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ACTS 1-12
FOR YOU



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Acts 1-12 For You

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Series Preface

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centred
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *Acts 1-12 For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two (or occasionally three) shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **gray** when they first appear, and are explained in the

[glossary](#). There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

Bible translations used:

- ESV: English Standard Version (this is the version being quoted unless otherwise stated)
- NIV: New International Version, 2011 edition
- NASB: New American Standard Bible

Introduction to Acts 1 - 12

The Gospel of Luke concludes with the disciples in Jerusalem praising God after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. As we see in Luke 24:49, Jesus left the **apostles**^[1] with the promise that he would send “the promise of my Father,” the Holy Spirit, to them. After that, Luke records that Jesus was “carried up into heaven” (Luke 24:51). Luke, however, did not want to end his history with the **ascension** of Jesus. Instead, he decided (and, from the heavenly rather than human perspective, was inspired by God’s Spirit) to write a second volume which chronicles the events of the early church—what we call the book of Acts.

There are many similarities between the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. First, *both Luke and Acts focus on how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament and inaugurates the **new covenant***. For instance, Luke concludes his gospel with Jesus teaching the apostles, “‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms [i.e. the entire Old Testament] must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that **repentance** for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things’” (Luke 24:44-48). We see similar statements throughout Luke’s Gospel; in Luke 4:18-21 Jesus quoted from the prophet Isaiah and said that the Scripture was being fulfilled in himself.

The Book of Acts also focuses on how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament. In Acts 1:15-26, Luke records how Peter taught that “the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of **David** concerning **Judas**.” Also in the next chapter, Peter’s sermon argues, on the basis of Old Testament Scripture, that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 2:14-36). Luke shows us the apostles, like Jesus, constantly returning to Scripture as the

source of their teaching, and taking care to show repeatedly how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament.

By focusing on the fact that Jesus has fulfilled the Old Testament, Luke is helping us to see that God's word never returns empty (see Isaiah 55:11), and that the basis of our Christian belief is found in the Scriptures. Jesus and the apostles appealed to Scripture and always rested their conviction on the authority of God's word. Likewise, the church must reason from the Scriptures in the same way the apostles did. If we are to be like the early church in Acts—if we are to be like Jesus—we must hold fast to the authority of Scripture. If we do not, we have no authority to speak or even to know. Luke wants his readers to trust the word of God, and to know the truth about Jesus Christ and his gospel.

In every generation, the church must be reminded to hold fast to Scripture's authority, because in every generation we are tempted to replace Scripture with something else. Instead, we must affirm that the Scriptures are a wonderful, unchanging, sufficient gift from God and the only source of truth and life. Where we find a faithful church, we find that it is a church deeply rooted in Scripture. If we are going to have healthy churches, full of healthy Christians, we're going to need to answer a lot of questions. Those questions are answered in the book of Acts.

Second, *both Luke and Acts focus on the person and work of Jesus*. Obviously, the Gospel of Luke is primarily committed to teaching the church about who Jesus was and what he accomplished. Luke wrote a rigorously researched narrative of Jesus' life and teachings so that his readers might "have certainty" concerning the things that were taught about Jesus (Luke 1:1-4). But Luke did not say everything about Jesus that he wanted to in his Gospel. Luke has much more to say about Jesus in the book of Acts. Interestingly, the first verses of Acts make this very point. In Acts 1:1, Luke states that his first book was about all that Jesus "began to do and teach." The implication is that Acts is the record of what Jesus continued to do and to teach, by the Spirit, in his church.

Third, *both Luke and Acts focus on the people of God, the church*. Luke indicates through both his volumes that God's purpose is to **redeem** a people as his own purchased and precious possession—his very own people. This redeemed group of people is known as the church. The book of Acts emphasizes that there is one people of God. One of the early controversies in the church was about whether **Gentiles** could be included in the church without first becoming Jewish. But Luke makes clear that the new covenant is for all peoples. In the new covenant, **circumcision** is no longer the defining mark. Instead, faith in Christ and **baptism** as a public declaration of that faith create the boundaries of the new-covenant community.

Finally, *both Luke and Acts focus on the sovereignty of God*. We meet so many individuals in these two books, but God is always the main actor. He uses the most unlikely of people to spread the gospel, like the impetuous Peter or even the murderous Saul. But it is his work, through people. Thus in Acts, Luke reminds us that God is **sovereign** in our life and in his world, even when we don't understand what he is doing. We can be confident that the Lord is building his church and pursuing the good of his people—and we can feel privileged that he calls us to join him in this work. As we work through this wonderfully exciting book, keep these themes in mind and watch how Luke gloriously unfolds them.

ACTS CHAPTER 1 VERSES 1-26

1. The Promise and the Mission

The Book of Acts begins in the same way as the Gospel of Luke, showing that this is the second volume of Luke's two-volume history. In **1:1-2**^[2], Luke reminds **Theophilus** that the first volume was dedicated to "all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles."

Luke also indicates the content of Jesus' teaching during the time after the resurrection but before Christ's ascension. Jesus was "speaking about the **kingdom of God**" (**v 3**). This mention of the kingdom of God is significant. As the rest of Acts unfolds, we will find that the apostles must have taken Christ's message to heart. Much of the preaching in the book of Acts focuses on the coming of God's kingdom in the person of Christ. In fact, not only does the book of Acts begin with God's kingdom; it also ends by declaring the kingdom of God. In 28:31, Luke indicates that Paul was "proclaiming the kingdom of God."

In **1:4-5**, Luke indicates that Jesus told the apostles to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came upon them. These verses introduce another incredibly important **theological** theme that will develop throughout the book of Acts—the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit falls on the apostles at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), their lives and their ministries are radically transformed. Acts shows us that Christ sends the Spirit to make the proclamation of the gospel effective. The church is built by God's word and God's Spirit.

This point is something we must remember especially today. God does not build his church through gimmicks or programmatic cleverness. The church is not dependent on marketing strategies for its success. Our only hope to

see lives changed by the gospel is to faithfully proclaim God's word and then trust God's Spirit to make our proclamation effective. Even in our own lives as Christians, as we seek personal transformation into Christ's likeness, we must turn to God's word and then ask God's Spirit to make it effective in our lives as we trust in the gospel of Christ.

In **1:6**, the apostles ask Jesus, "Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus responds by saying that they are not called to know when the Father will accomplish his purposes (**v 7**). Scholars have a wide range of opinions as to what is happening in these verses. What exactly are the apostles asking? What are the assumptions that lie behind this question? Why does Jesus respond with something of a non-answer?

Ultimately, we cannot reconstruct what was happening in the minds of the apostles. What does seem clear is that the apostles were expecting Jesus to make good on the Old Testament expectation that Israel would become an eternal kingdom with the **Messiah** reigning on the throne of David. We see, for instance, that Isaiah had spoken of a day when Israel would reign over the nations, which would stream to Zion to hear the word of the Lord (Isaiah 2:1-4).

The apostles are essentially asking if the end has come. Jesus rebuffs their question, indicating that their job is not to know the exact timing of the fulfillment of God's plan. Instead, their job is to be faithful as they wait. They may not witness the final culmination of God's plan, but they are to witness to God's Son (Acts **1:8**).

Immediately, Jesus describes what the Spirit will equip the apostles do: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (see [this map](#)). This verse is one of the most important in the book of Acts. First, it shows us that the power the Holy Spirit gives to God's people is the power to witness to Christ. Second, this verse also functions as a second "Great Commission" (see Matthew 28:18-20). Jesus describes the gospel moving out through concentric circles from Jerusalem

to Judea and Samaria and finally to the entire world. Finally, this verse functions as a preview of the entire book of Acts, which will track the movement of the apostles as they travel from Jerusalem to the outer reaches of the Roman Empire.

Jesus Leaves

Immediately following this second Great Commission and the promise of the coming Spirit, Jesus is taken up into heaven (Acts **1:9**). The ascension marks a significant change in **redemptive history**. Christ's death, resurrection, ascension, and the Spirit's arrival at Pentecost inaugurate the era of the new covenant. As the prophet Jeremiah explained, the new covenant is not like the old covenant given at Sinai, because in the new covenant the **law** of God is written on the hearts of God's people and not on tablets of stone (Jeremiah 31:31-33). The new covenant is also different from the old covenant because it includes men and women from every tribe, tongue, and nation. Whereas the old covenant was restricted to those who were physical descendants of **Abraham**, the new covenant comprises Abraham's spiritual children—those who exercise saving faith in Christ (Galatians 3:29). As a result, the people of God in the new covenant are called to be a missional people. Instead of finding their identity in their ethnicity, God's new-covenant people identify with Christ and with his global kingdom. In this new covenant era, the Christian church will evangelize and preach the gospel to the nations.

After the ascension, two men in white robes confronted the shocked disciples (Acts **1:10**). The disciples were evidently confused and fascinated as they continued to stare into the heavens long after Jesus had disappeared. The angels asked the apostles why they were staring into heaven, and encouraged them to remember that just as Jesus had ascended into heaven, so also he would one day descend in glory and power at the second coming (**v 11**).

This mention of Jesus' second coming introduces yet another important

theological theme in Acts—the *parousia*. This Greek word literally means “arrival” or “advent,” and it is often used to refer to the second coming of Christ. While the **incarnate** Christ came as a humble baby, Christ in his second coming will appear in power and ultimate authority. He will return as the King of kings and Lord of lords, accompanied by an angelic host to claim his church and crush the head of his enemy once and for all.

The fact that the angels reminded the apostles of Christ’s second coming at the time of his ascension is incredibly significant for Christians today. It is surely striking that the very thing the angels wanted the disciples to know most just after Jesus had departed was that he was coming back. As we live by faith and trust Christ as he reigns on the throne, we must do so with the ever-present thought that Jesus will, indeed, return and consummate his kingdom. In the absence of Christ’s physical presence, we must behold his return with the eyes of faith and trust that our King will come again.

Another thing we must recognize is that Christ’s ascension is perhaps one of the doctrines most often overlooked by evangelicals. Yet Jesus’ ascension into heaven is essential to the Christian faith. The ascension proves that Christ actually resurrected from the dead and is currently reigning in heaven. The resurrection was not the finishing point of Christ’s journey—it was part of the route to his ascension and **exaltation** (see Philippians 2:6-11).

Historically, the church has recognized the ascension in three distinct ways. The first aspect the ascension demonstrates is the reality of Christ’s present lordship. Because Jesus ascended into heaven through the power of God, he is now reigning from the throne of God. Though Jesus is absent physically from the church, he is actively and unconditionally ruling over his church from his place at the right hand of God (Ephesians 1:20-23).

The second reality of Christ’s ascension is that Christ has now become the **mediator** of those who believe in him. As the author of Hebrews asserts, Christ became the believer’s superior great **High Priest** and is currently **interceding** for his church (Hebrews 4:14 – 5:10; 7:1 – 10:39). Thus, Christians can have hope that Christ is acting on their behalf at all times.

Finally, the ascension shows us Christ's active participation in judgment. Though God the Father is the ultimate judge, Christ, seated at the right hand of the Father (Ephesians 1:20; see also Mark 16:19), is also given the privilege and authority to judge. This authority was re-established when Christ returned to heaven and began to judge the hearts of men. When reading the entirety of the New Testament, all three of these realities are tied to both Christ's present reign as well as his promise to return.

Waiting Well

At the conclusion of their conversation with the angels, the disciples move to action. For almost three years, the disciples relied on Jesus for everything from their itinerary and food supply to spiritual guidance. Now they must manage on their own and carry the mantle of the church.

Luke doesn't give any indication that the disciples were uncertain about or divided over what they should do next. Rather, Luke records that the disciples returned from the Mount of Olives—the scene of the ascension—to the city of Jerusalem. Upon entering the city, the disciples went to a particular upper room (Acts **1:13**). While it's possible that this room was the same one used for the meal Jesus shared with his disciples the night before his death (the "Last Supper," Luke 22:12), Luke does not make that clear. Instead, it seems far more likely that this room is the same upper room the disciples used after the crucifixion (John 20:19). This room would have held real significance for the disciples, and thus served as a meeting place in uncertain times.

After listing the disciples who were present (Acts **1:12-13**), Luke gives further details about others who also gathered with them in the upper room—"the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers" (**v 14**). One person notably absent from this cast of characters is Judas.

The mention of Mary's presence in the upper room deserves special attention. Mary wasn't present simply because she was Jesus' mother, but because she was a faithful follower of Christ. She trusted her son as Savior.

Mary believed in his death and resurrection, and thus joined together with the disciples and other believers. The mention of Jesus' brothers is highly significant as well. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus' brothers are placed in opposition to Jesus and his ministry (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3). Mark even notes that Jesus' own family thought he was "out of his mind" (Mark 3:21), and the apostle John states, "Not even his brothers believed in him" (John 7:5). Now, however, Jesus' family is counted among this small band of faithful believers in the upper room.

After describing who was present in the upper room, Luke specifically details what the group was doing. We're told that the group as a whole became joined "with one accord" (Acts **1:14**). Again, Luke is affirming that everyone present was committed to the unifying belief that Jesus is the Messiah, risen from the dead and ascended into heaven. Faith in Jesus unified them together as one people.

Luke also indicates that these men and women were devoted to prayer. This devotion to prayer was an act of obedience to Christ (Luke 18:1). Trusting in the promise of the coming Holy Spirit, the group relied on asking God in prayer to guide their actions. It was because of the disciples' devotion to prayer that the Lord began to work through them to build his church.

What Now?

Consider what must have been going through the minds of the disciples after Jesus ascended into heaven and left them alone. They undoubtedly would have been filled with uncertainty, anxiety, and fear. In a matter of a few days, they'd gone from lamenting the loss of their Savior to rejoicing over the reality that he was alive. After all this, they now faced a crucial and urgent question: what now?

We face this same question today. How ought we to respond to the news that Christ is not dead, but rather, is resurrected and ascended into heaven? How we respond to this question dictates not only how we live now, but

also how we will spend eternity. Just as the disciples faced the uncertainty of the future, we too face the uncertainty of our immediate futures. Though we don't know what will happen this side of heaven, we must follow the disciples' example of trusting our King. If we respond to his commands in faith, then our eternal destiny will be secure in him.

A second application from the text is made evident in Jesus' family. The gospel is capable of changing literally anyone. In the same way that Jesus' brothers came to believe in him after denying his identity and straying from his teaching, so too can the greatest sinner and most ungodly come to Christ. That Jesus' family was among the first post-resurrection believers to confirm his ascension is of considerable importance.

We all too frequently pass judgment on those around us whom we think are too sinful or resistant to the gospel to turn and believe in Jesus, unconsciously concluding that they're beyond the reach of God's redemptive grace. We must allow God's word to remind us of his incredible power to redeem the lost. In Luke 23:42-43, a criminal condemned to death for sinful actions came to trust in Christ in his final moments on earth. Salvation is not dependent on someone's merit, but rather on a person's belief in the **atonement** and redemptive work of Christ. If a person believes that Christ died, rose again, and ascended into heaven for the sake of sinners, so too can they be like the thief on the cross and enter the kingdom of God. Everyone must believe this to be saved; anyone can believe this and be saved; and no one is beyond God's reach to bring them to this belief in order that they might be saved.

A third application is the need for unity in the church. When the group first gathered in the upper room after Jesus ascended into heaven, they recognized the importance of being unified together as one. Just as the early church desperately needed to be unified, so too is the church today in desperate need of unity—spiritual unity, not structural unity. The church doesn't need a central bishop or priest, but rather a central unification in one Lord, one faith, and one baptism (Ephesians 4:5). One way we demonstrate our unity around the truth is by our praying together to the

Lord of truth. We should not miss in Acts **1:14** the fact that the early church committed itself to prayer. Prayer is a powerful declaration of our dependence on him and our unity with each other. If we would have unified churches, we need to have praying churches. It's when our local churches are spiritually unified together in obedience to their King, both within themselves and with one another, that God's glory becomes evident. It's through this unity that our churches display the power of the gospel to the world around us.

Questions for reflection

1. How important is Acts 1:8 to the way you look at your own life, purposes, and priorities?
2. What difference would it make to you if you considered the reality of the ascension shortly after waking each day?
3. If we would have unified churches, we need to have praying churches. How committed are you to praying for your church, and with your church?

PART TWO

The Apostolic Vacancy

After describing the unity that those who believed in Christ's resurrection and ascension shared with one another, Luke further details the events of the upper room, particularly as they pertain to the leadership of the early church.

In Acts **1:15**, Luke states that 120 people were present in the upper room, and he also indicates that Peter was the first to take charge and address the first assembly of the church. Given Peter's history, we might assume that he would be the least likely person to assert leadership in the early church. Just remember his three-fold denial of Christ during the trial. Nevertheless, Peter was restored (John 21:15-19), and we find here that Peter is feeding Christ's sheep just as Jesus commissioned him to (John 21:17).

Peter's address to the other disciples focuses on Judas' betrayal of Christ. Peter indicates that this action was foretold by the Old Testament, and that the Old Testament now gives them instructions on how to choose Judas' replacement among the apostles (Acts **1:16, 20**). Before examining the content of Peter's speech, we should notice two points about what Peter believes about the character of Scripture. First, Peter indicates that the Scripture "had to be fulfilled" (**v 16**). This statement shows Peter's confidence in the **veracity** of Scripture and in the prophetic nature of the Old Testament. Second, Peter indicates that Scripture came as "the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David." Thus, Peter simultaneously affirms the divine and the human authorship of Scripture. God speaks in Scripture, but he speaks through certain individuals. B.B. Warfield called this the "**concursive** theory of inspiration" (*Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, page 119). Scripture has both a divine and a human author, who together, in God's sovereignty, produce inscripturated revelation. As Peter wrote later in his second epistle, "Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). Thus, when Scripture speaks, God speaks.

What Happened to Judas

As he does frequently throughout the book of Acts, Luke interjects in Peter's sermon an informative statement about Judas' fate. Acts **1:18-19** thus serves as a historical and descriptive explanation of what happened to Judas after he betrayed Jesus. Without sparing his readers any nauseating detail, Luke depicts Judas' death thoroughly. He indicates that Judas used the betrayal money—30 pieces of silver (Matthew 26:14-15)—to buy property. Without any further explanation of the cause of the incident, Luke describes Judas as “falling headlong,” after which “he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out.” This is both vivid and horrifying.

Luke dramatically describes Judas' death in order to remind us of the futility of rejecting Christ. He further seeks to disgrace Judas and his unbelief by describing the infamy of the property on which Judas died. The property became known in Aramaic as “Akeldama,” or “Field of Blood.” This designation served as a reminder to all who heard of the ultimate end for the one who betrayed Christ.

It's amazing, and extremely sobering, to consider that Judas was with Christ and the apostles throughout Jesus' entire earthly ministry. Judas heard the Sermon on the Mount. He agonized over interpreting the parables. He witnessed Jesus' miracles. He shared in the ministry experience that Christ freely gave to his disciples. Judas even served as the group's treasurer (John 12:6). Yet, he threw it all away. Judas preferred the pleasures of money over the kingdom of God.

Judas' life and death is a reminder to all of us of the need to genuinely examine ourselves to see if we are truly trusting in Christ. Judas experienced what only a select few individuals ever had—life and ministry with the Lord of creation. Peter even reminded his listeners that Judas was “allotted his share in this ministry” (Acts **1:17**). The reality of Judas' fall after being so close to Christ serves as both a reminder of the need to exercise true repentance and as a warning against false assurance or secret sins. Judas had numerous opportunities to believe in Christ and place his faith in the

Savior. Instead, he deemed it more advantageous to betray Christ for worldly gains.

We must remember that none of us are above or beyond abandoning Christ. Though we won't be presented with the exact opportunity that Judas faced, we still in effect betray Christ whenever we make any created thing a higher priority than Christ himself. Our thirty pieces of silver may not be financial, but each one of us is tempted to trade our Christ-won heavenly inheritance for the things of this world, and to live for created things rather than our Creator. We must always be on guard against chasing after fleeting riches. Instead, we must walk each day in faith and repentance, trusting only in the free mercy of Christ in our fight against sin.

Apostolic Criteria

After this short historical interjection from Luke, we see Peter continuing his sermon by quoting two separate psalms. First, he quotes Psalm 69:25, which holds the distinction of being the psalm that is the second most frequently quoted in the entire New Testament. Psalm 69:25 prophesied the inevitable outcome that would come to Judas and his property. In that psalm David indicated that the house of the one who betrayed Christ would become "desolate" and that "no one [would] dwell in it." In other words, Judas' life and legacy would be completely annihilated—just as his actions had been intended to enable Jesus' enemies—successfully, so they thought—to annihilate the Lord.

Second, Peter quoted Psalm 109:8—"Let another take his office." At this point, Peter's intention becomes clear—Judas must be replaced among the twelve disciples. Peter recognized the significance of having twelve disciples—not eleven—for that number mirrored the twelve tribes of Israel (see Revelation 21:12-14). As there had been twelve sons of Jacob as the foundation of God's Old Testament people, so there must be twelve apostles as the foundation of God's New Testament people. Since neither Christ nor the Holy Spirit was there to lead them (the Holy Spirit doesn't

arrive until Acts 2), Peter rightly looked to Scripture for authority in his leadership. By quoting the psalmist's prophecy about a replacement, Peter exercised leadership, not on the basis of his authority, but on the basis of God's authority found in Scripture.

In speaking to the believers gathered in the upper room, Peter stressed the importance of the future apostle being one who was present during Jesus' ministry and a witness of his resurrection. The new apostle must have been verifiably present at "**the baptism of John**," and on the day Jesus "was taken up from us" (another reminder that the ascension was enacted by the Father), and (between those two events) he must have been a "witness to his resurrection." Thus, Peter in essence argues that the twelfth apostle must be a man who was present from the beginning of Christ's ministry until the end. Don't miss this indication that many others besides the original twelve disciples must have continually followed Jesus.

1:21-22 makes it clear that an apostle must be a witness to Jesus' resurrection. Paul affirms the importance of this event in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 by labeling Christ's resurrection as of "first importance." Both Acts **1:21-22** and 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 show us just how central the resurrection is to our faith. In fact, Paul would later say that if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then our faith is in vain (1 Corinthians 15:17). Christians rightly prioritize Christ's death on the cross, but often tend to forget about the resurrection. Peter and Paul rightly remind us that the resurrection is just as indispensable as Christ's death. Without the resurrection of Christ, we can have no confidence that God accepted Christ's sacrifice. Without the resurrection of Christ, we can have no confidence that the new creation has dawned and will one day come in fullness. Without the resurrection of Christ and his ascension, we can have no confidence that he is interceding for us at the Father's right hand.

Notably, as Peter continues he refers to Jesus as "the Lord Jesus" (Acts **1:21**). In fact, from this point on, the customary reference to Jesus is "Lord Jesus." This change in idiom is not accidental. Instead, it reflects the disciples' confidence that the risen and ascended Christ is indeed reigning at

the right hand of God and is the Lord of all creation. Though Jesus has always held the position of “Lord,” as the second member of the **Trinity**, Peter is recognizing that Christ, now as the God-man, has finished his earthly work and has been exalted by the Father to the throne of heaven.

Choosing the Replacement

Once Peter finished giving guidelines for picking Judas’ successor, two names were brought forward: “Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias” (**v 23**). Apparently, both men were equally qualified to replace Judas, so the disciples, again faced with uncertainty, turned to prayer.

The disciples’ prayer was plain and simple and yet effective. They acknowledged that God knew all things, and was capable of making the decision for them (**v 24-25**). In acknowledging God’s sovereignty and **omniscience**, they confessed their lack of wisdom in making such important decisions. Their actions also demonstrated that the church is not built on human authority, nor is it a human concoction. Jesus Christ is the Lord of the church. By praying, the disciples were humbly submitting to Christ’s lordship and his right to order his people in a way that he sees fit.

After praying, the disciples decided that they would let the Lord decide Judas’ replacement as they cast lots. Casting lots was a common practice in the first-century. Marks would be etched onto rocks or sticks which were then tossed into a small area; the objects would be interpreted to make specific decisions depending on how they fell. **Verse 26** is the only time the New Testament mentions the practice. Once the Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost (2:1-13), the Holy Spirit is the one who guides the church’s decisions.

This immediately raises the question: should we cast lots today for important decisions? I do not believe we should. We must remember to interpret Scripture according to its redemptive historical timeline. As redemptive history changes from one epoch to another, so too do the

expectations on God's people. Now that we live after the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2) and the completion of the **canon** of Scripture, Christians should now make decisions on the basis of Spirit's guiding and the teaching of Scripture. We use Bible-informed wisdom in the context of a local church community in order to make faithful, God-honoring decisions.

Returning to Acts, once the lots are tossed, they fall to Matthias, and he thus becomes the twelfth and final member of the apostles (**1:26**). This mention of Matthias is the one and only in the Bible. Church history and tradition, however, show that Matthias and the other disciples continued to have fruitful ministries for the gospel (see, for instance, the helpful discussion of the apostles' lives and ministries in John MacArthur's *Twelve Ordinary Men*).

The replacement of Judas underscores God's just judgment on sin. Unquestionably, God judged Judas. The graphic description of Judas death is a picture of what awaits those who reject Christ. Of course, not all who reject Christ will meet such a violent end in this life. But the Bible indicates that all who refuse to believe the gospel will meet God's eternal judgment (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10). Judas was rejected and replaced. His life serves as a warning for all of us that we must never turn away from Christ and reject the gospel. We should never forget what is at stake in this life, nor the urgent need of salvation for our unbelieving friends and neighbors. God's judgment on sin and rebellion is just, real, and eternal. The gospel is the only message that can save the lost and turn someone away from the **wrath** of God.

At the same time, the replacement of Judas also highlights God's mercy. The appointment of Matthias helped the apostles share what was surely an enormous load of ministry needs in the following years, as the church started to rapidly expand across the known world. It also ensured that there was yet one more reliable eyewitness of Jesus' life, ministry, and resurrection.

Christians should take tremendous comfort from the fact that our faith is

not based on hearsay, rumor, or wishful thinking. Instead our faith is based on the historical fact of the resurrection of Christ—an event substantiated by hundreds of eyewitnesses in the early church, including the apostles themselves (1 Corinthians 15:6). Christianity is not based on an idea or a philosophy. Christianity is built on a person: the historical person named Jesus Christ, who 2,000 years ago died for our sins and then rose from the dead. The resurrection is not a speculative idea but a historical fact. This is surely an unshakeable foundation.

Questions for reflection

1. How does considering the Holy Spirit's role in the writing of Scripture give us confidence in and excitement about the Bible?
2. How does Judas' death serve as both a reminder and a warning to you? What things in your life tempt you to betray Christ, just as Judas did?
3. What was the difference between Judas the betrayer and Peter the denier?

2. The Day of Pentecost

By Acts 2, the apostles, along with 120 other disciples and eyewitnesses of Jesus Christ, have gathered in the upper room. They are waiting for the Holy Spirit, whom Christ had promised to send (Acts 1:4-5). This chapter describes the fulfillment of that promise on the day of Pentecost as the Holy Spirit descends on the apostles and empowers them for gospel ministry.

The Moment of Pentecost

Pentecost was the day on which the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples (**2:1-4**). This event is perhaps one of the three most important moments in redemptive history. The first event was creation, the moment when God created the stage on which he would work out his sovereign plan. As John Calvin said, God created the world to function as a theater of his glory in the drama of redemption (see Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.6.2).

The second most significant moment in redemptive history was the **substitutionary** death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. In the cross and resurrection of Christ, God accomplished redemption and ushered in the new covenant, fulfilling all the promises and expectations of the Old Testament.

The third most significant event in redemptive history is the day of Pentecost—the birth of the church, the creation of God's new-covenant people.

Scholars have interpreted Acts 2 in a number of ways, and different theological traditions often appeal to this event in an effort to support their

particular doctrinal distinctives. For that reason, as we interpret the events at Pentecost, we must be incredibly cautious that we don't read into the text anything that is not actually there. Instead, we must attend to the actual narrative and unpack the message Luke intended us to see. One way to do this is to see how Luke portrays Pentecost as having three defining characteristics: it was dramatic, universal, and polarizing.

Dramatic

Luke highlights that Pentecost was a dramatic and unique moment in salvation history. The writers of the Bible frequently use comparisons to describe great works of God. Luke does the same in this chapter when he writes, "And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind" (v 2). This isn't a simple breeze. The great sound arrested everyone's attention (v 6). In comparing the sound from heaven to a turbulent wind, Luke intimates that this event is no ordinary moment in the history of the church. In fact, by referring to a "rushing wind," Luke is intentionally calling our minds to other portions of Scripture where wind has great theological significance.

Throughout the Bible, the work of God is described with the imagery of wind. In fact, in the Old Testament the Hebrew word *ruach* means both "wind" and "Spirit." Ezekiel describes the Spirit of God working in and through the wind (Ezekiel 37). In that chapter, Ezekiel is shown a valley of dry bones and is asked if the bones can live. He gives the only answer a prophet can: "O LORD God, you know" (37:3). God then demonstrates his power to Ezekiel by giving the bones muscle and tendons, but even then the bones do not come alive. Rather, the dry bones only come alive when the Spirit enters them (37:10). The implication is clear: only the Spirit can give new life. By recalling the great rushing wind, Luke is indicating that God's life-giving Spirit has come to rest on the apostles. The sound of a violent wind signals the **advent** of the life-giving Spirit. Luke makes this point explicit when he notes that those in the upper room were "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:4).

Immediately after the wind, Luke also records that “tongues” like fire rested on those who were gathered (**v 3**). Once again, the mention of fire evokes other significant moments of redemptive history described in Scripture, such as **Moses’** encounter with the burning bush in Exodus 3 or the fire on Mount Sinai in Exodus 19. Like wind, fire in Scripture often symbolizes the presence of God’s Spirit. **John the Baptist** even alluded to this when he indicated that Christ offered a greater baptism because he would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matthew 3:11). Thus, the falling of tongues like fire on the disciples in Acts **2:3** represents the triumphant arrival of the Holy Spirit.

