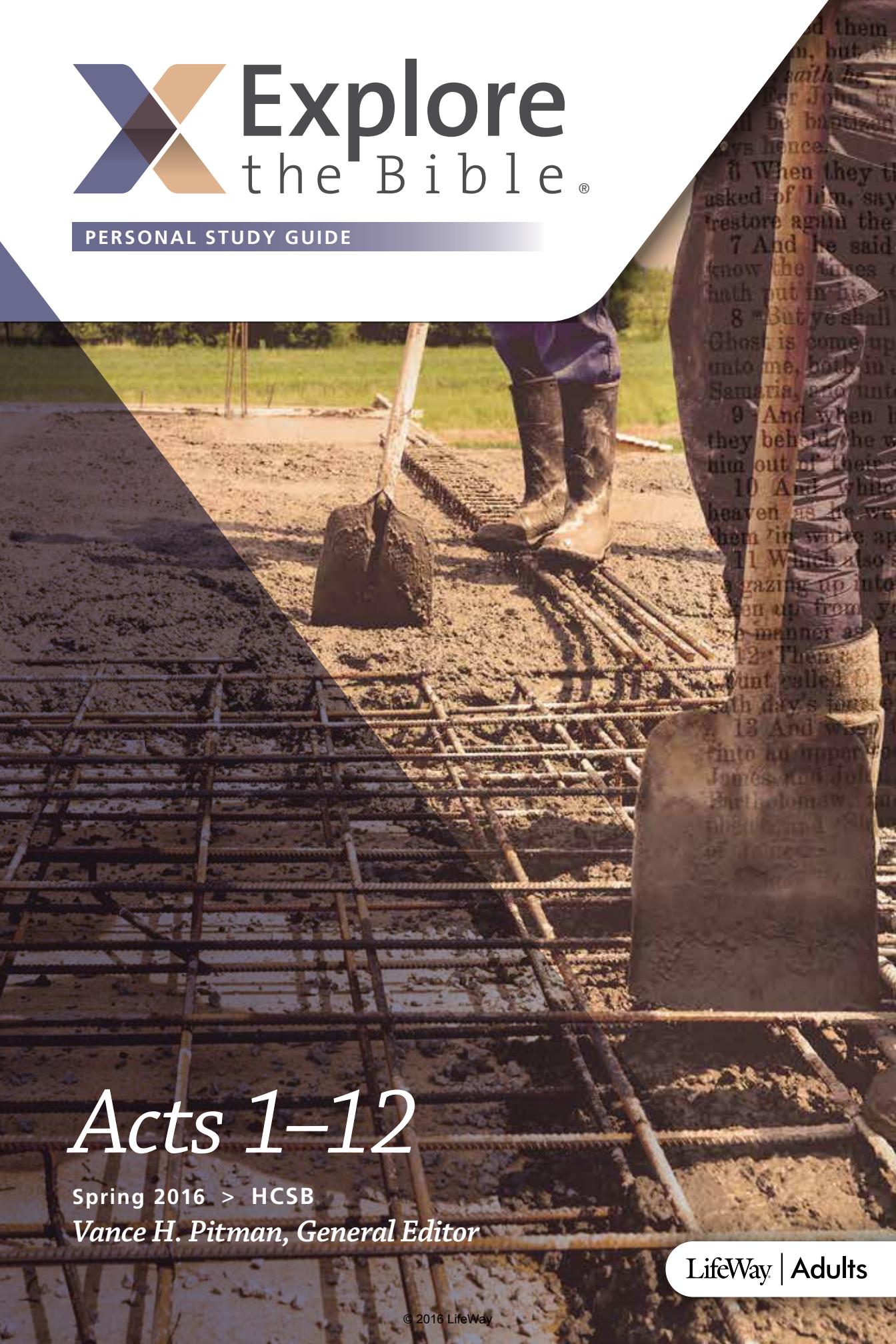




# Explore the Bible®

PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE



## Acts 1–12

Spring 2016 > HCSB

*Vance H. Pitman, General Editor*

LifeWay | Adults

# LIFE BY DESIGN

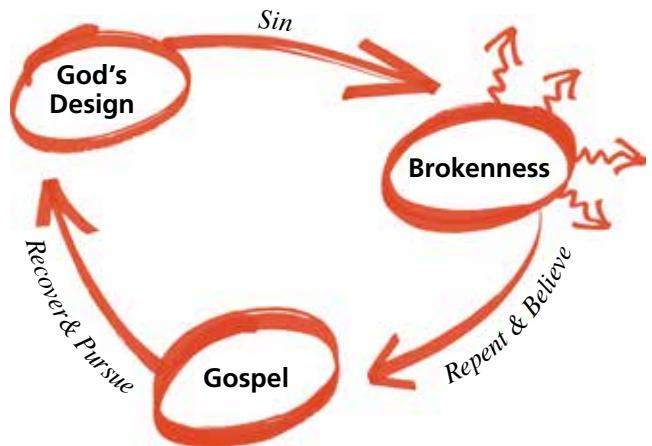
**We live in a broken world. This brokenness is seen in suffering, violence, poverty, pain, and death around us. Brokenness leads us to search for a way to make LIFE work.**

The Bible tells us that God originally planned a world that worked perfectly—where everything and everyone fit together in harmony. God made each of us with a purpose—to worship Him and walk with Him. (See Genesis 1:31 and Psalm 19:1.)

Life doesn't work when we ignore God and His original design for our lives. We selfishly insist on doing things our own way. The Bible calls this sin. Sin leads to a place of brokenness. The consequence of our sin is separation from God—in this life and for all of eternity. (See Romans 3:23 and Romans 6:23.)

At this point we need a remedy—some good news. Because of His love, God did not leave us in our brokenness. Jesus, God in human flesh, came to us and lived perfectly according to God's Design. Jesus came to rescue us—to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. He took our sin and shame to the cross, paying the penalty of our sin by His death. Jesus was then raised from the dead—to provide the only way for us to be rescued and restored to a relationship with God. (See John 3:16, Colossians 2:14, and 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.)

We don't have the power to escape this brokenness on our own. We need to be rescued. We must ask God to forgive us—turning from sin to trust in Jesus. This is what it means to repent and believe. Believing, we receive new life through Jesus. God turns our lives in a new direction. (See Mark 1:15, Ephesians 2:8-9, and Romans 10:9.)



When God restores our relationship to Him, we begin to discover meaning and purpose in a broken world. Now we can pursue God's Design in all areas of our lives. God's Spirit empowers us to recover His Design and assures us of His presence in this life and for all of eternity. (See Philippians 2:13 and Ephesians 2:10.)

Now that you have heard this Good News, God wants you to respond to Him. You can talk to Him using words like these: My life is broken—I recognize it's because of my sin. I believe Christ came to live, die, and was raised from the dead—to rescue me from my sin. Forgive me. I turn from my selfish ways and put my trust in You. I know that Jesus is Lord of all, and I will follow Him.

*Excerpted from Life on Mission: A Simple Way to Share the Gospel.*

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\*Easter Evangelistic Emphasis



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ADULT PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE

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## A WORD FROM THE GENERAL EDITOR



For much of my Christian journey, if you had asked me what the Book of Acts is about, I would have answered that it's about the birth and growth of the early church. In reality, the Book of Acts is about that and so much more.

The story opens with the resurrected Lord Jesus spending His last 40 days on earth with His disciples, speaking about the kingdom of God (1:3). It closes with the apostle Paul spending two years in Rome under house arrest and telling all who came to visit him about Jesus and the kingdom of God (28:30-31). Between these two bookends is the account of the birth and growth of the church. The implication is significant: God established His church as His primary tool for the expansion of His kingdom to the ends of the earth!

What you will read in the Book of Acts is the story of believers—ordinary people—being empowered by the Holy Spirit to accomplish God's eternal mission of establishing a kingdom representing every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. It's an action-packed story filled with arrests, miracles, persecution, martyrdom, radical conversions, and missionary movements. Most amazing of all is that the story is still being written today. You and I as believers in the twenty-first century are now a part of this amazing story. God is still at work, expanding His kingdom to the ends of the earth through His church.

Co-laboring in Christ,

***Vance H. Pitman***

*Vance H. Pitman is senior pastor of Hope Church in Las Vegas, Nevada.  
Follow Vance on Twitter at @vancepitman.*



# WORD WISE

Terms listed here are identified in the Bible commentary with a dot (•).

**Ananias** [an uh NIGH uhs]—Greek form of Hebrew name meaning “the Lord has acted graciously”; with Sapphira, his wife, a deceitful couple in the early church

**Candace** [KAN duh see]—word of uncertain meaning; probably a royal title rather than a family name; the queen of Ethiopia whose servant was baptized as a believer in Christ by Philip

**Cappadocia** [KAP uh DOH shih uh]—province in Asia Minor (modern Turkey)

**Cypriot** [SIP rih aht]—citizen of Cyprus, a large island in the eastern Mediterranean Sea

**Cyrene** [sigh REE nee]—city on the North African coast south of the island of Crete

**Elamites** [EE luhm ights]—citizens of Elam, a region on the western edge of ancient Persia (modern Iran)

**Gamaliel** [guh MAY lih uhl]—grandson of a great Jewish rabbi (Hillel); highly regarded Pharisee and teacher of the law who advised the Sanhedrin not to condemn to death Christ’s apostles; teacher of Saul of Tarsus (Paul)

**Medes** [MEEDZ]—citizens of a region located north of Elam that was once part of the ancient Persian Empire

**Mesopotamia** [MESS uh puh TAY mih uh]—region including what today is Iraq

**Pamphylia** [pam FIL ih uh]—province of ancient Asia Minor (modern Turkey)

**Parthians** [PAHR thih uhnz]—citizens of Parthia, a region in the northwest part of ancient Persia (modern Iran)

**Phrygia** [FRIJ ih uh]—region that lay east of Asia Minor (modern Turkey)

**Pontus** [PAHN tuhs]—region south of the Black Sea in what today is Turkey

**Sadducees** [SAD joo seez]—name meaning “righteous ones”; influential Jewish religious group in NT times; controlled the priesthood and temple

**Sanhedrin** [san HEE drihn]—most powerful Jewish council/court in NT times; claimed its authority from the 70 elders appointed by Moses (Num. 11:16)

**Sapphira** [suh FIGH ruh]—name meaning “beautiful” or “sapphire”; with her husband, Ananias, a deceitful couple in the early church

**Theophilus** [thee AHF ih luhs]—name meaning “lover of God”; individual to whom Luke addressed both his Gospel and Acts, and who may have supported Luke financially in writing the two works

# BIBLE READING PLAN

## MONTH 1

- 1. Acts 1:1-5
- 2. Acts 1:6-8
- 3. Acts 1:9-11
- 4. Acts 1:12-14
- 5. Acts 1:15-22
- 6. Acts 1:23-26
- 7. Acts 2:1-4
- 8. Acts 2:5-13
- 9. Acts 2:14-17
- 10. Acts 2:18-21
- 11. Acts 2:22-28
- 12. Acts 2:29-32
- 13. Acts 2:33-36
- 14. Acts 2:37-40
- 15. Acts 2:41-42
- 16. Acts 2:43-47
- 17. Luke 23:1-4
- 18. Luke 23:5-12
- 19. Luke 23:13-19
- 20. Luke 23:20-25
- 21. Luke 23:26-31
- 22. Luke 23:32-34
- 23. Luke 23:35-38
- 24. Luke 23:39-43
- 25. Luke 23:44-49
- 26. Luke 23:50-56
- 27. Luke 24:1-8
- 28. Luke 24:9-12
- 29. Luke 24:13-27
- 30. Luke 24:28-35
- 31. Luke 24:36-43

## MONTH 1

- 1. Luke 24:44-51
- 2. Acts 3:1-10
- 3. Acts 3:11-16
- 4. Acts 3:17-23
- 5. Acts 3:24-26
- 6. Acts 4:1-4
- 7. Acts 4:5-12
- 8. Acts 4:13-18
- 9. Acts 4:19-22
- 10. Acts 4:23-26
- 11. Acts 4:27-31
- 12. Acts 4:32-37
- 13. Acts 5:1-6
- 14. Acts 5:7-11
- 15. Acts 5:12-16
- 16. Acts 5:17-24
- 17. Acts 5:25-32
- 18. Acts 5:33-42
- 19. Acts 6:1-7
- 20. Acts 6:8-10
- 21. Acts 6:11-15
- 22. Acts 7:1-5
- 23. Acts 7:6-8
- 24. Acts 7:9-16
- 25. Acts 7:17-22
- 26. Acts 7:23-28
- 27. Acts 7:29-32
- 28. Acts 7:33-34
- 29. Acts 7:35-39
- 30. Acts 7:40-47

## MONTH 1

- 1. Acts 7:48-56
- 2. Acts 7:57-60
- 3. Acts 8:1-8
- 4. Acts 8:9-13
- 5. Acts 8:14-17
- 6. Acts 8:18-25
- 7. Acts 8:26-29
- 8. Acts 8:30-35
- 9. Acts 8:36-40
- 10. Acts 9:1-6
- 11. Acts 9:7-16
- 12. Acts 9:17-20
- 13. Acts 9:21-25
- 14. Acts 9:26-30
- 15. Acts 9:31-35
- 16. Acts 9:36-43
- 17. Acts 10:1-8
- 18. Acts 10:9-14
- 19. Acts 10:15-23
- 20. Acts 10:24-33
- 21. Acts 10:34-43
- 22. Acts 10:44-48
- 23. Acts 11:1-9
- 24. Acts 11:10-17
- 25. Acts 11:18-26
- 26. Acts 11:27-30
- 27. Acts 12:1-5
- 28. Acts 12:6-10
- 29. Acts 12:11-14
- 30. Acts 12:15-19
- 31. Acts 12:20-25



# INTRODUCTION TO ACTS

When the engineer John Roebling designed the Brooklyn Bridge, he knew that it would need a strong foundation. Consequently, he planned for two massive stone towers to stand on bedrock on opposite sides of the East River. These towers, with the help of a network of steel-wire cables, would support the nearly 1,600-foot bridge. Because of its superior design and construction, the Brooklyn Bridge remains in use to this day, more than 130 years after its opening.

Similarly, the Book of Acts stands as an enduring bridge of truth lodged deeply into the bedrock of God’s Word. It connects the Gospels—centered in the miraculous birth, sinless life, atoning death, victorious resurrection, and exalted ascension of Jesus Christ—with the Epistles and Revelation. It provides a dramatic narrative of the continuing work and witness of the Risen Lord through His followers.

Acts is thus the account of the expansion of God’s kingdom through the birth and growth of the early church. While it chronicles an approximate 30-year history of people, places, and events in the early church, more importantly it magnifies the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in propelling the gospel message to the ends of the earth.

## »» BACKGROUND

**Writer**—The writer of Acts did not identify himself by name. However, clues within the book and its clear connection to the Gospel of Luke have led most evangelical Bible scholars to conclude that Luke, a physician and missionary associate of Paul (Col. 4:14), wrote both the Third Gospel and Acts. He addressed both works to one named Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1), and in Acts 1:1-2 he referred to the Gospel as his “first narrative” about “all that Jesus began to do and teach” until He ascended to heaven. Luke thus wrote Acts as a sequel to the Third Gospel. He tied the two works together by reporting at the end of the Gospel and again at the beginning of Acts the Lord’s promise concerning the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:1-8) as well as Jesus’ ascension (Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:9-11).

Vocabulary in both the Gospel and Acts includes medical terms that a trained physician might use. In addition, there are sections in Acts where Luke abruptly switched to the first-person plural pronoun—the so-called “we” sections (16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16). These sections likely describe times and events at which

Luke joined Paul as a missionary coworker and eyewitness to the gospel's advance among Gentiles throughout the Roman world.

**Date of Writing**—Bible students hold differing views about the date that Luke wrote Acts. One view (the view I hold) is that Acts was written in the early 60s. This view takes note that Luke made no mention in Acts of the Jerusalem temple's destruction in A.D. 70. It seems probable that Luke would have mentioned such an event had he written after it. Other Bible students, however, hold to a date of writing as late as the mid-80s, while still others propose a middle-ground date sometime around the temple's destruction in A.D. 70.

**Purpose**—Luke stated up front his purpose in writing Acts. He wanted to present an accurate narrative of the events surrounding Jesus and the continuing influence of His message. Embedded within that purpose was an effort to defend the faith against assertions on the one hand that Christianity was a political movement against Rome and on the other hand that Christians were only a sect of Judaism.

## »» KEY THEMES

*Prominence of the Holy Spirit*—As promised by Jesus, the Holy Spirit filled the early believers with His presence and power. He lived in them permanently. Through the power of the Spirit, the gospel message was proclaimed everywhere, and lives were transformed. That same reality continues for believers today.

*Significance of witnessing*—The faithful witness of the gospel message pointed to the undeniable truth about the Risen Christ. Likewise, today's believers have a story to tell about Jesus' redeeming work in our lives, making the difference between despair and hope.

*Expansion of God's kingdom through the birth and growth of the church*—The early church began in Jerusalem, but it multiplied into numerous congregations throughout the Roman Empire. These churches faced external pressure in the form of persecution and internal pressure in the forms of strife and false teaching. Still, the kingdom continued to advance, crossing every barrier that threatened to hinder it. For this reason, many Bible students refer to this beloved Bible book as "the Acts of the Holy Spirit."



# OUTLINE OF ACTS

## I. Empowerment for the Church (1:1–2:47)

- A. Waiting for power (1:1-26)
- B. The source of power (2:1-13)
- C. Pentecostal witness to the dispersion (2:14-47)

## II. Early Days of the Church (3:1–12:25)

- A. In Jerusalem (3:1–7:60)
- B. In Samaria: the Samaritan Pentecost (8:1-25)
- C. To the ends of the earth: Philip’s witness (8:26-40)
- D. Conversion and preparation of Paul (9:1-31)
- E. In Judea: Peter in Caesarea (9:32–11:18)
- F. To the ends of the earth (11:19–12:25)

## III. Paul’s First Missionary Journey (13:1–14:28)

- A. Cyprus (13:1-12)
- B. Pisidian Antioch (13:13-52)
- C. Iconium (14:1-7)
- D. Lystra, Derbe; return to Antioch (14:8-28)

## IV. The Jerusalem Council (15:1-35)

## V. Paul’s Second Missionary Journey (15:36–18:22)

- A. Antioch to Troas (15:36–16:10)
- B. Troas to Athens (16:11–17:34)
- C. Corinth (18:1-22)

## VI. Paul’s Third Missionary Journey (18:23–21:16)

- A. The Ephesian Pentecost (18:23–19:41)
- B. Macedonia to Troas, Athens, Corinth, and return (20:1–21:16)

## VII. Paul en Route to and in Rome (21:17–28:31)

- A. In Jerusalem (21:17–23:35)
- B. In Caesarea (24:1–26:32)
- C. Voyage to Rome (27:1–28:15)
- D. Ministry at Rome (28:16-31)

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Session

1

# ENTRUSTED

Jesus assigned His followers the task of telling everyone about Him and His message.

## ACTS 1:1-11

<sup>1</sup> I wrote the first narrative, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach <sup>2</sup> until the day He was taken up, after He had given orders through the Holy Spirit to the apostles He had chosen.

<sup>3</sup> After He had suffered, He also presented Himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during 40 days and speaking about the kingdom of God. <sup>4</sup> While He was together with them, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for the Father's promise. "This," He said, "is what you heard from Me; <sup>5</sup> for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." <sup>6</sup> So when they had come



DATE OF MY BIBLE STUDY: \_\_\_\_\_

11

together, they asked Him, “Lord, are You restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time?” <sup>7</sup> He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or periods that the Father has set by His own authority. <sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” <sup>9</sup> After He had said this, He was taken up as they were watching, and a cloud took Him out of their sight. <sup>10</sup> While He was going, they were gazing into heaven, and suddenly two men in white clothes stood by them. <sup>11</sup> They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you have seen Him going into heaven.”

*Observe the promises made to the apostles in this passage. How are the promises connected to one another?*

---

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*Identify the actions the apostles were to take. How are these actions related to the promises?*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

Have you ever imagined what it would be like to work as a 911 emergency dispatcher? You would constantly handle desperate calls from people in need. Some callers might be crying out for help concerning an imminent threat or a crime that had been committed. Others might be pleading for assistance with a life-threatening medical emergency, a fire, or a horrible traffic accident. In many of these cases, your rapid yet calm response as a dispatcher could make the difference between life and death for someone at the scene. You must quickly understand the crisis, collect necessary information, and alert the appropriate emergency responders.

***When have you recently been a part of communicating important information to others?***

---

---

Emergency dispatchers receive and communicate vital information that saves lives. Similarly, the Risen Christ commissioned His followers to communicate the message of salvation to a lost and dying world. The Holy Spirit would empower them to fulfill their mission.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **ACTS 1:1-26**

The opening chapter of Acts pulses with expectation. It promises a dynamic sequel to the gospel story concerning “all that Jesus began to do and teach” (1:1). Luke assured his readers that the resurrected Lord Jesus, having ascended, was continuing His redemptive mission on earth. He would do so through the Holy Spirit’s empowering His followers “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:8).

Luke reported the Risen Lord’s final instructions to His apostles: to remain in Jerusalem until they received the Holy Spirit (1:4-5). Their mission would require a supernatural enablement; it could not be accomplished on the basis of human energy and effort. The apostles wondered if Jesus’ instruction signaled the imminent restoration of Israel as a political kingdom, but Jesus clarified the mission: they were to be His witnesses throughout the world (1:6-8). Jesus then ascended into heaven, and two angels assured the watching apostles that He would one day return in the same way that He left them (1:9-11).

In the remainder of chapter 1, Luke reported the process by which the community of disciples, now numbering about 120 people, restored the number of apostles to 12 after Judas the betrayer’s death. The group flourished in an atmosphere of unity, so Peter led them to recommend worthy potential replacements, to pray about the decision, and then to select the new member of the Twelve by casting lots. Trusting God’s guidance, the group selected Matthias to join the apostles (1:12-26).



# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## THE REMEMBERED PROMISE (ACTS 1:1-5)

### VERSES 1-2

**<sup>1</sup> I wrote the first narrative, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach <sup>2</sup> until the day He was taken up, after He had given orders through the Holy Spirit to the apostles He had chosen.**

Luke reminded •*Theophilus* (see p. 6) that *the first narrative* he wrote (the Gospel of Luke) had focused on the life, actions, and teachings of Jesus during His time on earth. Some Bible students understand the phrase “most honorable Theophilus” in Luke 1:3 to suggest that this individual was an important Roman official (compare Acts 23:26 and 26:25). He may also have been a believer who supported Luke in the writing of the Gospel and Acts.

Luke wanted his readers to know that the spread of the gospel across the Roman Empire was the continuation of Jesus’ saving mission. The Lord’s atoning death for sinners and victorious resurrection were complete, yet the mission to take this good news to the world and make disciples in all the nations was ongoing.

Luke reported that Jesus *had given orders through the Holy Spirit to the apostles*. The term *apostles* refers literally to those who have been appointed and sent out on a mission. The Commander giving the orders was Jesus. The Holy Spirit was the presence of God who would guide the apostles and empower them to carry out the mission. Before Jesus ascended, His disciples were ministry learners. Afterward, they became ministry leaders. They became proclaimers under the Risen Lord’s command and commission.

### VERSE 3

**<sup>3</sup> After He had suffered, He also presented Himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during 40 days and speaking about the kingdom of God.**

Luke emphasized two key truths to reinforce his readers’ faith in Jesus. First, after Jesus *suffered* and died on the cross, He also *presented Himself alive*. Jesus’ resurrection was not some cleverly devised yet wishful story circulated by His grieving followers to keep His memory alive. Rather, Jesus’ resurrection was real and true,

authenticated by **many convincing proofs**. The Greek word translated *proofs* refers to a certainty that can be confirmed by evidence. The resurrection of Jesus was confirmed when He appeared to multiple individuals and groups **during 40 days** after His tomb was found to be empty (1 Cor. 15:4-8).

A second truth Luke emphasized was the centrality of **the kingdom of God**. Indeed, God gave birth to the church for the purpose of expanding His kingdom. Faithful Jews longed for God to restore Israel to its former national glory. Jesus taught, however, that He inaugurated God's righteous reign through His ministry and mission. Jesus took on human nature to live among us, to give Himself as a sin-sacrifice in our place, to free us from sin and death by His resurrection, and thus to establish God's reign in our hearts when we place our faith in Him. The growth of the Christian community gave proof that *the kingdom of God* was indeed flourishing.

#### VERSE 4

**<sup>4</sup> While He was together with them, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for the Father's promise. "This," He said, "is what you heard from Me;**

Jesus commanded the apostles **not to leave Jerusalem** until further notice. What was so significant about their staying in Jerusalem? This city was the epicenter of Jewish worship and temple sacrifices. Centuries earlier the prophet Joel had predicted the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem and a subsequent spiritual awakening (Joel 2:28-32). Furthermore, Jerusalem was the location of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Consequently, He instructed His apostles to remain in the city until they could boldly announce the fulfillment of **the Father's promise**.

#### VERSE 5

**<sup>5</sup> for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."**

The promise concerning the Holy Spirit assured the apostles they would enjoy the Risen Lord's continuing presence. Baptism presents a picture not only of the cleansing of repentance (John's baptism **with water**) but also of the believer's immersion into the all-encompassing presence and power of **the Holy Spirit**. The phrase **you will be baptized**



is in the passive voice, emphasizing that the apostles could not initiate this action. Instead, they would receive the Holy Spirit's action.

