



VICTORY HILL CHURCH

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE BOOK OF ACTS
2020 SMALL GROUP WINTER-SPRING SEMESTER
Acts, chapters 1-16

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Before we begin...

As we begin our journey, let me set the background. Jesus was sentenced to death and executed. The One who promised to restore Israel and bring life, is now dead. The disciples are confused and afraid. Three days later, Jesus was resurrected. He appeared to the disciples and others. Later, Jesus shares his final words with the apostles before ascending. He tells them the Holy Spirit will come and empower them. As a result, the church is born. The political, racial and religious climate that was already a hot mess...just got messier.

The book of Acts is an amazing account about the first hours, days and years of the early church. It was a time of excitement and fear. It was a season of both freedom and imprisonment. It was also a time of sharing life and suffering death at the hands of those who opposed Jesus.

It's also worth mentioning that Acts was written by Luke, who was a physician (this was the same person who wrote the gospel of Luke). This is an important fact, especially in the book of Acts, because many people were miraculously healed from medical conditions. The fact that a physician validated each account makes each miracle even more credible, as well as detailed and precise.

As you dive into the stories, you will quickly learn what it means to be the Church. The same Holy Spirit and the same power found in the pages of scripture, lives inside of every Christian today. And He still desires to do great things through you.

Chad

The Promise of the Holy Spirit

1. **Welcome**
2. **Prayer requests & Prayer**
3. **Warm Up:** What is the status of your New Year resolutions?
4. **Tonight's Story:** Jesus gives final instructions: **Scripture:** Acts 1:1-11

5. **Background:** Jesus, who was publicly crucified, is now resurrected and made known to the apostles. As he prepares to go to heaven, he leaves them with specific instructions that will launch the New Testament church.
 - A. **Tell the Story:** Assigned
 - B. **Read the Story:** Assigned
 - C. **Rebuild the Story:** Facilitator and group together

 - D. **Discussion Questions:**
 - The apostles continually ask Jesus a question about the restoration of Israel. Why?
 - We often speak of "church" as a building. We "go to church." Yet the church is not a destination but a movement. What does that statement mean to you?
 - Why was Jerusalem probably the last place to which the disciples wanted to go?
 - According to Acts 1:8, the power is given for a specific purpose. What is it? In what ways is this purpose played out? Give an example(s) of what it would look like to see someone demonstrating this *power*.
 - How should these last words of Jesus shape the world perspective of all Christians?
 - E. **Gospel Challenge:** Share the first name of someone you personally know who isn't a Christian or has fallen away from church. As a small group, pray for the names mentioned. As a Christian, lean into God's power and use courage to invite him or her to church or your small group. Remember, one invite can change a life!

The Promise of the Holy Spirit

Commentary Notes

This would be the last time they would see Jesus in His physical body, until they went to heaven to be with Him forever. There is nothing specific in the text to show us that they *knew* this would be their last time seeing Him on earth, other than the weight of the question they were about to ask.

Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? This was a question asked many times before, but it had a special relevance now. They knew that Jesus had instituted the New Covenant (Luke 22:20). They also knew that the restoration of **the kingdom to Israel** was part of the New Covenant (as seen in Jeremiah 23:1-8, Ezekiel 36:16-30, Ezekiel 37:21-28).

The disciples certainly knew the many Old Testament prophecies describing the spiritual *and* national rebirth of Israel. The disciples probably thought that the spiritual rebirth seemed certain, so the national would also come.

With their question about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel, it is possible that the disciples still saw **power** too much in terms of Caesar's kind of power, and not enough in terms of God's kind of power.

The natural result of receiving this promised power would be that they would become **witnesses** of Jesus, all over the earth.

i. Notice that this really wasn't a command; it was a simple statement of fact: **When the Holy Spirit has come upon you... you shall be witnesses of Me**. The words **shall be** are in the indicative, not the imperative. Jesus didn't recommend that they become **witnesses**; He said they would **be witnesses**.

The Holy Spirit Comes

1. **Welcome**
 2. **Prayer requests & Prayer**
 3. **Warm Up:** What is your most memorable spiritual experience?
 4. **Tonight's Story:** The Holy Spirit Comes: **Scripture:** Acts 2:1-47
 5. **Background:** The apostles, along with other believers were gathered in an upper room, waiting for Jesus' promise about the Holy Spirit to be fulfilled.
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- A. **Tell the Story:** Assigned
 - B. **Read the Story:** Assigned
 - C. **Rebuild the Story:** Facilitator and group together
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- D. Discussion Questions:**
- Jesus told the disciples to go to the upper room and wait for the promise of the Spirit. Ten days later, the wait is over. Why do you think Jesus made them wait ten days? How can "waiting" strengthen our spiritual person? Life example?
 - The Bible says the Spirit gave them the ability to speak different languages. Why this gift? What does this teach us about the motives of all spiritual gifts?
 - What should be the goal of our weekend services, small groups, and other church events in light of verse 42?
 - There seemed to be a balance in the early church between being "in the temple" and "from house to house" (2:46-47). How might this serve as an example for us?
- E. **Gospel Challenge:** In your prayer time, be sure to war for your family, your marriage and your church. Prayer changes things!

The Holy Spirit Comes

Commentary Notes

The disciples waited until **the Day of Pentecost had fully come**, but they didn't know ahead of time how long they would have to wait. It would be easy for them to think He would come the same afternoon Jesus ascended to heaven; or after 3 days, or 7 days. But they had to wait a full 10 days, until **the Day of Pentecost had fully come**. The only possible Scriptural precedent for this might be *Jeremiah 42:7: Ten days later the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah*. But who would have suspected that? God used this time to break them down and then to build them up. We can imagine how their patience and kindness and compassion was tested during this time, yet they all stayed together.

Suddenly there came a sound from heaven: The association of the sound of a **rushing mighty wind**, filling the **whole house**, with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is unusual. But it probably has connection with the fact that in both the Hebrew and Greek languages, the word for *spirit* (as in *Holy Spirit*) is the same word for *breath* or **wind** (this also happens to be true in Latin). Here, the **sound from heaven** was the sound of the Holy Spirit being poured out on the disciples. Some say we are dealing with two separate gifts. They argue that the 1 Corinthians gift must be regulated and restricted, while the *Acts 2* gift can be used any time without regulation. Those who believe they are two separate gifts emphasize that the speech of *Acts 2* was immediately recognized by foreign visitors to Jerusalem, while the speech of 1 Corinthians was unintelligible to those present except with a divinely granted gift of interpretation.

The Gift of Tongues has an important place in the devotional life of the believer, but a small place in the corporate life of the church (*1 Corinthians 14:18-19*), especially in public meetings (*1 Corinthians 14:23*).

