

ACTS

Part One



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Part One



Becoming a Christian

In the Bible, God reveals His truth about how to have eternal life by becoming a believer in the finished work of Jesus Christ. The believer is a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, a true child of God, and one who has been saved by God according to God's grace (undeserved favor). "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8–9).

HOW DOES ONE BECOME A CHRISTIAN?

The Bible, God's word, says that eternal life (salvation) is a free gift of God which cannot be earned or deserved (Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:8–9).

However, we also find in God's word that all people are born sinners and cannot save themselves from the penalty of sin, which is eternal death and separation from God. God's requirement is perfection and no one is perfect (Isaiah 53:6; Romans 3:3–23; Ephesians 2:1–4).

God tells us in His word that He is holy, meaning that He is perfect and that He is also just, meaning that He gives to sinners what is deserved, and because of His holiness and justice He must punish sinners. But thankfully, the Bible also says that God is loving and merciful and does not take pleasure in punishing sinners (Exodus 34:6–7; Ephesians 2:4–5).

God has mercy on sinners by not giving them what they deserve. This is only possible because He gave His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, the God-man, to be the substitute for sinners bearing the penalty for their sin and satisfying God's justice (John 1:1,14; Isaiah 53:6; Romans 5:8).

Jesus said that in order for anyone to have eternal life there must be repentance of sins and faith placed in His substitutionary death on the cross to pay for the penalty of one's sins. This faith must be in Jesus Christ alone, not depending on anything else including "good works" (Mark 1:15b; Acts 20:21; Ephesians 2:8–9).

WHAT THEN IS THE RESPONSE TO THESE THINGS IF ONE DESIRES TO HAVE ETERNAL LIFE AND BECOME A CHRISTIAN?

1. Pray and ask God to forgive you. The Bible says that you must repent of your sins, being ashamed of them, genuinely regretting and grieving over them, and firmly deciding to make an about-face and turn away from sin and your old lifestyle (Acts 3:19–20).

2. Pray and tell God that you place your faith in Jesus Christ alone to save you. The Bible says that for you to become a Christian, you must place your faith and trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ who died on the cross to become your substitute and who took the penalty for your sin upon Himself once and for all (John 3:36).



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Preparation

[PREPARATION]

✦ GETTING READY

How did the disciples prepare to become Jesus's witnesses?

Read Acts 1.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to help you understand how Jesus calls and prepares His disciples for His mission in the world.

[THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

When Jesus ascended into heaven, He promised to send His Holy Spirit to empower His disciples to become His witnesses in the world so they could carry on His mission and ministry.

✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

This chapter is a good place for biblically situating the doctrine of the ascension. In Acts 1 Luke depicted Jesus's ascension as a homecoming and the finishing of a course. However, the ascension is itself a transitory period, during which Jesus reigns as king of creation and prepares to return in glory to restore and judge the whole earth.

✦ MEDITATE

He [Jesus] said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. 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'" (Acts 1:7–8).

[GETTING STARTED]

+This section will introduce the lesson by identifying the main point of the passage and offering a preliminary application of it.

QUESTION *Why do you think Jesus spent forty days with His disciples after His resurrection before ascending to heaven?*

QUESTION *What does it mean to be a witness for Jesus in the world today?*

Now what? Jesus had risen from the dead. They'd seen Him, talked with Him, eaten with Him, learned new ways of reading the Scriptures from Him. But what would it all be *for*? After all, not all His promises had yet come true. He said He was going to the Father, and He said He would send the Holy Spirit. And then ... they had each other, their collective memory of their time with Jesus, the Scriptures, and some general direction (e.g., "Make disciples!").

But many questions remained unanswered. What would become of Israel in general, and Jerusalem in particular? What was the greater meaning of the Old Testament promises of restoration and renewal? To whom would they turn when they faced a severe threat from a local authority, an interpretive issue about the Scriptures, or an unexpected manifestation of spiritual power? Who would be "in charge," and what would it even mean to be "in charge" anyway?

✚ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Acts 1:1–8 tells the story of Jesus at the end of His forty days of resurrected ministry, promising the disciples He would give them the Holy Spirit. Acts 1:9–11 narrates Jesus's ascension and includes symbolic and conversational details that help readers understand its significance. Acts 1:12–26 tells the story of Peter answering Jesus's challenge to strengthen his brothers by initiating a process to replace Judas. Taken together, these passages show the ways Jesus prepared His disciples to become His witnesses.

1. *The promise of the Holy Spirit*
2. *The ascension*
3. *The selection of Matthias*

+This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 1.

1. *The promise of the Holy Spirit*

✦ READ ACTS 1:1–8

QUESTION *Luke mentioned the Holy Spirit three times in these first eight verses. What did he say he wanted his readers to notice about the Holy Spirit at the beginning of this book?*

QUESTION *Luke pointed out that Jesus “presented himself alive” to His disciples for forty days (v. 3). What other things in the Bible happened for periods of forty days (or years)?*

In the first eight verses of his second book, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Luke gave his readers the context needed to understand the beginning of the history of the church.

In verses 1–2, he made an explicit link between *The Acts of the Apostles* and *The Gospel According to Luke*. Luke referred here to his Gospel as “the first book” and characterized its contents as all that Jesus began to do and teach until His ascension. (Luke concluded his Gospel with his account of the ascension in 24:50–53). One of the subtle points made in this introduction is that what Jesus did before He ascended to heaven was just the beginning. The things His disciples would do and teach, particularly the things recounted in this book, are called the acts of the apostles, but Luke made the point that they could also be called, in a manner of speaking, the continued acts of the ascended Jesus.

In verse 3, Luke described the resurrection as a period of transition between the events at the climax of his Gospel and those at the beginning of this book. Instead of describing the resurrection as an event—which it certainly was—he described it as a period. Specifically, he pointed out that it was a period of forty days. When we read “forty days,” Luke wanted us to recall other forty-day periods, such as Noah’s forty days and nights of the flood, Israel’s forty years of wandering in the wilderness, and Jesus’s forty days of temptation in the wilderness. In each of those instances, forty days was a time of waiting and transition after a significant experience of God’s salvation—protection from the flood, deliverance from Egypt, baptism in the Jordan. Even here, Jesus spent the forty days following His resurrection simply waiting and preparing His disciples for the kingdom of God.

In verses 4–5, Luke pointed out one of the things Jesus said during this forty-day period: that the disciples should wait for the promise of the Holy Spirit. Most recently, this repeated Jesus’s promise in Luke 24:49

nearly verbatim: “Behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” But this promise of the Holy Spirit recalls two other significant prophecies about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all flesh. In Joel 2:28–32, God said, “It shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.” In Ezekiel 36:26–27, God said, “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit ... I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” These passages, which you may want to read in full, help us understand what Jesus wanted His disciples to wait for. This would happen, Jesus said, “not many days from now” (Acts 1:5).

In verses 6–7, the disciples responded to Jesus, and they showed their fundamental misunderstanding about the kingdom of God. They asked Him whether at this time, the time of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit in “not many days,” He would also restore the kingdom of Israel (v. 6). Jesus corrected their misunderstanding by outlining the scope of the beginning of their mission. In short, the answer was no. But when He pointed out that it was not for them to know the “times or seasons” (*chronous e kairous*), He was reminding them of a verse in Daniel: “Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes time and seasons (*chronous e kairous*); he moves kings and sets up kings” (Daniel 2:20–21). In other words, issues of timing within the kingdoms of the earth is up to God.

In verse 8, Jesus reoriented their expectations about the kingdom of God. He characterized them in two keywords: “power” and “witnesses” (*marturios*). As we pay attention to the acts of these apostles, we will look for their demonstrations of power and the way they bore witness to, and were literally martyred for, the kingdom of God. Luke used Jesus’s answer about the scope of their witness to organize the rest of his book. The Acts of the Apostles begins with their works of power and witness in Jerusalem (Acts 1–7), zooms out to Judea and Samaria (Acts 8–12), and then expands to “the end of the earth” (Acts 13–28). Just as Jesus identified Himself as the anointed servant of God (Luke 4:18–19; cf. Isaiah 61:1), He identified His disciples as anointed to be “a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6; cf. Acts 1:8).

QUESTION *Why did Jesus want the disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit?*

QUESTION *Based on His answer to their questions and these allusions to the Old Testament, what did Jesus want the disciples to know about the kingdom of God?*

APPLICATION POINT / First, we should follow Jesus's advice to wait before we jump into ministry. While Jesus didn't tell the disciples to wait indefinitely, there is certainly wisdom in respecting the biblical tradition of wandering, slowly assimilating all the lessons you've learned from God's expressions of favor and allowing Him both to expose your misunderstanding about His mission and clarify what He actually wants to do in your life. When we jump in headfirst without waiting on God to work in our lives, we're prone to misunderstanding His mission and taking bold steps we might later have to walk back.

Second, we should expect God to challenge and reorient our nationalist assumptions. The disciples misunderstood the nature of God's kingdom, expecting an imminent restoration of their own nation. And who doesn't, in some way, want that? But part of God's sanctification of our hearts is His sanctification of our political imaginations. After forty days—or forty years—of waiting with God, imagine how different our understanding of His vision for the kingdoms of the world might be.

QUESTION *What areas of your life or ministry might require more patience and dependence on God's Spirit before moving forward?*

QUESTION *How might your expectations about what God is doing need to shift to align with His kingdom purposes?*

2. The ascension

✚ READ ACTS 1:9–11

QUESTION *How did Luke describe Jesus's ascension? Pay attention to the physical aspects.*

QUESTION *What do you think was the purpose of the ascension?*

Acts 1:9–11 tells the very important story of the ascension in a very brief passage. We'll take this passage in three parts.

First, Luke narrated the ascension itself (v. 9). The phrase "he was lifted up" has both a physical meaning and a symbolic one. When we think of Jesus being lifted up, we should think about other passages in the

New Testament that describe His exaltation, like Philippians 2:9–11. The cloud should remind us of several significant clouds in the Old Testament. The cloud associated with the presence of God in Exodus 13:21–22 led the Israelites through the wilderness on their long journey out of Egypt and into their new land. The cloud associated with God’s glory that filled the temple in 1 Kings 8:10–11 signified God’s approval of Solomon’s building project and showed Israel that since they had left Egypt in Exodus, consecrating their temple meant they had *finally* settled into their new home. Or there is the cloud associated with the authority of a son of man in Daniel 7:13–14. In this passage, the son of man rides the clouds of heaven to receive authority and dominion in the presence of the Ancient of Days. Of all the verses about clouds, the ones from Daniel give us the fullest explanation of the meaning of the ascension. But by ascending on a cloud, Jesus showed His forty days of wandering were over, and He had finally settled into the “new land” of heaven to rest and reign.

Second, Luke narrated the disciples’ response (v. 10). They were left gazing into heaven. The moment is characterized by awe but also, perhaps, by confusion. They wouldn’t understand the meaning of Jesus going up into heaven until the Spirit was sent down from heaven to give them understanding. The disciples’ gaze could also be one of the scenes Paul had in mind when he exhorted the believers to “set your minds on things that are above, not things that are on earth” (Colossians 3:1–4). The two men in white in the scene likely were angels, and their appearance at this moment can be interpreted as a divine confirmation of the significance of the ascension. Just as two men in white flanked the empty tomb, saying “He is not here,” so two men flanked the ascended Christ.

Third, the men in white spoke (v. 11). The first part of their message prompted the disciples to shift their attention from the cloud that carried Jesus to the mission He had given them. This passage could be read either as a gentle rebuke, urging them to stop lingering and start actively waiting to receive the Holy Spirit, or as an acknowledgment that there is a time to look up and a time to look out (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:1). Several monastic communities, for example, take Acts 1:10 as a theme verse, identifying their special place in the diverse community of the church as those who stay put, ever looking up in prayer. The second part of their message adds a second promise to Jesus’s promise to send the Holy Spirit: the promise of Jesus’s return, or *parousia*. Jesus’s ascension was not Him leaving the world for good; it was His enthronement at God’s right hand, where He rules the affairs of the kingdom of God on earth and in heaven even more fully than before. The ascension was Jesus’s promise that He would fulfill “all that [he] began to do and teach” until He returns the same way He left.

All told, the ascension is not an ending but a transition. Having ascended, He rules all creation and intercedes for His people (see Romans 8:34; Hebrews 1:3). Having ascended, Jesus would now send the Holy Spirit, just as He had promised (John 16:7). Having ascended, Jesus will one day come again to judge and restore the whole world (see Acts 3:21; 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17).

QUESTION *What is the significance of the cloud?*

QUESTION *Why does it mean that the ascension is a transition, not an ending?*

APPLICATION POINT / First, we should live with purpose in anticipation of Jesus's return. The angels asked the disciples, "Why do you stand looking into heaven?" A lot of things we would like to know about—what heaven is like, God's plan for the kingdoms of the world, Jesus's return—aren't for us to know. Let's commit ourselves to discerning and participating in Jesus's mission to see more truly into the kingdom of God.

Second, we should reflect on the significance of Jesus's ascension. When we affirm the basics of our faith, we say Jesus rose from the dead, is ascended, and *will* come again. "Ascended" is Jesus's current state of being. Over the course of the next week, read and reflect on Scriptures like Daniel 7:13–14; Mark 16:19; Hebrews 1:3; and Romans 8:34 that give us insight into the significance of the ascension.

QUESTION *The angels asked the disciples, "Why do you stand looking into heaven?" How does this question challenge us to live with purpose as we wait for Jesus's return?*

QUESTION *How does better understanding Jesus's ascension affect your life personally? How does it affect your prayers?*

3. *The selection of Matthias*

✚ **READ ACTS 1:12–26**

QUESTION *Why do you think the apostles decided to replace Judas?*

QUESTION *How do you see Peter showing leadership in this passage?*

The disciples weren't ready yet. There was one thing left to do: replace Judas. In verses 12–26, Luke chose to tell the somewhat administrative story of how Matthias replaced Judas.

