

Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 1

Day One: The Church is Born

Imagine if you will what it would be like if the book of Acts wasn't in the Bible. You would open the pages to see the ministry account of Jesus ending in the Gospel of John; and next you would read about a man named Paul writing a deep treatise to the followers of Jesus living in Rome. But who was Paul? And how did the gospel get all the way from Jerusalem to Rome? The Book of Acts answers these questions and many more. It is in fact the only historical account in the entire New Testament describing the first three decades of the church's existence. And we have Luke to thank for it.

Luke's book of Acts picks up where his Gospel left off, giving us the details of the church that Jesus had earlier promised would be built. Luke's Gospel is his *first account* of the life of Jesus and Acts is his *second account*. In Acts 1:1–2, Luke states that he wrote his Gospel to contain “all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up.” His Book of Acts then, is the record of the continuing ministry of Jesus Christ—after His ascension—by the power of the Holy Spirit through His chosen apostles. Together, the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts form a complete, all-inclusive seamless account of how the followers of Jesus were able to “turn the world upside down” (Acts 17:6).

Who was Luke? A close friend and traveling companion of the Apostle Paul, Luke was a physician, a researcher and a meticulous record keeper. He had an educated knowledge of law, culture and customs and the region's geography. He relied on previous written sources and no doubt personal interviews with leading figures such as Peter, John, and others. But we also see him using the first person plural pronouns of “we” and “us,” revealing that he too was an eyewitness to many of the events recorded in Acts. He wrote both of his accounts to Theophilus, whose name meant “lover of God.” Whether this man was a believer already or someone Luke wished to win to Christianity we don't know. Luke's reference to him as “most excellent Theophilus” (Luke 1:3) suggests that he was a man holding a position of importance.

As we study the Book of Acts, we will see in the first generation of the church, ordinary men and women doing extraordinary things! They were capable of miracles, signs and wonders because “*they were filled with the Holy Spirit.*” Herein lies the key to every believer's success in the Christian life. The Holy Spirit, as the third person of the Trinity, acts as the divine source who creates, sustains, and purifies the faith of all those who put their faith in Jesus Christ. We will discover He is not merely an influence or power emanating from God—rather He is God. He functions with purpose, emotion, and will. He can be grieved, quenched, resisted, tested, and blasphemed. But He loves the saints, teaching, guiding, comforting, correcting, and blessing them. He seals, fills, and indwells believers, illuminating their understanding and application of God's Word so they can resist sin and obey God.

Read Acts 1 in its entirety. Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Record your first impressions of the book. Make note of what you personally hope to gain from your journey this year.

Deeper Discoveries ~

The opening scene of Acts 1 reveals the previews of coming attractions. This is the beginning of the church. The apostles and disciples were gathered together for a season of prayer. Jesus had commanded them to wait for the fulfillment of the promised indwelling Spirit. The fact that these individuals did not have a building of their own in which to meet, did not diminish their passion or deter their purpose.

1. What does it tell *you* about what the church really is?

2. If you were to describe to someone else what the church looks like, what would you say?

3. How long have you been an active part of the church? What in particular has blessed you about being a member of God's family?

The Apostle Paul would later add perspective and principles to the early believers on how they should regard their position as a Christian and behave in like manner. What do the two following passages from Paul's letter to the Ephesian church reveal to you about . . .

- The Church's foundation: Ephesians 2:19–22

- The Church's goal: Ephesians 4:11–16

Day Two:

Power to Change the World

1. According to Acts 1:1–3, list the words and phrases Luke uses to describe the reality of Christ's resurrection.

Before ascending to the Father, Jesus made many appearances to the believers over a period of forty days. Luke is the one who emphasizes the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. You may find it helpful to read the last chapter of the Gospel of Luke to appreciate the transition into this first chapter of Acts. It was during this time that Jesus gave many “infallible [convincing] proofs” that He was alive, speaking about the kingdom of God.

Then being assembled together with them, “He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, “which,” He said, “you have heard from Me . . . you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (vv. 4–5). Still believing that Jesus had come to restore an earthly kingdom to Israel, they asked Him about it. This was a question they had asked many times before; but now Jesus was about to ascend, and they probably felt He would leave them to oversee it. The verb *restore* reveals that they anticipated the establishment of an immediate political rule over a territorial kingdom. Jesus’ final word on it: *It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority* (v. 7).

But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (v. 8). How would these men carry out such a plan? They still weren’t ready and there was much they yet did not understand. They would do it with the enablement of a divine power they had never known or experienced before—a power that would change the world!

2. What do you think Jesus meant when He told His followers they would be “witnesses” to Him? Look up the word; write a definition. (Think about what a witness does and says.)
 - a. Most believers will not be called upon to address a large audience with the gospel message. Give an example of a way in which *you* might be a witness for Christ?

When it comes to being a witness for Jesus, we cannot depend on our natural abilities, the power to effectively witness comes from the Holy Spirit. It is the supernatural outpouring of God that provides the empowering for believers to take the gospel message to the world.

Look Closer ~

During His three and a half years with them on earth, what did Jesus want His followers to know about the Holy Spirit?

- John 14:16–17

- John 14:26

- John 16:5–15

To better grasp what Jesus stated in John 16 about the Holy Spirit's work, let's look at it this way . . . Before becoming a Christian, the Holy Spirit was *with you*. He made you aware of the fact that you are a sinner in need of a Savior. He convinced you of your need for Jesus. Once you prayed to receive Christ into your heart, the Holy Spirit came inside to *indwell you—seal you—teach you—and transform you* into a follower of His.

- How do the above references help you to understand your need for the Holy Spirit in your role as a witness?
- Presently, what about the Holy Spirit's role is of utmost importance to you? Why?

Here in Acts 1:8, Jesus is speaking of something more—a *spiritual empowerment*—to share the gospel in your own sphere of influence.

3. Personal: Have *you* ever asked God for this empowerment? You need only pray, "Lord, fill me with the power of the Holy Spirit today. Help me to share the good news of salvation with those around me." If you prayed that prayer, trust God to open doors of opportunity to you in the next week. (Make note of them in your lesson.)

Memory verse: Acts 1:8 Write out the verse; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.
But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

Day Three: What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do

Only Luke records the Lord's ascension in both his gospel and his Acts historical accounts. It is a brief mention but the emphasis is not on Jesus' departure, rather on what His followers are to do as they await His return. Although the Holy Spirit had not yet come, the family of believers met in the upper room and, standing in the middle, Peter took the lead in choosing another disciple to take the place of Judas. Peter quoted from two passages in Psalms, relying on God's Word to lead them in determining God's will. They prayed and cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias to be numbered among the eleven apostles. Today, we would consider the method of casting lots an imperfect way to discover God's will, but to them it was tradition and what they knew. It may not have been perfect, but their method drove them to look to God's voice in scripture rather than rely on their own feelings and emotions in difficult circumstances.

Have you ever been in a holding pattern, just praying and waiting and watching eagerly for God to do something? Are you in one right now? Sometimes the hardest moments are right before the answer comes! Press on dear believer and continue in prayer—the answer will come.

Below is an exercise that will encourage you as you wait on God's will. Look up the references keeping your situation in mind. Consider the lesson in each and then how you can apply that lesson to your life.

1. *Wait on the Lord*: Philippians 4:6. What does the verse say? What do you learn from it?

2. *Watch for God to speak to you through His Word*: 2 Timothy 3:16–17. What do the verses teach you? How can you make practical application of the lesson in them?

3. *Walk worthy of your calling* as a Christian where God has placed you in His church: Ephesians 4:1–3. What is the lesson here and how can you apply it this week?

4. *Witness for Christ wherever He takes you*: 2 Timothy 4:1–2. What do these verses say to you? How can you apply them to your present circumstances?

Day Four:

Luke

The Bible is rich with the lives of men and women who represent the heartbeat of Acts—real people—whose hearts were filled with the Spirit of God in loving obedience to Christ. It was these ordinary individuals who became extraordinary by turning their world upside down! Each week we'll take a closer look at their lives in the hope of enriching our own.

Aside from what is mentioned in the introduction to this lesson, what we know about Luke the man is very little. In fact, there are only three direct references mentioned about him in the New Testament and these were written by the Apostle Paul. Look up each reference below and challenge yourself to select one word that summarizes what it says about Luke.

1. Colossians 4:14 _____
2. Philemon 24 _____
3. 2 Timothy 4:9–11 _____

From Luke's style of writing we can assume he received a Greek education, most likely studying in the schools of Tarsus, as did Apollos and Saul. Greek students placed a high value on excellence, striving to achieve in their chosen field. In such a culture, to set aside one's own personal drive and embrace the teaching of Christianity that meant "in humility consider others better than yourself," was not only distasteful, it was considered shameful. But in coming to Christ, Luke found that which embodied the highest while at the same time set the plumb-line to everything that was worldly in his thinking. Scripture doesn't tell us when, where, or how Luke was led to Christ, but he found in Jesus the One who fulfilled his dreams and ideals.

Luke's background in education and his chosen profession equipped him to become Paul's personal doctor—"beloved physician." He was educated; he was faithful; but it was the Holy Spirit who made Luke the right man for the job. He is an example to us of someone who allowed his gifts and talents to be used for God's glory.

When was the last time you did an inventory check of your own life and what makes you the right person God needs for the job? Perhaps you never have. Are you aware of the areas in which God has gifted you and the purpose for which He carefully designed you to serve Him? Take a few minutes and ask the Lord to lead your thinking in the personal questions that follow. Don't worry if your answer is *unknown*. As you become better acquainted with the Holy Spirit this year through your study of Acts, you will also gain a deeper understanding of *who you are in Christ*, and how He wants to gift you and use you for His glory!

- a. What do you recognize to be your "natural abilities" (i.e., your God-given talents)?
- b. What character qualities and spiritual gift(s) has God added since you received Christ as your Savior?
- c. In what way are you using these talents and gifts in your service of Him? Will you ask Him to fill you afresh today with the Holy Spirit and thank Him for doing so?

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Compose a prayer of thanksgiving for what you've learned this week.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.

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Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 2

Day One: Poured Out On the Church

At the end of Acts 1, the Lord's followers were obediently gathered together for a time of silence and prayer. Jesus had commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait for the promise of the Father: "You shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (Acts 1:5). It had been fifty days since His resurrection. Forty of those days were filled with appearances of Jesus to His followers. But now the time of waiting had come to an end.

Pentecost, the *Festival of Weeks*, was a feast celebrated fifty days following Passover commemorating the first fruits of the harvest (Num. 28:26). Jewish tradition taught that Pentecost observed the day when the Law was given to the nation of Israel. The Jews lovingly referred to it as "Joy of the Law." What began in that upper room as the Old Testament commemoration of Pentecost became a new celebration of the Church receiving the fullness of God's Spirit.

Read Acts 2:1–47.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord. The focus of day one will be vv. 1–13.

Note your findings in vv. 1–4:

- The setting for the Spirit's manifestation: _____
- What the believers heard: _____
- What the believers saw: _____
- How they were impacted: _____

- What stands out to you about the crowd's responses in vv. 5–13? (Pay attention to phrases such as "they were *all* . . .")

Deeper Discoveries ~ Speaking in Tongues

On the day of Pentecost, believers were given the ability to speak in different languages. People from different regions of the globe were able to hear God being glorified in their native tongue. This was a unique occasion when “they were all filled” and began to speak with other tongues.

Note: As we will see later on subsequent to this event, not everyone who believed received this gift. It is one of many spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4) but not meant to be the evidence of having received the Holy Spirit. Scripture teaches that all believers are baptized by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13) as they become identified with Christ by faith. But the real evidence of the Holy Spirit’s indwelling of the believer comes about by exhibiting the “fruit of the Spirit” found in Galatians 5:22–23.

As the church began to grow, some of these early believers spoke in tongues as a way to pray to God in private. Others spoke in tongues at larger meetings requiring interpretation for the benefit of everyone present. The Apostle Paul would establish guidelines for the church so that the gift of tongues would not be personally abused but practiced in an orderly fashion for the edification of all. We find these guidelines set forth in 1 Corinthians 14. Look them up and summarize the main point.

- a. Vv. 1–5 _____

- b. Vv. 14–33 _____

- c. Why did Paul teach that there should be orderliness to the exercising of spiritual gifts?

Is the filling of the Holy Spirit a one-time experience? Yes, in the sense that once we are filled we are also *sealed*—becoming His forever. But it doesn’t stop there, Ephesians 5 tells us to “be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs, from the spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord” (vv. 18–19 NIV). The original Greek language means to “be *being* filled”—the verb is in the present tense. This filling is to be repeated as often as we need it to allow the Holy Spirit entrance into every part of our lives—our prayers, our worship, our work, our family, our free-time choices. To be spirit-filled and spirit-led means to make Him a part of every area every day!

- d. Personal: Where do *you* need the Holy Spirit’s touch today? Will you ask Him for it?

Memory verse: Acts 2:39 Write out the verse; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.
*For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off,
as many as the Lord our God will call.*

Day Two:

Preaching with Power

Read Acts 2:14–35 for review.

What Luke records in Acts 2 is not his first mention of the Holy Spirit. Luke introduced him early on in his gospel account as being present at the incarnation and virgin birth of Jesus (Luke 1:15, 35). He also recorded the Spirit descending upon Jesus at his baptism by John (Luke 3:22). Although the disciples walked with Jesus, listened to his teachings, and fellowshiped with him for over three years, they never understood what Jesus had told them about his arrest, trial, death, and resurrection. Not until they had experienced these things for themselves did they begin to realize God had a plan much greater than their wildest imaginations. And it was the same on the day of Pentecost. Huddled together, dazed, confused and cautious, these men (and women) waited and prayed . . . and waited and prayed . . . until suddenly, they experienced one of the New Testament's greatest miracles!

It is widely believed that next to the fear of dying, what people fear most is public speaking. Yet when Peter rose to his feet that day there was no evidence of fear, in fact, quite the opposite. Only a few weeks earlier Peter found it impossible to admit he was one of Jesus' followers. Here we see him for the first time boldly proclaiming Christ to thousands of listeners.

As you carefully examine the text, observe Peter's demeanor and who stood with him. Why do you think this was? Notice that Peter didn't buffer his speech with people-pleasing rhetoric; he carefully chose specific heart-piercing words to drive home the message.

1. What does Peter reiterate from the prophet Joel about the last days? Vv. 17–21

2. The heart of Peter's message was centered on the Lord Jesus. Select the most descriptive words about Jesus that round out the picture . . .
 - a. His life – v. 22

 - b. His death – v. 23

 - c. His resurrection – v. 24

 - d. His ascension – v.33

As the crowd heard Peter preach they were struck to the core. Many in the crowd knew who Jesus of Nazareth was; they had heard Him teach, witnessed His miracles and saw Him crucified. God's Holy Spirit was bearing witness of the truth through the message.

Personal: Our take-away from today's lesson is two-fold: 1) There is always a direct link between the Holy Spirit and the preaching of the gospel message; and 2) The same Holy Spirit who empowered Peter that day wants to empower *you today!* What have *you* learned that you can incorporate into your own sharing of the gospel message?

Day Three: A Day of Signs and Wonders

Read Acts 2:36–47 for review.

“Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36). In essence telling his listeners, “the one you think is dead is your living long-awaited Messiah and Lord!” As the listeners leaned in with rapt attention and conviction, they were “cut to the heart, and asked Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do? (v. 37)’” Hearing the words of Peter’s immediate answer, this vital church begins to grow and to set forth the pattern for generations that follow.

Verses 38–47 form the template for today’s exercise. Think about the lesson contained in each verse and what you can learn to apply to your own Christian walk. If there is a word you don’t know—look it up and write its definition in the margin. Dig as deeply as you can for the understanding and personal application. (If this is challenging for you, listen as your group shares their answers and learn from their examples. Be patient . . . spiritual growth takes time.)

1. Verse 38: What is the lesson (what does it mean) and personal application (to me)?

2. Verse 39: What is the lesson and personal application?

3. Verses 40–41: What is the lesson and personal application?

Focusing on verses 42–47, we see the purity of these young believers brought a deep sense of unity and joy in being together. Their priority was meeting the needs of others and maintaining closeness. Their resulting behavior became the perfect demonstration of love in action.

4. Having a commonality, in what ways were they willing to sacrifice for one another?
Do *you* see the need of someone around you that you can meet in a tangible way?
5. Maintaining a right heart-attitude will *enable us* to mirror this same kind of love in action. Read Philippians 2:1–4 and reflect what *you* can do to be like these first century Christians.
6. In these last days, how do the verses in Hebrews 10:23–25 echo for us the sentiment of the early church in Acts 2?

Unity of the believers—learning how to love and live together—is the greatest identifying mark of God’s people. Next to our salvation it is the most important thing to Him. The question is: do others see *you* loving and serving the brethren?

Day Four:

Peter

We all have a “giant” stalking us, one that at times appears bigger than life; at other times we fight to bring him down to manageable size so as not to allow people to notice. His name is *fear-factor*; or we could nickname him *mistake-maker*. He always shows up to taunt us when we do something wrong, at a time when we have the best of intentions. And he is there with frustrating regularity. We sometimes help him out by looking for (and prejudging) the mistakes of others, while he is actually lurking nearby—pointing out ours! Peter could’ve been the official “mistake-maker poster boy”—that is until Pentecost. Early on he was known for testing the boundaries, succumbing to pride, giving in to fear, and taking matters into his own hands. But all of his mistake-making didn’t take Jesus by surprise. Jesus knew Peter intimately better than Peter knew himself; and although Jesus dealt with Peter’s shortcomings and failures, He saw beyond them to the potential of a finished transformed life.

It was Peter’s brother Andrew who first introduced him to Jesus. Peter was one of the first called to be a disciple. He had the distinction of being among the three who formed the inner circle around the Lord. Although his strong loyalty and leadership abilities are visible throughout the four gospels, it is Peter’s impulsiveness and tendency to readily stick his foot in his mouth that we remember most—perhaps because these are the areas in which we can most easily relate.

Look up the references below where you see examples of Peter in action. What can you discern about his motive; what was the actual result?

1. Matthew 14:22–31

2. Matthew 16:21–23

3. Matthew 26:31–35; and 69–75

Read Peter’s sermon again in Acts 2:14–36. Make note of what *you* are able to discern about the difference in Peter following the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. How do your observations encourage you regarding your own Christian witness?

Jesus knows you better than you know yourself. He didn’t give up on Peter— He won’t give up on you! The same Holy Spirit who transformed Peter’s life is working in you to transform yours. Describe *YOU*— *before* and *after* the Holy Spirit came into your life. Remember: He isn’t finished! He promises to perfect and complete that which He’s begun in you (Phil. 1:6).

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

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1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Compose a prayer of thanksgiving for what you've learned this week.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.

Notes

Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 3

Day One: The Opportunity for Ministry

It was Graduation Day as the hopeful teenager donned his cap and gown to walk up the aisle of the auditorium while the band played the obligatory tune of “Pomp and Circumstance.” He proceeded across the stage to the podium where he was given a handshake and handed his diploma. The ceremony itself was enjoyable, but the boy eagerly anticipated the moment when he would be handed not a diploma, but the keys to a brand new car. As father and son shared a congratulatory hug, dad slipped into his son’s hands a gift wrapped box. He opened it to find a beautiful new leather Bible with his name engraved in gold on the cover. What was this—a Bible? It was certainly not what he wanted or expected. Where was the shiny new car? Angry and let down, the son stormed off to sulk alone. It was a lost opportunity and only years later—on the occasion of his father’s death—would he open the Bible to find keys to a brand new car tucked inside the pages on which were underlined the words of 2 Corinthians 9:15: “Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!”

When life hands you a hard blow, what do you do? When you run out of options and hopes fade, where do you turn? Is there a second chance? The disciples asked these same questions in the early days of ministry when many were turning away from Jesus. It was Peter who cut through the confusion: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ the Son of the living God” (John 6:68–69). It was a life lesson that would be replicated again on an ordinary day as Peter and John walked up the steps of the temple gate together to pray.

Read Acts 3:1–26.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord.

Look close ~

Write down your first observations of the text: the setting, the lame man, what you notice about Peter and John.

The early Christians were still faithful Jews who attended prayer three times during the day: at the morning, afternoon, and evening time of sacrifice. At three o'clock in the afternoon, Peter and John walked to the temple and there they met a man who was crippled from birth sitting outside. Persons with defects were not allowed to enter temple worship but they could position themselves on the outer steps and beg alms of those going inside.

Remember, these disciples had just witnessed the first ever evangelistic effort which resulted in thousands coming to Christ. Now the viewfinder is narrowed down to just one lost sheep that God points to as being in need as much as those who heard the message at Pentecost.

1. Look for a moment at Matthew 18:11–13; what do these verses tell you about the heart of God and why Peter and John felt a divine prompting.

In the hustle and bustle of the crowd coming and going from the temple, it's fair to say that no one else took their time for the lame beggar except to drop a few coins. And sometimes it's that way with us too; it's easy to write a check or offer some cash to the homeless; but do we take time to pause and pray or speak a word of truth to them? In those moments, if we are aware and willing, God may want to use us to reach the one lost sheep He is pursuing.

2. Ministry is not about size, it is about *seizing the moment, heeding the challenge* to have our faith tested, and *letting God use us* to bring Him glory. When was the last time you allowed your faith to be tested by a ministry opportunity? Are you aware of missed opportunities? Keep watch this week for whomever God brings across your path.

Memory verse: Acts 3:19 Write out the verse; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.

*Now turn from your sins and turn to God, so you can be cleansed of your sins.
Then wonderful times of refreshment will come from the presence of the Lord (NLT).*

Day Two: The Power for the Miracle

Review Acts 3:1–10.

Peter and John went to the temple that day not expecting to minister; they were there to pray. But something wonderful happens when we're in a habit of praying—our eyes are opened to people and opportunities to reach out and meet their needs. Occasionally, we may even see a miracle take place in our lives!

1. With eyes locked on the beggar, what does Peter say to him? v. 4

Peter wouldn't have needed to get the man's attention if he simply wanted to give him money. But because Peter intended to share a spiritual lesson, he needed to make a connection with him. The Greek translation of this passage says that the man gave the apostles his full attention, expecting something very generous from them (v. 5). What follows is a ministry opportunity that only God could perform.

2. In an unexpected dramatic call to action, what does Peter offer this man? v. 6
 - a. After forty years of being unable to walk, what immediately followed? Vv. 7–8
 - b. What was the response of the crowd to the event? Why?
3. The physical healing and the spiritual healing occurred simultaneously; which do you think was greater? (Support your point of view.)
4. Contrast the difference between what the beggar expected and what he received. (See Ephesians 3:20 to add to your understanding.)

