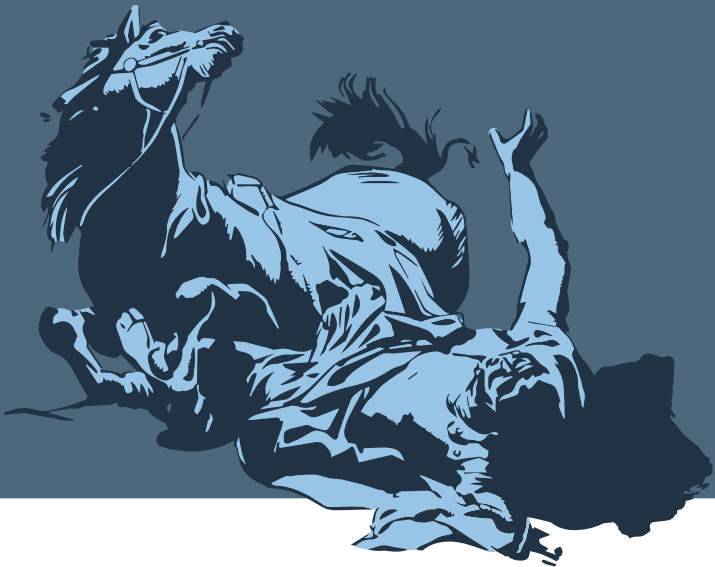




Acts

CONFIDENCE & PURPOSE



Preface:

This study guide can be used for individual Bible Study, small group curriculum, or family studies.

Small Group Leaders Note:

The purpose of this study guide is to draw you and your group into conversation and discussion of God's Word and its application to our lives. The questions are posed in a specific order and each of the questions has a specific purpose. As you are familiar with the purpose of each question, this will help guide the flow of the discussion.

A high-level view of the five basic questions and their functions:

1. Introduction (lean in). The goal of this first question is to get everyone in the group to “lean in” and get involved. It is normally easy to answer, fun and creates a sense of energy—so much so that you'll see group members sometimes physically lean in as they engage in the discussion.

2. Observation (look down). This is an observation question. It is designed to help group members “look down” and see the relevant details and facts in the Bible passage being studied. This question establishes a solid foundation for the rest of the study. Regardless how much time someone has spent studying God's word in their lives, everyone in the group can get involved simply by taking an observant look at what the passage says.

3. Evaluation (look up). What do we learn about God from this passage? This is the ultimate goal of every Bible study—to get a clearer picture of the God we worship, so that we can serve and love Him better.

4. Understanding (look out). This question helps group members “look out” and see the principles of the Bible passage through the lens of the world today. It builds a bridge between the facts of the passage and our understanding of it as it relates to our lives and culture.

5. Application (look in). Here is where group members begin to “look in” and see what God might be nudging them to change in their lives. During this part of the study, group members move from “knowing” to “doing” what God’s word says. It’s the final step of all Bible study: life change—of being transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Adapted from the Liquid Curriculum Series

Five Transformational Activities

We have a new feature we are now including in our Study Guides. This will be an opportunity for you to take additional steps in growing deeper in your faith and drawing closer to your Creator. We believe there are five transformational activities that can deepen your time with God—in whatever Bible study setting you find yourself. These are also great practices we are asking all our small groups to incorporate into the life of their groups.

We will be recommending one of these activities each week for you to integrate into your study and devotional time—with your family, or small group, or any place you engage with these study guides. Here is a list of these transformational activities as well as a brief description for each. At the end of the study questions, you will find each week that we have included a suggested activity. We pray that this may this deepen and enrich your time with God and that you may you draw closer to the God you love.

1. Bible Study — We seek to learn more about the triune God with the goal of knowing Him better and applying His will in our lives.

2. Prayer — We seek to learn how to have a deeper and richer prayer life that is consistevnt and meaningful. We will practice this both individually and corporately.

3. Community — We grow more when we are together than in isolation. We want to have a place to love and support each other and encourage one another in the faith. “From Jesus, the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:16).

4. Worship — We seek to incorporate into our study of God an element of worship. Knowing about God is different than knowing and worshipping God. This may or may not include music. Worship is a response to all that God is with all that we are. All of life is worship.

5. Outreach — We seek to be healthy in our spiritual growth by avoiding insulation and isolation—which comes from a loss of vision and passion for reaching out and ministering to those around us.

Chronology of Acts

(All dates are approximate, based on F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 475.)

Date	Event	Palestinian Ruler	Roman Emperor
AD 30	Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection; Pentecost (Luke 23-24; Acts 1-2)	Herod Antipas (4 BC-39AD)	
33	Martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 6:8-8:1)		Tiberius (14-37AD)
33	Conversion of Paul (Acts 9:1-19)		
35	Paul visits Jerusalem to see Peter (Galatians 1:18)	Pontius Pilate (Procurator) (26-36)	
35-46	Paul in Cilicia and Syria (Galatians 1:21; Acts 9:30)		Caligula (37-41)
44	Herod Agrippa I dies (Acts 12:19-23)	Herod Agrippa I (37-44)	
46	Paul visits Jerusalem to clarify the mission to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:1-10)		
47-48	First Missionary Journey: Paul and Barnabas in Cyprus and Galatia (Acts 13-14)		Claudius (41-54)
49	Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15)		
49-50	Second Missionary Journey: Paul and Silas travel from Antioch to Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia (Acts 16-17)		
50-52	Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:1-18)	Felix (Procurator) (52-60)	
52	Paul visits Jerusalem		
52-57	Third Missionary Journey: Paul in Galatia, Ephesus, Macedonia, Corinth (Acts 18-21)	Herod Agrippa II (53-70?)	Nero (54-68)
May-57	Paul to Jerusalem (Acts 21:1-23:22)		
57-59	Paul imprisoned in Caesarea (Acts 23:23-26:32)	Portius Festus (Procurator) (60-62)	
59-62	Paul sent to house arrest in Rome (Acts 27:1-28:31)		

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Contagious Confidence Acts 8 07/10	5
Confidence from Conversion Acts 9:1-31 07/17	15
Confidence with Power Acts 9:32-43 07/24	25
Confidence in Direction Acts 10:1-23 07/31	37
Confidence in the Gospel Acts 10:24-48 08/07	49
Confidence in God's Plan for Salvation Acts 11:1-18 08/14	59
Confidence in God's Plan for Ministry Acts 11:19-30 08/21	69
Confidence in God's Power Acts 12 08/28	79
Purpose Protects Truth Acts 13:1-13 09/11	89
Purpose Proclaims the Gospel Acts 13:14-52 09/18	99
Purpose Perseveres through Trials Acts 14 09/25	99
Purpose Preserves Grace Alone Acts 15:1-35 10/02	99
Purpose Provides Change Acts 15:36-16:22 10/09	99
Preface	vii

Table of Contents cont.

Purpose Promotes Opportunity _____	5
Acts 16:23-40 10/16	
Purpose Builds Endurance _____	15
Acts 17:1-15 10/23	
Purpose Promotes Boldness _____	25
Acts 17:16-34 10/30	
Purpose Provides Comfort _____	37
Acts 18:1-22 11/06	

**The moment we step
into eternity, we will
undoubtedly and
instantly become
radically God-centered.
How then does it
not follow that this
very reality should
characterize and define
our quest in the here
and now?**

Introduction

Imagine you were one of the early Christ-followers in the first few weeks and months following Pentecost. The aroma of Acts chapter 2 surely permeated the life of the church as it grew and spread. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe. Everyone held all things in common. And the Lord was adding to their number daily. It must have been a euphoric feeling to experience and witness all that God was doing in and through the early church.

Then, continue to put yourself in these shoes as Peter and John were soon arrested for proclaiming this amazing Good News! Might that have shaken your confidence a bit? Might that have dampened the euphoric mood a little? At minimum, it must have been confusing.

But then, shortly after this, the unthinkable happened. One of the most influential, godly, charismatic leaders of the church was brought before the Jewish religious leaders. And here, this man Stephen boldly proclaimed the good news which was the cause of this euphoric time of blessing. You might be thinking that this is exactly what needed to happen. These religious leaders will finally hear this amazing news and will lead all of Israel in a national repentance for rejecting Messiah.

Yet what happens next? Stephen is actually murdered by these religious leaders for teaching about Jesus. Stephen becomes the first recorded martyr in the church. How would this shocking turn of events affect the life of the early church? After all, this “church” was a work of God, was it not? Why would there be such resistance to it? Why would anyone oppose this message of love?

How did things turn so quickly? Not only was Stephen dead, but every follower of Christ was now in danger as Saul was going from house to house dragging off believers to prison.

What do you think of when you hear the word “martyr”? Typically, we picture someone who has given his or her life for the sake of the gospel. That is clearly true. *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* is full of such examples. However, what many do not realize is that *every Christian is called to be a martyr*. To clarify—not every Christian is necessarily called to die for their faith, but every Christian is called to give their life.

In Romans 12:1 Paul says: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. This is your true and proper worship.” Our entire lives are to be a *living sacrifice* made to God—a sacrifice we offer up on the altar of God’s mercy, for Him to do with as He wills.

Where we see this reflected in Acts is in perhaps the key verse of not only chapter one, but the entire book. In Acts 1:8, we see Jesus telling His disciples that they will be witnesses. The Greek word for “witnesses” is “*martyres*.” Jesus is calling each and every one of us to be a witness; to be a martyr. Perhaps we need to expand our understanding of what it means to be a martyr (to be a Christian) to include the whole of our lives dedicated to serving God—to bearing witness to who He is.

This word “martyr” is used in scripture both as a noun and as a verb. As a noun, this word touches on our identity. Who am I? I am a witness. That is what God made me *to be*. My life exhibits the characteristics of one who is wholly dedicated to God. As a verb, this term also determines what I do. I bear witness. This is what God has called me *to do*. The core purpose of the Christian life revolves around glorifying God by obeying the Great Commission—by being and making disciples. To be a martyr—to be a witness—is the central theme running throughout the book of Acts.

Our first introduction to the picture of “martyr” in the book of Acts is that of Stephen. His example clarifies for us the all-encompassing nature of this call. This is not

a choice we casually make. This is not a task for the faint of heart. To be a Christ follower—to be a martyr—requires an all-out commitment. In standing up to be counted for Christ, we are wagering our eternity on the fact that the message of Christ is true. We are then dedicating ourselves to the most serious, sober, and solemn of all causes. The danger of living in our time, a time and

“In standing up to be counted for Christ, we are wagering our eternity on the fact that the message of Christ is true.”

culture that requires little of Christians in terms of commitment and sacrifice, is that we can easily lose that “all-in” mentality.

It is easy for people today to think of Christianity as simply another of the many options they have for filling the hours of their day—a worthwhile cause that seems noble. They can choose to watch TV, or go for a hike, or spend a few mind-numbing hours on social media—or they can choose to go to Bible study tonight. The call of “dying to ourselves, taking up our cross, and following Jesus” is foreign to many who call themselves Christian today. Attending church, for many people, looks like sitting in the back row, watching the show, and going home. They conveniently show up late because, “why do we need to sing so many songs anyway?” and then exit as soon as the sermon is done—to beat the crowd to Denny’s.

What I fear we have lost in our consumer culture and the “me-first” world we live in is the radical nature of the call that is placed by God through scripture on the Christian life. We have lost the urgency, seriousness, and importance of the call. Many of us have completely lost the understanding that this world is not our home. We are so perfectly at home here in this world that we shy away from anything that infringes upon *our freedom to become too busy for church*.

We have lost, to some degree, an understanding of what it truly means to be a God-worshipper. The journey

of this life is the journey from radical self-centeredness to radical God-centeredness. Few would argue against the truth that the moment we step into eternity, we will undoubtedly and instantly become radically God-centered. How then does it not follow that this very reality should characterize and define our quest in the here and now? Should we not arrange our priorities and desires around the centrality of God and the intentional, passionate pursuit of Him in the moment by moment?

“The journey of this life is the journey from radical self-centeredness to radical God-centeredness.”

The question then becomes: what are we doing? How are we living our lives? As C.S. Lewis has observed: “We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.”

How do we get from where we are to where we need to be? How are we to accomplish this mission of becoming martyrs? We do this by intentionally training ourselves to reflect God’s character to the world. We do this by consistently bearing witness to the world of God’s love, message, desires, and will. We were made in His image for this very purpose. We are, in essence, little mirrors that reflect God to those around us. The question we need to ask ourselves is: how clear, how accurate is that reflection? How clean is our mirror?

This is the challenge that this next section of Acts lays before us. The fallout of the death of Stephen sounds a clarion call that requires a response. How will the early church respond? How then will we respond? What does it mean to be a disciple? What does it mean, and how am I purposefully arranging my priorities with this in mind?

Week 11:

Contagious Confidence

As we have seen, the early church was a time of miracles. We're familiar with the mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, as well as the miraculous healings in the early chapters of Acts. But there were other miraculous works of God on display as well. One of these miracles involved the spread of the gospel to Samaria.

In the first part of Acts chapter 8, we read about the boldness of Philip as he takes the gospel down to Samaria. Following this, the apostles send Peter and John to Samaria as well, to put the apostolic stamp of approval on the legitimacy of their conversion. Samaria was the region north of Judea and south of the Galilee. It is said they went “down” to Samaria because Jerusalem is the high point in the region.

We recall Jesus commanding the gospel to go out from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. We also see in the beginning of Acts chapter 8, the persecution of the church forcing those early believers to begin to obey that command. But what we might not realize is that the reluctance for most people in this time to preach the word of God in Samaria was not just an issue of convenience or geography, and it went even beyond the question of Jew/Gentile relations. It involved a deeply-held hatred and prejudice that these early believers had to overcome in order for God's love to be spread to Samaria. The history of this region makes this clear. Let's take a look at a bit of this history.

The nation of Israel started, in a sense, when God called Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees to a land he “knew not of.” But *Israel* was just a family at this point. The same family status carried forth through Isaac and Jacob—and even with Joseph. It was not until after

the birth pangs of the Exodus that the nation of Israel was born. Yet still, it was really no more than a loosely confederated group of tribes that all hailed under the banner of Jacob (Israel). The nation “proper” began when it was united under a king for the first time.

After what is known as the “united kingdom” period of Saul, David, and Solomon, the nation of Israel underwent a civil war, resulting in the “divided kingdom.” The ten tribes to the north followed Jeroboam in revolt to form the Northern Kingdom—which continued to be called “Israel”. Only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin remained loyal to the rightful king Rehoboam and formed the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel (sometimes called Ephraim or Samaria) entailed throughout the years a succession of 19 kings—who were all wicked. This kingdom lasted less than 200 years and was conquered by the Assyrian Empire in 722 B.C. The Southern Kingdom also consisted of a series of 19 kings (and one self-appointed queen, for a time), eight of whom were good, God-honoring kings. Judah was thus allowed by God to last a bit longer—until the time of Nebuchadnezzar. Babylon, led by general Nebuchadnezzar, came in three waves to conquer Judah (606, 587, and 586 B.C.).

The way that Assyria dealt with their conquered peoples was to scatter them across their empire, mixing them with other conquered peoples—diluting the culture and thereby lessening the odds of any potential uprisings. Likewise, Assyria brought other conquered peoples into the Samaria region of Israel to intermarry with any remaining Jews. The result was that in the Northern Kingdom (referred to as Samaria) there came to be what the Jews thought of as “half-breeds,” or people that had married with other nationalities, and had corrupted the pure Jewish lineages. Thus, this entire region, north of Judea and south of the Galilee, was populated with a mixed-race people later called the Samaritans.

Whereas, the Babylonians handled their conquered peoples differently. When the Southern Kingdom of Judah was eventually conquered in 586 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar (who was now king) took Judah as a whole people into captivity, where the children of their nobles (who were the future leaders) were retrained to think, eat, and worship like Babylonians—and thus were made easy to control.

God had made it very clear in Deuteronomy 7 that when the Jews came into the land He was to give

“When Israel returned from their devastating 70-year captivity in Babylon, it seems they had finally learned that lesson and grew to fiercely guard that ethnic purity.”

them, they were not to intermarry with any other peoples. This was not an ethnic superiority issue. It was because if they intermarried, the other peoples would tempt them to worship other gods. We see evidence of this time and time again throughout their history—as Israel failed to learn that lesson. When Israel returned from their devastating 70-year captivity in Babylon, it seems they had finally learned that lesson and grew to fiercely guard that ethnic purity.

The Jews became fanatical about keeping their racial lines pure—seeing this as the main reason God temporarily took their land from them—namely, the idolatry that resulted from intermarrying with other peoples. This ethnic purity became a fiercely held passion for them.

So by the time Jesus arrives, the “pure” Jews in the south despised the Samaritans in the north and would have nothing to do with them.

Thus we see in the New Testament era, when travelling from Judea up to Galilee, Jews would go so far as to cross the Jordan river to the east, travel north bypassing Samaria, then re-cross to the west—all to avoid even the slightest contact with the hated half-breed

Samaritans. So, when we see Philip and others preaching in Samaria, we must recognize this as nothing short of a miraculous work of God enabling this to happen. God was overcoming centuries of hatred and prejudice in lovingly prompting these new passionate Christ-followers to take that giant step of sharing the gospel with their neighbors to the north.

As a side note, one common question that arises from this history revolves around the purported idea that there were somehow “ten lost tribes of Israel.” It is sometimes taught that when Assyria scattered those from the ten tribes in the Northern Kingdom across their empire, these ten tribes were “lost.” This is just another example of why we need to read our Old Testament more closely and test everything we hear by the Word of God (Acts 17:11).

It’s important to note that before the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C., that the faithful, God-fearing Jews from those ten northern tribes migrated south, escaping the idolatry, to join with the two southern tribes, thereby preserving a remnant from all twelve tribes (2 Chron 11:13-16).

The first century Jewish historian Josephus confirms this as well in his work, *The History of the Jews*. In addition to the faithful fleeing to the south, the idolaters from the Southern Kingdom of Judah migrated north so they could participate in that wicked lifestyle. In other words, there are no “ten lost tribes of Israel”—despite the teaching of some. God always preserves for Himself a faithful remnant (1 Kings 19:18, Romans 11).

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Read Ephesians 2:11-22. How does this background help us understand Acts chapter 8 and the work God is doing here more clearly? What does this passage teach us about the plan of God to take the gospel to the Gentiles? What key words or ideas stand out to you when reading this passage?



The theory of the ten lost tribes is not at all biblical but was made popular starting in the 1850's by some, including the royal family of England, who wanted to argue for their claim to divine right of rule. It came to be known as "British Israelism" and asserted that the British royals were actually descendants of King David. They argued that Jeremiah brought the true heir to the throne of David to England about the time of the Babylonian Captivity—and he founded the royal family of England. This erroneous teaching stems from a failure to carefully read and understand our Bible. Descendants of all twelve tribes of the Jews were among those sent captive to Babylon with the rest of the nation in 586 BC. There have never been ten lost tribes because God promised to always preserve a faithful remnant of Israel.

“...there are no 'ten lost tribes of Israel'—despite the teaching of some. God always preserves for Himself a faithful remnant.”

This preaching of the gospel to Samaria was no less a miracle than the mighty wonders witnessed at Pentecost. Buckle up for this next section of Acts. God is on the move.

Discussion Questions

1. What is one of your favorite stories from the Old Testament? Why is it special to you?

2. One commentator made this observation about this passage in Acts chapter 8: “Signs and wonders can be from God or from Satan.” What is your reaction to this idea? What evidence for this idea do we find in this passage? What are the implications of this for the spread of the gospel in the early church? What are the implications for us today?

3. Read Isaiah chapter 53 out loud. What do we learn about Messiah from this passage?

4. Where did you see God's hand at work in how you came to trust in Him? How have you seen Him work in the way that others around you came to faith—or in opportunities you have had to share your faith?

5. Share about a time you stepped outside of your comfort zone to share God's love with someone. How did that make you feel? Share a time that you recognized the opportunity was there, but didn't take it. How did that make you feel? Where do you feel God is calling you to be bolder in your witness?

