



Acts

VISION & ACTION



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 consistent 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)	Tiberius (14-37AD)
33	Martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 6:8-8:1)		
33	Conversion of Paul (Acts 9:1-19)		
35	Paul visits Jerusalem to see Peter (Galatians 1:18)	Pontius Pilate (Procurator) (26-36)	Caligula (37-41)
35-46	Paul in Cilicia and Syria (Galatians 1:21; Acts 9:30)		
44	Herod Agrippa I dies (Acts 12:19-23)	Herod Agrippa I (37-44)	Claudius (41-54)
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)		
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)		

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Introduction

Simply stated, information is not transformation. Unfortunately, we can sometimes get the two confused. Whether or not we fully realize it, many believers approach the study of God's Word in this way. We seek after knowledge. We spend our time focused on learning more and more new facts and pursuing teachers with novel insights that will help us understand God's Word in fresh ways. And these are all good things...unless that is where we stop. These are indeed good *first* steps. We need information. We need to begin with a deepening knowledge of God and His Word. But knowledge alone simply puts us in the starting blocks. What we do with that information is what is truly important.

What happens weeks or months from now when we have long forgotten that clever sermon or that insightful blog? On what will we lean when we inevitably face a temptation to compromise or are plagued with crippling anxiety over an upcoming decision? When the rubber meets the road and we need to actually apply God's Word to the situations in our lives, information alone is not enough.

After we are exposed to God's Word, what is the next step? What do we do with that valuable information we have been gifted? This is where we must choose to actively and purposefully pursue the journey of sanctification. This is why each question five in our weekly study guide is so important. This question directs our focus toward *applying* what has been discussed, both in the text of scripture and in your groups.

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We need to passionately seek after more and

more knowledge of God—all the while understanding that knowledge is merely a means to an end. This goal is not *propositional* knowledge about God, but rather a *relational* knowledge of God. It is communion with God. But then, the next crucial step involves taking that knowledge and applying it to our lives. It is putting into practice the things we know of God and His character. We understand wisdom to be the application of knowledge. And wisdom in scripture is described as the knowledge of God. The more time we spend with God, the more wisdom, knowledge, and understanding we can receive (Prov 2:6). Wisdom is the fear of God (Prov 1:7, 9:10). It is thinking God's thoughts (1 Cor 2:12-13). Thus, in many ways, sanctification is a journey towards—and a growing in—godly wisdom.

The next question though is: how does sanctification work? What is *our* role in sanctification? What is God's role? How do we partner with the Holy Spirit in growing our faith? First, we must more fully understand the biblical use of the term sanctification.

Sanctification is growth. It is the journey of moving from where we are when God saves us to where He wants us to be—in terms of faith, dependence, humility, maturity, and holiness. Sanctification involves being set apart for a purpose. It is, in a very real sense, the state of proper functioning. Through the process of sanctification, God makes us more and more like Jesus. He makes us more holy and set apart so that we can fulfill the purpose for which we were created. When we are functioning in the way we were designed, we are sanctified.

We are born in this world, and prior to sanctification we are of this world as well. Sanctification weans us off the world, helps separate us from its influence, and fashions us into the likeness of Christ. The Bible uses the term sanctification in a couple of different ways. Sometimes, sanctification is used as a synonym for salvation—including its past, present, and future aspects.

However, a clearer way to understand what scripture is referring to in the process of sanctification is in seeing it as the present tense aspect of our salvation. It is helpful to envision our salvation as having 3 “tenses”. Salvation involves a past, present, and future work of God in our lives. Seeing the similarities and differences between these 3 aspects gives us a fuller understanding of the work of God in saving us. This then will help give us a context in which to comprehend our role in growing closer to God.

The past tense of salvation is called “justification”. This is the one-time act of God in our lives that frees us from sin’s dominion. It is where God declares us to be not guilty of all the charges that sin levels against us. This “not guilty” verdict is a result of Christ having paid the penalty for our sins on the cross. He exchanges His life of perfect righteousness for our life of sin. He pays all that we owe for our rebellion against our creator, and brings us out of darkness into the light. We are no longer dead (separated from God), but rather are alive and adopted into God’s family. We are now members of a new spiritual kingdom. The righteousness God credits to our account is “alien” (foreign) to us. It is not our own righteousness. When God credits to our “account” the merit of Jesus’ perfect life and substitutionary death, this is what changes our status from “unsaved” to “saved”.

Once our judicial position has been changed with reference to God through justification, we can begin the process of “practically” matching our practice with that position. This is the present tense aspect of salvation. It is called “sanctification.” In God’s eyes, we are now positionally perfect, holy, and blameless. Yet, we still continue to sin on a daily basis. It’s important to see though, that since there was nothing we could do to earn or deserve the righteousness credited to us, there is nothing we can do to be disqualified from it either. That daily sin does not affect our position—our status before God. We cannot lose that justified standing. Yet, God saved us for the purpose of sanctification. Our destiny

is to be like Christ. This is what sanctification is all about. It is the progressive and cooperative work of both God and man that frees us of sin and makes us more and more like Christ. As we cooperate with the Holy Spirit and yield to His control, we grow in grace and are spiritually renewed. This is a life-long process that will never be fully complete in this life.

The final tense of salvation is future (after death). This is called glorification—where God completes the sanctification process that He began in us in this life. We are fully and finally sanctified at this point and are given immortal bodies where sin will no longer have a home. We will then be both positionally and practically perfect and complete.

It is important to see that both justification and glorification are “monergistic”—God working alone. But sanctification is “synergistic.” It is God working *with* us. This is why we can say it is a “cooperative” work of both God and man working together toward this transformation.

So back to the question: what is God’s part, and what is man’s part in sanctification? God’s part is undeniable. All three members of the Trinity are active in sanctification. Philippians 2:13 tells us that God is at work in His children both to will and to work for His good pleasure. Jesus is the “perfecter” of our faith (Heb 12:2). And the Spirit produces His fruit in our lives, according to Galatians chapter 5.

It has been said that our role is both active and passive in the journey of sanctification. We are to present our bodies as living sacrifices to God (Rom 12:1), and to avoid presenting our members to sin as instruments of unrighteousness (Rom 6:13). In this, we are trusting that God is doing His work of cleansing our hearts. This trust is the passive side of our role.

But we are also called to obedience. This is where we actively choose to do what God has revealed is right. We are to put to death the deeds of the flesh (Rom 8:13).

We are to flee immorality (1 Cor 6:18) and put on the whole armor of God (Eph 6) so that we may defeat the attacks of the enemy. We are to actively pursue holiness. The pace of our sanctification is largely up to us. We can grow in holiness quickly or slowly—depending on how beholden we are to our sin.

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So, we circle back to where we began. It is important to see that what truly transforms us is not an acquiring of facts and information. It is an encounter with the creator Himself. It is exposure to the beauty, majesty, holiness, and splendor of all that God is. This is what motivates that desire and drive for holiness.

As we begin this next section of Acts, let's focus on how God is growing and sanctifying the early church, and how He is doing the same thing in us.

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Week 28:

A Vision to Equip

In Acts 18:23-19:7, we are introduced to a new character in the unfolding story of the early church. We meet Apollos, a Jew from Alexandria, Egypt, who was learned, eloquent, and mighty in the scriptures. It is said of Apollos that he taught accurately the things of Jesus. But we also learn that his understanding of the gospel was incomplete. He knew about repentance and forgiveness of sins, but had not yet been taught about the significant change that was wrought as the New Covenant was instituted.

We have touched on this issue several times in the past few chapters of Acts. The New Covenant brought with it the forgiveness of sins, but it also inaugurated a new age—the age of the Spirit. No longer were there external, fleshly, identity markers of who was and was not a member of the family of God. The new identifying marker was internal—the presence of the Holy Spirit in one’s life. This promise of the Spirit that God had revealed through Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Joel was a central component of the New Covenant. The Holy Spirit was

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poured out on the world at Pentecost and the presence of the Spirit in someone’s life had now been recognized by the disciples and followers of Jesus as the incontrovertible sign of the reality of someone’s conversion and the legitimacy of their faith.

Yet, not all of these New Testament believers were present at Pentecost to witness the outpouring of the Spirit. And some of the followers of John the Baptist also became Christ followers. We see

both in the story of Apollos, and with the believers he had been teaching at Ephesus, examples of theological shortfalls that needed to be addressed. Thus, God reveals in this passage how He accomplished two things: the completion of the education of those with an inadequate understanding of New Covenant salvation, and the provision of, and continued emphasis on, unity as He used the Apostles to validate the legitimacy of the faith of these Gentile communities.

The baptism by John was preparatory, and focused Israel on the need for repentance in anticipation of the arrival of Messiah. This message of repentance was received and embraced by many in Israel as “the fullness of time” drew near. Apollos was among this group. But evidently, this was as far as his understanding went. He did not yet understand that the baptism of John prefigured and prepared Israel for what would come later: baptism in the name of Jesus and the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:16). Aquila and Priscilla gently and discreetly pulled Apollos aside to help him understand more fully the ramifications of the coming of Messiah, as well as the developments that took place at Pentecost.

In fact, this insufficient theology was so blatant that when Paul arrived at Ephesus, he discovered that the believers that had been sitting under the teaching of Apollos had not even heard that there was a Holy Spirit. Through Aquila and Priscilla and the teachings of Paul, the situation was addressed and the proper teaching occurred.

But the question that many ask at this point is: how could these believers in Ephesus be truly saved without having the Holy Spirit? And if that was possible then, is it possible today? In fact, there has currently arisen an unfortunate teaching by some in certain sectors of the worldwide church that we can and should expect (and even seek after) what they call a “second blessing.” This is the idea that someone can be saved, and then later in their Christian walk encounter a higher level of Christian

experience. This false teaching states that subsequent to the new birth, as one seeks out and strives for this second blessing, they are then blessed with the baptism of the Holy Spirit—a higher tier of Christian status and mark of maturity. Yet, as we have seen, this is not how Acts describes the singular event of the baptism of the Spirit.

We began our study in Acts by highlighting the truth that not everything written in this book was intended to serve as authoritative examples for us to follow. Here we find another example of how the book of Acts is often *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*. Scripture often describes what took place rather than urging us to follow what transpired as an example.

We have seen several times in Acts how the apostles came to a certain region that had received the gospel message—and when they arrived to authenticate the legitimacy of the faith of those in that city or region, hands were laid on these new believers and the Spirit was poured out on them. For example, back in Acts chapter 8, we saw Peter and John—envoys representing the leadership of the early church—travelling down to Samaria to validate and legitimize the salvation experience of the Samaritans, since otherwise the salvation of this fringe people group would be suspect. In Acts chapter 11, Barnabas was sent down to Antioch for that very same reason.

It is important to see that there was a very real danger of separate sects developing within the early church. There was such skepticism that Gentiles could be saved outside of the gateway of Judaism that unless God had quelled that suspicion and doubt through the efforts of both

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Peter and Paul, there certainly would have developed a “second-class Christian” mindset with which Jewish Christians would have labeled Gentile (and especially Samaritan) believers. This is an unfortunate result of this erroneous teaching today as well. Some Christians are treated as second-class citizens if they have not received this so-called “second blessing.”

Apollos himself is mentioned later in scripture with regard to an incident that Paul takes time to address to the church at Corinth. In 1 Corinthians chapter 3, Paul goes out of his way to rebuff some followers of Jesus who had begun to separate from others based on whom they were evangelized by. Some believers said they were of Apollos, and others said they were of Paul. Paul quickly shut this nonsense down by pointing out that everything any of these teachers had done pointed only to Christ. This theme of the need for unity within the early church is almost all-pervasive throughout the New Testament.

We also need to see that this was a unique time in the history of God’s family. The seismic shift that was taking place in the identity of the family of God necessitated special care and attention to ensure that questions were answered and fears were allayed. The “overlap of the ages” was a time of transition which necessitated visible exceptions to how things normally operated—so that this all-important unity might be preserved.

Yes, it is normative for the Holy Spirit to be poured out into someone’s life at the moment they come to faith in Messiah. And for the early church, this often resulted in supernatural signs being manifested to bear witness to the validity of this experience. However, as the transition from the Mosaic Covenant age to the New Covenant age occurred, God selectively made exceptions to this norm to ensure that everyone, in all regions and people groups, understood that there is one, and only one body of Christ. He did this by temporarily withholding what would normally and naturally accompany the salvation experience—both here and with the Samaritans in Acts

chapter 8. Here we see that Paul was able to validate the legitimacy of the faith of this very important church of Ephesus while teaching the church at large a crucial lesson about unity.

DID YOU KNOW?

Apollos hailed from Alexandria, Egypt—a city founded by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C. At one point, a full third of the worldwide Jewish population lived in Alexandria. It was here that the Septuagint was produced—a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament (275–260 B.C.). This made God’s Word available in the common tongue for many in the Greek speaking world, and this was the version of the Bible that most New Testament writers quoted from.



Discussion Questions

1. We see that Priscilla and Aquila were tentmakers, just like the apostle Paul. But they have been more remembered for the way they used their spiritual gifts in leading and teaching God’s Word to others. What gifts do you believe you have? Where have you felt most fulfilled in using your gifts?

2. Read Acts 18:23-19:7. What surprises you most about what happens in this passage? Compare Acts 18:25 with 18:28. What do these truths teach about how God can use anyone in His service—regardless of their learning or the length of time they have been saved? What was the difference between the baptism of John the Baptist and the baptism into the Lord Jesus?

3. How is it possible that this group in Ephesus could be saved without having received the Holy Spirit? What can we take away from this section of scripture regarding God’s heart for unity within the church? Why was it important and meaningful for Paul to lay his hands on these believers? What happened when Paul laid his hands on them? Why do you think it was significant that there were supernatural signs that accompanied the laying on of Paul’s hands?

4. How do you see Paul handling doctrinal error within the church at Ephesus? How do you see this issue addressed in the church today? Is it our job as believers to correct the doctrine of others? Why or why not? What might this look like?

5. What gap in your understanding of God’s Word and the story of salvation did God fill in for you at some point in your life? How did that come about? What area of doctrine do you wish you understood more clearly? When have you helped others come to a better understanding of God’s Word? Where do you see God potentially wanting you to play this mentor role in someone else’s life?

Going Deeper

1. In this passage, baptism is prominently on display. From what you can see here, what role did baptism play in the life of these early believers? What role did John's baptism play, and what role did baptism into the Lord Jesus play? Why was baptism such an important aspect of their coming to faith? What difference do you see between the importance and immediacy of baptism for them, and the way it is often practiced today in the church? Why the difference? How would you define baptism—and how can this definition impact how we treat it today?

2. Read Romans 6:3-11. What truths stand out to you from this passage? Discuss them one by one. What important theological ramifications flow from the image that baptism communicates?

Transformational Activity

BIBLE STUDY:

This week pick a biblical topic that you would like to know more about. Perhaps it is spiritual warfare, or obedience, or the role of suffering in the Christian life, or any other topic you have been curious about. Spend some time with a concordance or a Bible study program or even your favorite search engine, and do a deep dive into that topic. Come back next week ready to share any insights you have gained. Perhaps this might inspire additional deep dives in the future.



Week 29:

A Vision of Humility

In our passage this week from Acts chapter 19, we learn that Paul spent over 2 years in one place teaching this one church. Seeing that in the past, he stayed just a few days at some churches and a few weeks at others, we ought to be a bit curious as to why Paul chose to stay for so long in this one city.

Not only would Ephesus prove to be one of the most significant and influential churches in the early church era, and a place that would be a central hub for the spread of the gospel, we also get a hint in the first verse of our passage as to what Paul was up to during his time there. It says in Acts 19:8 that Paul entered the synagogue reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. Why did Paul’s message focus on the “kingdom of God,” and why was this such a crucial topic—perhaps prompting him to spend so much time in this one place?

Much has been said and taught in the church over the years about the kingdom of God—much of it helpful, but a good deal more of it not. For this discussion, we must press “rewind,” and look back to the introductory material we covered in the study guide for 1 & 2 Thessalonians. There, we spent much time and effort discussing how one’s approach to the study of eschatology (the end times) is dependent upon presuppositions, and is determined by one’s hermeneutic (how one chooses to read scripture). If you choose to read scripture in a straightforward and literal fashion, this will send you down a particular path and land you in a specific camp for understanding the end-times. But if you believe that scripture is not to be read in a straightforward and literal way, and that we somehow possess the ability and permission to allegorize texts of scripture (and thus pour

into them whatever meaning we would like), this will then send you down a different path and land you in a different

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camp for understanding the end times. The topic of the coming kingdom of God is ultimately a discussion of the end times in broad terms.

This same issue of presuppositions lurks behind how we understand the topic of the kingdom of God. If you are not familiar with the discussion we had about hermeneutics and how absolutely crucial it is to read scripture in a straightforward, literal

way, let me encourage you to revisit the introductions to each of the chapters in our 1 & 2 Thessalonians study guide. That discussion will go a long way toward helping you understand how important and foundational this topic is. A literal, physical (new creation) view of the kingdom of God is absolutely essential in order to properly understanding the message of scripture and the good news of the gospel.

All that being said, the topic of the kingdom of God is one that lies at the very heart of the gospel message, and is one that is woven throughout the entire Old Testament. If we look back to the beginning of salvation history, as the message of the good news gained more clarity over time (through progressive revelation), the prophets spoke more and more about this promised kingdom that Messiah was to bring. This was the hope of Israel. The Messiah was coming to restore that which was lost. Mankind had given up paradise in the garden, and through our rebellion, we forfeited that place and experience of perfection. God then chose a people through whom He promised to rectify that sad state of affairs. His plan involved God choosing a nation through whom He would bless the world. We need to read that word “bless” in terms of salvation and restoration. The

blessing that He promised was indeed salvation—from sin and from sorrow. But it would also be a return, of sorts, to those Edenic conditions where we would fellowship with God. He would be our God and we would be His people.