The disciples descended the Mount of Olives and returned to their life of waiting and prayer in Jerusalem. In these verses, Luke named the eleven remaining disciples (v. 13) and described the activities they conducted—namely, prayer—and the company they kept—namely, the women, Mary, and Jesus’s brothers. This was an “opt-in” community of whoever still believed in Jesus and attached themselves to the company of the apostles. While there may have been followers of Jesus under other roofs, this was the particular group to whom Jesus had promised the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In verses 15–20, Peter brought up the need to replace Judas. In Luke 22:32 Jesus had charged Peter with the words, “Strengthen your brothers.” In this moment, Peter stepped up to meet that charge. He made his case by appealing to Psalms 69:25 and 109:8, interpreting them through the lens of Jesus’s betrayal and death. Psalm 109:8 in particular voices the lament of a righteous person regarding his accuser. Peter read this as Judas’s betrayal of Jesus, saying of Judas, “Let another take his office!” This is an example of the emerging practice of spiritual interpretation of Scripture. Peter brought to mind what he called the Scriptures, and we call the Old Testament, and found new meaning in them based on his understanding of Jesus’s life and passion. This became a paradigm for interpreting Scripture in the first several centuries of the church.

In verses 21–22 Peter finished his speech by laying out the criteria for replacing Judas as an apostle. He established Jesus’s baptism by John in the Jordan as the start of His ministry and decided that a new apostle must be a “witness” to Jesus’s entire ministry career, starting then. While this was not a criterion for following Jesus, it was a criterion for becoming one of His chief witnesses. How else could this person, in the words of John, testify to “that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands” (1 John 1:1)? After all, Jesus had specifically commissioned these people to be His witnesses (Acts 1:8).

Based on the story of Matthias’s selection in verses 23–26, all that mattered to Peter was that whoever was chosen met the qualifications. The apostles prayed to God, who “know[s] the hearts of all” (v. 24). The word Luke used is a compound word, *kardio-gnostes*; literally, “heart-knower.” The final decision was made by casting lots, an old practice with roots in Leviticus 16:8 and Proverbs 16:33. From the Proverbs passage, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.” The effect was that Matthias wasn’t chosen by a loudmouth, by a persuasive faction, or by some unique qualification. Matthias was no one’s candidate; he was simply a witness to the life of Jesus, and that was enough.

QUESTION *Why did the apostles need to replace Judas?*

QUESTION *How would you describe Peter’s interpretation of Psalm 109:8, and how would you describe his leadership decisions?*

APPLICATION POINT / First, we should actually rely on prayer for guidance. The disciples devoted themselves to prayer in verse 14 and again in verse 24. In the end, they were content to let Peter's decision and the throwing of lots determine their next steps. Sometimes, we overthink important decisions, imagining we have the power to determine the outcomes of our own ventures. At other times, we don't give our decisions enough thought, leaving them to chance or to the powers that be. Like Peter, we should trust our ability to identify good criteria and then ask God to help us make faithful decisions.

Second, we should appreciate the importance of a faithful witness. Justus and Matthias were put forward because they had been faithful *witnesses* to Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. Notice that Luke made no mention of their gifts and abilities, resources and networks, families or schooling. The apostles put forward witnesses. In our lives, we should appreciate the value of faithful witnesses—those who have faithfully stood by their church, their workplace, their family, watching them go through high and low seasons. Ultimately, if we believe God is at work in the world, what more important work is there for us than paying attention to our own lives and the lives of others and bear witness to the ways we see God working? We have no witness to bear if we haven't witnessed—that is, *seen*—God at work.

QUESTION *What role does prayer play in your decision-making? What role does identifying good criteria play?*

QUESTION *In what ways can you grow as a more faithful and consistent witness to Jesus's work in your life?*

INEXT STEPS

Now, the apostles were prepared. Jesus had promised to send the Holy Spirit to empower them to be witnesses (Acts 1:1–8; cf. John 16:7); He had ascended bodily into heaven, finishing His course and taking His position as sovereign king of creation (vv. 9–11); and Peter had strengthened his brothers by restoring the twelve-strong team of apostolic witnesses. The overarching lesson from this week, perhaps, is that Jesus addresses our faulty imaginings about earthly power and sends us out as His *witnesses*. Each of us carries in our hearts an ideal for how the world should work, how leaders should conduct themselves and direct our affairs, and how people should behave. Many of us hope Jesus will help us realize our dream for how the world should work. This week let's bring our hopes to Jesus and ask Him to clarify for us what it means to be sent out into the world to be His witnesses.

[PRAY]

+Use this prayer as a guide to pray through these passages this week.

Almighty God, who exalted your Son Jesus Christ to reign at your right hand and poured out the promise of the Holy Spirit upon His people: Grant us patience to wait upon your Spirit, that we may be empowered to bear witness to your kingdom in every place. Reorient our hearts to seek your purposes above our own and fill us with hope in the return of our ascended Lord. Strengthen us for the work you have given, that we may proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth, through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Preparation

[PREPARATION]

✦ GETTING READY

What are the consequences of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit?

Read Acts 2.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to help you understand Luke's vision for gospel proclamation and gospel response in the power of the Holy Spirit.

[THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

The Holy Spirit empowers both the proclamation of the Word and the faithful response of devoted repentance.

✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Peter used Psalm 110:1 to support his claim that Jesus's ascension into heaven was His enthronement by the Father as "Lord" of heaven and earth. While Jesus was called Lord throughout the Gospels, His exaltation and enthronement mark an official transition in the way His witnesses talked about Him. From then on, Jesus was not only the Christ, or the Messiah; He was also Lord of all.

✦ MEDITATE

"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

[GETTING STARTED]

+This section will introduce the lesson by identifying the main point of the passage and offering a preliminary application of it.

QUESTION *What is the mission of the Holy Spirit?*

QUESTION *How does the Holy Spirit add individuals to the church?*

What comes to mind when you think about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit? Do you picture a series of miracles, a stunning visual display, a large worship service?

When Luke told the story of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, he used sensory language—“a sound like a mighty rushing wind,” “divided tongues as of fire” that “appeared” (vv. 2–3). Over the course of the story, there were signs and wonders (vv. 6–8, 43), but Luke didn’t linger long over those details. The heart of Acts 2 is Peter’s sermon, with the climax being the people’s response. The first fruit of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was mass repentance and corporate devotion, which this chapter gives us an iconic view of.

✦ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Acts 2:1–13 sets the scene and shows the disciples’ Spirit-filled ability to speak in languages understood by “devout men from every nation.” This scene reversed the story of the Tower of Babel and signified the Spirit’s mission to reunite people from all nations. Acts 2:14–36 recounts Peter’s proclamation, in which he took three passages from the Scriptures and used them to explain the outpouring of the Spirit and the enthronement of Jesus. Acts 2:37–47 captures the people’s response of repentance and devotion, giving us a window into the foundational practices of the first converts.

1. *The Holy Spirit descended*
2. *Peter preached*
3. *The people responded*

+ This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 2.

1. The Holy Spirit descended

✦ READ GENESIS 11:1-9; ACTS 2:1-13

QUESTION *In Genesis 11:1-9, why did God confuse the language of the people? What was He preventing?*

QUESTION *In Acts 2:1-13, what allusions do you see Luke making to the Old Testament?*

Perhaps no chapter in the book of Acts is as dependent on the Old Testament as this one. Luke began the story by pointing out it was “the day of Pentecost,” and everyone was “together in one place” (v. 1). That was because the Day of Pentecost was one of the Jew’s three “convocations” or pilgrimage festivals, the three high holidays over the course of the year when everyone who could, came to Jerusalem. Pentecost celebrated both the giving of the Law at Sinai and the beginning of the wheat harvest (see Exodus 23:16; Leviticus 23:15-21). To this day, Christians embrace Pentecost as a kind of harvest of souls (see, for example, John 4:35).

In verse 2, Luke described the “rushing wind.” When the first readers of this book heard these words, their minds would have recalled the Spirit’s hovering over creation in Genesis 1:2 and His resuscitation of the “dry bones” in Ezekiel 37:9-14. Luke was setting up his Pentecost story with the themes of new creation and new life.

In verses 3-4, tongues of fire “rested” on each of the disciples as they were filled with the Holy Spirit. The primary background for this passage doesn’t come from the Old Testament but from John’s words just before he baptized Jesus: “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matthew 3:11). The miraculous sign accompanying this baptism was their sudden and inexplicable ability to speak in languages not their own that were understood by the diverse groups of people around them who had also come to celebrate Pentecost (verses 4, 6).

At this point it helps to review two key passages from the Old Testament, the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 and the story of Abram's call in Genesis 12. Genesis 11 starts by pointing out that all the people spoke the same language (v. 1). As a result, they were able to collaborate in their prideful project of building a tower "with its top in the heavens" (v. 4). To stymie their pride, or keep them humble, God "confused their language" (vv. 7, 9), causing them to disperse and the project to die on the vine. In Genesis 12 God called Abram out of this dispersion, telling him He would make Abram "a great nation" (v. 2). Though Abram had to leave home and settle a new land, God would bless everyone who blessed him and curse those who cursed him (v. 3).

Turn again to Acts 2, picking up at v. 4. After confusing the language of the nations in Genesis 11:7 and 9, God gave the disciples the miraculous ability to speak in such a way that these "devout men from every nation" understood (vv. 5–8). To drive the point home, Luke listed seventeen different language groups present that day. In the face of this miraculous sign, people responded in two ways. Some opened their hearts and minds to this phenomenon, approaching it with wonder and curiosity: "What does this mean?" (v. 12). Others, quick to write it off, said the men were drunk (v. 13).

Putting the pieces and allusions together, here is the picture Luke has painted. On a day when devout Jews had come to thank God for the harvest, the Spirit blew as He had in creation, breathing new life into people who would become the harvest of God. Where He had formerly divided the people into different nations, God now began a new work of unity—reconciling the nations of the world into a community who would understand and collaborate with one another in the household of God. In this narrative, Luke presented the Holy Spirit as a harvesting force who inspires speech, breaks divisions, makes understanding possible, and creates new unity.

QUESTION *How does the story of Pentecost reverse the story of the Tower of Babel?*

QUESTION *How did Luke characterize the person and work of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:1–13?*

APPLICATION POINT / First, we should recognize the Holy Spirit as a unifier. Just as God reversed the division of Babel by enabling the disciples to speak languages understood by all nations, the Holy Spirit continues to break down barriers between people today. While we shouldn't expect the Spirit to descend in tongues of visible flame or give us fluency in French overnight, we *should* expect the Spirit to help us communicate the gospel to people in ways we couldn't in our own strength. Paul described God's mission as "breaking down in [Christ's] flesh the dividing wall of hostility ... that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace" (Ephesians 2:14–15).

Second, we should celebrate and find ways to participate in God's global mission. By reversing the divisions He prudently created at Babel, God showed His heart for gathering people from every nation into one unified family. Participating in God's global mission doesn't necessarily mean quitting your job and moving overseas, although sometimes it does. As we continue our study of The Acts of the Apostles, consider how you could devote more of your time, treasure, or talents to the church's ongoing efforts to reach the nations with the gospel of Christ.

QUESTION *How does the Spirit accomplish unity? How can we participate in this mission?*

QUESTION *How are you participating in God's global mission already?*

2. Peter preached

✚ READ ACTS 2:14-36

QUESTION *What points did Peter make in his sermon?*

QUESTION *What do you notice about the ways he commented on and interpreted these three Scripture passages?*

In Acts 2:14–36, Peter “strengthens the brothers” again by delivering what some have called the first Christian sermon, bearing witness to the resurrection while reciting and interpreting three passages of Scripture: Joel 2:28–32; Psalm 16:8–11; and Psalm 110:1. If you were to flip back and forth between Acts and these Old Testament passages, you might notice some significant differences in the wording. The reason for this is that Peter would have been quoting from what we call the Septuagint (LXX), a popular Greek translation of the Old Testament, where the Old Testament in our Bibles has been translated from Hebrew manuscripts (MT). Peter was not misquoting the Old Testament; he was simply reciting texts he'd learned and memorized from a different translation.

In verses 14–15, Peter refuted the accusations of drunkenness. In his opening words, he showed himself to be empowered by the Spirit, speaking with newfound courage and clarity. And just as Jesus had said, the gospel message began to spread in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 1:8).

In verses 16–21, Peter explained the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that has just occurred (v. 4) by reminding the people of the prophecy in Joel 2:28–32, reciting the entire passage. In these verses, Joel looked forward to a time—the last days—when God would “pour out” his Spirit on all flesh (v. 17). By “all flesh,” Joel meant all people, irrespective of age, sex, or social status: “your sons and your daughters ... your young men ... your old men ... male servants and female servants” (Joel 2:17–18). When the Spirit was poured on them, Joel said, they would prophesy, see visions, and dream dreams. Two parts of this prophecy are especially important for this book. First, Joel said God would show “wonders” in heaven and “signs” on earth (v. 19). Second, this would be an upsetting and unsettling time (v. 20) during which whoever cried to the Lord for salvation would indeed be saved (v. 21).

Peter proclaimed Jesus’s resurrection in verses 22–24. First, he linked Jesus’s “mighty works and wonders and signs” that his audience had seen or heard about to the wonders and signs in Joel 2:30 (cf. Acts 2:19). Those works of Jesus’s, said Peter, were a fulfillment of what Joel prophesied. Then, Peter described the significance in his own words, adding his own theological reflection on the event. He described Jesus’s death as planned and foreknown by God (v. 23) and depicted the resurrection as God unbinding the cords by which death had tied Him down (*lusas tas dinas tou thanatou*, v. 24). This metaphor was picked up by subsequent Christian preachers, like Polycarp in *Epistle of Polycarp*, 1.2.

