

THE SERIES GUIDE

EXPERIENCE

SEASON 2

Tap or click to add a heading

INTRODUCTION

Introduction.

We are excited to welcome you back to season two of our focus on the story of the early church in the book of Acts.

Our first season was entitled “Experience,” as we discussed the experience of the Holy Spirit poured out upon the followers of Jesus, as well as the experience of the spread of the gospel.

In this second season, we will examine the risks involved in choosing to believe in this gospel of Jesus Christ, following Him in a world with very different values than what He taught, and living out those beliefs come what may.

A risk is defined as a situation or opportunity involving danger. Some risks are more obvious to us. I once jumped out of a perfectly good airplane on a dare from about 1800 college students. Thankfully, I had a parachute and a grown adult I was strapped to, but still, I knew the risks at that moment.

But you and I take daily risks that we probably don't even consider. You may think those risks begin as soon as your feet hit the floor in the morning (driving being one of the most dangerous forms of

transportation), but 1 in 8 people with heart disease die in their sleep, and 25% of strokes happen during sleep, and every year, one in two million people die falling out of bed. So, no one is safe.

Here are a few more interesting risk facts. A 2018 online article on MentalFloss.com stated that "...you're far more likely to die while canoeing (the risk factor is 1 in 10,000) than while bungee jumping (1 in 500,000)." That came as a surprise to me. According to an online 2016 Men's Health magazine article, running a marathon is almost as dangerous as riding a motorcycle (one of the many reasons I don't run).

But there are risks we actively choose to partake in each day. Historically, choosing to believe in God is a risky endeavor. However, for too many of us in the Western world, we've settled into a comfortable form of Christianity, a Christianity that doesn't ruffle feathers or cause us to stand out. Some of us even retreat from the rest of the world so we can live out our faith in peace, while followers of Jesus in many parts of the world continue to be persecuted for what they believe.

OpenDoors.org, a site dedicated to educating about the persecution of Christians in the world, states that 1 in 7 Christians worldwide, with 365 million suffering high levels of persecution and discrimination (to learn more, go to opendoors.org).

This persecution dates back to the beginning of the Christian movement. As we continue our study in the book of Acts, the followers of Jesus faced danger and took plenty of risks to further the gospel. Over the next five weeks, we'll explore some of these risks,

including the risk of standing up for what you believe in (the stoning of Stephen), the risk of taking a new path (the conversion of Saul), the risk of moving beyond your comfort zone (taking the gospel to the Gentiles), and the risk of investing in others (Barnabas and Saul).

As we explore the risks they took to follow Jesus and spread the gospel, we'll ask ourselves: what are we willing to risk to help spread His gospel in our world today?

Jesus never promised us easy. He said, *"You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. But the gateway to life is very narrow, and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it."* Matthew 7:13-14 NLT. But He did promise that He will always be with us, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20).

It may be difficult sometimes to follow Jesus, but it's easier when we travel that narrow road together.

Thanks so much for joining us.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paddy McCoy', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Paddy McCoy
Lead Pastor, Crosswalk Portland
Crosswalk Global Network Teaching Team

DAY 1

THE RISK OF STANDING UP FOR WHAT YOU BELIEVE IN

Acts 6: 8 Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs among the people. **9** But one day, some men from the Synagogue of Freed Slaves, as it was called, started to debate with him. They were Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and the province of Asia. **10** None of them could stand against the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen spoke.

11 So they persuaded some men to lie about Stephen, saying, "We heard him blaspheme Moses, and even God." **12** This roused the people, the elders, and the teachers of religious law. So they arrested Stephen and brought him before the high council.

13 The lying witnesses said, "This man is always speaking against the holy Temple and against the law of Moses. **14** We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the Temple and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

15 At this point everyone in the high council stared at Stephen, because his face became as bright as an angel's.

Luke introduced us to Stephen at the beginning of chapter 6 as a man chosen by the twelve apostles to help care for the widows that some thought were being overlooked. In that introduction, Stephen is mentioned as a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Verse 8 says he was full of God's grace and power.

Stephen must have been quite the individual to receive such accolades from Luke, and I'm drawn to the apparent contrast between the words "grace" and "power." Grace often elicits a sense of calm, generosity, and sweetness, whereas power evokes imagery of strength and even forthrightness. To be seen as holding both of these qualities must have made for quite a charismatic character.

Nevertheless, the Jews from the Synagogue of Freed Slaves chose to pick a fight with Stephen. Likely, they had been slaves in the areas mentioned, and once freed, they came home to Jerusalem and were more than excited to hold tightly to a more rigid understanding of the Torah. They also obviously did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah or that he had been raised from the dead.

The only problem was they couldn't stand against Stephen. For Stephen, this was a fulfillment of what Jesus had told them would happen, "So don't worry in advance about how to answer the charges against you, for I will give you the right words and such wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to reply or refute you!" Luke 21:14-15 NLT

I'm guessing that Stephen's graciousness infuriated the Jews all the more. So, much like what had

happened to Jesus at his trial, the Jews get people to lie about Stephen.

Notice the contrast between Stephen and these Jews. When the Jews debate Stephen (v 9), are against Stephen (v 10), rouse the people against Stephen, and arrest him (v 12), Stephen's face becomes as bright as an angel's.

I believe Stephen was reflecting on the One who held his countenance. He wasn't focused on the people, their reactions, or the potential risks involved in standing up for what you believe in. He fixed his gaze upon his Rabbi, and as we'll see in this passage, his Rabbi was looking back at him.

Questions:

1. Stephen was well thought of by the people as someone gracious, full of the Spirit and the Spirit's power, and a person of faith. Do you now know, or have you known, someone with some of these same qualities? What about how they live their life gives them these attributes?
2. Have you ever been in a situation where you were being attacked for what you believed in? How did you respond?
3. How can you be reminded to keep your gaze on Jesus even in difficult circumstances?

DAY 2

THE RISK OF STANDING UP FOR WHAT YOU BELIEVE IN

Acts 7:1 Then the high priest asked Stephen, “Are these accusations true?”

2 This was Stephen’s reply: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me. Our glorious God appeared to our ancestor Abraham in Mesopotamia before he settled in Haran. **3** God told him, ‘Leave your native land and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.’ **4** So Abraham left the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran until his father died. Then God brought him here to the land where you now live.

5 “But God gave him no inheritance here, not even one square foot of land. God did promise, however, that eventually the whole land would belong to Abraham and his descendants—even though he had no children yet. **6** God also told him that his descendants would live in a foreign land, where they would be oppressed as slaves for 400 years. **7** ‘But I will punish the nation that enslaves them,’ God said, ‘and in the end they will come out and worship me here in this place.’

8 “God also gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision at that time. So when Abraham became

the father of Isaac, he circumcised him on the eighth day. And the practice was continued when Isaac became the father of Jacob, and when Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs of the Israelite nation.

Remember back to yesterday when the Jewish men from the Synagogue of Freed Slaves persuaded men to lie about Stephen? As part of those lies, they said, “We heard him blaspheme Moses, and even God” (Acts 6: 11), and they said that Stephen was attaching the law and even the Tabernacle, the dwelling place of God. In other words, they were accusing Stephen of attacking their story.

So, how does Stephen respond? By talking about their story. He is going to remind them of their past in hopes of connecting their past to the present, to Jesus.

As we read through Stephen’s sermon, I think it’s important to remember how Stephen was described as a man full of the Holy Spirit, of faith, gracious, and powerful. In fact, Stephen is the first person outside of the twelve apostles to perform “amazing miracles and signs among the people.” (Acts 6:8). So, while he may be passionate, he doesn’t seem to be angry here. I don’t think he’s trying to condemn the Jews but rather save them, just like Jesus would have.

It’s also important to remember that by starting with Abraham, Stephen isn’t just connecting the dots of their story; he’s hoping to remind them of the call God gave to the Israelites first through Abraham - *“I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and*

make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others.” Genesis 12:2 NLT

The gospel was beginning to spread beyond the Hebrew-speaking Jews to the Greek-speaking Jews, and it was about to go international into the land of the Gentiles. Taking time to remember their original call from God was important because, over time, they had a tendency to forget. In fact, they started to think that they were better than everyone else and therefore should only associate with those like them.

But God’s call for the children of Israel was to be a blessing to others, not just Jews, but all people from all nations, tribes, languages, and tongues.

So, as we go out to stand up for what we believe in, let us check to make sure our motivation is not to separate ourselves from others or live as elitists but rather to be a blessing to others. Jesus lived his life this way, and what was His reward? The people killed him for it, God raised Him from the dead and changed the world.

Questions:

1. Think about your faith story. What are some of your most meaningful experiences, and what is it about those experiences that have stayed with you?
2. Have you felt God’s call in your life at any point? If so, what did you feel that He wanted you to do?
3. As you go about your day today, what are three ways you can live today as a blessing to others?

DAY 3

THE RISK OF STANDING UP FOR WHAT YOU BELIEVE IN

Acts 7:9 “These patriarchs were jealous of their brother Joseph, and they sold him to be a slave in Egypt. But God was with him **10** and rescued him from all his troubles. And God gave him favor before Pharaoh, king of Egypt. God also gave Joseph unusual wisdom, so that Pharaoh appointed him governor over all of Egypt and put him in charge of the palace.

11 “But a famine came upon Egypt and Canaan. There was great misery, and our ancestors ran out of food.

12 Jacob heard that there was still grain in Egypt, so he sent his sons—our ancestors—to buy some. **13** The second time they went, Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers, and they were introduced to Pharaoh.

14 Then Joseph sent for his father, Jacob, and all his relatives to come to Egypt, seventy-five persons in all.

15 So Jacob went to Egypt. He died there, as did our ancestors. **16** Their bodies were taken to Shechem and buried in the tomb Abraham had bought for a certain price from Hamor’s sons in Shechem.

17 “As the time drew near when God would fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in

Egypt greatly increased. **18** But then a new king came to the throne of Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph. **19** This king exploited our people and oppressed them, forcing parents to abandon their newborn babies so they would die.

As Stephen continues to share the Israelite story, it's clear that their story has not been an easy one.

Starting with Joseph being sold into slavery by his own family, to famine and misery, to the change of regimes that led to oppression and extreme cruelty, the Israelite story is littered with hardships and pain. Those hardships and pain can do at least one of two things: they can push you to reject your identity and run away from all the hardships, or these circumstances can strengthen your bonds to each other as you lean on one another to survive.

As difficult as it was at times, the Israelites persevered, but they were never alone. God was with them even when they didn't think he was. At every step, God continues to work to fulfill His promises. With Joseph's misfortune, God worked and used those circumstances not only Joseph's family but the people of Egypt and Cana as well. As we'll see as Stephen goes on, God continued to be faithful to the Israelites even in a land of slavery, even to the point of helping the Egyptians realize who the one true God was.

So again, it all comes down to focus. We can focus on our difficulties, our bad circumstances, our struggles, or we can focus on the One who is bigger than any circumstance we face. Stephen was focus on his Savior, right up to the very end. In my faith journey, I

have noticed that it's easier to take risks for Jesus, when I'm focused on Him and all the risks He took for me.

Questions:

1. Are there hardships you've faced that you feel actually strengthened your faith? If so, what were they, and how did they strengthen your faith?
2. Have you ever gone through a season in life when you felt as if God wasn't there, only to have Scripture or someone try to tell you otherwise? Did their words help or hurt?
3. Choose one quality of Jesus that you love to focus on throughout the day today. Take note of how your day started versus how your day ended when you kept that quality as a focus of your day.

DAY 4

THE RISK OF STANDING UP FOR WHAT YOU BELIEVE IN

Acts 7:20 “At that time Moses was born—a beautiful child in God’s eyes. His parents cared for him at home for three months. **21** When they had to abandon him, Pharaoh’s daughter adopted him and raised him as her own son. **22** Moses was taught all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was powerful in both speech and action.

23 “One day when Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his relatives, the people of Israel. **24** He saw an Egyptian mistreating an Israelite. So Moses came to the man’s defense and avenged him, killing the Egyptian. **25** Moses assumed his fellow Israelites would realize that God had sent him to rescue them, but they didn’t.

