



A Teaching Outline

Unsung Heroes of the Bible

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Unsung Heroes in Acts

When we think of the success of the early church, we often think of the work of the apostles. But the church could have died if it hadn't been for the unsung heroes, the men and women who through some small but committed act moved the church forward.

The crippled man

Acts 3:9-12

All the people saw him walking and heard him praising God. [10] When they realized he was the lame beggar they had seen so often at the Beautiful Gate, they were absolutely astounded! [11] They all rushed out to Solomon's Colonnade, where he was holding tightly to Peter and John. Everyone stood there in awe of the wonderful thing that had happened.

[12] Peter saw his opportunity and addressed the crowd. "People of Israel," he said, "what is so astounding about this? And why look at us as though we had made this man walk by our own power and godliness?"

In his excitement, the formerly lame man began to jump and walk around. He also praised God! Then others were 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.

Solomon's Colonnade was part of the Temple complex built by King Herod the Great in an attempt to strengthen his relationship with the Jews. A colonnade is an entrance or porch supported by columns. Jesus taught and performed miracles in the Temple many times. When the apostles went to the Temple, they were undoubtedly in close proximity to the same religious leaders who had conspired to put Jesus to death.

Peter had an audience, and he capitalized on the opportunity to share Jesus Christ. He clearly presented his message by telling (1) who Jesus was, (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 lame man, often create teachable moments. Pray to have courage like Peter to see these opportunities and to use them to speak up for Christ.

Five deacons

Acts 6:2-5

So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers.

"We apostles should spend our time preaching and teaching the word of God, not administering a food program," they said.

[3] "Now look around among yourselves, brothers, and select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. We will put them in charge of this business. [4] Then we can spend our time in prayer and preaching and teaching the word."

[5] This idea pleased the whole group, and they chose the following: Stephen (a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit), Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas of Antioch (a Gentile convert to the Jewish faith, who had now become a Christian).

Another internal problem developed in the early church between the Hebrew-speaking Christians (probably local Jews who had been converted) and the Greek-speaking Christians (probably Jews from other lands who had been 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.

"The Twelve" are the 11 original disciples plus Matthias, who had been chosen to replace Judas Iscariot (1:26).

As the early church increased in size, so did its needs. One great need was to organize the distribution of food to the poor. The apostles needed to focus on preaching, so they chose others to administer the food program. Each person has a vital part to play in the life of the church

If you are in a position of leadership and find yourself overwhelmed by responsibilities, determine *your* God-given abilities and priorities and then find others to help. If you are not in leadership, you have gifts that can be used by God in various areas of the church's ministry. Offer these gifts in service to him.

This administrative task was not taken lightly. Notice the requirements for the men who were to handle the food program: They were to be well respected and 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.

Everyone has heard of Stephen, and many know of Philip, but there were five other men chosen to be deacons. They not only laid the foundation for service in the church, but their hard work also gave the apostles the time they needed to preach the gospel.

Ananias

Acts 9:10-19

Now there was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, calling, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord!" he replied.

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

[13] "But Lord," exclaimed Ananias, "I've heard about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem! [14] And we hear that he is authorized by the leading priests to arrest every believer in Damascus."

[15] But the Lord said, "Go and do what I say. For Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. [16] And I will show him how much he must suffer for me."

[17] So Ananias went and found Saul. He laid his hands on him and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you may get your sight back and be filled with the Holy Spirit." [18] Instantly something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized. [19] Afterward he ate some food and was strengthened. Saul stayed with the believers in Damascus for a few days.

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.

Faith in Christ brings great blessings but often great suffering, too. Paul would suffer for his faith (see 2 Corinthians 11:23-27). God calls us to commitment, not to comfort. He promises to be with us *through* suffering and hardship, not to spare us from them.

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 (9:2). In obedience to the Holy Spirit, however, Ananias greeted Saul lovingly. It is not always easy to love others, especially when we are afraid of them or doubt their motives. Nevertheless we must follow Jesus' command (John 13:34) and Ananias's example, showing loving acceptance to other believers.

At least three years elapsed between Acts 9:22 and 9:26. After time alone in Arabia (see Galatians 1:16-18), Saul (Paul) returned to Damascus and then to Jerusalem. The apostles were reluctant to believe that this former persecutor could have become one of them. Saul escaped to Caesarea, where he caught a ship and returned to Tarsus.

Although Acts makes 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 him. Evidently, the Holy Spirit had filled Saul when he received his sight and was baptized.

Ananias had the responsibility of being the first to demonstrate Christ's love to Saul (Paul) after his conversion.