Repent, and let every one of you be baptized: Responding to the question, "*What shall we do?*" Peter gave them something to *do*. This means that we must *do* something to be saved, we must *do* something to follow Jesus; it doesn't just "happen."

The church is meant to worship God and learn His Word together. Yet it is meant to do more; God wants us to share our *lives* with one another. This is God's prescription for church growth. If we take care to follow the example of *Acts 2:42-47*, God will take care of growing the church Himself.

A Lame Begger is Healed

1. **Welcome**
2. **Prayer requests & Prayer**
3. **Warm Up:** Describe a time in your life when you found yourself without money.
4. **Tonight's Story:** Acts 3:1-10
5. **Background:** Peter and John recently experienced the in-filling of the Holy Spirit and begins their public New Testament ministry.

A. Tell the Story: Assigned

B. Read the Story: Assigned

C. Rebuild the Story: Facilitator and group together

D. Discussion Questions:

- How do you respond to the beggar on the street corner or some random intersection?
- The lame man was looking for support in his current condition, but Jesus had other plans. Describe a time when Jesus healed a "crippled" area of your life?
- Read Acts 4:16. Could the priests and leaders of the temple deny that a miracle occurred? Why or why not? How does this understanding add credibility to the account?
- Peter did not give the beggar money, but instead he shared the power of Jesus. Have you ever shared Jesus with someone and seen their life transformed? Share.
- Which is more important: ministering to a crowd of over 3,000 (Acts 2) or ministering to a solitary crippled man (Acts 3)?

E. Gospel Challenge: Pray and ask God for boldness and courage to share the name of Jesus to the people that He places in your path. Like the lame man, there is no such thing as coincidence when we meet people that need Jesus.

A Lame Begger is Healed

Commentary Notes

The ninth hour: “Perhaps this time of day, even then, held special significance for them because it was the hour when Jesus cried from the cross, ‘It is finished’ (John 19:30).”

The Jewish historian Josephus described this gate on the temple mount; made of fine Corinthian brass, seventy-five feet high with huge double doors, so beautiful that it “greatly excelled those that were only covered over with silver and gold.”

Of course, the lame man felt he had no other option than to be supported in his condition; and it was certainly better for him to be supported than to starve to death.

In addition, the man had good reason to believe that begging at the **Beautiful** gate could support him. There was (and is) a strong tradition of alms-giving (giving to the poor, especially beggars) in Judaism, and doing it as an act of righteousness.

The man must have been happy and encouraged when Peter and John looked at him intently. Most people who want to ignore beggars are careful to not make eye contact with them. When they looked at the lame man so intently, he probably thought he had a big gift coming.

When Peter and John gave him no money, we might have heard the lame man complain: “You don’t care about me. You won’t support me. Look at the mess I’m in.” But Peter and John wanted something greater than supporting the man in his condition. They wanted to transform his life by the power of the risen Jesus Christ.

“It is not the Church’s business in this world to simply make the present condition more bearable; the task of the Church is to release here on earth the redemptive work of God in Christ.”

Walking in Boldness

1. **Welcome**
2. **Prayer requests & Prayer**
3. **Warm Up:** What is the bravest thing you have ever done?
4. **Tonight's Story:** Acts 4:13-21
5. **Background:** The religious leaders are upset about the lame man being healed and the great following (of Jesus) that it created. Peter and John are arrested and brought before the council. Peter boldly proclaims Jesus and rebukes the leaders for rejecting Him when he was on earth.

- A. **Tell the Story:** Assigned
- B. **Read the Story:** Assigned
- C. **Rebuild the Story:** Facilitator and group together

D. Discussion Questions:

- The religious leaders noted that Peter and John were not educated, trained men, but saw their boldness. What does it mean to be "bold" for Jesus?
- What evidence led them to believe they had been with Jesus? What evidence should we see today in our own lives that prove we follow Jesus?
- Peter and John's response to the religious leaders was certainly bold. What do you think drove this boldness? What do you think weakens boldness?
- If you were in need, to whom would you go and what would you do? How should 4:23-24 serve as an example for us?

- E. **Gospel Challenge:** Peter and John didn't have a formal education, but they knew scripture and followed Jesus. There's nothing wrong with getting a good education, but knowing God's Word is essential in being an effective Christian. Spend time this week finding/creating a Bible reading plan.

Walking in Boldness

Commentary Notes

It is helpful to remember that God has used many who were greatly educated. Moses, Daniel, and Paul are all Biblical examples. Augustine, Martin Luther, and Billy Graham are just a few historical examples. It's just as wrong to think that formal education *disqualifies* someone for effective service as it is to think that it automatically *qualifies* someone for effective service.

It is interesting to note what the Jewish leaders did *not* do: they did not make any attempt to disprove the resurrection of Jesus. If it were possible to do, *this* was the time to do it; yet they could not. "Had it seemed possible to refute them on this point, how readily would the Sanhedrin seized the opportunity! Had they succeeded, how quickly and completely the new movement would have collapsed!"

They realized that they had been with Jesus: This means that the bold exclusivism of Acts 4:12 was coupled with a radiant love characteristic of Jesus. If we will preach *no other name* we should also make it evident that we have **been with Jesus**.

People *should* go to Jesus directly, but often they won't. The only Jesus they will see is what shines through us. We must work to make the fact that we have **been with Jesus** as obvious in our lives as it was in theirs.

We cannot but speak: Peter and John *must* speak of the **things which** they had **seen and heard**. They had to, not only because of the inner compulsion of the Holy Spirit, but also because of the command of Jesus: *You shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem (Acts 1:8)*.

The Death of Ananias & Sapphira & the Imprisonment & Rescue of the Apostles

1. **Welcome**
2. **Prayer requests & Prayer**
3. **Warm Up:** What is your favorite movie about being rescued?
4. **Tonight's Story:** Acts 5:1-26
5. **Background:** The apostles performed signs and wonders and the church continued to grow, despite bad decisions and opposition from religious leaders. The times were becoming more dangerous for Christians, especially the apostles.
 - A. **Tell the Story:** Assigned
 - B. **Read the Story:** Assigned
 - C. **Rebuild the Story:** Facilitator and group together
 - D. **Discussion Questions:**
 - What prompted Ananias and his wife, Sapphira to sell their property and give money to the apostles? What was their motive? What can we learn from this?
 - The apostles did a lot of miracles, which resulted in people believing in the name of Jesus. Have you ever witnessed a miracle from God? Did it cause others to believe?
 - The Bible says an angel of the Lord rescued the apostles from prison and told them to go teach in the temple, which was why they were in prison to begin with. Has the Lord ever prompted you to share your faith when it didn't make sense to do so?
 - What do you think was going through the minds of the officers who found the empty jail cells still secured? How do you think it impacted their belief about Jesus?
 - E. **Gospel Challenge:** Every miracle from God will always glorify Jesus. There is no such thing as a small miracle. What miracle has God done in your life that you could share with someone who isn't a Christian?

