

RADICAL

ACTS

CHURCH OF POWER



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
The Promise of Power Acts 1 04/24	5
The Coming of Power Acts 2:1-13 05/01	15
The Proclamation of Power Acts 2:14-36 05/08	25
The Church of Power Acts 2:37-47 05/15	37
Effects of Power: Opportunity Acts 3 05/22	49
Effects of Power: Confidence Acts 4:1-22 05/29	59
Effects of Power: Boldness Acts 4:23-37 06/05	69
Effects of Power: Purity Acts 5:1-16 06/12	79
Effects of Power: Joy in Persecution Acts 5:17-42 06/19	89
“I Was Born for This” Acts 6 & 7 06/26	99

**“Our
God is
a God
who
speaks.”**

Introduction

Our God is a God who speaks. He is a God who communicates to us what He wants us to know. He is not silent. He does not leave us in the dark. He reaches out in love to reveal who He is, to reveal His plans, and to give us an opportunity to respond to Him in faith. In the book of Acts, we have been given one of the most strategic and necessary components of God's revelation of His story to us. Here we see Jesus beginning to build His church (Matt 16:18). We see the Great Commission beginning to be fulfilled (Matt 28:19-20). We see a preview of the coming kingdom and the initial fulfillment of the New Covenant. The book of Acts fills out the picture and answers questions that arise from the Gospels. Acts also forms a bridge that connects the Gospels and the Epistles.

When we dive into the book of Acts, we need to keep several important truths in mind. The first truth is that this is God's inspired Word. We need to understand that the ultimate author of scripture is the Holy Spirit. Yes, He worked through the individual human authors—through their personalities, abilities, and styles—to produce what He wanted communicated. But we need to know, without question, that what was produced—the final product which comprises these 66 books of the Bible—was precisely the Bible God wanted us to have. Thus, what the Holy Spirit has chosen to reveal about the founding of His church and the early history of its expansion here in the book of Acts is exactly what He wanted us to know. Each detail is there for a reason. And because it is God's inspired Word, it is a reliable source upon which we can base our life and the practice of our faith.

The next truth is that the book of Acts is history—but it is history told with an agenda. What is included and highlighted, and what is not included tell a specific story and paint a precise picture. It is not an exhaustive

history, but it is a story told with a theological end or goal in mind. The Holy Spirit, through Luke, wants to take us on a journey—both figuratively and literally. Just as in other historical books of the Bible, we are presented in Acts, “history with a message.” One of our tasks as we not only read, but study the book of Acts is to search out what that purpose and message is.

We see something similar in the four-fold presentation of the life of Christ contained in the Gospels. Each Gospel presents the life of Christ, but from a slightly different angle. A different theological agenda is at play in each book. In Matthew, we see the author painting a picture of the coming Messiah who was long-promised to Israel. In Mark, we see a picture of the suffering servant whom Isaiah had foretold. In Luke, we see presented the “Son of Man.” The humanity of Jesus is on full display. And in John we are shown a revelation of the deity of Jesus like nowhere else.

What is the agenda that Luke reveals here in Acts? Luke writes to highlight specific, historical events that reveal how God is bringing His salvation to the world, beginning in the early church. This involves both how the church began and how the message of Christ spread.

We also see in the opening sentences of Luke and Acts that these books are both addressed to someone named Theophilus. This reveals that the book of Acts is, in essence, part two of a larger work that might be better entitled “Luke-Acts”—both written by Paul’s travelling companion, Luke. One intriguing suggestion by some scholars is that Luke-Acts perhaps comprised the trial documents that would have had to accompany Paul to Rome, preceding his trial before Caesar. There are several hints in this two-part work to support this idea. Among other things, Paul is always shown to be innocent in all the trials he faces. Next, Christians are demonstrated to be law-abiding citizens, rather than the troublemakers their detractors make them out to be. And Centurions

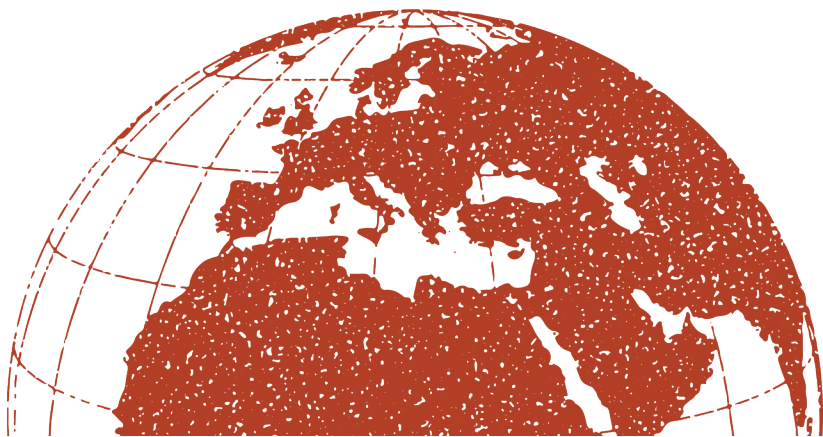
are consistently portrayed in a positive light. Regardless of the intent, it is clear that Luke and Acts do go together.

“Luke is simply describing what the church did, at that time, and in that historical context— rather than prescribing patterns for the church universal to follow.”

Another important lens through which we ought to read the book of Acts involves the question: “Is what is presented here descriptive or prescriptive?” In other words, are the examples and stories chronicled here simply narration of what took place in history, or are they injunctions that we should follow? Some would have us believe the latter—that what took place in the early church ought to be seen as normative (and thus the standard) for all churches for all time. Yet we will miss the point and purpose of the book if we read it that way. For the most part, Luke is simply describing what the church did at that time and in that historical context, rather than prescribing patterns for the church universal to follow.

One simple example of this is found in Acts chapter four. Here we see that in this intense time of persecution, these faithful believers would sell all that they had and lay it at the feet of the apostles—to be distributed to any as had need. This story is not modeling for us a mild form of socialism that we should emulate. This unselfish generosity was something these believers engaged in to meet a specific need, in a specific time, during a severe period of persecution. It is not a mandate upon all believers for all time to sell all our property and give it to the church. That is not to say that there are not sections of teaching within Acts, but it’s important to see that the purpose of historical accounts is not the setting up of norms for us to follow. We must keep that lens in place throughout our journey in Acts.

Buckle up for an exciting ride and a journey where we will witness how a few simple, obedient, faithful followers of Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, turned the world upside down.



Week 1: The Promise of Power

And so... the adventure begins.

We are in for a treat as we begin our journey through the origins of the early church, with Luke as our tour guide. So many important, foundational ideas are presented here in the first chapter of Acts. In fact, the very first sentence in the book is chock full of deep, rich truths.

In this one sentence (Acts 1:1–2), Luke ties this volume (Acts) with part one (Luke) of the two-part work “Luke-Acts.” We see, too, that Luke is relaying all the information he is recording to an individual named “Theophilus.” He affirms that Jesus ascended bodily into Heaven. He reveals that Jesus gave orders through the Holy Spirit to the apostles. He also confirms that these apostles were, indeed, chosen by Jesus. This one-sentence snapshot gives us a preview of what sorts of things we should expect along our journey in Acts. We could spend many fruitful hours plumbing the depths of the theology underlying the statements made in just this one sentence. How much more, then, does the Holy Spirit have in store for us as we press onward and upward?

Luke goes on in chapter one to relate how Jesus commanded His apostles not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for something called “the baptism of the Holy Spirit.” Next week we will go into detail as to what that event signifies. But this mention in Acts 1:8 of a future baptism of the Spirit brings up a common question. Why does Jesus refer to the baptism as future (Acts 1:8), if He had already breathed on His apostles and given them the Spirit just after His resurrection in John 20:22?

The most common understanding of what happens in John 20 is that it does not involve the apostles

being “baptized” with the Holy Spirit. The eschatological event of the outpouring (baptism) of the Spirit would not take place until Pentecost (the Jewish feast of Shavuot), which is celebrated 50 days after the Sabbath of Passover week. Furthermore, just as all the other major feasts of Israel look forward to specific fulfillments in the ministry of Jesus, the Feast of Pentecost is fulfilled by the Spirit’s arrival and outpouring upon the church on the very day the Jewish feast of Shavuot was celebrated. It could not have taken place any other time.

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In fact, the Spirit could not be poured out until after the ascension of Jesus. Jesus says in John 16:7 that the Helper would not come until He (Jesus) went away. Thus, what happens in John 20 when Jesus breathes on the apostles could be likened to the Spirit’s activity in the Old Testament—when the Spirit would come upon individuals temporarily, as He equipped them for service. We will go into more detail on this idea next week.

An interesting interchange also happens in Acts 1:6–8. In light of the events the apostles had just experienced (having their Messiah die and rise again) and their inevitable confusion flowing from the kingdom expectations they surely must have had, they go on to ask Jesus an obvious question. They ask in 1:6, “Is it at this time you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” In fact, this idea was so important to them that this is the very first question they ask Him.

How did Jesus answer them? Did He say, “You foolish little disciples, there isn’t going to be any literal kingdom? I am just going to rule metaphorically in your hearts.” No, He knew they still had squarely fixed in their

mind the ironclad promises God had made all throughout the Old Testament to all Israel about their ruling and reigning with Him in His earthly kingdom. It is important to note that Jesus did not take this opportunity to disabuse them of this notion—and thus, He affirmed it. He simply told them that they didn't need to worry about when it would happen. Our God is a promise-making, promise-keeping God. He had promised Israel a literal, political, coming kingdom in which Messiah would rule and reign on David's throne in Jerusalem—and this kingdom is still coming.

STUDY TIP

As we make our way through Acts, highlight or take notes on the role prayer plays in the early church. Every time you see someone praying, take note of who is praying, why they are praying, what the result is, and think about how these truths can help transform your own prayer life.



