

Acts Devotional

Introduction
And
Background Issues

Written By:

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Greetings. We are about to embark on an incredible journey together. We get to see the Kingdom of God expanding in the life of the early church as described by Luke in the book of Acts. On behalf of the pastors and teaching team that put this devotional together, let me say that it is our prayer that you are changed as you encounter God in the pages of Acts.

Below is a brief description of some of the background issues in Acts, and then the regular weekly devotional begins. Let me also encourage you to really take some time to dig in. As my pastor, Kendrick Vinar, likes to say, “You get out of it what you put it to it.” So read, ponder, think, pray, and allow God to meet you as you spend time with Him this summer. Let’s get started.

Author, Date, and Location:

While nothing in ancient scholarship is considered certain, there is very little doubt that the author of the book of Acts is Luke the physician, who also wrote the Gospel of Luke. There are several reasons to conclude this. The most important one is that both works are addressed to Theophilus. There is some debate about the identity of Theophilus. Some have suggested that his name is a pseudonym – Theophilus literally means “Lover of God” from the Greek words “Theos” (God) and “Phileo” (love). But more than likely he was a historical figure who funded the materials (scrolls and ink, etc.) for Luke to make his composition of both Luke and Acts.

It is most likely that Luke wrote both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts between A.D. 58-66. We know that Luke traveled with Paul on many of his journeys (2 Tim. 4:11) and during this time Paul spent a lot of time in prison waiting to be transported to Rome. This would have given Luke the time he needed to research his Gospel and record the accounts of Acts.

Acts was most likely written during Paul’s two-year imprisonment in Rome (Acts 28:30). There are several key historical indicators that point to this being the case. First, Luke portrays both Rome and Judaism in a neutral, at times positive, way. But historically, by A.D. 65-70, both the Christians and the Jews are seen as “enemies” by Rome and were periodically persecuted. Secondly, Luke was with Paul near the time of his death (2 Tim. 4:11), yet the death of Paul is not recorded in the book of Acts. Paul’s death is believed to have been during the persecution of Nero, which was around A.D. 65-66. So it makes the most sense for Acts to be written before this time. Finally, there are several passages in Acts where Luke transitions to the first person, “we,” in describing the events that are taking place. This indicates that he was writing them at or near the time of their occurrence. Since one of these passages is Acts 28, it seems that Luke was writing during Paul’s arrival in Rome in A.D. 62. This also indicates that Luke wrote Acts while in Rome when Paul was awaiting trial.

Title, Message, and Structure:

“What’s in a name?” is what Shakespeare asked, but in the world of Biblical studies, there is often little significance to the name of a book. Interestingly enough, however, there has been a debate on the name of Acts. Historically it has been called “The Acts of the Apostles” because the book follows many of the original twelve and their ministry to the local churches in the first century. The book is also primarily interested in the ministry of Peter and Paul, two apostles. But many find this name inadequate. With the recent charismatic movement and because Luke talks more about the Holy Spirit than any other New Testament writer, many have wanted to call the book “the Acts of the Holy Spirit.” This makes sense considering the birth of the church was in Acts 2 when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Christians.

But would Luke have seen his book this way? After all, he begins Acts by saying, “In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that **Jesus began to do and teach**, until the day when he was taken up... (Acts 1:1-2a).” By saying that in his Gospel he “began” discussing Jesus’ work and teaching, he’s implying that in this book he’s continuing to discuss the work and teaching of Jesus. This has a subtle implication because Jesus, in human form, is gone before the end of chapter 1, and from there we do indeed see the “acts” of the Holy Spirit and the apostles.

What does this mean? Simply put, that the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church *is* the work of Jesus. What happens in Acts, and what we do today as part of a Spirit-filled church, is no less part of what Jesus is doing than if He were still here on earth in God-man reality. Thus the book could be aptly titled: “The Acts of Jesus as Administered by the Holy Spirit Through the Work of the Church.”

The message and structure of Acts is described in verse 1:8: “*But 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.***” From Acts 1:9 to the end of the book, Luke shapes his writing to demonstrate how this took place.

While scholars disagree on the exact structure of the book of Acts, they do tend to see three or four major movements.

1. Acts 1:1-2:41 – Introduction and the ***Holy Spirit*** poured out upon the church
2. Acts 2:42-6:8 – Early church in ***Jerusalem***
3. Acts 6:9-12:24 – Spread of the Gospel to ***Judea and Samaria***
4. Acts 12:25-28:31 – Spread of the Gospel to the ***ends of the earth***

Interestingly, in each section there is a reference to the disciples being “witnesses” (Acts 1:8, 5:32, 10:39, and 13:31), to the filling of the Spirit and speaking in tongues (Acts 2:3, 10:46, 19:6¹), and to the word of God being proclaimed and expanding (Acts 6:7, 9:31, 12:24, 16:5, 19:20).

This further demonstrates that Luke is not simply out to write a history of the early church, rather he is out to demonstrate how the teaching and command of Jesus to take the Gospel to the world is being fulfilled and to encourage the church that follows to continue in His great work.

Acts and the Kingdom of God:

Usually when we think of the Kingdom of God, the parables in Matthew’s Gospel jump to mind. We might not even consider the book of Acts. However, while there is not a teaching on the Kingdom of God in Acts, there is no better demonstration of the Kingdom of God on earth than what is seen in this book. Here’s why:

First, *the book is the second part of a two-part work, and the Gospel of Luke speaks non-stop about the Kingdom of God.* In his Gospel, Luke mentions the phrase roughly thirty times. If Acts continues what Jesus “began” to teach in the Gospel, then it is simple to conclude that Acts is the outworking of Jesus’ teaching on the Kingdom.

¹ There is some speculation as to whether or not the “disciples” in Ephesus were Gentiles or Jews, but the fact that the event takes place in a Gentile province miles away from Jerusalem is enough to point to Luke’s message of the power of the Holy Spirit moving into the “ends of the earth.”

Second, *the literary structure of Acts demonstrates that it was meant to exemplify the Kingdom of God at work.* The phrase “Kingdom of God” only appears six times in the Book of Acts, but each time it seems to be used by Luke to further both a connection to his Gospel and his structure for Acts (1:8).

- Acts 1:3 – *To these [Jesus] also presented Himself alive [and] over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the **Kingdom of God.*** This passage opens the book and links what Jesus was teaching with what Luke recorded in his Gospel.
- Acts 8:12 – *Philip preaching the good news about the **Kingdom of God** and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike.* This passage is when the Gospel is first preached to the Judea-Samaria region and is having its effect.
- Acts 14:22 – *[Paul]... encourag[ed] them to continue in the faith, and saying.” Through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God.”* Here Paul is encouraging Gentile churches that they will receive the same persecutions and the same Kingdom Jesus taught (in the Gospel of Luke) to His followers.
- Acts 19:8 – *And he entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the **Kingdom of God.*** Here Paul is in Ephesus and is trying to persuade Jews to believe in Jesus.
- Acts 28:23 – *When they had set a day for Paul, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers; and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the **Kingdom of God** and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening.* Here again, we see Paul trying to persuade Jews about the Gospel of Jesus.
- Acts 28:30-31 – *And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the **Kingdom of God** and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.* This is the last verse of Acts. Notice both “Kingdom of God” and “teaching” of Jesus are used here. Both are used in Acts 1:1-3 as well. This implies that what Paul is doing at the end of Acts, is what Jesus was doing at the beginning of Acts. In short, *it implies that the entire book of Acts is about the teaching and demonstration of the Kingdom of God.*

By the use of this phrase at these key locations in the book, Luke is letting us know that the early church is living all Jesus taught about in the Gospels. As the church expands, so to does the Kingdom.

Finally, *the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church at Pentecost is seen as the result of Jesus taking the eternal throne of David in heaven and ruling over all the created order.* The watershed moment in the book of Acts is Pentecost. It includes the “power” of the Holy Spirit by which the church will be “witnesses” to all the world. In his sermon explaining the events of Pentecost, Peter says the following (my emphasis is added):

29 "Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. 30 **Being therefore a prophet,** and knowing that **God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne,** 31 he foresaw and **spoke about the resurrection of the Christ,** that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. 32 This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. 33 **Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.** 34 For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,

""The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand,
35 **until I make your enemies your footstool.'**

36 Let **all the house of Israel** therefore know for certain that **God has made him both Lord and Christ,** this Jesus whom you crucified." – Acts 2:29-36 ESV

God, in the Old Testament, promised David that one of his descendents would sit on a throne and rule an eternal Kingdom (2 Sam. 17:12-16; 1 Chron. 17:8-15). This promise was never fulfilled in Israelite history (as evidenced by the fact that the Romans were in power at the time of Christ). Yet David, being a prophet, prophesied in Psalm 110 that God would make the world the footstool of David's son. Peter says that David prophetically saw the resurrection of Christ and the inauguration of the event in which Jesus would take the throne of David. This event would be proven when God poured out His Spirit on His people. After which, this Spirit, being sent from the King, would enable God's people to bring His Kingdom (Christ's) to all the world – thus bringing everything under subjection to the rule of Christ (1 Cor. 15:24-28).

Therefore, because Acts is about the Gospel being spread to the ends of the earth by the power of the Holy Spirit, through the church; it is also about how the power of the Kingdom of God is being spread to the ends of the earth as well.

Considering these facts, we should take careful insight into how we read the book of Acts. It portrays life in an ever-expanding Kingdom of God. To some degree, our lives and experiences should be similar to those we see in this book. Perhaps, in those areas where we are not similar, it reveals parts of our life where we should seek to know, understand, and invite Christ's Kingdom to rule through His Holy Spirit.

Special Issues in the Book of Acts:

The most critical “special issue” that impacts our study of Acts is the nature of how to understand the book and its impact on the Christian life. Acts is a narrative, and narratives always have particular interpretation challenges. It is easy to know what Paul means when he tells us “do not be anxious for anything” (Philippians 4:6) in a letter. It is harder to know how to respond to Scripture when we see that Paul shaved his head to make a vow in the book of Acts (Acts 18:18). Below are the major interpretive issues in the book of Acts, and what approach we should take in understanding the book.

Acts as Descriptive vs. Prescriptive: These two views deal with how we should understand the writing of Acts. Is Luke simple “describing” the events that took place, and, like any good historian, just reporting the facts but not necessarily endorsing a pattern of how the church should act or behave; or, is Luke writing the book of Acts to “prescribe” a pattern of behavior that the church is forever supposed to copy? At first glance, it doesn't seem to be that big an issue. However, because Acts is the only book in which actions of the early church are described, it actually has become a major issue. Doctrines of church leadership, baptism, evangelism, ordination, elders, deacons, gifts of the Holy Spirit, preaching, missions, church structure, and many more vary based on whether you view the book of Acts as descriptive or prescriptive. In fact it's not too much of an overstatement to say that the differences between the plethora of denominations in Christianity comes down in large part to how one interprets Acts.

Acts as Normative vs. Transitional: These views deal with how we understand Acts in term of the time in which it was written. The *Normative* position says that what is described in Acts is normal church life for all time. Therefore, the types of things we see in Acts – gifts of the spirit, church leadership, miracles, missions, casting out of demons, etc. – we should see in our church life today. The *Transitional* view says that Acts was a “transition” period between the Old Testament age and the final writing of the Bible (i.e. the New Testament was being written). Thus, what is described in Acts are events that are meant to prove that Jesus' Spirit and mission were given to the church, and things like the gifts of the Spirit, church leadership (apostles and prophets), and other events are limited to the “transition.” Once Scripture was completely written, it is sufficient to instruct God's people to carry on the mission of Jesus, thus the other giftings, leadership offices, etc. we see in Acts gradually faded out over time and are no longer to be repeated in today's church (see section titled *Spirit Fillings and Gifts in Acts* for a more detailed

explanation). Again, you can easily see how this would impact the understanding of Christian life based on the view you hold.

Briefly, here is my opinion on the issues above.² *I believe that Acts is a description of a normal Christian life with certain transitional and prescriptive implications.* Let me deal with each of these separately:

Description of a normal Christian life: It is clear that Luke is describing what happened in the early church in a way that emphasizes the expansion of the Gospel to the ends of the earth. In doing this, he records all the normal activities of the church – evangelism, development, spiritual gifts, growth, etc. Why then, as the *transitional position* asks, do we not see more of these spectacular events in our Christian life, and should we try to construct our church experience to look exactly like the events of Acts? There are a number of reasons, but let me give this thought. Acts records nearly three decades of church history. What seems “regular” to the modern reader in Acts – church altering prophecies, power conflicts with sorcerers, raising the dead, etc. – is actually spectacular and not part of everyday experience. (Notice, even Luke says the miracles of Paul were often “extraordinary” in Acts 19:11). Considering this, it might not be accurate to say today’s church is miles away from the book of Acts. After all, if I were a betting man, I’d be willing to bet most, if not all, the spectacular events recorded in the book of Acts have taken place on the planet earth in the last 30 years.