The death of Ananias & Sapphira & the Imprisonment & Rescue of the Apostles

Commentary Notes

Ananias, with Sapphira were obviously imitating Barnabas. He had probably received much “publicity” for his substantial gift, so they wanted that same attention. Key questions: Did Barnabas give a large sum of money to the church just to get attention? Do many give to the church today to get attention?

Seemingly, God chose to do these miraculous works **through the hands of the apostles** and not mainly through others. Yet God wisely chooses which hands will bring a miracle. He had a purpose in doing it **through the hands of the apostles. They brought the sick out into the streets**: People were so convinced of the reality and power of what the Christians believed, they thought they could be healed by the mere touch of Peter’s shadow. However, we can trust that Luke is not merely recording legends. “From what we know of physicians, even in those days, we cannot assume that Luke would gullibly accept stories of ‘miraculous healing’ without investigating them.” (LaSor)

The apostles, like Jesus whom they represented, were persecuted because their good works and popularity were a threat to those who had an interest in the status quo of the religious establishment. Sadly, the religious establishment of that day left the people worse off, not better.

An angel of the Lord opened the prison doors: This was easy for God to arrange. Angels are *all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation (Hebrews 1:14)*. God sent forth this angel *to minister for the apostles*. Locked doors are nothing for God or those who He uses. *Their rescue from prison was wonderful, but for a purpose – so they could continue their work. God didn’t set them free primarily for their safety or comfort. They were set free for a reason; and after this they were not always delivered.*

They entered the temple early in the morning and taught: This was remarkable obedience and boldness. If they were not sure if God wanted them to continue their public teaching work, the word from the angel at [Acts 5:20](#) made it clear that they were to continue. They went to the most public place they could (**the temple**), and as soon as they could (**early in the morning**). When they were thought to be in the prison, they were obediently teaching God’s word to the common people.

The Appointment of Deacons and Arrest of Stephan

1. **Welcome**
2. **Prayer requests & Prayer**
3. **Warm Up:** Have you ever been falsely accused by someone?
4. **Tonight's Story:** Acts 6:1-15
5. **Background:** To this point in the Book of Acts, Satan's attacks on the church came on many different fronts. He attempted many forms of direct opposition and intimidation, and he tried to corrupt the church from within. These strategies were all unsuccessful in stopping or slowing the work of the church. Now Satan hoped to "divide and conquer" by raising one group of Christians against another and the arrest of Stephan, one of the newly appointed deacons.
 - A. **Tell the Story:** Assigned
 - B. **Read the Story:** Assigned
 - C. **Rebuild the Story:** Facilitator and group together
 - D. **Discussion Questions:**
 - The accusation of neglect resulted in appointing seven men to serve and take care of widows, while the church leaders continued preaching and teaching. As a result, God's word and new disciples multiplied. What does this speak to you about serving?
 - When the members of the synagogue could not withstand Stephan's wisdom, they twisted his words. Has the Holy Spirit ever gave you "on the spot" wisdom before?
 - Compare 7:55-56 with Matthew 26:63-64 and Mark 14:61-62. What similarities do you see between Stephen and Jesus?
 - What do you see in the life of Stephen that you would like to be part of your life?
 - E. **Gospel Challenge:** Pray and ask God to give you both peace and wisdom. Oftentimes our reaction (or the lack thereof) can be the greatest witness for Jesus.

The Appointment of Deacons and Arrest of Stephan

Commentary Notes

To oversimplify, **Hebrews** tended to regard **Hellenists** as unspiritual compromisers with Greek culture, and **Hellenists** regarded **Hebrews** as holier-than-thou traditionalists. There was already a natural suspicion between the two groups, and Satan tried to take advantage of that standing suspicion. It's important to remember that though the titles **Hebrews** and **Hellenists** are used, *these were Christians, followers of Jesus*. They were all from a Jewish background, but they had all embraced Jesus as their Messiah.

The daily distribution: The early church took its responsibility to help support **widows** seriously because they often had no other support; but they also expected these widows to serve the church faithfully (1 Timothy 5:3-16). There is the hint here of a growing division between the religious leaders and the early followers of Jesus. The care of widows and orphans was an important part of Jewish life, and normally the temple authorities organized the distribution to the needy. Yet it seems that the Christian widows were not cared for by the Jewish leaders; probably because they didn't like the fact that the apostles kept preaching Jesus when they were told to stop.

"In a congregation of that size, it was inevitable that someone's needs would be overlooked." (MacArthur) Satan loves to use an unintentional wrong to begin a conflict. The **Hebrews** were right in their *hearts*, and the **Hellenists** were right in their *facts*. These were perfect conditions for a church-splitting conflict.

Some believe that this is evidence of a superior attitude among **the twelve**; that they considered themselves above such work. This was probably not so, and they were wise in delegating these responsibilities. God did not call these apostles to be *everything* for the church. God has and will raise up others to serve in other ways. **We will give ourselves continually to prayer:** They gave themselves to more than **the ministry of the word**. "Therefore, pastors must not think that they have so done their duty that they need to do no more when they have daily spent some time in teaching." (Calvin)

Stephen debated with Jews from **the Synagogue of the Freedmen**. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, he showed greater wisdom than his opponents (**they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke**). There is no indication that Stephen – in himself – was smarter, better educated, or a better debater than these Jews. We should attribute his upper hand in the debate to **the Spirit by which he spoke**.

The opponents of Stephen could do nothing against the followers of Jesus until they got popular opinion on their side. Previously, persecution against the apostles had been limited because popular opinion was with them (Acts 2:47, 5:26).

Stephen's Response to the Council

1. **Welcome**
2. **Prayer requests & Prayer**
3. **Warm Up:** Were you ever sent to the principal's office? If yes, why?
4. **Tonight's Story:** Acts 7:54-60

5. **Background:** Stephan responds to the council, not in defense, but rather using the opportunity to share Old Testament history to reveal the true picture of God, His son Jesus and their rejection of the true Messiah.
 - A. **Tell the Story:** Assigned
 - B. **Read the Story:** Assigned
 - C. **Rebuild the Story:** Facilitator and group together

 - D. **Discussion Questions:**
 - The council was absolutely enraged at the response of Stephan, yet he did not flinch. Instead, Stephan saw the heavens open up and Jesus standing next to the Father. Have you ever had a supernatural God-experience?
 - The council had a religion about God, but not a relationship WITH God, like Stephan did. What is the difference in Jesus religion and Jesus relationship?
 - Stephan was stoned to death, in the presence of Saul (who later became a Jesus follower). How would you respond to someone who asks, "Why didn't God save Stephan?" How did God use his death to glorify Himself?
 - How has God used a bad situation to bring about something good in your life?