We also cannot ignore what is, in essence, a world-changing statement made by Jesus in verse eight of chapter one. Jesus proclaims that His disciples would be His witnesses, starting in Jerusalem. They would then move out to Judea and Samaria. Then finally, His Word would reach out to the ends of the earth. Some have even structured the book of Acts with these three centrifugal (outward moving) movements in mind. But what this proclamation does is to put into sharp relief the task that Jesus is laying at the feet of His church. This is so much more than merely a motto verse used by the modern missions

movement. This verse reveals a kingdom program shift that creates reverberations that will be felt all throughout the book of Acts—even down to this day.

In the coming chapters, we will see that with the death of Stephen and the persecution of believers that followed, the early church was roused to attention. We see in Acts chapters eleven through fifteen that

the early church is learning the lesson that Israel fundamentally misunderstood. Israel mistakenly believed God called their nation to be merely a light shining on a hill, drawing men to God by drawing the nations to itself. The nation of Israel myopically saw the movement of the good news about God as only centripetal (inward moving), not centrifugal (outward moving). Yes, this was part of her God-given task. Israel was, indeed, called to be that shining light drawing the nations to God. But God had also called them to go out to other nations as well with the news of God and

His goodness. Whether through laziness or arrogance as the “chosen people” of God, Israel’s sense of set-apartness grew into a sense of privilege and exclusivity that prevented them from fulfilling the task of worldwide witness, for which God had set them apart in the first place.

What the persecution of the early church accomplished was to force believers out of the comforts and coziness of home and scatter them all over the known world. Jesus’ last words before His ascension in Acts chapter one are a reflection of this desired centrifugal movement: “...you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, (close by), and in all Judea and Samaria (further out), and even to the remotest part of the earth (even further).” They had a responsibility, really, a purpose to “go into all the world.” It took persecution to help clarify for them the urgency of this purpose—and to begin that outward movement that would be so necessary for the spread of the gospel God had planned.

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Discussion Questions

1. In Acts 1:3, we read about “many convincing proofs.” What is the most powerful and convincing proof for you that Christianity is true?

2. What stands out to you in Acts 1:1–9? What is surprising? What do you think would have been the first question you might have asked Jesus in this situation? What do you think was behind the question the disciples asked Jesus?

3. What do we learn about God in Acts 1:1–11? List as many things as you can. What is God up to in this section of scripture? What do we learn about His short-term plans and His long-term plans?

4. There was a popular song on the radio a few years back called “Jesus Take the Wheel.” How have some people taken that idea and applied it to the Christian life in a wrong-headed way? What is a healthy and mature way to approach that idea in our Christian walk?

5. In Acts 1:8, Jesus tells His followers (then and now) that we will be witnesses. Where are you currently a witness? What does this look like? Where else do you feel called to be a witness? What sorts of things hold you back from being a witness more often?

Going Deeper

1. Jesus promised His disciples that they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit. What do you think they understood about the Holy Spirit before this? (Read Gen 1:2; Job 33:4; Ps 51:11, 139:7; Is 42:7; Ex 31:1-5). Why was the empowerment of the Spirit in the Old Testament not permanent in the lives of believers?

2. What does it mean to be empowered by God for service? How does the indwelling Holy Spirit sustain, support, aid, guide, and inspire the work He has given us to do? When have you felt the support of the Holy Spirit most in your efforts to serve Him? When have you noticed times of attempting to work in your own strength?

Transformational Activity

PRAYER:

This week, try devoting a few moments each morning to asking God to give you a renewed hunger and thirst for not only His Word, but for God Himself. Ask Him to open your eyes to see Him and His work in your life in a new and different way. Then, in your family or group time, share what God revealed to you.



Week 2: The Coming of Power

As we round the corner from the close of the earthly ministry of Jesus in Acts chapter one and move on toward His transition to sitting at the right hand of the Father in Heaven, we come upon a monumental event in the history of the church and really, the history of the world. The outpouring of the very Spirit of God upon the world was an event that was both cataclysmic and eschatological in scope.

In our unfortunate tendency to underappreciate the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit, we can easily miss the significance of the gift the world was given at Pentecost. The wonder-working, powerful presence of God Himself was poured out upon the world in a way that had never been seen before. In helping us to recognize the significance of what would happen, Jesus told us in John chapter sixteen that it is actually to our advantage that He would go away, so that the Spirit could then be sent. What Jesus is saying is that however amazing it was that God Himself was here on earth in human flesh, it was even better for us that the Holy Spirit should come.

As we begin to peel back the layers of what this event represents here in Acts chapter two, we cannot help but be struck with the prominence the ministry of the Holy Spirit holds in the founding of the church. The inauguration of the church age was sparked by none other than this baptism of the Spirit. John the Baptist had earlier promised that this event was coming in Mark 1:8 when he said, “I baptized you with water, but He [Messiah] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

So what is this baptism? The baptism of the Spirit was a one-time event that happened at Pentecost when God poured out His Spirit upon the world in a unique way. From this point on in salvation history, ransomed,

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redeemed, and regenerated God worshippers are indwelt with the Spirit of God immediately and permanently at the moment of salvation. We know this is a permanent gift because of the words of Jesus in John 14:16: “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever.” This permanent indwelling of believers was not available prior to the crucifixion and resurrection. It could not have

occurred before the sin issue had been dealt with at the cross—when our hearts were cleansed and made ready to be a suitable habitation for God Himself.

Later on in the history of the early church, in his letter to the church at Corinth, Paul looks back at this event to help us understand that in this “baptism,” all believers are placed into union with Christ (and other believers) through the outpouring of His Spirit upon the world (1 Cor 12:12–13). The followers of Jesus in the early church experienced this outpouring in Acts 2:1–4. Additionally, believers all throughout the subsequent church age, including ourselves, participate in this historical baptism as they are regenerated and indwelt by the Spirit at the moment of salvation. This pouring out of the Spirit into the world, and thus into our lives, is something that impacts every believer and is not any sort of “second blessing” reserved solely for the holy few.

In contrast, in the Old Testament we see the Holy Spirit “come upon” various individuals in a special way, as a temporary empowerment for service—especially leaders and kings. But prior to Christ, no one is said to be indwelt with the Spirit. This is a reality King David expressed when he prayed “...take not thy Holy Spirit from me” (Psalm 51). Back then, the Spirit would only come upon individuals to empower them for specific tasks.

This prayer of David is not a prayer we can pray today. We have no need to. The Holy Spirit is a permanent resident in our hearts. Jesus further distinguishes between the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament vs. the New Testament in John 14:17 where He describes the Spirit as being “with” His disciples, but that soon He will be “in” them.

This event of the baptism of the Spirit inaugurated the church age—an age which will continue on until the church, the bride of Christ, is raptured away (1 Thess 4:16–18) to be married to her betrothed, Jesus Christ, at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:7–9).

When it comes to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in the church, there are several different and sometimes related terms that it might be helpful to distinguish. It is important to be precise in our theology—because sloppy theology produces imprecise understandings of who God is. And it should be our task above all to have a proper understanding of who God is, so that we can worship Him rightly and truly.

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First, nowhere in the Bible is a follower of Jesus commanded to be baptized with the Spirit. It is not an “experience” we are to seek after. It is simply described as what God does to believers at the moment of their salvation. We need to be careful not to overstep how the Scriptures defines something. The baptism of the Spirit is not a second blessing reserved for the spiritually elite.

Next, in contrast to this initiatory rite (baptism and indwelling) that happens to believers, we are indeed commanded to be filled with the Spirit. This is a response of the will. It is something we must choose to do. The

Greek word translated as “filled” in Ephesians 5:18 (where we are commanded to be “filled with the Spirit”) is “pleroo” (play-rah-owe). The meaning of this term is “to be controlled by.”

This same term is used in scripture to describe those who were “filled” with rage. In other words, they were controlled by their anger and acted accordingly. In Ephesians chapter five, we are enjoined not to get drunk with wine (be controlled by wine), but rather to choose to be controlled by the Holy Spirit. So, rather than an ecstatic experience as it is sometimes described, to be filled with the Spirit is actually a decision of the will.

Every Christian is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Our heart is His habitation. But we can choose to follow His promptings or not. Every Christian has the opportunity to walk in the power of (to be filled with, or choose to be controlled by) the Holy Spirit. This is a moment-by-moment decision we make to either operate according to our own wills, or to yield our will to the will of God. This is what it means to be “filled with the Holy Spirit.”

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

What has been your understanding of “being filled with the Spirit”? How should being filled (controlled by) the Spirit affect how we live, the decisions we make, and how we react to people or situations? How can we train ourselves to continually “be being filled” (as the Greek expresses it)?



Discussion Questions:

1. Describe a time when not knowing the language of the region you were in posed a challenge?

2. What precisely happened on the Day of Pentecost? What transpired and how is it described in scripture? What was the result of this event?

3. What do we learn about the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:1–13? Read John 14:16–17, 26, 16:13–14; Rom 8:26. What else do we learn about the ministry of the Spirit?

4. How have you heard others define “being filled” with the Spirit? How would you define it?

5. When have you felt the power of the Holy Spirit in your life most acutely? In other words, when, in your life, have you felt that you most fully gave over control to the Spirit? What was the circumstance and what was the result?

Going Deeper:

1. What do you see as the connection between Pentecost and the Jewish feast of Shavuot (Deut 16:9–10)? When and where did they both occur? What manifestations happened at both? What covenant was given at Shavuot and what covenant was given at Pentecost? How do these covenants relate to each other?

2. In terms of timing and the desired spread of the gospel, describe how and why this particular manifestation of miraculous languages was strategic and advantageous for the beginning of the church age. What all was accomplished through this miracle?