So, in one sense, this renovation and renewal of creation was the promise of restoration that Messiah would bring in His kingdom. Yet in another sense, all of Israel had woven into their national DNA a memory of the greatness of the reign of David and Solomon. This golden age was the peak of greatness their nation had experienced, as God had set up an earthly kingdom where He fought their battles and they had rest on every side. In the midst of David's reign, God promised David and his descendants a coming kingdom that would never end—one that would be ruled by Messiah Himself from David's throne. He would rule with a rod of iron and peace would abound. The description of these kingdom conditions glows from the pages of many of the major prophets. This memory too, filled out the expectations of Israel as they longed for the coming of Messiah—namely a return to this Davidic picture of the kingdom. These were the two aspects of the promised coming kingdom.

The question that begs to be asked and answered is this: if Jesus was indeed the Messiah, why had the kingdom not yet been set up? This implied question is actually the needed context to understand much of

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

As usual, Paul's appeal to those in the synagogue provoked a negative response. What is it about the Gospel that incites such a reaction in people? What is the "offense of the gospel"? In other words, what are we really saying to people about their lifestyle and worldviews (not to mention their eternal destinies) when we proclaim the Good News? If we do not experience such reactions, what might that say about our message (2 Tim 3:12)?



what happens in the gospels. The disciples confirmed the centrality of this question as they left the temple in Matthew chapter 24. They pointed out to Jesus how amazing the temple complex was, perhaps hearkening back to the greatness of Solomon's temple—which far outshone the temple Herod had expanded for the Jews. Jesus responded by saying that this was not what they should be looking for. Those very buildings they so admired would be torn down and not one stone would be left upon another. The immediate questions that entered their minds in response to Jesus' statement were: when would these things happen that Jesus spoke of, and what would be the sign of their arrival?

Jesus affirmed the validity of their questions by not denying the presupposition lying behind them (that a literal kingdom was coming). He simply redirected their eagerness by *not* revealing to them any sort of timetable. What He clearly did *not* do was undermine the foundation of their question: namely, that He was going to bring a literal kingdom to exist there on earth. He clearly was. Those that read the scriptures with an allegorical lens must redefine terms like “kingdom” (and “Israel”) to mean something completely different from what they have always meant, from the beginning of the nation until now.

When we read scripture in a straightforward, literal fashion, we discover that the Bible describes in Revelation chapters 19-20 how Christ is going to return and establish His kingdom here on earth. It will be a literal, earthly, political kingdom where He will bodily reign from Jerusalem for 1,000 years. This viewpoint is referred to as the “Pre-Millennial” return of Christ. Other traditions read the Bible in a less literal fashion and so come up with other conclusions regarding His return. Scripture clearly teaches that at the end of this thousand-year kingdom God will destroy the current Heavens and Earth and create a new Heavens and Earth where we will dwell with Him forever. The New Testament reveals the length of time this earthly kingdom will last: 1,000 literal years.

But it is in the Old Testament where so much of the colorful description of this kingdom lies.

In the previous study guide discussion mentioned earlier (1 & 2 Thessalonians), we learned that coming out of a Platonic (derived from the philosopher Plato) philosophical background and worldview, some in the early church believed matter (and anything physical) to be evil, and things of the spirit (and that which was immaterial) to be good. This drove them to see the straightforward scriptural interpretation of a literal, physical, coming kingdom of God as fleshly—and thus, evil. (This same philosophy would later introduce the heresy that Christ was not actually a fully physical human, but only appeared to be.) Thus, they opted to *spiritualize* whatever they could in scripture to avoid any connection with the physical. The early church father Origen (later branded a heretic) was the champion for using the allegorical method in reading scripture. This harmful hermeneutical approach took root in the Roman Catholic Church, and survives today in many of the Reformed Protestant churches where the issue of hermeneutics was unfortunately not “reformed.”

The “new creation” model of eschatology, which takes scripture at face value... does not let pagan Platonic presuppositions color the interpretation of God’s promises.

This leads us to an understanding of why some in the church today try to sell us on what is known as a “spiritual vision” model of eschatology, which argues that the primary purposes of God in the establishment of His kingdom are spiritual only, rather than physical as well. This is how they can make the ludicrous claim that the second coming of Christ already happened (perhaps in 70 AD)—because Christ only came to “rule in our hearts,” rather than to literally rule from Jerusalem. The counter to this view is the “new creation” model of eschatology, which takes scripture at face value and does not let pagan

Platonic presuppositions color the interpretation of God's promises. In other words, it's important to see that when we read about the "kingdom of God" in scripture (in both the Old and New Testaments), it is primarily referring to the Messianic Millennial (1,000-year) reign of Christ on earth. There are other subtle, nuanced ways the term kingdom is used in scripture, but only as a preview of what the kingdom coming in fullness will entail.

This is what Paul took such great care (and time) to communicate to the church at Ephesus. The topic of the kingdom of God has filled many volumes of Christian literature. Much ink has been spilt pouring over and explaining this crucial idea. It is an issue that the church needs to be intentional about exploring and expounding more precisely, and more often.

Discussion Questions:

1. We see the Ephesians giving up many of their practices—even burning their books—when they trusted in Messiah. What sort of lifestyle changes did you need to make when you began following Christ?

2. What do we learn about the kind of city Ephesus was from Acts 19:18-20? What did their worldview revolve around? Why do you think the episode of the seven sons of Sceva had such an effect on them (19:17)? How does this background regarding the mindset of the people of Ephesus help us understand why God might choose to work in such an unusual way there (19:11-12)? Should we take this episode as normative or as an anomaly? Why?

3. What are some dangers that flow from focusing too much on the miraculous—as opposed to how God works in our everyday lives? Why do you think God uses the miraculous in some situations and not in others? Why do you think we seem to see less miraculous working by God today than in Bible times? What do we learn about God from the miraculous? What do we learn about God from seeing His hand in the mundane?

4. Where do you see people today trying to use the “right words,” or treating prayer as if it is a magical formula to get things they want from God? Have you ever expected prayer to work like that? What are some examples? What is the underlying presupposition about prayer that this kind of attitude reveals? How does John 14:13-14 play into this?

5. How do people sometimes try to use Jesus for their own purposes today? What does this look like in fringe movements? What might it look like our own lives? What is one lesson we can take from this passage about how we look at Jesus—specifically regarding how we approach Him in prayer? What is one prayer that you can pray this week to realign your heart towards a more humble approach to prayer?

Going Deeper:

1. What the world considers normal usually runs counter to Christian culture and values. This passage offers us a somewhat radical example of this in the magic and sorcery present in Ephesus. Most of us did not need to burn our magic books when we came to Christ. But what does the call to be “in the world, but not of the world” look like in your life? Where do we most often fall short attempting to live in a counter-cultural way? How has the Spirit reminded you of this need?

2. It is clear from this passage that, regardless of the unique methods utilized in this city, healing come from God and God alone. Many of us have wrestled with God in our prayers over the question of healing. What do we learn about God when He chooses not to heal? What do we learn about ourselves? How can our journey through this one issue help secure our eyes on God and on eternity better than other issues might?

Transformational Activity

OUTREACH:

Often the preaching of the gospel brings reactions we do not expect. Take some time this week to think through your expectations when you are obedient to share the Good News with others. What do you expect to happen? What has been your experience sharing the love of Christ with others? Have some responded right away? Have others rejected not only the message, but you as well? As you examine your heart on this, jot down some thoughts you can share with your family or group about what we should expect when reaching out to others with God's love. What are we called to do—win converts, or sow seeds?



Why does scripture characterize the Christian life as warfare?



Week 30:

A Vision Amidst Confusion

In Acts chapter 19, we witness a violent clash of ideologies and worldviews. We then watch the mayhem that unfolds as a result. Vested interests are challenged and a heated conflict ensues. Yet, we need to realize that what is happening on the surface of this story is merely a faint reflection of what is going on behind the scenes. Let's see if we can pull back the curtain a bit to get a view of the bigger picture. What we're going to see is that there is a spiritual battle at play in the seemingly innocuous story of merchants selling idols at the marketplace.

When we come to faith in Messiah, we step foot into a world that was previously unfamiliar to us. We are entering into the realm of spiritual warfare. When we declare faith and trust in God to save us, we are not only adopted into His family, we are conscripted into His army. Scripture is rife with pictures and imagery of warfare that illustrate the mindset we must adopt as we navigate the Christian life. We are told to put on the armor of God. We

When we declare faith and trust in God to save us, we are not only adopted into His family, we are conscripted into His army.

are admonished that "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against...the spiritual forces of evil in the Heavenly places" (Eph 6:12). It is said that the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but have divine power that can destroy spiritual strongholds.

Why is this? Why does scripture characterize the Christian life as warfare? What is it about living the life of a kind-hearted, grace-filled, humble servant of God that evokes such violent opposition from not only the forces of Satan, but from the world he has inspired to follow and imitate him?

Beginning the life of following Jesus is certainly eye-opening in many respects, but none so much as the revelation and realization that there is more to life and existence than what we can see with our eyes. There is an unseen world all around us where battles are waged and where powerful beings exist that shape and influence the world that is visible.

We grow up in a culture that sensationalizes the possibility of supernatural creatures like ghosts, goblins, and ghouls—but for the trivial purpose of entertainment. Countless movies and TV shows center around the supernatural. The result is that we become, in essence, inoculated to the reality and power of the unseen world, as all of these tales are neatly set within the realm of fiction. We don't really believe in the power or existence of Satan, because cartoon pitchforks and horns ever so subtly undermine the credulity of biblical accounts of his activity.

Yet, if we are aware of this covert attempt to color and co-opt our worldview and are privy to the strategies of Satan in how he operates and influences (à la C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*), we can more readily identify these flaming arrows as they head our way. First and foremost, we must acknowledge that scripture is unequivocal in how it describes the power of the unseen world and the influential activity that takes place there. When we say that followers of Christ are involved in spiritual warfare, I think we are sometimes naïve regarding what that really means. There is a sinister and wicked undercurrent flowing beneath and behind this world system that is normally not visible. Yet every so often, scripture pulls back the curtain to give us a glimpse into that reality.

One such glimpse comes in 2 Kings chapter 6 where Elisha asks God to open the eyes of his servant to enable him to see the flaming, angelic chariots surrounding the armies of their enemy. What we learn here is that there actually exists an unseen dimension of reality all around

us—a reality that Elisha’s servant was not privy to until God opened his eyes.

In Daniel chapter 10, mention is made of the angelic warfare happening behind the scenes—affecting the destiny of nations. This episode in Daniel 10 is the prototypical pulling back of the curtain. When reading the book of Daniel it become apparent that there is another, perhaps even higher dimension of reality that, in some ways, carries more weight—is even more real and influential than the one we see around us. Reading stories in scripture of the realm of the spiritual can be both shocking and comforting at the same time, as we recognize the sovereign hand of God guiding it all.

At this point, you might be wondering what this spooky discussion has to do with Paul preaching to the city of Ephesus. The link will come as we unpack the origin and purpose of the pagan mythology that drove the economy in Ephesus.

When we think of Greek or Roman mythology, we might fondly recall 7th grade social studies class, learning about the exploits of Hercules, the battles of Achilles and Hector, and the journeys of Odysseus. Epic stories from the Iliad and the Odyssey take root early in our educational development,

DID YOU KNOW?

The pagan goddess Artemis (Diana) that was worshipped in Ephesus was not the Roman goddess Diana (or Greek Artemis) who was the beautiful huntress and the sister of Apollo. Artemis of the Ephesians was a black, squat, multi-breasted goddess that related to fertility in man, animals, and nature. She was called “the great mother,” and there was a great festival to her that was held yearly in the month of May. Her temple in Ephesus was four times larger than the Parthenon and was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.



which we might think to be innocuous—stories that merely slake our adolescent thirst for adventure and innate wanderlust. However, little do we realize, that these “stories” comprise a carefully crafted worldview that shaped worldwide cultures for many centuries and satiated mankind’s inherent yearning for an explanation of the origin of all that we see.

Thinking man has always sought after an explanation for our origins. Why is there something rather than nothing? Since something exists, whence did it come? The Judeo-Christian answer to those questions requires forfeiture of all of our vices. Thus, alternative explanations have been tirelessly sought after. Mankind has to account for its origins, otherwise we are accountable to the creator God of the Bible. But mankind loves their sin and tenaciously clings to control too much to stomach that solution. The current iteration of these explanations exists today in the form of the pseudo-science we call “evolution”.

In the ancient world, this explanation for origins came in the form of mythology. But how did this come about? To understand, we must look back to the time of Noah. The entire world’s post-flood population descended from the eight people that exited the ark—a group of people that remained together for some 100 years after the flood. This was an event that could not be ignored—and thus had to be explained. God then scattered this growing group via the confusion of languages at Babel. As new nations and people groups formed around shared languages, memories of the flood passed from generation to generation, becoming embedded in the cultural history of each of these groups. Every ancient culture contains within its memory and lore some form of flood narrative. Over 270 such flood narratives have been catalogued. So how did these cultures describe and explain the flood?

It is easy to imagine that these memories gradually, over long periods of time, became both fuzzier and more

sensationalized. Thus, people, in their need to explain origins and desire to fit the world-wide catastrophe of the flood within their worldview, concocted elaborate tales, adapting and utilizing historical personages and passed-down stories from their shared history, such as Eve, Nimrod, and Noah, to become superhuman characters like Hera, Hercules, and Triton. Satan could then easily draw upon such stories to inspire the creation of full-fledged mythologies that were not just colorful stories and morality tales, but objects of fear, adoration, and worship—(and here is the key) fueled by the very real power of the unseen demonic forces. What developed in these mythologies were objects of worship made in man’s image—personalities that were relatable, yet also powerful enough to demand veneration. They were gods and demi-gods that bore the same frailty and flaws fallen mankind saw in himself, yet which, most importantly, allowed for pagan flavored immoral worship. This worship would then draw men away from God, while satiating the universal human need to worship something greater than himself.

By the time we get to the exploits of Paul, these stories were not mere myths and legends, but had evolved into the Greek Olympian religion and its Roman counterpart—which then birthed the mystery religions of the first through fifth centuries AD that dominated the western world. As we see in Acts chapter 19, the entire economy of major cities was dependent on the propagation of and continued success of these idol worshipping cults. This was the juggernaut of Satanically inspired, demonically empowered pagan idolatry that confronted Paul at every stop in his journeys.

We can easily balk at the fervor of the mob portrayed

Paul's encounter in Acts 19 showed Satan's hold on the ancient world to be precarious, and this simple message of a dying and rising savior was poised to topple it all.

in Acts chapter 19 and write it off as exaggeration and hyperbole, but it was more than just the livelihood of these merchants that was at stake. This conflict embodied the spiritual battle that was being waged between the forces of God and Satan and his minions—who had carefully curated this religious world, which served as the alternative to the Judeo-Christian narrative.

The conflict we see in Ephesus is spiritual warfare being waged at a fever pitch. Paul is striking at the heart of pagan worship—namely, the profit center that drove the idol industry. If these gods could be discredited, then the entire economy of idol merchandizing would collapse. This confrontation was real and the stakes were high. This was so much more than Paul sharing the story of a Jewish Messiah. It was a worldview clash that carried with it enormous consequences. Paul's encounter in Acts 19 showed Satan's hold on the ancient world to be precarious, and this simple message of a dying and rising savior was poised to topple it all.

Do we not face the same challenges today as we preach an unknown God to a secular, humanistic world that is desperate to cling to a worldview that enables them to maintain their slippery grasp on a stubbornly persistent illusion of control over their own domain? Whether or not we realize it, we are engaged in the same sort of spiritual battle. It is well-nigh time that we purposefully and passionately enter the fray.

Discussion Questions:

1. In this passage, we see Paul wanting to venture into the mob to try to quiet the crowd, but his friends did not let him. When have you followed the advice of others, and been glad you did?

2. Why would the silversmiths, craftsmen, and workmen feel threatened by what Paul was doing? Why do you think this devolved so quickly into a frenzied riot? What was at stake? How did pagan idolatry intersect with their livelihood? Do you see this confrontation as part of a larger issue? Why?

3. How is the message of Christianity counter-cultural? Why do you think this is so? How might this be by design? What is it about the gospel that confronts and even judges the world? What happens to the gospel message when it does not conflict with the world? What are some examples? What do we learn about God's value system from the violent reaction that people have to it?

4. Where do you see the gospel conflicting with economic interests in the world today? How might being faithful to the gospel hinder someone from advancing in their chosen profession? When have you experienced this yourself? Describe places where you see religion, business, and patriotism intermixed in today's culture?

5. Where do you see the church having bought into the value system of the world? How do we need to look less like the world? In our teaching? In our worship? In our lifestyles? What is God teaching you about difficult choices you need to make? In what ways can you shift toward a more eternal perspective in the priorities you hold in life?

Going Deeper:

1. Read Ephesians 6:10-12. How does this passage touch on the situation we see Paul encounter in Ephesus in Acts 19? Why do you think Paul wrote this specific message in Ephesians chapter 6 to this specific church? Read Revelation 2:1-3. What effect did the teaching and encouragement from Paul have on this church in the long run?

2. Why do you think the Christian life is likened to warfare so often in scripture? What does this imagery prompt in our hearts? What are some ways we need to take that call to battle more seriously?

Transformational Activity

PRAYER:

It is so easy and so natural to drift little by little into looking, acting, and thinking like the world around us. We all struggle with being accepted early on in life. This need persists even as we mature and begin to see the dangers this poses. Take some time this week to pray that God would reveal areas in your heart where you still struggle with the biblical call to be different from those around you—areas in which you may need to divorce yourself from the value system of this world. Come back together next week ready to share what the Holy Spirit revealed to you.



**The conflict we
see in Ephesus is
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Week 31:

A Vision of Persistence

As we make our way through the book of Acts, from time to time we stumble upon various issues that, although only mentioned in passing, are worth spending time unpacking. One of these issues has to do with when the church would gather together for worship. In Acts 20:7, Luke points out that the brethren gathered together on the first day of the week to break bread. Now we may take for granted that the time we meet for church is on Sundays. But was it always this way? Several questions arise from this passing comment. When did the early church meet for worship? What is the Sabbath? Why was it so important to God that Israel observe the Sabbath that He included it in the Ten Commandments? Since the Sabbath was clearly important to God, should we still observe the Sabbath today? And again, if the Sabbath was such a non-negotiable, why would the early church change from gathering together to worship on the Sabbath (the seventh day of the week), to begin meeting together on the first day of the week?

