

Acts 100

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Forward

Nearly 2,000 years ago, a match was struck in Palestine.

At first, just a few in that corner of the world were touched and warmed; but the fire spread beyond Jerusalem and Judea out to the world and to all people. Acts provides an eyewitness account of the flame and fire—the birth and spread of the church.

Beginning in Jerusalem with a small group of disciples, the message traveled across the Roman Empire. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, this courageous band preached, taught, healed, and demonstrated love in synagogues, schools, homes, marketplaces, and courtrooms, and on streets, hills, ships, and desert roads—wherever God sent them, lives and history were changed.

Written by Luke as a sequel to his Gospel, Acts is an accurate historical record of the early church.

But Acts is also a theological book, with lessons and living examples of the work of the Holy Spirit, church relationships and organization, the implications of grace, and the law of love.

And Acts is an apologetic work, building a strong case for the validity of Christ's claims and promises.

The book of Acts begins with the outpouring of the promised Holy Spirit and the commencement of the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This Spirit-inspired evangelism began in Jerusalem and eventually spread to Rome, covering most of the Roman Empire.

The gospel first went to the Jews; but they, as a nation, rejected it. A remnant of Jews, of course, gladly received the Good News. But the continual rejection of the gospel by the vast majority of the Jews led to the ever-increasing proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles. This was according to Jesus' plan: the gospel was to go from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Chapter 1

PETER'S MINISTRY

The book of Acts begins where the Gospels leave off, reporting on the actions of the apostles and the work of the Holy Spirit. Beginning in Jerusalem, the church is established and grows rapidly, then faces intense persecution, which drives the believers out into the surrounding areas.

Through this dispersion, Samaritans and Gentiles hear the Good News and believe.

The book of Acts continues the story Luke began in his Gospel, covering the 30 years after Jesus was taken up into heaven.

During that short time the church was established, and the gospel of salvation was taken throughout the world, even to the capital of the Roman Empire.

Those preaching the gospel were ordinary people with human frailties and limitations, were empowered by the Holy Spirit to take the Good News “all over the world” (Acts 17:6).

Throughout the book of Acts, we learn about the nature of the church and how we today are also to go about turning our world upside down.

Luke's former book was the Gospel of Luke; that book was also addressed to Theophilus, whose name means “one who loves God

Acts 1:1-11 explains the bridge between the events recorded in the Gospels and the events marking the beginning of the church. Jesus spent 40 days teaching his disciples, and they were changed drastically. Before they had argued with each other, deserted their Lord, and one (Peter) even lied about knowing Jesus.

Here, in a series of meetings with the living, resurrected Christ, the disciples had many questions answered.

They became convinced about the resurrection, learned about the kingdom of God, and learned about their power source—the Holy Spirit.

By reading the Bible, we can sit with the resurrected Christ in his school of discipleship.

By believing in him, we can receive his power through the Holy Spirit to be new people. By joining with other Christians in Christ's church, we can take part in doing his work on earth.

Luke says that the disciples were eyewitnesses to all that had happened to

Jesus Christ—his life before his crucifixion (“suffering”), and the 40 days after his resurrection as he taught them more about the kingdom of God.

Today there are still people who doubt Jesus’ resurrection. But Jesus appeared to the disciples on many occasions after his resurrection, proving that he was alive.

Look at the change the resurrection made in the disciples’ lives. At Jesus’ death, they scattered—they were disillusioned, and they feared for their lives.

After seeing the resurrected Christ, they were fearless and risked everything to spread the Good News about him around the world. They faced imprisonment, beatings, rejection, and martyrdom, yet they never compromised their mission.

These men would not have risked their lives for something they knew was a fraud. They knew Jesus was raised from the dead, and the early church was fired with their enthusiasm to tell others.

It is important to know this so we can have confidence in their testimony. Twenty centuries later we can still be confident that our faith is based on fact.

Jesus explained that with his coming, the kingdom of God was inaugurated. When he returned to heaven, God’s kingdom would remain in the hearts of all believers through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

But the kingdom of God will not be fully realized until Jesus Christ comes again to judge all people and remove all evil from the world. Before that time, believers are to work to spread God’s kingdom across the world. The book of Acts records how this work was begun. What the early church started, we must continue.

God would be with and within his followers after Christ returned to heaven. The Spirit would comfort them, guide them to know his truth, remind them of Jesus’ words, give them the right words to say, and fill them with power (see John 14-16).

At Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4) the Holy Spirit was made available to all who believed in Jesus. We receive the Holy Spirit (are baptized with him) when we receive Jesus Christ. The baptism of the Holy Spirit must be understood in the light of his total work in Christians.

Chapter 2

Held 50 days after Passover, Pentecost was also called the Feast of Weeks. It was one of three major annual feasts (Deuteronomy 16:16), a festival of thanksgiving for the harvested crops. Jesus was crucified at Passover time, and he ascended 40 days after his resurrection.

The Holy Spirit came 50 days after the resurrection, ten days after the ascension. Jews of many nations gathered in Jerusalem for this festival. Thus Peter's speech (Acts 2:14) was given to an international audience, and it resulted in a worldwide harvest of new believers—the first converts to Christianity.

This was a fulfillment of John the Baptist's words about the Holy Spirit's baptizing with fire (Luke 3:16) and of the Prophet Joel's words about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Joel 2:28-29).

Why tongues of fire? Tongues symbolize speech and the communication of the gospel. Fire symbolizes God's purifying presence, which burns away the undesirable elements of our lives and sets our hearts aflame to ignite the lives of others. On Mount Sinai, God confirmed the validity of the Old Testament law with fire from heaven (Exodus 19:16-18).

At Pentecost, God confirmed the validity of the Holy Spirit's ministry by sending fire. At Mount Sinai, the fire had come down on one place; at Pentecost, fire came down on many believers, symbolizing that God's presence is now available to all who believe in him.