Certain transitional...implications: There are some things in Acts that will probably never happen again. Some aspects of the event of Pentecost (Jesus taking His throne in heaven and the initial pouring out of the Holy Spirit) will not happen again – even though the results of the event (Spirit empowerment, the gifts of the Spirit, salvation) are ongoing. We also probably will not find too many people who have the “baptism of John” but not the Gospel (Acts 19), nor should we ever have another church counsel to discuss the place of circumcision (Acts 15). So we are right to see certain things in the early church as unique to its time, but it still should not diminish the fact that Luke was recording normative church life.

Prescriptive implications: There are things that are, and should be seen as, templates for the church to copy. Church government, deacons, baptism, church growth; all of these are recorded in ways that prescribe strategies, structures, and philosophies that are useful to the expansion of God’s Kingdom in a Biblically faithful way for today. While not following this template might not be sin, it is probably fair to speculate that obedience to the model greatly improves the efficiency of the church and its people in fulfilling their call to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

² More details on why I hold this opinion are given in the section *Spirit Fillings and Gifts in Acts*.

Acts Devotional

Week One

Written By:

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Today's Reading Section: **Acts 1:1-11 AND Introduction by Jeremy**
(if you haven't read it yet)

Comments:

Luke begins the book of Acts by referencing his first account of what Jesus did and taught (the Gospel of Luke). He picks up the story with the resurrection of Christ. Jesus appears to the apostles and does two things: gives them many convincing proofs that He's alive and He speaks to them of things concerning the Kingdom of God. Wow...the Kingdom of God must have been a pretty important topic to Jesus.

This devotional will walk you through every verse in the book of Acts. We'll study this important topic of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus gathers His disciples together and tells them "to wait for what the Father had promised." The promise is the baptism of the Holy Spirit – an infilling of the very presence of God that would never leave them nor forsake them. Notice that the disciples needed to wait. Jesus could have given them the Holy Spirit right then and there. Often God's promises come and there's a period of waiting.

God's timing is perfect. Maybe there's a preparation He wants to do in our hearts. The disciples spent much time in worship and prayer before the promise came. Maybe He wants to unite our hearts and get us connected relationally before the promise comes. Maybe He wants to gather unbelievers so that when the promise comes they'll benefit receive it also.

What promises has God given you that you are waiting for? There's something in the human psyche that wants to know the timing of when it'll happen. In verse 6, the disciples ask "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the Kingdom to Israel?" Notice also what timing they were concerned about: when the Kingdom would be restored. They knew that God had promised He'd restore the Kingdom to His people.

Jesus' answer is that it's not for you to know the times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority. Let go and trust Him for the timing. You wait. Now it seems like Jesus changes the subject from the disciples question about the Kingdom being restored. Jesus says that you'll receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.

This is really cool...that's the restoration of the Kingdom of God. The power of God is given to witness about Jesus even to the remotest part of the earth. The Kingdom will expand and be restored as you proclaim Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Lastly, Jesus takes off and flies into the sky (vs. 9). The disciples are standing there shocked and amazed. Two angels explain, "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven." (vs. 11) The Kingdom will ultimately be restored when Jesus comes back a second time. For now, go and wait in Jerusalem for the promise and then expand the Kingdom by the power of the Holy Spirit through proclaiming the teachings of Jesus and doing His deeds.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Have you read the Introduction to the devotional yet? ☺
2. On what specific issues are you “waiting for what the Father has promised”?
3. In what areas of your life are experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit working through you?
4. In what areas are you walking more by your own power and not leaning on God?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Ask God to give you revelation and understanding into the Kingdom of God.
- Wait on God and ask Him to fill you with the Holy Spirit. If you’ve been striving, worrying, or frustrated then lay down those issues and receive the grace and faith to trust God for His solution in His timing.
- Pray for God to transform your life as you study the Kingdom of God in the book of Acts.
- Pray for one other person who needs to come into the Kingdom of God.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 1:12-26Comments:

After returning to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olivet where Jesus ascended to heaven, the disciples gather together in the upper room. The power will be demonstrated in the book of Acts is founded upon principles of the Kingdom.

In vs. 14, "these all" – all eleven disciples were together in one place (see also Acts 2:1). Their unity is a powerful force in advancing God's Kingdom. Disunity causes weakness and makes one vulnerable to attack. Personal prayer is an important spiritual discipline, but here we see the church gathered together, in unity, praying corporately.

Secondly: "with one mind." Their unity is more than location – gathering in one place. It's also spiritual – one heart, one mind, one vision, one passion.

Lastly: "continually devoting themselves to prayer." Prayer flows naturally and becomes a priority in life when we are humble, dependant on God, and delighting in Him. Our human tendency is to get busy, find pleasure in stuff and activities, become independent, and self-sufficient.

Luke then shares how Judas was replaced as one of the disciples (vs. 15-26). That's a pretty good chunk of chapter 1 given to Judas. Why? Maybe God put that emphasis into Scripture as a warning to us. In vs. 19 it says, "And it became known to all who were living in Jerusalem."

When the disciples cast lots to choose Judas' replacement, they acknowledged their lack of really knowing someone's heart. "You Lord, who know the hearts of all men." (vs. 24) I think it surprised the disciples as much as anyone that Judas was a traitor.

Questions for Reflection:

1. When do you gather with other believers in unity for worship and prayer? Sunday morning and _____.
2. Are you experiencing any disunity with other Christians?
3. When is your opportunity to gather for corporate prayer with other believers?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Today let your heart return to that place of humility, dependency upon God, and passion for Him. Unite your heart with believers in your life.
- Forgive if you've been offended. Repent if you've been critical. Ask God to make you one a peacemaker and unifier.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 2:1-13Comments:

The book of Acts is fully named the "Acts of the Apostles." But perhaps it'd be better titled "The Acts of God." Jesus sent the disciples to Jerusalem to wait for the promise of the Father (Acts 1:4). Our reading picks up as the disciples are gathered together in one place. Then there "came from heaven a noise." (2:2) The Holy Spirit comes from heaven to "each one of them" (2:3).

There are "acts" that God has planned for your life. As we meditate upon this passage of Scripture it refocuses us on God and allowing His Holy Spirit to work through us. There is the timing issue. You may need to wait. We have a continuous need to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Paul instructs us in Ephesians: "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit," (Eph 5:18)

The supernatural occurrence in Acts 2 was that the disciples began to speak in tongues. Read again in verses 9-11 all the different languages that were spoken that day. God didn't have to recount all that detail. I think it reflects God's heart for the Gospel to be proclaimed to every tongue, tribe, and nation (Rev. 5:9). The passion in God's heart is that all may hear.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Are you anxious or impatient about something that isn't happening when you want it to happen?
2. How are you participating in bringing the gospel to the ends of the earth?
3. This may be a question you haven't considered: do you speak in tongues? If not, consider finding someone who can teach you more about this gift. If you have the gift, do you exercise it regularly?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Confess your anxiety or stress to God. Lay it down and empty yourself, then wait.... Ask the Holy Spirit to come and fill you. Receive by the faith the power of the Holy Spirit. Let your frustration be replaced with peace. Let your anxiety be replaced with faith.
- Pray for the gospel to be spread to every tongue, tribe, and nation. Maybe zero in on a specific country or people group that is in your heart. Pray for a missionary.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 2:14-36Comments:

Today's section of Acts is the first recorded sermon after Jesus was raised from the dead. People were amazed, confused and perplexed. Peter's preaching proclaims the truth with authority. He explains the events by connecting them to two things: fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Peter quotes the book of Joel in vs. 17-21 (Joel 2:28-32). The fulfillment of this Scripture is a significant shift in the story of God's redemption of man. Peter is saying that now we are in "the last days" (vs. 17). The shift is from God pouring out His Spirit on a few (prophets, priests, and kings) to pouring out His Spirit on all – regardless of age, race, or social status. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Take a moment to meditate on God's desire to pour out His Spirit on people – your family, your co-workers, your city, and to the ends of the earth. Let God fill you with His lavish generous love for all people.

In the next section (vs. 22-36), Peter clearly explains the gospel – Jesus Christ was crucified, God raised Him up from the dead, He sits in heaven, and now has poured out His Spirit on all flesh. Peter ends his sermon by making it very personal: "this Jesus whom you crucified." (vs. 36) He was leading them to a place of repentance (for participating or supporting the crucifixion of Jesus) and having faith that Jesus fulfilled the Scripture as the Messiah.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Have you lost faith for anyone in your life that God wants to pour out His Spirit upon?
2. On the day of Pentecost God poured out His Spirit such that it was visible and audible. Peter says, "He has poured forth this which you both see and hear." (vs. 33). How is God's Spirit both visible and audible in your life?
3. What are some ways that God may want to demonstrate the power of His Spirit so that others both see and hear it through you?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Drink in and receive the Holy Spirit today.
- Ask God for open doors today to both let others see and hear His Holy Spirit working in you.
- Pray specifically for one person who doesn't yet know Jesus as his/her Savior.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 2:37-41Comments:

Today's short section is a very important one. How does one respond to the gospel message? After the people in Jerusalem heard Peter's first sermon, they were deeply moved in their hearts and wanted to respond in a way that was fitting to the truth of the message.

They ask a simple and open-ended question: "Brethren, what shall we do?" (vs. 37) A person who has been deeply touched by God and realizes that he/she hasn't lived for God and is deserving of judgment doesn't put conditions on God. They humble themselves and are willing to do whatever God asks.

Peter answers the question with two commands and one promise. A summary would be: repent, believe, and receive.

The first command is "repent." The entrance into the Kingdom of God has the same requirements that both John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed. Repentance is changing your mind and turning the direction of your life around. Agreeing with God about what is right, good, and honorable and agreeing with God about what is wrong, evil, and dishonorable. The agreement is not just mental but repentance is demonstrated by actions of changing behavior. That doesn't mean being perfect but it means changing the direction that your life is pointed. Turning around and following God.

Secondly, be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Believe! Believe that Jesus Christ died and paid the price for sins. Believe that He rose from the dead and lives forever. Be baptized publicly to proclaim your faith in Jesus Christ to God, the world, and the devil.

Thirdly, you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. God will come and dwell with you. You will receive His power to live a new life.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Is there any area of your life that needs repentance? Do you need to turn around, agree with God, and follow Him?
2. Have you been water baptized? If not, take the initiative and talk with a pastor. Have your family members been water baptized?
3. The promise of the Holy Spirit is for you and your children and for all who are far off. Who comes to your mind? Pray for that person today that God will soon bring him/her into His Kingdom.

Prayer Points for Today:

- Repent
- Believe
- Receive

Acts Devotional

Week Two

Written By:

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Today's Reading Section: Acts 2:42-47

Comments:

We are specifically looking at the Kingdom of God in Acts as we study the book. Because people view God's Kingdom in different ways, it's important to agree on a basic definition of the Kingdom as "God's rule and reign in and through his people."

The initial chapters of Acts portray the birth of the church. Though the Kingdom of God is not limited in its expression to the church, certainly the church is one of the main expressions of God's Kingdom on earth under the New Covenant. The above verses show us five characteristics of the church and therefore we see a picture of God's Kingdom in action.

In Acts 1:8, Jesus told his disciples that they would receive the power of the Holy Spirit and be witnesses to the ends of the earth. That prophetic instruction by Jesus is the theme for the entire book of Acts; and our text today is the beginning of the fulfillment of Jesus' words.

When we read Acts 2:42-47 along with the rest of the book, especially chapter 4, these five characteristics of the church stand out:

1. A foundation of truth
2. Devotion to prayer and praise
3. Community with notable unity
4. Preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom in boldness
5. A demonstration of God's power

Questions for Reflection:

1. Why do many churches, and even whole denominations, gravitate to one or two of these characteristics rather than cultivate all of them?
2. What are some problems that arise from emphasizing one or two above the others?
3. If God intended the church to walk in all of these, can we expect the church to be "up to the task" during difficult times such as we live in today?
4. After going through persecution, the church not only survived but thrived with the same characteristics. What does this tell us about God's plan for his church?

Prayer Points for Today:

- That the church today would be a Kingdom-oriented church that impacts the world around us.
- That we would be devoted to all God has, so that the church will be up to the task.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 3:1-26Comments:

In the Gospels Jesus says many times that supernatural healing and casting out demons are a sign of the Kingdom being at hand. One does not have to look far in the book of Acts to see the Kingdom of God manifested in this way. Acts chapter 3 is one such example.

Peter and John are used by God in an amazing healing of a crippled beggar. Understandably, crowds of people are astonished by this and come running to Solomon's Porch. Peter takes advantage of this situation to preach a sermon to the "men of Israel." His sermon has a number of powerful points:

1. First he asks them, "Why does this surprise you?"
2. He also asks, "Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?"
3. Then Peter does an amazing job of telling the whole story of Jesus the crucified Messiah. Peter clearly relates the story of Jesus to the Old Testament, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He also relates the story of Jesus to the Old Testament prophets saying they prophesied both the first and second coming of Jesus as the Messiah.
4. In the middle of this powerful sermon Peter charges them to repent, turn to God, and have their sins wiped away because of Jesus the Messiah.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Why does Peter make such a point about the people being surprised?
2. Why does he make it clear they didn't heal the man by their own power or godliness?
3. When he preaches his sermon, why does Peter speak about the "God of our fathers" and relate the story of Jesus to the Old Testament prophets?
4. In fact, should the men of Israel have known better than to be surprised, and should they have known about Jesus as the Messiah? If so, why?
5. Do you see a message in this story to the modern American church? For example, are American Christians often surprised by the power of God and do we tend to make celebrities out of those doing the healing? Is repentance needed?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Pray that the church in America hears the message from this story.
- Ask God to "wake up" Christians to the amazing things found in the book of Acts and that we would see them as normal for a powerful God in our day also.
- Pray for wisdom that we don't make celebrities out of ordinary people when God uses them to do extraordinary things for His glory.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 4:1-22 & Acts 5:17-42

Comments:

Here are two accounts of the apostles being arrested and persecuted. Again, the Kingdom of God is evident in their actions and words. The religious leaders, on the other hand, are jealous and disturbed. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection so the apostles' teaching specifically troubled them.