So Luke describes the sudden coming of the Holy Spirit in two common metaphors found in Scripture: wind and fire. As mentioned above, the wind isn’t just any earthly wind; it’s a heavenly, Spirit-filled wind. And the tongues like fire fulfill John the Baptist’s testimony about Jesus. The suddenness of this event demonstrates that this was no mere ordinary act. The apostles were not strategically planning the events of Pentecost. Instead, Pentecost rushed upon them with sudden, divine power. These events can only be explained as acts of a sovereign God working out redemptive history according to his will. This is something of heaven coming down to this earth.

Universal

Verse 5 tells us that “devout men from every nation” were gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost. The sound of the rushing wind was so arresting that a multitude gathered to witness the preaching of the apostles. What was even more arresting, however, was that the crowd found the apostles speaking in tongues. As Luke notes, “They were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language” (**v 6**).

The global dimension of this event is magnified by the list of nations mentioned in **verses 9-11**. While most of these devout Jews were probably familiar with the local language, Luke highlights their surprise at hearing the apostles speaking in their own languages. He writes, “And they were amazed

and astonished, saying, 'Are not all these who are speaking **Galileans**? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?'" (**v 7-8**).

The gift of tongues at Pentecost and the list of nations present to witness the event underscore the universal scope of the new covenant. Jesus commanded the apostles not just to preach the gospel in Jerusalem, but to "make disciples of *all nations*" (Matthew 28:19, italics mine). Indeed, as we saw in the [previous chapter](#), Jesus reiterated this same commission in Acts 1:8 when he told the disciples that they would be his witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." In the new covenant, the message of the gospel is universal in scope. The day of Pentecost signified that reality as the nations of the world gathered to hear the mighty works of God in their own languages.

Polarizing

While some of the people present at Pentecost were amazed at what they heard, others were perplexed. All of those present were trying to make some sense of the event. Indeed, an event of this magnitude demands explanation. But those who observed this phenomenon had no explanation for it, and it bothered them tremendously. As Luke notes, they were saying to one another, "What does this mean?" (**2:12**). The crowd would soon receive their answer from the apostle Peter, who begins to respond in **verse 14**.

Yet, while some of the Jews were eagerly looking for an explanation of the event, others simply mocked the apostles—accusing them of drunkenness (**v 13**). Their **hypothesis** was, of course, ridiculous. Has anyone ever met a drunk who could suddenly speak a foreign language they did not already know? This is one example in Scripture where men try to give an explanation for a great work of God that does not recognize the work of the divine, and so they end up making fools of themselves. A right understanding of the events of Pentecost recognizes that this moment could only be accounted for by the actions of God.

The polarizing nature of Pentecost, however, demonstrated that the gospel itself would be polarizing. As Jesus had explained, the gospel would even separate families from one another (Luke 12:51-53). The gospel reorients our ultimate allegiances and demands that we submit our whole lives to the rightful King of creation: Jesus Christ. That message is a polarizing message, and one which has continued to divide Christians from the rest of the world.

The Meaning of Pentecost

Christ had promised the disciples that they would be filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5, 8). Pentecost is the fulfillment of that promise. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is poured out on the apostles effectively creating a new temple: the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. The presence of the Spirit also empowers the apostles for gospel ministry—gifting them with the ability to preach the gospel and also giving them the courage to herald the name of Jesus to a hostile world.

Ultimately, the meaning of Pentecost is unpacked by Peter's sermon in 2:14-40, as we will see. Just a few weeks previously, Peter was denying Jesus on the night of his trial (Luke 22:54-62). Now he stands before a crowd representing the nations of the world, who are both bewildered and scoffing at the apostles. With the gift of the Holy Spirit now energizing and filling him, Peter boldly confronts the scoffers, and proclaims the gospel to all present. One of the main points we can learn from Pentecost, then, is that God's Spirit fuels God's mission by empowering weak people. The Spirit creates the church and, in turn, the church proclaims the gospel to the world by the power of that same Spirit. The Spirit then adds more people to the church through the preached word (Acts 2:41).

Then what about believers today? Are Christians filled with the Spirit when we first come to follow Jesus Christ as Lord? The book of Acts and the rest of the New Testament make clear that Christians should not expect a later **spiritual baptism** after **conversion**. When believers come to faith in Christ, they also receive the Spirit. In fact, the Holy Spirit is the one who brings

about the entire process of salvation. He **convicts**; he calls; and he **regenerates** (Titus 3:5). It's unbiblical to teach that one can be a true believer in Christ and be bereft of the Holy Spirit: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3b). Today's Christians do not have to wait for a later gifting of the Holy Spirit in their experience of conversion. As Acts progresses, the expectation that followers of Christ also have the Spirit upon conversion is seen as the norm.

Should believers today expect to speak in tongues? Many good Christians today disagree over just this issue. One thing to recognize about Pentecost, however, is that it is a unique redemptive-historical event. In fact, the way tongues were employed at Pentecost was different from how the gift of tongues was employed in the early church. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul corrects the abuse of tongues in the church at Corinth. He writes that a translation was required for such languages because an untranslated language did nothing to build up the others present (1 Corinthians 14:6-19). The gift of tongues in Acts 2 did not require a translator; instead, those who were present heard the apostles' words in their own languages. This is because the purpose of the gift of tongues in Acts 2 was to enable the gospel to be heard by all those who had traveled to Jerusalem from foreign countries. The very purpose was to overcome any need for translation, not to require it!

Ultimately, Pentecost demonstrates that God keeps his promises. He had promised to send his Spirit, and Pentecost was the moment in salvation history when he did just that. For today's readers, Pentecost means that every believer has access to the promised Spirit of God and has been gifted by that same Spirit, who arrived at Pentecost to carry on the mission of the church: proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. The coming of the Spirit means we have all we need to boldly herald the gospel, and no excuse for not doing so.

Questions for reflection

1. The apostles waited to begin their ministry until after they had been filled with the Holy Spirit... and then they immediately began it. Are you someone who tends to seek to minister in your own strength rather than the Spirit's, or tends not to minister at all because you forget you have the Spirit?
2. How do the images of wind and fire excite you about the reality that you are indwelled by this same Spirit?
3. "Pentecost demonstrates that God keeps his promises." In what way do you need to remember this truth today?

PART TWO

The coming of the Holy Spirit in the events of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-13) sets the stage for Peter's sermon in **verses 14-36**. At this point, it's important to note that this sermon marks the beginning of the church's witness in fulfillment of the commission given to the apostles in 1:8. With this sermon, Peter launches the Christian church's testimony to world, which states that Jesus Christ is the crucified and resurrected Lord. The message will start here in Jerusalem, but, as the book of Acts makes clear, it will continue to spread to the rest of the world.

The Man

2:14-36 is one of the most astounding sermons ever preached. But before looking at what was said, or even how it was said, notice who spoke to the Jerusalem crowds on this remarkable day. **Verse 14** reveals the preacher of the day to be Peter, who stood alongside the other apostles. This fact may not surprise us, but we must consider again how shocking it is in the biblical storyline that Peter was even present, let alone speaking. In the Gospel of Luke, Peter acted in a cowardly way—even denying Jesus in the last moments of Jesus' life (Luke 22:54-62). The presence of Peter on the day of Pentecost is testament to the willingness of Christ to forgive even the worst of sinners. The boldness of Peter on the day of Pentecost can only be explained by the power of the Spirit working in him. Just a few weeks prior, Peter was turning his back on Christ. Now he is proclaiming him confidently, and even (as we shall see) confronting the Jews with their sin and their need to repent.

We should reflect upon Peter's boldness and leadership on the day of Pentecost. The grace he received from Christ at the restoration following his denial enabled him to preach the gospel and to do so boldly. The Lord had known that Peter would deny him: "Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me" (Luke 22:34). Later that evening, Peter did in fact deny the Lord, and doing so emotionally broke him

(Luke 22:54-62). The apostle John fills in the details of what happened after Peter's denial. In light of Peter's three-fold denial, Christ extended mercy to Peter by granting him three-fold redemption (John 21:15-19). Peter has felt the sorrow of his sin and redemption by Christ's grace. The reason this is important is that Peter's story is the story of every Christian. The mercy of the Lord can restore anyone. Now Peter extends that same mercy to the crowd that has gathered together on the day of Pentecost.

The Method

The second thing we should notice about Peter's sermon is his method of delivery. Look at how quickly Peter points his listeners to Scripture, "This is what was uttered through the prophet Joel" (Acts **2:16**). In fact, Peter appeals to Scripture repeatedly. Over the course of his sermon, he weaves together great Old Testament passages that speak about Christ—Joel 2, Psalm 16, and Psalm 110.

Peter's sermon is a marvelous example for us of what preaching ought to be—turning to the biblical text, explaining it, applying it, and calling for a response. In other words, Peter shows here in the very first chapters of Acts that the first-century apostles engaged in **expository** preaching. His proclamation focuses on the person and work of Jesus Christ. His focus is appropriate given the importance of the moment that has just occurred. Too often, sermons weave around unrelated stories or topics without focusing on Jesus. Peter does not do this. His sermon is direct and demonstrates the fulfillment of God's promises in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The Message

In Acts **2:17-21**, Peter explains and defends the actions of the apostles in the upper room at Pentecost. Some Jews in the crowd believe the apostles are drunk (v 13). But Peter explains that the prophet Joel predicted the bewildering events of Pentecost, and that the apostles are thus fulfilling Old Testament prophecy. As Peter explains, Joel 2 prophesied that miraculous

signs would accompany the pouring out of the Spirit in the “last days” (Acts **2:17**). According to the Old Testament, the “last days” were days of the new covenant and the new creation. Peter is essentially teaching the crowd that all of the Old Testament promises about the new creation have now been inaugurated by the work of Jesus Christ.

Peter continues his sermon by emphasizing God’s sovereignty over the events surrounding Jesus’ death and resurrection. As Peter notes, the death of Jesus Christ was part of God’s “definite plan” from all eternity (Acts **2:22-24**). Some theological traditions have the mistaken notion that history unfolds as a co-operative project between God and man—God is waiting to see how our actions will shape history and will then respond accordingly. This view, however, is inconsistent with the Bible. Jesus did not end up on the cross by a failure of his ministry. Peter declared that Jesus was delivered by God the Father according to the predetermined plan of God (**v 23**). God did not send Jesus Christ in order to see how his creatures in their sinfulness would respond to him. Nor did God consider the crucifixion to be a mere possibility. Jesus Christ was the Lamb of God, who was sent to die.

This great truth should give Christians everywhere steady assurance that God is truly in control of world history and in control of our lives. Our God is not waiting to see how history unfolds. The God of Scripture is the God who orchestrates all things according to the counsel of his will (Ephesians 1:11). He is the God who acts in history. He is the **transcendent**, eternal, sovereign, **omnipotent**, and omniscient God. This does not mean that the men responsible for the crucifixion are without excuse; those who were present at the crucifixion are still called “lawless” and they are still guilty of their sin (Acts **2:23**). The Bible holds both of these seemingly conflicting facts—God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility—as harmonious truths.

Of course, the story doesn’t end with the crucifixion. Peter continues his sermon noting, “This Jesus ... you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up...” (**v 23-24**). The lawless had sought to kill Jesus, but God raised him up. All of redemption comes at God’s initiation. Human beings had reached a point of absolutely insoluble rebellion. There was

simply nothing else that we could do for ourselves. But God took the initiative and saved us through the work of Christ. Peter is teaching that unbeknown to the lawless men that killed Jesus, God had always planned to deliver up his Son to be slain, and then to raise him from the dead. It was in this victory that God demonstrated his wisdom and power over death.

In **verses 25-28**, Peter quotes from Psalm 16:8-11 to show that the Old Testament anticipated the resurrection of Christ. David had prophesied, “You will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption” (Acts **2:27**). As Peter points out, this could not have been fulfilled by the historical David because “he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day” (**v 29**). Instead, David was “a prophet” and was speaking of one of his descendants (**v 30**). Peter continues, “[David] foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ” (**v 31**).

Arguing from Scripture then, Peter continues to emphasize the lordship of Christ now made known through the resurrection. Jesus has been “exalted at the right hand of God” and has “received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit” (**v 33**). Again, in **verses 34-35**, Peter shows that Jesus is even greater than David, the towering king of Israel’s past. Peter shows that Jesus fulfills the prophecy of Psalm 110:1, where **Yahweh** (“the LORD”) speaks to David’s “Lord” and invites him to sit at his right hand—a position of strength and power. Concluding, Peter then calls his audience to reckon with Scripture and the clear Old Testament teaching regarding the identity of Jesus: “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made [Jesus] both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts **2:36**). Peter’s argument is saturated in Scripture. He is reasoning from the Old Testament to demonstrate that Jesus is indeed David’s greater son, the Messiah of Israel.

The Response

In response to Peter’s sermon, the crowd turn to him and to the rest of the apostles and ask, “What shall we do?” (**v 37**). This question is a genuine

response to the preaching of God's word. Peter's sermon demonstrates how the gospel can be preached with such clarity and power that the only appropriate response is to ask "What should we do?" Notice the crowd does not ask, "How can we fix this problem?" They only ask, *Is there any hope? What, if anything, can be done about this?* Peter's answer is simple: "Repent and be baptized ... in the name of Jesus Christ ... and you will receive the Holy Spirit" (v 38). This is a good example for us. With boldness we should invite people—exhort people—to come to Christ.

With this response Peter shows us how to rightly respond to the gospel. First, we forsake sin and repent. Sin demands repentance because sin is a violation of God's commandments. Mentally assenting to the wrongness of sin is not enough. That is not repentance. Feeling sad about the consequences of sin is not sufficient. That is mere regret. We demonstrate true repentance by a genuine hatred of sin with a Spirit-empowered desire to never engage in that sin again and a Spirit-driven determination to obey Jesus instead.

Second, alongside repentance, Peter calls the crowd to be baptized. Baptism is an essential part of Christian discipleship and represents our forgiveness of sins. But is baptism necessary for salvation? The New Testament clearly represents baptism as a visual picture of salvation. The one who is immersed in the waters of baptism is the one who has been regenerated. So, baptism is not a prerequisite for salvation (the repentant thief on the cross was assured of his place in paradise, but was in no position to be baptized, Luke 23:40-43). The New Testament, however, doesn't recognize any unbaptized believer. Baptism is a necessary sign of obedience and discipleship. We do not need to be baptized to be saved, but if we are saved, then we will get baptized.

In Acts **2:41**, Luke states that three thousand souls were added to church that day. These words are evidence of the power of the gospel through the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. This day began with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the demonstration of the Spirit's power in the gift of tongues. But what moved the crowd to repent and believe was the

preaching of the gospel—the proclamation of the inauguration of the new covenant in Christ. That is how God’s Spirit works. He empowers God’s people to preach God’s word in order to proclaim God’s gospel; and as they do this, the Spirit brings others to repentance and faith, and grows God’s church.

The First Church Community

The newly regenerated, repentant, and baptized **saints** gathered together and were devoted to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer (**v 42**). This verse is **paradigmatic** for understanding the apostolic church and for understanding what churches should prioritize in our own day. Churches must always remember to evaluate their priorities in light of these words. The first priority is clearly given to the teaching of the apostles. For over 2,000 years faithful Christianity has been that which has esteemed and treasured the teachings of the apostles. Faithful churches prioritize the teaching of the apostles by studying the Scriptures and centering their worship around the preaching of God’s word. In the Scriptures, the inspired, wholly authoritative word of God is preserved without error. No church can be healthy unless it gathers together to be devoted to the exposition of the word of God.

Even though the priority is clearly placed on devotion to the teaching of the apostles, fellowship is very important to the life of the church as well. This fellowship is not a superficial gathering around ham sandwiches and meringue pies. Fellowship in the church is based upon the common love that believers have for one another and their Lord. It was this love that motivated the early church to sell their possessions to meet the needs of those around them (**v 44-45**). Christians have a mutual love, accountability, and affection for one another that they do not have for those outside the community of God. This fellowship is born out of and sustained by the teaching of Scripture. Fellowship can only be distinctly Christian if it gathers around the word of God.

Third, the early disciples dedicated themselves to the breaking of bread. The reference to “breaking of bread” refers to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, which the early church observed as a way of visually proclaiming and reminding one another of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Finally, the church valued corporate prayer. If any church is going to be an authentic church of the Lord Jesus Christ, it will feature all four of these activities. If any of these components are missing, there is a critical problem with the church’s health.

The True Miracle

Acts 2 ends with a remarkable scene: “Awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles” (v 43). That sense of awe is critical for us to understand the vitality of the early church. The early church was awestruck with the power and wonder of God made known through the miraculous works of the apostles. God had finally inaugurated the kingdom. Peter preached about it and the new saints gathered together around that teaching. People of all walks of life were repenting and being baptized and the Lord was adding to their number daily—this is the true miracle of this chapter. And that miracle continues today, in every local church that is moved by the Spirit to gather round the word, that lives in awe of the Lord, and that therefore proclaims the gospel to all who will hear.

Questions for reflection

1. Have you actually been cut to the heart by your sin and Christ’s resurrection? Have you repented and been forgiven? And have you been baptized? If not, will you repent and seek forgiveness right now, and pursue being baptized?
2. How could you use the structure of Peter’s gospel outline here to

communicate to a non-Christian you know the truth about Jesus and the response that it demands?

3. In what ways do each of the four aspects of Acts 2:42 play out in your own church? How can you encourage, and contribute to, each?

ACTS CHAPTER 3 VERSES 1-26

3. Preaching and Power

Acts 2 provided a remarkable picture of Christianity's earliest days. The gift of the Spirit invigorated the apostles, the gospel was being proclaimed with unstoppable boldness, and the church was growing at a rapid pace. Acts 3 continues the story of the spread of the gospel and the miraculous work of the Spirit through the ministry of the apostles.

An Ideal Ministry Partnership

In **verse 1**, Luke notes that Peter and John were laboring alongside one another in ministry. Interestingly, the biblical text and some historic traditions indicate that Peter and John were very different from one another. John was known for his kindness and focus on loving others. Peter is often remembered for his boldness and brashness. This companionship models the type of partnership that's most effective in gospel ministry. God gives the church spiritual gifts and various leadership personalities. Our job is to help one another exercise our gifts with greater excellence and godliness, while at the same time making up for the gifts that others lack. This melding of personalities and gifts will best serve **Christ's bride** to faithfully meet the challenges that ministry presents. Peter and John complemented one another's personalities and so could work as the kind of ministry team that helps build up the body of Christ.

This verse also sets the context for the following account. Peter and John were making their way to the temple at the ninth hour—that is, three o'clock in the afternoon. The Jewish calendar has three scheduled times of prayer: the morning hour, the afternoon hour, and the evening hour. Three o'clock was the time set aside for the “evening” hour of prayer. During certain times of the year, Middle Eastern regions begin to get dark around

4:30pm, and so for the safety of those traveling to the temple, the designated times of prayer are set in hours of daylight. Luke indicates that Peter and John were making their way to the temple at this time, which suggests that they were merely doing what was expected of them—faithfully observing the evening hour of prayer.

The Lame Beggar

Having established the setting, Luke takes his readers to the heart of the narrative in **verse 2**. Luke indicates that there was a man at the temple who had been lame “from birth.” In order to understand just how desperate this man’s situation was we need to know something of the historical context. Essentially, in the first century disability was a veritable death sentence—or at least a sentence to a lifetime of poverty. A disabled person was not only an economic liability to the family, but also an enormous economic drain on the society. Sadly, many of these stigmatized “liabilities” were victims of **infanticide** in the **pagan** world. In the Jewish world, however, killing a disabled infant was strictly forbidden. Nevertheless, it remained very difficult for a family living at a basic level of subsistence to care for disabled people. Often all that could be done for a disabled person was to take them to public places where they could receive **alms** or gifts of mercy, as with this man. In short, disabled people in the ancient world usually lived desperate lives.

Additionally, those with disabilities were often shunned as spiritually or morally inferior. This worldview is reflected in John 9, when the apostles encountered a man who had been born blind. Upon seeing the man the disciples asked Jesus, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2). In response, Jesus rebuked them, and told them that it was neither the sin of the man nor of his parents that caused his blindness. Rather, Jesus said that the man was born blind so that God’s work might be displayed in him (John 9:3). But one cannot blame the disciples for asking their question Why?, since it would have been a customary question to ask in a case of **congenital** disability.

Before moving on, it's worth stopping to consider the apostles' question in John 9. Is disease or disability a punishment for sin? The answer isn't as black and white as one might hope. The disciples' mindset on this issue was both right and wrong. It's right to attribute all disease and disability to sin generally. After all, without sin there would be nothing but perfection throughout created order. It's wrong, however, to think that one can always identify a particular sin that caused such a disease or disability. Of course, sometimes a disability can be traced to a specific sin—for instance, liver disease caused by alcohol abuse—but mostly the causes of disabilities cannot be traced to a sinful or dysfunctional behavior, and to believe otherwise is a **fallacy** that Jesus warned his disciples against.

With this historical information in place, we can see just how tragic and urgent the situation is in Acts 3. When the lame man calls out to Peter and John, he is pleading for the help to survive, pleading for the chance to live just one more day.

A Beautiful Place

Interestingly, the Bible indicates that the lame man was placed before the temple gate called “Beautiful” (v 2). This gate is most likely the one that led from the outer Court of the Gentiles into the inner Court of the Women. Gates in the first century were huge doors that served as protection for cities or complexes like the temple, and a gate's size and intricacy signaled the value of either the person or deity who was honored by the gate. The more magnificent the gate, the more the apparent value of the revered subject. This is the reason why one of the first things Alexander the Great demanded after he defeated King Darius of Persia was the gates of the city—gates that would be rebranded to signal the glory of Alexander.

The lame beggar strategically places himself near this gate to beg for alms, indicating that he is looking to receive the graces of faithful Jews entering the temple to worship God. Devout Jews sought to obey the law, which stipulated caring for the needy. So in the eyes of the beggar, the temple gate

was surely the best place to find people who would care for him.

As this man asks them for “alms” (v 3), Peter and John have compassion on him (v 4-5). Instead of ignoring him, as most of us tend to do when encountering tragedy in public, Peter and John looked directly at the man and said, “Look at us!” Because of their intentionality, this man expected to receive something from them, so he gave them his attention (v 5). But what the lame man received was surely not what he was expecting! Standing at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, Peter and John showed the lame man an even more “beautiful gate”—one that allowed them to share the grace of Jesus Christ with a man in need.

One thing we see in this story is that we often expect too little of God. Or perhaps more accurately, we fail to see the true depth of our need and thus fail to seek out a legitimate solution to our state. This beggar thought the best he could get was money for his next meal. By the end of the story he would learn that Christ gives far more than he could ever have imagined. Like the lame beggar, we ask for alms, rather than seeking healing. We often fail to see that our deepest needs are not physical but spiritual. We often ask the Lord to change our circumstances, rather than asking him to change us so we can find joy in any circumstance. C.S. Lewis once memorably commented on this pattern:

“If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

(The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses, pages 1-2)

God does not promise prosperity in this life, but he does promise his Spirit and power over sin. God does not promise wealth, but he does promise

contentment in Christ. We may not be rich in this life, but God promises us riches in heaven. We should not be so easily distracted with what this world has to offer when Jesus can offer us so much more than we could ever have imagined.

What I Do Have I Give to You

Having caught the lame man's attention, Peter spoke on behalf of both of the apostles and informed the man that they would not be giving him silver or gold. They had something much more valuable to give (v 6). They offered grace and healing by the power of the Holy Spirit. This deposit of grace was not merely for the sake of the lame man, but for the demonstration of the gospel. Peter made it crystal clear that they were working for and through the name of Jesus Christ. In the Gospels, miracles serve many purposes. One of the chief purposes of Jesus' miracles was to signify his messiahship. In Acts, miracles signal the triumph of Christ in the resurrection. The miracle Peter was about to perform for this man pointed to the power of the living Christ.

Should we pray for similar miraculous acts today so that they might verify the truthfulness and power of the gospel? Christians are, of course, divided on the issue of whether miraculous gifts continue to operate within the church today. However, all Christians believe that God is still sovereign and does still act in miraculous ways throughout the world. While our main prayer should be that God would change hearts so that the lost might receive the gospel, we should never shy away from asking God to do whatever it takes to awaken sinners to their need of salvation. We cannot dictate how God should act in the world, but we can always ask him to use his power to glorify himself and save the lost.

After Peter gave the lame man the command to "walk," the apostle took the initiative to help the man up to see the fruition of the miracle. Peter's intention was to show that something external had happened to the man. This man was now able to stand, walk, and leap (v 7-8).

Having been healed, the first place the man visited was the temple (**v 8**). This point is significant for at least two reasons. First, Leviticus indicates that disabilities prohibited people from entering the temple (Leviticus 21:18). The fact that this formerly lame man was able to enter the gates shows that he had been completely healed. Second, recall that this miracle occurred during the hour of prayer. By entering the temple, the man indicated that he recognized God as the source of his healing, and so he was going to thank and praise him. In fact, that's just what he did. Luke notes in Acts 3, in both **verse 8** and **verse 9**, that the man went about the temple "praising God."

The formerly lame man was not alone in his amazement at what had happened. As soon as the nearby people saw that he was able to walk, they too were filled with "wonder and amazement" (**v 9-10**). This wonder and amazement drew the people near to the apostles, and Peter and John saw a further opportunity to share the gospel. A new door had been opened—one that presented the chance to unpack the greatest source of awe and wonder: the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Throughout the story of this miracle, Luke regularly invites his readers to remember the source of the miracle, Jesus Christ. Whereas our tendency is to focus on the miracle itself: Luke wants us to draw our eyes upward to the God of the miracle. Luke highlights this point throughout the story. He reminds us that the miracle was done "in the name of Jesus Christ" (**v 6**). The story concludes with praise being offered to God. As Christians, we must remember that God's gifts must ultimately lead us to praise God himself. Even miraculous gifts should draw our eyes upward to the Giver. And as Peter and John will show us in the next section, every gift should ultimately lead us to freshly consider the free gift of salvation in the gospel—the most miraculous gift of all.

Questions for reflection

1. How does the gospel influence your commitment to compassion and

care for those in need? What are some ways the gospel should influence our thinking in that regard?

2. In what ways can you take the initiative, as Peter did, to pursue open doors for gospel declaration?
3. What are some things that you have personally witnessed that have caused you to feel “wonder and amazement” at the work of God? How might that move you to praise God and speak out for him today?

PART TWO

In the previous section we saw how the Spirit worked through Peter and John to heal the lame man at the gate of the temple. The rest of Acts 3 shows how this miracle created an opportunity for the preaching of the gospel. The setting was Solomon's Colonnade, also known as Solomon's Portico (**v 11**). This grand porch had giant columns that surrounded the temple; it overlooked the city and served as a place for people to gather and converse in. Interestingly, this was the same place where Jesus was nearly stoned for preaching the gospel to the Jews in John 10:22-39. Undeterred by that memory and emboldened by God's Spirit, the apostles take advantage of an incredible opportunity to begin another evangelistic sermon.

The people of Israel were mistakenly looking to the faith and piety of Peter and John as the source of the miracle. Peter, however, rejected those (surely tempting) **accolades**. We, too, ought to deflect praise upwards, to the source of all blessings and gifts. Instead Peter pointed the crowd to Jesus as the source of the miracle (Acts **3:12-16**). At the same time, he boldly proclaimed that his audience needed Jesus just as much as the lame man did, not for physical healing but for spiritual healing.

The Author of Life (and What You Did to Him)

Peter emphasizes three theological facts in his sermon: the glory of Christ, the sinfulness of man, and the right response to the gospel. Peter begins developing the glory of Christ in **verse 13**. In this passage, he uses Old Testament language to teach us something about the character and identity of Christ. First, Peter notes that it was "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers" who "glorified" Jesus as the true source of the miracle. This list of the **patriarchs**—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—recalls God's promises to Abraham in Genesis 12, 15, and 17. In those passages, God promised Abraham that he would be father to a multitude of nations (Genesis 17:6). As the rest of the New Testament makes clear, this promise is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus and the church. Jesus

is the true offspring of Abraham (Galatians 3:16), and those united to him by faith are Abraham's children (Galatians 3:29).

Second, Peter identifies Jesus as God's "servant" (Acts **3:13**). This language calls to mind the famous prophecy of Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12. In his earthly ministry, Christ came as the suffering servant represented in this passage. This servant, Peter said, was disowned and delivered over by his present audience to the Romans for crucifixion. The Jews disowned Jesus, cut him off from the people, and delivered him to **Pilate** in utter humiliation. So by using the word "servant" here, Peter was very consciously claiming that Jesus fulfilled the Isaiah passages. The point of these Old Testament allusions was to confront the crowd with the identity of Jesus. Jesus is no mere prophet; he is the source of Israel's hope and the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. The one whom they crucified is, in fact, the Messiah.

In Acts **3:14**, Peter goes on to describe the character of Jesus. He calls Jesus "the Holy and Righteous One"—designations clearly meant to evoke Jesus' divinity. To refer to a mere man as "the Holy and Righteous One" would have been **heresy** for first-century Jews.

While Peter extols the glories of Christ in his sermon, he is also exposing the sinfulness of the crowd. He reminds them that they "asked for a murderer to be granted" to them. This phrase refers to the moment during Jesus' trial when the Jewish crowd asked Pilate for the murderer Barabbas to be released instead of Jesus. As Peter continues, he reminds the crowd that they chose instead to kill "the Author of life" (**v 15**; see Hebrews 2:10; 12:2; John 1:4). The irony is thick: the Jews demanded that Pilate kill the Author of life while at the same time demanding he save the life of a murderer.

Once again, Peter is swift to remind his audience that Jesus is not still dead. No: "God raised [Jesus] from the dead" (Acts **3:15**)—and, Peter reminds his audience, he and the other apostles were eyewitnesses of the resurrection. The fact that the apostles and other Christians could give eyewitness testimony to the resurrection was a credible proof of its reality. The

resurrection could have been easily disproved if it wasn't true. The testimony of the apostles could have been discredited. The Jews could have produced Jesus' body or come up with an alternative explanation for an empty tomb. But they couldn't. The only legitimate explanation for the empty tomb was that Christ had been raised from the dead.

