

TODAY IN THE WORD™

A ministry of Moody Bible Institute

THANKFUL
for the GOSPEL

THE BOOK OF ACTS

NOVEMBER 2020

Time to Take a Stand

From the President of Moody Bible Institute

“I believe the greatest danger to Christianity today is not persecution, but secularism. It has the power to lull us to sleep, to silence our voices, and to put us in our place.”



When I was a young pastor, I was invited to give the invocation and benediction at a prestigious graduation ceremony on a

Chicago college campus. The college president informed me that, since this was a nonsectarian event, I should not mention the name of Jesus. After they introduced me, I stepped to the podium and prayed a watered-down prayer. Returning to my seat, I felt a profound sense of regret. Have you ever been under the conviction of the Holy Spirit? I thought of Paul's words, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16).

I had allowed political correctness to squeeze Jesus out of my prayer. Before I gave the benediction, I said, "I know this is a nonsectarian event and I don't want to offend anyone, but I'm going to pray in the name of the only One I believe in: my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." That prayer was full of power. As I made my way down the aisle, I knew they were not happy, but I had a clear conscience.

In the book of Acts, we see people radically transformed by Jesus who became bold about the gospel. They refused to be silenced, even when faced with dire consequences. In the days after Pentecost, Christians were tortured, threatened, put in jail or to death. And while societies have tried to stamp out the fire of the gospel ever since, it has never been successfully extinguished! The gospel is a wildfire that cannot be stopped.

I believe the greatest danger to Christianity today is not persecution, but secularism. It has the power to lull us to sleep, to silence our voices, and to put us in our place. In Acts, Peter and John were told "not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" (4:18). But they replied, "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (vv. 19–20).

Friends, there are some of us who should be standing up but right now you're sitting. You should be speaking, but you're silent. I believe that now is the time for you and me to live boldly for Jesus. Like those early Christ followers, we must be unashamed of the gospel, living out our faith, and pointing others to Jesus! May we be unable and unwilling to be silent about what we believe. ■

God's Beautiful, Imperfect Church

by Dr. John Koessler

"Instead of searching for the perfect church, we should find one that values God's Word and proclaims the gospel."

The book of Acts provides a snapshot of what life was really like in the early church. According to Acts 2:42, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Luke describes what might sound like a utopian community. They shared their possessions. Their meetings were characterized by gladness and sincerity. No wonder many people think the church today should go back to its New Testament roots!

Yet we should not ignore the imperfections. In the book of Acts we see the real-world flaws of this remarkable community. We discover that some of its members were hypocrites (5:1–2). We witness the church's first significant organizational change when some of its older members were being neglected, possibly due to cultural prejudice (6:1). And we see the church's reluctance to accept the newly converted Paul because of his former life (9:26). Its members displayed human weakness and a full range of emotions. Some were upset after they heard Peter had

met and dined with Gentiles (11:2–3). Paul and Barnabas had a disagreement so sharp that they went their separate ways (15:39). Some needed further doctrinal instruction (18:25–26). And Paul warned that some of them would become false teachers (20:30).

If you need more evidence of the early church's imperfections, all you have to do is read the New Testament. But a day is coming when the church will be presented to Christ "without stain or wrinkle" (Eph. 5:27). Until that day, God calls us to worship and serve together with His beautiful, imperfect church. Paul advises, "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Col. 3:13).

Instead of searching for the perfect church, we should find one that values God's Word and proclaims the gospel. If the church practices "speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ" (Eph. 4:15). Such a church is built upon the truth. ■

For Further Study

To learn more, read *Church* by A. W. Tozer (Moody Publishers).

Go Deeper

We hope these questions will help you consider (or discuss with others) what God is teaching you through this month's study of His Word. We've left a bit of room to write down your thoughts as well!

WEEK 1: List some of the strengths of the New Testament church. Do you see these strengths in your own church?

WEEK 2: List some of the weaknesses of the New Testament church. Do you think the church still struggles in these areas?

WEEK 3: What made Paul such an unlikely choice for an apostle? Why should this encourage us today?

WEEK 4: What does the book of Acts reveal about facing hardship in the Christian life?

Want more questions? Check out the Go Deeper section on our website or app!

TODAY IN THE WORD™

Thankful for the Gospel: The Book of Acts

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.—Romans 1:16

The book of Acts gives us a glorious picture of what Christ can do with a handful of scattered, frightened believers. Their faith in the risen Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit transformed this small group into committed, fiery apostles who gave their lives to spreading the gospel from Jerusalem into the rest of the Roman Empire. They boldly preached the message of Jesus to Jews first, then extended it to the Gentiles—and changed the world!

Too often our own lives and our church experience don't reflect the same change. We struggle with fear, insecurity, doubt and may feel we lack the power of the Holy Spirit. As you read about the early church in Acts, remember—the same Christ is the head of the church today, He loves His followers with the same everlasting love, working in their hearts for His glory. We pray the book of Acts will encourage you, and by the end of our study you will:

- Gain confidence in the power of the gospel to save
- Grasp the basic content of the apostles' gospel message
- Have an accurate view of life in the early church

Thank you for studying the Bible with us! You are an integral part of the church of Christ and a valued member of the *Today in the Word* family. ■

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Good News

Read Acts 1:1–26

Stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.—Luke 24:49

Imagine that you are the very first person to hear incredible, life-changing, world-shaking good news. Who would you tell? Would you make a call, text a friend, or post to social media? Certainly, you wouldn't be able to keep this news to yourself. You'd want to share it with as many people as possible. The word *gospel* is derived from a term meaning "good story" or "good news." Today, we begin a study of the book of Acts, going back to the beginning of the church and the early spread of this good news.

The book of Acts is a close companion to the Gospel of Luke, which he calls "my former book" in Acts 1:1. Biblical scholars say the Gospel of Luke and Acts were probably one work made up of two scrolls. Luke's second volume, the book of Acts, begins with Jesus' final instructions to the disciples before His ascension. Jesus spent the forty days between His resurrection and ascension teaching about the kingdom

of God. Before He departed, Jesus hits pause on the disciples' mission. He tells them to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit is poured out upon them. The Holy Spirit is considered so essential to the mission of the church that the first disciples needed to wait until they had been "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49).

During this waiting period, the apostles appointed a replacement for Judas, who had betrayed Christ and then committed suicide. Two candidates were nominated, and Matthias was chosen after prayer and casting lots (v. 24). This method was similar to the one used by the Jewish priests to discern God's will. However, there is no mention of the apostles employing this method again after Pentecost.

► As we begin our study of Acts, ask God to grant you insight through the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit also empowers us to serve God well and to share the good news of the gospel. Give thanks today for the gospel!

Pray with Us

Lord Jesus, may this study of the book of Acts increase our love for your Word, desire to serve you, and zeal to share the good news.

The Church's Birthday

Read Acts 2:1–47

And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.—Acts 2:47

When I was a boy, I would eagerly count off the days until my birthday. This wasn't because I was in a hurry to be one year older; it was because I wanted presents. It is customary for people to receive gifts on their birthday, and the church was no different. The day of Pentecost marked the beginning of the church, the day Jesus fulfilled His promise to send the one He called the "Advocate" (sometimes translated *counselor* or *comforter*) and "the Spirit of truth" (John 15:26).

People witnessed the descent of the Spirit upon the assembled church through audible and visible signs. There was a sound like that of a violent wind and what looked like tongues of flame that separated and rested upon each of the disciples. They began to speak about God in foreign languages (vv. 1–4). The sound attracted the attention of those who were visiting Jerusalem "from every nation under heaven" (v. 5). They were

amazed to hear the disciples speaking their native languages (vv. 6–12).

Jesus promised that the coming of the Spirit would empower the disciples to tell others about Him (Acts 1:8). The effect upon Peter was evident as he stood boldly and explained that what these visitors were seeing had been predicted by the prophet Joel (vv. 14–16). Peter preached the gospel, emphasized the resurrection, and called them to turn to Christ. "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins" (v. 38). He promised that all who did so would also receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

► The first church exhibited outward signs of their inner transformation as believers. Describe the characteristics of the early church included in the closing verses of this chapter, verses 42–47. Do you think today's church reflects the passion and dedication of those early believers?