Personal: Could *you* perhaps be this lame beggar today? Expecting one thing from God when He wants to do another that is completely outside your present understanding? God will at times bypass your temporal need to address the greater eternal need. Commit your way to Him today and then watch expectantly for Him to do above what you could ask or think! Use your lesson as a worksheet this week to record any happenings.

Day Three: The Message of Ministry

Review Acts 3:11–26.

The lame beggar did not need to understand his healing to have faith in God. His obedience to Peter's command to "rise up and walk" was evidence of the faith in his heart. All the people ran toward where the miracle took place. Their amazement at what they saw was immediately addressed: "Why do you marvel at this? Or why look so intently at us (v. 12) as though by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?"

1. Peter answers his own question. By whose name and power was he healed?

Peter includes himself as one of the “eyewitnesses” in looking back momentarily (vv. 13–15) at the One who was not only the power but also the message behind the miracle—JESUS. In recognizing the crowds’ guilt, Peter also acknowledges they had no idea what they were doing. But there were prophets and prophecies centuries earlier proclaiming this would come to pass.

2. In verse 19, Peter issues a gracious appeal to accept the gospel message. Do a little research and write a definition for each of the words that depict the message of salvation:

a. Repent— _____

b. Converted— _____

c. Sins— _____

d. Blotted out— _____

e. Refreshing— _____

3. In case you’re wondering how much God loves you, write out the words of Romans 5:8 below, inserting your name to personalize it.

4. If you’ve ever pondered how *completely* your sins are forgiven, take a look at what the Bible has to say (jot down the key words that stand out to you):

a. Psalm 51:1–2 _____

b. Psalm 103:12 _____

c. Isaiah 43:25 _____

d. Isaiah 44:22 _____

When something is blotted out it is gone—remembered no more. Since God does not remember your former sins—let them go! And return to Him.

But one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

(Philippians 3:13–14)

Day Four:

JESUS: Name above All Names

Review Acts 3:13–22.

Peter used five different titles or names for the Lord Jesus in his astounding spontaneous sermon. Today we'll look at them to delve a little deeper into their meaning. It is in these deeper discoveries of Jesus that we find the sweet spot of His nearness and the motive for our service.

“His Servant Jesus” – v. 13:

Peter begins with a history lesson to let the people know that God's work did not originate with Jesus' life upon earth as we know it. As a Jew speaking to other Jews, Peter invoked the most revered of Jewish patriarchs saying, “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob . . . glorified His Servant Jesus. What was His role as “servant” according to Philippians 2:5–8? (Is “this mind” in you?) How has God exalted Him now? Philippians 2:9–11

“The Holy and Righteous One” – v. 14:

In his sermon, Peter pointed to the fact that the Jews who worshipped at the temple in Jerusalem disavowed and rejected the *Holy and Righteous One*; but they did it in ignorance and unbelief. Realize that before *you* received Christ *you* too were numbered among them. But now God has made a way for you to know this “Righteous One.” What is the proof? 1 John 2:3–6

“The Prince of Life” – v. 15:

The rejection of God's Holy and Righteous One resulted in His death. The very Author of human life had His breath snuffed out by His people. But God raised Him from the dead so that you could have new life with Him. John 14:1–4 reveals His plan for you; what is it? How does it motivate you to want to fulfill your purpose by serving Him before you go home?

“A Prophet like Me” – v. 22:

Peter referred to one of the Old Testament heroes of the past—Moses—to tie the thread of salvation to Jesus: “Him you shall hear in all things, whatever He says to you . . .” (Deut. 18:15) In other words, belief in Moses should produce belief in Jesus. Another Old Testament prophet says it well; look up Isaiah 55:3. What does Isaiah refer to in this verse? Write it out below.

“The Christ” – v. 20:

The power to heal and to save resides in the name—Jesus Christ. What does Colossians 1:15–16 proclaim about Him? _____

If you do not have the assurance of your salvation or that your sins are forgiven, you can pray to receive Christ as your Lord and Savior today. Pray these words: *Lord Jesus, I confess my sins to You. I need your forgiveness and Your Holy Spirit to follow You. Please come inside and be MY Lord—My God today! I thank You that I am forgiven and I belong to You. Amen.*

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Compose a prayer of thanksgiving for what you've learned this week.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.

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Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 4

Day One: The Outbreak of Persecution

Acts 4 is a continuation of the healing of the lame beggar in Acts 3 and the aftermath of preaching in Jesus' name. The scene opens with an arrest and a public hearing and ends with the summary of events that formed the core of the early church. We need chapters like this one, where we see the emphasis on the Word of God, the power of the Spirit, and the unity of the believers. These three at work: *Word—Spirit—Unity*, constitute the growth and fortitude in a Christian that makes the impossible become possible. There was a holy boldness and simplicity that permeated every aspect of these believers' lives. As a result, they personified what they knew to be true of Jesus. Their courageous response to God and their obedience to the Spirit's prompting, resulted in them turning their world upside down!

Read Acts 4:1–37.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord.

Imagine what the world would be like today if Christians united together and activated like these first-responders. What kind of impact would we/could we make? Share your initial thoughts.

Memory verse: Acts 4:12 Write out the verse; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.

*Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven
given among men by which we must be saved.*

While Peter and John were speaking to the crowd that had assembled, members of the Sanhedrin (mainly Sadducees—priests authorized to preserve and protect Jewish tradition) *came upon them* (v. 1), meaning suddenly by force with an attitude of hostile intent. They were greatly disturbed that these two unlearned Galileans would be so presumptuous as to assume their role of teaching and interpreting the Scriptures.

Peter and John's words were intolerable to these leaders, but the real issue was that they were proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (v. 2). These same Jewish leaders had put Jesus to death as a blasphemer and now the apostles were boldly proclaiming Him as the resurrected Messiah.

1. If the crowd perceived any truth to their claim, the religious leaders would be branded as heretics. Notice the different responses to the truth going forth . . .
 - a. What action did Peter and John's words prompt the religious leaders to take?
 - b. Was the crowd influenced by the Sadducees? What effect did Peter and John's teaching have upon the crowd?
 - c. What does this contrast *reveal to you* about the power of the gospel message?

Deeper Discoveries ~

This was the first act of open opposition against the early church and although it took place very quickly, it was to be expected. Notice what words Jesus gave to His followers as an early warning. Consider how you can turn them into a lesson and personal application today.

- a. John 15:18–19: What is the lesson? How can you make this a personal application?
.....
.....
- b. John 15:20: What is the lesson? How can you apply it?
.....
.....
- c. John 16:2: What is the lesson? How can you apply it?
.....
.....
- d. The apostles would in turn teach the inevitability of persecution to the church. What did the Apostle Paul say in his letter to his son in the faith? 2 Timothy 3:12
- e. According to Peter, what is part of the believer's calling? 1 Peter 2:21

- f. Personal: Have *you* ever been persecuted for your faith in Jesus Christ? When?
How should Matthew 5:11–12 your heart attitude when enduring persecution?

Day Two:

Seizing the Moment

Review Acts 4:5–12.

Aware that God, not the authorities, was in control of the circumstances. Peter and John offered no resistance at their arrest or arraignment. The chief priests (rulers), elders (family and tribal heads), and scribes (law experts) made up the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the nation. They convened in a place called the Hall of Hewn Stone (thought to have been an area in the temple itself). Placing the apostles in the center of a circle, they began the formal interrogation.

1. What did the ruling party demand to know? v. 7
2. What does this text reveal about Peter that is paramount to his defense?

Submission to the Holy Spirit's control is what enables believers to handle persecution in a way that glorifies God. Because Peter was Spirit-filled, he not only endured maltreatment at the hands of his accusers, he became victorious in it. He allowed the persecution to drive him closer to God, giving him the boldness to seize the moment.

3. What does Jesus say about this in Luke 12:11–12?
 - a. How would more of the Spirit's presence make for a stronger church against today's worldly opposition? Be specific with your example.
4. Briefly summarize in your own words how Peter expressed the gospel message, issuing an invitation to repent and receive Jesus Christ as their Savior. Vv. 10–12

There are not many "ways" or "names" by which we may choose to claim salvation. There is only one: Jesus Christ. Today's Christians live in a pluralistic religious society that wants "open-mindedness" to many ways, not one. But because we preach a *one-way* gospel message, we are often branded as intolerant and narrow-minded. Half of that statement is scriptural and relevant: *Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it* (Matthew 7:13–14). The biblical view of Christianity is not one of intolerance; it is God's will that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

5. What did Jesus say about the exclusivity of salvation? See John 10:7–9; John 14:6.

Day Three: Obedient to God Whatever the Cost

Review Acts 4:13–22.

Peter's bold impassioned plea failed to soften the hard hearts of the religious leaders who marveled at the confidence of these uneducated, untrained men.

1. What ultimately stood out to the religious council as they watched and listened? v. 13

Jesus Himself produced the same wonder among the Jews who heard Him teach in the temple. Though He too was uneducated, "The people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority" (Matt. 7:28–29). Jesus' answer to their wonder was, "My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me" (John 7:16).

2. Personal: Do others recognize you as having been with Jesus? How?

The disciple's experience with Jesus was personal—they saw Him, heard Him, and touched Him. We cannot spend time with Him in the physical sense, but we can spend time with Him by meditating on His Word, listening to Him speak, sensing His leading by the Holy Spirit, and understanding Him as we follow in obedience. The reward for our submission to Him is a greater revelation of Himself!

The council had a difficult decision to make; a miracle had taken place and all in Jerusalem knew about it. How could they further silence Peter and John to contain it? Perhaps intimidation would work. So in order that this teaching not spread any further, they commanded them not to speak to others in Jesus' name (vv. 17 and 21).

3. Peter and John did not hesitate to answer. How did they respond? vv. 19–20

Peter and John refused to obey the orders of the Sanhedrin but they did not argue with them; rather they treated them with respect, explaining that they simply could not stop speaking. Like the Apostle Paul, "Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:16), they too were compelled to speak by a higher authority.

4. When is it alright *not* to obey those representing the government?

Peter taught that believers are to obey the government authorities (1 Peter 2:13–17). The reaction of Peter and John to the Sanhedrin's command however, establishes the limits of that obedience. They would obey as long as it did not cause them to disobey their sovereign Lord. The only instance when it is acceptable to disobey is when God's commands conflict with those of the government.

5. Personal: Have *you* had to pay a cost for your submission to Christ? How did it impact you? Please explain.

Day Four:

Prevailing Prayer

Review Acts 4: 23–37.

From the onset, as this emerging church faced opposition and persecution, the Holy Spirit was there to guide, provide, and override those who opposed the will of God. Once released, Peter and John returned to the believers to report all that the chief priests and elders had said to them (v. 23). When they heard, they raised their voice to God. Today we'll take a close look at their prayer to add to our own understanding of what it means to prevail with God.

The Acknowledgement:

The first key to answered prayer is in acknowledging to whom it is we are praying. Slow down as you examine v. 24, and note the specific things that should shape your perspective.

Notice what is happening in vv. 25–27. The quote from Psalm 2 is a prophetic utterance that unbelievers would try to come against God and against His people. The words David spoke were coming to pass and it was all in accordance with God's foreknowledge and will. Against whom were these persecutions actually aimed (v. 27)? _____

Jesus had promised the disciples that because He was persecuted they would be also. Peter would later write a word of encouragement to the believers in 1 Peter 4:12–14. Recap what he says there: _____

The Specific Request:

In the midst of strong threats, look at the confidence of their words in vv. 29–30. What is the essence of their prayer? _____

It's amazing these believers didn't pray to be free from persecution—they prayed to have *boldness in persecution*! This is the kind of prayer that prevails with God. But how often do we fall to our knees when our lives are shaken, instead of praying to be Holy Spirit shaken (v. 31)? Notice they did not all speak with tongues; what did they all speak? _____

Lesson: The Holy Spirit's empowering was not for the purpose of speaking in tongues. The *purpose* of the Holy Spirit's empowering is that we might become bold witnesses for Him.

The Overflowing Aftermath:

Because the prayer originated from the Holy Spirit, the result was also God-breathed. The "multitude that believed" experienced the overflowing grace that accompanies the outpouring of power. Jot down how God's grace was manifested among them. (Use this day's template to compose a prayer—*yours for the asking*—on day five.)

v. 32: _____
v. 33: _____
vv. 34–35: _____
vv. 36–37: _____

The first mention of Barnabas in the book of Acts is linked to him giving. Remembered for his benevolent spirit, he became recognized as the “Son of Encouragement” by the believers.

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you’ve learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you’d like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week’s verse from memory.

3. What does this week’s verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Compose a prayer—*yours for the asking*—from what you’ve learned. Acknowledge to whom it is you make your request. Ask . . . and record the aftermath.

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Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 5

Day One: Purity, Power and Persistence

As Acts 5 opens, the spirit of giving continues with the believers experiencing a time of great power and great grace. Thousands of Jews that had come to celebrate Pentecost had received the message of the gospel and were converted to Christ. The needs of the many who had lingered in Jerusalem to become instructed and grounded in God's Word were met by those Christians that had sold their belongings and pooled their resources. Each gave of what they had to see that no one lacked. It was a time for great rejoicing, with all who believed being of one heart and one soul and having all things in common such as had never been before.

Into this time of growth as a church family, Luke introduces the first instance of hypocrisy and betrayal of unity. The story in our chapter this week and the startling outcome may at first seem shocking to us, but in the end it is a lasting reminder of God's holiness and His high standard for His church. We also witness the continued signs and wonders being performed by the apostles and their persistence to remain true to their calling to preach Jesus as the Christ.

Read Acts 5:1–42.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord. Write down your first impressions.

Memory verse: Romans 1:16 Write out the verse; repeat it daily to commit it to memory.

*For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation
for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.*

vv. 1–11: The word “but” in v. 1, points out the contrast between the gift Barnabas gave at the end of chapter 4 and that of Ananias and his wife Sapphira. Like Barnabas, they also sold a piece of property in order to donate the proceeds to the church.

1. Peter clearly points out in v. 4 that withholding a portion of the proceeds for themselves was not a sin. What was their sin?

The believer’s giving was not compulsory, it was voluntary. Nowhere do we see in scripture where they were commanded to give everything to the church. New Testament teaching instructs Christians to give voluntarily (2 Corinthians 9:7).

2. Guided by the Holy Spirit, Peter confronted Ananias. Who did Peter say had tempted Ananias’ to lie? To *whom* did he lie?
3. In your opinion, why would someone lie to God? What would they intend to gain?

Day Two:

Deeper Discoveries

Review Acts 5:1–11.

Verse 3 states that Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit; v. 4 says that he lied to God. This is a confirmation of the deity of the Holy Spirit—He is One with God. It also affirms the fact that the Holy Spirit is not merely a force or influence; He is a Person—One that can be sinned against.

- a. Acts 5:5–6: What lesson do you derive in these verses? What personal application?

- b. Acts 5:7–9: What is the lesson? What is the personal application?

- c. Acts 5:10–11: What is the lesson repeated in these verses? The personal application?

- d. A little investigation reveals that the name Ananias means “God is gracious,” and Sapphira means “beautiful.” Do *you* think Ananias and Sapphira were true believers? Why or why not?

The complete narrative of this story seems to indicate that both Ananias and Sapphira were indeed Christians and a part of the church family. It is important to point out that Luke does not make mention that they were condemned to eternal punishment for their sin. Most commentators seem to agree that they were saved and their death was their judgment (1 John 5:16–17) for their sin but that they will inherit eternal life.

- e. Has God lowered His standard for purity or unity? Given the same circumstance in the church today, what do you think would be the outcome? Why?

God's desire is for a pure church and He is willing to judge people to have it. "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up" (James 4:8, 10).

- f. What word of warning is there for believers in 1 Peter 4:17? What does this mean to you right now?

- g. What word of truth and hope do you find in 1 John 1:7–10?

Your effectiveness as a witness is closely linked to being a vessel that is clean and set apart for Him. Keep short accounts with God, daily confessing your sin and receiving His forgiveness. "It is written, 'Be holy for I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:16; Leviticus 19:2).

Day Three: Power and Persistence

Review Acts 5:12–32.

Now that the sin of Ananias and Sapphira had been dealt with, the church was again in one accord. What did we learn from their example? That church discipline is key to not only purifying but also evangelizing the church. Luke stopped counting heads in numbers as the church exploded, referring to them as "multitudes of men and women" (v. 14). The people were gathered together in Solomon's Porch, where earlier Peter had preached and where Jesus gave His discourse (John 10) on His sheep hearing His voice. Could we say that these believers were uncompromising holy? Absolutely! Think about it . . . is there a cost to discipleship?

You decide by reading and briefly summarizing what Jesus had to say . . .

1. Matthew 10:32–39 _____

2. Luke 9:57–62 _____

Jesus doesn't want a partial commitment, He wants your total commitment. In other words, He wants ALL of you! A church made up of committed followers will become a powerful persistent army of witnesses to the watching world.

Enter the opposition (same crowd as in Acts 4), who again imprisons the apostles.

3. Briefly recap the surprising twist no one saw coming in verses 19–20.

“Go stand . . . and speak . . . all the words of this life.” The Greek word used for “life” in v. 20 is *zoe*, often used as a synonym for the Lord Jesus (see John 1:4 and 1 John 1:1–2).

4. When brought again before the council and the high priest, with what were the apostles charged? How did they respond? vv. 28–29

5. By now they knew that not only were they witnesses, who else were they assured was with them? v. 32

6. Once again (as in Acts 4), we see an example when Christians must put God's authority above that of governmental authority. When again (remind yourself) is civil disobedience permissible and even appropriate?

Day Four: Are You For or Against Him?

Review Acts 5:33–42.

The high office Gamaliel occupied suggests that he was not a newcomer to public life. He most likely was present when the Lord Jesus appeared before the same council. He may even have been an eyewitness to the dreadful events that had taken place in Jerusalem. Could it be that he rose to his feet to address his peers because he became inwardly disturbed and possibly even fearful due to the death and resurrection of Christ, and now the transformed lives of His disciples? Luke records that he was a man of intelligence and honesty, a teacher who understood Jewish law and was respected by all. The Apostle Paul acknowledged him as his own teacher (Acts 22:3); one honored to the degree that he was referred to as “Rabban,” meaning *our teacher*, a title higher than that of “Rabbi,” meaning *my teacher*.

1. What are *your* initial impressions of this religious leader Gamaliel? What about him stands out to you?
 - a. Was Gamaliel *for* or *against* the apostles?

At first glance, it may appear difficult to discern whether Gamaliel was for or against them. He obviously feared God and dared to address a position that was directly opposed to the rest of the council. And he intervened with reason and persuasive speech on behalf of the apostles. It would, however, seem that he was taking a middle-of-the-road, wait and see position. There does not appear to be any evidence that he was a believer in Christ.

2. Do *you* think it is possible to be Christian and at the same time have a middle-of-the-road attitude about Jesus? Why or why not?
3. What does Jesus himself say about this in Matthew 12:30a?
 - a. How about Revelation 3:15–16?
 - b. Do the verses you have just read leave room for middle ground?
4. State your own reasons for taking a strong stand for Christ. How would exhibiting your convictions potentially affect you? What would it reveal to the rest of the world?

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Which area is God currently working into your life: *purity–power–persistence*?
Compose a prayer today asking Him to help you apply it.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.

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Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 6

Day One: The Church Needs Servants

Luke continues to reveal in a very transparent way the issues of the first-century church. It was a unified congregation, grounded in the teaching and preaching of the gospel; but it was not perfect because it was filled with imperfect human beings functioning in an imperfect world. The example of Ananias and Sapphira had dawn the believers into a greater reverence for God's holiness coupled with a deeper commitment, making the church stronger than ever.

In chapters 6–7, we find a way to deal scripturally with church issues as well as how to raise up qualified candidates for leadership. We will learn that it is God who calls people to lead and that He requires both commitment and faithfulness on the part of those appointed to serve.

Acts 6 marks a transition in leadership from the dominating presence of Peter to that of the apostle Paul, who is brought into view at end of chapter 7. Peter's ministry was primarily to the Jews at Jerusalem and Paul's was to the Gentiles throughout the Roman Empire. In between these two pillars, we are introduced to Stephen whose brief ministry catapulted the gospel out into the remainder of the world. In the hope that those who heard him would become saved, his selfless and fearless proclamation of the gospel led him to pay the ultimate price.

Read Acts 6:1–15.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord.

Memory verse: John 15:12–13 Write out the verse; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.

*This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.
Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.*

The explosive growth that had brought many blessings to the church now also brought some problems. Without means of mass communication, there arose some physical needs that had to be dealt with administratively. It was time for the leadership to organize and begin delegating.

A complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. These Hellenistic Jews were Greek speaking Jewish Christians who were dispersed to other countries, having assimilated the customs of the Gentile nations. The Hebrews mentioned were Aramaic speaking Jewish Christians who had never left their homeland and were steeped in Old Testament cultures and customs. These Jewish Christians detested everything associated with Gentiles and regarded the Hellenistic Jews as being contaminated through their contact with them.

1. What now becomes the priority for the disciple? v. 4
2. List the qualities that would be required for those chosen to take over the job of serving tables. v. 3
 - a. Do *you* think that these seem like high standards for such ordinary tasks? Please explain.

The requirements were: "From among you . . . of good reputation . . . full of the Spirit . . . possessing wisdom . . . to supervise." The seven chosen would become the first deacons. The word *deacon* is derived from the Greek word "to serve." These men would assist the apostles. Their responsibilities would later develop as their role became official (1 Timothy 3:8–13).

3. How were these men confirmed? Vv. 6–7
 - a. What subsequently followed and how does this reveal the necessity of orderliness in the church?

Stephen's was the first name put forth as deacon, giving us a glimpse into his standing among the other believers. He was "full"—meaning, *controlled by* the Holy Spirit, wisdom, faith and power.

4. What else do you learn about Stephen from Vv. 8–15?
5. Personal: Consider what your study in Acts 6 has taught *you* about the path of humble service. How would devoting yourself to prayer and the Word keep you as a vessel fit for the Master's use?

Day Two:

Stephen Delivers a History Lesson

Stephen's speech in Acts 7 is the longest recorded in the book of Acts. With the Old Testament in view, he carefully laid out the story of God's work with the nation of Israel up to his present day. Keep in mind that this is a layman who was a true student of scripture, one who was steeped in Old Testament history and able to articulate it in relation to the Messiah—His coming, death, resurrection and, as a result, the future hope for God's people.

