

Acts Devotionals 2

ILLUSTRATIONS, DEVOTIONALS, HOMILIES

Acts of the Apostles

Compiled by Chapter

Today in the Word (Moody), Our Daily Bread (Radio Bible Class), Our Daily Walk - F B Meyer, Our Daily Homily - F B Meyer, Our Daily Bread (not duplicate entries) [CLICK BELOW TO GO TO CHAPTER](#)

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ACTS 1

Acts 1:1-9

He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15).

While speaking to the Radio Bible Class staff at a chapel service, John De Vries of Bibles For India told what might have happened when Jesus entered heaven immediately following His ascension.

The angels, rejoicing that Christ's mission on earth had been completed, gathered to welcome Him home. They were eager to know who would have the privilege of proclaiming to the world the good news that Christ had been born, had lived, had died, and had risen from the dead to provide salvation from sin. In fact, the angels were hoping they themselves would be given the honor. So they were greatly disappointed and amazed when Jesus looked down to earth and pointed to the tiny group of followers He had just left behind. "Those are the ones I want to be My witnesses," Jesus announced. "I have given to them the commission to go into all the

world and preach the gospel. They have experienced the thrill and reality of redemption from sin; they are to be My messengers!"

The torch of the gospel, handed to those early followers of Christ, has been passed down through the generations until today it is in our hands. The responsibility of proclaiming that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners is ours to fulfill.

Angels might long for the privilege of telling the world about Christ, but they have not experienced the joy of forgiveness and the hope of glory. That's why the task has been entrusted to us. —R. W. De Haan ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

**Our only real excuse for living in this world
is to be witnesses for Jesus Christ. —Sweeting**

Acts 1:8

Missionary Keith Gustafson was forced to leave the Congo because of the civil war that erupted in 1997. He reported that as the fighting spread, people in the remote area where he lived knew that soldiers were approaching because of the message of the drums. Down the trails and along the riverbanks came the chilling drumbeat that warned of danger.

The drums of the Congo are also used to alert the tribes when there's been a death, to announce a birth, or to call a meeting. They serve as a general news alert; a messenger follows up with additional information.

We have the opportunity to deliver a news alert to the people with whom we come in contact every day. Our manner of speech and our moral standards can help prepare the way to share the gospel. We can follow up our general testimony with the specific message of the gospel. —D. C. Egner ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

**THEY WITNESS BEST
WHO WITNESS WITH THEIR LIVES
AND THEIR LIPS.**

Acts 1:8

An insurance company sponsored a conference at its huge, national headquarters building in New York City. Agents from all over the country attended. During the convention, one of the delegates from a western state sold insurance to a barber, an elevator operator, and a restaurant employee—all three of whom had worked in that headquarters building for years. That “out of stater” wrote those policies because the local staffers had neglected to do their “homework.”

Acts 1:8

Our Source of Power (by Warren Wiersbe)

Anointing oil speaks of the presence and the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives. All believers have received the anointing of the Spirit (1 John 2:20, 27), and therefore we ought to be “a fragrance of Christ” to the Heavenly Father (2 Cor. 2:15). The more we are like Jesus Christ in character and conduct, the more we please our Father; and the more we please Him, the more He can bless and use us for His glory.

I once heard Dr. A. W. Tozer say,

“If God were to take the Holy Spirit out of this world, much of what the church is doing would go right on; and nobody would know the difference.”

We have so much in human resources available to the church today that we manage to “serve the Lord” without the unction of the Holy Spirit working in our lives. But is that what God wants?

While here on earth, Jesus lived His life and did His work through the anointing of the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:16–19). If the spotless Son of God needed the Spirit's power, how much more do we! Do we dare pray in the energy of the flesh when the Spirit is present to assist us (Rom. 8:26; Eph. 2:18)? Do we try to witness for Christ without asking the Spirit to help us (Acts 1:8)? Can we fellowship with our Lord in His Word apart from the ministry of the Spirit of God (Eph. 1:15–23; 3:14–21)? - Warren Wiersbe

Acts 1:8

F B Meyer

Ye shall be my witnesses.

How different this function, entrusted to the apostles, to that assumed by the self-styled priests of our time, who claim the power to repeat the sacrifice of Calvary, and to absolve the penitent from his sins! The Master did not say that his followers were to become sacrificing priests, but witnesses to what He had done and would do.

Looking to Jesus is the condition of witness-bearing — How else can we bear witness of Him? As we behold Him we shall reflect Him; and as we reflect Him we shall be changed into the same image from glory to glory, as by the Lord the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18, r.v.). It will not involve strenuous effort to witness to Jesus, if we are living in fellowship with Him. Light is self-revealing. In infinitesimal touches and expressions the light we are catching from Him will gleam forth, and men will unconsciously be led to believe in Him who has made us what we are.

Witness-bearing must spread through successive circles of influence — like the circling wavelets from a stone flung into the midst of a calm mountain lake. Some think they could witness in the uttermost ends of the earth, but they neglect the Jerusalem of the home. Those who begin here will be led almost unconsciously forward to the Judaea of their relatives, and the Samaria of their near neighborhood, and so to the further boundary.

For witnessing we have supreme power. — If even your testimony is demanded, claim the power for the emergency. It is certainly at hand, and within reach. The hand of faith, the opened heart, may surely receive not a power, an attribute merely, but the Spirit, whose attribute of power certainly accompanies Him. Not It, but He. - Meyer, F. B. Our Daily Homily

Acts 1:15

And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples (Acts 1:15).

Remorse deprives many Christians of the joy that should be theirs. A man in his middle years has withdrawn from the people in his church because he feels so bad about his past infidelity—a sin that broke up his home. An elderly woman needs counseling from time to time because she can't forget an affair she had more than fifty years ago. A young woman sees a psychiatrist because she can't forgive herself for having had an abortion. Each of these people is now a Christian, but each is paralyzed at times by remorse over the past.

If anyone ever had good reason for allowing the memory of a grievous sin to put him on the shelf, it was Peter. He had been such a coward. He had fled Gethsemane at Christ's arrest, and then denied three times that he knew the Lord Jesus. Later, he felt so bad that he wept bitterly. Yet he did not allow his remorse over past failures to make him ineffective in his service for Christ. He accepted the Lord's forgiveness, and he received new hope from Jesus' commission, "Feed my sheep." In Acts 1:15 we find him back in his role as the leader of the disciples. By taking Jesus' words of forgiveness to heart and by forgiving himself, he put the past under the blood of Christ.

As believers, when we confess our sin, we can leave it with Christ and forget it. Then we can move on to find a new way to serve Him. We need never let remorse remove our joy. —H. V. Lugt ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

**Christians should seek to erase from their memory
the sins God has erased from their record.**

Acts 1:1-11.

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 1773, the young pastor of a poor church in Wainsgate, England, was called to a large and influential church in London. John Fawcett was a powerful preacher and writer, and these skills had brought him this opportunity. But as the wagons were being loaded with the Fawcetts' few belongings, their people came for a tearful farewell.

During the good-byes, Mary Fawcett cried, "John, I cannot bear to leave!"

"Nor can I," he replied. "We shall remain here with our people." The wagons were unloaded, and John Fawcett spent his entire fifty-four-year ministry in Wainsgate.

Out of that experience, Fawcett wrote the beautiful hymn, "Blest Be the Tie that Binds." If Jesus' eleven disciples had known that song, they surely would have sung it on the occasion recorded in these opening verses of the book of Acts. They would have tried anything to keep Jesus from leaving them.

We know from John 16:6 that the disciples were "filled with grief" at the Last Supper when Jesus announced He was leaving them. Forty days had passed since His resurrection (Acts 1:3). Maybe their anxiety had been forgotten. Whatever the case, the disciples

were hoping for a kingdom (v. 6), not a gospel commission.

But a commission is exactly what Jesus gave them. Verse 8 is not only a principle of ministry that is still in force today. It is also a concise outline of Acts, describing the birth and growth of a new program in God's eternal plan—the church.

The spread of the gospel and the growth of the church will be our focus this month as we begin an exciting trip through the book of Acts. This book is volume two of Luke's inspired writings (v. 1; cf. Luke 1:1-4). He saw the events of Acts as a continuation of Jesus' ministry, and that's the way we should see them too.

APPLY THE WORD

The disciples' hearts probably sank when they heard Jesus say, "Wait" (v. 4). "Wait" has never been a very popular word. Most of us hate to wait, because it seems that nothing is happening while we're sitting on our hands. But waiting is not only a good spiritual discipline for us; it's also one of God's answers to prayer.

Acts 1:6-11

This same Jesus... will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven. - Acts 1:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

History is filled with the record of famous returns. In February, 1815, the emperor Napoleon returned from a brief exile on the island of Elba to regain control of France. On October 20, 1944, General Douglas MacArthur waded ashore at Leyte in the Philippines in fulfillment of his famous promise, "I shall return." And on a lesser scale, we have seen politicians and other public figures revive their careers after major setbacks. Even the sports world recognizes and celebrates athletes who win "comeback player of the year" awards.