 - E. **Gospel Challenge:** God doesn't always remove us from pain or predicament, but we can always trust God as we go through it. Who do you know that may be doubting God's intervention? How can you pray for them or share with them?

Stephen's Response to the Council

Commentary Notes

When Stephen declared that he saw Jesus *standing at the right hand of God*, it was too much. The Sanhedrin reacted quickly, violently, and together. When Jesus, before this same body of men, declared that He would sit at the right hand of God, they had the same reaction and sealed his death as a blasphemer ([Matthew 26:64-66](#)).

"For Stephen to suggest that the crucified Jesus stood in a position of authority at the right hand of God must have ranked as blasphemy in the thinking of those who knew that a crucified man died under the divine curse." (Bruce)

They cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord:

These were distinguished, older men behaving this way. The reaction of the Sanhedrin seems extreme, but is typical of those who reject God and are lost in spiritual insanity. They wailed in agony and covered their ears at the revelation of God, which they regarded as blasphemy.

It is a dangerous thing to be religious apart from a real relationship with Jesus Christ. This fulfills what Jesus warned about in [John 16:2-3](#): *Yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me.*

Ran at him: This uses the ancient Greek word *hormao*. This is the same word used to describe the mad rush of the herd of swine into the sea ([Mark 5:13](#)). This was an out-of-control mob rushing at Stephen.

Lord, do not charge them with this sin: God answered Stephen's prayer, and used it to touch the heart of a man who energetically agreed with his stoning – even though the man didn't know the prayer was being answered. When we get to heaven, we should thank Stephen for every blessing brought through the ministry of Saul of Tarsus.

Stephen displayed the same forgiving attitude that Jesus had on the cross ([Luke 23:34](#)). He asked God to forgive his accusers, and he made the promises loudly and publicly.

If the gospels contain that which Jesus *began* to do and to teach, they also only contain that which Jesus *began* to suffer. There was a sense in which Jesus suffered along with Stephen as he was martyred.

A Revival breaks out in Samaria

1. **Welcome**
2. **Prayer requests & Prayer**
3. **Warm Up:** What is your most memorable church experience?
4. **Tonight's Story:** Acts 8:1-24
5. **Background:** Stephen has just been Martyred (the first Christian martyr) and the church (known as "The Way") is under heavy attack and persecution. Remember the context; the "church" was a very new concept to religious leaders and society.

A. Tell the Story: Assigned

B. Read the Story: Assigned

C. Rebuild the Story: Facilitator and group together

D. Discussion Questions:

- Stephen's death was a springboard for severe persecution of the church, even putting people (Christians) in prison. How did God use Stephen's death and the persecution that followed to strengthen the church? How has God used an adversity in your life to make you stronger and/or enhance your ministry?
- Phillip went to Samaria to share the message of Christ. Samaria was a very hostile place for Jews to hang out (racial tension) and probably not the first pick as a place to share the gospel. Have you ever shared Christ in a hostile environment?
- Phillip had an encounter with a sorcerer, who deceived the people that his power was from God. If you were there, how would you have known if the sorcerer's power was from God or not? (see verses 18-19)
- Peter told Simon that he should pray for repentance. Do you think that Simon's words in verse 24 reveal a change in his heart? Why or why not?

E. Gospel Challenge: Jews and Samaritans were considered enemies. Jesus taught us to love and pray for our enemies. How might you pray for the enemies in your life this week?

A Revival breaks out in Samaria

Commentary Notes

The old translation says Paul brought havoc to the church. This word is an ancient Greek word that could refer to an army destroying a city or a wild animal tearing at its meat. He viciously attacked Christians, including **women**.

A great persecution arose against the church: Stephen's death was only the beginning. The floodgates of persecution were now open against the Christians. Saul was only one of many persecutors of Christians. This was the first persecution of the Christians as a whole. Before, the apostles had been arrested and beaten and persecuted; here, every believer was threatened with violence and perhaps death.

They were scattered throughout the regions: Now the Christians were forced to do what they had been reluctant to do – get the message of Jesus out to the surrounding **regions**.

Scattered: According to Boice, there are two different words in the ancient Greek language for the idea of "scattered." One has the idea of scattering in the sense of making something disappear, like scattering someone's ashes. The other word has the idea of scattering in the sense of planting or sowing seeds. This is the ancient Greek word used here.

The resulting good of the spread of the gospel leads some to see this persecution as being the will of God. God can and will use pressing circumstances to guide us into His will. Sometimes we have to be shaken out of our comfortable state before we do what God wants us to do.

Generally speaking, the Jews of that day hated the Samaritans. They considered them compromising half-breeds who corrupted the worship of the true God. "There was deep-seated prejudice, amounting almost to hatred, standing between the Jews and the Samaritans." (LaSor)

This Simon had a fair degree of local fame. He was honored as one who didn't only *have* the power of God; they said of him **"This man is the great power of God."** In the Bible **sorcery** is associated with occult, magical practices – and often with the taking of mind and mood altering drugs. Whatever *real* power Simon had, it was from Satan, not God. Simon thought that the Holy Spirit was merely a power that could be bought or sold. He wanted to control the working of the Spirit, and regarded the Holy Spirit as a power he could use as he wanted, instead of a *Person* who ruled his life. Simon did not really desire the Holy Spirit for himself, but the ability to impart the power of the Holy Spirit to others at his will. This would give him much spiritual authority.

The Persecutor Meets Jesus

1. **Welcome**
2. **Prayer requests & Prayer**
3. **Warm Up:** How old were you when you started attending church?
4. **Tonight's Story:** Acts 9:1-19

5. **Background:** The newly formed church continued to flourish, but was also under heavy persecution from the high priest. Saul was the ring leader of the persecution.

- A. Tell the Story:** Assigned
- B. Read the Story:** Assigned
- C. Rebuild the Story:** Facilitator and group together

- D. Discussion Questions:**
 - Have you ever found yourself thinking that you were serving God sincerely, only to discover that your sincerity was misplaced (a tradition or a religious rule you used to keep)?
 - Saul was literally knocked to the ground. Can you describe a time in your life when God had to humble you in order to bless you?
 - Do think everyone has the same conversion experience? Can you share your testimony with the group about your experience in becoming a Christian?
 - In what way does God giving Saul a second chance indicate to us how we should respond to those who have treated us unfairly or have made mistakes?
 - Do you believe God has a plan for you? Why or why not?

- E. Gospel Challenge:** What is a next step that you have not yet taken as a Christian (baptism, tithing, serving, etc)? Spend time in prayer this week and ask God to give you courage to take a next step.