Finally, Peter teaches his audience how to respond rightly to the gospel. The doctrine of justification and salvation by faith alone is articulated in **verse 16**. The lame man was healed not by any **inherent** power in Peter, John, or the lame man himself. Instead, healing came by faith alone in the name of Jesus Christ. The implication for the crowd is clear. Just as the lame man was healed by faith in Christ, so too the crowd can only be forgiven of their sin by turning to Christ in faith and repentance.

Repent Therefore

In **verse 17**, Peter begins to compel his audience with greater urgency to respond to the gospel. He pleads with them as “brothers,” and even admits that he knows they acted “in ignorance”—not having recognized who Jesus truly was. Yet, Peter also recognizes that even if they acted in ignorance, they are still guilty of their sin (see Numbers 15:22-25, 31). In light of that bad news, Peter then gives his audience the good news. The death of Jesus Christ was no accident. Instead, it was the fulfillment of the prophetic expectations of the Old Testament (Acts **3:18**).

In light of these truths, Peter implores his audience to respond to the mercy of Christ. **Verse 19** is the heart of Peter's sermon. He exhorts the people to “repent therefore, and turn back” to God. The word “therefore” signifies a causal relationship: that is, in light of the fact that the Israelites freed a murderer and killed the Author of life, and in light of the fact that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's plan of redemption witnessed to by the Old Testament prophets, those Israelites *must* repent and turn to Christ to be saved. To do anything other than repent would be utterly nonsensical.

The command to repent occurs throughout Acts, appearing in every

evangelistic sermon of the apostles. We have already seen in Acts 2:38 how Peter encouraged the crowd at Pentecost to repent. Certainly, Peter's sermon in Acts 3 will not be the last time we see the apostles pleading with unbelievers to repent of sin.

True repentance has four essential aspects. First, it must be intellectual—someone must have an awareness and understanding that they have done wrong. Second, it must be emotional—someone must hate sin as God does. Third, it must be volitional—someone must have an earnest desire to change and sin no more. Finally, it must be spiritual—someone must believe that Christ is faithful and just to forgive all sins and cleanse from all unrighteousness those who confess their sins (1 John 1:9). This is the kind of true repentance Peter asks of his audience.

After calling the Israelites to repent, Peter calls them to “turn back” (or “return,” NASB) to God. Remember, Peter was speaking to devout Jews who had gathered at the temple. These people saw themselves as faithful followers of Yahweh. The idea that they would have to “return” to God was unthinkable. As far as the Jews were concerned, they had never left God.

With this command, Peter was upending the Jews' assumptions about themselves and their relationship with God. They may have been physical Israelites, but that did not make them inheritors of eternal life. What they needed was union with the true **seed** of Abraham: Jesus Christ. These Jews thought they were righteous before God on account of their commitment to the law and their sacrifices. But their confidence was misguided. Peter thus calls them to return to God by coming to Jesus Christ himself.

Reasons to Respond

In **verses 19-23** Peter gives his listeners (and us) three reasons to accept his exhortation:

- “that your sins may be blotted out”

- “that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord”
- “that he may send the Christ appointed for you”

Let’s look at each in turn.

First, when we repent, our sins are “blotted out” (or “wiped out,” NIV) by God (**v 19**). This phrase is a glorious summary of the gospel. Our ultimate problem is not something outside of us, but something inside of us: namely, sin. Sin incurs God’s wrath and must be punished. When we turn to Christ, however, God wipes out our sin such that we no longer must bear its penalty.

Second, Peter notes that repentance leads to “times of refreshing” (**v 20**). Likely, this phrase refers to the hope of the rest and refreshment with Christ in the new creation. Because Jesus has already inaugurated the new creation, this is something we can already partially experience now, even as we await the full experience of that refreshment at the return of Christ. That is why Peter notes that Jesus is coming back to fulfill all of the messianic expectations of his kingly rule (**v 21**). Thus, Peter exhorts his hearers to repent so that they might enjoy the times of refreshing, coming through the forgiveness of sins now and **consummated** at Christ’s return.

Third, Peter implores the Jews to repent so that God will “send the Christ appointed for you” (**v 20**). As the following verses make clear, this refers to the second coming of Christ. Peter is, thus, imploring the Jews to consider the end of history. Christ will come again, and they should want to make sure that when he does, they are those that Christ has come for, rather than those Christ will come against.

In **verses 22-23**, Peter expands upon the truth that Christ will come to judge those who have not repented. In these verses Peter warns that those who refuse to repent will be “destroyed from the people.” Peter also develops this idea from the Old Testament by quoting from Deuteronomy 18:15-18. In these verses, Moses tells Israel that God will raise up another prophet from among the people to lead them through another **exodus**.

Moses here is speaking of Jesus and his death on the cross. Indeed, the exodus of Israel is a type—an event that points to something greater—of Jesus’ atonement. When the people of Israel were taken out of bondage to Egypt, their rescue anticipated our deliverance from sin. Jesus is the figure Moses is talking about, but Jesus is greater in every way than Moses. Whereas Moses only physically delivered the Israelites, Christ spiritually delivers all who believe in him. The exodus through Jesus is a far greater one! Those who reject his work on the cross and do not repent will not experience this saving exodus from sin. Rather, they will be condemned to face utter destruction (Acts **3:23**).

Toward the Cliffhanger

In the closing verses of the chapter, Peter again presses his Jewish audience to respond to the person and work of Christ. Moving from Moses to **Samuel**, Peter argues that there has been an unbroken line of prophetic expectation that Jesus Christ has now fulfilled (**v 24**). In **verse 25**, Peter shows that his audience should have recognized this. The Jews are, after all, “sons of the prophets” and of the patriarch Abraham. Jesus is the culmination of their story, and they should have recognized that God was fulfilling his promises! As Peter notes, for thousands of years the Jews have been waiting for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, that in his offspring “shall all the families of the earth be blessed.” Peter claims that this very thing has happened through Christ. Jesus fulfills this universal aspect of the covenant, for his church is composed of people from “every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9). The Jews should have realized this truth.

Peter concludes his sermon by again holding out the hope of repentance and forgiveness. He tells the Jews that while the gospel is indeed for all peoples, it has come “to you first”—to the Jews. Peter is imploring them to seek salvation while they still have time. Christ is being offered to them “to bless” them and to turn them from their wickedness (Acts **3:26**). What a tremendous picture of the gospel. Even these people, who called for the blood of Christ and for the murderer Barabbas to be freed, are now offered

forgiveness and blessing through that same Christ. This gospel is the only gospel that can save. This gospel founded the early church.

This chapter of Acts shows that there are only two possible responses to the gospel: repent and return to God, or reject it and be destroyed by his wrath. Peter preached the truth of the gospel and called his hearers to respond affirmatively. Christians are those who have heard that same gospel, have responded with repentance, and who now strive to ensure that those around us hear that gospel and are also called to respond with repentance so that they, too, might enjoy their sins being wiped out and the anticipation of eternal refreshment.

But chapter 3 finishes with something of a cliffhanger, for Luke has not yet told us how those listening to Peter responded. In chapter 4, we shall see both of the two possible responses on display, gloriously and tragically.

Questions for reflection

1. Why is it tempting to ignore the truth that there are only two possible responses to the gospel?
2. When you share the gospel with someone, do you call for repentance as Peter did, and do you make the same promises that Peter did? How does it impoverish our witness if we only do one or the other?
3. Reflect on the titles for Jesus that Peter uses in this chapter. How does each of them move you to praise Jesus for who he is?

4. Opposition Begins

In Acts 4, Luke gives us our first glimpse of the division brewing between the people and the Jewish leaders. This division ultimately emerges from two things: (1) The apostles' preaching of the gospel, and (2) one specific aspect of the content of their preaching: namely, the resurrection from the dead.

The Provocation of the Gospel

In Acts 4, Luke records that the priests, the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees soon joined the crowd that was listening to Peter (**v 1**). The captain of the temple guard was the chief auxiliary to the chief priest—basically his right-hand man. In other words, the captain of the temple held something of a priestly role with authority. The Sadducees represented one of three major Jewish theological and philosophical schools, along with the **Pharisees** and **Essenes**. The Sadducees did not believe in angels or demons, nor in a future resurrection from the dead (see Luke 20:27).

While these Jewish authorities listened to the apostles, they were “greatly annoyed” with what they heard (Acts **4:2**). Obviously, they rejected the notion that Jesus, a condemned criminal, was the fulfillment of the Old Testament's prophetic expectation. In addition, Luke notes that the Jewish leaders were particularly annoyed that the apostles were preaching about the resurrection from the dead in Jesus.

It's easy to see why the Jewish leaders would be so annoyed at the apostles. First, as already mentioned, they thought it was preposterous, even **blasphemous**, to preach that Jesus is the Messiah. Second, they did not want the apostles provoking the Roman authorities to again take notice of Israel. Rome viewed Jesus as a political insurrectionist. The leaders did not

want his followers fomenting trouble and risking further increased Roman interference in their land. Finally, the Sadducees certainly did not want the apostles preaching about the resurrection from the dead since they did not believe in even the possibility of such a resurrection.

As a result, they arrested Peter and John and kept them in custody until the next day (**v 3**). This is the first time in Acts that we see followers of Jesus imprisoned for preaching the gospel. But it would not have been a surprise to them, for Jesus had made it clear that the world would hate Christians (John 15:18). Why? Because Christians follow in the steps of Christ, and therefore encounter the same hostility that Christ himself encountered. The world hated Jesus and crucified him. It should not be shocking to Christians that as we follow Christ, an uncomfortable life will, to a greater or lesser degree, await us. As Paul says, “All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12), and so it is “through many tribulations [that] we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Suffering and rejection will often be the result of faithfulness, but so also is blessing. Jesus promises nothing less than blessing to all those who remain faithful to him in the midst of suffering.

Furthermore, the suffering of the church is often the very means that Christ uses to bring others into his **fold**. We see even in Acts 4 that the persecution against Peter and John did not stop thousands of people from giving their lives to Christ. Though it may seem counter-intuitive, God uses the faithfulness of his people in the face of persecution to embolden other believers and draw unbelievers to himself.

The Church Will Not Be Stopped

Verse 4 highlights the results of the preaching of the word, even in the midst of controversy and **antipathy**. Many people believed the gospel as a result of the apostles’ faithfulness. Luke gives an approximate number: about 5,000 men were saved. In chapter 2, those who had believed amounted to “about three thousand souls” (2:41). Now in Acts 4 another 5,000 are added

to the church! These numbers display a rapid and dramatic expansion of the church. This growth reveals the explosive power of faithful gospel preaching. Pastors and church leaders go to church-growth conferences all the time, looking for new methods to grow churches numerically. The method given by Luke in the book of Acts is simple: faithfully preach the gospel to the lost.

The Spirit-Powered Sermon

Once imprisoned, Peter and John face tough questions from the “rulers and elders and scribes” concerning their authority and their theology (**4:5**). The “rulers and elders” refers to those who were part of the ruling Jewish council known as the Sanhedrin. The scribes were men who were respected for their great learning and were the chief interpreters of the law. Luke also indicates that many people “of the high-priestly family” gathered to question the apostles the day after their arrest (**v 5-6**). Notice the first question the authorities ask: “By what power or by what name did you do this?” (**v 7**). What an incredible question. If Peter and John could have chosen a question for their prosecutors to ask, this would be the one! This question gives Peter and John an unquestionably open door to share the gospel.

The question also reveals a great deal about these Jewish leaders:

- *Ignorance*. This counsel was made up of people who were supposed to know everything about Scripture—yet they failed to recognize Jesus as the Messiah.
- *Arrogance*. The Scriptures warn against taking a hand against one of God’s prophets (Psalm 105:15). This group crucified the only begotten Son of God, and they have also arrested the apostles, who function as prophets of the gospel. This should have been evident from the fact that these men not only reasoned from the Scriptures, but by the fact that they had just healed a lame man at the temple gates.

- *Fear*: The content of the apostles' preaching undermined and threatened the authority of these Jewish leaders. That's why the Jewish leaders wanted to know the "name" of the one who had commissioned them to preach.

Though they have been gifted an open door for the gospel, the apostles must still choose to walk through it—and they do, for the Spirit is giving them the ability to do so (Acts **4:8**). Peter and John make it clear that they do not preach or perform miracles in their own name or by their own power. Rather, they do all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. They are quick to point to the "means [by which] this man has been healed" (**v 9**). The exchange between the authorities and the apostles is extremely important. Luke records that Peter is "filled with the Holy Spirit" before he begins his speech (**v 8**), again showing us how the Spirit emboldens us and equips us for ministry.

In **verse 10**, Peter addresses not only the Sanhedrin, but "all the people of Israel." He claims with authority that the man was healed "by the name of Jesus Christ"—rejecting any attention that might be placed on the apostles as the ones who actually performed the miracle. Peter's primary concern is to point people to Jesus, the resurrected Lord. Peter continues his argument by claiming that Jesus is "the cornerstone" that Israel rejected (**v 11**). In the first-century Jewish world, the cornerstone was an ornamental stone that designated a building and gave it a particular dignity. The chief cornerstone identified the building, made it distinctive, and gave it meaning.

The word "cornerstone" also hearkens back to another Old Testament passage that Peter's audience would have surely remembered. Psalm 118:22 says: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." This is a prophecy speaking about the rejection of the Messiah. So once again, Peter is showing his audience that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. Even the rejection and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was forecast by the psalms. If the Jews truly believed their Scriptures, they would become followers of Christ.

In this cornerstone alone, Peter says, is salvation. Peter makes it crystal clear that the gospel message is an exclusive one. There are not many paths to salvation and there are not many foundations upon which to build eternally. Instead, “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). While the word “salvation” is precious to Christians, salvation was not a familiar Jewish theological term at the time. Instead, the Jews associated words like victory, freedom, and justice with the advent of the Messiah. But Peter wants the Jewish leadership to see that their ultimate need is salvation—deliverance from sin’s power and freedom from sin’s penalty.

The irreducible minimum of the gospel is that we are sinners who need a savior, and that the Savior has come. We need to be saved from sin and its eternal consequences. We don’t need self-improvement or self-esteem or self-renovation. We need salvation. We need to be saved from God’s judgment. The doctrine of salvation is not an accessory to the Christian faith. Instead, salvation is the very heart of what Christ accomplished for those who respond to him in faith and repentance—and he is the only Savior.

We Cannot But Speak

The first response of the gathered authorities was that they “observed the confidence” of Peter and John (v 13, NASB). This confidence enabled the apostles to confront unbelief with the authentic gospel and undiluted truth claims concerning Christ. What was so astounding to the authorities was that they considered Peter and John to be “uneducated.” This was not an insult on their part. In fact, it was a reality. Peter and John were fishermen, not budding scholars fresh out of a seminary doctoral program. That’s why the Jewish leaders were so shocked at the apostles’ confidence and their theological reasoning. After all, most people in first-century Israel were illiterate. How could these simple men have such a poised and well-articulated message? How did they know so much about the Bible? How could they speak with such authority?

When the Jewish leaders recognized that Peter and John had been with Jesus, and when they saw the healed lame man at their side, they “had nothing to say in opposition” (**v 14**). Indeed, what could they possibly say? Peter and John did not heal this man in secret. Everyone knew what had happened, and they knew that the words and actions of Peter and John could not have a human explanation.

Stumped, the Jewish leaders asked Peter and John to leave the council (**v 15**). While conferring, they asked an inevitable question: “What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it” (**v 16**). No one could deny the miracle! But tragically, the council was not concerned with actually dealing with the message that Jesus was the Messiah. Instead, they were set on shutting down Jesus’ messengers in order to control public opinion and limit the spread of any reports about healings in Jesus’ name (**v 17**).

Aiming to quieten the situation as quickly as possible, the authorities order Peter and John “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” (**v 18**). The apostles, however, appeal to a higher authority and ask whether they should answer to God or men—to which question there is only one legitimate answer (**v 19**). Yet this must have sounded like an insult to the Jewish leaders, for they had spent their entire lives as the religious authorities in Israel. But the apostles rebuff their claims of total control over the religious life of Israel. Instead Peter and John reply, “We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (**v 20**). The way the disciples describe their mission as witnesses of Jesus in this verse is quite remarkable. They “cannot but speak” of Jesus. In other words, the gospel was not some theoretical philosophy. It was a message of salvation that had to be proclaimed.

Ultimately, the Sanhedrin could not find any “basis on which to punish them” (**v 21**, NASB). All the people were glorifying God on account of the healed man. God’s work was being recognized in a powerful and public way. The council, therefore, had no choice but to let the apostles go free. Ultimately, no one could deny the miraculous healing of the lame man (**v**

22). Punishing the apostles would have caused major dissent among the crowd in Jerusalem.

The Sanhedrin was blind and deaf to the salvation Jesus provided and to the wonderful miracle that Peter and John performed by God's power. Instead, they craved their own control and their own prestige. They wanted to quell the apostles' message so as to preserve their own place in Jewish society.

We will often be tempted to do the same as the Jewish leaders. The gospel offers free grace, but it also demands that we bow our knees to King Jesus. This man, born of a virgin, was crucified, and then raised to life from the dead three days later. Peter and John had seen this resurrected King with their own eyes, and had heard him speak to them with their own ears. Indeed, they could not help speaking about the Lord Jesus Christ.

We must approach gospel ministry with the same sense of urgency as did Peter and John. They did not need an evangelistic program to encourage them to share the gospel. Instead, they just could not help speaking about it. They were witnesses of the resurrection and were compelled to tell others about Jesus. We may not be eyewitnesses of the resurrection, but we do see Jesus exalted in heaven with the eyes of faith. Indeed, may God transform our hearts so that we "cannot but speak" of Jesus in a lost and dying world, whatever anyone may say to us or threaten to do to us.

Questions for reflection

1. Are you willing to face persecution for your public witness?
2. Why do you think we are tempted to resort to other means for building Christ's church rather than the preaching of the word? What does this passage teach us about the power of the preached word?
3. Why is it liberating to have the same attitude toward God, the gospel, and other people that Peter and John did?

PART TWO

Acts **4:23-37** recounts the response of the saints to the miracle God had displayed through Peter and John in the previous passage. The gathered believers respond to God in two ways: in prayer and in fellowship. As we will see, these two responses are distinguishing marks of the early church, and so ought to mark the church today.

Faithful Prayer

When the apostles were released, they “went to their friends” (**v 23**). Who were these companions? The remaining apostles along with other believers in the early church. No doubt these men and women were wondering what had happened to Peter and John behind the closed doors of the Sanhedrin council. But, soon enough, the released apostles “reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them.”

Once the assembled believers heard about all that had happened to Peter and John, they did what many would not—they prayed. Regrettably, for many of us, prayer is not our reflexive response to good news. But the early church prayed without ceasing; it was a reflex to almost any circumstance. Luke notes that they “lifted their voices together to God” (**v 24**). This type of faithful response from the early church ought to embolden us to go to God in prayer in every conceivable circumstance. Prayer is a gift from our heavenly Father. Prayer should be the Christian’s natural first reaction to the testimony of God’s power or a problem in God’s world.

The primary theme of this prayer is God’s sovereignty and power. Understanding this theme more fully will teach us not only how the early Christians understood the character of God, but also how these same truths should influence our own prayer lives.

The structure of the prayer is quite important. Whereas we might typically begin our prayers with requests, the early church first began by extolling God for his matchless character. They praised the one “Sovereign Lord, who

made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them” (v 24). These Christians ascribed glory and honor to God as the Creator of the universe. They recognized God’s sovereign rule and worshiped him, not principally for what he had done, but more so for who he is. This short word of exultation introduces the theme of God’s power and sovereignty that we will find throughout the prayer. When we pray to God, we pray to the One who is in complete control.

After recognizing and worshiping God for his sovereignty, the early church did something very interesting in their prayer: they quoted Scripture. The next lines of the prayer (v 25-26) are a quotation from Psalm 2. Before reflecting on the content of the psalm, it’s worth noting that the early church used Scripture as a way to ignite their prayer life. Scripture guided and governed their prayers. Rather than feeling the need to spontaneously “make up” their prayer, they prayed in response to God’s word. This practice is enormously helpful and makes for more biblical, God-honoring prayers.

But why would the apostles quote from Psalm 2? Because Psalm 2 speaks about how the nations would rage against the Messiah, and how God would ultimately overcome their rebellion. The early church was witnessing this firsthand. They had already seen the hostility to Jesus that had nailed him to the cross. They also were now entering into that suffering, as Peter and John experienced the threat of imprisonment for preaching the gospel. But they had also seen Jesus’ triumph over death in the resurrection, and Psalm 2 reminded the Christians of God’s ultimate victory over opposition. It encouraged them to continue in faithfulness to Jesus Christ, God’s “anointed,” who would quell human rebellion. From Psalm 2, the church could take comfort that God had all persecution under his sovereign control.

The theme of God’s sovereignty continues in Acts 4:27-28. The early church prayed, “In this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.” In other words, God not only knows the future, but he has also ordained every occurrence in world history. The

apostles remind themselves—and they remind us—that Jesus’ trial and death did not happen by accident. His crucifixion was not the outcome of random historical chance. From the beginning, God had determined to crucify his Son in order to redeem a lost humanity. God **predestined** the sending of his sinless Son, Jesus, to take the divine punishment of sin on the cross. The wrath poured on Christ was the satisfaction needed to forgive our sin.

We should pray with the same boldness and confidence in God’s sovereignty. When we bend our knee to this glorious truth, we recognize that God is meticulously involved in every aspect of creation and in every part of our lives. God is never caught off guard or surprised by the actions of people. He ordains all things according to the counsel of his will (Ephesians 1:11). As we see in Acts **4:27-28**, God even uses the wickedness of people in order to accomplish his perfect purposes (see Genesis 50:20). In that light, we can be confident that God is working all things for the good for those who love him (Romans 8:28-30). We should pray, therefore, just as the disciples prayed, mindful of and confident in the truth that God is truly sovereign. No area of our lives is out of the bounds of God’s reach and sovereign plan.

What They Did Not Pray

One startling feature of this prayer is that the believers never asked God to spare them from further confrontation or suffering. Rather, they prayed that they would be granted boldness to “speak [God’s] word with all boldness” (Acts **4:29**), as the Lord continued to work powerfully through and around them (**v 30**). In other words, they were praying, *Lord, in the face of opposition, don’t let us weaken. Don’t let us compromise. Please keep working out your purposes, and please keep us working for your purposes.* These Christians recognized their weakness and valued the success of the gospel far above their own physical comfort.

Of course, it is not wrong to pray against suffering and persecution. But we

should never fear opposition to the extent that we prioritize our personal security above the mission of spreading the gospel. Fear is often a dangerous weapon which the world wields against the church. God's people face threats every day, particularly in nations that do not protect religious liberty, or that even actively oppose it. But as we pray for protection, we must also ask God, as the early church did, to give us the strength needed to endure the dangers that come with faithful gospel ministry. Our mission matters more than our safety.

Jesus told his followers that the world would hate them. Often, we seem surprised when the world despises us—we are taken aback that Jesus was telling the truth! Jesus explicitly told his disciples that danger was coming their way, but that they were not to lose heart. Christ overcame the world. Therefore, when persecution knocks on your door, pray for boldness in proclaiming the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Knowing what we face, but also the King who sustains us, we should pray that the Lord would get us into the right kind of trouble.

When the believers finished praying this incredible prayer, “the place in which they were gathered together was shaken” (**v 31**). This little detail seems incidental but it's pregnant with theological significance. Consider other events that Scripture records in which the ground shook. For instance, the ground shook when Isaiah encountered God in the throne room of the temple (Isaiah 6:4). Likewise, the earth shook during the death of Christ when the temple curtain was torn in two (Matthew 27:51). The shaking of the ground, therefore, symbolizes the presence of God and his approval of their prayer. The earth rumbles to demonstrate that God has been in their midst. Such an event, much like the signs and wonders God performs through the name of Jesus, bear testimony to the awesome power of God.

Additionally, these gathered saints “were all filled with the Holy Spirit and they continued to speak the word of God with boldness” (**Acts 4:31**). In the book of Acts, every time persecution comes to the church the church responds, by God's grace, with undaunted gospel proclamation. Such boldness is a sign of authentic Christianity. As we read further, we witness

another distinguishing mark in the lives of these saints.

True Unity

The Christian life is a public life. It's not cloaked in secrecy or hidden deep within some secret club. One of the ways our faith in Jesus is displayed to the outside world is through the visible fellowship of believers with one another. To be a Christian means to live in unity with God through Christ, and to live in unity with God's people, the church. Luke shines a light on the unique role that fellowship plays in the Christian life in **verses 32-37**.

The most important part of this passage is found in the phrase "the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul" (**v 32**). According to the text, the congregation was marked by its unity. They represent an ideal portrait of how the church should be, how a congregation should approach its mission, and how the members of a church should relate to one another. The question is: what kind of unity do we have in these verses, and how should churches today strive to emulate it?

Today, churches often pursue unity by dismissing doctrinal distinctives or by trying to smooth over some of the rough edges of the gospel message, such as the exclusivity of Christ, or the reality of hell. These efforts often build the appearance of unity, but they do not reflect the biblical model of church unity—a unity built around sound doctrine and the clear teaching of God's word. The church in Acts was unified around the gospel and was established on God's truth. This central building-block produced one heart and soul among the believers. Such unparalleled unity was a gift of the Holy Spirit.

The believers in Acts were so unified in the gospel that they were willing, voluntarily, to divide up their own possessions in order to provide for those in need: "No one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own" (**v 32**). This demonstrates a complete rejection of materialism. They recognized the infinite value they had found in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and so they loved one another by freely sharing their worldly possessions

with one another.

As the members of the church shared their goods, the apostles continued “giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ” (v 33). The men who walked with Christ, talked with him, watched him die, and visibly saw the Christ resurrected were teaching other people about him. This may sound like an unnecessary and simple statement, but this little phrase shows us that the believers’ love for one another stemmed from their love for Christ. They understood that their material goods would fade away, but that their joy in the resurrected Christ would last forever. This is why they were able to let go of their “stuff” so easily, even to the extent of selling off their property for the sake of the church (v 34). Our material gifts are from God and are to be used for his glory. The church in Acts understood this—all because they loved Jesus more than what they owned.

When we finally see our role in God’s plan, we recognize that we are called to pray to God and live in harmony with other believers—brothers and sisters who may not share our interests, race, level of education, or economic status—as we seek to share the gospel with our communities. Western society relentlessly promotes and prioritizes individualism, but that’s not how God designed his church. Christianity is a team sport, not a solo game. God wants us to cling to him and to gather in unity with other Christians so that we build up one another in the grace of the gospel.

Christians need one another, as unified members of a local church, for strength in difficult times of persecution. While we may not suffer persecution like believers in other countries, we know that suffering is a part of the Christian life. The world hates Jesus, and so the world will hate his people. As believers, we must submit to a unified gospel-preaching local church and be reminded constantly about the unfading kingdom that rests under the rule of the everlasting King Jesus.

Questions for reflection

1. How do you tend to respond to difficult circumstances? What would it look like to respond in the way this church did?
2. God is utterly sovereign. What difference will this (or should this) make to your prayers today, and to how you respond to successes and setbacks today?
3. List some of the needs of members in your church. How can you contribute some of what God has given you to help those who are less fortunate?

5. Problems and Persecution

Acts 5 contains some of the most remarkable and shocking narratives in all of the New Testament. In fact, Acts **5:1-11**, the story of Ananias and Sapphira, has often confused scholars and ordinary Christians alike. Is it true that God killed a husband and wife simply for lying? What can we learn from this story?

A Half-Hearted Part-Gift

Acts 4 concluded with the account of the early Christians selling what they had and giving it to the church to take care of any who might have need (4:32-37). Acts 5 picks up on the same theme, introducing a husband and wife, Ananias and Sapphira, who also sold a piece of property in order to give the money to the apostles. Yet, Ananias and Sapphira were different from those Christians described in chapter 4. Instead of turning all of the proceeds over to the apostles, they kept some back and gave only “a part” (**5:1-2**). In **verses 3-4**, Peter clearly teaches that Ananias’ problem was not that he only gave part of the proceeds. As Peter says, “While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?” Peter affirms that Ananias has every right to decide what is wisest to do with his money. Ananias’ problem is that he and his wife have lied about the fact that they are keeping back part of the money for themselves (**v 8**).

Why Ananias decided to lie about this is not stated, but we can certainly imagine a number of reasons why someone might be tempted to behave as Ananias did. He may have simply loved money and refused to part with all of it, while simultaneously wishing to appear more godly by claiming to give away all of his money. He may have simply made a habit of lying throughout

his life. Whatever the case may be, Ananias' sin is a graphic reminder of our need to speak truth diligently and without fail. Peter's condemnation reminds us just how serious the sin of lying truly is, particularly when it comes to our Christian faith. The apostle asked Ananias why Satan had filled his heart (**v 3**) and condemned him for lying, not to men, but "to God" (**v 4**).

Truth Matters

We can draw two important applications from the actions of Ananias. First, Christians must be people of the truth. Jesus taught that Satan "is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). That is why Peter told Ananias that Satan had filled his heart. When we speak falsehoods, half-truths, or even shaded truths, we do not reflect the glory of the One who is "the truth" (John 14:6); we instead reflect the image of Satan.

Second, Christians must never value either money or personal reputation above holiness. Ananias claimed to be giving away all that he had earned from the sale of his field. He valued his reputation and his money more than the truth. He desired the praise of others while maintaining a certain amount in his bank account. But Christians cannot set their hopes on such things. We must instead lay up treasure in heaven, valuing what is eternal, and not what is passing away. The praise of others is a vapid thing, disappearing as soon as it arrives. Money is likewise temporary and fleeting. If we set our hopes on those things, we will find that, at best, we are sorely disappointed; or that, at worst, we, like Ananias, walk a dangerous path of hypocrisy.

Luke describes the aftermath of Ananias' deception in Acts **5:5**: "When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last." God killed Ananias for his sin. As you might imagine, the early church reacted instantly and dramatically to this event: "Great fear came upon all who heard of it."