Pray with Us

As we read the second chapter of Acts, we marvel at the passion for God shown by these early Christians and the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Lord, may we obey your Spirit and live according to your Word.

Power in the Name

Read Acts 3:1–26

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our Fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus.—Acts 3:13

“What’s in a name?” William Shakespeare asked. If the name is Jesus, the answer is “Life!” This was the message Peter preached to those who saw him heal a man who had been lame since birth. The miracle took place at the temple, which the first disciples visited daily (Acts 2:46). They met together in a portion of the temple known as Solomon’s Colonnade, an area of the temple’s outer court where Herod had built two rows of columns. Jesus also taught there during His earthly ministry (John 10:23).

The man whom Peter healed was well known to those who visited the temple. The apostle’s message to the astonished onlookers was direct and uncompromising. “You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead,” Peter said. “We are witnesses of this” (v. 15). The miracle of healing was not a publicity stunt. It was an up-close demonstration of the power of Jesus, the only source of life and salvation. While onlookers

were startled to witness the healing of someone they knew very well (16), Peter pointed beyond the miracle to the faith it represented. “By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong,” he said. “It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see” (v. 16).

The lame man’s healing, although amazing, was intended to direct their attention to an even greater miracle. The miracle of forgiveness comes through faith in Jesus Christ. To experience this forgiveness, we must turn from our sin to Christ and believe that Jesus is the Righteous One sent from God.

► Just as the lame man Peter met at the temple gate could not heal himself, we cannot solve our sin problem. We must rely on the power in Jesus’ name. If you know Jesus as your Savior, tell someone about Him and His healing power today.

Pray with Us

Today, we come to our glorious Savior with thanksgiving and praise for the miracle of forgiveness of our sins. Indeed, as our Scripture reading says, “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob . . . has glorified his servant Jesus” (Acts 3:13).

Stopping the Message

Read Acts 4:1–22

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.—Acts 4:12

Parents know that telling your child not to touch something will probably have the opposite effect, making them instinctively want to do the thing you've forbidden. Reverse psychology works on adults as well. Telling us not to do something can make it somehow more desirable. In today's reading, the religious leaders thought that instructing the disciples to quit spreading the gospel would put an end to it. We know that the exact opposite happened.

The temple guard and the Sadducees, upset by the teaching of the disciples, seized Peter and John and brought them to the religious leaders. The Sadducees were especially disturbed because Peter's message emphasized the resurrection of Christ. The Sadducees were a religious party whose members came from many of the priestly families. They did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. When the rulers and elders demanded an explanation, Peter replied: "It is by

the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed" (v. 10). He told them that Jesus was Israel's rejected Messiah and that salvation was "found in no one else" (v. 12).

Such boldness in the face of opposition surprised them because Peter and John were "ordinary men" who had not been trained by the rabbis (v. 13). At a loss over what to do next because an undeniable miracle had taken place, they ordered Peter and John to stop teaching in Jesus' name (v. 17). They refused, appealing to common sense. "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges!" they answered (v. 19).

► Verse 13 describes Peter and John as "unschooled, ordinary men." Do you ever feel unqualified to share your faith with others? Ask God to give you confidence not based on your own expertise or authority, but relying on Him alone!

Pray with Us

Father, in the name of Jesus, help us to listen to you, and not to the world. Help us also by the power of your Spirit to live today in light of Christ's victory on the cross.

One in Heart

Read Acts 4:23–36

All the believers were one in heart and mind.—Acts 4:32

Many churches have a sign that promises visitors a “friendly church.” Unfortunately, newcomers who venture inside some churches may discover that the church members really only like the people they already know. A truly friendly church will care deeply for every person who enters the doors. In its early days, the experience of the New Testament church was marked by an uncommon unity. As the church grew in numbers, so did the mutual concern of its members.

The church showed this unity of heart and mind in practical ways by caring for one another’s needs. They “shared everything they had” (v. 32). Luke’s observation that “there were no needy persons among them” in verse 34 seems to be an echo of Deuteronomy 15:4. There the Lord had promised that “there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you.”

One of the ways they were able to do this was by selling land and allowing the apostles to distribute the proceeds among those who had need. Some have incorrectly characterized this as either communal living or communism. It was neither. These early Christians continued to live in their homes and own private property. The sale of land or houses was “from time to time,” as the need arose (v. 34).

Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, is singled out by Luke as an example (v. 36). His nickname Barnabas meant “son of encouragement” or “son of exhortation.” As a Levite, he assisted the priests in their duties. Later on, Barnabas would introduce Paul to the other apostles and become one of his most trusted associates (Acts 9:27).

► How can we reflect the unity of the early church? Do you see someone living among you who is in need? How can you use the blessings God has given you, your family, or your local church to help someone else today?

Pray with Us

Dear God, we love the picture of church unity revealed to us in the book of Acts. Show us, we pray, how we can work toward the same unity in our local congregations—for your glory! Amen.

Hypocrisy and Courage

Read Acts 5:1–42

You have not lied just to human beings but to God.—Acts 5:4

It is tempting to idealize the early church. Yes, the early believers were a courageous, faithful, and unified group of people, passionate about teaching the gospel. But today's account provides a reality check. There were hypocrites in the early church just as there are today. On the surface, Ananias and Sapphira appeared to follow the example of Barnabas, sharing their possessions with those in need (4:36–37). They sold property and acted as if they had placed all proceeds at the apostles' disposal. In reality, they kept back some of the proceeds for themselves.

Their sin was not that they kept a portion of the sale. That land was theirs by right. They could do with it whatever they pleased. Their sin was being deceitful, and not only toward the church. "You have not lied just to human beings but to God," Peter said (v. 4). The death of Ananias and Sapphira by God's hand made a strong impression on those who observed the church from a distance. Verse 13 says, "No one else dared

join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people." This seems to have been God's intent. It was not only to make a statement to the church but also to discourage any person who might frivolously join this fledgling community.

The apostles continued to preach the gospel, accompanied by remarkable miracles designed to show that their message came from God. Unfortunately, as the church's numbers increased, so did the jealousy of the Jewish high priest and his associates. When they arrested and imprisoned the apostles, a miracle happened. An angel opened the doors of the jail and set them free (v. 19)! Despite increased threats and pressing danger, the apostles continued to share the good news about Jesus.

► Have you ever been disappointed by the insincerity or hypocrisy of other believers? The church may sometimes disappoint us but we must remember that we do not see the whole picture. God alone knows those who are truly His (2 Tim. 2:19).

Pray with Us

Lord Jesus, we ask for courage to follow you boldly, honestly, without reservations. Give us grace to obey you without hypocrisy; make us people worthy of your calling.

Growing Pains

Read Acts 6:1–15

So the word of God spread.—Acts 6:7

Most churches say they want to grow, but when numbers actually increase, not everyone is happy. More people often bring more challenges. This was also true for the early church. As their numbers grew, some widows were overlooked in the daily distribution of food (v. 1). There may have been an element of cultural tension in this. Those who were overlooked differed from the rest by language or custom. The Hellenistic Jews had adopted the customs of Greek culture. They would have been in the minority.

The apostles' observation in verse 2 was not a dismissal of the problem. They recognized that this congregational concern required daily attention and would cause them to neglect their own ministry. The solution was organizational. Instead of taking on this responsibility themselves, the apostles delegated it to seven, chosen by the congregation. The fact that all had Greek names indicates that they were chosen from among the neglected group. Those who were most affected by the

problem were empowered to address it. Although the task was practical, the qualifications required of those who handled it were spiritual (v. 3).