But all of these fade into nothingness when compared with the promise and hope of Jesus' return. Jesus had told His troubled disciples, "I will come back and take you to be with me" (John 14:3). He had assured His accusers in the Sanhedrin: "In the future you will see the Son of Man... coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26:64).

And in a final word of assurance, the angels told the watching disciples that Jesus would come back exactly as He had ascended.

The ascension of Christ is the third essential element of the gospel that Paul lists in 1 Corinthians 15. Christ "was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (v. 4). Just as Jesus' burial proved He had actually died, so His ascension testified to the reality of His resurrection.

The Gospel writers and Paul add that the risen Christ appeared to believers on a number of occasions in the forty days between His resurrection and ascension.

Paul's reference to his own experience with the resurrected Christ is unique (1 Cor. 15:8). Since Paul is probably referring to his Damascus road conversion (Acts 9), this means that Jesus' appearance to Paul was not only post-resurrection, but post-ascension.

Chronologically, of course, the ascension of Christ is not part of the seven remarkable days from Palm Sunday to Easter. But our study of Holy Week would not be complete without this climactic event and the wonderful promise attached to it: Jesus will return!

APPLY THE WORD

The hope and certainty of Jesus' return are as real today as they were on the day our resurrected Lord ascended back to heaven.

As believers in Jesus Christ, then, we are called to live each day in light of Christ's soon return. One thing this hope should do for us is to keep us from getting too attached to the temporary "stuff" we own. So today, let's do a brief "reality check" of our discipleship by considering these questions. Are you holding your earthly possessions with an open hand before the Lord? Is there something He cannot take without upsetting your world? Do you own anything that has become more valuable to you than the hope of Christ's return?

Acts 1:1-9

You will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth. - Acts 1:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

Raised in the Philippines, Lenardo (Nard) Puggyao trusted Christ at age fourteen after reading the Gospel of Mark in his own language. Later, he left for high school in the back seat of a missionary airplane, and was himself led into the field of missionary aviation. He graduated from Moody in 1975.

Nearly twenty years after reading the Gospel of Mark for the first time, Nard piloted the plane that carried the first five hundred copies of the complete New Testament translated into his native tongue. “As I circled over the village,” Nard says, “I knew that down there, underneath those coconut groves, that’s where God formed me. I said, ‘God, look at that little hut. That’s where you formed me in secret. What a privilege, now I’m carrying your Word back to my own people.’ ”

Nard Pugyao and other missionary aviators around the globe are a vital part of fulfilling the Great Commission. The version recounted here in Acts is spoken just before the Ascension, meaning that these are the last words spoken by Jesus on earth.

It’s interesting to note that they were spoken in response to a question about the kingdom (v. 6), about which Christ had been preaching since His Resurrection (v. 3). The disciples wanted to know God’s timetable for history—Jesus’ promise of the Holy Spirit had led them to wonder if the end times were near, since prophecy often linked or blended the two (see, e.g., Joel 2:28–32).

Jesus’ answer, in effect, was that this was not their business. Following the empowering arrival of the Holy Spirit, they were to be Christ’s witnesses throughout the world. As we saw in Matthew, the proclamation of the gospel was to start in Jerusalem and expand outward to nearby regions, finally reaching “the ends of the earth” (v. 8). This could be an “outline” of the book of Acts, following the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem (ch. 1–7) to Judea and Samaria (ch. 8–9) to the rest of the known world at that time (ch. 10–28).

APPLY THE WORD

Numerous ethnic groups around the world do not yet have God’s Word in their own language, or any gospel witness at all. Today, please pray for such unreached people groups, and for the many organizations and missionaries who are working to reach them with the gospel.

Acts 1:7

TODAY IN THE WORD

In the late 1980s, Korean pastor Lee Jang-rim predicted that Christ would return on October 28, 1992. Thousands of his followers sold their houses in preparation. When the date passed uneventfully, some committed suicide. Lee was later imprisoned for stealing \$4 million from his parishioners. A few years later, predictions of Christ’s return abounded in anticipation of the Hale-Bopp comet in 1997. Nearly a century earlier, Charles Taze Russell, the founder of Jehovah’s Witnesses, used intricate Bible studies to claim that Christ would return in 1910, which he later changed to 1914, and then again to 1929.

Since Christ’s ascension, there’s been no shortage of predictions of the year—or in some cases, the very hour—of His return. Today’s passage cautions against such efforts. As we saw in yesterday’s study, believers are to be encouraged by the certainty that the Lord is coming back for His own, even if all the details of that glorious event aren’t as clear as we might wish.

Verse 1 indicates that Paul had taught about this before. There may have been some false teachers in Thessalonica who claimed that the day of the Lord had already taken place. Others were claiming that there wasn’t anything to worry about, perhaps denying any final judgment, preaching “peace and safety.” The mention of the thief indicates that the day of the Lord is associated with judgment, just as it is in the Old Testament (see Amos 5:18-20 and Zeph. 1:14-18).

Many scholars believe that Christians will be raptured before the events described in this passage. Others claim that believers will be raptured either during or after these terrible events. But Scripture is clear that no one will be able to predict the exact time at which the Lord will return. Yesterday’s passage shows that it will be a glorious event for believers; today’s passage adds that it will be destruction for those who have rejected Him.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Concerning the Lord’s return, we must be careful to avoid two extremes. The first is to become preoccupied with efforts to determine a precise time and date. The second is to think so little about this event that nothing in our daily lives is impacted. Consider for a moment what changes you would make in your life if the Lord were to return next week ... or today. As we’ll see tomorrow, wise believers live as if the Lord might return any day.

Acts 1:1-11

Go and make disciples of all nations. - Matthew 28:19

TODAY IN THE WORD

According to the 2005 Baylor Religion Study, 79.1 percent of Christians said that they had not shared their faith with a stranger during the previous month. This reflects the uneasiness that many Christians feel about evangelism. Many don’t know what to say or

worry about offending people. If you can identify with these sentiments, you're not alone. Yet both Matthew's Gospel and today's passage make it clear that Jesus commissioned His followers for this very purpose—to be His witnesses.

The book of Acts—our focus for September—is filled with great encouragement for sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. Throughout our study, we'll find numerous summaries of the gospel, compelling examples of evangelism, and winsome role models. We'll see the amazing ways in which the gospel spreads and transforms everything in its path.

Recording the gospel's power was one of Luke's primary purposes for writing Acts. In his Gospel, Luke tells Theophilus (who may have funded Luke's work) that he's writing an account of Jesus' life so that Theophilus might be certain of what he's been taught (Luke 1:4). In “volume two,” Luke summarizes where he left off (see Luke 24:44-53) and assures Theophilus of the many “convincing proofs” that affirm Jesus' resurrection (Acts 1:3). Although Luke himself wasn't an eyewitness of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, his written record rests solidly on eyewitness testimony.

Luke next records how Jesus instructed His disciples to wait for the promised Holy Spirit. It would only be through the Spirit that the disciples could be Jesus' witnesses to the ends of the earth.

The disciples' question (v. 6) shows how deeply they longed for the physical restoration of God's kingdom on earth. Yet Jesus' answer is a good reminder that God alone knows the timing of His plans. Even the disciples had to be warned against speculating about the future. Instead, both they, and we, can know with certainty the most important thing—that Jesus is coming back (v. 11)!

APPLY THE WORD

Many Christians have thought a lot about the resurrection, but not as much about Jesus' ascension. Yet knowing that Jesus now sits at the right hand of the Father, has complete authority over every evil power (see Eph. 1:19-21), and is currently interceding on our behalf (see Heb. 7:25), fills us with assurance as we share the gospel. And until His glorious return, we've been given the Holy Spirit, who emboldens us to bear witness to the risen Lord Jesus, and works through our fears and failures.

Acts 1:1-11

But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. - 1Thessalonians 5:4

TODAY IN THE WORD

The remarkable sales of the Left Behind series, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, have put a spotlight on both the interest and anxiety many feel about the return of Christ. The results of a recent poll posted on the series' Web site www.leftbehind.com revealed that nearly 50 percent of the respondents were “anxiously awaiting” Christ's return. Three out of ten said that they hoped Christ would return in their lifetime—but not yet. Two out of ten said that they were unprepared and were afraid that they would be left behind when Jesus Christ returns for His church.

We should not be surprised at such interest. Jesus' own disciples were curious about the events that would lead up to the establishment of His kingdom. Meeting with Him on the Mount of Olives not long after the Resurrection, they asked whether the time had come to restore the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6). This question was not prompted by idle speculation. Jesus' disciples had a personal stake in the matter. During His earthly ministry, Jesus had promised the apostles that He would confer upon them a kingdom and that they would each sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:30).