Transformational Activity

BIBLE STUDY:

Sometime this week, spend a few minutes searching your favorite Bible website or app, or simply google “Bible verses about the Holy Spirit.” Keep reading verses until you come across something about the Spirit that was either new information to you, or that struck you in a new way. Share your findings with your group or family.



Week 3:

The Proclamation of Power

As Jesus was about to depart and leave this world in Acts chapter one, He told His disciples to wait for something the Father had promised them. His very last words to them revealed what that special gift from the Father was all about. They would receive power as the Holy Spirit was poured out on the world. We see so many amazing miracle stories in the beginning of Acts that we might miss the significance of what this outpouring truly represented.

With the death and resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Spirit, a new age dawned in salvation history. Pentecost is, in one sense, the tie that connects the Old Testament with the New. It is the bridge over which the Old Testament believers crossed to get into the New Testament and New covenant age.

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The event of Pentecost was not just another miracle. This was the inauguration of a completely new era in the outworking of the plan of God. As we examine the flow of salvation history and try to get a grasp of how significant the coming of the New covenant really is, we see back in the beginning that God chose one man, Abraham, to be the channel of His blessing to the world. Through him, God raised up a family and then a nation to be a light shining on a hill—so that the world would come to know God. And through this nation, God would bring a savior, a Messiah. God promised His people, the Jews, a blessed kingdom where Messiah would rule and reign.

When Messiah arrived, He offered Israel this promised kingdom. Though many Jews would accept Him as their king, the nation as a whole did not. So, because of this rejection, the kingdom was now postponed. In explaining this postponement, Romans 11:25 says that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles is brought in. In Matthew 23:39, Jesus mourned over Jerusalem and said that Israel would not again see Him until they acknowledged their sin (Hosea 5:15) and would finally then say "...blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."

So, beginning in Acts chapters one and two, we see God doing a new work in the world by grafting in a whole new group into His family. At Pentecost, this new organism, the church, was created. The church was something that was not seen in the Old Testament. This new living organism is what the book of Ephesians calls a mystery, and was born on the day of Pentecost as God poured out His Spirit upon the world. In the church, we now see Jews and Gentiles together in one family. Gentiles no longer have to become Jews to enter the family of God.

God replaced the covenant He made with Moses (the Mosaic Law) with a New covenant that would regulate the life of those in relationship with God. This was necessary because the people of God were now no longer a theocracy, one nation called out from among many (as was Israel). Now, after Pentecost, the people of God are comprised of those who are called out from many nations. A theocracy would no longer be appropriate to regulate the life of this family. Therefore, God needed a new administrative covenant to administer His blessings to His people. God gave His people this New covenant to govern our relationship with Him. The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost was the inaugural sign of that New covenant.

God has been working out His plan of redemption

since the very beginning. And God has chosen to use covenants as the mechanism through which He would relate with His children and through which He would redeem the world back to Himself. It might be helpful to take a step back and discuss what covenants are and how God uses them in the outworking of His plan.

DID YOU KNOW?

Oftentimes, when the writers of the New Testament quote passages from the Old Testament, it can appear to be a bit different from how those verses appear in our Bible.

This is because quite often New Testament writers are quoting from the Septuagint—which was the Greek translation of the Old Testament completed around 275 B.C.—and was the most common Bible used by those in the New Testament era.



Throughout salvation history, God entered into covenants (contracts or agreements) with mankind in order to establish relationships with people and to reveal His plans for dealing with humanity's sin by sending a Redeemer. The four (redemptive) covenants are the Abrahamic, Davidic, Mosaic, and the New covenants.

In the Abrahamic covenant, God promised blessing to the world (the promise of a redeemer) and chose Israel to be the channel of that blessing. However, this was just a promise. There were no details included as to how God's people would access this promise. When Israel eventually became a nation at the Exodus, God then gave them those details in the form of the Mosaic Law. These laws were the terms by which His people Israel would be able to experience that promised blessing. Through obedience

to the Mosaic covenant, the people of God were able to demonstrate that they were God's covenant people. By following the Law, they were able to experience the blessings the Abrahamic covenant promised. As they

obeyed, they prospered. As they disobeyed, they were disciplined.

Later, God clarified this initial promise made to Abraham by giving the Davidic Covenant. The Davidic Covenant gave the people a better, fuller understanding of what the coming King (Messiah) would be like. They now knew the promise of the Abrahamic blessing would come in the form of a kingdom. The Davidic covenant was an elaboration and clarification of the Abrahamic covenant.

But as we move forward throughout history the reality of the power of sin in people's lives becomes more clear. God had promised to protect and preserve Israel, but Israel forfeited the blessings God promised in the Mosaic covenant through her persistent disobedience and her rejection of the offer of the Kingdom. And since the Mosaic covenant was the mechanism by which Israel was able to enjoy the blessings God had promised, there needed to be a new covenant that would accomplish this same purpose—one that would apply to Gentile as well as Jew.

Through the prophets, God promised Israel there was coming a New covenant that would replace the old Mosaic covenant, and would once and for all take care of the problem of sin—not just temporarily cover over it (Jer 31:31–34). Through the New covenant, God would enable His people to obey His Law through the inner promptings of the indwelling Holy Spirit. It would be God's Law written on our hearts, not just on tablets of stone.

The New covenant helped the newly constituted people of God (Jew together with Gentile) understand how the blessings of God that were promised in the Abrahamic covenant would now be experienced in everyday life. And the New covenant included the ultimate blessing, promising forgiveness of sins through the coming of the Messiah.

Pentecost was so much more than just a miraculous event. It was the inauguration of the Church Age and the initial fulfillment of the promised New covenant—a covenant God made with Israel, and which He will ultimately fulfill with them at His return.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe a time when you went to a large crusade or Christian event (e.g. a Christian music festival, Promise Keepers, Billy Graham or Greg Laurie crusade, etc.). What stands out in your memory of that experience?

2. Read Acts 2:22–24. List out all the facts and details Peter squeezes into these three short verses. How do you think his audience would have reacted to Peter's message in this section? What do you think would have been most impactful or convicting to them? Why was it impossible for death to hold Jesus?

3. What do we learn specifically about God in Acts 2:22–24? What do you think Peter means by “predetermined plan and foreknowledge” (NASB)? How does this help us better understand both Christ's mission and God's sovereignty?

4. How do most people outside the church view the New Testament claims of Jesus rising from the dead? What reactions have you heard from others?

5. Read 1 Corinthians 15:51–58. How does Paul describe our own resurrection? How does he conclude this thought in v. 58? In other words, what are the ramifications for our own lives because of the coming resurrection?

Going Deeper

1. Why is the resurrection of Jesus so important in the message of Peter here in Acts chapter two? Why is it so important to the Christian faith? What does it accomplish/validate? How does the resurrection prove that Jesus is the Messiah?

2. Read 1 Corinthians 15:1–19 and discuss what you see there about the importance of the resurrection.

Transformational Activity

COMMUNITY:

One way to build relationships in community is through vulnerability and transparency. Around your tables or with your family try a “share and ask” exercise.

SHARE: Share a time when you felt like God was asking you to do something beyond what you felt you were able. What did you learn about yourself and about God through this experience?

ASK: What is something you are dealing right now with that makes you feel overwhelmed? How does the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit help you feel more confident?



Week 4: The Church of Power

Acts chapters one and two are setting the stage for the story that will unfold in the rest of the book. We see foundational building blocks being laid here that the Church Age itself will be built upon. One of these building blocks is set in place right before Jesus ascends into Heaven. Here, Jesus lays out for the apostles what the geography of evangelistic progression in the early church will look like.

In Acts 1:8, we see the first stage of this progression involving the witness by the apostles to those in Jerusalem. The next two stages move progressively further out—to Judea and Samaria, then to the remotest parts of the earth. Here in the first few chapters of Acts, what we see described is that first stage of witness to Jerusalem taking place. This increasingly outward-pushing progress of the gospel sketched out by Jesus in Acts 1:8 is the template for gospel expansion that has been used ever since. And this template adds more clarity to the command given by Jesus in the Great Commission.

As the early church sought to live out the realities of that command, and as we, ourselves, face those same realities, one question begs to be answered: should we as a church strive to be centripetal or centrifugal? Whether or not we realize it, this is a question that affects us all as the body of Christ. And it affected those in the early church who heard Jesus give the Great Commission. What do these terms mean, and how should this question impact how we “do church”?

This “Great Commission,” the last great command that Jesus proclaimed in Matthew 28:19, has been taken by many churches as their marching orders—the prime directive we are to be about as a church.

The Great Commission: “Go into all the world and invite them to your church service, where the paid professional ministers can preach the gospel to them.” No? Is that not quite what Jesus said? Whether or not it is actually expressed in this way, the church can sometimes operate in just this manner—very centrally focused and centrally minded.

“Should we be a centripetal or centrifugal church? You may not even realize that this is a debate within Christianity.”

The way the local church is often organized today is as a central structure, which is “attractional” in purpose and method—so that whenever we disperse, the goal is simply to come back to the center. Thus, many churches offer as many opportunities as possible to “gather.” And when we do gather, the temptation is to make it a spectacle—something that might be attractive to the world. The

technical term for this structure is “centripetal” (focused in on the center).

On the other end of the spectrum from the attractional church is what is known as a centrifugal church. This is where the energy and momentum is outwardly focused. You might remember the carnival ride where everyone stands against the back wall of a circular ride, and then the spinning begins. You are forcefully pressed against the wall as you spin round and round, and then the floor drops out. It is “centrifugal force” that sticks you to the wall. This kind of movement is seen in what is sometimes called the missional church. The outward focused goal or aim in this church philosophy is focused on “going.” The effort is on being the church in the world. And while this appears to be both biblical and laudable, the unfortunate by-product can be that “going” is so prioritized and seen as the “be-all and end-all,” that sometimes the needed preparation suffers. The “go” idea is unfortunately understood to be the primary

focus of the Great Commission, whereas the only verb in Jesus' command is actually "make disciples." This should be our imperative. Should we be a centripetal or centrifugal church? You may not even realize that this is a debate within Christianity.