The apostles' defense is wisely two-fold. As they proclaim who Jesus is, they cite Old Testament Scripture, plus they say, "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." Based on this, Peter also explains they must obey God rather than men.

The religious leaders were astonished by the courage of the apostles noting that they were unschooled, ordinary men who had been with Jesus. It also says that when Peter gave the defense he was filled with the Holy Spirit.

The miraculous jailbreak and the angel's instructions add a dimension of supernatural Kingdom expression. The speech by Gamaliel is fascinating. He proposes to let the apostles go because if what they are doing is of human origin it will fail, but if it is from God the religious leaders would find themselves fighting God!

Questions for Reflection:

1. Peter tells us in 1 Peter 2:13 that we are to submit to every authority for the Lord's sake. How is Peter justified when he tells the Pharisees it is better to obey God rather than men? What does this show about the Kingdom of God in Acts?
2. Why was it important for the apostles to use both Scripture and experience in defense of their actions?
3. Why would the apostle's courage be astonishing to the religious leaders of the day?
4. What's the application for us today that the apostles were "ordinary men"?
5. What effect did the angel's instructions have on the apostles? What does this say to us?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Pray that when we experience conflict of Kingdoms, we will understand from a Christian view, boldly going for obedience of God and not fear of man.
- Pray that Christians will do Kingdom works in faith even when we think of ourselves as ordinary.
- Ask God to fill His people afresh with the Holy Spirit and draw us all to the place of "being with Jesus" continually and deeply.
- Pray for supernatural Kingdom expression in America today.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 4:32 – 5:11Comments:

The attributes of the church that we saw in chapter 2 are still evident even after persecution, which we see in the closing verses of chapter 4. The church is not only surviving; it is thriving, and the community has a unity that is quite amazing.

In this section we see three “great” expressions of the Kingdom in the church: great power, great grace, and great fear. The power is from God, the grace is from God, and the fear is of God.

Chapter 5 opens with the word “but” in most translations. It is definitely a “however” story, which is a real bummer for the church, and yet we see the importance of a healthy fear of God being established along with grace and power.

Several other points about the Lord and His church stand out in this story. The activity of the Holy Spirit is evident as Peter uncovers the lie. The activity of Satan is also obvious as he fills Ananias' heart to walk in the sin of deception. There is also the underlying thought of people wanting the full benefits of the church without a full commitment. Luke comments on this in our next reading where in verse thirteen he says, “No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people.” Verse eleven is the first time the word church is used in the book of Acts.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What does it tell us about the attributes seen in the early church if they not only survived persecution but were actually stronger after persecution?
2. What is the importance of great power, great grace, and great fear?
3. Do we see the activity of the Holy Spirit in the church today as is evident in Acts?
4. Why did people not dare join the church in Acts even though they were highly regarded? How does that apply to our time?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Pray that the same characteristics found in the early church would be evident in our time.
- Pray that a healthy fear of God would return to the church in America.
- Ask the Lord for fresh activity of the Holy Spirit as seen in Acts.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 4:23-31 & Acts 5:12-16Comments:

Prayer offered up by the Christians in chapter 4 is an example of awesome Kingdom prayer. It is based on the truth of God's sovereignty, an understanding of what the Lord was doing in their time, and a sincere request to perform miracles and healings for the sake of the Kingdom. We see the certainty of God answering when the place in which they prayed was shaken, they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word with boldness. Ongoing evidences of their prayers being answered are signs and wonders performed by the apostles and numbers of people coming to Christ who were added to the church.

The temple courts, including Solomon's porch, are a focal point for many of these happenings as we see in our chapter 5 reading as well as the previous reading in chapter 3. However, the Christians were destined to fulfill Jesus' prophecy in Acts 1:8 of being His witnesses not only in Jerusalem, but also Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. As the book of Acts continues it is obvious that God took his people "beyond Solomon's porch."

Questions for Reflection:

1. What do we learn from the disciples' prayer in chapter 4 that should also guide our prayers now?
2. What always accompanied the signs and wonders that the disciples performed?
3. When the Lord led His people beyond Solomon's porch, the book of Acts records their continued exploits. Solomon's porch in Jerusalem was familiar territory for the first Christians. What is the familiar territory in your life, which God is taking you beyond for the sake of his Kingdom?
4. Do you think we sometimes see less of God's acts through us because we are stuck in Solomon's porch (familiar territory/comfort zone)?

Prayer Points for Today:

- The Bible teaches us that for our prayers to be effective we must pray in God's will. Ask the Lord to teach us to pray as the first disciples prayed.
- Pray that we will see signs and wonders in their proper context of preaching the gospel, which is outside the walls of the church more often than not.
- Pray for a willingness and excitement to go "beyond Solomon's porch" into a place of advancing the Kingdom in unfamiliar territory.

Acts Devotional

Week Three

Written By:

Jim Reklis

Staff Pastor

Grace Church of Chapel Hill, NC

Today's Reading Section: Acts 6:1-7

Comments: *Unity and Leadership*

What would stop the Kingdom of God from breaking into the world as witnessed in the first five chapters of Acts? We have witnessed the early church and its leaders press through persecution, sin among its members, and the imprisonment of its leaders. A new problem now arrives. It comes in the midst of dynamic growth. Many Jews are coming to faith in Christ, thousands of them. Yet we see that racial and ethnic division has been around a long time.

The advance of the Kingdom comes to a screeching halt due to disunity! I find that amazing. Throw us in prison, threaten us, even commit sin ourselves, yet God's Kingdom marches on. But if we allow disunity in our midst the whole thing stops.

The church and its leaders are faced with two problems. The first is addressing the issue of disunity and seeing that this new Body called the church would truly minister to itself in love. The issue is providing for the legitimate needs of widows who are from different ethnic backgrounds. The second is addressing the question, what should church leaders give their time and attention to? Should Peter personally minister to these widows rather than pray and minister the Word? He makes it clear he can't do both. He says he would have to neglect the one, prayer and the Word, in order to serve the other. Again the Holy Spirit helps the whole church see the wisdom of making sure their leaders did what matters most for them and to find other competent and anointed leaders to ensure the church properly ministers to itself.

Notice the result is the resumption of dynamic growth touching even more spheres of influence in Jerusalem! Unity and leadership keep the Kingdom moving forward.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Do you see disunity in your family or church? Remember it disguises itself in the form of our prejudices and strong feelings about issues.
2. How is this disunity affecting the advance of God's Kingdom?
3. What can you do to resolve disunity? Will you?
4. To what areas do you want your church leaders devoting their time and energies?
5. Will you help minister to the Body so the Kingdom can keep advancing?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Pray for our unity as a church.
- Pray for your leaders to devote themselves to the right things.
- Pray for the whole church to serve one another and build itself up in love. (Eph. 4:15-16)

Today's Reading Section: Acts 6:8- 7:60

Comments: *A Kingdom Paradox*

I love reading this book! It is like an action-packed thriller that leaves your heart racing as you turn each page. Today's reading is the riveting account of Stephen, the first martyr. He is one of the seven chosen to oversee the ministry to the widows. But he is also a powerful communicator with gifts of miracles and signs and wonders. We don't know the specific demonstration, but do know it got everyone's attention. He is brought before the Jewish leaders and he goes to work to bring conviction so they can believe. He gives a great overview of the whole Old Testament with the goal of showing them that they are just like their forefathers who rejected God. Now they too could repent and believe in God's sent one, Jesus the Christ. With hearts hardened, they cast him out. He is stoned to death as he beholds the glory of God.

I find a paradox represented here that is profound and often misunderstood by Christians. This is the paradox. The Kingdom of God is both the supernatural works of God and the suffering and sacrifice of the saints. I find I want to say, "Wait a minute, if Stephen could do signs and wonders, do one now and call fire down or blindness or something, but don't just die!" I mean isn't the Kingdom about winning and God vindicating Himself? The answer is yes, but His ways of doing so are through both divine intervention and suffering. God vindicates Himself whenever a believer willingly suffers for righteousness sake. When a Christian says, I prefer God and His glory over life itself, God is vindicated and glorified; perhaps even more than when He intervenes by miracles and signs and wonders and performs a rescue. As you read through Acts you will find this paradox alive: Apostles getting delivered *from* people one time and delivered *into* their hands another. Saints being kept from death while others killed for their faith. Here's the key, they all had faith and God honored that faith. Their faith allowed them the freedom to let God be in charge and choose which way He would vindicate His Kingdom. Either way, God wins!

Questions for Reflection:

1. Do you struggle with this paradox? If so, how?
2. Is your faith for a specific outcome or for God to do what He sees as best to glorify Himself?
3. How is your faith exercised when you suffer for the Kingdom?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Ask God to give you a heart that totally trusts in His wisdom and sovereignty over everything.
- Trust God's Word that says He works all things for your good because you are called by Him. Be specific with your circumstances.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 8:1-40

Comments: *Kingdom Expansion*

Stephen's anointed preaching and subsequent stoning led to a widespread persecution of the church in Jerusalem. Saul of Tarsus was a central leader of this attack. As a result many of the believers left Jerusalem. It is interesting that God gave them the freedom to leave. In fact, as we see in the next chapters, God was spreading the Gospel of the Kingdom by scattering them where He wanted them to go.

Phillip, another of the Seven, was a mighty evangelist and went to Samaria. It's important to note that as Jews this would have never happened. The Samaritans were considered outcasts and idolaters, definitely not a part of the faith community. As a Christian, Phillip had an obligation to bring the good news about Christ to them. And they received it wholeheartedly. So, a group of people once separated from the community of faith is now unified by Christ. The Kingdom of God brings salvation to people and then brings all believers into unity through one person, Jesus Christ.

Phillip's next stop is a high-ranking official from Ethiopia. God is so wise! We live with the internet, jets and global trade so that talking with people from other lands is common. Not so in Phillip's time. The whole story demonstrates God's sovereign plan, even the timing of what the official is reading when Phillip arrives. History bears witness to a Christian community being birthed in Ethiopia in the early first century. And it began with one person moved by the Holy Spirit to speak to one other person! That is the power of the expansion of the Kingdom. Read Matthew 13 for more on the spreading power of the Kingdom.

God loves people from every nation, tribe, and tongue. He is sending His people to tell them the good news often in mysterious and unusual ways, but always for the purpose of His Kingdom coming to the earth.

Questions for Reflection:

1. God has a purpose and will disrupt our lives to get us on track with it. Have you ever seen God interrupt your plans in order to get you onto His plans?
2. How can you see God working in your life to spread His Kingdom to people?
3. What people is God calling you to reach out to?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Ask God to make you flexible to His plans, willing to go and do what He wants.
- Ask God to make you sensitive to the voice of the Holy Spirit so you can bring good news to others.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 9:1-43

Comments: *It's not a fair fight when you fight with God!*

I wonder how the church was praying regarding this persecutor, Saul. He was making life miserable for Christians. Arresting them, separating them, having some killed. I'm sure many were afraid of this persecution touching them or those they loved. Yet, he was no match for God. God is sovereign, which means He does as He pleases with whom He pleases, when He pleases, etc. What a picture of sovereign grace we have here with Paul. He was so lost and fighting against God, yet it did not hinder God from saving Him. All of Paul's boldness, self-righteous anger, and hardness of heart could not stop God from transforming him into a very different man with a very different purpose. No wonder it was difficult for the disciples to accept him, it was such a radical change!

Spiritual warfare is real, but it is not a fair fight. Yes, the devil hates Christians and works to their demise. We aren't to mess with him lightly. But, he can't ever really win. Because God is supreme and over everything, even all the devil plots, we can have confidence and boldness. This is what fueled the believers in Acts. God matched the opposition punch for punch and then threw a TKO on Saul. He becomes the great Apostle Paul, writes over a third of the New Testament and spreads the Gospel of the Kingdom over Europe as a beachhead to reach the rest of the world. I love how Acts 9:31 puts it after God wins over Paul, "so the church...enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase."

Questions for Reflection:

1. Who or what seems to be bigger than God right now in your life?
2. What are you battling that seems to be stronger than you?
3. Now imagine, how is God working in these situations? Think of specific ways and even Bible verse to help you.

Prayer Points for Today:

- Pray for your eyes to be opened to the greatness of God over your life.
- Pray for God's Kingdom to come into each situation.
- Receive His peace as you let go and let God be who He says He is for you.