The fact that Jesus did not give a precise date when responding to the disciples' question does not mean that we should ignore the subject of Christ's return. Today's verse reminds us that when that day arrives, it shouldn't come as a surprise to us. But if we are not to know the times or the dates, which have been placed under the Father's authority, how can we avoid being taken by surprise? The answer is found in Jesus' charge to be His witnesses by the power of the Spirit (v. 8). This is more than a command; ultimately it is a promise. Those who follow Jesus are called to be living demonstrations of the reality of His power and authority as they wait for Him to return. We are not waiting passively, but rather we are to keep our focus on His return through our active lives of purpose to bring glory to God.

APPLY THE WORD

We do not need to know the day or the time of Christ's return because we are to live every day with the expectation that He might return for us today. As we work and wait for that day to arrive, we can learn more about what the Bible teaches about the second coming of Christ. For a theological treatment of the subject, ask for *Understanding Endtime Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach* by Paul Benware (Moody Publishers) at your local Christian bookstore.

Acts 1:1-14

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses. - Acts 1:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

An American student going to Britain's Oxford University for graduate study went to see the poet T. S. Eliot. As his visitor was about to leave, Eliot said, "Forty years ago I went to Oxford. Now, what advice can I give you?" The student waited breathlessly for a profound insight from the great poet, only to hear, "Have you any long underwear?"

You may have heard a lot of practical advice concerning the new year. But for profound insights on how to live, we must dig into the timeless wisdom of God's Word.

That's the best way to begin this new era, which we hope will also be a time of some new beginnings for you in your Christian life. We want to talk about new beginnings this month by studying the book of Acts and the founding of the church. This is really the beginning of our story, because the history of Christ's body is still being written today.

The book of Acts is actually volume two of Luke's biblical writings (v. 1; cf. Luke 1:1-4), since he saw the events of Acts as a continuation of Jesus' ministry. Biblical research and archaeology have confirmed that Luke was a very accurate historian.

We will approach this study topically, rather than try to cover every verse in the book. Our purpose is to deal with only those events that helped establish and expand the church.

Jesus' ascension set the stage for the church's birth. It was forty days after His resurrection (v. 3), and now that the Lord was alive the disciples were hoping for a kingdom (v. 6).

But they received a commission instead. Today's verse is not only a great principle of ministry. It is also a concise outline of the events in Acts, tracking the growth of the church.

The disciples may not have felt ready for a ministry "to the ends of the earth," but they soon would be. As Jesus was taken from them, they heard the angels' promise of His return in the clouds. With that assurance, the apostles and the other believers went back to Jerusalem to pray and wait.

APPLY THE WORD

The very name "Acts" suggests doing something, yet this book of action begins with Jesus' command to wait (v. 4).

The world has been waiting for this first day of the new millennium for several years, but the kind of waiting Jesus was talking about is very different. It's the waiting of an obedient disciple listening for the Lord's direction. Maybe it would be good for us to begin this year by asking the Lord to show us what He wants us to learn. Then we have to wait for the answer.

Acts 1:9; Hebrews 4:14-1

TODAY IN THE WORD

Taxes are due in a month and a day! Those who have complicated financial affairs or who find government regulations difficult to understand may hire an accountant or a tax service to calculate their taxes for them.

One benefit of having an expert fill out your tax forms is that in case of an IRS audit, that person or agency will represent you before the auditor or in tax court. He will speak on your behalf, bringing his superior knowledge to bear on your side and in your defense.

That's what Christ, our great high priest, is doing right now for us. With knowledge of our situation and our humanness, He is interceding on our behalf (Heb. 4:14-16).

The truth of the Savior's ascension back into heaven and His present ministry at the Father's right hand is a priceless blessing and comfort to God's people. We began the month with Jesus' promise that He was going back to the "Father's house" to prepare a place for us. His ascension was the first step in the fulfillment of that promise.

After the dramatic moment in which Jesus was taken up into heaven while the apostles looked on, His presence and ministry dominate Scripture's references to heaven. For believers, the knowledge of Jesus' ministry in heaven is a source of encouragement and a spur to holy living. For example, as Stephen was being stoned for his witness, he saw heaven open and Jesus standing at God's right hand (Acts 7:55-56)--a profound comfort to a suffering saint.

The writer of Hebrews uses the high priestly work of Jesus in heaven as an encouragement for believers to be faithful. And Paul reminds us that we will appear before Christ in heaven to give an account of our Christian lives and to receive rewards for faithfulness (2 Cor. 5:10).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The fact that Jesus is now in heaven at His Father's right hand should make a difference in your life today.

Scripture says Jesus stands ready to intercede for you with God the Father (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:24-25). He carries you on His heart the way the Old Testament priests carried the names of Israel's tribes on their garments when they went before God.

Acts 1:12-26

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. - James 1:5

TODAY IN THE WORD

Waiting is never easy, but God can use waiting to accomplish great things. Following Jesus' ascension, the disciples returned to Jerusalem and waited--just as Jesus had commanded them (Acts 1:4). They didn't know how long they would have to wait, and as it turned out, it was only ten days.

Acts 1:14 tells us that Jesus' followers prayed while they were waiting for God to reveal what would happen next. Notice how they prayed: in a unified way and constantly. Recall from yesterday's study that Jesus had prayed for the unity of His followers. We see that prayer being answered. Only lives transformed by Jesus could have enabled a Jewish political activist like Simon to be unified in prayer with a Roman tax collector, Matthew, whom the Jews hated. In "volume one" of the gospel of Luke, we learn that after His resurrection and prior to His ascension, Jesus "opened [the disciples'] minds so they could understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45). It's likely that the 120 who were waiting here in Acts were also studying God's Word.

Perhaps it was this focus on God's Word that led Peter to connect the situation regarding Judas with the Psalms. First, Peter acknowledged Judas's original share in the ministry. The parenthetical note in verses 18 and 19 was probably inserted by Luke for the benefit of the letter's recipient, Theophilus (Acts 1:1). It shows why Peter saw fulfillment of Psalm 69:25 in the terrible consequences of Judas's betrayal. From Psalm 109:8, Peter understood the need to find a replacement for Judas.

APPLY THE WORD

All of us are interested in determining God's will for our lives. At times, we might be tempted to cast lots!

Acts 1:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

Everyone knew that Mark was the one to call with computer problems. So it was perfectly natural for Brian to give Mark a call when his laptop started acting funny. Mark quickly identified the problem, but after an hour on the phone trying to teach Brian what to do, he finally decided it was best to come over in person. Mark walked Brian through the necessary steps, explaining what he was doing and showing Brian how to fix the problem himself in the future.

Any good teacher knows that people learn better when things are modeled and not just explained. We see just how good a teacher Jesus was when we look at how He taught His disciples to pray.

Matthew shows us that this teaching was part of the Sermon on the Mount. In this extended sermon, Jesus taught how His followers should live, and naturally prayer was an important part of this teaching. Because life in the kingdom of God is completely different from natural human wisdom, Jesus began by teaching how His disciples should not pray.

Followers of Jesus aren't those who love to be seen as religious, visible to all with their seemingly pious and devoted prayers. Instead, believers should direct their prayers quietly to the Father, away from the public spotlight. Followers of Jesus shouldn't mindlessly repeat the same thing over and over, because God already knows our needs before we pray.

After these words, Jesus then modeled for His disciples how to pray. In Luke's Gospel, the disciples had just seen Jesus praying, so they naturally wanted Him to teach them how they should pray. The Lord's Prayer is both an example of what to pray for and an actual prayer for us to use. This prayer covers the full spectrum of our lives. The first part directs us to God's glory and will; the second part assures us that He will meet our needs.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Individual and corporate prayer are both important, but notice that the Lord's Prayer is addressed to Our Father. Prayer as a group is often lacking today. If you're in a Bible study or Sunday school class, consider praying the Lord's Prayer out loud as a group. Maybe this already happens as part of the your church's worship service. Either way, let the Lord's Prayer be part of worshiping the Lord in prayer together with other believers.

Acts 1:12-26.

TODAY IN THE WORD

After his defeat in the 1976 Presidential race, Gerald Ford was asked by a reporter if his running mate had cost him the election. Ford acknowledged that he might have done better with Nelson Rockefeller, his current Vice-President. But Ford went on to say that he didn't think his choice of a running mate—a Kansas senator named Dole—was as significant as his unpopular decision to pardon Richard Nixon.

When it comes to choosing a Presidential ticket there are no guarantees—as we shall no doubt learn again this November. But when God chooses the right person for the job, there is no need to second-guess. Matthias is a case in point.