Soon after Stephen was selected as one of the seven (v. 3), recognized for his faith and wisdom, we see him face significant trouble. He preached the gospel so effectively that his opponents instigated a few troublemakers to make false claims about his teaching (v. 11). They brought him up on charges before the Sanhedrin, a kind of Supreme Court for the Jewish people, presided over by the high priest. The Sanhedrin had its own police who could make arrests, but they required confirmation of the Roman governor in cases that involved the death penalty.

► Have you experienced growing pains in your spiritual journey? Sometimes, as God leads us into new areas of service, we will face new struggles and challenges. Remember that following Christ will not be without struggle, but it will be rewarded.

Pray with Us

Father, give us a better understanding of the struggles and conflicts in the early church. As we grow in Christ, help us avoid the same problems today. Thank you for loving your church, the Bride of Christ.

The First Martyr

Read Acts 7:1–60

I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.—Acts 7:56

As a young Christian, I remember reading the story of Jim Elliot, one of the five missionaries who lost their lives when they attempted to bring the gospel to the Huaorani people of Ecuador. When I was finished, I got down on my knees and asked God to make me a martyr too. My request was born of youthful impatience and a rash hunger for glory. Certainly, I didn't understand the motivation of actual martyrs, most of whom stumbled into their unique calling.

Stephen was the church's first martyr. We use this term to speak of those who give their lives for their faith, but the word itself actually means *witness*. Stephen did not set out to become a martyr. He was merely responding to the charges brought against him (v. 1).

Acts 7 records his speech before his accusers. Beginning with Abraham, Stephen narrated the history of the Jewish people highlighting their resistance to God's purpose. He shows how God worked in the lives of Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and then Moses.

His history lesson culminated in the crucifixion of Jesus. "You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit!" he said (v. 51).

His accusers were "furious and gnashed their teeth" (v. 54). They said Stephen was speaking against the law (Acts 6:13). He charged them with ignoring it. Their anger turned murderous when Stephen described a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God (v. 56). In the crowd was "a young man named Saul" who would eventually become a follower of Jesus and go on to write much of the New Testament (v. 58). We know him today as the apostle Paul.

► We shouldn't aspire to be a martyr. Rather, we need to set our sights on being a faithful witness. What does it mean for you to live for Jesus today? Maybe you can start by telling someone what He has done in your life.

Pray with Us

Is God calling you to a more committed discipleship today? Almighty God, we ask that you would guide our steps as we follow you, so that others will see your work in our lives and come to faith in Christ.

Expanding the Gospel

Read Acts 8:1–40

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.—Acts 8:4

When Jesus gave the church its marching orders, He outlined His plan for its expansion: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In today’s passage, we begin to see the fulfillment of this promise. But God’s instrument for initiating this worldwide expansion of the gospel might surprise you. Instead of conferences, summit meetings, or strategic planning sessions, the Lord used persecution!

Stephen’s death sparked “a great persecution” that scattered the church, but as the people spread, so did the message of Christ (v. 1). Philip, another of the seven chosen in Acts 6, went down to Samaria where he baptized a sorcerer named Simon. Ultimately, Simon’s conversion proved to be superficial. He seemed to have been more attracted to power than to Christ. When Simon offered to pay Peter and John for the ability to impart the power of the Holy Spirit, he revealed his true character (vv. 20–23).

This chapter describes an encounter between Philip and an Ethiopian court official. The two met on one of the main roads which ran south from Jerusalem. The Ethiopian kingdom was located in the region that now corresponds with Southern Egypt and Northern Sudan. We can be sure that this encounter was not an accident. An angel directed Philip to the road “that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” Philip obeyed, and when he heard the Ethiopian reading Isaiah’s prediction of Jesus’ suffering from Isaiah 53, Philip posed a simple question that led to the subject of the gospel. The ending was probably not what either of them expected; the Ethiopian official asked Philip to baptize him.

► Have you ever tried asking a question in order to begin a spiritual conversation? Sincere question can lead to opportunities to share the gospel. You might ask someone, “Are you interested in spiritual things?” Or even, “Do you think you will go to heaven when you die?”

Pray with Us

Lord, thank you for the wisdom and discernment demonstrated by the disciples in today’s Scripture reading. We have a lot to learn from them today. Give us a teachable heart and a humble spirit.

An Unlikely Convert

Read Acts 9:1–31

This man is my chosen instrument.—Acts 9:15

It used to be common for high school yearbooks to designate someone from the graduating class as “Most Likely to Succeed.” If Saul of Tarsus had attended high school, he might have been chosen for that honor. But I think he would also have been considered the “Least Likely to Follow Jesus.”

We can certainly all agree that Saul (later known to the church as Paul) was an unlikely convert. A fierce enemy of the faith, his plan was to arrest Christians in Damascus and then bring them to Jerusalem for trial. His targets were probably believers from Jerusalem who had fled because of persecution. But Saul’s campaign of terror was cut short by a blinding light from heaven and a challenge from Jesus (vv. 4–5).

Saul wasn’t persuaded by argument but through a personal confrontation by the living Christ! Once in Damascus, the Lord sent Ananias to pray that Saul’s sight would be restored and to baptize him. The result was dramatic. Saul did

not waste any time but immediately began to tell others in the synagogues of Damascus “that Jesus is the Son of God” (v. 20).

When Saul returned to Jerusalem, the believers were wary of him. After all, he was well known for persecuting the church. It took Barnabas, who may have known Saul before, to introduce him and persuade believers that his conversion was genuine. Just as he had in Damascus, Saul immediately began telling others about Jesus. His boldness sparked a hostile reaction among Greek-speaking Jews. When the believers learned that they planned to kill Saul, they sent him to Tarsus by way of Caesarea.

► Newcomers often need help to find their place in the church. Is God calling you to be a Barnabas to someone in your church this week? If you can’t think of anyone, ask your pastor for someone who could use a welcoming friend. Start by asking what led them to the Lord or to your church.

Pray with Us

Jesus, we thank you for the radical transformation of Saul, the persecutor of Christians, into Paul, a fiery apostle. This is such an encouragement to us, that you will never leave us where we are, but mold us into true disciples.

To the Gentiles

Read Acts 9:32–10:48

God does not show favoritism.—Acts 10:34

While Saul traveled toward Caesarea, Peter was on the move, preaching the gospel and performing miracles at Lydda and Joppa (modern Jaffa). While there, a “devout and God-fearing” man from Caesarea named Cornelius, a Gentile and a Roman officer, had a vision of an angel urging him to send for Peter (10:2–6). “God-fearer” was a label given to Gentiles who followed some of the customs of the law but were not full converts to the Jewish faith.

Peter also had a vision in which a voice from heaven ordered him to eat foods that the Mosaic law had forbidden. Its meaning wasn’t really about food, but people. Peter summarized it this way: “I should not call anyone impure or unclean” (10:28). The vision and the arrival of the three servants of Cornelius showed Peter that God was willing to include Gentiles in the promises of the gospel. God confirmed this for Peter by the same kind of signs in the house of Cornelius that the

church had experienced on the day of Pentecost. These signs weren’t just for Peter’s benefit but would later be cited as proof of God’s acceptance of the Gentiles when he returned to Jerusalem.

You may wonder, *Shouldn’t Peter have already known that the gospel would include the Gentiles?* After all, Jesus had commanded His followers to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). But like Christ’s teaching about the resurrection, it took time for the church to grasp the full significance of what Jesus had commanded. Peter would eventually discover that he needed to have this important lesson reinforced by a blunt reminder from the apostle Paul (Gal. 2:1–16).

► Let’s be honest. Is there someone you think would never become a believer? Our study in Acts should remind you that we mustn’t be so sure! We can be too quick to write off people whom God is calling, simply because they are different from us.

Pray with Us

Is there a “Cornelius” in your life? Someone you think will *never* come to Christ? God overcomes all the unlikely scenarios to bring people to Himself. Praise Him today and ask for courage and insight in sharing the gospel.