26 “The next day he visited them again and saw two men of Israel fighting. He tried to be a peacemaker. ‘Men,’ he said, ‘you are brothers. Why are you fighting each other?’

27 “But the man in the wrong pushed Moses aside. ‘Who made you a ruler and judge over us?’ he asked.

28 'Are you going to kill me as you killed that Egyptian yesterday?'

29 When Moses heard that, he fled the country and lived as a foreigner in the land of Midian. There his two sons were born.

30 "Forty years later, in the desert near Mount Sinai, an angel appeared to Moses in the flame of a burning bush. **31** When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight. As he went to take a closer look, the voice of the Lord called out to him, **32** 'I am the God of your ancestors—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.' Moses shook with terror and did not dare to look.

33 "Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground. **34** I have certainly seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groans and have come down to rescue them. Now go, for I am sending you back to Egypt.'

35 "So God sent back the same man his people had previously rejected when they demanded, 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us?' Through the angel who appeared to him in the burning bush, God sent Moses to be their ruler and savior.

36 And by means of many wonders and miraculous signs, he led them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and through the wilderness for forty years.

37 "Moses himself told the people of Israel, 'God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among your own people.' **38** Moses was with our ancestors, the assembly of God's people in the wilderness, when the

angel spoke to him at Mount Sinai. And there Moses received life-giving words to pass on to us.

39 “But our ancestors refused to listen to Moses. They rejected him and wanted to return to Egypt. **40** They told Aaron, ‘Make us some gods who can lead us, for we don’t know what has become of this Moses, who brought us out of Egypt.’ **41** So they made an idol shaped like a calf, and they sacrificed to it and celebrated over this thing they had made. **42** Then God turned away from them and abandoned them to serve the stars of heaven as their gods! In the book of the prophets it is written, ‘Was it to me you were bringing sacrifices and offerings

during those forty years in the wilderness, Israel?

43 No, you carried your pagan gods—the shrine of Molech,

the star of your god Rephan, and the images you made to worship them.

So I will send you into exile as far away as Babylon.’

This is a long passage to reflect on today, so we’ll make today’s reflection a little shorter so you don’t have too much to chew on.

To the Israelites, Moses wasn’t just another hero of the faith; he was the hero. Moses stood up to Pharaoh, led the Israelites out of Egypt, parted the Red Sea, gave them the law, and took them to the Promised Land. Moses was actually all that and a bag of chips.

At least, those’ the parts of the story they liked to brag about. We tend to do that as humans; when we look up to someone, we tend to keep elevating them to the point where they’re more myth than reality.

Let's remember the parts of the story that made Moses human. Moses was raised a prince of Egypt and thought he'd be the answer to his people's prayers when it didn't seem like God was listening. When that didn't work, Moses hid in the desert for 40 years, hoping to be forgotten. God didn't forget, and he called him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses' response? He was scared to death and begged God to choose someone else.

Moses' faith journey wasn't unlike ours. He had high highs, and low lows, but here's the amazing part; God still used him to do more than he could have ever imagined.

But God didn't stop with Moses. In fact, Stephen tells us in this passage for the first glimmer of connecting to the Jesus story when he said, "Moses himself told the people of Israel, 'God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among your own people.'"

Who was this other prophet? Had he come yet, or are we still waiting for him? We're about to find out.

Questions:

1. Who is one of the heroes in your faith story and what was/is it about them that made such an impact in your life?
2. Who is a character in Scripture that you identify with, and what about their journey gives you encourage for yours?
3. Have you ever had a moment where you felt like a failure, or maybe you just felt like you messed up, but then you found out that God used that

moment to bless someone else? What was that experience like for you and your faith journey?

DAY 5

THE RISK OF STANDING UP FOR WHAT YOU BELIEVE IN

Acts 7:44 “Our ancestors carried the Tabernacle with them through the wilderness. It was constructed according to the plan God had shown to Moses.

45 Years later, when Joshua led our ancestors in battle against the nations that God drove out of this land, the Tabernacle was taken with them into their new territory. And it stayed there until the time of King David.

46 “David found favor with God and asked for the privilege of building a permanent Temple for the God of Jacob. **47** But it was Solomon who actually built it.

48 However, the Most High doesn’t live in temples made by human hands. As the prophet says,

49 ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Could you build me a temple as good as that?’ asks the Lord. ‘Could you build me such a resting place? **50** Didn’t my hands make both heaven and earth?’

51 “You stubborn people! You are heathen at heart and deaf to the truth. Must you forever resist the Holy Spirit? That’s what your ancestors did, and so do you!

52 Name one prophet your ancestors didn’t

persecute! They even killed the ones who predicted the coming of the Righteous One—the Messiah whom you betrayed and murdered. **53** You deliberately disobeyed God’s law, even though you received it from the hands of angels.”

Now, Stephen is hitting the home stretch of his sermon. Today, we’d say he’s “landing the plane” or “bringing it home.” But this is where the story turns because up till now, the Jews listening would have agreed with almost everything Stephen has said. In his final words, however, Stephen shares some truths that are too hard for them to hear.

Again, since they brought up accusations concerning the tabernacle, Stephen makes sure the story he tells includes the tabernacle.

After mentioning other heroes of the faith, David and Solomon, Stephen talks about the temple of God. To the Jew, the temple represented God’s presence with them. Again, so far so good, until verse 51.

Not only does Stephen call them stubborn or stiff-necked, but the next word he uses in Greek is the word *aperitmetos*, which means uncircumcised. These are VERY strong words for Stephen. If they weren’t paying attention up to this point, they were now. To call a Jew uncircumcised was probably one of the worst insults you could share, for they were children of Abraham, to whom God gave the covenant of circumcision.

But Stephen wasn’t saying this word to reference literal circumcision, he used it to say they were rejecting God by rejecting the Holy Spirit. After all,

just like they persecuted and killed the prophets of old, they did the same to Jesus, the Son of God.

Stephen wasn't a dummy. He knew what he was saying and how hard it would be for them to hear. But he wasn't trying to win a popularity contest; he was trying to wake them up to who Jesus actually is. He wasn't out to destroy them but to save them, and he was willing to risk his life to do so. Sound like anyone else we know?

Please remember, Stephen wasn't trying to prove them wrong and himself right so he could be in the winner's circle. He wasn't angry and lashing out. He was trying to save, and we know that even though he was powerful and passionate, he was also a man of grace, full of the Holy Spirit.

As we stand up for what we believe in, we will also be able to do so with grace, full of the Holy Spirit. We serve a God of love, who, yes, at times, had to rebuke the Pharisees and teachers of the law by calling them a brood of vipers, but he also wept over them. Remember, Jesus didn't come into the world to condemn it but to save it. So when we stand up for what we believe in, let us remember the nature of the One we're standing up for and do our best to imitate His heart for all people.

Questions:

1. Can you remember a time when you felt like your beliefs were being attacked? How did you react?
2. Some of us are very passionate people when it comes to sharing our beliefs. How can we

remember to keep the Spirit of Jesus at all times,
even when we feel attacked?

3. What do you believe in enough to risk your life for?

DAY 6

THE RISK OF STANDING UP FOR WHAT YOU BELIEVE IN

Acts 7:54 The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen's accusation, and they shook their fists at him in rage. **55** But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God's right hand. **56** And he told them, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's right hand!"

57 Then they put their hands over their ears and began shouting. They rushed at him **58** and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. His accusers took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul.

59 As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." **60** He fell to his knees, shouting, "Lord, don't charge them with this sin!" And with that, he died.

8:1 Saul was one of the witnesses, and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen. A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the

apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria. **2** *(Some devout men came and buried Stephen with great mourning.)* **3** But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison.

The Jewish leaders continued to deny the evidence in front of them. They refused to listen (they even covered their ears) and believe in Jesus despite the miracles he performed and the prophecies he fulfilled, and they are doing it again here.

When you and I stop listening, we're in trouble. When we feel as if we've got all the answers to life's questions, when we've got our doctrinal statements sealed up nice and tight, then we're no longer open to what else the Holy Spirit may have to teach us. So I pray that we won't be those people with eyes to see but cannot see or ears to hear but can't hear.

There is something else to take note of in this powerful passage. Verse 55 says that Stephen saw Jesus "*standing in the place of honor at God's right hand.*" It can be easy to miss this important detail. In other places in Scripture, the Son of Man is seated, not standing, next to the throne. So why the difference here? Why is Jesus standing?

Many scholars have attempted to answer this question, but the most likely response is that Jesus is standing here specifically for Stephen. As Stephen has been standing for Christ, confessing Jesus, now at the end of his life, Jesus is standing for Stephen, confessing His support of Him. It's a beautiful picture

of a Savior who stood for us first, stands by us now, and continues to stand for us next to the Father, cheering us on as our lives point to Him.

I'm also reminded in this passage that though the Jewish leaders thought they were putting an end to the spread of the gospel, they actually enabled it to go even further, to Judea and Samaria and beyond.

I can't help but go back to Genesis again, to the words spoken by Joseph after he revealed his identity to his brothers. *"You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people."*
Genesis 50:20 NLT

Instead of silencing the followers of Jesus, they enabled the gospel to spread even further than it had to date. And yes, there was even someone in the crowd that day that this event may have impacted more than we know. Someone who would soon confront this Jesus message in a way he could never have imagined.

So rest assured, Stephen's risk was not wasted. His death planted seeds that would continue to propel the gospel to the ends of the earth. Thank God!

Questions:

1. Think briefly about what it would feel like to see Jesus standing next to the Father, clapping for you. How does that make you feel? What does it make you think about?

2. What parallels do you see between how Jesus died and how Stephen died?
3. Has there been anything you can point to in your life that may have been intended to harm, but good actually came out of it?

DAY 7

SMALL GROUP STUDY GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with or with your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN QUESTIONS

As we begin the journey of exploring the risks we're willing to take for the gospel of Jesus Christ, what would you consider as some of the biggest risks you've taken in life, and feel free to share some fun ones and some more serious ones with the group.

HEAD

1. Read Acts 6:8-15, and share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts concerning the reading of the passage.
2. How do you picture someone like Stephen, who is full of both God's grace and His power? What do you think he was like? How did he hold those two qualities so well?
3. Why do you think the other Jewish men were ok with lying about Stephen?

4. How was Stephen able to not react in anger to these false accusations, but instead try to reason with the other Jews?
5. What a contrast between Stephen's face, and what I imagine the face of the Jewish leaders in this moment.
6. Read Acts 7:44-8:3, and share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts concerning the reading of the passage.
7. Scholars have different thoughts, why do you think Jesus was standing instead of sitting next to God?
8. Saul was standing there, watching the stoning take place. Do you think this moment stuck with him after the fact? If so, in what way?

HEART

1. Do you think that Stephen started this speech knowing what the outcome could be? In other words, do you think he knew the full risk he was taking in this moment?
2. The Jewish men stopped listening and just lashed out at that which was different from what they believed. What kinds of things happen to us when we stop listening to others?
3. What practices could you and I adopt in our lives to help us maintain a level head and remain gracious even when attacked?
4. Are there things you believe that you'd be willing to risk your life for?

HANDS

Make a list of the things that are a part of your faith that you know you'd be willing to stand up for. Feel free to list things you still have questions about concerning your faith; maybe you'd like to be more sure, but you're just not there yet. Think of someone you can share both lists with, and maybe even talk about your beliefs and what matters most.

LIVING WORDS FOR YOUR WEEK

"But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,"

1 Peter 3:15 NIV

DAY 8

THE RISK OF TAKING A NEW PATH

Acts 9:1 Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers. So he went to the high priest. **2** He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains.

We already know Saul's pedigree, as we studied some of it in our last series from Philipians:

"...Indeed, if others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more! I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault."
Philipians 3:4-6 NLT

I'm sure many, including the young Saul, considered him the GOAT (greatest of all time) of the Torah. Not

only was he all these things, he was taught by one of their day's most respected and revered teachers, Gamaliel. Saul was so sure his way was the right way he was willing to persecute, even kill, those who disagreed with him.