The Persecutor Meets Jesus

Commentary Notes:

Still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord: The picture is of an angry, violent man absolutely convinced of his own righteousness. Saul *hated* the **disciples of the Lord**. He wasn't seeking Jesus when Jesus sought him. We might say that Saul was decided *against* Jesus when Jesus decided *for* Saul.

Went to the high priest: Saul did his persecuting work under the direct approval of the highest religious authorities. He **asked** and received **letters from** the high priest authorizing his mission. Saul of Tarsus – this highly educated man – thought that Christianity was both wrong and deceptive. Perhaps he took his example from Phineas, who in the Book of Exodus killed an immoral man and woman with a spear, and God honored his action by halting a plague. Maybe Saul thought he was trying to stop a plague of false religion.

If he found any who were of the Way: Here, Christianity is referred to as **the Way**. This seems to be the earliest name for the Christian movement, and a fitting one – used five times in Acts.

Then he fell to the ground: Saul's reaction was simply to fall **to the ground**. This wasn't because of honor or reverence for God, it was simply a reaction of survival – he was terrified at the heavenly light.

Why are you persecuting Me? As the heavenly light overwhelmed him, Saul was confronted by the true nature of his crime: He persecuted *God*, not *man*. Saul thought that he was serving God in viciously attacking Christians, but he discovered that he was fighting God. This has been sadly true through history. Often those who are convinced they are doing God a favor do much of the worst persecution and torture ever practiced.

We shouldn't only emphasize the "**Me**" in the phrase "**why are you persecuting Me.**" We should also notice the "**why**" and see that Jesus asked "**why are you persecuting Me?**" That is, "Saul, why are you doing such a futile thing?"

For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake: This was a sobering addition to the great call God put upon the life of Saul. Saul would leave a life of privilege to embrace a higher call, but a call with much suffering.

Peter and Cornelius

1. **Welcome**
 2. **Prayer requests & Prayer**
 3. **Warm Up:** What is the strangest dream you ever had?
 4. **Tonight's Story:** Acts 10:1-48
5. **Background:** Peter, a devout Jew, has a dream and is sent to share the gospel with the Gentiles. God uses a vision to help Peter overcome his racial tendencies.
- A. **Tell the Story:** Assigned
 - B. **Read the Story:** Assigned
 - C. **Rebuild the Story:** Facilitator and group together
- D. Discussion Questions:**
- What makes the story of Peter and Cornelius a turning point for the early church?
 - It was against Levitical Law at that time for Jews to associate, eat with, or even visit the house of a Gentile. What was God teaching Peter through the vision? How does this speak to us today in our context in terms of reaching different people?
 - What principles or beliefs do you hold that limit your ability to reach out to people "different" from you? How would others around you feel if you moved beyond these limits?
 - What shows the receptivity of Cornelius and his household to the Word of God (10:33, 44)? What does this teach us about the prep work of the Spirit?
- E. Gospel Challenge:** Sometimes we can struggle in believing God really can save anyone. This is especially true when we hear stories about people who do really bad things or are vocal about their disbelief in God. Take time this week to pray and ask God to begin working on the people who don't believe. Prayer changes things.

Peter and Cornelius

Commentary Notes:

Cornelius was an officer in the Roman Army. A patriotic Jew of that day would naturally dislike or even hate him. Cornelius was in the category of what the Jews called *God-fearers* (**one who feared God**). These were Gentiles who loved the God of Israel; they were sympathetic to and supportive of the Jewish faith. Yet they stopped short of becoming full Jews in lifestyle and in circumcision.

It is significant that God spoke to Cornelius directly, even calling him by name. It is also significant that Cornelius responded with a healthy fear of the heavenly and holy (**he was afraid**). This shows that Cornelius had a real relationship with God.

Send for Simon whose surname is Peter: Probably, Cornelius didn't even know who Peter was. But he knew that he should do what God told him to do, and he could trust that God was speaking to this one named **Peter** also (**He will tell you what you must do**). **He will tell you what you must do:** God sent an angel in a vision to Cornelius, but He used a *man* to preach the gospel to him.

Rise, Peter, kill and eat: This obviously went against Peter's commitment as a Jew, which was to never eat anything except kosher foods. Certainly, among the **all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air** there were non-kosher animals included.

Three men are seeking you...go down and go with them, doubting nothing, for I have sent them: At this point, God *has not* told Peter that his visitors were Gentiles. Normally, a godly Jew like Peter would not associate in this manner with Gentiles. Knowing this, and knowing Peter's previous resistance (*Not so, Lord!*), God simply surprised Peter with the knowledge that these men were Gentiles. All Peter needed to know was that the Spirit said, "**I have sent them.**" The idea that God could send and use Gentiles was entirely new to Peter. God was expanding Peter's mind and heart.

By entertaining these Gentile guests, Peter went against the customs and traditions of Israel, but not against God's Word. Possibly, at this very moment, God flooded Peter's heart with an understanding that though the Old Testament said God's people were not to become like their pagan neighbors, it also said God wanted His people to become a light to their neighbors who didn't know the true God. **While Peter was still speaking these words:** Salvation came when each one of these Gentiles responded to Peter's message with believing faith in their hearts, so that they were actually born again as they listened and believed. "Oh that the Spirit of God would in the same manner interrupt us!" (Spurgeon)

The term "Christian" is Coined

1. **Welcome**
2. **Prayer requests & Prayer**
3. **Warm Up:** In your opinion, what is the most important attribute others should see in a Christian?
4. **Tonight's Story:** Acts 11:19-30
5. **Background:** The church continued to be persecuted, but also continued to grow in numbers and in their discipleship.

- A. **Tell the Story:** Assigned
- B. **Read the Story:** Assigned
- C. **Rebuild the Story:** Facilitator and group together

D. Discussion Questions:

- Who played an important part in your spiritual growth? How did he or she encourage you to become the disciple you are today?
- Antioch was the first place we see the church intentionally going after Gentiles (unsaved, non-Jews). In today's context, we should be reaching the unchurched as well. What things do we practice or do as a church that shows our intentionality in reaching the unchurched? Why are there many churches that push back against reaching unchurched people?
- Do you consider yourself to be a generous person? Why or why not?
- If you were geographically scattered due to persecution (as these believers were), would your first impulse have been to speak about Jesus or to hide and allow things to cool down? Explain

- E. **Gospel Challenge:** The Bible teaches that the early Christians were very benevolent and generous. In what ways can you begin to live our generosity to show the love of Jesus to others?