The importance of the Sabbath was ingrained into the habits and patterns of life of Israel—so much so that by Jesus' time the Jewish religious leaders had constructed elaborate safeguards around the practice, protecting the people from even accidentally approaching breaking Sabbath laws. The Mishnah and the Talmud (Jewish commentaries on the Law of Moses) have much to say about how they thought the Sabbath ought to be observed. These safeguards went so far as to determine how many steps you could take on the Sabbath. They prohibited lighting a candle on the Sabbath (although you could hire a Gentile to light a candle for you). They even determined how much you were allowed to spit before it was considered “work.” Even today in Israel,

you will notice they have set aside what are known as “Sabbath elevators”—which automatically stop at every floor (so you don’t have to push the button—which would be “work”).

The Sabbath was clearly a big deal, both to God and to the Jewish people. The majority of the early church was Jewish. So, for the early church to leave the practice of worshipping together on the Sabbath to move to worshipping on the first day of the week was extremely significant. We have covered extensively how important identity markers were to the daily life of God’s people. Sabbath-keeping was at the heart of these identity markers that demonstrated their set-apart status. So what changed that the Jewish believers in Messiah would even consider making this move?

Simply put, it was the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ that changed things. The resurrection of Christ was so monumental to them—it so transformed their faith—that moving the day of worship became necessary. They also understood that Christ Himself is our Sabbath. Thus, Sunday worship became the norm.

One thing we need to recognize is that Sabbath worship was never mandated in the Mosaic Law.

Gathering together on the first day of the week to rest, remember, and celebrate became the rhythm of the church.

God had given His people rhythms of life to practice so they would not forget the source of their blessings—and so that they would have a regular time to re-orient their minds and hearts onto God’s

Word and be encouraged by God’s people. This was the purpose behind both the Sabbath and the cycle of feasts God had established for the life of Israel.

One thing we need to recognize, though, is that Sabbath *worship* was never mandated in the Mosaic Law. Merely keeping the Sabbath holy was the command.

Over the years, worship on the seventh day had become a part of their weekly life—since the other six days were work days. But many groups today, most notably the Seventh Day Adventists, mistakenly believe that Israel was commanded to gather on the Sabbath for worship. Yet, sacrifices at the temple were made on a daily basis, so worship was actually continual. Sacred assemblies were held on the Sabbath, and organized worship services did happen on the Sabbath, both in the Old and New Testaments. But there is no scriptural command to do so.

We also need to understand how a day was measured in Jewish thought. In Genesis chapter 1, at the end of the first day of creation it says, “And it was evening and morning, day one.” Thus, for the Jews, a day began at sundown one day, and ended at sundown the following day. All throughout Jewish history, the Sabbath began at sundown on Friday evening and ended at sundown on Saturday evening. So, when we get to discussing the day of worship for the early church, we need to recognize that Sunday, the first day of the week, was a work day for them. They were commanded to work six days and rest on the seventh (Friday sundown to Saturday sundown). The seventh day being a day of rest did not change for them. Therefore, it is much more likely when it says they gathered together on the first day of the week, it was on Saturday night, not Sunday morning.

We see this reflected in our passage in that they gathered together to break bread (most likely dinner). Then Paul spoke a message that lasted until midnight. It also notes that there were many lights in the upper chamber—indicating it was night when they gathered. That is not to say that today, we ought to gather together on Saturday night, rather than Sunday morning. But, to be precise, we should recognize that this was most likely the case for the New Testament church.

This all leads to the next question: what was God’s heart behind establishing the Sabbath? It’s easy for us

to see that God knows the hearts of His people because He created them. God gave the Sabbath to His people Israel out of His abundant love for them. God desired for His people to experience rest and rehabilitation, and to also receive a taste of the eternal rest they would have one day in heaven with Him. In fact, God was so serious about this commandment that He said in Exodus 31:14, “Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death.”

God created the Sabbath, specifically for Israel, as a day set apart—a holy day—during which His people would rest and trust Him to provide. God modeled this for them in Genesis 2:2–3, when He rested on the seventh day following creation. Clearly, God does not need to rest, but He set this example for His people to follow. He was modeling for Israel a rhythm after which they were to pattern their daily lives. It is how He designed human bodies and minds to function. We work and then we rest. Later, God commanded Israel to “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” (Exodus 20:8). It is the fourth of His Ten Commandments, given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. His command was for all of Israel to observe one day of rest, regardless of their circumstances.

Why? God is a loving Father. He takes care of His children. He provides for us. Seeing how the people of Israel were taken care of in the wilderness demonstrates how much God loves, cares for, and provides for His children. Every morning God would provide manna for His people (Ex 16:4). He provided enough for the day and no more. Daily, the people would learn the lesson that God gives us what we need. God also rained down quail in the evenings so they could have meat as well (Ex 16:13). He gave them water from a rock (Ex 17:6). God even miraculously allowed their clothes and shoes to not wear out for the

God created the Sabbath as a day set apart—a holy day—during which His people would rest and trust Him to provide.

entire 40 years of wandering (Deut 29:5).

It's hard to imagine how the people of Israel could still doubt that God would provide for them. After seeing the waters of the Red Sea parted; after seeing the

STUDY TIPS

In order to get a better handle on specific biblical topics or themes, try highlighting or marking every instance of that topic with a specific color. For example, every time you notice a mention of God's heart for the poor, notate it. This will create an inductive study catalogue that will continue to grow. This will also help you read the scripture with a helpful and discerning eye, and train you to always be watching for specific themes and topics during your study.



miraculous, terrifying encounter with God on Sinai; after seeing Him provide for them day after day, with even a double portion before the Sabbath (Ex 16:29), it's hard to imagine they still doubted. However, it's human nature to doubt. Even though we have seen God provide in the past, we still, somehow, doubt that He will provide today. Even though He provides today, we doubt He will do it again in the future. Thus, the Sabbath served to remind Israel each week that they were dependent upon God and not on themselves.

Does this mean we should still observe the Sabbath today? Several things point to the idea that, although God gave the Sabbath to Israel and not to us, and although we are not under the Mosaic Law for faith and practice, God designed life in such a way that human beings operate best when we do practice a Sabbath rhythm in our lives. It's important to acknowledge that the command to keep the Sabbath holy was not given until

the Law of Moses, was not repeated in the New Testament like the other nine of the Ten Commandments, and thus is not a command to Christians today. However, we need to recognize that the example of the Sabbath comes in the

very creation story—well before the nation of Israel was created and the Mosaic Law established. The example of a Sabbath rest can be seen as a question of human nature. God designed humans in such a way that our bodies and minds operate best when we set aside one day a week to “rest” from whatever kind of work we do the rest of the week. We are not commanded to set aside the seventh day like Israel was. Nor do we understand this in a legalistic way, as did the Rabbis. But many Christians over the years have understood this Sabbath principle (of resting once a week from the work we normally do) to be helpful for prompting us to honor and trust God by believing He will provide for us, and not having to work seven days to take that burden upon ourselves.

Discussion Questions:

1. Poor Eutychus will forever be remembered for falling asleep in church. Describe a time you were the most tired you have ever felt.

2. Read Romans 15:25-29. Why was Paul so intent on making it to Jerusalem? Why do you think scripture mentions Paul's travelling companions in Acts 20:4? If Paul was carrying a large sum of money through perilous lands, would he need protection? Read 2 Cor 8:16-23. How would these companions help Paul regarding accountability? What does this say about Paul and his aim of staying above reproach? What can the church today learn from this example?

3. Read Galatians 2:7-10 and 1 Cor 16:1-4. When Peter, James, and John gave their stamp of approval to the ministry of Paul, what is the only thing they asked of him? Why do you think this is one of the driving forces in Paul's ministry? We sometimes read about Paul collecting money for the persecuted saints in Jerusalem and gloss over it—not realizing its importance to Paul. Read Acts 8:1. How do you think Paul's role in persecuting the early church motivated him to do everything he could to alleviate the suffering he helped cause? What does the early church's burden for the poor say about God's heart for the poor?

4. We see God providing for the persecuted saints in Jerusalem through the missionary efforts (and heart) of Paul. How do you think the church in general today does in regards to supporting and providing for the persecuted believers around the world? Where do you see this happening? Why do you think it is not as big a priority today as it perhaps was for the early church?

5. It seems the issue of having a desire to help the poor and persecuted really comes down to a question of the heart. Why do you think some people are more passionate about helping the persecuted and poor than others? What has God been speaking to your heart about this issue?

Going Deeper:

1. Read Ex 16:23-30. Describe the various reasons why you believe God gave the Sabbath to Israel. What is it about the nature of man that made it necessary? How did it force the Jews to learn how to trust God?

2. Sometimes followers of Messiah under the New Covenant get confused about the Sabbath, thinking it is for believers today. Read Ex 31:13-17 and Ezek 20:12. Who was the Sabbath made for? The Sabbath was the sign of the Mosaic covenant. It is not commanded in the New Testament. The Jerusalem council did not order the Gentiles to observe it. Paul never taught about it with regards to Gentiles. Read Col 2:16; Rom 14:5; Gal 4:9-10. Why do you think people today try to apply the Sabbath to the New Testament church? How might we observe a “Sabbath principle” of rest (and trusting God) without placing ourselves under the burden of the Law?

Transformational Activity

COMMUNITY:

This week, take some time to brainstorm different ways that your family or group can help support those who are less fortunate. There are ministries that provide aid for the persecuted church around the world, and we all are pretty familiar with aid agencies that help the poor in other countries. But there are also local ministries that we can look to support as well. Come together and discuss how you, as a group, might actively engage in this kind of ministry of mercy.



**The
substitutionary
atonement by the
God-man Jesus
Christ is the heart
of the good news
of the gospel.**



Week 32:

A Vision of Faithfulness

In our passage this week, we see a heartfelt farewell message from Paul given to the leaders of the church of Ephesus. Paul doesn't think he will ever see them again, as he is on his way to Jerusalem where dangers surely await. Several vivid images flow from this passage. We see Paul describe how he served the Lord with humility and tears, how bonds and afflictions await him, and how he did not shrink from declaring to them the whole counsel of God. But one phrase and image stands out far above the rest.

In Acts 20:28, Paul admonishes these leaders to be on guard, shepherding the church of God, which He “purchased with His own blood.” This image, “purchased with His own blood,” describing what Jesus did on our behalf on the cross, is one of the most important ideas in all of Christianity. This is known as “the atonement.” When we come across ideas like this, it is worth taking time to explore.

It is challenging not only to understand what all is involved in the atonement, but even more so to explain it briefly. The starting place for understanding this concept is the fact that God created the universe as a place where He would be able to pour out His love. But the children He placed in that universe rebelled against Him. We decided we wanted to rule our own lives. This rebellion is called sin.

To sin against an infinite God is an infinite offense that requires satisfaction. The just penalty for the offense of defying and warring against God is to dwell outside His presence forever. And the most amazing news in the history of news is that God loves us so much that actually He offers to pay that penalty—that price—for us.

But the key question is: what would that payment entail? The atonement is the theological term that attempts to describe all that was involved in Jesus paying the price for our sin.

There are many aspects to what Christ accomplished on the cross. We have already seen the term “satisfaction.” The atonement also involves the concepts of: sacrifice, ransom, substitution, obedience, redemption, propitiation, and reconciliation. There have been many attempts over the centuries to encompass all the various facets of what the atonement both accomplished and means in one definition or theory. Most of these “atonement theories” fall short of truly capturing

To sin against an infinite God is an infinite offense that requires satisfaction.

all that the cross represented. They will normally focus on one or two of these facets. Yet scripture speaks of all of them. The view that most contemporary, conservative Protestant theologians have landed on is what is known as “Penal Substitutionary Atonement.”

This doctrine has been defined in this way: “Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross takes the place of the punishment we ought to suffer for our sins. As a result, God’s justice is satisfied, and those who accept Christ can be forgiven and reconciled to God.” It is “penal” in that it is related to the punishment for offenses. And it is a substitution in that one person takes the place of another (also known as the vicarious atonement, i.e. done in the place of someone else). So, on the cross, Jesus was our substitute—vicariously taking the punishment for our sin upon Himself. God’s justice demands that the offense of sin be paid, or atoned for. The death of Jesus propitiated (or satisfied) the demands of God’s holy justice. We see God’s mercy in this transaction in that He allowed the death of Jesus to apply to all who accept it as a free gift, offered by Christ to us.

This idea of substitution is seen so clearly in the

prophetic passage Isaiah 53:5: “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” Paul elaborates on this idea in another passage: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Peter also proclaims: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24).

Jesus bore in His body—while He was on the cross—the full penalty for all the wickedness mankind has ever done: all the unjust wars, atrocities, killing, outrageous and senseless violence, selfishness, hate, and evil mankind has accumulated and committed throughout all of time. Jesus experienced everything I would have experienced if I spent an eternity separated from God—all that fear, loneliness, anger, desperation, pain, and torture. The cumulative weight of all the suffering I would ultimately have endured is hard to even fathom. Yet, that is merely what one person deserves. Jesus bore the full and collective weight of that unbearable misery and anguish on behalf of all people for all of time.

The Gospel message is that we are sinners, separated from God by our rebellion, and that God, in His love, sent His only Son to die on the cross and pay the penalty we owe for our sins. This is the good news the Gospel is here to proclaim. The phrase “substitutionary atonement” is the core of this Gospel message. While these can be intimidating theological terms, each word carries enormous weight. The “substitutionary” aspect of the atonement conveys that it is not our own

Jesus experienced everything I would have experienced if I spent an eternity separated from God—all that fear, loneliness, anger, desperation, pain, and torture.

righteousness that merits salvation or pays the penalty for our sin. We cannot take any credit for our salvation.

In other words, the righteousness we receive from Christ is described as an “alien” righteousness by theologians—meaning it is something outside of us. This is an absolutely crucial concept to understand. Ephesians 2:8-9 says “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works so that no one may boast.” This righteousness is something outside of ourselves, given to us as a gift. We can contribute nothing to it.

The “atonement” aspect of the phrase reveals that a payment was made to deal with the consequences of our sins. In the Old Testament, God established a system of regular ritual sacrifices His people Israel would perform, to remind them of the horrible cost of sin. But while these sacrifices of bulls and lambs and goats did temporarily restore their fellowship with God, they never paid for their sins. The word “atonement” in Hebrew (kafar) only means “to cover.” It doesn’t mean “to take away.” These sacrifices only temporarily covered over their sins until the ultimate sin sacrifice would eventually come—which would, once and for all, truly take away all of our sin. In the fullness of time, God sent His Son to accomplish this horrible, yet beautiful deed.

In biblical thought, the term “blood” carries significant weight. Leviticus 17:11 tells us: “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.” That’s why the sacrificial system God established required the shedding of blood—which is equated with the giving of a life. Hebrews 9:22 tells us that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. But we also see in Hebrews 10:4 that the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sin.

The blood of the God-man Jesus Christ paid the penalty that mere animals could not. But it’s important

to see that this “once-for-all” sacrifice had to be made by One who is both God and man. Our sacrifice had to be made by God for it to be of sufficient worth to bear the weight of the sins of the whole world. And it had to

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Somehow we in the church have come to see an unfortunate distinction between clergy and laity when it comes to doing the work of ministry. We sometimes “leave ministry to the professionals” and fail to see that we are all called to ministry in one form or another. What does it mean to be faithful in your calling to ministry? Artists learn by copying masters. Who are you imitating when it comes to being faithful to the ministry God has called you to?



be made by a man, in order for that substitute to be able to legitimately represent us. Thus, we see the necessity of Jesus being both God and man. The substitutionary atonement by the God-man Jesus Christ is the heart of the good news of the gospel.

The Bible says that when Jesus died on the cross, the curtain in the temple split in two. This curtain was the entrance to the Holy of Holies, the place the High Priest only entered once a year on the Day of Atonement. It was this curtain that separated God from the people. After Jesus died, the priest no longer had to sacrifice for the sins of the people. Jesus was the ultimate and final sin sacrifice! When we accept Jesus’ gift of forgiveness, we can be in a right relationship with God forever.

John Walvoord has said, “*Christ in His death fully satisfied the demands of a righteous God*

for judgment upon sinners and, as their infinite sacrifice, provided a ground not only for the believer’s forgiveness, but for his justification and sanctification.” Only through Christ’s death could justification, redemption, propitiation, and reconciliation all be accomplished. This is just a glimpse of what this phrase in Acts 20:28 points us to, and it is crucial for us to understand.

Discussion Questions:

1. Describe an occasion when you had a difficult time saying goodbye to someone.

2. Read Acts 20:24. What do you think it means to consider one's life "as of no account"? What does this look like practically? What other images do you see in this verse? Why is the image of a race helpful to us in characterizing our spiritual life? Do you think the task that God set before Paul was his alone? Or has God given each of us this task? Why do you think that? How might this verse help us develop a more eternal perspective?

3. Read Acts 20:26-31. What images stand out to you? What does it mean to proclaim the whole will of God? What does it mean to shepherd the flock of God? Is this shepherding limited to pastors? Why or why not? What do we learn about the heart of Paul from this passage? What do we learn about the heart of God?

4. Paul clearly reveals the tender loving feelings he had for this church here in this “goodbye” setting. At other times, he seems to be much more harsh in how he writes his letters. What approaches have you seen work (or not work) in how pastors approach motivating/exhorting their flock? What approach works best with you and your personality—the stick or the carrot?

5. Who has God placed in your life for you to shepherd? What has this looked like for you? What experiences have you had in shepherding others? What have you learned about yourself through this process? What have you learned about God? What might the Spirit be saying to you today about how you accomplish this task? What is one thing you can do this week to be a better shepherd?

Going Deeper:

1. In Acts chapter 20 and in other passages, it has become clear that afflictions await Paul in Jerusalem. Yet Paul is steadfast in his desire to get there. Read Acts 20:22-25, 21:4, 10-14. Why do you think there is a difference of opinion on whether Paul should continue on to Jerusalem? Which side do you fall on...and why? Do you think Paul should have heeded the advice of his friends? How can we determine when it is best to trust our own wisdom or rely on the wisdom of others? How might our theology of suffering inform how we view this issue of Paul continuing on toward Jerusalem?