Like so much of the narrative of Acts, today's passage is clear and uncomplicated. The eleven disciples obeyed Jesus' command and returned to Jerusalem to await the promise of the Holy Spirit. It was while they were "constantly in prayer" (v. 14) that Peter addressed a crucial issue, the defection of Judas Iscariot. Peter cited two passages in Psalms as a testimony to the fall of Judas and the need to replace him. Jesus told the apostles that they would sit on twelve thrones as judges of Israel (Matt. 19:28). On that basis alone, they would need to replenish the apostolic ranks.

Remarkably, the choice of Matthias has long been a source of controversy among Bible students. Some think Peter acted impetuously, taking things into his own hands. They believe Paul was meant to be the twelfth apostle.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Someone once said that if the critics are right about Paul and Matthias, someone is going to be sitting on someone's lap at the judgment. After all, there are only twelve thrones!

Acts 1:15-26

God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. - Acts 2:32

TODAY IN THE WORD

After Jesus' resurrection, the Twelve had several important assignments to fulfill. One was to obey the Lord's instructions and remain in Jerusalem until they received power for ministry through the coming of the Holy Spirit. The other was to choose a successor for the now-deceased Judas.

Peter led the way in the meeting to decide who the newest member of the Twelve would be. Peter's speech shows how well he knew the Scriptures and the high regard in which he held them. They ""had to be fulfilled"" (v. 16).

Peter cited several Psalms that prophesied Judas's betrayal, although Judas was not mentioned by name in the Old Testament. Instead, the two references from the Psalms refer to enemies of the Davidic king, who is often representative of the Messiah.

Two things are particularly noteworthy about the casting of lots that placed Matthias among the Twelve. First, the qualifications needed by the candidates shows why there could be no such thing as apostolic succession. An apostle had to be an eyewitness of Jesus' resurrection (v. 21).

What's interesting about this account is the controversy it has generated among Bible teachers. Some think that Peter and the body of believers acted too hastily in electing Matthias to take Judas's place.

Why is that? Because some people believe God intended Paul to fill that slot. But this idea has several major flaws, the biggest being that the Bible never condemns this action. Furthermore, Paul never claimed this position for himself, realizing that God had made him an apostle to the Gentiles.

The number of the Twelve was made complete again just before Pentecost.

Why was it so crucial to replace Judas? Perhaps because Jesus had told the Twelve they would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Since Judas was disqualified from apostolic service by his sin, someone else was needed to occupy that throne.

Even though James, the brother of John, was later killed by Herod, he was not replaced because he was not disqualified as Judas had been. The band of apostles was now complete and ready for service.

APPLY THE WORD

Today we see a real contrast between us and the disciples in the first days after Jesus' resurrection.

These first-century saints were waiting in Jerusalem for the power and presence of the Holy Spirit to come upon them. What they were prayerfully anticipating is a daily reality for us. How well are we doing with the gifts God has given us? The book of Acts outlines what those early believers did when they were empowered. Let's pray that our lives will reflect the same fearless, all-out commitment to Christ that marked theirs.

ACTS 2

Acts 2:1-13.

TODAY IN THE WORD

W. W. Moseley had a burden for China. So the young British minister set out to translate the Bible into Chinese. Language experts told him it couldn't be done, but Moseley refused to give up. One day in the British Museum library, he came across a Chinese manuscript containing portions of the New Testament! Moseley's discovery drew fellow Britisher Robert Morrison, soon to be the first Protestant missionary to China. Morrison copied the manuscript, took it with him to China, and used it to translate the book of Acts, and then other portions of Scripture, into Chinese.

No language barrier can keep the Creator of language from making Himself known! On the Day of Pentecost, God would give a powerful witness to the coming of the promised Holy Spirit. The marvel of Pentecost is the supernatural coming and miraculous enabling of the Holy Spirit. The first witness to Pentecost was not words, but wind and fire. In the original language, the words for "wind" and "spirit" are closely related. The blowing wind speaks of the Holy Spirit's power; fire signifies the presence of God.

As for the gift of tongues (v. 4), these were languages known to the hearers but not previously known to the speakers. That simple fact is often overlooked or ignored in the confusion that surrounds much modern-day teaching on the ministry and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

This is not to deny the Spirit's power or sovereignty. Could He reproduce the miracle of Pentecost? Of course—He is God! But Pentecost was certainly a unique event: the birthday of the church. As such, it need not be repeated. While we are right to seek the Spirit's power and filling today, the purpose of Pentecost has been fulfilled.

Acts 2 is an example of a principle you'll want to keep in mind this month. Acts is a transitional book, bridging the old and new covenants, showing how the focus of God's program moved from Israel to the church.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The curiosity and confusion of the crowd (vv. 7-13) reminds us of people's confusion about spiritual things today. Spirituality is a popular topic, but there are as many varieties of "religions" as there are cable TV channels! Are there people in your world who are searching for spiritual reality? They often reveal their need in what they say around the office or in casual conversation over the back fence.

Acts 2:1-13

I am the LORD, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me? - Jeremiah 32:27

TODAY IN THE WORD

The word unique is badly overused, but it's the right word to describe the events that unfolded on the day of Pentecost. Since unique means "one of a kind," it applies only to persons, things, or events that have no equal. The perfect example is Jesus Christ in the flesh, God's "one and only Son" (Jn. 3:16).

Pentecost was also unique as the birthday of the church. The church's "birthday gift" was the coming of the Holy Spirit in a dramatic display of power to live inside believers, in fulfillment of Jesus' promise (Jn. 14:15-17). Also in fulfillment of this promise, the Holy Spirit comes to indwell a person at the moment of salvation (1 Cor. 12:13). Paul's statement also shows that the Spirit's baptism unites Christians together in the body of Christ.

The miraculous events of Pentecost capture all the attention--and it was a miraculous day. God provided a witness to the new work He was doing.

The first witness to Pentecost was not in words, but in wind and fire. The words for wind and spirit are closely related in the Greek language. The blowing wind speaks of the Holy Spirit's coming in power; fire in the Bible often signifies the presence of God.

It was also miraculous that the believers could praise God in languages they had not learned. The fact that the gift of tongues in Acts 2 was known human languages is confirmed by the word “language” (vv. 6, 8).

We are not denying God's power or sovereignty when we say Pentecost is unique. Could God reproduce the miracle of Pentecost? Of course; He's God! But the purpose of Pentecost has been fulfilled. Our calling today is to seek the Spirit's power and filling (Eph. 5:18).

Acts 2 is an example of a principle we need to keep in mind this month. Acts is a transitional book, bridging the old and new covenants, showing how the focus of God's program moved from Israel to the church.

Many of the events we will read about in Acts are unique to that transitional period of time. Grasping this principle will help avoid a lot of confusion as we go along.

APPLY THE WORD

The curiosity and confusion of the crowd at Pentecost reminds us of people's confusion about spiritual things today. Spirituality is popular. But the world offers a confusing mix of ideas, and interest in spirituality doesn't necessarily mean people are turning to Christ and the truth of Scripture for answers. Are there people in your world who are searching for spiritual reality? Ask God to help you be a good listener, and be ready to offer a word for Him.

Acts 2:1-13 John 3:5-8

The wind blows wherever it pleases ... So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. - John 3:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

Nineteenth-century Methodist leader Samuel Chadwick once commented about the Holy Spirit that “the Spirit is more than the minister of consolation. He is Christ without the limitations of the flesh and the material world.” What did Chadwick mean?

Unlike our incarnate Lord Jesus, the Holy Spirit is not limited by a body to one place and time. Free as the wind, He comes and goes as He wills. This helps explain why Jesus said to His disciples that it is better if He goes and the Holy Spirit comes (John 16:7).

No phenomenon better captures the freedom of the Holy Spirit than the rushing wind of Pentecost. The Spirit came upon the assembled believers with the sound of a mighty wind. As they were praying, He suddenly blew in. Jesus says that people born of the Spirit are the same way (John 3:8). Spirit-people, like the Holy Spirit, are not programmatic or predictable. Rather than following rules, they follow a still small voice, the Spirit.

Such a man was Paul, whose missionary travels unfolded not as a pre-set plan but under the guidance of the Spirit. (He had to explain this to the Corinthians who, on one occasion, understood his sensitivity to the Spirit's leading as a breach of promise. See 2 Cor. 1:17.) The actions of those walking in the Spirit can seem as mysterious as the motion of the wind, especially to those who are not in God's kingdom.

The Spirit is also like wind, says Bible commentator John Gill, because His workings are secret and invisible. In the depths of the heart the Spirit speaks and breathes.

In Greek, the word for wind is the same as the word for breath. God, in the indwelling of His Spirit in us, is as close to us as the very breath we draw. God breathed into Adam and he became a living soul; Jesus breathed on His disciples and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (Gen. 2; John 20:22).

APPLY THE WORD

This month heralds both Christmas and winter winds. But while the winter wind is blowing, so is the wind of the Spirit.