The Term "Christian" is Coined

Commentary Notes:

Preaching the word to no one but the Jews only: At first, Christians scattered over the Roman Empire preached only to Jews. But they eventually began to preach Jesus Christ to Gentiles as well. **Some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene...spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus:** These unnamed disciples from Cyprus and Cyrene are genuine heroes. They began the first mentioned "mission to the Gentiles" (here called **Hellenists**) in Antioch. In Antioch, we have the first example of Christians deliberately targeting Gentiles for evangelism, and this effort had great results (**a great number believed and turned to the Lord**).

When they had come to Antioch: Antioch was founded about 300 B.C. by Seleucus I, one of the inheritors of Alexander the Great's empire. He liked to make a city and name them after his father, Antioch, and he did this about fifteen times. This city of Antioch was called "Syrian Antioch" or "Antioch on the Orontes." In the first century it was a city of more than half a million people; today it is a Turkish city with a population of about 3,500.

They sent out Barnabas: The church in Jerusalem sent an able man in Barnabas, previously known for his generosity (*Acts 4:36-37*) and his warm acceptance of Saul of Tarsus after he was converted (*Acts 9:26-28*). At the church in Antioch, when Barnabas **had seen the grace of God, he was glad**. There was something in the work and atmosphere among the followers of Jesus in Antioch that made Barnabas able to see the **grace of God**.

Barnabas rightly focused on his main job as a leader of the congregation. He strengthened the church family itself, with the result that **a great many people were added to the Lord**. This is the plan for church growth spoken of in *Ephesians 4:11-16*. Leaders in the church dedicate themselves to building strong, healthy Christians. As the saints are equipped for the work of the ministry, they grow into maturity, and do their ministry, and it *causes growth of the body*.

In Latin, the ending *ian* meant "the party of." A *Christ-ian* was "of the party of Jesus." **Christians** was sort of like saying "Jesus-ites," or "Jesus People," describing the people associated with Jesus Christ. Boice thinks the idea was that they were called "Christ-ones."

You can tell these were truly **disciples** and *Christians*, because they gave generously to meet the need. They gave, **each according to his ability**. This means that they gave **according** to the **ability** of their resources; those who had more gave more, probably referencing a proportional giving. It also means that they gave **according** to the **ability** of their faith, trusting that their gift to God's work was a worthy investment in His kingdom, and not a loss.

James is killed and Peter imprisoned

1. **Welcome**
2. **Prayer requests & Prayer**
3. **Warm Up:** Have you ever bailed anyone out of jail?
4. **Tonight's Story:** Acts 12:1-25

5. **Background:** A Roman government was committing violent acts against Christians, including incarceration and even death. This was a very volatile, scary time for the newly formed church.
 - A. **Tell the Story:** Assigned
 - B. **Read the Story:** Assigned
 - C. **Rebuild the Story:** Facilitator and group together

 - D. **Discussion Questions:**
 - Usually when someone is killed "with the sword," it usually meant they were beheaded. Why do you think Herod wanted to persecute members of the church? Why do you think he chose beheading instead of some other form of execution?
 - What do you think was running through Peter's mind as he sit in prison? Why was he so surprised, to the point of thinking it was a dream? Do you ever pray, but struggle in believing God hears you or is working in your life?
 - What are some possible explanations for why they didn't believe Rhoda?
 - If God can do anything, why do these kind of things happen? Why did God allow James, one of the original twelve and the brother of Jesus, to lose his life?

 - E. **Gospel Challenge:** Has there ever been a time when life didn't make sense? Maybe something that happened to you or someone else? Read Hebrews 11 and ask God to strengthen your faith, even when life doesn't make sense.

James is killed and Peter imprisoned

Commentary Notes:

Some readers will recall that in the early days of the Church, about 44 C.E., King Herod Agrippa killed the apostle James, the son of Zebedee and one of the original 12 (see Acts 12:1–2). Thus it must be another James to whom Luke refers in verse 17 of the same chapter, where he records that Peter sent news of his release from prison to someone named James. Though as many as seven different people by the same name have been identified in the New Testament, it is James the brother of Jesus (Galatians 1:19) who is the most likely in this case. As we have just seen, Jesus' brothers were present with the apostles in Jerusalem as the Church began after Jesus' departure (Acts 1:14). This same James appears later in Acts as the leader of the church at Jerusalem, so it's reasonable to suggest that he is the author of the New Testament book by that name.

Stretched out his hand to harass some from the church: No doubt, this was done because it was politically popular for Herod. It pleased many of his citizens who didn't like Christians. Many political figures are ready to persecute Christians if it will make them politically popular.

Because he saw that it pleased the Jews: Seeing his increased popularity when he killed James, Herod sought to improve his ratings even more when **he proceeded further to seize Peter also.**

"Normally it was considered enough for a prisoner to be handcuffed to one soldier, but as a special precaution Peter had a soldier each side of him and both his wrists were manacled" (Stott)

"So there were always four soldiers guarding Peter. Extraordinary precautions were also taken by chaining him to two soldiers instead of one as usual (compare Seneca, Epistulae, 5:7). The other two soldiers kept watch outside the cell." (Hughes)

Prayer was offered to God for him by the church: In this contest, Herod had his soldiers and his prisons; but the church had the power of prayer. The outcome would soon be seen, and easily decided.

Did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision: Peter obeyed without really knowing what was happening. He knew enough to sense that God was doing something and the explanation could come later.

But they said to her, "You are beside yourself!" We are comforted (and amused) by the little faith of these Christians. Even while they prayed for Peter, they found it hard to believe God actually answered their prayer. Their prayer was earnest (Acts 12:5), but their faith was not overwhelming. Little faith can accomplish great things if it is placed in the great God.

Paul meets a Jewish Sorcerer

1. **Welcome**
2. **Prayer requests & Prayer**
3. **Warm Up:** Have you ever been on a mission trip?
4. **Tonight's Story:** Acts 13:1-12

5. **Background:** Paul, Barnabas and John Mark are sent out on their first missionary expedition from the church at Antioch. Paul is encountered by a Jewish Sorcerer.
 - A. **Tell the Story:** Assigned
 - B. **Read the Story:** Assigned
 - C. **Rebuild the Story:** Facilitator and group together

 - D. **Discussion Questions:**
 - Have you ever fasted before? What drove the decision to fast? What was your experience?
 - How (in what way) has the Holy Spirit spoken to you in the past? What specific work has He called you to?
 - Why do you suppose the Elymas (the sorcerer) did not want his friend to hear the truth of the gospel? What does this say about Satan's strategy?
 - How can you tell whether or not a "prophet" is speaking God's truth? How did Paul know?

 - E. **Gospel Challenge:** Our story reminds us that spiritual warfare is real. Read Ephesians 6:11-20. Ask God to help you wear all of the spiritual armor mentioned by Paul so that you may be able to stand against our adversary, Satan.

