

SMALL GROUP GUIDE

**THE BOOK OF  
ACTS**  
AN ACTION-PACKED ACCOUNT OF THE CHURCH

## **ACTS 01/04: PETER AT PENTECOST**

The Book of Acts carries its name for a reason. It's all about action. Every page is packed with power and adventure. Acts, written by Luke, continues the story of the Church's expansion after Christ, from its humble beginnings in Jerusalem to the rapid spread of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire.

Acts is action-packed, character-driven, and rapidly moving. This sort of storytelling makes me think of comics. It's a literary universe where the stories never grow stale. The characters keep the story fresh. The action keeps the story exciting. The overall story moves quickly. That's why you cannot go to a movie theater without seeing at least one poster for a film based on a comic book. These movies are magnets. They draw people in and keep them coming back.

There are so many characters and storylines that comic companies have "universes." A universe is a fancy word for the fictional world crafted by a studio. Think of it like a big, make-believe world where superheroes and villains live, shop, and fight. Did you know there are thousands of characters in the Marvel universe alone? It's not just Hulk, Iron Man, and Black Widow. There are over 2,000 others.

Luke wants to introduce you to the characters who made up the action-packed adventure known as the Church. For this reason, Acts reads a lot like an action-packed comic without the pictures. New characters are introduced often. Power is impossible to miss. The action jumps off the page. It's mesmerizing. While comics are captivating, they are fake. However, the Book of Acts is not a work of fiction; it's a work of investigation.

Luke meticulously documented the story of the Church's advance. Here is the cool thing, though. The action that started in Jerusalem is still going on all over the world. From Jamaica to Jakarta to Jerusalem, the Church continues to grow a few millennia later. With so much expansion, we need action. That's why Luke is here to recruit you. Let's take a look at the story of Pentecost to learn two character traits of Kingdom recruits.

### **READ: Acts 2:1-7;41**

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began

to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans?” [...] Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

### **They Were Obedient to Jesus**

The story of Pentecost unfolds like the opening of a comic—the moment you can tell something special is about to happen with these seemingly unassuming characters. A mighty rushing wind filled the entire house where the disciples were gathered. Then, apparitions of fire appeared over their heads as if they were being controlled by an invisible puppeteer. At that moment, the Holy Spirit descended upon them. As they stepped into the streets of Jerusalem, their voices cut through the massive crowd that had gathered for a religious festival. Miraculously, the words they spoke were understood by all who heard them. It did not matter if they were from Ethiopia, Rome, Samaria, or South Dakota: they could hear the sermon in their native language. People panicked. Then, a confident man stood up, cleared his throat, calmed the crowd, and delivered a universe-shifting message.

Who took the stage? It was none other than Peter. I am sure the disciples and even members of the audience gasped when they saw his face. Why? Because Peter had a reputation among the close followers of Jesus. Just a few months earlier, he had publicly denied Jesus on the eve of his death and then fled from the crowd (Luke 22:54-62). While Jesus was in the most vulnerable position of His life, Peter pretended he didn’t know Him and fled into the darkness of night.

Look at him now! Peter, the impulsive and clearly flawed follower, was standing at the center of this extraordinary scene. He was boldly proclaiming the message of the same man he had turned his back on. His convicted eyes swept across the sea of faces as he recounted the story of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection. Then, thousands of people turned their lives over to Jesus.

Here Peter was preaching the first evangelistic sermon since Jesus moved out of town and into heaven. This is proof of Peter’s obedience. What if he never went to Jerusalem? What if he threw in the towel? Nobody would have blamed him, but his obedience set up an amazing outcome. The crowd started out confused and ended in clarity. Masses met Jesus and were filled with the Holy Spirit. Can you imagine what

would have happened if Peter never stepped out in obedience? Imagine how much he would have missed out on.

Just like Peter, we can find the strength to overcome our fears, face our challenges, and step out in obedience. Be like Peter. Be obedient. The Holy Spirit will do the rest.

### **They Were Overcome by the Holy Spirit**

Not a single one of those disciples could take credit for what unfolded. People heard the disciples' words in their native tongue. Supernatural fire figures danced over the disciples' heads. Thousands came to faith in a man who was publicly executed. Every moment was miraculous, which proved the Holy Spirit's power was all over Pentecost.

The disciples knew they had to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit if they were going to make any progress. They were preaching an illegal message that also seemed illogical. Peter preached that a man from the past came back from death, and now he could change people's lives in the present. People believed it and were changed. The only logical explanation was that this was from a Higher Power. The Spirit triggered the expansion of the Church.