Acts 2:1-3 Lev 10:1-7; Mat 3:11-12

Let us ... worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our “God is a consuming fire.” - Hebrews 12:28b-29

TODAY IN THE WORD

Nadab and Abihu didn't take God at His word. As Levites and sons of Aaron, they knew that offerings of incense must burn with fire from the tabernacle altar, not with fire from some other source. Yet Nadab and Abihu disobeyed these instructions and offered strange fire before the Lord. “So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord” (Lev. 10:2).

In order to explain, Moses reminded Aaron that God had said, "Among those who approach me I will show myself holy" (v. 3). Fire represented the presence and purity of God. The fire that burned continually on the temple altar symbolized God's presence within Israel; the sacrificial code detailed how to approach the presence without being consumed. It also suggests the danger of approaching Him arrogantly. He is not a cozy hearth-fire, but a "consuming fire." It is wise to keep this fact in mind as we consider the fire of Pentecost.

The Holy Spirit came in tongues of fire not to consume, but to inaugurate a central shift in divine-human relations. The presence of God, once confined to the temple, would now reside within individual believers.

The gathering of the faith community—not the tent or the building—is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). This is a weighty honor in light of how jealously God preserved the holiness of His presence with Nadab and Abihu.

The Spirit's coming as fire not only links believers to the temple, but also to temple sacrifices. Sacrifices burned in the temple were pure—the healthiest animals from the flock, without defect, injury, or illness.

APPLY THE WORD

Our bodies belong to God. Is this how we think of ourselves? Do we live in order to render ourselves a pure sacrifice to God, or do we live to please the flesh?

Acts 2:1-13 John 14:15-18, 25-26;

You know [the Spirit], for he lives with you and will be in you. - John 14:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

Italian instrument maker Antonio Stradivari made about 1,000 violins, cellos, and other instruments during his long career. He inscribed the Latin version of his name on the label of his

masterpieces, making the name Stradivarius synonymous with excellence in instrument craftsmanship. That's still true today, more than 200 years after Stradivari's death.

Jesus Christ also put His name on His masterpiece, the church. We still carry His name today, more than 2,000 years after our Lord walked the earth with His apostles--His earliest followers and the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20).

Jesus knew that His time on earth would be limited to the few years He was with the Twelve. So on the night He was betrayed, Jesus explained His new relationship to the body of people who would soon become the church. His visible, temporary presence on earth with His disciples would be replaced by the invisible--and eternal--ministry of the Holy Spirit within each disciple.

We said yesterday that the presence of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers is a distinguishing mark of the church. If you're a veteran in the body of Christ, you have heard this truth taught many times. It's hard for us to appreciate what a revelation and departure this was for those first believers.

The apostles were stunned and even fearful in the upper room when Jesus announced that He would be leaving them. But Jesus' teaching that night on the Holy Spirit shows that every need His followers could ever have is met through the Holy Spirit's work.

Those first believers needed counsel, as do we: The Holy Spirit is our Counselor. They needed to know the truth, as do we: He is the Spirit of truth. The assignment for all believers is to understand what Christ has taught us, and the Holy Spirit is our tutor in the things of Christ.

On the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit came to indwell God's people as Jesus had promised. The disciples in Jerusalem were filled by the Spirit for witnessing, serving, and holy living. This is the same Holy Spirit who lives within us today.

APPLY THE WORD

The church has the greatest teacher ever in the Holy Spirit, since He is God. What's more, He is a permanent resident in the heart of every Christian. We know from 1 Corinthians 2:14 that the Spirit's help is absolutely essential to understand spiritual truth, because it cannot be grasped by the human mind alone. This includes the teaching we share with you day by day in Today in the Word. If it is not your habit each day to ask the Spirit to be your teacher, these studies on the church would be a great time to make this prayer a part of your daily devotional routine.

Acts 2:1 Leviticus 23:15-22

Celebrate the Feast of Harvest with the firstfruits of the crops you sow in your field. - Exodus 23:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

You may have noticed that the passage you read for today and the verse quoted on this page call the same Jewish feast by different names. Actually, Moses did not really assign the feast a specific name in Leviticus 23, but described its duration and various offerings instead. It was known by several names, including the ""Feast of Weeks,"" because of God's instruction to count off seven weeks from the firstfruits offering before holding the festival.

The fact that this feast was observed fifty days after the firstfruits offering is a clue to its more familiar New Testament name. In later generations this special day came to be known as Pentecost, derived from the Greek term for ""fifty.""

Pentecost was an early summer feast to celebrate the arrival of the wheat harvest. The specified number of days between Firstfruits and Pentecost tied the two harvests together, since Firstfruits was an early spring feast to celebrate the barley harvest.

The place this festival holds as part of our heritage of faith is obvious from Luke's statement that it was the ""Day of Pentecost"" on which the Holy Spirit was given. Pentecost became the birthday of the church, as the symbolism of this harvest festival received new meaning in the fulfillment of Jesus' promise of the Spirit (Acts 1:4).

It's interesting to note that Jewish tradition identified Pentecost as the day when Moses received the law from God on Mount Sinai.

The offerings of Pentecost were more elaborate than those commanded for the feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread. These included bread made with yeast or leaven. Pentecost was the only time that leavened bread was allowed to be brought in offering to the Lord. After the birth of the church, Pentecost must have taken on new meaning for believers. Paul had a strong desire to reach Jerusalem for Pentecost after being delayed on his trip (Acts 20:16). This feast was another witness to God's provision, which we enjoy today in the ministry of the Spirit through the church.

APPLY THE WORD

Sometimes it's easy for us to criticize the church and focus on its shortcomings.

But we need to remind ourselves that Jesus Christ loved the church and gave His life for it (Eph. 5:25). At Moody Bible Institute we are committed to serving, strengthening, and helping the body of Jesus Christ fulfill its holy calling. Today, let's pray together that Christ will protect and empower His church in a special way during this historic year.

Acts 2:1-21

You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. - Acts 1:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

On this day, believers from all cultural backgrounds join together in celebrating our Savior's birth. Whether there are drums or church bells, rice cakes or Christmas cookies, the focal point is the same for all Christians.

From a tiny manger in Bethlehem to nations around the world, nothing in history compares with the spread of the gospel. Acts 2 records the very beginning of this worldwide explosion. Jews from "every nation under heaven" (v. 5) were gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost. This feast day celebrated the first fruits of the harvest (Lev. 23:19-22; Ex. 34:22) and was one the three most important holy days for Jews.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, the small band of disciples began to share the good news of Jesus Christ with the multitude of assembled Jews. The list of nations (vv. 9-11) is similar in some ways to the table of nations listed in Genesis 10, just before the Tower of Babel incident. This shows us that what God had to separate because of human sin, He was now reversing because the descent of the Holy Spirit.

Although some accused the disciples of being drunk, Peter rightly understood that this phenomenal event signaled the last days prophesied by Joel (2:28-32). This outpouring of the Spirit was possible, because, unlike David who died and still lay in his tomb, Jesus now sat enthroned at the right hand of the Father.

Yesterday we read in Jesus' final words while on earth that His disciples would be His witnesses to the ends of the earth. This commission is also recorded in Acts 1:8, where the program to be followed is more clearly outlined. The spread of the gospel would begin in Jerusalem, which is what we read about in today's passage. And although the focus here was on the Jews, there are indications that these Jews shared the gospel in their home countries (see 1 Peter 1:1). Also, Peter indicated that the gift of the Spirit was also for "all who are far off" (v. 39), an expression that referred to Gentiles.

APPLY THE WORD

It's easy for the true meaning of Christmas to be obscured by the gifts and activities of the season. Take some time today to review our study of God's great gift of redemption through His Son Jesus Christ. Truly this is the indescribable gift (2 Cor. 9:15). Then take some time to pray for individuals in your life who need this gift, asking the Holy Spirit for opportunities and receptivity to share with this person. Finally, if God places a specific nation on your heart, pray that the gospel will go out and be received there.

Acts 2:1-13

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. - Acts 2:4

TODAY IN THE WORD

These days, English is the language of the entire world. In business, education, diplomacy, entertainment, and the media, it reigns supreme. One might find a Singaporean corporation negotiating with a Vietnamese supplier in English. Or a Brazilian businessman on a plane, reading a newspaper and watching a movie in English. Or German tourists in China, ordering from restaurant menus translated into English. Literally billions of people around the globe speak, or are learning to speak, English.

The ability to use language is empowering, as the events of Pentecost attest. We know this day as the “birthday of the church,” and the doctrine of the church is our topic this month. Jesus had told His disciples to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit, who would inaugurate an age of witness (1:8). They obeyed, and fifty days after the Passover Sabbath they were gathered together, probably still trying to make sense of all that had happened. Suddenly the Spirit came upon them, manifested as a strong wind (cf. John 3:5-8) and as “tongues of fire.” His power was also shown by their immediate ability to “speak in other tongues,” that is, foreign languages (vv. 2-4).