In verses 25–28, Peter recited a second passage of Scripture, this one from Psalm 16:8–11. In this psalm, David expressed his hope that God would not ultimately abandon his soul to Hades or “let [his] Holy One see corruption” (v. 27). In verses 29–33, Peter commented on this Scripture, pointing out that David remained dead (v. 29). Therefore, in these words, David must have been referring in some way to the promise God made to give him a lasting throne (v. 30; cf. 2 Samuel 7:12–16). Jesus was not abandoned to corruption (v. 31) but was raised up (v. 32) and set on the throne of heaven (v. 33a) from which He poured out His Spirit (v. 33b).

In verses 34–36, Peter quoted and explained Psalm 110:1. In this passage, David described a direct address he himself wasn’t a part of: “*The Lord said to my Lord ...*”. Throughout history, Christian commentators have pointed out that in these words David was describing God the Father enthroning Jesus, or God the Son. Psalm 110 is not only the most quoted psalm in the New Testament but also one of the most quoted psalms of the church fathers. Peter concluded his sermon by proclaiming Jesus was not only the Christ (meaning “Messiah” or “Anointed One”) but also Lord of heaven and earth, having been raised and exalted by God (v. 36). He didn’t beat around the bush either; for the second time, Peter pointed out that “you crucified” Him (vv. 23, 36).

QUESTION *How does Peter's sermon help you understand what it means to proclaim Jesus's resurrection?*

QUESTION *How does this change the way you read passages like Psalm 16? How might this change the way you read other psalms?*

APPLICATION POINT / First, we should ask the Spirit to empower us to bear witness to Jesus. In Acts 1:8, Jesus told His disciples the Holy Spirit would give them power to be His witnesses. We see this power in action for the first time in Acts 2:14–36. Just as in the days of Peter and the apostles, Jesus pours His Spirit onto His church to embolden us to bear witness to the ways we've seen His glory and experienced His life-giving power and understood the Scriptures. Ask the Spirit to make you, like Peter, bold to bear witness to Jesus.

Second, we should reflect on the Scriptures through the lens of the life of Jesus. The Old Testament tells the story of a people who were brought out of Egypt, settled in a land, exiled, and then brought back home as a redeemed community. The Gospels tell the story of a person, Jesus, who came up out of Egypt, ministered in Galilee and Jerusalem, was sentenced to death, and then raised back to life. At every point, the story of the Old Testament corresponds to an experience of Jesus. When we read the Scriptures or even the events of our lives and the world around us, we can note the ways they match the pattern of the life of Christ, "in whom all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17). If we do, we will have the same kind of insight into the Scriptures and the world that Peter had.

QUESTION *What would it look like to ask the Spirit to give you boldness?*

QUESTION *How would reading the psalms as pointing to Jesus deepen your Bible reading and your prayer life?*

3. *The people responded*

✚ **READ LUKE 3:10–14; ACTS 2:37–47**

QUESTION *How did the people respond to the sermon?*

QUESTION *What echoes of Luke 3:10–14 do you hear in Acts 2:37–47?*

Acts 2:37–47 narrates the people’s response to Peter’s sermon and then provides a famous depiction of the life of the early Christian community.

In verse 37, Luke described the people as having been “cut to the heart.” This recalls a picture painted by the prophet Zechariah during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah: “I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him ...” (Zechariah 12:10). Luke saw Zechariah’s prophecy being fulfilled and credited Jesus with “pouring out” on these people both a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy. They simply asked in response, “What shall we do?” This response has become a well-known line in what we call homiletics, or the study of preaching. When people are “cut to the heart” by the Word of God (see Hebrews 4:12), the question “What shall we do?” is an ideal response. This response also echoes the response the crowds gave John the Baptist after his preaching: “And the crowds asked him, ‘What then shall we do?’” (Luke 3:10).

In verses 38–40, Peter told them. First, he told them to “repent.” John the Baptist made his own message of repentance very practical: “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise;” “Collect no more than you are authorized to do;” and “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages” (Luke 3:11–14). We aren’t told exactly how Peter told people to repent, but Luke did say, “with many other words he ... continued to exhort them” (v. 40). It can be difficult sometimes to understand what repentance looks like. John the Baptist had a pretty good idea of people’s characteristic sins, based on how they dressed and their place in society. Many times, repentance simply comes down to divesting ourselves of what we’ve hoarded and becoming more serious in our generosity. What’s at stake, said Peter, is our entanglement in our “crooked generation,” constantly and subtly being encouraged to follow after ungodliness.

In verse 41, everyone who received Peter’s word followed his instruction to be baptized (cf. v. 38). Luke then said “about three thousand souls” were saved. Luke’s mention of “three thousand souls” recalls another key Scripture passage. Exodus 32 tells the story of the people immediately breaking God’s covenant by constructing and worshipping a golden calf. In verses 25–29, Moses commanded the Levites

gathered around him to put the idolaters to the death by sword. The narrator records, “That day about three thousand men of the people fell” (v. 28). Immediately following this verse, Moses told the Levites, “Today you have been ordained for the service of the Lord” (v. 29). Back in Acts 2:41, Peter spoke a word that “cut” the people to the heart, and three thousand were added to the community of believers.

In verse 42, those three thousand souls continued their repentance through their devotion to three practices. First, they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching—that is, the kind of apostolic interpretation and application of the Scriptures we just read about in verses 14–41, in the Gospels, and in the Epistles of the New Testament. (Notably, the apostles’ teaching wasn’t just doctrinal but also about how to practice repentance.) Second, they devoted themselves to “the fellowship of the breaking of the bread” (in Greek, this is one phrase). Their ritual commemoration of Jesus’s death bound them together in a community that spilled over into their common lives and involved other meals. Third, they devoted themselves to “the prayers,” which probably refers to the set times of prayer offered at the temple (see, e.g., Acts 3:1). These three practices have correspondences in verses 44–46. The apostles’ teaching corresponds to the practices of generous distribution; the fellowship of the breaking of the bread corresponds to “breaking bread in their homes”; and the prayers correspond to attending the temple together.

During this time, Luke added, the “wonders and signs” prophesied by Joel (Joel 2:30; cf. Acts 2:19) and performed by Jesus (v. 22) continued to be performed by the apostles (v. 43). These wonders and signs only motivated the repentant believers to engage in their devotions more seriously (v. 43). And it is these devotions of generosity, remembrance, and piety that resulted in the Lord adding to their number those who were being saved (v. 47).

QUESTION *What is the significance of the people’s response to the sermon?*

QUESTION *How did the people turn their repentance into habits?*

APPLICATION POINT / First, we should practice asking the question, What shall we do? When we read stories like this one, we are often tempted to measure ourselves against Peter, either imagining we’re called to live up to his example or that such a thing is impossible for us. Statistically speaking, most of us will spend the majority of our lives like these three thousand converts, tasked with responding to the heart-piercing words of the proclaimed gospel and figuring out how to disentangle ourselves from our crooked generation (v. 40). We should seek out leaders, mentors, and disciplers who can speak meaningfully to our stage of life and position in the world and tell us how to live lives of repentance and devotion.

Second, we should engage in communal practices of generosity, commemoration, and piety. When many of us hear the word “devotions” today, we usually think of silent and solitary engagement with the Bible or a spiritual book. But in Acts 2:42, “devotion” looked more like a monastery that offered a summer camp. Groups of people bonded over meals, and others divested themselves of extraneous assets. They attended temple together *several times a day*. What would it look like for us to strengthen our repentance by devoting ourselves—together and out loud—to common practices like these?

QUESTION *Who in your life can you ask to show you how to practice repentance?*

QUESTION *What is today’s equivalent of “the prayers” (2:42; 3:1)?*

[NEXT STEPS]

“What then shall we do?” This is an existential question we all must answer when we’re addressed by God’s Word. But it is also the practical question we must ask those who have devoted their lives to practices of repentance. Like many first-century Jews, we are entangled in a “crooked generation,” and Peter’s exhortation to save ourselves rings true for us today. This week celebrate Jesus’s ascension and outpouring of the Holy Spirit by devoting yourself more deeply to the practices of repentance—generosity, commemoration, and piety—and the Lord will only add to our number those who are being saved.

[PRAY]

+Use this prayer as a guide to praying through these passages this week.

Almighty God, who poured out your Holy Spirit upon the apostles at Pentecost, filling them with boldness to proclaim the gospel and forming your church as a people devoted to your Word, fellowship, and prayer: Grant us the same spirit, that we may repent of our sins, proclaim Christ crucified and risen, and live as a community marked by generosity, joy, and worship, to the glory of your name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Jerusalem

[PREPARATION]

✦ GETTING READY

How did the community of believers respond to threats from without and from within?

Read Acts 3–5.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to help you understand the early believers' example of authentic and bold generosity.

[THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

The Holy Spirit emboldens believers to speak about Jesus and practice generosity in the face of increasing opposition.

✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

The Holy Spirit is God. In the Nicene Creed, we say, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life." And in the Athanasian Creed, we say, "What quality the Father has, the Son has, and the Holy Spirit has." One of the texts the church uses to anchor our affirmation of the Spirit's divinity is Acts 5:3–5, when Peter called Ananias's lie a lie to "the Holy Spirit" and therefore to "God." We take this as evidence that, even very shortly after Pentecost, apostles, like Peter, referred to the Holy Spirit as God.

✦ MEDITATE

And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31).

[GETTING STARTED]

+This section will introduce the lesson by identifying the main point of the passage and offering a preliminary application of it.

QUESTION *How do churches grow?*

QUESTION *How should churches respond to opposition?*

In Acts 3–5, Peter, along with John, commenced his ministry leadership in Jerusalem. It began nicely, with a healing followed by a stirring and popular speech in the temple. After all, that’s how Jesus’s ministry had started. Once the Holy Spirit descended on Him in the form of a dove and He had spent time waiting in the wilderness, Jesus came out proclaiming a gospel of repentance and performing signs and wonders, garnering both support and opposition along the way.

The book of Acts differs in at least two ways. For one, the authority structure is significantly less clear. Peter responded to Jesus’s charge to “strengthen your brothers” by implementing decision-making mechanisms and speaking on behalf of the community. But as the community grew, we wonder what will happen next. We also see a community discerning how to welcome new members and begin a life on mission together. As they did, we’ll read about some beautiful instances of bold generosity as well as a disturbing instance of deceptive generosity.

✚ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Acts 3 tells the story of Peter healing a lame man, reincorporating him into the worshipping congregation, and taking the opportunity to proclaim Jesus as the source of salvation. Acts 4 tells the story of the apostles’ first obstacle, a cease-and-desist order from the rulers of the religious establishment. We’ll read both how Peter responded to the high priest and how the believers responded to the story Peter told them when he got back. Acts 5 tells the church’s first “fall” narrative, the story of Ananias and Sapphira’s attempt to deceive the church. In the latter half of the chapter, we’ll read about the escalating conflict between the apostles and the authorities.

1. *Peter’s ministry*
2. *Trouble without*
3. *Trouble within*

+ This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 3–5.

1. Peter's ministry

✚ READ ACTS 3

QUESTION *What did Peter and John do for the lame man? How did Luke conclude the story?*

QUESTION *What new language did Peter use to describe the death and resurrection of Jesus?*

Acts 3 tells the first two accounts of Peter's post-Pentecost ministry in Jerusalem. They're two happy ones: a healing story (vv. 1–10) and an account of another of his sermons, or proclamations (vv. 11–26).

The setting for this first healing story is Peter's attendance of "the prayers" in the middle of the afternoon (v. 1; cf. 2:42) at what we might call a 3:00 p.m. service. When they arrived at "the Beautiful Gate," the gate that divided the outer and inner courts of the temple, they met a man who was customarily brought there by his friends to beg for alms (v. 2). Giving alms at the temple was a common Jewish practice at this time (see Psalm 112:9), so begging for alms here would have been both normal and socially acceptable (v. 3).

The first gift Peter gave the man was the gift of mutual attention (vv. 4–5). Peter "directed his gaze" at him, and the man "fixed his attention" at them. Peter's response in verse 6 has become an iconic memory of the church, reminding us that whether or not we have the material means to change someone's life, we always have the ability to give our attention and speak a word of encouragement or prayer. But Peter also had the miraculous ability to proclaim the man healed.

Luke then recorded that the man "entered the temple with them" (v. 8). While he would have been invited to beg for alms, he would not have been admitted into the inner courts of the temple, according to a legalistic (over-)interpretation of 2 Samuel 5:8 by some influential rabbis. This healing also recalls the time Jesus healed the lame in the Jerusalem temple during the final week of His life (cf. Matthew 21:14). While it is unequivocally good news that the man was healed of his physical disability, Luke continued the good report by pointing out that the man was made able to join the company of believers who had come to praise God together (vv. 8–9; cf. 2:42). And this was good for those believers too. When they saw him

healed, they recognized him and “were filled with wonder and amazement,” which only strengthened their own faith (v. 10).

For the second time, Peter responded to the people’s amazement at these “signs and wonders” by proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus from several passages from the Scriptures (vv. 11–26). He began his proclamation by attributing this healing to the power of God and specifying that this God—their God—had “glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied” (vv. 12–13). Again, Peter pointed a finger at the men in the temple and said, “You killed the Author of life” (vv. 14–15). Although he didn’t mince words, he still extended a word of forgiveness—“I know that you acted in ignorance”—that echoes Jesus’s words from the cross, “They know not what they do” (v. 17; Luke 23:34). After all, Peter had denied Jesus too and had stood in the same need of repentance and forgiveness as these people.