Today's Reading Section: **Acts 10:1-48**

Comments: *The beginning of to the ends of the earth*

Until now, the Gospel was being preached only among the Jewish faithful and to those exposed to the law of Moses. What about the rest of the world who were worshipping other gods, idols and holding to other belief systems? At this time in the early church, there was a strong link between the practice of the Mosaic laws and rituals and faith in Christ. The revelation of Christ as seen through the Old Testament law and prophets was of incredible importance. Up until now the Apostles did not have a clear revelation of God's intent to shine the light of the Gospel on all peoples.

Peter is going to the cities of Israel preaching Christ. Again, God as the sovereign King over all interrupts Peter's ministry nap with a divine vision. We might underestimate the importance and history-changing intervention of this event. You and I who have enjoyed the blessing of the Gospel in America might not be here today. Christianity might have become an offshoot of Judaism rather than the earth-changing force God intended it to become. The hundreds of millions of believers in Asia, Africa, and Latin America would be lost in their Christ-less belief systems. But God had other plans. His Kingdom includes people from every tribe, nation and tongue. So again He moves on His people to follow His plan.

Peter and the other Jewish believers are amazed that God pours out the Spirit on Gentiles and conclude that they are able to become believers in Christ as well. Paul later has a more complete revelation of the fullness of the Body of Christ (Ephesians 2-3 explains it well). It was Jesus who proclaimed and prophesied that this Gospel must be preached to every group before He comes again. There are still 639 people groups with more than 100,000 people who have no one engaged in bringing them the Gospel. Some of these groups have tens of millions of people.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Like Peter, in what ways do you limit in your mind who can receive the Gospel?
2. What people or people groups do you find it hard to believe God wants to include in His Kingdom?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Ask God to give you His heart for the people you find hard to love.
- Pray for God to open the eyes of hearts to come to know Him, see Him for who He is.
- Ask God to send laborers to all the unreached, unengaged people groups left in the world.

Acts Devotional

Week Four

Written By:

Jonathan Love

**Executive Pastor
Grace Church of Chapel Hill, NC**

Today's Reading Section: Acts 11:1-12:5

Comments:

Reread the following verses: Acts 11:19-21

I love this passage of scripture because it stands as yet another reminder of how our sovereign God thwarts Satan's plans and actually uses his own schemes against him. From our human perspective Stephen's martyrdom seemed like a horrible thing. I am sure that Satan scoffed as the last stone was thrown and relished the opportunity to scatter the young church in fear for their lives. Certainly no one would convert now, not after seeing what happened to Stephen. No doubt he thought he had severely stunted the growth of the church. As always, in his finite understanding he overplayed his hand. Little did he know that God was sovereignly moving behind the scenes to catapult the church to a whole new level of impact and effectiveness. We see in the passage above that those who scattered as a result of the persecution went and preached the gospel to a lot of people. They went to Jews at first and then even begin preaching to the Greeks, a whole new segment of culture that the gospel had not yet reached. The results were huge and far-reaching; a large number of people got saved!! It reminds me of the story of Joseph when his brothers sold him into slavery and yet God was in it working His perfect will. Joseph declared in Genesis 50:20 "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." Sound familiar? Scripture also tells us that if Satan knew what he was doing he never would have crucified Jesus (1 Cor. 2:8). We must remember that even in our most difficult times, God is at work to accomplish His perfect will in our lives. He is putting us into position and preparing us to do great things for the Kingdom!

Questions for Reflection:

1. Can you think of one situation in your life that seemed like a bad thing the enemy was throwing at you at the time, but can now look back and see the hand of God at work?
2. How do you handle difficult times? Do you get frustrated and down or are you able to take a step back to see how God could redeem the situation for His purposes?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Pray that God would give you a revelation of His sovereignty.
- Pray that God would help you to embrace His will even when you don't understand.
- Pray that God would help you to see your most difficult times as opportunities.
- Pray that God would use you and your life circumstances to reach many for Him.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 12:6-13:44Comments:

Reread the following verses: Acts 13:42-44.

Paul and Barnabas had been commissioned by the Holy Spirit to go and preach the gospel and so they set out and eventually came to Pisidian Antioch. They went into the synagogue and Paul passionately and boldly preached the gospel. This takes us up to verse 42 above where the Bible says that the people “kept begging” Paul to come back and teach on the next Sabbath. It actually says they were begging to hear the truth of the good news that Paul was proclaiming. I wish that I had the same result every time that I shared the gospel with someone! Even though we might not have this same result every time we share, I think we can learn a very important lesson from this passage of scripture. People are hungry for the word of God. I'm afraid that one of Satan's greatest schemes is to convince us that no one wants to hear the gospel and that if we try and share it with them we will only annoy or agitate them. This lie has led to many Christians sitting on the sidelines instead of engaging in the battle to personally evangelize those in their sphere of influence. No doubt there will be many who don't want to hear, but at the same time there are people in your life who are hungry to hear God's story of redemption. Verse 44 says that the whole city came to hear the word of the Lord. The truth is that God has placed you in a mission field where you live, work, play, and do life. There are people in your life who want to hear the gospel and God wants to use you to share it with them. It most likely won't be bold street preaching to strangers, but God wants you to look for opportunities to speak when you discern spiritual hunger. Don't listen to the lie of the enemy that says they don't want to hear and that you will offend them. Instead, remember that they need the truth and the Holy Spirit is at work to open up their eyes and reveal the love of God to them. So go for it! Start looking for ways you can share the gospel and live with the expectation that many will want to hear the word of God. Who knows, they might even beg you to come back and share more.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Can you think of 3 people in your life who need to hear the gospel? List them:
2. Have you felt that if you share the gospel with them, they would get annoyed?
3. When you think of sharing the gospel, do you expect rejection or great success?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Pray that God would give you a passion to evangelize and the courage to expect fruit.
- Pray that God would give you strategic ways to pray for and share with lost people you know.
- Pray that God would open the eyes of the lost friends you wrote down in question #1.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 13:44-52Comments:

Reread the following verses: Acts 13:50, 52.

Take special notice, “But the Jews incited the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city, and instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. And the disciples were *continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit*.”

Paul and Barnabas had just faced persecution and been driven out of the city where they were ministering. Yet, the Bible is quick to point out that they were continually being filled with joy and the Holy Spirit even in the face of the persecution. How could that be, it doesn't seem like a time to be joyful! I think some of us have a wrong interpretation of what true joy is. The meaning of the word joy is “a calm delight.” It is not a high emotional feeling of continued happiness based on circumstances. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit and in order for us to live a life of joy, we must be continually filled with the Holy Spirit. When we are submitting ourselves to God and being filled with the Holy Spirit on a daily basis, then joy is a natural result. We become more aware of the fact that God is in control and that He is accomplishing His plans in our lives. Just like James says we can consider it all joy even when we face various trials, because we know God is in control and He is at work in our lives. If we are not maintaining that intimacy with God and are not being filled daily, then we can easily start grumbling and lose our joy based on what we are facing at the moment. Paul and Barnabas were filled with joy because people were being saved and God was being glorified. They knew they were in the center of God's will and that He was using them. They were not going to let persecution take that calm delight away. I think the way we handle hard times says a lot about our relationship with God. God has rescued you from your sins and given you hope and a future. He has gifted you and you have a divine destiny for your life. He has chosen to use you to accomplish great things for His Kingdom. He has revealed Himself to you and desires intimacy with you. That is the basis for your joy and nothing can take that away. No amount of difficulty, hardship, or persecution can change these truths. Being filled with joy in the midst of your hardest times is true worship. So no matter what comes at you today, connect with God and allow His joy to fill your heart.

Questions for Reflection:

1. List 10 things that God has done for you that would be good cause for joy.
2. Take a few moments to worship and thank God for each of these 10 things.

Prayer Points for Today:

- Ask God to fill you today with the Holy Spirit and with joy.
- Ask God to give you eyes to see hard times as opportunities for worship.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 14:1-14:19Comments:

Reread the following verses: Acts 13:50; Acts 14:2 and 19.

These verses serve as a reminder that we are in a war. Satan hates God and he hates those who belong to God. He wants to be god and seeks worshippers for himself. He will try everything within his power to keep people in darkness. He won't let them go without a fight. For those of us who are saved, there is nothing he can do to take that away from us, but he still seeks to destroy our lives and testimony so that we would be powerless to reach others. God on the other hand sent His Son to save sinners and to destroy the works of the devil. Jesus crushed the head of Satan on the cross and took back all authority in heaven and on earth, and He has passed on that authority to His people, the church. He has commissioned us to take the gospel to the ends of the earth and make disciples of all nations. Just like Paul and Barnabas, we can expect opposition whenever we try to advance His Kingdom and preach the gospel. Satan won't just stand by and watch as we plunder his possessions. However, God has given us everything we need to overcome the enemy and be victorious as we press forward. We will face warfare, persecution, and all sorts of things that the enemy will throw against us. But we can rest assured that Jesus Christ is building His church and the gates of Hell will not prevail against us. Jesus told his disciples that they would face tribulation but that they could have peace, because He has overcome the world. So be encouraged. You have been gifted and anointed by God to destroy darkness. You are a weapon in His hands and Satan is afraid of you because there is nothing he can do to stop you. He can throw the kitchen sink at us, but the gospel will go forward and God's Kingdom will rule over all!!! Don't get discouraged if you face opposition when you try and witness or live for God. Expect it, but know that God is with you and you will be victorious.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Can you think of one thing you could do today to advance God's Kingdom and destroy darkness?
2. What are some ways that you have experienced opposition in the past when you have stepped out to do something bold for God? What were the results?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Pray that God would anoint you to do what you came up with for question #1.
- Pray that God would use you in mighty ways to do great exploits for Him.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 14:19-28

Comments:

Reread the following verses: Acts 14:19-22

When you read these verses, you can't help but think that Paul has lost his mind. He must be crazy. While he was in Lystra the Jews from Antioch and Iconium came and stirred up the crowd and they tried to stone him and left him for dead. After the stoning, Paul simply gets up and goes back into the city. He leaves the next day and goes and makes a bunch of converts in Derbe, but then he comes back to Lystra, Antioch, and Iconium, the three cities responsible for the stoning. He came back to strengthen the disciples there and encourage them. I don't know about you, but if I had been stoned by a bunch of angry people, I would get the heck out of dodge and not look back. Not Paul. He came back. As I thought about these verses I realized that Paul was a man with a singular passion. He made a choice to devote his life to glorify God and to win for God the reward of His suffering. That was his soul purpose for living. He had nothing else. Paul was not going to stop until the great commission was fulfilled or he died, whichever would come first. Maybe he was crazy. Read 2 Cor. 11:23-29 and you may agree with me. Why would someone endure all that? Why would someone purposefully subject themselves to such treatment? Paul tells us why in 2 Cor. 5:14. He states that the love of God compelled him. The word "compel" means to force someone to do something. The love of God had transformed his life, and that same love now compelled (forced) him to love others and give of himself sacrificially for their benefit. Christ's love that had converted him now compelled him to selfless abandon. He knew the greatest thing he could do with his life was to lose it so that he could share God's love with others. I pray today that God's love would compel us in the same way that it did Paul. I pray that we would be people who freely spend our lives to share the love of God with others. I pray that God would fill us with a passion for the lost that would cause us to go way beyond our comfort zones to reach others. There is no greater calling than this.

Questions for Reflection:

1. In view of all that Christ did to save you, do you feel compelled to share the love of God with others?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Pray that God's love would compel you to reach out to others.
- Pray for eyes to see the lost as God sees them.
- Pray that the things of this world would not cloud your passion for God and His purposes for your life.

Acts Devotional

Week Five

Written By:

DeWayne Watson

**Family Life Pastor
Grace Church of Chapel Hill, NC**

Today's Reading Section: Acts 15:1-35Comments:

Conflict!!! Yeah, I know. For some, simply hearing or reading the word creates stomach pain and weakens the will to live. For others there is a flushing of the face, accelerated heart rate, and clenching of the fists as we prepare to win at any cost. Then there are those of you (notice I've certainly removed myself from this group) that handle conflict with a kind of godly grace that baffles those of us in either of the former groups.

I'm going to confess to, for the most part, being a member of second troop. I think when I can see conflict coming from a long way off I'm able to prepare myself to handle it the right way, but even then not always. Having put that little tidbit on the table let me say how much I love our selected verses for today and tomorrow. They are a case study in Christian conflict management.

What a humdinger of a conflict! I'll be somewhat delicate here as the subject matter demands I be, but it must be said that the difference of opinion about whether a gentile who converts to Christianity should be circumcised is no small matter, and was worthy of, in my opinion, armed combat!

You can see both sides of argument, or at least from where they were born. One is rooted in tradition and the other in grace. It occurs to me, and I hope you agree, that where the law of grace can be applied it sure should be. If you listen carefully you will hear my gentile friends in Acts 15 shouting a heartfelt "amen."