Waiting can be a difficult discipline. We are often tempted to run ahead of Jesus, trying to carry out His mission on our terms and with our strength. Such schemes fail sooner or later. On the other hand, we will never be disappointed when we obey Jesus, even when His command is to wait for something that only He can give us.

***What makes it difficult to wait for the Lord to prepare us to fulfill His purposes? What are the rewards of waiting on His timing?***

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## **THE RESURRECTION PROCLAIMED (ACTS 1:6-8)**

### **VERSE 6**

**<sup>6</sup> So when they had come together, they asked Him, “Lord, are You restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time?”**

When the Risen Lord spoke to His apostles about the kingdom of God, they were curious (and perhaps confused) about what this meant. They knew that Old Testament prophecy connected the establishment of God's kingdom in Israel with the outpouring of God's Spirit (Joel 2:27-28). Thus, their question to Jesus about ***restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time*** revealed their hope for Jewish independence and the restoration of the people of Israel as a nation. Jesus would clarify for the apostles that the kingdom of God centered in Him, not in a national entity. The kingdom of God is the reign of His grace and power in the lives of those who believe in Jesus.

### **VERSE 7**

**<sup>7</sup> He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or periods that the Father has set by His own authority.**

Although the apostles asked for specific information about the restoration of Israel, Jesus declared that only the Father knows the precise schedule regarding those matters (Matt. 24:36). Consequently, it was both futile and distracting from the real mission for the apostles to dwell on ***times or periods*** that were beyond their control.

The Lord did not commission us as His followers to speculate about God's end-time calendar; He commissioned us to live faithfully each day, passionately proclaiming the gospel and making disciples.

### KEY DOCTRINE: *Evangelism and Missions*

The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the preaching of the gospel to all nations.

#### VERSE 8

**<sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."**

The mission of testifying to the resurrection was a task so enormous that the apostles needed supernatural ability. They were inadequate in every way until Jesus gave them a promise and a command. He promised them **power when the Holy Spirit** had come on them. The word *power* denotes a divine enablement. The Greek term is the source of the English words *dynamic* and *dynamite*.

The power Jesus promised to His apostles was inseparable from the mission He assigned them. The declaration **you will be My witnesses** carries an imperative tone. *Witnesses* are individuals who know something to be true and feel compelled to tell others about it. The apostles knew that Jesus had conquered sin and death through His death and resurrection. They were to tell others this good news.

Some Bible students point to verse 8 as the outline of Acts in a nutshell. That is, the remainder of the book shows how the early church pursued the mission to be Jesus' witnesses **in Jerusalem** (chaps. 1–7), throughout the regions of **Judea** and **Samaria** (chaps. 8–12), and on to **the ends of the earth** (chaps. 13–28).

The content of the apostles' testimony focused on Jesus' death and resurrection. The cross pointed to Jesus' victory over sin. The resurrection pointed to His victory over death and the grave as well as His validation as God's Son. Therefore, believers today, like the apostles and the early church, are commissioned to bear witness to a world-changing historic event.



In a politically correct culture, even some believers might question whether it is appropriate to urge non-Christians to believe in Jesus. To that attitude, Acts 1:8 gives three responses. First, the Lord has given believers a message to share that is backed by His authority. The gospel is His story, and He has commissioned His followers to tell His story and make disciples of all nations.

Second, the mission of Jesus is designed to be the consuming priority in the life of every believer. Christians are stewards of the good news that every person needs to hear—that Jesus triumphed over death to provide eternal life for all who believe in Him. Third, the gospel transcends all politics and cultural opinions. The apostles often referred to Jesus by the title “Lord” to emphasize His undisputed ownership over life and eternity.

***What hinders people from fulfilling their assignment to testify about Jesus’ presence in their lives? What role does the Holy Spirit play in helping a believer share the gospel with others?***

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### **BIBLE SKILL: *Compare passages with related concepts.***

Read Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:46-49; and John 20:21. Compare those passages to what Luke recorded in Acts 1:5-8. Take note of similar themes, teachings, and directives. How do the passages complement one another?

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## **THE RETURN PORTRAYED (ACTS 1:9-11)**

### **VERSE 9**

**<sup>9</sup> After He had said this, He was taken up as they were watching, and a cloud took Him out of their sight.**

Jesus' ascension demonstrated the Father's pleasure in welcoming the Son back into the glory of heaven (John 17:4-5). It bridged the gap between the atoning work of Christ on the cross and His heavenly ministry as High Priest (Heb. 8:1). Furthermore, the ascension opened the way for the continuation of Jesus' power and presence with His followers through the Holy Spirit. It was for their benefit that He would return to heaven and the Spirit would come to them (John 16:7). Finally, the ascension underscored the fact that Jesus had given His apostles (and the church) a mission as His ambassadors.

#### VERSE 10

**<sup>10</sup> While He was going, they were gazing into heaven, and suddenly two men in white clothes stood by them.**

As Jesus ascended into heaven, the apostles *were gazing into heaven* so intently that they didn't notice the appearance of *two men in white clothes*. The context strongly suggests these *two men* were angels, sent by God to assure the apostles concerning Jesus' future return.

#### VERSE 11

**<sup>11</sup> They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you have seen Him going into heaven."**

The two angels expressed a gentle rebuke in their question to the apostles. Instead of remaining in that place and *looking up into heaven*, the apostles needed to obey Jesus' command to stay in Jerusalem and prepare to get about the business of His mission. As motivation, the apostles were to keep in mind that one day their Master would *come in the same way* they had seen Him ascend into heaven. That is, He will return personally, bodily, visibly, and victoriously. The promise of the Lord's return motivated the apostles to engage in fellowship and prayer with other believers who were gathered at Jerusalem in the upper room (Acts 1:12-14).

***How might believers get caught gazing when they need to be obeying the Lord? What role does witnessing play in preparing for Jesus' return?***

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## IN MY CONTEXT

Believers follow Christ and point others to Him through the power of the Holy Spirit. In obedience and out of love, believers are to share the gospel with others. Believers are to live in light of Jesus' lordship and in anticipation of His return.

***What is your group doing to point others to Jesus? What role do you play in helping the group point others to Jesus? Discuss ways your group can be more intentional in sharing the gospel.***

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***What factors cause you to hesitate in fulfilling the mission of being Jesus' witness? What steps can you take to overcome your hesitation and obey the Lord's command to be a witness?***

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***Record the names or initials of people with whom you could share the gospel. Ask God to help you find a way to talk with each person listed. Begin to act on what He reveals to you.***

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## MEMORY VERSE

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. —Acts 1:8



## Session 2

# EMPOWERED

Jesus empowers His followers to be witnesses through the Holy Spirit.

## ACTS 2:1-15

<sup>1</sup> When the day of Pentecost had arrived, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> Suddenly a sound like that of a violent rushing wind came from heaven, and it filled the whole house where they were staying. <sup>3</sup> And tongues, like flames of fire that were divided, appeared to them and rested on each one of them. <sup>4</sup> Then they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different languages, as the Spirit gave them ability for speech. <sup>5</sup> There were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. <sup>6</sup> When this sound occurred, a crowd came together and was confused because each one heard them speaking in his



own language. <sup>7</sup> And they were astounded and amazed, saying, “Look, aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? <sup>8</sup> How is it that each of us can hear in our own native language? <sup>9</sup> Parthians, Medes, Elamites; those who live in Mesopotamia, in Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup> Cretans and Arabs—we hear them speaking the magnificent acts of God in our own languages.” <sup>12</sup> They were all astounded and perplexed, saying to one another, “What could this be?” <sup>13</sup> But some sneered and said, “They’re full of new wine!” <sup>14</sup> But Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice, and proclaimed to them: “Men of Judah and all you residents of Jerusalem, let me explain this to you and pay attention to my words. <sup>15</sup> For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it’s only nine in the morning.”

*Observe the progression of the actions described in this passage. How does each action build on the previous one?*

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*Identify the crowd’s reactions to hearing words spoken in their various languages. How did these reactions open the door for the believers to share the gospel?*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

Think for a moment about the power sources we depend on every day. We have electricity for our homes and offices. We use gasoline in most of our vehicles. We have propane for outdoor grills and solar energy for indoor warmth and light. We even benefit from the huge wind-driven turbines that convert kinetic energy into mechanical power.

***If you had to choose to live without one power source you currently rely on, which one would you give up? Explain your reasoning.***

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Just as vehicles require fuel, factories must have a power source, and homes need energy, so also must we as believers depend on the activating power and indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. We cannot live victoriously and accomplish our gospel mission without the Holy Spirit. Neither could believers in the early church.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **ACTS 2:1-15**

Pentecost, also known as the Feast of Weeks, was one of the three major Jewish festivals observed annually. Occurring 50 days after the Passover feast, Pentecost was a joyous celebration marking the completion of the grain harvest. It thus attracted Jews and proselytes from all over the Roman Empire to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the festivities. No one could have imagined, though, the supernatural power that would be unleashed during the first Pentecost following Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

The Day of Pentecost was the time that God chose to fulfill His promise to send the Holy Spirit to guide and empower believers. The Spirit's coming was sudden and dramatic. He came like a mighty wind into the hearts of believers. He ignited their lives with such power and clarity that they were able to declare the message of the gospel in such a way as to be understood by people representing at least 15 different languages (2:1-13).

Furthermore, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit marked the formal beginning of the church. The indwelling Spirit sealed believers to Christ and connected them to one another in an unprecedented union for an unwavering witness to the world. It fell to Simon Peter on that day to boldly step forward and explain to the crowd in Jerusalem that what they were witnessing was nothing less than the long-anticipated fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (2:14-16).



# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## THE SPIRIT GIVEN (ACTS 2:1-4)

### VERSE 1

**<sup>1</sup> When the day of Pentecost had arrived, they were all together in one place.**

The word ***Pentecost*** comes from a Greek term meaning “fifty.” Originally, Pentecost was known as the Feast of Weeks because it occurred seven weeks plus one day after Passover (Lev. 23:15-16). This was one of three annual pilgrimage feasts when all Jewish males were expected to travel to Jerusalem and present an offering of first fruits to the Lord (Deut. 16:16).

The statement ***they were all together in one place*** carries profound implications. The unity of the believers testified to their cohesive focus on Jesus. He consumed their attention. He dominated their thoughts. When we as believers rivet our passion on Jesus in a unified obedience, the impact of our witness can be phenomenal.

Trees unified make a forest. Players unified make a team. Links unified make a chain. One snowflake is not much, but when joined with many others they can blanket a landscape. Similarly, spiritual unity energizes the impact of our witness for Christ.

***Why is unity of purpose and focus critical for the church? Why, then, do so many believers struggle to be unified in purpose and focus?***

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### VERSE 2

**<sup>2</sup> Suddenly a sound like that of a violent rushing wind came from heaven, and it filled the whole house where they were staying.**

The prayer meeting of believers was suddenly interrupted by a sound from above. The word ***like*** denotes a comparison of similarity. The sound was similar to the roar of a powerful wind. In the Old Testament, wind often represented God’s invading presence (Ps. 104:3; Ezek. 37:9-10). Furthermore, wind signified God’s power to tear down and build up.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit combats the teaching that He gradually moved into the lives of believers. His heavenly origin removes any conclusion that He came as a result of spiritual worthiness among believers. Clearly the Holy Spirit came in fulfillment of God's plan and not as a result of human orchestration.

While we may wonder how long the powerful sound lasted, we have no doubt about its capacity, because it **filled the whole house**. Everyone heard, and everyone experienced it.

### VERSE 3

**<sup>3</sup> And tongues, like flames of fire that were divided, appeared to them and rested on each one of them.**

In addition to the sudden and powerful sound, **tongues, like flames of fire** settled on the believers. This was a visual representation of the Holy Spirit. *Tongues* represented human speech and the communication of the gospel. *Fire* indicated the purifying presence of God. Long before this event, the Lord had appeared to Moses in a bush that burned with fire yet was not consumed (Ex. 3:2). Later, the Lord guided the Israelites through the wilderness in the form of a pillar of fire at night (13:21). Then, when the Lord confirmed His covenant with Israel on Mount Sinai, He sent fire from heaven (19:18).

The fire associated with God's presence in the Old Testament was reserved for unique occasions, but the image of fire that rested with believers on the Day of Pentecost pointed to the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist testified that Christ would immerse believers with the Holy Spirit and fire (Luke 3:16). Pentecost served as the public fulfillment of that prophecy.

### KEY DOCTRINE: *Holy Spirit*

The Holy Spirit enlightens and empowers the believer and the church in life, worship, evangelism, and service.

### VERSE 4

**<sup>4</sup> Then they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different languages, as the Spirit gave them ability for speech.**



The external manifestations of sound and fire reinforced the inward, transforming power of the Holy Spirit. The statement ***they were all filled*** indicates an intense and total saturation. In other words, the Spirit engulfed the believers to the brim and was ready to overflow. They were thus empowered for the purpose of bearing witness to Jesus in a miraculous way. Consequently, they were able to ***speak in different languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.***

Two important truths can be seen here. First, the power of the Holy Spirit enabled believers to act bravely and to speak boldly. Second, as the context of this passage confirms, their declarations were not ecstatic, unintelligible expressions. Rather, their words were clear and understandable, not just in the Aramaic language but also in the multiple *different languages* and dialects of the hearers.

The believers in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost were engulfed by the Spirit, and the Spirit filled them. Today, every new believer experiences the baptism with the Spirit at the moment of conversion; the Spirit indwells the individual and immerses him or her into the body of Christ. This happens only once. However, when believers falter but then repent and grow in faith by opening their lives more fully to the Holy Spirit's control, they experience the Spirit's filling. This can happen again and again. The apostle Paul urged the believers of Ephesus to continually "be filled by the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18).

***What are the evidences of the Holy Spirit indwelling a believer?***

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**BIBLE SKILL:** *Use multiple Scripture passages to understand a key doctrine.*

The Person and work of the Holy Spirit comprise an essential doctrine of the Christian faith. Review the following passages and identify what they teach about the Holy Spirit: 1 Corinthians 2:10-14; 12:4-11; Ephesians 4:30. How could you use these passages to explain the Holy Spirit's work to someone?

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## THE QUESTIONS ASKED (ACTS 2:5-13)

### VERSES 5-6

**<sup>5</sup> There were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. <sup>6</sup> When this sound occurred, a crowd came together and was confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language.**

There were many thousands of Jews in the first century who lived in Jerusalem on a permanent basis. During major festival times, the city's population swelled as ***devout men from every nation under heaven*** came there to participate in the worship and festivities. The ***sound*** of the Spirit's arrival evidently had been heard by bystanders; it attracted ***a crowd***. If that noise made the people curious, the next sound baffled them. Each person heard the believers ***speaking in his own language***; presumably the message was about Jesus.

### VERSES 7-8

**<sup>7</sup> And they were astounded and amazed, saying, "Look, aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? <sup>8</sup> How is it that each of us can hear in our own native language?"**

The words ***astounded*** and ***amazed*** capture the emotions of the crowd. Some have called this event not just a miracle of speech but also a miracle of hearing. That is, the speakers obviously were ***Galileans***. Typically they could speak in Hebrew or Aramaic, and possibly some could communicate in Greek. Thus, the crowd's first question was about how hearers were able to understand the believers' message in their ***own native language***.

### VERSES 9-10

**<sup>9</sup> Parthians, Medes, Elamites; those who live in Mesopotamia, in Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes,**

Luke listed the various language groups and places represented by people in the crowd. The list of nations proceeds generally from east to west, beginning in the region of modern-day Iran (***•Parthians, •Medes, •Elamites***), then moving to the region of modern-day Iraq (***those who live in •Mesopotamia***), to Israel and modern-day



Turkey (*Judea and •Cappadocia, •Pontus and Asia, •Phrygia and •Pamphylia*), southward across the Mediterranean Sea to the region of North Africa (*Egypt and the parts of Libya near •Cyrene*), then finally farther west to *Rome*, the seat of the empire.

Think about this: In Jerusalem that day were potential converts who, if they believed, could become gospel witnesses “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) simply by returning to their homelands. To this day, the Holy Spirit continues to work in the midst of churches not only to send out missionaries to the nations but also to bring people—students, employees, tourists, refugees—from the nations to the churches, where they can hear the gospel proclaimed.

#### VERSE 11

**11 Cretans and Arabs—we hear them speaking the magnificent acts of God in our own languages.”**

*Cretans and Arabs* may have been among the group of “visitors from Rome” (v. 10). That is, they may have previously moved to the imperial city from the island of Crete (the largest Greek island in the Mediterranean) and the land of Arabia southeast of Judea, then joined the pilgrimage of Jews and proselytes to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. In any case, they added to the many groups hearing about *the magnificent acts of God in their own languages*.

#### VERSE 12

**12 They were all astounded and perplexed, saying to one another, “What could this be?”**

The reaction from some in the crowd was astonishment; others were *perplexed*. They wanted to understand what they were witnessing. When the Holy Spirit empowers believers to tell others about Jesus, it often evokes questions. Some questioners may only be curious, but others may sincerely want to know the truth.

#### VERSE 13

**13 But some sneered and said, “They’re full of new wine!”**

Some people in the crowd *sneered*. These hearers accused the believers of being drunk on *new wine*. Such a response can be instructive for believers today. We should not expect every person to

welcome and appreciate our testimony about Christ. Some will reject the gospel and think of Christians as lunatics.

***When have you seen unbelievers so curious about Jesus that they were stirred to ask questions? What types of things does God use today to lead unbelievers to seek Him and His offer of salvation?***

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## THE OPPORTUNITY SEIZED (ACTS 2:14-15)

### VERSE 14

**<sup>14</sup> But Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice, and proclaimed to them: “Men of Judah and all you residents of Jerusalem, let me explain this to you and pay attention to my words.**

Peter seized the opportunity to explain to the crowd what had happened. His proclamation contained twin imperatives: ***let me explain*** and ***pay attention to my words***. The expression *pay attention* refers to concentrated listening. Peter spoke with conviction and authority about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### VERSE 15

**<sup>15</sup> For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it’s only nine in the morning.”**

Peter showed that the accusation of drunkenness was baseless. At ***nine in the morning***, one of the daily prayer times, no observant Jew would be acting in such a profane way.

Peter took the initiative to witness, and his example stands as motivation for us today. We may face barriers to the gospel, but the Holy Spirit will empower us and use our faithful testimony. What the Spirit did in the early church after Pentecost, He can do today as well.

***What excuses do we sometimes voice about sharing our faith in Jesus? Why do you think we sometimes fail to seize opportunities to witness?***

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## IN MY CONTEXT

Believers are enabled by the Holy Spirit to fulfill their God-given mission. God's demonstration of Himself through believers can cause unbelievers to become curious about God and His power. When placed in situations where unbelievers are asking questions, believers can seize opportunities to share Jesus.

***Reflect on the privilege believers have been given to bear witness for Christ. How does your attitude affect your activity as a witness? Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you any attitudes that need to change and to fill you with power to share the love of Jesus this week.***

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***Review the things your Bible study group does that cause people to be curious about Jesus. In what projects could your group become involved as a means to initiate curious conversations about Jesus? Identify steps the group will take to be more involved or more intentional.***

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***Consider the various means you have at your disposal to be a witness for Jesus. Ask God to show you opportunities to do so. List actions you will take to maximize your witnessing.***

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## MEMORY VERSE

When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth. For He will not speak on His own, but He will speak whatever He hears. He will also declare to you what is to come. —John 16:13



## Session 3

# UNIFIED

The impact of the gospel is seen in the unity found among Jesus' followers.

## ACTS 2:41-47

**<sup>41</sup> So those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about 3,000 people were added to them. <sup>42</sup> And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers. <sup>43</sup> Then fear came over everyone, and many wonders and signs were being performed through the apostles. <sup>44</sup> Now all the believers were together and held all things in common. <sup>45</sup> They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as anyone had a need. <sup>46</sup> Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple complex, and broke bread from house to house. They ate**



their food with a joyful and humble attitude,<sup>47</sup> praising God and having favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to them those who were being saved.

*Identify words or phrases that describe things done by the early church. In what ways do you see these actions being done in your church?*

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*What words or phrases point to attitudes possessed by the members of the early church? How are these attitudes connected to the actions identified earlier?*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

Division within a group can be deadly to its well-being, whether the group is a family, a corporation, a nation, or a church. Division shouldn't be confused with disagreement. Disagreements happen all the time in groups, especially in groups that value freedom and promote the respectful exchange of ideas. Of course, major disagreements that aren't handled properly can contribute to division. But when division occurs, the group—like a body attacked by cancer cells—has come to be at war with itself.

*How would you explain the difference between a division and a disagreement?*

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Abraham Lincoln was chosen by the delegates of the Illinois Republican state convention as their candidate for the United States Senate on June 16, 1858. The nation at the time was torn between slave and free states; whatever position candidates took regarding the

issue of slavery was controversial. Upon his selection, Lincoln delivered his famous “House Divided” speech to the convention delegates. In the speech he referred to the well-known saying of Jesus that a house divided against itself cannot stand (see Mark 3:25). He was warning that the nation would not endure in a divided condition.

Lincoln lost that Senate race, but he went on to be elected two years later not as a senator but as president of the United States. The rest is history. The hallmark of Lincoln’s presidency, and indeed his life, was an unflagging passion to preserve the nation’s union that was based on the ideals of freedom and self-government.

Long before the United States grappled with the idea of national unity, the early church displayed an even greater form of unity—the unity of the Spirit. Luke described in Acts 2:41-47 what this unity looked like in the life and actions of the first believers. As the early church in Jerusalem multiplied in numbers, the believers took steps to strengthen their unity. We can learn much from their actions.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **ACTS 2:41-47**

Acts 2:14-40 is Luke’s record of the “sermon,” or message, that Peter delivered to the crowd in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. Onlookers asked for an explanation of the Holy Spirit’s empowerment of believers to communicate the gospel in languages other than their native tongues. Peter explained that what had happened was nothing less than the divine fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies about the dawning of the new, messianic age. He quoted from the Book of Joel and from two messianic psalms (Pss. 16; 110) and then concluded with a passionate declaration that Jesus—the very One whom the Jews had recently crucified—was both Lord and Messiah.

Peter was filled with the Spirit, but he was also filled with God’s Word. As a result, those who heard his message were compelled to reach a verdict about Jesus in their hearts. Consequently, Peter urged his listeners to repent of their sins and be baptized as a testimony of their surrender to Christ.

The response to Peter’s message was staggering, as 3,000 people became new believers. This burgeoning community of Christ-followers became actively engaged in listening to the apostles teach,



in talking to and encouraging one another, in taking meals together, and in praying together. They demonstrated Christlike love for one another, and they acted with grace toward others in Jerusalem. Furthermore, their example continues to shine across the centuries and to beckon churches today to manifest the mission of Jesus.

***As you reflect on the fellowship that exists in your church, what three words would you use to describe it? What specific examples can you point to that demonstrate this fellowship among the believers?***

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## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**DEVOTED** (ACTS 2:41-42)

### VERSE 41

**<sup>41</sup> So those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about 3,000 people were added to them.**

Can you imagine the addition of 3,000 new believers to your church in one day? The picture that Luke presented about the beginning of the church is beautifully compelling. It was a holy celebration for the Jewish individuals who repented and accepted the message of the gospel. The Greek word translated **accepted** carries the idea of a glad reception. The new believers delightfully embraced the truth about Jesus and then demonstrated their obedience publicly through the act of baptism.

The inward change and the outward rite underscore the proper order and sequence: faith (conversion) first, then obedience (baptism). In other words, these thousands of new believers were not saved by being **baptized**. Rather, they were saved when they repented and believed in Jesus. Their baptism was an act of obedience as believers and a testimony of what had occurred in their hearts.

The bold and revolutionary devotion of 3,000 believers also initiated conflict and controversy. Many of them risked social alienation and expulsion from the synagogue for their public baptism as followers of Jesus Christ. To be baptized in the name of Jesus

indicated a devotion to Him as Messiah and an open acknowledgment of Jesus authority in their lives.

Today many believers around the world take great risk to follow Christ. Their devotion to Christ is greater than their desire for safety and security.

#### VERSE 42

**42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers.**

The fervor and dedication of the first converts set a standard to be followed. The activities that defined their new life together should be continuing priorities for churches today.

The first activity of the believers' devotion involved spiritual growth through **the apostles' teaching**. The believers submitted themselves to godly instruction from the apostles. This instruction was life-transforming truth that Jesus had taught the apostles. It likely included truths such as the nature and work of Christ, His atoning death and victorious resurrection, as well as practical godliness from the Old Testament Scriptures.

A second activity the believers were devoted to was **fellowship**. As a family of faith, the first believers celebrated their shared salvation through Jesus. They practiced a dynamic connection to one another because they were joined by a common faith in the Savior.

Third, the believers practiced the **breaking of bread** together. This could refer either to eating meals together in fellow believers' homes or to partaking of the Lord's Supper in worship. In either case, the practice enhanced the believers' shared life in Christ.

Fourth, the early believers devoted themselves to **the prayers**. Jews were accustomed to regular times of prayer each day. Jewish believers continued this discipline as Christ's followers, but their prayer lives became deeper and richer as they realized they could pray about anything in the name of Jesus (John 14:13-14).

***How does participation in these activities promote unity in a church? Can a church be unified and not focus on these elements? Explain.***

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**BIBLE SKILL:** Do a concept study of the Greek term *koinonia*, rendered “fellowship” in Acts 2:42, by considering other appearances of the term in the New Testament. (English words may differ in translations.)