Going Deeper

1. Why do you think it was important for the Apostles to come down to Samaria to put their stamp of approval on the conversion of the Samaritans? Why do you think God would delay pouring out His Spirit on those in Samaria until Peter and John were present? Would this have helped the Samaritans, or the leadership of the church, or both? Why?

2. The court official, while most certainly having been prevented from entering the *temple proper* on his trip to Jerusalem because he was a eunuch, asks Philip a telling question: “What prevents me from being baptized?” He learns that there are no preconditions or impediments between himself and membership in the family of God through faith in Messiah. This freedom was certainly welcome to this man who was so used to barriers in his life. What does “freedom in Christ” mean to you?

Transformational Activity

PRAYER:

This week, take a moment each morning to ask God to bring someone across your path who needs God's love expressed to them. Then watch throughout the day for the different ways God opens up doors for you to be a witness (a martyr). This is a prayer you can be assured God will answer in abundance. Share with your family or group the results of what happened.



**Buckle
up for
this next
section of
Acts.**

**Our God
is on the
move.**



Week 12:

Confidence from Conversion

As the apostle Paul enters the scene, we turn a significant corner in the history of the church. The flavor of the book of Acts noticeably shifts and we find it is time to begin to discuss an issue that will be, in one sense, the primary issue the early church will deal with—all the way from the conversion of Paul until the church council in Acts 15—and even beyond.

One of the most confusing and hotly debated issues the early church dealt with following the coming of Messiah had to do with the identity of the family of God. How did one identify that they were a member of the family of God, and what were the identity markers? The church was basically having an “identity crisis.” The reason this had become a crisis is that with the coming of Messiah and the dawning of a new age (the age of the New Covenant), the make-up of the family of God had now changed, and it took time for the early believers to understand this. The family of God had always consisted of God-worshippers from the Jewish people and those that “became” Jewish. But now, with a growing Gentile population of Christ-followers, along with the radical change the New Covenant brought, the old rules no longer applied.

We will see this issue come to a head in Acts chapter 15. Paul’s first missionary journey to the Gentile world forced the church to grapple with this issue. So many Gentiles were coming to faith in Messiah, the early church needed to clarify just how these Gentile believers fit within the newly reconstituted family of God.

As we survey the book of Acts, we see this issue being carefully, systematically, and progressively addressed by the Holy Spirit. Changing the mindset and removing the long-held prejudices of the early

church would understandably take some time. In Acts chapter 8 we see Peter and John—envoys representing the leadership of the early church—travelling down to Samaria to, in a sense, verify and legitimize the salvation experience of the Samaritans and ultimately welcome them into the family of God.

Then, a couple of chapters later, in Acts chapters 10-11, we see Peter (who had come a long way towards understanding, but was still not quite fully convinced) get an object lesson from God on this issue in the form of a vision: a sheet full of unclean animals. In Acts chapter 10, we see Peter now become fully persuaded that Gentiles are fellow heirs of the Gospel, and in Acts chapter 11, he then explains this important clarified doctrine to the leadership of the church. The church is starting to get it.

When we ultimately get to Acts chapter 15, the issue had become so contentious and the opposition so fierce that the first all-church council had to be convened to settle the issue once and for all. The question was: did Gentiles have to become Jews first to be able to be a part of the family of God? If we don't understand the importance of this issue, then we will not truly understand large portions of the book of Acts, the entire book of Galatians, and much more of the New Testament. Let's back up a bit to explain how this became an issue and how it developed over time.

When God set apart the Jews as His people in the Old Testament (Lev 20:26), He prescribed various means by which His people would set themselves apart and be distinguished from the *goyim* or the *ethne* (the non-Jewish world). The primary marker that identified His people and set them apart was the sign of circumcision. There were also various other means of distinguishing them as well, such as dietary laws, Sabbath keeping, and various purity practices. All of these "identity markers" that set apart national, ethnic Israel as the people of God were subsumed under the overarching rubric known as "The Law." It was the Law that served as the identifying

feature which delineated or demarcated who was and who was not a part of the people of God. Those who were a part of God’s family looked and acted in a certain way, so as to display His holiness and remain distinct from the surrounding nations that did not know God.

“Those who were a part of God’s family looked and acted in a certain way, so as to display His holiness and remain distinct from the surrounding nations that did not know God.”

Obviously, we cannot see the state of someone’s heart; all we can see are the externals. Consequently, what was used to identify different groups of people are called “identity markers.” These are outward, external, easy-to-identify labels, which help us to distinguish who belongs to which group. Societies have always had these kinds of identity markers. Today, if we see someone driving a BMW or Ferrari or wearing

certain labels on their clothing, we recognize what socio-economic class with which they are identifying themselves.

In the New Testament we see the phrase “works of the Law” referring to Israel doing the things which express Jewish identity. These were *markers of identity*. Obeying the works of the Law was essentially Israel’s part in responding to the grace that had been given them, in being chosen as the people of God. They were to display that righteous living in gratitude for God’s gracious choice of them—and this obedience would set them apart as distinct and holy. God wanted them to keep themselves separate from the wicked nations around them, and bearing these identity markers was how they did it.

The Law then served as a protector of the inheritance God had promised them, in that it regulated obedience for blessing in the land of promise. They

observed the Law in obedience, but also as an act of worship, identifying themselves as God’s family. Despite what we might have been taught, obeying the Law for Israel was not a matter of works-righteousness. The Law was not a way for them to make themselves right before God, or earn salvation in any way. It was a response in gratitude for what they had been given.

But things always get corrupted over time. As time progressed, Israel’s focus on these identity markers and their sense of “set-aparthood” grew into a sense of privilege and exclusivity. They had forgotten that they were set apart in order to be a light unto the nations—to draw all nations to the glory of the One who called them. Instead, they were doing what the Law had prescribed in order to display, or even flaunt that set-apart status, rather than to live truly holy lives. The Law’s role in defining Israel’s holiness to God became its role in separating and isolating Israel from the nations.

This sense of privilege and pride prevented the Israelites from fulfilling the role God had intended them to fulfill. The identity marker became more important than what it identified. So, when the New Covenant arrived, Israel was not prepared for the fact that the Law was no longer to serve as the identity marker of the people of God. These identity markers had become everything to them.

It was not, though, as if this extreme concern about staying separate and distinct evolved in a void. Coming out of the intertestamental period, in which Jewish distinctive lifestyle was constantly under attack, preserving that separateness became a matter of extreme passion and fervor for the Jews. Consequently, when Paul shows up indicating that all these (fleshly)

“This sense of privilege and pride prevented the Israelites from fulfilling the role God had intended them to fulfill. The identity marker became more important than what it identified.”

identity markers (for which many Jews had literally died) are no longer important, they would naturally have assumed that their national distinctiveness was simply under attack again.

Just as circumcision and the Law defined and demarcated the boundaries of who comprised the people of God under the Mosaic Covenant, it is now the gift of the Spirit that serves this purpose under the New Covenant. Membership in God's family is no longer defined as being bar mitzvah ("son of the commandment"), but as one who has been adopted by God and shares the Spirit of God's Son. It was the radical change from an outward, fleshly sign of belonging to an inward, spiritual sign of belonging that was so difficult for the Jews to understand. The draw towards continuing on with how things had always been was what made the Judaizing offer of Paul's opponents so appealing. The outward signs were all they ever had known.

THIS was the issue that caused so much trouble in the early church. These Jewish Christians would have been thinking: "how could these Gentiles be equal members of the family of God if they didn't look like us or act like us?" It was because the identity marker that identified a member of the family of God had changed with the coming of the New Covenant.

Paul's railing against the Law and reliance upon "the works of the Law" in his writings is not an attack against nor an indictment of Israel, as some might claim. Nor was it

STUDY TIP

It is helpful to be on the lookout for parallel passages or other accounts in scripture of the same event. Study Bibles can help draw these things to our attention. Comparing Acts 9 with Acts 22 and 26 helps give us a clearer and fuller picture of Paul's conversion. So too, Stephen's recounting of the history of God's people in Acts chapter 7 gives us additional details we would not otherwise have.



an argument against the fact that the Jews were the chosen people of God, or an argument that the Jews had forfeited anything. Nor is it an attack on any supposed theology of works-righteousness. It is an attack against the anachronistic thinking (thinking that was no longer applicable) that living a Jewish lifestyle is what defined being a member of the family of God. This is the issue we will see Peter and Paul and the leadership of the early church wrestle with over the next 7 or 8 chapters of Acts.

Discussion Questions

1. How did God first get your attention? Was it through a positive experience or a negative one? Was it clear and unmistakable, or more subtle? How do you use this experience to share with others what Christ has done for you?

2. What role did Stephen, Ananias, and Barnabas play in God drawing Saul to Himself and growing Saul in his faith? What were the specific events in this conversion narrative that you believe were most profound for changing Saul's understanding and perspective?

3. In Acts chapter 9, how do you see the sovereignty of God on display: 1) In Saul coming to faith? 2) In the early church coming to accept and then embrace Saul? 3) In the transition toward the gospel being extended to the Gentiles?

4. Who do you see being a Stephen, Ananias, or Barnabas in your life? Where do you see God calling you to fill this role in others' lives?

5. What changes have people noticed in you because you follow Jesus? What changes have you noticed in yourself? What would it look like for you to say to God, "Here am I, send me?" In what areas of your life is God calling you to a greater commitment, obedience, or boldness?

Going Deeper

1. Re-read Acts 9:1-19. Then read Acts 22:1-16 and Acts 26:1-18. What additional details do we learn about Paul's conversion from the accounts Paul gives to the crowd in Jerusalem and to King Agrippa? How does this help us to understand Paul's conversion more fully? What can we glean about how Paul felt about his former life of persecuting Christians? How do you think this motivated his service to the Lord?

2. From time to time Luke will pause his narrative in order to summarize what is happening. Re-read Acts 2:42-47; 6:7; 9:31. How do these summaries help us understand what is happening more clearly? If you had to summarize what we have learned in Acts so far, what would you say?

Transformational Activity

COMMUNITY:

In our passage this week, Ananias heard the call of God to reach out and draw a brother into fellowship. God also used Barnabas to help that same brother no longer feel like an outsider. Who is someone in your sphere of influence who you might reach out to, to draw into community? Who is someone, perhaps even in your own small group or Bible study, that you can help more feel like he or she belongs? Everyone feels like an outsider at one point or another. God calls us to love others into fellowship, family, and acceptance. Talk with your family or group about how someone has done that for you, and how you might seek out opportunities to do that for others.



Week 13: Confidence with Power

One of the key doctrines that arose out of the Protestant Reformation is known as “the perspicuity of scripture.” This means that the message of the Bible is clear and understandable, and that the Bible can be understood by everyone in its normal sense. The idea has been expressed in this way: “The main things are the plain things, and the plain things are the main things.” This powerful truth helped take the power out of the hands of the Roman Catholic Church, who had controlled how people read and understood scripture for many centuries—and it gave the Bible back into the hands of the people.

Yet, as we read scripture, it is sometimes easy to stay only on the surface—simply tread water and not venture any deeper. However, the adventure that the divinely inspired Word of God affords us is that in addition to the main and plain things, we can oftentimes unpack and uncover truths about God that can take a bit of digging to discover.

Now don’t get me wrong. I believe there is one meaning (although often multiple applications) of a text of scripture. Yet sometimes that precise meaning can lead us to additional deeper theological truths about God and the unveiling of His plan. To be clear, this is NOT a matter of reading scripture through an allegorical lens. But when we read the whole of scripture, and interpret scripture in light of other scripture, we can start to put pieces together and begin to recognize a systematic big picture that reveals the plan of God in a clearer way. We can begin to understand more clearly what God is up to.

As we noted in Acts chapter 9, God has begun a significant new work. The conversion of Paul paves the way for God to begin to implement one of the most

important aspects of the coming of the New Covenant—namely, that the barrier of the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles has now come down. Gentiles have access to the family of God as *Gentiles*—without having to enter into the commonwealth of Israel through being a proselyte to Judaism.

“Gentiles have access to the family of God as *Gentiles*—without having to enter into the commonwealth of Israel through being a proselyte to Judaism.”

However, as we saw last time, the opening up of that door to the Gentiles was going to be a difficult pill to swallow for the Jewish followers of Christ. So, in Acts chapter 9 and following, we can start to trace the outline of what that shift will look like. We see the Holy Spirit sovereignly arrange circumstances to put into place what would be necessary for that seismic shift to occur.

The leader of the early church, the apostle Peter, had spent some 14 years ministering to and sharing the gospel with Jews. However, God had other plans. Being an orthodox Jew, Peter had been taught that Gentiles were unclean, and as such, he would have nothing to do with them. Yet, little by little, bit by bit, God begins to open Peter’s eyes to this new phase in the outworking of God’s plan. One powerful truth we will uncover time and time again in scripture is that God prepares us for what is to come. So how is God preparing Peter’s heart for this new era in His plan?

We see the first of these baby steps in what seems to be merely a side note in Acts 9:32. As Peter just happened to be in “those parts,” he “happened” to stop in the Gentile city of Lydda. While he was visiting some Jewish followers of Messiah, he healed a man named Aenaes. God used this miracle to get the attention of those in this Gentile region, and many came to faith. With little fanfare or notice, we see that Gentiles are being saved. The door to the Gentiles is squeaking open a bit.

Then, since Peter just happened to be in the area, some of the followers of Jesus in the nearby town of Joppa sent for Peter. A faithful servant of God, Tabitha, had fallen ill and then died. Clearly, they thought Peter could do something about it. Peter arrived and raised Tabitha from the dead through the power of the Holy Spirit. This, too, became known in the surrounding area and many more were saved in this Gentile region.

Was God starting to get Peter's attention? It seems so, in that Peter stays with a man named Simon—who was a tanner (Acts 9:43). Why is this significant? Because no self-respecting Jew would be a tanner, since skinning animals made you unclean. Thus, Simon is most likely a God-fearing Gentile who has come to faith in Messiah. Peter staying with someone like this would be unusual to say the least.

Not too long before, Peter would never have given this man the time of day (Acts 10:28). Yet here we see that Peter is changing. Is he there yet? Not quite. We will see in the next chapter how it takes a vision from God presented no less than three times to truly get his attention and open his eyes.

But now, through a series of seemingly random circumstances, Peter is primed and ready for a life changing vision, and for a trip down to Caesarea (a Roman stronghold) to preach the gospel to a group of both Jews and Gentiles. Through all of this, we see Peter unmistakably witness that salvation has come to the Gentiles—an earth-shattering revelation for the Jews to hear.

Will this close the case for Peter? Will he finally and fully be onboard with welcoming Gentiles with

“..we see Peter unmistakably witness that salvation has come to the Gentiles—an earth-shattering revelation for the Jews to hear.”

open arms? Not yet. For we see later on, as reported in Galatians chapter 2, that Paul has to confront Peter about still holding some of his former prejudices regarding the Gentiles.

Sometimes when reading scripture, we don't necessarily see how one story lays the foundation for the next. This brief mention in Acts chapter 9 of Peter healing Aeneas in Lydda sets the stage for—and really enables the beginning of—a great movement of the Gospel to the Gentiles over the next few chapters in Acts.

In Acts chapter 10, we begin a section of early church history where the gospel goes out to the Gentiles in a new and powerful way—which ultimately lays the foundation for your salvation and mine. In this chapter, Peter will be called to Cornelius in Caesarea, because he “happened” to be nearby in Joppa. Why was he in Joppa? Because (in the previous chapter) he was called there to minister to Tabitha, because he “happened” to be nearby in Lydda (Acts 9:38). Thus, in a sense, God changes the entire trajectory of the early church through the fact that Peter made a stop in Lydda to heal a man. This is why digging a little deeper in our study of the Bible is so fruitful. Seemingly insignificant details can add pieces to the puzzle of our recognizing the hand of God at work.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Why do you think that miraculous healings (like Aeneas and Tabitha) do not happen regularly today like they did in the early church? What was the purpose of most of the miraculous healings done by the apostles? How would you refute the common saying, “seeing is believing” (John 20:29)? How might our faith be made stronger by believing without having miraculous confirmations?



When we take the time to step back and look at themes, and movements of God, and how God is

orchestrating events, we begin to see a picture being painted of the sovereignty of God that will serve to undergird our entire Christian worldview. We can see seemingly insignificant events being orchestrated by God to accomplish His longer-term plans.

When we take the time and care to notice such things, the hand of God becomes unquestionably visible to us, and our trust in His sovereignty grows and grows. And as it does, our worry and anxiety begin to shrink.

Discussion Questions

1. In this passage, we see that Tabitha was well known for her deeds of kindness and charity. What deed of kindness has someone done for you in the past that has really stuck with you?

2. Read Acts 3:1-10; Luke 5:18-26. How are these healing encounters similar to and how are they different from the encounter Peter had with Aeneas in Acts 9:32-35?

3. We have explored how the sovereign hand of God is evident in the way the events in the second half of Acts chapter 9 unfolded. Have you taken the time to notice things like this in your own life? What seemingly insignificant events in your life has God used to make significant changes to your path and your trajectory? How have you seen God sovereignly direct your path in preparing you for what is to come? How would you define the sovereignty of God?

4. What was the result of the healing of Aeneas (9:35)? What was the result of the raising of Tabitha from the dead (9:42)? We have seen all throughout the book of Acts that God uses the miraculous to grab people's attention, so that the gospel can be preached, and so that people can be saved. Where have you seen others today seek out the miracle, rather than the miracle worker (God)? Where have you seen people so focused on asking for the healing that they miss out on the Healer? In the long run, what is more important—that we get the healing and the miracle, or that we encounter the One those experiences point us to? Why do you think this is such a difficult lesson for many of us to learn?

5. What do you notice in Acts 9:36-39 about the life and legacy of Tabitha? What was her life characterized by? For what was she remembered? If someone were to summarize your life right now, what would they say? What would you like for them to say? In other words, what would you like to be true of your life? What is something you can do this week to change that narrative?

Going Deeper

1. Why do you think Tabitha was raised from the dead and Stephen was not? What was the result of Stephen's death? What was the result of Tabitha's resurrection? What did God accomplish through both of these situations? How do you process the fact that sometimes God's actions and plans may not make sense to us?

2. When reading stories of miraculous healings in the Bible, sometimes we can think, "Well, that was great for them...but what about me? Why is God not healing my sickness or disease? Why is God not rescuing me from my trial?" How do you reconcile the challenges in your life with a God who is sovereign—One who is able to take these challenges away, but does not? What role have these challenges played in your spiritual growth? How have you seen God more clearly because of these trials? How have you learned to take your eyes off the trials and place them on God?

Transformational Activity

WORSHIP:

Take some time to share with your family or group some of the ways you have seen God work miraculously in your life, delivering you from times of trial and suffering. Then share about times when God did not deliver you from such times and what you learned about God and about yourself from this. How did your faith and trust grow because of this? Using these experiences, set aside time to worship God together—calling out to God words and phrases about who He is and what He has done, and praising Him for His wisdom, provision, and sovereignty.



Week 14: Confidence in Direction

A very important character we will bump up against many times in the New Testament is a ruler named Herod. Now we won't see him directly in Acts chapter 10, but we do see the fruits of his handiwork. This ruler is often referred to as "Herod the Great." His fingerprint is not only seen all throughout the New Testament, but all throughout the modern land of Israel as well. And interestingly enough, his grandson, Herod Agrippa I, also shows prominently in the seaside city of Caesarea, where Acts chapter 10 takes place.

It's easy to confuse all the various Herods mentioned in scripture and in history, so let's pause for a moment to briefly distinguish them from one another. We will not list out all seven of the Herods, but these four are the most prominent. The first Herod that comes on the scene is the most famous, and is known as Herod the Great. He was the Herod we read about in the Christmas story who sought to discover the birthplace of Jesus in Matthew chapter 2, and who ordered the slaughter of all the young male children in the region. His father, Antipater, was a man of great wealth whom Julius Caesar appointed king over the Jewish lands. We will come back to Herod the Great in a moment.