Deeper Discoveries ~

The historical details of Stephen's account are broken down and presented for you below. After reading the verses, challenge yourself to summarize one lesson for each passage. Look for what God was saying to His people through their circumstances about His relationship to them.

1. Abraham and the Inheritance: Vv. 1–8

God called His people out—to be set apart—in covenant relationship with Him in a land that He would give to them.

2. Joseph and Egypt: Vv. 9–16

3. God Delivers Israel by Moses: Vv. 17–38

4. Israel – Worship – and the True Temple: Vv. 39–50

5. Challenge yourself further: Stephan tied the historical relevance of the Old Testament to his witness for Christ. Can you pick one of the lessons from Stephen's message to use in sharing about *your faith* in God? (Tie it to your Christian testimony.)

He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.
(Acts 17:26–27)

Day Three:

Stephen the Martyr

Read Acts 7:51–60.

Luke described Stephen as “full of faith and the Holy Spirit (v. 5), and that he was also “full of God’s grace and power” (v. 8 NIV). These qualifications allowed him to not only lead but also do signs and wonders. God’s anointing had enabled him to argue passionately against his opposition, who ultimately labeled him as a blasphemer.

Toward the end of Stephen’s message, the pronoun used switches from “our” to “you,” as he refers to his audience as “stiff-necked” and “uncircumcised in heart and ears, always resisting the Holy Spirit.” Their ancestors had persecuted and murdered those who prophesied of Jesus’ coming; and now his generation had done the same to their Messiah. But Stephen never finished his address, he was abruptly attacked while accusing them of their sin. Stephen hoped that they would recognize it and turn toward repentance.

1. In your own words, write your observations about the scene before you in Vv. 54–60.

- a. The crowd’s response: _____

- b. What Stephen saw? _____

- c. Stephen’s heart attitude toward their actions: _____

Luke tells us the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. He, too, had some role in the execution.

2. Stephen fell to his knees and uttered what words similar to those of Jesus?

Up to this point, we have seen three trials presented in the book of Acts: the first ending in threats (chapter 4), the second in beatings (chapter 5), and the third in death (chapter 7). Stephen becomes the first person martyred for his faith in Christ but he will not be the last. When he had prayed for his murderers he “fell asleep.” The Greek word used is *ekoimethe*, from which we derive the word *cemetery*. The Bible teaches that when Christians die they are not gone; they are “asleep” until Jesus wakes them up. The Apostle Paul will later write that for believers to be *absent from the body is to be present with the Lord* (2 Corinthians 5:8).

A key word in this passage is “Son of Man” (v. 56). This is the only time in the New Testament this is spoken by anyone other than Jesus. Stephen saw a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Did Jesus stand to honor and welcome this martyr home? We don’t know. But we do know from Stephen’s message and his prayer for his killers that he embodied the same attitude of forgiveness and service that Jesus did.

3. What words in Matthew 20:27–28 convey the heart essence of God’s servant? What can you take away from this example for your own service?

Day Four:

In His Footsteps

Could you love your enemies in the face of your imminent death? If stones were being hurled at you in rage, would you be able to pray for those desiring your destruction? Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit: "And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not charge them with this sin.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7:59–60).

The dictionary defines *enemy* as an adversary or foe. It denotes one who opposes or vies with another; one who manifests ill will; or one whose relation to us is likely to provoke ill feeling. These may include others who oppose our ideas, who contend with our decisions, who engage in vindicating their supposed rights against us, whose material interests clash with our own, and who have spoken out against us or taken steps to injure us. Perhaps today you find yourself in a situation where you are dealing with an *enemy* and you don't know what to do next.

Jesus would tell you to follow in His footsteps and love that person. Is that a hard path to follow? Most certainly, in fact it would be absolutely impossible apart from the Holy Spirit.

Look Closer ~

Turn to Matthew 5:43–48. Here we find the signposts on the path we as believers are to follow. What does Jesus say should be the believer's response to each of the assaults below? v. 44

- a. Those who are *your* enemies?
- b. Those who curse *you*?
- c. Those who hate *you*?
- d. Those who spitefully use and persecute *you*?
- e. When *you* follow this pattern, how does God view you? v. 45
- f. Think about it: Why is it so important that *you*, as a child of God, exhibit behavior that is different from those who don't know Jesus Christ?
- g. If the Lord has pointed out someone through your study today that *you* need to begin loving, write down that person's name and begin to pray for them.

G. Campbell Morgan said of Jesus: *He loved His enemies. He did good to them that hated Him. He blessed them that cursed Him. He prayed for those that spitefully used Him. When they smote Him on the cheek, He turned the other. When they tore away His coat and gambled for it, He made no protest. The Master is the Revelation and Interpretation of His own law. I cannot live there, save in the measure in which my life is His life, interpreted to me, realized within me, manifested through me, by the ministry of the Holy Spirit."*

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Which of the behaviors mentioned in Matthew 5 about *loving your enemies* are you having the greatest struggle with right now? Compose a prayer asking God to help.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 7

Day One: The Gospel Thrives

As evangelism grew and gained momentum, so did the growing opposition effort against it. In Acts 8:1, we find the first mention in scripture of the word *persecution*. While the apostles remained in Jerusalem for the time being, many Christians were becoming scattered, taking the gospel message with them to the outer regions of Judea and Samaria. Literally on the run for their lives, we imagine these men and women grabbing their children along with whatever possessions they could carry with them and fleeing in earnest. On the run and fearing for their lives, they continued to remain faithful to Christ, proclaiming His message wherever they went.

After the death of Stephen, Luke draws our attention to two contrasting individuals: Saul, who led the charge to not only defeat but destroy the church; and Philip, who personified the message of the new life in Christ he boldly went forward to proclaim.

Read Acts 8:1–40.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord. Write down your first impressions below.

Memory verse: 2 Corinthians 5:17 Write out the verse; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away;
behold, all things have become new.*

The death of Stephen dealt a devastating blow to the church, but while believers were grieving, instead of being halted by persecution, the gospel was being jettisoned forth.

1. What was Saul's reaction to Stephen's death? What did he begin doing to the church? Vv. 1–3

2. Compare Acts 8:1 and 4 with that of Acts 1:8. How were the present happenings actually the result of God's will?

3. Personal: Is there any opposition in your life right now? Think about it: how can you view and deal with that opposition in light of what you are studying? Please explain.

Day Two:

Counterfeit in Samaria

Read Acts 8:5–25 for review.

In this passage Luke mentions Philip for the second time. Previously (6:5) he was one of seven leaders appointed to handle the daily ministry of food to the widows in the church. Now as Saul was vigorously making havoc of the church in Jerusalem, Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ: *And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did* (v. 6).

1. In contrast to Stephen's eloquence in preaching, what does Luke emphasize about Philip's preaching? Vv. 5–8
2. Another man is mentioned—Simon the sorcerer—who also astonished the people of Samaria. How did he view himself? How did the people view him? Vv. 9–11
3. Luke seems to distinguish between the fact that the people “heeded” (gave serious attention to) Simon, but that they “believed” Philip (v. 12) when he preached. What resulted from them believing?

A quick read of this story prompts us to be as surprised as the Samaritans were that Simon also believed and was baptized. But it begs the question: was this magician sorcerer truly convicted and converted?

4. Given a little background about Simon's occupation and estimation of himself, what *may* have been the motive behind Simon's profession of faith and baptism?

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that the people in Samaria had received the gospel message they sent Peter and John to them (Vv. 14–17). Why? Certainly not to make less of Philip's ministry; rather the Jerusalem leaders affirmed his ministry. Philip was a layman with no experience in dealing with new converts. His example of submitting to the authority of Peter and John is a beautiful example to the church today of inexperienced younger believers yielding to more mature older Christians as a model of unity. These newborn believers in Samaria were edified by the presence of experienced Christians from Jerusalem as they laid hands on them and prayed for the Holy Spirit.

5. What was Simon's reaction to the evidence of spiritual gifts in operation by Peter and John (Vv. 18–19)?
 - a. What was Peter's response to Simon? Why? Vv. 20–24
 - b. What offer of hope did Peter extend to Simon? Do *you* think Simon repented?
 - c. Simon attempted to use the Holy Spirit's gifts for his own purpose but failed. How might his story serve as a warning today?

It's interesting to note that the term *simony* originated with this event. The dictionary defines it as the *traffic of sacred things for monetary gain* and actually mentions Simon's offer to Peter. Peter's statement about Simon's money perishing along with him was not a final condemnation; he offered Simon the opportunity to repent. Simon's request of grace for sale revealed he may have understood the gospel message but not the grace of God because he had a counterfeit response to it. In the end, Simon feared the consequence but there is no indication he actually repented, which means to turn around and go in the opposite direction by changing one's ways.

6. Think about it: the act of believing the truth does not guarantee true conversion. Like the apostles, many of the people in Jesus' day believed the signs and wonders He did but they were not converted: *He did not commit Himself to them because He knew all men* (John 2:23–25). Have *you* truly repented by turning from *your* sin and going the one true way of faith in Jesus Christ?

Day Three: Convert in the Desert

Read Acts 8:26–40 for review.

How does anyone find Jesus? Luke answers that question in the passage before us. But the real answer can be found in the pages of the Old Testament: *You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart* (Jeremiah 29:13).

1. No one is out of God's reach when the heart is set on knowing Him. How did the Lord direct Philip to the place where he would meet the Ethiopian eunuch?
 - a. Describe the man Philip was sent out to meet. Why had he been to Jerusalem?
 - b. What was this official doing when Philip met up with him?

- c. What did Philip ask him? How did he respond?

This official knew that the passage from Isaiah 53 was significant but he did not know of whom it referred. As Philip sat with him he opened his mouth and beginning at Isaiah 53, preached Jesus to him.

- d. What request did the man make of Philip and what condition did Philip place on him?

After hearing of the eunuch's statement of faith, the chariot stopped and the two went down into the water where Philip baptized him. *When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing.* We must note that it was not baptism that saved the man; it was his faith in Christ. Baptism is an outward step of obedience responding to an inward change of the heart that has taken place by faith. Old things have passed away, a new creation in Christ is revealed.

Why would Philip leave an already successful ministry going on in Samaria? Simple: because God told him to go! And his spiritual detour saved a man's soul and allowed Philip to continue preaching in all the cities until he arrived in Caesarea. What if Philip had said no? God would've found someone else and Philip would have missed an opportunity.

2. Personal: What about *you*? Do you hear those subtle gentle promptings here and there telling you to speak to someone? It could be in a café or an airport or a hospital. You see a stranger, perceive a need, and realize you have the answer. Are you ready? You should be. What does Peter instruct the believer in 1 Peter 3:15? Write it out below.

Keep getting ready—God wants to use *you* to deliver His message of salvation!

Day Four:

Saul the Persecutor

As we get our first glimpse into the Apostle Paul's early life, we find him known by his Jewish name, *Saul*, which comes from the Hebrew *Shaul*, meaning *asked*. Later on in Acts 13 we will see him called by his Christian name of Paul. The transition from one name to another took place when he committed his life to Christ. The word Paul means *little*, as he chose to be recognized as the *little one* in Christ's service. It marks the turning point from his affiliation with his former countrymen to his new commission as *apostle* to the Gentiles.

Saul was a native of Tarsus, a city of Cilicia (Acts 21:39; 22:3) and was of pure Jewish descent, of the tribe of Benjamin (Philippians 3:5). We find no mention of his mother in Scripture, with the information regarding his father being minimal; mainly that he was a Pharisee (Acts 23:6) and that from him Saul inherited the rights of Roman citizenship (Acts 22:28). It will help us to better understand his life and teaching if we remember that he was first a Hebrew by birth, a Roman citizen by right, and a Pharisee of the highest order. As was the custom of the Jews that all boys learn a trade, Saul learned to make tents (Acts 18:3) from the haircloth supplied by the goats of his native province and sold in the local marketplace. At the proper age of thirteen he went to Jerusalem to pursue his religious studies. It was there he became a student of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), under whose mentoring Saul grew in his understanding and observance of the law.

We will have many opportunities to study up close the life of Saul. For now, we will take a retrospective look back at it from his writings. This will set the stage for the dynamic dramatic ministry that is about to unfold.

1. In Paul's letter to the Philippians he wrote about his life before meeting Christ. Read Philippians 3:4–10 and in a sentence or two state your findings.

- a. Who he was:

- b. What he did:

- c. What motivated him after meeting Christ:

2. In looking back . . . from *your* believer's perspective, what are some facts about *you* before you met Christ? What were some of the things you considered important before becoming a Christian? How do you feel about those things today?

Deeper Discoveries ~

Verse 10 presents the ultimate goal of every sinner saved by grace. In your own words, what is the lesson in each of the following? As you define each one ask yourself in the form of a question: *do I know Him; His power; His sufferings; am I being conformed into His likeness?*

- a. *That I may know Him—*

- b. *And the power of His resurrection—*

- c. *And the fellowship of His sufferings—*

- d. *Being conformed to His death—*

- e. *I press on that I may lay hold . . . (v. 12)—*

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Compose a prayer asking God to help you as you keep getting ready to share His good news.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.

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Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 8

Day One: Missionary to the Gentiles

The entrance of Saul in Luke's account leads the reader back to the end of chapter 7 and the tragic act of Stephen's death. Those who witnessed the stoning had lain down their clothes at a young man's feet whose name was Saul. Following his consent to that horrific act, in chapter 8 we saw him making havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women to prison. Here in chapter 9, he expands the hunt more than a hundred miles northeast of Jerusalem to Damascus which was about a six-day walk. His persistent determination was a testimony of his commitment to the cause.

Luke here refers to Christianity as *the Way*—the earliest name for the Christian movement. It indicates that faith in Christ transcends belief in a set of opinions or doctrines. It is rather a way of living and behaving as well as believing. It is a fitting title—one Luke uses five times in the book of Acts.

Read Acts 9:1–9.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord. Write down your first impression of Saul's encounter with the Lord.

Memory verse: Proverbs 21:2 Write out the verse; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.

Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the hearts.

Acts 9 does not contain the entire record of what took place on that Damascus Road. Paul himself recounts the story repeatedly in his own words. Look up each passage and record your summary highlights. Contrast and compare any similarities and differences you notice. (Please note: although there are differences, there are no disagreements or discrepancies. The different records simply reflect the manner in which the facts of the event are presented to different groups of people on multiple occasions.)

1. Acts 9:3–9 (The shortest of the historical accounts.)

2. Acts 22:4–16 (Delivered by Paul in the Hebrew tongue to the Jews. It is the longest recorded statement.)

3. Acts 26:12–18 (Given by Paul in the presence of the Roman governor Festus and the Jewish King Agrippa; addressed to both Jews and Gentiles.)

4. Paul also mentions his conversion briefly in the following places. Note what you find in each case.

- a. 1 Corinthians 15:8–9 _____

- b. Galatians 1:15–16 _____

- c. 1 Timothy 1:12–13 _____

- d. According to 1 Timothy 1:12–13, *why* did God show Paul mercy? *How* did God demonstrate grace to Paul?

God extends mercy by not giving us what we *do* deserve—which is death; and He offers grace by giving us what we *don't* deserve—which is a call to serve Him!

Day Two:

Called and Sanctified

Read Acts 9:10–30.

It has been noted that when God saves a man, He first takes the man—breaks the man—and then makes the man. The divinely predetermined outcome of God's call is becoming fit for the Master's use. Saul's unique call is one of the most dramatic on record, revealing to the world what God does when He fully invades a person's life.

In a strikingly undramatic follow up to a startling conversion, what we see in verses 10–30 is the *setting apart* of God's chosen instrument for His own purposes. It is *sanctification* in its infancy, the beginning of a process that lasts a lifetime. Saul, this once powerful and zealous persecutor of the church is led humbly by the hand into the city of Damascus. "And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank" (Vv. 8–9).

1. What are some of the things Saul might have experienced during those three days of fasting and blindness?
2. What was Ananias sent by the Lord to do? What was his initial reaction? Why?
3. God will now unfold a new direction for the church to His humble servant Ananias before revealing it to the rest of the world. What did God tell Ananias about the vessel he was sent to pray for? Vv. 15–16
4. How did Ananias acknowledge Saul's conversion? Briefly cite the points of his message to Saul in verses 17–19.

Saul immediately began to grow in his understanding of Christianity while preaching that Christ is the Son of God. His call answered and his initial training begun, Saul headed into the desert of Arabia for some prolonged time alone with the Lord. The reference to "many days" (v. 23), speaks of this period of three years he remained in Arabia. There he received greater deeper revelations from the Lord that would prepare him for his life's mission.

5. How does God sanctify His people today? See John 17:17 and Ephesians 5:26.
 - a. By whom are you being sanctified? 1 Corinthians 6:11 How does this understanding affect your perspective?

*For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one,
for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren.*

Hebrews 2:11

Day Three: Saved and Satisfied to Serve!

Read Acts 9:31–43.

The churches were enjoying a season of great prosperity according to verse 31: *Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.* Notice the key words: *peace—edified—walking in fear of the Lord—and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit.* The gospel was going forth; people were being blessed, healed, and served by the body of Christ.

Out of the vast multitude of believers, Luke singles out a female disciple for honorable mention. Her name is *Tabitha* (Aramaic) or *Dorcas* (Greek)—both names mean “gazelle.” One wonders why Luke mentions a woman at all, and when he does it is within the context of her using her gift to serve others. We aren’t told whether she was single, married or widowed; simply that her life was one of value.

1. What facts can you determine about her from your reading of the text?
2. To whom do you think she ministered?

Certainly devout in her faith and service, Dorcas was loved by all. And in a scene reminiscent of Jesus raising Jairus’ daughter from the dead (Mark 5:21–24; 35–43), here again is an upper room full of people mourning the loss of their loved one. Peter voices the equivalent of Jesus’ words: “Tabitha kumi [arise]” (v. 40), and she opened her eyes and sat up.

3. What familiar result took place after Peter raised Dorcas back to life? (v. 42)
4. From your perspective, why would Luke think it significant to focus his readers’ attention on a relatively unknown female disciple of Christ? Could it be because it is the everyday ordinary behind-the-scenes believers who exemplify gospel love in action—without any expectation of recognition or applause? Please share your thoughts.
5. Personal: Are *you* satisfied to be saved to serve others? It is in God’s plan for you. Are you looking for recognition or reward? Or is performing “secret service” fulfillment enough?

Day Four:

The Goads of God

For Saul, that day on the Damascus Road was much like any other, hunting down Christians—who were of “the Way” and bringing them bound to Jerusalem. But then *suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. He fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ And he said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads’* (Acts 9:3–5). Oh, that we could hear the tone of the Lord’s words, for they were certainly meant as a tender loving appeal to Saul. Jesus used an expression from a common Greek proverb with which Saul would be well acquainted. They were words aimed at the heart of the religious leader who represented persecution to the church of Christ!

Jesus Himself appeared to Saul, revealing that he was taking a hard path in struggling *against* God’s divine promptings. Had the Lord not intervened that day, Saul would have been lost. How kind it was of the Lord to condescend to such a sinner to “goad” him in the right direction (and Paul would later write about this marvelous grace in his letters). The word *goad* means to *spur, drive, or incite to action*. Oxen and other beasts of burden were most often *goaded* to move in their master’s desired direction. But in the Christian life these *goads* are Holy Spirit promptings—convictions—which can cause a person to immediately pause and assess which is the best way to take. If a person is resistant, ignoring these goads, the way can become very hard. But if, on the other hand, we yield obediently to these promptings, the understanding of God’s will and His way can become quite clear. God has indeed planned our way, but He also gives us a free will to *choose* whether or not we will obey.

Deeper Discoveries ~

Saul was resisting, kicking against God’s highest and best for him without realizing it. There will be times when we too will face difficult choices, causing us to feel the same divine sharp pricks goading us in the right direction. Look below at the references taken from the book of Proverbs. Consider the lesson in each verse and how it may apply to *your* life right now. Make note of your discoveries in the space provided.

- a. Proverbs 15:24 _____

- b. Proverbs 16:9 _____

- c. Proverbs 16:17 _____

- d. Proverbs 16:25 _____

- e. Proverbs 19:21 _____

- f. Personal: What *goad* is God using to get your attention and spur you to action or a different direction right now? Is it a crisis situation or a sudden illness? The loss of a loved one or financial hardship? Write it down, committing yourself to Him in prayer.

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Using Psalm 139:23–24, prayerfully ask God to lead you in His way.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.

[illegible]

Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 9

Day One: The Conversion of the Gentiles

Nearly ten years had passed since Pentecost. Peter had been God's instrument in opening the door of salvation for the Jews (Acts 2) and also the Samaritans (Acts 8). Now God would use him to open the same door for the Gentiles in Acts 10. But before God could use Peter, He would have to do a work in Peter's heart. After all, a ranking officer in the Italian Regiment of the Roman Army would not have been the evangelistic target of a card-carrying proper Jewish Christian like Peter.

Cornelius belonged in the category of what the Jews referred to as God-fearers. These Gentiles loved the God of Israel and were supportive of the Jewish faith, but they stopped short of becoming Jews in lifestyle and circumcision. And because Cornelius was a loyal servant of Israel's oppressors, any Jew of that day would have been automatically prejudiced against him. This moment would become not only the turning point for Peter, but also for church history as well.

Read all of Acts 10–11.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord.

Record your initial impressions of the gospel message being offered to the Gentiles. Be prepared to share your findings with your group.

Memory verse: Acts 10:43 Write out the verse; repeating it daily to commit it to memory.

*To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him
will receive remission of sins.*

Day Two:

Read Acts 10:1–48 for review.

In Acts 10, we have the contrast of two “religious” men: Peter who had lived all his life as an Orthodox Jew before becoming a follower of Jesus Christ; and Cornelius who was religiously devoted to God, but it was not enough to save him. He undoubtedly had a limited understanding of his sinfulness and God’s holiness, but he was not able to bridge that gap, bringing the two together on his own. God sent an angel to instruct Cornelius and, being the compliant military officer that he was, he readily obeyed. Peter, however, was a different story. God would use a vision of food to reinforce to Peter that a Gentile did not have to first become a Jew before becoming a Christian.

1. What do we know about Cornelius’ belief in God? Vv. 2–8

As God was speaking to Cornelius, He was also speaking to Peter. Miles apart, God would bring them together to fulfill His plan. While on the housetop praying, Peter became hungry (something not at all unusual when believers try to pray). God would use this distraction to get Peter’s attention and speak to him.