God's Growth Strategy

Read Acts 11:1–30

Who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?—Acts 11:17

Every child has heard their parent say, “How many times do I have to tell you?” The answer to this rhetorical question is always the same: *More than once!* Perhaps this is why we find repetition in Scripture. Today's passage is no exception. Luke has already described these events. Why does he choose to repeat them again here? One reason is that they have historical significance. Luke is simply describing what Peter said to those who questioned him. Another reason is to emphasize their importance. The spread of the gospel to the Gentiles was a significant development in the church's mission. One that some had difficulty accepting.

Luke's account of Peter's meeting with the apostles emphasizes two important facts. First, it was God who initiated the mission to the Gentiles (v. 12). Peter did not hesitate to enter the home of Cornelius because he knew God had worked on both sides to make the connection. It was clearly the leading of the Spirit.

Second, the apostles and the rest of the believers in Judea rejoiced over this development (v. 18). God used Peter to open the door, but he was not the only one God used to reach out to the Gentiles. Some from Cyprus and Cyrene proclaimed the gospel to Greeks in Antioch. Located in Syria, Antioch was one of the largest cities in the Roman empire. So many responded to the gospel that the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to investigate. Satisfied that what was taking place was a work of God, Barnabas promptly went to Tarsus to find Saul and bring him to Antioch. The two of them spent a year there teaching these new believers.

► Christians need other Christians to grow in faith and practice. Who is the Barnabas or Saul in your life? Not only do we need the challenge and encouragement of other believers in our lives, but we might be that person for someone else. Whom can you serve today?

Pray with Us

Lord Jesus, your plan for bringing the gospel to the Gentiles was fulfilled wondrously in Acts. We pray for an open heart and spiritual insight to bring the gospel to those who don't know you.

Rescued by God

Read Acts 12:1–25

But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.—Acts 12:24

Do you enjoy surprises? Perhaps a refund you didn't expect or friends who surprised you with a party. Surprises can delight or dismay us. But for God there are no surprises at all. The early church could take comfort in knowing that nothing was beyond His control, not even the persecution they were enduring.

In Acts 12, the church experienced two surprises that demonstrated God's intervention and provision. The first was Peter's deliverance from prison, which even had elements of humor. While the church prayed, Peter was asleep, seeming untroubled by his predicament. In fact, he slept so soundly that the angel struck him on the side to wake him up (v. 7). Peter then followed the angel's instruction, passing by two guarded gates until they came to the third, which opened on its own accord. Perhaps because he was dazed with sleep, Peter realized that a miracle had taken place only after he had walked a full block!

The second was Peter's surprise arrival at their prayer meeting. Despite

their earnest prayers, the church was stunned when Peter showed up at the door. They refused to believe the servant who brought the news. Then, the servant girl was so excited that she forgot to unlock the door and let Peter in! The place where they were meeting was also the house where John Mark (the author of the Gospel of Mark) and his mother stayed (v. 12). A fourth-century tradition also identified this as the location of the Last Supper. James and the other disciples were elsewhere, probably hiding (v. 17). The details given in this narrative of Peter's escape suggest that Luke had heard about the event from someone who was an eyewitness.

► The answers to our prayers are not always as miraculous as this, but we are often just as surprised. Are you sometimes nervous about asking God to answer your prayers? Do not be afraid. Your heavenly Father knows what you need even before you ask (Matt. 6:8).

Pray with Us

As we read Acts 12 today, we enjoy the lighter mood of the narrative and the elements of humor and irony in Scripture. Lord, thank you for revealing real, even flawed, people in your Word, as well as their emotions and feelings.

Opposition and Opportunity

Read Acts 13:1–52

The word of the Lord spread through the whole region.—Acts 13:49

There are many ways to share the gospel. Some people use small booklets or pamphlets. Others memorize an outline and use questions as a discussion starter. Some people take a longer approach and develop a friendship that leads to spiritual conversations.

In today's reading, we have a snapshot of how Saul (now called Paul) preached. The Holy Spirit directed the church at Antioch to set apart Paul and Barnabas "for the work to which I have called them" (v. 2). Luke doesn't describe in detail how this call came, except to say that the Holy Spirit spoke to the church's prophets and teachers while they were worshipping. John Mark, a cousin of Barnabas, also accompanied them as a servant or assistant (v. 5).

In Salamis, the chief town of Cyprus, they began by visiting the Jewish synagogues. In Paphos, the island's official capital, they encountered a magician and false teacher named Bar-Jesus (perhaps

meaning "son of Joshua") or Elymas (which may have meant "wise" or "learned"). Elymas acted as a kind of court magician and seems to have felt threatened when the proconsul invited Paul and Barnabas to speak. When the magician argued against the gospel, Paul denounced him, saying that the Lord would make him temporarily blind.

A more detailed account of Paul's message is in verses 13–41. Like Stephen in his message before the Sanhedrin in Acts 7, the apostle began with a short summary of Jewish history, tracing God's dealing with the nation of Israel from the Exodus to Jesus.

► Paul called his listeners to respond by placing their faith in Jesus: "Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses" (v. 39). For an extra challenge today, try writing an outline of Paul's message in your own words.

Pray with Us

Father, help us submit to the transforming work of your Spirit. Show us how to overcome opposition and use every opportunity to spread the good news. May the apostle Paul's zeal for the gospel serve as an inspiration to us today.

Questions & Answers

by Dr. Michael Rydelnik, Moody professor
and host of Moody Radio's *Open Line*

Q Some say that recent events mean the end of the world is near. Is the COVID-19 global pandemic a sign of the end times?

A The Bible teaches that before Jesus returns to establish His kingdom on earth, there will be a 7-year period known as the Tribulation or the Day of the Lord. Some are concerned that we are now in that period of tribulation. But, as bad as this pandemic may be, I do not believe it to be the Day of the Lord.

First, none of the corollary events connected to the tribulation period have taken place. Earthquakes, famines, and terrifying signs in the heavens are mentioned in Luke 21. Revelation 6:12–14, describes the 6th-seal judgment which will take place in the first half of the seven-year tribulation (violent earthquakes, cosmic signs in the heavens, and the uprooting of mountains and islands). The Day of the Lord will include plagues, but also other terrifying events which have not occurred yet. While we are enduring a pandemic now—other plagues in the past have been more serious than this one.

Second, the man of lawlessness has not yet been revealed. In the first century, false teachers spread the

idea that the Tribulation had already begun. In 2 Thessalonians 2:3, Paul said the “man of lawlessness” had not yet been revealed. Paul was speaking of a coming world dictator, the future false messiah, also called the antichrist (1 John 2:18) and the Beast (Rev. 13:1–10). Since this person has not yet been revealed, we are not yet in the Day of the Lord.

Third, Israel has not signed a covenant with this future false messiah. Daniel 9:27 indicates that the end times seven-year tribulation will begin when this future false messiah makes a treaty with the leadership of Israel. It has not yet been signed, so we are not yet in the tribulation.

We should not be surprised that we are facing difficulties. Jesus said, “In this world, you will have trouble” (John 16:33). Nevertheless, we are not to fear. Nothing can befall us apart from God’s loving hand. He will bring us through this crisis or home to His loving arms.

Q What do Jewish people believe will happen when someone dies?

A Jewish people (myself included) often joke that where there are two Jews, there are three opinions. Since there are many perspectives on this and other doctrinal beliefs,

“We should not be surprised that we are facing difficulties. Nevertheless, we are not to fear. Nothing can befall us apart from God’s loving hand. He will bring us through this crisis or home to His loving arms.”

I will explain the traditional Jewish view, as found in ancient Rabbinic writings, like the Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash.

Traditional Judaism teaches that all people, both Jew and Gentile, will stand before the Lord, who will judge them based on their adherence to the Torah, the Law of Moses. The righteous will be resurrected to Paradise while those who are totally wicked will be sent to Gehenna (or Hell) to suffer, after which they will be annihilated. The vast majority (who have done both good and evil) will go to Gehenna to atone for their sins and then be resurrected to life.

The apostle Paul had a radical departure from his training in Rabbinic Judaism. His declaration that we “are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:24) is the message we must present to both Jews and Gentiles, since “no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law” (Rom. 3:20).