God made his presence known to this group of believers in a spectacular way—violent wind, fire, and his Holy Spirit. Would you like God to reveal himself to you in such recognizable ways? He may do so, but be wary of forcing your expectations on God. In 1 Kings 19:10-13, Elijah also needed a message from God. There was a great wind, then an earthquake, and finally a fire. But God's message came in a "gentle whisper."

These people literally spoke in other languages—a miraculous attention-getter for the international crowd gathered in town for the feast. All the nationalities represented recognized their own languages being spoken. But more than miraculous speaking drew people's attention; they saw the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The apostles continued to minister in the power of the Holy Spirit wherever they went.

Christianity is not limited to any race or group of people. Christ offers salvation to all people without regard to nationality. Visitors in Jerusalem were surprised to hear the apostles and other believers speaking in languages other than their own, the languages of other nationalities, but they need not have been.

God works all kinds of miracles to spread the gospel, using many languages as he calls all kinds of people to become his followers. No matter what your race, color, nationality, or language, God speaks to you. Are you listening?

There is a list of many lands from which Jews came to the festivals in Jerusalem. These Jews were not living in Palestine because they had been dispersed throughout the world through captivities and persecutions.

Very likely, some of the Jews who responded to Peter's message returned to their homelands with God's Good News of salvation. Thus God prepared the way for the spread of the gospel. As you read Acts, you will see how the way was often prepared for Paul and other messengers by people who became believers at Pentecost.

The church at Rome was probably begun by such Jewish believers.

Peter tells the people why they should listen to the testimony of the believers: because the Old Testament prophecies had been entirely fulfilled in Jesus (2:14-21), because Jesus is the Messiah (Acts 2:25-36), and because the risen Christ could change their lives (Acts 2:37-40).

Not everything mentioned in Joel 2:28-29 was happening that particular morning.

The "last days" include all the days between Christ's first and second comings, and is another way of saying "from now on." "The great and glorious day of the Lord" (Acts 2:20) denotes the whole Christian age. Even Moses yearned for the Lord to put his Spirit on everyone (Numbers 11:29).

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was released throughout the entire world—to men, women, slaves, Jews, Gentiles. Now *everyone* can receive the Spirit. This was a revolutionary thought for first-century Jews.

After Peter's powerful, Spirit-filled message, the people were deeply moved and asked, "What shall we do?" This is the basic question we must ask. It is not enough to be sorry for our sins—we must let God forgive them, and then we must live like forgiven people. Has God spoken to you through his Word or through the words of another believer? Like Peter's audience, ask God what you should do, and then obey.

About 3,000 people became new believers when Peter preached the Good News about Christ. These new Christians were united with the other believers, taught by the apostles, and included in the prayer meetings and fellowship.

New believers in Christ need to be in groups where they can learn God's Word, pray, and mature in the faith. If you have just begun a relationship with Christ, seek out other believers for fellowship, prayer, and teaching. This is the way to grow.

Recognizing the other believers as brothers and sisters in the family of God, the Christians in Jerusalem shared all they had so that all could benefit from God's gifts. It is tempting—especially if we have material wealth—to cut ourselves off from one another, each taking care of his or her own interests, each providing for and enjoying his or her own little piece of the world. But as part of God's spiritual family, it is our responsibility to help one another in every way possible. God's family works best when its members work together.

Chapter 3

The Jews observed three times of prayer—morning, afternoon and evening. At these times devout Jews and Gentiles who believed in God often went to the temple to pray. Peter and John were going to the temple in the evening.

The gate called Beautiful was an entrance to the temple, not to the city. It was one of the favored entrances, and many people passed through it on their way to worship. The crippled man was begging where he would be seen by the most people.

Giving money to beggars was considered praiseworthy in the Jewish religion. So the beggar wisely placed himself where pious people might see him on their way to worship at the temple.

The crippled man asked for money, but Peter gave him something much better—the use of his legs.

We often ask God to solve a small problem, but he wants to give us a whole new life and help for all our problems. When we ask God for help, he may say, “I’ve got something even better for you.” Ask God for what you want, but don’t be surprised when he gives you what you really need.

“In the name of Jesus Christ” means “by the authority of Jesus Christ.” The apostles were doing this healing through the Holy Spirit’s power, not their own.

In his excitement, the formerly crippled man began to jump and walk around. He also praised God! And then others were also awed by God’s power. Don’t forget to thank people who help you, but also remember to praise God for his care and protection.

Peter had an audience, and he capitalized on the opportunity to share Jesus Christ.

He clearly presented his message by telling

- (1) Who Jesus is,
- (2) How the Jews had rejected him,
- (3) Why their rejection was fatal, and
- (4) What they needed to do to change the situation.

Peter told the crowd that they still had a choice; God still offered them the opportunity to believe and receive Jesus as their Messiah and as their Lord.

Displays of God’s mercy and grace, such as the healing of this crippled man,

often create teachable moments. Pray to have courage like Peter to see these opportunities and to use them to speak up for Christ.

Pilate had decided to release Jesus, but the people had clamored to have Barabbas, a murderer, released instead (see John 19:1-16).

When Peter said “You handed him over to be killed,” he meant it literally. Jesus’ trial and death had occurred right there in Jerusalem only weeks earlier. It wasn’t an event of the distant past—most of these people had heard about it, and some may very well have taken part in condemning Jesus.

Jesus, not the apostles, received the glory for the healing of the crippled man. In those days a man’s name represented his character; it stood for his authority and power.

By using Jesus’ name, Peter showed who gave him the authority and power to heal. The apostles did not emphasize what *they* could do, but what God could do through them. Jesus’ name is not to be used as magic—it must be used in faith.

When we pray in Jesus’ name, we must remember that it is Christ himself, not merely the sound of his name, who gives our prayers their power.

John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus by preaching repentance. The apostles’ message of salvation also included the call to repentance—acknowledging personal sin and turning away from it. Many people want the benefits of being identified with Christ without admitting their own disobedience and turning from sin. The key to forgiveness is confessing your sin and turning from it (see Acts 2:38).