But what if the church was actually both centripetal and centrifugal? In Ephesians 4:11–13, Paul discusses the purpose of the church. He says we are to be about the business of equipping each other to do the work of ministry, in order to edify the body, until we are unified and mature. The starting place for Paul is equipping. We need to be training the body so that it is prepared to go out into the world and fulfill the Great Commission. The focus is outward, but not at the expense of inward preparation.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

What kinds of churches have you attended—centripetal or centrifugal? What are some examples of what this looked like in the practices of those churches? What is the benefit of each approach? What steps would you recommend for helping your church improve in promoting a culture of evangelism?



While there is nothing wrong with "gathering," the church is not to be merely a place from which we encourage people to bring their unsaved friends to a building to hear the gospel. We are to train people to "go out" and be the gospel to and in the world. The church today can sometimes be a place where evangelism in practice has become merely "inviting unbelievers to an event" rather than being or embodying Christ in the community—and sharing the saving message of what Christ has done. We must not lose the priority of equipping and training.

What if we were intentional about not being simply a "holy huddle" where outsiders were sometimes uncomfortable around us and our "church-speak"? What if we really understood that the

“The church today can sometimes be a place where evangelism in practice has become merely 'inviting unbelievers to an event' rather than being or embodying Christ in the community...”

church is not a building, but is actually you and me? What if the church really acted like the body of Christ in practical ways? What would this look like?

Perhaps it might start with focusing on what being the body of Christ entails. God chooses to use each and every one of us, through the supernatural gifts He has given us, to complement and complete each other in working towards a unified end. As we cooperate with God, He is building one unified body. We function in unity to accomplish our purpose—to build each other up to the glory of God, so that we

can go out into the world and spread the good news. We need to understand how indispensable each of us is in the proper and healthy functioning of the body. We need to set our priorities with kingdom ends in mind. And we need to engage and participate in the kind of equipping that will prove fruitful as we go out into the world with a missional mindset.

What do we need to do to make that happen? We need, first of all, to take up the mantle of evangelism that God has placed upon each and every one of us. The Great Commission was not given only to the Billy Grahams of the world. It was given to you and to me. We need to do more than merely give intellectual assent to the task of personal evangelism—a task God has assigned to each and every one of us regardless of our other gifts (or of excuses we might make). We need to pray for God to bring into our lives and across our paths opportunities to share the good news. We need to pray for eyes to see and a heart that is obedient to these divine appointments. But before all of that, perhaps we might consider rethinking how we view church. Is it a place we come to receive, or a place we come to give?

Discussion Questions

1. Describe a time when you were able to share your faith with someone. What were you thinking and feeling, both before and after the encounter?

2. In Acts 2:37, what does it mean that the listeners were “pierced to the heart?” What is the role of the Spirit in bringing us to salvation? Read John 16:7–11 and discuss how this fits in with Acts 2:37. Read also John 6:44, 65.

3. What does it mean to repent? What is the role of repentance in salvation? Read Acts 2:38, 3:19, 5:31, 20:18–21. How does this call to repentance help us to understand God and salvation better?

4. What are some ways you have seen others share the gospel that you found very effective? What about some ways that you have discovered were not effective?

5. How would you explain in your own words to someone how they could become a Christian? What is required? What is promised in return?

Going Deeper

1. To whom is Peter addressing his sermon (read Acts 2:5, 14, 22:36)? Why is this important? Read Romans 1:16; Acts 17:2. Why is the gospel “to the Jew first”? Read Romans 9:1–5, 11:11–15. What privileges had God given Israel? What responsibilities had He given them? How is God using them in His plan to save the world?

2. What is “lifestyle evangelism”? Why is it necessary but sometimes not sufficient?

Transformational Activity

PRAYER:

This week, spend some time in prayer, praising and thanking God for the salvation He provided in Jesus Christ. Thank Jesus for the sacrifice He made and the agony He endured for us. Thank your Father for sending us His Spirit to dwell within us and lead, guide, and minister to us. Ask God to send across your path someone who needs to hear about His saving love. And pray that your heart would be prepared to share that message of love.

Then, as you gather, discuss the person God placed on your heart to witness to, as well as your plan for reaching out to them.



Week 5: Effects of Power – Opportunity

Another amazing miracle happens here in the infancy of the church that puts on display the fact that God is up to something. God is at work. In Acts chapter two, we saw a miracle that was cosmic in scope. While here in chapter three, the miracle we see is of a more personal nature.

This is the second time here in the early chapters of Acts that we see the Holy Spirit use a miraculous event to accomplish something very specific. In chapter two, we saw the Baptism of the Spirit take place where miraculous signs and wonders happened, for the purpose of drawing the people together to do something specific...to hear the word of God proclaimed. Here in chapter three we see the same exact thing happen. Peter and John heal a lame man. And when all the people come together to see it, Peter stands up to preach the Word of God. In the book of Acts, we see that God is speaking. New revelation is happening—and God’s *modus operandi* is to use the miraculous to point our attention to that fact.

We can easily look past the terms “signs and wonders” and miss the obvious point. What does a sign do? It points to something. A road sign gets our attention and points us in a particular direction. Supernatural signs work the same way. Their purpose in scripture is to get our attention and point us to the fact that God is about to speak. The sign itself is not what is important; God’s message is.

Yet there are many within the church today that have a preoccupation with the signs themselves—and seek out these kinds of experiences as ends in and of themselves. In fact, it can be said of this theology that (in their practice) experience ends up being the most

important validator of truth. Experience and emotion seem to be among the highest objectives in their practice of the Christian life.

While this unfortunate theology is worth exploring (and debunking), this idea of experience often being too prominent a validator of truth brings up a broader and more significant question: namely, where do we, ourselves, look for truth?

“What sorts of things do we allow entrance into the vault of our worldview? How do we gauge what is true and what is not?”

As thinking Christians, and as those who will one day give an account before God (Rom 14:12), we must examine what grid we are using to evaluate truth claims. What sorts of things do we allow entrance into the vault of our worldview? How do we gauge what is true and what is not? And what are our criteria for prioritizing which sources of and filters for truth are the most reliable?

We may assume that for most people the Bible, as God’s revelation to us, is the unquestioned primary source for where Christians do (and should) go for truth about the world around us. Unfortunately, this is not, in fact, where many Christians look first when evaluating truth claims. How did this come about? How has the battle cry of the Reformation—“Sola Scriptura” (scripture alone)—lost its luster? How have we gotten to where we are today?

One diagnostic question we can use to assess where we stand on this issue is this: if your “reason” leads you to believe something about God, or the world, or truth, and this belief seems to contradict the Bible, which are you more apt to trust? In other words, what source for obtaining truth is more reliable and trustworthy to you: your own thoughts and reasoning ability, or God’s Word?

For those who sometimes struggle to understand something the Bible says, or who perhaps wrestle with the believability, morality, justice, or fairness of events or stories in scripture, the initial reaction is often to question or doubt rather than trust. When this happens, are they not placing their reasoning ability ahead of the Word of God in trustworthiness? Despite the reality that we view life and reality through cracked and clouded lenses due to the Fall, some still retain unquestioned confidence in their own ability to ascertain and adequately evaluate truth. This presupposition deserves some introspection.

In addition to the Bible and “reason,” other sources for evaluating truth claims include: “experience” (including emotion), and “tradition.” While there are other sources, these seem to be the most prominent. Historically, Christians correctly looked to the Bible as the primary and final arbiter of truth. But as history gradually unfolded, other competing sources unfortunately took priority over the Bible. For example, prior to the Reformation, when the Roman Catholic Church held such dominance in both world politics and ecclesiastical life, “tradition” (church confessions, religious dogma) outweighed scripture in priority for vast sections of Christendom in assessing truth and for practical rules regulating daily conduct. In other words, the people trusted the Roman Catholic tradition and teaching magisterium to tell them what to believe more than they trusted the Bible.

During the Enlightenment (18th century), “reason” took center stage in the battle for prominence, as man’s confidence in man outshone all else. We feel the reverberations of this even today. Modern man’s confidence in his own “reason” has led to science rising to the level of “religion” in many senses. The authority that science holds in many minds regarding reliability for establishing truth persuades some to doubt God’s Word when the two appear to be in conflict—even to the point where we are expected to pledge allegiance to the

unassailable “objectivity” of science, regardless of its many obviously biased presuppositions.

“We must hold fiercely to the commitment that God reveals Himself, and that the Bible must be our most trusted source for truth.”

When the pendulum of public sentiment swung back towards the emotion of Romanticism (early 19th century), away from the cold rationalism and logical, analytical thought of the Enlightenment, “experience” (i.e. information that comes through direct encounter, participation, and observation) and also “emotion” became the primary filters through which mankind processed reality. These took center stage in evaluating

truth and reality. So, what we see is that during different eras, various filters regulated how humans assessed truth claims. The question we must ask ourselves is: where do we look for truth? Practically, not just in theory.

Clearly, the battle is raging. Even something as basic as how we process truth and reality is under attack. We must hold fiercely to the commitment that God reveals Himself, and that the Bible must be our most trusted source for truth. It is the only objective, divine, and infallible source we have.

DID YOU KNOW?