His son, Herod Antipas (also called Herod the Tetrarch), is our second Herod. He ruled the northern region of Galilee after his father (Herod the Great) had divided his kingdom into fourths. Herod Antipas was the ruler who ordered the beheading of John the Baptist in Matthew chapter 14 after John rebuked his unrepentant sin of stealing his brother's wife. This was the Herod that was present during the trials of Jesus in Luke chapter 23.

A third Herod was known as Herod Agrippa. This was the grandson of Herod the Great via his son Aristobulus

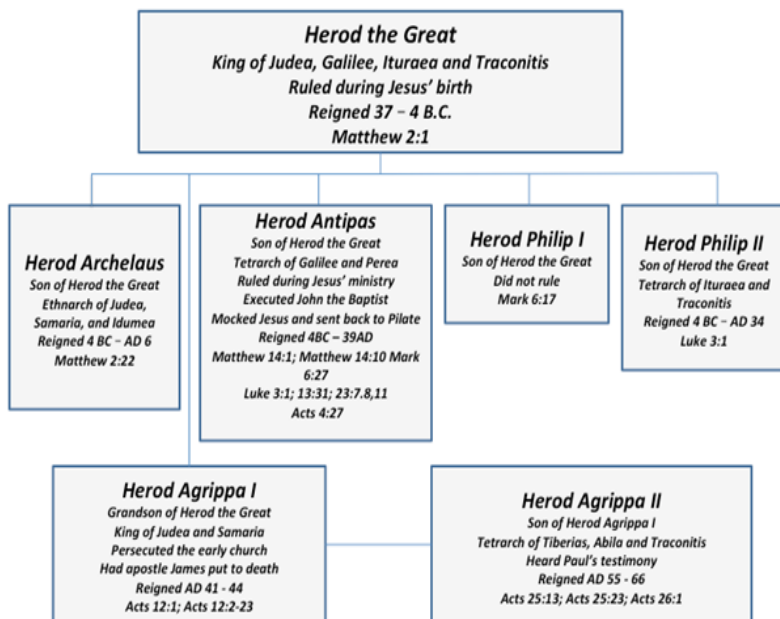
IV. This Herod was sent to Rome to be educated under the Caesars. He ended up becoming friends with several Caesars and was eventually appointed king over Galilee and the surrounding regions. Herod Agrippa persecuted the early church, had the apostle James put to death, and had Peter arrested (Acts chapter 12).

“...the people cried out that Herod's voice was the voice of a god and not of a man... When Herod accepted their praise and did not give God the glory, he was struck down by God, was eaten by worms, and died.”

As mentioned earlier, Herod Agrippa intersected with Caesarea in a remarkable story that is reported in both the New Testament and in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus. Later in Acts chapter 12, it is described how the people of Tyre and Sidon came before Herod Agrippa, who was angry with them. At one point, the people cried out that Herod's voice was the voice of a god and not of a man. According to Josephus, the royal robes Herod

was wearing (that the Bible makes reference to) were made “wholly of silver.” Josephus goes on to say that the appearance of these clothes, “...illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays...was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him.” When Herod accepted their praise and did not give God the glory, he was struck down by God, was eaten by worms, and died.

A fourth Herod mentioned in scripture was Herod Agrippa II, the son of Herod Agrippa. This Herod also played a role in the history of Caesarea. This was the Herod to whom the Apostle Paul made his appeal in Acts chapter 26. Herod Agrippa II was considered to be the least wicked of all the Herods—and in fact, he seems to come close to believing the testimony of Paul. There is a circle carved into the rock in the ground in modern day Caesarea, where it is believed Paul made his defense.



Copyright © 2011, Carolyn Hurst, All Rights Reserved. Permission to copy for church or personal use only is granted by Carolyn Hurst.

It's also easy to confuse the various mentions of Caesarea in scripture. The most familiar Caesarea to most Bible readers is a town called Caesarea Philippi, located about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. This place was made famous by Jesus asking His disciples in Matthew chapter 16, "Who do men say that I am?" Peter's reply, "Thou are the Christ, the Son of the living God," rings out through history for its bold, unashamed declaration of the truth that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Jesus responds that flesh and blood did not reveal this to Peter. Jesus continues: "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hell will not overpower it" (Matt 18:18). This place, its history, and the powerful proclamations that happened here could merit their own study. This is always a favorite spot when visiting modern day Israel. To stand in front of a giant ancient cave (which the Greeks named "the gates of Hell") and recount the words of Jesus is a powerful experience indeed.

But the Caesarea on display here in Acts chapter 10 is a coastal city that was built by our first Herod, Herod the Great. This entire city was a marvel of engineering that would be difficult to match even today. This coastal Caesarea, was named “Caesarea Maritima,” was located on the Mediterranean shore some thirty-three miles north of Joppa and sixty miles northwest of Jerusalem.

The Roman emperor Caesar Augustus gave the site to his friend Herod the Great. Between 25 and 13 B.C., Herod constructed his most extensive building project there—a city designed on the Roman model. He named the city in honor of the emperor, and also named the harbor “Sebastos,” the Greek equivalent of Augustus.

Herod built this seaport on the site of the old Phoenician city Strato’s Tower. The place was given this name after the king of Sidon, Strato I, erected a tower as a lighthouse and built a small, fortified port to provide anchorage for ships sailing in the eastern Mediterranean. No natural ports existed along Israel’s coast. During bad weather, this could be a dangerous sector on the major shipping route from Alexandria to Phoenicia, Syria, and eventually to Athens and Rome. To provide a safe haven, Herod created an artificial harbor, constructing large breakwaters.



- | | |
|----------------------|----------------|
| A Theater | E Lighthouse |
| B Palace | F Aqueduct |
| C Temple of Augustus | G Amphitheater |
| D Harbor (Sebastos) | H Hippodrome |

The city of Caesarea encompassed 165 acres. It boasted a theater, an amphitheater, a hippodrome, palaces, public buildings, storerooms, residential areas, and a sewer system. The enormous scale of this project is revealed in the dimensions of some of the structures. The hippodrome (used for chariot races), seating 38,000 people, was 1500 feet long and 250 feet wide. The theater was 300 feet in diameter and could accommodate 4,000 people. Both of these have been excavated today. Some of the stones used to build the harbor's breakwater were 50 feet long, 18 feet wide, and 9 feet thick. A 7-mile aqueduct (that is still visible today) brought water to the city from Mount Carmel.

“Herod the Great, in addition to being a homicidal madman who killed many of his own family to secure his spot on the throne, was an engineering genius who built many of the significant sites that survive today in Israel.”

Herod the Great, in addition to being a homicidal madman who killed many of his own family to secure his spot on the throne, was an engineering genius who built many of the significant sites that survive today in Israel. We typically know Herod the Great as the Herod who was ruling at the time of the birth of Jesus, but he was also one of the most significant historical figures in the development and building of the Israel Jesus knew.

He built Caesarea Maritima, a mammoth port city. He constructed the Herodium—a fortress towering over the tiny town of Bethlehem. This fortress was built atop a man-made mountain and was eventually where Herod chose to be buried. Herod also built Masada, a giant hilltop fortress that contained no less than 3 palaces. But his crowning achievement had to be the construction and expansion of the Second Temple. This is the temple that Jesus taught in. This incredibly ornate and beautiful marvel of engineering was and still is the focal point of study, dispute, curiosity, and worship among the three

major world religions today.

DID YOU KNOW?

The harbor at Caesarea was as large as that of Piraeus, the port of Athens. It brought status and much revenue to Herod's kingdom. He used the port to import materials for his numerous building projects. The harbor also made Palestine easily accessible to Rome, only a ten-day voyage away.



Discussion Questions

1. We see Peter struggling with certain foods in our passage this week. What foods do you enjoy today that you disliked as a child? What foods do you still refuse to eat?

2. Read Leviticus 11:1-19. Why do you think God forbade eating these particular kinds of animals? Read Acts 10:9-16. What do you think was going through Peter's mind when he was told in a vision from Heaven to do something he had been taught from his youth was completely unacceptable? Why do you think this exercise is repeated three times? Which would be worse: to disobey a heavenly vision, or the written Law of God? How would Jesus' words in Mark 7:17-23 speak to this issue?

3. Looking back through the last few chapters, how has God been preparing Peter for his appointment with Cornelius? What are some examples? What are some other stories in scripture where God prepared His servants for what was to come? What does this say about God? What else do we learn about the heart of God in this passage?

4. What practices of other Christian denominations make you uncomfortable? Where have you seen ecumenism (collaboration and cooperation between different groups—including between Christian and non-Christian groups) practiced that you thought went too far? What are some traditions the church holds on to that go beyond what scripture teaches? How well do you think the church does in not being a “respector of persons,” and welcoming people from all backgrounds equally?

5. It seems fair to say that we all have blind spots—places we fail to recognize truth in our lives. In what areas might the Holy Spirit be nudging you to re-examine long held beliefs and practices—practices that may simply be traditions of men, rather than commands of God? What gets in the way of you being more open and loving to people that are different from you?

Going Deeper

1. In Matthew 16:17, Jesus called Peter “Simon Bar-Jonah” (or Simon, son of Jonah). In Acts chapter 9, we find Peter being called out of Joppa on a mission to the Gentiles. In Jonah chapter 3, we find the reluctant prophet Jonah (the namesake of Peter) also in Joppa, reluctant to embark on a mission to the Gentiles in Nineveh. Oftentimes, God’s message to the nations was to repent because of their wickedness. But salvation for the whole world was always the objective. In addition to the book of Jonah, we see God’s heart for people from every nation, all throughout the Old Testament. Read: Psalm 67:1-2; 57:9; 96:1-4; Deut 4:5-6; 31:12; Jer 1:5; Isaiah 49:5-6. How would you describe God’s heart for the nations in the Old Testament? Why do you think Israel missed their missionary call to the nations?

2. How is Cornelius described (Acts 10:2, 22). Despite all of these “good” things, what was he lacking (Acts 11:14)? In other words, why was Peter’s message necessary? Also, as evidenced by his message, what did Peter think Cornelius was lacking (Acts 10:42-43)? Why do we sometimes think that being “good” really is enough? How could Cornelius “fear God with all his household,” and “pray to God continually,” and not be saved? The question might be phrased, “How could God send someone like Cornelius to hell?” How would you respond?

Transformational Activity

PRAYER:

Pray this week that God would open your eyes to areas of your walk with Him that need attention. Ask such questions as: “Am I as welcoming to others as I ought to be (and what can I change)?” “Am I holding on to manmade traditions that get in the way of God’s heart for outreach?” “What have You been preparing me for in service to You, oh God?” Then, when you meet together as a family or group, share the insights God has revealed to you.



Week 15:

Confidence in the Gospel

What does it mean to be a member of the family of God? That is a question we might not spend much time thinking about. We simply take for granted that we (Gentiles) are co-heirs with Christ—that we are grafted into the vine and co-exist alongside the Jews. In fact, some Christians (tragically) try to disenfranchise the Jews as the original and primary members of the family of God—and replace them with the church. That is how comfortable and confident we are with our identity as members of the family of God (and is perhaps a reason we might want to spend some quality time in Romans chapter 11). However, we will miss what is truly happening in the book of Acts if we don't recognize the magnitude of this issue for these early believers.

A few weeks ago, we introduced this idea that the coming of the New Covenant brought with it a seismic shift in how the family of God was comprised and how these early followers of Jesus viewed themselves. We see this truth unfolding in Acts chapter 10 in a significant way.

As we make our way through Acts, we see God call one of the most devout Jews alive at the time to be the apostle sent to evangelize the Gentiles. The Apostle Paul is arguably one of the most unlikely of candidates to be given this task. He was so zealous for his people and his understanding of the Jewish faith that he participated in the arrest and imprisonment, and even murder of many early Christians. Yet it is not Paul that takes the most convincing that the lowly, undeserving Gentiles are now being grafted into the family of God and that they now have equal access. It is the leader of the church, Peter, that God puts His attention on and takes the time to convince.

God goes to great lengths to open Peter’s heart and mind to this challenging truth. In Acts chapter 10, we see the climax of this exciting journey by Peter. It takes a very unusual vision, given by God to Peter, to awaken his understanding that God wanted him to see things differently. God then underscores the message of this vision by having some God-fearing Gentiles summon Peter to speak to them.

The climactic verse in Acts chapter 10 is verse 45, which says: “All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also.” Scripture does not report that they were amazed that God did such a miraculous work in appearing to Peter. Nor does it say they were amazed that God spoke so powerfully through Peter that many souls were saved from eternal separation from God. It says that what shocked them was that the gift of the Holy Spirit, the unmistakable sign of New Covenant salvation, was given to Gentiles—people they considered unclean and unworthy.

It is crucial for us to see how important this issue was to the early church—and especially to its leadership. We have mentioned a bit of the history of Israel that primed them to be extremely wary of and on the lookout for those who would try to get them to compromise on this issue of their national distinctiveness. But it might be helpful to dive a little deeper into this background.

Paul addresses this issue in the book of Ephesians, and he does so using the image of a dividing wall that had separated Jews and Gentiles—a wall that has now come down because of the sacrifice of Jesus. In Ephesians, Paul explores the theological ramifications of what this means. He uses the theme of unity as the mechanism to describe and define this issue.

All throughout scripture, we recognize that the Holy Spirit unites, while Satan and sin divide. One of the main jobs of the Holy Spirit in the story of scripture is

to unite. He restores the unity that God created in the world that was fractured at the Fall. In the beginning, God created us to be in close fellowship with Him, in a loving relationship. But sin got in the way. Sin always divides

“Sin always divides and separates. It separated us from God. It separates us from each other. It even causes division within ourselves.”

and separates. It separated us from God. It separates us from each other. It even causes division within ourselves.

In Ephesians, this dividing wall is indeed that disunity and separation between Jew and Gentile. We can understand why Paul is focusing on division when we recognize that before Jesus came, the only “people of God” were the Jews. If someone wanted to become a member of the family of God, they had to first become a Jew (or unite themselves to the commonwealth of Israel through become an official God-fearer). But now, after Jesus died, paid for our sin, and instituted the New Covenant, the separation between God and man (and the separation between Jew and Gentile) has now been torn down. Both Jews and Gentiles can come directly to God together. The new amazing way that Jews and Gentiles are united is in something that wasn’t seen in the Old Testament—something called *the church*. In Ephesians, the church is called a “mystery”—something that is being revealed that was previously unknown. This dividing wall was torn down in the creation of the church, but this unity was created at the expense of something very dear to the heart of the Jews—namely, all the external trappings of how they displayed they belonged to God.

But as we have pointed out, this would have been very hard for the Jews to hear. Centuries earlier, Israel was conquered by the Assyrians, and the Jews from the Northern Kingdom were scattered across the known world. Just over a century later, the Southern Kingdom was conquered by Babylon and its people taken captive

for 70 years. This was the most devastating thing that could have happened to them—not just that they were conquered, but that because of this experience, they would have thought the Word of God had been broken. God had promised to protect them and preserve them in the land. God said in Jeremiah chapter 31 that as long as the sun, moon and stars were in the sky, Israel would be a nation. Thus, the Jews were beyond devastated. They thought that God's promise was broken. They hadn't just lost their land, they thought their God had failed.

When they were eventually allowed to return to the land, they came to understand it was their sin that had caused the captivity. It was their idolatry brought on by the influence of marrying foreign women that had caused their downfall. Therefore, the number one thing that was hammered into them by the prophets was the reminder to keep their race separate, distinct, and pure, and not let other nations come in and pollute their minds and draw them into worshipping other gods. Keeping separate from the other nations and maintaining their national identity as the people of God became a point of obsession with them. What did this look like practically? Identity Markers! In their viewpoint, Judaism was the one and only way to have fellowship with God. Any other thought to them was idolatry. And any attempt to water down that message or change it in any way was met with open hostility.

Then, when Messiah came and instituted the New Covenant by the sending of the Holy Spirit, the identity of the people of God changed. The family of God was no longer a distinct people made up of one nation. It was now comprised of people called out from many nations. The people of God were no longer a nation, a monarchy, ruled by God. They were now many peoples from many different nations comprising this new organism called the church, the bride of Christ. When the Christian Jews were taught this, it was very difficult to hear, understand, and believe. Keeping a pure national identity and separateness was their obsession. To say that one could

access God without becoming a Jew had always been blasphemy to them.

This was the source of the dividing wall that separated Jews and Gentiles—the dividing wall that has now come down. Gentiles could now be members of the family of God as *Gentiles*, and Christian Jews had a problem coming to grips with this. This caused dissention within the church. The book of Ephesians seems to have been written to correct that mistaken theology, and to promote the need for unity in the church—a unity that we actually possess in reality, and that we should strive for practically.

What it comes down to is that the Jews had taken the outward sign (physical circumcision) and made it the whole reality. Yet the inward sign (circumcision of the heart) is what the Lord had desired all along. This is the issue Paul is constantly addressing. He is saying that being a Jew (outwardly) is not being a true Jew. Jews who are Jews inwardly is what God has always sought. Thus, Paul is essentially saying that God is now taking away that outward sign so you can no longer rely upon that as proof that you are a part of the family of God. Now it is revealed that it always had been a matter of the heart, and the proof of this is that the identity marker of the family of God will now be the indwelling Holy Spirit. There is no longer an outward sign to signify that inward reality—it is all inward. In essence, Paul is saying that this will force those who are a part of “believing Israel” to grapple with the truth of what it means to be in the family of God.

**“Gentiles
could now be
members of the
family of God
as *Gentiles*, and
Christian Jews
had a problem
coming to grips
with this.”**

Discussion Questions

1. Describe a time when you arrived somewhere and you felt like you didn't belong (a party, a youth group, a new city, etc.)? How did that make you feel?

2. Compare Peter's message here in Acts 10:34-43 with his previous sermons (Acts 2:22-39 and Acts 3:12-26). What are some of the differences in approach that Peter takes here? What accounts for these differences? What can you determine, based on sermons, are indispensable elements to the gospel message?

3. What do we learn about God in Acts 10:34-43? Why does it matter that the Spirit was poured out on the Gentiles (v.45)? Why do you think God would reveal the risen Christ to certain people and not to others (vv. 40-41)? See also John 14:19-24.

4. If someone were to walk into your church, what assumptions would they likely make about who (or what kind of people) did and didn't belong there? Do you believe everyone would feel welcome? What groups do you think might not feel as welcome as others? What might be done to fix any shortcomings in this regard?

5. What is your immediate reaction when you see someone at church who seems like they don't belong? If your reaction is to reach out to welcome them, what kind of response do you often get? If your reaction is not to reach out, why do you think that is? From looking at this passage, where Peter learns a valuable lesson in this regard, what might the Holy Spirit be communicating to you?

**FOR FURTHER
DISCUSSION**

What are some of the specific techniques Peter uses in his presentation of the gospel at the house of Cornelius? Which of these techniques might we make use of as well when we are sharing the gospel with others?



Going Deeper

1. Read through Acts chapter 10 and note all the different supernatural ways God communicates with people. Why do you think God chose to work in these ways in this chapter? What would this accomplish that could not be accomplished otherwise?

2. Based on this story, do you believe that someone can be saved without hearing and responding to the gospel message (also see Acts 11:14; Rom 10:8-15)? Why or why not?

Transformational Activity

COMMUNITY:

Begin this week by praying together with your family or group that there would be an overwhelming sense of unity, openness, and transparency present in your discussion. Then take turns sharing what being accepted and feeling connected means to you. Share about times when you have felt isolated – perhaps even in this group. Talk about the causes and possible solutions. Pray together that the Spirit would guide your hearts towards sensitivity in this issue.



Week 16:

Confidence in God's Plan for Salvation

In Acts chapter 11, we see the leaders of the early church confronting Peter because he had been seen eating with Gentiles. We read, “So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers took issue with him and said, ‘You visited uncircumcised men and ate with them’” (Acts 11:2–3). We might wonder why this would be a concern for them. Why would they care that Peter had lunch with someone who was not a Jew?