When we repent, God promises not only to wipe out our sins but to bring spiritual refreshment. Repentance may at first seem painful because it is hard to give up certain sins. But God will give you a better way. As Hosea promised, “Let us acknowledge the LORD; let us press on to acknowledge

Chapter 4

These priests may have been chief priests, who had special influence and were often close relatives of the high priests.

The captain of the temple guard was the leader of the guards who was set around the temple to ensure order.

The Sadducees were members of a small but powerful Jewish religious sect that did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. They were the religious leaders who stood to gain financially by cooperating with the Romans.

Most of those who engineered and carried out Jesus' arrest and crucifixion were from these three groups.

Peter and John spoke to the people during the afternoon prayer time.

The Sadducees moved in quickly to investigate. Because they did not believe in the resurrection, they were understandably disturbed with what the apostles were saying. Peter and John were refuting one of their fundamental beliefs and thus threatening their authority as religious teachers.

Even though the nation was under Roman rule, the Sadducees had almost unlimited power over the temple grounds. Thus they were able to arrest Peter and John for no other reason than teaching something that contradicted their beliefs.

The rulers, elders, and teachers of the law made up the Jewish council—the same council that had condemned Jesus to death (Luke 22:66).

It had 70 members plus the current high priest, who presided over the group. The Sadducees held a majority in this ruling group. These were the wealthy, intellectual, and powerful men of Jerusalem. Jesus' followers stood before this council just as he had.

The council asked Peter and John by what power they had healed the man (Acts 3:6-7) and by what authority they preached (Acts 3:12-26).

The actions and words of Peter and John threatened these religious leaders who, for the most part, were more interested in their reputations and positions than in God.

Through the help of the Holy Spirit (Mark 13:11), Peter spoke boldly before the council, actually putting the council on trial by showing them that the One they

had crucified had risen again.

Instead of being defensive, the apostles went on the offensive, boldly speaking out for God and presenting the gospel to these leaders.

Knowing that Peter and John were unschooled, the council was amazed at what being with Jesus had done for them

A changed life convinces people of Christ's power. One of your greatest testimonies is the difference others see in your life and attitudes since you have believed in Christ.

Although the evidence was overwhelming and irrefutable (changed lives and a healed man), the religious leaders refused to believe in Christ and continued to try to suppress the truth.

The early church was able to share possessions and property as a result of the unity brought by the Holy Spirit working in and through the believers' lives.

This way of living is different from communism because:

- (1) The sharing was voluntary;
- (2) It didn't involve *all* private property, but only as much as was needed;
- (3) It was not a membership requirement in order to be a part of the church.

The spiritual unity and generosity of these early believers attracted others to them. This organizational structure is not a Biblical command, but it offers vital principles for us to follow.

Chapter 5

In Acts 5:1-8:3 we see both internal and external problems facing the early church. Inside, there was dishonesty (Acts 5:1-11) and administrative headaches (Acts 6:1-7).

Outside, the church was being pressured by persecution. While church leaders were careful and sensitive in dealing with the internal problems, there was not much they could do to prevent the external pressures.

Through it all, the leaders kept their focus on what was most important—spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Even after the Holy Spirit had come, the believers were not immune to Satan's temptations.

Satan was defeated by Christ at the cross, yet he was still actively trying to make the believers stumble—as he does today (Ephes. 6:12; 1 Peter 5:8).

Satan's overthrow is inevitable, but it will not occur until the last days when Christ returns to judge the world (Rev. 20:10).

The sin Ananias and Sapphira committed was not stinginess or holding back part of the money—it was their choice whether or not to sell the land and how much to give.

Their sin was lying to God and God's people—saying they gave the whole amount but holding back some for themselves and trying to make themselves appear more generous than they really were.

This act was judged harshly because dishonesty, greed, and covetousness are destructive in a church, preventing the Holy Spirit from working effectively.

All lying is bad, but when we lie to try to deceive God and his people about our relationship with him, we destroy our testimony about Christ.

God's judgment on Ananias and Sapphira produced shock and fear among the believers, making them realize how seriously God regards sin in the church.

Although many people greatly respected the apostles, they did not dare join them in the temple or work beside them. Some may have been afraid to face the same kind of persecution the apostles had just faced (Acts 4:17), while others may have feared a similar fate as the one that fell on Ananias and Sapphira.

What makes Christianity attractive? It is easy to be drawn to churches because of programs, good speakers, size, beautiful facilities, or fellowship. People were attracted to the early church by expressions of God's power at work, the generosity, sincerity, honesty, and unity of the members, and the character of the leaders. Have

our standards slipped? God wants to add believers to his *church*, not just newer and better programs or larger and fancier facilities.

What did these miraculous healings do for the early church?

- (1) They attracted new believers.
- (2) They confirmed the truth of the apostles' teaching.
- (3) They demonstrated that the power of the Messiah who had been crucified and risen was now with his followers.

The apostles experienced the power to do miracles, great boldness in preaching, and God's presence in their lives, yet they were not free from hatred and persecution.

They were arrested, put in jail, beaten, and slandered by community leaders. Faith in God does not make troubles disappear; it makes troubles appear less frightening because it puts them in the right perspective

The Pharisees were the other major party in the Jewish council with the Sadducees (Acts 5:17). The Pharisees were the strict keepers of the law—not only God's law. Hundreds of other rules they had added to God's law.

They were careful about outward purity, but many had hearts full of impure motives. Jesus confronted the Pharisees often during his ministry on earth.

Unless disciples in these groups endorse obviously dangerous doctrines or practices, it is often wiser to be tolerant rather than repressive

Chapter 6

Another internal problem developed in the early church. The Hebraic Jews, native Jewish Christians, spoke Aramaic, a Semitic language. The Grecian Jews, Greek-speaking Christians, were probably Jews from other lands who were converted at Pentecost.

The Greek-speaking Christians complained that their widows were being unfairly treated.

This favoritism was probably not intentional but was more likely caused by the language barrier. To correct the situation, the apostles put seven respected Greek-speaking men in charge of the food distribution program.

This solved the problem and allowed the apostles to keep their focus on teaching and preaching the Good News about Jesus.