The sides are drawn as Paul and Barnabas head off to one of my favorite meetings in scripture. Just look in the room described in verse 6 and following. Peter is there. James is there. Paul, Barnabas, and others are present. Wow! I hope to have some sort of instant replay device in Heaven just so I can watch that gathering. Can you imagine? In verse 7 they're discussing, they're arguing, they're agreeing and disagreeing, each with an absolute assurance that he is right. Then Peter, I really love this guy, takes authority and brings God's voice into the room. It is for Christ and the souls of the lost that we exist he says. Not the law, not for their pride in which much of the argument was rooted, but in the hope that salvation would spread wide into the gentile world.

Whew! I'm glad Peter chimed up. I'm one of those gentile guys who benefited from his precise presentation of the gospel to godly men. Paul and Barnabas took that message back to the gentile churches, the men of which all in unison breathed a great, GREAT sigh of relief.

Now and then you and I will get to be the authority in the room that ends the conflict with wisdom, but not every time. Sometimes we'll have to be the ones who look at our opinion and find that it doesn't best promote the cross (yes that applies to everything in our lives) and yield to the wisdom of another. Either way conflict can be resolved without fear, and without fighting. It should be, and really it must be.

Questions for Reflection:

1. With whom am I currently in conflict?
2. Am I standing on principle, passion, pride, or the truth?
3. How might I best resolve the conflict?
4. Can I be right or wrong and still maintain a relationship with the other party?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Ask God to deal with you in the following areas: Pride, Clarity, Vision, Hope, Love.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 15:36-41Comments:

Surprise! Two of the big players in the room yesterday couldn't get along! They finally agreed to disagree. I love it! If all else fails then I have to shake hands with the opposition and move on. What a relief right? Now, I don't mean to belittle the hurt that accompanies a disagreement that ends in divergent paths. I'm sure that both Paul and Barnabas walked away from each other shocked at what has just occurred.

They had both in the recent past witnessed the masterful way in which Peter had shut a disagreement down and brought everyone to the table in peace and now they couldn't agree on whether or not to bring an upstart evangelist named John Mark on the road with them. Paul disagreed "strongly!" Are you seeing that? It makes me laugh, not at Paul, because, well, he's Paul and I'm just DeWayne, but the truth is he's just Paul! He wrote more books of the Bible than anyone. He witnessed the salvation of thousands; and he started churches all over the place. Jesus even started him off by knocking him off his horse and blinding him. That same guy blew his top to such a degree that he could not be reconciled with his friend Barnabas whose name actually means FRIEND!

So here it is. After yesterday we went to sleep thinking that we had to bring peace to every situation by giving in. Sometimes as I said before, that's true. We're going to have to give in because we're just plain wrong, but sometimes we're not, or at least all the evidence, as was the case with Paul, indicates that we're right, and we are duty bound to stand our ground. What do we do if there will be no peace and we are certain of our correctness? We shake hands, hug necks, high five or whatever and walk away smiling and at peace even as we disagree with the person across the proverbial table. We must not dislike them, talk bad about them, carry a grudge, or even allow ourselves the luxury of some kind of righteous indignation.

I know what you're thinking. Verse 39 simply says that they separated. That could mean that Paul punched Barnabas in the nose, they called each other heretics and stormed off to other "opportunities" in ministry. Perhaps I'm making their departure from one another more cordial than it was. I don't think they continued texting each other every day, but I know that they continued in the same harvest field. I know that both pointed lost people to the cross, and I know that they are both in Heaven right now, and they completely agree about who was right and who was wrong, and I expect they've had a good laugh about it all.

You and I are going to have that same experience someday. That person who refuses to see your side of things here may well be your next door neighbor in Heaven, so while you wait for God's moving company to come and take your spiritual stuff through the pearly gates Paul, Barnabas, and I encourage you to agree to disagree as you peacefully and harmlessly walk away from that one or those in your life with whom you cannot agree.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Am I trying to win an un-winnable argument?
2. Does it really matter?
3. Does my cause advance the cause of Christ?
4. Is it time to shake hands and walk away in peace?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Look over yesterday's prayer points.
- You'll find them remarkably useful.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 16:1-40Comments:

It will not surprise you to find that this is a fun chapter for me to read. There's a lot of stubborn obedience, blessing and faith in there and I like it all. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger right? Well look at this.

Paul and his new traveling companion, Silas, are off to continue spreading the word that the apostles in Jerusalem had handed down, primarily about circumcision. They chose another well thought of young man named, Timothy, to help them spread this great news, and the first thing Paul requires of him is the very thing they are going about putting an end to, and he does it! Whoa!

That would have been an ender for me. Good luck Paul and Silas, I'll be elsewhere. Don't call. Timothy stubbornly obeys! His mind and body surely demanded that he pass on the opportunity, but his spirit heard God calling him to obey and follow Paul and so he amazingly did. . .without painkillers. . .yeah. You and I will be called to do the irrational in our faith walk so that He can be supernatural in the lives of those we encounter. Timothy knew he was released from the old rule, but he also knew that the old-line thinkers were still around and he could better serve them with the respect he would receive for his complete stubborn obedience.

Next Paul and Silas want to head into Asia, but God repeatedly says no. I don't know what God was protecting them from, or reserving for Himself, or sovereignly preventing, but he would not let them into Asia with His blessing. Paul was very type A and didn't like to be told no. He argued a lot and was pretty good at it, but He refused to argue with God this time around. God wanted them in Macedonia, so (I think somewhat reluctantly) they went.

They went in verse 13 to a riverbank where they "supposed" people met for prayer. Supposed? I love that! Here's the quote: "Hey Silas I think this looks like a place where people probably come to pray. Let's wait here and see what happens." Poor Silas right? Well, they wait there and some ladies show up, and sure enough God has in mind to draw the wealthy Lydia and her whole house to Himself while providing for Paul and Silas. Paul stubbornly obeyed and beautiful things happened.

Here's the big punch of the chapter. Paul is so annoyed at the persistence of the demons who are tormenting a girl who is aggravating him that he almost absentmindedly tells them to leave her. Those demons were some other guys' payday so they were really irritated and crookedly had Paul and Silas severely beaten and thrown in jail. It's midnight they've been beaten bloody and are locked in stocks. Here's the quote: "Hey Silas. Let's sing some worship songs, and pray together. I feel blessed and anointed." Okay, maybe it wasn't just like that, but they were in pretty bad shape and still were of a mind to praise the one for whom they were taking the beating. As they worshiped the earth shook and they were released, but they didn't run.

As a result the jailer and his family came to Christ, Paul and Silas were legally released with an official apology, and they even got to stick it to the town council by leaving when they were good a ready. Stubborn obedience works and it ushers greater blessing and deeper faith into your life. Try some of that today.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Am I saying no to God about anything?
2. What will it cost to say yes?
3. What will it cost me to say no?

Prayer Points for Today:

- God, help me stubbornly obey you today from the inside out.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 17:1-34Comments:

It goes without saying that Paul was an outreach and evangelism megalith. We begin chapter 17 walking with Paul onto slightly damp spiritual ground where he digs geysers. "As was his custom" Paul went to the synagogues to convince anyone there that the God they were serving had a son who died to pay for their sins, and was then resurrected proving that he really was God's son.

Talk about a cold call! Imagine someone interrupting something like a church service or Bible study at Grace Church with a new idea that adds to what we already know to be true. You're right! It wouldn't go over to well. I might well be one of the people you would see escorting the person to his or her car.

But Paul had a secret weapon that was fully engaged all through his ministry life and certainly in this chapter. The Holy Spirit was already working in these people's lives. That's how the ground in these "fields" got a little wet. The Holy Spirit was setting Paul up for success. In Amphipolis and Apollonia Jews and Gentiles listened and believed having only just heard.

Of course Paul's spiritual opposition was taking notice, and attempted to confound his efforts, but God kept him one step ahead of any evil that might befall him. In verse 6 one of his attackers accuses him of turning the world upside down. I want someone to cast that glorious dispersion on me! That surely got the Devil's attention, but it didn't matter. Paul was on the move.

He, Silas, and Timothy went to Berea and repeated their successful pattern and sure enough more people, some of whom were very influential, listened and believed. Trouble followed without effect as Paul headed to Athens for a spectacular collision of cultures and spiritual ideals.

I can imagine Paul entering the city and shaking his head at the foolishness of these well-advanced people as he studies the many idols along the way. "To the unknown God indeed" he must have said. Then with a sparkle in his eye, and willingness to debate he went to the synagogue, the town square, and to the council of philosophers, and captured the imagination of everyone he encountered. They didn't all come to believe right then, but many did, and they all listened. Being an Athenian by birth or just a visitor required that they listen. Paul knew where he was. He, with absolute resolve, infiltrated a hotbed of religious cross talk and shone a huge spotlight on Jesus.

What a glorious God he describes in the closing verses of this chapter! That God is our God! That Son is still Jesus, and His resurrection is still the greatest moment in the history of the universe! Go tell someone about that today. Pick someone hard that you're sure won't listen and give them the truth. If they won't listen, that's fine. Move on. That's what Paul did because he knew, I know and God surely knows that with His help someone is going to listen, believe, and be changed by the life and truth of Jesus Christ.

Questions for Reflection:

1. From whom have I been holding back from sharing the gospel?
2. Where in my circle of influence does the name of Jesus seem most ignored?
3. When am I going to take His name into that place?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Ask God to touch you in the area of you Faith, Motivation, Compassion, Love, Courage.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 18:1-23Comments:

Isn't it a great feeling when you survive the turmoil and discover that God had something wonderful lined up for you all along? I've enjoyed that experience more than once. Such is the case with Aquila and Priscilla as we jump into chapter 18. This couple had been forced from their home, their clientele, their friends and truly their entire lives because Caesar decided that the Jews should leave Rome. But God had a great plan for each of them and for Paul.

Of course they were tentmakers as was Paul so they had something to talk about right away. They needed a friend and some guidance and Paul needed a place to stay and way to support himself. God supplied it all through what must have been very difficult circumstances.

Having gotten all of that under control Paul took off for the synagogue. He sure loved to state his case, and everyone sure liked to listen whether they agreed or not. After Timothy and Silas came in to town, Paul took his preaching up a notch and as usual the Jews in leadership didn't like it. I love this next part. In verse 6 after they had opposed and insulted him he "shook the dust from his robe and said, "Your blood be upon your own heads—I am innocent. From now on I will go to the gentiles." That was a powerful moment my friends. He called them down, shut them up, and blew them off. Yes!

The difficulty of dealing with those exceedingly stubborn Jews brought our irritable friend Paul to a new place in ministry with a new focus and vision. Some times we just have to be flabbergasted before we move on. God uses these circumstances to grow, and move us. I'm thankful for that.

So, right away new converts are baptized and Paul discovered that God had provided for him a stronghold in Corinth. He stays in Corinth for what must have seemed like forever as his ministry exclusively to the gentiles flourished. Even when those pesky opponents of his tried to push him out, the pagan governor Gallio took Paul's side and essentially told them to shut up. Beautiful.

Paul couldn't really stay in Corinth forever. There was much more work to be done, and in him burned a desire to do that very work, so he packed up, said goodbye to those who would have become his very close friends, and coworkers and sailed to Syria. We should take some delight in finding that this discourse and observation of Paul's ministry begins its end with his decision to take Aquila and Priscilla with him. I mentioned four days ago that I would like an instant replay machine in Heaven just so I can see how things happened. This is another occasion that I would like to observe. This wonderful couple having left all they knew in Rome had met Paul and faithfully worked with him for many months and to such a degree that he didn't want to go without them. That must have been a wonderful moment.

That is the kind of service and faith that we all should aspire to develop. Yes, develop. It's work, and it might bring us through some turmoil, but there is blessing on the other side for certain. They go with Paul as He shaves his head, which I think a funny albeit important inclusion into scripture, and then continue to serve, work, and learn as Paul repeats his ministry strategy arguing with the Jews, and reaching out to the gentiles even as tumultuous events abound. So stick it out! You are called to something great! Serve someone who's getting something done for the Kingdom, and take the lead somewhere else for God's sake.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Am I considering giving up in an area where God might be growing me?
2. Is there someone in my life that should be serving as they minister?
3. Where should I be taking the lead not matter what the cost?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Ask God to bring to you Vision, Clarity of thought, Bigger dreams, Strength to hold on.

Acts Devotional

Week Six

Written By:

John Held

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Today's Reading Section: Acts 18:24 – 19:7

Comments:

In this section of Scripture, we are introduced to “a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria.” Alexandria was recognized as the intellectual center of Egypt and had a world-renowned library. The city had a huge Jewish population at this time. It was in Alexandria, during the early second century B.C. that the Hebrew Bible (what we call the Old Testament) was first translated into Greek. This translation, known as the Septuagint, became popular among the Jews living outside the land of Israel, for whom Greek was the spoken language. Later, when the Christian church began to spread throughout the Roman Empire, the Septuagint was adopted as the church's primary Bible.