At this point, Peter made the same exhortation he had made in his previous proclamation: “Repent” (v. 19). His message follows the same logic as Isaiah 58:1–12. In that passage, the Lord promised that when His people pursued His righteousness with generosity and justice, their “healing [would] spring up speedily” (v. 8). Here, Peter said their repentance would be followed by “times of refreshing” and the return of Jesus (v. 20). Jesus will remain in heaven “until the time for restoring all the things” (v. 21). It seems Peter had two hopeful futures in view: an immediate future of refreshment and a distant future of restoration.

Peter finished his sermon by bringing up two passages of Scripture from either end of *Torah*, Deuteronomy 18:15–19 and Genesis 12:3. In the first passage, Moses prophesied the future rise of a special Jewish prophet, whom Peter identified as Jesus (vv. 22–24). By referencing the second passage, Peter reminded the people in Jerusalem of God’s commitment to His promise to Abram, to bless his family in order to bless the whole world. He pointed out that “God ... sent him [Jesus] to you first, to bless you *by turning every one of you from your wickedness*” (vv. 25–26). If God blesses His people by turning them from their wickedness, then the exhortation to “repent” (v. 19) makes perfect sense.

QUESTION *How do you think Luke wanted his readers to think about the purpose and possibility of miracles?*

QUESTION *According to Peter’s proclamation, why should people repent?*

APPLICATION POINT / First, we should recognize that miracles serve a greater purpose than physical healing. To be clear, the New Testament emphasizes the importance of improving the material conditions of the poor through concrete acts of generosity. Remember Acts 2:45; and also consider Galatians 2:9–

10 and James 2:15–16. However, Luke draws our attention to the man’s restoration to the worshipping fellowship—his ability to attend “the prayers”—and the way his healing enriched both his joy and faith and the joy and faith of the other believers. We should ask God for healing and “times of refreshing” but desire that everyone might enjoy full participation in the congregation of God’s people.

Second, we should recognize repentance as the pathway to spiritual refreshment. Peter’s call to repentance in verse 19 is neither guilt-mongering nor navel-gazing; it was opening the door to “times of refreshing” from God’s presence. When we acknowledge our sins and wickedness and turn from them to God, we enjoy peace, purpose, and joy in His presence and in the community of believers. Repentance has a way of strengthening our ankles from the sin that leaves our bones broken (v. 7; Psalm 51:8).

QUESTION *How has God worked in your life in ways that welcomed you into more joyful participation in the congregation of the faithful, whether it was through a physical miracle or not?*

QUESTION *What makes an invitation to repentance a blessing?*

2. Trouble without

✚ READ ACTS 4

QUESTION *Why did the rulers of the temple arrest Peter and John?*

QUESTION *What is the nature of the conflict in verses 1–22?*

Acts 4 recounts the fallout of Peter and John’s healing of the lame man in Acts 3. It begins with their arrest and the defense they gave before the Sanhedrin (vv. 1–22) and then shifts to the response of the other believers, namely, their prayer (vv. 23–31) and their increased commitment to generosity (vv. 32–37).

The trial appears to have been an honest one. The healing had, after all, taken place within the temple grounds, and it was the provenance of the temple rulers—the high priest and the high-priestly family—to be “annoyed” by this unexpected display of power and conduct a formal investigation.

The way Luke tells the story, the temple leaders were annoyed that these men had entered the temple and begun teaching about Jesus and proclaiming His resurrection (vv. 1–2). Peter and John were held in custody, though many believed their words (vv. 3–4). The examiners got straight to the point: You invoked a power; what was it? (vv. 5–7). Peter’s response consists of four movements. First, he raised the point that the investigation was “concerning a good deed done to a crippled man,” implying that good deeds should need no justification (vv. 8–9). Second, he answered the question plainly: It was “by the name of Jesus Christ” (v. 10–11a). Third, he repeated his common refrain, reminding the leaders that “you crucified” him (v. 10; cf. 2:23, 36; 3:15). Finally, Peter said salvation is only in the name of this Jesus (v. 12).

Having heard Peter’s testimony, the rulers “were astonished” and “recognized that they had been with Jesus” (v. 13–14). To their credit, they took Peter’s critique (“We are being examined today concerning a good deed done,” vv. 8–9) to heart and let them go. Peter’s defense, however, hadn’t assuaged their deeper concern, the emergence of an undeniable and popular power creating converts at their temple (vv. 15–17). Leveraging their spiritual authority, they “charged” Peter and John not to speak in Jesus’s name (v. 18). Peter and John responded by appealing to their right to spiritual integrity, saying they must speak of what they had seen or heard from God (vv. 19–20). Since this miracle had been so well received and because people were praising God for it, the rulers levied a few more threats and let them go again (vv. 21–22).

Peter and John returned to the community with a story to tell (vv. 23). Far from tempering the believers’ enthusiasm, this episode only emboldened them. The believers, who had made a lifelong practice of singing the psalms at “the prayers,” were reminded of the opening words of Psalm 2. They didn’t so much interpret Psalm 2 as they used it to interpret what had just happened to Peter and John (vv. 24–28). Emboldened by this reading, they asked God for greater boldness to speak and for more signs and wonders to be performed in the name of Jesus (vv. 29–30). God responded to their prayer both by giving them the boldness they asked for and by “shaking” the place where they were gathered (v. 31). Whether Luke was describing a physical earthquake, a spiritual sensation, or social upheaval, we don’t know. It appears as if he was inviting his readers to use their imagination.

Acts 4:32–37 resembles Acts 2:43–47. In both passages, Luke points to the believers holding all things in common and meeting one another’s needs through charitable distributions (2:44–45; 4:32, 34–35). In this later passage, Luke adds that the apostles were not just “teaching” but giving their testimony with great power (v. 33), and he briefly introduces a new figure named Barnabas (vv. 36–37). Barnabas features more prominently in Acts 9–15, but Luke introduces him here partly to transition to the story he’ll tell in Acts 5. For now, Barnabas participated in the practice of holding all things in common by selling some of his land and bringing the money to the apostles for the distribution (v. 37). His act recalls Jesus’s words to Peter about leaving houses and lands for the sake of Jesus’s name (Matthew 19:27–29).

QUESTION *How did Peter defend himself to the rulers of the temple?*

QUESTION *How did the believers interpret what happened to Peter and John at the temple?*

APPLICATION POINT / First, we should respond to opposition with generosity. The early believers didn't respond to this first expression of resistance by hedging their bets; rather, they doubled down on their generosity. Barnabas even sold off his land because he believed the community of believers was a better investment. The boldness to speak is one thing, but the boldness to go "all in" in our pursuit of the kingdom of heaven is something else. When we face opposition of any kind, we should respond by increasing our generosity.

Second, we should pray the psalms to make sense of our circumstances. The psalms aren't the only prayers out there, but they were the prayerbook of the early church. In circumstances of every kind, they were able to articulate their struggles and their triumphs in the words of the prophets, kings, and musicians who had gone before them. The death and resurrection of Jesus didn't obscure the psalms but only unlocked new interpretations and deeper meanings. Consider incorporating the psalms into your regular prayer life and praying through them to understand the conflicts you find yourself experiencing.

QUESTION *What is the value of doubling down on generosity when the going gets tough?*

QUESTION *What would it look like for you to engage the psalms more deeply in your prayer life?*

3. Trouble within

✦ READ ACTS 5

QUESTION *What exactly was Ananias and Sapphira's sin?*

QUESTION *How did Peter and John continue to show their "boldness" in this chapter?*

Every time the Scriptures describe the people of God experiencing a glorious new beginning, there's a "fall" narrative that serves as a warning. In Eden, it was Adam and Eve transgressing God's boundaries, hiding from Him, and shifting the blame (Genesis 3). After the flood, it was Ham behaving extremely disrespectfully and inappropriately toward his father (Genesis 9). After their deliverance from Egypt, it was the Israelites' idolatrous creation of a golden calf (Exodus 32). In the tabernacle, it was Nadab and Abihu ignoring their instructions and offering unauthorized incense (Leviticus 10). In Acts 5, Barnabas's act of generosity was immediately followed by the duplicitous and deceptive act of false generosity by Ananias and Sapphira (vv. 1–11). Their story is followed by more signs and wonders (vv. 12–16) and then another trial (vv. 17–42).

Like Barnabas, a man named Ananias sold a piece of land (v. 1). Conspiring with his wife, he presented some of the sales revenue as if it were the whole in an attempt to appear more generous than he was (v. 2). Peter interpreted this act of duplicity as a "lie to the Holy Spirit" (vv. 3–5). Peter reminded him he was under no compulsion to sell the land in the first place; all of this was his choice. And Ananias died on the spot (vv. 5–6). When his wife, Sapphira, came in, Peter gave her an opportunity to tell the truth, reminiscent of God coming to Adam and Eve in the garden (vv. 7–8). Rather than confess, she stuck to her husband's story and died the same way (vv. 9–10). As with the death of Ananias (v. 5b), the death of Sapphira inspired fear (v. 11). The focus of the story is not duplicity and deceit writ large but specifically *lying to the Holy Spirit* (vv. 3–5, 9). What does it mean to lie to the Holy Spirit? This story doesn't provide a strict definition, but we can point to some clues. Ananias and Sapphira lied to the church; they sought approval from the Spirit-filled community and pretended to participate in the Spirit-inspired work of generosity.

The phrase "many signs and wonders" serves as a transition as Luke zooms out from this "fall" narrative to the broader story (vv. 12–16). Despite Ananias and Sapphira's sin, the community of believers grew. As they grew, their capacity to heal also grew, and people traveled from all over to see what was going on.

In verses 17–42, Luke recounts the next chapter of the conflict between Peter and John and the high priest. Having recently been "greatly annoyed," the rulers of the temple were now "filled with jealousy" and threw the men in prison (vv. 17–18). Without a struggle, an angel released the men and commissioned them to teach (vv. 19–20). Rather than seek their own escape, they simply returned to the first place they had gotten into trouble and continued teaching about Jesus (v. 21a). When the high priest summoned them for trial and the guards couldn't find them, someone tipped them off that Peter and John were in the temple (vv. 21b–26). In verses 27–32, the council questioned them, and they responded. Not only had they disobeyed the high priest's charge, but they also criticized them for killing Jesus (vv. 27–28). In Peter's response, he continued to refer to Jesus as the one "whom you killed" but whom "God exalted" and identified himself as a witness of all this (vv. 29–32).

This left the council “enraged” (v. 33), only to be pacified by the revered teacher, Gamaliel (vv. 34–39), who reasoned with the council as follows: first, he framed his advice by telling the “enraged” council to be careful (v. 35). Then, he reminded them of the religious movements led by Theudas (v. 36) and Judas (v. 37), neither of which amounted to anything. If this new religious movement, founded by Jesus and continued by the apostles, were a human effort, it would end with a whimper just like the previous ones (v. 38). It was in their best interest to let it fizzle out because, if they had judged wrongly, and this were a movement of God, then they’d find themselves having opposed God (v. 39). Agreeing with Gamaliel, the council increased the men’s punishment, beating them, and repeating their “charge” to cease and desist (v. 40). This only encouraged the men, who rejoiced and counted these punishments an honor. And they went on teaching and preaching as before (vv. 41–42).

QUESTION *How does Ananias’s brazenness compare to the apostles’ boldness?*

QUESTION *What do you make of Gamaliel’s advice?*

APPLICATION POINT / First, we should cultivate spiritual honesty. Ananias and Sapphira’s story warns us against pretending to be more generous or spiritual than we really are. They desired to *appear* holy without actually *becoming* holy. They sought recognition instead of transformation. Their story challenges us to ask ourselves how much we really want to be made holy and how much we are seeking to benefit from our participation in Christian community. We should strive to be honest before God and others.

Second, we should follow Gamaliel’s example of testing whether a work is from God. Just like the chief priests and Pharisees prematurely judged Jesus as being a blasphemer, so the council had prematurely judged Peter and John for putting Jesus’s death on their heads. Gamaliel wasn’t swept away by religious fervor but kept his cool and allowed this movement to play out. As a faithful Jew, He knew God would confirm the words of His prophets by bringing forth good fruit from them. Like Gamaliel, we can patiently watch the movements and works that spring up around us, paying attention to evidence of spiritual fruit.

QUESTION *What are some ways we might be tempted to present a more spiritual or generous image than is true?*

QUESTION *How can we discern whether a spiritual movement or work is truly from God? What signs of spiritual fruit should we look for?*

[NEXT STEPS]

These chapters urge us to double down on the practice of generosity, even in the face of opposition. Why should we do this? First, it's hard to imagine a more spiritual practice than attuning ourselves to the needs of those around us and sacrificing our own resources to meet those needs. This builds up the church in love. Second, generosity is an act of repentance, helping us disentangle ourselves from a crooked generation. Finally, authentic generosity is the only antidote to the temptation of false generosity—trying to appear better than we are. For all these reasons, commit yourself this week to following the apostolic pattern of true and bold generosity.

[PRAY]

+Use this prayer as a guide to pray through these passages this week.

Almighty and Everlasting God, who through signs and wonders confirmed the witness of your apostles and called many to repentance: Grant us boldness to proclaim the name of Jesus Christ that we may walk in your truth, offer ourselves with integrity and bear faithful witness to your mighty works. Strengthen our hearts by the power of your Holy Spirit that we may rejoice in suffering for the sake of the gospel and trust in your sovereign hand, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Stephen

[PREPARATION]

✦ GETTING READY

How do you feel about evangelism and witnessing? What are your fears, worries, doubts, or concerns around sharing the gospel with others?

Read Acts 6–7.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to help you see the need to boldly proclaim the gospel regardless of the consequences to your own life.

[THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

- 1) The Holy Spirit is a spirit of unity, not division; there should be no division in the church.
- 2) The Holy Spirit empowers believers to boldly speak the truth about Jesus regardless of opposition and persecution.

✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Those who reject the gospel are resisting the Holy Spirit. Stephen went through the history of God's relationship with Israel, how He called Abraham, was with Joseph and saved his family from the famine, called Moses to save them from slavery in Egypt, Joshua to bring them into the promised land, David to lead them, and Solomon to build a house for Him. He ended his sermon by confronting the Jewish leaders. They were stiff-necked and uncircumcised of heart, just like their ancestors who had grumbled in the wilderness and rejected the prophets God sent to bring them back to Him. They rejected and killed the Messiah—God Himself. Stephen called this hard heartedness “resisting the Holy Spirit” because it is the Holy Spirit who draws us to the Father (John 6:44). This happens not only with atheists who openly reject God but also with those who claim to know God, like these religious leaders, but did not even recognize Him when He came to earth because they misunderstood who God is and what religion is all about.

+ MEDITATE

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit” (Acts 7:51).

[GETTING STARTED]

+This section will introduce the lesson by identifying the main point of the passage and offering a preliminary application of it.

QUESTION *How should churches respond to division in the church?*

In Acts 6:1–7, division began to creep into the church, which had been supernaturally unified up to this point. This was not a small group of people; it was a community of thousands, from many different backgrounds and cultures, yet they were completely unified by the power of the Holy Spirit. But sin had crept into the church, and now there was division between different people groups. The apostles didn’t put up with this disunity. They didn’t ignore it or sweep it under the rug or split the church into different denominations. They confronted the disunity as the sin it was and put leadership in place to rectify it.

QUESTION *How can Christians boldly speak the truth about Jesus regardless of opposition and persecution?*

In the rest of Acts 6–7, we see the story of the stoning of Stephen, a man chosen as one of the first deacons. He was doing signs and wonders among the Jewish people, and they brought him before the Sanhedrin and the high priest, where they brought false witnesses against him. Instead of defending himself, Stephen reminded them of the story of Israel’s relationship with God throughout the Old Testament and confronted them for their uncircumcised hearts, saying they had rejected Jesus the way their ancestors had always rejected true prophets of the Lord. Though Stephen knew he was facing death for speaking the truth, he boldly declared the gospel and confronted them with hard truths about their false empty religion.

✚ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Acts 6:1–7 tells the story of the first division in the church between the Hellenistic Jews and the Hebraic Jews. As a result, the church chose a group of deacons to oversee the distribution of food so the apostles could focus on teaching and prayer. The rest of chapters 6 and 7 tell the story of the martyrdom of Stephen. He was captured by the Jews and brought before the Sanhedrin and the high priest, whom he confronted for their rejection of Jesus. Then he saw a vision of Jesus at the right hand of God, and the people stoned him to death.

1. *Division and Deacons*
2. *Stephen's Sermon*
3. *The Stoning of Stephen*

[GOING DEEPER]

+ This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 6–7.

1. *Division and Deacons*

✚ READ ACTS 6:1–6

QUESTION *Why did the Hellenists complain to the apostles? What was the apostles' solution to the conflict?*

QUESTION *What were the requirements for the leaders chosen to serve tables?*

The opening of this story tells us that the disciples were increasing in number (6:1). When churches grow, there are often “growing pains” like division, conflicts, and disagreements. Though the church is God’s kingdom on earth. It is made up of imperfect human beings; there will always be conflicts. The question is how you handle them.

The two groups in conflict were the Hellenists and the Hebrews, both Jewish groups. The first church in Jerusalem was made up of mostly Jewish Christians with a few Gentile proselytes; Gentiles didn’t really start coming to the faith until the gospel spread beyond Israel. But even within the Jewish people, there were many different cultures and languages because Jewish people lived in different countries throughout the region, not just in Israel. This is called the Diaspora, when the Israelites were dispersed from Israel to

other lands.

When the Israelites were brought out of Egypt (1445 BC), they all lived in Israel together. In 722 BC, the northern kingdom (Israel) was overthrown by Assyria and was dispersed. Those ten tribes were “lost”; they did not maintain their Israelite identity but assimilated into the cultures of other lands. In 586 BC, the southern kingdom (Judah) was exiled to Babylon. They worked hard to maintain their identity, and their people became known as “the Jews” (not Israelites). After seventy years of captivity in Babylon, a remnant returned to Israel, but many of them didn’t, and Jews continued to disperse to many different lands over the centuries. By the time of Jesus, there were Jewish communities all over the Roman Empire. We see this reality in Acts 2, where Jews from nations all over the empire gathered in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost (Acts 2:9–11). Within the Jewish people there were two main schools of thought about how they should relate to the culture of the nations in which they lived:

- Hellenistic Jews had adopted Greek culture, language, and ways but remained faithful to Israel’s God and the Jewish faith.
- Hebraic Jews refused to adopt Greek culture or language, maintaining cultural purity too, not just the Jewish religious faith.

You could compare Hebraic Jews to Hasidic Jews today, who reject technology, wear distinctive clothing and hair styles, live in separate neighborhoods, have separate schools, work in their own businesses, and follow traditional cultural practices on top of orthodox faith. Hellenistic Jews would be like a Jewish American who dresses like any typical American and participates fully in our culture while remaining faithful to their religion.

Most of the Jews living outside of Jerusalem in Gentile nations were Hellenized. Hebraic Jews were only in Israel, mostly in Jerusalem. When the first church started, a lot of Hellenized Jews were in Jerusalem visiting for the Passover festival. When Peter preached, both Hellenized and Hebraic Jews became Christians and joined together as the first church. When the church began, the Holy Spirit gave them a supernatural unity. Their community was unified in purpose and heart and shared everything they owned so that no one was in need. But very soon (the very next chapter!), sin began to creep in.

The church was pooling their resources so there was no one in need among them. One way they did this was by giving daily food to widows who could not provide for themselves in the Greco-Roman economy. At some point, the Hebraic Jews who led this ministry started to neglect the Hellenized widows. The Hellenistic Jews complained to the apostles, who agreed this wasn’t right. In the same way the apostles didn’t put up with sin in the church with Ananias and Sapphira, they didn’t put up with division in the church either. They didn’t ignore it or sweep it under the rug or split the church into denominations. They handled the situation, confronted the disunity as the sin it was, and rectified it.

Their solution was to have the people appoint seven Hellenized Jews to oversee the distribution to their widows. We know they were Hellenized Jews (and one Gentile proselyte to Judaism) because they were all Greek names. They were chosen by their own people from among their own people, which assured representative leadership. Though they aren't explicitly called "deacons" in the story, in the phrase "serve tables" the word "serve" is the verb form of deacon ("servant"), so this is considered the establishment of the office of deacons in the church. The apostles needed to focus on teaching and prayer, so they needed other leaders to handle the service ministries of the church. The serving ministries are no less important than the teaching ministry. These new leaders were held to the same high standards, to be of "good repute" and "full of the Spirit and of wisdom."

The apostles laid hands on these men and prayed for them, setting them apart for this position, similar to the way leaders were ordained in the old covenant by anointing with oil and prayer. This was symbolic of the Holy Spirit being laid upon them, empowering them for service.

QUESTION *How did the disciples' way of handling this situation include the people in the solution? What kind of leadership does this reflect?*

QUESTION *How did their solution keep the church unified and yet also recognize the diversity within the church?*

APPLICATION POINT #1: UNITY IN DIVERSITY / The apostles did not let this conflict divide the church. They confronted the conflict head on and came up with a solution that kept them together as one body while being honest about the diversity in their body and fair to all the different parts of the body. Their solution wasn't to split the church to "keep the peace." They didn't try to pretend there wasn't a cultural divide between the two groups. They recognized that both groups needed representative leadership to ensure one wasn't favored over the other.

APPLICATION POINT #2: DIVISION OF LEADERSHIP / The apostles recognized that they couldn't handle all the things that needed to be done around the church by themselves, so they created different leadership positions for different things. This doesn't mean serving ministries are less important than teaching ministries. It was just a wise division of labor, gifting, and calling. Scripture describes the church as a body with different jobs for different parts, all of which are equally important. The Holy Spirit gives different spiritual gifts to different people for their roles. It's important that we maintain this same attitude in our churches today. Of course, teaching/preaching is central to the ministry of the church, but the preacher/teacher is not any more important than any other "smaller" part of the body. We are all ministers, just in different ways—some big, some small. Every role in the body is equally important.

QUESTION *How have you seen churches build unity among diverse groups and members in their churches? How have you seen churches show equal inclusion to different cultures and groups?*

QUESTION *How would you describe your unique gifting and calling in the body of Christ? How have you been called and equipped to serve in ministry in the church and the world around you?*

2. Stephen's Sermon

✚ READ ACTS 6:7-53

QUESTION *Why did the religious leaders arrest Stephen? What does it tell us about his case that they brought false witnesses against him?*

QUESTION *What did Stephen accuse the Jewish leaders of doing?*

This section opens by telling us that the church continued to grow and even a great many of the priests became believers. Knowing the background of Jesus's story, this is shocking. Even some of the religious leaders who had opposed Jesus were persuaded to believe. This is amazing news, but it also created an even greater threat to the high priest and other leaders who wanted to maintain their power. The gospel will always be a threat to human power because it's all about humility and giving up your power to serve others.

Stephen was one of the seven Hellenized Jews chosen to be the first deacons/servants of the church. Acts describes him as "full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (6:5) and "full of grace and power" (6:8). But Stephen not only served tables at the daily food distribution to the widows, he also did great signs and wonders among the people in the community. He was not only empowered with the spiritual gift of service, but he was also given supernatural power to do miracles, along with supernatural wisdom and boldness to preach before the people, even the Sanhedrin and the high priest.

Because he was preaching the gospel and doing miracles, members of five different synagogues rose up against Stephen. The synagogue of the Freedmen was a synagogue of freed former slaves. The other four were made up of Jews from the regions mentioned. Notice the contrast between the church, who had built unity between different people groups, and the Jewish synagogues, which were divided by people groups. This detail in the text reminds us that it is only new life in Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit that bring unity in diversity among all different people groups.

They tried to argue with Stephen, but they could not withstand the wisdom he was given by the Holy Spirit. This was a typical “honor challenge” in their culture. A person challenged someone with a difficult question, and if they answered well, they gained honor and the person challenging them lost it. If they answered poorly or not at all, they lost honor and the person challenging gained it. This is the same thing the Gospels say about Jesus, that people constantly tried to challenge His wisdom, but no one could beat Him.

Because they couldn’t discredit him by this honor challenge, they stirred up the people, elders, and scribes, and brought him before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish supreme court/council. Also like Jesus, having no real evidence against Stephen, they brought false witnesses who said he spoke blasphemous words against Moses, God, the temple, and the Law. When he was standing before the council, God made His supernatural presence with Stephen visible; his face was like the face of an angel! Yet they still pushed back against him. This is how closed their hearts were to the Holy Spirit.

The people accused Stephen of saying Jesus would destroy Jerusalem and change the customs of Moses. This was a distortion of the gospel message, that we are not saved by the law but by grace. Jesus said He didn’t come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). Stephen responded with a long retelling of the Old Testament story, starting with the promises God made to Abraham all the way to Moses. He reminded them that their fathers refused to obey Moses in the wilderness (7:39), that the people of Israel, generation after generation, worshipped false gods and rejected the prophets God sent to bring them back to Him. Jesus didn’t reject the Law; He was actually the only person who ever kept the law of Moses perfectly.

Stephen called them “stiff-necked people” just as God had called Israel in the wilderness (Exodus 32:9). God had told them circumcise their hearts, not just their bodies (Deuteronomy 10), but Stephen said their hearts were still uncircumcised. Like Jesus, Stephen said they had persecuted all the prophets who had ever tried to speak hard truths to them (Matthew 5:12). They resisted the Holy Spirit, like God’s people had always done. They thought they were being religious, but they missed the whole point of their religion, which was to draw them near to God. It was not Jesus who hadn’t kept the Law of Moses, it was them (7:53).

Like Israel had done for generations, they were performing empty rituals, but their hearts were so far from God that they didn't recognize Him when He came and walked in the flesh among them. They rejected Jesus just like their ancestors had rejected the prophets who spoke God's true Word. He was the Righteous One, the Messiah, God-made-flesh, and they murdered Him. Stephen called Jesus's death what it really was—not the execution of a criminal, but the murder of an innocent man, the only Righteous One who ever lived.

QUESTION *Why did Stephen respond to their accusations with a review of God's covenant relationship with Israel from Abraham to Moses? What was he trying to show them?*

QUESTION *Why did Stephen call these people “stiff-necked” and “uncircumcised in hearts and ears”? What do those phrases mean and how are they connected to the story of the Old Testament?*

APPLICATION POINT / Stephen's sermon challenged the emptiness of following religion yet completely missing God Himself. There were a few people throughout the Old Testament who knew God in an intimate relationship of faith (Abraham, Joseph, Moses, etc.), but most of the people followed the religious rituals and missed God Himself. How many people still do this today? How many people sit in church every Sunday but completely miss having a real relationship with Jesus? How many people think Christianity is about following a set of rules instead of following Jesus? How many of us have such a distorted view of who Jesus is that we wouldn't recognize Him if He walked into our churches today? This is the challenge of Stephen's sermon for us. If Jesus showed up in our world today, would we follow Him or crucify Him? Do we really know who Jesus is? Do we have an authentic relationship with Him? Or are we just play-acting at an empty religion?

QUESTION *What does a real relationship with Jesus look like in today's world? How can you know you are really following Him, not just empty religion?*

QUESTION *What misconceptions do people in our world today have about Jesus and Christianity? How can you show them who Jesus really is?*

3. The Stoning of Stephen

✚ READ ACTS 7:54–60

QUESTION *Why was the Sanhedrin enraged by what Stephen said?*

QUESTION *What are the similarities between Stephen's death and Jesus's?*

Stephen boldly confronted the Sanhedrin and the high priest with the very hard truth—they thought they were religious, even the highest religious leaders of the land, but they didn't know God at all. So much so that they didn't recognize Him when He came in human form and spoke the truth about the kingdom. But instead of causing them to repent and turn back to God, Stephen's message only enraged them. Grinding their teeth was a sign of imminent attack.