This administrative task was not taken lightly. Notice the requirements for the men who were to handle the food program: full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. People who carry heavy responsibilities and work closely with others should have these qualities. We must look for spiritually mature and wise men and women to lead our churches.

The apostles' priorities were correct. The ministry of the Word should never be neglected because of administrative burdens. Pastors should not try, or be expected to try, to do everything.

Instead, the work of the church should be spread out among its members.

The most important prerequisite for any kind of Christian service is to be filled with faith and the power of the Holy Spirit.

By the Spirit's power, Stephen was a wise servant (Acts 6:3), miracle worker (Acts 6:8), and evangelist (Acts 6:10). By the Spirit's power, you can exercise the gifts God has given you.

The Freedmen was a group of Jewish slaves who had been freed by Rome and had formed their own synagogue in Jerusalem.

These men lied about Stephen, causing him to be arrested and brought before the Jewish council. The Sadducees, the dominant party in the council, accepted and studied only the writings of Moses (Genesis through Deuteronomy).

In their view, to speak blasphemy against Moses was a crime. But from Stephen's speech (Acts 7), we learn that this accusation was false. Stephen based his review of Israel's history on Moses' writings.

When Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin (the council of religious leaders), the accusation against him was the same that the religious leaders had used against Jesus (Matthew 26:59-61).

The group falsely accused Stephen of wanting to change Moses' customs, because they knew that the Sadducees, who controlled the council, believed only in Moses' laws.

Chapter 7

Stephen launched into a long speech about Israel's relationship with God. From Old Testament history he showed that the Jews had constantly rejected God's message and his prophets and that this council had rejected the Messiah, God's Son.

He made three main points:

- (1) Israel's history is the history of God's acts in the world;
- (2) People worshiped God long before there was a temple because God does not live in a temple;
- (3) Jesus' death was just one more example of Israel's rebellion against and rejection of God.

Stephen didn't really defend himself. Instead, he took the offensive, seizing the opportunity to summarize his teaching about Jesus. Stephen was accusing these religious leaders of failing to obey God's laws—the laws they prided themselves in following so meticulously.

This was the same accusation that Jesus had leveled against them. When we witness for Christ, we don't need to be on the defensive. Instead, we can simply share our faith.

Circumcision was a sign of the promise or covenant made between God, Abraham, and the entire nation of Israel (Genesis 17:9-13).

Because Stephen's speech summarized Israel's history, he summarized how this covenant fared during that time.

Stephen pointed out that God always had kept his side of the promise, but Israel had failed again and again to uphold its end.

Although the Jews in Stephen's day still circumcised their baby boys, they failed to obey God. The people's hearts were far from God. Their lack of faith and lack of obedience meant that they had failed to keep their part of the covenant.

Stephen's review of Jewish history gives a clear testimony of God's faithfulness and sovereignty. Despite the continued failures of his chosen people and the swirling world events, God was working out his plan.

When faced by a confusing array of circumstances, remember that: (1) God is in control—nothing surprises him; (2) this world is not all there is—it will pass, but

God is eternal; (3) God is just, and he will make things right—punishing the wicked and rewarding the faithful; (4) God wants to use you (like Joseph, Moses, and Stephen) to make a difference in the world.

Stephen used the word “ekklesia” (translated “assembly”) to describe the congregation or people of God in the desert. This word means “called out ones” and was used by the first-century Christians to describe their own community or “assembly.”

Stephen’s point was that the giving of the law through Moses to the Jews was the sign of the covenant. By obedience, then, would they continue to be God’s covenant people, But because they disobeyed (Acts 7:39), they broke the covenant and forfeited their right to be the chosen people.

From Galatians 3:19 and Hebrews 2:2, it appears that God had given the law to Moses through angels. Exodus 31:18 says God wrote the Ten Commandments himself (“inscribed by the finger of God”).

Many prophets were persecuted and killed: Uriah (Jeremiah 26:20-23); Jeremiah (Jeremiah 38:1-6); Isaiah (tradition says he was killed by King Manasseh; see 2 Kings 21:16); Amos (Amos 7:10-13); Zechariah (not the author of the Bible book, but the son of Jehoiada the priest, 2 Chronicles 24:20-22); Elijah.

Stephen saw the glory of God, and Jesus the Messiah standing at God’s right hand. Stephen’s words are similar to Jesus’ words spoken before the council (Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69).

Stephen’s vision supported Jesus’ claim and angered the Jewish leaders who had condemned Jesus to death for blasphemy. They would not tolerate Stephen’s words, so they dragged him out and killed him. Keep honoring God in your conduct and words; though many may turn against you and your message some will follow Christ. Remember, Stephen’s death made a profound impact on Paul, who later became the world’s greatest missionary. Even those who oppose you now may later turn to Christ.

Chapter 8

Persecution forced the Christians out of Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria— thus fulfilling the second part of Jesus’ command (see Acts 1:8). The persecution helped spread the gospel. God would bring great results from the believers’ suffering.

Persecution forced the believers out of their homes in Jerusalem, and along with them went the gospel. Sometimes we have to become uncomfortable before we’ll move. We may not want to experience it, but discomfort may be the best thing for us because God may be working through our hurts. When you are tempted to complain about uncomfortable or painful circumstances, stop and ask if God might be preparing you for a special task.

Israel had been divided into three main regions—Galilee in the north, Samaria in the middle, and Judea in the south.

The city of Samaria (in the region of Samaria) had been the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel in the days of the divided kingdom before it was conquered by Assyria in 722 B.C.

During that war, the Assyrian king took many captives, leaving only the poorest people in the land and resettling it with foreigners. These foreigners intermarried with the Jews who were left, and the mixed race became known as Samaritans.

The Samaritans were considered half-breeds by the “pure” Jews in the southern kingdom of Judah, and there was intense hatred between the two groups. But Jesus himself went into Samaria (John 4), and he commanded his followers to spread the gospel there (Acts 1:8).

Jesus encountered and drove out many demons during his ministry on earth.