2. Briefly recap what Peter saw in his vision and his response. Vv. 9–16

3. Peter had a habit of telling the Lord “no” (Matthew 16:22; John 13:8). Compare Peter’s response: “Not so, Lord!” with Cornelius’: “What is it, Lord?” Who was more open to hearing the word of God? What do you think hindered Peter?

In the Old Testament way of looking at things, there was *holy* and there was *common*. That which was holy was made common when it came into contact with something common. It could then only be made holy again through a ritual cleansing. When something was holy, it was deemed *consecrated*; when it was made common, it became *desecrated*.

For emphasis and so that Peter would get the point, God repeated the vision three times. While Peter wondered within himself what the vision meant, the men from Cornelius' house arrived at the front gate. Notice that Acts 10:13 and 15 both state that a *voice* had spoken to Peter. But in verse 20, we are told that it was God the Holy Spirit speaking to Peter. He was already saved, filled with the Spirit, and mightily used by God, but he was still Peter. God needed to shake him out of his comfort zone in order to use him effectively.

4. Personal: Has God ever had to shake *you* out of your comfort zone in order to get your attention? Briefly state the facts below.

At this point, God had not yet told Peter that his visitors were Gentiles. Normally Jews would not keep company with them. All Peter needed to know was (v. 20): "Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them." Peter responded by extending hospitality to them and going with them the next day.

5. What did Peter find when he arrived in Joppa and met Cornelius? Vv. 24–33

6. What in Peter's message reveals that God had changed his heart? Vv. 34–43

Cornelius prayed and God heard and answered! The result: "Whoever believes!" There was no longer Jew nor Gentile, rich nor poor, black nor white; all were made one in Christ.

7. While Peter was still speaking, what took place confirming that it was the work of God? What did Peter command to happen? Vv. 44–48

The addition of Gentiles was not a new plan, rather a long-awaited promise fulfilled (Isaiah 60:1–3). Jesus also spoke of the promise of "other sheep, not of this fold" (John 10:16). And He said, "If I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself (John 12:32).

Selah ~

Centuries earlier another Jew named Jonah came to Joppa with a message from God to evangelize the Gentiles. But this prophet of God took a ship in the other direction and refused obedience to the divine call until he was thrown overboard in a violent storm, swallowed by a whale and remained in its belly for the duration of three days before being spat upon the land. Jonah indeed had to learn his lesson the hard way—that it is better to obey the first time. Peter was willing to re-examine his heart and his beliefs and change them to reflect God's heart for the lost. Are you a *Jonah* or a *Peter*? What adjustments do *you* perhaps need to make to be used by God in a greater way?

Day Three: Peter Defends God's Grace

Read Acts 11:1–30 for review.

Acts 11 recounts the acceptance of the gospel by the Gentiles. Now Jews and Gentiles were united and equal in the eyes of God (Gal. 3:26–28). But no sooner did Peter return to Jerusalem than he was met by strong rebuke from the Christians there for eating and fellowshiping with Gentiles. And before we judge them for their response, let's remember that they did not have the letters of Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and Hebrews that we do to help us understand God's big picture of salvation. Many Jews still believed that in order to be a good Christian they still had to be a good Jew living by the law. It was not just a matter of religious faith but also of cultural habits that would take time to change.

Peter was becoming the "rock" Jesus required him to be. He had nothing to fear in following God's command. As he recapped the entire experience for the believers in Jerusalem, those critical of him changed their heart attitude. In his personal defense, Peter offered three distinct points. Look at the references to follow, summarizing them in your own words.

1. Acts 11:5–11 _____

2. Acts 11:12–15 _____

3. Acts 11:16–17 _____

The conclusion of the matter in chapter 11 is critically important (v. 17): The Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentiles just as He did upon the Jews at the beginning, revealing God's approval of Peter's ministry to them. Peter had spiritually discerned God's leading and he obediently followed. If God was moving the ministry out to the Gentiles, then who was he that he could withstand God? The lesson here is that any action taken on behalf of God must be in line with the Word of God before we have the assurance of God. In this case it passed the litmus test!

Deeper Discoveries ~

Look at the remainder of the text to understand the responses of the Jewish believers towards the Gentile Christians. Look for a lesson and a personal application. As you do, think about how *you as a believer* ought to relate to others who may differ from you but who are also of the family of God. If you have ever had to defend the grace of God, you know you can only do it by obeying Him.

- a. Acts 11:17–18 *Accepting the Gentiles:* _____

- b. Acts 11:19–26 *Encouraging the Gentiles:* _____

- c. Acts 11:27–30 *Receiving Help from the Gentiles:* _____

Day Four:

Christians: *Jesus People*

The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch (11:26b). How did the name *Christian* ever become the title which identified the followers of Jesus? Up to this point in time the believers referred to their teaching as *the Way*, but they did not have an official name for themselves other than that of disciples. But at the time of the first century, there may have been a couple of factors that resulted in the title.

The ending *ian* literally meant “the party of.” So a *Christ-ian* was therefore “of the party of Jesus.” It was tantamount to saying “Jesus-ites” or “Jesus People”—those belonging to the group that followed Jesus. Since the Greeks in Antioch were known for using satirical statements when sneering or heckling people they did not approve of, they no doubt used the name to mock the followers of Jesus. But the “Jesus People” appreciated the title enough that they put a positive spin on it and embraced it.

The name *Christian* appears only twice in the New Testament in addition to Acts 11:26. Look up the other references and in your own words, note what is associated the name . . .

- a. Acts 26:28

- b. 1 Peter 4:16

The title *Christian* is an appropriate one, as the very essence of the gospel is the presentation of Christ to men. Believers have not only accepted a principle or some truth *about* Christ; rather we have received the person of Christ into our hearts. When we bear the name we also bear the identity and responsibility that accompanies it as well. It represents a converted lifestyle involving an inward spiritual transformation that bears witness of our eternal destiny. It is not merely what we are called—it is what and who we are!

- c. Personal: Are *you* willing to be called a Christian—one of the “Jesus People”? What does the name represent to you?

- d. Define the responsibility that accompanies representing Christ to others.

“A Christian is a CHRIST-ian. The *ian* stands for **I AM NOTHING**, and all that remains is CHRIST. The container by itself is nothing; it is only precious for what it contains. “We have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us” (2 Cor. 4:7). Happy are those who are daily being transformed into the Lord’s likeness!

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Compose a prayer asking God to show you how *you* are becoming more like your Lord.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 10

Day One: God's Omnipotence

One of the great lessons in the Christian life happens when the believer realizes experientially that God sees, knows, and acts on their behalf because He is in complete control! Though we may not fully understand His ways, we know His will is always best. And when we put our confidence in the truth of scripture, we can be assured we are safe: *For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open unto their prayers; but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil*" (1 Peter 3:12).

Once again the enemy rears his ugly head, this time through another of the Herods. In an effort to win the Jewish popular vote, Herod Agrippa I begins to ruthlessly persecute the church by taking aim at two of its pillars: James and Peter. One would be allowed to die while the other would be set free. This earthly king would stretch forth his hand in an effort to destroy the church, but God would overrule from heaven to protect it and propel the gospel onward.

Peter's deliverance would take place at the Passover time when the Jews celebrated their Exodus from Egypt. The word "delivered" in Acts 12:11 is the same word used by Stephan when he spoke about the Exodus (Acts 7:34). In answer to the persistent prayers of God's people, Peter experienced a new kind of deliverance.

Read Acts 12:1–25.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord. Write down your first impressions.

Memory verse: Hebrews 11:6 Write out the verse; repeat it daily to commit it to memory.

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Up to Acts 12, the church was on a “winning streak,” experiencing one conversion after another. Saul’s dramatic conversion was soon followed by Cornelius and his entire household. Then there came the mixed crowd of Jews and Gentiles in Antioch. But here in chapter 12, there is a new development in church history—James is the first of the twelve to be martyred. He was not the first to die for his faith in Christ. Stephen (Acts 7) was martyred earlier, as were others. But the death of James somehow crushed the notion that the twelve enjoyed a unique divine protection.

1. Jesus did not promise His closest followers protection; rather what did He tell them they could expect? Matthew 10:16–26 How did He encourage them in these verses?

2. James was the brother of John, and often the two were linked with Peter for special intimate moments with the Savior. Recall what a few of those were that are recorded for us in scripture.

- a. Matthew 17:1–2 _____
- b. Mark 5:35–42 _____
- c. Matthew 26:36–38 _____

3. In Mark 10:35–40, James and his brother John came to Jesus and asked to be singled out for special favor. What did they specifically ask of Him? How did Jesus respond?

Jesus promised that they would indeed drink of His cup and be baptized with His baptism. This martyrdom of James is the fulfillment of that promise. And despite repeated attempts to also martyr John, he would fulfill the promise through a lifetime of service to God.

When Herod saw that killing James pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter and put him in prison. He delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover.

4. Challenge: Contrast the difference between the persecution brought by Saul of Tarsus (Acts 8:1–3) and that of King Herod here in chapter 12.

Day Two:

Prevailing Prayer

Read Acts 12:5–19 for review.

Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church (Acts 12:5). The believers were helpless to open prison doors, but did they give up? No, they prayed! Fervent, earnest, constant prayer was offered to God by the believers. The key word *constant* conveys the idea of something earnest or firmly believed. Literally, it refers to the *stretching out of all they can do for something*. Much of our prayer is powerless because it lacks earnestness. We must remember that the key to *prayer that prevails* is found in: 1) knowing to whom it is we pray; 2) what specifically to pray for; and 3) joining the power of our prayers with that of other believers.

1. Once Peter was delivered, he found his way to the prayer meeting at the house of Mary, John Mark's mother. A brave Rhoda answered as Peter knocked but then what did she do? Why?
-

2. When she ran to tell the other believers inside, how did they respond? Who did they believe it was at the door?
-

Why would an angel bother to knock? But the Jews did believe in guardian angels and felt that the man at the door had to be an angel that looked like Peter. Just outside the door stood the answer to their earnest prayers, but they did not believe it! Their faith did not match the earnestness of their request.

3. As Peter continued knocking and they opened the door, what was their response? v. 16
-

4. What did Peter direct the believers to do? v. 17
-

Except for a brief mention in Acts 15, this is the last that Luke speaks of Peter. He now fades from the scene and Paul becomes the primary figure in the remainder of the book.

The lesson from this scene is simple but striking . . . God always responds to the faith of the individual seeking Him in prayer; but in all matters pertaining to the well-being of His Church, He desires that we *unite together* in our supplications: *Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.* Matthew 18:18–20

5. Looking at Matthew 18:18–20, consider the following . . .
 - a. What is the condition for answered prayer?
 - b. What does it mean to “agree”? How many are required to agree?
 - c. Why do you think there is more power when believers unite in agreement?

Day Three:

Prompt Obedience

Read Acts 12:6–11 for review.

Four squads guarded Peter, each squad had four soldiers at all times; two were chained to him while the other two stood watch outside the cell. Herod put him under heavy guard, well aware that the previous time Peter was arrested, he got out of jail. Herod was determined that would not be repeated.

1. What was Peter doing on what was supposed to be the last night of his life?

-
- a. Imagine, in chains and believing he was about to die, Peter showed no signs of anxiety at all. What does the Bible say about God's care for His own? Psalm 127:2
-

2. What were the angel's instructions to Peter?

-
- a. As Peter obeyed, he didn't understand that what the angel had done was real. What did he think?
-

Once they passed the first and second guard gates, they came to the iron gate leading into the city which opened of its own accord. The angel immediately left and Peter understood that God was up to something.

- b. When Peter "came to himself," what did become clear to him? v.11
-

The angel had brought light and liberty into that dark prison cell. The guards were unaware that anything was happening. But if Peter was going to be delivered, he had to *promptly obey* what the angel commanded of him. What does that tell us? That sometimes even in miracles, God expects our willing participation—our faithful obedience whether or not we understand.

- c. The angel that miraculously removed the shackles and chains also commanded Peter to humbly stoop down and put on his own shoes. Think about it: what might Peter have remembered about that act of obedience later on in life when he wrote his letters?
-

- d. Personal: Are *you* perhaps right now being held against your will in a difficult situation? Does it seem like prison? Are you praying in faith and asking other believers to pray with you? Is there a step of obedience God has asked you to take? Please explain.
-

Prison cells, armed guards, holding chains, guard posts—all are nothing when God is with us and prayer is upholding us! And the iron gate . . . don't worry about that until you come to it. When you do, God Himself will take care of it!

Day Four:

King Herod: Sin's Brutality

King Herod Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great, who murdered the children when Jesus was born. He was also the nephew of Herod Antipas, who played a role in the trial of Jesus. He ruled from A.D. 37–44 and was quite the political figure of his day with an ability to please both Romans and Jews. Friend to kings and emperors alike, he wielded considerable power and influence, manipulating every situation to his own personal advantage. He was a perfect example of a successful man of the world; nothing was more important to him than the applause and admiration of people. But like his predecessors, Herod was an exceedingly wicked man.

Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church (Acts 12:1). Herod's attention to the rites, ceremonies and religious observances of Jewish law brought him respect from the priests and Pharisees. He didn't care whether the believers in the church were of God or even whether they were right or wrong. He gained in popularity by killing James and tried to do the same to Peter, but God had other plans. When at last Herod seemed to rise to the pinnacle of his own glory, receiving the acclamation that he was not a mere mortal but a god, he was stricken and died a victim of his own arrogance and pride.

"The proud man . . . enlarges his desire as hell, and he is like death, and cannot be satisfied (Habakkuk 2:5b). The significance of James' death to the church meant nothing to a man like Herod. Such ruthless shedding of blood is a lasting example of a spirit—a life—void of God. It is sin's indifference to sorrow and injustice and it continues to this day.

Deeper Discoveries ~

Take a closer look at the verses below. Look for the lesson in each verse. Ask yourself in the form of a question how each might apply to you.

- a. Proverbs 13:13 _____

- b. Proverbs 16:18 _____

- c. Proverbs 26:12 _____

- d. Read through Romans 1:18–32. What is the natural result when sin rules the life?

Herod's horrific death was symbolic of the kind of life he lived—one governed by sin's brutality and depravity. But God overruled, and verse 24 presents us with the positive results: "The Word of God grew and multiplied." Those who feared the commandment were indeed rewarded. What the enemy meant for evil God used for good.

- e. As you ponder what you've just studied, how might the truth of it keep you humble and thankful?

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Give God your praise for setting you free from sin's grasp and giving you life.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.

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Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 11

Day One: Dealing with the Ups and Downs of Ministry

We have come to the end of the first major section of the book of Acts and to a turning point in the story. Up to this point in time, Peter has been the predominant figure, preaching the gospel to the Jews in Jerusalem and preaching throughout Judea and Samaria. Peter now exits from the scene and here in Acts 13–14, Luke describes the preaching of Paul through six cities, beginning and ending in Antioch. Now we see the gospel message going forth to the Gentiles, and reaching to the uttermost parts of the earth. This next major section of the book (Acts 13–28), has often been referred to as the *Acts of Paul*, who now becomes the dominant figure, and Antioch the epicenter of church activity.

We saw earlier in our study how the church in Antioch was established, that as persecution followed the stoning of Stephen, believers were scattered to the outer areas of Cyprus and Phoenicia and Antioch. Because many were being saved, the news of new converts reached the elders in Jerusalem, and Barnabas was sent out. He brought Paul to join him in Antioch and for an entire year they taught the newest disciples in the truth of God's Word. Next Luke brings into focus Paul's first missionary journey, where he proclaims a universal gospel offering salvation to all who will hear and receive it.

Read Acts 13:1–52.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord.

Memory verse: James 5:16 Write out the verse; repeat it daily to commit it to memory.

The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

The spotlight has now shifted from Jerusalem to Antioch, from the Jews to the Gentiles, and from Peter to Paul (*Saul*).

1. Using Acts 12:25 and 13:1–2 pick out the key words that describe the congregation at work in Antioch.

The word “called”—*proskaleo*—in the Greek, speaks of a divine setting apart for service to God. The Holy Spirit called Barnabas and Saul to a mission field that was yet unknown to them. As the congregation continued their work of fasting and prayer, they laid hands on them and *sent them away*, meaning they “released them from their duties” at Antioch. We learn from this that Barnabas and Saul believed they were under the authority of the church at Antioch. Their first ministry team consisted of two “eyewitnesses” who had the opportunity to see and hear Jesus. They took along John Mark who, though new to service, was well accustomed to prayer meetings in his home. (We will examine him more closely on *Day Four* of our lesson.)

2. What are some of the benefits you can think of when individuals form a service team to accomplish God’s work? Give some examples.

3. Personal: Have *you* ever teamed up to share the gospel of Christ? How?

Deeper Discoveries ~

Verses 6–12 reveal the mixed results to be expected when the gospel is preached. Look closely at what is happening in these verses and compose a lesson and an application from them.

Vv. 6–7 Lesson: _____

Application: _____

Vv. 8–11 Lesson: _____

Application: _____

v. 12 Lesson: _____

Application: _____

Note: We must point out the name change in v. 9 from that of *Saul* to *Paul*. Up until now, Saul was known primarily as a Jew (born of Hebrew parents) preaching to his fellow Jews. Here we find him in a Roman setting and Luke is referring to him by his Roman name of *Paul*, which he will continue to use throughout the remainder of Acts as he preaches to Gentile audiences.

Day Two: The New Church's Old Testament Foundation

Read Acts 13:13–41 for review.

In this passage, Luke records the first of Paul's sermons in Acts. As we follow Paul's travels, we will see that he had a specific approach in mind: target a strategic city, plant a church, and then evangelize the surrounding cities. He usually went first to the local synagogue where he could find both Jews and Gentiles who were eager to hear the Word of God. The synagogue rulers offered the opportunity for their guests to share a word of encouragement (v.15). Paul accepted and rising to his feet, he began to masterfully weave passages from Israel's history and Old Testament prophecy with the message of salvation in Christ alone.

1. Notice in verses 16–20, Paul's initial focus is on God's control of history (spanning some 450 years) and the unique place God had for the nation of Israel. Write down the specific verbs in these verses that clearly put the character of God on display. Ex: *God chose*. . .

2. In the following, briefly restate the point of history that forms the tapestry of Paul's testimony:

a. Vv. 21–22: _____

b. v. 23: _____

c. Vv. 24–25: _____

d. v. 26: _____

e. Vv. 27–29: _____

f. Vv. 30–37: _____

g. Vv. 38–39: _____

Paul's message was that the law could not justify the sinner; it could only point out that all men are sinners (Romans 3:20). What the law could not do, God through Christ did for us—granting the forgiveness of sins and imputing to us the righteousness of Christ, declaring us justified, or *just as if I'd never sinned!* That was good news to the religious audience of Jews and Gentiles listening to Paul—they could leave knowing peace for the first time. What about *you*—do you want peace? No Christ, no peace. Know Christ and you'll also know peace. Ask Him to come inside as your Lord and Savior right now. Tell someone today about your commitment to Him.

Day Three: Blessing and Conflict at Antioch

Read Acts 13:42–52 for review.

Along with the invitation to believe, Paul quotes from Habakkuk 1:5, a word of warning that faith would bring forgiveness but that rejection would bring judgment. Paul and Barnabas left with the invitation to return the next week and again preach to the Gentiles. Luke notes that the entire city was stirred up to *hear the Word of God* (v. 44).

Write down the mixed reviews and responses to Paul's sermon by each of the following groups:

- a. The Jews (Vv. 45–46): _____

- b. The Gentiles (Vv. 47–49): _____

- c. The city's leaders (Vv. 50–51): _____

- d. The disciples (v. 52): _____

Paul's message in the synagogue was that God had sent the Word to the Jews first, but they had now rejected it. As a result, Paul would now take the message of the *Good News* to the Gentiles. In his defense, Paul quoted the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah 49:6, "I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, that you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth."

Sadly, the unbelieving Jews were not going to sit back and allow Paul and Barnabas to accomplish their mission without disrupting them. In the end, the Jews expelled both men from their city, but Paul and Barnabas were not discouraged or disheartened; they simply shook off the dust from their feet and moved on toward the next city, leaving behind them the joyful disciples who believed.

We can see from Acts 13 that ministry does indeed have its ups and downs, but the important thing to remember is that we are merely the messengers—it is the work of the Holy Spirit to save souls! We testify, but He transforms. We humbly present the message and God receives the glory. And it is important for us to always remember that the responses and results are not our responsibility . . . we leave those to Him!

- e. Personal: Share a time when you ministered the gospel only to received mixed reviews and responses. As you look back on it today, in light of what you have just learned, how does it strengthen your resolve to keep on sharing the message?

Day Four:

John Mark: Deferred Service

We know him best as Mark, author of the second of the four gospels. He is introduced to us in Acts as *John* (Hebrew meaning *Yahweh has shown grace*). John Mark's mother was Mary (sister of Barnabas), a Christian woman of wealth and position with a home large enough to accommodate prayer gatherings. It is to their house that Peter came earlier when the Lord set him free from prison. John Mark would've been quite accustomed to ministry, yet we find that he was a young man torn between his desire to serve the Lord and personal weaknesses that, for a time, would hold him back from service.

John Mark apparently remained at home until being brought to Antioch by Barnabas and Saul (12:25). He had accepted their invitation to accompany them as their *assistant* until the difficulties of the journey prompted his retreat and return home. Did he perhaps not appreciate the position of "assistant" to these two strong leaders? Or was it that the hardships of traveling became too much for him? The reasons for his desertion are not clearly defined for us. It may have been that the privileges of wealth did little to prepare him for the demands of ministry. In any case, serving the Lord did not turn out to be what he expected it to be, so he did an abrupt about-face and headed for Jerusalem. We will see further down the road that God did indeed have a place of service for John Mark, but it would be another two years before he would be ready to step forward again. Whatever it was that John Mark did, the Apostle Paul considered it severe, prompting Paul's refusal to enlist his help for a long time.

1. Look ahead at Acts 15:36–39. What do you see in these verses about the seriousness of John Mark's actions for Paul?

Paul would later enlist another young man named Timothy (Acts 16:1–3) to take John Mark's place as his assistant. Eventually, John Mark was able to redeem himself and was restored and reassigned to service.

2. Again we are not told the specific details, but how do we know John Mark had made amends with Paul? See 2 Timothy 4:11.

What about *you*? Have you ever failed in your service for the Lord? Perhaps you can relate to John Mark—*tried; failed; waited two years to try again*! Did your own personal expectations of what you thought ministry would be become the stumbling block that sent you back home?