Cornelius

Acts 10:30-35

Cornelius replied, "Four days ago I was praying in my house at three o'clock in the afternoon. Suddenly, a man in dazzling clothes was standing in front of me. [31] He told me, 'Cornelius, your prayers have been heard, and your gifts to the poor have been noticed by God!

[32] Now send some men to Joppa and summon Simon Peter. He is staying in the home of Simon, a leatherworker who lives near the shore.'

[33] So I sent for you at once, and it was good of you to come. Now here we are, waiting before God to hear the message the Lord has given you."

[34] Then Peter replied, "I see very clearly that God doesn't show partiality.

[35] In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right.

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

But God told Peter to take the Good News 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, race, geography, economic level, or educational level—to keep us from telling others about Christ.

Every nation has people who are restless for God, ready to receive the Good News—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.)

His example showed Peter that the gospel was for *all* people, Jews and Gentiles.

Rhoda

Acts 12:13-15

He knocked at the door in the gate, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to open it. [14] When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the door, she ran back inside and told everyone, "Peter is standing at the door!"

[15] "You're out of your mind," they said. When she insisted, they decided, "It must be his angel."

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.

Her persistence brought Peter inside Mary's home, where he would be safe.

James

Acts 15:13-21

And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me: [14] Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. [15] And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written,

[16] After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: [17] That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things.

[18] Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world. [19] Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God:

[20] But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood. [21] For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath day.

This James is Jesus' brother. He became the leader of the church in Jerusalem and wrote the book of James.

Despite the compelling experiences of Peter, Barnabas, and Paul, James turned to God's Word as the ultimate test of truth. This should be the way we evaluate events. We all have beliefs (some of them fervent), we all have experiences, and our tendency is to want to measure others by our yardstick.

It is common for believers to think that their experiences, their convictions, are true and should be the norm. Different ideas are thought to be inferior or invalid. Ultimately, however, what matters is what God's Word says. The more we know God's Word, the more we read it, study it, memorize it, and meditate on it, the better we will be able to discern what is right and best in times of controversy or doctrinal disagreement.

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

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, other actions were inappropriate for believers, but the Jews were especially concerned about these four.

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

He took command of the Jerusalem council and had the courage and discernment to help form a decision that would affect literally millions of Christians over many generations.

Lydia

Acts 16:13-15

And on the Sabbath we went out of the city by a river side, where prayer was wont to be made; and we sat down, and spake unto the women which resorted thither.

[14] And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul.

[15] And when she was baptized, and her household, she besought us, saying, if ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there. And she constrained us.

Inscribed on the arches outside the city of Philippi was a prohibition against bringing an unrecognized religion into the city; therefore, this prayer meeting was held outside the city, beside the river.

After following the Holy Spirit's leading into Macedonia, Paul made his first evangelistic contact with a small group of women. Paul never allowed gender or cultural boundaries to keep him from preaching the Good News. He preached to these women, and Lydia, an influential merchant, believed. This opened the way for ministry in that region. God often worked in and through women in the early church.

Lydia was a merchant of purple cloth, so she was probably wealthy. Purple cloth was valuable and expensive. It was often worn as a sign of nobility or royalty.

Luke highlights the stories of three individuals who became believers through Paul's ministry in Philippi: Lydia, the influential businesswoman (16:14), the demon-possessed slave girl (16:16-18), and the jailer (16:27-30). The Good News was affecting all strata of society, just as it does today.

Why was Lydia's household baptized after Lydia responded in faith to the Good News? Baptism was a public sign of identification with Christ and the Christian community. Although all members of her household may not have chosen to follow Christ (we don't know), it was now a Christian home.

Lydia practically begged for the opportunity to host Paul and Silas in her home. Rather than seeing the men as a burden and their presence as a disruption of her family and business routine, Lydia laid out the welcome mat.

The notion of hospitality is related to the word "hospital." In other words, we practice hospitality when we generously and cordially throw open the doors of our homes to care for others. In hospitality, we nurture, strengthen, and serve.

The result is that others find physical, spiritual, and emotional help. When they leave us, they are healthier and more whole than when they came. Is this your practice? Is your home a "hospital" for hurting or needy souls?

She opened her home to Paul, from which he led many to Christ and founded a church in Philippi.

Jason

Acts 17:5-9

But the Jews which believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an uproar, and assaulted the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. [6] And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also; [7] Whom Jason hath received: and these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus. [8] And they troubled the people and the rulers of the city, when they heard these things.

[9] And when they had taken security of Jason, and of the other, they let them go.

The Jewish leaders didn't try to refute the theology of Paul and Silas, but they were jealous of the popularity of these itinerant preachers. Their motives for causing the riot were rooted in personal jealousy, not doctrinal purity.