You cannot do anything significant for Christ without the Spirit. It's not just major events, either. You need the Holy Spirit to guide you in your friendships. You need the Holy Spirit to help you in your daily decisions. You need the Holy Spirit to go with you to school, work, and even the grocery store. The Spirit strengthens you for every moment—both big and small.

As the believers departed from Pentecost, they carried a renewed sense of boldness that led to supernatural outcomes, thanks to their obedience. That is how our part in God's plan tends to work. We step out in obedience, and God does the rest. Look at the disciples. They knew they had been directly commissioned to spread the gospel wherever they went. They had no control over how people would react, but they just obeyed. God used their submission to accomplish his mission.

## TALK IT OUT

*Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.*

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and the lowest part of your week?

Q1: If you could have any superpower, which would you select? Why?

Q2: What's one thing that stood out to you from today's message?

Q3: What do you think was Luke's purpose for writing Acts? How does the message of Acts connect with today's believers?

Q4: What kind of emotions did Peter have to overcome before stepping up on that platform on Pentecost? Do you think it was difficult for him to step out in obedience like this?

Q5: The study highlights two character traits of Kingdom recruits: obedience to Jesus and being overcome by the Holy Spirit. Can you think of a time in your life when obedience to Jesus led to a significant change or outcome?

Application: Obedience plays a big role in the early Church. They had to go to Jerusalem, wait for the right time, and preach when prompted. What is a step of obedience God has in front of you this month?

## READING PLAN

*READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY*

Acts 1

Acts 2

Acts 3

Acts 4

Acts 5

Acts 6

Acts 7

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

## **ACTS 02/04: STEPHEN EXECUTED**

Have you ever been on a cruise ship? They're insane, aren't they? The sheer fact a 228-ton vessel of metal can float is mind-blowing, but it's not just that. Complete with power plants, massive restaurants, luxury spas, and waterparks, these things are like floating resort cities at sea. Modern vessels provide their passengers with every comfort imaginable. Cushioned lounges, daily housekeeping, fancy dining packages, and over-the-top entertainment are all part of the experience at sea.

On the flip side, have you ever seen a battleship? These mighty war machines cut through the open ocean with determination, manned by a crew prepared to fight. Are they luxurious? No. Is there a spa? Nope. Is there a fancy waterpark with fake waves to boogie board on? Not at all.

Pastor Vance Havner once said, "The Christian life is not a cruise ship, but it's a battleship."<sup>1</sup> While I was reading the Book of Acts, this statement came to mind and smacked me right in the face. While it may seem appealing to imagine our faith journey as a peaceful, luxurious voyage, the reality is that we are called to a life of conflict and challenges.

Let's pick up our story in the Book of Acts. After the miraculous events of Pentecost, the early apostles carried out their mission with laser focus. They immediately spread to different cities, preached to crowds, baptized new believers, and dealt with a lot of persecution along the way. Why? Because everyone hated Jesus. The Jewish leaders hated Jesus. Rome hated Jesus. After all, they killed him. They hated the fact that Jesus was getting more famous after his murder than during his ministry. This put the disciples in the middle of a battle—Christ vs. Caesar.

Back then, the Christian life was a life of conflict. Their lifestyles were far from a vacation or a leisure cruise. They were at war. Rumors spread. People hid. Rome was throwing Christians in jail and threatening their lives. That did not stop the early leaders from preaching the gospel at every opportunity.

A young preacher named Stephen found himself in front of the toughest crowd I could imagine: the council that elected to have Jesus executed. Unwaveringly, he challenged

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<sup>1</sup> The Wiersbe Bible Study Series: *Be Diligent: Mark: Serving Others as You Walk with the Master Servant* by Dr. Warren W. Wiersbe

them on their disbelief, spoke with fiery words, and leveraged skilled arguments to present proof for Jesus. Did everyone repent as they had at Pentecost? No. Did people kindly ask him to leave? Not exactly. Sadly, this sermon turned into a siege.

**READ: Acts 7:54-59**

When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

My heart hurts reading this. An eerie darkness cast Jerusalem into a shadow. Chanting echoed through city streets as an angry mob formed with a young preacher in the middle of the rioters. He wasn’t fighting. He wasn’t resisting. He wasn’t trying to talk them out of it. He was...glowing. Truly, “the glory of God” was upon him.