The picture of Saul here starkly contrasts that of Stephen from the previous chapter. Whereas Stephen is gracious and powerful, with the face of an angel, Saul is uttering threats and eager to kill. Reminds me of something a teacher once said, *"...by their fruit, that is, by the way they act...A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit."* Matthew 7:16a, 18 NLT

From the perspective of the gospel, Saul was bad fruit, and left a wake of destruction wherever he went. But to be fair, Saul did so because he was deeply convinced that his way was the right way, and he was willing to risk his life to protect it.

But what if he was wrong? What if his way wasn't the Way at all? What if Saul could become just as passionate for a different cause, one driven by love instead of fear? Man, wouldn't that be something?

Questions:

1. Have you ever done something based on the belief that you were 100% right, only to find out later that you were not 100% right? What happened?
2. How do you think Saul was able to justify breaking the law (for example, do not murder) to protect his cause?

3. Knowing what happens to Saul, can you see God's sense of humor in choosing the most unlikely person to do the most unlikely of things? Has he ever asked you to do something you were sure you could not or that He had chosen wrong?

DAY 9

THE RISK OF TAKING A NEW PATH

Acts 9:3 As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. **4** He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?”

5 “Who are you, lord?” Saul asked.

And the voice replied, “I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! **6** Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

7 The men with Saul stood speechless, for they heard the sound of someone’s voice but saw no one! **8** Saul picked himself up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes he was blind. So his companions led him by the hand to Damascus. **9** He remained there blind for three days and did not eat or drink.

This is a story I have thought so much about over the years. I have so often wondered what Saul thought about those three days he was blind. But before we get to that, let’s look at the passage from the beginning.

At the start of the story, we know Saul is still charging off to Damascus to arrest and potentially kill men and women who claim to follow the Way (i.e., Jesus the Messiah, and their resurrected Lord). We know his disposition at the start of this chapter is one of intense focus with a side of anger and/or rage. He believed so much in what he was doing that nothing and no one was going to stop him.

Until...

We don't know exactly how it all happened, but we do know this story became significant enough to the early church and to Luke that he shared it three different times. We know Saul saw a light and heard a voice, a voice that those with him could hear but not see the source. Saul, on the other hand, could see someone, though his eyes probably struggled to focus on the light around him.

Unable to recognize the form, Saul asked who it was and used a term of reverence, "lord." It is not a capital "L" Lord, but a lowercase. He didn't know who he was talking to yet, but he was about to find out.

It's such a short interchange, but it was enough to knock Saul off his high horse, metaphorically speaking (he was probably more likely to ride a donkey at this time over a horse). There must have been something more to this experience that we don't fully understand for it to affect Saul so dramatically so quickly. Whatever the case, Saul would have the next three days in darkness to consider it.

So, what did Saul think about during this time? Maybe he thought about how convinced he had been that Jesus of Nazareth was dead, and yet there he was, standing before him. Maybe he thought that if Jesus had risen, if that story was true, then there were other things he had gotten wrong about Jesus. Those three days in darkness were spent with the Holy Spirit, helping Saul connect the dots.

Whatever it was, Saul would never be the same again, and the rest of the church over the last 2,000 years said in unison, AMEN!

Questions:

1. Have you ever been confronted by Jesus?
2. Is there something in your life that you used to believe, but now you believe something different?
3. Have you given your life over to Jesus and His way? If not, and you're feeling that stirring, please, tell a pastor. If you have, take some time to think about when you gave your life to Christ and what was meaningful about that experience to you.

DAY 10

THE RISK OF TAKING A NEW PATH

Acts 9:10 Now there was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, calling, “Ananias!”

“Yes, Lord!” he replied.

11 The Lord said, “Go over to Straight Street, to the house of Judas. When you get there, ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying to me right now. **12** I have shown him a vision of a man named Ananias coming in and laying hands on him so he can see again.”

13 “But Lord,” exclaimed Ananias, “I’ve heard many people talk about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem! **14** And he is authorized by the leading priests to arrest everyone who calls upon your name.”

15 But the Lord said, “Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. **16** And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name’s sake.”

This passage offers us another classic look at God calling someone to do something and they respond by saying, “Me? Do what? You’ve got to be joking!”

Plenty of other greats in Scripture had this same response. Abraham and Sarah were too old, Moses was too scared, David was too small, Jeremiah was too young, Mary was too virgin, Peter was too obnoxious, and Saul? Well, he was too much of a murderer. But through all these stories, we’re shown time and time again that God seems to know what He’s doing. Abraham and Sarah become parents, Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt, David beats Goliath, Jeremiah becomes the prophet to Israel, Mary gives birth to the Son of God, Peter becomes the rock upon which Christ will build his church and Saul? Well, he becomes the first missionary to the gospel of Jesus Christ and is responsible for most of the New Testament.

All Ananias had to do was trust that God knew what He was doing. No, it didn’t make any sense to Ananias, but God still asked him to trust, move, and go to one of the most dangerous men of this early movement and help him see Jesus.

That’s all anyone is asked to do; we’re asked to help other people see Jesus more clearly. There are times when that’s scary, times when we may not agree based on what we know, but always times when we’re asked to trust God.

And in case you didn’t realize it, the rest of us can be thankful that Ananias chose to trust God.

Questions:

1. Have you ever been asked to do something you were sure you couldn't do? How did you respond?
2. Have you ever had someone in your life that you thought was the last person God would use to do anything, that God did use to do something?
3. What in your life do you need to trust God with today?

DAY 11

THE RISK OF TAKING A NEW PATH

Acts 9:17 So Ananias went and found Saul. He laid his hands on him and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” **18** Instantly something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized. **19** Afterward he ate some food and regained his strength. Saul stayed with the believers in Damascus for a few days.

We’ve used this story of Saul’s conversion as a metric for our stories. Some might even say, “Well, yes, I became a follower of Jesus, but it wasn’t a Damascus Road-type experience.” Sometimes, we can glorify certain types of conversions while downplaying others.

For example, we are wowed by the person who was a gang-member and a self-proclaimed Satanist, who then had an encounter with Christ and now travels the country speaking to youth groups about how Jesus saved his life. We sometimes celebrate those stories while at the same time feeling bad about the fact that our own story is less dramatic. In fact, if we were born into a denomination, grew up going to

church, and still do, we sometimes say we don't really have a testimony to share. However, I don't think this could be further from the truth. I think both stories are powerful, and both stories should be celebrated. The important part of any of our testimonies is, have you met the risen Lord?

And sure, maybe you met him in a prison cell after being arrested for a DUI, or maybe you met him in a pew on a Saturday morning where you attended church every week, but one day, there he was, Jesus. Whatever your story, remember, it's your story, and it matters to God.

Obviously, Saul's experience was dramatic. He was so sure of one thing, one version of the story, that he was willing to kill for it. Then he met the resurrected Jesus and became sure of something else, another version of the story, and for that, he was willing to be killed.

Whatever your story is, what matters is that you come to meet the risen Lord, that you look into His eyes, and that you see Him staring back at you with a love so deep and so profound that you can't imagine living without it. When you have that conversion experience, you'll never return to who you were before. And that, my friends, is a risk worth taking.

Questions:

- 1.** What's your testimony, that day or season, when you first came to meet Jesus?
- 2.** Do you believe that Jesus loves you, died for you, and can't wait to return to be with you forever?

3. If so, what are you willing to risk to make Him the most important thing in your life?

DAY 12

THE RISK OF TAKING A NEW PATH

Acts 9:19b Saul stayed with the believers in Damascus for a few days. **20** And immediately he began preaching about Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is indeed the Son of God!”

21 All who heard him were amazed. “Isn’t this the same man who caused such devastation among Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem?” they asked. “And didn’t he come here to arrest them and take them in chains to the leading priests?”

I like to imagine what it would have been like to be among the crowd of Jesus’ followers, listening to Saul that day. They all had heard the horror stories of what he had done to followers of Jesus, and they knew how he sided with the Jewish leaders who had Jesus killed. But now, he’s standing before them, preaching convincingly that Jesus is the Son of God. He’s telling them how wrong he was, likely how sorry he is for the pain he caused, and how important it is for us all to come to know Jesus as their Lord.

If I were them, I’d be super skeptical! Was he trying to trick them? Get them to let down their guard so he could wipe them out? Or was he serious? I mean, up

to this point, his words were just that, words. He hadn't been "converted" long enough to have much fruit to back up those words. So likely, there were those in the crowd that day that I questioned his conversion, this new path he claims to have chosen.

We still do this to people today. We wonder if the person that betrayed us last year, who is now standing in the waters of baptism with the pastor if they've really changed. Or we question the murderer on death row who now claims to have accepted Jesus and received His forgiveness.

But in this story, I'm struck by how quick some of those Jesus followers were to accept Saul's conversion, even if they did so at an arm's length for a time. I'm sure Ananias' testimony helped, as did Saul's description of what happened and how he claims to have seen the resurrected Jesus. Maybe he even told them what he looked like. Additionally, something had changed for Saul. He wasn't so full of anger and rage. He seemed to have a peace and a calm that almost seemed other worldly. Between his change in demeanor and his change in his theological position, many struggled to make sense of it all.

In verse 21, it says that all who heard Saul were amazed. The Greek word for amazed is *existemai*. It means to stand beside oneself, to be dumbfounded, and to struggle to explain or account for something.

To the worldly observer or the Jew closed off to Jesus, none of this made any sense. However, to the believer in Jesus Christ, to the crowd that had received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, to

those that had seen miracle after miracle, they may not have fully understood it, but they knew from whence the change came. The only thing that made sense is that Saul met Jesus on the road to Damascus and was forever changed.

I doubt Saul knew in those first days of his conversion exactly how his life would change: how he would lose his seat in the Sanhedrin, how he'd likely lose family and friends, or how, in the coming years, he would suffer much for the gospel of Jesus Christ. But Saul would soon discover that there were risks in taking a new path for choosing to believe in something different. Not everyone, including friends, family, and former colleagues, would understand. At the same time, when you know you've found the most important thing in life, there's nothing you won't give to hold onto it. And when that one thing is Jesus, you realize there's also nothing you won't do to share Him with others.

Questions:

1. Have you ever doubted someone else's conversion? If so, who and why?
2. Have you ever had an encounter with God that left you amazed, dumbfounded, and unable to explain?
3. Has someone in your life struggled to support you and your beliefs? What's that been like for you?

DAY 13

THE RISK OF TAKING A NEW PATH

Acts 9:23 After a while some of the Jews plotted together to kill him. **24** They were watching for him day and night at the city gate so they could murder him, but Saul was told about their plot. **25** So during the night, some of the other believers lowered him in a large basket through an opening in the city wall.

26 When Saul arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to meet with the believers, but they were all afraid of him. They did not believe he had truly become a believer!

27 Then Barnabas brought him to the apostles and told them how Saul had seen the Lord on the way to Damascus and how the Lord had spoken to Saul. He also told them that Saul had preached boldly in the name of Jesus in Damascus.

28 So Saul stayed with the apostles and went all around Jerusalem with them, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. **29** He debated with some Greek-speaking Jews, but they tried to murder him.

30 When the believers heard about this, they took

him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus, his hometown.

What a turn of events! The one who was seeking to kill the followers of Jesus is now being sought after by some of the same Jews he was working with just days before, to be killed.

These were confusing times for sure; confusing for Saul, who has had his whole world turned upside down in a matter of three days; confusing for his former colleagues, teachers, and companions who saw him as their strongest ally in the cause against the Jesus followers; confusing for the followers of Jesus who he had been pursuing to kill.

What may have been the hardest for Saul was the fear from the followers of Jesus. He had chosen to give up his past life for this new life, this new path, and now some of the others who chose that same path were afraid of him.

Thank goodness for Barnabas. We'll talk more about him in a couple of weeks, but for now know that we all need a Barnabas who is willing to stick their neck out for us.

Even still, it was too early in Saul's conversion story for him to be a full-fledged apostle (i.e., one sent). There were too many questions and too many doubts. Saul needed some time to mature in his faith. It didn't mean God wouldn't use him; it just meant he needed some time at the feet of Jesus so that his witness would come not from a moment but from a life of devotion.

There are times when you and I need to spend more time at the feet of Jesus, too. It doesn't mean Jesus won't use us along the way; it just means that we need to make sure that for all the things we're doing for Jesus, we are also doing them with Jesus. We need that day in, day out, walk with Him to feed our souls so that we can live out of the overflow of our hearts.