Q I thought that when followers of Jesus died they were absent from the body and present with the Lord. But the Bible also says we are raised on the last day. Which is it?

A The Bible states that those who trust in Jesus’ death and resurrection will be with the Lord immediately upon death. The Lord told the thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (a first-century Jewish word for Heaven; Luke 23:43). Paul states that when he died he would be with Jesus immediately (Phil. 1:21). He said he “would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). When followers of Jesus die, their immaterial spirit or soul goes to be with the Lord immediately.

The confusion arises from 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 which describes believers who died as being asleep. The word “asleep” is a euphemism for death. Upon physical death, the immaterial person goes to be with the Lord. Our bodies become empty vessels, separated from our spirits. At the resurrection of the dead, our bodies and spirits will reunite. Then, we will have glorified bodies, like the resurrected body of Jesus (see 1 Cor. 15:42–49). We need not fear death. We can have the confident expectation that at the moment of physical death, our spirit will live in the presence of the Lord. Then, at the end of days resurrection, our body will reunite with our spirit, and we will serve the Lord forever. ■

Dangers, Toils, and Snares

Read Acts 14:1–28

*We must go through many hardships
to enter the kingdom of God.—Acts 14:22*

“Through many dangers, toils, and snares/I have already come;/Twas grace that brought me safe thus far,/ And grace will lead me home.” John Newton penned these words in his famous hymn, “Amazing Grace.” A slave trader who, after his conversion to Christianity, became a pastor, Newton was celebrating God’s gracious leading in his own life and the life of others.

“Dangers, toils, and snares” perfectly describe what Paul and Barnabas experienced during their return trip to Antioch. But they refused to let these trials stop their mission. Their message to these new disciples was: “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (v. 22). Paul and Barnabas had learned through experience. Nearly everywhere Paul preached, he faced opposition. Even some of his successes posed problems.

In Lystra, after Paul and Barnabas healed a man who had been lame since birth, the people concluded that he and Barnabas must be gods.

His opponents came down from Antioch and Iconium winning over the crowd who then tried to stone Paul, leaving him for dead. But none of this discouraged Paul! Rejection and opposition did not cause him to question his message or the God who had commissioned him to deliver it.

Despite the many toils and dangers they faced, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch triumphant. It would have been easy for them to deliver a negative report. After all, they had been opposed at every turn. Instead, they gave a positive report, observing that God had “opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (v. 27). It was true. God had used the opposition Paul and Barnabas faced to direct their efforts.

► Not all the obstacles you face are true roadblocks. Many are street signs, placed in your path by God to refine your direction. Every believer faces hardship. We can see trials and rejection as proof that we are being faithful to God’s calling and message.

Pray with Us

Father, today’s Scripture reveals some of the reasons for opposition, rejection, and hardships in our lives. Lord, help us understand which are roadblocks and which are street signs, placed by you to give us direction.

Jesus Is Enough

Read Acts 15:1–40

We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are. —Acts 15:11

When Bill heard that Jesus died to pay for his sins, it did not make him grateful. Instead, he got angry. “I don’t want Jesus to pay for my sins,” he said. “I want to pay for them myself!” Some people find it hard to accept a gift, especially when that gift is eternal life.

This was true for many who had spent their lives observing the Law of Moses. They were willing to grant that God would accept the Gentiles through Jesus but only if they were circumcised first “according to the custom taught by Moses” (v. 1). They taught that circumcision was necessary for salvation. Because they claimed to represent the Jerusalem church, the believers in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas to meet with the apostles to resolve the dispute. Before rendering a decision, the apostles and elders met to “consider the question” (v. 6). Peter observed that God had already settled the matter when He gave believing Gentiles the gift of

the Spirit without requiring them to be circumcised first (v. 8). Paul and Barnabas described how God had validated their ministry to the Gentiles by confirming their message with signs and wonders (v. 12). James, a brother of Jesus and who presided over the meeting, explained that the Scriptures agreed with this (v. 15).

The inclusion of the Gentiles in the gospel was part of God’s plan all along. The letter that the apostles and elders sent back included restrictions involving dietary practices that were sensitive to those who valued the Mosaic Law as well as temptations common to Gentile culture.

► Jesus is enough. We are saved not because of what we do, but only because of what Christ has done. The way to become righteous is through faith. No religious rite or human action can substitute for what Christ has already done on our behalf.

Pray with Us

Jesus, thank you for who you are, your victory on the cross, and the sufficiency of your sacrifice for our salvation. We rejoice together with the apostles that we don’t have to follow the Mosaic law in order to attain peace with God.

The Power of the Gospel

Read Acts 16:1–40

*Believe in the Lord Jesus,
and you will be saved.—Acts 16:31*

Adam and Eve, David and Jonathan, James and John are a few of the famous pairs you will meet in the Bible. In today's passage, we are introduced to Timothy, who would later become Paul's protégé in ministry. Paul would later say of Timothy, "I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare" (Phil. 2:20).

Timothy joined the ministry team when Paul visited Lystra. Since Timothy was of Jewish descent through his mother but had a Gentile father, Paul arranged for him to be circumcised for the sake of the mission (v. 3). The Holy Spirit guided Paul and his companions during their journey and eventually directed them to enter Macedonia (vv. 6–10). The text doesn't reveal what means God used to redirect Paul along the way, except for the vision in verse 9. In Philippi, the apostle followed his usual pattern of proclaiming the gospel to the Jews first. Instead of a synagogue, Paul found a group of devout women meeting for prayer. Lydia, a dealer in

purple cloth, was the first to believe their message. She was a wealthy businesswoman who invited Paul and his companions to stay in her home.

Their next conversion came as a result of what others would have considered a setback, if not a travesty of justice. Paul and Silas were arrested, flogged, and thrown in prison, contrary to Roman law (v. 37). Their misfortune turned into an opportunity for the gospel as the jailer and his household were converted. When the magistrates learned of their mistake, they tried to send the two away quietly. But Paul demanded that the magistrates escort them from the prison, which amounted to a public apology from them.

► The gospel's power does not depend on you! What you experience as a setback in your life could be God's open door for the gospel to move forward. Ask God to help you recognize the difference and to accept and even welcome His working in your life.

Pray with Us

When we encounter difficulties and opposition, is it a setback or an open door from God? Father, help us see and understand the difference and act according to the guidance of your Spirit.

Who Is Your God?

Read Acts 17:1–34

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.—Acts 17:24

In his book *Jesus Among Other Gods*, Ravi Zacharias observed, “All religions are not the same . . . At the heart of every religion is an uncompromising commitment to a particular way of defining who God is or is not and accordingly, of defining life’s purpose.” Every time Paul preached the gospel, he challenged existing ideas about the gods, pointing to the one true God. His message was consistent whether his audience was Jew or Gentile.

In Thessalonica, Paul and Silas spent three Sabbaths proving that Jesus was the Messiah. They received a positive response, especially among the Greeks and several prominent women in the congregation, which prompted his opponents to round up a mob and make false accusations. In Berea, a city 50 miles west of Thessalonica, people examined the Scriptures “to see if what Paul said was true” (v. 11). But when Paul’s opponents from Thessalonica heard about it, they sent agitators there too. Paul left Silas and Timothy in Berea to follow up and went on to Athens.

Idolatry in Athens provoked Paul to preach in the marketplace. When the crowd, including a group of philosophers, heard Paul teach about Christ and the resurrection, they invited him to address the Areopagus, an administrative body that served as a court and exercised authority over religious matters. Paul began with observations about their spiritual practices, “I see that in every way you are very religious” (v. 22). He noted their altar to an unknown god (v. 23), and used that common point to spring into an explanation of the true God and the gospel. He reasoned about God from creation, and quoted their philosophers. But central to it all, he preached Christ and warned of the judgment to come.

► When we tell others about Jesus, we often begin with what others already know or believe. Consider your audience: Do they know any Scripture? What assumptions do they have about God? Then point them to Christ and the Cross.