Verses 7-11 describe Sapphira's similar encounter with Peter just after the death of her husband. Sapphira, not knowing that her husband was dead (**v 7**), came to Peter, who questioned her about whether she had given the full

amount of money for the sale of her land. Sapphira, like her husband, lied to Peter—who condemned her, too, for conspiring with Ananias “to test the Spirit of the Lord” (v 9). Just as her husband had done, Sapphira “fell down at [Peter’s] feet and breathed her last” (v 10). The same young men who had picked up Ananias to bury him now came and retrieved Sapphira’s body (v 6, 10). Once again the early church responded appropriately: “And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things” (v 11).

We learn several important lessons from the story of Ananias and Sapphira. First, this story reminds us that God is infinitely holy and must be worshiped as holy. Too often, modern Christians have no sense of the holiness of God. Indeed, one of the biggest problems with modern Christianity is that we have lost our sense of God’s limitless perfection and moral purity. Correspondingly, we have also lost our sense of the gravity of our sin. As R.C. Sproul explains in his classic work *The Holiness of God*:

“When we understand the character of God, when we grasp something of His holiness, then we begin to understand the radical character of our sin and hopelessness. Helpless sinners can survive only by grace. Our strength is futile in itself; we are spiritually impotent without the assistance of a merciful God. We may dislike giving our attention to God’s wrath and justice, but until we incline ourselves to these aspects of God’s nature, we will never appreciate what has been wrought for us by grace”
(*The Holiness of God*, page 183)

As Sproul goes on to explain, our sin is not some minor **peccadillo** or small mistake. Instead, “every sin is an act of cosmic treason, a futile attempt to dethrone God in His sovereign authority.” Human nature balks at the story of Ananias and Sapphira because we think one little lie is not deserving of God’s wrath and the execution of capital punishment. But this shows how little we understand God’s holiness and our own sinfulness. Sin is an assault on God’s very character. The fact that God did not cast all of humanity into ruin when Adam and Eve first rebelled against him is a sign of his long-suffering and his amazing grace, and not a sign that sin is not really that big a

deal. The true marvel in this passage is not so much that God killed Ananias and Sapphira, but that God has not executed justice on all of us, and that instead his Son came to die so that there might be a church community that enjoyed his Father's favor and salvation. In this light, the grace of the gospel found in Christ Jesus shines with the utmost radiance and glory.

Second, we must respond to God's holiness in the way that the early church did. The early church "feared" when they heard the report of what had happened to Ananias and Sapphira. Because of the grace of God found in Christ, our relationship with God is no longer one of a guilty offender before the Judge. Nor is God some cruel tyrant who is out to get us. God is a Father: a loving Father who pursues the good of his children. But that does not mean we should not also fear God. We should. We should stand in awe and wonder at his holiness. We should fear his power and his might. We should fear him as our Creator, who holds his very breath in our hand. He is our Father, yes, but he is also our awesome Lord. Knowing him as the former does not negate responding appropriately to him as the latter: "If you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear," the apostle Peter would write to the churches of modern-day Turkey years after he had witnessed the judgment of Ananias and Sapphira (1 Peter 1:17). This fear gives birth not to timidity and uncertainty in our relationship with God, but to reverence and wonder.

Signs and Wonders

God had not allowed lying and hypocrisy to grow within his church. And now, his church continued to grow in the city. Acts **5:12** takes us back to a very familiar setting, Solomon's Portico. This location is where Peter and John went to preach the gospel after healing the lame man at the Beautiful Gate. Apparently, this site continued to be very important for the Christian church after that time. Indeed, it seems that Solomon's Portico was ground zero for public ministry among the early Christians. In Acts 3, Peter had preached the gospel in the Portico; here, signs and wonders were taking place among the people gathered there with the apostles.

Yet **5:13** indicates an interesting dynamic with regard to these crowds. Evidently, the publicity about the arrest of Peter and John, and the news of Ananias and Sapphira, scared many people away from associating with the apostles. The apostles, early Christians, and others interested in the gospel were gathered in Solomon's Portico, but now there was a sense of political tension in the air. Even though people held them in "high esteem," they feared their own leaders, so they dared not associate with the Christians.

At the same time, Luke notes in **verse 14** that despite this tension, the church continued to grow. Just as we saw earlier in the book of Acts, the teaching of the apostles, authenticated by the Holy Spirit with signs and wonders, drew people to the gospel. Thus, even though many of the people feared associating with the Christians, the church still found itself growing in number. Nothing, not even human fear, can keep the gospel from effectively challenging sinners and converting them from sin and for salvation. Even in this tense atmosphere, the church still grew rapidly and constantly by the preaching of the word and the power of God's Spirit.

Not only was the church growing, but it was growing to such an extent that sick people were being carried to the apostles for healing, as **verse 15** describes. Apparently, the news about the healing of the lame man had spread far and wide. The crowd was bringing "out the sick into the streets" and laying them on cots so that at least the shadow of Peter might fall on their loved ones and heal them. This is indeed a demonstration of radical confidence in the gospel. These people had confidence in the power of God's presence, which had very clearly come to rest on the apostles. It was so clear, in fact, that even to be in the presence of the apostles was to feel the power of God. And that was their source of hope. As a result, Luke notes that the sick and those who were afflicted with **unclean spirits** were all healed (**v 16**).

Moreover, the apostles were drawing crowds from the "towns around Jerusalem." Luke is helping his readers see that the apostles' ministry was becoming so publically visible that some type of confrontation would soon have to take place. In other words, the gospel could no longer be confined

to Solomon's Portico, to the precincts of the temple, or even to the city of Jerusalem. The countryside was emptying out and masses of people were coming! In fact, the reference to the apostles casting out unclean (or evil) spirits is a visible symbol of the spiritual warfare taking place in and around the apostles' ministry. Thus, we should not be surprised as opposition to the church increases in the coming chapters of Acts. After all, the apostles had already been arrested and threatened; yet despite these warnings they continued to preach and draw attention to the gospel.

Verses 12-16 remind us once again that the Lord builds his church, not humans. You may imagine how some Christians might have thought that no one would join the church once word had got out of what happened to Ananias and Sapphira. But the church is not built on marketing strategies or pragmatic advertisement schemes or feel-good programs. The church is built on the power of God's word and Spirit. Persecution, fear, and negative reports could not keep God's Spirit from saving sinners and bringing them to Jesus. We should never look for alternative means to spread the gospel that downplay the centrality of God's word or undermine the truth about his judgment or his salvation. The apostles watched the Spirit at work in bringing men and women to Christ because they were committed to sharing the message of Christ in the power of the Spirit, and so could leave the results to God. We must follow in their footsteps; we must be faithful as they were.

Questions for reflection

1. What forms might compromise and hypocrisy take in your own life?
2. How, as local church members, can we address compromise in each other's lives with both seriousness and graciousness?
3. How is it both freeing and liberating to know that we are called simply to be faithful, leaving the results to God?

PART TWO

Evidence of Angels

Acts **5:17-32** tells the story of increasing opposition to the gospel. In **verse 17**, the high priest and his associates, the Sadducees, rise up in indignation and jealousy against the apostles. At this point, it is important to remember that the Sadducees represented the **liberal** sect of Judaism. They accepted only the Torah (the law) as Scripture, and they did not believe in angels, supernatural gifts, the resurrection, eternal life, heaven, or hell. But not only were the Sadducees theologically compromised; they were also politically corrupt as they collaborated with pagan Rome. They secretly agreed with Rome that the temple and the rest of the Jewish territory was really under Roman control, but went along with the charade that the Jewish authorities maintained control. When the Sadducees saw the apostles gathering such a large following, particularly one that was centered on the temple, the Sadducees knew that this threatened their political commitments. Furthermore, the attention garnered by the apostles was diverting the attention they felt should be given to them. This, then, explains the source of their envy.

That envy then led to action as the Sadducees publically laid hands on the apostles and imprisoned them (**v 18**). God, however, was extraordinarily merciful to the apostles. In the very next verse, Luke tells us that an angel of the Lord opened the cell doors and freed the apostles (**v 19**). The irony in this story is quite thick. The Sadducees did not believe in angels—and yet the Lord sent one of his angels to free the apostles whom they had imprisoned!

This angel also gave some very specific instructions to the apostles upon their deliverance: “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life” (**v 20**). This command is quite astounding. The apostles were in prison for having preached the gospel. As the angel delivers them, we might expect that he would instruct them to hide or wait for the

authorities to lose some of their fervor against the gospel. But the angel instructs the apostles to go right back to the task of preaching and evangelism. We often value our safety and security more than the gospel and the Great Commission. But here we find a beautiful picture of God's provision in the midst of the apostles' faithfulness. God is commanding them to continue on in the very activity that got them arrested in the first place. Yet, at the same time, God is showing his love and care for the apostles by freeing them from prison, and demonstrating that he will provide for their needs as they seek first the kingdom of God.

Also, we should note briefly that the angel instructed the apostles to continue preaching the message "of this Life" (v 20). The Scriptures make it very clear that Jesus is "this Life." Indeed life was one of the central images Jesus Christ used of himself (e.g. John 6:67-69; 14:6). Thus as the apostles were to go and preach life, they were to go and preach Jesus.

Free to Preach

Acts **5:21** indicates that the apostles understood the seriousness and the urgency of their call. We can surmise that the angel freed them from their cell shortly before daybreak, and thus, before doing anything else, the apostles went to the temple and began teaching the gospel message.

Since it was early in the day, word had not yet circulated about the release of the apostles from prison. In fact, the following verses narrate the somewhat comical story of Israel's leaders coming to learn that the apostles were no longer in their cell. Luke says that "the council" and "all the senate of the people of Israel" came together to try the apostles. "The council [and] all the senate of the people of Israel" most likely refers to the Sanhedrin, the body that ruled over Israel. The fact that the Sanhedrin was involved, and not just the Sadducees or the high priest, shows that the apostles were no longer considered just a threat to the temple or the religious authority, but were also seen as a threat to national security.

When the council was ready to commence the trial, orders were sent to

the prison to bring the apostles for the hearing. What a shock there would have been when the prison guards went to the cell and looked in to find everything in order, apart from one detail: there were no prisoners (**v 22**). The condition of the cell was all as it should have been; the only problem was that there were no apostles there. This was truly bad news for the guards. Losing a prisoner meant your life would be forfeit. So in fear and embarrassment, the officers had to come back to the council and report the absence of the apostles (**v 23**). Such news “greatly perplexed” the chief priests (**v 24**). Puzzlement and anxiety rippled through the council.

Finally, someone reported that the apostles were in the temple teaching the people (**v 25**). The captain of the temple guard, along with some officers, went to seize the apostles, presumably intending to do so by force. However, because they feared the crowd they arrested the apostles without violence, and brought them before the council for trial peacefully (**v 26**).

This entire episode is full of irony. The apostles are released by an angel whom the Sadducees, their imprisoners, deny the existence of. The political class, who like to be known for their wisdom and knowledge, have no idea what has happened to the apostles. The leaders of the people are so frightened by them that they fear being stoned if they injure the apostles in any way (**v 26**). The ironies in this story are evidence of God’s sovereign hand at work. This passage shows us that nothing can befall God’s people if he does not ordain it. God can turn the greatest powers of this world into bumbling fools who fear the very people they rule. God can send angels to open prison doors to ensure his gospel continues to be proclaimed. God’s plans cannot be stopped and the advance of his kingdom cannot be thwarted; and so his people must not be silenced.

The Trial

Verse 27 brings us to the beginning of the apostles’ trial before the Sanhedrin. The high priest scolds the apostles for continuing to teaching in “this name”: that is, the name of Jesus (**v 28**). The high priest’s indictment of

the apostles actually says quite a bit about their faithfulness to the Great Commission. They had “filled Jerusalem” with their teaching (**v 28**). This tells us that their message was not confined to Solomon’s Portico or the temple; it had become a major public topic throughout the city.

Further, the chief priest charged the apostles with trying to bring Jesus’ “blood” upon them. This is the real core of the issue. The high priest remembered that Peter had made it abundantly clear in 2:22-23 and 4:10 that Jesus Christ was a man attested to by God, whom the Jews had crucified but whom God had raised from the dead. The responsibility for his blood was on the Jewish leaders’ hands. “This name” of Jesus, then, presented a serious problem to the Jewish leadership. This was the name that the chief priests feared, and it explains their efforts to avoid it and to try to prevent its promotion.

In **5:29**, the apostles answer the high priest’s charge with one of the most important statements in the New Testament: “We must obey God rather than men.” Not only is this verse immensely important for the Christian life, but it also helps us understand our relationship to government within a biblical worldview. The Bible consistently teaches that the government has a rightful authority given by God himself (e.g. Matthew 22:15-22; Romans 13:1-7). Thus, all humans, and especially Christians, are to submit to the authority of the government. Yet governments themselves are not God—and so they can overreach their authority and make demands that go beyond the authority invested in them by the One who is God. For instance, no government has the right to compel someone’s conscience to believe one idea over another. A government that forbids the worship of the one true and living God is one which, at that point, does not deserve and cannot receive our submission.

The apostles were not political revolutionaries. Their aims were spiritual, not material. Yes, they ultimately served another kingdom; but as Jesus taught, his kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36). Acts **5:29** shows that the apostles understood the government’s authority in their life, but they also recognized that the government was not to be given ultimate and

complete loyalty. When an order from the government demands that we compromise the gospel, Christians must respectfully disobey human authority and remain faithful to God. In short, we must obey God rather than man.

Counted Worthy To...

Peter once again seized the opportunity in **verses 30-31** to preach the gospel. The high priest and his associates claimed to represent God as his spokesmen to the people. But Peter declared that they were the very ones who had killed God's own Son. He was the Prince and Savior through whom came the forgiveness of sins (**v 31**). Peter goes even further in **verse 32** and indicates that the apostles were the ones that truly obeyed God, which was attested to by the fact that God had given his Spirit to them.

We should take note of the apostles' example of faithfulness in this passage. In the face of danger and opposition, they did not negotiate or compromise with the high priest for the sake of their own personal comfort or even for their lives. Rather, the apostles realized that there was a massive chasm between themselves and the religion of Judaism represented by the high priest and the Sanhedrin. The New Testament makes clear that if someone rejects the Son, they reject the Father. There is no common ground between those who reject Jesus and those who have submitted themselves to the resurrected Christ. By God's grace, may we follow the apostles' example in standing firm upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as we declare salvation throughout the world, whatever the cost.

In **verse 33**, Luke indicates that the Sanhedrin was enraged and wanted to kill the apostles. Yet, once again, God sovereignly intervened and used one of the members of the Sanhedrin to save them. Gamaliel, a Pharisee who enjoyed a good reputation both within the council and more widely, addressed the council and told them not to harm the apostles (**v 34-39**). He told only two stories of other would-be "messiahs" (Theudas and Judas the Galilean, **v 36-37**) who gained a following for a time but were then quickly

forgotten. Gamaliel concluded, “So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” (v 38-39). Gamaliel likely thought the apostles would fade away just like the other messianic movements of Theudas and Judas the Galilean. The other members of the Sanhedrin heeded Gamaliel’s advice and did not kill the apostles.

The apostles, however, were not totally “off the hook.” **Verse 40** recounts that the Sanhedrin had them beaten and again charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus. The response of the apostles is particularly inspiring and instructive. Remember, they had returned from their whipping. Yet first, they worshiped God: “They left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (v 41). Then second, they continued preaching, teaching, and evangelizing (v 42).

Once again, the apostles did not value their own personal security above the Great Commission. Neither should we. Indeed, they even rejoiced when they were “counted worthy to suffer dishonor” for the sake of the gospel. So should we. And when we, like they, trust in God’s sovereignty and genuinely desire to see the kingdom of God advance, we will not resent God’s trials in our life, but we will even learn to rejoice in them.

Questions for reflection

1. Can you think of times in your life that looked desperate and hopeless, but through which you saw the sovereignty of God at work? How does this encourage you to remain faithful to him today?
2. Are you prepared to suffer dishonor for Christ’s name? Would you count it a privilege to do so? If not, what would it take for you to adopt this perspective?
3. “We must obey God rather than men.” How does this need to shape

your own actions today? Is there anyone you know whom the Lord is prompting you gently to challenge with this exhortation?

6. I See Heaven Opened

Acts 6 introduces Stephen, the first **martyr** of the Christian church. The first half of the chapter records a division that emerged in the early church and the establishment of a **diaconate** in order to resolve that problem. Stephen was among those first **deacons**. The second half of the chapter focuses on Stephen's evangelistic ministry and the opposition that begins mounting against him—opposition that will ultimately lead to his martyrdom at the end of chapter 7.

A Church Divided?

6:1 describes the origin of a controversy that erupted in the early church: “A complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.” Thus, there seems to have been some discrimination, or at least perceived discrimination, in the way the early church was caring for its widows. The “Hellenists” (that is, the Greek-speaking Jews) were not receiving the same level of care as were the native Jerusalem widows.

The response of the disciples is particularly noteworthy. While concerned about the plight of the widows, they ultimately wanted to ensure that they did not give up the ministry of the word as their primary concern. Luke records that the apostles said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables” (**v 2**). Later, in **verse 4**, the apostles again emphasize that they must wholly devote themselves “to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” This response demonstrates that the apostles recognized that the most crucial aspects of any church are the faithful teaching and preaching of God's word, and the ministry of prayer. Once again we see Luke emphasizing that the church is built and sustained

by God's word and God's Spirit. Only as a church faithfully preaches and teaches Scripture, and then pleads for God's Spirit to bless their efforts, can they expect to see true conversions and true growth in godliness among God's people. The church is created by God's word and sustained by God's word. Indeed, without the word of God a church ceases to be a church. Thus, the apostles prioritized God's word even above the physical needs of the congregation.

The apostles, however, were not indifferent to the plight of the Hellenist widows. Instead they asked the congregation to appoint "seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" to care for the widows (v 3), so that they themselves could continue to focus on the task for which they had been appointed by Christ and were responsible to Christ—devoting themselves "to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (v 4). The church, joyfully submitting to the leadership of the apostles, chose Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus (v 5). The apostles also prayed for these men and "laid their hands on them" (v 6), which indicates that these men were being appointed to a special function within the life of the church.

Some scholars refer to these seven men as the first diaconate. While these men are never specifically referred to as deacons, their task within the church certainly resembles the task given to deacons later in the New Testament (1 Timothy 3:8-13). Further, the fact that the apostles "laid hands" on these men shows that they were probably formally appointing them to the office of deacon.

Deacons, according to Scripture, are to function as the chief servants within the church. In fact, the Greek word deacon (*diakonos*) means "servant." Deacons are qualified members of the church (1 Timothy 3:8-13) who serve the physical and administrative needs of the body. Some churches today view deacons as primary leaders and teachers within the church. But the New Testament is quite clear that the task of theological leadership falls to the overseers—elders or pastors—of a congregation (1 Timothy 3:1-7).

Three Lessons for the Church

We can learn three important lessons about deacons and their role in the life of a church from this passage. First, deacons are to free up the church's preachers and teachers from administrative concerns so that they can focus on the ministry of prayer and the word. The apostles appointed deacons to ensure that the congregation would have its physical needs taken care of, while also ensuring that they themselves would be able to continue to give focused attention to the ministry of the word so that everyone in the congregation might be spiritually nourished.

Second, as already mentioned, deacons are to function as the chief servants within the church. These seven men in Acts 6 were specifically appointed to serve the widows and "serve tables" (v 2). Finally, deacons are a gift to the church to promote the church's unity. We must not forget the occasion for the apostles' appointment of these seven men to serve as deacons: division was emerging within the church because the Hellenist widows felt they were not being cared for (v 1). In order to ensure that disunity did not spread throughout the congregation, the apostles appointed deacons to help keep the church unified. Their service and care for the needs of others maintained the integrity of the church.

As Mark Dever has noted, all spiritual gifts are designed to maintain the church's unity:

"Really, this is the goal for all the gifts that God's Spirit gives to His church—to build one another up and encourage each other (e.g. Romans 1:11-12). Paul says to the Corinthians that God's gifts are 'for the common good,' (1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 12). He exhorts these early Christians, 'Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church,' (1 Corinthians 14:12). So Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:26, 'all must be done for strengthening.' ... So Peter wrote, 'Each should use whatever gift he has received to serve others administering God's grace,' (1 Peter 4:10)."

(A Display of God's Glory, page 11)

Those who do not serve as a pastor or a deacon in their congregation will nevertheless find that this passage has several important applications for every church member. First, every Christian should value a rightly ordered church. The Bible spends a great deal of time talking about church order and church **offices**. Acts 6 makes plain why a rightly ordered church is so important: biblical order preserves church unity. If we are seeking to be agents of unity within our local congregations, we should be those who value a biblical doctrine of the church.

Second, like the apostles, every church member should value the time that church leaders and pastors dedicate to the ministry of the word and prayer. Indeed, church members should expect nothing less from their pastors, and they should encourage their pastors to spend their time investing in word and prayer. Every church member should make it his or her goal to find ways to remove burdens from their pastors so that they can invest more deeply in their study of Scripture and in prayer.

The final verse of this section of story shows how God blesses churches that care about church order, about unity, and about the centrality of Scripture. In **verse 7**, Luke records that “the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” We should not miss Luke’s point. As the deacons served the church and the church maintained its unity, the apostles were able to focus on God’s word and prayer. As a result, “the word of God continued to increase” and God continued to bring sinners into his kingdom. Remarkably, even some of the priests—those who had been most hostile to the apostles and to the gospel—were saved as well.

Stephen is Seized

The latter half of Acts 6 and all of chapter 7 focus on Stephen, the first martyr of the church. Stephen has already been introduced in **6:5** as one of the deacons chosen by the congregation. There, Luke also indicated that

Stephen was “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.” In **verse 8**, Luke reintroduces him as “full of grace and power ... doing great wonders and signs among the people.”

As Stephen was doing “wonders and signs,” some from the “synagogue of the Freedmen” opposed and “disputed” with him (**v 9**). As the name implies, the synagogue of the Freedmen likely refers to Jews who had been freed from slavery, either from Cyrene or some other Gentile territory. Stephen’s responses to his opponents dumbfounded them. Luke records that when Stephen refuted his opponents, they “could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking” (**v 10**). This statement actually fulfills the words of Christ in the Gospel of Luke when he told his followers, “I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict” (Luke 21:15).

Acts **6:11-15** records the angry response of the crowd to Stephen’s message. His opponents, clearly unable to refute Stephen, decided to get back at him through trickery and false accusations. They “secretly instigated men” who accused Stephen on trumped-up charges alleging that he had spoken “blasphemous words against Moses and God” (**v 11**). They did not stop there. They also “stirred up” the crowd as well as its leaders so that Stephen was seized and brought to trial (**v 12**). This **kangaroo court** clearly had no interest in truth or justice. Instead, Stephen’s opponents incited “false witnesses” to lie about what Stephen had said (**v 13**). They claimed that Stephen had committed blasphemous offenses (**v 14**):

1. He spoke against the temple (“this place”).
2. He spoke against the Law (“the customs that Moses delivered to us”).

We will not read Stephen’s response to these charges until chapter 7. But what are we to make of the opposition Stephen encountered and the trumped-up charges that were brought against him? First, we must remember that true godliness often kindles the world’s fierce opposition. Stephen was known for his godliness and virtue. He was “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (**6:5**). We should not be surprised therefore to see the

world's hostility directed at a man like him. The more we walk in the footsteps of Christ, the more we will find that we will encounter the same hostility and persecution that Christ himself encountered.

Second, like Stephen we must be patient with unbelievers and opponents even as they twist and pervert the message we preach. Stephen was quite probably teaching the crowd how Jesus himself fulfills the message of the Old Testament. Jesus fulfills the **Sinai covenant** and is himself the true temple. Thus, it's not that Stephen was saying that the law and the temple should be abandoned. The law and the temple were signposts that pointed to the Messiah. Yet Stephen's opponents claimed that he was saying that Jesus would destroy the temple and change the law of Moses. Stephen patiently endured such false accusations and, as we will see in the next chapter, continued to teach and preach even in the face of this opposition.

This chapter ends with a rather perplexing verse: "And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel" (**v 15**). One huge problem here is the all-too-common confusion concerning angels. In the Bible, angels are not sweet, "cherubic" creatures, seeking to bring cuteness to a room. They are messengers of God. They inspire awe and fear. Their purpose was to bring a message from the one true God. This is the ministry of the word of God. Thus for Luke to say that Stephen had the face of an angel was to comment on his role as a true messenger of the word of God. Luke is not asking us to picture Stephen with an angel-like face, but rather, with an expression that denoted his determination to speak God's word fearlessly, faithfully, and forcefully to the end. May we too share that face of an angel in our day.

Questions for reflection

1. How do the apostles in verses 1-7 demonstrate a balance between the prioritization of word ministry and the practicing of mercy ministry? What should this balance look like in your own church—and what

would be the likeliest way for you to become imbalanced in some way?

2. "True godliness often kindles the world's fierce opposition." How have you experienced this? Did you see it as a reassurance or as a reason for compromise?
3. What would it mean for you to have "the face of an angel" today?

PART TWO

The Defense of History

At the beginning of chapter 7, the high priest demands that Stephen respond to the charges made against him, asking, “Are these things so?” (7:1). Stephen spoke with great power before this unjust court—and the words of Christ were fulfilled when the crowd “could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking” (6:10; see Luke 21:15). Leaving the crowd dumbfounded and unwilling to listen, Stephen was accused of speaking against two sacred aspects of first-century Jewish life: the law and the temple. There were no more grievous charges to lay against a Jew, and it became a familiar tactic of the Jewish opponents of the early church (see Acts 18:12-13; 21:27-30).

This much is clear, however: Stephen was not actually insulting either of those things.

Acts 7 records Stephen’s defense against these accusations and is one of the longest sermons in the book of Acts. At first glance, it is not immediately apparent precisely how Stephen’s speech is a response to his accusers. It mainly reads like a recitation of the history of Israel, starting with Abraham and concluding with the building of the temple. In fact, many New Testament scholars believe that Stephen’s sermon has little or even nothing to do with the accusations made against him. For instance, one scholar, Ernst Haenchen, exclaims in his commentary:

“Stephen is supposed to be answering the question of whether he is guilty of the charges, but a very large part of his speech has no bearing on this at all!”

(The Acts of the Apostles, page 286)

Similarly, Martin Dibelius argues that the speech was “irrelevant” and had “no purpose whatever” with regard to the charges

(Studies in the Acts of the Apostles, pages 167-169).

Yet, Stephen's speech is much more than an abstract history lesson. Instead, this chapter is an exercise in **biblical theology**. Stephen is retelling Israel's history in order to make a specific point about how that history anticipated the person and work of Jesus Christ, and about how his opponents' response to truth is nothing new. As we might expect, Stephen's speech focuses particularly on the themes of the temple and the law. He demonstrates how each one was fulfilled by Christ with the inauguration of the new covenant.

Christianity and the Law

For instance, with regard to the law, Luke shows that rather than speaking against Moses, Stephen was preaching against the **cult** of Moses, which ironically was propagated by those who denied what Moses had taught: namely, that a day was coming when a greater Moses would come to redeem the people (**7:37**). By preaching the word, Stephen countered the false understandings of his listeners with the way Scripture itself presents Moses: as a foreshadowing of the One who would come and lead his people in a greater exodus: their redemption from bondage to sin. Stephen demonstrates how Christ was greater than Moses.

The accusation that Stephen spoke against the law is the primary reason why most of his speech focuses on the life of Moses. Stephen divides Moses' life into three 40-year periods. He retells the first 40 years of Moses's life in **verses 20-22**, where he describes Moses' birth, his adoption by Pharaoh's daughter, and his education in the Egyptian court. Next, Stephen discusses Moses' life from 40 to 80 years old in **verses 23-29**. As Stephen makes clear in this text, Moses, like the prophets who came before and like those who would come after, was rejected by the people of Israel. Stephen indicates that when Moses killed the Egyptian who was abusing an Israelite slave, "he supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand" (**v 25**). But the Israelites rejected Moses (**v 27-28**), causing him to flee into the wilderness (**v 29**).

The final 40 years of Moses' life are described in **verses 30-43**. In this section Stephen recounts Moses' experience at the burning bush (**v 30-34**) and his deliverance of Israel from Egypt (**v 35-43**). Once again Stephen underscores the fact that Moses was rejected by Israel: "This Moses, whom they rejected ... God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush" (**v 35**). Stephen even records that Moses performed "wonders and signs" (**v 36**) among the people. What's the implication of this retelling of Moses' life? Moses is in line with Jesus and Stephen, servants of God who performed signs and wonders (Acts 2:22; 6:8) and yet were rejected by Israel.

Again, Stephen's recounting of Israel's history is much more than an innocuous history lesson. By retelling the story of Moses, Stephen showed his audience that he was not denying the law. Instead, he was upholding the true purpose of the law. The law was intended to demonstrate people's inability to live a life of obedience to the law (**7:38-40**), and so to point to their need for a Savior. The law also pointed to that Savior. Men like Jacob's son Joseph, and Moses, were **types** of the Messiah: their lives foreshadowed a coming Savior, who would also be rejected by Israel (**v 37**).

Those who would eventually stone Stephen were (at best) following the letter of the law, not the spirit of it. Thus Stephen demonstrated that the law was not the **capstone** of God's redemptive plan. Instead the law was a signpost, pointing to the people's need for a Messiah. Stephen indicts the people for not seeing how the law pointed beyond itself, and for how they could not fulfill the law. And so the people, not he, had actually spoken against the law, since they would not listen to the constant call of the law to despair of attaining self-righteousness and to be led to trust God's gracious promises for final redemption.

In fact, by turning the law and the temple into ends in themselves, and by failing to see the true purpose of the law and the temple, Israel had become idolatrous. Stephen makes this point in **verses 39-43**. When Israel rejected its leaders, the people invariably turned to idolatry. From the exodus to the **exile**, Israel was embroiled in the worship of idols.

Christianity and the Temple

Stephen also makes a similar argument with regard to the temple. Just as the law was not an end unto itself, so too the temple ultimately pointed beyond itself. The temple, the bulwark of Judaism in the time of Jesus, was passing away. Everything the temple represented was perfectly fulfilled in Christ. For those Jews who regarded the temple as the very center of their religious life, Stephen's claim would have been near blasphemous. Yet as he reflected on the scope of redemptive history, Stephen recognized that the physical temple had heralded the day in which Christ, the great High Priest, went behind the curtain of the temple "not made with hands" and made final atonement for the sins of his covenant people (Hebrews 9:11-14; 6:19-20).