Find and read the following verses: 1 Corinthians 1:9; 10:16 (*participation*); 2 Corinthians 6:14 (*in common*); 9:13 (*sharing*); Galatians 2:9; Philippians 1:5 (*partnership*); 2:1; 3:10; Hebrews 13:16 (*to share*); 1 John 1:3,6,7. How does each verse help you better understand the nature of the relationship of *koinonia* among believers?

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## TOGETHER (ACTS 2:43-47a)

### VERSE 43

**43 Then fear came over everyone, and many wonders and signs were being performed through the apostles.**

At first glance we may wonder why ***fear came over everyone***. This reaction was not a feeling of dread or doom. Instead, it was a profound sense of awe and reverence about all that the Lord was doing. The Bible instructs us in many places to fear God, because doing so humbles our ego and magnifies His attributes. The word that is translated *fear* in this verse is the same Greek word that was used to describe the reaction to Jesus’ restoring a widow’s son back to life (Luke 7:16). It is a disposition of the heart in response to the awesome power of God.

The believers’ fear was reinforced by ***many wonders and signs*** that God ***performed through the apostles***. The purpose of this miraculous activity was to draw attention to the gospel message and to validate the gospel messengers.

### VERSE 44

**44 Now all the believers were together and held all things in common.**

The words **together** and **in common** offer a delightful portrait of the community of believers. Friendship and cordiality between followers of Jesus is an intense and edifying bond. A solitary follower of Christ who claims he or she doesn't need partnership with other followers is an easy target for Satan, the enemy.

Scripture exhorts us to worship together, to encourage one another, and to love and honor others. These biblical activities are fulfilled in a shared passion for Christ and in a mutual bond with one another. Strong relationships among believers require attention and effort, however, especially in the increasingly high-tech world of digital communication and social media. Virtual reality must not replace authentic, personal togetherness.

#### VERSE 45

**45 They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as anyone had a need.**

The believers living in Jerusalem demonstrated a deep commitment to Jesus that overflowed in mutual support for one another. As needs arose, they **sold their possessions and property** to help other believers. The verb rendered *sold* is in a tense that suggests the believers sold items from time to time. There was no expectation that new believers must immediately relinquish all their possessions upon conversion (as some religious cults in history have practiced). The emphasis in the early church was on compassionate ministry, not asceticism or political socialism. When Christians discovered that someone was facing great need, the grace of Christ moved them to sell items to help relieve the hardship.

Generosity is an attribute of God's grace, and He delights to see it practiced in His church. Numerous surveys throughout modern times have revealed that most churches function with less than 20 percent of the members committed to consistent, proportional giving. Too many church members seem to develop an allergic reaction to calls for generosity. If every believer practiced godly generosity, it would not only advance the spread of the gospel but also enable churches to minister mightily in the name of Jesus to people with desperate needs. Here's a question to ponder: Do you think some believers' discomfort about generosity today is more a problem of insufficient resources or a problem of incorrect priorities?



#### VERSE 46

**<sup>46</sup> Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple complex, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with a joyful and humble attitude,**

**Every day** the believers in Jerusalem met **together in the temple complex**. At this early stage, Christ's followers continued to worship within the structure of their Jewish heritage. They had opportunities in that setting to interact with other Jews and to testify about Jesus. The Greek term rendered *together* refers to more than the proximity of people to one another; it speaks of people being united in spirit and purpose. Believers were united in their faith in Jesus and in their mission of telling others about the gospel.

The early believers' daily practice of worship speaks loudly to today's culture. Many Christians today are drawn to competing interests on Sundays, not to mention on the other days of the week. Leisure, recreation, and convenience tug at the hearts and minds of Christians and non-Christians alike. We must not neglect the feeding of our souls that happens in worship and fellowship with other Christians.

The early Christians' life together also included visits into each other's homes for shared meals. Such occasions were marked by **a joyful and humble attitude** on the part of believers. Their lives were not easy and trouble-free, yet the Spirit filled them with joy and hope.

As believers today, we sometimes think that solemn reverence is more important to the Lord than overt gladness. Certainly there is a time and place for both, but Scripture teaches us that joy is as much an expression of sincere worship as is subdued seriousness. When we reflect on the forgiveness of our sins through Christ and the eternal hope we have because of His resurrection from the dead, there is more than enough reason to be filled with gladness and generosity!

#### VERSE 47a

**<sup>47a</sup> praising God and having favor with all the people.**

Gratitude and good will overflowed in abundance. The believers praised God with energetic gratitude and won the respect of others by their joyful, humble fellowship. A vibrant church shines in two directions: (1) upward in adoration to God for the gift of His Son and (2) outward in grace toward others. Both directions are vital.

***What does a consistent display of sincere adoration to God and grace toward others show about what a church believes about God?***

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### **KEY DOCTRINE: *The Church***

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth.

### **GROWING (ACTS 2:47b)**

#### **VERSE 47b**

***47b And every day the Lord added to them those who were being saved.***

The early church in Jerusalem was a healthy witnessing community. Believers testified about Jesus. They related to and connected with other citizens in the city. The Holy Spirit used their testimony to draw unbelievers to faith, and ***the Lord added*** to the church ***those who were being saved***.

In other words, the early church experienced both qualitative and quantitative growth. Believers grew in their faith, and more people came to place their faith in Jesus as the Messiah. The people being ***added*** to the church were those whom the Lord had saved by grace through faith in Jesus. That is, the new believers weren't being saved by "joining" the church. The church is the community of those who have been saved by faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 4:10-12).

***What does this passage teach about the relationship between church growth and church health? How do they enhance each other?***

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## IN MY CONTEXT

To be spiritually healthy, believers need to be connected to other believers. In churches, believers can do life together, meet others' needs, and worship together. Every believer is to be a witness.

***If a dozen people were randomly selected to observe you every day for one week, how might they evaluate your devotion to Jesus? After studying this session's Bible passage, what do you think needs to improve regarding your devotion to Jesus?***

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***What are you doing to help strengthen unity in your church and Bible study group? Identify some strategies you can apply to sweeten and enhance your relationship with others in your congregation and group.***

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***Reflect on how doing life with other believers helps you share the gospel. What can you do to help motivate other believers to share the gospel?***

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## MEMORY VERSE

Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple complex, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with a joyful and humble attitude. —Acts 2:46



Session

4

# RESURRECTED!

Salvation through faith in the Resurrected Son is the message of the church.

## LUKE 24:1-12

<sup>1</sup> On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they came to the tomb, bringing the spices they had prepared. <sup>2</sup> They found the stone rolled away from the tomb. <sup>3</sup> They went in but did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. <sup>4</sup> While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men stood by them in dazzling clothes. <sup>5</sup> So the women were terrified and bowed down to the ground. “Why are you looking for the living among the dead?” asked the men. <sup>6</sup> “He is not here, but He has been resurrected! Remember how He spoke to you when He was still in Galilee, <sup>7</sup> saying, ‘The Son of Man must be betrayed into the hands of sinful men, be crucified, and rise on



DATE OF MY BIBLE STUDY: \_\_\_\_\_

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the third day?’”<sup>8</sup> And they remembered His words.<sup>9</sup> Returning from the tomb, they reported all these things to the Eleven and to all the rest.<sup>10</sup> Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them were telling the apostles these things.<sup>11</sup> But these words seemed like nonsense to them, and they did not believe the women.<sup>12</sup> Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. When he stooped to look in, he saw only the linen cloths. So he went home, amazed at what had happened.

*Observe the verbs in the passage, noting how each action moves to the next. Consider how each action leads to or is a response to the message of the two angels (“men ... in dazzling clothes”).*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

Great messages carry a profound ability to stimulate change, motivate hope, and define a future. Consider the impact of the following statements delivered by individuals of historical note:

- *Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!*—Patrick Henry, in a 1775 speech calling for Virginians to take up arms in the American colonies’ struggle for independence from Great Britain.
- *We shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, ... in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender!*—Winston Churchill, in a speech to the British House of Commons on June 4, 1940, after the Battle of Dunkirk.
- *I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.*—Martin Luther King, Jr., in a speech on August 28, 1963, from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, calling for racial justice and freedom in America for all of its citizens—black and white, Jew and Gentile, Protestant and Catholic.

***Think about a message you have heard that motivated a change in your actions and attitude. What about the message caused you to respond?***

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Magnificent messages can shape the trajectory of an individual life or, indeed, a nation. There is one message, however, that has the power to change the course of our eternal destiny. It is the message first delivered at a Jerusalem cemetery in the early dawn of a long-ago Sunday morning: He is not here, but is risen! The proclamation of Jesus' resurrection from the dead remains the most powerful, life-changing message in human history. It is the glorious message of the Lord's forgiveness of our sin and victory over death.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **ACTS 2:14-46; LUKE 23:1-24:51**

The cross and the resurrection are inseparable aspects of the saving work of Christ. The cross will always be a stumbling block of offense to those who are perishing (1 Cor. 1:18). It cannot be sanitized or made acceptable to those who oppose Christ. While the cross testifies to the truth of God's redeeming grace, the resurrection testifies to the triumph of God's transforming power. That's why Good Friday must never be isolated from Resurrection Sunday. Jesus died on the cross so that we might be set free from sin. He was raised from the dead so that we might be given new life and bear witness to His power over sin and death.

Peter's message on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-40) represented his deep conviction born out of personal inspection of the empty tomb. Jesus had been wrongly condemned, beaten, and crucified on a hill outside Jerusalem alongside two criminals (Luke 23:1-49). Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish high council but also one who had disapproved of condemning Jesus, received permission to place Jesus' body in a new tomb (23:50-56). On the morning of Jesus' resurrection, several women were the first ones to discover that the stone that sealed the tomb had been rolled away. The tomb was empty, and two angels announced that Jesus had been resurrected (24:1-8).



When the women reported the encounter to the apostles, Peter ran to the tomb to investigate. What he saw corroborated the women's testimony and filled the apostle with amazement (24:9-12). Later, the Risen Lord appeared to other followers, including a pair while they were walking to Emmaus (24:13-35) and then a larger group gathered in Jerusalem (24:36-49). At some later time, Jesus led His disciples to Bethany and from there ascended to heaven (24:50-51).

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### AN EMPTY TOMB (LUKE 24:1-3)

#### VERSE 1

**<sup>1</sup> On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they came to the tomb, bringing the spices they had prepared.**

All four Gospels state that women were the first believers to find the empty tomb on Sunday morning, *the first day of the week* (see also Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:1-2; John 20:1). According to Luke, the female followers of Jesus from Galilee had watched as Joseph of Arimathea [AR ih muh THEE uh] placed the Lord's body in the tomb on the day before the Sabbath (Luke 23:54-55). Following the Sabbath Day, the women were returning to the tomb for the purpose of applying *spices* and oils to the body to limit the odor of decomposition.

#### VERSE 2

**<sup>2</sup> They found the stone rolled away from the tomb.**

First-century burial tombs often were dug into the face of a rock hill. Such a tomb usually featured a large central room which might contain one or more stone benches. Multiple niches were carved into the inner wall. For burial, a corpse was covered with fragrant spices, bound tightly with winding strips of cloth, and then placed into one of the niches. The tomb was then sealed shut by rolling a large, circular stone over the entrance.

The women plodded to Jesus' burial place through the gloomy light of dawn. To their surprise and dismay, they found that the huge stone had been *rolled away from the tomb* entrance. On one hand, this would have been a welcome surprise; before their arrival the

women had puzzled over how they would move the stone in order to attend to the body (Mark 16:3). On the other hand, the open tomb was a troubling sight; it suggested that someone might have secretly moved the body (Matt. 28:12-15; John 20:15).

### VERSE 3

**<sup>3</sup> They went in but did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.**

The stone that sealed Jesus' burial site had not been rolled away so that Jesus could escape. The Risen Lord was not bound—either by burial wrappings or a solid rock tomb! Instead, the stone had been rolled away so that His followers could walk in and bear witness that the tomb was empty. They ***did not find the body of the Lord Jesus***, because death couldn't hold Him. He was alive!

***How does the empty tomb serve as a testimony of Jesus' identity? How can you use the fact of the empty tomb to witness to the lost today?***

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### **BIBLE SKILL: Use Scripture to understand the meaning of an event.**

Read Peter's sermon in Acts 2:14-36. Look for how Peter interpreted the events of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. Underline words or phrases Peter used to describe Jesus. Read the passage aloud, emphasizing phrases that point to Jesus' resurrection. Record insights you gained by reading Peter's sermon aloud.

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### **FULL DISCLOSURE** (LUKE 24:4-8)

### VERSE 4

**<sup>4</sup> While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men stood by them in dazzling clothes.**



The body of Jesus was not in the tomb, and the women thus far had no explanation for the disappearance. What was beyond their human ability to comprehend required divine revelation to explain. The **two men** who suddenly **stood by them in dazzling clothes** were angels. While the other Gospel writers highlighted different details, all of them described the essential truth about this angelic visitation. The angels' gleaming attire against the backdrop of a dark tomb provided a stunning contrast.

#### VERSE 5

**<sup>5</sup> So the women were terrified and bowed down to the ground. “Why are you looking for the living among the dead?” asked the men.**

In Scripture, angelic appearances understandably evoked fear in people—at least initially. The women at the tomb **were terrified**. Their fear quickly became mixed with reverential awe as they **bowed down** in the presence of the two divine messengers as a sign of respect and in recognition of their heavenly purpose.

The angels gently rebuked the women by asking why they were seeking **the living among the dead**. Jesus had predicted to His followers more than once that He would suffer, be crucified, and then be raised from the dead on the third day (Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23; Luke 18:31-33). The women knew that the suffering and crucifixion had occurred just as Jesus predicted. Did they not expect the resurrection to occur also?

To this day, critics try to explain away the truth behind the empty tomb. They contend that Jesus didn't really die on the cross but only lost consciousness, which He then regained once He was placed in the cool tomb. However, such flawed thinking refuses to consider the strong evidence of the brutal flogging Jesus endured, the fatal torture of Roman crucifixion, and the bloodletting after a soldier pierced Jesus' side with a spear.

#### VERSE 6

**<sup>6</sup> “He is not here, but He has been resurrected! Remember how He spoke to you when He was still in Galilee,**

The empty tomb was the result of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. The angels declared that Jesus had **been resurrected**. They challenged

the women to recall what Jesus had taught about the resurrection while they were in Galilee.

#### VERSES 7-8

**<sup>7</sup> saying, “The Son of Man must be betrayed into the hands of sinful men, be crucified, and rise on the third day?” <sup>8</sup> And they remembered His words.**

The angels used the messianic title *Son of Man* to refer to Jesus. This title was Jesus’ usual way of referring to Himself in conversation with others. In addition, the angels indicated a divine necessity in the word **must**. That is, the betrayal, condemnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus comprised a series of necessary events in God’s plan of salvation. This requirement often may feel beyond our ability to fully understand. Indeed, God says to us through Isaiah the prophet: “For as heaven is higher than earth, so My ways are higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:9). Accordingly, we stand on the gospel by trusting in the Lord.

The resurrection of Jesus is definitive proof that God vindicated the sacrifice of His sinless Son. It is also the central message of gospel preaching and God’s exclamation mark upon His plan of salvation.

Although the women had come to the tomb to attend to a corpse, the angels’ announcement prodded them to recall Jesus’ prediction about His resurrection. They **remembered His words**. Remembering the truth about Jesus is vital to our faith and spiritual growth.

***How can times of uncertainty become opportunities for remembering truths from Scripture about Jesus? How can a time of uncertainty in another person’s life be an opportunity for you to share Jesus with them?***

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#### **KEY DOCTRINE: *Salvation***

Salvation involves the redemption of the whole man, and is offered freely to all who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, who by His own blood obtained eternal redemption for the believer.



## COMPLETE AMAZEMENT (LUKE 24:9-12)

### VERSE 9

**<sup>9</sup> Returning from the tomb, they reported all these things to the Eleven and to all the rest.**

Imagine the women's elation as they left the tomb to report their experience **to the Eleven and to all the rest** of Christ's followers! Not only were the women the first witnesses of the empty tomb, they became the first to testify about the good news of the resurrection to others. The term rendered **reported** denotes the activity of a messenger in proclaiming a vital message from a reliable sender.

### VERSE 10

**<sup>10</sup> Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them were telling the apostles these things.**

Who were the women who found the tomb empty and heard the announcement from the heavenly messengers? Luke identified three of them by name.

**Mary Magdalene** [MAG duh leen] was the one member of the women's group specifically identified by all the Gospel writers (see Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:1; John 20:1). According to Luke 8:2, Jesus had driven out seven demons from Mary, and she had been faithfully devoted to Jesus ever since. She was an eyewitness to Jesus' death on the cross (Matt. 27:56) and was one of the first followers—if not the first—to have a face-to-face encounter with the Risen Lord Jesus (John 20:11-18).

**Joanna** was identified in Luke 8:3 as "the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward." Luke further described her as one of many Galilean followers who provided monetary and material support to Jesus during His ministry. She is an example of how Jesus drew followers from different social strata and from all walks of life. Thus, she is proof that the gospel spills over all barriers that divide humans.

**Mary the mother of James** probably was the same woman identified in Mark 15:40 as the mother of "James the younger" (possibly the apostle called "James the son of Alphaeus" in Acts 1:13). Like Mary Magdalene and Joanna, Mary the mother of James was a follower from Galilee who was present at Jesus' crucifixion and bore witness to His resurrection.

In addition to these three, there were **other women** in the group as well who could substantiate the empty tomb and the angels' message that Jesus was alive. Still, the women had to keep explaining to the apostles what they had seen and heard. The information they shared seemed too improbable for the men to accept.

#### VERSE 11

**<sup>11</sup> But these words seemed like nonsense to them, and they did not believe the women.**

The women's testimony was initially met with disbelief. The apostles considered their account **nonsense**. The Greek term rendered *nonsense* was used to describe the delirious rambling of a sick person. Thus, consider this situation: Jesus' own apostles at first could not embrace the reality of His resurrection. They were either unable to process the miracle or unwilling to allow themselves to believe it, in spite of the fact that they had heard Jesus teach it and promise it (Luke 18:33).

#### VERSE 12

**<sup>12</sup> Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. When he stooped to look in, he saw only the linen cloths. So he went home, amazed at what had happened.**

One way to overcome skepticism and unbelief is to examine the evidence and verify the facts. Consequently, Peter decided to go to the tomb and investigate the details of the women's testimony. John evidently went with Peter when he **ran to the tomb** (John 20:3).

Peter knew from experience that Jesus could be trusted. No doubt the flame of faith still burned, despite the winds of doubt that howled inside Peter's mind. Yet Peter was willing to subject his doubts to the evidence before him. When Peter looked inside, he saw **only the linen cloths** that had wrapped the lifeless body of Jesus. When Peter left the tomb to return home, he was **amazed at what had happened**.

***Describe how the empty tomb changed the lives of the people present that Sunday. How are these changes seen in the lives of people who trust Jesus today?***

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## IN MY CONTEXT

We can have confidence that Jesus is resurrected from the grave, securing our salvation. Believers should respond to the resurrection with awe and amazement. Believers must share what they have discovered about the empty tomb.

***Evaluate your level of confidence that Jesus was raised from the dead. What factors increase that confidence? What factors cause doubts? Record a prayer, asking God to help you have a greater confidence in the truth of the resurrection.***

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***What evidence can you point to in your life that demonstrates the resurrection of Jesus has changed you? How can you celebrate those changes? Record steps you will take to celebrate the power of Jesus' resurrection.***

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***With your Bible study group, create a list of essential truths that a person must understand in order to confess Jesus as Savior. Refer to the information on the inside front cover for assistance. Commit as a group to share these truths with at least one person in the next week.***

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## MEMORY VERSE

God has resurrected this Jesus. We are all witnesses of this.  
—Acts 2:32



## Session 5

# COURAGEOUS

The Spirit gives believers courage to proclaim the truth.

## ACTS 4:1-13

<sup>1</sup> Now as they were speaking to the people, the priests, the commander of the temple police, and the Sadducees confronted them, <sup>2</sup> because they were provoked that they were teaching the people and proclaiming the resurrection from the dead, using Jesus as the example. <sup>3</sup> So they seized them and put them in custody until the next day, since it was already evening. <sup>4</sup> But many of those who heard the message believed, and the number of the men came to about 5,000. <sup>5</sup> The next day, their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem <sup>6</sup> with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John and Alexander, and all the members of the high-



priestly family. <sup>7</sup> After they had Peter and John stand before them, they asked the question: “By what power or in what name have you done this?” <sup>8</sup> Then Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit and said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders: <sup>9</sup> If we are being examined today about a good deed done to a disabled man—by what means he was healed— <sup>10</sup> let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—whom you crucified and whom God raised from the dead—by Him this man is standing here before you healthy. <sup>11</sup> This Jesus is the stone rejected by you builders, which has become the cornerstone.

<sup>12</sup> There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people, and we must be saved by it.” <sup>13</sup> When they observed the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed and recognized that they had been with Jesus.

*List the different groups with whom Peter and John came into contact in this passage. Which conversations do you think required the most courage, and why?*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

Countless acts of bravery have occurred in the course of human history. Some have been recorded and acknowledged with medals, statues, or other forms of recognition. At the top of my list of courageous individuals is Jesus Christ. The pain of Jesus’ death was beyond compare. Jesus willingly surrendered Himself as the sinless Son of God and became sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). No greater price was ever paid or could be paid by another person.

*What motivates people to accomplish acts of bravery? What were Jesus’ motivations in sacrificing Himself for our sins?*

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At the same time Jesus demonstrated supreme courage in suffering, His disciples fell away in fear for their lives. Even Peter, who had pledged to stand courageous with Jesus, denied the Lord three times. But Jesus' resurrection changed everything. The Risen Christ, through the indwelling Holy Spirit, provided believers spiritual power and courage they had never known before. They would need this power and courage as they faced persecution for Jesus' sake.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **ACTS 3:1–4:31**

Peter and John demonstrated spiritual courage by healing a crippled man in Jesus' name at one of the temple gates (3:1-10). The healing stirred a lot of astonishment among the people. Peter seized the opportunity to explain that the source of the power for the miracle was the Risen Christ. Moreover, Peter challenged the crowd to repent of their sins and place their faith in Jesus (3:11-26).

The boldness of Peter and John in publicly proclaiming the gospel put them in direct conflict with the temple authorities. The two were arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin for questioning (4:1-12). The council threatened Peter and John against continuing to preach in Jesus' name, but Peter courageously answered that their testimony about Jesus was a matter of being obedient to God. Unable to find a way to punish the two apostles, the council released them with additional threats (4:13-22).

Peter and John returned to the congregation of believers and reported to them all that had happened. The congregation immediately entered into a time of prayer. They praised God as the Sovereign Creator, and they asked God to give them boldness to continue proclaiming the gospel and ministering in Jesus' name even in the face of threats. The Lord responded to their prayers by shaking the place with His presence and by filling all of those in the assembly with the Holy Spirit (4:23-31).

### **KEY DOCTRINE: *Salvation***

There is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.



# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## THE CHALLENGE (ACTS 4:1-7)

### VERSE 1

**<sup>1</sup> Now as they were speaking to the people, the priests, the commander of the temple police, and the Sadducees confronted them,**

The amazing healing of a man who had been lame from birth drew a crowd to the temple area known as Solomon's Colonnade (3:11). Consequently, Peter stepped forward to explain the miracle as proof that God's kingdom had arrived in the form of Jesus the Messiah (3:19-20). Many in the crowd were captivated by the miracle and listened intently as Peter spoke.

However, some in the crowd took offense. ***The priests, ... the temple police, and the •Sadducees*** (see p. 6) confronted the two apostles. These groups controlled—and benefited from—everything that went on at the temple. Only authorized *priests* could offer the sacrifices and conduct worship. The ***commander*** of the temple guard was responsible for security. The *Sadducees* came mainly from aristocratic Jewish families who had made deals with the Roman authorities to gain control over the priesthood and temple activities.

### VERSE 2

**<sup>2</sup> because they were provoked that they were teaching the people and proclaiming the resurrection from the dead, using Jesus as the example.**

What ***provoked*** the temple authorities was not the lame man's being healed or the crowd's praise to God for the miracle. Instead, they reacted with hostility because the two apostles were ***proclaiming the resurrection from the dead, using Jesus as the example***. The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection (Matt. 22:23; Acts 23:8). Furthermore, they had conspired with the Pharisees and others in the Sanhedrin to have Jesus crucified (John 11:47-53). Now, here were two Galilean fishermen not only proclaiming to a temple crowd that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah promised by the Old Testament prophets but also the Resurrected Lord whom God's people were to welcome by repenting and believing in Him.

### VERSE 3

**<sup>3</sup> So they seized them and put them in custody until the next day, since it was already evening.**

The temple guards arrested Peter and John and held them *in custody* until they could be interrogated. The Sanhedrin had authority to punish temple violators, but official meetings of the council ordinarily did not take place after sunset.

### VERSE 4

**<sup>4</sup> But many of those who heard the message believed, and the number of the men came to about 5,000.**

The arrest of the messengers did not (and could not) silence the message. Opposition to the gospel may slow its spread, but it cannot stop it. Many in the temple crowd not only *heard the message* but also *believed* in Jesus as the Messiah. Whether the number **5,000** represented a new total of all believers in Jerusalem or the number of converts that day is unclear. Either way, the number indicates that the transforming power of Jesus was spreading like a wildfire.