Although Apollos was skilled and eloquent as a speaker and powerful in his use of the Old Testament Scriptures, his knowledge of the gospel was deficient. Commentators speculate that he may not have known about the death and resurrection of Jesus or about the Holy Spirit's outpouring that began on the Day of Pentecost. After hearing him speak, Priscilla and Aquila took him aside privately and “explained to him the way of God more accurately.” (18:26) Having received more accurate instruction, Apollos continued to gain the respect of the Christians in Ephesus, so that when he decided to go to Achaia, the church encouraged him and wrote a letter to introduce him to the Christians there. Our text says he “greatly helped” the church in Achaia – a fact Paul acknowledges in his letter to the Corinthians. (1 Corinthians 3:6)

Chapter 19 records the early events of Paul's third missionary journey. Having left Antioch, Paul traveled overland through “the region of Galatia and Phrygia” (18:23) and came into Ephesus. Here, Paul came across some disciples of John the Baptist. Although they had received the baptism of repentance that John proclaimed, they were unfamiliar with ministry of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. Using the message of John as a starting point, Paul presented to them the gospel of the Kingdom. On hearing this good news, they believed, were baptized in the name of Jesus, and received the gift of the outpoured Spirit when Paul laid his hands on them.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What things does Luke tell us about Apollos?
2. How did Priscilla and Aquila serve Apollos?
3. Is your understanding of the gospel and Christian doctrine sufficient to discern and graciously correct those who may need to have the “way of God” explained more accurately?
4. Look at Acts 18:28. What does “the Scriptures” refer to? How does this relate to Luke 24:27,44?
5. Together with repentance, faith in Jesus Christ, and water baptism (signifying our death and resurrection with Christ), what other blessing does Paul view as an essential part of the Christian life?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Thank God for His goodness toward you expressed in the gospel. Ask God to deepen your understanding of and passion for the gospel. Ask God to equip you and use you to share the gospel with others.
- Thank God for those leaders whom He has called to teach His Word and equip His people for works of service. Ask God to raise up and equip the next generation of leaders.
- Thank God for the gift of His outpoured Spirit. Ask Him to fill you afresh with His Spirit.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 19:8-20Comments:

One can see a pattern in Paul's evangelistic ministry; in fact, Luke uses the phrase "as was his custom" (Acts 17:2) to communicate Paul's usual preaching strategy when entering a new region. As he came into a city, Paul would enter the synagogue and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. This would continue until those Jews opposed to the message of the gospel would come against him. When this occurred, Paul and those who had come to faith through his preaching would then relocate, and Paul would continue to boldly proclaim the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles. This is what occurs in Ephesus – after preaching in the synagogue for three months – "reasoning and persuading them about the Kingdom of God" – opposition arose. Luke tells us that Paul then relocated to "the hall of Tyrannus" where he lectured daily for two years. Certain "Western text" Greek manuscripts add that these daily lectures were held between the hours of 11:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. This would be during the hottest part of the day when people, having begun work at sunrise, would take an "elongated siesta" and then resume work in the later afternoon. If this were the case, Paul probably worked as a tentmaker in the morning and evening and used this five-hour period each day to teach, rather than nap. Luke tells us that these daily teachings eventually led to the evangelization of the entire province of Asia.

Not only was the spoken message of the gospel of the Kingdom going forth boldly, Luke tells us that God was also doing "extraordinary miracles" (Luke does not regard these as typical, even for miracles) through Paul – the sick were healed and those with evil spirits were delivered through "handkerchiefs and aprons" that touched Paul's skin. The mention of exorcisms serves as an introduction to the story of the seven sons of Sceva, "itinerant Jewish exorcists." Their attempt to use the name of Jesus in some "mechanical" way led to what one study Bible calls a "reverse exorcism" – the demon drove out the exorcists! Luke tells us that as this story became known, both the Jewish and Greek residents of Ephesus were struck with a solemn fear and the name of Jesus was held in high honor. A number of those "who had practiced magic arts" but who had been healed and delivered and had come to faith in Jesus Christ burned the books and items in their possession that were tied to their former occult practices. This section ends with the glorious declaration, "So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily."

Questions for Reflection:

1. This is the fifth reference to "the Kingdom of God" in the book of Acts (cf. 1:3,6; 8:12; 14:22). What is the central message of the Kingdom of God?
2. What two words stand out in the description of Paul's preaching?
3. Look at verse 8 and verse 9. What does this tell us about Paul's method of evangelism?
4. In spite of the obvious differences between first-century cities in the Roman Empire and our own cities today, what lessons can be drawn from Paul's evangelistic method?
5. What manifestations of the Kingdom's power were being experienced in Ephesus (v. 12)? What made these "extraordinary miracles"?

6. What lessons can be learned from the encounter between the seven sons of Sceva and the evil spirit they were attempting to exorcise?
7. What is “fifty thousands pieces of silver” worth in today’s currency?
8. What is significant about the fact that the Ephesians “burned” their occult books and material?
9. Are there items in your possession that are associated with the occult, or tie you in an unhealthy way to your former way of life, before Christ?
10. Do you see a connection between the events recorded in verses 18-19, and Luke’s statement in verse 20?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Surrender to God’s authority in your life.
- Pray for greater passion and boldness in sharing the gospel with those in your circle of relationships.
- Pray that His Kingdom would come and His will be done in your family, church, and city.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 19:21-41Comments:

Luke begins this section by telling us of Paul's intention, after more than two years of ministry in this region, to depart Ephesus, obviously confident that his work of establishing the church in this city was at the stage that he could leave, in order to revisit Macedonia and Achaia (across the Aegean Sea on the Ionian peninsula [modern-day Greece]) on his return to Jerusalem. Paul's reason for this "roundabout" route was to collect the offering he had been encouraging the churches in this region to gather on behalf of the church in Jerusalem (see Acts 24:17; Rom. 15:25-26; 1 Cor. 16:1-6; 2 Cor. 8:1; 9:1-5). After visiting the saints in Jerusalem, it was his hope to travel to Rome (and, as we learn in his letter to the Romans, to continue on to Spain [Rom 15:28]) – such was his burden to be faithful to the apostolic call that God placed upon his life and to share the gospel "in lands beyond" (2 Cor 10:16). Having set Timothy and Erastus on ahead, Paul remained in Asia "for a while" longer.

Luke gives us a detailed account of the riot instigated by Demetrius, "a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis." He, together with his fellow craftsmen and "workmen in similar trades," received a considerable income through the sale of items crafted in honor of the goddess Artemis. With the spread of the Christian faith, demand for these items greatly decreased. Although Demetrius' concern was primarily economic, he was also able to "arouse civil and religious pride" as well – the city of Ephesus was the center of the cult of Artemis, and her temple in the city was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The image, enshrined in that temple, was probably a meteorite – "the sacred stone that fell from the sky" – which appeared to some to resemble a many-breasted female. It is interesting to note in verse 31 that "some of the Asiarchs" are mentioned as "friends" of Paul. These were high-ranking government officials. Their concern for Paul's safety indicates that he had made a favorable impression on them as a man of character and integrity.

Some commentators believe Luke's purpose in recording this event and its outcome was to show that the opposition to Christianity in Ephesus stemmed from greed, jealousy, and ignorance. The Christians in the city were innocent of the accusations leveled against them. By recording the reasoned argument of the town clerk to the mob gathered in the theater, Luke proves that the preaching of the gospel was not viewed as unlawful by the Roman government (see also Acts 18:12-16).

Questions for Reflection:

1. What insights do we gain regarding Paul's passion for the spread of the gospel through his statement, "I must also see Rome"? What further insights are provided in Romans 15:22-24?
2. Why did Paul "pass through Macedonia and Achaia" on his way to Jerusalem?
3. What was the primary cause of the riot in Ephesus?
4. What conclusions can be drawn about the advance of the Kingdom as we consider the riot in Ephesus and its aftermath?
5. Why does Luke record this incident?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Ask God to work godly character in your life that would be evidenced by others for the advancement of the Kingdom of God.
- Ask for knowledge and discernment as to your sphere of influence.
- Ask for the boldness, zeal, and determination to be used by God to fulfill His purposes in your life.
- Ask for wisdom and godly counsel to speak into your life and a humble heart to receive words of caution (verse 30).

Today's Reading Section: Acts 20:1-16Comments:

“After the uproar had ceased” (that is, after the riot in Ephesus), Paul “sent for the disciples” (perhaps he was still “laying low”), encouraged them, and left for Macedonia. The text says “he came to Greece” – probably Corinth, where he spent three months. It was during this visit that Paul wrote his letter to the Romans. Made aware of a plot against him, Paul decided not to sail directly from Achaia to Jerusalem, but traveled overland, going back through Macedonia. Paul’s traveling companions are listed in verse 4. These men represented the different churches that had taken part in the Jerusalem offering, and these men were accompanying Paul to present the gift to the church. We are told that these men went on ahead to Troas, while Paul and Luke (who again joins Paul in his travels [20:5]) sail from Philippi. It was here, in Philippi, where another “we-section” of Luke’s account ended (16:12), indicating that he might have been residing in this city.

The team stayed in Troas seven days. Here, Luke relates Paul’s last night with the believers in the city, and the story of Eutychus, who had fallen asleep as Paul talked late into the night. This young man fell from the third story window and died; however, Paul raised him from the dead, bringing “not a little comfort” to those who had witnessed this.

This section ends with Luke’s description of Paul’s voyage along the Asian coast to Miletus.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Before Paul departed for Macedonia, how does Luke describe Paul’s ministry to the disciples in Ephesus?
2. How does Luke summarize Paul’s ministry to the saints throughout Macedonia (verse 2)?
3. What do you find interesting by the fact that Paul rarely traveled alone?
4. We are told the church gathered “on the first day of week.” What day was that? Is this significant?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Ask God to use you to encourage others today (see Heb 10:24-25).
- Ask God to deepen your love for and commitment to the local church.
- Ask God to give you a good and noble heart – teachable and ready to hear and receive instruction from God’s Word.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 20:17-38Comments:

From the port city of Miletus, Paul “sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.” The city of Ephesus was located about forty miles north of Miletus, so it would have taken a few days for the elders to arrive. Paul’s speech to the Ephesian elders is the only record we have of Paul speaking directly to elders; in fact, it is the only record in Acts of a major speech to Christians. These words take on even more meaning as we recognize that this section of Scripture is Paul’s final exhortation and warning to these men. As Paul comes to the end of (what we know as) his third missionary journey, he reminds these leaders that the responsibility for the defense of the gospel and the welfare of the church has been entrusted to them. Having diligently worked among them “proclaiming the Kingdom,” Paul can boldly say, “I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.” (20:25, 26-27) Paul reminds them that his personal example is to be a pattern for them. They are to pay attention to their own spiritual condition, as well as the spiritual condition of the flock under their care – a flock purchased with the blood of Christ, a flock in which the Holy Spirit has made them overseers. Paul declares with absolute certainty, “fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.” (Acts 20:29) In fact, he goes on to predict “from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.” (20:30)

The love Paul had for these leaders, and their love for him, is obvious as Luke brings this chapter to a close. Paul was not only a man of amazing courage and determination; he was also a man of deep affection, who genuinely loved others.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What is unique about Paul’s speech to the Ephesian elders?
2. What imagery is used in describing an elder’s ministry?
3. How does Paul view the stewardship that has been entrusted to elders?
4. What insights can we gain as to Paul’s understanding of the church?
5. What does Paul see as one of the greatest dangers threatening God’s people? How are elders to protect the church from this threat?
6. How does verse 28 relate to what Paul tells Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:16?
7. How has Paul’s life among them demonstrated the gospel and set a pattern that they are to follow?
8. What brought the most sorrow to these elders?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Read Hebrews 13:7 and 17. Take a moment to pray for your leaders.
- Ask God to make you courageous for the gospel, knowing that there will be opposition and resistance to the advancement of God's Kingdom.
- Ask God to enable you to persevere, recognizing that trials and suffering are a part of the journey (see Acts 14:22).
- Pray to esteem the gospel above your own life (verse 24).

Acts Devotional

Week Seven

Written By:

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Today's Reading Section: Acts 21:1-36

Comments:

Reread the following verses: Acts 21:12-14

In Acts chapter 20 we see the heart of Paul in his desire to go to Jerusalem (20:22-24). His deepest passion was the glory of “the name of the Lord Jesus” (21:13) as connected to “The gospel of the grace of God” (20:24). This is what was driving Paul in all of his ministry.

God has a sovereign evangelistic strategy for his Kingdom that cannot be thwarted. This in no way means that we don't strategize or make plans. We see that Paul carefully planned his missionary journeys throughout the book of Acts. But Paul trusted in the sovereignty of God above those plans and he encountered many interruptions along the way. In fact Paul felt so strongly that every moment of adversity he encountered was meant by God as an opportunity to bear witness to the very gospel that he was longing to preach. He knew God would use it to advance his Kingdom. Look at the words of Jesus in Luke 21:12-13...

They will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness.

Knowing that Luke traveled with Paul, I'll bet Luke reminded Paul of these words often.

The people who encouraged Paul to not go to Jerusalem in chapter 21 loved Paul deeply and didn't want to see him undergo suffering. All of us would have probably had the same feelings. The important question is this: Will we say “Let the will of the Lord be done” so that there are opportunities for us and or others to bear witness to the gospel of the grace of God?