Stephen was about to face the most horrendous ordeal one could imagine—an unjust execution. Stephen’s accusers dragged him out into the street and began to pelt him with large boulders and stones. These were designed to shatter bones, rip open skin, and leave their victims hemorrhaging. It was a disgusting and undignified way to die.

Stephen’s glowing face did not show his agony. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (Acts 7:59). With every rock that pummeled his flesh, Stephen got closer to meeting Jesus, the man he gave his life for. After the rocks stopped flying, the mob stopped shouting, and the apostle stopped moving, everyone gathered around a corpse. Stephen had become the first martyr for the Christian faith. At that moment, he was united with Jesus.

Like a soldier on a warship wearing a bulletproof vest and helmet, this story gives us two key defenses for life’s battles.

## **Be Filled**

There is no question that Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit. Acts 6:8-10 recounts how Stephen, “a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people” (Acts 6:8). These miraculous acts were not for his own glory, but God’s. This divine connection drew people from all walks of life to the Christian movement while simultaneously stirring up animosity among those who rejected it.

Even in the midst of this horrific scene, the early Christians stood as living testaments to the comforting and life-changing help that comes from the Holy Spirit. They were so full of the Spirit that they were empty of stress over death.

Since life can feel like a battle, we need to have our defenses in place and our captain close. He’s calling the shots, keeping us safe, and setting up a strategy. The Holy Spirit allows you to have your leader as close as possible. He is with you in tough times. He is with you in battles. He is with you in persecution. He is with you in rejection. He is even with you in death. When you are filled with the Spirit, you are safe and sound. Since God is within you, not even death can harm you.

There was also an intentional way the disciples carried themselves that protected their hearts well.

## **Be Forgiving**

While boulders continued to damage his organs and crush his limbs, Stephen didn’t curse or complain. Rather, he forgave his executioners. “Lord,” he implored, his voice hoarse, “do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). I cannot help but assume the hearts of his assailants were twisted into knots. How can you forgive people while they are actively torturing you?

At that moment, a ray of sunshine broke from the clouds and shot directly toward Stephen, bathing his bloodied form in a warm glow. It was as if a window had been opened to heaven. Rocks dropped with loud thuds as onlookers observed God’s power.

The story of Stephen’s martyrdom challenges us to examine our own hearts. How forgiving are we? Are we willing to kneel in prayer instead of taking vengeance? Are we



willing to remain silent instead of spreading rumors? Can we extend the hand of forgiveness, even to those who seek to do us harm?

Since the early Church was so terribly persecuted, Christians' lives had to be marked by forgiveness. Mercy wasn't negotiable for them. There were too many atrocities to count and too many evil people trying to cause them harm. Thus, they had to forgive frequently and freely.

To do so is to walk in the footsteps of Jesus when He said from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (KJV; Luke 23:34). This concept is not just theological; it's logical. If the disciples let every betrayal turn into bitterness, they'd be completely overtaken by anger. Thus, they had to release it. Not only was this what God commanded, it was what they needed.

Your life will feel like war, so please be sure to protect yourself from the danger out there. The Holy Spirit will protect your life, and forgiveness will protect your heart. One keeps you safe, and the other keeps you steady. Like the early believers, embrace the Holy Spirit's power and radical forgiveness. When you do, you are prepared to face any battle that comes your way. Be battle-ready. Be filled with the Spirit and forgiving of others.

## TALK IT OUT

*Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.*

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and the lowest part of your week?

Q1: What do you think this means: "The Christian life is not a cruise ship, but it's a battleship."

Q2: What's one thing that stood out to you from today's message?

Q3: What do you find interesting about Stephen's reaction to being attacked?

Q4: How does being filled with the Holy Spirit change the way you respond to life's battles?

Q5: How can you become more in tune with the Spirit?

Q6: Why is forgiveness crucial for faith in the face of challenges?

Q7: Are there any places in your life where you need to extend forgiveness?

Application: Write down the name of the person you need to forgive tonight and place it somewhere you will see it. Pray for that person daily and begin to work towards forgiveness.

## READING PLAN

*READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY*

Acts 8

Acts 9

Acts 1

Acts 11

Acts 12

Acts 13

Acts 14

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

## ACTS 03/04: **PAUL MEETS JESUS**

As we continue our journey through Acts, we have seen unimaginable beauty in the account of Pentecost and witnessed the unbelievable tragedy of martyrdom. Stephen's death served as a significant tipping point in the story of the early Church. After this, every believer had a death wish. Jewish leaders were searching for them like hunters. Rome was not just imprisoning them; it was killing them. Stephen's riot-turned-execution served as the tipping point of the Church's story.