There were three figures in the Old Testament that the faithful worshippers of God were expecting as a part of the coming of the kingdom: the Messiah (Is 53:1–12), a second arrival of Elijah (Mal 4:5–6), and a “prophet like Moses” (Deut 18:15). We see this expectation clearly in John 1:19–21. We seem to get the identity of this “prophet like Moses” here in Acts 4:21–23. (Also see Matt 11:14 for the identity of Elijah.)



Discussion Questions

1. In the beginning of Acts chapter three, we see a man who is begging for alms. Do you typically give money (or other things) to homeless people you encounter? Why or why not?

2. Just like in his message in Acts chapter two, Peter packs a powerful punch in just a few short verses. List all the details you notice in Acts 3:13–16. Why are each of these points significant?

3. What does it mean to pray in the power of the name of Jesus (see Acts 3:16, 4:10)? What do we learn about God from this?

4. How well do you think the church, in general, does in ministering to those in need? What is the role of the church in feeding the hungry and taking care of the widow and the orphan?

5. In the beginning of Acts chapter three, we see an example of how felt needs are often not the same as real needs. Where have you seen this play out in your life? When did you ask God for something that was not perhaps what you really needed? How did God answer your prayer?

Going Deeper

1. What is Peter’s approach when he discusses the sin of his audience (Acts 3:14–15, 26)? Why do you think he does not “pull any punches” or hold back at all? How does this compare to the way we share our faith today? Why the difference? When is it appropriate to come on strong regarding a person’s sin?

2. Acts 3:13 uses a simple word to describe Jesus. We may pass over this without notice, but the term “servant,” when it comes to the role of Messiah, points us back to the servant songs of Isaiah. Slowly read Isaiah 52:13–53:12 out loud and stop every time you come across something that points us to Jesus. Discuss what each of these items mean as you go.

Transformational Activity

OUTREACH:

In Acts chapter three, Peter and John coupled the meeting of physical needs with a presentation of the gospel. Discuss together how you might engage in this strategy with your group or family. What are some ways you can minister to the physical needs of those you encounter and use this as an opportunity for sharing your faith? What are some tangible and practical ideas (e.g. carrying basic hygiene items in your car to give to the homeless, or organizing a group to hand out food where homeless people gather, or reaching out in love to the outcasts of society with time and attention)? What preparation do you feel you need to be able to confidently share the gospel?



Week 6: Effects of Power – Confidence

As chapter four of Acts begins, do you think the followers of Jesus had any idea the tempest of persecution that was brewing and headed their way? In this chapter, we see the beginning of the waves of persecution that will eventually turn into full-blown storms.

We see the gospel being proclaimed boldly in Acts chapters two and three. The influence and impact of the gospel was never so potent as at that moment. Hundreds of eyewitnesses were alive and could testify to the reality of the resurrection (1 Cor 15). The religious leaders had to resort to bribery to keep the truth from getting out. Thousands upon thousands were coming to faith in Jesus as the Messiah—which threatened the stranglehold

these religious leaders had on the people, not to mention the income stream which accompanied the institutional worship of that day. Pushback was inevitable. This pushback grew and grew into an intense persecution that shaped the rest of the book of Acts in significant ways. Opposition from Satan invariably flares up as the proclamation of the gospel goes out.

But as to the question of whether or not the followers of Jesus had any notion this was headed their way, we can look to the words of Jesus in John 15:20 where Jesus emphasized to His followers that they should: “Remember the words that I said to you. ‘A slave is not greater than His master. If they persecuted Me, they

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you...”

will also persecute you...” If they indeed remembered His words, they would not have been surprised.

Peter re-emphasized that same point when he said, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation” (1 Pet 4:12–13). In his last letter before being martyred for his faith, the apostle Paul also hammers home this same idea: “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12). We should not, indeed, be surprised when we encounter persecution. In fact, this verse enjoins us to examine whether or not we are truly seeking to live godly lives, if we do not see persecution happening.

Jesus very clearly laid out the cost of discipleship in Mark 8:34–35 when He said, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.” We sometimes get the wrong impression of what Christ was saying here. The cross was not a burden to bear, it was an instrument of death. In this passage, Jesus is saying: if your life is more important to you than following Me, then you have chosen the wrong path. Unless you are willing to suffer for Me, then My suffering isn’t for you.

Jesus is unambiguous as He concludes His message in Mark 8:35–38 when He says, “...whoever will lose his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it.” He goes on to warn that whoever is ashamed of Him in front of this wicked and evil generation will face His denial of them when He returns with the holy angels. There is no “bait and switch” in this offer of eternal life. Jesus tells us up front that it will cost us absolutely everything if we wish to follow Him: absolute allegiance, denial of our own wills, certain suffering, and possibly even our lives.

The rest of the scriptures are also unambiguous on this point. Suffering and the Christian life go hand in hand. “If we suffer we shall also reign with Him” (2 Tim 2:12 KJV). “For momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (2 Cor 4:17). “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22b). “But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering” (Rom 8:17 NLT).

“There is no ‘bait and switch’ in this offer of eternal life. Jesus tells us up front that it will cost us absolutely everything if we wish to follow Him...”

Seeing suffering as a natural part of this age—a natural part of citizenship in the kingdom of God—rather than as a foreign, unforeseen intrusion—can help us fight off the feelings of confusion and indignation that we might otherwise have. Seeing suffering as the necessary birth pangs associated with the coming birth of the new creation gives those birth pangs a context and provides for us a feeling of participation in the outworking of God’s plan.

James goes so far as to say, “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2–4). James seems to be saying that we are lacking something if there are not trials and tribulations in our life. The only way to get to the state of “perfect and complete” is through the crucible of trials.

Are you surprised when you encounter various trials? If so, it might be time to reevaluate your expectations of what the Christian life is all about. When

DID YOU KNOW?

Who were the Sadducees?

During the time of Jesus, the Sadducees held the political and religious seats of power. They were the wealthy power brokers who held the majority position in the Sanhedrin. They were the cultural liberals of the day, who were religiously conservative. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection or the supernatural. They also did all they could to appease their Roman overlords. They believed in only the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) and rejected the oral traditions held by the Pharisees.



we see suffering as not only necessary, but as a badge of honor—a commendation from our captain—it will transform our understanding of suffering from “trouble” to “training”. Philip Yancey has said: “We are not put on earth merely to satisfy our desires, to pursue life, liberty, and happiness. We are here to be changed, to be made more like God in order to prepare us for a lifetime with Him.”

The believer is called to follow Christ’s example—to follow in His steps and partake in His sufferings. Suffering is the path by which we come to the place of preparedness for the kingdom. Suffering is part of a greater whole. It is the link between our present state of lowliness and our future state of glory. Understanding suffering as an absolutely essential ingredient in the life of the believer provides for us the perspective we need to properly and profitably endure the trials of this life.

As we journey through the rest of the book of Acts, let’s be on the lookout for the role that trials and tribulations play, both in forming the heart of Christ in the lives of His followers, as well as in the development and spread of the gospel.

Discussion Questions

1. Peter and John enter into a face-off with the authorities in Acts chapter four. Describe a time when you felt like breaking the rules. What happened?

2. Read Acts 4:19–20; Acts 5:27–29; 1 Peter 2:13–15; Romans 13:1–7. What is the responsibility of the Christian to the ruling authorities?

3. What do we learn about God from the healing of the lame man and from what God allowed Peter and John to experience in this story? What do you think Peter and John learned about themselves and about God by going through what they did?

4. Read Acts 4:12 (see also Matthew 1:21 and 7:13–14; John 14:6). Christianity is notably exclusivistic—in other words, it teaches there is only one way to God. This is in contrast to syncretism, which is the approach that most other religions take. Syncretism allows for multiple paths or worldviews and considers all to be valid. Why do you think the world reacts so forcefully against the narrow, exclusive claims of Christianity? Why is it so threatening to them? How do you view the narrowness of Christianity? Does it, at times, make you uncomfortable?

5. In Acts 4:14 we read about the effect of people “having been with Jesus.” When people look at your life, would that be their assessment of you? Why or why not? What can you do this week to bear the aroma of Jesus and be an accurate reflection of Him to the world? Try to think of specific things that might be difficult or take you out of your comfort zone.

Going Deeper

1. Compare the boldness of Peter in Acts 4:8–12 with the cowering Peter of Matthew 26:69–75. What do you think explains the difference in Peter in these two stories? Why do you think we Christians have such varying consistency when it comes to the bold proclamations of the gospel? At some times we seem to have no fear? While other times we cower before a servant girl.

2. How can we be confident of whether or not a command or edict from our governing authorities contradicts what God desires us to do? How can we verify such things? How do we deal with the fact that good, Bible-believing Christians can differ on this question?

Transformational Activity

COMMUNITY:

Discuss with your group or family the importance of community in the Christian life. Describe a time when you felt very supported by your church family. Describe a time when you did not experience the support of Christian community around you. How has that support (or lack) affected your Christian walk? Talk together about how you might reach out to others in your church family who do not experience that same level of community.

What are some ideas for how you might invite others into community? Perhaps challenge one another to speak to one person you haven't met each week at church. Introduce yourself. Let them know where you are connected and find out where they are connected (or not). Seek to be a conduit for the Holy Spirit to draw others into closer fellowship in our church family.



Week 7: Effects of Power – Boldness

As we spend time with our Maker reading His Word, it can be breathtaking to witness how the Holy Spirit painstakingly paints a picture for us, revealing who God is and what He desires for us. Sometimes this artistry reveals itself in bold declarations about God and His works. At other times it is manifested in God’s power being put on display. Yet occasionally, we see this picture being painted through honest cries of the heart evinced in the simplicity of a prayer.