### VERSES 5-7

**<sup>5</sup> The next day, their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem <sup>6</sup> with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John and Alexander, and all the members of the high-priestly family. <sup>7</sup> After they had Peter and John stand before them, they asked the question: “By what power or in what name have you done this?”**

The Sanhedrin consisted of seventy-one members, featuring *rulers* (tribal leaders), *elders*, and *scribes*, as well as Pharisees and Sadducees (temple authorities). The council was presided over by *the high priest*, who at this time was the same father-in-law/son-in-law duo (*Annas* and *Caiaphas*) that had presided over the condemnation of Jesus (John 18:13,19-24). The identities of *John* and *Alexander* are unclear, although they likely were part of the priestly aristocracy—perhaps two of the more prominent *members of the high-priestly family*.

The Sanhedrin sat in a semi-circle during its meetings; thus, Peter and John had to *stand before them*, enduring the intense pressure of a largely hostile group. The central question from the Sanhedrin concerned the authority and power of the apostles' activity.



**What modern-day comparisons could be made to what Peter and John faced? What role do you think intimidation played in this inquiry?**

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## **THE ANSWER** (ACTS 4:8-12)

### **VERSE 8**

**<sup>8</sup> Then Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit and said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders:**

Once again Peter experienced the filling of *the Holy Spirit*. Perhaps at this precise moment he recalled Jesus’ promise that the Spirit would provide His apostles with courage and the words to speak when they were dragged in front of hostile courts (Matt. 10:16-20). Indeed, Peter was respectful toward the council as he began to answer the question concerning the apostles’ source of authority.

### **VERSE 9**

**<sup>9</sup> If we are being examined today about a good deed done to a disabled man—by what means he was healed—**

Peter began his defense by reminding the council of the event that had ignited everything that followed, including his and John’s arrest and appearance before the Sanhedrin: *a good deed done to a disabled man*. Peter first wanted the council to think about the benefit of that miracle not only for the healed man but also for the entire Jewish community. Healing was always a blessing from God.

Peter would have more to say on the question of *by what means* the man *was healed*. The word translated *was healed* could also be understood as “was saved.” Thus, Peter established a basis to speak of both physical restoration and spiritual redemption. The source of either blessing, however, was not Peter but the Lord.

### **VERSE 10**

**<sup>10</sup> let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—whom you crucified and whom God raised from the dead—by Him this man is standing here before you healthy.**

The words **let it be known** are emphatic. Peter was filled with boldness as he stated that what he was about to profess concerned not only the council but indeed **all the people of Israel**. With all eyes riveted on him, Peter declared that the power of **the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene** had made the lame man whole again.

Can you imagine the blanket of tension created in that room by Peter's statement? It likely became ten times heavier as Peter looked squarely into the eyes of those who had condemned Jesus and added: **whom you crucified and whom God raised from the dead**. Peter intended for everyone to hear that the man's healing was irrefutable proof Jesus Christ was both Savior and Risen Lord.

Believers today can find in Peter's testimony a model of bold witnessing. First, Peter spoke out of his personal experience. He could talk so openly because he knew Jesus so intimately. Second, Peter pointed exclusively to Jesus as the Savior. There was (and is) no other name by which a person can be saved (Acts 4:12). No longer was Peter afraid to profess the name of Jesus.

#### VERSE 11

**<sup>11</sup> This Jesus is the stone rejected by you builders, which has become the cornerstone.**

Going still further in his defense, Peter quoted Psalm 118:22 as a prophecy that was fulfilled in Jesus. While members of the council interpreted this text in terms of the nation of Israel, Peter explained that Jesus was **the stone** that had been **rejected** by the religious leaders of God's people (**you builders**). Jesus had not fit their expectations of the Messiah, so they rejected Him. In doing so, however, they rejected the very One whom God had sent to be **the cornerstone**. The *cornerstone* was the most essential stone in a building, because it was the standard that ensured the entire structure was secure, straight, and level.

The application of this Old Testament text to Jesus was unmistakable. First, Jesus had been sent by God, the Chief Architect and Builder. Second, the religious authorities had sinned in their rejection of Jesus. Third, their action in crucifying Jesus had been reversed by God, who resurrected Him. Fourth, Jesus became *the cornerstone* of a new, living sanctuary—all who by faith in Jesus are being built together for God's dwelling (Eph. 2:17-22).



**VERSE 12**

**12 There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people, and we must be saved by it.”**

Peter’s defense concluded with a dramatic assertion. **Salvation** is available only through Jesus. His sinless life, atoning death, and victorious resurrection bridged the gulf created by mankind’s sin so that we could be made right with God. Moreover, the phrase **no other name under heaven** reinforces the solitary means of God’s redeeming purpose. In God’s one and only Son rests our one and only hope of forgiveness and eternal life.

In today’s politically correct culture, the exclusive claim of the gospel is often met with censure—much like the opposition it provoked in New Testament times. Many adults today embrace religious pluralism and dismiss the claim of salvation in Jesus alone. Furthermore, some critics of the gospel argue that the New Testament message of salvation in Jesus marginalizes those who reject it. To the contrary, God’s way of salvation invites everyone who wants abundant life to receive it by faith in Jesus. His way is open to all, but not everyone accepts the invitation.

***Which phrase in Peter’s defense do you think carried the most weight? Explain. Do you believe that same phrase is as persuasive today as it was in the first century? Why or why not?***

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**BIBLE SKILL: Memorize a verse and consider its practical implications.**

Memorize Acts 4:12 in a preferred translation. Paraphrase the verse in your own words. Record three reasons why Jesus is the only way of salvation. Record two commonly held cultural beliefs the verse challenges. How does the belief that Christ alone can save impact your view of missions?

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## THE RECOGNITION (ACTS 4:13)

### VERSE 13

**13 When they observed the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed and recognized that they had been with Jesus.**

There was a quality about Peter and John that could not be denied. Notice the verbs **observed**, **realized**, **amazed**, and **recognized**. The members of the Sanhedrin looked at Peter and John carefully. They *observed* the apostles' boldness and candor. They watched as Peter spoke openly and without fear. The Sanhedrin also *realized* that Peter and John were not trained teachers or scribes; rather, they were common men of the day, **uneducated and untrained**. Yet their lack of formal training seemed to be contradicted by a bold wisdom and understanding of Scripture that could not be denied.

The religious leaders thus *were amazed* at what they saw and heard concerning Peter and John. This verb conveys the idea of surprising wonder. The Sanhedrin literally wondered at the news about Jesus, and they were amazed by the persuasive testimony of these untrained fishermen. Most significantly, the members of the council realized that Peter and John **had been with Jesus**. They had been companions of Jesus during His ministry.

Only a few weeks before, Peter and John had been frightened and bewildered men. Now they were poised, articulate, and courageous proclaimers of the gospel. What accounted for the dramatic transformation in these men? The same power that had given strength to the legs of a man lame from birth also gave courage and words to these two apostles. Likewise, men and women today who have been transformed by faith in the Living Christ are empowered to bear witness to His grace and power. Such amazing change may prompt others to ask believers, "In whose name do you do this?"

***What role did Peter and John's perceived weakness play in their being effective witnesses for Jesus? How can God use our perceived weaknesses to bring honor to Himself?***

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## IN MY CONTEXT

Believers can expect to be challenged by others who do not accept Jesus and His teachings. Believers can depend on the Holy Spirit to provide them courage and words when challenged. Only through faith in Jesus can a person experience salvation. When asked to give an account for our actions, believers must be careful to give God the honor.

***Reflect on how the Holy Spirit provides courage to witness even when facing a potentially hostile group or individual. Identify actions you can take that help you depend on the Holy Spirit. Which of these actions do you need to establish in your personal walk with Christ?***

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***Identify a work associate or neighbor who knows that you follow Christ. How can you use that person's interest in your way of life to talk to them about salvation? When could you share Jesus with them?***

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***Tell others in your Bible study group about recent opportunities you have had to talk with individuals about Jesus. Discuss how sharing these testimonies with one another is an encouragement. Spend time thanking the Lord for allowing you to be His witness.***

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## MEMORY VERSE

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people, and we must be saved by it. —Acts 4:12

## Session 6

# INTEGRITY

Believers are to take sin within the church seriously.

## ACTS 4:36-37; 5:1-11

<sup>36</sup> Joseph, a Levite and a Cypriot by birth, the one the apostles called Barnabas, which is translated Son of Encouragement, <sup>37</sup> sold a field he owned, brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet. <sup>5:1</sup> But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property. <sup>2</sup> However, he kept back part of the proceeds with his wife's knowledge, and brought a portion of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. <sup>3</sup> Then Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the proceeds from the field? <sup>4</sup> Wasn't it yours while you possessed it? And after it was sold, wasn't it at your disposal? Why is it that you



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planned this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God!”<sup>5</sup> When he heard these words, Ananias dropped dead, and a great fear came on all who heard.<sup>6</sup> The young men got up, wrapped his body, carried him out, and buried him.<sup>7</sup> There was an interval of about three hours; then his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.<sup>8</sup> “Tell me,” Peter asked her, “did you sell the field for this price?” “Yes,” she said, “for that price.”<sup>9</sup> Then Peter said to her, “Why did you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out!”<sup>10</sup> Instantly she dropped dead at his feet. When the young men came in, they found her dead, carried her out, and buried her beside her husband.<sup>11</sup> Then great fear came on the whole church and on all who heard these things.

*Compare and contrast the action words that describe Joseph’s giving and the actions words that describe Ananias and Sapphira’s giving. What phrases reveal how important believers’ integrity is to God?*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

Jesus designed His church to be a group of people focused on obeying Him and striving to fulfill His mission. However, the church is not an assembly of perfect saints. Sincere believers sometimes fail to practice the virtues they have committed to uphold. Indeed, one mark of a maturing follower of Christ is the believer’s keen awareness of the ongoing spiritual battle with the world, the flesh, and the Devil. Still, the passionate believer maintains a relentless desire to honor Christ in all the details of his or her life.

The church must always be ready to confront, seek the repentance of, and restore those believers who fall into sin. The church must never ignore or casually endorse deceitful, reprehensible behavior. Actions that damage the integrity of a congregation must be addressed. To ignore or condone sins is to allow a spiritual cancer to grow that can eventually corrupt the well-being of the entire congregation.

***Do you think people who claim to be Christians but poorly reflect Christ should be confronted? Explain.***

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## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **ACTS 4:32–5:16**

External opposition to the early church was a real and ongoing danger (4:3,17). Those who had opposed Jesus and cried the loudest for His crucifixion simply transferred their hostility onto Christ's followers. Yet Satan, the church's number one enemy, also found new ways to attack Christ's followers. He attacked on the inside.

External opposition did not deter the early church's growth, either numerically or spiritually. The number of believers reached at least 5,000 men, even as Peter and John were arrested, interrogated, and threatened by the Jewish high council (4:1-22). Indeed, as a response to these first acts of persecution, the early church became more passionate in their praying (4:23-31) and more devoted to one another in their fellowship and ministry (4:32-37).

It was at this point that Satan stirred turmoil internally in the church by tempting Ananias and Sapphira, two professing believers who were husband and wife, to lie to God concerning their giving. God exposed the couple's deceit, however, and they died (5:1-11). This event and many other miraculous happenings resulted in hosts of new believers being added to the church (5:12-16).

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### **EXHIBIT A: BARNABAS** (ACTS 4:36-37)

#### **VERSES 36-37**

**<sup>36</sup> Joseph, a Levite and a Cypriot by birth, the one the apostles called Barnabas, which is translated Son of Encouragement, <sup>37</sup> sold a field he owned, brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.**



When God works mightily in a community of believers, He takes delight in their unity and fellowship. One way that godly fellowship becomes evident in a group is when believers show constant concern and generosity for one another (Acts 4:32-35). Luke emphasized the early church's experience of fellowship by highlighting one man who was a prime example of glad generosity (4:36-37) and one married couple who through deceit and pretense became a prime example of insincere fellowship (5:1-11).

Luke's prime example of sincere fellowship—an example to follow—was a believer named **Joseph**. Joseph was **a •Cypriot** (see p. 6) **by birth**, meaning that he was born on the island of Cyprus (located in the eastern Mediterranean Sea south of modern-day Turkey). He also was **a Levite**, indicating that his family heritage was from the Israelite tribe that became closely connected to temple life. How long Joseph had lived in Jerusalem is unclear; what is clear is that he was a landowner and had become a follower of Christ. He was intimately involved in the life of the early church in Jerusalem.

Another key fact Luke included here is that Joseph was **the one the apostles called Barnabas, which is translated Son of Encouragement**. Indeed, Barnabas would become a key leader in the Jerusalem church and would play a significant role in the spread of the gospel (11:22-26; 13:2-3; 15:2-3). In addition to his generosity and encouragement, Barnabas constantly displayed a profound faith that was willing to take risks in order to advance the mission of Christ.

Barnabas served as Luke's "Exhibit A" for exemplary service in the cause of Christ. He was filled with the Holy Spirit and maintained a supreme focus on the glory of God and the building up of the church. In a providential way, we have Barnabas to thank in part for a huge portion of the New Testament. He obeyed the Lord and befriended a new believer—the former persecutor of Christians—named Saul of Tarsus (Paul), whom God used to write many of the New Testament epistles. Barnabas defended Paul when others were suspicious of this former antagonist. Barnabas labored to advance the message of Jesus as a faithful team player.

The sincerity Barnabas displayed throughout his ministry was demonstrated early on when he **sold a field he owned, brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet**. The context reveals that Barnabas's motive behind his action was to provide additional funds

for the church's ministry to needy believers (4:34-35). Barnabas's integrity and generosity were twin virtues that blessed other believers and energized their devotion.

How can believers today practice similar generosity with integrity? It starts by recognizing the principle of divine ownership. God owns everything, including us. We are recipients of His extravagant grace. Our generosity is but a small reflection of God's majestic generosity, demonstrated most vividly in Jesus' death on the cross for our sins. As believers, we practice generosity with integrity when we open our hearts and hands and surrender to God all that we are and have.

***How would you describe the relationship between generosity and encouragement? Can one be done without the other? Explain.***

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### **KEY DOCTRINE: Stewardship**

God is the source of all blessings, temporal and spiritual; all that we have and are we owe to Him.

### **EXHIBIT B: ANANIAS (ACTS 5:1-6)**

#### **VERSE 1**

**<sup>1</sup> But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property.**

Luke's example of insincere fellowship—an example to avoid—was focused on a married couple, ***a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira***. In contrast to the description of Joseph (Barnabas), Luke gave no biographical details concerning these two. The name *Ananias* means “God is gracious.” *Sapphira* refers to the typically blue gemstone known as sapphire; accordingly, the name means “beautiful.” There is a touch of irony in the meanings of these two names, especially considering the ungracious and ugly nature of the couple's act of deceit when they, like Barnabas, ***sold a piece of property***.



## VERSE 2

**<sup>2</sup> However, he kept back part of the proceeds with his wife’s knowledge, and brought a portion of it and laid it at the apostles’ feet.**

Ananias and Sapphira made a seemingly generous donation. The problem lay in their deception and manipulation. They publicly pretended to give the whole amount but secretly **kept back part of the proceeds**. The verb rendered *kept back* refers to embezzlement and fraud. A parallel Hebrew word appears in the Old Testament account of Achan taking treasures from the conquered city of Jericho that were to be devoted completely to God (Josh. 7:1).

Ananias and Sapphira acted hypocritically. They were self-serving instead of Christ-serving. They misrepresented their Lord and acted dishonestly toward the community of believers.

## VERSE 3

**<sup>3</sup> Then Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the proceeds from the field?”**

How did Peter discern the hidden problem? Could he detect the presence of guilt in the man’s demeanor? The text doesn’t reveal a clear answer, but based on the apostle’s question, I believe the Holy Spirit gave Peter a profound revelation of insight.

Notice that Peter didn’t begin with a word of condemnation. Rather, he began with a question: **Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the proceeds?** The question gave Ananias an opportunity to confess his wrongdoing—which was no longer secret—and to repent.

Bible students have debated whether or not Ananias and Sapphira were genuine believers. Presumably they were part of the “large group of those who believed” mentioned in Acts 4:32. In any case, Satan is a shrewd adversary who through temptation is certainly capable of leading weak believers into committing acts of treachery and sin.

## VERSE 4

**<sup>4</sup> Wasn’t it yours while you possessed it? And after it was sold, wasn’t it at your disposal? Why is it that you planned this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God!”**

Peter continued to pepper Ananias with questions designed to solicit repentance. The first two questions in verse 4 were rhetorical; the assumed answer to both was yes. However, these two questions also reveal that neither Peter nor the congregation had made mandatory the selling of property. God delights in cheerful givers who display generosity as an act of loving fellowship (2 Cor. 9:7).

Peter's final question revealed the root problem. Ananias's sordid scheme was premeditated. The verb **planned** emphasizes purposeful forethought. Ananias became so consumed by a desire for recognition that he justified to himself and to his wife an unholy plan.

#### VERSE 5

**<sup>5</sup> When he heard these words, Ananias dropped dead, and a great fear came on all who heard.**

The truth seized Ananias, and he **dropped dead**. Luke said nothing about the physical cause of Ananias's sudden death. It wasn't necessary to explain the medical symptoms. The primary point was that the believing community (**all who heard**) understood the man's death to be an act of divine judgment.

God takes sin in His church seriously. Sin is visible before God, even if it is hidden from others. As a result of Ananias's death, **great fear** settled on all the believers. Everyone gained a deeper understanding of God's holiness and a reverent fear about the consequences of sin. A reverent, healthy fear of God is taught throughout Scripture. Psalm 111:10 teaches that "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom."

**BIBLE SKILL:** *Learn more about a key phrase in the Bible by studying other verses where it is found.*

Read these verses, looking for the phrase "the fear of the Lord":  
2 Chronicles 19:7,9; Job 28:28; Psalms 19:9; 111:10; Proverbs 1:7; 8:13; 10:27; 14:26-27; 15:16; 16:6; 22:4; 23:17; Acts 9:31; 2 Corinthians 5:11. Establish a definition for this phrase based on the verses you read.

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## VERSE 6

**<sup>6</sup> The young men got up, wrapped his body, carried him out, and buried him.**

The Jerusalem believers often assembled in an open area of the temple complex. Was this where the confrontation and death of Ananias took place? Luke didn't say. The brevity of Luke's description was meant to keep the focus on God's expectation of sincerity and purity in the church fellowship. Nevertheless, some **young men** compassionately tended to the details of burying Ananias, indicating it had been a public death observed by witnesses.

***What are other ways that Satan leads Christians to commit acts that can harm the local church? How should the church respond to the conduct of willfully disobedient believers?***

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## EXHIBIT C: SAPPHIRA (ACTS 5:7-11)

### VERSES 7-8

**<sup>7</sup> There was an interval of about three hours; then his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. <sup>8</sup> "Tell me," Peter asked her, "did you sell the field for this price?" "Yes," she said, "for that price."**

Sapphira remained in the dark concerning her husband's death for **about three hours**. When she **came in** to the place where Peter and the others were, she was unaware of **what had happened**. With this detail, Luke wanted his readers to know that Sapphira would have the same opportunity to confess and repent as her husband had. Sadly, her terse replies to Peter's questions revealed she had been a willing accomplice in her husband's deceitful scheme.

### VERSE 9

**<sup>9</sup> Then Peter said to her, "Why did you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out!"**

As he had done with Ananias, Peter confronted Sapphira with the underlying sin of their action. By agreeing to lie to the church about

their donation, the couple effectively had conspired to **test the Spirit of the Lord**. Their actions were reminiscent of the ancient Israelites' blatant distrust of God in the wilderness—a distrust that usually brought on God's swift and severe discipline. A similar divine discipline was now occurring in the early church.

#### VERSE 10

**10 Instantly she dropped dead at his feet. When the young men came in, they found her dead, carried her out, and buried her beside her husband.**

God's judgment upon Sapphira happened **instantly** as she too **dropped dead** at Peter's feet. Although we cannot assume that all sickness and death are direct consequences of people's specific sins, God can and does exercise temporal judgments when He decides the occasions warrant them. His temporal punishments of believers, however, do not signify eternal damnation.

Some critics have objected to the severity of God's judgment on Ananias and Sapphira. The critics' objection, however, lacks a biblical understanding of God's righteousness. If God had ignored the couple's treachery in the early community of believers, He would have violated His own character. Only a judgment so drastically opposed to sin could reveal a purity so compelling for the infant church.

#### VERSE 11

**11 Then great fear came on the whole church and on all who heard these things.**

Once again **great fear** permeated the Jerusalem congregation. The believers realized in a fresh way that they were accountable to God for their actions and motives. Here is the first time the word **church** appears in the Book of Acts. The term denotes people who are called out by Christ to live for Him and to testify about His saving grace.

***How do you think non-Christians in Jerusalem viewed the early church? Do you think the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira helped or hurt the early church in their community? Explain.***

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## IN MY CONTEXT

Believers encourage others through their genuine acts of obedience and sacrifice. Believers must examine their motives for giving, realizing that not all motives are honorable. Believers are held accountable by God for their actions and motives.

***Discuss with the group ways they prefer to be encouraged. Include in the discussion how telling about acts of generosity can serve as motivation. Be prepared to tell about when someone's generosity was an encouragement to you.***

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***Select a day to record the main actions you take during each hour of the day. Evaluate your motives behind each recorded action, marking any that you take with an inappropriate motive. Ask for God's forgiveness and help in changing inappropriate motives.***

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***Consider the checks and balances you have established for evaluating your motives for giving. Why is it important to regularly examine your motives?***

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## MEMORY VERSE

And the apostles were giving testimony with great power to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was on all of them.  
—Acts 4:33



## Session 7

# FAITHFUL

Believers must remain faithful to sharing the gospel message even when opposed.

## ACTS 5:25-35,38-42

<sup>25</sup> Someone came and reported to them, “Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple complex and teaching the people.”

<sup>26</sup> Then the commander went with the temple police and brought them in without force, because they were afraid the people might stone them. <sup>27</sup> After they brought them in, they had them stand before the Sanhedrin, and the high priest asked, <sup>28</sup> “Didn’t we strictly order you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to bring this man’s blood on us!” <sup>29</sup> But Peter and the apostles replied, “We must obey God rather than men. <sup>30</sup> The God of our fathers raised



up Jesus, whom you had murdered by hanging Him on a tree. <sup>31</sup> God exalted this man to His right hand as ruler and Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. <sup>32</sup> We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him.” <sup>33</sup> When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. <sup>34</sup> A Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law who was respected by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered the men to be taken outside for a little while. <sup>35</sup> He said to them, “Men of Israel, be careful about what you’re going to do to these men. [...]” <sup>38</sup> And now, I tell you, stay away from these men and leave them alone. For if this plan or this work is of men, it will be overthrown; <sup>39</sup> but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You may even be found fighting against God.” So they were persuaded by him. <sup>40</sup> After they called in the apostles and had them flogged, they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and released them. <sup>41</sup> Then they went out from the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to be dishonored on behalf of the Name. <sup>42</sup> Every day in the temple complex, and in various homes, they continued teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

*Take note of words or phrases that reveal the attitudes and motives of the religious leaders. Then identify words or phrases that reveal the attitudes and motives of the apostles. How do the lists compare/contrast?*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

Most of us value faithfulness. We recognize it in employees who reject other attractive job offers and continue to work for their current company. We celebrate significant anniversaries with a husband and wife who remain faithful to each other throughout their lives. We become endeared to a player who chooses to stay with our favorite pro team instead of being lured away by a rival team.

***What other acts would you point to as portraits of faithfulness? What level of value would you place on faithfulness to Christ and His church?***

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Throughout history, many Christians have remained faithful to Christ even as they faced intense pressure to compromise their faith. Christians today continue to risk their freedom and lives in many parts of the world. Indeed, many Bible students understand biblical prophecy to teach that persecution of believers will not only continue but also intensify before the return of Jesus Christ.

In this session, we will see how the leaders of the early church responded with faithfulness in the face of threats of persecution and martyrdom. We will be challenged to examine our courage in sharing the gospel and be encouraged to pray for believers suffering persecution around the world today.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **ACTS 5:17-42**

Temple leaders decided that new measures had to be taken against the followers of Christ. Thus, they had the apostles jailed to await a hearing before the •Sanhedrin (see p. 6). When the Sanhedrin convened and ordered the apostles to be brought in, it was reported with surprise that the apostles not only were absent from their cells but were standing in the temple courtyards teaching the people!

The police then retrieved the apostles and escorted them before the council, whereupon the high priest reminded them of the council's demand that they stop their evangelistic activities. Speaking for the apostles once again, Peter boldly explained that they were witnesses of what God had done in Christ. They had no option; they were compelled to obey God and to tell the people the truth about Jesus and the gospel (5:17-32).

Irate council members wanted to kill the apostles then and there, until a Pharisee named Gamaliel persuaded them otherwise. He advised the council to take a cautious approach—an approach that still resulted in the apostles being flogged and threatened (5:33-42).



# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## RETURNING TO THE SCENE (ACTS 5:25-28)

### VERSE 25

**25 Someone came and reported to them, “Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple complex and teaching the people.”**

Our study passage picks up at a point when the apostles, after having been thrown in jail to await the council’s convening and then miraculously being delivered by an angel (5:17-21a), were once again teaching in the temple courtyards. The council had convened for the hearing, but the apostles were not in the jail (5:21b-24).