Look back on that terrible scene. While the crowd gathered and prepared to throw the stones, they didn't want to get their cloaks dirty. So, what did they do? They gave them to a young leader who was overseeing the stoning of Stephen. His name was Saul. Luke points out, "The witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul" (Acts 7:58). He wasn't just present. We have reason to believe he was a participant. Saul was a murderer, but he was about to become a crucial figure in the movement called the Church.

It's important to recognize that movements often begin with the actions of a lone individual, not massive crowds. Think about ants. Yep, the little bugs that ruin picnics. However annoying, ants are intriguing little insects. It's estimated that five ants can carry up to 250 times their body weight as a group. To put this into perspective, that's like a basketball team lifting a tank or Boeing 737 Max.

In the same way, the early Church showed off its collective strength to spread the message of Jesus. Talk about a heavy weight to carry! No single person could do it alone. They needed multitudes. They needed masses. They needed a colony. Just as ants demonstrate their collective strength by working together, the Book of Acts reminds us that big moves take place in small moments. However, those small moments ultimately culminate in revival—a fancy word for when a bunch of people turn to Jesus at once, as we saw at Pentecost. Simply put, revivals are made up of many individuals.

The Apostle Luke wants to introduce you to these individuals because he is studying the growth of the Church, after all. Since expansion takes place through conversation, proclamation, and declaration, Luke intentionally wants you to know all the people who were giving their lives to Jesus and proclaiming his name.

Actually, Luke mentions over 180 individual names in his two books recounting our history as the Church. Why would he mention so many names? Shouldn't it just be God, Jesus, Stephen, and maybe Peter? He understands that Spirit-empowered individuals create a universe-shifting impact. In the passage we are about to study, you will see three steps designed to help you move into your greatest potential impact.

**READ: Acts 9:1-5, 18-20**

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. [...] He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

Paul was on the road to Damascus, but it may as well have been the road to the death of the masses. The orders in his pocket served like a hit list, ready to hunt Christians like it was a twisted sport. His journey was interrupted, though. Struck by a blinding light, he heard a voice asking, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Suddenly, the lights went out. Saul had been blinded by a brilliant light that wrapped around Jesus, the man he hated. After that, he gave his life to Jesus.

In that moment, everything changed. With a newfound purpose pumping through his veins and the Spirit's presence within his heart, Saul arose from his life-altering encounter and embarked on a difficult and dark walk that would forever alter the course of the Church. While his eyes remained blinded, his future was never brighter. He was no longer walking that journey alone. The Son of God met him there. The power of God transformed him there. The Spirit of God empowered him there. Then, he took that power and presence with him throughout the known world.

So, how can we step into our individual impact? Let's draw from the story of Paul and identify three key steps towards personal and communal revival.

### **Step 1: Experience**

In the same way that Paul encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus, we must also seek a personal experience with Him. When he started that trip, his name was Saul. Now, it's Paul. He was so radically changed by his experience with Jesus that he had to change all his usernames.

We, too, will be radically changed when we have a genuine encounter with Jesus. It probably won't look like Paul's. There might not be a bright light, a tumble off a horse, or blindness, but we can have real and meaningful encounters with Jesus through prayer, reading the Bible, and seeking His presence in our lives. When you experienced Jesus for the first time, I assume it wasn't as theatrical, but that doesn't make it any less powerful.

### **Step 2: Education**

Following his encounter with Jesus, Paul was instructed to go and find disciples at once, not just to regain his sight but to be trained. Education and training are vital aspects of impact. In our individual lives, we should actively seek to learn more about Jesus, deepen our understanding of the Bible, and engage in discipleship every moment we can. Through education, we don't just increase our knowledge; we increase our impact.

Do you know what I find mind-blowing? Saul knew a lot about Jesus and the Bible. The guy was a scholar who likely had much of the Old Testament memorized. Not to mention, he spent much of his adult life studying the rebellious rabbi from Galilee. This goes to show a powerful point: there is a major difference between knowing about Jesus and having a real experience with him. When Paul was saved, the switch flipped. His knowledge became an allegiance.

Paul certainly knew everything Christ claimed, but until his encounter with Jesus, his life wasn't any different because of it. Some of you may feel the same way. You may know all the facts, details, and storylines, but you don't feel any different. Everyone talks about their "radical change" and their "testimony," but all you can do is recite

some facts you learned in Sunday School and maybe recite the books of the Bible in order. If that's the case, you may need to go back to Step 1. Sadly, so many people actually start their journey on Step 2. Receiving an education about Jesus without having a real experience with Him will be exhausting because you're just learning facts. After you've had an experience with Him, it's exhilarating because you're learning about your perfect friend and your heavenly Father.