Instead of being afraid, Stephen gazed into heaven. This phrase gives us a sense of calm. He was "full of the Holy Spirit," a spirit of peace, not fear. When he looked up, he saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father. The right hand was the position of honor—Jesus is God the Son, king with Him over all creation. Jesus was standing, not sitting, which means His work is not yet done. A king sits on the throne to rule in peace when the battle is over. For now, Jesus has conquered sin and death, but He is still fighting the spiritual battle with the kingdom of darkness over the souls of humankind until He returns to judge all humanity and usher in the final consummated kingdom of God.

Stephen told them what he saw, but they "stopped their ears." He had called them stiff-necked and uncircumcised of heart and ears, and now they proved it. They refused to listen to the truth. Even though they had visibly seen God's glory was upon him (6:15), though they had seen him do miracles (6:8), though they had heard him preach the truth (7:1–53). They refused to believe because he had called them out. They cast him out of the city and stoned him, which was the punishment for blasphemy. In their minds, saying Jesus was the Son of Man was blasphemous. The Son of Man was the figure from the vision of Daniel 7, the heavenly being who was "like a son of man" (God-made-flesh), to whom the Ancient of Days (God the Father) gave all authority, glory, and sovereign power. The one whom every nation will worship, whose dominion is everlasting, and whose kingdom will never be destroyed. But it's not blasphemy, it's true. Jesus is the God-made-flesh king who will reign forever at the right hand of the Father. But their hearts were too closed to hear it.

Stephen's vision assured him that what he was preaching was true and that even though he would die for the gospel at this moment, he would immediately enter eternal life with Jesus in His kingdom. He could see, literally, that the suffering of this present moment was nothing compared to the eternal glory to come

(Romans 8:18). If he had any fear of death, this vision would have given him the strength to endure it.

As Stephen was being stoned to death, he said two of the same things Jesus had said on the cross, but asking these things of Jesus rather than the Father: to receive his spirit and not to hold this sin against those who stoned him. This is in addition to when we saw that Stephen was like Jesus in his incomparable wisdom, in his miracles, and in the fact that they brought false witnesses to testify against him. Those who follow Jesus and have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them will be like Jesus in the way that they live, the way they speak truth with boldness even in the face of death, and the way they love and forgive their enemies.

QUESTION *What does Stephen's death tell us about him? What did it tell us about Jesus?*

QUESTION *What does Stephen's death tell us about the way the world will respond when we boldly speak the truth about Jesus, especially when we call them out on their sin and hard-heartedness?*

APPLICATION POINT / Stephen was the first martyr of the church. Like all the prophets before him, including Jesus, the hope of his message was that people would repent and turn back to the Lord, which some will do when we preach the gospel. But others, especially those whose power or status are threatened by our words, will become enraged and seek to silence us by whatever means necessary. Some, like these leaders, will even think they are doing the right thing by persecuting us; they'll think they are saving others from our "lies." Stephen's story shows us what it looks like to preach the truth boldly regardless of the consequences to ourselves and put our trust in our eternal future even if it means suffering or death in this life.

QUESTION *In what ways are you boldly sharing the gospel with others in your life?*

QUESTION *Have you encountered resistance to the message? How can you overcome those obstacles to get the message out?*

[NEXT STEPS]

Share the gospel, even if it's unpopular. These chapters remind us that the most important thing in life is to share the gospel with others. This is the message and the mission we've been entrusted with as God's people, the church. In our culture, a lot of people are resistant to hearing about Jesus. There are very few people in our culture who haven't heard about Jesus at all. Most people have already heard the gospel message (or some false version of it) and have already rejected it (or the false version). Or they may have rejected Jesus based on a negative experience with the church. Many people are like these religious leaders; they think they are already following the right thing because they are religious, but they have missed Jesus Himself.

This week let's refocus on sharing the gospel with everyone we encounter in our daily lives in whatever ways we can. It may be in small ways here and there for certain people and situations, or you may have a full-blown conversation with someone if it feels like they're ready for it. Pray for opportunities to witness to people and then keep your eyes and ears open for ways you can share the gospel this week.

[PRAY]

+Use this prayer as a guide to pray through these passages this week.

Dear God the Father, the Ancient of Days, and God the Son, who stands at His right hand, give us the boldness to speak the truth of the gospel to everyone we encounter, even when it's hard. Even when it means confronting people who think they're religious but are missing out on Jesus. God, we pray for those who don't know you, that their eyes may be opened and their hearts may be softened to hearing the truth, repenting, and turning back to you. Give us the words to say and give us the hearts to love others, even our enemies. Thank you for the gift of salvation, by which we have the kind of secure hope in our eternal future that gives us no fear of death. In the name of the one to whom has been given all glory, honor, and dominion forever. Amen.

Judea & Samaria

[PREPARATION]

✦ GETTING READY

How does Jesus's call to love our enemies differ from other religions and philosophies?

Read Acts 8–9.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to help you understand the way the early believers passionately shared the gospel with everyone they encountered, even their enemies. Ask Him to give you that same kind of passion for sharing the gospel.

[THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

The Holy Spirit calls us to share the gospel to everyone, including our enemies.

✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

The Great Commission that was given to the first disciples was meant for all of us, the church in every generation. Every disciple is called to make disciples—to bring more people into the kingdom (baptizing) and help them grow in spiritual maturity (teaching). Or as Jesus said here in Acts, to “be my witnesses” everywhere we go. Many of us get overwhelmed by the idea of sharing the gospel or making disciples or by that big, scary word—evangelism. We picture standing on street corners, preaching to big crowds, or making viral TikTok videos. We might think we should have a theology degree, have studied the Bible for a certain number of years, or be able to answer all the hard questions. But Jesus describing it as being His witnesses helps us see that any believer can do it. When you are a witness in court, you only have to tell what you have seen and heard. You don't have to know every detail about the situation, just what you witnessed yourself. When we are Christ's witnesses, we just share our story, our testimony of what Christ has done in our lives, how He has changed us, what we know from our own personal experience with Him. We don't have to have all the answers. We just have to tell our story.

✚ MEDITATE

“So there was much joy in that city. ... The eunuch ... went on his way rejoicing” (Acts 8:8, 39b).

[GETTING STARTED]

+This section will introduce the lesson by identifying the main point of the passage and offering a preliminary application of it.

QUESTION *Think about people you may consider your enemies. Why do you feel that way about them?*

QUESTION *Do you want them to be saved and come to know Jesus?*

In Acts 8–9, the church was scattered from Jerusalem by the persecution happening there. The deacon Philip went to Samaria and preached the gospel to the Samaritans, the greatest enemies of the Jews, and many of them believed. Then Jesus Himself appeared to Saul, the greatest enemy of the church, and he believed and was completely changed. These stories show us that no one is ever so far from God that they cannot repent and come to Him. Even the people we may consider our greatest enemies. Even people we think are cruel or evil. No one is irredeemable.

That’s why we should share the gospel with everyone. Even people who seem to hate Jesus, the church, and everything about it. God desires all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Jesus died for us when we were still His enemies. We were once His enemies too! He wants to save His enemies, your enemies, my enemies. Instead of hating them, shunning them, or trash talking them, we should be praying for them, sharing the gospel with them, telling them about Jesus. Because we could have a Saul-to-Paul moment with them. Jesus’s greatest enemy could become His greatest advocate. Your greatest enemy could do a one-eighty and completely change if the Holy Spirit got a hold of him.

✚ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Acts 8 tells the story of Philip preaching the gospel in Samaria after Stephen’s stoning, when a great persecution broke out in Jerusalem, and the church scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Philip preached to many people, including a magician and an Ethiopian eunuch. Acts 9:1–31 tells us the story of the conversion of Saul, who had been the leader of the great persecution of the church in Jerusalem. Jesus appeared to Saul on his way to Damascus and called him to be His instrument to the Gentiles. Acts 9:32–42 tells us the story of Peter raising the disciple Tabitha (Dorcas) from the dead.

1. Philip in Samaria

2. The Conversion of Saul

3. Peter in Judea

[GOING DEEPER]

+ This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 8–9.

1. Philip in Samaria

✚ READ ACTS 8.

QUESTION *Why did Peter rebuke Simon the magician?*

QUESTION *How do we see Philip following the leading of the Holy Spirit?*

In Acts 1:8, Jesus told the disciples that when the Holy Spirit came upon them, they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The story of Acts follows this geographical outline:

- Acts 1–7: in Jerusalem
- Acts 8–9: in Judea and Samaria
- Acts 10 and beyond: to the ends of the earth

At the end of chapter 7, we saw the first martyr for the faith, Stephen, one of the seven Hellenistic Jewish Christians who were appointed as the first deacons in the church in Jerusalem. Stephen's stoning started a major persecution against the church, led by a young Pharisee named Saul. But instead of destroying the church or stopping their mission, it pushed them to fulfill the next phase of Christ's mission—to be His witnesses in Judea and Samaria.

The Philip in Acts 8 is not the apostle Philip from the Gospels. We know this because Acts 8:1 says when the believers were scattered to Judea and Samaria, the apostles stayed in Jerusalem. Also, when the Samaritan believers had not yet received the Holy Spirit, the apostles Peter and John had to come from Jerusalem to lay hands on them. If this Philip were the apostle Philip, he would have had the apostolic authority to lay hands on them. This was the deacon Philip, one of the seven Hellenized Jews (like Stephen)

who had been ordained by the apostles for ministry.

In the time of Jesus, the Samaritans were the greatest enemies of the Jews. The Jews considered them half-bloods, worse than Gentiles. They were the descendants of the northern tribes (Israel or Israelites) who had intermarried with Gentiles after being taken over by Assyria (722 BC) and so were “lost” forever. The southern kingdom (Judah or Jews) remained ethnically pure, even through their exile to Babylon. Yet Jesus intentionally went to Samaria, met a woman of bad reputation, and had with her the longest, most theologically rich conversation recorded in the Gospels. She became one of the first evangelists, spreading the gospel to her entire village (John 4). Not only did Jesus tell His disciples to love their enemies, He lived it out!

The text doesn’t tell us why Philip was the one to go to Samaria, but as a Hellenized Jew, he may have been more open to preaching to the Samaritans than the more purist Hebraic Jews. As a deacon with Stephen, he may have felt personally inspired by Stephen’s death to go out and preach. When Philip went to Samaria, he preached, did many miracles, and cast out many demons, and the crowds listened “with one accord.” All of this, including the unity and joy they experienced, are signs of the power of the Holy Spirit.

A magician named Simon believed, was baptized, and began to follow Philip. Magic was forbidden by Old Testament law because those who practiced magic were either using trickery, which was deceitful, or they were practicing magic by the power of demons. This was an abomination to the Lord. Those who practiced witchcraft were to be put to death (Leviticus 20:27). But in this story, a magician came to faith in Jesus, showing us that no one is ever too far from God to repent and come to Him.

The believers of Samaria had believed and been baptized, but they had not yet received the Holy Spirit, so Peter and John went down from Jerusalem, laid hands on them and prayed, and they received the Spirit. When Simon saw that, he offered to pay Peter and John for the power to give people the Holy Spirit too. Peter rebuked him to repent and pray for forgiveness for thinking he could buy the gift of God.

We must understand that the different ways new believers received the Holy Spirit in Acts reflect a unique and transitional period in redemptive history and are meant to describe what happened then—not prescribe how it must happen for all believers today. While some received the Spirit at the moment of belief (Acts 10:44–48), others did so after baptism and the laying on of apostles’ hands (Acts 8:14–17), or even after receiving fuller instruction in the gospel (Acts 19:1–7). Pentecost itself (Acts 2) is seen as a one-time, foundational event, the inauguration of the new covenant era. These differences served to confirm apostolic authority, unify Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles into one church, and affirm the gospel’s expansion to all people. Ultimately, the normative pattern, as seen later in Scripture (e.g., Romans 8:9; 1 Cor. 12:13), is that all who believe in Christ receive the Holy Spirit at conversion.

Then an angel told Philip to go to the road to Gaza where he met an Ethiopian eunuch. In this story we see that God's invitation to be saved is open to everyone, regardless of ethnicity, social status, or anything else. As an Ethiopian, he was a Gentile, from the southernmost part of Egypt. This was again witnessing to their enemies. The original enemies of the Jews were the Egyptians, who had enslaved them back in Exodus. As a eunuch, this man was a slave, of no value in the eyes of the world, considered just property. Yet he had value in the eyes of God. Also, as a eunuch, he was castrated, which made him permanently ritually impure. No one with damaged sexual organs could be in God's presence (Deuteronomy 23:1), not because He didn't love them, but because of His holiness. The tabernacle was an earthly representation of God's heavenly kingdom where there will be no suffering, sickness, or pain. Yet He welcomed him to receive the gospel and be baptized into His family! God intentionally sent Philip to this man to show us that the invitation to join His kingdom is open to all people.

QUESTION *Why did Simon want to have the power of the Holy Spirit? What is the real purpose of the power of the Spirit?*

QUESTION *What can we learn about witnessing from the story of how Philip shared the gospel with the Ethiopian eunuch?*

APPLICATION POINT / We can learn several things from the story of Philip in Samaria:

- Philip followed the Spirit's instructions exactly. The Spirit spoke and he followed. The Holy Spirit still speaks to us and guides us; we must listen for His voice and follow His leading.
- The Holy Spirit empowered Philip and spoke through him. The Spirit will give us the words to say and equip us with everything we need to do what He calls us to do.
- The eunuch was reading the Scripture, but he didn't understand what he was reading. He needed someone to explain it to him. This is why we have leaders, pastors, and teachers who study and teach. This is why it's important to be sure we are learning from someone who really knows Scripture.
- Philip explained the gospel to the eunuch, starting with a prophecy from Isaiah. The whole Bible points to Jesus; it's all one story that leads us to the gospel. Every story, every passage is important to read and study.
- The people of Samaria and the eunuch responded with joy when they received the gospel. Christians should be filled with joy at the hope of our salvation.