An unidentified person came and reported to the Sanhedrin that the apostles were at that moment ***standing in the temple complex and teaching the people***. The phrase *teaching the people* indicates an essential aspect of evangelism. Preaching and teaching are complementary ways of communicating the gospel. They may differ in form, but their function and purpose are the same. Preaching is proclamation of the gospel message. Teaching often involves more detailed explanations and responses to listeners’ questions. However, both preaching and teaching have one aim: to persuade people to believe in Jesus Christ.

### VERSE 26

**26 Then the commander went with the temple police and brought them in without force, because they were afraid the people might stone them.**

The temple police once again detained the apostles, but this time ***without force***. The police gauged that the situation was volatile. The people were sympathetic to the apostles. A strong-arm tactic might enrage the crowd and spawn a violent backlash.

### VERSES 27-28

**27 After they brought them in, they had them stand before the Sanhedrin, and the high priest asked, 28 “Didn’t we strictly order you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to bring this man’s blood on us!”**

Behind closed doors the high priest exhibited his animosity toward the apostles. He reminded the apostles about the council's prohibition against teaching about Jesus. Notably, the high priest did not ask how the apostles escaped from the jail.

The statement ***you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching*** refers to both the reality of the situation and the council's deep-seated fear that their place and control over the people were slipping away. They took great offense at the apostles' insistence that the religious leaders had Jesus' ***blood*** on their hands. However, the apostles were not speaking or acting with vengeance. They were testifying to the truth. The Jewish leaders had the same opportunity as others to hear, repent, and trust God's redeeming plan through Jesus the Messiah.

***What motivated the religious leaders to silence the apostles? How is that motive seen in today's world?***

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### **KEY DOCTRINE: *Religious Liberty***

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and He has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are contrary to His Word or not contained in it.

### **STANDING THEIR GROUND (ACTS 5:29-32)**

#### **VERSE 29**

**<sup>29</sup> But Peter and the apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than men."**

Again Peter served as the speaker for the apostles. He explained that as witnesses of the truth, the apostles had no choice but to ***obey God rather than men***. His point was that for followers of Christ, God's commands take precedence over everything—including cultural traditions, rules, and norms. This is a truth that is no less applicable for believers today than in Peter's day. Christ has commanded us as believers to be His witnesses. We must obey Him.



**BIBLE SKILL: Memorize a verse and apply it to real-life situations.**

Memorize Acts 5:29 in your preferred translation. Create a chart with parallel columns labeled "Family," "Work," and "Government." Give examples under each category of how this verse could be properly applied to specific conflicts between human authority and God's authority.

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**VERSE 30**

**<sup>30</sup> The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had murdered by hanging Him on a tree.**

Peter's message explained why they couldn't bow to the Sanhedrin's orders. God had *raised up Jesus*, whom the Jewish leaders had rejected and crucified. The expression *hanging Him on a tree* was Peter's way of saying the Jewish leaders considered Jesus' crucifixion to be a sign of God's curse on Jesus (see Deut. 21:22-23). By resurrecting Jesus, God in fact vindicated His Son and the gospel.

**VERSE 31**

**<sup>31</sup> God exalted this man to His right hand as ruler and Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.**

Furthermore, Peter indicated that God *exalted* Jesus to *His right hand as ruler and Savior*. The Lord Jesus stands as *ruler* and *Savior* because He utterly defeated sin and death, opening the way for our salvation. That salvation can be received through *repentance* and *forgiveness of sins*. The words *to Israel* indicate that the gospel came first to the Jews and then to non-Jews (Rom. 1:16). The name *Israel* also indicates that Peter appreciated the fact that his immediate hearers were the Jewish religious elite.

**VERSE 32**

**<sup>32</sup> We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him."**

Peter again stressed that the apostles had been **witnesses of these things** (Jesus' sinless life, atoning death, and victorious resurrection). Furthermore, **the Holy Spirit** was a divine witness to these events, and the Spirit now indwelt and propelled the followers of Christ (**those who obey Him**) in their mission to preach and teach the gospel. Therefore, the apostles could not and would not obey the Sanhedrin.

**How would you summarize Peter's defense? Do you think Peter's speech was more convincing or more convicting? Explain.**

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## **WAITING DURING DELIBERATIONS** (ACTS 5:33-35,38-39)

### **VERSE 33**

**<sup>33</sup> When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.**

Like a blade, Peter's preaching could be soul-piercingly sharp (see Acts 2:37; 4:1-2). It could evoke either repentance or rage, depending on the hearer's attitude. This verse makes clear that most of the council members had the latter reaction to Peter's testimony: **they were enraged and wanted to kill** the apostles. They had used their influence with the Roman authorities to get rid of Jesus (so they thought); they could do the same with Jesus' followers.

### **VERSE 34**

**<sup>34</sup> A Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law who was respected by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered the men to be taken outside for a little while.**

One of the more influential and popular council members, a Pharisee named **•Gamaliel** (see p. 6), wanted to offer a different approach. He was concerned about the council handing down more death sentences against the apostles. The apostles enjoyed great favor with the people at the moment, and Gamaliel could think of at least two other groups that recently had sprung up, grew rapidly, but then died away to nothing (5:36-37). To propose his alternate response, Gamaliel directed that the apostles be taken outside the meeting area.



### VERSE 35

**<sup>35</sup> He said to them, “Men of Israel, be careful about what you’re going to do to these men.**

Gamaliel urged the irate council members to exercise caution. Issuing death sentences could stir up a popular uprising against the council. Furthermore, the council might find itself in opposition to God!

### VERSE 38

**<sup>38</sup> And now, I tell you, stay away from these men and leave them alone. For if this plan or this work is of men, it will be overthrown;**

As mentioned, Gamaliel knew of two recent, failed revolutionary movements. Thus, his proposal to the council was that a similar outcome would happen to Jesus’ followers if their movement was merely of human origin. In other words, in time the apostles’ activities might be rejected by the people or, worse, attract brutal reprisals from the Roman authorities.

### VERSE 39

**<sup>39</sup> but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You may even be found fighting against God.” So they were persuaded by him.**

Gamaliel also advised the council to consider the position they would be in if what was occurring was *of God*. First, they would not be able to overthrow what God empowered. Second, the council would find themselves in the horrible position of *fighting against God*. Gamaliel’s argument thus convinced the council to spare the apostles.

***What wisdom do you see in Gamaliel’s proposal to the council? How might his words help believers today who face opposition to the gospel?***

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## REJOICING FOR THE OPPORTUNITY (ACTS 5:40-42)

### VERSE 40

**<sup>40</sup> After they called in the apostles and had them flogged, they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and released them.**

The Old Testament law allowed for various forms of punishment for offenders, including the practice of administering public beatings on them (see Deut. 25:1-3). Having been persuaded by Gamaliel to back off of their demand for death, the council imposed two forms of punishment. First, they called in the apostles and **had them flogged**. Such a whipping was meant to humiliate, injure, and scar the victim. Second, the council again ordered the apostles **not to speak in the name of Jesus**.

#### VERSE 41

**<sup>41</sup> Then they went out from the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to be dishonored on behalf of the Name.**

The council's punishment did not have the desired effect. The apostles walked away from their beatings not cowering and crying but rather rejoicing that **they were counted worthy** to suffer shame and a beating in Jesus' name. They viewed their mistreatment as confirmation of their devotion. They bore no shame for being faithful to Jesus. Insults and injuries were badges of honor.

#### VERSE 42

**<sup>42</sup> Every day in the temple complex, and in various homes, they continued teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.**

Neither did the apostles obey the order to stop teaching about Jesus. If anything, they increased their gospel activity. They taught daily. They taught both in the temple area and in people's homes. The words **they continued** underscore the apostle's determination to obey the Lord. They did not stop declaring the good news that Jesus is the Messiah. They faithfully and courageously obeyed the Lord's express command to go and tell everyone to repent and believe.

***How can opposition to the gospel produce encouragement and courage in believers? How does opposition and persecution provide a platform for the gospel to be shared and lived?***

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## IN MY CONTEXT

Believers are to faithfully stand for Jesus when facing personal challenges. The truth of the gospel is trustworthy and can be shared with confidence. Believers can rejoice when persecuted, realizing that the gospel was proclaimed in the process.

***Consider times in your life when someone challenged your faith. How did you respond? What can you learn from the response of the apostles to help you respond when facing opposition in the future?***

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***Reflect on ways you have found the gospel to be trustworthy. How do the things on which you reflected give you confidence to share the gospel? Identify one person with whom you can share about the trustworthiness of the gospel this week.***

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***Share with others in your Bible study group about situations in which you have faced opposition to your belief in Jesus. Record insights gained from one another's stories. Take time to thank God for the opportunity to present the gospel in the midst of standing up to opposition.***

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## MEMORY VERSE

But Peter and the apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than men." —Acts 5:29



## Session 8

# SELFLESS

Believers honor God and further His kingdom through selfless service.

## ACTS 6:1-10

<sup>1</sup> In those days, as the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint by the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution. <sup>2</sup> Then the Twelve summoned the whole company of the disciples and said, “It would not be right for us to give up preaching about God to handle financial matters. <sup>3</sup> Therefore, brothers, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we can appoint to this duty. <sup>4</sup> But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the preaching ministry.” <sup>5</sup> The proposal pleased the whole company. So they



chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte from Antioch. <sup>6</sup> They had them stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. <sup>7</sup> So the preaching about God flourished, the number of the disciples in Jerusalem multiplied greatly, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith. <sup>8</sup> Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> Then some from what is called the Freedmen’s Synagogue, composed of both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, came forward and disputed with Stephen. <sup>10</sup> But they were unable to stand up against his wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking.

*Using brief phrases, identify steps the early church took in responding effectively to a complaint by some of the members.*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

Imagine that you are seeking a job to provide for yourself and your family. You open a newspaper or go online to find a listing of possible employment opportunities. There you find a listing divided into three sections: “Executive opportunities,” “Management opportunities,” and “Servant opportunities.” Which section would you peruse first?

Most of us would prefer to be executives or managers. The titles imply authority, good compensation, and benefits. Few of us would be immediately drawn to consider the positions found under the “servant” category. Servants, by definition, lack authority and are often not highly compensated for their work.

***What advantages does one gain by having a service-oriented job? What makes it difficult for some people to serve others?***

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When the apostles in the early church were faced with a complaint from a particular group of believers, they quickly determined that the solution lay in calling out willing, servant-hearted individuals. In this session, we will discover that serving others is a distinguishing mark of authentic Christianity.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### ACTS 6:1–8:3

As the early church grew, so did its challenges. Acts 6 opens with a dispute about the distribution of goods to needy widows in the fellowship (6:1-7). Complaints and accusations arose. The apostles led the congregation to select seven wise and godly men who could provide leadership and resolve the tension. The believers supported the proposed solution, and the Jerusalem church continued to thrive.

Stephen served as one of the Seven, yet he also provided strategic evangelistic leadership (6:8-15). His message about Jesus offended some Jewish listeners. They stirred up hostility and arranged for false witnesses to accuse Stephen before the Sanhedrin.

Acts 7 throbs with the passion of Stephen's message to the Sanhedrin. His application of Old Testament history reached a flash point when he explained that the Jewish people were betrayers and murderers of Jesus the Righteous One. The response from the Sanhedrin was swift and aggressive. They condemned Stephen to be stoned to death outside the city.

Saul of Tarsus agreed with the death sentence and served as an accomplice in Stephen's execution (8:1-3). He held the robes so the men could hurl their stones at Stephen.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### A NEED DISCOVERED (ACTS 6:1-2)

#### VERSE 1

**<sup>1</sup> In those days, as the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint by the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution.**



The rapid expansion of the Jerusalem church *in those days* also brought on some growing pains. The term *the disciples* here referred to all who had trusted in Jesus as a result of the apostles' evangelistic teaching and the Holy Spirit's powerful work. As the number of believers increased, so did the opportunities (and needs) for ministry.

The apostles faced a challenge: the needs of the congregation exceeded the apostles' capacity to handle. Consequently, a *complaint* arose between *Hellenistic Jews* and *Hebraic Jews*. Both labels refer to Jews who had become followers of Jesus. The *Hellenistic Jews*, however, had formerly lived outside the homeland and spoke Greek as a primary language. They had returned to live in Jerusalem for various reasons. Some were widows who had come home to live out the remainder of their days. *Hebraic Jews* had lived in the promised land all their lives and spoke Aramaic, a language closely related to Hebrew.

From the beginning, the early Christian community embraced the work of helping those who needed help (2:45). By the time of Acts 6, the church had initiated a system of *daily distribution* to provide for the needs of Christian widows. However, the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians believed that their widows were being neglected.

## VERSE 2

**<sup>2</sup> Then the Twelve summoned the whole company of the disciples and said, "It would not be right for us to give up preaching about God to handle financial matters."**

The apostles called together the believers to address the complaint and to propose a solution. (The term *Twelve* refers to the original eleven apostles plus Matthias; see 1:26.) The apostles neither ignored the problem nor chastised those believers who brought the complaint. Instead, they clarified the issues involved in the situation.

The church's ministry to widows was important, but so was the apostles' responsibility of *preaching about God*. This was the central focus of their calling from God. They could not handle all the details of a care ministry without neglecting their primary task. To neglect the gospel outreach to unbelievers would be not only unwise but also disobedient to the Lord.

With the expression *handle financial matters*, the apostles did not seek to belittle the importance of ministry. Rather, they clarified that the church must not neglect the Lord's command to make disciples.

The apostles wanted the ministry to widows to continue but without taking away from the ministry of preaching the gospel.

***How might the increasing involvement of the Twelve in the care ministry for widows have potentially weakened their preaching-teaching ministry? How does understanding one's call to a particular type of ministry give clarity when facing choices about involvement?***

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## **A SOLUTION REACHED** (ACTS 6:3-7)

### **VERSE 3**

**<sup>3</sup> Therefore, brothers, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we can appoint to this duty.**

The apostles instructed the assembly to select **seven men** to handle the care ministry to widows. The process of delegating specific tasks to assistants while leaders attend to their priorities has biblical precedent. Moreover, the process of matching believers with roles suitable to their gifts is crucial to the mission of the church.

The apostles stipulated that the congregation select men who met two vital qualifications. First, the men needed to have a **good reputation**. That is, their godly character should be well-known and consistent over time. Second, the men needed to be **full of the Spirit and wisdom**. Their words, attitudes, and lifestyles needed to show that they were men of faith who lived under the Spirit's control. Wisdom would be needed in making decisions for ministry.

### **VERSE 4**

**<sup>4</sup> But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the preaching ministry."**

We shouldn't underestimate the apostles' leadership or minimize the congregation's cooperation. When servant leadership joins hands with the supportive participation of believers, a church thrives.

The words **we will devote ourselves** emphasize a settled conviction. The apostles announced that their full attention would be given to **prayer** and **the preaching ministry**.



When a church encourages its leaders to devote themselves to prayer, God is pleased. Pastors who regularly practice the discipline of prayer in private can expect to experience God's pleasure in public. Conversely, pastoral leaders who neglect private prayer—thinking it to be unimportant—will be all the weaker in their practice of prayer in congregational worship. Fervent and faithful prayer catches the attention of God.

Coupled with their dedication to prayer, the apostles vowed their devotion to preaching the gospel. The ministry of preaching demands rigorous, faithful study of God's Word. While preaching may seem to be a simple presentation of a biblical message, it demands a surrender of both heart and mind to the supremacy of Christ. The preacher feels the weight of the cross with every sermon.

### KEY DOCTRINE: *The Church*

The New Testament church's scriptural officers are pastors and deacons.

#### VERSE 5

**<sup>5</sup> The proposal pleased the whole company. So they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte from Antioch.**

What might the apostles have done if the congregation had rejected their proposal? Perhaps they would have prayed for God to show them another “win-win” solution. One thing, I believe, that the apostles would *not* have done was agree to lessen their commitment to preaching the gospel. Neither do I think they would have adjourned the meeting and hoped the problem went away on its own. As it turned out, the plan ***pleased the whole company*** of believers.

The congregation chose seven men to handle the care ministry to widows. Luke did not describe the method of selection (as he did for the selection of Matthias as an apostle; see Acts 1:23-26). Interestingly, though, all of the men chosen have Greek names. This would suggest that they were of the Hellenistic Jews and would ensure that their widows would not be overlooked in the daily provision.

Luke characterized **Stephen**, whose name means “crown,” as a **man full of faith and the Holy Spirit**. Luke had more to say about Stephen in 6:8–7:60. We will explore some of that later in this session.

**Philip** is only listed by name here. As with Stephen, however, Luke had additional stories to tell of Philip’s bold witnessing (8:4-13,26-40; 21:8). We will explore Philip’s activities in an upcoming session.

The other five men chosen also are named: **Prochorus** [PRAHK uh ruhs], **Nicanor** [nigh KAY nawr], **Timon** [TIGH mahn], **Parmenas** [PAHR mih nuhs], and **Nicolaus** [NIK uh LAY uhs], **a proselyte from Antioch**. Nothing more is told of these five in Scripture. However, we can assume they were equally qualified and equally devoted to carrying out the care ministry to all of the Christian widows as were Stephen and Philip. As such, they set a sterling example for all future believers who serve the Lord and their churches in ministry tasks.

#### VERSE 6

**<sup>6</sup> They had them stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.**

The apostles arranged a commissioning service for the seven men. They **prayed and laid their hands on** the men. Ministry service is not a task to be taken lightly by the church. The practice of laying on hands to recognize a person’s call to service can be traced back to Moses’ laying his hands on Joshua as a new leader (Num. 27:22-23). It was a symbolic act, yet full of rich spiritual significance.

When the apostles prayed for and laid hands on these seven men, they approved the selection made by the Jerusalem church. They also affirmed the qualifications of the men to fulfill the assignment.

Some Bible students suggest that these seven men were the first deacons. Other Bible students point out that the Greek noun for deacon does not appear in the passage. In the least, however, these men were precursors to the servant-leaders clearly designated as deacons in later New Testament times (see Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8-12).

***How would you compare the way this issue was handled to the way similar issues are sometimes handled in today’s churches?***

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## VERSE 7

**<sup>7</sup> So the preaching about God flourished, the number of the disciples in Jerusalem multiplied greatly, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith.**

Having solved a ministry and fellowship challenge among the believers, the apostles refocused on their assigned task, and the gospel preaching ministry *flourished*. The word translated *flourished* denotes an increase in quantity. The apostles talked to more and more unbelievers; consequently, the number of the Christ-followers in Jerusalem *multiplied greatly*. The Greek word rendered *multiplied* is a key term in the Book of Acts, signifying rapid numerical growth. It also suggests that the new believers being added to the church became passionate witnesses themselves.

Interestingly, Luke reported that among the hosts of new Christ-followers was *a large group of priests*. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus estimated that as many as twenty thousand Jewish priests lived in the vicinity of Jerusalem at this time. Luke's phrase *a large group* could mean anything from dozens to hundreds of priestly converts. In all likelihood, though, it was a large enough number to cause alarm among the Jewish religious leaders.

### **BIBLE SKILL: Compare passages with related themes.**

Compare Mark 10:45; Philippians 2:7; and John 13:4-5, looking for teachings about serving. How does each verse present the same concept in a different way? What principle could you formulate from these passages? How can that principle be lived out today?

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## **A SERVANT TESTED (ACTS 6:8-10)**

### VERSE 8

**<sup>8</sup> Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.**

In 6:8–7:60, Luke reported at length about the activities and martyrdom of **Stephen**, one of the seven men chosen to handle the care ministry to widows. Stephen was not only a compassionate helper but also a confident witness for Jesus. He modeled a wonderful combination of **grace** and **power** in his Christian lifestyle. The Lord used this disciple to do **great wonders** and **signs** among the people.

#### VERSE 9

**<sup>9</sup> Then some from what is called the Freedmen’s Synagogue, composed of both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, came forward and disputed with Stephen.**

Stephen’s bitterest opponents turned out to be Jews of a synagogue filled with former Roman slaves from the areas of Cyrene and Alexandria in North Africa, as well as from **Cilicia** [sih LISH ih uh] and **Asia** (areas in what today is Turkey). A synagogue was a local community of Jews who met for worship and religious teaching. The synagogue building was used as a place to discuss community issues, to decide discipline for religious and social violators, and to provide help for the needy. This particular group of Jews perceived Stephen’s testimony about Jesus as a threat to their tradition. Thus, they disputed with Stephen, perhaps in a series of debates.

#### VERSE 10

**<sup>10</sup> But they were unable to stand up against his wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking.**

Stephen’s opponents could not counter the truth he declared. His testimony—as indicated by his defense presented in 7:2-53—was filled with **wisdom** from the Old Testament Scriptures. Moreover, **the Spirit** empowered Stephen to speak boldly and persuasively. Sadly, his opponents eventually gave way to an uncontrollable rage, taking Stephen outside the city and stoning him to death (7:54-58). To his last breath, however, Stephen kept a faithful, forgiving spirit (7:59-60).

***What role did Stephen’s dependence on the Holy Spirit play in his life? How does the Holy Spirit provide us power to take a stand for Christ?***

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## IN MY CONTEXT

Believers help spread the gospel even as they serve through the church's ministries. Every believer has an important role to play in the church's mission. Believers experience God's blessing as they serve in the power of the Spirit.

***Identify ways your church is involved in meeting needs in your community. What steps can your Bible study group take to help your church better meet the needs of people in your community?***

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***How ready do you feel to share the gospel with someone? What is one step you could take to be more ready?***

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***Consider the role you play in the life of your Bible study group. What can you do to better serve the group? What can your group do to better serve the people at your church?***

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## MEMORY VERSE

Therefore, as we have opportunity, we must work for the good of all, especially for those who belong to the household of faith.  
—Galatians 6:10



## Session 9

# OBEDIENT

Opportunities to share the gospel message come through obedience.

## ACTS 8:26-31,35,38-39

<sup>26</sup> An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip: “Get up and go south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is the desert road.) <sup>27</sup> So he got up and went. There was an Ethiopian man, a eunuch and high official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to worship in Jerusalem <sup>28</sup> and was sitting in his chariot on his way home, reading the prophet Isaiah aloud. <sup>29</sup> The Spirit told Philip, “Go and join that chariot.” <sup>30</sup> When Philip ran up to it, he heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, “Do you understand what you’re reading?” <sup>31</sup> “How can I,” he said, “unless someone guides me?”



So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. [...] <sup>35</sup> So Philip proceeded to tell him the good news about Jesus, beginning from that Scripture. [...] <sup>38</sup> Then he ordered the chariot to stop, and both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. <sup>39</sup> When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him any longer. But he went on his way rejoicing.

*Identify phrases in this passage that show the depth of Philip's daily walk with the Lord. How did Philip's walk with the Lord influence his actions?*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

*Firefighters.* Just to say the word can bring to mind ideas such as “bravery,” “honor,” and “selflessness.” We often label firefighters (along with soldiers and other emergency first responders) as heroes—and rightly so. Firefighters must be ready to leave the comfort of the station house at a moment's notice. Their equipment must always be inspected, clean, and ready to deploy. Engines must be full of fuel and tanks full of water. Firefighters must stay physically fit and keep up to date on their training. When an alarm sounds, there's no time for a delay, a dry run, or a seminar on the latest firefighting techniques. People's property and even their lives may be saved or lost depending on the time it takes for firefighters to respond.

*What are examples of other occupations that require constant readiness?*

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The Lord Jesus expects His followers to remain ready to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. Believers who live in close fellowship with Christ and who keep their eyes and ears open can find daily opportunities to tell others about the Lord. Moreover, they can look back later and recognize that often their witnessing opportunities

were not accidental at all; they were divine appointments. This session focuses on just such an appointment involving Philip, one of the seven men chosen by the early church to handle the care ministry for widows. By obeying the Lord's guidance and being always ready to talk about Jesus, Philip led an international traveler to faith in Christ—and made missions history in the process!

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **ACTS 8:4-40**

The martyrdom of Stephen set off a scorching outbreak of persecution against Christians in Jerusalem; it was led by Saul of Tarsus, a firebrand Pharisee (8:1-3). Many believers were forced to flee the city and seek refuge in other places. Wherever they scattered far and wide, however, they took the gospel message with them (8:4).

Philip—who like Stephen had been among the seven men set apart to handle the church's ministry to widows (6:5)—went to the region of Samaria. There he began proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah. Philip's preaching was accompanied by powerful signs, including the expulsion of evil spirits from some people and the physical healing of others. A sense of joy spread over the whole area (8:5-8).

Among the Samaritan converts was a well-known former sorcerer named Simon. He professed to believe in Jesus and was baptized, yet he was astonished most by the miraculous works Philip performed (8:9-13). When Peter and John came from Jerusalem to Samaria and laid hands on the new converts to receive the Holy Spirit, Simon offered to buy that power from the two apostles. Peter rebuked Simon and urged him to repent of making such a sinful request (8:14-25).

Philip followed the Lord's direction to leave Samaria and go to a road running between Jerusalem and Gaza. There he came upon an Ethiopian, an important official in the royal court, who was reading a scroll of Isaiah as he rode along in his chariot. Philip greeted the man and soon had an opportunity to explain how Jesus fulfilled the prophecy in Isaiah that the man was reading. The Ethiopian declared his faith in Jesus, and Philip baptized him. The man then went on his way as a new believer, while Philip moved to other coastal towns, preaching the gospel everywhere he went (8:26-40).



# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## COMPELLED TO SEEK (ACTS 8:26-29)

### VERSE 26

**26 An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip: “Get up and go south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is the desert road.)**

Like a storm wind that catches up seeds and then drops them far and wide onto new ground, the persecution against the church in Jerusalem only scattered hosts of gospel witnesses into new areas. Wherever these believers went, they talked about the good news of Jesus Christ, which took root in many hearts. Luke gave an example of this phenomenon in the account of Philip in Samaria (8:4-8). The gospel advanced in other ways too, including by what might be called divine appointments between an attentive, obedient believer and a spiritual seeker. Luke gave an example of this type of gospel advance in the account of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26-40).

Luke began the account by reporting that ***an angel of the Lord*** spoke to Philip. An *angel* is a messenger from God, so the instructions for Philip to ***get up and go*** emphasize God’s perfect timing and guidance, the urgency of evangelism, and God’s expectation of obedience on the part of His gospel witnesses.

Moreover, the angel gave Philip clear details about the destination: he was to head ***south*** and go to a road that ran between ***Jerusalem*** and the city of ***Gaza*** near the Mediterranean coast. Yet the angel did not reveal at this time the purpose of Philip’s journey. So these details emphasize not only the exactness of God’s guidance but also the need for the believer to trust and obey the Lord step-by-step.

### VERSE 27

**27 So he got up and went. There was an Ethiopian man, a eunuch and high official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to worship in Jerusalem**

Notice the profound simplicity of Philip’s response: ***he got up and went***. He obeyed in faith. He obeyed immediately. As believers today, we can learn a lot from Philip’s obedience. God may prompt us to go

to unexpected places or to prepare ourselves in unexpected ways to meet a strategic need of a single, unexpected individual.

Imagine Philip's thoughts when he finally arrived at his roadside destination: "Why did God send me here of all places? What am I supposed to do now?" Then Philip saw the reason God sent him there. Traveling along the road in a horse-drawn chariot was **an Ethiopian man** (probably accompanied by a small entourage, including a chariot driver and a security detail). In biblical times, the name "Ethiopia" was associated with the land of Cush in the upper Nile River valley rather than with the present-day nation of that name located at the southwestern end of the Red Sea.

Luke provided additional information about this Ethiopian man. First, he was **a eunuch**. In ancient Near Eastern societies, this term often referred to a man in charge of a king's harem. The eunuch was rendered sexually impotent by means of castration. Over time, the term also came to be used of men—usually royal officials—who served the queen or other female members of the royal court and who took a vow of sexual abstinence as part of their service.

Second, the man was a **high official of Candace** (see p. 6), **queen of the Ethiopians**. Indeed, he was the queen's chief financial officer (**in charge of her entire treasury**). As such, he played a key role in the financial well-being of the entire nation. Third, the man had been in Jerusalem **to worship** at the temple. This fact suggests the man was (or hoped to be) a proselyte to Judaism. The law of Moses forbade eunuchs from entering the Lord's assembly (Deut. 23:1); however, the prophet Isaiah foresaw a day when eunuchs who obeyed God's Word would be welcomed into God's presence (Isa. 56:3-5). Perhaps it was in reading the words of Isaiah that the Ethiopian found hope.

## VERSE 28

**<sup>28</sup> and was sitting in his chariot on his way home, reading the prophet Isaiah aloud.**

The phrase **sitting in his chariot** suggests that the chariot was large—more like a jaunting cart or wagon—and had a driver. More significant, however, is the fact that the Ethiopian eunuch was reading aloud from **the prophet Isaiah** as he rode along. This suggests the man was educated, was wealthy enough to own a handwritten copy of a biblical scroll, and was concerned enough about his spiritual



condition that he traveled hundreds of miles to and from Jerusalem by chariot to find answers. A person truly thirsty for God will go to great lengths to satisfy that need.

#### VERSE 29

**<sup>29</sup> The Spirit told Philip, “Go and join that chariot.”**

Once again Philip received a divine direction. Interestingly, this time the guidance came not through an angel but directly from *the Spirit*. The Holy Spirit’s powerful activity in and through believers is one of the main themes of the Book of Acts.

Philip didn’t debate God’s direction. He trusted God. Such trust lies at the heart of obedience. Philip could now see why God had led him to this place. It was a divine appointment the Lord had arranged in detail so that an Ethiopian eunuch who served in a Gentile queen’s court could learn that the gospel included him too.

***What are means the Lord uses today to direct believers in carrying out the gospel mission? How do faith and obedience factor into those means?***

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#### PREPARED TO SHARE (ACTS 8:30-31,35)

#### VERSE 30

**<sup>30</sup> When Philip ran up to it, he heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, “Do you understand what you’re reading?”**

Philip followed the Holy Spirit’s direction and ran to the chariot. Do you suppose that as he ran Philip thought about potential obstacles that might hinder the encounter? Would there be a language barrier? Would the security detail (if there was one) stop him? How should a gospel conversation begin in such a situation?

Many believers today wrestle with similar kinds of thoughts and sometimes allow the fear of inadequacy to dampen their passion for witnessing. Philip’s example encourages us as believers to trust and obey the Holy Spirit, for He is at work around those who need to hear the gospel, in the witnessing situations to which He has guided us, and in our own fearful hearts.

Philip initiated the encounter by watching and listening. He noticed the man was reading a passage aloud, and he listened closely enough to recognize the text was from Isaiah 53. Paying close attention to what captures another person's interest or activity can often open a door of opportunity to talk about spiritual matters. Respect and flexibility are key qualities in effective evangelism.

Notice also that Philip asked a respectful, yet probing, question. He didn't simply ask what the man was reading but rather asked if the man understood the passage. A good question can break down barriers and open the flow of communication about the gospel.

***What questions could a person use today to initiate a conversation about spiritual matters with an unsaved friend? With a person you just met?***

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#### VERSE 31

**<sup>31</sup> “How can I,” he said, “unless someone guides me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.**

The doctrine of the clarity of Scripture teaches that the Bible can be understood by the ordinary reader. It isn't written in a secret code that only a select few can decipher. Yet neither is it a text in which each person's private interpretations are necessarily true and correct. Thus, the Ethiopian official invited Philip to ***come up and sit with him*** in the chariot. The verb ***guides*** means “to instruct.” The official, an expert in financial matters, humbly welcomed an opportunity to learn from Philip what a key Bible passage meant.

We may wonder what prompted such a prominent official to invite a stranger to ride with and teach him. Perhaps Philip's disarming style and winsome approach impressed the Ethiopian. More significantly, though, the Holy Spirit was actively engaged in this encounter. The Lord directed Philip to connect with a man who needed a holy transformation. Philip simply trusted and obeyed the Lord.

#### VERSE 35

**<sup>35</sup> So Philip proceeded to tell him the good news about Jesus, beginning from that Scripture.**



Acts 8:32-33 reveals that the Ethiopian official was reading Isaiah 53:7-8, which speaks of the Messiah's unjust suffering and death. The sticking point for the Ethiopian seems to have hinged on the identification of this Suffering Messiah (Acts 8:34).

This was an opening Philip used to tell him *the good news about Jesus*. (Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy is another of Luke's major themes in the Book of Acts.) A consistent Christian lifestyle and a respectful witnessing approach speak volumes about the Lord Jesus. Yet at some point a verbal presentation of the gospel is necessary, so that unbelievers may hear and respond in faith to Jesus (Rom. 10:14-17).

***How did Philip use Scripture to point to Jesus? Why was it important for Philip to make this connection?***

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## **FOCUSED ON SALVATION** (ACTS 8:38-39)

### **VERSE 38**

**<sup>38</sup> Then he ordered the chariot to stop, and both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.**

It is possible that during his visit to Jerusalem the official had seen converts baptized as followers of Christ. At some moment on his journey home, the Ethiopian believed in Jesus. He then wanted to know from Philip if anything disqualified him—as it did in Judaism—from being baptized as a believer (Acts 8:36).

Because he professed faith in Jesus, nothing disqualified the Ethiopian eunuch from being baptized (8:37). Consequently, when they came upon a body of water, the official commanded the chariot to stop, the two men went down into the water, and Philip *baptized him*. What an amazing sight the man's baptism must have been for his entourage to watch! What a gratifying result of Philip's obedience! What a powerful testimony of a transformed individual!

In the New Testament, the significance of baptism is never isolated from the method—immersion in water. Baptism signifies the believer's identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. Baptism doesn't save anyone; Jesus alone saves.

***How would you use this passage to explain baptism to someone? What other information would you need to give them a more complete picture?***

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### **KEY DOCTRINE: *Baptism***

Baptism is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Saviour, the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus.

### **VERSE 39**

***<sup>39</sup> When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him any longer. But he went on his way rejoicing.***

After the Ethiopian's baptism, the Holy Spirit ***carried Philip away*** to another place of service. Whether this was a miraculous exit or simply the way Luke described the two men's parting of ways is not clear. (Philip traveled northward from Gaza toward Caesarea, evangelizing in towns as he went; see 8:40.) In any case, the Ethiopian man ***went on his way rejoicing***. Joy is a characteristic associated with faith in Jesus; it is a sign of new life.

### **BIBLE SKILL: *Use multiple Scripture passages to understand a major doctrine.***

Read Luke 23:43 and Ephesians 2:8-9. How does Jesus' promise to save the repentant thief demonstrate Paul's teaching that salvation is by faith alone? Now read Ephesians 2:10. How is water baptism considered a "good work" by a believer and therefore not a requirement for salvation?

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## IN MY CONTEXT

Believers must recognize opportunities to share Jesus with others as they are directed by the Holy Spirit. Believers gain confidence to share as they grow in their understanding of the Scriptures. Salvation is available to all who are willing to receive Jesus.

***What barriers must you overcome to better recognize opportunities to share Jesus with others? Identify steps you will take to overcome a barrier.***

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***Schedule time this week for searching your Bible and prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you how you can network with others in your Bible study group to more effectively share the gospel.***

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***List questions you have that keep you from following Jesus. Review the article on the inside front cover as a starting place to get those questions answered. Then visit with the leader of your group about your questions.***

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***If you are already a follower of Jesus, list the questions you had prior to making that commitment. How can you use those questions to introduce someone to Jesus?***

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## MEMORY VERSE

So those who were scattered went on their way preaching the message of good news. —Acts 8:4



Session 10

# CONVERTED

God calls people to be His messengers, with the first step being a commitment to follow Christ.

## ACTS 9:3-9,15-20

<sup>3</sup> As he traveled and was nearing Damascus, a light from heaven suddenly flashed around him. <sup>4</sup> Falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” <sup>5</sup> “Who are You, Lord?” he said. “I am Jesus, the One you are persecuting,” He replied. <sup>6</sup> “But get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” <sup>7</sup> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the sound but seeing no one. <sup>8</sup> Then Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing. So they took him by the hand and led him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> He was unable to see for three days and did



not eat or drink. [...] <sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to him, “Go! For this man is My chosen instrument to take My name to Gentiles, kings, and the Israelites. <sup>16</sup> I will show him how much he must suffer for My name!” <sup>17</sup> So Ananias left and entered the house. Then he placed his hands on him and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road you were traveling, has sent me so that you can regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” <sup>18</sup> At once something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized. <sup>19</sup> And after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul was with the disciples in Damascus for some days. <sup>20</sup> Immediately he began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues: “He is the Son of God.”

***Notice Saul’s response to the directives given to him by Jesus and Ananias. How does Saul’s response demonstrate faith in Jesus?***

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

Jack grew up in Ireland at the turn of the 20th century. He became an atheist at age 15, convinced there was no place in modern thinking for belief in a supernatural deity. Over the next 15 years, however, he read certain religious works and developed close friendships with two Christian men whose influence helped convince Jack to renounce atheism. At age 33, Jack confessed his faith in Jesus Christ and reconnected with the church of his childhood.

Who was this man whose conversion caught people by surprise, including—by his own admission—Jack himself? Most people today know him as C. S. Lewis. He was one of the most persuasive Christian apologists of the twentieth century and author of timeless literary works such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Mere Christianity*.

***Who would surprise you the most if he or she became a professing Christian? Would you be skeptical or accepting of that person? Explain.***

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Centuries before C. S. Lewis, Saul of Tarsus shocked both Jews and Christians alike when he professed a life-changing encounter with the Risen Christ. At the time, he was a fierce persecutor of the early church, watching approvingly as Stephen was stoned to death (Acts 8:1). He was en route to a distant city to arrest more Christians and drag them back to Jerusalem for trial and perhaps execution when the Lord Jesus captured Saul—heart, mind, and spirit.

As we study this passage together, we will see how God saved Saul and put him on a path to lead many others to Christ. God saves and calls individuals to accomplish His plan of salvation.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **ACTS 9:1-31**

Saul intended to imprison the messengers of Jesus and thereby silence their message about Jesus. He secured documents of authority from the high priest in Jerusalem so that he could arrest believers living in Damascus and extradite them to Jerusalem (9:1-2).

Saul's journey to Damascus was interrupted by a blinding light from heaven and the voice of Jesus asking Saul why he was persecuting Him. Jesus told him to get up and go into Damascus where he would receive further instructions (9:3-9).

At the same time, God commanded a believer named Ananias, who lived in Damascus, to go to the house where Saul was staying and pray for him. Understandably, Ananias was reluctant to do so, because Saul's violent reputation was widely known. The Lord explained to Ananias that Saul was His chosen instrument to present the gospel message to Gentiles and Jews as well as to kings (9:10-16).

Ananias obeyed the Lord. He found Saul and prayed for him. Saul immediately regained his sight and was baptized. Soon after, Saul began testifying about Jesus in the synagogues and proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God and the Messiah (9:17-22).

Some unbelieving Jews plotted to kill Saul and silence his witness, but his friends rescued him and escorted him out of Damascus at night. Saul returned to Jerusalem, where Barnabas befriended him and introduced him to the apostles. Another attempt by some Jews to kill Saul led the believers to escort him to Caesarea, where he was sent to Tarsus. Meanwhile, the church kept growing (9:23-31).



# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## THE CONFRONTATION (ACTS 9:3-6)

### VERSE 3

**<sup>3</sup> As he traveled and was nearing Damascus, a light from heaven suddenly flashed around him.**

Saul was headed to **Damascus**, armed with arrest warrants for both male and female followers of Christ. Somewhere near the city, however, Saul was confronted by the Risen Christ. The phrase **a light from heaven** indicated a divine intrusion. Later, when recounting his conversion experience to a king, Saul described the intensity of this light as “brighter than the sun” (Acts 26:13).

### VERSE 4

**<sup>4</sup> Falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”**

The flash of light was so intense that it forced Saul to fall to the ground. Can you picture Saul thrashing about blindly on his hands and knees in the dust, panicked and crying out for help? However, Saul heard a voice that called him by name and asked, **“Why are you persecuting Me?”** Saul was suddenly confronted with the fact that to persecute Jesus’ followers was to persecute the Son of God.

### VERSE 5

**<sup>5</sup> “Who are You, Lord?” he said. “I am Jesus, the One you are persecuting,” He replied.**

So far, Saul was unsure of the speaker’s identity, although his use of the term **Lord** suggests he knew the voice was from God. What a stunning—and piercing—revelation it must have been to hear the divine voice say, **“I am Jesus, the One you are persecuting.”** The same Lord Jesus to whom the dying martyr Stephen had prayed as Saul watched (7:58-59) was indeed alive and reigning in heaven!

### VERSE 6

**<sup>6</sup> “But get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”**

A dramatic change came over Saul. A few minutes before, he was a self-righteous persecutor of Jesus. Then the Risen Lord arrested Saul's heart, mind, and soul with a piercing flash of light. Now blinded, humbled, and prostrate in the dust, Saul received his first order from the One he had persecuted: **get up and go into the city**. Saul had a new life that would come with a new purpose. In the city, he would be told what he must do. A former ungodly rebel was being transformed into a godly revolutionary.

***How would you characterize the confrontation between Jesus and Saul? In what other ways does Jesus confront people about their need for Him?***

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### **KEY DOCTRINE: Election**

Election is the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners.

### **THE COMPANIONS** (ACTS 9:7-9)

#### **VERSE 7**

**<sup>7</sup> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the sound but seeing no one.**

Saul's traveling companions were affected by the encounter, but in a different way than Saul. The group of men probably included members of the temple police sent to enforce the extradition of believers from Damascus to Jerusalem. Three descriptions paint a picture of the men's reaction. First, they were **speechless**. They could not find the words to explain what happened, although they too had been knocked to the ground by the light along with Saul (22:9; 26:14). Second, the men heard **the sound** that occurred but did not hear it as the voice of Jesus speaking to Saul (22:9). Third, the men saw **no one**. They were unaware of the Lord's presence, because either the Lord prevented them from seeing Him or they were spiritually unable to see.



***Saul's traveling companions were prohibited from hearing Jesus' message to Saul. What does this teach us about how God relates to His people?***

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#### VERSE 8

**<sup>8</sup> Then Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing. So they took him by the hand and led him into Damascus.**

Bewildered, broken, and powerless, Saul slowly rose to his feet in obedience to Jesus. The veil over his heart concerning Christ had been lifted, but his physical sight was yet to be restored. He could open his eyes, but he couldn't see anything. He stood helpless and dependent, no longer the proud, self-righteous Pharisee but rather the humbled follower of Christ who needed his companions to lead him by the hand into the city of Damascus.

#### VERSE 9

**<sup>9</sup> He was unable to see for three days and did not eat or drink.**

Saul remained sightless ***for three days*** as he stayed in Damascus. The phrase ***did not eat or drink*** may indicate either that Saul was fasting in repentance and meditation or that he was simply uninterested in food and drink in light of the dramatic changes in his life.

God often arranges for those He calls into service to have a time of deep evaluation and reflection. He utilizes a sifting and seasoning process to forge holy character in their hearts. Those who are trained in the valley of God's discipline can discover their own inadequacy and His supreme sufficiency.

#### **THE COMMISSION** (ACTS 9:15-20)

#### VERSE 15

**<sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to him, "Go! For this man is My chosen instrument to take My name to Gentiles, kings, and the Israelites.**

All that Luke said to introduce Ananias into the account of Saul's conversion is that he was "a disciple" in Damascus (9:10). The name *Ananias* means "the Lord has shown grace," which certainly describes

this believer's brief role in Scripture. Ananias is an example of all those Christians who quietly but effectively serve the Lord behind the scenes. Their names seldom appear in the news or in history books, but their obedience to God in crucial situations often shapes the future in remarkable ways. Such a believer was Ananias of Damascus, whom the Lord sent to instruct and baptize Saul.

Ananias had heard about Saul's hostile activities against believers in Jerusalem and knew that Saul had come to Damascus with the same intent. He was hesitant to go and find Saul (9:13-14). Thus, the Lord explained to Ananias that Saul was His **chosen instrument** to carry His message to **Gentiles, kings, and the Israelites**. The phrase *chosen instrument* literally means "choice vessel" (or jar). Later, Saul (by then known as Paul) described himself and his missionary team as bearers of treasure in clay jars (2 Cor. 4:7).

Saul was well-suited for the lifework God had for him. He could communicate in Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. He was trained in the Old Testament Scriptures, was a citizen of the Roman Empire, and was able to support himself as a tent maker. But most significant of all, he had encountered the Risen Lord and had been transformed.

**BIBLE SKILL: Compare Bible verses to understand the writer's thoughts.**

Compare Romans 1:1-5; 9:24; Galatians 1:15-16; and Ephesians 3:7-13. What do these passages reveal about Saul's (Paul's) understanding of his calling from God? What do these passages reveal about God and His work in this world? Write a summary of what you think Saul (Paul) understood it meant for him to be a chosen instrument.

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**VERSE 16**

**<sup>16</sup> I will show him how much he must suffer for My name!"**

Saul's selection and suitability for the gospel mission also meant that Saul **must suffer** on behalf of Jesus. Those who walk closely in Jesus'



steps cannot avoid the burden of the cross or the pain of sacrifice. The verb *must suffer* indicates a divine necessity. Saul would experience the agony and affliction of discipleship, yet he would never grow ashamed of his devotion to Christ (2 Tim. 1:12).

#### VERSE 17

**17 So Ananias left and entered the house. Then he placed his hands on him and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road you were traveling, has sent me so that you can regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”**

Ananias arrived at the place where Saul was staying. The Lord had previously given Ananias the exact house and address (see 9:11). Moreover, in a vision Saul had already learned of the man’s name who would come and restore his sight (9:12). How wonderful it must have felt as both men realized the Lord had been working in both of them to bring about His holy purpose!

Notice that Ananias addressed Saul tenderly as ***Brother Saul***. Jews used the term *brother* as a word of courteous address; however, Christians came to use the term to indicate a spiritual relationship in the family of faith. Likewise, Ananias’s placing his hands on Saul demonstrated the bond created by the Holy Spirit in the family of God. In effect, Ananias affirmed that he and Saul were fellow believers. He had come to Saul in the Lord’s authority to restore Saul’s sight and to pray so that Saul might be ***filled with the Holy Spirit***.

Bible students sometimes debate the precise time that Saul was saved. Some hold that Saul’s conversion happened on the Damascus road. Others suggest that it occurred during the three-day period in Damascus as Saul was praying (9:11). Still others propose that Saul’s conversion happened during Ananias’s visit. What we can know with absolute certainty is that Jesus saved and changed Saul, forgiving him of his sin. The Holy Spirit filled Saul and began to prepare him for the great work of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth.

***How important is it for a believer to be able to pinpoint the precise time of his or her conversion? Give reasons for your answer.***

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#### VERSE 18

**18 At once something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized.**

As Ananias conveyed Jesus' promise, Saul regained his sight. The Greek term for *scales* was used to refer to anything from an onion peel to fish scales to snowflakes. The text simply says that what fell off of Saul's eyes resembled scales.

Next, Saul *got up and was baptized*. Although not stated directly, baptism may have been connected here with the filling of the Spirit, which Ananias had stated was part of his purpose in coming to Saul (9:17). In any case, Saul's baptism was an act of obedience and Saul's public profession of being a follower of Jesus Christ.

#### VERSE 19

**19 And after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul was with the disciples in Damascus for some days.**

Saul's baptism signaled the end of his fasting, whether it had been a fast for spiritual reasons or otherwise. He regained his strength to go along with his restored eyesight. Equally important, he gained spiritual strength by meeting for several days *with the disciples in Damascus*. Saul discovered in his time at Damascus that a church is a fellowship of the forgiven who declare their allegiance to Jesus and reach out to the unforgiven with the good news.

#### VERSE 20

**20 Immediately he began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues: "He is the Son of God."**

Saul quickly began to proclaim Jesus *in the synagogues* around Damascus. No doubt many of the Jews who heard him wondered how a fervent-hearted Pharisee could change so radically in his message. Saul preached Jesus as *the Son of God*, a title that affirmed Jesus as Deity and as the long-awaited Messiah of Israel.

***Why was it significant that Saul immediately began to proclaim Jesus?  
Why do new believers often display passion for telling others about Jesus?***

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## IN MY CONTEXT

God uses all kinds of people in kingdom work and does so in different ways. God calls specific individuals to focus on mission work. All believers can share with others about who Jesus is.

***Share about your conversion experience with a person in your group. In what ways did your conversion differ from Saul's conversion? In what ways was it similar?***

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***Ask God to help you understand your role in His mission. Thank Him for ways He has used you in the past and commit to be available to Him in the future. Ask God to call people out of your group to share the gospel with people who have yet to hear His truth.***

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***Record your understanding of who Jesus is. Name one person with whom you can share what you have recorded. Ask God to help you share with this person in the next week.***

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## MEMORY VERSE

Immediately he began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues: "He is the Son of God." —Acts 9:20



Session 11

# BOLD

Sharing the gospel involves taking bold action based on faith in Jesus.

## ACTS 9:36-43

<sup>36</sup> In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha, which is translated Dorcas. She was always doing good works and acts of charity. <sup>37</sup> In those days she became sick and died. After washing her, they placed her in a room upstairs. <sup>38</sup> Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples heard that Peter was there and sent two men to him who begged him, “Don’t delay in coming with us.” <sup>39</sup> So Peter got up and went with them. When he arrived, they led him to the room upstairs. And all the widows approached him, weeping and showing him the robes and clothes that Dorcas had made while she was with them. <sup>40</sup> Then Peter sent them all out of the room. He knelt down, prayed,



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and turning toward the body said, “Tabitha, get up!” She opened her eyes, saw Peter, and sat up. <sup>41</sup> He gave her his hand and helped her stand up. Then he called the saints and widows and presented her alive. <sup>42</sup> This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. <sup>43</sup> And Peter stayed on many days in Joppa with Simon, a leather tanner.

*Highlight words or phrases used to describe Dorcas. Look for descriptors that point to her character.*

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*Outline the steps taken by Peter in this passage. Notice how each action leads to the next.*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

*Miracles.* We use this word to refer to athletic victories, to a business deal falling into place, and to medical breakthroughs. We may even use the term to describe how a husband and wife stayed together through a stormy time in their relationship. All of these examples include perseverance, with the reward being the victory, the deal, the breakthrough, or the enduring relationship. In some ways, such “miracles” can be explained. But what about the ones that can’t be explained—at least not by pointing to human efforts?

*In what ways do people sometimes confuse miracles with hard work or some other tangible explanation? Why do some people search for any explanation of a true miracle that eliminates God from the equation?*

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Around 1819, in the later years of his life, Thomas Jefferson completed *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, a work that came to be known also as the *Jefferson Bible*. As the longer title implies, Jefferson sought to present a compilation—drawn only from the Gospels—of Jesus’ pure ethical principles. Using a razor, he literally cut and pasted together selected passages, purposely omitting most passages that featured miracles or referred to Jesus as Deity.