Looking back just one chapter, we see Peter’s declaration to these uncircumcised Gentiles: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile” (Acts 10:28). Thus, it was known (not only to Jews, but to non-Jews as well) that this interaction was simply not allowed. Yet, there’s more to the story. In addition to this understanding of the obligations of law-abiding Jews, we have already explored in previous weeks why the Jews were so zealous for keeping themselves separate from the nations around them. Their intermarrying with pagans in the past had cost them their nation and led to the Babylonian captivity. Consequently, in the minds of the circumcised believers confronting Peter, both their law and their history made it unthinkable that any self-respecting and law-abiding Jew would even consider such a thing.

Two thoughts arise from this seemingly straightforward verse (Acts 10:28). First, was it indeed contrary to God’s Law for them to socialize with the uncircumcised? The Law of Moses did forbid alliances by contract or marriage with the surrounding nations, but did it ever prohibit socializing or mingling with such people? The Rabbis and the Jewish Midrash (commentary by prominent rabbinic sages) certainly had a lot to say about

this issue. But perhaps this is just another example of something Jesus chastised the Pharisees and Scribes for—the human tendency to add layer upon layer to what God had required. The words of Jesus are stinging in Mark 7:9 where He says of the Pharisees: “You are *experts* at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition.” This penetrating rebuke states that these teachers not only regularly set aside God’s actual law for their own interpretation of it, but that they are actually experts at it. Imagine their reaction to someone

“Don’t we tend to add buffer zones around the clear and precise requirements of God? ...we mustn’t confuse the lines we arbitrarily draw in the sand for the clear lines that God gives us.”

telling them that they were the very best at doing exactly the opposite of what God desired.

While we may marvel at (and perhaps enjoy) the razor sharp incision Jesus made into their hypocrisy, might we also look in the mirror and ask whether this is something we also engage in? When I was growing up, I was taught that “we don’t smoke, or chew, or go with girls that do.” Our fundamentalist sensibilities

had given us a keen sense of the need to avoid even the appearance of impropriety. We were also taught to build a hedge around our purity—so that we wouldn’t even come close to compromising. Don’t we tend to add buffer zones around the clear and precise requirements of God? Some of these hedges may have been borne of the wisdom of experience. But we mustn’t confuse the lines we arbitrarily draw in the sand for the clear lines that God gives us. Saying, thinking, or teaching that something is from God when it is not is an issue God takes seriously. Just ask Moses—who forfeited the Promised Land for just such an offense.

We can easily fall into the trap of living according to the traditions of men, rather than the clear Word of God. Many a church has split over the placement of the

organ on stage or whether or not to have a coatrack in the foyer of the church. We major in the minors and neglect the weightier matters of the law of God: justice and mercy and faith (Matt 23:23). Are we, too, straining out gnats and swallowing camels?

The other thought that Acts 10:28 provokes revolves around the doctrine that our God is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb 13:8; Malachi 3:6; James 1:17). This important and comforting truth about God is a heart anchor, buttressing our reliance upon a God who is steadfast, unchanging, and trustworthy. Where this theological truth intersects this passage (Acts 11:1-18) is in the question of how it is, then, that God can seemingly be doing things differently than He used to. How can God show no partiality now, when He seemingly did before? Salvation used to be of and through the Jews, but now Gentiles apparently have equal access. The reaction of the circumcised at the end of this passage reveals that they, indeed, recognized that God was working in new ways (Acts 11:18). So, did God change the rules mid-stream?

One important lens through which we might consider both reading God's Word and viewing salvation history is a theological understanding known as "progressive revelation." This is the idea and teaching that God does not, and has not, revealed everything about Himself and the unfolding of His plan all at once. God has slowly and progressively revealed more and more about what He is up to in succeeding eras of salvation history.

In other words, Moses understood more about God's plan than did Adam or Noah. And David had more clarity and insight on such things than did Moses. Which also means that even though

“God has slowly and progressively revealed more and more about what He is up to in succeeding eras of salvation history.”

Jesus was the full and final revelation of God, in a sense, we, today, have available to us more insight into the overarching plan of God than did any of these giants of the faith—including those in the time of the apostles. The perspective of history and fulfilled prophecy gives us an advantage over those who were peering into the future through a glass darkly, as it were.

An example of this would be that we today can understand the role of Israel in the plan of God with much more precision than those just several hundred years ago. We see that after a time of dispersion, God has brought them back into their land and has resurrected them as a people—for the purposes He laid out in Ezekiel 36 & 37. He has brought them back into their land in unbelief through (and for) judgment, and will ultimately bless them following their national repentance (Hosea 5:15; Zech 12:10; Rom 11:26).

We see this idea of progressive revelation made clear for us in Ephesians chapter 3 where Paul describes the “mystery of Christ.” This is something, he says, “...was not made known to the sons of men in other generations, as it has now been revealed.” God revealed more and more to mankind—as they were able to hear and understand. Throughout earlier eras of salvation history, God was revealing Himself and His will for humanity a bit at time, accommodating Himself to the ability of people to comprehend His revelation. This is certainly not a strange idea to us. We reveal more and more about the world to our children as they grow and mature, and are able to grasp new and more complex ideas.

In light of this, what does it mean for there to be a new era in salvation history—other than that the rules have, indeed, in some sense changed (or perhaps have been updated). Salvation is and always has been by grace through faith. But the makeup of the people of God has necessarily changed. Certain rules applied when the family of God was comprised of a nation which was ruled via a national theocracy. Those national rules and laws

cannot apply to the current phase of God’s program—to and through people called out from many disparate nations. A different economy of salvation was needed. Thus, God replaced the Mosaic covenant with a new and better covenant. This is not a matter of God changing in any way, shape, or form. It is a matter of the plan of God unfolding and new vistas coming into view.

The death and resurrection of Jesus, and the coming of the New Covenant was always the plan. But when it did happen, following Israel’s rejection of the offer of the kingdom, the next planned phase of the outworking of God’s plan was instituted. Likewise, when Christ returns, the next phase will bring with it more changes. This, too, does not mean that God changes. It means that His plan is on track and everything is going as it should—as He has promised through prophecy.

STUDY TIP

When you come across important biblical and theological ideas or issues, doing a simple Google search can be a helpful way to expand your knowledge about such topics. You no longer need fancy, expensive Bible software for such things. Try searching for “table fellowship in scripture,” or “the New Covenant in the Bible” and see what results you find. As you do this more and more, you will begin to find some favorite sites that are very helpful—such as GotQuestions.org.



Discussion Questions

1. In this passage, we see Peter persuading the leaders of the church to see things in a different way. Describe a time when you changed your mind about something significant. What was the result?

2. For the benefit of the other leaders of the church, Peter recounts the events he experienced down in Caesarea. Here he highlights the role of the Holy Spirit in what happened. Why would this be important for Peter to highlight (1 Cor 12:13)? How does this relate to the coming of the New Covenant? Why do you think God chose Peter to take the lead in extending the gospel to the Gentiles?

3. How is God active and working in this passage (Acts 11:1-18)? How does He interact with Peter? How does He impact the Gentile believers and also the leaders of the church at Jerusalem?

4. Where do you think the church today goes too far in staying separate and distinct from the world? Where do you think we don't go far enough?

5. Where have you been drawn into legalism? Why do you think this is a common tendency for Christians? What have you learned about yourself and about God (and grace) through this topic of legalism?

Going Deeper

1. What precisely was the offense that the leaders of the church in Jerusalem took with Peter? Was it the idea that Peter was perverting their understanding of the Law by not requiring the Gentile converts to be circumcised? Or, was it actually that he was eating with Gentiles (Acts 11:3). Why do you think “table fellowship” was such a deal-breaker for these self-appointed guardians of the Law (Luke 5:30, 7:34, 15:1-2, 19:7)?

2. What “traditions of men” (Mark 7:9) still lurk within the halls of the church today? In other words, what traditions and customs that are not found within scripture continue to guide how we do church today? Which of these are helpful—and which are not, and should be done away with?

Transformational Activity

OUTREACH:

Being willing to reach out to others often begins with an examination of our own hearts—considering what might be the cause of our hesitancy to more consistently “be” a witness. Discuss with your family or group some reasons you don’t make this a priority in your life. Might hidden prejudice, or busyness, or a lack of opportunity play into the equation? Do you live in a Christian bubble, and have few friends outside the Christian world? Do you not truly feel the force of the command and desire of Jesus for us to share our faith? While acknowledging any feelings of inadequacy, try to go beyond this to explore other reasons.

If outreach *is* a significant part of your life, share what it is that motivates you.



Week 17:

Confidence in God's Plan for Ministry

In the first two verses of our passage this week (Acts 11:19–30), we see some significant statements. This passage flows directly from the events in the previous section, which communicated that the message Peter had given to the leaders at Jerusalem was having its result. The gospel was beginning to go out to the Gentiles. The first few baby steps were being taken toward a more inclusive attitude—not just by leaders like Peter and Paul, but by everyday followers of Messiah.

In Acts 11:19, we recognize that the persecution that began with the death of Stephen, indeed, resulted in the “going out” that Jesus commanded back in Acts chapter 1. Yet, we also see that this idea of the “dividing wall” having come down was not something quite universally embraced throughout the church—at least, not yet. Some believers were still stuck in the old ways—thinking that Jews alone were the focus of the gospel message. But then, a ray of hope arrives in verse 20 where we see that others had indeed gotten the message. The Greeks (Gentiles) were also getting the Word of God preached to them.

DID YOU KNOW?

It is interesting that the message to the Greeks here was not that Jesus was “Messiah,” but that Jesus was “Lord.” The idea of a Messiah would have been meaningless for these Greeks. It’s important to know our audience when sharing our faith—and to take notice when those in the scripture do the same.



The mention of these particular cities/places in verse 19 is not coincidental. There was a large Jewish

population in Cyprus. So much so that this is where Paul and Barnabas would soon begin their first missionary journey. Barnabas was from Cyprus—which undoubtedly helped get them off to a good start on their mission.

Also, Antioch is highlighted here. Antioch was the third largest city in the Greco-Roman world (behind Rome and Alexandria). It was not only the capital city of the Roman province of Syria, it was strategically located at the intersection of two of the most important trade routes in the Ancient Near East. The north-south trade route, the Via Maris, connected Egypt and Rome, running along the coast of Israel straight through Antioch. The east-west trade route connecting Rome with the Silk Road and the orient in the east also ran through Antioch. The famous Silk Road trade route actually began in Antioch. Antioch is so strategic that it, not Jerusalem, becomes the center of the missionary push into the Greco-Roman world. Some consider Antioch to be the second most important city in the history of the early church—behind only Jerusalem.

Just as the church leaders in Acts chapter 8 had sent Peter and John down to Samaria to verify and place the stamp of approval upon the converts in Samaria, they now send Barnabas to Antioch for much the same reason. We have discussed the power of unity in the family of God, and can imagine what damage might have come from a lack thereof. Thus, the leaders of the church deftly avoid any possible competing faction of the church springing up—both in Samaria and in Antioch—by affirming and confirming the faith of these new believers in the Gentile regions. And by doing so, these leaders are acknowledging that these movements evidence the hand of God is at work. This work is sanctioned by Him. Also, notable by its absence is any mention of the need for these Greek believers to now be circumcised. New Covenant theology is beginning to take shape.

We also see here that after surveying the situation, Barnabas sets off to retrieve Paul—who had been tucked

away in his hometown of Tarsus, undergoing training for the task that lay ahead of him. God had clearly revealed at the time of his conversion that Paul was destined to bear God's name before the Gentiles. God uses Barnabas to get this ball rolling. It is time for this mission to begin.

“To claim the name of Christ as our very identity carries with it no little obligation. For those of us who bear the name of Christ, we can too easily forget the weight of that responsibility.”

Some commentators believe that during these years of training for Paul, many of the experiences he later alludes to might have taken place. Possible options for this timeframe include: 1) Paul's being caught up to the third Heaven to hear those inexpressible words he makes

reference to in the twelfth chapter of 2 Corinthians, 2) Perhaps the first of the five times he received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes (2 Cor 12:24), and others. Surely, during this time Paul would have been disinherited by his family and friends and have “suffered the loss of all things.” Regardless of what took place and when, this was the time of preparation that God affords to all His servants. God invariably prepares us for what is to come.

After spending a year training up and teaching the Christ-followers in Antioch, Barnabas and Saul are set apart by the Holy Spirit for the task of venturing out into the Gentile world to begin the first of three missionary journeys that will change the world. This is the origin of the gospel moving from the east into the west—moving from *Judaism only*, to now an inclusion of the Gentile world. This is a monumental shift we are witnessing.

An interesting side-note is recorded here about Antioch. It is here that the followers of Christ were first called “Christians.” This is a moniker we bear proudly today, but it was most likely a term of derision used by outsiders back then to mock the followers of Jesus. The

term means “little christs.” The followers of Jesus had their own names for themselves. They would refer to one another as “the brethren,” “disciples,” “saints,” and “believers.” Yet as time wore on, the term “Christians,” as well as its meaning, began to grow on these followers of Jesus. The name eventually stuck.

This comment in the text of Acts of the name “Christians” being coined in Antioch is made almost in passing, yet it carries great meaning. To claim the name of Christ as our very identity carries with it no little obligation. For those of us who bear the name of Christ, we can too easily forget the weight of that responsibility. We are His representatives, His emissaries, and even His ambassadors to the world. We are the face, not to mention the hands and feet of Christ to a watching world. We are Jesus “with skin on”—as has been so cleverly quipped.

The story is told of Alexander the Great being made aware of a soldier in his ranks who bore that same name. However, the soldier named Alexander was known for his cowardice and irresponsible behavior. The man was brought before the general Alexander cowering in fear. This

was arguably the greatest general history has ever seen—a man who conquered the known world by the age of 23. General Alexander asked the young man if it was true that his name was indeed Alexander. Trembling, he said, “yes.” Alexander the Great then answered simply yet piercingly: “Then either change your conduct, or change your name.”

The name “Christian” itself ought to be eminently motivating, driving us toward the passionate desire to be found worthy to bear the name.

**“The name
'Christian'
itself ought to
be eminently
motivating,
driving us toward
the passionate
desire to be
found worthy to
bear the name.”**

Discussion Questions

1. Followers of “The Way” were first called “Christians” here in Antioch. What nicknames have you had in the past? Where did these names come from? Why were they significant?

2. Why do you think the apostles sent Barnabas to Antioch—why send anyone (why had they done this in the past—Acts 8:14?), and why specifically Barnabas (Acts 4:36)? Why do you think Barnabas went to get Saul from Tarsus? What was Saul’s experience and response that prompted Barnabas to think of him (Acts 9:9, 19-20)? Why would Barnabas be the perfect one to help Saul get established in ministry (Acts 9:26-28)? Why would Luke mention the impending famine at the end of this chapter? How does this set up a later work Paul will be involved in?

3. How do you see the sovereign hand of God at work in this passage? How are the pieces being put in place and the stage being set for what is about to happen in the work of God in the world? What do we learn about God's heart from this section of scripture?

4. Where do you see unity in the church (universal) today? Where do you see division? What are some remedies we see modeled here in Acts?

5. We see both local and global missions described in this section of scripture. How are you involved in the work of God—both on a local level and on a broader level? What are we called to do as Christians in both contexts? How might the Spirit be prompting you to do more? What are some specific examples that you might explore?

Going Deeper

1. How would you characterize the mission strategy of the early church? Was it well-thought out and meticulously planned? Or was it borne of following the leading of the Spirit—as circumstances forced them out of their comfort zone? In our own planning and strategizing for ministry, how ought we to integrate our own planning, with the leading of the Spirit? In other words, how much of ministry comes from our own cleverness and energy, and how much comes from simply tapping into what God is already doing?

2. How does Christian generosity and providing for the poor promote unity within the church—in both the giver and the receiver? How well do you think the church (universal) today does in regards to taking care of the less fortunate?

Transformational Activity

BIBLE STUDY:

Spend some time this week doing a word search on the topic of *unity* in the Bible. Grab a concordance, or use your favorite Bible app or website and search this term. Explore what God's Word says about this issue. What is the role, purpose, and necessity of unity in the church? How has God used unity, or a lack thereof, as a tool to wake us up to certain realities? Come next week ready to share your findings.



**We major in
the minors and
neglect the
weightier matters
of the law of God...**

**Are we, too,
straining out
gnats and
swallowing
camels?**



Week 18:

Confidence in God's Power

In Acts chapter 12 we come across a unique story—one that revolves around the ministry of angels to God's people. After Herod Agrippa had the apostle James (the brother of John) killed with a sword, he had Peter arrested as well (Acts 12:2-3). While sleeping in chains, surrounded by guards, Peter is awakened by an angel, who proceeds to rescue him from jail. This is just one of many stories of angels openly acting on behalf of God's people in scripture.

Unfortunately, over the years, much “folk theology” has been passed down from generation to generation that communicates a less than accurate picture of who angels are and what they are truly like. Both in literature and in movies, a sensationalized and even misleading depiction of angels has crept its way into our worldviews, with the result that many people are either confused or

“Both in literature and in movies, a sensationalized and even misleading depiction of angels has crept its way into our worldviews, with the result that many people are either confused or simply deceived about the topic of angels.”

simply deceived about the topic of angels. Some of us may have visions in our minds of chubby little cherubs playing harps, or beautiful women with wings and long, flowing locks of hair. What exactly are angels, and how can we separate fact from fiction when it comes to these mysterious creatures?

Angels are mentioned 273 times in scripture, and they appear in 33 of the 66 books of the Bible. Angels are present in not only apocalyptic (end times) sections of scripture, but also prophetic, historical, and poetic books as well. Clearly, Jesus

taught about angels (Matt 13:39, 41, 49; Mark 12:25; Luke 12:8-9; John 1:51).

Angels are referred to in various ways throughout scripture. They are called angels, sons of God, sons of the Mighty (One), the holy ones, watchers, watchmen, spirits, stars, ministers, and as a host (army). They are universally understood to be messengers of God—created to serve God.

Despite their great power and splendor, it is important to understand that angels are created beings. They were already in existence when God created the earth (Job 38:4-7). There is no indication in scripture how long before the earth they were created. They were created holy (Mark 8:38), but had the ability to choose contrary to their nature (Jude 6). One third of the angels followed Lucifer in his rebellion against God (Rev 12:3-4). Angels hold a status that is higher than man (presently), but lower than Messiah (Heb 1:4-2:8).

The abode of angels is Heaven (Matt 18:10; Luke 22:43; 2 Thess 1:7). They are referred to as “hosts of Heaven” throughout the scriptures. The sphere in which they operate is both the Heavens and the earth. They are God’s ministers to accomplish His will here on earth. Some angels are said to have power over the winds or over fire, and others over the waters.

Sometimes angels appear in dreams or visions. They also manifest themselves physically here among us. They always appear as young men—never as women, children, cupids, or old men. The appearance of angels is so awe-inspiring that the universal response to their arrival is fear.

Some teach that angels are not personal beings, but rather are emanations, powers, or some kind of energy or force (a la electricity). But scripture describes them as having intellect, emotions, and wills—all the characteristics of personality. They are said to have wisdom (2 Sam 14:20). They have the ability to praise

(Psalm 148:2). They have the capacity to communicate, to know things, and to learn—all of which require intelligence. Angels have the capacity for joy (Job 38:7; Luke 15:10), which involves emotion. In Luke 2:13 the angels praise God. In Hebrews 1:6 they worship God. And in Jude 6, they leave their proper abode—all of which involves them exercising their will.

In that they are created beings, angels necessarily have the limitations of “creature hood.” While extremely powerful, they do not have the abilities or attributes of God. They are not omnipresent. They are limited to one location. This applies to Satan and demons as well. They are also not omnipotent. An angel needed the archangel Michael’s help in Daniel 10:13. And they are not omniscient. They have the ability to learn.