3. Personal: Think about a time when you became discouraged because ministry didn't work out the way you had planned. What were you hoping to accomplish? What actually ended up happening?

-
- a. What valuable lesson did you learn from that failed experience on your part?
-

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: If you were to select one life-lesson you've learned about ministry that you could pass on to someone else, what would it be?

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.

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Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 12

Day One: The Risks and Rewards of Service

Acts 14 brings the first missionary journey to a close. Here we pick up Paul and Barnabas in Iconium and by the end of the chapter return them to Antioch in Syria. This chapter will take us into the realm of uncivilized pagan culture where superstitious behavior rules the day, proving once again that God often uses opposition to His word to create occasions for the gospel to be preached.

Iconium was a part of the Roman province of Galatia but its cultural and social influence was more Greek than Roman. Known for its beauty and prosperity, Iconium was bordered to the south by forests and plains and to the north by tall mountains. Here the missionaries would repeat their familiar pattern of going first to the synagogue to preach. Paul had not given up on the Jews and this time the persecution against them would allow for a different result—they would remain for a considerable length of time.

Read Acts 14:1–28.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord. Write down your first impressions.

Memory verse: Acts 14:22 Write out the verse; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.

We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.

1. Using Acts 14:1–7 as your reference point, consider the following . . .

a. What do we learn about the result of Paul and Barnabas' preaching?

b. Who stirred up the unbelievers? How?

This time Luke uses an interesting phrase to describe the gospel: *word [message] of His grace*. He links it with the accompanying signs and miracles unique to the apostles to remind us of the transitional nature of this book and because there was as yet no completed written Word of God. In other words, as Paul and Barnabas spoke boldly, it was the Lord himself who bore witness to the *word of His grace, granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands* (v. 3). Hebrews 2:4 speaks of this kind of miraculous intervention: *God bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will*.

2. What ultimately happened over time as the result of their stay in Iconium?

A “violent attempt” [plot] was made by both Jews and Gentiles and *rulers*. This conveys a strong spontaneous reaction that is uncontrolled by reason or planning and accompanied by those in positions of authority. Once the violence erupted, the apostles made their way to Lystra, preaching to those in the small towns and villages in the surrounding regions. Their flight crossed more than geographical boundaries—it also took them to a new political climate as well.

Day Two: One Gospel, Different Responses

Read Acts 14:8–20 for review.

Paul and Barnabas left Pisidia Antioch and Iconium unscathed, but the manifestations of persecution would catch up with them in Lystra, a place known for its pagan idolatry. We note from the text that Paul was apparently preaching as he became aware of a man listening nearby who he discovered was lame. God had given Paul the spirit of discernment in realizing this man had the faith to be healed. And what we see playing out in verses 8–20, are four responses to the message of the gospel going forth. We'll examine these more closely in *Deeper Discoveries* in an attempt to peel back the layers of what each one means and what we might derive from it.

Deeper Discoveries ~

1. *The lame man's response to the Word* (Vv. 8–10): What is the lesson to be discovered and is there a personal application?

2. *The crowd's response to the lame man's healing* (Vv.11–13): What is the lesson to be discovered and is there a personal application?

3. *The apostle's response to the crowd* (Vv.14–18): What is the lesson to be discovered and is there a personal application?

4. *The disciple's response to Paul's suffering* (Vv.19–20): What is the lesson to be discovered and is there a personal application?

Note: The believers in Lystra who stood by Paul were of a minority, new in their faith, but not afraid to stand with him in his hour of need. This was the only stoning Paul ever endured (2 Cor. 11:25). Some think that this is the moment when Timothy witnessed the event and it eventually led to his relationship with Paul (2 Timothy 3:10–11).

Many commentators also agree that it is this event described in Acts 14 that Paul speaks about in 2 Corinthians 12 where he is caught up into heaven and heard things that he could not talk about. As a result, Paul was given a thorn in the flesh so that his dependence would be upon God and not upon himself. The disciples in Lystra that encircled Paul on the ground that day thought him to be quite dead, and the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe.

Day Three:

Taking Care of Business

Read Acts 14:21–28 for review.

After preaching the gospel in Derbe and bringing many new souls into the kingdom of God, Paul and Barnabas returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. Thus began their journey homeward. Take a look at your Bible map to see that they could have chosen a route that was much easier to travel and not nearly so dangerous. But they traveled back through the same cities where they endured persecution and suffering to minister to the believers they had made on their earlier visits.

1. Consider their determined purpose in going back. From Vv. 22–23, what insight you gain about how they:
 - a. *Strengthened the disciples—*
 - b. *Exhorted the disciples—*
 - c. *Organized the believers—*
 - d. *Commended the believers—*
 - e. Had Paul and Barnabas taken the shorter easier route home, what might have happened to these new believers in the faith?

Paul's word of encouragement and truth to the believers at Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch is our memory verse this week: "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God" (v. 22).

2. In reflecting back on this first journey, how would Paul later state this truth to Timothy, his son in the faith? 2 Timothy 3:12

Before leaving for home, Paul did what would allow him to leave this young flock of believers and have peace of mind—he commended them to the Lord with prayer and fasting (v. 23). He knew it wouldn't be easy for them, they too would endure persecution; but Paul left them an example they could follow. He had to trust them to God.

3. Personal: Is there anyone or anything in your life that you need to give to the Lord? Perhaps with a time of prayer and fasting? In a sentence, please write down the person or the need and commit it to Him. Then trust Him to undertake with the answer!

Day Four:

The Homecoming

Paul's first missionary journey was his shortest in time and distance—encompassing 1,400 miles and lasting two years (46–48 A.D.); but it established Paul as the leader in spreading the gospel. Two years after their initial departure, Paul and Barnabas sailed back home to Antioch: “And gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. So they stayed there a long time with the disciples (Vv. 27–28).

Look back for a moment at Acts 13:1–4a. Recall who sent Paul and Barnabas out and the anticipation of such a unique and historical adventure. Scan through chapters 13 and 14 again to glimpse the highlights of their trip once they came full circle.

1. How do you think Paul felt and what he thought at the end of his first missionary journey?

2. Personal: Recall a trip you were really excited to take. What do you remember most about it?

- a. How did you feel once you returned home?

- b. What was the first thing you did upon your arrival?

Eccl. 7:8 says, “The end of a thing is better than its beginning.” For Paul and Barnabas, coming home to the disciples and sharing their experiences must’ve been somewhat like a welcomed retreat coupled with a jubilant celebration! This first one would set the template and tone for the remaining three missionary journeys yet to follow. Paul’s method, we will learn, was always the same, he used one approach: faith in Jesus Christ based on Old Testament scriptures pointed at the Jews; and for the Gentiles the goodness and greatness of God in offering His gift of salvation to all. This he accomplished without the use of the modern technology, transportation, and telecommunication we have available to us today! Paul utilized the two simple tools that are at the disposal of every believer in the world: Truth and testimony.

3. As you ponder the person God uses and the ways He uses them to get His Word out to the world, how does it motivate your perspective and priorities? Please explain.

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Ask God to help you use His truth coupled with your personal testimony to get the gospel out to those around you.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.

Notes

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Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 13

Day One: Only God Can Change the Rules

Acts 15 is a sublime chapter for the majority of Christians in the world with no Jewish heritage or lineage that can be traced back through the Old Testament. We Gentiles are descended from races and backgrounds having no connection to the nation of Israel's promise of salvation; but we are none-the-less *chosen*, heirs of salvation through the New Covenant in Christ. This was preached by those first century missionaries like Paul and Barnabas, and affirmed by the mouth of Peter: "God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe" (15:7).

The words penned by Luke here confirm what we believers already know by faith—that our salvation is a gift of God and our spiritual transformation is the result of the Holy Spirit at work within us. Our flesh in us wants to add something to our salvation so that we feel we have a part in it, but the Bible teaches that the sum total of our righteousness is like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6a). In other words, even on our best days we cannot merit being saved. There is nothing we can do to make God love us any more than He already does and there is nothing we can do to cause Him to love us any less. His love is perfect, ours is imperfect; but the love of Christ indwelling us through the Spirit not only makes us His, it also makes us become *like Him*.

Read Acts 15:1–41.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord. Write down your first impressions.

Memory verse: Ephesians 2:8–9 Write out the verse; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.

*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves;
it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.*

What we see happening in Acts 15, is that legalistic Christians from Judea were spreading a false message that a person had to keep the rites and traditions of the Jewish forefathers in order to be accepted into the faith. Essentially they were teaching that you must first become a Jew before becoming a Christian.

1. Look back at Acts 10:44–48. What had disproved that circumcision was not a prerequisite to salvation?

2. How had Peter convinced those in Jerusalem that God had granted salvation to the Gentiles? Acts 11:17–18.

It's interesting to note that the date of Paul's letter to the Galatians (churches in the region of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe) is uncertain, prompting many commentators to agree that it was written prior to the council of Jerusalem. If so, that would mean that Paul was writing to counteract the situation being considered here in Acts 15.

Deeper Discoveries ~

Today we'll look closer at a portion of Paul's letter in Galatians 5:1–6, dealing with Christian liberty and the snare of returning to a yoke of bondage through works of the flesh. If this exercise is challenging for you, just do your best to determine the lesson in each verse below and an application to daily life. Put the application in the form of a personal question. (Ask your group leader for assistance.)

v. 1: _____

Vv. 2–3: _____

v. 4: _____

Vv. 5–6 _____

Day Two: The Jerusalem Council

Read Acts 15:1–21 for review.

In verses 6–21, Luke describes several meetings that took place within this conference dealing with the central issue of circumcision. Peter must have been sitting silently by listening and waiting for the Spirit to direct him to speak.

1. What, again, does Peter remind them that God had him do? v. 7

- a. He reiterated the proof that they were truly born again—what was it? Vv. 8–9

- b. What were the legalists trying to do that Peter was clearly refuting? v. 10

Paul apparently did not enter into the debate on this occasion, he let Peter handle the heavy lifting. But in verse 12, Luke does mention that Barnabas and Paul offered more documentation to the argument. We notice that Barnabas is mentioned first in order, meaning perhaps that he still held the prominent position in the Judean churches in terms of influence.

2. How did Barnabas and Paul attest to the acceptance of the Gentiles? v. 12

3. When it was James' turn to share, what did he state they should not do and what should they ask of the Gentiles? Vv. 19–21

Although this section of scripture is a difficult one to understand, the point that stands out is that believers must keep the main thing the main thing, which is we are saved by the work of God's grace through Christ; not by keeping the law nor by our own efforts. The Word of God going forth, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the working of signs and miracles all were evidence that God was guiding and fulfilling His plan.

4. Personal: Have you ever known a moment when you doubted your salvation because you've looked at it in light of your weaknesses and realized you're not good enough? Look again at this week's memory verse in Ephesians 2:8–9 in light of what you're learning. What does it mean to you to be saved by grace?

Day Three:

The Letter

Read Acts 15:22–35 for review.

The leaders and elders present at the meeting threw their support behind James' recommendation and a letter was drafted to be sent by a delegation affirming the unity of the conference decision.

1. Think about the purpose of the letter and strategy of the delegation and write your thoughts below.

2. Who is commended for risking their lives and how would this validate the message?

3. Who are the new names introduced to confirm the counsel's agreement?

4. How was the news received by the multitude of believers in Antioch?

5. In your own words, state how Judas and Silas fulfilled their part of the mission.

6. What did Paul and Barnabas do? Why was this important?

The Christian leadership of this early church exhibited a loving concern for their mission that overruled their own differences and even their personal biases. They took a step of faith that was essential for the future success of evangelizing the Gentiles. It was a turning point—one that allowed procedures and protocols to be established that afforded everyone the opportunity to receive the gospel without any restrictions attached.

7. Personal: Are *you* perhaps a leader in your church fellowship? What does the model in Acts 15 teach you about the necessity of maintaining integrity in your leadership? How can the church be adversely affected if you don't regard it as a priority?

Day Four: The Parting of Brothers

Read Acts 15:36–41 for review.

Now Barnabas was determined . . . but Paul insisted . . . then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. Thankfully the details of the apostles' lives are not concealed from us, they are recorded for our benefit. Paul and Barnabas were both justified in thinking that the matter concerning John Mark was not a small one; each needed to allow conscience to have its way. We note that scripture does not affix blame on either man, and no doubt the peace and joy of both men became clouded by this unfortunate episode.

The word *contention* (v. 39) is a strong one, denoting “an access.” Luke uses it here in its common medical sense, meaning it is the equivalent to a long term disease taking a turn for the worse, and heightening into its severest form when manifested. It is comparable to the English word *paroxysm*, which by definition is a “violent access of feeling or of rage or of convulsion.” In other words, after a long term uncomfortable feeling about it and ongoing discussions regarding the differences, neither Paul nor Barnabas cooled down; their anger broke out into such an acute form that they consequently separated.

1. Personal: Has there ever been a time in your life when you severed a relationship over a difference of opinion? Briefly state the facts.

- a. Were you ultimately able to determine the cause of your differences and work through them?

- b. Regardless of the outcome, what lessons did you learn from the painful experience?

Realizing the fallibility of men and women in the Bible helps us to hold up the mirror and recognize our own shortcomings and learn from our differences. Hopefully, we do not allow the gospel message or work of the ministry to become secondary to our own feelings and actions.

2. Take a moment to meditate on the words found in Paul's letter to the Colossians 3:12–16, and consider the following . . .

- a. When you have a disagreement or complaint against another, what should you do? Why is this important?

- b. What is the “above all these things” important action to remember? How can you best achieve this goal?

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. (Rom. 8:28)

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Compose a prayer of thanksgiving for God's gift of salvation to you.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.

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Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 14

Day One: New Vision and Doors of Opportunity

Now ready to launch a second missionary journey, this time Paul and Silas reverse the order of the previous trip, coming first to Derbe and Lystra, where they enlist the aid of a young but eager disciple to replace John Mark as Paul's assistant. From there as Paul attempted to travel east in to Asia, God redirected him into Europe where Paul received a vision in the night of a man pleading with him, "Come over to Macedonia to help us." His response to that call would allow him to take the light of the gospel to a very diverse set of individuals and circumstances.

It's comforting to know that closed doors are sometimes used by God to direct us just as much as open doors. The apostles themselves were not always clear where and how God wanted to direct them. Disappointment we learn is often followed by uncertainty, causing God's servants to not rely on their instincts but rather on the Holy Spirit to lead the way.

We will see in our chapter this week that not every sinner comes to Christ in the same manner. Timothy responded to the scripture taught by his mother and grandmother, then by the Apostle Paul. Lydia was converted through a conversation at a prayer meeting, and the jailer met Christ through the drama of a prison earthquake. In one moment he wanted to take his life, and in the next he was praising God! They were all very different individuals meeting Christ in different circumstances, yet every one of them transformed by the loving grace of God.

Read Acts 16:1–40.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord. Write down your first impressions.

Memory verse: Phil. 1:6 Write out the verse; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.

*Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you,
will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.*

Timothy was the son of a mixed marriage, his father being Greek, and his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois both Jewish. These two women raised him knowing the scriptures and subsequently, Paul reached him with the gospel on his previous journey when Timothy witnessed firsthand Paul's sufferings. Now it was Paul's desire to take the young man with him and, to avoid any opposition from the Jews, he decided that Timothy would become circumcised. This seemed to contradict the decision of the Jerusalem Council; however, we will see it was for good reason. The council's decision meant that it was not necessary to be circumcised in order to be saved. Paul's concern over Timothy was not an issue of salvation but rather service. Paul had Timothy circumcised so as not to offend the Jews they would be working alongside.

Paul's decision was controversial but wise, since his work with the Jews would have been made considerably more difficult by ignoring Timothy's situation. This small Jewish community in Lystra would have considered an uncircumcised child of a Jewish mother an apostate [deserter] to the faith. Since Timothy was already a believer, his circumcision had nothing to do with salvation; but Paul wanted to remove the any stigma from this young man as far as the Jewish community in Lystra was concerned.

1. At times it becomes prudent to make the hard call in order *not* to offend other believers. To understand a little more of why Paul made this call, examine the following two passages of scripture and record how/why Paul's mindset influenced his decision. Keep in mind that the integrity of the ministry is the priority for God's servants.

a. 1 Corinthians 9:19–23

b. Romans 14:13–19

It is no stretch of the imagination to say that Timothy was Paul's favorite companion and co-laborer on his ministry journeys. Paul would later write about him to the Philippian believers: "I have no one like-minded, who will sincerely care for your state" (Philippians 2:19). Timothy would go on to become a major player on Paul's missionary team. We will learn more about this on Day Four of our lesson.

Day Two: The First Convert in Europe is a Woman!

Read Acts 16:11–15 for review.

Paul and his team traveled 150 miles to the port of Philippi, a bustling commercial city known as “Rome away from Rome.” We notice they did not immediately go out to minister, but paused to rest, pray, and plan their next step. Then on the Sabbath, they walked a mile out of town to the banks of the Gangites River because they had no Jewish synagogue inside the city. In cases where there were not ten males present to form a synagogue, believers gathered under the sky and near the water where they could be easily found by other Christians. We can’t help but be drawn in by this quiet idyllic scene and how it would naturally lend itself to worship and prayer.

It is now twenty years after Pentecost as we see Paul and his companions hundreds of miles from Antioch, sitting by the river discussing spiritual matters. Luke does not need to mention Paul sharing the gospel—it is understood. It is however, striking that the group discussing scripture with Paul consists entirely of women. To appreciate the scene, we must note that Jewish rabbis believed it was better for the words of the law to be burned rather than delivered to a woman! That belief was no longer Paul’s perspective; he’d been obedient to the Lord, who had now prepared the way.

Deeper Discoveries ~

Here we have a beautiful moment in a tranquil setting—Creator God at work among His creation in nature and in the human heart—preparing a soul for eternal life with Him. Read verses 11–15 again; don’t take them at face value. Put yourself on the riverbank . . .

Observe: Luke telling us that Paul didn’t rush out into ministry immediately, he rested his body and listened to the Holy Spirit direct him (v. 12).

Ask yourself [To determine a lesson]: Why resting and listening would be invaluable to our spiritual wellbeing and service to God.

Ask yourself: Who was Lydia? What do we know about her? Why had she come that day? What was she looking for? Why had Paul come that day? How does Lydia respond to the words spoken by Paul? In what way had God gone before Paul to prepare new converts for himself? The scene will come alive to you if you’ll let it. As it does you will sense yourself appreciating what you’re reading. Look for a lesson and an application in each verse.

v. 13 Lesson: _____

Application: _____

v. 14 Lesson: _____

Application: _____

v. 15 Lesson: _____

Application: _____

Lydia’s apparent gift of hospitality may have opened a future door for the believers to meet in her home for worship and prayer. She no doubt became a valuable contributor to the ongoing work in Philippi and to the missionary ministry of Paul (Philippians 4:14–19).

Day Three:

Songs in the Night

Read Acts 16:16–40 for review.

A demon-possessed slave girl shouting the truth and religious magistrates ordering Paul and Silas beaten and imprisoned—the result of Satan’s hindering work. Yet Luke presents us with the beautiful scene of the gospel light brightly shining. With their feet in prison stocks, a beaten and battered Paul and Silas turn their grim prison cell into a chamber of prayer and praise. Not only did they sing, all the prisoners listened to them and then God met them with another miracle!

1. Briefly state what took place next in v. 26?
 - a. What was the initial reaction of the jailor? v. 27
 - b. Paul’s focus was on the jailor rather than escaping; as a result, what did Paul do? v. 28

Astonished that every prisoner was accounted for, the jailor uttered the most important words anyone can ask: “What must I do to be saved?” Paul and Silas spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house (v. 32). They had the right answer—faith in Jesus Christ.

2. What action following this amazing moment testified to the transformation of the jailor? Vv. 33–34

Instead of hiding, Paul attempts to gain a formal apology from the authorities by choosing to assert his Roman citizenship against the injustice he and Silas had endured. They had not broken any Roman laws and were innocent of any wrong; there had been no hearing or opportunity to defend themselves. It was critical for the respectability of the believers in the city that the magistrates take responsibility, which they did with great fear and embarrassment. Asked to leave the city, Paul and Silas pay one more visit to encourage the believers.

3. When things were at their worst, Paul and Silas were reduced to using the only weapons at their disposal; and as it turns out, *prayer* and *praise* are enough to usher in a miracle! Personal: Can *you* think of a time when you were at your lowest and all you could do was look up? And in lifting your praise to God, you found Him releasing you not *from* your suffering but *in* it? What did you learn?

“It is easy to sing when we can read the notes by daylight; but the skillful singer is he who can sing when there is not a ray of light to ready by. Songs in the night come only from God; they are not in the power of men.” (Charles Haddon Spurgeon)

Day Four:

Timothy, Paul's Son in the Faith

Timothy's name is mentioned more often in the salutation of Paul's epistles than any other. With the exception of the Thessalonian letters, his name is accompanied each time by a term of endearment: *our brother* (2 Corinthians, Colossians, Philemon); *bondservant* (Philippians); *a true son in the faith* (1 Timothy); *a beloved son* (2 Timothy). Paul considered himself Timothy's mentor, investing his time and energy in this young man's life because he counted him worthwhile to the ministry. Throughout their relationship, Paul commended the positive aspects of Timothy's character and corrected the negative to help him develop to his full potential.

1. Look carefully at the selected scripture passage in 1 Timothy 4:12–16, with an eye to see what Paul saw in Timothy. Note the instruction or admonition that was deliberately intended to help him heed his ministry.
 - a. Verse 12: _____
 - b. Verse 13: _____
 - c. Verse 14: _____
 - d. Verse 15: _____
 - e. Verse 16: _____
2. Paul's second letter to Timothy contains the last words he shared with his son in the faith. Put yourself in Timothy's shoes for a moment; what do these verses in 2 Timothy tell you to expect from *your* own experience as a servant of Christ?
 - a. 1:6–7: _____

 - b. 1:8–9: _____

 - c. 2:15: _____

 - d. 2:20–21 _____

3. Personal: Would you like to be a "Timothy"—to have someone mentor you in your Christian walk? Pray and ask God for a *parent in the faith* who will model for you what it means to follow Christ and be used by Him to serve others. Perhaps speak to your group leader or pastor about some guidance in this area.
4. Are you discipling a "Timothy" right now? Does someone look to *you* as their role model? If so, thank God for trusting you with this responsibility. Write their name down, noting the qualities you notice and where they could use a little encouragement. Make an effort in the coming week to reach out with a visit or phone call, or email to bless them.