### **Step 3: Expansion**

Paul went from murderer to missionary. The fire that burned on the road to Damascus engulfed his heart. From that day forward, he carried it like a torch around the known world. He went to synagogues, preached in public places, and had personal conversations with anyone who would listen. Paul understood the significance of making an impact one person at a time.

In our own lives, we should recognize that expanding God's Kingdom is not solely achieved in big, over-the-top places. It often takes place one conversation at a time. Just as Paul focused on personal interactions, we should make a difference in the lives of those we encounter daily—sharing our faith, offering encouragement, and demonstrating true love.

Just like the early Church was shaped by individual encounters, personal growth, and the influence of dedicated followers, we, too, can play a significant role in the ongoing Christian movement. By seeking a personal experience with Jesus, prioritizing education and discipleship, and sharing the gospel, your impact will be unimaginable. The Book of Acts reminds us that God worked in individuals before He ever worked in temples, so let Him do His work within you today. God starts movements in single moments. Your moment is right here and right now.

## TALK IT OUT

*Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.*

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and the lowest part of your week?

Q1: Why do you think Luke talks about so many different people in his book about the Church? What does this mean for us today?

Q2: What's one thing that stood out to you from today's message?

Q3: Have you had a personal encounter that significantly impacted your life? Now, compare that to the way Jesus has impacted your life. In what ways is He changing you?

Q4: How do you learn more about Jesus in your daily life? Are there specific practices or resources you find helpful in your spiritual education?

Q5: Are there examples from your life where a personal interaction significantly impacted your personal faith?

Application: God starts movements in single moments. How can you actively participate in God's movement in your community? Are there specific ways you can be more open to those opportunities?

## READING PLAN

*READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY*

Acts 15

Acts 16

Acts 17

Acts 18

Acts 19

Acts 20

Acts 21

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

## ACTS 04/04: **PAUL PREACHES JESUS**

Today, we turn our attention to that same man we examined last time—Paul. However, he is looking very different at this point. He isn't a persecutor; he's a preacher. Not only that, he's working miracles by God's power, planting churches, and traveling the world to tell anyone with ears about his new friend, Jesus.

Interestingly, there are few accounts of Paul preaching from a stage. There are even fewer examples of him using a microphone (zero). Instead, much of his ministry leveraged one-on-one interactions. I love that. He understood that each person was a vital part of God's grand plan (Romans 8:28). After all, God's plan is made up of people pursuing His purpose. Thus, Paul built his ministry on conversations instead of conventions.

For instance, in the metropolitan city of Corinth, Paul met a man named Aquila and his wife, Priscilla (Acts 18:1-3). Paul made money by making tents, and so did they. They ended up working together as a little ministry-supporting side hustle. Ultimately, Paul became their friend, mentor, and pastor. Paul disciplined them in their workshop while weaving fabric, tanning leather, and tying knots.

Why would an important man like Paul do this kind of one-on-one ministry? Shouldn't he have made a YouTube channel or something? Paul knew something we can often forget: salvation has a snowball effect. When one person experienced Jesus, they took it to their city. Then, those people took it to other cities, and eventually the message spread further than Roman roads could take them. Paul's intentionality with people such as Priscilla and Aquila was also his strategy. Eventually, we see that this power couple led Apollos to the Lord, and then Apollos became one of the most successful evangelists to ever work in Alexandria (Acts 18:24-28).

Paul's ministry was defined by a close-knit community. We can see this by the fact that he almost always had a partner on his trips. They preached together, traveled together, and even got arrested together. Let's take a look at the story of Paul and his friend Silas getting thrown into prison.

### **READ: Acts 16:23-31**

After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. When he received these orders, he put them in



the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" The jailer called for lights, rushed in, and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household."

Paul and Silas were not known to keep a low profile. After a public riot, these men found themselves bound to a jail cell. They preached a message of freedom, but they were being held captive. Their bodies were bloody and bruised from the beating, yet they still chose to sing songs of praise in the middle of the prison.

God decided to bring a little bass to their concert. Suddenly, an earthquake shook the foundations of the prison, breaking the chains that bound them all. The jailer, awakened by the commotion, feared the worst. He was worried that his prisoners had escaped. But Paul called out, assuring him they were still hanging out in the cold cell. Baffled and desperate to understand the source of their faith, the jailer asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" The jailer was saved just moments after nearly taking his own life.