2. When good, godly people genuinely disagree about a biblical issue or course of action, how should they proceed? How are we to make the decision? What is the role of church leadership in settling these issues? How might humility and a desire for unity factor into how these conflicts play out?

Transformational Activity

WORSHIP:

An important element of worship is gratitude. We are sometimes taught to pray using the acronym “A.C.T.S.” (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication). This is a helpful reminder that being grateful for what God has given us is a crucial part of learning that God is sovereign, and that He provides everything we need. In Acts chapter 20, Paul’s gratitude for the Ephesian church gushes forth. What are you grateful for? Spend some time this week in worship of our God, noting all the things you are grateful for. When you come back together in your group, share what you are grateful for about our church family. Spend time together praising God for His blessings and provision.



Week 33:

A Vision of Sacrifice

As we move into chapters 21-28, we are transitioning to a new section of the book of Acts. This segment deals with the five years Paul spent in prison. This section can be divided into three periods: his imprisonment in Jerusalem, his imprisonment in Caesarea, and his imprisonment in Rome. These imprisonments comprise fully one-fourth of the book of Acts.

All throughout the book of Acts, as Paul has spread the good news of the gospel, he has encountered significant opposition to his mission. We discussed several weeks ago the Satanic sponsorship of that opposition and how it presents itself in the unseen world of spiritual warfare. But much of it is also demonstrated in the clash between Jewish followers of Messiah and the Jews who thought and taught that Paul was simply an apostate who was attempting to undermine the Jewish faith.

This became a very familiar refrain for Paul. He would enter a new city. He would then preach the gospel “to the Jew first” (Rom 1:16)—nearly always beginning at the synagogue. Then the opposition would arise—both in the cities Paul was visiting, and from the rabble-rousers that followed him from city to city attempting to sabotage this undertaking. The conflict would then cause him to flee to the next city. This pattern occurred over and over again, throughout all three of Paul’s missionary journeys.

From this ongoing conflict, we see several groups begin to be distinguished. We have Jews, who are just Jews, and who reject the messiahship of Jesus. We also have Jews that embrace Messiah. We have Gentiles who come to faith in Jesus. And we have Gentiles who do not. This conflict between Paul, and both Jewish Christians

and Jewish non-Christians comes to a head in the section of Acts we are now entering, as Paul is arrested here in Jerusalem because of this conflict, and will spend essentially the rest of his life in prison.

**What is a Jew?
What is a
Christian? How
does the Bible
distinguish
between Jewish
and Gentile
believers—or
does it at all?**

This conflict also highlights the fact that there are new groups and identities that are formed surrounding and stemming from the coming of Messiah. Prior to this, the Bible divided the world into two categories: Jew and Gentile. But now, other categories emerge which need clarification and definition.

This is an issue that has caused significant confusion and engendered endless debate both within the church and without. Many questions arise from this identity issue that many people simply don't have an answer to. What is a Jew? What is a Christian? How does the Bible distinguish between Jewish and Gentile believers—or does it at all? Can a person be both a Jew and a Christian? What is a Messianic Jew? Is it right to distinguish between Jewish believers and non-Jewish believers within the body of Christ today? Is being Jewish a religious identification or a national ethnic distinction?

It won't be possible to cover all the facets of this discussion in this short introduction, but we will be able to at least give some definitions. This material comes from Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum—a preeminent authority on both Christianity and Judaism. He is a giant of the faith and it would be well worth your time to seek out his teaching.

When you ask the question “who is a Jew?” you will doubtless get a wide variety of responses. Some believe that if you live in Israel or identify with the Jewish state, this makes you a Jew. Some would say that a Jew is one who observes Jewish practices. Surprisingly, the largest

category of responses identify a Jew as someone who simply *considers* themselves a Jew.

Biblically, a Jew is defined only as one who comes from the line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Bible defines Jewishness in terms of nationality—a nationality based on lineal descent, not location. So, according to scripture, the Jewish people are a nation. For thousands of years they were a scattered nation. But they were still a nation. A Jew can never become a non-Jew (and a Gentile can never become a Jew). Regardless of what religious faith he adheres to, he is still a Jew. Just as, regardless of what faith someone who is Chinese follows, he is still Chinese.

The theology of modern Judaism teaches that Jewishness is determined by the mother. If the mother is Jewish, the child is Jewish. Yet this is not what scripture teaches. In the Old and New Testaments, genealogies list the names of the men, not the women (occasionally making reference to notable women in history). Thus, if we use the Bible as our authority, if a father is Jewish, the child is Jewish.

Hence, a Gentile is simply one who is not a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The world is comprised of two groups: Jews and Gentiles. Millions of Arabs are descendants of Abraham, yet they are clearly not Jews. To be a Jew, one must be a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This brings up the question of Gentiles who convert to Judaism. Does their conversion make them a Jew? No, according to scripture this makes them a proselyte (Matt 23:15; Acts 2:10, 6:5, 13:43). In the Old Testament, Ruth is called a “Moabitess”, both before and after her acceptance of the God of Israel.

When we get to the New Testament, a third category is added. We now see Jews, Gentiles, and Christians (according to 1 Cor 10:32). Clearly, no one can ever be born a Christian—so this falls within a bit of a different classification. Becoming a Christian only comes through

faith in Messiah. Everyone is still born either a Jew or a Gentile. However, either a Jew or a Gentile can become a Christian—not through church membership, or baptism, or any other means outside of faith alone in the work of Christ alone.

With that being said, is there such a thing as “Hebrew Christianity,” or “Messianic Jewishness”? According to what we have seen in scripture, a Jew is someone who is a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And a Christian is someone who has expressed faith in Jesus as Messiah. Thus, it is perfectly right and proper to call a Jew who has trusted in Messiah a “Hebrew Christian”. They are Jewish by descent, and a Christian by faith. Another term for this is “Messianic Jew”. Messianic believers in Yeshua (Jesus) do not lose their Jewishness. Such Jews normally prefer to call themselves “completed Jews,” rather than “converted Jews.” Conversion implies ceasing to be something and becoming something else. Paul clearly and proudly identified himself as a Jew all throughout his life (Rom 11:1; 2 Cor 11:22; Phil 3:4-8).

The last question we will have time to address here is this: “is it proper for us to make distinctions between Jewish believers and non-Jewish believers in the body of Christ?” There are two categories of error when it comes to this question. The first is far more insidious. It is the idea that Christians are somehow “spiritually Jews.” This is one of the most destructive teachings ever to arise within the church. We have covered this extensively in previous studies, pointing out that the only way to come to such a conclusion is to give yourself permission to allegorize the sacred text of scripture—thus allowing yourself to define biblical terms however you wish (as if we have divine permission to do such a thing). Scripture only and always refers to Israel as the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The church is never referred to as Israel. The church exists on earth from the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost until it is taken out of the world at the rapture. There is no “church” in the Old Testament. The church is identified in scripture clearly as “the body

of Messiah,” and “the bride of Messiah.” Neither of these identities could be possible prior to Messiah coming.

Being grafted into the seed of Abraham as Gentile followers of Messiah merely gives us access to the rights and privileges that heretofore belonged only to the Jews. This makes us partakers specifically of the blessings of the Jewish covenants. It does not make us Jews. Even still, we do not share in all the facets of the covenants, but only in the spiritual blessings. For example: we do not inherit the land, nor are we required to undergo circumcision.

So, the first error attempts to argue against all distinctions, claiming that all believers are Jews. The second error tries to make all believing Jews into non-Jews, claiming that there is no longer any Jew nor Greek, etc. This error arises from a misapplication of Galatians 3:28, where Paul tells us that for those who have been baptized into Messiah, there can be neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female. This is a simple error to deal with. Paul, in the context of this teaching, is clearly referring to justification. His point is that there is no advantage to being in any particular class. In other words, being a Jew or a male or a free man gives you no advantage when it comes to being justified by faith. If this were not the case, then androgyny would be the order of the day—because Paul equates “no Jew or Gentile” with “no male or female”. And it would be ridiculous to claim that Paul is saying we can no longer distinguish between these two genders within the church.

The Bible does not support the idea of Gentiles becoming “spiritual Jews.” And it does not say that all distinctions between Jew and Gentile are erased within the body of Christ.

**Scripture only
and always
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the descendants
of Abraham,
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The church is
never referred to
as Israel.**

There is much more that could be said, but as we read these passages, we need to keep clear definitions in mind. Jews are Jews, and Gentiles are Gentiles. Jews can come to faith in Messiah and become Christians (while remaining Jews). However, Gentile Christians are in no way ever considered Jews (or a part of Israel). Israel is the original and primary member of the family of God, and Gentiles, when they believe, are grafted into that family—as Gentiles. Keeping these distinctions in mind as we continue on through Acts will help clarify what these conflicts are all about.

DID YOU KNOW?

Paul writes in 2 Cor 4:17–18, “This momentary, light affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.” C.S. Lewis penned a masterful sermon inspired by this verse entitled “*The Weight of Glory*.” Elsewhere, Lewis wrote: “I didn’t go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you really comfortable, I certainly don’t recommend Christianity.”



Discussion Questions:

1. Describe a time when you had a big decision to make. Did you follow the advice of people you trusted, or not? Why?

2. Read Acts 19:21, 20:22-24, 21:13-14. What do we learn about Paul's heart for the suffering brothers and sisters in Christ in Jerusalem? What do we learn about his resolve? What do we learn about the Spirit's leading in this issue? What did the Christians at Tyre believe about suffering that set them in opposition to what Paul clearly believed? Was Paul being disobedient in insisting on going to Jerusalem—since he was not following the advice of godly brothers and sisters? How are we to proceed in making difficult decisions when we seem to be getting conflicting messages?

3. What opportunities were afforded to Paul because he did go down to Jerusalem? What avenues for spreading the gospel were opened because he did not shy away from certain suffering? What does this teach us about how God uses suffering in our lives? What can we learn about our own reactions when suffering comes our way? We have touched on this many times before, but it bears repeating—what role does suffering play in our lives in turning our hearts toward God? What does God accomplish in our lives through Him allowing suffering that cannot be accomplished in other ways? What do we learn about God from this truth?

4. When have you seen godly believers honestly disagree about a secondary issue within the church? How was it handled? How would you have liked to see it handled differently?

5. What misconceptions did the zealous Jews at Jerusalem have about Paul and his message? How do we know when it is better to stand for one's principles or to be flexible in deference to the conscience of others—even when they may be wrong? Where in your life do you feel you may need to wrestle with this same decision?

Going Deeper:

1. Why do you think Paul followed the advice of the leaders at Jerusalem who counseled him to take the temporary Nazirite vow as well as pay for the four other men to do so, and yet he did not take the advice of those in Tyre who counseled him not to go to Jerusalem? Read Numbers 6:1-21. What was the purpose of the Nazirite vow? What did it accomplish? Paul was no stranger to such a vow (Acts 18:18). Why was it advantageous for Paul to do this now? How was it not compromising his faith to do so?

2. Why was it important that James and the leaders of the church affirm that Gentiles were free from keeping the Law? Why was it important that they affirm the right of the Jewish believers in Messiah to voluntarily continue keeping the Law—even after Messiah came?

Transformational Activity

BIBLE STUDY:

This week we focused on the decision Paul made to continue on to Jerusalem—even though trials would await him there. Godly decision-making centers our hearts on the need for wisdom. This week, do a word search for “wisdom” in scripture. You may want to begin in Psalms and Proverbs. What does the Spirit tell us about wisdom—what it is, what it is not, and how to acquire it? Come back next week ready to share what you found.



**The church exists
on earth from the
outpouring of the
Spirit at Pentecost
until it is taken out
of the world at the
rapture.**



Week 34:

A Testimony of Mercy

As we make our way through this final section of the book of Acts (the imprisonments of Paul), we come to the first of his three imprisonments. In this section of scripture, we witness the riot that occurs as a result of Paul coming to Jerusalem, as well as his subsequent imprisonment. It is clear that Paul's ministry has had an effect. Jews from all over the ancient world have made their way to Jerusalem for Passover, and many have brought an animosity that has been building toward the gospel message Paul has been spreading. Paul has been preaching the message of a crucified Messiah—an offense to many God-fearing Jews. We discussed earlier the Satanically-inspired opposition that followed Paul wherever he went. We now see that opposition come to a head.

In response to the riot, Paul takes the opportunity to once again preach the gospel. As part of this message, he recounts for the second time the story of his conversion on the road to Damascus. He will end up telling this story three times in Acts (chapters 9, 22, & 26). In this particular retelling, he mentions that immediately following his encounter with the risen Lord, he was led by the hand into Damascus (since he had been struck blind). Here, Ananias was used by God to heal Paul of his blindness. And the first thing Ananias told Paul to do was to get baptized.

This is something we in the church can sometimes overlook. Every time baptism is presented in scripture, it is described as the initial step of obedience following a profession of faith. As soon as we commit our lives to Christ, the biblical expectation is that we are to be baptized. Both here in this passage and in Acts chapter 8, with the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch, baptism

is portrayed as immediate. Somehow, in the church, we have developed this understanding of baptism as a step of faith we take when we feel we are ready. But this is not a teaching found in scripture. Baptism is presented as a declaration to a watching world of our change of allegiance. And the examples we have in scripture point to the fact that it is to be done right after conversion.

This brings us to the larger issue of the sacraments (or ordinances) in general. When Christ ascended into Heaven, He left His church with instructions for two specific rites to practice as an outward sign of the saving truth of our Christian faith: baptism and communion (the Lord's Supper). Several questions arise from this discussion. What are the sacraments? Why do some churches call them ordinances? Why does the Roman Catholic Church recognize seven sacraments, and the Protestant church recognizes only two?

As we begin to explore these questions, we need to define and distinguish two terms: sacrament and ordinance. Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and some Protestant denominations use the term "sacrament" to refer to these rites through which God's grace is conveyed to an individual. Many evangelical churches prefer the word "ordinance"—which can be defined as a "God-ordained ceremony."

Historically, a sacrament has been understood to be a ritual—through the practice of which, grace is conveyed to a partaker. But the quality of that grace is understood differently by different groups. In Roman Catholicism, the grace that is conveyed is actually thought to be "saving grace." In other words, the Roman Catholic Church (which we will abbreviate as RCC) teaches that

Baptism is presented as a declaration to a watching world of our change of allegiance. And the examples we have in scripture point to the fact that it is to be done right after conversion.

portions of salvation are received by the recipient (from the church) as one participates in these rituals. What the RCC is saying is that we are being saved little by little by participating in the sacraments. It is not difficult to see both the problem with this, and the motivation for this teaching to exist.

The problem is that scripture clearly teaches that salvation comes by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. The RCC teaches that it is grace, along with “faith-infused works,” that merits salvation. We Protestants roundly reject any idea or doctrine which suggests that our works are meritorious in any way to save us. The motivation for the RCC incorporating this into their theology is consistent with other aspects of their teachings, which provide for them a strategic element of control by their teaching magisterium over their parishioners. If we must come to the church to receive bits and pieces of salvation, then we are at their mercy for everything else.

What is less known is that historic Protestantism has also taught that a sacrament is actually a means of grace, yet not the grace of salvation (justification). The Heidelberg and Westminster Catechisms discuss how through our participation in the sacraments we participate in the blood and body of Christ (1 Cor 10:16) and thus our faith in His promises is fortified. These historic Protestant traditions recognize that we are

Historic Protestantism has also taught that a sacrament is actually a means of grace, yet not the grace of salvation.

recipients of many different kinds of grace by God. The grace of rain in its seasons, and the sun shining upon us, and the provision for our bodily needs are all measures of grace that God bestows upon us. So, historic Protestantism would say that we do receive grace through participation in the sacraments, in that we are partakers of the blessing—of which the sacraments are divinely appointed signs and

seals. In other words, we are blessed by the fellowship with other believers, the unity these sacraments (or ordinances) promote, and in other ways as well. Thus, the kind of grace we receive through the sacraments would be in line with sanctification, rather than justification. In other words, we are in no way saved (or “more saved”) by participating in the sacraments.

In order to avoid any association with the teaching of the RCC regarding meritorious salvific grace being conveyed through the sacraments, many Protestant denominations prefer to use the term “ordinance” when referring to baptism and the Lord’s Supper. An ordinance is usually not considered to be a conduit of grace but simply a rite or ritual commanded to be performed by the Lord. In other words, a sacrament, at some level, involves a supernatural work of God. An ordinance is simply an act of man in obedience to God—a visible sign of saving truth. But are we missing out on a richness of experience in not recognizing the work God does in our lives through these rituals—all for the sake of potentially mistaken definitions?

As to the number of sacraments or ordinances we are to perform, the RCC teaches there are seven: baptism, confirmation, holy communion, confession, marriage, holy orders, and the anointing of the sick. According to the RCC, these sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. In other words, salvation is dispensed to us by and through the RCC by means of all these sacraments. The RCC also affirms that for believers, the sacraments of the New Covenant are necessary for salvation. This teaching clearly reveals a works-based understanding of salvation and an approach to worship that requires it to be administered via the clergy.

Protestants have recognized three tests that determine what is and is not an ordinance. 1) Was it commanded by Jesus? 2) Was it observed in the book

of Acts? 3) Was the rite or ritual expounded upon in the Epistles? With these criteria, Protestants have generally only recognized baptism and communion as valid ordinances. Some Brethren groups also include foot washing as an ordinance. However, it only passes one of the three tests. It is not included in the book of Acts or in the Epistles.

There are many other significant differences Protestants have with the RCC regarding the meaning, practice, and role of baptism and communion in the life of the believer. As we come across opportunities to explore important theological issues as they arise in our journey through Acts, we are building a solid foundation upon which our faith and understanding of God and His Word can grow.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Roman military Commander mistook Paul for an Egyptian assassin who had recently stirred up dissent. “The Assassins” were a sect of the Zealots, known as the “Sicarri” (meaning “dagger men”) who regularly carried hidden daggers in order to assassinate both Romans and Jews who supported them. One of their most famous victims was the high priest Jonathan, the son of Annas, the high priest.