Pray with Us

Today’s reading shows Paul’s creativity in preaching the gospel in Athens. What a powerful example for us! Lord, may we also find ways to share the good news with all people, finding unique approaches to their hearts.

The Power of Weakness

Read Acts 18:1–22

I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling.—1 Corinthians 2:3

Are you comfortable talking to others about what you believe? According to Barna Research, the primary reason some people are unwilling to talk about matters of faith is that religious conversations can create tension and cause arguments. Paul also found this to be true but that did not keep him from telling others about Jesus.

The city of Corinth was the next stop on Paul's itinerary. Corinth was an important commercial center of its time, also famous for its loose morals. Once there, the apostle met Aquilla and Priscilla, both Jewish Christians from Rome. Aquilla shared Paul's trade as a tentmaker, as well as his faith. We know from 1 Corinthians 9:12 that Paul worked to support himself while at Corinth so that he would not "hinder the gospel of Christ." Corinth had a long tradition of public speaking, where paid professionals practiced rhetoric for pay. Paul worked so that the Corinthians would not misunderstand his motives.

Paul's teaching in the synagogue created so much opposition that Paul

"shook out his clothes in protest" and told them that he was turning to the Gentiles (Acts 18:6). This act was a familiar ritual that signified rejection, like saying, "I am washing my hands of you."

Paul seems to have been intimidated by the opposition he encountered. But God did not want him to stop. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, assuring him of His presence and telling him to "keep on speaking" (v. 9). Paul would later write to the Corinthians and remind them how he had come to them "in weakness with great fear and trembling" (1 Cor. 2:3).

► Just because you experience fear, it does not mean that you are unqualified to tell others about Jesus. Perhaps you can team up with someone. You may also want to strengthen your evangelism skills by reading a helpful book such as *How to Give Away Your Faith* by Paul Little. Take small steps and learn how to share your faith.

Pray with Us

Paul's example in today's Scripture helps us overcome discouragement and fear. Thank you, Father, for reassuring Paul with your presence through his "great fear and trembling" (1 Cor. 2:3).

Powerful Encounters

Read Acts 18:23–19:20

In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.—Acts 19:20

Most people know the name of Jesus, but they may not understand fully who He is. They have important gaps in their understanding. After a year in Corinth, Paul set out again, dropping off Priscilla and Aquilla at Ephesus. There they met Apollos, who taught what he already knew about Jesus accurately enough but “knew only the baptism of John” (18:25). The couple filled in the gaps in Apollos’s information, and he went on to be a powerful defender of the gospel. Meanwhile, Paul arrived in Ephesus, where he met other former disciples of John. They also needed more information about Jesus. They had been baptized by John but not “in the name of the Lord Jesus” (19:5).

Notice that Paul followed the same pattern of ministry in Ephesus as he had in Corinth. He preached every Sabbath in the synagogue until persistent rejection drove him out. During the week, he conducted discussions in the afternoon in the lecture hall of Tyrannus after

working at his tentmaking trade in the morning. During these two years of his ministry, the Lord confirmed the authenticity of Paul’s message with miracles.

The sons of Sceva were itinerant exorcists who attempted to use Jesus’ name to cast out demons. Their approach appears to have relied more on incantations and magic spells than prayer or faith. The difference is reflected in the demon’s ironic reply in 19:15: “Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?” When others heard about their failure, they confessed their sin and showed their repentance by burning their scrolls that contained the magic spells, which were considered valuable.

► There is power in the occult, but it is no match for Jesus’ name. The power you have in Christ does not work like a magic spell but works by taking God at His word. If you have dabbled in the occult, confess and find forgiveness in Jesus’ name.

Pray with Us

We praise you, Lord, as a powerful Creator, the source of truth and grace, and the giver of true freedom. Give us courage and discernment to follow you wholeheartedly, with commitment and strong faith.

Hard Pressed

Read Acts 19:21–20:12

*We are hard-pressed on every side,
but not crushed.—2 Corinthians 4:8*

Doing the right thing, especially when it is a God-centered thing, is often met by opposition. While on his deathbed, evangelist John Wesley wrote a letter of encouragement to William Wilberforce, a British politician who led the movement to abolish the slave trade. “Unless God raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils,” Wesley warned. “But if God be for you, who can be against you?”

When the gospel spreads through a culture, it will disrupt the sinful structures in it. The growing number of believers in Ephesus were disturbing to those whose income was tied to idolatry. Demetrius, a silversmith, stirred this discontent into a near-riot by appealing to a mixture of religion, local pride, and greed. The tradesmen seized Paul’s traveling companions and took them to the theater, where public meetings took place. It is estimated that the theater could seat 25,000 people. While Paul wanted to address the mob personally, his friends persuaded him not to enter

the theater. The clerk who acted as the executive administrator of the city’s official assembly quieted the mob by warning that the Romans could charge them with rioting.

Paul planned to return to Jerusalem and then go to Rome, passing through Macedonia and Achaia along the way (Acts 19:21). His itinerary was interrupted because of plots against him (Acts 20:3). During a weeklong stay at Troas, Paul’s extended message combined with the stuffiness of the upper room where they were meeting had an unfortunate result. Eutychus, one of those who accompanied him from Ephesus, dozed off and fell out the window to his death! Through the power of Christ, Paul restored the man to life.

► Are you going through difficult times because of your faith in Jesus? Don’t be surprised if your efforts to spread the gospel bring opposition or unexpected hardship. Remember that God will carry you through. If God is for you, who can be against you?

Pray with Us

In response to today’s teaching from Acts 19 and 20, let’s pray for the determination to always rely on God no matter the situation. Lord, help us remember that with you on our side we can overcome anything!

A Shepherd of the Flock

Read Acts 20:13–36

Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace.—Acts 20:32

Pastors are called many things. Some people address them as *reverend*, *preacher*, or even just *brother*. The term *pastor* comes from the Latin word for *shepherd*. Paul used this term to describe the work of the church leaders in Ephesus (Acts 20:28). Hoping to reach Jerusalem by Pentecost, the apostle stopped at Miletus and sent for the elders of the church of Ephesus. While he did not know exactly what lay ahead, he was certain that “prison and hardships” would be in his future (v. 23).

Paul’s tone was grave because he knew he would not see these leaders again. He began by reminding them of his own pattern of life and ministry. The heart of his message was a charge to “keep watch” (v. 28). Like ordinary shepherds, pastors must act as guardians over God’s flock. The threat from false teaching can come from both outside and inside the church. Personal ambition is a major motive for false teachers that arise within

the church. They “distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them” (v. 30). False teachers are often motivated by greed (v. 33). They enrich themselves at the expense of God’s people. Using language reminiscent of the prophet Samuel’s farewell address in 1 Samuel 12:1–5, Paul urged the church’s leaders to follow his example instead.

The apostle’s warning shows that one of the primary functions of the church’s leaders is to teach God’s Word. This is why 1 Timothy 3:2 says anyone who serves as an overseer must be “able to teach.”

► In Ephesians 4:11, Paul says that pastors whose ministry is teaching are Christ’s gift to the church. Do you pray for your pastor? Pastors need wisdom from God’s Word and the courage to speak the truth. Maybe you can write a note or send an email to offer your encouragement and express appreciation for their ministry.

Pray with Us

We invite you to use today’s passage as a reminder to pray for your pastor and ministry leaders. Jesus, thank you for raising shepherds in the church! We ask that you protect them and guide them as they lead others.

Bound in Jerusalem

Read Acts 21:1–40

I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.—Acts 21:13

Paul was aware what the future held for him, but still he kept on going. The same was true of Jesus who told His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem to be killed and rise again on the third day, Simon Peter objected. In Matthew 16:22, Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke Him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”

When Luke and his team learned that Paul would be arrested and handed over to the Gentiles in Jerusalem, they too were upset (v. 11–12). Paul’s fate was revealed to them by the Holy Spirit during a week-long stopover at Tyre and confirmed by the prophetic message of Agabus in Caesarea (v. 11). Although verse 4 sounds as if it was the Holy Spirit telling Paul not to go to Jerusalem, it was the Spirit who initially directed Paul to make the journey (Acts 20:22). The Holy Spirit did not object to Paul’s trip. It was Paul’s friends who objected because of what the Spirit revealed about its outcome. When they realized that

Paul, like Christ, was determined to follow through even at the cost of his life, they recognized that this was God’s will (v. 14).