In the second half of Acts chapter four we see recorded a prayer by the apostles that adds a few pieces to the puzzle of our understanding of who God is and how He has revealed Himself to us. In Acts 4:23–24 we see that God had delivered Peter and John from the grasp of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council. In response, the apostles gathered and lifted up their voices in prayer and praise for what God had done. It is here, in this prayer, we are exposed to truths about God that would be worthwhile to explore.

“God is close to the brokenhearted. He is nearer than we can imagine.”

The prayer of the apostles begins on a grand scale—praising God for His work as creator of all things. “Oh Lord it is Thou who didst make the Heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them” (Acts 4:24). This truth highlights that God is everywhere and is all-powerful. He is completely different from and above all of His creatures. He is indeed “transcendent” and beyond compare.

Later in that same prayer, the apostles petition God to heal and grant confidence to His servants—things

that require God to be intimate, close, and present. The term for this is “immanence.” God is close to the brokenhearted. He is nearer than we can imagine. So, a question we must ask is: which is He? Is God above all and transcendent or is He nearby and immanent?

Theologian John Frame describes these two truths in this way:

Divine transcendence and immanence are the related Christian doctrines that while God is exalted in his royal dignity and exercises both control and authority in his creation (transcendence), he is, by virtue of this control and authority, very present to his creation, especially his people, in a personal and intimate way (immanence).

In many places in the Psalms we do experience God as intimately related with His creation—a God who hides us under the shadow of His wings, who lifts up the downtrodden from the dust. However, we also see a God who is wholly other—one who has set the moon and stars in space; whose glory rises above the heavens; a great King above all gods. Scripture bears witness to both truths simultaneously.

As we pull back the lens and zoom out, looking at the big picture, we notice there are two extreme pendular ends that have historically characterized thoughts about the involvement God has with His creation. On one end of the pendulum swing you have deism, which focuses exclusively on the transcendence of God—His existence above, beyond, and outside His creation. He is so distant that He is seen by deists as unwilling to play an active role in it. Deists simply believe there is a God, but don't go very far in defining or trying to understand that God—since He is unknowable.

On the other end of the spectrum, you have Pantheism, which so emphasizes the immanence of God that God is actually identified with and seen as creation itself. The unfortunate ramification of this ideology is that it makes God equal with His creation and thus unable to act upon it. Pantheists, in essence, worship nature.

They see God as so close that He is not only present, but actually part of everything around us. These are the two theological extremes.

What else does the Bible reveal about these two ideas regarding how God interacts with His creation? Isaiah defines and clarifies transcendence very well when he writes, “‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts’” (Isaiah 55:8–9). Psalm 57:5 tells us, “Be exalted above the heavens, O God; let Your glory be above all the earth.” We also see in Psalm 97:9, “For You are the Lord Most High over all the earth, You are exalted far above all gods.” The scriptural focus of transcendence is that God is not like man. God is infinite. Man is finite. God is holy. Man is sinful. God is independent. Man is contingent.

In addition to transcendence, we also see scriptural examples of immanence. Deuteronomy 4:7 states, “For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the Lord our God whenever we call on Him?” In 2 Corinthians 6:18 we read, “And I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to Me, says the Lord Almighty.” And nothing explains what immanence truly means better than the incarnation of Jesus Christ (Matt 1:23). God came near, dwelt among us, and has actually become one of us. Yet, it is important to see that God’s compassion, love, and nearness to us can only be understood in light of His transcendence. It is His majesty, power, glory, and even incomprehensibility that gives weight, meaning, and context to His intimate love for us.

The subtle dance between these two twin polar truths about God—transcendence and immanence—is a dance that runs throughout scripture and is woven throughout historical theological reflection. Yes, God is Almighty, holy, and wholly other. He is outside of

“The subtle dance between these two twin polar truths about God—transcendence and immanence—is a dance that runs throughout scripture...”

creation and holds the universe in the palm of His hand. Yet, He is also intimately related with us. He cares about us and loves us so much that each of our hairs is numbered. There is no place where God is not.

When thinking of God, we cannot speak of one of these truths without the other. The transcendence of God is one facet of the brilliant radiance of God. And His immanence reveals other essential truths of who He is and how He cares for us. As we

traverse the wonder and privilege of dwelling in God’s presence when exploring His revelation of Himself in scripture, let us be intentional about holding these two equally important realities in our minds and hearts.

STUDY TIP

Take a tour back through the first four chapters of Acts and list the specific ways you see God moving and acting to accomplish His will. What does God do—and why? Perhaps use this as the beginning of a list you will continue to add to throughout the rest of Acts.



Discussion Questions

1. Acts 4:32 begins, “All the believers were one in heart and mind.” Where in your life have you felt the most unity—the most like a team or a family? What did it look like? How did it make you feel?

2. Compare Acts 4:32–37 with Acts 2:42–47. What qualities characterized this church? List out as many as you can. How much of this do you think is possible today? Why?

3. How did the disciples react to the altercation with the chief priests and elders? What was their first instinct to do? What do we learn about God in this prayer? List as many observations as you can.

4. Why do you think prayer is sometimes our last resort option when faced with crises, rather than the first idea that comes to mind? What does this say about self-reliance vs. our dependence on God? How can we train ourselves to go to God first?

5. What did the disciples pray for in the end of chapter 4? Why do you think they did not pray for protection? What do you find yourself praying for the most? What does this say about your view of God?

Going Deeper

1. Compare Acts 4:27–28 with Acts 2:23. What do we learn about God’s role in the crucifixion of Christ? What does this say about the guilt of the parties mentioned in 4:27? What about our own guilt? Can God still hold them (and us) accountable if this was His plan all along? Read Romans 9:17–21. Does God still hold Pharaoh accountable? What is God’s typical answer in scripture when we ask “why?” (hint: Job 38:4–7; Romans 9:20). Does this truth about God comfort you or make you uncomfortable?

2. What is the prayer of the disciples in Acts 4:29? What do we see at the end of 4:31? Where have you seen God answer prayer—perhaps even this quickly and obviously? How has your view of prayer changed over the years?

Transformational Activity

WORSHIP:

As you gather this week, set aside some time to simply worship the Lord for who He is. Acts 4:24 says, “They lifted up their voices with one accord.” Take turns simply declaring things about God that are true. (“God you are worthy. You are just. You are patient. You take care of me,” etc.) Fill the room with proclamations of truth about God. Worship Him for who He is!



Week 8: Effects of Power – Purity

As we make our way through the book of Acts, we are finding that in each of the stories we read, there are important nuggets of truth about God and His revelation of Himself that beg to be explored. For example, we might find a passing reference to miracles—and this provides us an opportunity to dive deeper into a study of how scripture discusses miracles. Or we may come across a mention of the “New covenant”—this affords us the chance to fill out our understanding of this important theological concept. Contained within the stories that recount the foundation of the church being laid here in the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit generously leaves breadcrumbs that become trails for us to follow. He introduces ideas, reveals truths, and presents concepts, all of which offer to us an invitation, and perhaps serve as a nudge to get to know God better. And is that not the purpose of scripture itself—that we may be introduced to, and grow in our understanding of, and mature in our relationship with, the God of the universe?

We discover another of these breadcrumbs in the story of Ananias and Sapphira found in Acts chapter five. Here we read the account of a couple who was part of the early church that was experiencing persecution—and thus struggling financially. We witness incredible generosity in this story, as many in this church would give all that they had to help support those in need.

We learn that as Ananias and Sapphira come forward to donate the proceeds of a sale of property to the church, they are dishonest about the details of the transaction. Peter then asks why they have lied to the Holy Spirit about what they did. This is where that breadcrumb falls across our path. Peter goes on to say that they have not lied to men, but to God. As it turns out,

this is one of the most powerful passages that buttresses our understanding of the deity of the Holy Spirit.

Undergirding the doctrine of the Trinity is the foundational understanding that each member of our triune God is divine. The Father is God. The Son is God. The Spirit is God. And even though we confess the important truth that the Holy Spirit is indeed God, somehow there has come to exist within the psyche of many in the church a misunderstanding of who the Holy Spirit truly is. He is sometimes called an “it,” rather than “He.” The Holy Spirit is often unintentionally viewed as a lesser member of the Trinity. Undoubtedly, the Spirit is the most neglected member of the Trinity, thus, it is difficult to argue against the idea that our theology of the Spirit can oftentimes be a bit anemic.

“...it is difficult to argue against the idea that our theology of the Spirit can oftentimes be a bit anemic.”

What does the Bible reveal about the identity, personhood, and deity of the Spirit of God? Let’s begin with a short word about the Trinity. The Bible teaches that there is one God who has always existed in three distinct persons, each of whom are fully God. It is often helpful to think of there being one “what” (the substance of God) and three “whos” (the persons of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit). There is one substance or essence of God, and three distinct persons who share that substance. While there are three persons of the Trinity, there is only one God.

As we see in scripture, the Father blesses, chooses, predestines, and adopts. The Son accomplishes the work necessary to redeem us, forgive us, and make us alive. And the Holy Spirit is the one who seals us, teaches us, unites us, empowers us, and arms us for the Christian life. And while there is clearly overlap in the workings (i.e. job descriptions) of the members of the Godhead,

it is nonetheless helpful to see that the Father plans our salvation, the Son accomplishes our salvation, and the Holy Spirit applies the finished work of Christ to us for our salvation. The Holy Spirit is the member of the Trinity who clothes us with Christ's salvation and brings us into fellowship with God. While it is important to understand the uniqueness of each member of the Trinity, it is equally important to understand the unity within the godhead. There is ONE God. This God is a tri-unity.

“...the Father plans our salvation, the Son accomplishes our salvation, and the Holy Spirit applies the finished work of Christ to us for our salvation.”

With that in mind, we see in scripture that the Holy Spirit is not an impersonal force or abstract concept, but is a person who relates to the other members of the Trinity and to creation distinctly. When we talk about the Holy Spirit being the third person of the Trinity, we are not saying He is a corporeal “person” like you and me. The Holy Spirit is a “person” in the sense of having a center of personhood and the qualities of personality.