Stephen makes this argument by showing that God's presence in the Old Testament was never confined to the temple or even to the land of Israel. Instead, God appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia (Acts **7:2**). As Stephen goes on to explain, God continued to appear to Abraham and even cut a covenant with him all while Abraham did not even own a "foot's length" in the promised land (**v 3-8**). God was "with" Joseph in Egypt (**v 9**). God even visited Moses in the wilderness outside the promised land (**v 30-33**). Then God dwelt in the **tabernacle** outside of Israel during the time of promise (**v 44-45**). It was not until the days of Solomon that God's dwelling had a fixed location in the temple (**v 45-47**). Yet even Solomon recognized that the temple could never truly serve as God's ultimate dwelling place. This evidence leads to Stephen's conclusion in **verse 48**: "The Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands."

Stephen also quotes from Isaiah 66:1-2, showing that even the prophets recognized that God's presence could never be restricted to one location (Acts **7:49-50**). The fact that God was never confined to the temple, and the fact that the story of God's presence develops across the pages of the Old Testament, demonstrate that the story of the temple was incomplete under the old covenant. True believers would have recognized that there would come a day when God would be with his people in a way that was even

greater than under the old covenant.

Stephen thus turns the tables on his listeners. He, not they, has remained faithful to Scripture's teaching on Moses, the law, and the temple. Stephen becomes the prosecutor in this court scene and charges his audience with the ultimate crime: "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you" (**v 51**).

Stephen's scathing indictment has the ring of an Old Testament prophet. This, of course, is intentional. Stephen is saying that just as the brothers of Joseph rejected Joseph (**v 9-16**), and just as the people of Israel rejected Moses (**v 35**), so too the people of Israel are now rejecting Jesus, through rejecting his messenger Stephen. Stephen makes this point explicit in **verse 52**. Old Testament prophets, like Joseph and Moses, announced with their lives and with their words the coming of the Righteous One, the Messiah. Just as the fathers of Israel had killed so many prophets of God, so Stephen accuses his audience of committing an even worse act of rebellion by killing the Righteous One himself: Jesus. They are a proud, obstinate people who are unfaithful to the covenant. If they were faithful to the covenant, they would not have rejected the prophets of that covenant! Like Peter, who charged those at Pentecost with crucifying and killing Christ, Stephen charges the crowd in Acts 7 with murdering the Righteous One, the one long foretold by the prophets.

Though he indicts those listening, it is very important to note this was not an *ad hominem* argument. Stephen was not accusing the accusers for accusation's sake. He was taking this opportunity to preach the gospel to them by demonstrating how the Old Testament finds its fulfillment in Christ—how the redemptive purposes of God found their highpoint in the atoning work in the Lord Jesus, the Righteous One. By demonstrating how they had misunderstood the Old Testament, Stephen is calling the crowd to trust in Jesus.

We must never forget that while the gospel is good news, that good news must often be preceded by the bad news of our sin and condemnation. We

must exercise tact and care, but we must also, like Stephen, boldly tell our friends and neighbors that sin is an obstinate refusal to obey God, and thus it offends God. We are under God's wrath and deserving of his just judgment. In light of those truths, but only in light of those truths, the gospel is infinitely good news. It is only as we sense the depth of our sin and the inevitability of our condemnation that will we have any true sense of the glory and majesty of God's grace found in the gospel of Christ.

I See the Heavens Opened

After calling the people to repent, how did they respond? Just as people reject the gospel today, so too Stephen's hearers rejected his preaching (**v 54**). "They were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him." Just as in Acts 2:37, there was a reaction—but this time it was of a different nature. Again, God cut the people to their hearts—but this time, they were cut in a way that hardened them. The Lord used his word in such a way that it was as if knives pierced them. Feeling their hearts pierced by the word of God, the people immediately responded in vicious, brutish anger. Gnashing teeth is animalistic; as with those in hell, it demonstrates raw, absolute anger or intense pain (Luke 13:28).

Though the people were clearly not pleased with Stephen's preaching of the gospel, Stephen—"full of the Holy Spirit" (Acts **7:55**)—saw a vision of the glory of God, confirming that God was indeed pleased with his preaching. In the face of vicious brutality, Stephen saw an image of his Savior standing at the right hand of God (**v 55-56**). Like a man rising up from his chair to greet a friend, Jesus rose to greet Stephen. In a sense, this is the visual depiction of what all Christians want to hear when they meet their Savior face to face: "Well done, good and faithful servant ... Enter into the joy of your master" (Matthew 25:21). It was also a reminder to Stephen that because Jesus was at the right hand of the God who is on the throne of the universe, nothing could happen to him without the consent of his loving and sovereign heavenly Father (Matthew 10:29-31).

Then the picture shifts again from Stephen to his listeners. Upon hearing the declaration that he had seen a vision of Jesus at the right hand of Yahweh, “they rushed at him with one impulse” (v 57, NASB). Their response was natural. Unless God first regenerates the hearer, **fallen** humanity will reject the word of God—no matter how winsomely it is preached. The fallen man and woman will hear the gospel not with receptivity, but with enmity.

Having heard the gospel with hard hearts, their response validated Stephen’s indictment that they were uncircumcised in heart: “Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him” (v 58). With this first martyrdom, there is a clear shift in Acts’ portrayal of the people’s receptivity to the gospel. We have moved from the miraculous work of God to bring thousands to himself through the gospel preaching of Peter to the stoning of Stephen as a result of his gospel witness. From here, Acts portrays the gospel going forth not with ease, but in the teeth of powerful opposition and imminent persecution.

The Best Way to Die

We should not miss two details Luke records about Stephen’s martyrdom. First, before Stephen died, he cried out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (v 59). What tremendously encouraging words for any Christian undergoing persecution in our age! The worst anyone can do to us is send us to Jesus. When we die with faith in the Lord Jesus, we will be received into the loving care of that Lord Jesus.

Second, Luke records that Stephen prayed for those who were murdering him: “And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them’” (v 60). This act of prayer reflects Jesus’ own **intercession** for his persecutors in Luke 23:34: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” This parallel between Stephen and Jesus marks Stephen as a true disciple. He is following in the footsteps of his Savior. Even in death, God is conforming Stephen into the image of Christ, as he promises to do for all his children (Romans 8:29).

After Stephen's stoning, there is a shift in Acts from the gospel addressed to the Jews to the gospel addressed to the Gentiles. As we will see, God used Stephen's martyrdom as a catalyst that would begin to drive Christians out of the city of Jerusalem, and in the end into the utter most parts of the world, taking the gospel with them on their lips (Acts 8:4-6). Stephen's faithful preaching of the gospel, his clear declaration that Jesus Christ was the promised Messiah, his submission to the will of God in persecution, and his demonstration of mercy toward his persecutors as he prayed for them moments before dying—all of this was used by God to spur the church to go and make disciples of all nations. Stephen's life served as an example to the early church of a life of faithfulness to Christ no matter the cost will be.

In fact, Stephen's life still serves the church in just that same way. The account of Stephen's martyrdom reminds us that the world hates the message of the gospel and will even resort to violence to see it squelched. But the church must not fear the persecution of the world. Our God reigns in heaven: and even if the world turns against us, we will, like Stephen, find Jesus standing in heaven, ready to receive us as we remain faithful to him. May the Lord make us willing to serve the church like him, to preach the gospel like him, and to die for Christ like him.

Questions for reflection

1. What does Stephen's speech mean for our attitude toward "holy places"?
2. What would it take for you to be willing to live as Stephen did (and, if necessary, to die as Stephen did)?
3. Jesus waits to greet his friends as they reach their home in heaven. How does this comfort and/or exhort you today?

7. Beyond Jerusalem

The open persecution of the church in Jerusalem forced it to scatter across the regions of Judea and Samaria (**8:1**). Christians throughout the city, except for the apostles, ran for their lives. Many had joined the congregation on the day of Pentecost through the preaching of the Peter. Now, under heavy opposition, they were being driven out, scattered, and even killed.

This flight of Christians from Jerusalem is very significant in terms of redemption history. In the Old Testament, the Jewish temple represented the absolute center of God's presence among his people. According to the Jews, Jerusalem was the only place where God's special presence was truly found. Thus, this exodus of Christians from Jerusalem marks the end of Jerusalem's centrality in salvation history. This end had been announced by Jesus himself as he cursed the fruitless fig tree and then cleared out the temple, the place of real fruitlessness (Mark 11:12-21); and it was underlined by the utter destruction of the temple by the Romans in AD 70. Acts 8 shows that Jerusalem is no longer the center of what God is doing in his world, nor is it the place where God is most present in his world—his "holy temple" is now the gathered local church, a "dwelling place [of] God by the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:21-22).

In fact, we see in this scattering of Christians to Judea and Samaria the fulfillment of Christ's purposes for his church. Jesus had said the church would be his "witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). And so the persecution of the church only served God's purposes for the expansion of his kingdom and the advance of the gospel. The enemies of Stephen tried to shut down the gospel through violence, but God used their wickedness to expand the reach of the gospel!

Even as the Christians were scattered, devout men retrieved Stephen's body in order to bury him and mourn over him (**8:2**). In the first century, for a body to remain unburied and exposed to scavengers was a sign of humiliation, disrespect, and abandonment. The complete disregard for Stephen's body reveals just how seriously the church's persecutors, led by Saul (**v 1**), were taking their efforts to stamp out the church, and just how much they hated Christians. Yet, the care these Christians showed to Stephen's body, even in spite of this persecution, testifies to the power of their witness for the gospel. Devout Christian men would not allow the martyred body of Stephen to be defiled.

As these men mourned Stephen's death, Saul ravaged the church, systematically moving from house to house to imprison every believer he could find (**v 3**). The architect behind the persecution of the early church used the publicity of Stephen's martyrdom as an opportunity to launch a wide-scale attack on the followers of Jesus Christ. The people gathered under the banner of the gospel were now a people scattered by the sword of persecution.

This may have seemed a severe setback for the fledgling church. But our sovereign God acts in ways that confound the wisdom of the world. The more the world opposes the church, the more the Lord preserves and protects the gospel. Such was the case with Saul's oppression of Christians. The church spread—and the gospel with it—because Saul wanted to stamp it out. What Saul meant for evil, God used for good as God so often does (see Genesis 50:20). What we see as setbacks, the Lord uses for advance; where we see a detour from the obvious route, the Lord has so often plotted out a path to the growth of his people and the glory of his Son.

Scattering and Growing

Acts **8:4** reveals the fruit that began to sprout immediately as a result of Saul's intense persecution of the church. The scattered believers "went about preaching the word." Obviously, this is not the result Saul anticipated

or desired! **Verse 5** turns our attention to one of the scattered in particular: Philip. Philip was one of the Jewish Christians, along with Stephen, appointed to serve as one of the seven deacons in 6:1-6. Philip's actions in chapter 8, however, do not focus on his role as deacon, but instead continue to emphasize the theological upheaval happening in the hearts and minds of Jewish Christians. As a Jewish Christian, Philip would, if he were following the logic of traditional Jewish theology, have avoided Samaria at all costs. Samaria was considered unclean because the people had intermarried with Gentiles. In fact, the Jews used the designation "Samaritan" as an insult (John 8:48). It was not by accident that the Lord used a Samaritan as the "hero" of his parable about defining who our neighbor is (Luke 10:25-37). If Jerusalem had seemed like fertile ground for the gospel, Samaria looked like the opposite—rocky, unlikely ground for planting a church. Yet Philip went to Samaria and "proclaimed to them the Christ" (Acts 8:5)—and "the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said" (v 6). This was a sure sign that the new covenant would include people from all nations. The gospel was breaking beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem, and moving even to the unclean Samaritans.

Luke also notes that the signs and wonders that accompanied Philip's preaching drew attention from the crowd (v 6). Philip was casting out unclean spirits and, like Peter and John in Acts 4, was healing the paralyzed and lame (v 7). As a result, "there was much joy in that city" (v 8).

With so much positive attention being directed toward Philip, one of the men of the city, Simon the Magician, took a particular interest in Philip's miracles (v 9-13). Simon, who claimed to be "somebody great" (v 9), was known throughout the city as a sorcerer with great power. In fact, Luke notes that "from the least to the greatest," the people of Samaria would say, "This man is the power of God that is called Great" (v 10).

While the people had been "amazed" with Simon (v 11), the miracles of Philip and the preaching of the gospel turned them away from being impressed by Simon to being enamored with Jesus. Luke notes that "when they believed Philip as he preached the good news about the kingdom of

God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women” (v 12). Even Simon himself, amazed by Philip’s miracles, made a profession of faith in the gospel and was baptized (v 13).

Before moving on, we should reflect on the content of Philip’s preaching. Luke indicates that he proclaimed “the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” (v 12). As we might expect, these phrases are loaded with theological significance. The Jews thought that they alone would be in the kingdom of God. Yet Philip was proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom to the Samaritans! This was shocking. The good news of the gospel was that anyone, even “unclean” Samaritans, could enter the kingdom of God through the name—the person and the work—of Jesus Christ. Philip made clear that union with Christ, not ethnic identity, was the gateway into God’s kingdom—and his message was received “with joy.”

As we preach the gospel to those whom the Lord has placed around us, we must remember that no one is beyond its reach. This is a point that Luke implicitly makes again and again to his readers, presumably because we are so apt to forget it. A first-century Jew would have thought it impossible for a Samaritan to become part of the people of God. But God proved otherwise with these Samaritans. So we should ask, *Do I believe there are people who I know who are too dirty, too wicked, or simply too settled in their rejection of the gospel to come to Christ?* If so, then you have failed to properly understand the gospel. The gospel does not call us to be worthy or clean before we come to Christ—it calls us to come to Christ in order to be made clean. The gospel offers forgiveness to any outsider or outcast, and it is powerful enough to change any outsider or outcast—including those around you and me.

Receiving the Spirit

Philip was not a rogue evangelist. He did not go out apart from the church in Jerusalem. In fact, as **verse 14** indicates, Philip was in contact with the apostles, and they blessed and endorsed his ministry. When they heard that

Samaria had received the word of God, Peter and John were sent so that the Samaritans might also receive the Holy Spirit (**v 15**). Just as the gospel was for the Samaritans, so too was the Holy Spirit.

The Samaritans needed to receive the Holy Spirit because he had not yet been given to them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus (**v 16**). While these events are a bit perplexing, I believe that if we simply follow the logic of the story, we can see why the apostles had to come in order for the Samaritans to receive the Spirit.

The emphasis in Acts 8 is on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (**v 12, 16**). The Samaritans believed in Jesus and so Philip baptized them as a public declaration of their faith. Now, just as in the upper room in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit came and fell upon these believers—Samaritan believers—as a public demonstration that they too were part of the people of God, despite their ethnic identity.

When the apostles arrived, they laid their hands on the Samaritan believers and they received the Holy Spirit (**8:17**). The laying on of hands by the apostles was a symbol and manifestation of the Spirit coming in power. The apostles' presence and their role as mediators of the gift of the Spirit demonstrates that the church of Samaria had apostolic endorsement. In other words, they were truly an apostolic church. In fact, the church at Jerusalem and the church at Samaria constituted one people of God.

At this point, we may want to ask whether the church should still lay hands on new converts and tell them to receive the Spirit in this same way. To answer this, we need to recognize that the apostles are not here establishing a normative practice for the church in all ages and places. Instead, the visible manifestation of the Spirit marks the magnitude of this moment in salvation history—the inclusion of Samaritans into the covenant community. The faith of the apostles and those with them in the upper room was authenticated by the visible manifestation of the Spirit when he first came to Christ's people in Acts 2. So too here, the presence of the apostles and the visible manifestation of the Spirit authenticates the faith of

Samaritans and the breaking through of the barrier between Jew and Samaritans. The coming of the Spirit signifies that they are one church, one covenant community. In fact, in Acts 10 – 11 we will find the Spirit falling again in a similar way, this time on the Gentiles, once again authenticating their faith and demonstrating their unity with the covenant community. Remember Acts 1:8—since we do not live at such a significant redemptive-historical moment or in such a redemptive-geographical location, we should not expect this same experience, nor worry if we have not had or witnessed it. We can rest assured that if we know Jesus as Lord, we enjoy the full presence of his Spirit within us (1 Corinthians 12:3).

The Money Problem

Luke now brings us back to Simon, who is so impressed by the power of the apostles and the giving of the Spirit that he offers to pay the apostles money to possess such abilities (Acts **8:18-19**). Remember that Simon had believed, been baptized, and joined Philip (**v 13**). Yet, just five verses later, Simon is trying to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit—an act which Peter sternly rebukes.

Peter's rebuke of Simon is not mild, nor does it leave any doubt about the eternal state of Simon's soul. Peter tells Simon that his silver will perish with him because "[he] thought [he] could obtain the gift of God with money" (**v 20**). Further, he tells him that he has no "part" in the ministry and that his heart is condemned before God (**v 21**). Peter is revealing the true state of Simon's heart. Simon never exercised true faith in Christ. He wanted to enjoy and employ the power of the gospel, but it has now turned out that he never truly desired to repent of sin and be forgiven by God.

Peter drives this point home when he denounces Simon's action as "wickedness," and claims that he is in the "gall of bitterness" and "bond of iniquity" (**v 23**). How very different from the fruits of true conversion! Simon's desire for the Spirit's power, and not the Spirit itself, reveals that he is still a slave to sin.

Simon's "profession of faith" is instructive. We need to recognize that simply because someone says they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ does not necessarily mean they are genuinely converted. As James reminds us, even the demons believe (James 2:19). Further, Christ taught regularly that many people would show interest in the gospel but never be truly converted (Matthew 7:21-23; 13:18-23). Even baptism is not sufficient proof positive of true conversion. False confessions of faith lead to false baptisms. Genuine conversion leads to a genuine change of life and a daily walk in repentance, which demonstrates that a baptism was genuine. As Jesus taught, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21).

Peter's solution to Simon's problem is simple: repent and pray for forgiveness (Acts **8:22**). We can't be sure if Simon ever took Peter's advice, but we can be sure that his example serves as a warning to us. Mere intellectual assent to the gospel is an incomplete response to the gospel. Faith must take root in the heart and produce true repentance. The gospel sounded good to Simon, but he only wanted to reap its benefits. He wanted the gifts, but not the Giver—the power, but not the Person.

Simon responded by asking Peter to pray for him, "that nothing of what you have said may come upon me" (**v 24**). But this isn't what the gospel calls its hearers to do. True faith in the gospel requires us to rely on Christ for our salvation and to repent of our sins. We cannot come to God on any other terms. Simon was still making the same mistake. He wanted to be saved from the penalty of sin—he wanted the benefits of the gospel—but he was still not repenting of his sin and bowing his knee to King Jesus.

Simon should prompt us to consider the state of our own belief in Jesus. Is it intellectual or is it true heart-belief? Does it issue forth in repentance and change (albeit sometimes frustratingly slowly as you do battle with your sin)? Do you want the benefits God offers in the gospel, or do you want to know the God of the gospel? Peter urged Simon to believe in a way that would affect his whole life—a faith and repentance in which the head, heart, and soul would all be connected.

Even though we don't know whether Simon ever became a believer, we do know that many in Samaria were truly converted (**v 12**) and that the mission there continued (**v 25**). And, as we shall see in the next section, the spread of the gospel was far from over.

Questions for reflection

1. How has this passage shaped the way you view, and react to, personal or church-wide persecution?
2. In what ways does Simon the magician serve as a warning to you?
3. The message of the gospel was received "with much joy" in Samaria. Recall your own conversion. How did you experience the joy of discovering who Jesus was and coming under his rule? How might you recall that joy each day, so that it continues to be a mark of your life?

PART TWO

The first half of Acts 8 showed how not to respond to the gospel. Simon wanted the benefits of the gospel but would not truly submit his life to King Jesus. The second half of Acts 8 shows us a genuine picture of conversion in the person of the Ethiopian **eunuch**. False converts should never deter us from the mission to preach the good news to which God calls his followers.

Clear Direction

Simon's false conversion did not disillusion the apostles. In fact, it led them to continue their mission to preach and teach the gospel message (**v 25**). While the apostles are busy evangelizing, an angel appears to Philip and commissions him to "go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza" (**v 26**).

The road from Jerusalem to Gaza was not a road Jews would typically travel. It was a desert road, which made for a difficult and dangerous journey. Moreover, Gaza was a city of the Philistines. The Jews would not walk into Philistine territory unless they had a very good reason. Throughout the Old Testament the Philistines had been some of the fiercest enemies of Israel. In fact, much of 1 Samuel records the constant conflict that existed between the two nations.

Philip's presence on this road reveals something significant about the call of the gospel. If you truly embrace the gospel and determine to follow after Jesus, you may find yourself going where you never thought you'd go or doing something you never thought you'd do. Obedience to the gospel often requires us to obey in unexpected ways. The angel of the Lord came to Philip and ordered him—without giving any explanation—to go south. Philip simply trusted and obeyed. Unlike Simon the magician, Philip responded in total faith and obedience.

We may not have any angels appearing to us with explicit instructions for our life and ministry, but God has not left us without any knowledge of his

will for our life. God's will is made known in his word. As we study Scripture and seek first God's kingdom, God will make clear how we can follow him faithfully. Additionally, God's wisdom and purpose for our life is also made known through the loving care of a local church. As we submit ourselves to the authority of elders and to a congregation, we will find their wisdom instructing us on the path of greatest faithfulness.

Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

As Philip traveled, the Holy Spirit instructed him to meet an Ethiopian eunuch returning home from Jerusalem (Acts **8:27, 29**). Romans considered Ethiopia to be the edge of the world—an Ethiopian eunuch therefore would not be someone notable or prestigious in Roman eyes. But the values of God's kingdom are not the values of this world, and this eunuch would soon find that God himself had scheduled an appointment for him with the gospel.

Not only is the Ethiopian a resident of an empire on the outskirts of civilization; he's also identified as a eunuch. Luke could have described this Ethiopian simply as a "court official," but he doesn't. He gives us the Ethiopian's title (court official) and a physical description (eunuch). Why would Luke choose to focus on this?

Jewish law did not permit this man, as a eunuch, to enter the Jerusalem Temple (Leviticus 21:18-21; Deuteronomy 23:1). He could watch and worship from a distance in the Court of Gentiles, but he could not enter the Court of Israel. Even if he'd been a Jew, his status as a eunuch would still have rendered him unable to come into the assembly. He would have had to worship God from afar. In short, as both a Gentile and a eunuch this man was twice over an outcast, a religious outsider, someone who could not be welcomed into God's presence. With this in mind, the question arises: how is Philip going to treat this man? Further, will Philip offer the grace of God in the gospel even to this man, a Gentile eunuch?

The Spirit prompts Philip to "go over" and meet the eunuch (Acts **8:29**).

Only now do we discover that as the eunuch is traveling, he is reading the book of Isaiah (**v 28**). In the ancient world reading was done aloud. So, as Philip approaches the chariot, he hears the eunuch reading the prophet, and asks, “Do you understand what you are reading?” (**v 30**). We should note the centrality of the word of God in this encounter. Even as the Spirit supernaturally guides Philip to this conversation with the Ethiopian, the Lord uses the word of God and the ministry of Philip as the mechanism of the Ethiopian’s conversion. Our temptation is to wish for supernatural displays of power. But God delights in using his written word to convert the lost and expand his kingdom. Further, conversion is the greatest display of God’s supernatural power. Paul teaches that it takes the power that created light to create saving faith in the Lord Jesus in a sinner’s heart (2 Corinthians 4:6). In our passage in Acts 8, the greater miracle is not the Spirit’s speaking to Philip, but the Spirit’s work in the eunuch.

Philip’s question is very intriguing: “Do you understand what you are reading?” (Acts **8:30**). The Ethiopian admits that he needs someone to guide him and help him understand the message of Isaiah (**v 31**). This passage provides a glorious picture of how God uses his people and his word in tandem to advance the gospel throughout the world. Paul teaches on this very topic in Romans 10:

“There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’

“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’” (Romans 10:12-15)

We, like Philip, are called to open up the Scriptures and introduce the lost to Jesus. We cannot create new hearts in the lost, but we can put the message

of the gospel in their ears and point them to Scripture as the source of life, trusting that the God who brought this eunuch to faith can bring those we speak with to faith too.

Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch also shows us the indispensability of Christian teachers. While each of us needs the illuminating work of the Spirit to enable us to submit to Scripture, God also uses pastors and teachers to unfold the meaning of Scripture (Ephesians 4:11-12). We all, in some aspect, depend on gifted teachers of God's word to aid and enrich our understanding.

Beeline for the Cross

Luke tells us in Acts **8:32-33** that the Ethiopian eunuch was reading Isaiah 53:7-8, part of what is perhaps the most famous messianic prophecy in the Old Testament. In this passage, Isaiah describes how the Messiah would suffer on behalf of his people, and how those sufferings would lead to Israel's salvation.

But the eunuch is confused because he does not know of whom Isaiah was speaking: was Isaiah talking about himself, or someone else (Acts **8:34**)?

How will Philip respond? Charles Spurgeon said the preacher's responsibility, no matter what text of Scripture is in view, is to read the text and then make a beeline for the cross. This is precisely what Philip does with the passage from Isaiah—not a difficult task given that the passage is, in fact, all about the atoning work of Christ! So, "beginning with this Scripture" from Isaiah, Philip shared the good news of Jesus with the Ethiopian (**v 35**).

Thus, Philip faithfully carried out the task of evangelism. He shared Christ, and him crucified, with someone who did not know him. Philip's reliance on Scripture in the evangelistic task is instructive. Too often, Christians fail to appeal to Scripture or employ Scripture in evangelism. But Scripture should be our primary tool for introducing people to Jesus. What better way to let people encounter Jesus than simply to show them Christ in the pages of the

New Testament. As Mark Dever explains:

“The Bible is God’s Word and is inspired by God’s Spirit. God’s message can go out not just through your words and mine, but through his own inspired words. And we can know that he will take a special delight in showing the power of his Word as he uses it in conversions ... Referring to the clear teaching of the Bible also shows our friends that we are not simply giving them our own private ideas; rather, we are presenting Jesus Christ in his own life and teaching. Just as we want the preaching in our churches to be expositional—preaching in which the point of the message is the point of the Bible passage being preached—we want to see people exposed to God’s Word because we believe that God desires to use his Word to bring about conversions. It is God’s Word coming to us that his Spirit uses to reshape our lives. In your evangelism, use the Bible.”

(The Gospel and Personal Evangelism, pages 61-62)

Philip got to the core of the gospel: Jesus. To be sure, we must talk about other things too. We must talk about God’s holiness and righteousness, we must talk about sin, and we must talk about ourselves. But the core of the good news is the person and work of Jesus Christ. He is the one we must talk about most of all, and without fail.

Roadside Baptism

By now in Acts we have learned that proclamation of the gospel does not guarantee glad acceptance of that gospel. But here, the eunuch recognized Philip’s teaching as good news. God had already been sovereignly at work preparing the Ethiopian’s heart to receive the gospel in faith and repentance. The Lord had already drawn him to Jerusalem to worship. The Lord placed in his hands a copy of the book of the prophet Isaiah. And now, in this incredible moment, the Lord appointed a time for him to meet with Philip during his journey home.

Upon hearing the gospel, the eunuch desired to be baptized (Acts **8:36**).

Luke has not told us how much time passed as Philip “told him the good news about Jesus” (**v 35**), but one thing is certain: the prophet Isaiah does not speak of baptism. We can only assume then that Philip had explained that the gospel demands and creates in us the desire for obedience—an obedience that starts with baptism. This Ethiopian eunuch wanted to be baptized to declare the fact that the blood of the Lamb had redeemed him.

Having just come from Jerusalem, where the eunuch would have been barred from full access to the temple, now he discovers that he can be included in the very kingdom of God. The eunuch’s baptism marks his formal and full identification with God’s people (**v 38**). Once again, Luke is showing his readers that the gospel is breaking out of the boundaries of Israel. The new covenant includes Jews and Gentiles—and even religious outsiders like the Ethiopian eunuch. Ethnic identity no longer separates Jews and Gentiles in the body of Christ.

Interestingly, just a few chapters after Isaiah 53, Isaiah prophesied that under the new covenant even foreigners and eunuchs would not be cut off from the Lord’s people (Isaiah 56:3). The eunuch’s salvation is itself a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and demonstrates with clarity that the new covenant in Christ has arrived. As Isaiah says, the eunuch may not have sons and daughters, but, in the new covenant, he can lay claim to something even more valuable—“an everlasting name that will endure forever!” (Isaiah 56:5, NIV).

At the end of the story, Philip is “carried ... away” by the Spirit (Acts **8:39**) to continue his mission of gospel proclamation (**v 40**). What exactly “carried ... away” means is uncertain. It seems that Philip was miraculously transported away to Azotus. Yet this didn’t seem to bother the Ethiopian eunuch, who went on his way rejoicing (**v 39**). Indeed, there is no joy like the joy that comes to one who has been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb.

Questions for reflection

1. What reasons could Philip have come up with for not preaching the gospel at various points through chapter 8? What would he have missed out on if he had given up?
2. Read Isaiah 52:13 – 53:10. How would you use these verses to explain the gospel of Jesus Christ to a non-Christian who has had no exposure to Christian doctrines or terms before?
3. “Our temptation is to wish for supernatural displays of power. But God delights in using his written word to convert the lost and expand his kingdom.” Why is this good news for us? How does it remove our excuses for avoiding sharing our faith?

8. The Conversion of Saul and the Ministry of Peter

Acts 7 and 8 fleetingly introduced us to one of the most important figures in the New Testament: Saul, better known to us as the apostle Paul. In 7:58, Luke writes that the witnesses of Stephen's persecution laid their robes at Saul's feet as a sign of his authority over and agreement with the proceedings. Saul may not have thrown stones at Stephen, but he was certainly morally culpable. In many respects, he could even be seen as one of the leaders and instigators in Stephen's martyrdom. Then 8:3 revealed that Saul had one overwhelming mission in life: stamping out the spread of the gospel.