Satan rules demons or evil spirits. Many scholars believe that they are fallen angels who joined Satan in his rebellion against God, and who can cause a person to be mute, deaf, blind, or insane.

Demons also tempt people to sin. Although they can be powerful, they are not able to read our minds and cannot be everywhere at once.

Demons are real and active, but Jesus has authority over them, and he gave this authority to his followers. Although Satan is allowed to work in our world, God is in complete control. He can drive demons out and end their destructive work in people’s lives.

Eventually, Satan and his demons will be thrown into the lake of fire, forever

ending their evil work in the world (Revelation 20:10).

In the days of the early church, sorcerers and magicians were numerous and influential. They worked wonders, performed healings, and exorcisms, and practiced astrology.

Their wonders may simply have been magic tricks, or the sorcerers may have been empowered by Satan (Matthew 24:24 ;). Simon had done so many wonders that some even thought that he was the Messiah; but his powers did not come from God (see Acts 8:18-24).

Peter and John were sent to Samaria to find out whether or not the Samaritans were truly becoming believers.

The Jewish Christians, even the apostles, were still unsure whether Gentiles (non-Jewish) and half-Jews could receive the Holy Spirit. It wasn't until Peter's experience with Cornelius (Acts 10) that the apostles became fully convinced that the Holy Spirit was for all people.

It was John who had asked Jesus if they should call fire down from heaven to burn up a Samaritan village that refused to welcome them (Luke 9:51-55). Here he and Peter went to the Samaritans to pray with them.

This was a crucial moment for the spread of the gospel and for the growth of the church. Peter and John had to go to Samaria to help keep this new group of believers from becoming separated from other believers.

When Peter and John saw the Lord working in these people, they were assured that the Holy Spirit worked through *all* believers—Gentiles and mixed races as well as “pure” Jews.

Philip found the Ethiopian man reading Scripture.

Taking advantage of this opportunity to explain the gospel, Philip asked the man if he understood what he was reading. Philip (1) followed the Spirit's leading, (2) began the discussion from where the man was (immersed in the prophecies of Isaiah), and (3) explained how Jesus Christ fulfilled Isaiah's prophecies.

When we share the gospel, we should start where the other person's concerns are focused. Then we can bring the gospel to bear on those concerns.

The eunuch asked Philip to explain a passage of Scripture that he did not understand.

Some think that the Old Testament is not relevant today, but Philip led this

man to faith in Jesus Christ by using the Old Testament. Jesus Christ is found in the pages of both the Old and New Testaments.

God's entire Word is applicable to all people of all ages. Don't avoid or neglect to use the Old Testament. It too is God's Word.

Baptism was a sign of identification with Christ and with the Christian community. Although there were no witnesses besides Philip, it was still important for the eunuch to take this step.

Why was Phillip suddenly transported to a different city?

This miraculous sign showed the urgency of bringing the Gentiles to believe in Christ. Azotus is Ashdod, one of the ancient Philistine capitals. Philip probably lived in Caesarea for the next 20 years (Acts 21:8).

Chapter 9

Saul (later called Paul) was so zealous for his Jewish beliefs that he began a persecution campaign against anyone who believed in Christ (“who belonged to the Way”).

Why would the Jews in Jerusalem want to persecute Christians as far away as Damascus?

There are several possibilities:

- (1) To seize the Christians, who had fled,
- (2) To prevent the spread of Christianity to other major cities,
- (3) To keep the Christians from causing any trouble with Rome,
- (4) To advance Saul’s career and build his reputation as a true Pharisee, zealous for the law,
- (5) To unify the factions of Judaism by giving them a common enemy.

As Saul traveled to Damascus, pursuing Christians, he was confronted by the risen Christ and brought face to face with the truth of the gospel. Sometimes God breaks into a life in a spectacular manner, and sometimes conversion is a quiet experience.

Damascus, a key commercial city, was located about 175 miles northeast of Jerusalem in the Roman province of Syria. Several trade routes linked Damascus to other cities throughout the Roman world. Saul may have thought that by stamping out Christianity in Damascus, he could prevent its spread to other areas.

Paul refers to this experience as the start of his new life in Christ (1 Corinthians 9:1; 1 Corinthians 15:8; Galatians 1:15-16).

At the center of this wonderful experience was Jesus Christ. Paul did not see a vision; he saw the risen Christ himself (Acts 9:17). Paul acknowledged Jesus as Lord, confessed his own sin, surrendered his life to Christ, and resolved to obey him. True conversion comes from a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and leads to a new life in relationship with him.

Saul thought he was pursuing heretics, but he was persecuting Jesus himself. Anyone who persecutes believers today is also guilty of persecuting Jesus (see Matthew 25:40, 45) because believers are the body of Christ on earth.

Not him, Lord; that’s impossible. He could never become a Christian!” In essence, that’s what Ananias said when God told him of Saul’s conversion. After all,

Saul had pursued believers to their death. Despite these understandable feelings, Ananias obeyed God and ministered to Saul.

We must not limit God—he can do anything. We must obey and follow God’s leading, even when he leads us to difficult people and places.

Ananias found Saul, as he had been instructed, and greeted him as “Brother Saul.” Ananias feared this meeting because Saul had come to Damascus to capture the believers and take them as prisoners to Jerusalem (Acts 9:2).

But in obedience to the Holy Spirit, Ananias greeted Saul lovingly. It is not always easy to show love to others, especially when we are afraid of them or doubt their motives. Nevertheless, we must follow Jesus’ command (John 13:34) and Ananias’ example, showing loving acceptance to other believers.

Although there is no mention of a special filling of the Holy Spirit for Saul, his changed life and subsequent accomplishments bear strong witness to the Holy Spirit’s presence and power in his life. Evidently, the Holy Spirit filled Saul when he received his sight and was baptized.

Immediately after receiving his sight and spending some time with the believers in Damascus, Saul went to the synagogue to tell the Jews about Jesus Christ.