It did not take long before those who opposed the gospel of grace that Paul preached tried to kill him. They spread lies, saying Paul had brought Gentiles into the court of the temple where only Jews were allowed. They seized him, dragged him into the outer court of the temple precinct, and began to beat him to death. The commander of the Roman troops, stationed at the fortress adjacent to the temple, heard about the disturbance, saved Paul’s life by arresting him (v. 33).

► Sometimes what seems like misfortune is God’s way of furthering His plan. While today’s reading has a somber tone, it should be an encouragement for us to know that we can trust God with our future. Whatever happens today, remember that God has got your back!

Pray with Us

Father, we come to you today with a prayer of thanksgiving for ordering all the steps of our life. Thank you for your promise never to leave us or forsake us. Help us to believe your promises and rest in them.

Bearing Witness

Read Acts 22:1–30

Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven.—Matthew 10:32

Witness is a word we use to describe that act of sharing your faith. But what does it mean to witness to someone? When we witness, we give a firsthand account of what Christ has done in our life. The term actually comes from the legal world. A witness provides a firsthand testimony in court, bringing information about the case at hand. In today's passage, Paul served as a witness in his own defense by describing his personal conversion experience.

Witnessing, whether for Christ or in a court, means telling your story. Paul's story unfolds in three acts. First, he told his audience what his life was like before Jesus (vv. 2–4). Next, he explained what caused him to turn to Christ (vv. 5–16). Finally, he told them how his life changed after his conversion (vv. 17–21). Notice that the crowd was not receptive to Paul's testimony. The fact that someone rejects your message does not necessarily mean that you failed

as a witness. Jesus warned His disciples that not everyone would listen to what they said about Him. Some would even be put to death (Matt. 10:22; 24:9).

As they tied Paul with thongs in order to whip him, he told the Roman centurion that he was a Roman citizen. The Romans used a whip of leather thongs with pieces of bone or metal tied to the end. It was legal to interrogate a slave or an alien by flogging but not Roman citizens. The commander's error was compounded by the fact that Paul was a citizen by birth. The commander brought the apostle Paul to the Sanhedrin to find out more details about his case.

► Write out your story using Paul's three acts as a model. Briefly describe your life before you trusted in Jesus. What caused you to turn to Jesus in faith? Now talk about the change this has made. Find somebody to tell your story, and you are a witness!

Pray with Us

Lord Jesus, you brought the apostle Paul out of darkness into your wonderful light, and you did the same in our lives. We join our voices with those of other Christians through the ages to praise you for giving us a hope and a future.

Shrewd and Innocent

Read Acts 23:1–35

Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.—Matthew 10:16

When Jesus sent out His disciples to proclaim the kingdom of Heaven, He advised them to be “shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16). Jesus was using a figure of speech. In the Garden of Eden, the serpent was more “crafty” than any other beast (Gen. 3:1). A dove was a worthy sacrifice (Lev. 5:11) and a symbol of peace (Luke 3:22). Christ’s followers would need wisdom as they navigated the troubles ahead while also leading pure and holy lives.

Paul adopted this dual strategy while on trial before the Sanhedrin. When he was rebuked for speaking sharply to the high priest, even though he unjustly ordered that Paul be struck simply for testifying, the apostle apologized. Yet Paul also shrewdly exploited doctrinal disagreements between the Pharisees and Sadducees, the two parties that made up the Sanhedrin. These two groups had long-standing political differences that stretched back to the Maccabean Revolt against the Seleucid empire in the second century B.C. Paul appealed

to the belief of the Pharisees in the resurrection of the body and this divided the assembly.

Lysias, the Roman commander, learned that over forty men had conspired with the chief priests and elders to murder Paul, so he transferred him to Caesarea where Felix, the governor of Judea, resided. The letter that the Roman commander sent exonerated Paul of any charges that merited imprisonment (v. 29). Despite this, the apostle was held in protective custody in the palace that Herod the Great had built. The motives of Lysias and Felix were political. Yet it would be wrong to see Paul as only a pawn in all of this. God was setting the stage to fulfill His promise that the apostle would proclaim Christ “to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel” (Acts. 9:15).

► Do not be too quick to judge your circumstances. What appears to us to be an obstacle or a setback may be God’s way of strategically positioning you for the next stage in His plan.

Pray with Us

Father, the thought that we live according to your plan, and not ours, gives us confidence and joy. We ask for wisdom to see the circumstances of our lives through your perspective and follow your guidance.

Justice Delayed

Read Acts 24:1–27

And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night?—Luke 18:7

Although Thanksgiving Day was first proclaimed as a national holiday in the United States by Abraham Lincoln in 1863, its roots go back to the first harvest celebration observed by the pilgrims in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1621. They had begun in Nottinghamshire, England, and moved to the Netherlands. After twelve years, they relocated again to Plymouth. The reason for these moves was to worship without fear of persecution. Like Paul's, their mission was affected by political forces beyond their control.

Although Paul initially waited only five days before his first audience with Felix, the governor adjourned the trial without making a decision. One reason for the delay was Paul's use of the legal system to his advantage by arguing that key witnesses in his case were not present (v. 19). But Paul's case was delayed even further after Felix invited him to speak about his faith in Christ (v. 24). The moral tone of Paul's message, with its warning of

coming judgment, so alarmed Felix that he abruptly ended the audience (v. 25). This delay was motivated by a combination of guilt and greed. No doubt, Felix's history of marital infidelity made him uncomfortable. He also hoped that Paul would offer him a bribe (v. 26).

God used these unworthy motives to create an opportunity for Paul to share the gospel. During the two-year hiatus, Felix would often send for Paul and talk with him. Paul's prospects did not improve when Porcius Festus, the new governor of Judea, replaced Felix. Instead of deciding Paul's case or choosing to release him, Felix left Paul in prison.

► What about you? Are you feeling stuck in God's waiting room today? While it is no doubt frustrating, these times of delay are not necessarily a deviation from God's plan. Trust God's hand to set the next stage of your life. Let Him work in and through you, even during your waiting time.

Pray with Us

Following the prompt of today's devotional, we commit this day to prayer, even when it seems like we are in God's "waiting room." Lord, use the time when nothing seems to happen for your purposes. All our days are yours!

Two Kingdoms

Read Acts 25:1–27

The authorities that exist have been established by God.—Romans 13:1

Did you know you are a citizen of not one but two kingdoms? Martin Luther observed that we are in kingdoms of Earth and of heaven. In the heavenly kingdom, God rules perfectly. In the earthly, God has delegated authority to rulers who often exercise it imperfectly. While Paul answered first and foremost to God, He suffered and benefited because he was a Roman citizen.

Paul's case was one of the first matters Festus took up after he replaced Felix. Perhaps this was because he knew the Jews had sent letters to Rome criticizing Felix. Festus visited Jerusalem, where Paul's opponents demanded that he be transferred. Their request was a ruse. If Festus granted their petition, they intended to kill Paul while he was on route. Instead, Festus invited them to present their case to him in Caesarea (vv. 4–5). Festus attempted to curry favor with Paul's opponents by suggesting that his trial take place in Jerusalem. But Paul thwarted him by claiming his right as a Roman citizen

to appeal to Caesar. It is possible that he merely meant that Festus should render judgment in the case instead of Paul's opponents in Jerusalem. But it seems likely that Paul saw bias in the governor's suggestion of a change of venue for the trial. By appealing to Caesar, Paul not only kept the trial out of hostile territory, but he also obligated Festus to ensure his safety on the journey to Rome.