The execution of Stephen was just the beginning of Saul's reign of terror against Christians. But the grace of God would soon bring that reign of terror to an end. Acts 9 returns us to Saul's story.

Blinded by the Light

In **9:1-2**, Luke provides us with a graphic description of Saul's hatred of the church. Saul, "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (**v 1**), asked the high priest for authority to imprison any Christians he may find as he expanded his search-and-destroy mission outside of Israel, north to Damascus. Saul was not merely trying to abolish Christianity from Israel; he was seeking to eradicate it wherever it was found. Saul was desperate to keep the gospel from spreading any further.

This **monomaniacal** man was determined to end Christianity, which makes the unfolding narrative even more compelling. Saul's hatred of Christianity revealed the condition of his heart: he was dead in his **trespasses** and sins, a

rebel against the very God whose name he thought he was vindicating by persecuting the supposed blasphemers. Thinking he was doing the work of God, Saul was in fact following “the spirit ... at work in the sons of disobedience,” as he himself would later describe sinful rebellion (Ephesians 2:1-3). The only way he could be brought to life was by the sovereign grace of God, through the power of the very gospel he was working so hard to destroy.

But while Saul was still an **unregenerate** sinner whose visible actions demonstrated his **uncircumcised heart**, the goodness and loving-kindness of God were revealed to Saul on the road to Damascus. Just as he was approaching the city where he sought to persecute the church, a blinding light appeared from heaven (Acts **9:3**)—a light he later recalled as being brighter even than the midday sun (26:13).

This sudden, arresting light stopped Saul in his tracks, and he fell to the ground. In the midst of the blinding light, the Lord spoke to him saying, “Saul, Saul” (**9:4**). This emphatic declaration draws our attention to God’s **providential** calling of Saul. Reflecting on this event in Galatians 1:15, Paul wrote that God had set him apart before he was born, and then called him by his grace. Thus, God’s declaration to Saul on the road to Damascus is the inauguration of a divine act of grace that was planned long before.

Once he had Saul’s attention, the Lord asked him a revealing question: “Why are you persecuting me?” (Acts **9:4**). Stunned, Paul asked, “Who are you, Lord?” And the Lord replied, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (**v 5**). Can you imagine how Saul felt at that moment? The Lord of the people he had been imprisoning and even killing was, in fact, real; and was, in fact, infinitely powerful.

Through this exchange, we learn an important truth: to persecute Christ’s people is to persecute Christ himself. That is how closely Jesus identifies with his people, and how much he cares about his people. Just as the attack on 9/11 was an attack on America, despite being targeted at only two locations in only two cities, so any attack upon a believer is viewed by the

Lord as being an attack on himself.

After revealing himself to Saul, Jesus commanded him to rise and enter Damascus. But now as he entered the city, Saul carried a new commission from a new commissioner (**v 6**). Although the men with Saul who had shared his malicious intent saw nothing but light (**v 7**), Saul had seen and spoken to the risen Lord (see 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8).

In Acts **9:8-9**, Luke depicts an utterly helpless Saul. He began his journey in strong defiance of the gospel, but he entered Damascus guided by the hands of others, having lost his sight. Saul had experienced the blinding light of Christ. Instead of Saul laying hold of Christians, Jesus Christ had laid hold of him.

Saul's Unlikely Conversion

Verse 10 introduces us to a disciple named Ananias—one whom Saul would have been delighted to arrest just days before. The Lord called Ananias and he responded as we all should: “Here I am, Lord.” But the Lord spoke a hard word to Ananias. This disciple was to go and lay hands on Saul (**v 11-12**). Initially, having heard of Saul’s persecution of Christians and being ignorant of God’s miraculous work in Saul, Ananias responded with astonishment (**v 13-14**). To him, it was as if God were sending him to seek out persecution, imprisonment, and even death. Yet the Lord gave a simple and direct command: “Go!” (**v 15**).

Then the Lord graciously explained some of his purposes to this disciple, telling Ananias that he had chosen Saul to “carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.” God intended to use this new convert to spread the gospel throughout the nations. And as the rest of the New Testament affirms, this is exactly what Saul did. Only God’s sovereign, effectual call, which draws sinners to himself, can explain how Saul, a murderous avenger of Jewish honor, came to repentance and faith in Christ. Saul certainly did not volunteer for such a redemption and mission.

The Lord also shared with Ananias that Saul's mission would not be easy: "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (v 16). Saul would later find joy in suffering for the sake of Christ; rather than continuing as one who persecuted the church, Saul would himself endure persecution for the church, which would ultimately culminate in his martyrdom in Rome.

Receiving this word from the Lord, Ananias still needed to choose to "go." And go to Saul he did, entering the dwelling of his new brother in Christ (v 17). There is rich irony in this passage. The arrester becomes the one arrested; the one who would lay hands on Christians becomes the one upon whom Christian hands are laid; an enemy of the Way (v 2) becomes a brother in the Way. When Ananias touched Saul, the former persecutor was filled with the Holy Spirit. Through this act, Saul's physical blindness—a symbol of his spiritual blindness—fell from his eyes (v 18). Now united to Christ by faith and sealed by the Spirit, Saul went public with his faith by being baptized. His baptism openly demonstrated the inner realities of the gospel and identified him with Christ in his death and resurrection. As a result, the church of Damascus welcomed Saul into the congregation.

Saul's conversion will shock us unless we have grasped the sheer wonder of God's sovereign grace. We ought to expect the unexpected from God. God ransomed one of the most unlikely men—a persecutor of the church, no less—to be a frontrunner for his church. As that persecutor turned trailblazer would later put it himself, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Corinthians 1:27).

Persecutor Turned Preacher

After his baptism, Saul began his Christian life with the church at Damascus (Acts 9:19). The irony continues as Luke shows us Saul, who had intended to hunt for Christians in the synagogues of Damascus, now entering the synagogues to preach Christian truth. Jesus, Saul proclaimed, "is the Son of

God” (**v 20**). Luke presents this as a remarkable turn of events. Saul did not wait; he immediately began to show his fellow Jews that Jesus Christ was the Messiah of the Old Testament.

Saul’s original mission to persecute Christians was so well known that “all who heard him” were amazed and wondered if Saul, the man now preaching Christ in the synagogue, was the same Saul who had come to Damascus to kidnap Christians (**v 21**). Those at the synagogue recognized how unprecedented this was. The person who would have been voted least likely to become a Christian by his rabbinical school now stood as a vocal proponent of Jesus Christ. Mistaken identity seemed a more likely explanation than the truth!

As Saul proclaimed the gospel, he grew in fellowship with the body of Christ at Damascus, and increased in spiritual maturity and knowledge—he even “confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ” (**v 22**). Saul was doing absolutely the last thing anyone expected. The chief persecutor of the church was now its chief **apologist**. The persecutor had become the preacher.

After many days, the bewilderment of the Jewish leaders erupted into a murderous plot—a further ironic twist in Saul’s conversion story (**v 23**). The persecutor-turned-preacher was now the one persecuted. Saul found out about the plot, however, and escaped from Damascus with the help of the church. Rather than Saul dragging Christians back to Jerusalem under the protection of the high priest, he was let down in a basket from the city walls to hide from the Jewish leaders who wanted to take his life. Saul, a man who once held a place of such dignity that he would not get his hands dirty in the stoning of Stephen, now experienced a humiliating rescue operation. And yet he did so without grumbling or complaining. He embraced the humiliation of his escape because he knew the all-surpassing worth of Jesus Christ. After escaping, he fled into Jerusalem (**v 24-26**).

Verse 25 describes Saul’s extraordinary growth in godliness. Luke writes, “His disciples took him.” Why is this important? It shows that Saul had

already matured in the faith to the extent that he had disciples, his own followers, who were growing in the Lord under his teaching. Even as a recent convert, Saul was fulfilling the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20).

Another Plot Foiled

When Saul arrived in Jerusalem, he attempted to join up with the other disciples, but word of his repentance and faith had not yet reached them (Acts 9:26). They only knew Saul as the ravenous persecutor of Christians, not the hunted proclaimer of Christ. Understandably, they could not believe that the very one who had left their city to kidnap their brothers in Damascus had returned to Jerusalem claiming to be a disciple. Yet through the witness of one of their own, Barnabas, the disciples eventually welcomed Saul. Saul's personal testimony of what had happened on the road to Damascus was consistent with his bold preaching of the gospel, and the Christians trusted the validity of his conversion (**v 27**). Once the disciples in Jerusalem embraced Saul as a brother, he began to preach the gospel there, further demonstrating the authenticity of his faith (**v 28**). Saul's bold preaching of the gospel was confirmation for the disciples in Jerusalem. Why else would Saul preach the gospel unless he had truly been saved by it?

Saul's intrepid preaching once again put a price on his head—this time it came from the Hellenist Jews (**v 29**). Saul's experience is a clear reminder that there are only two responses to the gospel: embracing it in love or fighting against it in hate (however politely that may sometimes be done). In response to the Hellenists' plot to kill Saul, the disciples took him to Caesarea and then to Tarsus so that he could continue preaching the gospel freely (**v 30**).

After recounting God's marvelous, saving work in Saul's life, Luke highlights a wonderful truth: through the preaching of the gospel, the church was built up and strengthened. As the church walked in the fear of the Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit, it knew peace and grew in number (**v 31**). This

verse displays the progressive fulfillment of Christ's promise in 1:8: the church would be Christ's witness from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth. Christ's church was multiplying and the gates of hell were not prevailing (Matthew 16:18). The mission of the church was marching on, and now the greatest and most unlikely missionary ever known was helping to lead the charge. That mission continues still, and though you and I have not been converted in the manner Saul was, nor called to be the missionary to the Gentiles as he was, we have nevertheless been converted by the power of the living God to serve the living God by proclaiming the gospel of the living God. And if Saul's conversion teaches us nothing else, it is that no one is beyond the reach of the gospel of God, and thus we should see that it is always worth our every effort to share it with everyone.

Questions for reflection

1. Do you expect the unexpected from God? What difference does that make (or would that make) to your life?
2. How should God's sovereign power in converting people encourage us in our own prayers and witness?
3. What can you learn and apply to yourself from the response of Ananias in this passage?

PART TWO

As we turn our focus from Saul's conversion to Peter's ministry, we must remember just how rapidly the church was growing. As Luke comments, "The church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up" (**Acts 9:31**). Judea, Galilee, and Samaria were predominantly Jewish communities. Judea and Galilee were explicitly Jewish; Samaria was ethnically half-Jewish. And yet, the book of Acts gradually turns our attention from Jerusalem to narrate the spread of the gospel to non-Jewish lands. After the stoning of Stephen, Christians scattered throughout the Roman Empire armed with the gospel, ready to give an account for the hope that was in them (1 Peter 3:15). And so as they went, the church grew.

The Healing

On leaving Jerusalem, Peter was traveling from church to church, serving the body and building up the flock. God had already used Peter's preaching to save about 3,000 souls in Acts 2:41, and now his ministry was looking more and more like that of a missionary pastor. Paul, whose missionary journeys are more familiar to us, would also travel throughout Judea and Samaria, and eventually further out into the Roman Empire, to build the church.

As he was traveling throughout Judea, Peter turned to the church in Lydda (**9:32**), a town approximately 45 miles northeast of Jerusalem. While he was encouraging the church in Lydda, Peter "found a man named Aeneas" (**v 33**). The text does not say whether Aeneas was a Christian before Peter found him, but it seems he was well-known throughout the community (**v 35**). Aeneas had begged for food and money for years. In a world where most people could only survive by the sweat of their brow and the strength of their back, Aeneas was in a desperate condition. As Luke states, he had been bedridden for eight years (**v 33**). While paralysis has always been an awful reminder of the **fall** and our need for redemption, being paralyzed in a remote first-century village was virtually a death sentence.

Finding this paralyzed man, Peter spoke to him—an act of Christian humility. Rather than grandstanding and promoting himself and his healing power, Peter instead proclaimed Christ’s power to heal Aeneas. Just as Jesus healed the paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda by commanding him to rise (John 5:1-9), so here Peter commanded Aeneas to rise (Acts **9:34**). Immediately, Aeneas stood up and became a walking declaration of the healing power of God, a sign for all to see. Peter further commanded him to “make your bed” (v 34). Along with his paralysis, his death sentence had been taken away.

This passage, like many others in Acts, demonstrates how signs and wonders accompanied the preaching of the apostles and the advent of the new covenant. There are several important truths we learn from this passage. First, as we saw in Acts 2, these signs fulfilled Joel’s words in Joel 2:28-32. Second, we must remember that God can and does heal people even today. Whether through the ordinary means of modern medical technologies or through an extraordinary display of his covenant lordship, God sovereignly heals.

Third, this passage again underscores that God is the One who heals, not man. Even Peter, a man whom God used regularly to heal, was known not as a healer, but as an apostle. Peter’s title reminds us of what is central to Christ’s church: the preaching and teaching of God’s word. Miracles confirm this word. However, in our **post-apostolic** age, Scripture is our authenticating authority. The canon is now closed, and the Bible testifies to its own truthfulness as the word of God.

The progression of this narrative confirms this. After zooming in on Peter’s brief encounter with Aeneas, Luke zooms back out to record the greater miracle that followed the healing: “All the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord” (Acts **9:35**). The people believed in the One to whom the miracle pointed: Jesus Christ. By invoking the name of Christ in the healing of Aeneas, Peter declared Jesus to be not only the One who brings physical life, but also the One who brings spiritual rebirth through the Holy Spirit.

As I stated previously, I believe that with the completion of the canon miracles are no longer needed to authenticate the message of the gospel. Instead, Scripture is self-authenticating. By this we mean that just as we know the sun is bright by looking at it and that honey is sweet by tasting it, so Scripture's truthfulness is made clear by its character and nature. We do not need to appeal (indeed, we should not appeal) to any supposedly higher authority to authenticate Scripture (such as history, archaeology, science, or even miracles). Since Scripture is the word of God, there can be no higher authority than that word of God to tell us that it is the word of God.

But does that mean that it is wrong for us to pray for miracles today to aid our proclamation of the gospel? We may not need miracles to authenticate our message, but they certainly would garner attention and serve the forward progress of the gospel. Also, doesn't the Bible indicate that miraculous gifts continue today?

Many godly Christians disagree on whether miraculous gifts have continued in the post-apostolic age. I believe the evidence from Scripture indicates that miraculous gifts have indeed ceased. But that does not mean that God no longer performs miracles or is absent from his creation. Indeed, God can and does intervene in his creation and he acts in ways that can only be described as miraculous.

So we can ask God to do anything that would manifest his glory and increase the expansion of his kingdom. We can ask God to do anything that would exalt Jesus Christ. We can ask God to help his people. At the same time, we must remember that miracles do not change hearts; only the gospel does that. We must never forget in our lives or our preaching that the gospel contains its own power to save (Romans 1:16)—this is the way the Spirit works to bring people to faith in Christ, to the glory of the Father. So whatever our position may be on miraculous gifts, all Christians can and should unite around the fact that the gospel and the preaching of Christ must remain primary.

The Resurrection

Next, Luke takes us to the town of Joppa as he continues to give a chronological account of the first days of the apostles. Philip had likely already preached the gospel in Joppa on his way to Caesarea (Acts 8:40) and, in response, a church was established there. In Joppa we meet a disciple named Tabitha, who was also known by her Aramaic name: Dorcas. She was a godly woman and a follower of Christ, as demonstrated by the fruits of her charity and good works (**9:36**). But in God's sovereign plan, she fell ill and died (**v 37**).

Out of concern for their beloved sister and upon hearing that Peter was in Lydda, two Christian men traveled 12 miles from Joppa to Lydda to plead with Peter to come with them, presumably to revive Tabitha (**v 38**). Tabitha was a servant to the church's widows, was loved by her church, and was recognized for her godliness (**v 39**). She was an integral part of the church's visible demonstration of the gospel.

At this point, we should recognize some similarities between Peter's work and Jesus' work in raising the dead. Just as Christ was sought out to heal and ultimately to revive **Lazarus**, Peter was implored to come and revive Tabitha. And just as Christ came to raise Lazarus, Peter made the journey to raise Tabitha: an approximately three-hour trip by foot. Not only was Peter imitating his Lord; he was also obeying Christ's command to his disciples: "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons" (Matthew 10:8). Peter watched Christ perform these miracles and learned how God was glorified through them.

As when **Mary and Martha** sent for Jesus, expecting him to heal Lazarus (John 11:1-3), the widows met Peter in anticipation (Acts **9:39**). A faithful expectation filled the upper room. What would God do in their midst through Peter? Just as Jesus sent away the bystanders when he raised **Jairus'** daughter (Luke 8:49-55), so also Peter sent out the people (Acts **9:40**). Then the apostle "knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, 'Tabitha, arise.'" What power is found in the simple words he spoke!

Peter's humble command was loaded with faithful anticipation: he expected God to raise Tabitha to life. True to form, when Tabitha was raised to life, Peter immediately gave all glory to God, the One who providentially reigns over all, including death.

God's power was fully displayed after Peter's prayer. Tabitha sat up! A woman who was dead—undoubtedly dead—came back to life. Her resurrection from the dead comes in obedience to Peter's faith-infused command: "She opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up."

In **verse 41**, Peter takes Tabitha's hand and lifts her up. This action is far more significant than it may appear. By touching Tabitha, Peter demonstrated that she was truly risen and ceremonially clean. Old Testament saints were forbidden to touch a dead body, lest they become unclean. This small reference to Peter touching Tabitha's hand speaks volumes about God's restorative work. Tabitha was not just alive; she was truly whole. Peter then called all the saints and widows back into the room to present her alive. Imagine the response from those who saw her. They had placed her cold, dead body in that room just hours before. Yet, now she was standing alive before their very eyes.

Verse 42 connects the miracle to the reason why it was performed: "Many believed in the Lord." The miracle took place not for the glory, fame, and renown of Peter, nor merely for Tabitha's sake, but for the praise of God's name by those who would repent and believe in him through this demonstration of God's power and goodness. God used Tabitha's death and resurrection to grow his church and push the gospel further and further out from Jerusalem.

After healing Tabitha, Peter did not retreat to a Jewish city, but rather stayed in Joppa for many days, thus signaling the church's expansion into Gentile territories (**v 43**). In choosing to stay with Simon, who was a tanner by trade, Peter confirmed the increasing inclusion of the Gentiles in the new-covenant community. Jewish law would have rendered a tanner like Simon, as one who constantly touched and handled dead animals,

perpetually unclean. By lodging with him, Peter demonstrated to the church that they were no longer under the purity laws of the Old Testament, and that Gentiles had full inclusion in the kingdom of God.

Peter's actions, therefore, demonstrate that the gospel of Christ completely fulfilled the old-covenant economy, breaking down the dividing wall of hostility represented by the Old Testament law, which once separated the Israelites from the Gentiles. All, Jew and Gentile alike, are now made righteous by the atoning work of Jesus Christ—a work planned by the Father and applied by the Spirit.

The narrative of Tabitha's resurrection teaches us several important points. First, this story reminds us of Christ's power. We do not serve an impotent God. Instead, the risen Christ has power over death itself. Death, the great enemy of humanity, has no hold over King Jesus. For Jesus, raising a woman from the dead through Peter is as simple as waking someone up from a good night's sleep.

Second, we find in this story an anticipation of a greater resurrection to come. One day, Christ will call all of us out of the grave. As Paul states in 1 Corinthians 15:42-43, Christians will be sown "perishable" but raised "imperishable," sown in "dishonor" but "raised in glory." At the **last trumpet**, we shall all be given our resurrection body and will "put on immortality." This great hope should animate our lives. Because Christ has been resurrected, we can be confident that we too will be resurrected and will reign in glory with him for all eternity in the new heavens and new earth.

Finally, this story shows us a great deal about the goodness of God and the character of God's kingdom. Peter does not go about Israel spreading death and decay, or preaching platitudes and changing nothing. Instead, the apostles of Christ bring life and renewal. This story gives a faint glimpse of the type of kingdom into which we have been saved, just as the acts of the Lord Jesus himself did during his time on earth—a kingdom where death is not only reversed but wholly undone. In the coming kingdom, death will be

no more and life will be all that God intended it to be.

Questions for reflection

1. How are lives changed in Acts 9, and by what means?
2. What do you make of the relationship between the apostolic miracles and apostolic witness in Acts? How does that shape your expectations in the Christian life today?
3. How does the picture of final resurrection in the resurrection of Tabitha reassure and excite you about your future? How will that affect the way you think today?

9. God Shows No Partiality

As the last chapter showed, a great shift is taking place in the book of Acts. The gospel is moving toward the Gentiles. Some argue that this shift represents a turn from the Jews. Styling the narrative in this way, however, is inadequate. The shift is not a turn from the Jews but a turn to include the Gentiles.

One-Covenant Theology

Throughout history, many theological systems have tried to make sense of the relationship between Jew and Gentile in the new covenant. At the heart of this issue is the question of how the new covenant fulfills the old covenant and (therefore) how the promises of God are fulfilled. Around the time of World War II, a “two-covenant theology” developed. This system argues that God has one covenant with the Jews and another covenant with Christians. God’s covenant with Jews, in other words, does not require faith in Christ for salvation. But evangelical Christians must reject two-covenant theology. The New Testament clearly teaches that there is only one way to salvation for all: Jesus Christ. As Romans 1:16 says, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” The man who wrote those words was, as we have seen, himself a committed Jew who had come to faith in Christ and repented of his previous refusal to accept Jesus as the Christ, and his Lord.

Others argue that this implies that the Jewish people are uniformly closed to the gospel. This idea, however, is a lie that runs contrary to Scripture. As Paul—again, a Jew who was trusting the gospel for his salvation—says in Romans 11:1-5:

*“I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of **Elijah**, how he appeals to God against Israel? ‘Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.’ But what is God’s reply to him? ‘I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to **Baal**.’ So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.”*

This truth should drive our evangelism of all peoples. Sadly, the Christian church at large has failed to preach the gospel to Jewish people. As the book of Acts progresses, so to does the apostle Paul’s ministry to the Jewish people. We must follow Paul’s lead. Jews today continue to turn to the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior. That will only continue to happen if we continue to preach the gospel faithfully to them.

The God-Fearing Centurion

With all this in mind, we are ready to turn to Acts **10:1**, which introduces us to a man named Cornelius, a centurion in the Italian Cohort of the Roman army. His status as a member of the cohort was important because it represented some of the most respected and elite social classes in Rome. The Italian Cohort consisted of indigenous Italian officers. As Rome took over conquered peoples, it also took over their armies. In previous times, when a conquering army defeated a foe they would kill all the officers, because they were considered a threat. Alexander the Great thought this was a great waste of talent. So in his first great victory, Alexander the Great offered the defeated officers a deal: “You can be executed at this very moment, or you can become officers in my army.” This decision did not require much deliberation! That strategy largely explains why Alexander’s army kept growing the further away from Greece it went. Julius Caesar, in his book on war, said that Alexander gave Rome the model they used. All the Caesars continued in this manner.

Not all officers were equal, though. Some officers were from conquered peoples. Others were true Italians and had been officers from the beginning. Those officers were in the inner circle. Given his distinctly Roman name, such was clearly the case with Cornelius. He was at the very heart of the Roman military establishment, and a man who occupied a high station in life.

Not only was Cornelius an elite centurion; he was also a God-fearer (**v 2**). I remember hearing my grandmother describe people in terms of whether or not they were “God-fearers.” If someone lived recklessly, she would say, “That person needs the fear of God. They’re not God-fearing at all.” My grandmother spoke of God-fearers in a generic sense. When Luke uses the term, though, he is identifying a specific group of people. This term refers to Gentiles who had been drawn to the worship of the God of Israel and had come to acknowledge Yahweh as the one, true and living God.

Gentile God-fearers could not become Jews in any specific sense. They could not become Jewish “converts,” so to speak. Judaism is not a missionary religion. New Testament scholars debate whether there could be any assimilation. Some records do suggest assimilation, but it was certainly extremely difficult. It would have been virtually impossible for a Roman officer of the Italian Cohort to become Jewish. Even so, Cornelius was a God-fearer. Furthermore, he was “devout.” He had a heart for God and was seeking to please him, as was his whole household.

Luke also tells us that Cornelius respected Israelites as God’s chosen people and gave them alms. He recognized that Israel was the vessel of God’s divine plan. He revered the God of the Jews—he prayed to Yahweh.

The real drama of Acts 10 begins in **verse 3**. Cornelius, as clear as day, sees and hears an angel of the Lord in a vision. This vision is no hallucination or dream. God purposefully sends his messenger to Cornelius in a vision. The sight of this angel, which speaks to Cornelius by name, understandably terrifies him (**v 4**). The event is reminiscent of Paul on the Damascus road in Acts 9. Even Cornelius’ response to the angel—“What is it, Lord?”—is similar

to Paul's response—"Who are you, Lord?"

The angel responds, informing Cornelius that God accepts his prayers and alms as a memorial (**10:4**). Many Jews would have rejected that idea out of hand—they would have claimed that God would never receive a Gentile, much less an Italian. Nonetheless, the angel clearly makes that assertion. Cornelius has caught divine attention. The messenger then instructs Cornelius to send some men to retrieve Simon Peter, giving details of where in Joppa he can be found (**v 5-6**). Cornelius, being a faithful God-fearer and powerful centurion, obeys the Lord by commanding his men to go get Peter and not return without him (**v 7-8**).

An Unlikely Vision

Next, the narrative shifts back to Peter (**v 9**). We know from the massive turn that begins to take place at the end of chapter 9 that he's about to get a front row seat for a remarkable moment in redemptive history. Raised as an **orthodox** Jew, though, Peter is already in an awkward situation. He's in Joppa staying with Simon, a tanner who deals with dead animals. According to Old Testament Law, Simon should be considered unclean (Leviticus 11:1-8, 24-28). Although Peter doesn't know why God has brought him to Simon's home, he soon finds out. It will be a fitting backdrop for what the Lord is about to reveal to his apostle.

At lunchtime on the day after Cornelius' servants have gone off in search of Peter, the apostle went out on the rooftop of Simon's house to pray. The housetop was a private space, a place one could go to retreat from the hustle and bustle happening downstairs. While Peter is praying, he becomes hungry, and he begins to think about food (Acts **10:10**). As he drifts off in thought, he falls into a trance. And what does he see in this trance? Food—but not the kind a good Jew like Peter expects.

The first thing Peter sees is the sky opening up. In Scripture, the heavens open up only for divine activity, so Peter understands the significance of the sight. In this vision, Peter sees all kinds of animals displayed on a great

descending sheet (**v 11-12**). Some of the animals that he sees, though, Jews are not permitted to eat. Old Testament dietary laws forbid the eating of cloven-hoofed animals, scavengers, and pigs (Leviticus 11:1-8).

These laws had two purposes. One purpose was health, but the other—the more important purpose—was to distinguish Israel as God’s people. Israel was to be set apart from all other peoples of the earth, not only by how they worshiped, but also by what they ate. Following the Law was a sign of commitment to the one true and living God. Yet, Peter sees all kinds of four-footed animals in his vision. That includes the clean and the unclean animals: pigs, reptiles, and other animals that crawl on the earth—all which the Law did not allow Jews to eat.

An Unlikely Command

As Peter is gazing at this remarkable sight, he hears a voice he recognizes as God’s (Acts **10:13**). Peter can’t believe what he hears. The voice commands Peter to rise, kill, and eat the animals! He seems to think the Lord is putting his orthodoxy to the test, and so he responds that he’s never violated the law and eaten anything unclean (**v 14**). Peter is proud of his dedication. Though he may be hungry, he’s not going to eat forbidden food. The Lord tells Peter he has no right to call unholy what God has cleaned (**v 15**). The sequence happens three times before the vision stops (**v 16**).

What else happened three times with Peter? He denied the Lord (Luke 22:54-62). And after the resurrection, Jesus asked him three times, “Do you love me, Peter?” (John 21:15-17). When something happens three times to Peter, it is a fixed certainty. His denial was underlined by its repetition; his restoration and commissioning likewise. Now here, the repetition displays that this is no mistake or misunderstanding.

Yet Peter is understandably perplexed (Acts **10:17**). Criticizing Peter for not realizing the vision’s meaning is easy for us, but put yourself in his position. He’s deeply embedded in his Jewish upbringing. Including the Gentiles among the people of God represents a colossal theological shift. Peter

knows that Jesus is the Messiah and that salvation is for the Jews. Nevertheless, Peter has not yet fully grasped that salvation is also for the Gentiles, nor that now the **messianic age** has come, the issues of Jewish regulation and culture are no longer in effect.

As Cornelius' men arrive and speak with Peter (**v 17-18**), we can already see that something is beginning to change in him. He's doing things he doesn't fully comprehend yet, like (prompted by the Spirit, **v 19-20**) inviting Gentiles into the house to spend the night (**v 23**) after he discovers their purpose and the angelic command that lies behind their visit (**v 21-22**). A Jewish person would not bring ceremonially "unclean" people into a home. Doing so would render them unfit for temple worship. But by the end of **verse 23**, Peter is living in an unclean tanner's house, and offering hospitality to unclean Gentiles! A simple change of mind or opinion cannot explain this. Only a change of heart can explain such a radical transformation. God's unlikely command is leading Peter to do unlikely things.

These truths should affect us in at least two ways. First, this passage shows how the gospel extends even to outsiders. Gentiles were religious outsiders; as Paul says, they were "strangers to the covenants of promise" (Ephesians 2:12). The Lord loves to save outsiders and include outcasts in his kingdom. We need to keep hearing this because we are so apt to forget it. This passage, however, also shows us how God includes us in that mission. God not only has included "unclean" Gentiles in the new covenant, but he asked Peter, a Jew, to pursue Gentiles, to associate with them, to eat with them, and (as we shall see) to preach the gospel to them. What outsiders are in your life? Are there people that you believe the gospel is not really "designed" for? Those are exactly the people God wants you to have in your home, to share your life with, and to evangelize.

Second, God's command to Peter was no doubt uncomfortable; yet Peter still obeyed. Similarly, God will ask of us things that require us to go outside of our comfort zone. God will ask us to follow him to places of suffering. Indeed, the whole Christian life of discipleship is described by our Lord as taking up a cross to follow him (Matthew 16:24). We are called to deny

ourselves in the Christian life, and not pursue our own ease and pleasure. We are called to obey, even when we are perplexed. Peter models true Christian obedience. Wherever the Lord leads, we must follow.