Know that God will never miss an opportunity to use what we're willing to give to be a blessing to others, but sometimes, we need to receive God's blessing to be blessed and share it with others.

Questions:

1. What are some of the ways you spend time with Jesus that are most meaningful to you?
2. Is there a special place to you in your faith? Like Saul's Damascus experience, is there a place you go that helps you connect with your story?
3. Have others ever doubted your faith journey, or persecuted you in any way, for what you believe?

DAY 14

SMALL GROUP STUDY GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with or with your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN QUESTIONS

If you've given your life over to Jesus and you're willing to share, tell a short version of your testimony; when and why did you give your life to Jesus. If you haven't done that yet, share about something that you've learned about Jesus that you are particularly fond of.

HEAD

1. Read together Acts 9:1-30, and share any wisdom, insights, and thoughts that come from the reading of the Scripture.
2. How do you think Saul could justified killing others for what he believed? Do we see this same thing happen today and if so, where? How?
3. What do you think that encounter with Christ was like for Saul? What emotions did he experience?

Do you think at any point he questioned whether or not it was real?

4. When you think of Saul's days of being blind, what do you think might have gone through his head?
5. Ananias had heard all the horror stories about Saul and what he was doing to the followers of the Way. Do you think he stopped being scared to go to Saul after Jesus told him what to do?
6. Do you think it was a good idea for Saul to immediately begin preaching Jesus? Explain your answer.
7. Saul ends up going away and we don't hear from him again for 11 years. Why might these 11 years been an important time, and what might these years given Saul the opportunity to do?

HEART

1. How can you and I avoid hurting other people who think differently than us, for the things we believe strongly in?
2. If you had three days to ask God questions, or listen for His voice, what would you ask or what would you do with your time?
3. Has God ever asked you to do something that scared you to death, or at least you were convinced you couldn't or shouldn't, do? If so, what was it and what happened?
4. Can you think of a time that you were less mature in the faith? What's different in you between then and now?

5. Jesus spent roughly 30 years before he began his public ministry, Paul spent 11. Why is this time important and how is it so different from our world today? What lessons can we learn from this difference?

HANDS

Spend some time thinking back to your conversion experience, and your journey with Christ. Journal about what you're thankful for. Then, take time to think about, and pray over, someone you know who is young in the faith. What could you do for them this week that might encourage them in their journey, or what advice or tools could you share to help them keep growing?

LIVING WORDS FOR YOUR WEEK

"Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ"
Philippians 3:8 NLT

DAY 15

THE RISK OF STEPPING OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONES

Acts 10:1 In Caesarea there lived a Roman army officer named Cornelius, who was a captain of the Italian Regiment. **2** He was a devout, God-fearing man, as was everyone in his household. He gave generously to the poor and prayed regularly to God. **3** One afternoon about three o'clock, he had a vision in which he saw an angel of God coming toward him. "Cornelius!" the angel said.

4 Cornelius stared at him in terror. "What is it, sir?" he asked the angel.

And the angel replied, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have been received by God as an offering! **5** Now send some men to Joppa, and summon a man named Simon Peter.

6 He is staying with Simon, a tanner who lives near the seashore."

7 As soon as the angel was gone, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier, one of his personal attendants. **8** He told them what had happened and sent them off to Joppa.

This is such an amazing story, for it shows the gospel beginning to spread beyond the walls of Jerusalem. As we stated before, this was always Jesus' plan. Remember how he specifically went through Samaria to speak to the woman at the well and traveled to the land of the Gerasenes, Gentile territory, to heal the demon-possessed man? How did he heal the Centurion's servant and praise him for his great faith? Yes, the gospel started with the Jews but was always meant to go global.

Here, we're told Cornelius was a Roman officer. Remember that a Gentile was anyone who was not a Jew, but there were different "kinds" of Gentiles. For example, there were Gentiles who followed the cult of Rome and their many gods, but there were also Gentiles who believed in Yahweh, but they weren't born Jewish. Either way, cultures were about to mix, and as we continued to read the New Testament, the clash of cultures seemed difficult for the Jews. They seemed to worry that if they let in too many Gentiles, they may lose their identity and story.

But here, we meet a devout, God-fearing man who is making a difference of the kingdom of God. However, for the Jews, even the disciples, this shift in focus and the growing of God's table of fellowship would push and challenge them to step out of their comfort zones and what they had always known. This is where we'll find Peter, and it's fitting that Peter was involved in Cornelius' story. He should have already been used to being called out of his comfort zone by Jesus. Remember that story of walking on water? Well, we'll see Peter challenged again in the coming verses.

Questions:

- 1.** When and how have you been asked to step out of your comfort zones for your faith?
- 2.** Do you think it's possible to grow your table of fellowship, while still holding on to your culture, story, and identity?
- 3.** Have you ever had a spiritual encounter that you felt was supernatural (i.e. no other explanation)? What happened?

DAY 16

THE RISK OF STEPPING OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONES

Acts 10: 9 The next day as Cornelius’s messengers were nearing the town, Peter went up on the flat roof to pray. It was about noon, **10** and he was hungry. But while a meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. **11** He saw the sky open, and something like a large sheet was let down by its four corners. **12** In the sheet were all sorts of animals, reptiles, and birds. **13** Then a voice said to him, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat them.”

14 “No, Lord,” Peter declared. “I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure and unclean.”

15 But the voice spoke again: “Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean.” **16** The same vision was repeated three times. Then the sheet was suddenly pulled up to heaven.

17 Peter was very perplexed. What could the vision mean?

I’ll admit it; I love that today’s passage ends where it does. Why? Because in my experience, there are plenty of times when we have to sit with a mystery for a time. Maybe that mystery involved our faith; maybe

it was a part of our educational journey, or maybe it was coming to understand a friend or a spouse. Mystery is just a part of life; despite our best efforts, we don't always have the answers.

It's also interesting to note the timing of this experience. God was preparing Peter for something that hadn't happened yet. He was stirring something in his soul so that when the time came, Peter would be more open to what God was trying to teach and do through him. God always knows what we need before we do.

That said, it was a strange experience. The word in v 10 translated "trance" ekstasis, from where we get our word, ecstasy. For Peter, it was like a vision, but something from God that was very confusing and dare I say difficult.

It was a difficult vision to receive because, for Peter's entire life, there were things you did and things you didn't do. Eating was perhaps the most basic of those things, yet here, for the first time in his life, he was being told not to worry about it. He was challenged to think differently from what he had always believed, which is hard for us.

Makes me think of two passages. One comes from Isaiah..."For I am about to do something new..." Isaiah 43:19 NLT. God continually meets us where we are, moving us forward to a clearer understanding of Him. Sometimes, those moves are slow and happen over time, in other instances, it's a jarring shift that unsettles us for a time. The latter is what was happening to Peter in this story.

The other passage was one we studied in our last series, where Paul said to the Philippians, “I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done.” Philippians 3:7 NLT. Paul once thought, but now he believes something different. In the passage, he once thought the law was the most important thing, then he met Jesus and considered everything worthless compared to knowing Christ. This statement, “I once thought, but now I believe...” should be a familiar one in the life of a disciple. In the faith tradition of the Seventh-day Adventist church, we refer to this as present truth. When we recognize that truth is a person and not a position, then you must accept that truth is on the move as we follow Christ. This can be unsettling. It was for Peter.

But God wasn't going to leave Peter to figure this all out. He was going to walk him through this new thing, help him see that though he once thought, he can now believe, and even though it would take him out of his comfort zone, it would open the door for more and more people to come to know Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

Questions:

1. What is something you used to be so convinced you now think differently about?
2. Can you remember a time, maybe you're in the middle of it now, when God was trying to teach you something, but for a time, the answers remained unclear?
3. Do you notice that the older you get, the more comfortable you seem with questions that don't have answers? Why is that, you think?

DAY 17

THE RISK OF STEPPING OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONES

Acts 10:17b Just then the men sent by Cornelius found Simon's house. Standing outside the gate, **18** they asked if a man named Simon Peter was staying there.

19 Meanwhile, as Peter was puzzling over the vision, the Holy Spirit said to him, "Three men have come looking for you. **20** Get up, go downstairs, and go with them without hesitation. Don't worry, for I have sent them."

21 So Peter went down and said, "I'm the man you are looking for. Why have you come?"

22 They said, "We were sent by Cornelius, a Roman officer. He is a devout and God-fearing man, well respected by all the Jews. A holy angel instructed him to summon you to his house so that he can hear your message." **23** So Peter invited the men to stay for the night. The next day he went with them, accompanied by some of the brothers from Joppa.

24 They arrived in Caesarea the following day. Cornelius was waiting for them and had called together his relatives and close friends. **25** As Peter

entered his home, Cornelius fell at his feet and worshiped him. **26** But Peter pulled him up and said, “Stand up! I’m a human being just like you!” **27** So they talked together and went inside, where many others were assembled.

28 Peter told them, “You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you. But God has shown me that I should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean. **29** So I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. Now tell me why you sent for me.”

30 Cornelius replied, “Four days ago I was praying in my house about this same time, three o’clock in the afternoon. Suddenly, a man in dazzling clothes was standing in front of me. **31** He told me, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your gifts to the poor have been noticed by God! **32** Now send messengers to Joppa, and summon a man named Simon Peter. He is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner who lives near the seashore.’ **33** So I sent for you at once, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here, waiting before God to hear the message the Lord has given you.”

As I read this story a few times before writing, I kept being drawn to one statement. When Cornelius’ men arrive at Peter’s house, the Holy Spirit tells Peter, “Get up, go downstairs, and go with them without hesitation” (v 20). This was the Spirit helping Peter connect the dots between his vision and what was about to happen.

Peter eludes to this later in the story when he tells them, men, “You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you. But God has shown me that I should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean.” (v 28). You see, Jews and Gentiles didn’t cross those cultural boundaries, especially into one another’s homes. The Holy Spirit wanted Peter not only to go with the men but also not to hesitate. Hesitating may have immediately put up a wall between the men and Peter because that’s what they would have expected from a Jew: to be treated as less than human. So when Peter goes willingly, immediately, their hearts remain open for the Spirit to continue to work.

This is important in our work with others, especially as we step out of our comfort zones. As Peter realized, no one is impure or unclean, even those different from him, and as he says in the next verse for tomorrow, God shows no favoritism.

If you know Peter’s story, you know he didn’t always get this right. There was a time when he acted differently around the Gentiles than he did around the Jews, but God was working on his heart to show him how special all people are to him. It took some time.

As we’ll find as we read the rest of the New Testament, as the Gentile Christian population grew, the Jews got more and more jealous, and they feared that their unique identity would get lost. As a result, some chose to persecute the Gentile Christians instead of embracing them as fellow children of God. Why? Because growing is hard, stepping out of our

comfort zones is hard. In both, we risk change, but in the kingdom of God, it's the kind of change that helps shape and mold us into the people God needs us to be.

One last note from today's reading that I think is important to remember. When Peter entered Cornelius' home, Cornelius fell at his feet and worshipped him. One can understand why. Peter had walked with Jesus, performed miracles, and received the Holy Spirit. Peter could have received this honorable act, but he knew his place. He knew that Jesus made him special, and we all have access to Jesus.

So let us never forget the source of the good that lives in us. Jesus is always worshipped in our praise, and though we can receive a compliment from someone who thinks we did a good job representing him, may we also remember the source of our power—Jesus in us, Jesus through us, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus! Amen!

Questions:

- 1.** For Peter, Cornelius may have seemed like an unlikely source for God to speak to and through. Has God ever spoken to you through an unlikely source? Explain.
- 2.** How important do you think common hospitality is in keeping the door open to share Christ with someone?
- 3.** What helps you remember the source of your joy, your hope, your peace, and your power?

DAY 18

THE RISK OF STEPPING OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONES

Acts 10:34 Then Peter replied, “I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism. **35** In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right. **36** This is the message of Good News for the people of Israel—that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. **37** You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee, after John began preaching his message of baptism. **38** And you know that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. Then Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

39 “And we apostles are witnesses of all he did throughout Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a cross, **40** but God raised him to life on the third day. Then God allowed him to appear, **41** not to the general public, but to us whom God had chosen in advance to be his witnesses. We were those who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. **42** And he ordered us to preach everywhere and to testify that Jesus is the one appointed by God to be the judge of all—the living and the dead. **43** He is the one all the prophets

testified about, saying that everyone who believes in him will have their sins forgiven through his name.”