We don't know much about Jason except that he evidently was the local host and sponsor of Paul and Silas; thus, he took the heat for all the problems. Jason is just one of many "unsung heroes" who faithfully played their part to help spread the Good News. Because of Jason's courage, Paul and Silas were able to minister more effectively. You may not receive much attention (in fact, you may receive only grief) for your service for Christ. But God wants to use you. Lives will be changed because of your courage and faithfulness.

What a reputation these early Christians had! The power of the Good News revolutionized lives, broke down all social barriers, threw open prison doors, caused people to care deeply for one another, and stirred them to worship God. Our world needs to be turned upside down, to be transformed. The Good News doesn't merely improve programs and encourage good conduct; it dynamically transforms lives. Take courage and ask God how you can help spread his Good News throughout *your* world.

The Jewish leaders had to concoct charges against Paul and Silas that would be heard by the city government. The Romans did not care about theological disagreements between the Jews and these preachers. Treason, however, was a serious offense in the Roman Empire. Paul and Silas were not advocating rebellion against Roman law, but their loyalty to another king sounded suspicious.

Jason posted bond—putting up cash for freedom. By doing so, he promised that the trouble would cease or his own property and possibly his own life would be taken.

He risked his life for the gospel by allowing Paul to stay in his home. He stood up for what was true and right, even though he faced persecution for it.

Paul's nephew

Acts 23:16-24

And when Paul's sister's son heard of their lying in wait, he went and entered into the castle, and told Paul. [17] Then Paul called one of the centurions unto him, and said, Bring this young man unto the chief captain: for he hath a certain thing to tell him. [18] So he took him, and brought him to the chief captain, and said, Paul the prisoner called me unto him, and prayed me to bring this young man unto thee, who hath something to say unto thee.

[19] Then the chief captain took him by the hand, and went with him aside privately, and asked him, what is that thou hast to tell me? [20] And he said, The Jews have agreed to desire thee that thou wouldest bring down Paul tomorrow into the council, as though they would enquire somewhat of him more perfectly.

[21] But do not thou yield unto them: for there lie in wait for him of them more than forty men, which have bound themselves with an oath, that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him: and now are they ready, looking for a promise from thee.

[22] So the chief captain then let the young man depart, and charged him, See thou tell no man that thou hast shewed these things to me. [23] And he called unto him two centurions, saying, Make ready two hundred soldiers to go to Caesarea, and horsemen threescore and ten, and spearmen two hundred, at the third hour of the night; [24] And provide them beasts, that they may set Paul on, and bring him safe unto Felix the governor.

This is the only biblical reference to a member of Paul's family. Some scholars believe that Paul's family had disowned him when he became a Christian. Paul wrote of having suffered the loss of everything for Christ (Philippians 3:8). His nephew was able to see him, even though Paul was in protective custody, because Roman prisoners were accessible to their relatives and friends, who could bring them food and other amenities.

It is easy to overlook children, assuming that they aren't old enough to do much for the Lord. But this young man played an important part in protecting Paul's life. God can use anyone, of any age, who is willing to yield to him. Jesus made it clear that children are important (Matthew 18:2-6). Give children the importance God gives them.

He saved Paul's life by telling officials of a murder plot.

Julius

Acts 27:1,43

And when it was determined that we should sail into Italy, they delivered Paul and certain other prisoners unto one named Julius, a centurion of Augustus' band.

But the centurion, willing to save Paul, kept them from their purpose; and commanded that they which could swim should cast themselves first into the sea, and get to land:

Julius, a Roman army officer, was assigned to guard Paul. Obviously he had to remain close to Paul at all times. Through this contact, Julius developed a respect for Paul. He gave Paul a certain amount of freedom and later spared his life. How would your character look, up close and personal?

The soldiers would pay with their own lives if any of their prisoners escaped. Their instinctive reaction was to kill the prisoners so they wouldn't get away. Julius, the officer, was impressed with Paul and wanted to save his life. Julius was the highest ranking official; therefore, he could make this decision. This act preserved Paul for his later ministry in Rome and fulfilled Paul's prediction that all the people on the ship would be saved.

He spared Paul when the other soldiers wanted to kill him.

An invitation is given to open your heart's door to Jesus

Rev. 3:20

Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

To ask Jesus to come into your heart please pray this Prayer:

Dear Lord Jesus, I believe you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I ask you to forgive me of my sins and coming into my heart. I accept you as savior and will follow you as Lord. Amen.

References:

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Additional comments and charts are taken from: *Life Application Study Bible*. Illinois: Tyndale House 2007. Print