know who that is going to be.

### Acts 28:26-28

The people who had been waiting for generations for the Messiah to come didn't get it when it finally happened. They disbelieved, rejected it, and even crucified the Messiah. They knew the prophecies. They knew the Old Testament. If anyone should have known Jesus was the Messiah it was the Jews.

*How is it possible to have vision but not be able to see or hearing but not be able to understand?*

- Paul is talking about spiritual things. These people had perfectly good eyes but were not able to recognize the Messiah. They saw the miracles but they didn't really see that God was the one doing it. They heard Jesus teach but did not understand that he was from God.

*How is it possible that we can make the same mistake today?*

- When the Bible tells us something we are doing is wrong or sin but we don't listen to the warning.

*What does Paul say can result from that kind of thinking?*

- He says their hearts' became calloused or hardened.

Obviously that is not how God made us to live. When we see something is sinful we must avoid it and when we see something is righteous we need to live it out. When we do we will be living with eyes that see and ears that hear and our hearts will be softened.

Luke doesn't tell us what happened to Paul because Acts is not about Paul. Acts is about the spread of the Gospel to the Jews and Gentiles alike all around the world. The prophesy at the very beginning of Acts (Acts 1:8) has come to pass—the Gospel has reached Rome, which was the capital of the civilized world of their day and figuratively the “ends of the earth.” God made good on his promise to Paul and he will make good on his promises to us.

We carry on the apostles' mission to carry on the Gospel to the ends of the earth with great boldness.

#### **Application:**

[Only one question but try to really spend time discussing them as it sums up how we respond to the entire book of Acts.]

*How would you define the mission of the early church?/How can we live out the mission of the early church today?*

#### **Prayer:**

Prayer for boldness and commitment to continue the mission Jesus set in motion in the early church. Pray that our mission will match their mission and that our boldness will match theirs. Pray that God will use us as instruments for his Kingdom for the people we come in contact with on a daily basis.