What a powerful line that begins our reflection for today; “God shows no favoritism.” Powerful, but hard for us to remember and put into practice. Why? Because real community is hard. Loving those that are different than us can be a challenge, especially when they believe differently, act differently, and come from different backgrounds and experiences.

However, as Peter was shown with Jesus and started to put into practice here, all are important to God, and all were given the gospel to receive and share. He even says that Jesus “ordered” them “to preach everywhere and to testify that Jesus is the one appointed by God to be the judge of all.” so much language of inclusivity.

Of course, Peter was still learning what this really meant. Jesus taught them about the love of God for all of His creation, He backed up His teachings with the way He lived His life, and He commissioned them to “go into all nations,” but to embody and live this truth would take the disciples some time. It was out of their comfort zones and how they had lived their lives prior to Jesus.

But the Spirit continued to help Peter connect the dots between Jesus’ life and teachings and Peter’s ministry. Peter’s vision and encounter with Cornelius and his family put him in a situation to follow the example of his Rabbi.

This is one of the reasons that Crosswalk seeks to be a community of belonging for ALL people; we’re simply

trying to follow the teaching and example of our Rabbi. But admittedly, truly putting this into practice can be difficult. It means that when we gather on any given Saturday, we could have people sitting next to us who vote differently than we do, people who dress dramatically differently than we do, people who believe differently about God than we do, or who don't believe in God at all. This is where the call to LOVEWELL can be so challenging. It's easier to love those like us, but where the gospel rubber hits the road of our lives is the call to love all others as Jesus does.

Jesus once said this: "**32** If you love only those who love you, why should you get credit for that? Even sinners love those who love them! **33** And if you do good only to those who do good to you, why should you get credit? Even sinners do that much!**34** And if you lend money only to those who can repay you, why should you get credit? Even sinners will lend to other sinners for a full return." **Luke 6:32-34 NLT**

So what did He tell us to do? "**35** Love your enemies! Do good to them. Lend to them without expecting to be repaid. Then your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High, for he is kind to those who are unthankful and wicked. **36** You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate." **Luke 6:35-36 NLT**

Our call then is to love the Gentile, not just the Jew; to love the Republican, the Democrat, and the Independent; to love the agnostic, the atheist, the Muslim, the Hindu; to love to inspire of our indifferences and sometimes because of them. Because it's our diversity that makes us stronger, and

it's our diversity that makes us more like the kind of community God wants with Him forever - "After this, I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb..."

Revelation 7:9 NLT

Questions:

1. What kind of people are hardest for you to love?
2. If God shows no favoritism, why does it sometimes seem like some are more "blessed" than others?
3. How do you think we can work each day at becoming more loving, even towards our enemies?

DAY 19

THE RISK OF STEPPING OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONES

Acts 10:44 Even as Peter was saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the message. **45** The Jewish believers who came with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, too. **46** For they heard them speaking in other tongues and praising God.

Then Peter asked, **47** “Can anyone object to their being baptized, now that they have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?” **48** So he gave orders for them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Afterward Cornelius asked him to stay with them for several days.

Just like on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is poured out again, but this time on Gentiles. There is no denying that the God of Israel is now the God of and for all, for He has come to those outside the tribe as much as He has come to those inside. Even the gift they received was the same. In Acts 2, one of the results of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit involved was speaking in tongues, which is mirrored again here with the Gentiles.

In v 45, it says that the Jewish believers were “amazed.” The word in the Greek is *existemi*, it means to be utterly astonished, beside oneself, and at a total loss to explain what was happening. The Jewish believers were being pushed so far out of their comfort zones, so far beyond their previously established beliefs and expectations, that they are at a loss for words.

What so fascinating in this story is that compared to what happened in Acts 2, is that Jews in the crowd that day who heard Peter’s message after he was filled with the Spirit were convicted of their sin. Their need for Jesus and when they asked him what they should do, Peter told them to repent, be baptized, and THEN they’d receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. But in this story, the Gentiles received the Holy Spirit first, then came the conversation on whether or not the Jews could baptize them. So God chose to welcome them into the family through the baptism of the Holy Spirit, then man would have to make theirs, whether or not they would “allow” them to be baptized by water.

I once sat in a board meeting where a vote was brought as to whether or not a particular person could be baptized, only to have the final vote, in this case, be a no. The claim was that the person in question couldn’t be baptized because of a “known” sin in their life that, in the opinion of the majority of the board, the person wasn’t either willing to let go of or hadn’t repented of, yet. (I was thankful that the board didn’t know about the sins I struggled with)

In the case of the person I’m thinking of, to my knowledge, the vote from the board hurt them

deeply. They had a desire to continue to pursue Jesus, and the way they felt, that desire had a door slammed in its face. They knew they weren't perfect; they knew they were a work in progress (read Philippians 1:6), but they also knew Jesus was their only answer. They were willing to trust in Jesus for their salvation and for Him to produce the fruit of the Spirit as they walked with Him, but the church board said no, not yet. I don't believe the board intended to hurt the person, but that's what happened as it made the person wonder if they'd ever be "good enough" to give their life to Jesus.

So, what did this person decide to do? They ended up leaving the humans (i.e., the church community) to try to follow Jesus on their own. They figured that if the humans wouldn't let them continue to pursue Jesus, they'd do it without them. The problem is that none of us were meant to journey after Jesus alone; we were created to follow Jesus alongside other fault-filled human beings.

It wasn't long after this that I moved away from this community, but I still pray for that person. I'm not sure if they've reconnected with another community or what the status of their faith is, but I hope they haven't given up and thrown the baby out with the bath water, so to speak.

In these moments, we'd do well to remember this story in Acts 10, and what happened when Peter went back and got criticized by the Jewish followers for entering the home of a Gentile and eating with them. Peter told them the story of his vision, of the encounter with Cornelius and his family, and of the

outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and said, “Who was I to stand in God’s way?”

Who indeed! Our job is to introduce people to Jesus, and let Jesus go to work in their lives, period. Now, that’s not a one and done experience, but a commitment to journey in life together as a community of faith. Their journey may look different than mine, but if we pursue Jesus together, then Jesus is going to continue to work on us until the day He returns.

So let us not stand in anyone’s way when they want to give their life to Jesus, even in the times that make us uncomfortable. Rather, let us celebrate and journey alongside of people as together we keep our eyes on Jesus.

Questions:

1. If you have been baptized, do you think you understood everything there is to understand about your need for Jesus and all that He is to you on that day, or did you keep growing in understanding of all those things even after that day?
2. Have you ever witnessed what seemed like someone standing in the way of God’s work before? If so, how did it make you feel and what did it make you want to do?
3. What are some ways that you and I can encourage one another on our journey with Jesus?

DAY 20

THE RISK OF STEPPING OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONES

Acts 11:1 Soon the news reached the apostles and other believers in Judea that the Gentiles had received the word of God. **2** But when Peter arrived back in Jerusalem, the Jewish believers criticized him. **3** “You entered the home of Gentiles and even ate with them!” they said.

4 Then Peter told them exactly what had happened. **5** “I was in the town of Joppa,” he said, “and while I was praying, I went into a trance and saw a vision. Something like a large sheet was let down by its four corners from the sky. And it came right down to me. **6** When I looked inside the sheet, I saw all sorts of tame and wild animals, reptiles, and birds. **7** And I heard a voice say, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat them.’

8 “‘No, Lord,’ I replied. ‘I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure or unclean.’

9 “But the voice from heaven spoke again: ‘Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean.’ **10** This happened three times before the sheet and all it contained was pulled back up to heaven.

11 “Just then three men who had been sent from Caesarea arrived at the house where we were staying.

12 The Holy Spirit told me to go with them and not to worry that they were Gentiles. These six brothers here accompanied me, and we soon entered the home of the man who had sent for us. **13** He told us how an angel had appeared to him in his home and had told him, ‘Send messengers to Joppa, and summon a man named Simon Peter. **14** He will tell you how you and everyone in your household can be saved!’

15 “As I began to speak,” Peter continued, “the Holy Spirit fell on them, just as he fell on us at the beginning. **16** Then I thought of the Lord’s words when he said, ‘John baptized with[e] water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ **17** And since God gave these Gentiles the same gift he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to stand in God’s way?”

18 When the others heard this, they stopped objecting and began praising God. They said, “We can see that God has also given the Gentiles the privilege of repenting of their sins and receiving eternal life.”

I absolutely love the turn of events in chapter 11. At the beginning of the chapter, it sounds like the Jews back in Jerusalem were going to deny the sharing of the gospel to the Gentiles. They had criticized Peter for entering the home of a Gentile and eating with them. But when they heard Peter’s story, they “stopped objecting and began praising God.” Oh how I wish this would always be our response, even when we don’t understand everything God is up to at the time.

Remember how the Jewish people were “amazed” in Acts 10 that the Holy Spirit was poured out onto the Gentiles? That means that they didn’t understand it, but in Acts 11, they chose to celebrate instead of continuing to criticize what they didn’t understand.

I gotta speak for myself here in saying that I so want to be a part of a church that errs on the side of celebrating instead of explaining everything away or trying to make everything and everyone fit into my box of understanding. I want to keep my heart open to all the ways God works and all the people God can choose to work through, even the ways and the people I would least expect. And when I don’t understand everything there is to understand, but I can tell that God is at work, then I want to be able to dance.

So, how can we tell if God is at work or not? Well, the clearest teachings were given, other than whether or not Jesus is celebrated and lifted up is the fruit of the Spirit. Is there more love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control in and through a person or a movement than there was without them? If the answer is yes, then I can celebrate that God continues to move and work even in mysterious ways. I can rejoice and be glad that God’s Spirit depends on my understanding.

I pray that today, you and I could be open to all the wonderful ways God may work in and through the people around us, even when we don’t understand it all. And I pray that when we see it, we can praise God.

Questions:

- 1.** When was the last time you witnessed God truly at work in your life and/or in the lives of the people around you?
- 2.** What was the last thing you celebrated in your own faith journey? How about in the journey of your faith community?
- 3.** Why do you think we sometimes find it easier to criticize rather than celebrate?

DAY 21

SMALL GROUP STUDY GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with or with your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN QUESTIONS

Have you ever traveled to a foreign country, or visited a place, where you felt so out of place? Share what that was like and what you did to address your discomfort?

HEAD

1. Read Acts 10:1-48 together, and share any thoughts, wisdom, insight, or impressions that come to you through the reading of the Word.
2. At this time in Acts 10, the gospel had not spread much farther than the Jews in Jerusalem, so as a reader of the text today, why should you be excited at God's Spirit working in places where God's messengers hadn't gone yet?
3. Peter grew up his whole life believing that eating things declared impure or unclean was a sin, but

now God was challenging that belief. What do you think that was like for Peter? What is that like for us when God challenges something that we've always thought to be true?

4. So why do you think the Spirit fell on the believers before they were baptized instead of after? What did this mean?
5. Read Acts 11:1-18 together, and share any thoughts, wisdom, insight, or impressions that come to you through the reading of the Word.
6. Why do you think that even the Jews who spent time with Jesus had a hard time with the gospel going to the Gentiles?
7. Have you ever seen another person, or a community, that in your opinion "stood in the way" of God's work? What happened and what was the response?

HEART

1. Have you ever had God speak to you through an unlikely source or in an unlikely way? If so, what happened and how did you respond?
2. Because the church is made up of humans, and humans are far from perfect, what are some of the "us" and "them" divisions that you see the church make when it comes to the "sinners" and the "saved"?
3. Do you think the church needs to stop objecting and start celebrating? If so, what are some things we could celebrate more and what does celebrating look like?

HANDS

Spend some time thinking of three things happening in your life, and/or the life of your church, that you can celebrate. Then, think of one or two ways you could tangibly celebrate each of those things. Finally, over the next two weeks, see if you can't begin those celebrations and see what it does for your own faith journey.

LIVING WORDS FOR YOUR WEEK

1 Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heaven!