The miracle was appropriate to the context, for Jews from throughout the known world were still in Jerusalem for the festival (vv. 5, 9-11). Furthermore, the miracle was not just a display of power but had meaningful content, for the incredulous listeners heard the gospel preached in their native languages (vv. 6-8). Most everyone would have understood Greek or Aramaic, but God chose to proclaim the good news in the “heart languages” of everyone present. This removal of the language barrier is the counterpart to what happened at the Tower of Babel (see Gen. 11:1-9). Then God multiplied languages to undercut human pride; here, He used the multiplicity of languages to bring glory to Himself. Such multilingualism will one day be part of believers' praise in heaven (Rev. 5:9)!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

To honor the spirit of Pentecost, consider getting more involved in your church. Specifically, you could volunteer in a ministry that reaches out to international students or immigrant English language learners that may be in your community. It's a way to serve people by helping them get a key that opens doors to education and employment, and such a ministry includes loving our neighbor, hospitality, diversity, and mutual service—all beautiful aspects of the body of Christ!

Acts 2:1-41

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. - Acts 2:4

TODAY IN THE WORD

When you're reading a novel, there's a moment when it all comes together, when it all makes sense and you understand where all this is going. “Aha! So that's what's motivating him.” “Aha! So that's the secret she was hiding.” “Aha! So that's what the author is driving at.” No matter what kind of novel you're reading, these “Aha!” moments of crystallization are one of the joys of imaginative literature.

The disciples probably had the same feeling in today's reading. When the Holy Spirit descended, the gospel of Christ and the flow of biblical history became clear to them. “Aha!”

Before His Resurrection and Ascension, Jesus had promised the disciples that when He left He would send “another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth” (John 14:16-17). His presence would distinguish His followers from and empower them against an uncomprehending world. His daily filling would make it possible for us to live by faith, to pursue righteousness, and to show God's love (Gal. 5:22-23).

On the day of Pentecost, the Jewish Feast of Weeks, about 120 believers were gathered in one place when the Holy Spirit descended. The fire and wind demonstrated His glory and power. The believers began to speak in tongues, proclaiming the gospel in many foreign languages. We have compelling evidence for this, since an initially skeptical international audience heard virtually every language of the known world (Acts 2:5). The listeners were amazed and confused, coming up with the lame guess that the believers must be drunk.

APPLY THE WORD

A book that might help you better grasp the big picture of Scripture, the “one story” that we’re tracing this month, is *The Book of God: The Bible as a Novel*, by Walter Wangerin. We suggest you obtain and read this book in the near future.

Acts 2:1-41

The Lord confused the language of the whole world. - Genesis 11:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

Perhaps you can relate to the difficulty of struggling through a few phrases in another language while traveling. Now imagine having to read the Bible in another language because it's unavailable in your own. This explains the joy that Pa Bates, in Cameroon, had to receive God's Word in his language: “I had never thought that God could understand and even speak Ejagham, because I had never met any preacher since I was baptized 50 years ago who preached in Ejagham, much less read God's Word in Ejagham. I am pleased to know that God will understand me when I talk to Him.”

This same thrill electrified Jerusalem nearly 2,000 years ago—people from all over the Roman Empire suddenly hearing about God in their language!

Recall that Jesus instructed His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit. It's no coincidence that the outpouring of the Spirit took place as thousands were gathering for Pentecost, the Festival of Weeks, which celebrated the first fruits of the wheat harvest (see Lev. 23:15-22). Jews from all over were gathered to hear the good news that Jesus is both Christ and Lord. The barrier erected at Babel was being reversed through the Holy Spirit.

Yet this “wonder” needed God's revelation to be understood properly. So the Spirit directed Peter to Joel (2:28-32) to explain that the promised Spirit, not wine, enabled humble Galilean fishermen to speak other languages. Moreover, “miracles, wonders, and signs” attested the lordship of Jesus (v. 22), who had been crucified some 50 days earlier. Peter then moved to Psalm 16 to show that because David's death and burial were well known (v. 29), David's words actually pointed to the Messiah, Jesus, who could not be held by death and was resurrected. Finally from Psalm 110, Peter shows that Jesus is now exalted at God's right hand.

Peter's words cut to the core of those listening. Finally grasping the true identity of Jesus of Nazareth, they repented and were baptized.

APPLY THE WORD

Peter's sermon is one of several summaries of the gospel in Acts. Take a few minutes and meditate on what Peter says about the gospel's key components: Jesus' life and ministry (v. 22), His death (v. 23), His resurrection (vv. 24-32), and His exaltation (vv. 33-35). Then consider the importance of repentance, baptism, and accepting the gospel (vv. 38, 41). Next, try to answer the question “What is the gospel?” in your own words. Now pray that the Holy Spirit will open a door to share this wonderful news!

Acts 2:1-47

God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. - Acts 2:32

TODAY IN THE WORD

Inside the famous Canterbury Cathedral is found the small St. Martin's Church, the oldest in England. It dates back to the fifth century, toward the end of the Roman occupation.

Some speculate that St. Martin's may have been founded by Roman soldiers who had converted to the Christian faith. It is known that the church's structure contains many Roman bricks, and that a Christian queen, Bertha, worshiped there in the sixth century. The oldest remaining part of the church, the Chancel, is where Queen Bertha came to pray each day.

When the first waves of church expansion spread outward from Jerusalem and Rome, the faith reached as far as the borders of the Roman empire, including the British isles. And it all started with today's reading!

We've reached the third major section of this month's study. In between God's plan for the nations and Christ's sending us to all the world are key moments in early missions history. How does the early church begin to obey Jesus' command? We'll spend the next seven days examining this in Acts.

Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit, is often called the “birthday of the church.” The Spirit now lives in every believer (Eph. 1:13-14; 2 Tim. 1:14).

Thanks to the Feast of Weeks, on this important day of Pentecost Jews from throughout the known world were in Jerusalem. Their presence symbolically reflected the church's broad mandate: all the world! This is why the gift of tongues was given to the gathered believers (Acts 2:3-4). These were real languages, as confirmed by the multilingual Jews who formed the audience for this first "revival meeting" (vv. 5-11).

Peter's evangelistic sermon included fulfilled prophecy; the historicity of Christ's life, death, and resurrection; His authority as God incarnate (v. 22); the sovereignty of God (v. 23); and yet human responsibility for what had been done to God's Son (v. 36).

APPLY THE WORD

To get an overview of the first wave of church expansion, the early days of the apostles and other eyewitnesses of the risen Christ, reserve some time soon to read through the book of Acts from start to finish in one sitting.

Acts 2:1-47

We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues! - Acts 2:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

Try to imagine for a moment what it was like for the disciples after Jesus was taken up into heaven and before the Holy Spirit came. This small group must have experienced a wide range of emotions, from fear of the authorities who had crucified Jesus to hopeful expectation of the promised Holy Spirit (John 14:26).

The book of Acts opens by reviewing the events that we looked at yesterday in Luke 24. Commanded by Jesus to "wait for the gift my Father promised" (Acts 1:4), this small band of followers remained close at hand, probably meeting for prayer daily. Acts 2 says that the entire group was in one place on Pentecost. Recall that Pentecost was one of three annual Jewish festivals (see Dec. 2). During this festival, harvest firstfruits were offered to the Lord (see Ex. 23:16). It's no coincidence that the Spirit would be poured out on this day, because clearly the Holy Spirit is the firstfruit of eternal life in Jesus Christ. Paul says much the same thing in Ephesians 1:14, where the Spirit is a "deposit guaranteeing our inheritance."

The way in which the Spirit came was sudden—like a violent wind. And as a result, the entire group worshiped God and declared His wonders in languages previously unknown to them. It's not surprising that the crowd was baffled and even accused this group of being drunk (v. 13).

In his long speech, Peter linked this phenomenal event to the earlier prophecy from Joel (2:28-32). After reminding the crowd of the recent events concerning Jesus of Nazareth, Peter then proclaimed the outpoured Spirit as the gift of the risen Jesus Christ (v. 38), whom they too could receive if they repented. And in fact about three thousand people did receive Jesus that day.

APPLY THE WORD

The Holy Spirit is the gift from the Father and the Son. At His coming, we see the church infused with power to witness and to worship as never before. The link here between witness and worship is one that we looked at yesterday, and is quite clear in Acts 2. As believers praised God for His wonders, those listening repented and trusted Jesus. As we focus on worship this month, ask the Lord how your witness for Him can bring Him glory. You may be amazed at how He can use you to bring other people to saving faith in Christ.

Acts 2:14-47.

TODAY IN THE WORD

"Why should I worship a dead Jew?" The bluntness of the question startled evangelist Alfred Ackley.