Paul meets a Jewish Sorcerer

Commentary Notes:

Now in the church that was at Antioch: In Acts 12:25, we learn Barnabas, Saul, and John Mark were all at the church in Antioch, having returned from delivering a gift of support to the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30). Saul and Barnabas were among the teachers and prophets there, as were **Simeon**, **Lucius**, and **Manaen**. **Simeon who was called Niger:** Since **Niger** means *black*, he was presumably a black African among the congregation at Antioch, and possibly the same **Simeon** who carried Jesus' cross (Luke 23:26).

As part of their service to the Lord, they also **fasted**. Presumably, they fasted because they sensed a need to seek God in a special way. Judging from the calling described in the text, it is possible that they sought God about the need to spread the gospel to all the earth.

If we assume they fasted and prayed about the need of the world for Jesus, we can see how God answered their prayer – by using them. This is often how God moves, by sending the people who have it on their hearts to pray.

Many want to be “back seat drivers” in God’s work. They hope to say, “I’ll have the burden and you do the work.” But God’s typical way of working is to send the people who have the burden to do the work. Being intentionally **sent** by the church in Antioch, many regard this as the first real known *missionary* effort of the church. “The word ‘missionary’ has to do with sending. The Latin word *mitto*, *mittere*, means ‘to send’; ‘mission’ and ‘missionary’ come from the forms *missi* and *missum*.” (Boice)

Paphos: This city on the west coast of Cyprus was known for its immorality. Here Barnabas and Saul faced a combination of immorality and spiritual darkness that was common across the pagan world of the Roman Empire. “Paphos was infamous for its worship of Venus, the goddess of [sexual] love” (Barclay). “Athanasius styled its religion ‘the deification of lust.’ Neither men nor women could resort to the shrine of Venus without being defiled in mind and depraved in character.” (Spurgeon)

The proconsul, Sergius Paulus: This was an important man. A Roman **proconsul** was responsible for an entire province and answered to the Roman Senate. “All Roman provinces were divided into two classes, those that required troops and those that did not. The latter were administered by the Senate and ruled by proconsuls; the former were under the administration of the emperor.” (Williams)

Paul was opposed by a man named **Elymas**. His real name was *Bar-Jesus* (Acts 13:6) which means “son of Jesus,” and Luke couldn’t bear to call him that. This **Elymas** (who was some kind of advisor to the proconsul) attempted to frustrate the missionary efforts of Barnabas and Saul. We should not be surprised or shaken by opposition. “Wherever there is likely to be great success, the open door and the opposing adversaries will both be found. If there are no adversaries, you may fear that there will be no success. A boy cannot get his kite up without wind, nor without a wind which drives *against* his kite.” (Spurgeon) As Elymas was struck with blindness, we can’t help but think Paul would remember his own experience with God. Paul was struck blind at his conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:9). Certainly, those who resist God are blind spiritually, so God just gave Elymas a physical blindness that matched his spiritual blindness. Sadly, we never hear of Elymas repenting, as Paul did.

A Crowd that goes from Loving Paul, to Stoning Paul

1. **Welcome**
2. **Prayer requests & Prayer**
3. **Warm Up:** Have you ever had a near death experience?
4. **Tonight's Story:** Acts 14:1-23

5. **Background:** Paul and the other apostles enter the city of Iconium to preach the gospel. While they are there, they encounter a hostile crowd, influenced by the Jews.
 - A. **Tell the Story:** Assigned
 - B. **Read the Story:** Assigned
 - C. **Rebuild the Story:** Facilitator and group together

 - D. **Discussion Questions:**
 - Why do Paul and Barnabas usually start their ministry in the Synagogue? What would be a comparable place to start today? Despite opposition how might we "continue to preach the gospel?"
 - What would give you enough faith to "jump up and begin to walk" if you had been crippled all your life?
 - Verse 21 talks about "winning" a large number of disciples? What does that look like in the context of our church today? How do you define a disciple?
 - What hardships have you been through for the sake of ministry and sharing the gospel? How would your story help someone else?

 - E. **Gospel Challenge:** In our story, the crowds went from worshipping Paul to stoning Paul. This was all due to the evil influence of the Jews. How are you influencing the people around you today?

A Crowd that goes from Loving Paul, to Stoning Paul

Commentary Notes:

The leaders of the synagogue in Antioch had just expelled Paul and Barnabas from that city. Yet when they came to **Iconium**, they again began their evangelistic efforts by preaching in the **synagogue**. It was still a good way to start. **So spoke that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed:** Paul and Barnabas had success among the Jews and the Greeks, presenting the same gospel to both. The fact that **Jews and... Greeks believed** shows that Paul preached the same thing to both groups: That salvation is in Jesus, and we appropriate it by our belief (trust in, reliance on) in Him.

Unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren: Luke made it clear that it was not all the Jews of Iconium who did this, because many believed (Acts 14:1). Yet some not only rejected the message, but **stirred up** others to reject the message and the messengers (**against the brethren**).

Therefore they stayed a long time: They stayed as long as they could, despite the opposition, leaving only when it was absolutely necessary. They did this because they knew that these Christians in Iconium needed all the grounding they could get to stand strong in a city with much opposition. "It took a long time, however, for the opposition to become serious, and the missionaries continued to preach the gospel freely and boldly." (Bruce)

The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men! These people saw a stupendous miracle happen before their eyes, yet their idea of *who God is* had not changed. Therefore it seemed logical to them to consider Paul and Barnabas gods.

But when Paul and Barnabas saw **the priest of Zeus**, with **oxen and garlands... intending to sacrifice**, they knew things had gone too far. This was far more than honoring guests to the city. Paul called the Lystrian crowd to consider the real God, the One who stands behind all creation, not one of the lesser (and imaginary) Greek gods.

The Jews incited the people of Lystra against Paul and Barnabas, and instigated the stoning of Paul. This was obviously an attempt to execute Paul and Barnabas – with the rocks being thrown by the same people who wanted to worship them shortly before.

They stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. However, when the disciples gathered around him, he rose up and went into the city: Paul was miraculously preserved here. Some think that he was even actually killed and raised to life again, because stoning was usually reliable form of execution.

When Paul later wrote, *I bear in my body the marks of Jesus* (Galatians 6:17), he may have had in mind the scars from this incident. He certainly later referred to this stoning in 2 Corinthians 11:25.