2 Praise him for his mighty works; praise his unequalled greatness!

6 Let everything that breathes sing praises to the Lord! Praise the Lord!

Psalm 150: 1-2, 6, NLT

DAY 22

THE RISK OF INVESTING IN OTHERS

Acts 11:22 When the church at Jerusalem heard what had happened, they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

23 When he arrived and saw this evidence of God's blessing, he was filled with joy, and he encouraged the believers to stay true to the Lord. **24** Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and strong in faith. And many people were brought to the Lord.

25 Then Barnabas went on to Tarsus to look for Saul.

26 When he found him, he brought him back to Antioch. Both of them stayed there with the church for a full year, teaching large crowds of people. (It was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians.)

The church in Antioch began with Jewish believers in Christ from Jerusalem who were scattered following the persecution that came after the stoning of Stephen. But after some time, the Gentiles in Antioch began to hear and receive the message, and the community was growing so much that the leaders in Jerusalem got word and wanted to send help. So they sent someone they not only trusted, but who they had obviously been personally impacted by. Often, when Barnabas is mentioned in the book of

Acts, it is with positive adjectives such as son of encouragement, a good man, full of the Holy Spirit, and strong in faith. Barnabas was beloved, and according to the Jerusalem leaders (i.e., the apostles), he was the perfect person for the job.

I think it's fair to say that when Barnabas arrived in Antioch, he was blown away by what the Holy Spirit was doing in their midst. He may have even felt a little overwhelmed, so he decided he needed help caring for the believers there. But where he chose to go to help would likely have been seen as risky, maybe even a little ludicrous, especially by the Jewish believers in Antioch.

You see, Barnabas decided to go to Tarsus to look for a man named Saul. Yes, that Saul, the same one who had once led the persecution in Jerusalem that caused the Jewish believers there to flee to Antioch in the first place.

But it had been 11 years since Saul encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. 11 years since his life changed forever, and he chose to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. 11 years since he left Jerusalem to go back to his hometown, to process all that had happened, and to mature in the faith.

Barnabas and Saul had met before, however. In fact, it seems as if Barnabas was possibly the first person who believed Saul's testimony and that he had actually changed. In Acts 9, we're told that "Barnabas brought [Saul] to the apostles and told them how Saul had seen the Lord on the way to Damascus and how the Lord had spoken to Saul." (Acts 9:27, NLT)

So Barnabas saw something in Saul and stuck his neck out for him once before, and he does so again here, believing that God has great plans to use Saul for the growth of His kingdom. Barnabas was willing to risk his reputation to travel to Tarsus, 143 miles away from Antioch, track down Saul, and bring him in to help spread the gospel. For the Jews in Antioch, I'm sure Saul was the last person they would have chosen, but Barnabas was convicted and decided Saul was worth the risk.

There's always a risk whenever we choose to invest in someone else. Will the risk work? Will the person we're investing in be open and willing to learn, grow, and be humble enough to accept course correction? Will they stay the course or bail along the way?

But if the gospel is going to continue to spread, investing in others is part of our call, and the story of Barnabas and Saul is one of the best examples we can explore to see if it is worth the risk.

Questions:

- 1.** In your faith journey, who are the people who have invested in you, who made an impact in your life, were willing to take a risk to help you grow?
- 2.** Have you ever invested in another person, either professionally or spiritually? What was that journey like and how did it turn out?
- 3.** List out some of the risks you take when you invest in others.

DAY 23

THE RISK OF INVESTING IN OTHERS

Acts 13:1 Among the prophets and teachers of the church at Antioch of Syria were Barnabas, Simeon (called “the black man”), Lucius (from Cyrene), Manaen (the childhood companion of King Herod Antipas), and Saul. 2 One day as these men were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Appoint Barnabas and Saul for the special work to which I have called them.” 3 So after more fasting and prayer, the men laid their hands on them and sent them on their way.

Most scholars believe that Barnabas and Saul spent about a year with the believers in Antioch.

Affirmation - thanks to Barnabas, Saul is now accepted even by some of the people he had previously sought to persecute before his encounter with Jesus.

A changed life - sometimes you question, which is why it helps so much to have people like Barnabas who believe in you and encourage you.

Over the course of my life, I've had these types of encouragers. People who affirmed the call of God they

saw in me. People like my junior high maintenance man, who regularly told me he thought I'd be a youth pastor one day. Or my high school youth pastor, who was willing to invest in me, make me a leader, and even hire me for a couple of summers to work at the church and serve the youth. People like my second boss out of college who believed I was called for even greater things. And people like my colleagues at another university who knew what I was called to do even before I was.

Each of us has the incredible opportunity to be on the lookout for God's call and His work in the lives of those around us. A word of encouragement, a note of affirmation, can make a lifelong difference in the life of another. So let me encourage you to be on the lookout for how you can affirm God's presence and call in the lives of those around you, and then challenge you to take that risk and find ways to invest in them so that they might hear God's voice even through you and answer His call.

Questions:

- 1.** If you've had someone who believed in you, affirmed you, saw God in you, what did they say or do that helped communicate that belief to you?
- 2.** Is there someone, or several someone's, in your life that you've seen God work in, and/or believe God is calling to do something for His kingdom?
- 3.** What is one way this week you could affirm them and offer them a word of encouragement? One way you could tell them how you see God in them?

DAY 24

THE RISK OF INVESTING IN OTHERS

Acts 13:4 So Barnabas and Saul were sent out by the Holy Spirit. They went down to the seaport of Seleucia and then sailed for the island of Cyprus. **5** There, in the town of Salamis, they went to the Jewish synagogues and preached the word of God. John Mark went with them as their assistant.

You'll notice in today's passage the order of the names Barnabas and Saul. Barnabas was clearly the one leading the ministry, and Saul was there as his assistant, but both were sent by the Holy Spirit. Rest assured; there are times in our lives when we are asked to lead and times when we are asked to assist; both are just as important. Remember, at Crosswalk, we desire to be a community that exemplifies servant leadership, so who leads isn't as important as the opportunity we all have to serve.

Notice also that a new person has joined the team: John Mark. We'll hear more about him soon, but it's important to note that as Barnabas invested in Saul, they both invested in others so that more leaders could grow.

As they ministered, I think it's important to note that God doesn't send people out on their own to serve but rather in pairs or groups. Jesus didn't call one disciple; he called twelve. When he sent them out on their first missionary assignment, he sent them out two by two (Mark 6:7).

I've been in ministry long enough to know that it can sometimes be incredibly lonely. What makes it so much easier and more fun is when you can partner with other people at work. And truly, it's a little easier to discern what the Holy Spirit is up to when you can talk it over with others to see if they are sensing, learning, and feeling led in a similar way as you are at the time.

As a college chaplain, I'd often have students come to me with a burden on their hearts for a particular ministry to be started. They'd often pitch the burden to me and then say something like, "Which is why I think you, Pastor Paddy, should start this ministry?"

I'd laugh and politely tell them, "I actually have a lot of things on my plate that God has called me to at the moment, but it seems like He's placed this burden on your heart. Which means it's up to you to continue to listen to His call and see where He's leading."

After the initial shock of that statement wore off on them, I'd then tell them to spend some time in prayer. Then, as they continue to pray, they start talking to other people about the idea to see if they respond well to it and feel a similar call in their hearts. You see, I believe that if God is truly calling someone to do something, he won't call them alone; there will be others who will sense that call as well and then a wave will begin to build. Our job as leaders is to identify those waves and help people catch them (to use a surfing metaphor).

Finally, for today's reflection, notice how Barnabas and Saul continued to preach in the Jewish synagogues. Eventually, Saul becomes Paul and is known as the apostle to the Gentiles, but his journey started in the familiar, then moved more and more into the unknown. I think this journey allows us to mature and strengthen our

foundation, so that as God pushes us more and more into places that will push us and challenge us, we know how to keep leaning on him.

Questions:

- 1.** Can you think of a time that you sensed God calling you to do something that maybe surprised and/or frightened you? What was it and how did you respond?
- 2.** Is there a burden on your heart right now, for something you feel God may be calling you to do? Have you talked about it with anyone else? If not, could you this week?
- 3.** When life gets tough, or scary, what are some of the practices you turn to that keep you grounded in your walk with Christ?

DAY 25

THE RISK OF INVESTING IN OTHERS

Acts 13:13 Paul and his companions then left Paphos by ship for Pamphylia, landing at the port town of Perga. There John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem. 14 But Paul and Barnabas traveled inland to Antioch of Pisidia.

42 As Paul and Barnabas left the synagogue that day, the people begged them to speak about these things again the next week. **43** Many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, and the two men urged them to continue to rely on the grace of God.

Here, Saul has received his new name, Paul. It wasn't uncommon to be given a new name with a new call. Abram became Abraham. Jacob became Israel. Simon became Peter, and so on. So here, Saul becomes Paul, for he has become a new person. As he himself would later write, "This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" (2 Corinthians 5:17 NLT). New life, new name.

We also note here that John Mark has left them and returned to Jerusalem. Store this part of the story away for another day because we will come back to it.

But there is another major shift that takes place in this part of the story. You'll notice that up to this point, as we

mentioned yesterday, these stories have been the stories of Barnabas and Saul: the people in Antioch entrusted their gifts to “Barnabas and Saul to take to the elders of the church in Jerusalem,” (Acts 11:30), “When Barnabas and SAul had finished their mission to Jerusalem,” (Acts 12:25), they appointed “Barnabas and Saul for the special work,” (Acts 13:2), and “Barnabas and Saul were sent out by the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:4).

In this passage, however, with Saul’s new name, Paul, we also have a new order for these missionaries. Now, it’s “Paul and Barnabas” (Acts 13:42). Why is this significant?

Barnabas played a lead role in Paul’s life for some time. He was the one willing to take a risk and stand up for Paul when no one else would. He never forgot about him, and went looking for him to enlist him in the gospel work when others likely still saw him as too dangerous. And then, Barnabas continued to journey with Paul for some time until it became clear that Paul was ready to take the lead.

So what does Barnabas do? Barnabas takes a step back, and for a time, we read about the journey’s of Paul and Barnabas. “Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly...,” (Acts 13:46), “Paul and Barnabas went to the Jewish synagogue and preached...,” (Acts 14:1), “Paul and Barnabas came upon a man with crippled feet.” (Acts 14:8)

As we invest in others, there comes a point in time when we have to give them the opportunity to lead, to show to the world, and to themselves, what it is God has called them to do. Of course, there is risk to this as well. What if they mess up? What if they’re not as ready as we think they are? What if they get scared? But it’s important to remember that when we begin to let them lead, we don’t leave them. Rather, we continue to journey alongside of them so that if they fall, they fall forward; if they doubt, we

can continue to reassure them; and if they get scared, we are right there with them to remind them that they have been called. As I often tell my own kids, "You've got this, because God's got you."

Questions:

- 1.** If you have surrendered your life to Christ, remember back to that first decision. What new life did you experience, what changed?
- 2.** Has there been anyone in your life that was willing to let you take the lead? If so, what were those first few times like, and did that person stay connected with you?
- 3.** Personally, I don't like the word failure. I think something is only a failure if you fail to learn. Can you remember back to a time where you tried something that didn't work? If so, what did you learn from it?

DAY 26

THE RISK OF INVESTING IN OTHERS

Acts 13:44 The following week almost the entire city turned out to hear them preach the word of the Lord.

45 But when some of the Jews saw the crowds, they were jealous; so they slandered Paul and argued against whatever he said.

46 Then Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and declared, “It was necessary that we first preach the word of God to you Jews. But since you have rejected it and judged yourselves unworthy of eternal life, we will offer it to the Gentiles. **47** For the Lord gave us this command when he said, ‘I have made you a light to the Gentiles, to bring salvation to the farthest corners of the earth.’”

48 When the Gentiles heard this, they were very glad and thanked the Lord for his message; and all who were chosen for eternal life became believers. **49** So the Lord’s message spread throughout that region.

50 Then the Jews stirred up the influential religious women and the leaders of the city, and they incited a mob against Paul and Barnabas and ran them out of town.