As to their form, angels are described as spirit beings (Heb 1:14), and thus are immaterial. They have no physical form. Yet, they have the ability to take on a physical form (Gen 18-19; Luke 1:11). Since they are spirit beings, they have the ability to not be visible. Yet, they appear to have some form of corporeality—in that they can take physical form and in some sense, long to be embodied (Matt 8:28-34). Although the same rules of physicality do not apply to them as to us. In Luke 8:30, a legion of spirit beings could occupy the space of one man.

Another note about the body of angels is that they do not reproduce after their own kind. They are not sexless as some would assume. The Greek language has a neuter form (not male or female), yet it does not use it with regard to angels. They are always referred to in the masculine. There are no female angels, so they do not marry (Mark 12:25). In the case of Genesis chapter 6, some fallen angels do inhabit human forms and intermarry with human women. But the offspring of this union are grotesque and monstrous. The beings produced were not after their own kind, since angels cannot reproduce.

There seems to be a very systematic organization when it comes to the rank and titles of angels. The terms used to elucidate this organization include: thrones, dominions, principalities, powers, authorities, hosts, legions, and a title of “chief prince.” In Daniel chapter 10, we see that demonic spirits are regional, so it follows that angels might be as well.

The three categories or classes of angels are (or seem to be) angels, seraphim, and cherubim. Sometimes the term “angels” covers all orders of celestial beings, but it is most often used with the lowest of the three orders. As mentioned, they always appear as young men and are never described as having wings, as is sometimes taught. There are only two angels in scripture that are named: Gabriel and the archangel Michael. Gabriel seems to be a messenger of revelation. He brings news of the coming Messiah primarily—including His birth as well as the timeline of Messiah’s arrival detailed in Daniel chapter 9. The other named angel is Michael. He is called “the chief prince,” and as the one and only archangel, he appears to be the ruling angel over all other angels. Michael’s role seems to involve the protection of Israel.

The two other classes of angels mentioned in scripture are the seraphim (Isaiah and Revelation), and cherubim (all throughout the Old Testament, and the book of Hebrews). Which of them is the higher order of angel is debated. Seraphim surround the throne of God and are described as having wings. This may be where the image of angels having wings comes from—yet ordinary angels are not described as having wings. The constant cry of the seraphim is “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.” One important truth about seraphim is they are characterized by unceasing worship of God. They

**“When we
more clearly
understand the
nature, purpose,
and ministry of
angels, we are
better able to
understand the
enemy with whom
we are at war...”**

are described as being full of eyes, in front and back. They have four different faces: lion, calf, human, and eagle.

The cherubim are said to guard the way to the tree of life in Genesis chapter 3. Their image is embroidered into the curtains of the tabernacle and fashioned by gold in the mercy seat atop the ark of the covenant. God is described as “He who sits above the cherubim”—in the tabernacle and temple, just as he does in the Heavenly temple. These too, have four different faces. Some are described as having two wings, while others are said to have four wings. And Satan was described as “the

anointed cherub that covereth.” He appears to have been a ruling cherub before his fall.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Do you believe in guardian angels? Some Jews believed that our guardian angel actually looked like us (Acts 12:15). In Matthew 18:10, the term “their” is a collective pronoun in the Greek pointing to the fact that all believers are served by angels. Where are these angels focused, on God or on man? What do you think about this idea of guardian angels? Are you more comforted thinking an angel is assigned to watch over you, or that a sovereign God is?



Much more could be said of angels. It is important though, to re-examine our understanding of them to discern whether or not the information we have is biblical. It is indeed important to separate fact from fiction when it comes to angels. For some reason, this topic, more than others, is rife with misunderstanding and imprecision. Since Lucifer is a fallen angel, and is the deceiver, he most certainly wants us to misunderstand the kind of creature that he is and what he is capable of. When we more clearly understand the nature, purpose, and ministry of angels, we are better able to understand the enemy (Satan) with whom we are at war—and more importantly, we can more rightly discern the plan of God and our place in it.

Discussion Questions

1. We see some people in this passage today surprised at God answering one of their prayers. What is one of the most amazing answers to prayer you have experienced?

2. What part did the prayer of the believers in Acts chapter 12 play in Peter being rescued from jail? How does their belief or unbelief factor into the power/efficacy of their prayer? What can we understand more clearly about trials, the effect of prayer, and God's provision from this chapter?

3. Why do you think Peter was rescued and James was not (John 21:18-19)? Why do you think Peter left the prison here while Paul and Silas did not leave jail when given the opportunity in Philippi (Acts 16:25-34)? Where do you see the sovereignty of God at work in this chapter?

4. What religious liberties are under attack today—and what sorts of Christian activities do you imagine might become illegal soon in our current cultural climate? How might these kinds of persecutions affect your faith—and actions?

5. If you were arrested by a totalitarian government for being a Christian, what evidence would there be to convict you? What sort of testimony could be obtained from those around you on your behalf that would lead toward your guilt or innocence? What is one thing you could do this week to add to the prosecution's case?

Going Deeper

1. As we have been steeped in the topic of evangelism and sharing our faith all throughout the book of Acts, discuss whether anyone in the group has had the opportunity to share their faith since we have started this study of Acts. If so, what has your experience been? If not, discuss why you think this has not happened. How would evangelism being made illegal in your country affect your willingness and motivation for sharing the gospel?

2. Discuss the idea that although God is in the miracle business, miracles are not guaranteed. Even though Peter had been miraculously delivered from imprisonment before (Acts 5:18-20), he still was bewildered at his deliverance in chapter 12. There have been countless martyrs throughout history that did not see rescue, as did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (from the fire), or Paul and Peter (from prison). Is it more important to come up with convincing explanations for why we believe God does or does not do something, or to learn to trust the God that holds all things in His hands? Why is this so difficult for us?

Transformational Activity

PRAYER:

This week, take some time to research some persecuted believers around the world that your family or group can actively pray for. Come together as a group and discuss these opportunities—and choose the group for whom you will pray. Yet also discuss together why you think prayer projects like this are sometimes short-lived, and how you might craft into your group DNA a desire and passion for prayer for the persecuted.



Week 19:

Purpose Protects Truth

So far in Acts we have seen the first two geographical fulfillments of the command of Jesus in Acts 1:8. The gospel has gone out to Jerusalem and to Judea and Samaria. Now in Acts chapter 13, the giant leap forward of sending the gospel out to the ends of the earth is underway. The phrase “to the uttermost parts of the earth” is a Jewish figure of speech referring to the entire world. It is in this passage where the worldwide mission begins.

Yet, something happens here in Acts chapter 13 that is worth taking some time to explore. A seemingly inconsequential comment is made that carries with it important theological significance. We remember back in Acts chapter 9 that God revealed to Ananias that Paul was to be God’s chosen instrument to bear His name before Gentiles and kings. And although Paul knew he

“...the gospel is the power of God for salvation '...first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.' This reveals to us a principle of gospel priority for the Jewish people that is sometimes overlooked.”

was sent to bring the gospel to the Gentile world, where does he stop first—in every town he visits? He first preaches the gospel to the Jewish synagogue. We see this in Acts 13:5. This is the regular pattern the Apostle Paul always follows. The question is: why? Why would Paul begin his missionary journey to the Gentiles by focusing on the Jews? We know of Paul’s passion for his people. He says in Romans 9:1-3 that he would be willing to give up his salvation if they could be saved.

So was he just being stubborn in continuing to evangelize the Jews when God had called him to the Gentiles?

It does not take too much digging to find the answer Paul gives us. In Romans 1:16 Paul clearly states: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes...” And at that point is where many people simply stop reading. This certainly is a powerful statement as to the efficacy and purpose of the gospel message. But as we continue reading in this verse we see that the gospel is the power of God for salvation “...first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.” This reveals to us a principle of gospel priority for the Jewish people that is sometimes overlooked.

Paul declares that the gospel is to go out in the world, first to the Jew and then to the Gentile. Why would this be? The first reason is that the Jews are uniquely God’s chosen people. In Deuteronomy 7:6-8, Moses says:

For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery...

God chose Abraham to be the progenitor of a race through whom He would save the world. Israel is said to be the apple of God’s eye. They have an exalted place in His plan and a special place in His heart. Speaking of Israel, Paul says in Romans 9:4-5 “...theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised!” Their status in the economy of God’s plan of salvation cannot be disputed.

Many of us in the predominantly Gentile Protestant church sometimes either overlook or even ignore this priority—not understanding the Jewishness of our faith, nor taking into account the fact that Jesus was a Jew, that He is the Jewish Messiah, that the New Covenant was made with the nation of Israel, and that the Gentiles are grafted into the family of God, of which the Jews were the original and primary members. Some even go so far as to try to disinherit the Jews from not only their rightful place in God’s economy, but dispossess them from a lasting place in God’s plan at all. They have created a whole new system of how to read the Bible to enable them to pour a new meaning into the word “Israel,” and claim that this word actually refers to the Gentile church—when there is literally zero biblical support for this harmful idea.

Paul reaffirms this priority later in the same chapter we are studying and declares to the Jews in Acts 13:45, “It was necessary that the Word of God be spoken to you first...” However, God’s plan of redemption does not stop with Israel. We previously explored the centrifugal (outward travelling) movement of the message of the gospel. It begins with Israel and expands outward—eventually to the ends of the earth.

Jesus affirms this priority in Luke 24:46 when He says, “The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” Israel serves as the starting place and priority in the spread of the gospel, both in time and in geography.

There are two important things to note regarding this priority. First, Jewish priority is not due to anything special the Jews possess that others do not. God repeatedly tells Israel that He is not delivering them or providing for them based on anything they have done. Rather, it is for His name’s sake. His word and His character is on the line. He has promised to save them and protect them. And if He does not, He will be shown

to be a liar. So, God has bound Himself to the plight and destiny of Israel.

Second, when God opens up the mission to the Gentiles in the book of Acts, it is not to the exclusion of the Jews. He did not stop saving Jews in order to start saving Gentiles. Gentiles are grafted into God's family. But Romans chapter 11 is crystal clear that Gentiles are not to become arrogant, thinking their branch has supplanted the root of Israel. No, Paul declares to the Gentiles that it is the root that supports them. Paul supports this in his actions as well. He continues this practice of Jewish priority all throughout his ministry.

It is also important to emphasize that salvation comes to both Jew and Gentile the same way. It is the finished work of Christ on the cross and faith in that sacrifice that is the source of salvation for everyone. Paul says in Acts 20:21, "I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus." There are not two separate New Covenants—one for Jews and another for Gentiles. Everyone before the cross was saved by faith, just as everyone after the cross is saved by faith.

God promised the world that those who bless Israel would be blessed and those who curse Israel will be cursed. God's Word enjoins us in Psalm 122:6 to "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem." There are promises of blessing for those who put their favor on Israel.

We must also recognize that the Word of God links the awakening of the Jews and their repentance to the return of the Messiah. Satan knows this—and he has tirelessly attacked the nation of Israel

“It is the petition of the Spirit-indwelt, revived nation of Israel that will trigger Christ's return. Thus, if Satan can destroy Israel prior to this, in his mind, he can prevent Christ from returning.”

from their beginnings.

Why would Satan care about the Jews after already being defeated in his plan to foil the first coming of Messiah? Because he knows that according to Romans 11:25-26, a partial hardening will happen to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, and then God will pour out His Spirit upon them (Zech 12:10), so that they will look on Him whom they have pierced, and mourn for Him as for an only Son. And in Hosea 5:15 it says that He [God] will go away and return to His place

DID YOU KNOW?

Fasting is not something that is reserved for the super-holy or for ascetics and mystics. Fasting is a tool that can help enable us to focus our hearts and minds on God in a powerful way. It has been said that in fasting, one humbles oneself and “withdraws in the highest degree from the influence of the world and makes oneself receptive to the commands of Heaven” (E . Haenchen, Acts)



until Israel acknowledges their sin—their sin of rejecting Him as Messiah—and they seek His face. In their tribulation they will seek Him. They will say, “...come, let us return to the Lord. For He has torn us, but He will heal us. He has wounded us, but He will bandage us. He will revive us after two days. He will raise us up on the third day.” When Israel acknowledges their sin of rejecting Messiah and petitions His return, this will usher in the second coming.

It is the petition of the Spirit-indwelt, revived nation of Israel that will trigger Christ's return. Thus, if Satan can destroy Israel prior to this, in his mind, he can prevent Christ from returning. That is the reason for the anti-Semitism and attacks on the Jews over the centuries.

Israel lies at the heart of God's plan—from the beginning, all the way through to the end.

Discussion Questions

1. In Acts chapter 13, Barnabas and Saul set off on a great adventure (on foot). Describe the best adventure (or hike) you've ever been on.

2. In this passage, the Holy Spirit told the church at Antioch to set Barnabas and Saul apart for a specific work (Acts 13:1-3). How do you think the Spirit communicated this? How do you think the fasting, and praying of the church played into this revelation from God? Is prayer, accompanied by fasting, a prerequisite for hearing from God? How might the Spirit reveal something like this today—and do you think this kind of revelation would be dependent upon the church as a whole fasting and praying?

3. We are made witness to a rather remarkable miracle in Acts chapter 13. Normally, the types of miracles the apostles engage in tend to be on the positive side— healings and resurrections. But here, in Acts 13:11, a miraculous curse is pronounced. What do you think of this? Is this something you would normally expect from God? Why or why not? How does this miracle play into the spread of the gospel (Acts 13:12)? What do we learn about God from this episode?

4. This episode with Bar-Jesus prompts us to consider what our own response should be when we encounter false teaching within the church today. Do we tend to be more lenient than Paul was? Read through the descriptors Paul lays upon this man (Acts 13:10). Can you see leaders in the church today boldly proclaiming that sort of condemnation on false teachers? Why or why not? What should our response be?

5. What parallels do you see between the experience of Paul and the situation of Bar-Jesus? Do you think this experience may have stabbed like a dagger into the heart and memory of Paul? How so? How has God used (or redeemed) a past mistake in your life to further His word? Read 2 Cor 1:3-4. How have you seen this truth play out in your life?

Going Deeper

1. Discuss your experience with fasting and its role in your prayer life. Is fasting something you participate in? Why or why not?

2. In light of the discussion in the introduction to this chapter, what does Jewish priority in spreading the gospel look like today? If we do not make this a priority, are we ignoring Romans 1:16 and being disobedient to what God would have us do? What kinds of evangelistic efforts do you see the church today making with regards to the Jews? Why do you think this is the case?

Transformational Activity

PRAYER:

This week would be a good opportunity to explore how fasting can enhance your prayer life. If you have never fasted before, talk to your pastor or a friend who has fasted for guidance as to how to go about it safely. Decide how long you would like to fast (perhaps a day, or even one meal) and intentionally focus your heart on God every time hunger pangs arise, or the thought of food enters your mind. Also, use this as an opportunity to strengthen your resolve and your ability to say “no” when you need to. Come back together as a group and discuss your experience. Pray together over what God taught you about Himself and about yourself.



Week 20:

Purpose Proclaims the Gospel

Acts chapter 13 is a chapter of new beginnings—of sorts. The church has finally gotten the message about the implications of the New Covenant—and they are starting to organize efforts to spread the good news to the Gentile world. This is a momentous change and an exciting new beginning.

We also see a significant shift in leadership unfold in this section of scripture. Up until this point, the older, more experienced Barnabas had taken the lead in this missionary endeavor. We see in Acts 13:2 that the Holy Spirit indicated He wanted “Barnabas and Saul” set aside for service to Him—with Barnabas mentioned first. Then in Acts 13:7 it is also “Barnabas and Saul” that is mentioned. But beginning in Acts 13:13, we notice that a shift has occurred. Scripture now points to Paul first, saying that “Paul and his company...” put out to sea. From here on out, it is “Paul and Barnabas” that the scriptures refer to—rather than “Barnabas and Paul.”

It is here in this section we also see that John Mark withdraws from the missionary journey. We are not told why, but as we progress through Acts, we will discover that this is no insignificant event. Later in Acts, a disagreement over John Mark will spawn the formation of another missionary team that will be sent out on this mission to the Gentiles.

Yet, another shift happens in Acts chapter 13 that is important to note. Here on Cyprus, we start to see the apostle Paul actually called “Paul.” Prior to this he went by his Hebrew name “Saul.” There is a bit of confusion about this idea of name changes in scripture, and so it might be helpful to pause here for a moment to discuss this idea.

It was not uncommon in that day for Jews who lived in Gentile territories to have two names (in fact, Romans would typically have three names). These Jews would have their Hebrew name and also a Greek name by which they would be more accepted in Roman society. So, as a Jewish man, who was also a Roman citizen, Paul would naturally have two names. Other examples of this in scripture include: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) in Acts 1:23, John called Mark in Acts 12:12, and Silas called Silvanus in Acts chapters 15-18.

Oftentimes we see in scripture that God will change someone's name in accordance with a significant event or new season in their life. God changed the name of Abram (exalted father) to Abraham (father of a multitude) to reflect the promise that Abraham would be the father of many nations. So, too, God gave Sarai (my princess) a new name, Sarah (mother of nations) to cement in her doubting mind the surety of His promise. God changed their names right at the time He instituted the covenant of circumcision to mark this new season.

God also changed Abraham's grandson Isaac's name from Jacob (supplanter) to Israel (having the power of God)—helping Jacob begin to transition from one who was a conniver and schemer to one who would eventually trust in God to provide.

In the New Testament, we see God doing the same thing. We see Jesus call Simon (God has heard) by a new name, Cephas, which means Peter (rock). Jesus changes Peter's name right when He called Him to be a disciple. He was giving Peter a new identity. This is verified for us later as Jesus sometimes calls Peter by his old name—specifically when Peter is acting like his old self.

Consequently, some have taught that after Saul's conversion, God changed his name to Paul to reflect this new life he was to begin. But is this really the case? The conversion of Paul occurred around AD 34-37—and he did not begin his first missionary journey until around

“Paul is beginning a new phase of ministry—a ministry to the Gentiles. Thus, from this point on, Saul is known as Paul as he becomes all things to all men.”

AD 48. Thus, Paul continued to use his Hebrew name for up to 14 years after his conversion. So what was different about this occasion that prompted Paul to begin to use his Roman name, from the commencement of his first missionary journey onward, throughout the rest of his ministry?

In Acts chapter 13, Paul is beginning his ministry to the Gentiles. It would make sense

for Paul to begin to use his Roman name to give him entry into Roman cities more easily. He is identifying with his audience. Paul reveals his heart on this matter in 1 Corinthians chapter 9 where he says:

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1 Corinthians 9:19–23).

Paul is beginning a new phase of ministry—a ministry to the Gentiles. Thus, from this point on, Saul goes by the name Paul as he becomes all things to all men. It is exciting to realize that we too have a name change coming. In Revelation 2:17, Jesus promises to give us a new name. By what new identity will God want us to be known for all eternity?

This now brings us to the meat of the message in Acts chapter 13. Paul is following the priority he reveals in Romans 1:16, and begins his appeal in this new city by visiting the local synagogue, consistently as his first stop. Here we read a powerful recitation of the gospel message, given by Paul to a Jewish audience—which inaugurates his mission to the Gentiles.

Now, on every Sabbath in every synagogue worldwide, there was a reading of the Law as well as a reading from the prophets, after which came the sermon. It was up to the leaders of the synagogue to choose the readers of scripture for the day, but also to choose the speakers. This privilege often fell to distinguished visitors that happened to be in town. Paul and Barnabas were recognized as such—which gives us the blessing of being made witness to the only full-length sermon by Paul to a Jewish audience recorded in scripture.

In his message, Paul gives an historical review, in summary form, of the entire history of Israel. He begins with the Exodus from Egypt, and then moves through the wilderness wanderings and the conquest of the land. He then summarizes the period of the judges and the beginning of the monarchy. He finishes up the history portion of his message with King David—pointing to the fact that all of this recited history was given to prove that this Messiah, Jesus, was the promised descendant of King David.