Breaking Church Rules

1. **Welcome**
2. **Prayer requests & Prayer**
3. **Warm Up:** Do you consider yourself a rule breaker or rule keeper?
4. **Tonight's Story:** Acts 15:1-29

5. **Background:** Jewish Christians (often called "Judaizers") came to the congregation in Antioch and taught that Gentiles may become Christians, but only after converting to Jewish practices and submitting to all Jewish rituals, including circumcision.
 - A. **Tell the Story:** Assigned
 - B. **Read the Story:** Assigned
 - C. **Rebuild the Story:** Facilitator and group together

 - D. **Discussion Questions:**
 - Which church rules are required for salvation? (Read Ephesians 2:8).
 - Sometimes you need to adjust or remove religious traditions in order to remove potential obstacles that may hinder reaching unchurched people. Can you describe an example where this was the case (in your church or a previous church)?
 - What beliefs, practices or traditions should always exist in the local church?
 - What is the difference in an inward focused church and an outward focused church?
 - What are some things you need to change in your personal life in order to be more relatable and approachable to people who aren't Christians?

 - E. **Gospel Challenge:** It is easy to get hung up in "what we have always done." However, we know that change and growth are synonymous. Pray for your pastor and church leadership. Leading change is a very tough job.

Breaking Church Rules

Commentary Notes:

It was very difficult for some Jewish Christians to accept that Gentiles could be brought into the church as equal members without first coming through the Law of Moses. "It was one thing to accept the occasional God-fearer into the church, someone already in sympathy with Jewish ways; it was quite another to welcome large numbers of Gentiles who had no regard for the law and no intention of keeping it." (Williams)

You cannot be saved: This was not a side issue; it had to do with salvation itself – how one is made right with God. This was not a matter where there could be disagreement among believers, with some believing you must be under the law, and some believing it wasn't important. This was an issue that went to the core of Christianity, and it had to be resolved.

We can just imagine how Satan wanted to take advantage of this situation. First, he wanted the false doctrine of righteousness by works to succeed. But even if it didn't, Satan wanted a costly, bitter doctrinal war to completely split and sour the church. This may be the greatest threat to the work of the gospel yet seen in the Book of Acts.

If the Pharisees believed anything, they believed one could be justified before God by keeping the law. For a Pharisee to really be a Christian, it would take more than an acknowledgment that Jesus was Messiah; he would have to forsake his attempts to justify himself by the keeping of the law and accept the work of Jesus as the basis of his justification.

In Lystra, Paul and Barnabas did not allow the pagans to merely add Jesus to their pantheon of Roman gods. They commanded that they had to turn from their vain gods to the true God ([Acts 14:14-15](#)). These Pharisees who had become Christians had to do the same thing: Turn from *their* efforts to earn their way before God by keeping the law, and look to Jesus. You can't just add Jesus and now say "Jesus helps me to justify myself through keeping the law."

James voiced the decision of the council ([Acts 15:19](#)), but the unity behind the decision was one of several evidences that it was the work of **the Holy Spirit**. The Holy Spirit spoke through James and confirmed it through others. So much so that they could really say that the decision was made in cooperation with the Holy Spirit – **it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us**. "They boldly treat the Holy Spirit as *one of their number* – a fellow-counselor, who unites with them in the announcement of a joint conclusion; as though he, the Spirit of God, had sat with them in their deliberations." (Pierson) We are saved by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, not by any conformity to the law, and such obedience comes as a result of true faith, *after* the issue of salvation has been settled.

Paul and Silas in Prison

1. **Welcome**
2. **Prayer requests & Prayer**
3. **Warm Up:** Has God ever spoken to you through a dream or vision?
4. **Tonight's Story:** Acts 16:16-40
5. **Background:** Paul and his gang, now joined by Timothy, make their way through Phrygia and Galatia, sharing the gospel. The Holy Spirit gives Paul a vision of a man in Macedonia, asking for help. When he arrives in Philippi (which is a city in the district of Macedonia), he meets Lydia, who becomes a Christian. Lydia's home become the headquarters for the gospel in that region. Paul continues his ministry, but runs into trouble...again.
 - A. **Tell the Story:** Assigned
 - B. **Read the Story:** Assigned
 - C. **Rebuild the Story:** Facilitator and group together
 - D. **Discussion Questions:**
 - Why did the words of the slave girl annoy Paul? Why did the slave owners become angry about Paul removing the evil spirit from their slave girl?
 - The Bible says Paul and Silas prayed and sang songs to God. Have you ever worshipped God when things were bad or didn't make sense? What was your experience?
 - An earthquake can be very scary. Can you describe a time when God used a scary moment to provide a miracle in your life or someone you know?
 - Read verses 30-33. The gospel is simple. How have people, even churches, made the gospel something hard to understand or receive? How do you share the gospel?
 - E. **Gospel Challenge:** Spend time in the Bible this week, identifying scripture that talk about salvation. Know your stuff, so that when God opens up a door for you to share, you'll have no problem sharing Jesus.

Paul and Silas in Prison

Commentary Notes:

A certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination... brought her masters much

profit: This girl, though demon possessed, was a source of money for her owners as a fortune teller. Presumably this was because demons gave her supernatural insight into the lives of others. Today, much of what fortune-tellers and psychics do is only a money making sham. But when it is true and has a supernatural origin (as opposed to clever, insightful guessing), there is no doubt that it is inspired by demons. There are still those today who are **possessed with a spirit of divination.**

The demon-possessed slave girl preached for Paul, giving a demonic testimony to their divine credentials and their message. She didn't do this only once, but for many days (Acts 16:18).

Paul, greatly annoyed: Paul did not appreciate the free advertising from the demon. He did not appreciate the source of the recommendation, and he didn't need demonic approval of his work.

Paul and Silas were singled out and arrested, not only because there were the leaders of the evangelistic group, but also, by their appearance, they were the most obviously Jewish. This is indicated by how they began their accusation: **"These men, being Jews."** Luke was a Gentile, and Timothy was only half Jewish. Paul and Silas *looked* Jewish, and "Anti-Jewish sentiment lay very near the surface in pagan antiquity." (Bruce) The objection that these men were Jews is even more interesting knowing the Jewish community in Philippi was small.

Jewish legal tradition gave a maximum number of blows that could be delivered when beating a person, but the Romans had no such limit. We simply know Paul and Silas were severely beaten. Paul later wrote of his life: *In labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often.* (2 Corinthians 11:23) After such a bad beating, they were put in uncomfortable conditions (**fastened their feet in the stocks**). "These stocks had more than two holes for legs, which could thus be forced apart in a such a way as to cause the utmost discomfort and cramping pain." Though they were arrested, beaten, and imprisoned for doing good, Paul and Silas were filled with joy, and sang praises to God. It seemed as if nothing would make them stop praising God.

Anyone can be happy in pleasant circumstances, but real joy comes only from within, and is a gift available to Christians at all times. "Instead of cursing men, they blessed God." (Stott) The jailer was so impressed by Paul and Silas – by the love they showed to him, and from their ability to take joy even in misery – that he instantly wanted the kind of life that Paul and Silas have. This is how God wants our lives to be: Natural magnets drawing people to Him. Our Christianity should make others want what we have with God.