Questions for Reflection:

1. Think of some plans you may have. Are you holding them loosely before the Lord?
2. What areas of adversity or trial in your life can be used as an opportunity to bear witness to God's grace?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Ask God for a greater love and gratitude for the gospel in your own life.
- Pray for open doors today to be used by God and make him and his Kingdom known.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 21:37-22:29

Comments:

Reread the following verses: Acts 22:14-15

Let's consider the context of chapter 22. This is taking place after the Roman tribune arrested him outside the temple. Remember the Asian Jews had started the uproar against Paul and were beating him. The tribune and the Roman soldiers were putting a stop to the riot. Paul asks the tribune to let him speak to the crowd and he begins by saying in Hebrew to them "...hear the defense I now make before you." Paul then goes into the testimony of God's calling him.

I'd like for us to think of the bigger picture here. In yesterday's devotional we saw that Paul trusted in God's sovereignty over the advancement of His Kingdom. Do you see what's happening? Both Paul's suffering found in this chapter and the testimony he is sharing is a direct fulfillment of the vision that Ananias received when Paul was converted. This of course happened to Paul on other numerous occasions, and in this moment Paul knew that God was using his circumstances and his witness to advance the Kingdom. We know this because in Acts 9:16 we see that Paul was told by Ananias that he would suffer for the name of Jesus.

At this point in Paul's life he had written his letter to the Romans, probably even the same year. Think for a moment about the famous verse found in Romans 1:16, 17 and lay it over Paul's circumstances while bearing witness in Acts chapter 22.

For 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. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

Questions for Reflection:

1. Think about your own salvation testimony. Do you see it as a powerful tool in God's hands to advance his Kingdom?
2. Think through your current circumstances and recognize God's sovereignty over them. How may God lead you to be a witness and or share your testimony through them?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Ask God to increase your capacity to trust Him no matter what.
- Pray that God makes you more zealous and unashamed of the gospel than ever before. For the sake of His Kingdom's advancement.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 22:30-23:35

Comments:

Reread the following verses: Acts 23:6-8.

In the verse above notice that Paul was being perceptive and he used what he had perceived to his advantage. The last two days we've considered God's sovereignty and making the most of every opportunity to bear witness to God's grace. We've learned that God is completely sovereign over the advancement of His Kingdom and He uses the testimony of the gospel in a person's life to do it.

When we talk about God's sovereign Kingdom agenda we must never have a "Let go and let God" mentality. I know we have probably all used this cliché many times and our intentions have most likely been to exhort someone to trust God more and to quit being self-reliant. I'm in no way discouraging the heart behind it. But I'm not sure the phrase itself has been a very helpful one. It can imply that we have no responsibility at all and actually cause people to stop using their God-given brains.

Here's my point: Paul had a very passionate, radical zeal for God, but he was never careless. I'll bet he was very familiar with the many Proverbs that speak of bridling the tongue. I'm sure he thought often about letting his words be "like apples of Gold in settings of silver." (Prov. 25:11) Was everything peachy and non-confrontational? Of course not! But he chose his words wisely.

Paul used wisdom when he spoke his testimony and so should we. Remember the words of Jesus found in Matthew 10:16...

Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Zeal in itself doesn't mean much. (Rom 10:1-3) The Jews were both zealous and sincere, but it didn't save them. How are you cultivating the knowledge of God in accordance with your zeal?
2. Do you wisely consider the words you use when you're sharing your testimony? Remember life and death are in the power of the tongue.

Prayer Points for Today:

- Ask God for supernatural wisdom and discernment for each time you're with a person today.
- Pray according to Colossians 4:6 and ask God for help with your tongue today.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 24:1-21Comments:

Reread the following verses: Acts 24:14-16

Again we see Paul being as wise as a serpent and as innocent as a dove. He isn't being sneaky or dishonest in any way, but he's using every word carefully. It's interesting he doesn't go into a loud and clear gospel presentation like he did while at Athens on Mars Hill (Acts 17). Instead we find here that he talks about how he worships the same God that they profess to worship. Of course Paul knows the only way to worship God is according to "the way" (what they called Christianity). But he doesn't go there with them. Again he's being honest yet wise with his words.

Verse 16, *I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man*, seems to be exactly what is going on with Paul in this situation. If we look back in chapter 21, Paul was wrongfully accused of bringing gentiles into the temple. The Asian Jews were the ones who wrongfully started the commotion to begin with. Here we see that Paul on one hand is simply defending himself, but on the other hand he is being careful to wisely bear witness to the gospel. He might also be living out his own words found in 1 Corinthians 9:22b-23...

...I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

For all Paul knows, God could be using him to open a door for these unbelieving Jews. He believes in the sovereign hand of God to advance His Kingdom. He is convicted that whomever he speaks to, and however he speaks to them, God can use it for His sake. That is why he says that he becomes all things to all people. He does it for the sake of the Kingdom's advancement through the gospel.

Question for Reflection:

1. Think of all the people you know in your life who are unsaved. How do you relate to them?
2. Are you wisely stewarding all your relationships so that at some point there may be a door for the gospel?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Ask the Lord to give you Kingdom motives in all your relationships.
- Pray that God opens your eyes to see spiritually into the events that God will lead you in today so that you can be whoever you need to be for the sake of the gospel.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 24:22-27

Comments:

Reread the following verses: Acts 24:24-25.

This week's readings have helped us to see that truly serving God and His Kingdom purposes takes place when we acknowledge that He is sovereign over all earthly kingdoms and that the establishing of His own Kingdom will happen no matter what. Even though we make good plans for the Lord, He has an ultimate plan that cannot be interrupted. We know that he uses every circumstance of our lives, even suffering, to glorify His name, His gospel, so that His Kingdom is advanced in the earth.

While in Caesarea, Paul was kept in custody under Felix the governor for two years. During this time Acts tells us that Paul and Felix would often meet together and talk. (24:26) Although we can't be sure, we can assume, that in light of today's reading section above, Paul's time in custody may have been fruitful for the gospel in Felix's family.

We don't know what all took place in the two years that Paul was with Felix in Caesarea, but we do know that Paul was led by the Spirit and ready to reason with him "...about righteousness and self control and the coming judgment." Paul was ready in season and out of season to give an answer for the hope that was in him as Peter wrote about later in 1 Peter 3:14-17...

But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

Questions for Reflection:

1. If it hasn't already happened, someone someday will ask you for a reason for your relationship with God. What are you doing daily to prepare for these inevitable moments?
2. Think about your knowledge of scripture and your ability to wield it when making a defense. How can you grow in your Bible knowledge?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Ask God to make you hungry for knowing the bible in a deeper way.
- Pray that God would set your heart on fire for the advancement of his Kingdom and that you will have a readiness to share Christ in every situation.

Acts Devotional

Week Eight

Written By:

Adam Dawson

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**Cross Culture on Campus Student Ministries
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Today's Reading Section: Acts 25:1-27

Comments:

Reread the following verses: Acts 25:10-12

Paul was Kingdom minded. It is possible he knew that if he went to Jerusalem for trial he would be killed (v.3), but his physical survival was never his ultimate motivation. Paul probably figured that he wouldn't receive a just verdict if he went back to Jerusalem, but receiving social justice wasn't his ultimate goal.

Paul WANTED to appeal to the ultimate earthly authority, Caesar. Paul was a man who used his freedom in Christ to the max. Jesus didn't tell him to go to Rome and appeal to Caesar; Paul chose it. Jesus appointed Paul as a servant and a witness to the Gentiles "to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God" (26:18). By being given the power to make this happen because he was called to make it happen, Paul was also given freedom in how to make it happen. In this freedom, he appealed to Caesar, not because it saved his life – Jesus had that under control – and not because Paul just wanted a fair trial – Jesus, who knows about unfair trials, would use either a fair or an unfair trial for His good. Paul wanted the big man, Caesar, and Paul wanted the big city, Rome, where all of the culture, laws, and influence came from, not because this was the only way, but because he could. That is being Kingdom minded.

When you seek first the Kingdom of God the factors you use in making decisions change. You go for it. You go for it big. You don't always make the safe choice. Sometimes you make the risky one for God, knowing he can cash the checks you write on his account. Don't distort this principle. Some people write checks for themselves and expect God to cash them. He doesn't. He lets those checks bounce, but the ones you write for Him – the ones you actually write for Him – He cashes. So write big ones. Paul did...and it turned out pretty well.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What factors and motivations help make my decisions?
2. How am I using my freedom in Christ?
3. What is the largest check I wrote on Jesus' account?
4. What check will I write this week on His account?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Wisdom to use Christ's freedom.
- Courage to go all out for Jesus.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 26:1-11

Comments:

Reread the following verses: Acts 26:9-11

Paul's history of being a rebel to God's Kingdom is as explicit as it gets. He was religiously devoted to opposing God, the same God that he claimed to follow. He did everything in his power to kill the followers of Jesus, punish them, track them down, and force them to deny Jesus.

We must make similar admissions. We must tell our rebellious history because that is part of repentance: admitting we not only disobeyed God but we were hostile to Him by our disobedience. Although most of us may not identify with Paul's actions, we should. Once God confronts us with himself, we can clearly see how we have waged war against Him and that there was no indifference to Him, only hate.

Every citizen of the Kingdom of God has this in common, we were all once rebels but have now sworn allegiance to the true King because His love has utterly changed us. Telling the story of our being a rebel against the King helps show the reality of the Kingdom of God to those who are blind and under the power of Satan – to those who are currently rebels to God's Kingdom. Admit that you were once a rebel to God's Kingdom, but you now are under the true King and, consequently, now a rebel to Satan's Kingdom.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What is my history of being a rebel to God's Kingdom?
2. What is my history of being a rebel for God's Kingdom, i.e. a rebel against Satan's Kingdom?
3. How am I going to share this history with someone this week?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Clarity and eloquence in conveying personal rebellious history.
- Be used by God to release others from the power of Satan.
- Be open to advance the Kingdom of God in any way possible.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 26:12-32Comments:

Reread the following verses: Acts 26:22-29

Paul admits to doing 3 things:

- 1) testifying to everyone only what scripture says (v. 22)
- 2) boldly speaking true and rational words (v. 25)
- 3) wanting all who hear him to follow Jesus (v. 29)

Because of embodying these three principles, Paul is called crazy by the Roman Governor Festus. And in one sense, Paul is crazy. He is a principled man, unrelenting, bold, uncompromising, and epically influential. These behaviors are quite different than other people we see because his principles aren't contrived from any earthly standard or source. And it's not a matter of him merely deciding to subscribe to these three principles one day. His life in Christ made him different; Jesus coming to him on the road to Damascus remade Paul. Jesus took the zealous Paul and opened his eyes to reality. He quenched Paul's thirst with living water, completely obliterating the emptiness to which Paul was accustomed. Paul's boldness in front of Kings and Governors wasn't just an act of the will; it was a reflex of the heart. Paul wasn't led by insanity, but by the Spirit of Freedom and the mind of being a rebel to this world. Paul had certainty in Jesus that replaces all inaction, complacency, and indifference. Paul had a mission that knew no emptiness, accident, or ennui. Therefore, we have an excellent example of what a Christian, i.e. a little Christ, looks like.

Questions for Reflection:

1. How do I exhibit the 3 principles outlined to my life?
2. What does a Christian look like?
3. How do I influence others?

Prayer Points for Today:

- The word of God written in my being.
- Boldness for Jesus as a reflex.
- Desire for everyone to know Jesus.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 27:1-44

Comments:

Reread the following verses: Acts 27:21-26

This passage beautifully illustrates the freedom and security that the Kingdom of God provides. The choice of the ship's crew to sail despite Paul's perception that the ship would incur damage changed how Paul would get to Rome but it didn't change the fact that he would stand before Caesar. God assured him of this. That is security no one else can offer. At the same time, human decisions actually changed the circumstances. Because the crew did not listen to Paul in verse 7, Paul now informs them that they have to run aground on some unknown island.

A ship wrecking on some island might seem negligible in the grand scheme of things to the typical reader of the Bible, but it allows us to see our own circumstances more clearly. Inconvenient occurrences, like being in some kind of wreck or financial calamity, will happen and change the course we were taking but it doesn't have to change the destination. We have to endure events and disasters that seem useless and irrelevant to the plan that we thought God had for us, but we can never underestimate the importance of any occurrence. Let's not just endure such events. Let's see God's hand in them and thank Him.

Questions for Reflection:

1. In my life, give examples of how my decisions have had clear consequences, both positive and negative?
2. In my life, give examples of how God has directed things despite my best, or worst, efforts?
3. Where can I give Jesus thanks for making things happen in my life?

Prayer Points for Today:

- Thank God for everything.
- Continually ask for guidance and direction.

Today's Reading Section: Acts 28:1-31

Comments:

Reread the following verses: Acts 28:23-31

Jesus said in Acts 1:8, right before ascending into heaven, "But 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." God used Paul to do just that. This text shows Paul in the epicenter of the world, Rome, fully proclaiming the Kingdom of God, but the book of Acts ends there. We aren't told how Paul's trial turned out. We don't read about the fates of all the saints. And that is the right way to conclude this book. Acts is just the first part of the story of Christ's church as the vehicle for advancing the Kingdom of God. This book tells of the beginning of the church, not the end.