Questions for reflection

1. What would a “God-fearer” look like in your culture?
2. Since food restrictions are no longer one of the boundary markers between God’s people and everyone else, what (if any) are the boundary markers today, do you think?
3. “We are called to obey, even when we are perplexed.” Does this speak to a particular area of your own conduct, or a specific decision you are facing?

PART TWO

Before we continue the narrative, it's important we understand the context of where the rest of Acts 10 takes place. Caesarea was a prized city, named after Caesar Augustus. It was the most Roman of all cities that was connected with Judea. Its architecture and its culture were distinctly Roman, as evidenced by the aqueduct ruins that can still be seen there. Cornelius had most likely been appointed to serve in Caesarea for the rest of his life. His appointment in Caesarea, as well as his membership of the most illustrious Roman division in the legions, underlines the fact that Cornelius was no average soldier with an ordinary military posting; he was a man of esteem.

An Extraordinary Encounter

Cornelius, who has been waiting for his soldiers to return with Peter, calls together his relatives and close friends (Acts **10:24**). Although he had presumably grown up as a pagan in Roman culture, Cornelius had come to know about the true God of Israel. But he was still not a Jew. And he would not have been raised in an environment conducive to understanding the kind of worship Yahweh desires.

Presumably, a large part of what Cornelius knew regarding worship he had learned from Rome. Caesar claimed to be divine and had the power to take your life. When you entered his presence, you were required to bow and not look up. This would explain Cornelius' actions when he finally sees Peter (**v 25**). Cornelius doesn't exactly know who Peter is. He's only told to send for somebody named Peter staying at Simon the tanner's house in Joppa. Believing Peter to be a man of high esteem and worthy of worship, he falls at the apostle's feet. Peter, as we've seen time and again through the book of Acts, refuses to accept any exaltation of himself (**v 26**), and instead begins to proclaim the truth of the only One who is worthy of worship to those who have gathered there (**v 27**).

Peter's words, beginning in **verse 28**, are striking. They sound like an

incredibly rude way to enter someone's home! But Peter isn't saying that he's condescended to associate with a foreigner. He's merely recognizing the custom of the day. Caesarea was the place where most of the contact between Romans and Jews took place. But they did not meet in homes. Gentiles lived in their homes and visited other Gentiles, and Jews did the same with other Jews. The Jews kept to themselves.

Peter has clearly understood the correlation between the clean or unclean status of animals in his vision and the status of the people he is standing before (**v 28**). Overestimating the distinction in the Jewish mind between Jew and Gentile is almost impossible. The Jews despised the Gentiles. In the Jewish **worldview**, everyone was divided into Jews and Gentiles. If you were a Gentile, Jews believed that God neither loved nor chose you; he did not offer salvation to the Gentiles. Thus, what Peter says God has shown him (that he should call no person clean or unclean) presents a truly colossal shift in Peter's worldview.

First-century Jews emphasized their status as God's chosen people. They thought the reason God chose them was because they had some inherent quality that made them the best choice. As we have noted previously, the apostle Paul reverses this logic in 1 Corinthians 1:27-29:

"But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

Israel should have known this. The Lord had told them so in the Old Testament:

"For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love

on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.” (Deuteronomy 7:6-8)

Jewish ingenuity didn’t lead Israel out of Egypt. Jewish navigational techniques didn’t guide Israel through the wilderness. Jewish military strategy didn’t give Israel the conquest of **Canaan**. God did. God’s grace set them apart. Further, God promised to use Israel to bless all the nations of the earth (Genesis 22:15-18). Through Israel, God would bless all peoples and ethnicities—and that, by definition, included Gentiles.

Peter is coming to realize this. But since Jews and Gentiles do not mix company, Peter needs a pretext for why he’s with Cornelius. His statement —“I ask then why you sent for me” (Acts **10:29**)—is really a question. This carries a great deal of expectancy, pointing to something of major significance. Cornelius recounts the vision he received from God (**v 30-32**). He tells Peter that he obeyed God’s messenger and sent for him (**v 33**). As a soldier well acquainted with authority, Cornelius understands that obedience delayed is disobedience. When someone in authority tells a soldier what to do, the soldier does not say, “I’m going to take this under consideration.” Instead, Cornelius says, “I sent for you at once.”

Out with the Old, In with the New

Cornelius understands how remarkable it is to have Peter—a Jewish man and a leader in the church—in his home. He and the rest of the household have gathered to hear what the apostle will say to them (**v 27**). So, as Luke tells us that Peter “opened his mouth” (**v 34**), we are to have a sense of both tension and expectation. And Peter’s first words do not disappoint, revealing a dramatic change in his understanding. As a student of the Old Testament, Peter already knew that God shows “no partiality” (see 2 Chronicles 19:7; Proverbs 24:23; Deuteronomy 10:17), but he had not fully known what that

meant. Now he does.

And so in Acts **10:34-43**, Peter preaches the gospel to the Gentiles. His opening words reveal his new understanding of God's grace and of the identity of God's people in the new covenant. Peter states, "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (**v 34-35**). With these words, Peter makes clear that the church includes Gentiles as well as Jews. "Every nation" will be represented in the new covenant; the only requirement for entry into the people of God is faith and obedience.

Some believe that Peter's words in these verses mean that Cornelius was an "anonymous Christian." Anonymous Christians, according to this view, exist in every culture. They are people who do not know they are Christians. "Anonymous Christians" supposedly still worship the one, true God, even if they've never heard of Christ. That claim is heresy. Jesus himself said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6); and the New Testament makes clear that salvation comes only to those who believe in Christ and repent of their sins. This episode itself shows that this view of Cornelius cannot be right, for if God had already redeemed and accepted him, Cornelius would not have needed Peter, nor the gospel Peter preached!

The call to mission requires Christians to go to people who have not been evangelized. They may know that there is one God, since God has revealed some general information about himself to all people (Romans 1:18-32). They may even seek to honor God, as Cornelius did. They are not evangelized though, until they hear the gospel; and they are not saved unless and until they believe it. God is embracing people "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9). The gospel went to the Jews first and then to the Greeks. Both are offered it, and both need it if they are to be saved.

So Peter preaches the gospel to these Gentiles. He recounts the life of Jesus, the "Lord of all" (Acts **10:36**). He recounts Jesus' baptism (**v 37**), his

anointing by the Holy Spirit and his miracles (v 38), his crucifixion (v 39), and his resurrection from the dead (v 40). We should not miss that Peter's proclamation of the gospel focuses on the historical facts of Jesus' life. We must always remember that Christianity is not an idea or a philosophy; it is good news—a message of what God did through Christ in human history. The cross and the resurrection are not myths or **metaphors**. They are events—saving events in time, space, and history. Notice, too, that Peter's gospel to these Gentiles focuses on the same truths about the Lord Jesus as his gospel proclamation to the Jews had done. There is one gospel, centered upon one crucified, risen Lord. It is powerful to save anyone.

Peter continues to emphasize the historicity of the cross and resurrection later in his sermon. As he explains, Jesus did not appear “to all the people” but “to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead” (v 41). Once again, we see how important it was that the apostles, eyewitnesses of the resurrection, were to “witness” to others what they had seen.

Peter concludes his address by teaching his audience that because Jesus is the resurrected Messiah, he is both Savior and Judge. Jesus “is the one appointed by God to be the judge of the living and the dead” (v 42). Jesus' work on earth may be over, but that does not mean he is idly sitting in heaven. Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father interceding for those who are his, but also preparing to judge all the world at his return. Yet, there is hope for those who turn to Christ in faith and repentance. Peter concludes, “Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (v 43). Peter thus ends his sermon right where he began. The gospel message is not just for Jews but for “everyone.” Faith in Christ, not circumcision, is now the true mark of the people of God.

Pentecost for the Gentiles

Before Peter could even finish speaking, God sent the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and the other Gentiles who heard the word (v 44). The Jewish

believers were amazed that God had given the Holy Spirit “even” to the Gentiles (**v 45**). Those Jews who had accompanied Peter were now beginning to understand what he had already grasped—namely, the significance of Peter’s vision and the identity of God’s people in the new covenant. These Jews were amazed because the Gentiles had been fully included in the covenant community; they were given the Spirit just as the Jews had been in Acts 2. In fact, just like those Jews, these Gentiles began speaking in tongues (**10:46**). There was therefore, as Peter pointed out, no reason at all to withhold baptism, since the Lord had not withheld that which baptism is a sign of—salvation by faith and the gift of the Spirit (**v 47**). So, just as in Acts 2, these new converts to Christ were baptized (**10:48**).

Some take these events as evidence that when someone receives the Holy Spirit, they should also speak in tongues. But that reading of the text misses the point of the passage by failing to read it in its context. This entire chapter has focused not on the gift of tongues, but on the inclusion of the Gentiles in the covenant community. The coming of the Spirit on the Gentiles and their speaking in tongues is meant to remind us of Acts 2, and demonstrates that the same Spirit has fallen on both Jews and Gentiles. If these two groups share one Spirit, then they are one body—united by faith in Christ and all equally members of his church. This was, in effect, Pentecost for the Gentiles.

God has taken Peter on a long journey. When Peter went onto the roof in Joppa in 10:9, he still maintained a system of clean and unclean and operated according to the old covenant. By the end of the chapter, he has witnessed God pour out his Spirit on all people. The old way has ended, and the new way has begun.

As we reflect on these truths, we should both celebrate the fact that God’s grace has come to all people and remember that we have a responsibility to take the gospel to people groups that are still unreached. First, if you are a Gentile, rejoice that God has included you in his covenant people. God was under no obligation to extend his promises to you or me. Yet in his infinite mercy, God reached out to us and gave us the free offer of the gospel. But,

second, we must also remember that there are still places in the world that have no vibrant gospel witness. God makes clear in this passage that he intends to build an international community of Christ-followers who are known by their faith and obedience. Peter's vision of clean and unclean animals doesn't just make an abstract point about the character of God's covenant people; it is a call to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, and invite men and women from every nation to respond to Christ and to the promises of the gospel. We are called to pray for that mission, and give to that mission—and perhaps you are being called to go on that mission. Wherever God calls you to go, be on that mission.

Questions for reflection

1. In what way is it possible to believe in the “anonymous Christian” error in practice, even while rejecting it in theory? Are you tempted to do this to any extent?
2. “Obedience delayed is disobedience.” Do you need to stop delaying and start obeying in some way?
3. How can the events of Acts 10 give us great hope and conviction in our evangelism?

10. The First Gentile Church

The book of Acts is, in many ways, a series of turning points in the life of the early church. The key events in Acts—the ascension of Christ, the coming of the Holy Spirit, the stoning of Stephen, and the conversion of Saul—often transition the story of Acts from one stage to the next. Perhaps more importantly however, these events also serve as hinges upon which the pages of God’s unfolding plan of redemption continue to turn.

Acts 10 and 11 describe yet one more major turning point in redemptive history. These chapters, perhaps more than any others in Acts, unfold how the gospel and the mission of the church were understood by the apostles and the early church. These chapters reveal just how the gospel came to be proclaimed to all persons, both Jews and Gentiles. More specifically, the story of Peter’s vision, the salvation of Cornelius and his household (a Gentile family), and the coming of the Holy Spirit upon them help explain how, by the time we reach the end of the book of Acts, the church is largely a Gentile movement. Chapter 10 recounted the actual events; in chapter 11, we have Peter’s explanation and defense of his part in those events.

Criticizing Peter

11:1 shows that the news of the word of salvation coming to Cornelius and his family was spreading like wildfire. What modern readers likely take for granted today was clearly not a normal occurrence at this point in the life of the church—in fact, quite the opposite. Luke wants his readers to understand just how remarkable this event was. Even the apostles receive word about this extraordinary event—the salvation of Gentiles.

Luke makes clear that some early church leaders were not responding

positively to Peter's report: "When Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, 'You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them'" (v 2-3). Sadly, it seems the news that Peter, a Jew, visited and ate a meal with Cornelius, a Gentile, was more concerning than the fact that Gentiles had "received the word of God" (v 1).

Before continuing in this section of the book, we should consider for a moment the concern of Peter's critics. Luke clearly identifies the group criticizing Peter as the "circumcision party" and they in turn identify Cornelius and his family as "uncircumcised men" (v 3). Thus, the issue of circumcision is clearly at the forefront of this account. The matter of circumcision was central to how these first-century Christians understood the covenant, salvation, the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament, and the relationship between the Jews and the Gentiles. In Genesis 17, we see that God established a covenant of promise with Abraham.

"When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.' Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, 'Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations' ... And God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your

flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.” (Genesis 17:1-5, 9-14)

God’s covenant sign with Abraham was clear. In his sovereignty, God determined that circumcision would be the sign, or mark, that a man was part of God’s covenant. Thus, a circumcised man was identified as part of the offspring of Abraham. Conversely, a man who was not circumcised was not. Circumcision and its symbolic significance became so ingrained in the Jewish consciousness that they referred to themselves as the circumcised and to everyone else as the uncircumcised (see, for instance, Judges 15:18; 1 Samuel 14:6; 17:26; Isaiah 52:1). This view and this vocabulary are both clearly on display at the start of Acts 11.

To the Jewish mind, circumcision was more than a bare physical act. It was a moral one. To fully grasp the importance of circumcision for Israel, we need to understand the nations and cultures that surrounded Israel. None of the neighboring people groups held to the same kind of sexual morality as Israel. These peoples often incorporated all types of sexual debauchery into their worship of pagan deities. God, however, called Israel to pursue holiness: “For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy” (Leviticus 11:45; see also 1 Peter 1:15-16). Consequently, a devout Jewish man avoided prostitutes. A Jewish man knew that to sleep with a prostitute would bring the full condemnation of the community upon him and result in him being seen (rightly) as a sinner. Unlike the Greeks who tolerated, if not encouraged, homosexuality, the Jews did not participate in such activity as it was declared a capital crime under the Old Testament law (Leviticus 19:22; 20:13). The sexual standards of the Jews and those of the surrounding (and, oftentimes, invading) cultures were completely different; and the circumcision of every Jewish male was one way of underscoring that aspect of holiness. Circumcision made Israel different from the rest of the world and visibly manifested their unique position as God’s covenant people in the ancient Near East. Circumcision, therefore, was no trifling matter. It marked

the fact that Israel was separate from the nations and holy before the Lord.

The Jewish Christians in Acts, the “circumcision party,” understood that Jesus was the Messiah. They understood that he was the fulfilment of all that the prophets foretold. They also understood that he was Lord and Savior, and the very Son of God. These Jewish Christians, however, did not understand that salvation was not only for the Jews who had waited for hundreds of years with great expectancy, but also for the Gentiles. If we disregard Israel’s long history and the serious call to holiness represented by circumcision, we may be tempted to believe that these Jewish Christians in Acts 11 were exhibiting nothing more than unwarranted and ugly prejudice. That reading, however, is not only unfair to these early Jewish Christians, but it also misses the point of the biblical text. There is something a lot more than racial prejudice here. There is a great, deep, and moral aversion that, while wrong, was not wrongly motivated.

Peter’s Defense

Acts **11:4-17** demonstrates that Peter clearly understood the magnitude of the situation. He also understood that he had two charges to answer. First, what was he doing in a Gentile home? And, second, why had he acted as he had when the Gentiles believed the gospel? To address these concerns, Peter systematically recounts his experience in vivid detail. One can almost feel the energy growing in his explanation: the unique vision during a time of prayer (**v 5-10**), the visitors sent by Cornelius to summon Peter (**v 11**), the trip to see Cornelius and the recounting of his own heavenly vision to seek Peter (**v 12-14**), Peter’s preaching of the gospel and, as the great climax, the coming of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his household (**v 15**).

Peter’s retelling of the story answers each of the concerns of the Jewish Christians. What was he doing in a Gentile home? The answer is simple. Peter had responded to a divine vision. The Lord led, and he followed. What should the church do with Gentile believers? This answer was more theologically complex. But Peter makes it clear that Gentiles were in fact

part of the covenant community, even without circumcision, because the Lord gave them the Holy Spirit just as he had given him to the Jewish believers in Acts 2. God, in his grace, provided tangible evidence that this was his doing. This was not Peter's idea—his missionary strategy to reach the Gentiles; rather, this was God's sovereign doing.

Peter brings his explanation to a close by recalling the words of Christ: "And I [Peter] remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit'" (**11:16**). These words of Jesus were recorded back in 1:5. But Peter's words should also remind us of other words spoken by Christ during his earthly ministry: namely, that one of the ministries of the Holy Spirit is to remind us of the words of the Lord Jesus Christ. For example, Jesus taught his disciples that "the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name ... will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26). This is in part how the Holy Spirit ministers the word of God to us, bringing it to our mind in times of need. Peter was reminded, and he in turn reminds these leaders, that Jesus foretold the coming baptism by the Holy Spirit. And if that is the case—if that is how God was moving—Peter closes his defense by rightly asking, "If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" (Acts **11:17**).

The Gentile Mission and the Glory of God

With Peter's closing words, those who had been accusing—and on the verge of condemning—him "fell silent" and "glorified God" (**v 18a**). What a transformation! These men went from taking issue with Peter, and demanding an explanation for his perceived reckless behavior and disregard for the law, to glorifying God for what had happened. These leaders rightly concluded that God had granted to the Gentiles "repentance that leads to life" (**v 18b**). We can read over this story so quickly that we fail to grasp or appreciate that centuries of Jewish expectations had been reversed. The worldview of Judaism, which was shared by many Jewish Christians, had

been turned upside down. These leaders—and probably Peter until his experience—never expected that God would grant “repentance that leads to life” to the Gentiles. Why would God grant such a thing to uncircumcised people? To stiff-necked, rebellious, fornicating, adulterous, pagan-worshipping, idol-worshipping people—why would God do this? He did it for his glory! These early Christians understood that God was behind it all and therefore worthy of praise.

We also should not miss the way this passage describes the salvation of the Gentiles. Their “repentance that leads to life” is described as a gift “granted” by God himself. Ultimately, the only reason Cornelius and his household came to Christ was because God himself gave them the gift of repentance. The same is true today. We are all objects of sovereign mercy. The only reason any of us comes to Christ is because God himself grants us the gifts of faith and repentance (Ephesians 2:8-9). Salvation is all of grace, from first to last.

What About Circumcision?

Before moving on, we need to ask the question of how Christians should think about circumcision under the new covenant. Paul discusses this in some detail in his letter to the Colossians:

“See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us

*with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”
(Colossians 2:8-14)*

We see here that the physical circumcision that God had commanded of Abraham and his physical descendants in Genesis 17 pointed to a true and better circumcision that is now a reality in the new covenant—circumcision of the heart. While circumcision under the old covenant was enacted with human hands, under the new covenant it is a spiritual matter. As Paul notes in Colossians 2:11, it is one that comes “by the circumcision of Christ.” Just as bodily circumcision noted a ritual cleanness and was a physical sign of separation from ungodly nations, circumcision of the heart denotes separation from sin and from the ungodliness of the world. A circumcised heart denotes devotion to God and to his ways.

Once again, the accent is on the sovereign grace of God. We cannot circumcise our own hearts. Only God can do that. We are objects of God’s infinite mercy. The blessings of the new covenant that had now fallen on those Gentiles came only according to God’s gracious provision. As with these early Christians, our only response to these great truths should be to glorify God (Acts **11:18**) with profound and unceasing worship.

Questions for reflection

1. Notice that those who had been critical of Peter (v 2) fell silent (v 18) and then “glorified God.” They were willing to change their minds and retract their opinions based on Peter’s testimony regarding God’s word. When was the last time you changed your mind on something important to you and how you live, based on what you saw or were shown in God’s word?
2. The circumcision party were rightly motivated by a desire for moral purity. Is this something that describes you? Why/why not?
3. Why is the united decision of the body of believers in this passage great

news for us today?

PART TWO

The Hand of the Lord

Verse 19 picks up a storyline that has not been mentioned since the stoning of Stephen. At the beginning of Acts 8, we learned that Stephen's martyrdom and the persecution against the Jerusalem church caused many Jews to scatter. Now we discover in **11:19** that many of those Jews "traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch." In accord with their understanding of the old covenant, and not having heard of Peter's encounter with Cornelius, these Jewish Christians initially continued to share the gospel only among the Jewish population. Luke indicates that some of them, however, began sharing the gospel among the Gentiles: "men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus" (**v 20**).

Once again, we see the result of faithful gospel preaching: "And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord" (**v 21**). It is quite extraordinary to consider just how often we find this type of phrase in Acts. Regularly, the Lord saves a multitude as the church faithfully fulfills its commission to preach the gospel. Regrettably, in our own day, many churches have turned away from the simplicity of preaching and evangelism. Some churches and Christians seem to think that preaching and evangelism are ineffective means of advancing the kingdom. Instead, many church-growth books advocate an endless array of marketing strategies and clever programs designed to bring people into the church. But God's ways are far simpler and far more effective. This is his church-growth book: it is called Acts. Spirit-filled and Spirit-empowered preaching and evangelism are his appointed means of bringing people into his kingdom.

We should particularly note that the disciples in this passage did not have access to an enormous amount of money, or any status in the culture, or clever marketing techniques. These Christians were harassed and under constant threat of persecution. Yet God blessed their efforts to simply and

clearly communicate the gospel to their friends and neighbors and anyone they met. Let us never doubt God's power to save through the simple means of gospel preaching.

The Apostle to the Gentiles in a Church of Gentiles

After these men and women believed the gospel, reports of their conversions began filtering back to the church in Jerusalem—the “home base” for the early church (**v 22**). As a result, the church sent Barnabas to Antioch to investigate what was happening, much like when they sent Peter and John to investigate the progress of the gospel in Samaria (8:14). We must remember that even though, as seen in the last chapter, Peter had realized that the gospel was for Gentiles as well as Jews, that understanding had not yet pervaded the early church. Many Jews were still catching up, so to speak, with Peter's understanding. That is why the church sent Barnabas to investigate these conversions in Antioch.

Barnabas “was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (**11:24**). Once he arrived in Antioch, he “saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose” (**v 23**). Barnabas' actions serve as an example to us. Do we rejoice when we see the grace of God poured out on others? Are we quick to encourage others to remain steadfast? Too often we are so self-focused that we fail to see the grace of God all around us displayed in the lives of other people. Yet the Bible calls us, like Barnabas, to “rejoice with those who rejoice” (Romans 12:15). We should be quick to point out evidence of grace in the lives of others and to celebrate the grace of God.

In Acts **11:25**, Barnabas leaves Antioch to go to Tarsus to find Saul. The reason for his journey becomes clear in **verse 26**. After Barnabas finds Saul, he brings him back to Antioch where, “for a whole year,” they meet with the church and teach “a great many people.” Once again, Barnabas serves as a great example for us. Barnabas is not satisfied merely with seeing conversions; he wants to see the converted becoming disciples. Jesus, after

all, commissioned all believers to “make disciples”—not merely converts—by “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded” (Matthew 28:19-20). So we need to look at three things about Barnabas’ commitment to discipleship in this passage, for they will help us know what it means to obey Christ’s disciple-making commission.

First, Barnabas sought out qualified teachers to disciple the congregation at Antioch. Barnabas did not leave the important task of discipleship to a new convert. He did not merely pass out a curriculum and ask any random Christian to lead a discussion. Barnabas traveled to Antioch to find Paul because he knew the church needed a learned, godly, mature Christian to lead them and to teach them how to walk faithfully in the gospel.

Second, the primary context for discipleship was the gathered saints—that is, the local church. Notice that Paul and Barnabas taught the congregation when they “met with the church” (Acts **11:26**). We should never lose sight of the fact that the primary context for discipleship is the gathered church. Bible-study groups, home groups, and other settings can certainly aid our growth in godliness. Personal devotions are a great means of developing maturity. But God has ordained that preaching and teaching in the context of the local church should be the primary means by which Christians are disciplined and encouraged to follow after Christ.

Finally, Paul and Barnabas were patient, teaching over the course of an entire year. The Christian life and our primary doctrinal convictions cannot be mastered overnight. Discipleship takes time. Paul and Barnabas did not try to give the church at Antioch the bare minimum so that they could move on and do more evangelism. They valued discipleship enough to invest a significant amount of time into the church in Antioch.

We also find in Paul and Barnabas’ actions an example for teachers. Anyone who teaches the word must realize that faithful teaching and discipleship takes time. We cannot expect immediate change in those we are discipling. Just as in evangelism, we are entirely dependent on the work of the Spirit in the task of discipling. Sanctification is often a slow and

arduous process. We must patiently instruct those we are discipling and not lose heart when the work seems slow and difficult. And we must seek to locate the main weight of the discipling of others (and ourselves) in the local church, as we are taught by mature and gifted leaders.

At the conclusion of this section, Luke mentions that “in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians” (**v 26**). The label “Christian”—meaning “pledging allegiance to Christ” (just as the “Herodians” were those who promoted the cause of Herod)—was probably a term of derision applied to the church by unbelievers within the community. Believers, however, never shrink from being associated with their Lord, and thus these Antiochene Christians adopted the term as a way to describe themselves. Luke likely mentions this little detail for at least two reasons. First, the fact that these believers were called “Christians” shows that the church was gaining an identity beyond that of Judaism. Followers of Christ were no longer being seen as just some radical Jewish **sect**. Instead, the church was being identified as its own movement with its own doctrinal commitments.

Second, Luke likely records this detail to satisfy our historical curiosity and reveal the genesis of what has become the most common designation for those who believe in Christ. The label “Christian” may have initially been a term of derision, but believers rejoice in the name. We are not ashamed to be identified with our Lord, and the church throughout history has delighted to be called by his name—“Christian.”

Unity Looks Like Generosity

The final verses of Acts 11 record an interesting and instructive story that highlights the generosity and compassion of the early church. These believers were not just people of gospel words; they were people of good deeds. In **verse 27**, a group of prophets travels from Jerusalem to Antioch. While it may be striking to hear a group of people in the New Testament referred to as “prophets,” we must remember that the gift of prophecy was still active during the time of the apostles (1 Corinthians 12:10). In fact,

prophets will continue to appear throughout the book of Acts (see Acts 13:1; 15:32; 21:9).

One of the prophets, Agabus, “stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world” (**11:28**). Luke indicates that this famine took place during the reign of Claudius, who ruled from AD 41 to 54. Historians agree that there were several famines during Claudius’ reign—the famine referred to in this text likely occurred sometime between AD 45 and 47.

In response to this prophecy, “the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea” (**v 29**). **Verse 30** confirms that they carried through this intention, sending money with Barnabas and Saul to give to the elders at the Jerusalem church.

The famine-relief ministry of the church at Antioch reveals a great deal about the character of the early church. These Christians were enormously generous. The Jerusalem church did not even need to ask them for money; the Antioch Christians simply “determined” when they heard the prophecy of the famine that they should give money. They were also wonderfully united. As we have just seen, the church in Antioch was predominately Gentile. The church in Jerusalem was Jewish. But both were Christian. And as brothers and sisters, they supported one another.

Throughout Acts we have seen God work miracles for those inside and outside the church. This narrative, however, shows us how God traditionally works in the world—through his people. In the normal course of God’s providence, God meets the needs of his people through the service and generosity of other Christians. God could have miraculously provided food for the Jerusalem church. But in this instance, he was pleased to meet their needs through the compassion of others. The Christians in Antioch were generous with God’s generosity to them.

The generosity of this church serves as an example for us today. We are called to exercise the same generosity to relieve the suffering of our

brothers and sisters—even of those we have never met. Like the church in Antioch, we are called not just to respond to but also to anticipate the needs of others, and then to share generously what the Lord has given us.

We find a similar example of generosity in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5:

“We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.”

Clearly the Antiochene church and the Macedonian church were characterized by their generosity. Paul even says that the Macedonians’ “extreme poverty” flowed out in a “wealth of generosity.” These early Christians teach us that we do not need wealth to be generous. We simply need to value God’s kingdom above our own interests and value our brothers and sisters more than we value the number in our bank account.

Finally, note how these early Christians model the Christian life: it is one of both faith and works. These Antiochene Christians came to Christ by believing (Acts **11:21**)—by faith, and by faith alone. Yet their faith produced good works. Their trust in the Lord Jesus overflowed in acts of compassion for their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem.

This relationship between faith and works is an important theme throughout Scripture. Faith precedes works but it also produces works. As the **Reformers** were fond of saying, faith alone saves but a saving faith is never alone. Many Christians are confused on this point. They assume that because works do not contribute to our salvation, that means that works must have no place in the Christian life or that they are “optional.” But while the Bible clearly affirms that we are saved by grace alone through faith

alone, it also indicates that good works and a changed life are the necessary evidence that we have genuine faith. These early Christians understood that truth—and thus they were known both for their great faith and their good works. May people be able to say the same of us.

Questions for reflection

1. Look again at what Luke has told us so far in the book of Acts about Barnabas. What would it look like for you to be a Barnabas in your church?
2. The church in Antioch was known for its witness to non-Christians (v 20-22), for its loyalty to Christ (v 26), and for its generosity toward other believers (v 29). To what extent are these qualities things that your church is known for?
3. How about you personally?

11. The Apostle, the Angel and the King

This section is filled with intrigue, politics, and drama. Luke's opening words, "About that time" (**12:1**), shift the setting away from the previous scene at Antioch. But these words also signal a shift in the narrative. Luke is going to take his readers back in time to recount what had happened to the church at Jerusalem.

This is something today's writers of history often do. A historian telling the story of World War II, for instance, cannot do it all in chronological order (although Martin Gilbert's *The Second World War: A Complete History* comes fairly close). There are simply too many important events taking place in different theaters simultaneously, and so the action switches back and forth, from one to the other. Similarly, Luke's opening words move our attention to an event that took place around the same time as the famine that occurred in the days of Claudius (mentioned in 11:28). We are moving from the theater of gospel work in Antioch, back to the one in Jerusalem.

The "Jewish" King

So what happened "about that time?" "Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church" (**12:1**). We meet many Herods in the Bible. This particular Herod was Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great, who tried to kill Jesus soon after he was born (Matthew 2:1-18). Herod Agrippa claimed to be a Jew. His grandfather married a Jewish woman, which, according to Jewish law, meant Herod Agrippa could legitimately make this claim.