51 So they shook the dust from their feet as a sign of rejection and went to the town of Iconium. **52** And the believers were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

14:1 The same thing happened in Iconium. Paul and Barnabas went to the Jewish synagogue and preached with such power that a great number of both Jews and Greeks became believers. **2** Some of the Jews, however, spurned God's message and poisoned the minds of the Gentiles against Paul and Barnabas. **3** But the apostles stayed there a long time, preaching boldly about the grace of the Lord. And the Lord proved their message was true by giving them power to do miraculous signs and wonders. **4** But the people of the town were divided in their opinion about them. Some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles.

5 Then a mob of Gentiles and Jews, along with their leaders, decided to attack and stone them. **6** When the apostles learned of it, they fled to the region of Lycaonia—to the towns of Lystra and Derbe and the surrounding area. **7** And there they preached the Good News.

As we talked about last week, as the gospel spread beyond the walls of Jerusalem into the territory of the Gentiles, more conflict and jealousy arose between the Jewish followers of Christ, and the Gentile ones. Here, we start to see this conflict grow.

In v 45, we're told that the Jews "slanderd Paul and argued against whatever he said." Rest assured, following Jesus has consequences. As has often been said, if everyone you preach Jesus to likes you and everything you say, it may not be Jesus you're preaching. Or if you find a God who agrees with everything you do, it may not be God you've found.

Jesus is going to challenge us, push us into places we've never been before, and ask us to do and say things that may be hard at times. But the reason for all of this is his lvoe for us, his desire for us to grow more and more into

the people he see's when he looks at us, and his hope that we could help others do the same.

As I often say, Jesus never promised us that following him would be easy, he just said that he'd be with us every step of the way.

So we see here that this conflict turned to violence. It's amazing what happens and what we'll do, when we become so convinced that we're right, and so closed off to what new things the Spirit has to teach us.

In our faith tradition, our founders wanted to avoid this type of experience by teaching a concept called "present truth." This idea was that you and I will never know all there is to know. The Spirit will always have more to teach us, more to reveal to us. So hopefully, we can remain humble and open to what's next.

But because of how the Jews responded in this situation, Paul and Barnabas determined that their staunch close-mindedness was going to cause more harm than good, so they, "So they shook the dust from their feet as a sign of rejection..." (v 51) and went on to another village. This decision is not made lightly, but it was made for the benefit of God's people and the growth of God's kingdom.

As a result of this, we notice another shift in the story of the early church. Up till now, the message of Jesus and the gospel, empowered by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, had been widely accepted with 1,000's giving their life to Christ. However, in this story, we come across the first time that only "some" accepted or sided with these teachings.

It's important to remember that we are not the savior of anyone, Jesus is. Our job is to do what he's asked us to do, today, to the very best of our ability, and then to trust Jesus

to work. Not everyone will listen, not everyone will be impacted, but that doesn't mean that Jesus gives up on anyone. I believe he continues to work on people even if they reject us.

So today, as we choose to follow Jesus, may we have the courage to follow wherever he leads and do whatever he leads us to do. Then, may we trust in him for the outcome, even if it's not what we'd expect. And, may we cling to him even when the road gets rough.

Questions:

- 1.** Have you ever had someone push back on you, disagree with you, concerning your beliefs? How did you handle that experience?
- 2.** What has been one of the toughest experiences you've had in your journey with Christ?
- 3.** What are some ways that you and I can stay humble and open to whatever new things the Spirit has to teach us?

DAY 27

THE RISK OF INVESTING IN OTHERS

Acts 15: 36 After some time Paul said to Barnabas, “Let’s go back and visit each city where we previously preached the word of the Lord, to see how the new believers are doing.” **37** Barnabas agreed and wanted to take along John Mark. **38** But Paul disagreed strongly, since John Mark had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in their work. **39** Their disagreement was so sharp that they separated. Barnabas took John Mark with him and sailed for Cyprus. **40** Paul chose Silas, and as he left, the believers entrusted him to the Lord’s gracious care. **41** Then he traveled throughout Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches there.

Ahh, and here you have it, turmoil in the early church.

For so much of my life, I romanticized the early church. I’d say things like, “If only we could get back to the basics, like the early church,” or, “If only we’d let the Spirit lead like they did.” I saw the early church as this place where the Spirit was poured out, and the people followed, and more and more were added to their number daily.

Then one day I realized that there is a lot of the rest of the New Testament that addresses some of the challenges the early church had. A lot of those challenges concerned how to love and treat one another, especially the more diverse the church became.

So here, we have Barnabas and Paul who get into a disagreement. What's interesting is that the disagreement is over someone else Barnabas wanted to invest in, John Mark. John Mark had left Barnabas and Paul in the midst of their work, at a time that Paul felt was crucial, so Paul wasn't ready to put any trust back in John Mark. But Barnabas, on the other hand, was someone who saw something in others that not many others could see. He saw potential in John Mark, just like he had in Paul, and he was willing to take yet another risk to help see that potential become a reality.

Now, reading between the lines, Barnabas may have felt for a while that Paul was ready to lead without him. And truly, were they to go their separate ways, then the gospel could spread even farther. But Barnabas had set the example, you can't lead alone. So Barnabas chooses to invest in John Mark, and Paul chooses a young man named Silas.

I am so thankful for Barnabas, and in truth, though they had this disagreement, I don't believe Paul ever forgot how important Barnabas was to him and his spiritual journey. Because of his walk with Jesus, Barnabas was able to see something in others that no one else saw. Because he was willing to invest in others, take a risk on them, not only did they change, but look at what they contributed to the work of the kingdom of God: Paul was the first real missionary of the church, helping the gospel spread to it's farthest reaches to date, and, he just so happened to write what became a majority of the New Testament we now hold in our hands; John Mark became the author of one of the first stories of Jesus to be shared with the world. Barnabas, as far as we know, didn't author anything, but his mentees did. All because Barnabas was willing to invest in others. I think Paul held Barnabas in his heart up till his dying breath.

Are we willing to do the same? Are we willing to take the risk of investing in others, encouraging them, lifting them up, helping them see who God has called them to be, and then unleash them to go into the world as sent by God?

Barnabas invested in two people who helped change the world, maybe we could do the same.

Questions:

- 1.** Do you think we can all seek to follow the Holy Spirit, and still have disagreements?
- 2.** What do you think are some of the best ways to handle a disagreement within the body of Christ?
- 3.** Can you think of one or two people in your community right now that you could spend some time investing in?

DAY 28

SMALL GROUP BIBLE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with or with your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN QUESTIONS

Who was one of your favorite teachers, pastors, or leaders growing up and what was it about them that endeared you to them so much?

HEAD

1. Read Acts 11:22-26, 13:1-5 and 13-14 and 42-43, sharing any insight, wisdom, or thoughts that come to you through the reading of the Word.
2. What do you think the risks were that Barnabas was taking by going and getting Saul/Paul from Tarsus?
3. How do you think the Jewish believers who had fled Jerusalem due to persecution felt when they say Saul/Paul show up?

4. Why do you think the shift from Barnabas and Saul adventures to Paul and Barnabas adventures is important?
5. Read Acts 13:44-52, 14:1-7, and 15:36-41, sharing any insight, wisdom, or thoughts that come to you through the reading of the Word.
6. Why do you think the Jewish believers got so jealous about the Gentile believers?
7. Do you think Paul and Barnabas rejecting the Jewish believers and leaving was the right way to handle the situation? Why or why not?

HEART

1. Have you ever taken a risk and invested in someone else, maybe even in someone who others didn't see the same potential that you did?
2. Did you ever have someone take a risk in you? If so, what did that feel like?
3. Do you think that as followers of Jesus, we should always be investing in someone else, to grow them in their walk with Jesus and in their opportunity to serve His kingdom? If so, how do we start if we aren't already doing this?
4. As followers of Christ, do you think there are ways to avoid disagreements like the one between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark? Explain your answer and how you think we should respond to disagreements among believers.

HANDS

Spend time this next week praying for God to reveal to you the names of one or two people you could begin to invest in for the growth of the kingdom. As names come to mind, pray over them and give God time to work in your heart concerning how best to go forward. Then, take the courageous next step and approach them about joining you in some adventure involving the faith journey and/or the work of the kingdom.

LIVING WORDS FOR YOUR WEEK

"19 Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. 20 Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Matthew 28:19-20 NLT

DAY 29

THE RISK OF REJECTION

Acts 17:16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city. **17** He went to the synagogue to reason with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and he spoke daily in the public square to all who happened to be there.

18 He also had a debate with some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. When he told them about Jesus and his resurrection, they said, “What’s this babbler trying to say with these strange ideas he’s picked up?” Others said, “He seems to be preaching about some foreign gods.”

Acts 17 is one of my favorite chapters in the book of Acts. There is so much to unpack here that I look forward to spending time together.

First, Paul has continued his missionary journeys and now finds himself all the way out in Athens. Of course, Athens would be in the heart of Gentile territory and a place where the gospel message had not yet gone, to our knowledge. So what Paul had to bring was truly new teaching to many who were either considered pagan or whose religion involved the cult of Rome, where the emperor was the closest they got to divinity.

Obviously, when you head into new territory like this, the risk of rejection is fierce. Paul had no idea if they’d be open to hearing what he had to say, and even if they did, he had no idea if anyone would accept the gospel. But Paul knew his call to take the gospel to the Gentiles, so he

continued to be faithful to his call despite the risks in front of him.

The first thing to note, which I love, is how Paul apparently took time to walk the city and observe what was important to them before he started to speak with anyone. He didn't just go into the public square without any knowledge of what these people valued or believed in; instead, he took time to observe and listen to their culture.

We should remember this very important aspect as it pertains to evangelism. Instead of barging into a new town or culture or a room full of people we don't know from Adam and pushing our agenda on them, we'd be way better off listening to their needs and what they feel is important first. The more time we take to listen, as we'll see in this story, the more we may be able to connect their current culture and needs to the deep need in all of us to connect with something bigger than us. The hunger inside to fill that God-shaped hole we all have, even when we don't know what it is or why it's there.

So Paul took time to observe and listen, and then he began to teach. He tried to understand who they were and what made them tick, then he sought to connect them to the gospel. Let's see how the rest of the story unfolds.

Questions:

- 1.** Have you ever traveled to a country or place you had never been to? How did you prepare for that trip?
- 2.** If you take some time to think about walking the streets of where you live, read the news that is shared and the stories that get told, what are some of the things you think you'd learn about what the people in your town believe in, value, and spend their time with?

- 3.** Can you think of one way you could connect the gospel and story of Jesus, to one of those beliefs and values from those you live contest too?

DAY 30

THE RISK OF REJECTION

Acts 17:19 Then they took him to the high council of the city. “Come and tell us about this new teaching,” they said. **20** “You are saying some rather strange things, and we want to know what it’s all about.” **21** (It should be explained that all the Athenians as well as the foreigners in Athens seemed to spend all their time discussing the latest ideas.)

I have a group of dear friends that desperately try to get together at least once a year to catch up on life, and to talk and wrestle with our beliefs, with the goings on of our world, and with where we think it’s all heading, as well as how we respond to it all.

What I love about these conversations is that they not only bring us closer together as brothers, but they are always driven by one guiding light: our belief and commitment to Jesus. The reason this is important is that, without Jesus, I think we’d often leave these gatherings depressed over the state of the world. But with Jesus, we have hope that not only can we make a difference here on this earth, not only can we follow Paul’s admonishment to “rejoice always” (1 Thessalonians 5:16, NIV) despite the challenges in our lives and world, but we also remind each other that our lives on this earth are only part of the story.

In Athens, there was a place where people went to simply discuss the latest ideas and trends of the day. I’m not sure what the purpose of those meetings was, other than being seen as people “in the know.” But this group heard Paul

speaking, sharing a teaching they hadn't heard before, couldn't make sense of it, and wanted to know more.

It seems as if they placed a high value on knowledge; the more knowledgeable, the more you can speak to the things happening in the world, the more important you would be seen by others.

But what Paul had to teach them was so much more than mere knowledge; it was life. The question was, would they be willing to see past their thirst for worldly knowledge and be open to receiving that which is bigger than this world? Paul was willing to take the risk of telling them to find out.