The problem with Thomas Jefferson’s approach was (and is) that the inspired Scriptures do not offer readers the option of cutting and pasting what they prefer to accept. In the Bible, God’s message and His miraculous activities are woven together inseparably. The passage to be studied in this session is a clear example of how God continued to validate the gospel message about Jesus through miraculous works done by Jesus’ apostles.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### ACTS 9:32-43

In 9:1-31, Luke introduced the Christian leader whose missionary impulse and travels would dominate the last half of the Book of Acts—that is, he reported on the conversion and early preaching of Saul of Tarsus. Beginning in 9:32, however, and stretching through 12:19, Luke returned to follow the activities of the apostle Peter, after he and John had visited the many new converts in Samaria (8:14-25).

Having returned to Jerusalem after preaching in many Samaritan villages, Peter then traveled in Judea toward the Mediterranean coast. He came to the town of Lydda, where he met with an already established group of believers. The group may have included believers from the Day of Pentecost (2:5-11), from Philip’s preaching (8:40), or from both events. While he was in Lydda, Peter declared Jesus’ healing on a man who was paralyzed and bedridden for eight years. That miracle led more people in the area to turn to the Lord (9:32-35).

Peter was then called to the nearby coastal town of Joppa, because a beloved Christian woman named Tabitha, who lived there, had died. Her death grieved the whole community. Peter went to the house where the woman’s body lay and prayed for a miracle. Tabitha was restored to life, leading to much joy and many new converts to the faith. Therefore, Peter stayed in Joppa for a period of time (9:36-43).



**BIBLE SKILL:** *Read, reflect on, and react emotionally to events described in a passage.*

Read Acts 9:36-43 and record the possible emotions felt by the following:

- Those who knew Tabitha/Dorcas \_\_\_\_\_
- Peter on his way to Joppa \_\_\_\_\_
- Those who saw Tabitha/Dorcas alive again \_\_\_\_\_
- Unbelievers in Joppa who heard the story \_\_\_\_\_

How can analyzing these emotions help you better minister to those in grief?

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## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### THE 'FINAL' REST (ACTS 9:36-37)

#### VERSE 36

**<sup>36</sup> In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha, which is translated Dorcas. She was always doing good works and acts of charity.**

**Joppa** was an ancient port on Judea's Mediterranean coast (see p. 142). Jonah had once boarded a westward-sailing ship there to run away from God's call to prophesy against the wicked city of Nineveh (Jonah 1:1-3). Before that, Joppa had served as the port where massive cedar logs came by sea from Lebanon and then were transported overland to Jerusalem for the construction of the temple (2 Chron. 2:16).

In New Testament times, the population of Joppa was a blend of Jews and non-Jews. Moreover, a community of Christians lived there. One of these Christians was **a disciple named Tabitha**. The name is Aramaic and means "gazelle." Perhaps it reflected her parents' desire that she would display a graceful style and beautiful demeanor—which she did. Tabitha's name rendered in Greek is **Dorcas**. This is the name by which many Christian women today honor her, naming their Bible study groups and ministry groups after her.

Tabitha was known in Joppa for doing **good works and acts of charity**. The phrase *acts of charity* denotes works of mercy and compassion. Tabitha was always doing deeds of mercy; she personified consistency. Then and now, the spread of the gospel is enhanced by the graceful benevolence of untold numbers of disciples who quietly demonstrate their love for Jesus by helping others.

#### VERSE 37

**<sup>37</sup> In those days she became sick and died. After washing her, they placed her in a room upstairs.**

Tabitha **became sick and died**. How long she suffered is not clear, but the physician Luke's terse description could suggest that her death was sudden and unexpected. Even if not, however, the previous description of her gracious Christian deeds hints that her death would bring shock and sorrow throughout the town of Joppa.

As a pastor, I have walked alongside hundreds of families down the road of grief. Recently, our congregation mourned the unexpected deaths of three "Tabitha-like" members. Their passionate service for Christ in our congregation was contagious. Those of us who remain can identify well with the believers at Joppa when they heard the news of Tabitha's death.

In all likelihood, other Christian women came to the house and prepared Tabitha's body for burial. Ordinarily the burial would have taken place soon after the body was washed, anointed with spices, and wrapped in linen cloths. In the case of Tabitha, however, they placed her body **in a room upstairs**. Perhaps this was done because it was already late in the evening. The burial would need to wait until the next day. Or perhaps the delay was based on the hope that Peter would come and help them. The believers in Joppa knew that Peter was in Lydda (9:38). Probably they had also heard about the miraculous healing there of the paralyzed, bedridden man (9:34).

***What are some emotions people feel and questions people ask following the unexpected death of a loved one?***

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## THE REQUEST (ACTS 9:38-39)

### VERSE 38

**<sup>38</sup> Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples heard that Peter was there and sent two men to him who begged him, “Don’t delay in coming with us.”**

Joppa was located about 11 miles west of *Lydda*. The believers in Joppa had heard that Peter was ministering in Lydda and likely had also heard of Aeneas’s healing. Consequently, they sent two men to beg Peter to come immediately to Joppa. The exhortation *don’t delay* emphasized the seriousness of the situation.

Were the two men sent to Lydda before or after Tabitha’s death? If it was before, then the believers in Joppa hoped for a healing and knew that every moment counted. Any delay could be too late. More likely, however, the two men were dispatched after Tabitha had died. Thus, the believers were in hope of a miracle of restoration to life.

Either way, this verse reveals that grief often puts believers’ faith to the test. We can be tempted to try to get ahead of the Lord. We become frantic and try to dictate what needs to be done and when. On the other hand, times of grief can be occasions when we grow in faith, trusting that the Lord alone is our mighty Comforter and Deliverer.

### VERSE 39

**<sup>39</sup> So Peter got up and went with them. When he arrived, they led him to the room upstairs. And all the widows approached him, weeping and showing him the robes and clothes that Dorcas had made while she was with them.**

Peter exercised a measure of faith to leave Lydda and follow the two men to Joppa. Presumably, they told Peter about the situation concerning Tabitha. For when he arrived, they went immediately to the upstairs room where Tabitha’s body lay.

Evidently there was a gathering in the room—or at least in the house—of *all the widows* who had been grateful recipients of Tabitha’s ministry of mercy. Tearfully, they showed Peter the *robes and clothes* that Tabitha had made before her death.

Interestingly, Luke referred to Tabitha in this verse with her Greek name *Dorcas*. The reason is not clear, but one possibility is that many of the widows showing their garments to Peter were Greek-speaking

Jews or even Greek-speaking Gentiles. In other words, Tabitha may have provided loving assistance to the widows of Joppa regardless of their ethnicity.

Some years ago, I was asked to have a part in my uncle's funeral. After the graveside service, an elderly man hobbled toward the casket, gently placed his hand on it, and said, "I sure am going to miss you." I thanked the man for his kind sentiment toward my uncle, and he replied: "A man ought to live so well that when he dies anybody who knew him could testify how much he will be missed."

I can't think of a more fitting epitaph for Tabitha than that man's statement about my uncle. Tabitha lived in such a way that, at her death, all who knew her deeply missed her. But wait! The time had not quite arrived to write Tabitha's epitaph. God had a miracle in store.

***Why is it important for believers to be willing to adjust their lives, as Peter did, to help others in Jesus' name? What can hinder one's willingness?***

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## **THE RESTORATION** (ACTS 9:40-41)

### **VERSE 40**

**40 Then Peter sent them all out of the room. He knelt down, prayed, and turning toward the body said, "Tabitha, get up!" She opened her eyes, saw Peter, and sat up.**

Peter asked everyone to leave the room. The weeping and wailing of mourners made it difficult to concentrate in prayer. It is often hard to listen to the whisper of Jesus in the presence of noisy fears and doubts. Peter followed the example he had seen in the home of Jairus when Jesus prayed over Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:40-41).

Peter bowed on his knees, expressing his adoration and submission to the Lord. Then he faced the lifeless body and voiced a bold command: ***Tabitha, get up!*** Interestingly, these words are similar to Jesus' command when He restored Jairus's little girl ("Talitha" means "little girl" in Aramaic) to life. Peter was striving to emulate His Lord and to follow in His steps (1 Pet. 2:21). Peter possessed no power to restore life except through Jesus. Peter could not overcome death by his own command and strength.



Amazingly, Tabitha opened her eyes, saw Peter, and sat up. As was typical, Luke described this miraculous event with clarity and brevity. We might want to know all the thoughts that were rushing through the minds of both Tabitha and Peter. What emotions did they feel? Luke's emphasis, however, was simply on what the Lord did. He restored Tabitha to life!

#### VERSE 41

**41 He gave her his hand and helped her stand up. Then he called the saints and widows and presented her alive.**

Peter quickly helped Tabitha stand up. Presumably, her body was still constrained by linen burial wrappings, as was the case when Lazarus came out of the tomb upon Jesus' command (John 11:44). Moreover, when Peter asked the people to return to the room, they may have assumed it was for the purpose of carrying Tabitha's body to the burial site. How quickly their lamentation was turned to jubilation as Peter stood beside Tabitha and ***presented her alive!***

Tabitha's restoration to life, like Lazarus's, was not a resurrection in the ultimate sense. That is, at the final resurrection believers will be raised to eternal life and be given their resurrection bodies that will never die again. The miracles of restoration to physical life described in the New Testament are real, and they point unmistakably to the life-giving authority of Jesus Christ. Indeed, they give us supreme confidence that resurrection is our blessed hope as believers. Jesus' resurrection was real, and one day all those who believe in Him will be raised to eternal life also.

Another issue raised by this Bible text concerns the role of prayer and healing today. God's Word instructs us to intercede in prayer for other believers who suffer physical sicknesses. Sometimes He grants physical healing for our good and for His glory. Sometimes He has other purposes in mind and expects us to trust Him as He walks with us through suffering.

***What does this passage reveal about the power of Jesus? How is this same power demonstrated in our world today?***

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## KEY DOCTRINE: *God*

God is all powerful and all knowing.

### THE RESULTS (ACTS 9:42-43)

#### VERSE 42

**<sup>42</sup> This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.**

The miracle of Jesus' power over Tabitha's death was news that spread rapidly throughout the city of Joppa. The widows who were recipients of Tabitha's compassion no doubt told anyone who would listen. Of course, no one would have had a more powerful testimony of Jesus' power than Tabitha herself.

The words ***many believed in the Lord*** point to the underlying purpose of the healing of Tabitha. Genuine miracles in Scripture are never intended for curiosity seekers or to increase the fame of those who benefit from miracles. Rather, they are meant to authenticate the glory of Jesus. They point to the salvation Jesus offers. They illustrate and validate His power to heal, forgive, redeem, and restore.

#### VERSE 43

**<sup>43</sup> And Peter stayed on many days in Joppa with Simon, a leather tanner.**

Why did Peter stay on ***many days*** in Joppa? He did so to explain more fully the riches of God's grace in the message of the gospel. He stayed to give further guidance to believers living there, to help them grow in their faith. He remained in Joppa to encourage and protect the believers and to evangelize others.

During his extended stay in Joppa, Peter lived in the home of ***Simon***, a man who worked as a leather tanner. Jews typically looked down on the leather-tanning business. For one thing, the stench of skinning animals could be foul. More significantly, however, the handling of dead animals was a ritual purity issue. Simon's house was just the place, though, that would help prepare Peter for another giant step in his own spiritual growth (see 10:9-16).



## IN MY CONTEXT

God can be trusted even in the death of His faithful followers. God uses humans as instruments of His grace and healing. God uses a variety of means to bring people to Himself.

***List specific ministry actions your Bible study group can offer to grieving families after a death. Which of the actions listed is most needed? Identify steps your group can take to provide that action.***

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***Share about a time when someone in your life experienced an unexpected tragedy and God used you and fellow believers as instruments of His grace. How can you build upon that experience to help others?***

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***Identify individuals who, like Tabitha, model great grace and generosity. Write them a letter or note of encouragement and express your deep gratitude for their impact on your life.***

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## MEMORY VERSE

This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. —Acts 9:42



# Session 12

# ACCEPTING

The gospel message is meant for every person of every background, life experience, and heritage.

## ACTS 10:9-15,43-48

<sup>9</sup> The next day, as they were traveling and nearing the city, Peter went up to pray on the housetop about noon. <sup>10</sup> Then he became hungry and wanted to eat, but while they were preparing something, he went into a visionary state. <sup>11</sup> He saw heaven opened and an object that resembled a large sheet coming down, being lowered by its four corners to the earth. <sup>12</sup> In it were all the four-footed animals and reptiles of the earth, and the birds of the sky. <sup>13</sup> Then a voice said to him, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat!” <sup>14</sup> “No, Lord!” Peter said. “For I have never eaten anything common and ritually unclean!” <sup>15</sup> Again, a second time, a voice said to him,



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“What God has made clean, you must not call common.” [...] <sup>43</sup> “All the prophets testify about Him that through His name everyone who believes in Him will receive forgiveness of sins.” <sup>44</sup> While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came down on all those who heard the message. <sup>45</sup> The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. <sup>46</sup> For they heard them speaking in other languages and declaring the greatness of God. Then Peter responded, <sup>47</sup> “Can anyone withhold water and prevent these people from being baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” <sup>48</sup> And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay for a few days.

*Note Peter’s reaction to the vision. How would you characterize his reaction? What does the question Peter asked in verse 47 indicate about his further response to the vision?*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

The Great Wall of China originally was comprised of a series of fortified walls built over centuries of time to protect China’s northern borders. Later rulers joined the separate walls together and made them even bigger and stronger. Archaeological surveyors have estimated that the total length of all the combined walls spanned more than 13,000 miles. While such walls historically were constructed for defensive purposes, they often had a secondary, unintended consequence. They contributed to the cultural isolation of people groups behind the walls.

Walls of separation and isolation aren’t always physical structures. Language, religion, skin color, education, and social standing can also become barriers that isolate people according to their preferences and prejudices. These differences can create invisible but real barriers that keep people from interacting. Such walls also can be more difficult to tear down than physical structures like the Great Wall of China.

***What are some barriers in your community that keep people from interacting with one another? What barrier(s) have you seen come down?***

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The Bible passage for this session focuses on God's helping Peter overcome a barrier to his witness concerning the gospel. It challenges us today as well to tear down any walls that hinder our acceptance of other believers or our willingness to share the gospel with people from different cultures and backgrounds.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **ACTS 10:1–11:30**

In Acts 10:1–11:30, Luke continued to follow the apostle Peter's evangelistic work in towns along the Mediterranean coast. Having seen widespread response to the gospel in Joppa following the raising of Tabitha, Peter remained there, staying in the home of a leather tanner (9:43). Peter would soon receive a visit from three men of a nearby city; their urgent request would contribute to a transformation in Peter's attitude toward Gentiles.

Luke first described the situation of Cornelius, a devoutly religious, Gentile centurion living in Caesarea. In a time of prayer, Cornelius had a vision in which an angel of God instructed him to send to Joppa for Peter. Cornelius sent two servants and a soldier to ask the apostle to come to Caesarea (10:1-8).

Meanwhile, Peter also received a vision during a time of prayer. In his vision, Peter was confronted three times with a large sheet containing all types of creatures. He was instructed to kill and eat whatever he desired (10:9-16). The meaning of his vision became clear to Peter as he met the three visitors from Caesarea, went with them to Cornelius's house, and heard Cornelius's testimony regarding the angel's instructions to fetch the apostle. Peter was to explain the gospel to them (10:17-43). As Peter preached, the Holy Spirit came on Cornelius and the others gathered in his house. Peter then instructed the new believers to be baptized. Subsequently, Peter stayed on in Cornelius's house for a few more days (10:44-48).



Luke then reported about Peter's return to Jerusalem. There Peter was confronted by some Jewish Christians who were offended that he not only had visited but also had eaten with Gentiles. Peter explained everything that had led to his stay with Cornelius and emphasized that the Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit just as Jewish converts had. This was a breakthrough revelation for the early church (11:1-18)!

In 11:19-30, Luke described how the gospel spread northward from Jerusalem into places such as Antioch of Syria. The church in Antioch would play a key role both in the life of Saul of Tarsus and in the spread of the gospel to the far reaches of the Roman Empire. It was also in Antioch that followers of Jesus first came to be known as Christians. The section ends with a notice that the church in Antioch decided to send a relief offering to help suffering Christians in Judea.

### **KEY DOCTRINE: *Salvation***

Salvation is offered freely to all who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

## **EXPLORE THE TEXT**

### **THE VISION** (ACTS 10:9-15)

#### **VERSE 9**

**<sup>9</sup> The next day, as they were traveling and nearing the city, Peter went up to pray on the housetop about noon.**

The phrase *the next day* refers to the day after Cornelius had his vision in Caesarea and sent three representatives to Joppa to find Peter (10:3-8). Caesarea was located on the Mediterranean coast about thirty-five miles north of Joppa and served as the capital of Judea. Its magnificent, man-made harbor promoted international trade and travel, and the Roman governor's official residence was located there. Its population was a mix of Jews and Gentiles, but the two groups did not always live together peacefully. Cornelius, however, maintained a good relationship with the Jewish population and may have been recognized by the Jews as a God-fearer (10:2).

Meanwhile, Peter was still a guest in the home of Simon the tanner in Joppa (9:43). Peter went up onto the roof of the house around noontime **to pray**. A typical first-century house was a structure with a solid, flat roof. A small, private room might be built on the roof and made accessible by stairs on the outside of the main structure. However, the significant point made here is that God prepared the hearts of both Cornelius and Peter while they were praying.

#### VERSE 10

**<sup>10</sup> Then he became hungry and wanted to eat, but while they were preparing something, he went into a visionary state.**

The fact that Peter **became hungry** prepares us as readers for the vision to come. Spiritually, it helps us remember what it is like to “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matt. 5:6). Peter was about to learn that Jews were not the only people who hungered to know God. More importantly, he was about to learn that the gospel is life-giving “food” given by God for Jews and Gentiles alike.

Peter would initially be confronted with this truth in **a visionary state**. The term *visionary state* refers to a profound spiritual experience dictated by divine activity. In other words, Peter didn’t somehow hype himself into a trance. God brought it upon Peter to prepare him for the upcoming visit to Cornelius’s house.

#### VERSES 11-12

**<sup>11</sup> He saw heaven opened and an object that resembled a large sheet coming down, being lowered by its four corners to the earth.**

**<sup>12</sup> In it were all the four-footed animals and reptiles of the earth, and the birds of the sky.**

In his vision, Peter saw an object that resembled **a large sheet** being lowered from heaven by its four corners. The object served as an enormous pouch that contained all types of creatures—**four-footed animals ... reptiles ... and the birds**. The law of Moses strictly distinguished between clean and unclean creatures (Lev. 11). Unclean creatures were not to be eaten or even handled; violators of these rules would be deemed unholy before God. Therefore, many Jews viewed all Gentiles as being detestable before God because they didn’t keep the law. What possible message could Peter gain from a vision of both clean and unclean creatures in one large pouch?



## VERSES 13-14

**13 Then a voice said to him, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat!” 14 “No, Lord!” Peter said. “For I have never eaten anything common and ritually unclean!”**

Suddenly Peter heard a voice instructing him to **get up, ... kill and eat**. (Recall that Peter was hungry.) No caveat followed the command; Peter could feast on any creature he desired. But as suddenly and emphatically as the divine voice gave permission, Peter answered, **“No, Lord!”** Ironically, the “wall” erected by the law, forbidding Peter from eating **anything common and ritually unclean**, now hindered the apostle from gratefully saying yes to God’s gift of food.

Peter’s reaction carries far-reaching implications for believers today. In what areas of our lives are we saying no to God? When we say no to God, we disobey His authority. Moreover, we deny ourselves many wonderful blessings He wants to give us.

***What did Peter’s negative response to the voice reveal about his understanding of God’s plan to offer salvation to all people in Christ?***

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## VERSE 15

**15 Again, a second time, a voice said to him, “What God has made clean, you must not call common.”**

Repetition is a valuable teaching-learning approach. Peter experienced either part or all of the vision three times (10:16). After the second time, the voice delivered the gospel principle that would shatter Peter’s “wall” of tradition: **What God has made clean, you must not call common**. Peter would soon be invited to go to Caesarea and apply the principle in real life, proclaiming at Cornelius’s house that Jesus’ atoning death on the cross makes clean (saves) anyone who repents and believes in Him, whether Jew or Gentile.

***In what way might the early church have been impacted if God had allowed Peter to dismiss the heavenly vision?***

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**BIBLE SKILL:** *Read related passages that reinforce each other.*

Peter continued to learn the significance of the vision. Read Galatians 2:11-16. What does this event reveal about the difficulty of overcoming social barriers? How did God use Paul to reinforce to Peter (Cephas) the truth of Peter's vision in Acts 10:9-16? What does this exchange between Paul and Peter teach us about the need to be reminded of truths received in the past?

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**THE DECLARATION** (ACTS 10:43)

**VERSE 43**

<sup>43</sup> **“All the prophets testify about Him that through His name everyone who believes in Him will receive forgiveness of sins.”**

At this point, we have fast-forwarded through the narrative that describes the arrival of Cornelius's messengers in Joppa (10:17), their urgent invitation for Peter to come to Caesarea and preach the gospel at Cornelius's house (10:22), Peter's agreement to go (10:23), and the apostle's message to the people gathered at Cornelius's house (10:34-43). Verse 43 is a key statement in Peter's message; it prompted the beginning of a movement of the Holy Spirit on the hearers.

Peter began his message by saying that he now understood the truth revealed to him in his vision—namely, God does not show favoritism in regard to the gospel. In God's plan, the good news of Jesus Christ came first to the Israelites. Yet the truth of the gospel was then and is now that Jesus is Lord of all. Moreover, ***through His name everyone who believes in Him will receive forgiveness of sins.***

With the phrase ***all the prophets***, Peter declared that the prior testimony of the Old Testament foretold the truth about Jesus. Isaiah declared that the Messiah would bear the sin of humanity and justify many (Isa. 53:11). Zechariah asserted that the Messiah would release a cleansing, spiritual fountain to wash away impurities (Zech. 13:1). Malachi predicted that the Messiah would bring healing in His wings to all who revered His name (Mal. 4:2).



**What other Bible passages would you point to that support Peter's declaration of salvation for all who repent and believe in Jesus?**

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## **THE SIGN** (ACTS 10:44-46a)

### **VERSE 44**

**44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came down on all those who heard the message.**

The Holy Spirit's ability to break through to listeners is always greater than a gospel witness's ability to communicate. Still, the Spirit used Peter's words as fuel to ignite a fire in the hearers' hearts. The Spirit descended on Cornelius and the others while Peter was still speaking. Their hearts were ready and open to believe in Jesus.

### **VERSE 45**

**45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also.**

The phrase *circumcised believers* refers to Jewish Christians from Joppa who went with Peter to Caesarea (see 10:23). They *were astounded* when they saw the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Gentiles. They witnessed clear evidence that the gospel welcomes all people, Jews and Gentiles, into God's family by faith in Jesus Christ.

### **VERSE 46a**

**46a For they heard them speaking in other languages and declaring the greatness of God.**

There are similarities between this event in Caesarea and the outpouring of the Spirit in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. Both events were initiated solely by the Holy Spirit to magnify Jesus as God's Son. At both events the Spirit came down on all who believed. Likewise, at both events believers were given the ability to speak *in other languages* than their own in order to declare the greatness of God. The point was that God confirmed Gentiles' salvation by faith in Christ in the same way that He confirmed the salvation of Jewish

believers on the Day of Pentecost (2:1-4). It was a pivotal event in the movement of the gospel toward global impact. The Holy Spirit opened the door of hope for every tribe, race, and nation.

## **THE ACCEPTANCE** (ACTS 10:46b-48)

### **VERSES 46b-47**

**46b Then Peter responded, <sup>47</sup> “Can anyone withhold water and prevent these people from being baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”**

If the Holy Spirit gave to the Gentiles the same indwelling blessing that He gave to the Jews, then it meant God in Christ had purified Cornelius and his household and had made them pleasing in His sight. For Peter, therefore, the next step for these new believers was clear. As with the Ethiopian eunuch who had believed in Jesus along a desert road (8:36-38), nothing remained to prevent Cornelius and the other Gentiles who had believed from being baptized.

### **VERSE 48**

**48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay for a few days.**

Peter thus directed Cornelius and the other Gentiles ***to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ***. Baptism is a public demonstration of submission to Jesus as Savior and Lord. Immersion into water has no saving power in and of itself. That is why the new converts were to be baptized *in the name of Jesus Christ*. He is the One who saves and cleanses His followers from their sins.

Peter’s command was met by an enthusiastic reception. Moreover, these new believers displayed a spiritual hunger to hear even more about Jesus and their new life in Him. Perhaps also they thought about other friends and neighbors who needed to hear the gospel. In any case, they urged Peter to stay on in Caesarea for a few days.

***How would you describe the significance of the Gentile believers being baptized to the Jewish believers present? To other Gentiles present?***

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## IN MY CONTEXT

Salvation is offered to all regardless of heritage or race. Salvation comes through faith in Jesus alone. Believers can be advocates within the local church for new believers from different backgrounds.