Some Christians counsel new believers to wait until they are thoroughly grounded in their faith before attempting to share the gospel. Saul took time alone to learn about Jesus before beginning his worldwide ministry, but he did not wait to witness. Although we should not rush into a ministry unprepared, we do not need to wait before telling others what has happened to us.

Saul’s arguments were powerful because he was a brilliant scholar. But what was more convincing was his changed life. People knew that what he taught was real because they could see the evidence in the way he lived. It is important to know what the Bible teaches and how to defend the faith, but your words should be backed up with a changed life.

Chapter 10

This Caesarea, sometimes called Palestinian Caesarea, was located on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, 32 miles north of Joppa. The largest and most important port city on the Mediterranean in Palestine, it served as the capital of the Roman province of Judea.

This was the first city to have Gentile Christians and a non-Jewish church.

This Roman officer was a centurion, a commander of 100 soldiers. Although stationed in Caesarea, Cornelius would probably return soon to Rome. Thus his conversion was a major stepping-stone for spreading the gospel to the empire's capital city.

Cornelius wasn't a believer in Christ, but he was seeking God, and he was reverent and generous. Therefore God sent Peter to tell Cornelius about Christ. Cornelius is an example that God "rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Hebrews 11:6).

Those who sincerely seek God will find him! God made Cornelius's knowledge complete.

God saw Cornelius's sincere faith.

His prayers and generous giving was a "memorial offering before God," It was a sacrificial offering to the Lord. God answers the sincere prayers of those who seek him by sending the right person or the right information at the right time.

According to Jewish law, certain foods were forbidden to be eaten.

The food laws made it difficult for Jews to eat with Gentiles without risking defilement.

In fact, the Gentiles themselves were often seen as "unclean." Peter's vision meant that he should not look upon the Gentiles as inferior people whom God would not redeem. Before having the vision, Peter would have thought that a Gentile Roman officer could not accept Christ. Afterward, he understood that it was his responsibility to go with the messengers into a Gentile home and tell Cornelius the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ.

This act of worship could have caused Peter to become arrogant. After all, a Roman centurion was bowing before him. Instead, Peter pointed Cornelius to Christ.

We too should remember our mortality whenever we are flattered or honored and use the opportunity to give glory to God.

Perhaps the greatest barrier to the spread of the gospel in the first century was the Jewish-Gentile conflict. Most of the early believers were Jewish, and to them, it was scandalous even to think of associating with Gentiles.

But God told Peter to take the gospel to a Roman, and Peter obeyed despite his background and personal feelings. (Later Peter struggled with this again—see Galatians 2:11-14.)

God was making it clear that the Good News of Christ is for everyone! We should not allow any barrier—language, culture, prejudice, geography, economic level, or educational level—to keep us from telling others about Christ.

In every nation there are hearts restless for God, ready to receive the gospel—but someone must take it to them. Seeking God is not enough—people must find him. How then shall seekers find God without someone to point the way? Is God asking you to show someone the way to him? (See Romans 10:14-15.)

Peter's brief and powerful sermon contains a concise statement of the gospel: Jesus' perfect life of servant-hood; his death on the cross; his resurrection, personally witnessed and experienced by Peter; Jesus' fulfillment of the Scriptures; and the necessity of personal faith in him.

A sermon or witness for Christ does not need to be long to be effective. It should be Spirit-led and should center on Christ, the way and the truth and the life.

Cornelius needed Peter and his gospel to know the way to salvation. Peter needed Cornelius and his salvation experience to know that Gentiles were included in God's plan. You and another believer may also need each other to understand how God works!

Chapter 11

A Gentile was anyone who was not a Jew; the Jewish believers are sometimes referred to as “the circumcised believers” (Acts 11:2). Most Jewish believers thought that God offered salvation only to the Jews because God had given his law to them (Exodus 19-20).

A group in Jerusalem believed that Gentiles could be saved, but only if they followed all the Jewish laws and traditions—in essence if they became Jews. Both were mistaken. God chose the Jews and taught them his laws so they could bring the message of salvation to *all* people

When Peter brought the news of Cornelius’s conversion back to Jerusalem, the believers were shocked that Peter had eaten with Gentiles. After they heard the whole story, however, they praised God (Acts 11:18).

Their reactions teach us how to handle disagreements with other Christians. Before judging the behavior of fellow believers, it is important to hear them out. The Holy Spirit may have something important to teach us through them.

God had promised throughout Scripture that he would reach the nations.

This began with his general promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:3; Genesis 18:18) and became very specific in Malachi’s statement: “My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun” (Malachi 1:11).

But this was an extremely difficult truth for Jews, even Jewish believers, to accept. The Jewish believers understood how certain prophecies were fulfilled in Christ, but they overlooked other Old Testament teachings. Too often we are inclined to accept only the parts of God’s Word that appeal to us and support our own agendas, ignoring the teachings we don’t like. We must accept all of God’s Word as absolute truth.

Peter’s defense for eating with Gentiles was a simple restatement of what happened. He brought six witnesses with him to back him up, and then he quoted Jesus’ promise about the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 11:16). These Gentiles’ lives had been changed, and that was all the evidence Peter and the other believers needed. Changed lives are equally powerful evidence today.

Jesus had also demonstrated clearly that he and his message were for all people. He preached in Samaria (John 4:1-42); in the region of the Gerasenes, populated by Greeks (Mark 5:1-20); and he even reached out to Romans (Luke 7:1-10). The apostles shouldn’t have been surprised that they were called to do the same.

The intellectual questions ended and the theological discussion stopped with

the report that God had given the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles. This was a turning point for the early church.

They had to accept those whom God had chosen, even if they were Gentiles. But joy over the conversion of Gentiles was not unanimous. This continued to be a struggle for some Jewish Christians throughout the first century.

It was in Antioch that Christianity was launched on its worldwide mission and where the believers aggressively preached to the Gentiles (non-Jews who did not worship God). Philip had preached in Samaria, but the Samaritans were part Jewish (Acts 8:5);

Peter preached to Cornelius, but he already worshiped God (Acts 10:2).