The Spirit does things that only persons do. His work is distinct from that of the Father and the Son. Also, the fact that He does anything at all shows that He is a distinct person and not an attribute of God or an impersonal force. The personhood of the Holy Spirit is confirmed by:

- His Attributes—the Holy Spirit possesses intellect (Eph 1:17), emotions (Eph 4:30), and will (Acts 16:6).
- His Works—the Holy Spirit guides (John 16:13), teaches (John 14:26), testifies (John 15:26), regenerates (Titus 3:5), and intercedes (Rom 8:26).
- His Position—the Holy Spirit can be obeyed (Acts 10), lied to (Acts 5:3), resisted (Acts 7:51), grieved (Acts 4:30), and blasphemed (Matt 12:32).

All of these attributes are elements of personality. It is just as erroneous and awkward to call the Holy Spirit an “it” as it would be to call Jesus “it”. The Holy Spirit is a personal being who can be known, loved, and worshiped. He is not a force or an attribute of God; He is a person. The Holy Spirit is fully God. Everything that God is, the Holy Spirit is. The Holy Spirit is called God (Acts 5:3). The Holy Spirit is spoken of as equal with the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit is described as having attributes that God alone has. He is holy (Rom 1:4; Matt 1:20). He is omnipresent (Ps 139:7–10). He is omniscient (1 Cor 2:10–12). He is omnipotent (Is 11:2; Gen 1:2; Job 33:4)

The Holy Spirit does things that only God does. He was involved in creation (Gen 1:2; Ps 104:30). He gives life (Job 33:4, 34:14–15). He regenerates (John 3:6, 6:63; 2 Cor 3:6; Titus 3:5). He revealed God’s message to prophets and apostles (2 Pet 1:21; John 16:3). He sanctifies believers (1 Cor 6:11; Gal 5:22–23; 2 Cor 3:18; Rom 8:13). He convicts unbelievers of sin (John 16:9–11; Acts 7:51). He is the Helper/Counselor for the saints (John 14:26, 15:26, 16:7). He intercedes for the saints (Rom 8:26). He illuminates truths about Christ (John 14:26, 15:26). He enables believers to give witness for Christ (Mark 13:11; Luke 12:12; John 15:26–7). He empowers believers for life and ministry (Acts 1:8, 4:8, 31, 6:10, 13:9). He directs and commands the church (Acts 8:29, 10:19, 11:12, 13:2, 4, 15:28, 16:6–7, 20:22). The Holy Spirit also unifies believers (Phil 2:1–2; 1 Cor 12:11–14).

It is essential that we honor and worship the Holy Spirit for who He is. This brief mention in Acts chapter five that Ananias and Sapphira were lying to God when they lied to the Holy Spirit helps fill out our understanding of the Spirit in important ways.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Why is fellowship such an important element of body life within the church? What do we gain from it? What do we miss out on without it? How have you experienced the blessings of fellowship? Describe a time when you were deprived of fellowship. How is fellowship more than just “gathering”?



Discussion Questions

1. Describe a time when peer pressure coaxed you into doing something you might not have otherwise done.

2. What did Ananias and Sapphira do wrong? What would they gain by lying? Why do you think the punishment was so abrupt and severe? What was the lesson God had for this early church? Why do you think people today are not struck down by God for lying and cheating?

3. What do we learn about the heart and methods of God in this story? What do we learn about the Holy Spirit?

4. How might outsiders to the faith describe what happened in this early church (Acts 4:32–5:11)? What would be your response to them?

5. Describe a time when you tried to hold something back from God. What was the result? What is something you sense God might be wanting you to turn over to Him completely?

Going Deeper

1. Why is the Lord's Supper important? What does it mean to you personally? Why is eating together such an important part of fellowship?

2. One difficult task for modern Christians is getting past their own preconceived notions about what church is and should be, and transporting themselves into the time and mindset that these early believers would have been experiencing. What historical, cultural, and theological factors would have shaped and affected these early church experiences we read about in Acts 2:42–47 and 4:32–37? What did the Lord's Supper and the apostles' teaching mean to them? How did their political situation color how they made decisions?

Transformational Activity

COMMUNITY:

Plan a time to get together outside of the church group meeting time for a evening of true fellowship. Do some biblical research on how “fellowship” is more than simply “gathering together.” Design a time where you break bread, discuss the Word, involve accountability, pray, and worship together. Discuss how you might make your gatherings more closely match a biblical portrait of koinonia (fellowship). Explore what it means to share and participate with other Christians as partners.



Week 9: Effects of Power – Joy in Persecution

As readers, when we come to the end of Acts chapter five we find ourselves in disbelief at the change that has been wrought in the followers of Jesus. They are in some ways unrecognizable. Not too long ago, these same men were inconsolable. They were fearful and unsure. They were leaderless and rudderless. Yet now, in Acts 5:41, after having stood up to the all-powerful Sanhedrin, and having been jailed and beaten for testifying to the truth of the gospel, we read of the apostles, “So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.” What could have possibly happened to so transform these men into such courageous warriors?

It can be argued that along with, “Let there be...,” and “It is finished,” among the most important words ever spoken were, “Jesus is alive.” Because of the resurrection, everything changed. Satan had been the unchallenged god of this world. Now, he is defeated, simply awaiting his sentence to be carried out. Death had reigned and terrorized humanity ever since the beginning. Now death is powerless and need not be feared. The destiny of fallen humanity had been eternal separation from God. Now our rescue is complete. A way has now been made to grant us access to the throne room of God. Because Jesus rose from the dead, God’s creation can now enjoy fellowship with God again. The resurrection changed everything.

Volumes could be written about the many ways that the resurrection changed things. But here are just a few seismic shifts that occurred, which cannot be explained apart from the truth of the resurrection.

“In the face of possible persecution, imprisonment, torture, and even death, these followers of Jesus were transformed by the undeniable power of the resurrection.”

The disciples were transformed from cowardly and cowering to bold and courageous. Rather than running and hiding, or denying they knew the Lord as they had done before, the disciples stood before angry mobs and high priests boldly declaring the truth that Jesus was alive. In the face of possible persecution, imprisonment, torture, and even death, these followers of Jesus were transformed by the undeniable power of the resurrection.

Next, a new organism was born. The early believers in Jesus were formed into a body, a community that served and sacrificed for each other. They grew so quickly that Rome itself was forced to grapple with the empire-wide disruption the church caused within just one generation. Somehow, the church was growing even more rapidly in the face of persecution. Nothing can explain believers being willing to die for their faith other than the reality and power of the resurrection.

Also, the fact that the beliefs and practices of Jewish believers in Messiah were so revolutionized vouches for the power and reality of the resurrection. Coming out of the challenges of the intertestamental period, Jews were such passionate monotheists and were so fiercely committed to Sabbath (Saturday) worship that any challenge to their traditions was typically met with more than hostility—often resulting in angry mobs and riots. Yet, in response to the resurrection of Christ having occurred on Sunday, the new day of worship for these early believers now fell on Sunday. And even for these fiercely monotheistic Jewish Christians, there grew to be a new understanding of there being a tri-unity in the oneness of God. These revolutionary

changes to fundamental doctrines bear witness to the significance of the resurrection. The entire course of human civilization was radically affected by these three simple words: “Jesus is alive.”

We need to ask ourselves how our lives would be different if Jesus had not risen from the dead. Paul asks that same question in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. Some anti-supernaturalists in Paul’s day were teaching that the resurrection of the dead was impossible. Does that sound familiar? Are there any in our day that scoff at the supernatural being credited as an explanation for the miraculous.

**“We need to ask ourselves
how our lives would be
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Paul argues that if there is no supernatural, and no resurrection from the dead, then Christ Himself was not raised. And if Christ was not raised then what are we doing? We are wasting our time and our lives. Our one and only message to a lost and dying world is that sin has separated us from God—and the ONLY thing that can remedy that situation is the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul goes on to say that if Christ is not raised then he himself is a liar—and that Christians are the most pitiable of all people. They are fools chasing after folly.

But then Paul turns a corner. He says: but if Christ was raised from the dead, then all bets are off. Everything changes. If Christ was raised from the dead, then His resurrection is just the first of many that will follow. Paul is claiming that the resurrection of Jesus is the guarantee that you and I will also be raised from the dead.

If I can pause here for a moment. We sometimes

become so familiar with gospel truths that they lose their impact. Paul's claim is an outrageous claim with absolutely profound implications. God is guaranteeing that you and I will be raised from the dead. What does that mean? It means that all the fears we have had for our safety over the span of our lives have been a waste of time. How many of our worries have to do with fear of death? The resurrection of Jesus means that death is not something to be feared, but rather is a gateway to something far better.

All we know is what we have seen in this life, so it is difficult to imagine beyond that. But when we die, God will raise us from the dead to be in a place that is designed to last forever. Our paltry, temporary pleasures, that we cherish so devoutly, will undoubtedly be seen as trivial when compared with pleasures and joys that last forever. The fact that death is not the end nor is something to be feared ought to not only revolutionize how we view this life, but radically change our priorities. We are invincible. We are like those superhero characters on TV that charge into danger without a second thought—knowing that ultimately no harm can befall them. If death is the worst thing that can happen to us, AND we know that death is, in truth, a promotion, then what are we waiting for? What is holding us back from boldly engaging in what we were placed on this planet to do: spreading the word of Jesus.

The resurrection changes everything! The resurrection of Christ changed everything for the apostles, and it changes everything for us.