Discussion Questions:

1. In this passage, the Jews assume something that is not true about Paul. Are you the kind of person that “assumes the best” (or perhaps less than the best) about others? Where has this shown up in your life?

2. What does Paul reveal about himself in his testimony (Acts 22:1-21) that would be points of commonality with the Jews in his audience? How could Paul identify with his audience in terms of misplaced zeal? Why do you think Paul told his own story, rather than preaching a sermon to this crowd?

3. Describe Paul's experience on the road to Damascus. What details help explain why this would have affected Paul so radically? Why do you think Jesus told Paul that he was actually persecuting Jesus Himself? What was Paul's question in response to the statement by Jesus? Why do you think this was his reaction? What message do you think being struck blind communicated to Paul?

4. Why do you think that the mention of Paul being sent to the Gentiles in Acts 22:21-22 caused such a violent reaction in the crowd? What role did circumcision play in their reaction? What aspects of the gospel message are the most offensive to people today? Why?

5. When sharing your testimony, why is it helpful to relate your own experience in coming to faith in Messiah? Why is it important to also include the message of the cross? What would be missing if we neglected either one of those components? Describe a time you were able to share your faith with someone. In seeing what it consistently cost Paul to share his faith, what might the Spirit be saying to you about the excuses we use for not being as bold as we might?

Going Deeper:

1. As a Jew of Jews, Paul would have identified this bright light on the road to Damascus as the Shekinah glory of God. The term “Shekinah” has been defined as “the visible manifestation of the glory of God.” What are some examples in scripture of when this glory was manifested? Read Gen 15:17; Ex 24:17, 25:8-9, 13:21-22, 34:29-30; John 1:14; Matt 17:1-7; Rev 1:1, 12-16. What do we learn about the glory of God and the Shekinah?

2. Read Acts 2:38; Mark 16:16; 1 Pet 3:21. Why do some Christians believe that baptism is necessary for salvation? How would you answer this argument and their use of these verses? Read John 3:16; Acts 16:31; Eph 2:8-9; Titus 3:5; 1 Cor 1:14, 17. What do these verses communicate about this issue? Why is this important?

Transformational Activity

OUTREACH:

This week, take some time to craft two different versions of your testimony. Thoughtfully write out a full version of how you would share your faith with someone (including both *your* story and the story of the cross). This might be something you might share over coffee with someone. Then also craft a short “elevator speech” version of your testimony—something that you would share if you knew you only had a short time to speak with someone. Having something like this pre-prepared in your mind can go a long way toward you feeling more confident about witnessing to others when God brings along the opportunity. Then share with your family or group what you came up with.



Week 35:

A Testimony of Purpose

I don't know about you, but when I read about the religious leaders of Jesus' day—the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes—I have always, to some extent, lumped them all together into one group in my mind. To me, they were simply the Jewish religious leaders that were opposed to the gospel. But here in Acts chapter 23, we see a clear distinction between the Pharisees and Sadducees. In fact, it is a bit surprising to note that what separated these two major factions of religious leaders was often more important to them than even their opposition to the gospel.

These various leaders from opposing camps had come together, tenuously unified by their fear and hatred for what they considered a heretical movement—a movement claiming that Jesus was their long-awaited Messiah. Yet, Paul takes advantage of their ideological and theological differences to drive a wedge between them and ends up derailing the whole proceedings recorded in this chapter. All Paul had to do was (strategically) bring up one issue—the resurrection of the dead—and the battle lines were immediately drawn. But who really were these groups, and what role did they play in shaping the origins of the church? Exploring the differences between and origins of these groups will help us understand the context of the challenges both Jesus and His followers faced in their many confrontations with them. In fact, understanding the Jewish context for our scriptures is one of the most important lenses through which we can read the Bible. It absolutely makes the Bible come to life—and also steers us toward proper understandings of what is being communicated.

When reading the New Testament, we come across differences between these groups of religious leaders

from time to time. For example, we see Jesus answering different questions from the Pharisees and Sadducees in Matthew chapter 22. The issue the Sadducees used to try to trip Jesus up involved the possibility of the resurrection of the dead. When reading scripture we see the Sadducees only acknowledged the authority of the Torah (the 5 books of Moses). They did not believe in angels, nor did they believe in the possibility of the

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resurrection of the dead—whereas the Pharisees did. But there is much more that separated the various factions of Jewish religious leaders and groups at this time—and the history of these groups make that clear.

For this endeavor, we will need to rewind back to the time of the Babylonian captivity. The Northern Kingdom had been conquered

and scattered across the known world by the Assyrians in 722 BC. The Southern Kingdom was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar and taken off to Babylonian exile in 3 stages (605, 597, and 586 BC). At the end of this 70-year exile, as a result of this punishment by God, we essentially see the end of widespread Jewish idolatry by those who returned to the land. The people had, in effect, learned their lesson. However, the fallout from the Babylonian captivity cannot be ignored. Things were clearly different now. Jewish life, and even worship, would never be the same.

There were significant developments within the life of Israel at this time, which help us make sense of many New Testament stories. The temple laid in ruins when the people returned from Babylon. And when it was rebuilt (536 – 516 BC), it was a mere shadow of its former glory. Here is where we see the rise of the synagogue system. Although the temple was supposed to be the only place of corporate worship for the Jews, regional synagogues began to spring up. These began simply as places

for Jews to gather, but eventually became centers of worship as well.

There were also now three main centers of Jewish population: Babylon, Egypt and Israel. Only about 50,000 Jews had returned from Babylon to Israel after the captivity. Many had grown accustomed to Babylonian life and were quite comfortable there. Also, many of the Jews who had fled to Egypt at the time of the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC likewise stayed there in Egypt. This spreading out of the population also led to the further growth and expansion of the synagogue system, in that Jews were no longer able to come to the temple for their corporate worship.

Another significant development in this period was the emergence of certain attitudes and practices that laid the groundwork for the rise of rabbinic authority and tradition. All throughout the Old Testament, we see prophets and priests, but no rabbis. By the time we get to the New Testament, rabbis are clearly playing a significant role in the life of Israel. How did this come about? In these emerging synagogues, the more prominent teachers began to be called “rabbi” (meaning *teacher*).

After the Babylonian captivity, certain memorial fasts were added to the Jewish liturgical calendar (remembering the devastation of their 70 years in captivity) that were initially optional, but eventually became obligatory via rabbinic decree. Slowly, the idea of accepting rabbinic authority as binding took root—having its origins both in Babylon and here in this post-exilic world. Both the synagogue system and the rise of rabbinic authority were extremely significant shifts in the world of Judaism, and would shape and dominate Jewish life for hundreds of years—really extending all the way until today. Because of these beginnings, we will eventually see two completely different kinds of Judaism emerge: biblical (or Mosaic) Judaism and Rabbinic Judaism. The existence of these two different versions of Judaism is what occupied so much of Jesus’ time.

One of the primary goals of His teaching was to correct the faulty theology that the people had received through Rabbinic Judaism.

Interestingly enough, the priest Ezra accidentally

STUDY TIPS

As you are reading scripture, keep an eye out for things that either don't make sense, or are curious to you. This is an opportunity the Holy Spirit is giving you to do some investigation and research. More often than not, digging into these curiosities prove to be wonderful "aha" moments that you would not otherwise have if you did not take advantage of them. Discovering why the resurrection was such a hot button topic between the Pharisees and the Sadducees provides some very enlightening historical background and context for the events that occur in the gospels.



became responsible for other significant changes to Jewish life and worship as well. Ezra was the leader of the second return of the exiles from Babylon in 458 BC and was concerned with the spiritual welfare of the people. Understanding that idolatry and disobedience to the Mosaic Law was the cause for the Babylonian captivity, he began to teach and expound the Law for the people upon their return. His burden was to make the Law so clear that there would no longer be a danger of God's people breaking it—and thus avoid any need for another exile. In doing this, he inadvertently began the Mishnah (which will be described shortly). For the generation that followed Ezra, it was not enough to expound the Law—they set about building a fence around it.

As described by Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *"The Mishnah is also called the "oral law." Originally, the purpose of the oral law was merely to explain the Mosaic Law and nothing more. The Mishnah later developed [after Ezra's time] into a system of laws. The idea was to build a fence around the Mosaic Law so that it would be protected from*

being broken.” It was the veneration of the Law by Ezra, later corrupted by succeeding generations, that evolved into the “traditions of men” for which Jesus condemned the Pharisees. Jesus lambasted them saying that they broke actual commands of God for their man-made traditions. They nullified the Word of God for the sake of their traditions, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men. It is sadly inevitable that fallen mankind will eventually corrupt every good thing into something evil. Ezra’s passion for keeping the Law sacred and protecting the people from having to experience again the horrors of the exile turned into something vile that Jesus detested.

It is here that we venture into unfamiliar territory. Protestant theology has historically (and unfortunately) put a period at the end of the sentence when the Old Testament canon closed with Malachi, and, in essence, believes that nothing further of significance happened until the New Testament age begins. This period of time is even sometimes called, the “400 silent years.” But regardless of whether or not there were inspired writings being produced, much was happening during this time that helped set the stage for the unfolding of the New Testament era. This background helps us understand the meaning behind so many of the teachings of Jesus. It is this background that explains what the hearers of Jesus’ message were thinking when He said what He said—as well as the nuances of what He really meant.

During this intertestamental time, Israel was primarily ruled by the high priest. In the absence of a king, the high priest served as a de facto political ruler. Also, in the place of the prophet, they now had the scribe. Initially, scribes simply made copies of the Scriptures. But their role changed over time so they

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became interpreters of the Law—even for the purpose of formulating new laws. With these scribes, we see the beginning of the “oral law.” It is this oral law that became the primary point of contention between Jesus and the Pharisees.

At the beginning of the intertestamental period, the two main factions of religious leaders were the priests and the scribes. Initially they were united, but would later divide. From the priesthood arose the Sadducees—the ruling class of politicians. From the scribes arose the Pharisees. The Pharisees were the ones who demanded strict adherence to the Law and had the masses of the Jewish population supporting them.

The Sadducees were from the upper crust of society, and they controlled the temple and often dominated the Sanhedrin—the ruling Jewish council. They were the wealthy aristocracy that were always in the minority, but they had control of the temple treasury and wielded significant political power. They did not follow the oral law, only the five books of Moses. The Sadducees did not survive the Roman onslaught in 70 AD. Thus, Pharisaism was the group that did survive, and evolved into what we see today as Orthodox Judaism—also known as Hasidic or Rabbinic Judaism.

The two other significant groups in the time of Jesus were the Zealots and the Essenes. These were both factions of the Pharisees and had no theological differences with them. Yet the Zealots separated from the Pharisees over the issue of Roman occupation. The Zealots believed in active resistance, and some would even participate in assassinations of both Romans and the Jews who supported Rome. The Essenes believed in withdrawing from the world and did not support the Sadducean-controlled temple. The Essenes comprised the community where the Dead Sea scrolls were found in Qumran in 1947.

Understanding the origin of and differences

between the Pharisees and Sadducees helps unpack what is really happening in Acts chapter 23. As we will continue to see, understanding the Jewish context of our scriptures is absolutely essential for truly grasping the meaning of God's Word.

Discussion Questions:

1. In Acts chapter 23, Paul hears a very timely message of comfort from Jesus. When have you heard a message from God that you really needed to hear at that moment? How did that message come—through a friend, circumstances, a sermon, reading scripture, etc.?

2. The central theme in each of Paul’s sermons involves the resurrection. Why is the resurrection so central to what we believe as Christians? Why is it the “hope of Israel” (Acts 28:20)? Why is the resurrection the very core of what the cross represents? Why is this truth so central to our human condition (see 1 Cor 15:15-19)?

3. It is clear that the providence of God is active in Acts chapter 23 through His diligent care of Paul. Read Acts 23:6, 11, 16, 23-24. How does God provide for Paul in each of these situations? What does this tell us about God?

4. When discussing the charges against Paul, Festus declares to Agrippa in Acts 25:18-20 that he has no idea what all the fuss is about. The way he phrases it is very telling. He says the matter concerns some points of disagreement about their own religion, and about a dead man Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive. This, perhaps, captures a sense of how unbelievers view the central tenet of Christianity—the resurrection. How do you think those outside the church view our claim that Jesus rose from the dead? How do you think they view us for believing it? How do you feel about that?

5. Paul's strong words for the high priest are very reminiscent of Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees in Matthew chapter 23, where He calls them "white-washed sepulchers." How do these examples (the words of Jesus and Paul) guide our steps as Christians as we stand up against evil and call it what it is? When have you come across this situation in your life? How might we apply this example in our daily lives?

Going Deeper:

1. This is the fourth time it is recorded that Jesus appeared to Paul. Read Acts 9:3-6, 22:17-21 (describing something that happened back in Acts 9:29-30), 18:9-10, 23:11. What do we learn from each of these encounters with the risen Lord? What kinds of encouragements and instructions does Paul receive from Jesus? How would this help him in his ministry?

2. Read Luke 24:38-39; 1 Cor 15:1-24, 35-50 (esp. vv. 17, 21). Why is it so crucial that we understand that Jesus rose “bodily” from the grave? What does it prove about Jesus? What does it guarantee about our standing before God, and about our future?

Transformational Activity

BIBLE STUDY:

This week in your quiet time, think through some examples of how God consistently provides for His children. Compile a list of your 5 or 6 favorite examples from scripture to share with the group. Also, think through some examples of God's provision from your own life to share as well. This is a wonderful lens through which to read scripture. It can focus your heart on God and develop in you an attitude of gratitude.



Week 36:

Purpose Received and Given

Here in Acts chapter 24, we move into the second of Paul's three imprisonments. We have seen his imprisonment in Jerusalem, and now we transition north to his imprisonment in Caesarea Maritima. We discussed in week 14 of our Acts (book two) study guide how this manmade seaside city and artificial port was a marvel of engineering—one of the many monumental building projects of Herod the Great.

Here in Caesarea, a Roman stronghold and center for Roman administration, Paul will go on trial facing spurious accusations made by the Jews from Asia Minor that had followed him along his missionary journeys, causing trouble in city after city. Paul's defense before the Roman governor Felix can be divided into 3 sections: the charge against Paul (24:1-9), the defense of Paul (24:10-21), and the results (24:22-27).

In the previous chapter, the commander of the Roman cohort stationed at the Antonia Fortress (which overlooked the temple grounds) stepped in and rescued Paul when a mob formed, wanting to kill him. This commander, Claudius Lysias, controlled some 600 soldiers stationed at the Antonia Fortress. Roman sentries, posted on the towers of the fortress, could easily see what was happening below in both the inner and outer courts of the temple. They also had easy access from those towers to a stairwell, which led directly into the outer court (the court of the Gentiles), where Paul was being attacked. It was here that Paul was rescued and then shipped off to stand trial under the governor Felix.

In the first section of Acts chapter 24, we see that some of the accusers of Paul had come down to Caesarea

to make their case before Felix. Noticeably absent are the Jews from Asia Minor who had charged Paul with bringing a Gentile into the inner court of the temple—an offense that would bring a death sentence. This was, in fact, the only situation in which Rome had given the Jews authority to carry out the death penalty. In those days,

Tacitus said of Felix, “He exercised the power of the king with the mind of a slave.”

Rome permitted the Sanhedrin to kill any Gentiles who entered the inner court, even if they were Romans. If they found Paul responsible, he would be held accountable as well. Thus, the accusation by these rabble-rousing Jews against Paul was intentional and strategic.

The accusers present at the trial before Felix included Ananias (the high priest), and some of elders. Ananias would represent the Sadducees, and the elders would represent the Pharisees. This is the same Ananias who in Acts chapter 23 commanded that Paul be struck on the mouth for his insolence. Paul did not hold back from calling Ananias a whitewashed wall—meaning a tottering wall, precariously positioned to fall, whose perilous situation was concealed by a fresh coat of paint. Paul’s insult was certainly shocking to the bystanders, who were not used to the high priest being addressed in this manner. They asked Paul why he would speak to the high priest in this way.

Paul’s response has been widely misunderstood. He said he was not aware Ananias was high priest. Some explain this as Paul’s eyesight being poor, and thus he perhaps could not see to whom he was speaking. Others excuse Paul’s supposed ignorance based on the fact that it had been so long since Paul had been in Jerusalem that he was not up to date on who the current office holder of high priest was. However, as we are nearing the end of the book of Acts, we have gotten to know Paul quite well. It should be exceedingly obvious that Paul does nothing out of ignorance. He knew exactly what he was saying.

According to the Law of Moses, the office of high priest was hereditary, tracing all the way back to Aaron, the brother of Moses, down through the tribe of Levi. As such, it was an office that was held for life. The only legitimate successor was the son of the high priest after his death. Yet during this time, the Romans took it upon themselves to appoint the high priest—seeing that it was such an influential office in the sight of the people.

This corruption of the office of high priest becomes apparent in the trial of Jesus in John chapter 18, where it is mentioned that the Roman cohort led Jesus to Annas first. It says that Annas was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was “high priest that year.” That phrase itself should grab our attention, seeing that the office of the true high priest was not something that could be swapped out from year to year. The statement that Annas was sought out first by the Romans, in that he was the high priest prior to Caiaphas, reveals that the Romans considered him the true authority, rather than the recent appointee, Caiaphas. But it also reveals that neither one was the true Levitical high priest—which, again, was an hereditary position.

So as we come to Ananias, to whom Paul spoke so roughly, it is clear that he was not the proper, legally entitled high priest, and was someone to whom was not due the respect Paul mentions in Acts 23:5. Paul knew that one should not speak evil of the ruler (the high priest). So why does he? Because in his sight, Ananias was not the true high priest of the Jews—nor did he act like one. In fact, Ananias was notoriously unscrupulous and certainly deserved the criticism Paul gave him.