He then spends time proving that Jesus was, indeed, the Messiah—before moving on to the heart of the gospel message: the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Paul then finishes his gospel presentation by

“It is exciting to realize that we too have a name change coming. In Revelation 2:17, Jesus promises to give us a new name. By what new identity will God want us to be known for all eternity?”

promising that the work of Christ offers the forgiveness of sins. His message was so powerful that the entire city came out to hear Paul the following week. This powerful sermon has much to teach us on how we might formulate the sharing of the gospel with others.

DID YOU KNOW?

In light of the topic of Jewish priority of the gospel, which we discussed last week, some people are confused by Acts 13:46, 51, thinking that Paul was abandoning this principle. This was not a once-and-for-all turning to the Gentiles. This is simply a local or regional situation. This collection of Jews rejected the gospel. Thus, Paul moved on to the Gentiles in this region. He resumes his pattern of going to the Jews first at every new city he visits.



Discussion Questions

1. In this chapter, Paul summarizes the plan of God in one short sermon. If you had to summarize God's plan of salvation in three or four sentences, what would you say?

2. What does it mean to be "justified by faith" (Acts 13:38-39; Gal 3:6; Rom 4:3-5; 3:23-24; 5:1-2; 3:28; 5:8-11). Read each of these verses aloud (stopping after each one to discuss) and build a theology of salvation of grace alone through faith alone. What is the difference between justification and sanctification?

3. Read each of these verses (stopping after each one to discuss) and list the actions of God. What do each of these verses say God did (Acts 13:17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 30, 33, 48)? What do we learn about the heart of God from this passage?

4. In Acts 13:42-52, what are the various reactions recorded here to the gospel message? Why do you think there are such varied responses? What responses happen today when people are told they are sinners and are in danger of Hell?

5. In Acts 13:47, Paul succinctly states what he sees his mission of evangelism entailed. How would you phrase your own mission of evangelism? If you have not thought about this before, or cannot craft such a statement, why do you think that is? What is God's call on each of us regarding spreading His word to the world? Do you feel you take that call seriously? Why or why not?

Going Deeper

1. Read Acts 13:48. What does this verse mean? What does it mean to be “appointed unto eternal life”? Why do you think the Holy Spirit (through Luke) wanted it phrased in this way? Read also John 6:44; Matt 16:17; Eph 2:8-9; Rom 8:29-30). Who is the originator of our faith (Heb 12:2)? Why do you think scripture is so clear that the faith we have is a gift of God—and that we cannot come to Him unless He draws us? Why is this such a difficult truth for many Christians to accept?

2. It has been said that understanding God’s work throughout history helps us to better understand the work of God today. Why do you think Paul took time to recite the history of Israel when presenting the gospel message to this Jewish audience (Luke 24:27, 44-47)? What does this teach us about contextualizing the gospel message in the various settings we encounter? What might this look like in your life?

Transformational Activity

OUTREACH:

Spend some time this week thinking about the types of people with whom you are most comfortable sharing the gospel. Why do you think this is? Are you hesitant to share your faith with your coworkers, your family, or with strangers? Talk with your family or group about each person's experience sharing their faith. Encourage one another to be more bold and active in sharing your faith this week. Pray specifically that God would bring someone across your path who needs to hear the gospel—and then WATCH to see what happens! Pray each morning that God would strengthen your heart, your resolve, and your confidence that He is with you in this adventure.



Week 21:

Purpose Perseveres through Trials

One of the great accomplishments of the Roman Empire was the construction of a system of paved roads that wove their way all throughout the vast reaches of that ancient empire. Though it may not be obvious on the surface, this is yet another subtle reminder of the sovereignty and providence of God in “paving the way” (in this case, literally) for the gospel to go forth at exactly the right time and in the way He desired. These roads were the arteries that carried the apostles along their journey during the initial years of gospel expansion. How much easier must it have made travel in the ancient world to have these well-designed and strategic roadways connecting all the major centers of commerce and population?

The Roman roads were not the only timely and opportune feature of that era that God provided for the spread of His good news. Hundreds of years earlier, Alexander the Great conquered the known world by the age of 23 (and, reportedly, fell on his bed and wept, because there were no more worlds to conquer). In his genius, he enforced Greek as the “lingua franca”—the world-wide common tongue spoken by every people group. This language was inherited by the Romans who, although they preferred Latin, recognized the brilliance of Alexander and let the Greek language remain the language of commerce.

This feature not only united these ancient empires but made commerce and interaction that much easier between nations. An unintended consequence was that the spread of the gospel was made all that much easier as well. The New Testament was written in Greek and was thus easily translatable by every tribe and tongue.

The Hebrew Old Testament had been translated into Greek around 275 BC in Alexandria, Egypt. Thus, the entire canon of scripture would be easily accessible by the entire known world by the end of the first century AD

“When the work of God is being done, it will always be opposed by the evil one. The question remains—what will our own response be?”

We see the chess pieces being strategically moved behind the scenes by our sovereign God in setting the stage for the arrival of Messiah in the fullness of time—and for the spread of the good news throughout the world.

We also recognize that geographically, Israel was strategically placed by God at the crossroads of the world. All the east-west and north-south trade routes that connected the four corners of the globe ran directly through the tiny nation of Israel. Thus, a common tongue, a system of reliable roads, and the centrality of access to all the major ancient thoroughfares set the early church up well for being able to accomplish the Great Commission.

This preparation reaches a climax when the Day of Pentecost arrives, drawing crowds from all over the world to be present in Jerusalem to witness the outpouring of the Spirit of God upon the early church, and to hear the powerful testimony of the death, burial, and resurrection of Messiah—and to then bring that good news back home. This is the stage that is set as the book of Acts begins.

If you notice, there seems to be a pattern developing as Paul and Barnabas visit these new cities. This pattern involves a divided response. We see the gospel message proclaimed and we almost immediately see the satanic opposition. First, we see the power of God on display—something no opposition by the enemy can dim. The gospel is preached and souls are saved. The gospel wields a power in and of itself. It is infused with energy by

and propelled forth by God Himself. It is His Good News that transforms the world. We are simply the grateful voice boxes He uses.

But then, we see the immediate reaction and response by Satan. In Acts, this opposition often takes the shape of Jewish leadership from previous cities Paul has visited sending envoys to follow Paul and foil his plans. This is a pattern we, too, can expect as we are about the work of ministry. When the work of God is being done, it will always be opposed by the evil one. The question remains—what will our own response be? How will we react?

In Acts chapter 14, we see that God has opened a door to the Gentiles—as confirmed by the opposition Satan threw their way. Paul and Barnabas travel throughout Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), utilizing the Via Sebaste, the Roman road commissioned by Augustus Caesar to connect the military colonies in the region.

In each city they visit, they preach first at the Jewish synagogue. Jews and Gentiles come to faith, and then the opposition arises. At Iconium, there arose only the threat of being stoned. So, they fled to the next city on the tour. At Lystra, this opposition devolved into a full-fledged stoning, as Paul was dragged outside the city and left for dead.

One must wonder what was going on in the minds of the disciples at this point—both at that moment and later on as they were recounting to the leadership of the church at Antioch the success of their mission. They must have been wondering, and possibly even doubting,

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Looking at Acts 13:5, 14, 46 and 14:1-7, 21-23, what are some of the features of Paul's missionary strategy on this first journey? Why were each of these strategy elements important? How might this inform our own strategies?



the wisdom of their quest. Would a work that was truly of God instill this kind of anger and opposition in nearly every place they visited? Why would God not prepare a smooth path for this amazing good news?

They must have conquered their fear and their doubts because on they went. Not only that, but they made return visits on their way home to the very places they were very recently nearly killed.

Once they finished this first missionary journey, they gave what must have been a positive report to their commissioning church, in that they characterized it as God having opened the door to the Gentiles.

In some of the towns, there seemed to be a significant number of people who came to trust in Messiah. Yet, in Lystra, despite the initial positive response, (folks so enamored with the miraculous healing that they desired to worship Paul and Barnabas) the sentiment quickly turned. In the space of just one verse, those in Lystra went from worshipping Paul to stoning him. It might be tempting for Paul to write that visit off as a loss, seeing no appreciable results come from his stoning. Yet, we read in Acts 16:1-3 that one young convert that Lystra produced was no less than Timothy—one of the most significant leaders in the early church.

“In the space of just one verse, those in Lystra went from worshipping Paul to stoning him.”

This adventure of spreading the gospel in this early phase of the church was surely teaching Paul and Barnabas a significant lesson—one that would be echoed all throughout Paul’s subsequent writings. This lesson is encapsulated in his message to these churches in Acts 14:22: “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”

What stands out in this journey is that these obstacles never seemed to deter the disciples from their

task. This is a powerful reminder to us that our attitude makes all the difference in the world. The trite saying is “Trials will either make us bitter or better.” If Paul had let these challenges get to him, how much different would the history of the early church have been? We will all face challenges in the Christian life. This is promised to us. The question is: how will we choose to respond?

Discussion Questions

1. Having a city attempt to worship them must have been a surreal experience for Paul and Barnabas. Who was one of your childhood idols? How did they live up to (or fail to live up to) the pedestal you placed them on?

2. What is the purpose of the signs and wonders performed in Acts 14:3? What is Paul's main point about God when speaking to these idol-worshipping pagans in Acts 14:14-18? What kinds of evidence does Paul point these people to in his message? Why would this be effective? What do we learn about Paul in vv. 19-22? What do you think enabled him to press on? What would your reaction and attitude have been if these trials had happened to you?

3. What stands out to you in Acts chapter 14 about the plan of God in the spread of the gospel and how He is guiding its path? Is there anything that surprises you in what God is doing?

4. We have discussed at length the role of suffering in the life of the believer. How do you think most believers feel when they truly understand that we are not promised a bed of roses in this life—but rather, the opposite? How does this attitude change as one grows in their faith? What have you heard from those older and wiser in the faith regarding the purpose and necessity of trials in the Christian walk?

5. Seeing what Paul and Barnabas endured on this first missionary journey, are you encouraged to be bolder in sharing your faith? Or are you more hesitant, understanding that opposition always comes from the enemy when the gospel is preached? Discuss Acts 14:22 as a group. How does this promise from God sit with you?

Going Deeper

1. The people in Lystra reacted to the healing of the man in Acts 14:11 based on their presuppositions and worldview. When you came to faith in Jesus, what was one of the biggest misunderstandings about God or Christianity that you had to overcome before you would believe (if you had any)? What is an objection to Christianity or incorrect assumption about God that you have heard from others? How have you attempted to address these objections or misunderstandings?

2. As we make our way further into the book of Acts, we continue to see that divided response to the gospel mentioned earlier. Some people truly believe, while others are stirred up by the unbelieving Jews and raise up opposition to the gospel. This section raises a lot of questions for us to grapple with. How does Paul react to this opposition? How does he find common ground with whatever audience he encounters? What does Paul say about Jesus in this message? What does this teach us about the different kinds of approaches we should consider taking when sharing the gospel? How might we ascertain where someone is in their faith journey before we begin to share our faith?

Transformational Activity

WORSHIP:

In Acts 14:22, we are given a promise from God—not necessarily the kind of promise we would like, but one we cannot ignore all the same. What do you think about this promise? What are some of the promises of God that are most meaningful to you? Spend time this week focusing in on some of these promises. Then, when you come together as a family or group, share some of these promises with everyone. Make this a time of worship as you praise your God and creator for who is His and what He has promised. If you are able, praise Him for the trials He allows as well.



Week 22:

Purpose Preserves Grace Alone

From time to time throughout church history there have arisen conflicts within the walls of the church that are so serious, so foundational to the identity of the church and the doctrines upon which it rests, that the leaders of the church have felt it necessary to call a church-wide council to resolve these disputes. These conflicts go far beyond local or regional questions, but rather, involve the world-wide church gathering to prayerfully grapple with these issues.

There were many of these councils over the centuries, but the major ones included the councils of Nicea (325 AD) and Constantinople (381 AD). These councils dealt with issues surrounding the doctrines of the Trinity and the deity of Christ. Two more major councils came in the following century—in Ephesus (431 AD) and in Chalcedon (451 AD). These councils dealt with the two natures of Christ (divine and human), and condemned various heresies that had cropped up in the church. These councils were necessary because false doctrine was being taught by *so-called* church leaders.

In fact, this was the process by which the foundation of our universally accepted doctrine was laid. Every major doctrine in scripture has seen a time when it was fully studied and explored by the church—and each of these periods of deep doctrinal exploration was preceded by some sort of significant crisis that caused widespread interest and concern in that specific topic.

During the first few centuries of church history, the main issues the church at large grappled with were foundational in nature (the deity of Christ, the Trinity, the nature of man, and how Christ's two natures were

related)—primarily because this was the groundwork upon which would rest the doctrine for the rest of the church, for all time. These bedrock issues needed to be hammered out by the early church and solidified prior to any other doctrine—specifically because of these major heretics who were teaching otherwise and leading people astray. The rise of these heretics was the crisis that prompted the in-depth examination of those foundational issues.

Later, in the time of the Reformation, the church wrestled with the nature of justification (how we are made right with God), authority in the church, and the role of the sacraments—all because major abuses were being committed by an apostate Roman Catholic church. These abuses were so egregious that it made the Reformation necessary. This widespread apostasy was the crisis that caused these next doctrines to be studied, explored, and codified.

This brings us back to Acts chapter 15 and the calling of the very first all-church council. Undoubtedly, the most significant issue the early church struggled with revolved around how Gentiles and Jews fit together in the church. In this first church council, they debated whether Gentiles must adopt the identity markers of Israel (circumcision, dietary laws, etc.) to be considered children of Abraham, or whether there now a new way of identifying the people of God after the coming of the New Covenant.

Back in Acts chapters 9 and 10, we discussed how the church began to grapple with this issue. We saw that the new revelation these Jewish believers struggled with was that Jews and Gentiles now had equal access to God in this brand new organism called “the church.”

We discussed earlier that when God had set apart Israel as His people, He gave them specific means for keeping themselves separate and distinct from the nations around them. This “set-apartness” helped

preserve and protect them for experiencing the blessing God had promised them. The primary marker that identified Israel to others as God's people was the sign of circumcision, as well as other means of identification such as dietary laws, Sabbath keeping, and various purity practices. All of these served to delineate who was and who was not a part of the people of God.

To see how these things came to be, we look back to the intertestamental period when the Jews were subjected to unrelenting attacks on their identity and uniqueness. In fact, these "identity markers" were

"...when Paul arrived, teaching that all these (fleshly) identity markers were no longer important, the Jews would naturally have assumed that their national distinctiveness was simply under attack again."

the focal point of the attack on the Jews after their return from the Babylonian exile. As such, these identity markers became the acid test of one's loyalty to Judaism. Preserving that separateness understandably became a matter of not only extreme passion and fervor for the Jews, but was a matter of survival.

Thus, when Paul arrived, teaching that all these (fleshly) identity markers were no longer necessary (or applicable), the Jews would naturally have assumed that their national

distinctiveness was simply under attack again. When the New Covenant age dawned, Jewish believers were not prepared for the fact that the Law, and all the external identity markers they had fought and died for were no longer to serve as the identity marker of the people of God. It was now to be the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Just as circumcision and the Law defined the boundaries of who comprised the people of God under the Mosaic covenant, it is the gift of the Spirit that serves this purpose under the New Covenant. It was this radical

change from an outward, fleshly sign of belonging, to an inward, spiritual sign of belonging that was so difficult for the Jews to understand. The outward signs were all they ever had known.

So many Gentiles were coming to faith as a result of the first missionary journey by Paul that the Jerusalem council became necessary. When the “circumcision party” in Jerusalem got wind of the fact that these new believers were not being circumcised, they took it upon themselves to go down to Antioch to confront this challenge to the status quo. As we see in Acts 15:24, the leaders of the church did not send them. These troublemakers perhaps had their feathers ruffled because Peter had already successfully defended his ministry to the Gentiles before the leadership at Jerusalem (Acts 11:18). Thus, they simply came down to Antioch on their own and began teaching that unless these Gentiles were circumcised, that they could not be saved. Paul and Barnabas opposed them, and this confrontation lit the match, which started the fire that was resolved at the Jerusalem council.

The result of the council was that the church leadership rightly decided that they should not “bother the Gentiles” in placing upon them the burden of obeying the Law—a burden they themselves were not able to bear. The only thing they did ask these Gentile converts to do was to be careful not to offend their Jewish brethren with regard to meat sacrificed to idols, with blood, and to be sure to keep themselves clean from sexual immorality.

According to commentator Arnold Fruchtenbaum, the important takeaways from this first church council include: the gospel of grace was reaffirmed, the unity

“...well-intentioned believers can very well be wrong and jeopardize the mission of the church. We must always guard against any teaching that adds anything to faith as a requirement for salvation.”

of the church was preserved, the evangelization of the Gentiles could now proceed, and the Gentile churches were encouraged. Also, it was clear now that the future of the church was now guaranteed, in that they were protected from this insidious legalism. We also see the church's problems were settled by prayerful discussion, and an important separation was made away from Rabbinic and Mosaic Judaism.

One important truth we can all take away from this episode is that well-intentioned believers can very well be wrong and jeopardize the mission of the church. We must always guard against any teaching that adds anything to faith as a requirement for salvation.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

How is a call to holiness different than legalism? What calls to holiness have you most resonated with (a book, sermon, podcast, etc.)? What does pursuing holiness and godliness look like in your life?



Discussion Questions

1. What style of worship did you grow up with in church (hymns or choruses)? What happened when you first attended a church with a different style than you were used to?

2. How would you summarize the issue the church was grappling with in Acts chapter 15? Why was circumcision so important to the Jews? Why was it important that it not be imposed upon Gentile believers? What is the core message of the gospel? In other words, what is required for salvation? Why is this such an important topic to be clear on?

3. One commentator summarized this chapter by saying, “The church cannot make a test of fellowship what God does not make a condition of salvation.” What do you think about this idea? What are some examples of where this might apply? Where do you see this violated in the church today? From this passage (and from this comment), what do we learn about God’s heart for our attitudes of grace and acceptance in the church today?

4. Why do you think many of us in the church often have a bent toward legalism? What are some examples of legalism you have encountered in churches you have attended?

5. The issue in Acts chapter 15 is all about the purity of the gospel message—not adding anything to the gospel of grace. But the flip-side of this question is also important. In light of our desire not to offend Christian brothers (1 Cor 8), how far should we go in sacrificing the freedom we have in Christ? How much should we “go along to get along”? As another way of looking at this question: which is more important, exercising our rights, or love and grace toward our brothers? What are some examples of sacrificing freedoms have you seen or have done yourself? Where have you grappled with this issue?

Going Deeper

1. What activities or practices do you think Christians should be sensitive about engaging in, in the presence of a watching world? Why? How far can we go in restricting our freedoms (or expecting others to) before it becomes legalism?

2. Why did God choose Peter to be so instrumental in evangelizing the Gentiles, and not just Paul? What was the danger of different factions springing up within the early church—and how was this avoided?

Transformational Activity

BIBLE STUDY:

Take some time this week to reread the first part of the book of Acts again. This time, read it through the lens of what God has been doing in preparing the way for the gospel to go out to the Gentiles. Write down what you discover about how doors were opened, minds were changed, prejudices were undermined, and how the unmistakable presence of the Holy Spirit in these endeavors forced everyone involved to accept this new, difficult, culture changing, theological reality. When you meet with your family or group, discuss what you have been reminded of through this exercise, as well as ways that you think God might be opening your eyes to something you have not been able to see before in your own life.



Week 23: Purpose Provides Change

Coming out of the events of Acts chapter 15, the early church marked a significant milestone in their growth and development. The controversy surrounding the role that circumcision and other identity markers played in the family of God under the New Covenant had the potential of causing division and disunity. Yet, the church passed this test with flying colors. They handled the dispute peaceably and maturely, and sought the leading of the Spirit throughout. However, as we continue on reading in Acts chapter 15, we see an interesting and perhaps confusing event happen in the ministry of Paul almost immediately following this important theological and doctrinal decision.