On the one hand, you would think that openly declaring his Jewish heritage would cost Herod certain status and privileges in Rome. Yet many historians

believe it was a political move. Claudius, the emperor at the time, was very concerned with keeping the peace in Palestine and Judea. What better way to keep people happy than to have a king the Jews could recognize as one of their own?

Just how devoted was Herod at playing the part of the “Jewish” king? Well, we know he had moved to the palace in Jerusalem instead of remaining in Gentile territory. We also know from Jewish historians that he went to the temple every day and, as king, read the law as commanded in Deuteronomy 17:18-20. In fact, the first-century Jewish-Roman historian Josephus reports that Agrippa did everything he could to flatter the Jews and ingratiate himself into their favor.

Nevertheless, it was all an act. Herod’s ambitions were political, not spiritual.

Death and Prison and Prayer

In Acts **12:2**, Luke tells us that Herod killed James the brother of John with the sword. James and John were the sons of Zebedee, and known as the “Sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17). In Jewish law, a person was put to death by the sword if the circumstances of their case met the conditions laid out in Deuteronomy 13:12-15:

“If you hear in one of your cities, which the LORD your God is giving you to dwell there, that certain worthless fellows have gone out among you and have drawn away the inhabitants of their city, saying, ‘Let us go and serve other gods,’ which you have not known, then you shall inquire and make search and ask diligently. And behold, if it be true and certain that such an abomination has been done among you, you shall surely put the inhabitants of that city to the sword, devoting it to destruction, all who are in it and its cattle, with the edge of the sword.”

Based on what we know of Herod’s aims and motivations, and what we see

here in the Law of Moses, it seems that Herod charged James with enticing an entire group astray from the worship of God, and thus killed him with the sword.

When Herod saw that the execution of James pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter (Acts **12:3**). Knowing Peter's influence in and over the fledgling church, Herod no doubt wanted to execute him as well to continue to gain favor with the Jews. There was only one problem: it was during the days of Unleavened Bread—that is, the Passover. According to Jewish custom, no executions occurred during the Passover, so Herod had to wait. In the meantime, he put Peter in prison and ordered four squads of soldiers—sixteen guards in total—to keep watch, intending to kill him in sight of the people after the Passover (**v 4**). Herod did not want to take any chances with Peter in prison. He must have known Peter had been imprisoned at least once before; and that there were many miracles associated with Peter; and that Peter's friends might try to break him out. So Herod went to unusual lengths to secure the apostle. But, rather than plan Peter's escape, his friends prayed to God for him (**v 5**).

The church knew the sword waited for Peter if God did not intervene. They knew what Herod had done to James, and knew he wanted to do the same to Peter. And so they prayed. What a reminder to us of prayer's power. When the church is found to be faithful, it is always found praying. This church prayed fervently, and God answered. May God find the church today doing the same.

Enter the Angel

The next two verses set the scene for Peter's miraculous escape from prison. Presumably, "that very night" was the last night of the holy days, the evening before Herod would execute Peter. We find Peter "sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison" (**v 6**). Peter was utterly trapped. He could not have been more guarded as a prisoner: chained, behind bars, and vigilantly

watched by Roman guards. And yet, remember what the church was doing—she was praying. But we should not miss what Peter was doing—he was sleeping! He knew he would be executed the next morning, yet he was asleep, at peace with whatever his sovereign God decreed. But imagine his surprise as, instead of being violently awoken by a guard and led to his death, he was awakened by a bright light and a messenger of the Lord who immediately loosed him from his chains (**v 7**).

The angel essentially tells Peter to get dressed as if it were any ordinary day (**v 8**), and then leads Peter out of the cell. Peter, probably still half asleep, did not know if what was happening was real or a vision (**v 9**). After all, it hadn't been that long since Peter was sitting on a rooftop looking at a four-cornered cloth with animals on it. Luke, who most likely got the details of this night from Peter himself, records that Peter walked past the guards and right up to the gate that led into the city (**v 10**). This iron gate would have been extremely large and heavy. It was there for military purposes and to stop intruders. The text, however, says it simply “opened for them of its own accord”—the first automatic door!

Once Peter went through the gate and began to walk along the street, the angel departed. That seems to be when Peter “came to himself” (**v 11**). Up to this point, everything had seemed like a trance. The entire breakout felt surreal. But now Peter was outside by himself in the city. He finally comes to his senses and says, “Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.”

Peter's first thought, knowing that Herod would have a royal fit as soon as he realized his prized prisoner had escaped, was to go to Mary's house, where he thought many of his fellow believers would be gathered (**v 12**). He was right—and, as we have already seen, they were praying. Evidently, Mary was a wealthy woman since her house was large enough for Christians to meet there. We also know that Mary's house had a gate (**v 13**), which was typical of large homes and a mark of nobility in Jerusalem at the time. With what was surely great joy, Peter knocked on the door of the gateway.

Rhoda, the servant girl at the door of the gate, evidently knew Peter well and recognized his voice (**v 14**). One would think that her first reaction would be to let Peter in, but the excitement overwhelmed her. Instead of opening the door, she ran to tell those inside the house about the miracle that had happened: Peter was free and he was outside! Poor Peter was stuck there, probably looking over his shoulder, wondering whether another divine rescue would be necessary.

Meanwhile, inside Mary's house the very people who had been praying for Peter's rescue, tell Rhoda that she is out of her mind for telling them that their prayers have been answered (**v 15**). Though they had prayed faithfully, they were reluctant to believe that the outcome they had prayed for had actually transpired. This **paradox** often marks our own prayer lives, much to our embarrassment, perhaps. It was not without reason that Paul underlined the need, as we pray, to be "watchful in it" (Colossians 4:2). We pray to the God "who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20), so we would be wise not only to ask, but to keep watch for answers beyond what we hope for.

Peter naturally kept knocking, and so those who had been praying eventually went to the door to see for themselves (Acts **12:16**). We can only imagine the pure jubilation and amazement that must have struck them in that moment. Their shock and joy was so extravagant that Peter had to ask them to tone down the commotion, presumably lest it attract the local authorities, but also so that he might proceed to share with his brothers and sisters—whose prayers played a vital role in his rescue—the story of how the Lord had freed him from prison (**v 17**).

As James Montgomery Boice pointed out, one way to view Peter's rescue is as a picture of the way in which Jesus spiritually rescues all of us. Boice wrote:

"Peter's case was hopeless, humanly speaking. He was in prison surrounded by guards. He was asleep. He was condemned to die. His case pictures us in our sin. We are chained by sin and are unable to

escape. We are even asleep in sin, insensitive to it until God sends his Holy Spirit to break our shackles and free us ... This is a good picture of what God does with us in salvation. He sends his light to illuminate the spiritual darkness of our lives and strikes off the shackles of sin so that we might be set free to follow Jesus.”
(Acts, page 208)

Reader, Peter’s condition was your condition. You were hopeless and imprisoned in darkness. But God sovereignly worked in your life. As Paul states, and as we saw in a previous chapter, when God saves us he shows us the light: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Questions for reflection

1. How do these verses encourage you to pray boldly?
2. How do these verses encourage you to watch for answered prayer?
3. Consider the stories of James and Peter. What does this tell us about God’s sovereign plan for those who follow him?

PART TWO

The Missing Prisoner

The story continues in the second part of chapter 12, as Luke shifts the scene back to the prison where Peter was held. There was, Luke recounts with surely a degree of understatement, “no little disturbance” once the soldiers realized their prized prisoner was missing (Acts **12:18**). That shouldn’t surprise us. After all, Luke has just described one of the most remarkable prison breaks in the history of mankind. Any time someone breaks out of prison, there is obvious concern and controversy.

I remember driving late at night from Birmingham, Alabama to Nashville, Tennessee a few years ago. I was listening to the radio and heard about a prison break that had just occurred in Alabama. It was not a minor prison break; the escapees were condemned murderers. As I listened to the radio and continued driving, the reporter noted that the escapees had last been seen along the I-65 corridor—the exact route I was on! I hit the auto-lock button three or four times and determined that no matter who showed up on the road, I was going to keep driving. I later found out that the criminals were caught in southern Tennessee. As you can imagine, there was no small amount of consternation in that Alabama prison that night.

This is surely something like what the scene at Antonia Fortress, where Peter had been held, must have felt like. Once Peter’s escape had been discovered, the prison would have been intensely scrutinized. Remember, Herod had not just assigned one or two guards to keep an eye on Peter; he had assigned four squads, a total of sixteen soldiers (v 4), to make sure that Peter didn’t escape. In the ancient world in general and in Roman law in particular, if you were assigned to guard a criminal (especially someone who, like Peter, had been charged with a capital crime) and that criminal escaped, you would be executed. Those Roman guards must have been horrifically confused, especially the two guards whose chains had been attached to Peter but were now attached to no one.

Herod himself became involved in the ruckus surrounding Peter's escape. Imagine Herod's rage. When he woke up that morning, he thought he was going to execute Peter and earn more favor from the Jews—only to find out that his prized prisoner was nowhere to be found. After searching high and low for him, he decided to bring in the soldiers responsible. Of course, this interrogation was not helpful in any way—which most likely infuriated Herod even more. We shouldn't be surprised to read that Herod put the sentries to death after getting nowhere with them (**v 19**).

At the end of that verse, Luke includes an important note, but one that we'll skip over if we're not careful: "Then [Herod] went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there." Phrases like this remind us that Luke is composing a work of history in the context of first-century Roman life. Caesarea epitomized Rome; it was the most Roman of all the cities. It was also the least Jewish city in Judea. So what did it mean for Herod Agrippa to leave Jerusalem? What did it mean for him to go to Caesarea and move his royal operations to Caesarea? It meant that Herod was giving up the ruse of being a good Jewish king. Josephus, the Jewish historian, argues that this was the moment Herod changed his persona and decided to become transparently Roman. And this leads us to the last section of Acts 12.

Death of a King

Luke, the diligent historian, once again highlights specific historical figures and geographical locations in **verse 20**. He tells us that Herod Agrippa was angry at the cities of Tyre and Sidon (the reason for this is not given). These two cities, located in what was known as Phoenicia, are mentioned often in Scripture and are never spoken of positively. Both were large commercial port cities lacking an agricultural sector. As a result, they depended on the irrigated land of Judea for food. They were, in a sense, at the mercy of Herod for provision.

In their predicament, Tyre and Sidon combined their efforts in order to help one another. If they wanted to eat again, they needed someone from

inside Herod's court to help them, so they befriended Blastus, the king's chamberlain (**v 20**). The king's chamberlain had a good deal of power and influence—he was the equivalent of something like a modern day secretary of state or prime minister. So Tyre and Sidon won Blastus over and asked for peace for the sake of their survival. They needed this diplomatic situation to be resolved quickly, since it was the king's country that fed them.

Having made their plea, Tyre and Sidon waited for Herod's response. Luke doesn't provide much detail here, but Josephus records that Herod, in an effort to continue displaying his devotion to Roman culture, put on games in Caesarea to honor Caesar. This would have resulted in a large, celebratory gathering for the purpose of classical Roman entertainment. It's in this context that Herod chooses to respond to Tyre and Sidon's petition (**v 21**).

Interestingly, Luke chooses to pass over the content of Herod's speech. Instead, he focuses only on Herod's appearance and the crowd's response. Josephus tells us that Herod was wearing a robe made of spun silver threads. In the sun, the garment would have produced a blinding glare. Imagine standing on the steps of Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, while watching a politician in aluminum foil give an address. The crowd found the whole scene so mesmerizing that they effectively began to worship Herod, shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" (**v 22**). In other words, they were ascribing deity to Herod Agrippa. And Herod was gladly receiving it, convinced that he was in fact a god. Caesarea agreed with him and his ego far more than Jewish-dominated Jerusalem!

But there is still only one God in Caesarea, as everywhere. Herod and the crowds were mistaken. As a result of Herod's ostentatious display of pride, "an angel of the Lord struck him down" (**v 23**). We know from elsewhere in Scripture that angels are "ministering spirits" (Hebrews 1:14) who both help God's people and execute God's judgment against the wicked. And God was judging Herod, "because he did not give God the glory" (Acts **12:23**). Whereas Peter was so quick to point all praise and honor to the One who alone deserves it (Acts 3:12-16; 9:34), Herod gladly received the praise of others without reference to God. This shows us the seriousness of God's

commitment to his own glory. As Scripture teaches, the very reason God created the world and then saved his people was in order to make a name for himself (see Isaiah 43:7; Ephesians 1:5-6; 2 Thessalonians 1:10).

The Power and Glory of God

Some wonder whether God's pursuit of his own glory is self-absorbed and reveals some moral defect. Isn't self-promotion inherently wrong? Doesn't the Bible condemn seeking our own glory? Yes—but these criticisms fail to understand that the Bible condemns humans seeking their own glory in place of God's. It is wrong for us to exalt ourselves because we are mere creatures. But God is the eternal, infinite Creator and it is right for him to pursue his own glory.

John Piper has addressed this question helpfully:

“Because God is unique as an all-glorious, totally self-sufficient Being, He must be for Himself if He is to be for us. The rules of humility that belong to a creature cannot apply in the same way to its Creator. If God should turn away from Himself as the Source of infinite joy, He would cease to be God. He would deny the infinite worth of His own glory. He would imply that there is something more valuable outside Himself. He would commit idolatry.”

(Desiring God, page 45)

Herod was not God. And, Luke tells us, having been struck down, he was “eaten by worms” (Acts **12:23**). This narrative detail may seem quite macabre, but it stresses the frailty and finitude of even the greatest kings in comparison to the glory and grandeur of God. Herod exalts himself and takes upon him praise that is only due to God. But in the end he is a mere creature that returns to the dust and is eaten by worms. The irony is unmistakable. Our pretending to be something more than what we really are is ultimately the epitome of foolishness. Our final end is to become worm food; only the God who made us, and who made the worms, is enduring and eternal. When we forget this, we lose our humility, and we

lose our awe at the fact that God would be in any way mindful of us (Psalm 8:1-3).

So if we find such swift retribution on God's part somewhat shocking, our surprise perhaps reveals how little we reflect on the holiness of God. Scripture is clear: God will not give his glory to another (Isaiah 42:8; 48:11). The action of the crowd before Herod is rank idolatry. And the truth of the matter is that we're all like Herod. All of us crave and relish the praise of others. All of us follow in the footsteps of Adam and Eve—we want to “be like God” (Genesis 3:5). We establish ourselves as the object of admiration. The only reason we do not receive a fate similar to Herod is due to the sheer grace of God. The difference between a Christian and Herod is that the Christian, through no merit on his or her part, receives the mercy and forgiveness of God in Christ. Interestingly, we find in Peter a foil to Herod. Whereas Herod loved the praise of people, Peter refused the praise of others because he recognized that all praise belonged to God (Acts 10:26). Let us love the Lord like Peter and not ourselves like Herod.

The only way we can refuse the praise of others is by finding more delight in the glory of God than in anything this world has to offer. If we choose to live off the praise of others, we will find their words are a fickle and shallow source of joy. But when we find our ultimate delight in the glory of God, enjoying the love and approval of that God, then we will find great joy when we hear his praises fall from the lips of others. When we recognize that Christ is the greatest treasure in earth and heaven, we will gladly forgo the accolades of men to see God's glory made more visible and more fully known.

Luke records Herod's death not just to teach us about God's holiness and glory, but also to contrast the wisdom and power of the world with the wisdom and power of God. **12:24** reveals a stark contrast between Herod and the word of God. Herod was a great king, who was arrayed in splendor, and who received the adoration of the people, but now he is food for worms. His glory and power were fleeting. The word of God, however, increased and multiplied. Luke's message is clear: the kingdom of man is frail

and weak, but the kingdom of God is eternal and unconquerable. John Stott beautifully summarized this contrast:

“At the beginning of the chapter Herod is on the rampage—arresting and persecuting; at the end he is himself struck down and dies. The chapter opens with James dead, Peter in prison and Herod triumphing; it closes with Herod dead, Peter free, and the word of God triumphing. Such is the power of God to overthrow hostile human plans and to establish His own in their place.”

(The Message of Acts, page 213)

May we remember that the city of man is indeed a passing thing filled with nothing but death and worms, while the city of God holds out eternal life and life abundantly.

And the Word of God...

Verses 24-25 show once again that the mission of God in the world and the advance of the gospel cannot be impeded by any worldly power. Even in the face of severe persecution, “the word of God increased and multiplied” (**v 24**). Further, we find the apostles and early Christian leaders still busy with gospel ministry: “Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service” (**v 25**). These final verses of chapter 12, highlighting the power of God’s word and the continuing work of God’s people, underscore Christ’s commitment to see his kingdom spread from Jerusalem to the far corners of the earth. Nothing will stop that mission, just as he promised in 1:8.

The book of Acts is truly remarkable. Sixteen chapters of the book still lie before us. But consider what has happened thus far. At the beginning of the book, the church consisted of about 100 Christians gathered in a single city who had nothing more than a seemingly impossible mission and a commitment to pray for God’s help. Now, empowered by God’s Spirit and armed with God’s word, those Christians have multiplied into thousands. Now we find Christians scattered far outside the borders of Israel, even

including some most unlikely converts, such as an Ethiopian eunuch, a one-time persecutor of the church, and a Gentile army officer. It is almost unbelievable that the story is not even half over! It seems almost impossible. But of course, God was present with his people by his Spirit to fulfill his promises; and as the angel Gabriel told the mother of Jesus at the start of Luke's first volume, "Nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37).

Questions for reflection

1. "Herod was not God." In what ways are you tempted to treat the powers of this world as though they could affect or prevent the outworking of God's plan?
2. How has Acts 1 – 12 given you a greater gratitude to God for sending his Son to die for you, and his Spirit to open your eyes and bring you into membership of his people?
3. How has Acts 1 – 12 given you a great understanding of and excitement about God's purposes for you in this life? How is that affecting the way you live each day?

Glossary

Abraham: the ancestor of the nation of Israel, and the man God made a binding agreement (covenant) with. God promised to make his family into a great nation, give them a land, and bring blessing to all nations through one of his descendants (see Genesis 12:1-3).

Accolades: marks of acknowledgement or expressions of praise.

Ad hominem: an attack on someone's character rather than a consideration of their arguments.

Advent: coming.

Alms: money or food given voluntarily to help the poor.

Antipathy: deep dislike.

Apologist: a person who defends or justifies someone or something.

Apostles: men appointed directly by the risen Christ to teach about him with authority.

Ascension: when Jesus left earth to return to heaven, to sit and rule at God the Father's right hand (see Acts 1:6-11; Philippians 2:9-11).

Atoning: providing a way of coming back into friendship with someone.

Baal: pagan false god that was worshiped by the Canaanites living around Israel.

Baptism: the public ceremony involving water (either through immersion or it being sprinkled) by which someone is welcomed into the church as a member of God's people, through faith in Jesus Christ. Bible-believing Christians differ over whether baptism should be given to children of Christians, or to those who are professing faith in Christ themselves (I hold to the latter position and believe the proper "mode" of baptism is

immersion).

Biblical theology: the study of how God has worked in history to showcase his glory by rescuing his people, revealed in his word, the Bible. It understands every part of the Bible primarily within its historical context and its place in the unfolding story of God's salvation, which worked toward and climaxed in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of his Son, Jesus.

Blasphemous: when God is disrespected or mocked; or conduct or speech that will cause God to be disrespected or mocked.

Canaan: an area on the eastern Mediterranean coast, to the north of Egypt and the south of Syria (in modern-day terms). When referring to the land God had promised to give his Old Testament people (see Genesis 12:6-9), it is often known as the "promised land".

Canon: the collection of texts which are accepted as God's word.

Capstone: the first stone laid in the construction of a building, on which all the rest is built.

Christ's bride: the church. The Bible often uses the imagery of a bride and groom to describe the relationship between God's people and the Lord Jesus (or rather, the relationship between God's people and the Lord Jesus is reflected and pictured in the human marriage relationship)—e.g. Ephesians 5:31-32; Revelation 19:6-9.

Circumcision: God told the men among his people in the Old Testament to be circumcised as a way to show physically that they knew and trusted him, and belonged to the people of God (see Genesis 17).

Concursive: co-operative (between God and humans).

Congenital: a characteristic or flaw that existed already at birth.

Consummated: to have completed in every detail.

Conversion: the moment when someone for the first time recognizes Jesus, God's Son, as Lord, and turns to him as Savior.

Convicts: convince of the guilt of.

Cult: a religious community that exercises excessive and unhealthy power over its members.

David: the second king of Israel, whose reign was the high point of Israel's history. God promised that one of David's descendants would reign forever—the Messiah (see 2 Samuel 7).

Deacons: literally table-waiters; in the church, deacons are church members appointed to serve the church in practical ways.

Diaconate: the group of deacons in a church.

Elijah: an Old Testament prophet who announced God's judgment for his people's idolatry.

Essenes: a Jewish sect that was popular from the second century BC to the second century AD. They tended not to have many possessions or even to choose to live in poverty, and to have an expectation that the Messiah, God's promised King, would arrive very soon. Some removed themselves from everyday society and lived in detached communities.

Eunuch: a castrated man.

Exaltation: when Jesus ascended into heaven and was given glory and authority by the Father (see Philippians 2:9).

Exile: the time when the Jewish people were deported from their homeland to live in Babylon. This was a punishment by God for their unfaithfulness.

Exodus: literally "way out" or "departure"; the historical period when the people of Israel left slavery in Egypt and began to travel toward the promised land (i.e. the events recounted, unsurprisingly, in the book of Exodus).

Expository: refers to Bible preaching or Bible teaching that progresses systematically through a passage of the Bible, explaining and applying each part of that passage in turn.

Fall: the moment when Eve and Adam disobeyed God and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (see Genesis 3).

Fallacy: false or mistaken idea.

Fallen: affected by God's judgment, which was a consequence of the fall—the event when the first man and woman disobeyed God (see Genesis 3).

Fold: sheep pen.

Galileans: people from the region of Galilee, in the north of first-century Israel.

Gentiles: people who are not ethnically Jewish.

Heresy: false teaching that, if believed, causes someone to reject the true gospel in some way.

Herod: there are four Herods mentioned in the Gospels and Acts: Herod "the Great," who ruled Judea at the time Jesus was born; his son Herod Archelaus, who ruled part of his father's territory (including Bethlehem) upon Herod the Great's death; another of his sons, Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee and who was part of the process by which Jesus was tried and condemned; and Herod the Great's grandson, Herod Agrippa, who is mentioned in Acts 12.

High Priest: in the first half of the first century, this was the most senior member of the group who oversaw and ruled the religious life of Judea. The high priest was therefore one of the most powerful men in the nation.

Hypothesis: an idea or prediction, put forth in order to be tested (whether through experiment, further research, or debate).

Incarnate: the incarnation was the coming of the divine Son of God as a

human, in the person of Jesus Christ.

Infanticide: the killing of a young child.

Inherent: central; essential; residual.

Interceding: speaking on someone else's behalf.

Intercession: prayers requesting that God help someone.

Jairus: a synagogue ruler and the father of a 12-year-old girl who lived in Galilee, Jesus' home region. When his daughter grew seriously ill, Jairus asked Jesus to help. She had died by the time Jesus reached their house, but Jesus raised her from the dead (see Mark 5:21-43).

John the Baptist: Jesus' relative, and a prophet whose role was to announce that God's chosen King (Christ) would shortly be arriving in Israel, and to call people to turn back to God as their Ruler in preparation for Christ's arrival. See Mark 1:4-8.

Judas: one of Jesus twelve apostles (closest disciples), who was in charge of the group's money and who betrayed Jesus to his enemies in the religious leadership (see Luke 22:2-5, 47-54).

Kangaroo court: a court in which the normal procedures, rules, and laws are ignored.

Kingdom of God: life under Jesus Christ's perfect rule. We enter God's kingdom when we turn to his Son, Jesus, in repentance and faith; we will enjoy the kingdom fully when Jesus returns to this world and establishes his kingdom over the whole earth.

Last trumpet: refers to the loud trumpet sound that will accompany Jesus' return to earth when his people are raised to eternal life with him (see 1 Thessalonians 4:16; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52).

Law: God's standards, given throughout the Bible; however, "law" often refers to the law God gave to Moses for God's Old Testament people, Israel,

to obey (including the Ten Commandments, see Exodus 20:1-17).

Lazarus: referring here to the friend of Jesus who died, was buried for four days, and whom Jesus then raised back to life (see John 11:17, 38-44).

Liberal: an approach to a religion which does not hold to a literal reading of the religion's holy texts, and argues that doctrines must be re-evaluated and sometimes changed according to current cultural views and insights. Tends to focus on conduct rather than doctrine or beliefs.

Martyr: someone who dies for their faith.

Mary and Martha: the sisters of Lazarus (see **Lazarus**).

Mediator: someone who brings two people or parties who are estranged or distanced from one another into relationship.

Messiah: Christ, the anointed one. In the Old Testament, God promised that the Messiah would come to rescue and rule his people.

Messianic age: the historical era after the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, the Messiah.

Metaphors: images which are used to explain something, but that are not to be taken literally (e.g. "The news was a dagger to his heart").

Monomaniacal: obsessive concentration on a single issue or idea.

Moses: the leader of God's people at the time when God brought them out of slavery in Egypt. God communicated his law (including the Ten Commandments) through Moses, and under his leadership guided them toward the land he had promised to give them.

New covenant: a covenant is a binding agreement or promise. The old covenant set out how believers in the Old Testament related to God; Jesus established the new covenant, so believers now relate to God through Jesus' saving death and resurrection.

Offices: official positions within a church that are mentioned in the New Testament (e.g. pastor, elder, deacon).

Omnipotent: the characteristic of being completely all-powerful.

Omniscience: the ability to have complete, infinite understanding and knowledge of everything.

Orthodox: holding to the established doctrine and practice of a particular religion.

Pagan: a word used in the Bible to refer to non-Christians (e.g. 1 Peter 2:12; 4:3-5). Pagan religion (generally speaking) refers to a belief system that includes many gods who are unpredictable, and whose favor or blessing or protection needs to be bought or earned through ritual or sacrifice.

Paradigmatic: foundational; a template; setting a pattern to be followed.

Paradox: two true statements that seem to be contradictory, but aren't.

Patriarchs: the “first fathers” of Israel, to whom God gave his promises—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Peccadillo: offense, or weakness of character or conduct.

Pharisees: leaders of a first-century Jewish sect who were extremely strict about keeping God's laws, and who added extra laws around God's law to ensure that they wouldn't break it. They tended to focus on external acts of obedience.

Pilate: the Roman governor who oversaw the trial and execution of Jesus under Roman law.

Post-apostolic: the time between the death of the last of Jesus' apostles (see **Apostles**)—around the beginning of the second century—and today.

Predestined: God's sovereign action in deciding what will happen before it happens, meaning that his plans are always fulfilled and his promises are

always kept.

Providential: the truth that God is overseeing all events.

Redeem: free; release; buy back for a price.

Redemptive history: the process throughout history by which God has and will rescue his people from sin to live in relationship with him forever.

Reformers: the first two generations of people in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries who preached the gospel of justification by faith, and opposed the Pope and the Roman church.

Regenerates: causes there to be life where there was none.

Repentance: literally, a military word meaning “about turn.” Used to mean turning around to live the opposite way to previously.

Saints: Christians.

Samuel: son of Hannah and Elkanah who became the prophet who anointed David as king. His story is told in 1 Samuel.

Sect: small religious group that has separated from the main religion.

Seed: descendant or offspring.

Sinai covenant: the binding agreement made by God, with his people, as they traveled from Egypt to the promised land. Sinai was a mountain in the desert where the law was given.

Sovereign: royal; all-powerful.

Spiritual baptism: a baptism that involves receiving (for the first time, or in a deeper, more effectual way) the Spirit, subsequent to and separate from baptism in water.

Substitutionary: an act that involves a replacement, where someone (or something) stands in or is substituted for another.

Tabernacle: a large, tented area where the Israelites worshiped God, and where his presence symbolically dwelled (see Exodus 26; 40).

The baptism of John: the baptism performed or encouraged by “John the Baptist.” This was a public means of acknowledging the need to turn back to live under God’s rule and receive forgiveness; but (because John came before Jesus) it was not a public sign of pledging allegiance to Jesus Christ and placing one’s trust in his death and resurrection to forgive sins. See Luke 3:1-3, 15-17.

Theological: focusing on God’s perspective and the truth about him.

Theophilus: the person (most likely a real person, though some scholars disagree) to whom both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are addressed (see Luke 1:3-4; Acts 1:1). The name is Greek, and means “loved by God” or “friend of God.”

Transcendent: far above what is humanly possible.

Trespasses: actions which involve leaving a right path and straying into territory that has been ruled out of bounds.

Trinity: the biblical doctrine that the one God is three Persons, distinct from one another, each fully God, of the same “essence” (or “God-ness”). We usually call these three Persons Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Types: Old Testament historical figures who in some way pointed to what Jesus would be like when he came to earth, and/or to what Jesus would do when he was on earth. There are many—among the most important are Noah, Joseph, Moses, Samson, and King David.

Uncircumcised heart: a heart that the Holy Spirit has not set apart for faith in and love of Jesus, the Son of God (see Romans 2:28-29).

Unclean spirits: spiritual beings or forces that are opposed to the work of Jesus and his people.

Unregenerate: someone who does not have Spirit-given faith in Christ, and

is therefore without new, eternal life (see **Regenerates**).

Veracity: accuracy.

Worldview: the beliefs we hold in an attempt to make sense of the world as we experience it, and which direct how we live in it. Everyone has a worldview.

Wrath: God's settled, deserved hatred of and anger at sin.

Yahweh: the name by which God revealed himself to Moses (Exodus 3:13-14). Literally, it means, "I am who I am" or, "I will be who I will be." Most English-language Bibles translate it as "LORD."

Footnotes

1. Words in grey are defined in the Glossary. [Return](#)
2. All Acts verse references being looked at in each chapter are in bold.
[Return](#)

Appendix: Map of the Eastern Mediterranean in the Time of the Book of Acts



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