Believers who were scattered after the outbreak of persecution in Jerusalem spread the gospel to other Jews in the lands they fled to (Acts 11:19). At this time, the believers began actively sharing the Good News with Gentiles.

With the exception of Jerusalem, Antioch of Syria played a more important role in the early church than any other city.

After Rome and Alexandria, Antioch was the largest city in the Roman world. In Antioch, the first Gentile church was founded, and there the believers were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). Paul used the city as his home base during his missionary journeys. Antioch was the center of worship for several pagan cults that promoted much sexual immorality and other forms of evil common to pagan religions. It was also a vital commercial center—the gateway to the eastern world. Antioch was a key city both to Rome and to the early church.

Chapter 12

James and John were two of the original 12 disciples who followed Jesus. They had asked Jesus for special recognition in his kingdom (Mark 10:35-40). Jesus said that to be a part of his kingdom would mean suffering with Jesus (drink from the same cup—Mark 10:38-39). James and John did indeed suffer—Herod executed James, and later John was exiled (see Revelation 1:9).

Why did God allow James to die and yet miraculously save Peter? Life is full of difficult questions like this. Why is one child physically disabled and another child athletically gifted?

Why do people die seemingly before realizing their potential? These are questions we cannot possibly answer in this life because we do not see all that God sees. He has chosen to allow evil in this world for a time.

But we can trust God's leading because he has promised to destroy all evil eventually. In the meantime, we know that God will help us use our suffering to strengthen us and glorify him.

Peter was arrested during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the week-long festival directly following Passover. This was a strategic move since more Jews were in the city than usual, and Herod could impress the most people.

Herod's plan undoubtedly was to execute Peter, but the believers were praying for Peter's safety. The earnest prayer of the church significantly affected the outcome of these events. Prayer changes things, so pray often and with confidence.

God sent an angel to rescue Peter. Angels are God's messengers. They are divinely created beings with supernatural powers, and they sometimes take on human appearance in order to talk to people. Angels should not be worshiped, because they are not divine. They are God's servants, just as we are.

The prayers of the group of believers were answered, even as they prayed. But when the answer arrived at the door, they didn't believe it.

We should be people of faith who believe that God answers the prayers of those who seek his will. When you pray, believe you'll get an answer. And when the answer comes, don't be surprised; be thankful!

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answer comes, don't be surprised; be thankful!

Herod died a horrible death accompanied by intense pain; he was literally eaten alive, from the inside out, by worms. To be eaten by worms was considered to be one of the most disgraceful ways to die. Pride is a serious sin, and in this case, God chose to punish it immediately. God does not immediately punish all sin, but he *will* bring all to judgment (Hebrews 9:27). Accept Christ's offer of forgiveness today. No one can afford to wait.

John Mark was Barnabas's cousin (Colossians 4:10). His mother, Mary, often opened her home to the apostles (Acts 12:12), so John Mark would have been exposed to most of the great men and teachings of the early church.

Later, John Mark joined Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, but for unknown reasons, he left them in the middle of the trip. Paul criticized Mark for abandoning the mission (Acts 15:37-39), but he wrote the Gospel of Mark and was later acclaimed by Paul as a vital help in the growth of the early church (2 Timothy 4:11).

Chapter 13

The book focuses now on the ministry to the Gentiles and the spread of the church around the world, and Paul replaces Peter as the central figure in the book. Paul completes three missionary journeys and ends up being imprisoned in Jerusalem and transported to Rome.

The book of Acts ends abruptly, showing that the history of the church is not yet complete. We are to be a part of the sequel.

What variety there is in the church! The common thread among these five men was their deep faith in Christ. We must never exclude anyone whom Christ has called to follow him.

The church set apart Barnabas and Saul to the work God had for them. To *set apart* means to dedicate for a special purpose. We too should dedicate our pastors, missionaries, and Christian workers for their tasks. We can also dedicate ourselves to use our time, money, and talents for God's work. Ask God what he wants you to set apart for him.

This was the beginning of Paul's first missionary journey. The church was involved in sending Paul and Barnabas, but it was God's plan.

Why did Paul and Barnabas go where they did?

- (1) The Holy Spirit led them.
- (2) They followed the communication routes of the Roman Empire—this made travel easier.
- (3) They visited key population and cultural centers to reach as many people as possible.
- (4) They went to cities with synagogues, speaking first to the Jews in hopes that they would see Jesus as the Messiah and help spread the Good News to everyone.

No reason is given why John Mark left Paul and Barnabas. Some suggestions are:

- (1) He was homesick;
- (2) He resented the change in leadership from Barnabas (his cousin) to Paul;
- (3) He became ill (an illness that may have affected all of them—see Galatians 4:13);

- (4) He was unable to withstand the rigors and dangers of the missionary journey;
- (5) He may have planned to go only that far but had not communicated this to Paul and Barnabas.

Paul implicitly accused John Mark of lacking courage and commitment, refusing to take him along on another journey (see Acts 15:37-38). It is clear from Paul's later letters, however, that he grew to respect Mark (Colossians 4:10), and that he needed Mark in his work (2 Timothy 4:11).

When they went to a new city to witness for Christ, Paul and Barnabas went first to the synagogue. The Jews who were there believed in God and diligently studied the Scriptures.

Tragically, however, many could not accept Jesus as the promised Messiah because they had the wrong idea of what kind of Messiah he would be. He was not, as they desired, a military king who would overthrow Rome's control, but a servant king who would defeat sin in people's hearts.

(Only later, when Christ returns, will he judge the nations of the world.)

Paul and Barnabas did not separate themselves from the synagogues but tried to show clearly that the very Scriptures the Jews studied pointed to Jesus.

Paul's message to the Jews in the synagogue in Antioch began with an emphasis on God's covenant with Israel. This was a point of agreement because all Jews were proud to be God's chosen people. Then Paul went on to explain how the gospel fulfilled the covenant. Some Jews found this message hard to swallow.

Paul began where his listeners were and then introduced them to Christ. Because Paul was speaking to devout Jews, he began with the covenant, Abraham, David, and other familiar themes.