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Write a note of thanks this week to someone who has been a good Christian example for you. Tell them how much it has meant for you to "see" Jesus in them.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.

Notes

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Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 15

Day One: Receiving or Resisting the Word of God?

Cultures change along with the times as one generation passes to another, but people remain divided over the truth of Jesus Christ. Some have their hearts softened and prepared by the Holy Spirit to receive the gospel; still others remain hardened and resistant to Him. The details in our chapters this week allow us to see differing responses to the same gospel message, while at the same time helping us to better understand what we can expect from our own world as we witness for Christ. We see too, the advantage of ministry teams working alongside one another to achieve maximum results.

Take notice this week of Paul's method for sharing the *good news* and see if you can apply the same techniques. When you use the resources of scripture along with your personal testimony and example, the Holy Spirit is able to use you to transform the lives of others with whom you come in contact. As you take care to guard your relationship to God, He takes care of the responses of others to your message, guarding your reputation in the process.

Read Acts 17–18.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord. Write down your first impressions.

Memory verse: Acts 17:29–30 Write out the verse; repeat it daily to commit it to memory.

Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent.

It was Paul's custom to witness in larger cities targeting Jewish synagogues and then expect the new converts to evangelize the smaller outlying towns. Paul realized that not only was Thessalonica the capital of Macedonia, it was a "free city," a hub with harbor access at the crossroads of important trade routes.

While laboring during the week days in his tentmaking trade, Paul spend three Sabbaths ministering in the synagogues speaking to the Jews and Gentiles who were seeking God.

1. Notice the key words in Acts 17:2–3, depicting Paul's approach to the people:
 - *Reasoned*—dialogued through questions and answers
 - *Explaining*—by opening the scriptures
 - *Demonstrating*—to prove through evidence
 - Why would it be necessary to use different means to reach his audience?
2. What act of God did Paul continually emphasize about Christ through his preaching that is the bedrock of Christianity? (See Acts 1:21–22; 2:32; 3:15.)

3. At the end of three weeks of preaching, what were the results? v. 4

4. What did those who were not persuaded set out to do? Were they successful? Vv. 5–9

Those who have turned the world upside down have come here too (v. 6). Apparently the reputation of these early evangelists had preceded them! Sensational news has a way of doing that—shaking people to their core.

5. Personal: Recall a time when the news of your acceptance of Christ as your Savior caused others to feel the impact of your decision. Briefly share the results.

Day Two: Ministering at Berea

Read Acts 17:10–15 for review.

Under cover of darkness, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to the region of Berea where they would enjoy a rich time of ministry before the troublemakers from Thessalonica would again stir up the people, forcing Paul onward toward Athens. Much to Paul's surprise and relief, there in the synagogue of Berea he received a welcome from a group of people who would remain a model example to the Christian church for well over two thousand years.

1. Looking at verse 11, note the outstanding qualities of these Berean believers.

2. Because the Bereans were true students of the scriptures, what was the result of Paul's preaching there? v. 12

The passion and zeal these believers had for God's Word is exactly what pleases the heart of God. David the psalmist of Israel said, "I will worship toward Your holy temple, and praise Your name for Your loving-kindness and Your truth; for You have magnified Your word above all Your name" (Psalm 138:2). Why would David say such a thing? Because the Word of God—the *Bible*—reveals the God behind His name. All that is said and done *in His name* should be held up and tested by the Word—if it is inconsistent or contradictory to His Word, it is not sanctioned by Him. God puts a priority and value on His Word that His followers should esteem highly. In our *Deeper Discoveries* this week we will look at some verses from God's Word that hopefully will motivate us to daily search the scriptures—for in them we find Him.

Deeper Discoveries ~

Look up the verses below with the purpose of discovering a lesson and a personal application. Look for what God is saying in His Word; what He means by it; and how it applies to you. Put your application in the form of a question. The first example is done for you.

Isaiah 1:18 Lesson: God wants my fellowship; to hear my thoughts and reasons. He offers me forgiveness—the red stain of my sins to be made as white as snow.

Application: Do I realize that God wants my fellowship more than I want His? That He is willing to cleanse me of my sin to make it possible? Am I responding daily to His invitation?

2 Timothy 2:15 Lesson: _____

Application: _____

2 Timothy 3:16–17 Lesson: _____

Application: _____

1 Peter 3:15 Lesson: _____

Application: _____

Hebrews 4:12 Lesson: _____

Application: _____

Which of the above verses ministers to your heart today? Why?

Day Three: Ministering at Athens and Corinth

Read Acts 17:16–34; and 18:1–11 for review.

When Paul arrived in Athens, he found a city more populated with idols than with people! With plenty of deities to choose from, the saying was that in Athens it was easier to find a god than a man. This ancient city is comparable to our modern New York or Paris or Rome. It was filled with intellectuals offering a plethora of different ideas. Paul now found himself alone rather than with a ministry team (having left Timothy and Silas to care for the churches in Macedonia).

1. How did Paul react to the environment around him? v. 16
2. How did he attempt to share the truth with them? v. 17

There were two main groups of philosophers: the Epicurean school of believers denied there was a life after death and followed the rule that leisure and pleasure—freedom from pain, anxiety, and passion was the means to the highest end. The Stoics touted dependence upon oneself for every need, emphasizing reason and common sense in dealing with life's problems while living in harmony with all of nature. Paul certainly had his work cut out for him!

3. Did these philosophers take him seriously? What did they label him? v. 18

Paul seemed to move fairly quickly from the marketplace ministry to a bigger arena and more formal court of the Areopagus with his message. To the Athenians, Paul had some very strange ideas; and the divided opinions over his message got the attention of the council overseeing the affairs of the city. His words in the larger venue would make the difference between being able to exercise his freedom to preach or to be censored and silenced permanently.

4. Contrast the Athenians' pastime in v. 21 with that of the Bereans' in v. 11.
5. As Paul passed through the city, what did he notice that became the opportunity and anchor for his message? Vv. 22–23
6. What follows in Vv. 24–28, is the heartbeat of Paul's message. In your own words briefly state what Paul preached that day on Mars Hill.
 - v. 24: _____
 - v. 25: _____
 - v. 26: _____
 - v. 27: _____
 - v. 28: _____

7. Since we are His offspring, what are we believers *not* to think of God? v. 29
8. God may have overlooked such ignorance in times past, but what does He expect today? Why? Vv. 30–31
9. Personal: Paul's spirit was stirred with a holy indignation when he saw a city given over to idols. But he was moved with compassion for the people; compelled to reason with all who would listen. Have *you* ever faced down evil as Paul did? Did you act on it?

There was a minimum of miles between Athens and Corinth, yet they couldn't have been more different. Athens boasted economic status and historical significance with a population of nearly ten thousand. Corinth was relatively new but close to two hundred thousand resided there making it the largest city in Greece at the time. Corinth was well known for its commerce but even more so for its sexual immorality. The city was given to idol worship of many kinds with special emphasis on Aphrodite, her temple, and one thousand sacred prostitutes. Paul would preach there for an extended period, dealing with his greatest challenge to date.

Paul succeeded in finding a home with Aquila and Priscilla, working alongside them during the week and every Sabbath he turned his focus to persuading the Jews that Jesus is the Christ. Since Luke makes a distinction between Vv. 4–5, we can infer that once Silas and Timothy arrived, Paul gave himself over to preaching.

Look Closer ~

What does Luke tell us about the dramatic results from the opposition in Acts 18:6?

- a. Who were those that believed? Vv. 7–8

In the midst of spiritual prosperity we know there had to be spiritual attacks. Paul had come to Corinth in weakness, fear and in much trembling (1 Corinthians 2:3). We can assume the enemy was targeting him when he received a vision from the Lord to strengthen him.

- b. What did the Lord say to encourage Paul? What does the length of Paul's stay (approximately a year and a half) say about his confidence in the Lord?
- c. Personal: How does your confidence in God stack up to Paul's? Do you trust Him to protect you and defend your witness? Please explain.

*You who love the Lord, hate evil! He preserves the souls of His saints;
He delivers them out of the hand of the wicked. Psalm 97:10*

Day Four:

The Value of Ministry Teamwork

It is in the city of Corinth where Paul encounters Aquila, a Jew, and his wife Priscilla, driven there by the order of Claudius commanding all Jews to leave Rome. There were riots breaking out between unbelieving Jews against the Christian Jews similar to those in Jerusalem, Ephesus and Thessalonica. It is possible that Aquila and Priscilla were already believers when they came to Corinth in search of a new home. Paul arrived as did this couple, lacking in funds and the means of making a living. We recall that in Paul's early days he learned the skill of tentmaking and, when informed of a couple who recently arrived from Rome who were also tentmakers, they joined together as a team. Paul went to work for them, living in their home and forging a bond that would benefit them all economically and serve them well in the ministry.

Aquila and Priscilla were probably not aware of the impact of their friendship upon Paul and the believers, but as they willingly opened their hearts and their home, many lives were touched. Imagine the hours spent in the cutting and stitching of their work together, all the while exchanging words of encouragement and sharing the scriptures. Their workplace became a sanctuary and their new city a mission field. Paul would later say of this couple in one of his letters: "Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Likewise greet the church that is in their house" (Romans 16:3–5a).

Use this passage in Romans 16:3–5a, along with Acts 18 to answer the following:

1. What character qualities can you determine about Aquila and Priscilla?

2. What observations can you make about their spiritual gifts and how they used them?

3. How did this couple influence Apollos' testimony for the Lord?

4. To what length were they willing to go on Paul's behalf?

5. What insight do you gain about the power of friendship in working as a ministry team?

6. Personal: Look closely at Ecclesiastes 4:9–12. How does this passage beautifully depict the blessing of participating in a ministry team? What are you able to give right now to help forge a ministry team for Christ? Will you keep this a matter of prayer?

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Think about how you may have been resistant to God's Word. What did you receive this week from your study that will help you correct that resistance?

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ
Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 16

Day One: Life as a Believer in Ephesus

Ephesus was the capital city of the Roman province of Asia, and the center of commerce due to its large thriving harbor. Importing and exporting made it a wealthy city; the temple of Diana made it one of the seven known wonders of the world! Paul would spend nearly three years in and around the area (Acts 20:31), the longest stop on any of his missionary journeys. While there he would deal with everything from preaching, to sorcery, to riotous civil unrest involving people steeped in idolatry and the occult. It would prove to be not only dangerous, but also a fruitful exciting time of ministry.

Then as Paul's third missionary journey was nearing its end (around late A.D. 56 and into early A.D. 57), he moved on through the area of Macedonia and on into Greece. Apart from Paul's personal epistles to Timothy, his son in the faith, his teaching in Acts 20 reveals perhaps the most important aspects surrounding the role of those in church leadership. It is a rare poignant look at a loving Apostle speaking as shepherd in issuing a passionate challenge to properly tend and nurture the flock of God.

Read Acts 19–20.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord. Write down your first impressions.

Memory verse: Acts 20:24 Write the verse; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.

But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

Arriving in Ephesus, Paul encounters twelve more disciples of John the Baptist who, like that of Apollos (Acts 18), knew little to nothing of Jesus as the promised Messiah.

1. When Paul initially asked them whether they had received the Holy Spirit, what did they tell him? v. 2

After Paul more fully explained the gospel to them, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

2. What happened next following Paul's laying on of hands? v. 6

Luke tells us that Paul spent three months in the synagogue boldly speaking and persuading hearers concerning the things of the kingdom of God.

3. What took place when evildoers rose up speaking against the followers of the Way? v. 9

Paul was able to remain for the next two years teaching in Ephesus. As a result, *all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks* (v. 10).

4. Personal: Do *you* see a repeating pattern in Paul's sharing of the gospel? Whenever he met resistance and one door began to close, he looked for another door to open. He remained undeterred from everything but his mission, focusing his mental and physical energies on that which God had called him to do. What does this tell you about . . .

a. God's faithfulness in opposition? _____

b. His servant's steadfastness? _____

c. Think about how God's part and the servant's part are similar and necessary to achieving the goal of evangelism. Record your thoughts.

Day Two: From Miracles to Mayhem

Read Acts 19:11–41 for review.

As Paul's problems with the unbelieving Jews grew more intense, the opposition caused him to withdraw from the synagogue and turn to the school of Tyrannus. Not much is known about the man who's name in Greek meant "tyrant" or "sovereign." There were many such Greek schools of learning and stopovers were common for traveling teachers and philosophers passing through. Paul would no doubt have felt quite at home in such an environment—enough to remain for two years!

1. What kinds of miracles did God do through Paul during these days of ministry? v. 12

Within this setting at the school of Tyrannus, it is easy to understand how Paul might encounter itinerant (professional) Jewish exorcists who decided to follow Paul's example of performing miracles. Sceva, a Jewish chief priest at Ephesus, and his seven sons also did likewise, believing they, like Paul, could also cast out demons by using the "name of Jesus" (v. 13).

2. When the seven brothers confronted a possessed man the response was not what they expected. State what the evil spirit said to them. What does this tell you about demons ability to perceive things? Vv. 14–16

Incredibly, the possessed man attacked all seven brothers so violently that he tore off their robes, leaving them behind naked and wounded as they fled in terror! Great fear then fell upon all who heard of this event and the Lord's name continued to be magnified (v. 17).

3. What else took place as news of the incident spread?

- v. 18: _____
- v. 19: _____
- v. 20: _____

It is impossible to read this account and not be struck by the mighty power of the Holy Spirit at work in these new believers. God's presence was evident in Ephesus!

4. What began to take hold of Paul's heart around this same time? v. 21

Paul sent Timothy and Erastus on ahead to Macedonia while he remained a while longer in Asia: "And about that time there arose a great commotion about the Way" (v. 23). It is possible Luke's reference to the gospel as the "Way" was intended to let the reader know this trouble was directed at all believers and not just Paul.

5. Who stirred things up in an attempt to bring down Paul's ministry and why? Vv. 24–27

At the heart of the issue for Demetrius was their idol worship of many gods; but it was based on economics. Thousands upon thousands of pilgrims came in and out of Ephesus each year and Paul's preaching had turned many of the people away from purchasing idols while putting the reputation of their great goddess Diana in question. Beginning on an economic note, Demetrius stirred up the whole city to a patriotic religious level (Vv. 28–31).

6. What did Paul want to do about it? What prevented him? Vv. 30–31

The commotion rose to such a frenzy that most of the people did not know why they were there protesting. For some unknown reason, this mob pushed Alexander forward to make his defense to the people, but when they found out he was a Jew they responded by chanting for two hours, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!"

7. Luke introduces an unlikely hero into the scenario who is able to quiet the audience. On what basis does he make the argument that the assembly is unnecessary and unlawful? Vv. 35–41

After the uproar had ceased, Paul moved on to Macedonia and then to Greece where he remained for three months (Acts 20:1–7). This time he was accompanied by men from various churches who were likely appointed to bring their financial contribution to add to the relief effort of the believers in Judea (see Acts 24:17) and to protect Paul along the way. The group sailed from Philippi after the Feast of Unleavened Bread and stopped in Troas for a brief stay of seven days.

We will pick up the story again on *Day Four*, dealing with the miraculous healing of Eutychus. Next we look closely at the important details Paul had on his heart for the church leadership before his final departure. Knowing this would be his last visit with these elders of Ephesus, Paul poured out his passionate challenge to them to lovingly tend and nurture the flock of God.

Day Three: Corinth: Biblical Church Leadership

Read Acts 20:13-38 for review.

Refer to the map in the back of your Bible to reference Paul's third missionary trip. After the riot at the Temple of Diana, Paul spent some time with the believers in Ephesus, then moving on to Macedonia and Greece, back through Macedonia to Philippi, and on to Troas, Assos, by boat to Mitylene, Chios, Samos and then Miletus, where Paul invited the Ephesian elders to join him for a last church meeting. He reminds them of the plot of the Jews against him and that he is uncertain of what awaits him in Jerusalem. Regardless, he is prepared to finish his course. He issues a stern warning to be on guard against erroneous teaching, exhorting them to love and look after one another. After a time of prayer together, Paul issues his final farewell.

1. Allowing for travel time, Paul would've waited from 3–5 days for the elders to arrive; once they did, he used his life as an example. Summarize what Paul stated in Vv. 19–21.

Paul was reviewing with these elders that his message had always been that access to God comes only by repentance and faith in Christ. Today in *Deeper Discoveries* we will examine the remainder of Paul's message. Think carefully about the specifics in verses 22–28. Look for a spiritual lesson; what is Paul conveying to the elders? What does it mean to *you* personally?

Deeper Discoveries ~

- a. Vv. 22–23 Lesson: _____
Application: _____
- b. Vv. 24–25 Lesson: _____
Application: _____
- c. Vv. 26–27 Lesson: _____
Application: _____
- d. V. 28 Lesson: _____
Application: _____

Paul had a definite discernment that he would never see the Ephesian elders again. Unmoved by the uncertainty of what lay ahead, he was determined to finish his course. He would now sound the alarm by issuing a strong warning to these men.

The phrase “which He purchased” is *peripoieo* in the Greek, meaning “to acquire, obtain, or gain for oneself.” In other words, Jesus’ death and the shedding of His own blood was the price required to redeem the church. This was serious business to Paul.

- 2. What prophetic word did Paul foretell would come upon the churches after his departure? Knowing this, what did Paul not cease to do? Vv. 29–31

- 3. Once again using himself as an example, what life lesson did Paul leave the churches? Vv. 33–35

We might be inclined to view Paul as a hero; but he saw himself as a man on a mission, driven by the call of God to share the gospel with as many people as God would allow! Here using simple personal examples, tears, prayers and passionate pleas, Paul says his final good-byes.

- 4. If you were to summarize Paul's life-example into a sentence or two, what would you say sums up the man?

Day Four: The Miraculous Healing of Eutychus

Paul's last meeting with the believers would be a late one—lasting into the night, but no one seemed to mind (Acts 20:7–12). While he spoke, seated unnoticed among the group was a young man of Troas, Eutychus (whose name meant “fortunate”). He had climbed up to the third floor window, no doubt to rise above the stuffy atmosphere and breathe in some fresh air. Common apartment dwellings of the day were often several stories high and poorly constructed. So as the hours lingered on, the young man's eyes grew tired from the heat, causing him to fall into a deep sleep. Eutychus then spiraled downward onto the hard pavement below. The meeting grew to an abrupt halt amid the screams of onlookers, but it was too late—his limp body lay motionless and he was a lifeless corpse, pronounced dead at the scene.

1. What did Paul immediately do? v. 10

Paul wasn't around when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter from the dead (Mark 5:35–42), so he was apparently imitating the actions of the Old Testament prophets familiar to him.

2. What did Paul do in like manner to that of Elijah and Elisha? See 1 Kings 17:17–24 and 2 Kings 4:32–37.

3. What did Paul tell the people? v. 10

- a. What do you think this miracle would have revealed to the people about Paul?

Eutychus was not only *fortunate* as his name indicated—God's power was also in evidence. This miraculous act brought much comfort to the believers in Troas (20:12). Paul resumed speaking to an attentive grateful crowd until dawn and then he departed. The Amplified translation of v.12 reads: *They took the youth home alive, and were not a little comforted and cheered and refreshed and encouraged.* The people had heard the Word and witnessed a miracle! Their last meeting with Paul would never be forgotten.

4. Think about it: We don't often understand the workings of God. He does not give us the reasons *why* He allows some things to happen the way they do. But in our challenging trials, we can be certain that He will take the things that cause us alarm, confusion and grief and turn them into miraculous moments that bring Him glory and us blessing. If you have a situation right now that is causing you anxiety and concern, will you turn it over to Him, allowing Him to give you His peace? Write it down and offer it to the Lord.

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: To aspire to spiritual leadership is an honorable thing. If you could be a leader in your church, what to you would be the most important priority? Why?

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 17

Day One: Returning to Jerusalem

Exhibiting characteristics and actions similar to those of his Lord before him, Paul set his face to go to Jerusalem, contrary to the dire warnings he'd received from the followers who loved him. Repeatedly told of the dangers facing him there, the prophecy of Agabus would be fulfilled before the chapter ends. Of course at the time of writing, Luke was aware it was not time for Paul to die at Jerusalem but, in reflecting back, Luke is able to help with the details of what was in Paul's mind and heart as he headed home.

When facing trials, is it possible to know the will of God for a certainty before setting out on a charted course? Did the Apostle Paul struggle with this question? We can assume he did in light of the counsel he received and the consequences of his decision. But we can also be sure that Paul never lost his determined resolve to obey God by fulfilling his mission—even if it put him in harm's way.

Read Acts 21:1–40; and 22:1–29.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord. Write down your first impressions.

Memory verse: 1 Corinthians 15:10 Write the verse; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.

*By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain;
but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the
grace of God which was with me.*

We saw how difficult it was for Paul to depart from the Ephesian elders for the last time. His party sailed from Miletas to Cos—then Rhodes—then on to Patara (3 days journey). There Paul found a ship that would sail directly to Tyre, a trip of approximately 400 miles. They stayed a week with the believers while waiting for the ship to reload fresh cargo. Look on your Bible maps to trace the route taken by Paul.

1. In Tyre Paul encounters disciples that make an urgent plea; what is it? Vv. 4–6
 - a. Describe the scene at the shore and those who were present.
 - b. Why do *you think* the same Holy Spirit leading Paul to go would also lead these dear believers to try to stop him?

In Caesarea we find Philip and his four prophesying daughters, in addition to the prophet Agabus (previously mentioned in Acts 11).

2. Describe Agabus' dramatic portrayal of what would happen to Paul in Jerusalem?
Vv. 11–14
 - a. Who else joined in the appeals entreating Paul not to go on? How does Paul respond to their emotional pleas?

Faced with Paul's determination, the believers could only give up their appeals by aligning their will with that of God's for him.

3. Do *you* think that Paul was wrong not to heed them? Support your answer.

- a. Personal: Can you recall a time when your fellow believers warned you not to do something; but that God's Spirit clearly gave you a steady resolve to follow through? What happened?

Day Two:

Mixed Reviews at Home

Read Acts 21:15–40 for review.

Arriving at Jerusalem, Paul's third missionary journey comes to an end. He and his missionary team receive a warm welcome from the believers that await them and from Mnason, an early disciple, whose name means "reminding." He was a man of wealth, capable of housing Paul and his companions. Luke doesn't give us many details of Paul's time there but we can imagine the days were spent sharing stories and building up one another's faith. The following day Paul went to see James and all the elders, describing in detail—literally item by item—the things which God had done among the Gentiles (v.19). The team would also have handed off the generous gift being offered from the Gentile churches to those in Jerusalem.