- Most of all, we see that God's invitation is open to everyone, and we should share the gospel to everyone we can, including our enemies.

QUESTION *How have you seen people treat God like a genie or focus on getting power (or wealth or something else) from Him rather than the focus on the gospel?*

QUESTION *What have you experienced in sharing the gospel with people in your life? What was difficult about it? What went well? How can you better prepare yourself for witnessing?*

2. *The Conversion of Saul*

✚ READ ACTS 9:1-31

QUESTION *Why did Jesus say what He did to Saul on the road to Damascus (vv. 5-6)?*

QUESTION *Why were the apostles afraid of Saul when he came to Jerusalem?*

Acts 9 brings us back to the young Pharisee Saul, who had been leading the great persecution against the church, even going into people's homes and dragging them off to prison. Now he was on the way to Damascus, very far north, past Samaria, to search for Christians and bring them back to prison in Jerusalem. Saul's zealous anger was palpable; he was "breathing threats and murder" against the apostles.

Later we will learn that Saul was the ultimate Jewish man, "a Hebrew of Hebrews," a Pharisee who knew the Law backward and forward and followed it flawlessly (Philippians 3:4-6). He studied under the very famous rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3) and was very zealous for the purity of the people of God. He thought this movement of Jesus was blasphemy, so he felt compelled to destroy it. In Saul's mind, he was cleansing the synagogues of a dangerous heresy. He thought he was doing the work of the Lord.

But along the road, a light from heaven shone around him, and he fell to the ground. A voice spoke to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Saul asked who the voice was, and He responded, "I

am Jesus, who you are persecuting.” In every other story in Acts, it seems like the Holy Spirit is the main character. But here the story is very specific and very clear—Jesus spoke to Paul. It could have said the Spirit led him or the Father spoke to him, but it was very specifically a personal encounter with Jesus. This is because Jesus is what sets our faith apart from every other religion. It’s not a religion; it’s a relationship with a person.

We see this in Paul’s writings. He talked about his faith not as a religion, a set of rules, theological concepts, or a belief system but as “knowing Jesus.” Paul was completely Jesus-centric:

“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).

“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).

“Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Philippians 3:7–8).

Everything he said and wrote was focused on Jesus. Not the religion of Christianity, but the person of Jesus. Because he had encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. It was the person of Jesus who spoke to him, who transformed his life.

When Saul rose, he was blind, and they led him by the hand to Damascus. He fasted for three days, until a disciple named Ananias came to him because God had appeared to him too. Ananias laid hands on Paul, and he regained his sight and was filled with the Spirit. This is the first time we see the Spirit be given by the laying on of hands from a non-apostle, but it was directly commanded by God.

Ananias initially told God he had heard that Saul had been persecuting His people, but God assured him that He had chosen Saul to be His instrument to the Gentiles. God also told him Saul would suffer much for His name. When Saul began preaching the gospel in Damascus, the people were surprised because they knew he had been persecuting the Christians. Then the Jews of Damascus plotted to kill him, so he escaped by night through an opening in the city wall. He went to Jerusalem and tried to join the disciples there, but they were afraid of him; they didn’t believe he was really a disciple. Until Barnabas defended him and told them the story of his conversion. Then, when the Hellenistic Jews (not the Christian ones) tried to kill Saul, the apostles sent him to Tarsus, his hometown.

This section ends with a conclusionary statement that the church now had peace and was being built up. Because Saul was no longer persecuting the church, they had peace, at least for a little while. Eventually, persecution started again, and Saul himself would be persecuted as he had persecuted others.

QUESTION *How was Saul's life different after he met Jesus on the road to Damascus?*

QUESTION *What does the conversion of Saul teach us about who God can change?*

APPLICATION POINT / The conversion of Saul shows us that anyone can be converted by the gospel, even the greatest enemy of the church. This should give us hope for those we've been trying to reach who still seem far away from Jesus no matter what we do. Keep trying, keep reaching out. You never know. They are never too far gone to turn around and come to Jesus. Paul's conversion was a complete turnaround. He went from persecuting the church to being persecuted, from trying to destroy the church to building it.

This story also shows us in a very tangible way that our faith isn't about a religion; it's a relationship with the person of Jesus. Are you following Christianity as a religion or are you following the person of Jesus? What is the difference?

QUESTION *Think about the people in your life who are far from God. Why are they resistant to the gospel? How can you be praying for them to have a "road to Damascus" kind of encounter with Jesus?*

QUESTION *Reflect on your own relationship with Jesus. Do you feel the way Paul did, that to live is Christ and to die is gain? That everything else in the world is nothing compared to knowing Jesus? Does the way you live your life reflect that?*

3. Peter in Judea

✚ READ ACTS 9:32-42

QUESTION *Where do we see "rising" in both of these miracles? What does this language point to?*

QUESTION *What were the people's reactions to these miracles?*

The last bit of this chapter turns to Peter's activities in Judea as a bookend to Philip's activity in Samaria, being Christ's witnesses "in Judea and Samaria." Joppa was a city northwest of Jerusalem and southwest of Samaria, on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Lydda was the town next to it, just a bit inland from Joppa. The text says that as the church was growing and spreading, Peter was going here and there among all the people who had come to believe, visiting all the churches.

When he came to Lydda, there was a man who had been paralyzed and bedridden for eight years. Peter used his name—Aeneas. Then he simply said, "Jesus Christ heals you, rise and make your bed." And *immediately* he rose. No delay, no magic words or potions necessary. Just the power of Jesus. In nearby Joppa, a faithful disciple named Tabitha (Aramaic) or Dorcas (Greek) had died. Peter also used her name—Tabitha. And simply said, "arise." Though one was a healing from paralysis and the other was a resurrection from the dead, the language of "rise/arise" in both healings reminds us of the resurrection of Jesus. Though these healings brought physical life, the gospel is ultimately about the resurrection to eternal life with Jesus in heaven.

Both healings were done simply, without a lot of fanfare or elaborate words, rituals, or potions used by magicians. Both healings were personal; Peter used their names. One was a man, one was a woman, both were disciples of Jesus. Both healings happened immediately; Peter said rise and they rose. And both led to many people believing in Jesus. This is what Simon the magician had misunderstood about the power of the Holy Spirit. Not only is it not for sale, but it's not to be used for our own glory, power, or purposes. Peter never pointed to himself or his own power; he only pointed to Jesus. The power the Spirit gave to do miracles was only about bringing people to know Jesus, about building His kingdom. It was done for His glory, in His name, to show people He really is God and that His gospel message is true.

In Lydda, everyone who lived there saw the healed man and believed in Jesus. In Joppa, the resurrection of Dorcas became known throughout all of Joppa and many believed in Jesus because of it. The purpose of these healings, and all the miracles, was to bring people to know Jesus. The miracles show us what God's kingdom is like—a place with no sickness, pain, death, or evil. And they draw people to faith in Jesus. Because who else can raise the dead? Who else can bring life where there was only death? Like Peter said to Jesus, "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

QUESTION *Imagine you saw someone suddenly healed who had been bedridden for eight years or someone alive again after having died. What would your reaction be?*

QUESTION *Imagine you were the one who was healed. How would your life be different from that moment on?*

APPLICATION POINT / We may not have the gift of healing, but every one of us has been given spiritual gifts by the Holy Spirit. Scripture tells us the gifts are given to build up the church, to grow us into spiritual maturity in the fullness of Christ. All the power, authority, and gifts we are given by the Lord are never about us. They are always about giving glory to Jesus, sharing the gospel, and building His kingdom.

QUESTION *What spiritual gifts have you been given? How can you use them to build the church, share the gospel, and glorify the name of Jesus?*

QUESTION *How have you experienced healing—physically, spiritually, or emotionally—from the Holy Spirit in your life?*

[NEXT STEPS]

This week, step outside your comfort zone to share the gospel with someone who is different from you, maybe even someone you have considered an enemy—people who have been unkind to you, people who are difficult for you to love, people who have hurt you. How can you share the gospel with them, both with your words and actions? In small ways and big ways?

[PRAY]

+*Make a list of people you know who are far from God. Be sure to include people who are difficult to love, people who have hurt you, those you have considered enemies. Pray for each person on this list every day this week, not just for them to change the way they treat you but for them to come to know Jesus. Pray for their hearts to be softened. Pray for supernatural healing in their lives. Pray for someone like Philip to come along and explain the gospel to them in a way that opens their eyes. Pray for them to have an encounter with Jesus that is so undeniable that they can't reject Him anymore. Pray that they will see the beauty and goodness of Jesus and fall in love with Him and run hard after Him the rest of their lives. Ask God to give you a passion for sharing the gospel and give you opportunities to share the gospel with people who are far from Him.*

Peter & the Gentiles

[PREPARATION]

✦ GETTING READY

How have you seen people segregating themselves into different groups or “tribes”? Based on what? How can the church be a model of unity in diversity to the world?

Read Acts 10–12.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to help you understand that His kingdom is one body made up of all kinds of people brought together by our common identity in Christ.

[THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

The gospel is an invitation to all people to come to Jesus, not just the Jews.

✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

God spoke to Peter through a vision in which God told him he was allowed to eat any kind of animals, clean or unclean. The old covenant law had rules about “unclean” foods Jews were not allowed to eat (Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14). Peter had followed this law his whole life; he had never eaten anything unclean. God responded, “What God has made clean, do not call common” (10:15). Peter saw this as not just a statement about foods but also about interacting with Gentiles—“God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean” (10:28). Why? Because the food laws weren’t just about diet, they were part of a system designed to set God’s people apart from the other nations in the way they ate, practiced business, planted fields—everything.

But God’s intent in them living this way was not to exclude the Gentiles because they were unclean; it was to be a light to the Gentiles, to show them the ways of God and invite them into the covenant. The Jews had forgotten that their mission from the beginning was to bless the world, not hoard God’s blessings for themselves (Genesis 12:3). Being set apart wasn’t supposed to be about forming a holy huddle away

from the world but setting an example for the world. Through this experience, Peter came to understand that the true people of God aren't any particular physical nation but people of any nation who follow Jesus (10:34–35).

✦ MEDITATE

"If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" (Acts 11:17).

[GETTING STARTED]

+This section will introduce the lesson by identifying the main point of the passage and offering a preliminary application of it.

QUESTION *Some churches have an inward focus with their ministries rather than reaching out to the world. Why are we supposed to do both?*

QUESTION *How are you personally reaching out to the world for Jesus?*

In Acts 10–12, we see Peter finally understand that God's mission was never just for the Jews but for the whole world. In Acts 10, God gave Peter a vision and then the experience of the Holy Spirit being poured out on Gentiles. In Acts 11, Peter responded to the backlash from the circumcision party that if God had poured out His Spirit on the Gentiles, who were they to argue? In Acts 12, we see God supernaturally intervene in Herod Agrippa's persecution of the church, to keep the message going out into the whole world. This section is the transition point for the church, going from a primarily Jewish movement to a mission to the Gentiles, growing outward "to the ends of the earth." These chapters show us that God's mission has always been for the whole world. Abraham's family was chosen, not to hoard God's blessing for themselves but so the whole world would be blessed through them. In the same way, as God's people in the church, we are not to hoard God's blessing of salvation through Christ for ourselves but share it with the whole world.

✦ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+This section begins the mission to the Gentiles. In Acts 10 Peter had a vision of clean and unclean animals. Then he went to the Roman centurion Cornelius's house and shared the gospel, and the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius's household. Acts 11 tells us of the circumcision party's backlash against Peter preaching to the Gentiles, with a quick aside about the growth of the church at Antioch, which became

the center of the mission to the Gentiles. Acts 12 tells us that James the brother of John was martyred by Herod. Peter was arrested, but an angel opened the prison, and he escaped. The chapter closes with the story of Herod's death, being struck down by God because he let people worship him as a god and did not give God the glory.

1. *Peter's Vision and Cornelius*

2. *The Circumcision Party and the Church at Antioch*

3. *Peter's Arrest and Herod's Death*

[GOING DEEPER]

+ This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 10–12.

1. *Peter's Vision and Cornelius*

✚ READ ACTS 10.

QUESTION *What did God tell Peter about the unclean animals in his vision? What did Peter tell Cornelius that God had shown him?*

QUESTION *What did the Lord do for the household of Cornelius while Peter was teaching?*

At first glance, it may seem like there are two stories in Acts 10, but they are connected. Peter was still in Joppa and received a vision from the Lord. The day before Peter's vision, just north in Caesarea, a God-fearing Gentile named Cornelius received a vision from the Lord to send for Peter to come to him. These two visions are connected, and we see how when we understand the theology behind what God was showing Peter through this whole experience.

Cornelius was a centurion, an officer in the Roman army who led a regiment of a hundred men. He was stationed in Caesarea Maritima, a port city on the coast of the Mediterranean that Herod had dedicated to Caesar Augustus, ergo the name. It was the seat of the Roman procurators (financial officers) and considered by the Romans to be the administrative, economic, military, political, and cultural capital of Judea (Jews considered Jerusalem their capital). As a centurion, Cornelius would have embodied the ideals of a Roman officer—strength, dexterity, vigilance, discipline, energy, efficiency, and obedience. But Cornelius was a “God fearer,” a term Jews used for Gentiles who had not completely converted to Judaism but worshipped the God of Israel and followed some of the Jewish rites and traditions.