This powerful story proves that praise and worship were integral to the early Church's expansion. Wherever they went, worship followed. Through this lens, we can examine our own lives, discovering three vital lessons about the importance of praise in our journeys.

### **Let Praise Give Perspective to Your Problems.**

Paul and Silas were no strangers to hardships, facing numerous setbacks during their ministry. Yet, as they sat shackled in their cold, damp cell, they chose to sing praises to God. They were overcome with joy despite being in jail. Sure, they were physically imprisoned, but they were spiritually free. That was enough to give them perspective, which ultimately gave them joy.

According to a study from the University of California at Davis, people who regularly practice gratitude experience greater positive emotions, increased optimism, improved health, and stronger relationships.<sup>2</sup> It is impossible to be both grateful and ungrateful at the same time. Praise is like a perspective cheat code. It forces your brain to reflect on the Divine and forget the dreadful.

### **Let Your Worship Be a Witness.**

Paul and Silas's heartfelt impromptu worship night didn't go unnoticed. The other prisoners listened. I am sure some enjoyed it, while others held their ears shut. Regardless, their worship did them all a favor. As the song rang out, their chains rattled off.

As we reflect on Paul and Silas's experience in prison, we must ask ourselves, "What ultimately led to the jailer paying such close attention?" It wasn't just the miraculous earthquake or the unexpected jailbreak. I believe it was the sound of joyful songs echoing off the stone walls, causing him to wonder, "How can these unfairly arrested men be so happy?"

When you choose to praise God despite your problems, people take notice. Your worship is a witness because true worship embodies true joy, peace, and love. Who doesn't want to feel that way? When you can do that when things are anything but joyous, peaceful, and loving, you show the world that your peace comes from a higher power. Like Paul and Silas, your contentment comes from Christ.

### **Let Joy Fuel Your Journey.**

The jailer was so moved that he invited the men to his house to make them a meal and let them get cleaned up (Acts 16:34). While sitting around the dinner table, the prisoners talked to the whole family. I am sure his kids thought it was strange for Dad to have a couple of prisoners eat supper with them, but they just kept eating and maintained a strong grip on their forks. However, once the family understood the nature of these men, everyone got less tense. These were the two guys who had made their dad happy, so they were good in their book.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://health.ucdavis.edu/medicalcenter/features/2015-2016/11/20151125\\_gratitude.html](https://health.ucdavis.edu/medicalcenter/features/2015-2016/11/20151125_gratitude.html)

What do I mean by that? Take a look at this verse: “He was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household” (Acts 16:34). The salvation snowball effect proved true. The songs of the prison turned into the salvation of the jailer. Then he went home “full of joy,” and his family took notice. When he told them about Jesus, the whole house was saved. Joy drew them in, and Jesus changed their lives.

As the night carried on, I am sure they shared stories, offered to look out for each other, and prayed together. After all, they were family now. This household had just joined the biggest household in humanity—the Church. They rejoiced in their newfound faith, marveling at the grace and mercy that had brought them all together in the first place. Paul and Silas knew that this arrest was an appointment. They knew without a doubt that they were part of something much larger than themselves—a divine plan that spanned time and space, sparking connections between the most unlikely people to build the universal Church.

I love the humility of our closing scene. It shows Paul and Silas, two giants of the faith, sitting at a dinner table with a family, talking about Jesus. This is our calling. We are called to see every moment as a mission and every person as a potential part of God’s purpose. These stories are not just limited to Paul and his buddies, either. Not at all. The book of Acts is still being written; the cast has just gotten much bigger. If you follow Jesus, you are part of it. As you step into each day, ask yourself this question: “How do I put my salvation into action?”

## TALK IT OUT

*Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.*

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and the lowest part of your week?

Q1: Paul's ministry was centered around one-on-one interactions. Do you think this approach is still relevant and effective in today's world?

Q2: What's one thing that stood out to you from today's message?

Q3: How have personal relationships helped your faith journey or spiritual growth?

Q4: How can praise help you change your perspective, even when times are tough?

Q5: How can worship and joy be a witness to others?

Application: I love that we ended at a dinner table in our study of Acts. What is one interaction you can set up this week to be more intentional with those around you?

## READING PLAN

*READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY*

Acts 22

Acts 23

Acts 24

Acts 25

Acts 26

Acts 27

Acts 28

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.