Ananias was appointed high priest by Herod of Chalcis, the brother of the current king, Herod Agrippa I. The Jewish historian Josephus described Ananias as insolent, hot-tempered, profane, and greedy. He would often seize for himself the tithes that were supposed to go to the common priests. The Babylonian Talmud described him as very “stomach oriented.” Five years

earlier, he had been charged with being complicit in a violent outbreak between the Jews and Samaritans. He was removed from office and sent back to Rome. He would eventually be cleared of those charges and was restored to his illegitimate office by Emperor Claudius. He would later be deposed again, and was eventually assassinated by Zealots in 66 AD. Paul had predicted in Acts 23:3 that God would indeed smite Ananias—which proved here to be prophetic.

This Ananias stood as accuser of Paul before the Roman procurator Felix as we begin chapter 24. We thus transition from one unsavory character to another. Much is known of Felix from extra-biblical sources. He was the brother of Pallas, another famous person in Roman history. These brothers were formerly slaves, who were freed under the emperor Claudius. In fact, Felix and Claudius were childhood friends. Felix rose from being a slave to being a procurator of Judea from 52 to 59 AD. The Roman historian Tacitus said of Felix, “*He exercised the power of the king with the mind of a slave.*”

Felix was a very immoral man and had married three different royal women by the time of his appointment as procurator. While in office, Felix fell in love with Drusilla, the 16 year-old daughter of Herod Agrippa I, and persuaded her to leave her husband. Josephus says this persuasion was facilitated by Simon the Sorcerer through some form of magical incantation. Drusilla bore Felix a son they named Agrippa—who died in the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 AD.

From other historical writings, it is clear that Felix was a cruel despot. He had Jonathan the high priest assassinated for criticizing his rule. In our passage in Acts 24, Tertullus, the Gentile orator and mouthpiece

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the Sanhedrin hired for this trial, heaped false flattery upon Felix, purporting that through him, the Jews had enjoyed much peace. This was precisely the opposite of the truth. Felix was guilty of encouraging bands of thieves, with whom he would share the spoils. Under the rule of Felix, several uprisings and rebellions occurred, with the notorious “Assassins” rising up as well. Most notably, a fight broke out in that very marketplace of Caesarea between Jews and Gentiles. Felix reportedly sent in his soldiers, who killed many Jews. This prompted a complaint by the Jews to Rome. For this, Felix was deposed by Nero in 59 or 60 AD, and replaced by Festus. This was the next ruler under whom Paul had to stand trial.

Yet, with all this corruption around Paul, do we see him plead injustice? No, he simply understood that he dwelt in a land of corruption, and made his case as best he could. Underlying Paul’s actions and attitudes was an undeniable and even palpable reliance on the sovereignty of God. Paul knew God was in control—and that God had plans for him in Rome (Acts 23:11). This confidence colored everything Paul did.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

What do you think Paul must have been feeling after sitting for 2 years in confinement—having everyone he appeared before admitting his innocence? And yet he was still not freed. Describe a time when you could not figure out what God was doing in your life. What was it like when you could not understand the lessons God was teaching you? How did your confidence in the sovereignty of God factor into your ability to navigate this trial?



Discussion Questions:

1. The unfair treatment Paul receives in Caesarea lasts for more than 2 years, and is perpetrated by more than one governor. Think of a time you or someone in your family were treated unfairly. What did you learn through this situation?

2. Contrast how Tertullus addresses Felix with how Paul does. What sort of case or evidence does Tertullus present? What specific points of rebuttal does Paul give? Why was it important that Paul clarify that “the Way” was not a new sect, but was a continuation of the faith presented in the Law and the Prophets?

3. What would it mean if Christianity were merely an offshoot of Judaism? What does it mean that Christianity is actually the fulfillment of Judaism? Describe the continuity that exists between Judaism and Christianity. What specifically does Christianity fulfill? How does understanding this continuity help us better understand God and His plan?

4. What do you think it is about Paul's message that intrigues Felix (Acts 24:22-26)? What is it that Paul says that stops the conversation and causes Felix to pull away? What is it about this subject the world does not want to hear? Why? What is the difference between a curious onlooker and someone who is truly seeking after a knowledge of salvation?

5. What does it mean to maintain a blameless conscience before God (Acts 23:1, 24:16)? Before men? How does the coming resurrection and judgment factor into this desire (24:15)? What would this look like in your life? What is one thing you can do this week to pursue maintaining a blameless conscience?

Going Deeper:

1. When Paul began speaking of judgment, the conversation with Felix changed. Why do you think some preachers focus on sin and judgment more than others? Why do some focus on making us feel better about ourselves? What should be the purpose of preaching in churches today? What kind of approach do you prefer? What kind of approach motivates you more?

2. When Jesus sent out His disciples in Matthew chapter 10, He promised them they would be handed over to the courts and be brought before governors and kings for His sake. Jesus also assured them that in these situations, the Holy Spirit would give them the words to say. Paul encountered this precise opportunity here in Acts chapter 24. Do you think this promise in Matthew 10 relieves us from the need to think through our testimony or prepare an adequate defense for the gospel? Why or why not? If you had a chance to tell your story in a public setting, what would you say?

Transformational Activity

PRAYER:

In 1 Timothy 2:2, Paul instructed the church that we should pray for kings and for those that are in authority. Even though Paul faced corrupt officials who were simply looking for bribes, he never rebelled against their authority. He clearly saw governing authorities as having been established by God (Rom 13:1-7). Take time this week to pray for those in authority over you. Pray for their welfare, but also for your own heart towards them. Come together with your group and join in prayer over this.



Week 37:

Faithfulness in Accusation

As we make our way through this section of scripture, it might be helpful to recap a bit. We see Paul rushing back from his third missionary journey to get to Jerusalem before Passover. He succeeds—only then to be attacked, arrested, and beaten. By the grace of God, he escapes the attempt on his life in Jerusalem and is taken down to Caesarea to be put on trial. Here Paul languishes in prison under the indecision and greed of the inept and corrupt Felix—who is then succeeded by Festus. This is the setting as we approach our passage for this week.

Several questions arise from the story we read in Acts chapter 25. After three amazing missionary journeys, Paul must have been flying high. He was able to give a glowing report to the leaders at Jerusalem about all that God was doing in the Gentile cities throughout Asia Minor and beyond. He was also able to deliver the love offering he had been collecting for the brothers and sisters suffering from the famine in Judea. He must surely have been strategizing and planning what his next missionary endeavor would look like.

Yet now, after making it back to Jerusalem, Paul's situation radically changes. Things were now looking bleak. Assassination plots were being carried out. Paul spends the next two years in prison, unjustly accused and helpless, at the mercy of Roman officials who wanted nothing more than to ingratiate themselves to the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem—who very much wanted Paul dead. There must have been so many questions going through his mind. Where was God in all this? How could this possibly further the cause of the gospel? Was this his fault? Had he done something to bring all this on? These are all very understandable yet still plaguing

questions.

When God's people are struggling, doubting, and having a difficult time seeing God's hand in their situation, the Bible does not shy away from candidly reporting it. There are multitudes of examples of this in scripture. The Psalms are brimming with this kind of lament, grief, and mourning. Yet we see here that Luke does not mention

“There are no maverick molecules in the universe.” Nothing is too big or too small to fall outside the control and attention of our sovereign God.

Paul struggling in this way, here or at any point throughout this season of his ministry. This undergirds the idea that Paul's confidence was firmly grounded in the providence and sovereignty of the Lord.

Why could Paul have such confidence? After all, the plots against his life were seemingly never-ending. If we look back at the beginning, immediately following Paul's Damascus Road experience, before he had even begun his ministry, the Hellenistic Jews began plotting to put him to death (Act 9:23, 29). Then later, at the beginning of Paul's first missionary journey in Acts chapters 13 and 14, more of these plots developed and these Jews attempted to stone him—and at Lystra, they were actually successful. They stoned Paul and left him for dead. And many of these same men ultimately followed Paul to Jerusalem and formed a plot to kill him in Acts 23 as he was being held by the soldiers. Yet through all this, we see no grumbling, complaining, or even worry.

Perhaps one key to his mindset is that we see Paul being reassured by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself again and again. In Acts 18:9-10, when Paul was ministering in Corinth, Jesus came to him in a vision and said, “Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city.” Later, after Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, Jesus

actually stood at his side and comforted him by saying: “Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also” (Acts 23:11). We will see in the next few chapters, after Paul is on his way to Rome and experiences a shipwreck, an angel appears to him and bolsters his faith once again, saying: “Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you” (Acts 27:24).

While facing all these unjust accusations and having to endure trial after trial in Acts 22 through 26, from where would this confidence come? It is most certainly because of the comforting words of Jesus. However, it also seems to come from the assurance he had in the promises of God. All throughout Paul’s journeys, we see Jesus reaffirming the promise He made to Paul way back at the very beginning of his Christian life.

If you recall, as Paul was enduring three days and nights without sight in Damascus, God was arranging for Ananias to come and explain His plan to Paul. God told Ananias in Acts 9:15: “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.” Paul had set his compass by this promise and never wavered. Even though everyone around Paul was telling him to stay away from Jerusalem, he knew this was where God was leading and that suffering awaited. Paul knew he would eventually end up in Rome to bear witness to kings.

How could Paul have such confidence? Because of his robust understanding of the sovereignty of God. Because of his unwavering trust in God’s providence. God was working behind the scenes to accomplish His purposes. This was the trust Paul had—and is the trust that is available to us as well. Sometimes we can confuse sovereignty and providence in our understanding of God’s attributes. They are occasionally (and unfortunately) even used synonymously. So what is the difference

between the two?

The sovereignty of God concerns His power and ability. Whereas, His providence involves how He uses that power. The sovereignty of God means that He is in complete control of every event, circumstance, happening, and potentiality in His creation. Augustine said *“Nothing, therefore, happens unless the Omnipotent wills it to happen; he either permits it to happen, or He brings it about himself.”* As some would say: “There are no maverick molecules in the universe.” Nothing is too big or too small to fall outside the control and attention of our sovereign God.

John Piper defines God’s sovereignty as His right and power to do all that He decides to do. But Piper goes on to say that this definition, while accurate, does not touch on how God uses that right and power. This is where providence comes in. Here we must bring in other truths about God that scripture clearly reveals. We know from God’s Word about His abundant grace. We know that He is wise, just, and righteous. When we combine attributes such as these with His sovereignty, we are now venturing into the realm of providence. Piper says that providence includes what sovereignty does not. It is sovereignty in the service of wise purposes—or in other words: providence is wise and purposeful sovereignty.

The sovereignty of God assures us that nothing happens to us that is not first filtered through His will. And the providence of God assures us that every outcome is in accordance with His love, grace, mercy, and care. Even though God is sovereign, He does not rule the universe arbitrarily. His sovereign rule is carried out through the filter of His other attributes.

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So what does God's providence and sovereignty mean for us? What does Paul's example teach us? God's providence promises that God will provide for us. It pleases our Father to pour out blessings on His children. And His sovereignty means that He is able to accomplish all of His carefully crafted plans for our good. Our God is in control.

It means that we need not worry about anything. In fact, when we worry or are anxious, this means that we either don't believe in or don't understand the ramifications of a God who is sovereign. We need to acknowledge that God is God—that He is in control—and that He cares about what happens to us. God wants us to leave our worries in His hands. And if He is sovereign—truly in control—then there's no possible reason to be anxious.

A life of peace is possible. A stress-free way of living is not only offered in scripture, but is commanded—and it's how God designed life to be. We can have the peace of Stephen—who, in the midst of having stones cast at him, could say, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." We can have the peace of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who in plain view of the fiery furnace could say to the king of the entire known world: "the God we serve is able to save us." And we can have the peace of David—facing the giant twice his size—whose only thought was indignation

DID YOU KNOW?

When Festus asked for help from King Herod, it was not simply for friendly advice. Festus was in a real bind. He had no choice but to send Paul on to Rome—since Paul made his appeal. But Festus would look foolish if he had no legitimate reason for sending Paul. Every Roman official before whom Paul had appeared had proclaimed his innocence. And Paul's accusers had offered nothing outside of baseless religious accusations. This was a brand new post for Festus and his tenure was all but secure.



that some uncircumcised Philistine had dishonored the name of the living God. Let's follow the example of Paul and live our lives in the light of God's sovereignty and providence.

Discussion Questions:

1. It seems Paul is always making some sort of speech or defense in public. What is it about public speaking you fear the most?

2. What do we learn about the sovereignty of God through these endless judicial trials Paul faces? What have we seen so far in Acts that reveals what God wants to accomplish through Paul? What do you think Paul understood of this plan? Do you think it was wise or premature for Paul to appeal to Caesar? Why? What do you think Paul was thinking about the possible opportunity to speak to the Roman emperor?

3. Why do you think God allows the progress of the gospel to be decided, in a sense, by officials like Felix, Festus, and Herod? What do we learn about God through this? Does God still do this today? How?

4. When faced with injustice, how do you see other Christians respond? Do you think Christians today lean more on the sovereignty of God in such situations—or do they try to take matters into their own hands? What are some examples you have witnessed?

5. Our God is faithful during even the most trying times. What does this statement mean to you? What are some examples in your life? Do you struggle with truly believing it? Why? Where is God asking you to trust Him right now?

Going Deeper:

1. Even Festus recognized that the central issue in the dispute surrounding Paul was the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 25:18-19). What does the resurrection tell us about God? What does it reveal about the plan of God? In Matthew chapters 12 and 16 Jesus tells the unbelieving Pharisees that the sign of resurrection would be the only sign that would now be given to them—since they had rejected His offer of the kingdom. How does the resurrection (of Lazarus and of Jesus) serve as a sign to them? How does Paul describe the importance of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:3-8)? Why is the resurrection of Jesus just as important as His crucifixion?

2. In Acts 25:26 Festus refers to Nero as “my Lord.” The two previous Roman emperors, Augustus, and Tiberius refused this title. But the current emperor Nero did not—giving himself the title “Lord Emperor.” What does the term “Lord” mean in your life? How is it that we sometimes treat Jesus as Lord, and other times we don’t? Is it possible to accept Jesus as savior and not treat Him as Lord? Why or why not?

Transformational Activity

BIBLE STUDY:

There are certain ideas or terms that merit deeper study. Take some time this week to do a deep dive on the terms “sovereignty”, or “Lord”, or “justice”. What does the Bible have to say about these ideas? Come next week ready to share what you have learned.



Week 38:

Blessed Madness

In Paul's defense before King Agrippa in Acts chapter 26, we see yet another opportunity God provides for Paul to proclaim his testimony. Here is the first fulfillment of God's promise that Paul would testify before kings. Several interesting side notes grab our attention as we begin this chapter. Here, the king invites Paul to speak for himself, and Paul begins to make his defense. Yet we have already seen every Roman official who has heard Paul speak affirm that he has committed nothing worthy of the charges leveled against him. They, in essence, proclaim him not guilty. This includes Festus, who, even still, has chosen not to free him. In essence, Paul is invited to respond to non-existent charges.

Paul then begins his defense and boils down the issue at hand—the issue for which he is being attacked—as involving two areas of hope. The first hope is “the hope of the promise made to our fathers” (Acts 26:6-7, see also Acts 13:32)—namely, the hope that God would send a Messiah. This Messianic hope was the heart of Pharisaism. Interestingly enough, Paul points out in v.7 that this is a hope the 12 tribes are hoping to obtain. Paul speaks of these 12 tribes in the present tense—supporting the idea we previously discussed that there never have been *10 lost tribes* of Israel. He continues by saying this is something these tribes do *night and day*. He does not say “day and night,” as Gentiles might describe it—supporting the fact that the Jewish way of reckoning a day was sundown to sundown. This is another clue that Luke was Jewish.

The second hope Paul references is the hope of the resurrection—again, a pillar of Pharisaic theology. Paul asks in 26:8: “Why is it considered incredible among you if God does raise the dead?” In the Greek, it is clear

that Paul has turned away from addressing the king, and now is addressing the people in that he switches to the second person plural. In other words, “why is it incredible among you (all)...?” It might be even more precise to assume that he focused this question directly to the Sadducees who sat among his accusers. Might Paul be employing the same strategy of “divide and conquer” he used in back in Jerusalem?

We saw a few weeks ago in Acts chapter 23 how Paul drove a wedge between the Pharisees and the Sadducees by using this contentious issue of the resurrection of the dead in order to deflect attention off himself. This tactic was successful. The proceedings were derailed and chaos ensued. This forced the Roman military to step in—which set into motion the events that would force Paul to “endure many trials,” and which would eventually land him in Rome.

The opponents of Paul that stood accusing him here in Caesarea included both Sadducees and Pharisees. This is described in the previous chapter where we see that the chief priests and the leading men (literally, “the first men”) were the ones who brought charges against Paul to Festus (Acts 25:2). The chief priests were the heads of each of the 24 courses of the tribe of Levi, who would rotate duties in the operation of the temple. These were all Sadducees and were the leaders of the Sanhedrin. The leading men

DID YOU KNOW?

The Roman historian Josephus confirmed that Herod Agrippa II was indeed very knowledgeable about Judaism. Thus Paul declaring that he was happy to make his defense before this king was not simply flattery. As head of the temple, Herod would be required to know the teaching of the prophets. Paul affirms that Herod does, in fact, believe the prophets. This Herod was clearly the most reasonable and least evil of all the Herods presented in scripture.



would be the same as the elders mentioned in Acts 25:15 who were the Pharisees' representatives on the Sanhedrin. So Paul's arguments center on the heart of what the Pharisees believed.

Now that we see the stage that is set for Paul, and the audience to whom he addresses his defense, it's interesting to note that Paul begins his remarks by focusing on the fact that he was zealous for the Law in that he was a Pharisee, the strictest sect of Judaism. In fact, Paul elsewhere calls himself a "Hebrew of Hebrews" and "a Pharisee of Pharisees." His qualifications and zeal were unassailable. He even studied under the famous rabbi, Gamaliel. A few weeks ago we saw the differences between the Pharisees and Sadducees and how they both came to be. But what was it about being a Pharisee that gave Paul such credibility? Who were the Pharisees and what did they believe?

The Law of God was of paramount importance to the Pharisees. It was the center and anchor of their lives.

Growing up in church, I was taught that the Pharisees were the bad guys. They were always painted in a negative light. And while many of them did earn this reputation, we might be guilty of painting with too broad a brush if we too quickly dismiss the zeal they had for God.