Questions:

- 1.** Are there any beliefs you have, or ways you practice your faith, that others have seen as strange or weird? If so, how did you explain those beliefs and practices? Did you help them understand, or do you think they walked away still confused?
- 2.** Have you ever had the opportunity to share your faith in a setting that you weren't sure how it would be received?
- 3.** Do you have a community of people that you can wrestle with about your faith? If not, might you consider joining a Crosswalk connect group and begin to develop that kind of community?

DAY 31

THE RISK OF REJECTION

Acts 17:22 So Paul, standing before the council, addressed them as follows: “Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way, **23** for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: ‘To an Unknown God.’ This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I’m telling you about.

Recently, my son and daughter went to see a movie they had waited for release. The next day, their mom and I were talking to them when we asked what they thought about the movie. My daughter replied and said, “I pulled a dad.” We asked what that meant, and she said, “After the movie, all I could talk about were the spiritual implications she saw in the story.”

I both laughed and welled up with pride. It’s true. Since my teenage years, I have often watched movies and read stories, looking for the thread of the gospel story in them. You see, I believe that the gospel story is written deep inside all of us, and it comes out whether we know that story or not. So, from that perspective, I have a tendency to believe that all good stories we’re drawn to reflect that gospel story inside of us, or at least our hunger for it, even if we’re not believers or even know the story.

One time, my wife and I were watching a movie that I had hoped would be better than it was. Most of the film was dark, too dark for me, and at times, I considered walking

out simply because those things weigh on me in a way that I'm sensitive to. But then, all of a sudden, at the end of the movie, there was a moment where the protagonist made a decision to take the blame for something they didn't do, all to save the other characters in the story. It was a gospel moment! Though Jesus hadn't done anything wrong, he took on the weight of our wrongs to save us.

When this part happened in the movie, my nonverbal language told my wife what had just happened. She leaned over to me and said, "You saw it, didn't you? The gospel moment?" I said, "Yes, ma'am, finally!"

I share this because this is what I think Paul did in Athens. As he walked around the city, as he observed their culture and listened to their stories, he did so with a lens of the gospel story. He was trying to find a way to connect the dots between their lives as they had been and their lives as they could be with Christ. When he saw the idol to the unknown God, he thought, "Aha, that's it! That's how I'll try to crack that door open to tell them the gospel story." And so Paul simply takes something they are familiar with, and tries to connect it to the gospel. It's not only brilliant, it's the best chance to share the gospel with people who don't know it yet. Get to know them, then try to help see how God is already at work in their lives and in the world around them.

That's our job, to help people see God more clearly, and just like God did when he came to this earth and became human, we need to understand the people we're talking to as much as we can. Then, we take that risk and try to help them see Jesus.

Questions:

1. What are some of the ways you see God at work in the world around you on a daily basis?

- 2.** What could you do today that might help you be more aware of all the different ways you can hear from and learn about God in your everyday life?
- 3.** Next time you watch a movie, or read a book, ask God to help you see His story in that story.

DAY 32

THE RISK OF REJECTION

Acts 17:24 “He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn’t live in man-made temples, **25** and human hands can’t serve his needs—for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need. **26** From one man he created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand when they should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries.

27 “His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us. **28** For in him we live and move and exist. As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ **29** And since this is true, we shouldn’t think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone.

Paul’s comments here are not unlike what he wrote in his letter to the church in Rome, “For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God.” Romans 1:20 NLT

I like to think of this as Paul saying that God is everywhere, if we know Him and keep our eyes out for Him. Before this knowledge comes to us, we may experience God when a gorgeous sunset steals our breath, or the first time we

hear a baby laugh, or as we shudder at the powerful sound of thunder coupled with the bright light of lightning.

In fact, I give the Athenians credit for knowing that there are some things in this world that their gods and their knowledge and the stories of their past can't explain. So they responded by creating an altar to the unknown. They admitted there were things they didn't know and couldn't explain, and that's where Paul saw the door cracked open just a tad to be able to share the gospel.

Paul even goes so far as to say that this God they don't know, the God he is trying to make known to them, is actually so close that it's in him that we "live and move and exist." Then Paul shows another example of how he has tried to understand the people of Athens; he has read their poets and quotes them here, "We are his offspring." I believe Paul showed them great respect by seeking to understand a bit about them before trying to introduce them to God.

All of this would have been new teaching for the Athenians, who believed that there were all sorts of gods, a god for everything under the sun, including the sun. And since their gods were crafted out of the earth, it was a huge paradigm shift for them to be told that there is actually only one God who created all things and that this one God is also sovereign over all things.

Notice how Paul doesn't tell the whole story here. Maybe they weren't ready yet to hear that not only was it in this God that we live and move and have our being, but that this same God became human, lived, and died to save us from ourselves. Paul tries to share with them what he knows will challenge them but what he thinks will first connect most with their story.

I just wonder how our evangelistic efforts might improve if we spent less time speaking at people, and more time listening to people. Then, when the time was right as led by the Spirit, we helped connect God's story to their story in a way that honored both. Maybe that would be more like Christ's method of reaching us, than our method of proving to others how right we are and how wrong they are.

Questions:

- 1.** If you had the opportunity to talk to someone who you knew had never heard of God or had a concept for him, how would you describe who God is?
- 2.** What do you think is one way we can honor someone else's story?
- 3.** What do you think our highest value should be when talking to others; to prove to them that we are right, or to show to them that they are loved? Why does this matter?

DAY 33

THE RISK OF REJECTION

Acts 17:30 “God overlooked people’s ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now he commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him. **31** For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead.”

I imagine the word in today’s passage that these Athenians would have taken the biggest offense to, was the word translated here for ignorance. After all, these people prided themselves on being up to date on the latest knowledge, all the trends, and the most recent conversations in philosophy. How could they be ignorant?

But the word here has more to do with ignorance in divine things than earthly things. Something that they already alluded to with their altar to the unknown god. They were leaving the door open to the idea that they didn’t have all the answers, that there was a possibility of something they didn’t know, and that something was likely divine because, really if we could explain everything away, then it probably wouldn’t be divine. So they were at least somewhat ok with mystery.

Still, it may have been taken by some to be a biting word, but Paul was certainly trying to get their attention. He continues by saying that everyone needs to repent of their sins and turn to this God because the day is coming when the world will be judged. This sounds serious and even

ominous, but what they wouldn't have known yet is the good news of what Paul introduces them to next when he says that the judgment will come from the man this God has appointed. They don't know it yet, but this man is Jesus, and because Jesus is good, so too will the coming judgment be for those who cling to Him. Because we all want justice, right? We've all been wronged, we've all seen wrongs done to others, and we know of the many injustices that happen around the world. So yeah, we all long for the day when all is made right.

I think one critical aspect of Paul's speech today is to remember his motivation and where his conversation ultimately leads. Paul isn't trying to tell the Athenians how evil they are and how they should be ashamed of themselves. He is trying to introduce them to their need for God, how God is actually closer than they could possibly imagine, and how He's on their side. Then, he's going to give them the best news in the world when he introduces them to Jesus and his story.

So when you risk rejection for the sake of the gospel, it's so important to remember your motivation for sharing. Our motivation should always be centered on Jesus, and His call to love. It should always be about helping someone find their best life, and the way out of the hurt, pain, and shame this world dispenses. If that motivation remains, then we can go forward with more confidence knowing that the God of love won't let all of our efforts be in vain.

Questions:

- 1.** When you think of God's judgment, is it a good thing, or a bad thing? Something to rejoice over, or be scared of? Unpack your answer.
- 2.** Why is love a better motivator than fear or hate?
- 3.** What would you be willing to risk for the God of love, who gave His life for you?

DAY 33

THE RISK OF REJECTION

Acts 17:32 When they heard Paul speak about the resurrection of the dead, some laughed in contempt, but others said, “We want to hear more about this later.”

33 That ended Paul’s discussion with them, **34** but some joined him and became believers. Among them were Dionysius, a member of the council, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

I often tell people that I don’t care if you’re laughing with me or at me, as long as you’re laughing. But I imagine for Paul, this might have stung a little. After all, he had just poured his heart out to them, trying to make a connection between their world and his, and they responded with laughter.

The allusion is that they thought Paul was out of his mind. The catalyst to this conclusion seems to be the talk about the resurrection of the dead, clearly not a common belief in this time.

Whatever the case, it was Paul’s comments about the resurrection that put an abrupt end to their conversation. That was where they closed the door to the possibility of learning anything else from this foreigner. That was where they rejected him.

But not all of them. Luke tells us that “some joined him and became believers.” It seems like Paul went to a lot of work for “some.” But we have to remember that God can

still do immeasurably more than all we ask for or imagine. He can take 12 men who the world had passed by and turn them into apostles who would change the world. He can take five loaves of bread and two fish and turn them into enough food to feed more than five thousand. He can take water and turn it into the best wine you've ever had.

We don't know what seeds got planted that day in Athens. We know what immediately happened. Many laughed and rejected him, but some chose to follow. My guess is, God never gave up on those that were in the crowd that day. Whether they'd get to hear Paul again or another saint, I believe God's Holy Spirit would continue to knock on the doors of their hearts, hoping that someday it would all come together for them and they'd surrender their life to Him.

Whatever the case, Paul was willing to take the risk of rejection. He did what the Lord asked of him and trusted God to continue to work.

That same call is ours today. We should share the love of God in and through the person of Jesus with all who will give us an audience. To care enough about them and respect them enough to listen to their needs, learn their story, and then try to connect it to God's story. Then, continue to pray over them and trust God's work, even if their initial response is rejection.

I pray for all of us to have the courage, and joy in our hearts, to follow God and His Spirit wherever they lead us; to risk whatever He asks of us, and to trust that God will never let our work be in vain. Whether we get to see the fruit or not, He is still the Lord of the harvest and His desire is for all of us to come to know His love.

Sharing those truths are worth the risks involved.

Questions:

- 1.** Have you ever shared something you believed in with someone whose response was to laugh at you, and/or your belief? What did that feel like?
- 2.** Would you be willing to take the kinds of risks we've talked about in this series, even if it only won over some? Why or why not?
- 3.** Think through the risks Jesus took in coming to this earth to do what he did for us. Write them out, then spend time prayerfully consider what risks he might be asking you to take for him.

DAY 35

SMALL GROUP STUDY GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with or with your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN QUESTIONS

Share about a risk that you took in your life and what that risk was like? It might have been skydiving or bungee-jumping, or getting married, having kids, or sharing Jesus with a friend.

HEAD

1. Read Acts 17: 16-34, and share any wisdom, insight, thoughts or impressions that come to you through the reading of the Word.
2. What lessons can you learn from the time Paul spent wandering through the town of Athens and observing their culture?
3. Again, Paul went first to the Jews in this area to reason with them. Why do you think he did this before going into the marketplace?

4. Notice that in Acts 17:18, Paul has a debate with some of the Epicureans and Stoics, but they wanted to hear more from him. How do you think Paul debated in such a way that he didn't get shut down or forced to leave, but instead, they wanted to hear more?
5. Paul first speaks to them about how religious they are, and talks to them about their authors, even offering them praise. Why might this be an important first step in sharing the gospel with others?
6. Do you think Paul's time was wasted because he only reached some? Discuss your thoughts on this idea.

HEART

1. Paul saw things in Athens that deeply troubled him and motivated him to want to share the good news of Jesus Christ. What kinds of things do you observe in our world, our culture, that make you want to share that same good news?
2. Where are some of the places we can go, or some of the conversations we can have, to learn more about the world around us in hopes to connect those things with the gospel?
3. How do you think we could change our approach to evangelism within our faith tradition and churches, in light of Paul's approach in Acts 17?
4. When people reject you or laugh at you for what you believe in, how do you cope? What can you

do to remind yourself why you're sharing in the first place?

HANDS

This week, be on the lookout to find the gospel store in the world around you; be it through a movie, a television show, the news, nature, a conversation with a friend, a song on the radio, etc.... When you hear or see that connection, think of sharing it with a friend who might be curious about what your insight, or someone you think whose heart might be open, even if just a crack, to know more about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

LIVING WORDS FOR YOUR WEEK

"7 He replied, 'The Father alone has the authority to set those dates and times, and they are not for you to know. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'"

Acts of the Apostles 1:7-8 NLT