An angel appeared to Cornelius and called him by name, telling him to go get Peter. Meanwhile, Peter had a vision of both clean and unclean animals being let down from heaven on a sheet “by its four corners upon the earth,” representing nations from all over the world. God told him to “rise, kill, and eat,” but Peter said no because he had never eaten anything unclean or common by the Old Testament law. God told him, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” When Cornelius’s men appeared, Peter went with them because “God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.” He applied God’s words not just to animals and food laws, but to people as well. Why?

The food laws weren’t just about diet. They were part of a system designed to set God’s people apart from the other nations in the way they ate, practiced business, planted fields—everything (Leviticus 20:25–26). But the purpose of them living differently wasn’t to create an exclusive group who hoarded God’s blessings and kept everyone else out. It was to be a light to the Gentiles, to show them God’s good ways so they would be amazed and want to know God and live by His ways too (Deuteronomy 4:5–8; Isaiah 49:6). God told Abraham from the beginning that he was blessed to be a blessing to the world, not to hoard God’s blessings just for his family (Genesis 12:3).

The Jews had taken God’s good laws about clean and unclean and applied them to people too. They had added extra laws that said they couldn’t associate with Gentiles at all because they were unclean (10:28). But God’s law never said that. He said not to follow their practices but to obey His law instead (Leviticus 18:1–5). But He never said not to associate with them. How could they be a light to the Gentiles if they never associated with them? In fact, right in the middle of the section about how these laws set them apart from the nations, God’s law said to welcome any foreigner who wanted to join their community and treat them just like the native-born, like family – to love them as themselves (Leviticus 19:34). God didn’t want His people living by the Gentile’s sinful practices because they were not good for them, but if any Gentile wanted to join their community and live by God’s ways, He welcomed them with open arms. This is what Peter came to realize through the vision of the unclean animals. “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (10:34). It was about so much more than the dietary laws.

When Peter went to Cornelius’s home, he shared the gospel with them, and the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening. Peter later said it was just like the Spirit had done for the Jewish disciples at Pentecost, which proved to him that God shows no partiality and that the gospel is for any and all who would come to Him (11:15–17). This outpouring on the Gentiles initiated a new phase of the church’s ministry. From this point on, they would be His witnesses “to the ends of the earth.” There would be some bumps in the road with certain Jews still wanting to distinguish between Jew and Gentile (even Peter succumbed to that peer pressure) and some Jews teaching that Gentiles needed to follow Jewish purity laws to follow Jesus. But this was the turning point from which the church went from a primarily Jewish movement to a movement for the whole world.

QUESTION *What does it tell you about God that His invitation to salvation is open to all people?*

QUESTION *What does it tell you about the church?*

QUESTION *What does it tell you about our mission as His witnesses?*

APPLICATION POINT / God chose the Jews to be His people, “the people of my own possession,” but it was never just about them. It was always about God using them as His “kingdom of priests” to reach the whole world (Exodus 19:5–6); “I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, *that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth*” (Isaiah 49:6). In the new covenant, as the church, we are the people of His own possession, His priests to the world (Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 2:9). We cannot sequester ourselves into a holy huddle, hoard all God’s blessing for ourselves, and let the world outside burn. Our mission is to be God’s ambassadors to the world. To be the light to those who don’t know him. To share the gospel with them and live by His ways so they will want to know Him and live by His ways too.

QUESTION *How have you seen churches and Christians separate themselves from the world in a holy-huddle kind of way? How can we reach out to those around us instead?*

QUESTION *How are you being a light to the world around you? When people look at the way you live, are they drawn to the ways of Jesus?*

2. The Circumcision Party and the Church at Antioch

✚ READ ACTS 11

QUESTION *Why were the men of the circumcision party upset with Peter? What do you think “circumcision party” might mean?*

QUESTION *What is the shift in the mission of the church noted in v. 19–20?*

When Peter went back to Jerusalem, the “circumcision party” criticized him for eating with Gentiles. The “circumcision party” was a group in the church who argued that Gentile believers had to be circumcised (i.e., become Jewish) to be members of the church. They did not associate at all with Gentiles who had not been circumcised, not even Gentile Christians. When they criticized Peter, he told them about the vision God gave him and how the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles the same way it had been on the Jewish disciples at Pentecost. Peter said, “If God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” (11:17). When they heard this, they fell silent and agreed with Peter that God has also given the Gentiles salvation and eternal life.

But then, in Galatians, Paul told another story, which would have occurred a few years later, about Peter and the circumcision party in Antioch. He said Peter ate with the Gentiles until certain men from Jerusalem came. Then he separated himself and only ate with the Jews out of fear of the circumcision party, this same group of people he had already corrected! Paul found this so hypocritical that he confronted Peter to his face in front of everyone (Galatians 2:11–12). Peter had been eating with Gentiles and “living like a Gentile” (not following ritual purity laws) since this time in Acts 10–12, but suddenly, he had reneged.

Why was Peter so afraid of these people? He was one of the pillars of the church (Galatians 2:9); they should have submitted to him, not the other way around. Peter had already settled this matter with the circumcision party here in Acts 11. It didn’t make sense for him to be afraid of them years later at Antioch. This shows us that even the most dedicated of disciples can be wrong, make mistakes, or give in to peer pressured to sin, especially when it relates to some kind of faction in the church. This reminds us to fight even more against division in the church and work toward unity.

The second half of chapter 11 tells us about the church at Antioch, almost as an aside—while all these other things were going on, this is what was happening at Antioch. It is significant that Luke described it here, because Antioch became the center of the church’s mission to the Gentiles. Jerusalem was the original center of the church, but once the mission started spreading “to the ends of the earth,” the center shifted to Antioch. It became the sending church for all of Paul’s missionary journeys.

Luke said that after the stoning of Stephen, the disciples scattered even as far as Antioch, but they only preached the gospel to the Jews in those places. But then some men from Cyprus (an island in the Mediterranean, south of Greece) and Cyrene (a town on the coast of the Mediterranean in North Africa, in the westernmost part of Egypt) began to preach to the Gentiles in Antioch. The believers there sent for Barnabas, a Hellenized Jew from Cyprus who was part of the first church in Jerusalem. Barnabas went to Tarsus and got Saul, and they stayed in Antioch for a year teaching the people there.

Antioch was a large city with an eclectic mix of cultures and ethnicities. It was built as an intentionally divided city; a literal wall separated the Syrians and Greeks. At least eighteen different ethnic groups

lived there, all segregated into different communities. But the church at Antioch was different; it combined all these groups into one community. This is why Luke said they were first called “Christians” at Antioch. They were not grouped by nationality but defined by their allegiance to Christ. That was now their identity. They had redefined themselves according to Christ and His kingdom, not their ethnic kingdoms. Their citizenship was in the kingdom of God. They didn’t lose their ethnic identity, but it was no longer what defined them. It was no longer their community, their “family,” the people group they chose to align themselves with. Instead of grouping themselves with other Greeks or Ethiopians or Syrians, they grouped themselves with other Christians. This was their chosen family. Like we saw in Jerusalem, but on a much greater scale, this community was the definition of unity in diversity. It is this diversity that made Antioch such a model for what God’s kingdom is like—a great multitude of followers of Jesus from every nation, tribe, and tongue, all united as one body.

QUESTION *How did Peter submit to God’s authority in this story?*

QUESTION *What kind of image of the kingdom of God did the Christians at Antioch paint for the community around them, which was divided by nationality? Why might that have been attractive to them?*

APPLICATION POINT / We divide ourselves in a lot of ways. Sometimes it’s by ethnic identity. Many communities are divided into neighborhoods and groups by race or ethnic background. In many places, even churches are divided that way. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said that eleven o’clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America, and in many places that’s still true. But we also divide ourselves in other ways—by socioeconomic level, political party, education, interests, backgrounds, etc.

The church is the one place where people of all groups can come together in unity, bound by one common Spirit and one common purpose. Because once we have become a new creation in Christ, He is our identity. Whatever we were before, whatever else are we, we are all Christians now. We don’t lose those other things that make us who we are (ethnicity, background, education, political beliefs, etc.), but they no longer define us. They become secondary to our identity in Christ. Instead of grouping ourselves in those other ways, we group ourselves with other believers as our family. This is how we can have true unity in diversity, because we have a common identity, mission, and purpose in Christ and His Kingdom.

QUESTION *What would it look like for you to define your identity according to Christ and His kingdom rather than any other “group” you are a part of?*

QUESTION *How can defining ourselves by Christ and His kingdom help when we have conflicts in the church, when we see things from different perspectives based on our different backgrounds? How can pursuing Christ and His mission and kingdom keep us unified?*

3. Peter’s Arrest and Herod’s Death

✚ READ ACTS 12

QUESTION *How did Peter escape from prison?*

QUESTION *Why did God strike Herod Agrippa dead on the spot?*

The church had peace for a while because Saul had been converted, but now the persecution had returned. Instead of just being persecuted by the Jewish leaders, who thought they were purifying the people of God, they were now being persecuted by Herod, the political leader. This was Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great and brother of Herodias, who was married to Herod Antipas (after leaving Herod Philip) and had John the Baptist beheaded (Matthew 14). Herod Agrippa grew up in Rome and was a friend to the Roman emperor Caligula and played crucial roles in Roman politics. Agrippa came to power in 39 AD, when he returned to Judea from Rome and accused Herod Antipas of forming a plot against Rome. Caligula exiled Antipas to the south of Gaul and made Agrippa king.

With his dual Jewish/Roman identity, Agrippa played the role of intercessor with the Roman authorities on behalf of the Jews. He was careful to follow Jewish customs and was generous to the people, so he was very popular among the Jews. But he persecuted the Christians because they were a threat to the Jews (12:11). He executed James the brother of John (12:2), who with John and Peter, was one of the three in Jesus’s inner circle. He also arrested Peter, intending to bring him out for a public trial to make an example of him (12:3–4). But the church prayed earnestly for Peter, and an angel appeared in shining light, his chains fell off. When the angel directed Peter to follow him out of the prison, Peter thought he was just seeing a vision, but he was really escaping (12:5–10). He went to the house of the mother of John Mark (who traveled with Paul and Barnabas and wrote the Gospel of Mark) because many had gathered there to pray. Peter told them to tell James (the brother of Jesus who was leading the church in Jerusalem)

about this and then left so he wouldn't be found by Agrippa's men.

Agrippa went to Caesarea Maritima, the Roman capital of the area. There he brokered a deal with the people of Tyre and Sidon, two port cities on the coast of the Mediterranean north of Judea and Samaria that were often condemned by the prophets in the Old Testament for their pride, idolatry, and hostility toward God's people (Isaiah 23:1; Ezekiel 26:4; Joel 3:4; Zechariah 9:1–4). Yet Jesus had gone there and healed a young girl, showing His disciples that His ministry extended to all people (Mark 7:24–30). When Agrippa sat on the throne to address the people about the peace treaty with Tyre and Sidon, the crowds called him a god. The Bible says he put on "royal garments"; the Jewish historian Josephus said he was wearing a garment of silver that shined in the sun and made him look like a god. Agrippa did not deny it or turn the glory to God, so God immediately struck him dead (12:20–23).

When Agrippa died, the word of God increased and multiplied—the church grew. This chapter shows us how God Himself supernaturally took care of the threat of Herod Agrippa against the church. When Peter was arrested, God sent an angel to break him out of prison. When Agrippa allowed himself to be worshipped as a god, the Lord struck him dead. These stories show us the power and sovereignty of God. We don't know why God allows evil things to happen sometimes and intervenes at others, like allowing James to be killed but rescuing Peter. But we know God has the power to do anything, He will not allow His plans to be thwarted, and He will not share His glory with another (Isaiah 42:8). In both these stories, God supernaturally intervened to keep His message spreading and flourishing. Herod was trying to persecute the church, and God just flat-out put a stop to it.

QUESTION *How many times does the story of Peter's arrest tell us the people were praying for him? What does this tell us about the power of prayer?*

QUESTION *Imagine you were a Jew in the crowd at Agrippa's throne, joining in calling him a god, but then you saw him suddenly die. What would you think? How would it impact your view of God?*

APPLICATION POINT / These stories show us that God is in control, and His plan will not be hindered by anything. No human king can thwart God's will. Though God does allow bad things to happen, He takes what the enemy meant for evil and uses it for good to accomplish His will (Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28). He can work through us in natural ways or intervene supernaturally in what is going on in our lives. God is in ultimate control of all things and His will will be done. Our job is to listen for the guidance of His Spirit and follow where He leads.

QUESTION *What are some ways God has supernaturally intervened in your life?*

QUESTION *How have you seen people treat a human being as if they were a god? Even in the church sometimes? How can we be sure we are not worshipping a person but truly worshipping God alone?*

[NEXT STEPS]

This section gives us a beautiful image of God's kingdom as one big family of people from all different walks of life and all different people groups joined together in unity in Christ. Because once we become new creations in Him, our identity is found in Christ. The church is now our "tribe," our family. This week, focus on your identity in Christ and how that binds you to other Christians from all different walks of life. Consider ways you can tear down walls between different groups in your church and build unity among you. Also reach out to an unbeliever who is different from you to build relationship and share the gospel.

[PRAY]

+Use the following song as a prayer for unity in Christ this week. Feel free to look it up online and listen to it and sing along:

Bind Us Together, Lord, by John Keys

*Bind us together, Lord, bind us together
With cords that cannot be broken.
Bind us together, Lord, bind us together, Lord,
Bind us together in love.*

*There is only one God, there is only one King,
There is only one Body, that is why we sing:*

*Though there are many branches, there is only one vine,
We are one in Christ Jesus, that is why we sing:*

*One with Christ in his death that, as one, we might rise.
So we are but one people, that is why we sing:*

*There is only one table, Christ alone is our host.
He invites us together, that is why we sing:
Amen.*



2154 LOOP 337 N NEW BRAUNFELS, TX 78130

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