Because John Mark had backed out of the first missionary journey that Paul and Barnabas had just completed (Acts 13:13), when Barnabas suggested to Paul that Mark accompany them on their second journey, Paul was understandably hesitant. This issue became such a point of contention between them that Paul and Barnabas parted ways. Barnabas took Mark with him to revisit Cyprus, and Paul chose Silas to join him on this next trip.

As mentioned earlier, when Paul arrived back at Lystra and Derbe, he became acquainted with Timothy—and was so impressed by him, Paul asked him to join them on their journey. This is where the confusing part comes in. Timothy was a Jewish believer in Messiah who had not been circumcised. Most likely, his Greek father did not allow it. So Luke tells us that Paul had Timothy circumcised prior to setting out on their journey (because of the Jews in those parts).

The immediate question that arises is: did not Paul just fight a heated battle over whether or not

circumcision was necessary anymore? Why would Paul feel the need to have Timothy circumcised, when he fought so hard for Gentiles not to be burdened with that? In fact, in Galatians 2:2 we read that Paul’s other travelling companion on this missionary journey, Titus, was not compelled to be circumcised. Why did Paul want Timothy to be circumcised and not Titus? Was Paul being inconsistent (at best), or hypocritical (at worst)?

“Why did Paul want Timothy to be circumcised and not Titus? Was Paul being inconsistent (at best), or hypocritical (at worst)?”

There are several differences that need to be pointed out between the situations of Titus and Timothy that help us to understand what Paul would have been thinking. First, we see in Galatians 2:2-5 that Titus was a Gentile (a Greek). Yet, Timothy was a Jew. Although he had a Greek father, in that time having a Jewish mother meant that he was Jewish. He was also was raised studying the scripture (2 Tim 3:15) and was well thought of even by the surrounding cities (Acts 16:1-2).

So for Titus, giving in to the pressure to be circumcised meant that he would be acknowledging that the old identity markers were indeed still valid—that nothing had truly changed with the coming of Messiah and the inauguration of the New Covenant. Titus being circumcised would communicate that to be a part of the family of God, one still had to become Jewish. That was precisely the battle Paul had been fighting, and was the mindset he was trying to correct.

Whereas Timothy was already Jewish. For him to be circumcised did not carry with it the implication of the necessity of being Jewish to be saved. He was not moving from being a Gentile to becoming a Jew—as it would have been with Titus.

Next, the people that Paul was opposing in

Galatians chapter 2, as well as in Acts chapter 15, were those that called themselves Christians. They were believers in Messiah who were suffering under the constraints of legalism and were trying to impose that legalism on Gentile converts—and trying to get Titus to comply. This battle against legalism is the heart of the controversy of Acts chapter 15.

Yet it was not Christians who would have wanted Timothy to be circumcised. It was not an internal pressure to give into legalism that motivated Paul to have Timothy circumcised. It was an external desire and heart for evangelism that motivated Paul. He wanted to remove any barrier to unbelieving Jews—those whom Paul and Timothy were trying to save. This is what moved Paul to ask this of Timothy. Paul clearly desired to become all things to all people, so as to win others to Christ. And he motivated others around him to do likewise. Paul explained his heart to the church he loved in Corinth. We pointed to this passage a few weeks ago, but it is important to mention here as well:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law

STUDY TIP

Often, something as subtle as a pronoun can carry with it great meaning and insight. In our passage this week, we see Luke transition to using first person pronouns (16:10), indicating that he had joined the mission personally. Other important passages where pronouns greatly inform the meaning and interpretation include both Hebrews chapter 6 and 1 Thessalonians chapter 5.



of Christ, that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some. And I do all things for the sake of the gospel, that I may become a fellow partaker of it (1 Cor 9:19-22).

Because Paul always began his missionary efforts in each new city by preaching in the synagogue, he surely would have faced much opposition from his Jewish audience. This would be especially true if he was travelling and partnering with someone who was Jewish by heritage, but by behavior, was ostensibly repudiating one of the most important, closely held traditions of these Jews. Paul already faced an uphill battle with Jews, who felt he was abandoning Judaism. Removing one minor stumbling block for these Jews, whom Paul loved, was something we can be confident Timothy was glad to sacrifice for.

As this missionary journey continued, Paul and Titus found themselves redirected by the Holy Spirit on a number of occasions. It appears the Spirit made it clear they were not to head toward Asia (a region in western Turkey) as their next stop. They also desired to go to Bithynia, but God said “no” to that as well. Undeterred, they kept pressing on until their next destination was revealed by God to Paul in a dream.

What does this teach us about pursuing the will of God? One simple truth we can glean is that we must not become victims of “analysis paralysis.” Paul and Titus could have stopped in their tracks and tried to “discern God’s will.” Rather, they kept pressing on, allowing the Spirit to guide them as they went. They never stopped moving forward—energetically and passionately pursuing the task God had laid out for them. It was never a question of whether or not they would share the gospel. It was simply a matter of where they would carry out that obedience. They were Energizer bunnies that simply needed to be pointed in the right direction—and they were going! As

we are seeking God's best for our lives, we might follow that same example and be always pressing forward.

One last interesting note regarding Paul and his companions finally arriving Philippi and beginning to spread God's word in Europe for the first time is that Paul's first stop in Philippi was not at the synagogue. Was Paul finally changing tactics and giving up on this Jewish priority? No, we see that on the Sabbath Paul went outside the city gates, alongside the river, seeking out a place of prayer. Why would he go here rather than to the synagogue?

When we look back at the Babylonian captivity, when the Jews were separated from their homeland, the book of Ezekiel reveals that they would gather down by the river Chebar to weep and pray for their homeland and for the temple that lay in ruins. This became a traditional place for Jews to gather when they had no formal house of worship.

We know it took ten Jewish men to form a quorum and organize into a synagogue in any given town. Evidently, there were not enough Jewish men in Philippi to form a synagogue, and so Paul went where he knew faithful Jews would gather—down by the river. Jewish priority was still alive and well, and Paul sought out Jews where he knew he would find them.

“...there were not enough Jewish men in Philippi to form a synagogue, and so Paul went where he knew faithful Jews would gather—down by the river.”

Discussion Questions

1. Paul and Barnabas had a famous “parting of the ways” here in Acts chapter 15. Describe a time when you had a parting of the ways (a breakup, moving to a new place, breaking of fellowship). What was it like, and why was it significant to you?

2. At the end of Acts chapter 15, we see a conflict between two of the superstar leaders of the early church. What do you see as the case for Barnabas’ position? For Paul’s? What was the result of this conflict? How did it result in the furtherance of the gospel? Why do you think the early church chose to send out missionary efforts in teams like this (older and more experienced paired with younger)? What can this teach us about leadership development? How did having teams help with travel and evangelism in these missionary journeys?

3. How did the Lord open your heart to receive the gospel? Whom did He use in this process? How has the Lord used you in helping open others' hearts to the gospel? What does this phrase "the Lord opened her heart" teach us about God and about salvation? How might this truth inform your own personal evangelism?

4. What do you think about the idea of God guiding by the opening and closing of doors? Where have you seen this in the lives of others? Where have you see this in your own life? What is the danger of relying too heavily on this as a gauge of the will of God? What are other ways of following the leading of the Spirit? How is discerning God's will often a "team effort"?

5. Timothy certainly had the right to not be subjected to circumcision. But he chose to give up those rights, in order that the gospel might have a better reception. When have you given up your rights (what you deserve) for a greater good? Why do you think our culture today focuses so much more on rights than responsibilities? What is one way you can give up your rights this week for the purpose of serving others better?

Going Deeper

1. Why do you think God used more direct methods of revealing His will in New Testament times—even speaking directly to people? Why don't we see this today? What is the advantage of God not interacting with us today in that same way? What is the role of faith in all of this?

2. What are some other biblical examples of God using apparent setbacks in the furtherance of His plan? How did these situations play out? What does this teach us about the sovereignty of God?

Transformational Activity

OUTREACH:

In Acts chapters 15-16, we are following along with Paul as he is engaging in full-time missionary endeavors. While many of us would love to be able to serve God and His mission in this way, few of us are able—or willing to make the sacrifices necessary. But *full-time* is not the only way to participate in the missionary movement and call of God to “go into all the world.” Discuss with your family or group how together, you might support the missionary endeavors of others around the world. Simply writing a check is the “easy button” solution, but explore beyond this how else you might be enlisted by God in this outreach undertaking. Then take the next step of actually committing to do it!



Week 24:

Purpose Promotes Opportunity

In Acts chapter 16, we come to a simple story with a simple message. Beaten and bloody, Paul and Silas are sitting in a lightless, airless, dungeon-like prison cell. And we watch and wait to see what God will do.

Two significant things stand out in this passage. The first is the response of Paul and Silas to the situation in which they found themselves. The second is the profound nature of a simple question and a simple answer.

Paul and Silas had just begun this second missionary journey and had been able to visit and strengthen some of the cities where Paul had founded churches on his previous trip. They were also able to add a few more members to their team. Timothy joined their mission in Derbe. Then also, in Acts 16:10 we notice the pronouns in the narration switch to “we” from “they,” indicating that the author, Luke, joined them in Troas. He will remain with them until they reach Philippi—where it appears he stays behind to minister. The “we” pronouns continue until the end of chapter 16. They resume in Acts 20:5 when Paul revisits Philippi on his way back home. This is where Luke rejoins the team.

After a good beginning to their journeys, Paul and his team must have been feeling a sense of elation, sensing God’s leading and direction—having been prompted to make the big step of taking the gospel into Europe for the first time. They arrive in Philippi and the gospel does its work. Lydia and her family are saved. However, this is where the trouble begins. Where God is at work, Satan will attempt to thwart that work.

When Paul casts a demon out of a servant girl, her masters have Paul and Silas arrested. This was pretty

much the norm Paul had seen in most of the cities he visited. He arrives, the gospel is preached, and the opposition begins. Sometimes it would come in the form of an angry mob. At other times, it involved being run out of town. This time, it manifested as a beating with rods.

This is where we find Paul and Silas—in the inner prison, their backs flayed open, sitting in stocks. And this is where they have a choice to make. They can bemoan

“This is where we find Paul and Silas—in the inner prison, their backs flayed open, sitting in stocks. And this is where they have a choice to make.”

their situation or they can trust God. They can cry out in anger and frustration, arguing that they had done nothing to deserve this. Or they can praise God for the opportunity He gave them to preach the gospel.

We, too, are frequently faced with that same situation. Not that we find ourselves beaten and sitting in stocks all that often—but trials and tribulations do regularly (and predictably) come our way. It is then that we, too, have a choice to make. We can wallow in our misery. We can cry out “why God?” Or we can look beyond our present troubles to the One who sits outside of time and sees the end from the beginning—who is allowing struggles to come into our lives to enable us learn to trust Him more. Our response in those moments makes all the difference in the world. God can redeem those moments for His purposes and for His glory, and transform what can seem like hopeless situations into jubilant triumphs.

We often see David crying out to God in the Psalms. And yes, God’s shoulders are big enough to handle the weight of our complaints and tears. But where does David invariably end up in those Psalms? He travels from the “why God” questions, to the settled, rested assurance in the One whom he knows is in control. That is where God wants us to end up—trusting that He will not fail us.

When all seemed lost, Paul and Silas chose to pray and sing songs of praise to God. And Luke makes sure to mention that the prisoners were listening. Paul and Silas chose to be joyful despite their circumstances and trust that God was still God, even though, for a time, the world around them seemed to be falling apart. What did God do in response?

A giant earthquake rocked the prison and just so happened to loose all their bonds. Paul and Silas trusted God, and God worked a miracle. Because they chose joy in the midst of trials, the prisoners heard the gospel. Because they chose not to flee when their chains were loosed, the jailer and his family were saved. Because they trusted God and chose joy, a church was founded in Philippi—a church that Paul would later write a powerful letter to. In this letter, he crafts for our benefit an instruction manual on how to have joy in the midst of troubles. The book of Philippians is called the epistle of joy. It has blessed millions upon millions of faithful Christ followers over the centuries who have also found themselves facing trials and tribulations.

In this precious letter, we now have memorialized for us the wonderful promises, reminders, and assurances that have buoyed many a fragile heart over the years. Paul models for us, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13). He enjoins us, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:6-7). Paul focuses our attention on heavenly things by declaring, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil 1:21).

The first significant thing that stands out in this passage is that we are given an example to follow. We can choose joy—despite our circumstances—and because of the God we serve. So many amazing blessings flowed from Paul and Silas choosing joy.

The next significant thing in this passage is really a consequence of the first. It is that we are given a solution for the human condition. Here, we are provided a succinct, powerful answer to the question that every thinking soul wrestles with, namely, what is the purpose of this life? What is the remedy for all the suffering in the world? What is solution God provides for the state of fallen mankind?

Because Paul and Silas choose joy, they are given the opportunity to preach the gospel to the Philippian jailer. And because of this, he asks a pointed question that is recorded in scripture. This is a question that cuts to the heart of the desperate heart cry of our sinful souls. “What must I do to be saved?” This is the ultimate question of life.

The answer is just as profound, and just as succinct: “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved...” This is the message of the gospel in two brief sentences. What must I do? Believe! That is the message of the gospel, and more broadly, the message of the entire Bible condensed into its most compact form.

This really is the message of this fallen life. We find ourselves in a broken world, surrounded by pain and suffering. We seek and search and long for any kind of lasting relief—which never really arrives. When we reach the end of our rope and have nowhere else to turn, we finally ask that inevitable question, “What must I do to be saved?” And here, in a smelly dungeon—in a dark, dank prison cell—we hear the simple answer: Jesus. All we must do—all we can do—is believe. We must trust that we cannot save ourselves. We must acknowledge our creature-hood and humbly

“All we must do—all we can do—is believe. We must trust that we cannot save ourselves. We must acknowledge our creature-hood and humbly submit, bow, and concede our dependence upon our creator.”

submit, bow, and concede our dependence upon our creator.

It is that simple. All the deep, probing, existential questions that self-absorbed mankind has prided itself in asking from time immemorial, can be shown to be folly in one simple idea. Admit and recognize that you cannot—and that only God can.

DID YOU KNOW?

Augustus Caesar and Antony defeated Brutus and Cassius just outside of Philippi. Augustus made Philippi a Roman colony where ex-military were given land upon retiring. Filled with such a military population, who typically despised the Jews, it is no wonder that there was not the requisite number of ten Jewish men to form a synagogue.



Discussion Questions

1. While sitting in jail, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. What kinds of music (and which artists) most draw you into worship?

2. Why did Paul cast the spirit out of the young girl? What do you think of his reaction and response to that annoyance? In reaction to their beating, what did Paul and Silas spend the night doing? What does this tell us about their view of God? Their view of their circumstances? Their view of the jailer? Their view of suffering in the life of the believer?

3. What effect did Paul and the gospel have on the individuals mentioned in Acts 16 (Lydia, the slave girl, the jailer)? How is hope an integral part of the gospel message? What do we learn about God in Acts 16:6-10 and 16:25-34?

4. How do you see others around you responding to injustices happening to them? Is it more common to see others leave matters to the sovereignty of God, knowing that justice belongs to Him? Or is it more common to see people cry out and fight for their rights? What are some examples?

5. Earlier in this chapter, Paul’s group was actively guided by the Holy Spirit. Here, Paul chooses not to use his “get out jail free” card (of being a Roman citizen) and allows himself to be beaten, and then also chooses not to leave the jail when God provided a means of escape. These decisions must have been difficult, and were surely guided by the Spirit. What is your process for seeking the will of God in your life? Does it involve more than praying about a situation? Do you also seek out counsel? Do you seek out other means as well? Describe your process. What is one way you can endeavor to involve God more in your decisions this week?

Going Deeper

1. Why do you think Paul did not reveal his Roman citizenship until after the beating and imprisonment in Acts 16:22, when in Acts 22:25 he did so to avoid the beating? How were the situations different? What does this tell us about Paul and his commitment to the gospel?

2. The Philippian jailer asks a question many of us would love to hear: “What must I do to be saved?” If you were asked that question, how would you respond?

Transformational Activity

WORSHIP:

In Acts chapter 16, we see Paul and Silas singing songs of praise and worshipping—and it says “the prisoners were listening to them.” Discuss with your family or group how your own worship (the songs you sing, or the music you listen to) might be a witness to a watching world. Try to strategize one or two specific things you can do in this area that will make the aroma of Christ around you unmistakable. When you come back together, discuss how it went.



Week 25: Purpose Builds Endurance

It's interesting to note that upon leaving Philippi, Paul and his team travelled down the Egnatian way—a famous Roman road that linked the Aegean and the Adriatic seas. It ran through Philippi, across Macedonia, all the way to Rome, where it met up with Appian way. As Paul and his team left Philippi, they first came to the city of Amphipolis, the capital city of Macedonia Prima—a seemingly perfect and influential place for them to stop and share the gospel. But they passed this city by. They next came to Apollonia. Yet they did not stop here either. Neither of these towns apparently had a synagogue where Paul could fulfill his mandate of Romans 1:16—to the Jew first. So, on they went. The next town they came to was Thessalonica, where there was, as the text says, a synagogue of the Jews.

For three weeks Paul shared the gospel with the Jews in this synagogue, “...according to the scriptures.” He argued that the Messiah had to suffer, die, and rise again. The question for us then is: what were the scriptures referred to here? It was clearly and only the Old Testament. This was all that was available to them. The New Testament had not yet been written. This brings up the next pointed question. If we, today, were given the opportunity to share the heart of the gospel with someone, and we were only allowed to use the Old Testament, how effective would our presentation be? What are the Old Testament scriptures that come to mind that argue for the necessity of the crucifixion of Messiah? This might be a subtle nudge for us to spend a little more time in the Old Testament. Unfortunately, many people today consider Christianity to be a New Testament religion. And nothing could be further from the truth.

The stark reality is, if we are not familiar with the

Old Testament, then most of the New Testament makes no sense. For example, if we are not grounded in the truth of the fall of mankind in the early chapters of Genesis, then the remedy for the fall—which God provides in the death, burial, and resurrection of the Messiah—has no context and does not make any sense. If we are not conversant with the promise of salvation God offered to the world in the Abrahamic covenant, then the New Covenant inaugurated in the early chapters of Acts makes no sense. If we do not understand the sacrificial

“We are not a New Testament church. We are a biblical church that relies on the whole counsel of God, not just the last third of His revelation of Himself.”

system God instituted with Israel, then the sin sacrifice on the cross makes no sense. If we are not rooted in the sovereignty of God which is seen over and over and over again in His dealings with His covenant people Israel, then we will have an incomplete understanding of the promise-keeping nature of God presented in the New Testament—a truth that serves as an anchor for the confidence of our salvation.

One of the biggest tragedies flowing from the flawed theology of those that believe the church has replaced Israel in the plan of God is this truncated view of the plan of God, which causes many in the church today to view themselves as a “New Testament church.” We are not a New Testament church. We are a biblical church that relies on the whole counsel of God, not just the last third of His revelation of Himself.

So, Paul spends three weeks explaining the gospel to the Thessalonians. Not much more detail is revealed about this church in the book of Acts. We learn that, as usual, the gospel faced opposition, which caused the brethren to send Paul and Silas away by night. If we had to rely on this account alone, we would know very little about their situation. Yet, fortunately, Paul takes time later to write a couple of letters to this church to check

in on them. It is here in the books of First and Second Thessalonians that we learn so much more about this church and about what they struggled with.

Through these books, we see this church was undergoing persecution and affliction. This provides Paul with the opportunity to write a couple of invaluable letters that reveal much about the plan of God. These letters point us back to hope as the anchor we must hold on to when tribulations come our way. In the very brief time Paul spent in this city, he found it crucial to focus much of his efforts and message on the subject of the return of Christ. He only spent three weeks there, and many of the questions this church later writes to Paul about focus on this important doctrine.

As we have seen before, when persecution arises, it is our hope in the return of Christ that serves as a lifeline for us to cling to. As we study this doctrine of the end-times more and more, it becomes increasingly clear that the sovereignty of God is more on display in this doctrine than just about anywhere else. It is an understanding of the sovereignty of God that can assuage our fears and help us defeat the encroaching anxiety so many of us feel. A rock-solid confidence in God's sovereignty is indeed the remedy for the anxious feelings and fear that grip so many Christians today. We can be so grateful that Paul and his team stopped in Thessalonica—which ultimately produced and revealed such a crucial puzzle piece of God's plan.