Looking back at the Jews' struggle against Greek oppression back in the second century BC, we marvel at how they rallied and even triumphed over the mighty Greek empire, and threw off the mantle of Greek rulership for a time. This is known as the Maccabean revolt. The champions of this revolt were called "the Hasidim" (or the pious ones). They were called "the mighty warriors of Israel" in 1 Maccabees. They were devoted to obeying God alone in all that they did.

Unfortunately, the Maccabees' successors, the

Hasmoneans, gave into the Hellenization pressure (to become and live like Greeks), which presented a problem for these zealous followers of God. Some of these Hasidim chose to follow the path of violence and rebel against any and all of their overlords. They became the Zealots we mentioned earlier. Others decided that violence was not the answer. They considered their oppression to be the result of the failure of the people to follow God's Law. They taught that one should devote oneself completely to every detail of the Law, and to separate from anything that would distract from that devotion. These Hasidim became known as the "separatists" (perushim)—or "Pharisee" in English.

The Law of God was of paramount importance to the Pharisees. It was the center and anchor of their lives. The Pharisees desired more than anything to draw the people closer to God. They saw God as all-knowing, wise, just, and merciful. They taught that God loved His people and wanted them to live a life of obedience. They believed in many of the same things as Jesus: the resurrection

Many Pharisees supported Jesus and even came to faith in Him as Messiah. Jesus repeatedly ate at their homes, and Paul claimed he was proud to be a Pharisee.

of the dead, a coming day of judgment, and that God gave us a free will that worked together with divine guidance in human life.

The problem was that they also began to teach that God had given Moses a two-part Law: the written Law of the Torah, and an Oral Law, which was passed down (orally) from generation to generation. Eventually, this Oral Law began to equal the written Law in importance, and sometimes would even supersede it.

While many of these Pharisees were godly and righteous men who set extremely high standards of moral obedience for themselves, not all of them measured up to this standard. Clearly, the aphorism that *power*

corrupts applies here. And those that rose to power in the ruling classes of the Pharisees (and who abused it) had become what the Mishnah (the Rabbinic writings) called “plagues of the Pharisaic party.” Some became so zealous for their own oral interpretations and were so focused on the letter of the Law regarding obedience that they neglected the needs of those around them. This is evident in Jesus’ attacks on them. He said to follow what the Pharisees taught, but not to practice their hypocritical ways.

Jesus reserved His most scathing attacks for this type of Pharisee. These were the ones who should have known better. Matthew chapter 23 is overflowing with examples of what Jesus thought of the current generation of hypocritical Pharisees. He does not pull any punches. He calls them white washed tombs that are full of dead men’s bones. He calls them blind guides and a brood of vipers. Elsewhere He calls them sons of their father, the devil.

Yet we must be careful here in, indeed, painting with too broad a brush. Many Pharisees supported Jesus and even came to faith in Him as Messiah. Jesus repeatedly ate at their homes, and Paul claimed he was proud to be a Pharisee. Yes, Jesus strongly condemned the hypocrisy present in the Pharisees that opposed Him, and the legalism that many of them displayed was a barrier to the people coming to faith. But we should take care not to define or equate in our own minds the term “Pharisee” with the evils modeled by only some of them.

Discussion Questions:

1. By this point in Acts, Paul has been under intense scrutiny for a long time. How does it affect you when your faith is criticized or questioned?

2. What was the message of Jesus to Paul described in Acts 26:14-18? What specific items are mentioned? Why do you think it was important for Jesus to speak to Paul in Hebrew, and to use his Hebrew name (Saul)? What specific things will Jesus accomplish through Paul (v.18)? What do each of these things mean?

3. What is the core issue that Paul focuses on regarding the source of the conflict with the Jewish religious leaders (Act 26:6-8)? If the Pharisees also believed in the resurrection of the dead, why do you think they still opposed him? What is the main point Paul wanted to make in this address? What do we learn about God from Acts chapter 26?

4. Why do you think there is such hostility toward the name and message of Jesus (Acts 26:9-11)? If He was simply a good teacher and someone who merely taught us to love our neighbor, why would the world hate Him so? Why do you think Paul was “furiously enraged” at followers of Jesus? What sort of hostility have you seen in the world to the message of Christianity and the morality we stand for? How do you respond to such hostility?

5. What practical difference does the resurrection of Jesus and the coming judgment make in your life? How do you live differently because of these truths? What is one thing you can do this week to demonstrate unmistakably that you are a follower of Jesus?

Going Deeper:

1. Read Acts 26:20 and 20:21. According to Paul in these verses, how can someone be saved? How does faith in Jesus necessarily result in a changed lifestyle? Why do you think Paul would include “deeds appropriate to repentance” in this statement?

2. Each of the three versions of Paul’s conversion story adds new details. Compare these accounts and discuss the differences. What was the purpose of the account in Acts 9:1-9? What is the focus of the account in Acts 22:1-16? What does Paul emphasize here? What new detail does Paul add in Acts 26:4-20? What does this added detail draw attention to?

Transformational Activity

OUTREACH:

Often when we talk about crafting a testimony to share with others regarding what Christ has done for us, we focus on our own story. But just as (or even more) important to include is the story of what Christ did on the cross—and why it was so important. Take some time this week to summarize in just a few minutes the details of what Christ did for us by dying on the cross. Really focus on why it was important and what it accomplished. Come back next week ready to share what you came up with.



Week 39: Wisdom Despised and Rewarded

The action in the book of Acts reaches a fever pitch in chapter 27. We hit the high seas with Paul on his final adventure of spreading the gospel. He has long known that his destiny was to preach the good news in Rome, and here he is finally on his way. From the pronoun change to “we” and from the meticulous detail included in the writing, it’s clear that Luke, the author of Luke-Acts, has rejoined the mission. It seems he was in Caesarea the entire two years Paul was imprisoned there. Some believe this is when he penned this two-part work (Luke-Acts).

The action in the book of Acts reaches a fever pitch in chapter 27. We hit the high seas with Paul on his final adventure of spreading the gospel.

There is so much intricate detail laid out in this chapter that surely only an eyewitness would have been able to provide such description. With this amount of detail, this chapter provides an opportunity to explore many background topics.

As we begin this chapter, we see another centurion pictured as being honorable in the book of Acts—supporting the idea that Luke-Acts comprised the trial documents that had to precede a prisoner who would appear before Caesar. Luke always portrays Roman officials in a positive light. He also clearly lays the blame for any uprisings at the feet of the Jewish religious leadership—a topic about which Rome was especially sensitive.

We see that the centurion Julius is from the Augustan cohort—which implies that this was an Imperial cohort rather than a Senatorial cohort. Many people assume

that a centurion was commander over 100 soldiers in that the name comes from the root for 100. While early on in the history of the Roman army that may have been true, the centurion eventually came to be the leader of 80 men (for the most part). The number of soldiers in each cohort (and thus each century) differed, depending on which cohort they were in. Roman legions contained 10 cohorts, 9 of which contained 6 centuries each. Each of these centuries had 80 soldiers. However, the first cohort in each legion was double the size, containing 5 centuries of 150 men each. Thus, Roman centurions commanded either 80 or 150 men. There were 5 Roman cohorts stationed at Caesarea where this voyage began.

The first ship Paul was placed on for the journey to Rome was a smaller vessel, suitable for traveling from port to port along a coast, never venturing too far from shore. As the journey progressed, the centurion would be on the lookout for a larger ship, more suited to make the voyage on the open sea—one that would take them to Rome. They found such a ship in the city of Myra, on the southern coast of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). Myra was the chief port for the grain fleets that carried wheat from Egypt to Rome. At that time, Egypt was the chief supplier of grain for Rome. Captains who braved the weather late in the season would receive extra compensation for the danger of the journey. This was a much larger ship that would take them the rest of the way to their destination.

After setting off on this new ship and reaching the western end of Asia Minor at Cnidus, they were forced by contrary winds to sail out to open sea and find shelter under the lee of Crete, dropping down to the southern side of that island. They completed the first major portion of their journey by temporarily harboring at Fair Havens.

Here, Paul warned the centurion about the dangers of continuing their journey that late in the season. It was considered dangerous to sail on the open sea after September 14th. And no one would dare sail after

November 11th. Luke mentions that it was now dangerous because “the fast” had already happened. The fast he is referring to was Yom Kippur, or The Day of Atonement. In 59 AD, Yom Kippur fell on Oct 5th. Luke mentioning the fast without explanation supports the reality that Luke was a Jew, rather than a Gentile, as is commonly assumed. A Jewish writer, writing to a Jewish audience, would assume they knew what fast was being referred to.

The tense of the Greek reveals that Paul “kept on admonishing them” to consider postponing the journey until it was safer in the spring. But Paul did not yet have the credibility with the centurion he would later have. Thus, the centurion sided with the captain and pilot to continue on, despite the danger. The captain had a significant financial stake in making it to Rome before winter. But at this point, Paul had already experienced 3 shipwrecks—and the crew would come to regret not listening to his wisdom and experience.

Leaving Fair Havens, a place where they could not winter, they headed for Phoenix, a harbor that was further down the coast of Crete. When they encountered a gentle wind, they

STUDY TIPS

As you are studying God’s Word, one of the best habits you can get into is asking questions of the text of scripture. Some typical questions you might include: What does it say? What does it mean? What did it mean to the original audience? How does the immediate context of this passage help me understand the argument the author is trying to make? Where else does scripture discuss this topic? What does the text affirm and what does it deny? What are some timeless truths we can draw out of this passage? How can I apply these truths to my life today? These questions will go a long way toward helping you learn all you can in your Bible study time.



thought this was the sign they were waiting for. But soon a tempestuous gale overtook them, and they had to give in and were driven along, out of control. This particular gale was so notorious, it actually had a name. It was called Euraquilo.

Things were looking dire. They were forced to bring the ship's boat aboard—a small dinghy that would normally be towed behind the ship. But it was most likely full of water at this point, and would certainly be weighing them down. Here they also “frapped” the ship. This was a technique of wrapping the lower hull with ropes to keep it from coming apart in extreme conditions. Clearly they had given up hope, as they also began to jettison all the cargo as well as the tackle.

At this point, Paul gets the opportunity to offer up an “I told you so.” He had clearly warned them this would happen. But Paul rather gives them a message of hope—revealing that an angel had appeared to him, assuring him that they would make it safely to their destination without the loss of any life. This dream gave Paul the opportunity to gain credibility in the eyes of the crew and the centurion. They were all in desperate need of hope, and Paul gave it to them. When his dream came true, people looked to him for leadership.

Owing to their worldview, these seasoned sailors would undoubtedly have attributed the severity of the storm to supernatural causes. Thus, Paul's assurance that he had been visited by an angel would have carried great weight with them. It appears they now trusted Paul. This trust would shortly come in handy. In Acts 27:41, as the ship ran aground amongst the rocks and began breaking apart, the soldiers considered killing the prisoners rather than risking them fleeing as they made their way to shore. Any prisoner escaping would cost all the soldiers their lives. But this trust Paul had gained with the centurion proved useful—the centurion was now motivated to save Paul's life.

Previously, as they were approaching land, Paul encouraged them all to eat bread. They were, doubtless, weak from being seasick and not eating for some 2 weeks. They would need that strength to make it to shore. Paul sets an example for the others by breaking bread and eating in front of them. (This is a common phrase we see in scripture—the idea of “breaking bread.” Why did the Jews “break” bread rather than cut it? This was because the rabbis considered cutting to be an act of violence. They wanted to avoid doing this to something for which they should be grateful. Bread was a symbol of life for them.)

The whole party finally made it safely to the island of Malta, just off the coast of Italy. In the next chapter, we will see the final short leg of the trip that will bring Paul to

Rome. Through this harrowing adventure in Acts 27, we see God’s hand everywhere. He is sovereign in making sure Paul gets to Rome. His hand of protection was clearly on Paul. God’s sovereignty was also on display in allowing this storm to beset them, no doubt teaching them valuable lessons about His power and His provision in their lives. One question we might take away from this chapter is this: as we face the inevitable storms in our lives, do we have the same kind of confidence—knowing that God will get us exactly where He wants us to be?

Through this harrowing adventure in Acts 27, we see God's hand everywhere. He is sovereign in making sure Paul gets to Rome.

Discussion Questions:

1. Paul barely makes it to Rome with his life. Describe the most harrowing adventure you have ever been on.

2. Read Acts chapter 27 out loud. As you go, pause to point out moments or circumstances in this journey to Rome where you see the sovereign hand of God guiding this group? What surprises you about what you discover? What do you learn about God's sovereignty here?

3. Read Acts 27:21-26. Why do you think those aboard the ship would be likely, at this point in the journey, to believe Paul's assurances that they would make it to shore safely? How would this confidence in Paul help them in their journey? What would the others on the ship have learned about God from Paul's example? How had God been preparing Paul for the perils of this journey?

4. What leadership qualities did Paul exhibit on this journey? Where do you see others around you exhibiting these same qualities? Which of these qualities would you like to grow in? How can Paul's example help you in a situation you are facing right now?

5. If you had to describe your life right now like a weather report, how would you characterize it? How about 5 or 10 years ago? What have you learned about God that helps you navigate uncertainties better now than you used to? What is one situation in your life this week where you know you can trust God more?

Going Deeper:

1. How did Paul's example earn him the respect and right to be heard by those on the ship? What sorts of conversations do you think happened with Paul on the beach after everyone made it safely to shore? What specifically did Paul do in this crisis that might serve as a model for us? Where in your life are you an example that others can follow? What is the Spirit teaching you about how you lead others?

2. What are some takeaways for us from this chapter? Just because God protected the life of Paul and saw that he made it to Rome safely, should we believe that God will always protect us from the storms of life? Why or why not? How can we know when passages of scripture are descriptive or prescriptive? How can we understand Romans 8:28 in light of Paul's journey to Rome?

Transformational Activity

WORSHIP:

Psalm 139:9-10 was surely on the mind of Paul on this trip to the “remotest parts of the sea.” Read through Psalm 139 this week and note all that David highlights about God: His provision, His presence and protection, and His *hesed* (lovingkindness). Meditate on these truths this week. Come back together and share what God highlighted for you. Worship God together for His faithfulness.



Week 40:

Faithful to the End

Back in our journey through Acts chapter 19, we discussed the concept of “the kingdom of God,” and why it is such an important topic to understand when reading scripture. It is one of two promises that the Jews clung to all throughout history no matter what happened to them. The first promise was that God would send a Messiah to save them. The second promise was that God would ultimately raise them from the dead—so that they would be able to enjoy the earthly kingdom that Messiah would bring.

Here in the final chapter of the book of Acts, it is clear that Paul never wavered from his method or message. We

The question that Paul was constantly answering in one way or another was this: if Jesus was indeed Messiah the king, why had the kingdom not yet been set up?

see in Acts chapter 28 the final leg of Paul’s journey to Rome. After many hardships he finally arrives, and what does he do first? He calls together the leading Jews in Rome—in accordance with God’s principle of Jewish priority. The gospel goes to the Jew first. And what was his message? In Acts 28:23, after the Jews had gathered a large crowd to hear Paul speak, he spoke to them about the kingdom. To properly understand the meaning of this passage and the doctrine of the kingdom, we need to explore how the recipients of this message would have heard it.

We have already seen that this kingdom idea in scripture involved two aspects: 1) the expectation of the restoration and renewal of all things, and 2) the establishment of the rule and reign of Messiah in a literal, political kingdom—as Messiah would sit on

David's throne. Thus, the question Paul was constantly answering in one way or another was this: if Jesus was indeed Messiah the king, why had the kingdom not yet been set up? The coming of Messiah was so identified with the promised kingdom that Paul (and the other New Testament writers) had to take great care to explain the kingdom program.

This teaching about the kingdom program of God is so important, it is interwoven all throughout the book of Acts. A quick survey of Acts reveals this to be true. Jesus begins the book of Acts and launches His apostles into ministry by speaking about the kingdom (Act 1:3-8). In Acts 8:12, Philip corrects the mistaken understanding of the Samaritans regarding the kingdom. In Acts 14:22 Paul stands up, after being stoned and presumed dead, and encourages the disciples in Lystra, Iconium, Antioch, and Derbe regarding the future coming of the kingdom. In Acts chapters 19 and 20, Paul teaches on the kingdom in the city of Ephesus—both in the synagogue, and throughout the rest of his ministry there. Then finally, in Acts chapter 28, Paul explains the kingdom to the Jewish leaders in Rome (28:23), and Luke summarizes Paul's two-year ministry at Rome by pointing to his preaching regarding the kingdom (28:31).

From these examples, we see that the recipients of this kingdom message included unbelieving Jews, Jewish believers in Messiah, Samaritan believers in Messiah, and a church of believers. This message is never presented to an audience of Gentile unbelievers. And it is clear that the kingdom of God and the church of God are never equated. They are two separate things. The church is presented in scripture as the *bride* of Messiah (Christ), comprised of all believers from Pentecost until the rapture. The church is also described as the *body* of Messiah, here to do His bidding until He returns.

Both the bride image and the body image require that the Messiah already arrived to earth, and then left. Thus, there is no way to twist and torture the

term “church” to apply to the family of God in the Old Testament—because the Messiah had not yet come. We must clearly separate in our minds the idea of “church” from the identity of Israel. But we must also be clear that the church is not the “kingdom,” nor does the work of the church usher in the kingdom.

How does scripture define the kingdom? The coming Messianic kingdom is described very clearly in Daniel chapter 2 as something that is supernatural. When we seek to understand how God wants us to view this kingdom idea, Daniel chapter 2 is where we must start. Here, God is giving Nebuchadnezzar a preview and a timeline for all the Gentile world empires that will rule planet Earth, from his time until the 2nd coming. God tells him that there will be 4 (and only 4) earthly, political kingdoms or empires that will rule the world from his time (605 BC) until Christ returns.



After describing the empires of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome (with Rome coming in 2 phases), God then reveals in Daniel chapter 2 the earth-shattering news: in the final stage of the Roman Empire (the toes of iron mixed with clay), He will set up a kingdom

that will never be destroyed. This supernatural Messianic kingdom will put an end to all these man-made human kingdoms. But it is the way God describes this coming kingdom that is so important. He describes it as a stone that is “cut without hands.” This means it is supernatural. It is not part of the statue of human world governments. It comes in from the outside and destroys all the others—all at the same time.