***What social barriers cause you the greatest difficulties? How do those barriers impact your ability or willingness to witness to people in those groups? What actions can you take to remove those barriers?***

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***Consider your salvation. What could you point to that demonstrates you are trusting Christ alone for your salvation? Review the information on the inside front cover for more information about trusting Christ.***

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***What activities will you and your Bible study group initiate to be more inclusive of those outside your church? Identify barriers that need to be torn down, and initiate a plan for addressing those barriers.***

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## MEMORY VERSE

Then Peter began to speak: “Now I really understand that God doesn’t show favoritism.” —Acts 10:34



Session 13

# EXTRAORDINARY

Sharing the gospel message leads to experiences in which God demonstrates His power in extraordinary ways.

## ACTS 12:7-12,16-19

<sup>7</sup> Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell. Striking Peter on the side, he woke him up and said, “Quick, get up!” Then the chains fell off his wrists. <sup>8</sup> “Get dressed,” the angel told him, “and put on your sandals.” And he did so. “Wrap your cloak around you,” he told him, “and follow me.” <sup>9</sup> So he went out and followed, and he did not know that what took place through the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. <sup>10</sup> After they passed the first and second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened to them by itself. They went outside and passed one street, and immediately



the angel left him. <sup>11</sup> Then Peter came to himself and said, “Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel and rescued me from Herod’s grasp and from all that the Jewish people expected.” <sup>12</sup> When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many had assembled and were praying. [...] <sup>16</sup> Peter, however, kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astounded. <sup>17</sup> Motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he explained to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. “Report these things to James and the brothers,” he said. Then he departed and went to a different place. <sup>18</sup> At daylight, there was a great commotion among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter. <sup>19</sup> After Herod had searched and did not find him, he interrogated the guards and ordered their execution. Then Herod went down from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there.

*Notice the directions given by the angel to Peter. What do these directions reveal about Peter’s state of mind and alertness?*

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*Highlight words or phrases that point to the impact of Peter’s release. How did this impact the faith of the different people involved?*

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## FIRST THOUGHTS

Recent estimates indicate that Christians in at least sixty countries today face persecution from their governments because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Many believers who live in such areas that are hostile to the gospel have to maneuver through intimidation and oppression every day of their lives.

***Do you believe that persecution of a group more often disheartens members of that group or emboldens them? Explain.***

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Christians who live in persecuted areas and Christians who live in places that protect religious freedom are not separate entities. Rather, in Christ they are one body to suffer together and to celebrate together (1 Cor. 12:26). The Book of Acts is a remarkable testimony of the power and sovereignty of God over those who array themselves against the gospel—whether individuals or governments. The more the gospel’s enemies tried to stamp it out, the more it spread. In this session’s Bible passage, we will see God’s power displayed in the miraculous deliverance of Peter from prison. Today, we can be encouraged by this passage to have confidence that God will watch over believers as we take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### **ACTS 12:1-25**

As the church continued to grow and the number of believers multiplied, so did the list of the church’s opponents. Acts 12 begins and ends with a focus on Herod Agrippa I, who first became a ruler in A.D. 37 and was named king of Judea in A.D. 41, ruling over that region until A.D. 44. The grandson of Herod the Great, Agrippa I had a political knack for appeasing both the Jews and the Romans. His political acumen turned deadly for the church, however, when he realized that persecuting the Christians who lived in and around Jerusalem pleased the Jews. Acts 12 opens with Herod Agrippa attacking the church but closes with God striking down the cruel king as the message of the gospel prevailed.

Herod Agrippa began his persecution of the church by ordering physical attacks against known Christians, especially church leaders in Jerusalem. He killed the apostle James, son of Zebedee and brother of the apostle John. He then had Peter arrested and held in prison until after a Jewish festival ended. The church prayed for Peter, but the believers sadly expected Herod to execute Peter too (12:1-5).



On the night before Peter was scheduled to die by the sword, God arranged a great escape for the apostle. Peter was loosed from his shackles, allowed to walk past several guards and to make his way through Jerusalem without detection. A large number of believers who had gathered in a house to pray for Peter found it difficult to believe that God had rescued the apostle. Peter told them how God had worked miraculously to deliver him (12:6-17).

The chapter closes with a report of the incident that led to Herod Agrippa's death. In a public meeting, citizens of Tyre and Sidon hailed the king as a god. When Herod refused to correct the people's misplaced worship, an angel of the Lord struck down the king with a fatal infection. Meanwhile, the church flourished (12:18-25).

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### DELIVERANCE (ACTS 12:7-10)

#### VERSE 7

**<sup>7</sup> Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell. Striking Peter on the side, he woke him up and said, "Quick, get up!" Then the chains fell off his wrists.**

Peter found himself incarcerated for at least a third time as a result of his gospel preaching (see also 4:3; 5:18). This time he was arrested by Herod Agrippa following the king's senseless execution of the apostle James. Peter was kept in prison under constant guard until after a Passover observance, but everyone knew that the king intended to execute Peter as soon as the festival ended (12:4,6).

The night before his execution, Peter slept in chains, lying between two soldiers. Additional guards were posted at the prison door. The prospect of Peter's release looked dim. The probability of his death looked certain. What could Peter's fellow believers in the church do to help the apostle? They had no influence with either the Jewish leaders or the Roman authorities. But they could pray to God. And this they did, earnestly and with a united voice as "the church" (12:5).

While Peter slept, the church prayed and God intervened. God sent an *angel* to deliver Peter. In fact, Peter was sleeping so soundly—a testimony to his calm faith in the Lord—that the angel had to shine *a light ... in the cell* and poke Peter in the side to awaken him!

The command **Quick, get up!** denotes urgency and intensity. The mandate required immediate obedience. Notice the result of Peter's obedience: **the chains fell off his wrists**. When we are willing to obey God, He is prepared to do marvelous things for us and through us.

**What does it say to you about Peter's faith that he slept so soundly on the night before his scheduled execution?**

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#### VERSES 8-9

**<sup>8</sup> "Get dressed," the angel told him, "and put on your sandals." And he did so. "Wrap your cloak around you," he told him, "and follow me."<sup>9</sup> So he went out and followed, and he did not know that what took place through the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.**

The angel gave Peter specific instructions to get dressed, slip on his sandals, and put on his cloak. While the Lord orchestrated the extraordinary deliverance, He also expected Peter to follow the ordinary details. In other words, this wasn't the carrying out of a clever escape; it was a deliverance from God. To his credit, Peter obeyed the angel's detailed instructions, even though he was still a bit foggy and unsure whether the angel was present or was in a vision.

#### VERSE 10

**<sup>10</sup> After they passed the first and second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened to them by itself. They went outside and passed one street, and immediately the angel left him.**

The angel led Peter past two guard posts without being detected. Then they came to the huge **iron gate** that led outside and into the city; it miraculously opened on its own. The Greek word rendered **by itself** denotes a spontaneous process. God caused the gate to swing open just as Peter and the angel approached it. Then as soon as they stepped into the night air, the angel left Peter. This entire experience must have amazed and gratified Peter!



Bible students have sometimes questioned why God delivered Peter from Herod's murderous plot but allowed the apostle James to die a martyr's death (12:2). There is a mystery to God's sovereignty, and while His sovereignty may not answer all of our questions to our satisfaction, it does give us undying hope. Whether in life or death, the Lord promises to never forsake His people (Ps. 94:14; Heb. 13:5).

## KEY DOCTRINE: *God the Father*

God the Father is all powerful, all knowing, all loving, and all wise.

### DELIGHT (ACTS 12:11-12)

#### VERSE 11

**<sup>11</sup> Then Peter came to himself and said, “Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel and rescued me from Herod’s grasp and from all that the Jewish people expected.”**

Now outside the prison and walking the streets of Jerusalem, Peter ***came to himself***. That is, he realized he wasn't dreaming or having a vision. So he embraced two new certainties. First, he concluded beyond any doubt that ***the Lord*** had orchestrated his rescue. The facts of what happened couldn't be explained any other way—the angel, the shackles simply falling off his wrists, the guards remaining totally unaware, and the iron gate swinging open on its own.

Second, Peter concluded that while Herod had been all too willing to serve as his agent of death, also behind the execution plot was ***all that the Jewish people expected***. That is, the same rejection of God's plan of salvation in Jesus that led to the Savior's crucifixion was now spilling out against Christ's followers. Indeed, Jesus had warned the apostles that they would suffer because of Him—but He also had assured them of His help in perilous times (Mark 13:9-13).

#### VERSE 12

**<sup>12</sup> When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many had assembled and were praying.**

Peter's next decision was to reconnect quickly with fellow believers. Genuine fellowship helps sustain Christ's followers in times of suffering and tribulation. Perhaps Peter had received a message while he was imprisoned that a group of believers had gathered and were praying for him at the home of **Mary**, the mother of John Mark. (John Mark would soon serve with Paul and Barnabas on the initial leg of their first missionary journey; see Acts 13:5.) In any case, Peter had reason to believe that he would find a group of Christians gathered at Mary's house, so he went there.

**BIBLE SKILL:** *Use multiple passages to understand the importance of a major spiritual discipline.*

Individual and group prayer played a major role in the life of the early church. Read the following passages: Acts 1:24; 4:31; 6:4,6; 8:15; 9:11,40; 10:9,30; 11:5; 12:5. List what circumstances led to the decision to pray in each instance. What were the results of the prayers offered? How can we promote prayer in our churches today?

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**DETERMINED** (ACTS 12:16-17)

**VERSE 16**

**<sup>16</sup> Peter, however, kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astounded.**

Verses 13-15 describe a delightful scene, filled with irony, in which Peter, having walked out of an iron prison gate that opened on its own, could not gain entrance at the gateway door of Mary's house. He banged on the door until he got the attention of a servant girl, but she became so excited and overjoyed when she recognized Peter's voice that she ran inside to tell the others without unlocking the door for Peter. Then the believers in the house—who had been praying fervently for Peter—refused to believe the servant girl's news. They thought she was crazy! To her credit, however, the servant girl kept



on insisting that Peter was at the gateway door. It was not her wild imagination; neither was it only Peter's ghost or an angel.

The group inside the house continued to act with disbelief, but Peter **kept on knocking**. The longer the group delayed, the more dangerous it became for Peter to be outside in the street. Finally they opened the door and discovered to their astonishment that the servant girl was right. What joy must have swept over the group as they realized that it was indeed Peter who stood before them!

Before we criticize these believers for their slowness to believe God had answered their prayers, we should examine our own prayer and faith. We too can be tempted to doubt God's willingness or ability to intervene in our most distressing situations. Thankfully, God is patient with us. His grace is always sufficient, even when He answers our prayers in ways we don't expect or understand (2 Cor. 12:8-9).

***What makes people skeptical of God working in an unexpected way? How does seeing the outcome of a miracle move us away from our skepticism?***

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#### VERSE 17

**<sup>17</sup> Motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he explained to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. "Report these things to James and the brothers," he said. Then he departed and went to a different place.**

So exuberant was the group's response that Peter had to call for quiet. He could not stay long, and Peter wanted to make certain that **James** and other Christian leaders were told of his deliverance and were warned of the king's likely reaction to his rescue. This *James* was the oldest of Jesus' half-brothers (see Mark 6:3). He became the recognized leader of the church in Jerusalem.

Peter explained to the group ***how the Lord had brought him out of the prison***. Likely he also thanked the believers for their prayers and probably urged them to be cautious of Herod yet faithful to Christ. Peter then left Jerusalem and went to ***a different place***. Sometime after Herod Agrippa's death, however, Peter returned to Jerusalem to participate in a pivotal church council meeting (Acts 15:6-11).

## **DISTURBANCE** (ACTS 12:18-19)

### **VERSE 18**

**18 At daylight, there was a great commotion among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter.**

Daybreak brought bad news for the prison guards responsible for Peter. The word rendered *commotion* refers to great mental agitation and unrest. The guards were totally perplexed as to how Peter could have slipped his chains, got dressed, walked unnoticed past two guard posts and through a locked iron gate, and disappeared without a trace into the night. No doubt they were also struck with fear; guards who allowed prisoners to escape often forfeited their lives (see Acts 16:27).

### **VERSE 19**

**19 After Herod had searched and did not find him, he interrogated the guards and ordered their execution. Then Herod went down from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there.**

Humiliated, Herod Agrippa ordered a search for Peter, but the apostle was nowhere to be found in Jerusalem. He had left the city immediately after meeting with the believers at Mary's house.

Luke then reported that Herod Agrippa questioned the guards and ordered their execution. Whether the king killed all sixteen guards (12:4) that day or just the four who were on duty at the time of Peter's deliverance is not recorded. The difference would have meant nothing to such a ruthless despot. Afterward, Agrippa decided to leave Jerusalem and retreat to his palace by the sea in *Caesarea*.

In Acts 12:20-23, Luke told of Herod Agrippa's demise at the hands of an angel of the Lord. In what turned out to be a final act of arrogant blasphemy, Herod accepted the worship of some people who claimed he was a god. He was struck with an illness and died. By contrast, "God's message flourished and multiplied" (12:24).

***How does Peter's miraculous deliverance illustrate the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility?***

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## IN MY CONTEXT

God's work is beyond our comprehension and ability to explain. Believers can pray for and be thankful for God's protection and sovereignty. Demonstrations of God's power can lead to additional frustration for those who continue to reject Him.

***Identify an "extraordinary" need you are asking God to fill that would glorify Him and enhance the message of Jesus. Spend time in prayer, being sure to express trust in God regardless of how He answers.***

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***Think of some recent times when you have prayed for others. How would you rate the strength of your faith in the Lord to do marvelous, even miraculous, things in response to your prayers? How can you show trust in the Lord's grace even when His answers aren't what you hoped for or expected?***

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***Research the details about the present-day persecution of Christians around the world. How can you pray for your voice to be heard on behalf of your brothers and sisters in Christ? Identify steps your Bible study group can take to support those imprisoned for their faith in Jesus.***

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## MEMORY VERSE

So Peter was kept in prison, but prayer was being made earnestly to God for him by the church. —Acts 12:5



those who were once enlightened,  
the heavenly gift, became corrupt.  
Holy Spirit,<sup>5</sup> tasted God's good  
owers of the coming age,<sup>6</sup> and  
away, because,<sup>7</sup> to their own  
recrucifying the Son of God and  
to contempt.<sup>7</sup> For ground that  
rain that has often fallen on it, and  
vegetation useful to those it feeds,  
receives a blessing from God.<sup>8</sup> But  
horns and thistles, it is worthless  
be cursed, and will be burned up.<sup>9</sup>  
<sup>9</sup> Even though we are speaking this  
friends, in your case we are confident  
er things connected with salvation  
is not unjust; He will not forget you  
the love you showed for His name  
served the saints—and you continue  
them.<sup>11</sup> Now we want each of you  
strate the same diligence for the  
of your hope,<sup>12</sup> so that you would  
out imitators of those who inherit  
through faith and perseverance.

Inheriting the Promise



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# IN THE PRESENCE OF MY ENEMIES

By *Gracia Burnham*



» I was perfectly content to live in a small barrio in the Philippines with my jungle pilot husband, Martin, and my three children. We loved our ministry and our life overseas. We loved each other and our Lord Jesus.

Then came May 27, 2001. Martin had to go to the island of Palawan to fill in for another New Tribes Mission (NTM) pilot, and I decided to go with him. We left the children with coworkers and

told them we would return in one week. But life doesn't always go as planned—and we were taken hostage by militant Muslims while on Palawan.

For the next year, we lived with the Abu Sayyaf in the jungles—running from the military, sleeping in the open, starving, drinking river water, and witnessing the atrocities that this group inflicted on others, all the while wondering if we

would ever see our home and family again. It was a hard year—physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

I think the hardest thing about being held hostage was that I saw what I really was. In one swift moment of time, everything I had—except Martin—was taken away from me. And when everything is gone and you're in an uncomfortable position, you see what's really in your heart. And what I saw in mine was not pretty.

When I was faced with such an ugly Gracia, I began crying out to God to change me. And He started doing it. As months passed and God worked, I began seeing our captors as the needy kids that they were. My hatred was replaced with concern and even love for them. Contentment and joy grew in my heart, as I began acknowledging God's goodness to me on a daily basis instead of looking at the trials.

After 376 days as hostages, in the 17th gun battle, Martin was killed. I was wounded but rescued that day.

When I returned to America, I learned that God had been touching the hearts of countless believers to pray for us. In addition, my family began praying for the men who held us

captive—praying that they would be able to hear the gospel in their own language.

Something wonderful has happened. I have found some 23 or so of our captors in a maximum security prison in Manila. I am involved with a couple who is ministering to them. So far, four former Abu Sayyaf have come to know the Lord as their Savior!

We ought to be encouraged today. God is going to do what He says He will do. It may look different than what we imagined or planned, but in the end, “all things work together for the good of those who love God” (Rom. 8:28).

This article appeared previously in the March 2015 issue of *Mature Living*. To find out more about *Mature Living* or to order, visit [lifeway.com/matureliving](http://lifeway.com/matureliving).

Gracia Burnham tells the complete story of her and her husband's experiences in the full-length book *In the Presence of My Enemies* (a *New York Times* best-seller). She also is the author of *To Fly Again* and is the founder of the Martin and Gracia Burnham Foundation. She is the widow of Martin Burnham; the mother of Jeff, Mindy, and Zach; and the grandmother of five.



# JOPPA— CITY BY THE SEA

By Timothy Trammell



» Situated on the Mediterranean coast about 35 miles northwest of Jerusalem, Joppa today forms the southern suburb of Tel Aviv. As such, it is part of the largest city in Israel, a city that serves as the shipping, economic, and cultural center of the nation.

Originally the city was situated on a rocky hill just over 100 feet high, a hill that jutted slightly into the Mediterranean

and formed a small cape. To the north stretched the fertile Plain of Sharon and to the south, the Plain of Philistia. Joppa was the only natural harbor on the Mediterranean between Ptolemais (Old Testament Acco) and Egypt.

In the Old Testament era, Joppa was known as Japho or Jaffe. The Hebrew word means “beautiful,” reflecting the rolling hills that overlooked the sea and

the numerous springs that dotted the area, which together resulted in a garden-like environment.

When God summoned the prophet Jonah to preach to Nineveh, Assyria's capital, Jonah fled to Joppa. Here he boarded a ship to sail to Tarshish (Jonah 1:3). Interestingly, one of the main avenues of modern Joppa is named "Tarshish Street."

The only New Testament references to Joppa are associated with the ministry of Simon Peter. A lady named Dorcas—a believer whom Luke characterized as "abounding with deeds of kindness and charity" (Acts 9:36, NASB)—lived there. Her Aramaic name, Tabitha, no doubt reflected her character and her benevolent activities, for it means "gazelle," that is, "the graceful one" or "the gentle one." "Dorcas" is the Greek equivalent of the name.

Dorcas became ill and died. At the time of her death, Peter was in Lydda, a village about 10 miles southeast of Joppa. The Christians in Joppa sent an urgent appeal to him, "Do not delay in coming to us" (v. 38, NASB). Evidently Peter remembered Jesus' pattern when the Lord raised Jairus's daughter from the dead. Peter sent the mourners out of the room, knelt by the bed, and spoke a short

sentence, *Tabitha qumi* ("Tabitha, arise," v. 40, NASB). Taking her by the hand, Peter presented her alive to the people. Luke recorded that word of the miracle spread throughout Joppa, resulting in many becoming believers.

Peter remained in Joppa after the miracle, living in the home of Simon the tanner. His house was described as located "by the sea" (Acts 10:6). Probably this meant that the house was outside the city, for strict Jews considered the tanning of hides to be a ceremonially unclean vocation. Peter's lodging in such an environment pointed to his increasing emancipation from ceremonial traditions.

One may go to modern Joppa today and visit the traditional site of the house of Simon the tanner. Down a slope and overlooking the Mediterranean Sea is the Franciscan Monastery of Saint Peter, built in the 19th century on the ruins of a 13th-century Crusader fortress. The truth revealed to Peter in Joppa—that the gospel is for Jew and Gentile alike—is as valid and significant today as the day Peter received it.

This article is condensed from the original, which appeared in the Summer 2007 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. At the time of the article's original publication, Timothy Trammell served as an associate dean and senior professor of biblical studies at Dallas Baptist University, Dallas, Texas.

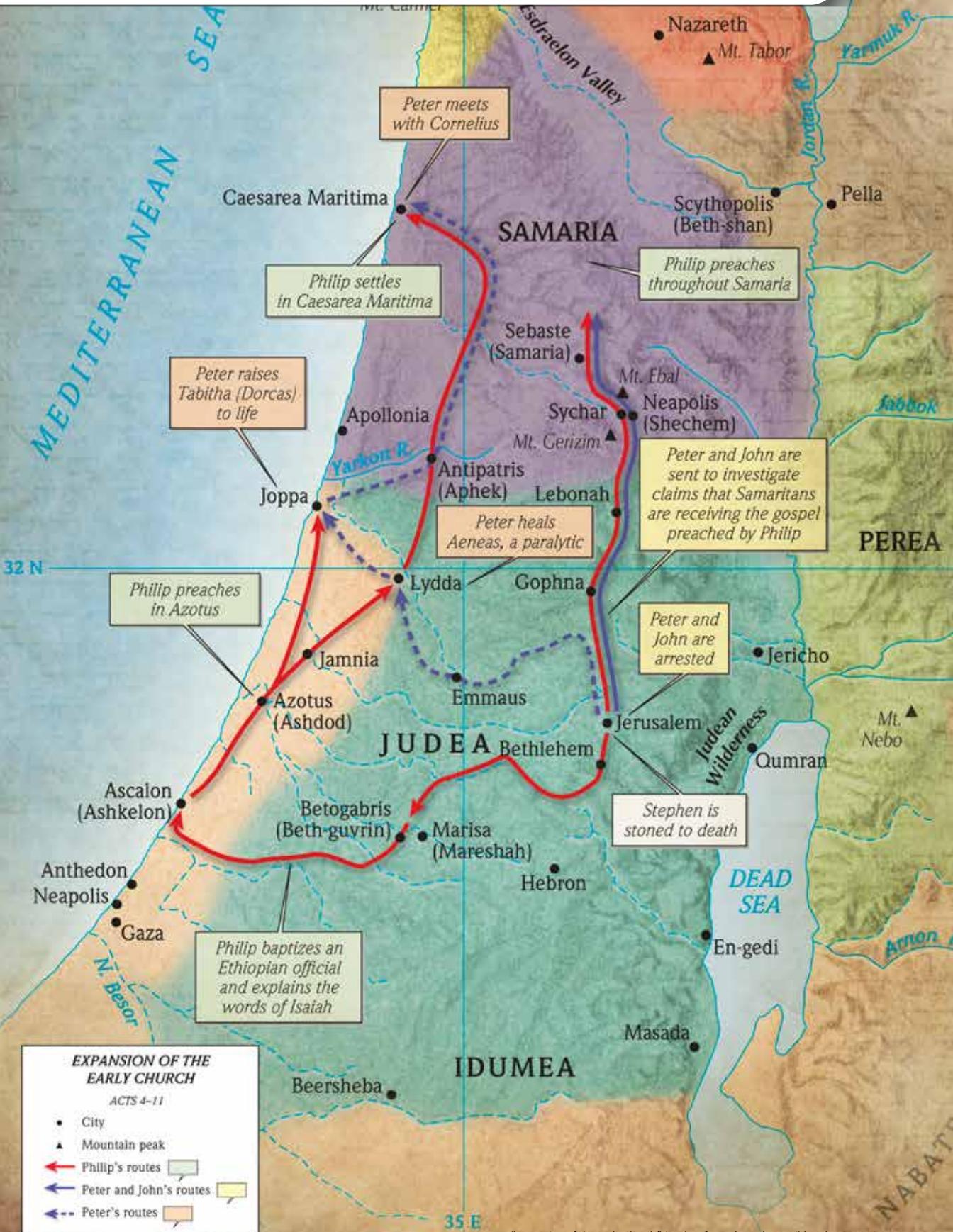


# COMING NEXT QUARTER

## 1 SAMUEL

- Session 1 **Answered!** > *1 Samuel 1:10-18,26-28*
- Session 2 **Called** > *1 Samuel 3:1-10,17-21*
- Session 3 **Worthy!** > *1 Samuel 5:1-6; 6:11-16*
- Session 4 **King?** > *1 Samuel 8:4-9,19-22*
- Session 5 **Feared** > *1 Samuel 12:12-22*
- Session 6 **Judged** > *1 Samuel 15:7-15,22-23*
- Session 7 **Anointed!** > *1 Samuel 16:4-13*
- Session 8 **Delivered** > *1 Samuel 17:32-37,42-50*
- Session 9 **Faithful** > *1 Samuel 18:1-5; 20:35-42*
- Session 10 **Blinded** > *1 Samuel 22:6-17*
- Session 11 **Protected** > *1 Samuel 25:14-17,32-38*
- Session 12 **Respect** > *1 Samuel 26:7-12,21-25*
- Session 13 **Victory** > *1 Samuel 30:6-8,18-25*

# Expansion of the Early Church



# Acts 1–12

First there were 12. Then 120. Suddenly there came an explosion of spiritual fire, and 3,000 were added. Then 5,000. Like the growth of a tiny seed into a giant tree, the church—called into being by Christ, planted in the gospel, and nourished by the power of the Holy Spirit—pursues to this day its mission of being witnesses of the Lord Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. From its earliest times, the church has stretched upward in faith and outward in evangelism despite facing bouts of heated persecution and spiritual drought. God’s kingdom marches relentlessly forward. By digging deep into Acts 1–12, today’s Christ-followers can reconnect with their dramatic early story, renew their passion to obey the Lord, and refocus their vision as His global witnesses.



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