1. How did the elders receive Paul's news? v. 20
 - a. At the same time, what rumor did the elders share with Paul that was circulating all over the city about him? Vv. 20–22

Paul was told about the thousands of Jews that had become Christians while he was away; and many of these new believers were zealous to hang onto the law and its old customs. Word had gone out that Paul was turning Gentiles away from Moses, circumcision, and the law. Paul's reputation had become so distorted that his homecoming presented an embarrassing situation for the elders.

2. "What shall we do?" It was a rhetorical question; what did they want Paul to do? Vv. 23–24
 - a. What did Paul choose to do? v. 26
3. What additional charge did he have to deal with? Vv. 27–29

The situation escalated to a riot with Paul being physically dragged from the temple and its doors shut behind him! They intended to kill Paul while *all of Jerusalem was in an uproar* (v. 31).

4. What did the commander order? Vv. 32–34
 - a. What was the multitude crying out? v. 36 What does this scene remind you of?
5. In verses 37–40, Paul takes matters into his own hands. What step does he take that will change everything?

When facing outer turmoil and inner fears, our part is to know God's will and to respond accordingly—His part is to work out the details. But how can we know His will for sure? There are three things here worth pondering . . .

- 1) We know God's will through His Word
- 2) We know God's will through the inner witness of the Holy Spirit
- 3) We know God's will through the supportive counsel of others

When all three are in agreement we can be assured of the next move to make. When all three are *not* in agreement, ask God to make the way clear before proceeding. Remember to trust God's Word and your inner witness above the opinions of well-meaning Christians. Always wait until God makes His way clear. He is never in a hurry—He puts your eternal well-being ahead of your temporal comfort.

6. Personal: Please share your thoughts on the above; relate the points to your current circumstances.

Day Three: Paul Addresses the Jerusalem Mob

Read Acts 22:1–29 for review.

When Paul was given permission, he stood on the stairs and motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great silence, he spoke to them in the Hebrew language (v. 40). Looking at Vv. 1–21, summarize the following:

1. How did Paul describe himself and his early life?

2. Briefly restate how he met Christ on the Damascus road.

3. What did Jesus commission him to do?

4. To whom did the Lord command that Paul be sent?

5. How did the crowd respond to the mention of the Gentiles? Vv. 22–23

6. As Paul was about to be scourged, what question does he raise?

If the centurion was fearful of Paul being wrongly accused and beaten—the commander even more so! He had already committed a crime by putting a Roman citizen in chains. To have scourged him as well was unthinkable.

The commander had purchased his citizenship for a big price, but Paul was born a citizen. We aren't told how Paul's family obtained citizenship, but theologians speculate one of Paul's ancestors likely received it in return for valuable services rendered to a Roman ruler or administrator.

Selah ~

Was Paul surprised by the sudden turn of events? Probably not; he no doubt repeatedly recalled the counsel of the loving believers when he was headed home and the prophecy of Agabus warning him what awaited. He knew the turmoil in Jerusalem was coming and he didn't waver for a moment.

Courage is coming to terms with your fears in the face of your enemy and opting to obey God's will—even if it results in personal harm. Mediate for a moment on 2 Corinthians 5:9–10; 14.

- What was always Paul's aim? Why?

- What was the governing motive that compelled Paul in every situation?

- What is your take-away truth from today's study?

Day Four:

On Being God's Mouthpiece

Agabus is mentioned twice in scripture: Acts 11:27–28, where he predicts a great famine fulfilled during the reign of Emperor Claudius; and in Acts 21:10–11, at Caesarea where he enacted the prediction of Paul's fate in Jerusalem. (Theologians have also come to think that Agabus may have been included in the *seventy* Luke writes about in his gospel account in Luke 10:1.)

The first man God called to the office of prophet was Abraham, but it was Moses who set the standard. There are three words used for the title: *Nabi*—always translated *prophet*; *Rohe*—translated *seer*; and *Hozeh*—translated as *prophet* (Isaiah 30:10) or *seer* (1 Chronicles 29:29). By whichever title, God's man became His mouthpiece to the people, speaking about situations through warnings and exhortations concerning the future. His mission was received and carried out as *the word of the Lord came*. (Meaning, the Lord became actively present to convey his message.) All that a prophet foretold had to come to pass for him to be believed (1 Samuel 9:6), and God repeatedly used prophets to urge His people to turn to Him (Jeremiah 7:23–25). In the New Testament we find Jesus proclaiming these words: "Among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist" (Luke 7:28).

Deeper Discoveries ~

Looking closer we find that the prophets were eager to know of God's grace as foretold in both the Old and New Testaments. Using 1 Peter 1:6–12 as your text, look for a lesson (what is God saying?) as well as a personal application (what does it mean to me?). The first couple of verses are done for you as an example.

Vv. 6–7 Lesson: The genuineness of faith is tested through trials to be found praiseworthy. Such testing will cause grief but won't last forever—it is only for a little while.

Application: As *my* faith is tested, will it praise and glorify the Lord? Will He be evident?

v. 8 Lesson: _____

Application: _____

v. 9 Lesson: _____

Application: _____

v. 10 Lesson: _____

Application: _____

v. 11 Lesson: _____

Application: _____

v. 12 Lesson: _____

Application: _____

Personal: Compare Amos 3:7 with John 15:15. Think about it: God has made known to *you* the very things that the prophets of old and even the angels desire to look into. How are *you* sharing what you are privileged to believe?

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Ask God to help you appreciate all He has revealed to you through His Word, and to act on it accordingly.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.

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Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 18

Day One: A Divided Sanhedrin Hears Paul

The Apostle Paul was about to be examined by scourging to determine the cause of the uproar his presence had stirred. The pivotal point of his brief remarks to the Sanhedrin: "I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead" (v. 6 NIV). The repercussions of that statement brought about an environment that was not only dangerous to Paul but terrifying to those who held him in protective custody, unsure of what to do with him and what would take place next.

How do you respond to those who oppose you simply because you're a Christian? How about to non-believers that are in authority over you in an environment that grows more hostile every day? Acts 23 gives us a visual on how to remain totally dependent on God, even when we don't see any way out or possibility of rescue. He is always near; He will never leave us nor forsake us. He is working out His plan even when we cannot see evidence of it. Our part is to walk by faith:

Forsaking All I Take Him.

Read Acts 23.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord. Write down your first impressions.

Memory verse: Philippians 4:11b–13 Write the verse; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.

... I have learned in whatever state I am to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Paul was again a prisoner, this time under house arrest and able to have visitors. But what were the charges against him? No one seemed to know, presenting a real dilemma for the Roman authorities. To have stirred up such pandemonium he must have committed terrible crimes. Claudius Lysias, the Roman commander, arranged for a special meeting of the Sanhedrin to find out. He brought Paul before them while he stood by to watch over his prisoner.

1. Without hesitating, Paul begins speaking, "Men and brethren," identifying with his fellow Jews. What was his statement regarding how he lived?
2. What was the high priest's response to Paul's statement?

Paul shocked everyone by rebuking Ananias, and there is much speculation as to why he did such a thing.

3. Why do *you* think Paul uttered his statement in verse 3?

Was it a mistake? Were Paul's thoughts and emotions battling it out? His apparent apology in verse 5 makes it seem as if he misspoke in a weak moment and was convicted in his spirit, making this great apostle all the more human in our eyes.

The word "conscience" means *to know with*, or *to know together*. It is the inner witness [judge] that distinguishes between whether we do right or wrong. The conscience does not set the standard—it only reveals whether or not the standard is being met or compromised. Scripture tells us that it is possible to have a *pure conscience* (1 Timothy 3:9), a *defiled conscience* (1 Corinthians 8:7), and *evil conscience* (Hebrews 10:22), and a *seared conscience* (1 Tim. 4:1–2). Paul had relentlessly hunted down and persecuted Christians, yet later in life he claimed to have a "good conscience before God."

4. Paul wasn't boasting, what truth made it possible for him to claim that statement? 2 Cor. 4:6
 - a. After Paul became a Christian, what did he say regarding himself? 1 Timothy 1:15–16

God gave everyone a conscience as the *plumb line* to help us know when we cross the line. If we would listen to our conscience then we, like Paul, could say, "I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men" (Acts 24:16).

5. Personal: How would maintaining a good conscience contribute to the quality of *your* Christian life?

Day Two:

A Conspiracy in the Making

Read Acts 23:11–22 for review.

Three times Paul addressed the group as “brethren” or “brothers.” He then cut to the bottom line with these strong words: “Concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!” (v. 6). When there arose a great dissension in the group, the commander feared for Paul’s life.

1. Although Paul’s fellow believers could visit him in prison, Luke does not mention those in the Jerusalem church coming to meet his needs or interceding on his behalf. Who was with Paul meeting the need of his soul?
 - a. When you picture this poignant scene, what comes to mind?
 - b. Personal: Now picture in your mind the Lord Jesus standing beside *you* in your circumstances. What difference does this assurance make in your circumstances?
2. The same radical Jews who started a riot at the temple took an equally disturbing oath. What was it and how many were involved in the conspiracy?

Going directly to the chief priests and elders and avoiding those supportive of Paul, Luke seems to say that the majority of the Sanhedrin agreed, joining with the conspiracy. In a mad twist of irony, they were prepared to break one of God’s commandments to achieve their evil end. So passionate were they in their hatred of Paul that they did not fear the potential consequences of Rome if they were caught.

3. Who heard about the plot and intervened?
 - a. What did Paul instruct the centurion to do?

Why would a Roman commander take the word of a young teenager? Perhaps he feared the Jewish leaders were capable of anything. Perhaps Lysias envisioned the possible consequences he would face if he lost his prisoner to them. God may have simply given favor to Paul’s nephew, we aren’t told; but with forty men united by an oath the plot indeed thickened!

We know nothing of Paul’s nephew and sister other than what Luke mentions in this chapter. Some commentators believe that Paul was excommunicated from his Jewish family when he became a Christian. He indicates in one of his letters (Philippians 3:8) that he suffered the loss of all things. Because Paul was previously a Pharisee, his sister would’ve been privy to inside information that was being passed along the grape vine. Whatever the case, his sister and nephew knew about the murderous plot and were willing to do something about it. Honorable mention must go to Claudius Lysias, who devised a simple but wise plan to move Paul out of Jerusalem and into the jurisdiction of the governor of Caesarea.

Day Three: Paul is Sent to Governor Felix

Read Acts 23:23–35 for review.

All things pointed to the providence of God at work to save Paul. Commander Claudius Lysias, taking no chances and under cover of darkness, orders his centurions to prepare a large assembly of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to guarantee a safe escort of Paul.

In an unusual move, Lysias composes a letter to governor Felix because of the rare situation dealing with Paul's Roman citizenship.

1. Read the letter delivered to Felix. Compare the way the commander presented the situation to Felix (v. 27) with the way it actually happened (22:29). Please share your thoughts on it.
2. What was the commander's final analysis of the accusations against Paul? v. 29
Was he a threat to Rome?

Paul indeed had the right to be tried in his home province or in the province where the alleged charges took place. Having arrived safely in Caesarea, Felix questioned Paul and decided to hear the case once Paul's accusers had joined them. We will see in the coming weeks that Felix vacillated and procrastinated in his thinking about the matter, not wanting to displease the Jews. Ultimately, Paul would remain a prisoner there for the next two years.

Deeper Discoveries ~

St. Augustine once said: *Trust the past to the mercy of God, the present to His love, and the future to His providence.* Without any doubt, the believer is safe in the hands of God, who can turn even the wrath of our enemies into a smooth path upon which we can travel safely in order to accomplish God's purpose. Read Psalm 145:17–21, and finish the following . . .

- a. *The Lord is righteous* _____
- b. *The Lord is gracious* _____
- c. *The Lord is near* _____
- d. *He will fulfill* _____
- e. *He will hear* _____
- f. *He will preserve* _____
- g. *My mouth shall speak* _____

Trust God to guard, guide and deliver you safely to your destination in His perfect will.

Day Four:

The Lord Stood with Paul

From Pharisee to persecutor, and preacher to prisoner, the miles logged on Paul's odometer through the years could have clearly indicated the Lord's faithfulness and nearness. But by Acts 23, Paul was hated by his own countrymen and held tenuously at the mercy of a heathen soldier who could at any moment turn against him. Worst of all, he was unsure of whether he would ever make it to Rome. Sure, Paul could look back and recall the occasions when he had heard the voice of the Lord. Initially on the Damascus road, Jesus identified himself and told Paul for the first time to, "Arise, to into the city, and wait to be told what to do" (Acts 9). Then when Paul was opposed by many in Corinth, Jesus spoke to him in the night by a vision: "Do not be afraid . . . and do not keep silent . . . for I am with you" (Acts 18). Again when Paul's life was threatened in Jerusalem, Jesus appeared to him in the temple telling him what to do (Acts 22). Now, as Paul realizes the possibility that he might not reach Rome to testify of the good news, Jesus appears to him again to lift his spirit and instruct him in what to do. The visual we derive from these verses is a beautiful picture of what the Lord wants to do in our times of need.

Circumstantially, things did not look good for Paul: "But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, '*Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome*'" (v. 11). Let these words sink in as you read them. Then think about how the Lord's message would have made a world of difference in Paul's heart and perspective.

1. *Be of good cheer*: How did these words impart *courage* to Paul's spirit?

2. *For as you have testified for me in Jerusalem*: In what way did Jesus *commend* Paul?

3. *So you must also bear witness at Rome*: How did the Lord's words instill *confidence* in Paul for was yet ahead?

Selah ~

Have *you* heard the Lord's voice through your lesson this week? Has He brought you a word of courage—commendation—confidence, or some other instruction? Make note of it and how His word has affected you.

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: *The Lord is near to all who call upon Him in truth* (Psalm 145:18). Write Him a prayer of thanks.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 19

Day One: Grace Under Fire

In Acts 24–25, we find Paul taking a stand for the third time (previously in Acts 21 facing a crowd of Jews; and Acts 23 before the Sanhedrin). This time however, he will be brought before two governors: Felix and Festus, and then finally before King Agrippa. There are two remarkable assurances to derive from Paul's example for believers facing stressful circumstances: (1) the power of God to enable us to remain calm; and (2) the confidence our hearts can have when our words are grounded in the truth.

Whenever we read in scripture of people going to Jerusalem, it speaks of them *going up*; but when they go from Jerusalem, they *go down* and away. The plan hatched by the Jewish religious leaders against Paul took them (literally and figuratively) *down and away* from the presence of God and His righteousness. Unknown to them however, was the reality that God was using their evil intentions to further His own plan for good.

Read Acts 24–25.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord. Write down your first impressions.

Memory verse: Romans 13:8 Write the verse; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.

*Owe to no one anything except to love one another,
for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.*

While the events leading up to Paul's present predicament seem to have taken longer, he had actually been in Jerusalem only a total of twelve days, hardly enough time to organize and lead a rebellion against the ruling Jewish authorities—yet that is what they pretended. Luke tells us here that Paul had been a prisoner for five days, while Felix awaited the arrival of Ananias and some of the elders led by a skilled orator named Tertullus (the equivalent of a prosecution attorney).

1. What did Tertullus do in his opening statement to gain favor with Felix? Vv. 2–4
2. According to the prosecutor, briefly state the charges against Paul in the following:
 - a. v. 5
 - b. v. 6
3. What does Tertullus falsely allege happened that prevented the proper Jewish authorities from dealing with Paul? v. 7
4. What does Tertullus invite Felix to do himself? Vv. 8–9

The reader is not informed as to how many people Ananias brought with him to the hearing but they now joined in as one voice to affirm the charges against Paul.

5. Think about it: If someone were to bring charges against *you* for being a Christian, what evidence would they present? How do you think you would respond publicly to their charges? Please explain.

Day Two: Paul's Defense Before Felix

Read Acts 24:10–27 for review.

In similar manner to that of the prosecuting attorney, Paul opened his remarks on a conciliatory tone, encouraging Felix to do his own fact-checker to ascertain what Paul had been up to since his arrival in Jerusalem. He had gone up to the temple to worship, yet had spent most of his time in Roman custody, not allowing him time or opportunity to form an uprising. Having denied the charges against him, Paul proceeded to make his point that the dispute was a religious, not a political one.

1. While Paul denied the false charges against him, he admitted to what was at the heart of the debate. Briefly restate Paul's points using your own words.
 - a. v. 14
 - b. v. 15
 - c. v. 16
 2. What was the other reason for Paul's appearance in Jerusalem? v. 17
 3. What was the real reason behind the charges brought against Paul? v. 21
 4. Think about it: It's hard to imagine ourselves on trial for being Christian, but it still happens daily in Third World countries. Paul's example models for us what to say about our faith in Christ and how to do it with grace and dignity. What stands out to *you* that you'd like to apply when sharing the gospel with others?
-
-

Deeper Discoveries ~

Luke seems to like to use the term *the Way* in speaking of these early believers (Vv. 14, 22). The common form of it is *hodos*—appearing 102 times in the New Testament. John the Baptist used it to warn people to *prepare the way of the Lord* (Matthew 3:3). The Pharisees told Jesus that He taught *the way of God in truth* (Matt. 22:16). The book of Hebrews talks about the blood of Jesus providing us a *new and living way* to God (10:20). The most obvious connection of the phrase relates back to Jesus' description of Himself in John 14.

- a. What is the lesson Jesus teaches His followers in John 14:1–6?
- b. What did Felix profess to understand about *the Way* in verses 22–25? Did this make a difference in Felix' life?
- c. Personal: Have you perhaps been studying the Bible for a while and made the determination in your heart that you *know about* God, His Word, and Christianity; but you've never fully surrendered your life to Christ? Are you afraid or like Felix, have you been putting it off? Will you pause now and tell Him that you realize HE IS YOUR Savior and you want Him to be Lord of your life? Ask Him to cleanse and forgive you of your sin and fill you with His Holy Spirit. Thank Him for coming inside and that you are born again!

Day Three: The Apostle Paul's Appeal

Read Acts 25:1–27 for review.

Jewish politics could be difficult to navigate, particularly for a new governor coming into office. Porcius Festus succeeded Felix, attempting to do a better job, but what would he do with a leftover Paul who was in prison but not formally charged? And given that he was a Roman citizen, Festus had to act expeditiously to prevent a bad problem becoming worse. While the Jewish leaders plotted to kill Paul, Festus decided to hear the matter. Paul had refuted the charges against him: offending the law, defiling the temple, and inciting treason against Rome. Now Paul would add to the list that he had not offended Caesar (v. 8).

1. Things were escalating, growing more intense. What do you discern as being most important to Festus at this point in time? Vv. 9–12
 - a. As Paul verbalizes his denials he seems defiant in his defense. What does he insist he is entitled to?
 - b. Do *you* think Paul was wrong in aggressively asserting his civil rights given how Jesus answered His enemies? Please explain.

Once Paul exercised his right as a Roman citizen to appeal to Caesar, Festus had no choice but to send him—and consequently the gospel—to Rome! But about this same time, Festus received a state visit from King Agrippa, the ruler who had jurisdiction over the temple in Jerusalem. It would make sense to share Paul's case with him even though these two rulers had no authority to make a decision. So in an elaborate display of pomp—*fantasia*—and circumstance, Paul the Apostle was brought in to them. He would once again be questioned and his hearers would once again be responsible for hearing the gospel message.

2. In an exaggerated attempt to embellish the charges, what did Festus say to King Agrippa? Vv. 24–27
 - a. Under what pretense did he arrange the meeting?
 - b. What was Festus' final assessment of Paul? v. 25

Agrippa's initial reaction to Paul, an innocent man, must have been one of great perplexity but, as we will see, he too will have his moment—his opportunity to respond to the message of truth.

Day Four:

Felix has His Moment of Truth

In a look back at Acts 24, we see that Felix was an informed man, aware of the testimonies of transformation that were circulating throughout Caesarea. Curious to know more, when Felix could not substantiate the accusations against Paul according to Roman law, he charged a centurion to keep Paul under house arrest but to allow him liberty and visits from his friends. Also aware of the monetary offering Paul had brought to the people of the area, Felix hoped to play his hand in a way that he could personally profit from Paul's imprisonment.

Paul always zeroed in on salvation through Jesus Christ and the hope of the resurrection when he preached. Interestingly, Paul reasoned with Felix about *righteousness, self-control, and the judgement to come* (Acts 24:25). Let's look at each of these independently to see how they fit into a Christian testimony.

1. Using Paul's own words, how is it possible to become righteous? Philippians 3:9
 - a. How do 1 John 2:29 and 1 John 3:1–3 add to your understanding?

When Paul spoke of personal righteousness as the divine ideal, it was impossible for Felix not to feel the pain of conviction. Paul went on to speak of self-control—or temperance—which involves acceptance of personal responsibility as it pertains to the use of one's body.

2. What do we learn about self-control in Proverbs 16:32?
 - a. Why is it so important that the believer have self-control? See 1 Corinthians 9:27.
 - b. Felix was not a free man because he was enslaved to his own sinfulness. As believers, what are we called to do? See Romans 6:16–19.

As he did earlier on his missionary journeys, Paul also spoke to Felix about judgment: *He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained* (Acts 17:31).

3. What do the following verses reveal to you about the coming judgment? Hebrews 9:27
 - a. Revelation 20:12 and 15 (The Great White Throne Judgment)
 - b. 1 Corinthians 3:11–15 (The Day of the believer's judgment)

Now as he [Paul] reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid (Acts 24:25). Literally, he became *terrified*, a conviction from God gripped his heart and he could not deny it. But he made his choice . . . he put it off for another day. What about *you*—have you made *your* choice? Don't put it off—you may not have another opportunity.

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Compose a prayer thanking God that He has shown you the Way to life.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.

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Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 20

Day One: Paul's Defense before King Agrippa

This week in Acts 26, we see the fulfillment of the Lord's promise regarding the Apostle Paul: "He is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles and kings . . ." (Acts 9:15). Each one present in the assembly room of the palace that day—among them important prominent government officials and ranking military officers—were all aware of the situation. And in the process of presenting his own defense, Paul meticulously depicted the transforming power of the gospel upon those who put their faith in Jesus Christ.

King Agrippa held authority over the court of meeting but, by the time it was over, Festus, as well as the king and his sister Bernice were each in the defendant's chair facing the inevitable truth staring them in the face—that God's grace was granting them the opportunity to listen to the gospel message! And they too would one day have to answer for it.