It is crucial to see that the stone is not part of the statue. Each of the four metals, representing Gentile world empires, follow one another throughout history as a part of the statue of a man—all human accomplishments. But the stone cut without hands, a supernatural kingdom, comes in from the outside and destroys—and then replaces—these previous world empires. The kingdom of God is not one of the human world empires that transforms into the kingdom of God, nor is it another human kingdom just tacked on to the end of the others in sequence. No, it comes in from the outside, destroys all the others, and replaces these kingdoms of men with the kingdom of God. This one fact is crucial to get our minds around if we are to have a proper understanding of what God is communicating to us about the coming kingdom.

The stone is *cut without hands*. The kingdom is not the church. It is not human government. It is not the result of the success of the missionary movement. It is God intervening in a radical, violent way, completely destroying the manmade, idolatrous systems we have created in our attempt to build our own towers of Babel and make a name for ourselves. That is the kingdom. That is what the Jews were expecting. And that is what Paul was preaching. Jesus came to offer this kingdom to Israel. Yet they rejected it (and Him).

The first half of the book of Matthew is all about the offer of this kingdom to Israel. Then the rest of the book describes what happens after Israel rejects this offer. After Matthew chapter 12, everything changes. The

purpose of Jesus' miracles early in His ministry was to serve as signs to get Israel to make a decision regarding His messianic claims.

The purpose of His miracles *after* Israel rejected Him as Messiah was for training the twelve apostles for the kind of work they would need to do in response to this rejection. When the religious leaders asked for a sign in Matthew 12—right after the rejection—Jesus said no. The only sign they would be given was the sign of resurrection. “This generation” of Israel would suffer the consequences of rejecting the long-awaited Messiah.

Attributing the miracles of Jesus to the power of Satan, claiming that Jesus was possessed by the devil himself, revealed that the Pharisees, and thus, the nation of Israel whom they represented, were rejecting His claim of being the Messiah. He had already performed two miracles that only the Messiah was supposed to be able to perform—the healing of a leper (recorded in Matthew 8, Mark 1, and Luke 5), and the casting out of a dumb demon (recorded in Matthew 12, and Mark 3). In response, the Sanhedrin were forced to declare their position on His claims of being Messiah. They made their position clear in saying that Jesus performed the casting out of the dumb demon by the power of Satan.

In response, Jesus declared that they had blasphemed the Holy Spirit. He characterized this as an unpardonable sin—namely, the national rejection by Israel of Jesus as Messiah. This was a sin that only the nation of Israel could commit, in that the Messiah was sent to God's people, Israel. It is not an individual sin. It

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is a national sin. The generation that committed it was now under an irrevocable judgment. Because of this, Jerusalem would now be destroyed (70 AD), and the offer of the kingdom would now be rescinded and re-offered to a later generation of Israel who would accept it—the generation of Jews alive at His return (Romans 11:26).

As a result of this rejection, the ministry of Jesus radically changed in four different ways. As mentioned already, the purpose of the miracles of Jesus changed after this. It was no longer to get Israel to make a decision regarding His messianic claims—that decision had now been made. The second change involved the people for whom He performed His miracles. Before the rejection, He performed miracles for the benefit of the masses, not requiring an exhibition of faith. Afterward, He only performed miracles for individuals, in response to their needs—and did require faith.

The third change involved His message of being the Messiah. Early on, Jesus and His disciples widely proclaimed that He was the Messiah. But afterward, He forbade them from mentioning it. After Peter's declaration in Matthew 16 that Jesus was the Christ (Messiah), Jesus told him to tell no one of this. The fourth change concerned His method of teaching. Before the rejection, He taught the masses

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

What does this shipwreck of Paul and his companions teach us about greed and the consequences of foolishness when making financial decisions? How did the desire for profit guide the decision making of the owners of the ship? What happened to the goods they were transporting? How does a right relationship with God help determine our values and guide our own decision making—even when it comes to the mundane? How does being a follower of Jesus affect our perspective and priorities when it comes to finances?



clearly in terms they could understand. But afterward, He taught them only in parables (Matt 13:34) in order to hide the truth from the masses (Matt 13:10-14). But to His disciples, He explained everything privately (Mark 4:34). These radical changes can only be understood in light of the monumental nature of the rejection of Jesus as Messiah. All of creation was waiting for the Messiah to come and set up His kingdom. Yet when He arrived, He and His offer were rejected. This lens of the kingdom offer is one of the most important lenses through which to read the gospels.

Discussion Questions:

1. After the perilous journey Paul and his companions endured, barely making it safely to shore, the kindness and hospitality of Publius must have been very welcome. Who is someone in your life that has demonstrated the gift of hospitality in extraordinary ways? What are some memories you have of their kindness?

2. As Luke is wrapping up this book, several ideas are presented that are worth discussing. Read Acts 23:6, 24:21, 26:6-8, 28:20. What is the hope of Israel? What does it mean that Paul is a “prisoner for the Lord?” Read Eph 4:1 and Phil 1:12-14. What was the result of the imprisonment of Paul? How is the last verse of Acts a fitting tribute to Paul’s service to the Lord? What kind of legacy do you desire to leave in this regard? In other words, how would you like the last verse of your life to read?

3. Since God had promised that Paul would reach Rome, why do you think He allowed all the trials that beset them on the way? Why make it a difficult journey rather than smooth sailing? How would the stories from this journey advance the gospel? Why do you think God does much the same thing in our lives? Why the twisting/turning path to get us where He wants us? What do we learn about God from this?

4. Read Acts 28:23-28. What do we learn about the various kinds of results we should expect when spreading the good news of the gospel? How does this quote from Isaiah explain some of the results we encounter? What reactions do you get from your non-Christian friends to your faith? What bothers them about it? How have you attempted to help them through these roadblocks?

5. What did Paul do with the time afforded him while in chains in Rome? Think about how many millions of people he has blessed and encouraged with his “prison epistles.” How do you react to situations that are beyond your control? How do you attempt to “redeem the time”? What is one thing you can do this week to seek to serve God better within the boundaries and constraints you have around you?

Going Deeper:

1. Describe the progress of the gospel from Acts 1:8 through Acts 9:15-16 and then all the way to Acts 26:22-23 and 28:22-23. What fulfillments (of prophecies and promises) have we seen? What obstacles did the early church face (regarding the gospel going out to the Samaritans and the Gentiles) from within and without? How do you see God's hand guiding the process?

2. Read Acts 6:7, 9:31, 12:24, 16:5, 19:20, 28:31. Based on these verses, how would you describe Luke's purpose in writing this book? Why do you think Luke would include summary verses like this? How does the last verse of the book reveal Luke's theme and what he is hoping to accomplish? How can verse 31 be seen as an invitation of sorts for us to continue in this work?

Transformational Activity

COMMUNITY:

This week, think about what it means to live in a community of faith. The book of Acts ends in a way that invites us to live out the next chapter of the growth and spread of the gospel. We are the “Acts 29 community.” What could this look like in your family and in your church? Think through the possibilities and come back ready to share and dream together as to how to embody this truth in new and powerful ways.



Week 41:

The Church in Action

We have made it to the end of the book of Acts! Throughout this journey, we have explored some amazing topics. We have looked at: Christology, Pneumatology (the study of the Spirit), the atonement, the doctrine of angels, baptism, identity markers, New Covenant theology, Kingdom theology, the redemptive covenants, the theology of suffering, transcendence and immanence, progressive revelation, spiritual warfare, circumcision, the Sabbath, sanctification, the difference between sovereignty and providence—and much, much more. We have covered a lot of ground!

One of the blessings of this kind of study guide is that when specific topics or individual doctrines arise from our weekly passage of scripture, we are able to take time to really explore them. In our daily Bible reading and through the sermons and messages we listen to, we are exposed to a lot of great theology and theological topics. But because the exposure to these topics is occasional, it is, by definition, not systematic. What I mean by that, is simply that the method of organization is accidental, rather than intentional. For example, we learn some amazing truths about the doctrine of the atonement when reading through sections of Romans, Hebrews, and many other passages. And as we grapple with these texts, through our own study or learning under a good Bible teacher, we begin to grasp little by little what this doctrine means and how to apply it to our lives. This adds to the storehouse of biblical knowledge we have accumulated over the span of our Christian life.

This is a great way to learn theology—in context, and within the situations in life. This approach is sometimes called “biblical theology” (in contrast to other approaches to studying scripture such as “historical theology”, or

“systematic theology”). Biblical theology examines the leaves on the trees. Whereas, systematic theology looks at the bigger picture—and is able to see the forest for the trees. Biblical theology is the version that we typically get in Sunday sermons, or in our own study of scripture.

However, it is helpful from time to time to step back and explore these important doctrines in a systematic way. When we take deep dives into specific issues or doctrines, we can more fully explore all the Bible has to say about them—more than time often allows for in a single sermon. When we do this, the big picture of God’s plan and a clearer picture of God Himself will regularly come into focus. Oftentimes, we need to see the big picture before the little individual pictures make sense. If you think about it, when you assemble a puzzle, you typically begin with the outside edge. This gives you the framework and structure in which you will work.

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This is what systematic theology does for us. That is primarily what we have been doing all throughout Acts in the introductions to each week’s questions. We sometimes explore the historical background of a passage. Or we look at the cultural context in which the passage takes place. Then, at other times, we springboard off a mention of an idea or topic in our passage and examine it in a more systematic, doctrinal way. This approach gives us the benefits of both “biblical theology” as well as “systematic theology.”

When we approach Bible study in this way, we begin to see more clearly how everything in scripture is connected. God is speaking in all parts of His Word. Because it is the same God who is speaking, the same

message is present in Genesis as in Revelation. What God tells us in one book of the Bible about a given topic helps inform that same topic when it is addressed elsewhere. There is a principle in theology known as “the analogy of faith.” This is commonly understood to mean that the best interpreter of scripture is scripture itself. And this is very true. Many times, we will gain a better understanding of difficult passages by looking at where else that same idea is discussed in scripture.

This is only possible because of the divine inspiration of scripture. Yes, there were human authors of each book of the Bible, but the Holy Spirit was also the (divine) Author behind the scenes—ensuring that everything produced in scripture was what He wanted

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produced. However, “the analogy of faith” is more precisely the idea that all scripture is in agreement with all other parts of scripture and will not contradict itself. Again, this is only possible because of its divine origin.

Another value to studying the Bible via systematic theology is that we can see more clearly the absolute need for searching out and understanding the context of what we are reading. We are pretty familiar with how easy it is to take a verse out of its immediate context and apply

it imprecisely—making it seem to mean something that was not intended by the author. Thus, we need to always take into consideration the literary context of passages. But another element of context is that there is a time and place in which scripture was written—and specific audiences for whom these individual writings were intended. When we take scripture out of that specific historical and cultural context, we lose not only much of the richness, but also the precision of what these passages actually mean.

One truth to get our minds around is that the Bible was not written to us. It was written to the Corinthians, and the Ephesians, and to specific audiences who would understand very clearly what was being said to them—because they shared the same worldview and what scholars call, *sitz im leben* (or, situation in life) as the authors. They had the same vocabulary and cultural understandings as the author. They shared a common upbringing in Jewish teaching, expectations, and lifestyle—a perspective that is foreign to us. Yes, the Bible was written for us (for our benefit, encouragement, learning, and edification)—but it was not written to us. Therefore, we must ask ourselves how the original recipients would have heard and understood the message.

Our challenge, then, is to take care to step outside our own cultural and historical context when we are studying God’s Word, and transport ourselves into the time and place, into the cultural atmosphere and *sitz im leben* of those who would be reading and hearing the message of scripture, so that we are filtering out, as much as possible, our own presuppositions and anachronistic assumptions—in order to get at what God is really communicating. As one writer puts it: “...if cultural values are presupposed within every faithful community...then the stories we read in the Bible may presuppose themes that are completely obscure to us...We live two thousand years distant; we live in the West and the ancient Middle East is not native territory to us.”

Everyone who reads the Bible reads it through cultural and historical lenses fashioned by the time and place in which they live. This is both normal and natural. For example, someone living in 1611 AD (when the King James translation was made), who read about Jesus being a “tekton” (the Greek word for “builder”) would naturally assume this meant that He was a carpenter—because the primary building material in 1611 was wood. Thus, the word “tekton” got translated as “carpenter” in the King James Version.

But when we understand that there was very little wood available to first century Israel, and that most of their construction was done with the materials they had an abundance of—namely stone, then we can more properly understand that, to the author and audience, “tekton” was much more likely to mean “stone mason” than it would carpenter. Surely, there were some aspects of wood working that tektons in Jesus’ day would need to engage in (furniture building, etc). But when we picture Jesus as a carpenter, we are not really being precise in what the culture and history and geography would require. There is no way around the fact that we are a product of our environment. And we need to understand that.

Whether we realize it or not, even the way we process truth claims has been flavored by the world around us. If you think back through recent human history, coming out of the enlightenment, mankind could not have been more optimistic about mankind’s potential. One significant consequence of enlightenment thinking was that mankind placed our own reason squarely at the forefront of how we process and evaluate truth claims. Post-Enlightenment, everything humanity experienced was now filtered through our mind, our reason, our rational capacity to calculate its merit—to evaluate whether or not it was true, good, or worthwhile. We started looking within ourselves for that authority. Prior to the Enlightenment, what was mankind’s primary filter for truth? The Bible—God’s Word. How did we know if something was true, right, or good? If it agreed with the Bible. Post-Enlightenment, our “reason” had now superseded the Bible in this regard.

Our own reasoning ability was now the arbiter of truth. This is when empiricism rose to prominence. What

When we fail to recognize the time-bound and culture-bound lenses through which we naturally read the Bible, we invariably end up with ethno-centric interpretations of scripture.

you could see, hear, taste, touch, and more precisely test—this is what we now considered to have validity. Where did this new priority leave the supernatural? Could you see it? Could you touch it? More importantly, could you test it? No! Therefore, secular (and sometimes even regenerate) mankind eventually rejected the supernatural. Anything that could not be tested was regarded as fairy tale. All the stories in the Bible that seemed unbelievable were now dismissed—and anyone who believed in such things was not considered “enlightened” (read that as “woke”). This spawned the rise of German, higher critical, liberal scholarship, which created man-centered, man-focused criteria with which the Bible was now judged. The Bible was no longer the rule of faith. What mattered now was our own judgment of the Bible. Do we not see this cultural value being force-fed to us today? This tendency to defer to our own reasoning ability first is a temptation we all now have, and is a crucial contextual lens we must understand if we are to guard against self-centered interpretations of God’s Word.

All this to say, we have a challenge before us if we desire to faithfully understand and represent the true meaning of scripture. There are multiple levels of context we need to keep in mind as we are studying its text. When we fail to recognize the time-bound and culture-bound lenses through which we naturally read the Bible, we invariably end up with ethno-centric interpretations of scripture.

Of paramount importance is the need to acknowledge that Jesus was Jewish. The culture He grew up in and the recipients of His message were almost exclusively Jewish. The entire New Testament presupposes the entire Old Testament. If we do not understand how Jewish thinking (read that as Rabbinic thinking on occasion), Jewish culture, and Jewish presuppositions undergird everything in scripture, we are handicapping ourselves from the very start. We need to be seeking out sources and helps that elucidate the Hebrew roots of our faith.

As we, the church (the 29th chapter of Acts, as it were) add to the story of faith we see lived out in the book of Acts, let us do so with a passion for God's glory, with an understanding of salvation history that enables us to see our place in that story, and with the tools to humbly and rightly interpret the Bible as the very Word of God.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Why do you think the book of Acts ends the way it does? Luke does not reveal the result of Paul's appeal to Caesar. We learn nothing about the church at Rome. Some believe Paul was killed soon after this—while others think he was acquitted and released for a few years and was able to revisit some of his previous churches. Why is there not a more definite ending provided at the end of chapter 28? How does this speak to the role we play in continuing the work that had now begun? How does this ending speak to Luke's purpose in writing?



Discussion Questions:

1. What has been the biggest season of change in your life?

2. After our journey through Acts, how would you define the church? What is its mission? What are the marching orders we've received from Christ? Does this mission more involve transforming culture or spreading the good news of the gospel? Why? How well do you think the church in Acts accomplished this mission? How well do you think we are accomplishing that mission today?

3. What do you see as the biggest obstacles we face today to staying on task in accomplishing the mission God has given us? How do you see the mission of the church applying to you personally? How are you engaged in this mission? What happened to the followers of Jesus in Acts as they pursued their mission? What kind of opposition do you encounter today? If God decided to give the church today a refresher course on what it should be about, what do you think He would say?

4. After having journeyed through Acts, what misconceptions about Acts do you think people have today? What surprised you in this journey? How will you think differently about Acts now?

5. Candidly, how will your life look different now, after our time together in Acts? How will your priorities change...or will they? What does the mission of the church mean in your life now? What is one thing you can pray this week in asking the Spirit to nudge you toward applying what we have learned?

Going Deeper:

1. How would you describe the Holy Spirit to an unbeliever? Where did you see the Holy Spirit actively working in the book of Acts? Where do you see Him working today? When you think about the Holy Spirit in your Christian walk, what comes to mind? How have you experienced the Spirit's work in your life recently?

2. According to the book of Acts, what is the connection between the church of the New Testament and Israel from the Old Testament? How are they similar? How are they different? Read Romans 11. What role does each play in the plan of God?

Transformational Activity

PRAYER:

Take some time this week to pray that the Spirit would instill in you a renewed desire to fulfill the mission the church was given by Christ. Pray about how we often allow the urgencies of life to determine our priorities rather than being intentional and purposeful in designing God-honoring and mission-fulfilling priorities. Ask the Spirit to reveal to you what changes you need to make regarding how the tyranny of the urgent sometimes controls your schedule. Come back together and share how we might use what we learned in Acts to reevaluate how we are investing the few precious minutes we are given in this life.



Acts

VISION & ACTION

These resources were very helpful in the creation of this study guide:
background material from Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum, “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.