This allows us to remember that because of Paul's missionary journeys and the early church spreading the gospel you and I heard the good news of Jesus. Our faith is a continuation of the faith of the early church. We are connected to Paul more intimately than we might realize. The same Holy Spirit that the early church received to be Jesus' witnesses is the same One we receive. He didn't stop at the end of the book of Acts. He was just getting started in advancing the Kingdom of God.

Questions for Reflection:

1. How am I connected with the early Christian Church?
2. How am I connecting others to the Church and to the Kingdom of God?

Prayer Points for Today:

- God's Kingdom comes.

Acts Devotional

Spirit Filling and Gifts in Acts

Written By:

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As I mentioned in the introduction, one of the key interpretive issues in the book of Acts is whether or not it is meant to record *normative* church and Christian life or a *transitional* period in the church. In the introduction I also argued that we see aspects of both in the book of Acts. Perhaps nowhere are these two issues more debated than in the issue of the filling of the Holy Spirit and His gifts to the church. The following explores this issue in more detail.

The Reason for the Debate:

As with any debate, both sides of the issue are heated in their argument and often judge the other side wrongly in their approach to the argument. Since I come from a more “normative” view, let me say that, while I think the overall “transitional” position is wrong, I understand where and why those holding that position do so. Among genuine, God-loving Christians who hold the “transitional” view of Acts is a dramatic and invaluable emphasis on the doctrine of the Sufficiency of Scripture. This Doctrine says that the Word of God, as we find in the Bible, is completely sufficient for salvation and all we need for life and godliness. The Bible is, and always will be until we meet the Holy Spirit in Heaven, the most perfect communication of the Holy Spirit’s will in all of human history. It is Spirit revelation at its peak.

To those holding the “transitional view,” an “ongoing revelation” in today’s church through prophecy, tongues, interpretation of tongues, etc. is difficult to understand. On one hand, it can’t be the equivalent of Scripture because, as all of us know, there are frequently errors in modern day prophets and prophecies. However, if a perfect God, by the Holy Spirit, declares something to a person who is called to proclaim such a word, how can the prophet get it wrong when they didn’t in the Old Testament or in the writing of Scripture? Thus, the “transitional view” has difficulty with a perfect Revelator (Holy Spirit), giving a perfect revelation, to an imperfect spokesperson in a way that isn’t Scripture.

To solve the problem, the “transitional view” believes that what we see in Acts, and the rest of the New Testament, is a transition between the Old Testament and the fulfillment of New Testament revelation and final writing of the Bible. To help this transition along, God instituted the offices of prophets and apostles to give revelation on the new things of God and to write the New Testament. Tongues was a sign that the same Holy Spirit that was poured out on Jewish believers at Pentecost, was also being poured out on all people (Gentiles). Thus the Gospel of Jesus Christ was for all. Once the New Testament, the full revelation, was completed, this transitional period was finished and the need for these gifts and the office of prophet and apostle was no longer needed and God allowed it them to fade out of use. They then point to most of church history as evidence for this being the case.

The questions for the “normative” view of Acts to answer are primarily threefold. First, what exactly are the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts. Second, how are they used and is it possible for the Holy Spirit to still be speaking today in a way that doesn’t violate the sufficiency of His perfect Scripture? Finally, why did it fade away in church history until the last 100 years? The following briefly looks at these issues.

Spirit Fillings:

There are six places in the book of Acts where a “filling” of the Holy Spirit is described – Acts 2:4, 4:8, 4:31, 9:17, 13:9 and 13:52. It is first, very important to notice that this reference – “filled with the Spirit” – seems to point back to the actions at Pentecost, where the church first receives the Holy Spirit. The implication is that the Holy Spirit is constantly filling the church to complete the work and mission of Jesus Christ.

With this in mind, notice the following four observations:

First, *the filling of the Spirit is a repeated event*. Acts describes the church being filled repeatedly, and individuals (Peter) being filled repeatedly. Thus, it implies that it is normal for Christians to have Spirit fillings repeatedly and often.

Second, *the fillings mostly occur with people who are already saved*. The people in the upper room were already followers of Christ who believed in Him by faith. Peter was already saved when we was filled with the Spirit in Acts 4. Thus, Spirit fillings are not the same as the saving work of the Holy Spirit, therefore, a Christian should expect to be filled often.

Third, *often, but not always, Spirit fillings are accompanied by miraculous events*. The Spirit of God is the same Spirit that created the earth, so we should not be surprised if some “strange” things happen when the Spirit fills us – even if He does it in surprising ways. Prophecy, tongues, miracles, boldness to preach all took place in Acts when the Spirit moved. At the same time, the Spirit’s filling may be a simple action without a massive miracle to accompany it. So we should also not be disappointed or even expect a “crazy” thing to happen every time we are filled by God’s Holy Spirit.

Finally, *fillings of the Spirit are often accompanied by a new evangelistic action*. Thus, the Spirit is always about the expansion of the Jesus’ Kingdom through the Gospel. While the Holy Spirit and His gifts have much benefit for the individual believer, He is mostly about motivating and empowering us for the Gospel.

There is one other passage in Scripture that is very instructive on the filling of the Holy Spirit and the evidence of that filling. That is Ephesians 5:18-21 (my emphasis added):

18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but **be filled with the Spirit**, 19 **addressing** one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, **singing and making** melody to the Lord with your heart, 20 **giving thanks always** and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 21 **submitting** to one another out of reverence for Christ.

The implication in the verse is two commands (“do not get drunk” and “be filled with the Spirit”) followed by four results or evidences of the second command: 1) “addressing” – there is spiritual community, 2) “singing and making” – there is worship, 3) “giving thanks” – there is thankfulness and provision, and 4) “submission” – there is submission to Christ the King. Three areas of submission in Ephesians 6 then follow up this passage: wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters. What Paul is saying is quite remarkable. One of the evidences of a life lived in the “filling” of the Holy Spirit is our submission to those in authority. Since Christ is the King of the Kingdom and the Head of His Church, the Spirit empowers us to submit to the King and to all whom the King places over us.

Given the Scriptural evidence, it is clear that the “fillings” of the Spirit in Acts are not a series of transitional events, but rather are normal occurrences intended for Christ’s church for all time. Thus, all that accompany these fillings should also be normative, as the following demonstrates.

Gifts of the Spirit

There are three different lists of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in Acts (Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11; Ephesians 4:11-12), and some, but not all, of these gifts appear in Acts. The following briefly shows the three most controversial gifts in Acts (tongues, apostles, and prophets/prophecy) and then discusses how the gifts are used in light of the “transitional” vs. “normative” positions.

Tongues: The word “tongues” has two primary meanings in Greek, “the tongue” and “languages.” Thus, when the New Testament uses the word it would be similar to us saying “foreign language.” Tongues appear in three places in Acts: Acts 2, Acts 10, and Acts 19, and their meaning is accompanied by a lot of controversy. Many see them simply as human languages, thus, the idea of a “prayer language” or tongues without a known meaning is downplayed. It is the fact that in Acts 2 the tongues are most likely just national languages that God enabled the Christians to speak (Acts 2:6). However, in Acts 10 and Acts 19 it does not seem to be “just national languages.” In Acts 10, Peter sees Cornelius and his family speaking in tongues. But it is clearly not a language that either understood (Greek, Latin or Aramaic), or else the “speaking” would have seemed normal. The same is the case with the 12 men in Acts 19. Furthermore, in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, the context does not seem to imply a known national language. So Acts implies that “tongues” can mean a foreign known language or an unknown prayer language.

Apostles: Those who take the “transitional view” believe that apostles were generally just the 11 that were discipled by Jesus, plus Matthias, and Paul who was added later. They say that the “apostolic” teaching was what needed to be finalized to complete the transitional period and that this was primarily done by their writing of the New Testament. Thus, there are no longer apostles in the church today. While it is true that the word “apostles” – which simply means “called-out ones” in Greek – is primarily used of the original 11 plus Matthias in Acts, there is one interesting verse in Acts 14:14 where Barnabas is called an apostle. He was neither discipled directly by Jesus nor is he accredited for the writing of any Scripture. Furthermore, many of the writers of the New Testament were never called apostles (Mark, Luke, Jude, James,³ perhaps the author of Hebrews), so it does not seem that “apostles” were tasked to bring an end to a “transitional” period. Rather, if you take Barnabas’ apostleship seriously, it appears that they were primarily responsible for church planting and overseeing the doctrinal issues of the churches’ that they planted. This is certainly something that is normative to today’s church.⁴

Prophets/Prophecy: Again, the “transitional” view sees New Testament prophets just like Old Testament prophets – bringing the perfect revelation of God to the church similar in scope to Scripture. But this does not seem to be the case in the book of Acts. Prophets are mentioned in Acts 11, 13, 15, and 21. The most significant prophet in the book of Acts is Aggabus (Acts 11 and Acts 21). What is so fascinating about the prophecy in Acts 21 by Aggabus, is that he gets the details wrong. He prophecies that it will be the Jews in Jerusalem who will deliver Paul into the hands of the Gentiles (Acts 21:11). However, it is actually the Gentiles who bind Paul and deliver him to the Jews for trial (Acts 21:37-23:11). Thus, the most recognized prophet of the New Testament does not deliver a revelation of inerrant accuracy on par with Old Testament Scripture, yet prophets and prophecy are held in high regard in the rest of New Testament writing (1 Thess. 5:20). This would seem to indicate that there has already been a transition that has taken place with regard to the office of prophet and prophecy. Could it be that with the full

³ It is possible that James is numbered among the apostles in Acts 15, but he is more likely one of the elders.

⁴ For a much better treatment of this issue, see Sam Storms article *Are Apostles for Today* on his website: <http://www.enjoyinggodministries.com/studies/controversial-issues/>.

revelation of who Christ was, a different form or revelation powered by the Holy Spirit was given to the office of the prophet for the normal operation of the church?⁵

This brief survey of Acts shows that it is possible for the gifts of the Spirit to have a “normal” place in the life of the church for all ages. But what about the main argument of the “transition” camp: does ongoing revelation of the Holy Spirit harm the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture? To answer this, let’s briefly look at Acts 2.

In the sequencing of events, the 120 are in the upper room praying, God pours out His Spirit on them, they are gifted with foreign tongues, spill out into the street speaking the Gospel in languages they don’t understand, Peter preaches to the crowd, and then 3,000 people get saved and the church is founded. Notice this, *the gifts of the Spirit are at work, but they must still be backed by the foundation of Scripture before salvation takes effect.* Everyone heard the gospel in their own tongue spoken by the various 120, but it wasn’t until after Peter preached from Joel 2, and Psalm 16 and 110 that the people believed. Thus, ultimately, it was the sufficiency of Scripture working with the gifts of the Spirit to bring about the birth of the church. If tongues were a “transitional” revelation that was on par with Old Testament Scripture, why would Peter need to appeal to the Old Testament?

It seems that it is perfectly acceptable for Scripture – Old and New Testament – to completely maintain its sufficiency for the life and godliness of the church and its members, while at the same time the Holy Spirit can be speaking to His people in different ways to empower them for the purposes of the Gospel and the Kingdom of Christ. Acts seems to show both as a constant norm in the church of Acts and the church of all time.

Church History:

So, if gifts of the Spirit are to be the norm, why did they disappear for much of church history?⁶ First, there is a growing belief among scholars that the gifts did not actually disappear, but were just rare between roughly A.D. 300 and 1600. Secondly, 1 Thessalonians 5:19-20, not only teaches us that we can quench the work of the Spirit in our lives, but links it to despising one of His gifts (prophecy). It might be possible that the way the church approached doctrine during this time restrained the full expression of many of the Holy Spirit’s gifts. Finally, as mentioned in the introduction, Acts was written over a 30-year period, and its events, while normative, are albeit extraordinary. It is also possible that with the lack of comprehensive recordings of church history outside the Catholic Church, many events are simply not recorded and are far between in actual history. It is sufficient to say that just because something is rare in history does not mean that they did not exist or that this rarity is a solid basis to believe in their actual extermination.

⁵ For a much better treatment of this issue see: Wayne Grudem’s *Bible Doctrine*, p. 396-426; or Sam Storms’ sermon “The Power of the Prophetic and How to Learn from Mistakes,” June 17, 2008 at the Grace Church website: www.gracelife.com/index.php?section=resources_sermons

⁶ For a much better treatment of this issue see Sam Storms’ article *Spiritual Gifts in Church History* at his website: www.enjoyinggodministries.com/studies/controversial-issues/

Resources and Recommended Reading:

Recommended Reading:

The Message of Acts, The Spirit, the Church and the World (Bible Speaks Today Series) by John Stott

Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work (John Stott Bible Studies), by John Stott and Phyllis J. Le Peau

The Gospel of the Kingdom, Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God, George Eldon Ladd

The information used for this background essay was taken from the following resources:

Acts – Baker Exegetical Commentary) by Darrell Bock

The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary by Ben Witherington III

The Expositor's Bible Commentary John and Acts edited by Frank E. Gaebelein

Lectures by Dr. Scott Kellum, associate professor of New Testament and Greek at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forrest, NC

Lectures by Dr. David Hogg, associate professor of Theology and Church History at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forrest, NC