DID YOU KNOW

The Bible teaches that both the saved and the unsaved will be given immortal bodies. We learn in Revelation chapter 20 that the unsaved dead are resurrected at the end of the Millennium. Matthew 25:46 unequivocally teaches that eternal punishment lasts as long as eternal life. The same word is used to describe each. Eternal punishment requires an immortal body.



Discussion Questions

1. Has being a Christian ever cost you anything or gotten you into trouble? Describe what this was like. How did you respond?

2. Examine each of the four statements Peter and the apostles made to the council in Acts 5:29–32. What does each statement mean, and how do you think these pronouncements would have been received by the religious leaders?

3. What is the picture of God we get in Acts 5:19–20? In 5:29–32? In 5:33–39? And in 5:40–42? What do you think of the advice provided by Gamaliel? Is it possible for godly wisdom to come from non-godly sources? Examples?

4. What are some of the reasons people reject the gospel today? How do you typically respond when you encounter those rejections?

5. If you were in the shoes of Peter and the apostles in 5:40–42, how do you think you would have reacted? Would you have continued preaching in the temple? How might we see something similar today? What kind of opposition or roadblocks do you encounter in spreading the Word of God today? How do you respond? Where are you involved in spreading the Word? If that is not a part of your life, what do you think the Holy Spirit is prompting you to do?

Going Deeper

1. Read Acts 5:17–20, 40 and compare this with Acts 12:6–19 and Acts 16:22–34. What are some similarities and differences in these stories? Why do you believe that God will sometimes deliver you out of hardships and at other times will not?

2. What does “...we must obey God rather than man” mean? What does it not mean? What does it look like to live life in the here and now as a citizen of the kingdom? How does this perspective affect the decisions we make, how we spend our time and money, and the priorities by which we live?

Transformational Activity

BIBLE STUDY:

Spend some time this week doing a “word search” on the topic of suffering or persecution in the Bible. Grab a concordance, or use your favorite Bible app or website and search those terms. Explore what God’s Word says about this issue. What is the role of suffering in the Christian life? How has God used suffering as a tool to make us more like Christ? How should we respond when trials and suffering come our way? Come next week ready to share your findings.



Week 10: “I Was Born for This”

Several weeks ago, we witnessed the beginnings of the storm of persecution that would fall upon the early church—a persecution that God would use in His desire to “encourage” His followers to move out from their comfortable homes and to be witnesses to the uttermost parts of the world. Here in Acts chapters six and seven we see the impetus for that persecution escalating into a full-blown fervor. The martyrdom of Stephen opened up the crack in the dam to let loose the full force of persecution we will witness all throughout the rest of the book. An important, yet challenging truth we are forced to grapple with—one that flows from these events is that God used the persecution of the early church—and uses the trials we face in this life—as tools to accomplish His will.

Yet, scripture takes this hard truth a step further. At the end of Acts chapter five we saw the apostles actually rejoicing over being counted worthy to suffer for the name of Christ. And here in chapters 6 and 7 we witness Stephen being fully ready to give up his own life for the message of the gospel. His eyes are so fixed

“God used the persecution of the early church, and uses the trials we face in this life, as tools to accomplish His will.”

on eternity that he ends up praying that God would not hold the sin of his murder against his killers. Several questions arise from the ideas that followers of Jesus should not be surprised at the suffering we encounter, and that we can even somehow rejoice to be counted worthy to suffer for Christ. How is it possible to have this kind of attitude toward suffering? How does the Bible characterize the purpose of our suffering?

Just as Stephen, in Acts six and seven, looks back

to the stories in the Old Testament to make his case, we shall begin there as well. During the Exodus, the people of God had to be wondering (if not on day one, surely on day ten thousand) why this trip through the desert was necessary. In their 40-year wilderness wanderings, the people of Israel learned some amazing lessons about the nature and character of God—about their own character and how God was weaning them off of Egypt by drawing them into dependence on Him. Indeed, this is a very important lesson that we all need to hear today: The road to glory necessarily leads through suffering. Where we see this in Israel, is that the road to the Promised Land had to lead through the desert.

We have already seen in 1 Peter 4:12 that we should not be surprised when suffering comes our way, as if something strange were happening to us. But rather, we should expect it, knowing that just as it was necessary for Christ to experience sufferings before His exaltation (Luke 9:22, 17:25, 24:7, 25–26), it is also necessary for us to experience sufferings as well. But the question arises: why, indeed, is it necessary?

One answer to this difficult question begins with the fact that mankind was created in the image of God to be in perfect fellowship with Him. Sin has distorted that image and broken that relationship. The ultimate end God is drawing man toward is a restoration of that relationship. We are to be reunited with Him in perfect love and fellowship. But there exists a barrier between mankind in his present state and that final goal. Sin has distorted that *imago dei* (the image of God) and corrupted our desires. We now desire and actively seek after things which are ultimately harmful to us. In his book [Suffering and God](#), Alistair McGrath has said, “The great prize set before us is none other than a relationship with God Himself. But our vision is so distorted by sin that we see nothing but the lesser prizes around us...our hearing is so dulled that we hear only the voices of the world and its transient goals.”

God, in His wisdom and love, desires to free us from the power that sin has over us. He wishes to overturn the effect sin has had—namely, the distortion of our natural tendencies. He longs to restore to us affections befitting God’s children, that we might once again desire what is appropriate and right—that He might then give us what is truly best for us. Ultimately, God is using the suffering we experience to mold us into the image of His Son. But in the here and now He also desires for us to experience freedom from the power of sin and victory over its seemingly irresistible influence upon us.

Suffering can promote maturity, develop endurance, discipline and humble believers, prompt humble dependence, and many other things besides. It is a tool in the hand of a wise and loving Father who is systematically making us more like Christ. It may seem pointless at the time, but God is able to use and transform our suffering and use it for His glory.

The primary way Scripture describes these necessary sufferings that precede the coming glory is through the vivid image of “birth pangs.” New birth does not come without birth pangs. The two are inexorably linked. So it is with suffering and glory. Glory will not come,

DID YOU KNOW?

In Acts 6:1–2, we see the apostles set apart seven men to help relieve some of their workload. The phrase, “to wait on tables” in v.2 means much more than simply being a waiter. Banking and financial transactions were done at tables, and so the figure of speech “serving tables” likely had to do with handling financial transactions and ensuring the proper distribution of needs to the poor. This came to be one of the roles of the “deacons,” which comes from the Greek for “serve” in this phrase.



just as the new birth cannot come, until the suffering and birth pangs have had their say.

“Suffering makes us long for home—our true home. Suffering makes it clear that this world is not our home.”

Creation itself is groaning and travailing in childbirth. We are experiencing its birth pangs. The new creation is coming. The sufferings of this present time Paul speaks of in Romans 8 are indeed those very birth pangs. When the travail is complete, the new creation will burst forth in glory and with unspeakable joy.

However, as with a birth, the process must run its course. Suffering must come before glory just as the seed being planted must come before the sprout, which must come before the growth, which must come before the fruit. It is the necessary order of things.

So why are birth pangs—why is suffering—why is time in the desert so necessary? Because suffering is the mechanism by which God turns our eyes toward Him. It alone is immediate and powerful enough to force us to loosen the grip we have on the things of this world. And valuing the things of God above all else is the goal. Suffering makes us long for home—our true home. Suffering makes it clear that this world is not our home.

So, how is it possible to understand the sufferings and travails of this life as something positive? How are we to “consider it all joy,” as James tells us? It is in the same way that mothers are able to endure the travails of birth pangs as necessary pain leading to a positive end. It is keeping the end result in mind. Scripture uses the image of birth pangs for that very reason—to point us to the joy that is coming. Scripture says of Jesus that for the joy set before Him He endured the cross. The cross was the necessary path for Christ. And suffering is the necessary path for us.

Discussion Questions

1. Stephen told the leaders they were doing just what their fathers did. What “parent-isms” have you found yourself saying that your parents said to you? Or what have you caught yourself doing (that your parents did) that you swore you would never do?

2. What were the accusations the Jewish leadership council made against Stephen (Acts 6:11, 13–14)? Were they true? Why were these important issues for them? What were the accusations Stephen made against the council (Acts 7:51–53)? Why were these accusations so infuriating to them?

3. Read through the sermon of Stephen. What stands out to you? What new information do we find in this sermon that we might not otherwise have? What do we learn about the plan of God through this message?

4. Where do you see people holding on to their idols, religious rituals, and religious heroes, and missing the point of what those items represent? Where do you see this both inside the church and outside the church?

5. What does it mean to be stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears (Acts 7:51)? Where in your life might you be reflecting a bit of that as well? Are we hearing and seeing what God is communicating to us today? Where is God trying to get your attention?

Going Deeper

1. We see in the sermon of Stephen a vast and detailed knowledge of the law and history of Israel. However, he was speaking to a group of people with just as vast a knowledge. What is the difference between Stephen and the religious leaders? What do we need beyond just knowledge? Why do you think the response of the religious leaders to Jesus was so different than Stephen's? Discuss this statement: "Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is never alone." How does this illuminate what we are discussing in this question?

2. While Peter's sermons led to mass conversions, Stephen's sermon led to his death. What was the difference? Why is the result of sharing our faith unpredictable? What effect do you think the death of Stephen had on the growth and spread of the early church?

Transformational Activity

WORSHIP & PRAYER:

We so often praise God and call Him “good” when blessings flow our way. But is God not good when we are experiencing trials and tribulations? Are not pain and suffering the only vehicles through which we truly experience growth and by which we are transformed into the image of Christ?

Take a few minutes together to list out some of the trials that God is allowing in your life—and is using for His glory. Sometimes these kinds of experiences can be so overwhelming that they are difficult to discuss and verbalize. If you are able, pray together, giving God the glory for the work He is doing in your life through these trials.



Acts

CHURCH OF POWER

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.