The rabble-rousers in Thessalonica make a passing comment referencing the effect that Paul and his merry band of evangelists were having on the world. When trying to manufacture charges against Paul and his team, some jealous Jews formed a mob with some wicked men from the

“It is an understanding of the sovereignty of God that that can assuage our fears and help us defeat the encroaching anxiety so many of us feel.”

marketplace, and claim that these men (Paul and those with him) “have turned the world upside-down.” This is early on in the career of Paul. This is only his second missionary journey, and already, the Roman Empire has taken notice.

The simple message of Christ crucified is having the effect that our savior desired, when He commissioned His church by sending them out to the uttermost parts of the world. This simple, but profoundly powerful message carries with it the potential to disrupt the course of this age. What an eye-opening, yet also convicting, truth flows from this simple comment. What effect were two young men having on the course of world events by preaching the gospel—on foot, town by town, dusty mile by dusty mile?

The next penetrating and necessary question that begs to be asked is: what effect would millions upon millions of Christians today have—who have literally at their fingertips the technology and ability to reach out to the entire world with one tweet, or post, or message? What effect could we (or perhaps should we) have on the world around us—if we were as committed to spreading the gospel as these early servants of God were?

As Paul and Silas flee Thessalonica, they come to a town we know even less about. The town of Berea is mentioned only here in the book of Acts—a city which Cicero calls “an out of the way city.” Yet this city carries with it a scriptural mention so powerful—so commendable—that we come back to this tiny mention time and time again.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

In Luke 8:4-15 we see Jesus discussing the different responses people give to the gospel as illustrated in the parable of the four soils. How do you see the four soils play out in the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea?



In Acts 17:11, Paul commends the Bereans, because unlike those in Thessalonica, it is said that they took the time to check up on what Paul taught them. Luke records that those in Berea, "...were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so." In other words, they didn't take Paul's word for it. They did their own research. They compared what they heard from Paul with God's revelation of Himself in scripture. That's why every teacher worth his salt will tell you *not* to unquestioningly believe everything they tell you, but rather, to check what you hear by the word of God. In other words, we need to do our own study and prove it to ourselves using scripture as our guide. We know little else of Berea, but this little mention is worth its weight in gold.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe a time when you spent a night in pain. How did your experience compare with Paul and Silas?

2. What is Paul accused of here in Thessalonica? What really lies behind these accusations? What does it mean that “these men have turned the world upside-down”? What did the rabble-rousers mean by it—and what did it mean in reality? In the intervening 2,000 years, how has the truth of the gospel turned the world upside-down? What effects has Christianity had on Western culture? What are some examples?

3. Where do you see the hand of God at work in this segment of Paul’s second missionary journey? How did God get Paul (and the gospel) over to Macedonia to get its initial foothold in Europe? By what means did God arrange for Paul and his team to get to the key cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Athens? Why is it important to take note of the sovereign, guiding hand of God in what happens around us?

4. In scripture, we can sometimes be surprised at the allegiances certain people or groups display. We have on the one hand, the religious leaders at the trial of Jesus crying out, “We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15). And on the other hand, we witness a once-pagan king of the world, Nebuchadnezzar, proclaiming that God is the Most High, and His dominion endures from generation to generation (Dan 4:34). This battle over who truly is king, Caesar or Jesus, lies at the heart of the trouble these early Christians faced. What it comes down to is this. Where do our sympathies and allegiances lie? Are they in this world, or the next? With all that being said, how do you see Christians today lining up in that same battle? How successful are we in rendering to Caesar that which is his, and rendering to God that which is His? Where can we do better?

5. How would you compare your own Bible study with that of the Bereans? What kinds of Bible study do you engage in—beyond just reading the text? What questions do you have about how to go about studying the Bible?

Going Deeper

1. Reflecting the questions asked in this week's introduction, what are the Old Testament passages that come to mind that argue for the necessity of the crucifixion of Messiah? How would you go about leading a Jewish person to a saving knowledge of Messiah using the Old Testament alone?

2. Why do you think Paul spent so much energy explaining the doctrine of the return of Christ to this church in Thessalonica? What is the benefit for us in spending time understanding this doctrine for ourselves? What is the connection between eschatology (the study of the end times) and the sovereignty of God? What is the connection between embracing the sovereignty of God and the battle with anxiety in our lives?

Transformational Activity

PRAYER:

When we read about Paul being beaten or forced to flee for his life from some of these cities, this reality can be a bit foreign to us. We live in a time and place where the freedom to worship how we like is still legal (for now). But we must be mindful that there are many places around the world where this is not the case. Take some time together as a family or group to pray for the persecuted church. Perhaps even do a bit of research on where the most persecution is happening today. As a group, adopt a specific region or country and commit to pray for them.



Week 26: Purpose Promotes Boldness

In Acts chapter 17, we see a very important event for the early church. Paul is given the opportunity to testify to the truth of the resurrection in the very epicenter of high-brow, sophisticated thought and culture in the world at that time—the Areopagus in Athens.

As was his priority, when Paul arrived in any city he went first to the synagogue to proclaim the gospel (Acts 17:17). In Athens, when he had received a favorable hearing in both the synagogue and the marketplace, he was taken to the Areopagus, the ancient meeting place for the Areopagus Court, the highest court in Greece. This is where civil, criminal, and religious matters were all heard—dating back to the time of ancient Greece. In Paul’s day, it continued to be a meeting place where philosophers and thinkers would discuss religion, philosophy, and ethics.

While there, Paul encountered representatives from the two leading Greek philosophies—Epicureanism and Stoicism. Epicureanism taught that while God did exist, He was not interested in nor involved in the affairs of man. The purpose of life was simply the seeking of pleasure. The Stoics, on the other hand, taught that

“The realm of the demonic is real, and powerful, and is constantly trying to draw our attention away from the one true God.”

the goal of life was to rise above the mundane existence of this world and seek for higher truth, and to avoid all entanglements with the flesh. This was the *pool of worldviews* Paul was swimming in.

What we see in this encounter with secular philosophy is a collision of worldviews. Greek philosophers were perfectly comfortable debating amongst themselves. Yet Paul was

bringing in a new teaching—a teaching that challenged their presuppositions. He attacked everything they took for granted. Paul argued, contrary to what his listeners believed, that God did not dwell in temples made with hands. He told them that God was not served by human hands and was not needy. These truths undermined the foundation of everything their pagan view of worship was based on. He argued that the divine nature was not like gold, silver, or stone—something dreamt up by man. Paul claimed these things while surrounded by gold, silver, and stone—all objects of worship.

But the most ingenious aspect of Paul's approach was to take something his listeners were familiar with and then imbue it with new meaning. Paul spring-boarded his whole message off the name of an obscure altar he had seen on his way into town. The altar was entitled, "to an unknown god." He claimed that he would now reveal to them who this God was, that they were unfamiliar with. He used this as a way to relate to and connect with his audience. This sermon by Paul serves as a wonderful example for us, in that it begins where the listeners are and then lays out the rationale for a Christian worldview.

Here we see Paul use a "hook" upon which he hangs his explanation of the gospel. Paul had to know the culture he was dealing with before he could undermine their presuppositions and help correct their thinking. Paul is setting up a context his hearers would understand, a context into which he could then proclaim the message that God was calling them to repentance—and from there he explains the truth of the resurrection. He explains who God is, what He is like, and the Christian view of history.

As we discuss how Paul confronts the idols and false gods in Athens, we sometimes hear how foolish these groups were to worship such things—because they are clearly not real. But perhaps our takeaway might more rightly be that, yes, they are real, but they are not God. The power behind these idols would not have inspired

worship if there was no real power there. The realm of the demonic is real, and powerful, and is constantly trying to draw our attention away from the one true God.

The truth is, we all have competing voices drawing us in different directions. In the world back then, it looked like idol worship. Yet is it really any different today? Scripture describes these voices as three influences drawing us toward sin and away from God: the world, the flesh, and the devil. 1 John 2:16 says: “For everything in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life, comes not from the Father but from the world.”

How do we hear the one true voice of God in our lives? We are constantly hearing competing voices in our heads and hearts—voices from the world around us and from our friends as to what to do, think, feel, and where to go. With all these voices and influences, how are we to know when it is God who is speaking?

The most obvious answer is that we are to spend time with God. The more time we spend with Him, the more clearly we know His voice—and the more recognizable it will be. This involves spending time in His word, spending time in prayer, and spending time walking with Him in our daily lives. This is referred to in scripture as “walking in the Spirit”. It is also described as being *filled with the Spirit*.

While we can often make this more complicated than it needs to be, the simple idea is that to be “filled” is to be “controlled by.” As we have discussed, the Greek word for “filled” in Ephesians 5:18 (where we are commanded to be filled with the Spirit) is “pleroo” (play-raw-owe). This term carries with it the idea of being carried along or borne

“...a simple definition of being filled with the Spirit would be 'a moment by moment decision to yield our will to the will of the Holy Spirit.'”

by—to be controlled by. When someone in scripture is “filled with” rage, or fear, or jealousy, they are controlled by those things.

So, to be filled with the Holy Spirit is to be controlled by the Holy Spirit. Thus, a simple definition of being filled with the Spirit would be “a moment by moment decision to yield our will to the will of the Holy Spirit.” We make choices every moment of every day that determine our allegiances and our behavior. As we allow ourselves to be controlled by the leading of the Spirit, we are filled with the Spirit. We are doing the things the Spirit would have us do.

What might this look like on a practical basis? As we are making choices, we can ask the questions: who is being glorified by this decision? Will this choice bring attention to me, or to God, and whose voice am I hearing? Perhaps we might seek to hear and follow that still small voice—which will become louder and louder the more we pay attention.

DID YOU KNOW?

Mars Hill was the Roman name for the Areopagus, the summit of the Hill of Ares, the Greek god of war. According to Greek mythology, this was where Ares stood trial before the other gods for the murder of Poseidon’s son. Mars Hill has become a classic example of why and how we are to contextualize the gospel with each audience we encounter.



Discussion Questions

1. How do you think you would act when entering a room of super smart or super rich people?

2. What stands out to you about Paul's message here on Mars Hill? How is it different from the sermon he preached to the Jews in Acts chapter 13? Where does he begin his message? Where does he end? How does Paul use scripture here? What do you think of Paul's methodology?

3. What does Paul say about the nature, character, and attributes of God? What does he say about mankind? About idols? About Jesus? Why do you think Paul included the resurrection in this message? Why is the resurrection so crucial and central to the gospel?

4. How is our culture today like or unlike the culture Paul was preaching to in Athens? How should we be adapting our approach to sharing the gospel in order to fit the mindset and presuppositions common in the world today? Do you think the “Four Spiritual Laws” approach still bears the same impact it did 30 or 40 years ago? Why or why not?

5. How many people do you know today who have never heard of Jesus or the gospel message? When we encounter such a one, how should this affect how we approach sharing our faith? Would you be able to share the good news of the gospel without using scripture? Where would you begin and what would you share? What is God prompting in your heart regarding sharing your faith?

Going Deeper

1. Epicureanism was the materialist, naturalist philosophy of the day. Epicureans believed in what they could see, feel, hear, and touch. To them, there was no immortality or anything supernatural. What does this remind you of today? How would you share your faith with someone like this?

2. How should we deal with those that believe science holds all the answers? How do we answer those that suggest Christians are simple-minded folks who ignore the clear teachings of scripture for “mere” belief? Why do you think it is so difficult for those who consider themselves elite or intellectually superior to accept the claims of scripture?

Transformational Activity

COMMUNITY:

A big part of creating community within a group is fostering a sense of safety—creating a place where people feel comfortable sharing challenges they are facing and even viewpoints that may not be popular. Your group needs to be a “no judgment” zone. Take the opportunity this week to discuss how Paul approached those on Mars Hill with respect and did not immediately condemn their idolatry, but rather, used it as a springboard to earn himself a hearing with this group. Discuss together how you would like to make sure everyone in your group feels free and comfortable to share anything they would like—without the danger of being judged. When you encounter such an opportunity in your family or group, be sure to surround the person with love and prayer, helping them know, first and foremost, that you care for them.



**How do we
hear the
one true
voice of
God in our
lives?**



Week 27:

Purpose Provides Comfort

After Paul left Athens, he came to Corinth, which was located fifty miles west of Athens. In Paul's day, Corinth boasted a population of some 500,000—a mammoth-sized city for that time. Much has been said about the debauchery for which the city of Corinth was famous. It was the center of the pagan worship of Aphrodite. The temple dedicated to Aphrodite had 1,000 cultic prostitutes. When the ancient writers wanted to express the idea of debauchery, they used the phrase “to corinthianize.” The city was very strategically located sitting on a narrow isthmus, which actually gave the city two harbors—one on the west side, which led to the Ionian Sea and the western Mediterranean—and another harbor on the east side which led to the Aegean Sea. This enabled Corinth to become an immensely wealthy seaport.

Here in Corinth, God was to bring two very important people into Paul's life. Aquila and Priscilla had recently arrived from Rome and shared the tent-making profession with Paul. The Roman emperor Claudius had issued an edict expelling all Jews from Rome in 49 AD—which is what brought Aquila and Priscilla to Corinth. This might seem like an inconsequential footnote of history, yet it turns out to be a significant detail that helps us

“When the ancient writers wanted to express the idea of debauchery, they used the phrase ‘to corinthianize.’”

understand much more clearly an issue that arises in the book of Romans—a letter Paul would write on his return trip to Corinth during his third missionary journey.

The Roman historian Suetonius recorded that emperor Claudius was reacting to a disruption in the Jewish community in Rome over a certain “Chrestus”—

which is most likely another spelling of Christos, meaning “Christ.” It appears that a riot broke out in Rome within that Jewish population over the issue of Messiah. Many commentators believe this to be opposition that Jewish Christians faced from the traditional Jews in Rome when these converted Jews were preaching Jesus Christ as Messiah. Intolerant of any sort of unrest, Claudius simply expelled the entire Jewish population—Christians included. The Jews would later be allowed to return, as we see in Romans 16:3.

But this mention of the expulsion from Rome is helpful clarifying background information as we read Romans chapter 11. In this chapter, we find Paul in the midst of a three-chapter excursus on the role of Israel in the plan of God, and how Israel’s existence and destiny demonstrates God’s faithfulness and His sovereignty. Chapters 9–11 are a tangible demonstration and explanation of what Paul has been arguing in chapters 1–8. His argument is that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone—for Jew and Gentile alike. And that God is reliable and trustworthy to accomplish this.

In Romans chapters 9–11 Paul is answering the assumed question, “How can we trust God’s promises when Israel is seemingly either rejecting the gospel, or God is rejecting them?” In chapter 11, Paul argues that Israel has not been rejected by God, but has rather been temporarily set aside in His plan—for a very

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

When Aquila and Priscilla were expelled from Rome, what do you think they were thinking? What would have been going through their minds after their world was turned upside-down? Years later, after becoming leaders in the church and mentors to other leaders—looking back, how do you think they viewed being expelled from Rome? How might this help us deal with unexpected trials and challenges in our own lives?



important purpose: so that salvation can come to the Gentiles, as Gentiles. This would then cause jealousy in Israel—a jealousy that God would use to draw Israel back to Himself—and thus fulfill His plan of bringing salvation to the whole world, to both Jews and Gentiles.

But the crucial part to focus in on is that in the midst of this temporary setting aside of the Jews, the temptation would be for the Gentiles to mistake this as a total rejection of the Jews by God, and thus claim an unwarranted status as the ones who have replaced Israel in God's program. Paul, here, uses the strongest phrasing the Greek allows, and says "*Me genoito*" (May it never be!). God has not rejected His people. He goes on to say:

I say then, they [the Jews] did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be! But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? If the first piece of dough is holy, the lump is also; and if the root is holy, the branches are too. But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not

spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. (Romans 11:11-20)

The context in which this misunderstanding might happen is perfectly reflected in the situation the church in Rome was facing. When the church at Rome was founded, it was naturally made up of primarily Jewish believers. These believers would have assumed the roles of leadership within the church.

But what would happen when emperor Claudius kicked all the Jews out of Rome? Who would be left populating the Christian church? Only Gentile converts. So then, the Gentiles would assume the positions of leadership. When the Jews were later allowed to return, naturally there would be a conflict as to whom those positions of leadership belonged.

Paul writes the letter of Romans (to the church at Rome) and helps clarify the position of both the Jews and the Gentiles in the economy of God's family. Paul tells the Gentiles not to be arrogant toward the root (the Jews) because the root supports them. The Jews were the original and primary members of God's family. And the Gentiles are grafted into that family. It is arrogant and misguided to try to elevate the status of Gentiles above the Jews, and patently unbiblical to claim that God has rejected His people the Jews altogether.

“Paul tells the Gentiles not to be arrogant toward the roots (the Jews) because the roots support them. The Jews were the original and primary members of God's family.”

This passing remark about Jews being forced to leave Rome might be easily overlooked. But it helps fill out the picture of the argument Paul is making in the book of Romans, as well as explains the interplay between Jews and Gentiles in these crucial chapters of the book of Acts, as the gospel is going out to the Gentiles.

Discussion Questions

1. In this passage, we learn of Paul's ability in leatherworking—what the Bible calls “tent making.” What hobby or skill do you have that you would consider making a full-time job if it were profitable enough?

2. Why do you think God went so far as to appear to Paul in a vision to communicate that he needn't be afraid any longer? What recent history might tempt Paul to think otherwise? What effect do you think that vision had on him? What message did it convey about how God is faithful to walk with us through our trials? Why do you think Paul stayed so long in Corinth, when he would typically only stay a short time in other places?

3. Why do you think the gospel took root in such a wicked, licentious place as Corinth? What does this teach us about the power and effect of the gospel? What was it about Corinth that prompted God to choose to have Paul set up shop and invest so much time and energy there? What do we learn about God in this passage?

4. How do people who do not have the promises of God to cling to, deal with the unexpected ups and downs of life? When life becomes uncertain, what do they have to hold on to? What have you heard or what do you remember (prior to being saved) about the mindset of those who do not have God to help them deal with such fear and uncertainty? For the Christian, how are things different? Or, how ought things be different? Why do you think so many Christians are paralyzed by anxiety when we have a God who is sovereign?

5. We are introduced to Aquila and Priscilla in this passage—a couple Paul took under his wing to mentor and train them for ministry. Who was someone who helped you when you were young in the faith? How did they help you? Who is someone that you have come alongside to help mentor? What gifts do you believe you have that God can use to help others?

Going Deeper

1. Read Daniel chapter 3 out loud together. What lesson do we learn about God's presence with us during our trials? How does this idea relate to Paul's vision in Acts chapter 18? God will sometimes rescue us from trials, but regardless, promises to walk with us through those trials. What other Bible stories point us to this powerful truth?

2. Read Romans chapter 11 out loud and discuss the argument Paul is making here. What role does Israel have in the plan of God? How do the Gentiles fit within that plan? How does the Jews' expulsion from Rome help inform the argument Paul is making in this chapter?

Transformational Activity

WORSHIP:

We have a promise-making, promise-keeping God. He is always there when we need Him. God showed up for Paul after a very trying time in his life. He had been fleeing persecution in city after city, and must have been getting weary. But God showed up for Paul in the form of a vision, reassuring him that he was, in fact, safe—and that he could go about the work God had given him. Take some time with your family or group and praise God for who He is. He is trustworthy. He knows what we need, and He provides. Praise God for all the times He has shown up in your life at just the right time. And praise God for the confidence you can have that He will continue to do so.



Acts

CONFIDENCE & PURPOSE

These resources were very helpful in the creation of this study guide: “Acts” by David Garland and “Serendipity Bible for Groups.” For helpful answers to many of your Bible questions, the website GotQuestions.org has often proven to be useful.