Later, when speaking to the Greek philosophers in Athens (Acts 17:22-32), he would begin by talking about what he had observed in their city. In both cases, however, he centered the sermon on Christ and emphasized the resurrection. When you share the Good News, begin where your audience is—then tell them about Christ.

Chapter 14

We may wish we could perform a miraculous act that would convince everyone once and for all that Jesus is the Lord. But we see here that even if we could perform a miracle, it wouldn't convince everyone. God gave these men power to do great wonders as confirmation of the message of grace, but people were still divided. Don't spend your time and energy wishing for miracles. Sow your seeds of Good News on the best ground you can find in the best way you can, and leave the convincing to the Holy Spirit.

Responding to the people of Lystra, Paul and Barnabas reminded them that God never leaves himself "without testimony." Rain and crops, for example, are evidence of his goodness. Later Paul wrote that this evidence in nature leaves people without an excuse for unbelief (Romans 1:20). When in doubt about God, look around and you will see abundant evidence that he is at work in our world.

Only days after the people in Lystra had thought that Paul and Barnabas were gods and wanted to offer sacrifices to them, they stoned Paul and left him for dead.

That's human nature. Jesus understood how fickle crowds can be (John 2:24-25). When many people approve of us, we feel good, but that should never cloud our thinking or affect our decisions. We should not live to please the crowd— especially in our spiritual lives. Be like Jesus. Know the nature of the crowd and don't put your trust in it. Put your trust in God alone.

Paul and Barnabas were persistent in their preaching of the Good News, considering the cost to themselves to be nothing in comparison with obedience to Christ. They had just narrowly escaped being stoned in Iconium (Acts 14:1-7), but Jews from Antioch and Iconium tracked Paul down, stoned him, and left him for dead.

But Paul got up and went back into the city to preach the Good News. That's true commitment! Being a disciple of Christ calls for total commitment. As Christians, we no longer belong to ourselves but to our Lord, for whom we are called to suffer.

Paul and Barnabas returned to visit the believers in all the cities where they had recently been threatened and physically attacked.

These men knew the dangers they faced, yet they believed that they had a responsibility to encourage the new believers. No matter how inconvenient or

uncomfortable the task may seem, we must always support new believers who need our help and encouragement. It was not convenient or comfortable for Jesus to go to the cross for us!

Part of the reason that Paul and Barnabas risked their lives to return to these cities was to organize the churches' leadership. They were not just following up on a loosely knit group; they were helping the believers get organized with spiritual leaders who could help them grow.

Churches grow under Spirit-led leaders, both laypersons, and pastors. Pray for your church leaders and support them; and if God puts his finger on you, humbly accept the responsibility of a leadership role in your church.

Paul probably wrote his letter to the Galatians while he was staying in Antioch (A.D. 48 or 49) after completing his first missionary journey.

There are several theories as to what part of Galatia Paul was addressing, but most agree that Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe were part of that region for which the letter is intended.

Galatians was probably written before the Jerusalem council (Acts 15) because in the letter the question of whether Gentile believers should be required to follow Jewish law was not yet resolved. The council met to solve that problem.

Chapter 15

The real problem for the Jewish Christians was not whether Gentiles could be saved, but whether Gentiles had to adhere to the laws of Moses. The test of following these laws was circumcision. The Jewish Christians were worried because soon there would be more Gentile than Jewish Christians. And they were afraid of weakening moral standards among believers if they did not follow Jewish laws. Paul, Barnabas, and the other church leaders believed that the Old Testament law was very important, but it was not a prerequisite to salvation.

The law cannot save; only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ can a person be saved.

The delegates to the council at Jerusalem came from the churches in Jerusalem and Antioch. The conversion of Gentiles was raising an urgent question for the early church—do the Gentiles have to adhere to the laws of Moses and other Jewish traditions to be saved? One group of Jewish Christians insisted that following the law, including submitting to the rite of circumcision, was necessary for salvation.

The Gentiles, however, did not think they needed to become Jewish first in order to become Christians. So Paul and Barnabas discussed this problem with the leaders of the church. The council upheld the convictions expressed by Paul and Barnabas that following the Jewish laws, including being circumcised, were not essential for salvation.

If the law was a yoke that the Jews could not bear, how did having the law help them throughout their history? Paul wrote that the law was a guide that pointed out their sins so they could repent and return to God and right living (see Galatians 3:24-25). It was, and still is, impossible to obey the law completely.

James' judgment was that Gentile believers did not have to be circumcised, but they should stay away from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality (a common part of idol worship), and from eating meat of strangled animals and from consuming blood (reflecting the Biblical teaching that the life is in the blood—Leviticus 17:14).

If Gentile Christians would abstain from these practices, they would please God and get along better with their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ. Of course, there were other actions inappropriate for believers, but the Jews were especially

concerned about these four. This compromise helped the church grow unhindered by the cultural differences between Jews and Gentiles. When we share our message across cultural and economic boundaries, we must be sure that the requirements for the faith we set up are God's, not peoples.

Apostleship was not a church office but a position and function based on specific gifts. Elders were appointed to lead and manage the church. In this meeting, apostles submitted to the judgment of an elder—James, Jesus' brother.

This letter answered their questions and brought great joy to the Gentile Christians in Antioch (Acts 15:31). Beautifully written, it appeals to the Holy Spirit's guidance and explains what is to be done as though the readers already knew it. It is helpful when believers learn to be careful not only in what they say but also in how they say it.

We may be correct in our content, but we can lose our audience by our tone of voice or by our attitude.

Paul's second missionary journey, this time with Silas as his partner, began approximately three years after his first one ended. The two visited many of the cities covered on Paul's first journey, plus others. This journey laid the groundwork for the church in Greece.

Silas had been involved in the Jerusalem council and was one of the two men chosen to represent the Jerusalem church by taking the letter and decision back to Antioch (Acts 15:22). Paul, from the Antioch church, chose Silas, from the Jerusalem church, and they traveled together to many cities to spread the Good News. This teamwork demonstrated the church's unity after the decision at the Jerusalem council.

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