Before his departure, Paul had the opportunity to speak to Herod Agrippa II. Festus claimed that the purpose of the meeting was so that he could consult with Agrippa about the case.

► When we, as Christians, exercise our rights and responsibilities as citizens, the system does not always act in our favor. But we can know for certain that God is at work in both kingdoms to accomplish His perfect purpose. That is why, in Romans 13:4, Paul calls civil authorities “God’s servants.” There is only One True Authority.

Pray with Us

Today's teaching about authority gives us an opportunity to pray for our leaders in all areas, as well as men and women in politics. Almighty God, we ask you to put your hand on our country's leaders—may they fear you and hear you.

A Reasonable Faith

Read Acts 26:1–32

Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?—Acts 26:8

Faith and reason are often viewed as opposites. In the beloved Christmas film, *Miracle on 34th Street*, the lawyer Fred Gailey tells Susan, “Faith is believing in something when common sense tells you not to.” While there indeed is more to faith than common sense, it is also true that faith does not ignore reason.

In his defense before Agrippa, Paul appealed to both personal experience and Scripture. His argument from experience focused on his former life as a persecutor of Christians. His view changed when the risen Jesus appeared to him and said that He had appointed Paul to be “a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me” (v. 16). Paul’s message was not based on philosophical or theological speculation. He knew it was true because he had seen and heard the living Christ.

Yet at the very heart of Paul’s defense was an appeal to Scripture. The main reason Paul changed his view was his realization that the

Christian message claimed: “nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles” (vv. 22–23). No wonder Paul said that his message was “reasonable” (v. 25). Rather than being insane, as Festus asserted, the things Paul said were the sober truth. Paul had said no more than what God had already predicted in the Scriptures. Paul’s claims were also based in fact. The things he spoke about were “not done in a corner” (v. 26). They had been seen by many.

► Reason alone will not lead someone to faith in Christ. That is why engaging in argumentation rarely produces converts. But we also know that the Christian faith is not unreasonable. The gospel message is based on facts and the sober truth of God’s Word. If you know an unbeliever, challenge them to study the Scriptures, and then believe!

Pray with Us

Jesus, author of our faith, we pray for those in our lives who don’t know you or have turned away from faith. Holy Spirit, work in their hearts and bring them to the Savior. Amen!

Faith in the Storm

Read Acts 27:1–44

I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.—Acts 27:25

During a violent storm at sea, the 18th-century evangelist John Wesley experienced a crisis of faith. While everyone around him seemed terrified, a band of believers known as Moravians were untroubled. While others screamed, they sang hymns. Wesley, who was already a preacher and considered himself a Christian, realized that they possessed a type of faith that he didn't. Two years later, he read Martin Luther's preface to the book of Romans. That night Wesley wrote in his journal, "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation."

Paul's journey to Rome was also interrupted by a terrible storm. The centurion who had custody over Paul and the other prisoners who sailed with him unwisely decided to travel on from Fair Havens despite unfavorable sailing conditions (vv. 9–12). The apostle's warning in verse 10 was probably his own judgment based on current conditions.

However, when the weather proved to be as treacherous as Paul had suspected, God sent an angel who reassured Paul that he must stand trial before Caesar. The angel also told Paul that God had graciously given him all the lives of those who sailed with him (v. 24). Paul's confidence that God would keep His promise helped him encourage the frightened sailors. But when the ship ran aground, the soldiers determined to kill all the prisoners to prevent them from escaping (v. 42). The centurion's intervention kept the soldiers from carrying out their plan. Everyone reached shore with no loss of life.

► Notice that God did not keep Paul from going through the storm or even from the consequences of other people's bad decisions. However, He did preserve Paul so that he would be able to fulfill God's purpose. What storm are you facing today? Look to God to carry you through.

Pray with Us

Today's Scripture reading reminds us that Christ is the Lord over all types of storms—physical, emotional, and spiritual. Lord Jesus, we lift up our personal storms to you and trust you to take us through them safely.

Safe and Sound

Read Acts 28:1–31

He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.—Acts 28:31

We have come to the end of the book of Acts but not to the end of Paul's story. We have been given a realistic view of life in the early church. We have heard the gospel message as preached by the apostles. And we have been encouraged by the power of the gospel to save! When Paul arrives "safely on shore" at Malta (v. 1), the islanders treated him with reverence and respect, although some of their notions about him were misguided (v. 6). Once in Rome, Paul was a prisoner again, living under house arrest (v. 16).

The first thing Paul did was to present his case to the local Jewish leaders. The reason was probably twofold. First, this was simply Paul's normal practice. He always began his evangelistic work with the Jewish people. Second, it may have been advantageous to his case. Since the complaint against him had to do with matters of Jewish belief, it would strengthen his argument before the emperor if the Jewish leaders in Rome

agreed that Paul had committed no crime against the Jewish people or their customs (v. 17).

"We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, and none of our people who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you," they said (v. 21). "But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect" (v. 22). Paul's message had two main thrusts. First, he preached Christ to them from the Scriptures (v. 23). Second, Paul explained that this good news wasn't for Jews only but that "God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!" (v. 28).

► The book of Acts gives us every reason to be thankful for the gospel. It reveals God's power to save everyone who responds to it with faith. If you have not done so already, believe it. If you already believe, ask God for a chance to share the gospel with someone today.

Pray with Us

Father, thank you for the lessons we've learned this month from the life of the early church. Lord, thank you for the gospel—a treasure you've given us. Truly, it's your power to save! May we live worthy of the gospel. Amen!

Make Room for Joy

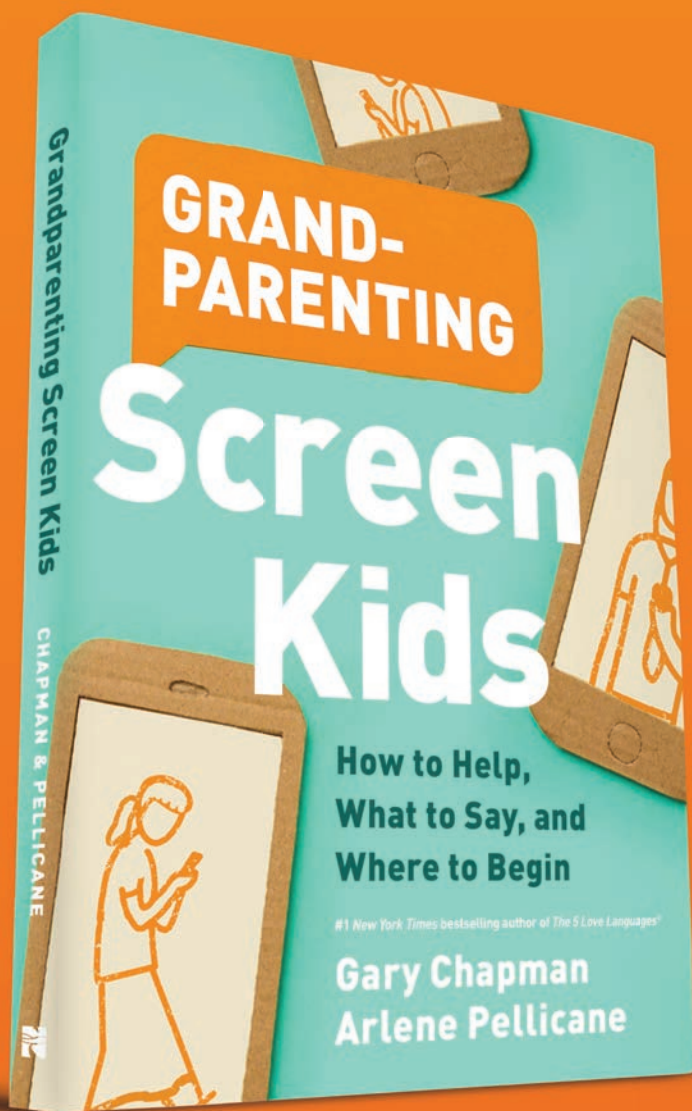


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