Read Acts 26:1–32.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord.

Memory verse: 1 Corinthians 1:18 Write out the verse; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.

*For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,
but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

1. Personal: Recall a time when the message of the cross was foolishness to you. Contrast that time in your life with the assurance you have today that it is the power of God.

Deeper Discoveries ~

It's interesting to note that Luke would highlight Paul's conversion story three times in Acts. While some might simply pass lightly over it, regarding it as mere review, there is a reason why we find it at this point in the book. Ask God to give you fresh eyes to see and insight to discern this time through. In your own words, write a summary sentence for each of the five features in our story and a lesson you can derive from each one.

- a. *Paul's early life* (Vv. 4–11): _____

Lesson: _____

- b. *The light Paul saw* (Vv. 12–13): _____

Lesson: _____

- c. *The voice Paul heard* (Vv. 14–18): _____

Lesson: _____

- d. *Paul's obedience to the vision* (Vv. 19–23): _____

Lesson: _____

- e. *Paul's challenge to those hearing the gospel* (Vv. 24–32): _____

Lesson: _____

- f. Now take it down even further: what one word would *you* use to best describe Paul's life and ministry? _____

Day Two:

On the Defense

Read Acts 26:1–11 for review.

Paul would later state in no uncertain terms writing his letter to the Corinthians that he had been entrusted with a stewardship: “For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:16–17).

1. Understanding Paul’s mindset as a preacher, why do you think he considered himself fortunate to make his defense to King Agrippa?
2. What point does Paul make in verse 4, concerning the Jews who testified against him?
3. What does Paul state as the reason he was standing trial? Vv. 6–7

Basically, Paul was in this present predicament for proclaiming that the promise of God to the Jewish forefathers had been fulfilled through Jesus Christ, the Messiah. But not surprisingly, scripture records that this *hope of Israel* would not be received by His own people.

4. Look closely at John 1. Jot down the specific words that stand out depicting Jesus as:

a. *The Eternal Word* (Vv. 1–3): _____

b. *The True Light* (Vv. 6–13): _____

c. *The Word becoming flesh* (Vv. 14–18): _____

d. *The Lamb of God* (Vv. 29–34): _____

Paul stated to King Agrippa that he was standing in his own defense and being judged for the hope of the promise made by God to Israel. In his early life, Paul himself fought vehemently against those who believed in Christ. He understood why the Jews didn’t believe, as he himself did *many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth* (v. 9). But Paul’s life’s mission became preaching Christ to these very people so they too would come to faith in Him.

Day Three:

Fully Persuaded

Read Acts 26:19–32 for review.

To our amazement, Paul was never concerned with the responses of his hearers. He was only interested in explaining how he came to know Christ and have a personal relationship with Him. In his audience sat individuals listening to his message that had different degrees of readiness and receptivity to the gospel message. Festus could not be expected to understand the things of Judaism, but King Agrippa was a Jew and had full knowledge of the history and facts concerning the faith. Paul had much to say to them and requested that his listeners pay attention: “Therefore, I beg you to hear me patiently” (Acts 26:3b).

1. Festus: *Worldly and unspiritual*—In contrast to Paul, Festus represents the carnal, worldly man, “Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, ‘Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!’” (v. 24). 1 Corinthians 2:14 helps us understand the reasoning of Festus; what does this verse say? Write it out.

2. Agrippa: *Almost a Christian*—He represents an awakened conscience. Paul recognizes it and poses the question: “Do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe.” What answer does Agrippa give to Paul? Vv. 27–28

It must be noted that the words *almost Christian* convey no sense of sin pardoned, no joy or peace with God, no claim to the abiding presence of Christ within the soul. When once the heart is quickened and the conscience awakened to sin, desire must give way to decision. Agrippa listened but did nothing to commit himself. This was his moment—he would never hear from Paul again.

3. Paul: *Fully persuaded*—Before encountering Jesus Christ on the Damascus Road, Paul thought it his duty to oppose Jesus: “I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Timothy 1:13). The “light” that surrounded Paul at his conversion also breaks through each believer’s heart today. Look at 2 Corinthians 4:6; what does this verse say?

Do you perhaps know a “Festus”—someone that is worldly and unspiritual? How about an “Agrippa”—someone who is *almost a Christian*? Would you take a moment and pray for them? How about *you*? Do you perhaps fall into one of these two categories? Or are you *fully persuaded*? If you are the latter, God has a plan and a purpose for your life that includes a mission to take the message of His truth to others. Fully persuaded means fully submitted to all that He has planned for you. In the remainder of our study we’ll look at that more closely. For today, consider where God has you at the moment and yield yourself to Him.

Day Four:

Ambassadors for Christ

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18). This week's memory verse is an anchor for those of us desiring to be used mightily of God while attempting to fulfill His will in our flesh. We can't do it—ours is simply to yield and He does the rest: *nothing in my hands I bring, but only to Thy cross I cling*. Paul began as a *persecutor* and found himself a *proclaimer* in the cause of Christ. The same might be said of us as well. Before Christ, we were part of the opposition; but after we became numbered among the family of God. Our inheritance is accompanied by the call of God; indeed it is our joy to serve Him!

Up Close ~

1. What is the "gospel" that you have received? Look at Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:1–4 and restate verses 3–4 in your own words.

2. As a *new creation in Christ*, what ministry has God entrusted to you? What does this mean to you? See 2 Cor. 5:17–19.

3. Having received this ministry, what does that make you? 2 Cor. 5:20 What are your thoughts about this?

4. In 2 Cor. 5:21, Paul condenses the mission message to one verse; what is it?

To them [saints] God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily (Colossians 1:27–29). Paul's words to the Colossian believers that also ring true today.

5. As you consider the great trust committed to you . . . how are you allowing God to work mightily in you? What would you ask Him for in order to complete *your* mission?

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Compose a prayer of what you need to speak out for Christ: is it opportunity or equipping? If you don't feel adequate, tell the Lord that today and watch what He will do on your behalf.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.

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Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 21

Day One: The Sovereignty of God

“For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us” (2 Corinthians 1:20). Jesus strengthened Paul on the night He stood with him in prison with the promise that Paul would bear witness for Him at Rome (Acts 23:11). The lesson for the student: when God makes a promise, it is backed up by His own sovereignty and faithfulness!

In Acts 27, Luke captures the imagination of his readers while at the same time revealing to them how God can work through the life of one man to bring deliverance to many. Remember, Luke wrote to Theophilus, a Greek, and the Greeks loved the Mediterranean Sea. They reveled in stories contained in their ancient literature of adventurous sea voyages full of danger, drama, and desperation. Here Luke writes an eyewitness account of one such voyage—this time ending in deliverance with Paul as the hero. This time it would be Paul himself who would bring encouragement and hope to an entire ship's register of men, assuring them that God would not abandon them in their hour of need.

Read Acts 27:1–44.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord.

Memory verse: Philippians 1:6 Write out the verse; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.

... Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.

The opening verses of Acts 27 reveal that Luke accompanied Paul across the Mediterranean, while the expedition was commanded by Julius, a centurion of the Italian Regiment. They sailed from Adramyttian, a port located on the northwest region of modern Turkey considered a part of Asia.

1. Who else accompanied them? v. 2
 - a. What else do we know about this man, who was a part of the missionary team? See Colossians 4:10 and Philemon 24.
2. The word *kindly* (v. 3) is the one from which we derive the word philanthropy. What did Julius allow Paul to do once they had reached their first stop in Sidon?

From there weather conditions forced them to sail closer to shore so they did not have to sail directly into the fierce winds. The trip to Myra covered some four hundred miles and could have taken up to fifteen days to complete. There Julius found a Roman ship bound for Italy and put his party on board. But the ship was no match for the weather and with great difficulty it reached Fair Havens. Up to this point, Luke gave great geographical detail; now he mentions the time reference of the “Fast,” referring to the Day of Atonement sometime toward the end of September or beginning of October; making it a challenge to cross the open sea and arrive at their final destination before winter.

3. What did Paul, a seasoned traveler, perceive by this point in the journey? Vv. 9–10
4. Choosing to pass on Paul’s advice, what was the consensus of majority, which included the centurion Julius and the owner of the ship who was also onboard? Vv. 11–12

The helmsman (pilot) of the ship along with the owner, opted to move on because the harbor where they were anchored would not be suitable to protect them from the strong northeast winds. Take a moment to look at your map to see where the vessel was and the distance they would need to travel to reach Phoenix. Had things gone as planned, the gentle south wind would have eased them toward the shore of Crete to Phoenix, where they could have wintered. But before they knew it, a *northeaster*—a wind of hurricane proportions came down upon them, causing conditions to change very drastically.

5. Personal: Recall a time when everything seemed to be smooth sailing and suddenly conditions worsened, forcing an immediate decision. Where did you turn; on whom did you rely for direction? What did you learn?

Day Two:

In the Tempest

Read Acts 27:13–26 for review.

It was not long before the “soft wind” they needed became the “strong wind” they feared. The word *tempestuous* (v. 14) gives us the word “typhoon.” The sailors referred to it as a Euroclydon. As the storm grew more fierce, the crew onboard did all they could to keep the ship afloat.

1. Using Vv. 15–20, briefly describe some of the measures the crew took for three days to save the ship.

2. When and why did they give up hope? v. 20

3. Paul stood in the midst of them to offer words of encouragement. What did he say? Vv. 21–22

4. How did Paul speak of his relationship with God and what God promised him? Vv. 23–24

Circumstances were bad, and Paul admonished the centurion, the helmsman and the owner of the vessel for ignoring his warning. They would all soon realize that God had spared all their lives for Paul's sake.

5. Think about it: Initially these men had looked to favorable circumstances to govern their decisions. As a Christian, how could this kind of thinking cause you a similar shipwreck?

6. Ultimately, it was not Paul's warning but God's Word that they would listen to. According to 2 Corinthians 5:7, what should we use as our compass in life? Explain why you think this truth is necessary in guiding the believer?

Day Three:

Stay in the Boat!

Read Acts 27:27–44 for review.

At midnight on the fourteenth day these battered sailors sensed that land was near. They remembered Paul's words about running aground and, checking the waters depth, dropped four anchors and prayed for daylight to come (Vv. 26–29).

1. In an effort to save themselves, recap how the sailors attempted an escape.
2. When Paul perceived what was happening how did he take the leadership role? What did he say? v. 31
 - a. What action did he encourage them all to take? Vv. 33–34

Paul had already told the men about his God, now in the midst of this mostly pagan group, he audibly offered up a prayer of thanksgiving as well as deliverance to the sovereign Lord of all Creation. The sailors may not have understood the significance of that prayer but it reminded Paul and the believers onboard that in the breaking of bread and giving thanks, Jesus is present. Luke specifically mentions that all two hundred seventy-six men on board ate food and were *all* encouraged. And when once they all had eaten, they lightened the load of the ship by throwing out the remaining grain into the sea. When daylight broke they cast off the anchors and ran the ship aground but the violence of the waves continued to break the ship apart.

3. There remained yet one more threat to Paul's life; what was it? How did the centurion intervene? What was the final outcome of the story?

Luke makes the point that no matter what difficulties we may face in life, God's sovereignty governs every detail! The safe deliverance of all the men came about only by listening to God's Word and obeying His directions through His servant Paul. The apostle throughout the crisis presented the example of abiding, remaining, knowing that his Lord was with him.

Deeper Discoveries ~

Whatever kind of storm life may present you—and there will be many—our boats are small and the turbulence of our circumstances will become like that Mediterranean Sea: violent at times, dark and dangerous. Remember that it is safer to stay in the boat with Jesus than attempt to weather the storm without Him! Learn to practice the presence of Jesus in your storm. Spend some time with Isaiah 30:15 (ESV). "For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, 'In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.' But you were unwilling." Consider what lessons it reveals and how you can apply it.

In returning and rest you shall be saved _____

In quietness and in trust shall be your strength _____

But you were unwilling _____

How can you apply its truth today?

Day Four: God's Word: Anchors in the Storms of Life

At times our journey toward home—our eternal home—will be fraught with events and expected circumstances that will disappoint us and cause us to face obstacles from which we, like Paul, are unable to free ourselves. We are promised the certainty of hardship and peril, but also the assurance of a safe refuge in God and reaching the shore. Be prepared, dear believer, for whatever the voyage will bring; let nothing shake your faith, for even the roughest passage will have a blessed end.

The journey for Paul and everyone onboard the ship had not progressed far before they faced a drastic change in the weather—they were completely at the mercy of the storm. Was the crew concerned about the cargo? No, in fact they repeatedly lightened the load to save the ship. Priorities change as we realize the need to abandon what is unnecessary in order to save what is precious—life!

1. When facing crisis situations, what should we believers be willing to throw overboard to lighten the load? What should we steadfastly keep as our main focus?

a. Philippians 3:8 _____

b. Hebrews 12:1–2a _____

You will face times when you incur loss; but as you do, remember the Lord has promised never to leave you nor forsake you. If you are willing to give up what you cannot keep—the things of this world, then you will gain what you cannot lose—your salvation.

2. Personal: If you seem to be holding onto the broken pieces of your life right now, there are anchors in the Word of God for you to hold fast—meaning hang onto firmly, tightly. Note them below . . .

a. 1 Thessalonians 5:21 _____

b. Titus 1:9 _____

c. Hebrews 4:14–16 _____

d. Hebrews 3:6 _____

3. Personal: The sureness of your faith depends on the strength of your anchor. *This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast . . .* (Hebrews 6:19a) How will holding firmly to the above anchors help you to weather the storms in your life?

“And so it was that they all escaped safely to land” (v. 44). This is the fulfillment of what God had earlier promised through Paul in verse 24. The vessel was shipwrecked and the cargo abandoned, but all of the men reached the shore—not one was lost! Some were strong enough to swim, some floated on planks and broken pieces of the ship, but they all made it safely.

Whatever it is you need today, hang onto your hope: **Hold On with Patient Expectation!** God is at work in the midst of your circumstances to bring you to your destination—your safe haven. Trust Him to get you there.

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Write a prayer thanking God that He has promised to bring you and your journey to completion in Him.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 22

Day One: Miracles on the Road to Rome

At the conclusion of the book of Acts, Dr. Luke tells his readers that Paul's life would be threatened by tumultuous seas, by soldiers, and by a snake; but God delivered him from them all, fulfilling His will. Paul remained under house arrest for two years in Rome before his case was heard. During this time he received all who came to him—no one forbidding him, the gospel was completely unhindered.

Dr. Luke would end his book before Paul's trial took place. We have every reason to believe that Paul was released and enjoyed a season of ministry that took him perhaps as far as Spain—his desire early on in his travels. Wherever he went, Paul's goal was to bring Jews and Gentiles alike into a relationship of faith in Jesus Christ.

Around the year 67, Paul would be arrested again. This time winter was approaching and Paul asked his protégé Timothy to bring him the two things in life he valued most: his well-worn cloak, stained from the years of beatings and travels, and the coveted parchments containing the scriptures. This time the outcome would be different, Paul would remain in prison till his death, and those he witnessed to in Rome would all desert him. But it was not the end of the story; in fact it was only the beginning. The book of Acts is still being written to this day. It is God's story—the continuing ministry of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Christians all over the world today have the privilege of playing a part—it truly is the never-ending story!

Read Acts 28:1–31.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord.

Memory verse: 2 Timothy 4:2 Write out the verse; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.

*Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season.
Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.*

The NASB translation of Acts 28:1 tells us that “when they had been brought through . . .” It accurately conveys the meaning that they had not escaped, but rather that God had brought them safely through. The island was called Malta, meaning place of “refuge.” It was an appropriate name for the culmination of a divine deliverance. Once on dry land, the natives warmly welcomed all 276 of them!

1. As the natives built a warm fire, what happened to Paul? What did the natives think of him because of it? v. 4
- a. Once they all watched for a while and no harm came to him, what did they think? v. 6

Luke’s point is that God protected his servant. There was at that time a man in the region who no doubt heard about the remarkable fact that Paul survived a serpent’s bite. Once Publius, the chief official or “first man” of the island heard about Paul, he invited the team to his home where they resided for three days.

2. During Paul’s stay, what was he able to do for his gracious host?
- a. What further blessing came to the people of this island that had become a refuge for Paul and his men?

This missionary team spent three months on the island of Malta, continuing to heal the sick and, although we don’t read of Paul preaching there, we know he did wherever he went.

3. In response to all that Paul and his men did for the Maltese people, what did the people do for them as they departed? v. 10

In spite of what it took to get to Malta, Paul and his men had many reasons to praise God! A great deal of ministry was performed there throughout their stay.

Take a moment to look at your maps to check out the final stages of Paul’s journey to Rome. Leaving Malta, the party sailed to Syracuse where they stayed for three days. Then it was on to Rhegium and from there to Puteoli, where they stayed with some fellow believers for seven days. And from Puteoli they made it on foot to Rome (Vv. 11–15).

Selah ~ (Pause and think about it . . .)

Note a highlight from your study in the book of Acts. How did it become a “refuge” for you?

Day Two:

Paul's Ministry at Rome

Read Acts 28:16–31 for review.

Once Paul arrived at Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners over to the captain of the guard but Paul was allowed to dwell by himself and the soldier guarding him (v. 16). Right up to the end, Paul would continue the pattern he set long ago for sharing the gospel—first to those of the synagogue, then to the people of the city. While under house arrest, Paul called for the Jewish leaders of the synagogue in Rome to come to him and hear his case.

1. Initially with the leaders present, how did Paul speak of his innocence? Vv. 17–18
 - a. Why did Paul tell them he was in Rome? Vv. 19–20

From everything we read in these verses, Paul had not come to Rome to die. He no doubt expected to be released and enjoy the liberty to share the gospel at Rome as he had throughout his missionary journeys. Surprisingly, the Jewish leaders did not know of the events surrounding Paul's appearance in Rome.

2. What was their response to him? Were they willing to listen? Vv. 21–22
3. What did Paul use as the basis of his text in preaching about Christ? v. 23 What do you recall from your earlier study about why this tactic would be a wise one?

The meeting would last all day as Paul shared with his “brethren” a survey of the Old Testament scriptures. His message would be laced with the story of Jesus: His birth, life, teaching, miracles, crucifixion, burial, resurrection, ascension, and promise to return again. Then he would confront them with their need to personally receive Jesus Christ as their Savior. Luke's emphasis to the reader in verse 25 is significant: the argument went on but no one began leaving until Paul quoted the words of Isaiah 6:9–10, spoke to the prophet by the Holy Spirit. Jesus had also quoted this passage (Matthew 13:13–15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10) to explain to His disciples why He used parables in speaking to the people. Now Paul also uses it here (and in Romans 11:8) to validate the Jews stubbornness and unwillingness to believe in God's own plan of salvation to the world.

4. Knowing many of the Jews would reject it, what was God's plan all along? v. 28

Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and receive all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him (Vv. 30–31). During these two years as Paul ministered, he also wrote four epistles: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. From these letters we learn that Paul anticipated standing trial and being released. It is likely that Dr. Luke finished writing the Book of Acts before Paul's release sometime around A.D. 63, accounting for why Luke did not finish Paul's story. Luke does however end on a high note in verse 31, noting that the gospel of Jesus Christ—God's story—will be preached unhindered throughout the world by courageous messengers willing to give and endure all for the salvation of the lost!

Day Three:

Chained but Unhindered

The Lord Jesus had promised Paul that he would reach Rome, but there was no mention that he would be a prisoner; and yet through Paul's captivity the ministry was expanded and enriched. While he awaited the decision of Caesar, he knew the ruler to whom he bowed and belonged was Jesus Christ. Yes, Paul was a prisoner chained to a guard but he was in bonds for Christ's sake.

Deeper Discoveries ~

Part of the expansion and enrichment of Paul's ministry came through the writing of the prison epistles. In them Paul stated that he was divinely appointed to defend the gospel. Today we'll look at a few of the verses from those writings to see what Paul thought of his chains and what take-away truth he hoped to communicate to the believers.

Take these verses as a personal challenge. As you read each one written in Paul's own hand, try to picture Paul and how he was affected; then consider what he would want you to know and how to apply that knowledge today in what you are facing.

- a. Philippians 1:6–7: What did Paul write about his chains? _____

What do these verses mean to you; how will you apply them? _____

- b. Philippians 1:12–14: What did Paul write about his chains? _____

What do these verses mean to you; how will you apply them? _____

- c. Ephesians 3:1, 6: What did Paul write about his chains? _____

What do these verses mean to you; how will you apply them? _____

- d. Ephesians 4:1–3: What did Paul write about his chains? _____

What do these verses mean to you; how will you apply them? _____

Paul was limited physically by his chains, but the reach of his ministry was not bound. We too will at times find ourselves restricted by time, ability, opportunity, and personal means. The question: will we allow ourselves to be mastered by our limitations or will we allow God to use our circumstances to transform us and others by His power and for His glory? What life lesson would God have you receive from Paul's words in Philippians 4:11–13?

Day Four:

The Invitation

Throughout the book of Acts, we've seen up close and personal the lives of those in the early church that God used to lay a foundation, ignite a work, and unite a body of believers called Christians. We've learned that the message of the gospel—the *Way*—has the power to transform lives wherever it is preached. We've also come to realize that it divides its hearers—some will believe, some will not; eternal issues are at stake. Today, looking back, where do *you* stand? Are you *for* or *against* Him?

In the book of Romans—another of Paul's writing—we find the plan of salvation clearly laid out. These are some of the same words that Paul shared with his fellow countrymen when he stood before them as he made his defense in Rome. Look up each of the references and write them out in the space provided. If you still have never yet walked this road personally, ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart to God's plan of salvation.

- Romans 3:10 _____

- Romans 3:23 _____

- Romans 5:12 _____

- Romans 6:23 _____

- Romans 5:8 _____

- Romans 10:13 _____

- Romans 10:9–10 _____

If you have not yet invited Jesus Christ to be your Lord and Savior, He is right now opening the door of your heart. Ask Him to come in, to forgive you of your sin, and be the Lord of your life. And thank Him that you now belong to Him for eternity. Rejoice that the conclusion of your study year has brought your life a new beginning! Give Him thanks and tell someone about the commitment you have just made.

Mark these verses in your Bible so that you have them accessible when sharing God's plan of salvation along with your personal testimony.

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

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1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Wherever you are, look upon your circumstances as *your* personal mission field for Christ. Tell Him what you need most to be an effective witness for Him.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.

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