But the young Jewish student was sincere. He had been attending Ackley's meetings and was wrestling with the truth. So Ackley went back to Scripture to prepare an answer. He opened to the story of Jesus' resurrection and read again, "He is risen." Suddenly, the familiar words came alive. The witness of Scripture and of countless believers points to one inescapable conclusion: Jesus Christ is alive! Ackley led that student to Christ and later sat down at his piano and expressed his joy in the hymn, "He Lives."

The risen Christ was the theme of Peter's greatest recorded message, the sermon of Pentecost. There is enough material in these verses to fill a book, so we will only highlight the main sections. Notice how Peter defended the miraculous events of Pentecost (vv. 14-21). The scoffers were wrong about the apostles being drunk. This was the work of God, not the result of wine. Peter quoted Joel's prophecy which refers to the last days. This would have startled Peter's hearers. Since the signs of verses 19-20 did not happen, there is obviously a later fulfillment to Joel.

Peter may have been saying that if Israel would accept their Messiah, Jesus (vv. 22-40), the “day of the Lord” would come. Or he may have been using this prophecy about the Messianic age to prepare the people for the heart of his sermon: the revelation that the One they crucified is both “Lord and Christ” (v. 36).

Whatever the case, the rest of the sermon is clear. Israel’s long-awaited Redeemer, the Messiah, is Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus’ life, death and resurrection prove His claim. When the people realized what they had done to their Messiah, they cried out for forgiveness.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Sunday is an appropriate day on which to read about the birth of the church.

Acts 2:14-36

During his years as premier of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev denounced many of the policies and atrocities of Joseph Stalin. Once, as he censured Stalin in a public meeting, Khrushchev was interrupted by a shout from a heckler in the audience. “You were one of Stalin’s colleagues. Why didn’t you stop him?” “Who said that?” roared Khrushchev. An agonizing silence followed as nobody in the room dared move a muscle. Then Khrushchev replied quietly, “Now you know why.”

Just as fear crippled many in the Soviet Union, it crippled the apostles during the time between Jesus’ arrest and His ascension. Every one of the apostles deserted Jesus in some fashion during His arrest and trial (Matthew 26:56). Following His death, they even locked the doors when they met together for fear of the Jews (John 20:19). It was not until after Jesus’ ascension and the entrance of the Holy Spirit that the apostles’ fear was overcome by faith. This is evident in Peter’s Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:14-36), Peter and John’s courage in the face of a religious trial (Acts

4:3-13), and the disciples’ prayer for boldness (Acts 4:29). Are you living by faith or by fear? Paul told Timothy that God did not design us with a “spirit of fear” (2Timothy 1:7), and yet all too often we choose the spirit of fear over the walk of faith. Such a choice may result in ignored responsibilities, unfulfilled potential, unused talents, unproven faith, or untaken stands. May we live according to the words of E. Stanley Jones who said, “I am inwardly fashioned for faith, not fear. Fear is not my native land; faith is.”

Acts 2:36

TODAY IN THE WORD

In democracies the people elect their president, in monarchical nations rulership is typically passed on through bloodline, and totalitarian governments often attain power through military force. God’s governance of His people is different. In God’s kingdom, God chooses His king to represent both the people and God’s interest.

Psalms 110 was originally used during the Davidic king’s coronation ceremony. One key to understanding Psalm 110 is that there are three main characters: the narrator, the Lord, and the Davidic king. God’s words are in quotations in many translations (vv. 1-2, 4). The narrator refers to the Davidic king as “my lord” and “you/your.”

The Lord is the one who installs His king to the throne. He seats the king at His right hand, empowered to represent God and carry out His purposes. God promises the king victory over those who oppose God and His king. The Lord anoints him as king and priest “in the order of Melchizedek” (v. 4). Melchizedek was king and priest of Salem, the one who blessed Abraham in Genesis 14:18-20. The priestly king is the perfect mediator between God and His people, atoning for the sins of the people and ruling over them justly. “Until” and “on the day of his wrath” correlate and look ahead to God’s final victory over all resistance to His rule (vv. 1, 5).

Though Psalm 110 is about the king, no human king served in this role faultlessly. The prophets criticized the kings of Israel and Judah who did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and they looked ahead to a future king who would serve God faithfully. The New Testament identifies Jesus as the final and perfect Davidic King who fulfills the Messianic Psalms (Acts 2:29-36). After Jesus’ resurrection, God exalts Jesus to His right hand (Eph. 1:20; Heb. 1:3, 13), and designates Jesus as the perfect high priest (Heb. 5:7-10; 8:1; 10:12). Jesus is the crucified and risen one who has been installed as the King through whom God is working His purposes in the world.

APPLY THE WORD

We know Jesus as our high priest, the perfect sacrifice who atones for our sins. But do we serve Jesus as King? Because Jesus is exalted at God’s right hand and is King and Ruler of the entire world, every area of our lives and every aspect of our will belongs to Him. Today spend some time in prayer reflecting on Jesus’ kingship, and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the ways in which your will can more deeply submit to Jesus the exalted King.

Acts 2:23

TODAY IN THE WORD

In the summer of 1961, the Freedom Riders endured and exposed racial injustice. Despite federal regulations (upheld by the Supreme Court) to the contrary, blacks and whites at that time were segregated on interstate buses and in interstate bus terminals. Civil rights advocates organized a series of interracial "Freedom Rides" to challenge this practice.

One of the buses was firebombed. Another was attacked, the Riders beaten by an angry mob. In Jackson, Mississippi, the Riders were arrested and thrown into prison. When their attorney defended them in court, the judge turned his back and refused to listen.

During his trials before the Sanhedrin, Pilate, and Herod, Jesus was also a victim of violence and gross injustice. His judges were hostile, the witnesses lied, and the outcomes were predetermined. No friends stood by Him. He endured physical and verbal abuse, especially in the custody of the cruel Roman soldiers. He was condemned for speaking the truth and identifying Himself as the Son of Man.

Since that wouldn't matter to the Romans, the Jewish leaders falsely accused Him of inciting political rebellion. Pilate, afraid to enforce justice because of the possibility of negative reports being sent up the chain of command, passed the buck to Herod. When Jesus refused to entertain Herod or do any miracles, the king mocked Him and sent Him back. Pilate bowed to the political pressures of the situation. The religious leaders manipulated the mob into demanding Jesus' death, and the state made the sentence of execution official.

Ironically, Pilate released a rebel named Barabbas. In a sense, we're all Barabbases—sinners released from prison, with Christ as our substitute. "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; He was led like a lamb to the slaughter" (Isa. 53:7).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

During this section of our month's study, we've tried to point out each day one or two ways in which you can imitate Christ. Compile these onto a single list, then add ideas and observations of your own. What have you seen in Jesus' character and actions that you especially want to see in your own life?

Acts 2:37-47

In 1773 the young pastor of a poor church in Wainsgate, England, was called to a large and influential church in London. John Fawcett was a powerful preacher and writer, and these skills had brought him this opportunity. But as the wagons were being loaded with the Fawcetts' few belongings, their people came for a tearful farewell. During the good-byes, Mary Fawcett cried, "John, I cannot bear to leave!" "Nor can I," he replied. "We shall remain here with our people." The wagons were unloaded, and John Fawcett spent his entire fifty-four-year ministry in Wainsgate. Out of that experience, Fawcett wrote the beautiful hymn, "Blest Be the Tie that Binds."

Peter's words pierced their hearts and they questioned what they should do (v. 37). Notice how the Holy Spirit took Peter's message to cause the listeners to be angry about their sin. He told them they must repent, turn to God, be baptized so their sins would be forgiven (v. 38). Repenting means to change our mind, which results in a change of life. This promise is also for us and our children. It is for everyone our Lord God will choose, no matter where they live (v. 39). Peter told them many other things and about three thousand believed his message and were baptized (vv. 40-41).

The characteristics of the early Church are listed (vv. 42-47):

1. It was a learning Church; it persisted in listening to the apostles as they taught (v. 42).
2. It was a Church of fellowship; it had the great quality of togetherness (v. 42).
3. It was a praying Church; these early Christians knew that they could not meet life in their own strength and that they did not need to (v. 42).
4. It was a reverent Church; in verse 43 the word translated "fear" has the idea of awe in it.
5. It was a Church where things happened; signs and wonders were there (v. 43).
6. It was a sharing Church (vv. 44, 45); they had a feeling of responsibility for each other.
7. It was a worshiping Church (v. 46); they never forgot to visit God's house.
8. It was a happy Church (v. 46); A gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms.
9. It was a Church whose people others could not help liking (v.47).

APPLICATION:

The early church attracted people because of the way the members loved each other, and served each other, and served the Lord. Lord, help me to be that kind of person.

Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37

Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs. - Deuteronomy 15:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

Christian "intentional communities" have sprung up in cities all across the United States in recent years. One of the best-known, Jesus People USA in Chicago, has been in existence since 1972; other intentional communities have formed in places as diverse as Philadelphia, Tampa, Durham, and San Francisco. These Christians are characterized by sharing property, living simply, worshiping together, and ministering in challenging neighborhoods. They strive to embody the description of the church in our reading.

Approximately 120 believers gathered in Jerusalem after Jesus' resurrection (Acts 1:15). By the Spirit's power after Pentecost, another 3,000 decided to follow the resurrected Christ (2:41). This miraculous conversion of new believers is followed by an equally incredible description of their life together (2:42-47).

Verse 42 explains that the Christian community was devoted to four practices. The first was teaching. Signs and wonders accompanied the apostles' teaching, confirming their authority (v. 43). The temple was also associated with teaching, they met there daily (v. 46). Second, sharing their possessions with one another was another prominent characteristic of their fellowship (vv. 44-46). Third, "breaking of bread" refers to shared meals and the hospitality of opening their homes to one another (v. 46). Finally, prayer included the daily temple gatherings and "praising God" (vv. 46-47). Their life in community gained the respect of those who were not Christians, and people "were being saved" every day (v. 47).

Peter and John continued to preach the gospel and were imprisoned (3:1-4:30). The believers were not deterred by this opposition. In fact, 5,000 more believed in Christ (4:4) and were further emboldened by the Holy Spirit (4:31). Acts 4:32-37 confirms that the Christians' vibrant community life continued and strengthened. They remained unified and remarkably generous with one another. Luke repeats: "There were no needy persons among them" (4:34).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The early church shared more than common beliefs and core values. They shared their whole lives-including their material possessions. Passages like Deuteronomy 15:1-18 and Leviticus 25 share astonishing similarities with today's readings. "There shall be no poor among you ... do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs" (Deut. 15:4, 7-8). Are our hearts hard or our fists closed to our brothers and sisters in need?

Acts 2:42-47

Let us not give up meeting together. - Hebrews 10:25

TODAY IN THE WORD

Officially, China has embraced a communist ideology for over fifty years. Despite decades of harsh reprisals against anyone accused of being a Christian, underground house churches spread throughout the country. These churches refused to join the official, government-run denominations, and no one knows exactly how many churches or believers may be in China. But it is known that some of these churches have begun sending missionaries and evangelists to other regions in China, continuing to spread the good news of God throughout the country.

There are many parallels between these Chinese churches and the gatherings of the first Christians. As the gospel spread among Jewish believers, these new congregations continued to meet in their local synagogues until they were forbidden to do so. Once kicked out of the synagogue, believers began to meet in homes.

Today's passage gives us a good picture of these early worship services. This passage immediately follows the miraculous outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, when 3,000 people became followers of Jesus. One thing we see is that new believers were quickly brought into local fellowships, where they received instruction about the faith (the apostles' teaching) and learned the basics of Christian fellowship (communion and prayer). As a confirmation of the gospel, especially among Jewish believers, the Spirit worked powerful miracles through the apostles.

In Acts 2 we find a number of key elements that characterize a vital worshipping community. First, notice that fellowship centered around good teaching, communion, and prayer. This recipe still produces growth among believers. Second, there was a mutual

commitment to meet each other's needs. Believers gave willingly to help each other, and this support included material and financial aid. Third, they met daily, either in a formal place of worship, such as the temple courts, or in each other's homes. Fourth, they praised God for all His good gifts. And finally, although it's not stated directly, it seems that they just enjoyed being with each other.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It's easy to get sidetracked from God's purposes for a worshiping community. Acts 2 helps us get back on track. As a new year approaches, let's ask if we're devoted to God's Word and prayer. Are we willing to help each other financially? Do we meet together regularly? Are we praising God? Do we enjoy good standing among people around us? If so, we can anticipate spiritual growth in our own hearts and in our group.

Acts 2:42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. - Acts 2:42

TODAY IN THE WORD

In what was called ""a landmark victory for Greek evangelicals,"" Christianity Today magazine reported last April that the European Court of Human Rights in France upheld the rights of three Greek Air Force officers to freely evangelize. The officers had been convicted of unlawful proselytism by a Greek military court. This case was similar to those in other countries where Christians have been harassed, arrested, and sometimes even killed for sharing the gospel with nonbelievers. The issue is vitally important, because the New Testament teaches us by command and example that evangelism is one of the church's non-negotiable ministries.

We can see the church's basic mission being carried out as early as Acts 2, which describes the birth and infancy of Christ's new body. Today's reading gives us a real-life glimpse into what the church is all about, almost as if we were standing outside the meeting room looking in through the window.

A variety of terms may be used to define the church's mission, but there seems to be general agreement that it includes these four foundations: teaching or instruction, worship, fellowship, and evangelism.

Those first believers were devoted to the apostles' teaching the Word of God as it was first spoken to the body of Christ. We, too, have the apostles' teaching, complete and bound together for us in one convenient volume.

Fellowship is also a part of the church's life. Biblical fellowship has nothing to do with whether ""food and fun"" are present. The issue is the sharing of spiritual life with one another.

We know that worship was also a dynamic force in the early church because the Bible describes some of those first services. The Lord's Supper and prayer were key elements of worship for the first church, as they are for us today.

Evangelism was also taking place regularly, as these Christians took Christ with them all over Jerusalem. People were being saved every day (v. 47), an incredible standard of faithfulness and obedience to Christ that we are still striving to meet today.

APPLY THE WORD

Passages such as this help to explain why every member of Christ's body needs to be attached to a local church. A detached body part is cut off from the flow of life.

Think about your church for a minute. Do you know someone who used to be an active part of your church's life and ministry, but who has been ""missing in action"" lately? You may be the friend who can reach out and draw that person back into the life of the body. If you are willing for God to use you in this way, tell Him so.

Acts 2:1-2, 4

When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind... And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-2, 4).

WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

In his diary Jim Elliot wrote, "Am I ignitable? ... Saturate me with the oil of the Spirit that I may be a flame."

The disciples went through emotional burnout. The trial, the crucifixion, and the burial nearly snuffed out their flame. The resurrection and forty days with Jesus served as a bellows, but the fire still flickered. Then the Holy Spirit came like a mighty wind, and they became human infernos.

The Holy Spirit participated in creation, empowered Old Testament people, revealed God's Word to the prophets, and played an

important role in Jesus' birth; but He never came for a permanent stay until Pentecost. Since then He has made His home in every believer and makes God's firepower available to us all.

The greatest evidence of His work may seem to many the most mundane: He grows spiritual fruit. That does not seem as exciting as starting spiritual fires. But His fruit is characteristic of Christ's life, and so He works at reproducing the best life ever lived in each believer. Like the oil of the olive used in lamps, the juice of this fruit lights the Christian life.

Unlike Jim Elliot, most of us would prefer to hear the Holy Spirit yell, "Lights out!" so we could get some rest. Instead, as a battle commander, He cries, "Fire!" - ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

Acts 2:4

RECEIVING THE HOLY SPIRIT (F B Meyer. Our Daily Walk)

"And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."--- Acts 2:4

ON THE day of Pentecost all who were gathered together in the upper room were filled with the Holy Spirit--women as well as men, obscure disciples, as well as illustrious apostles. Deacons called to do the secular business of the Church must be men filled with the Holy Ghost. That he was a good man, full of the Holy Ghost, was a greater recommendation of Barnabas than that he had parted with his lands.

The majority of Christians have seemed to suppose that the filling of the Holy Spirit was the prerogative of a few--they have never thought of it as within their reach; and the Church has been paralysed for lack of the only power that can avail in the conflict against the world, the power which was distinctly pledged by her ascending Lord. Pentecost was meant to be the specimen and type of all the days of the years of this present age, and we have fallen far below this blessed level, not because of any failure on God's part, but because the Church has neglected its privilege.

We must desire to be filled for the glory of God. We must seek the Spirit's power, not for our own happiness and comfort, nor even for the good that we may be the better able to effect, but that "Christ may be magnified in our bodies, whether by life or death."

We must bring cleansed vessels. God will not deposit His precious gift in unclean receptacles. We must be washed in the blood of Christ from all conscious filthiness and stain, ere we can presume to expect that God will give us what we seek.

We must appropriate Him by faith. There is no need for us to wait, because the Holy Spirit has been given to the Church. We need not struggle and agonize in the vehemence of entreaty, but have simply to take what God is waiting to impart. He gives the Holy Spirit to them that obey Him (Acts 5:32).

We must be prepared to let the Holy Spirit do as He will with and through us. There must be no reserve, no holding back, no contrariety of purpose. Let us believe and reckon that we are being filled with new power and joy which shall be for the glory of God and the service of man.

PRAYER - We pray, O God, that the Holy Spirit may so infill us, that sin and self may have no dominion over us, but that the fruits of the Spirit may abound to Thy honour and glory. AMEN. - F B Meyer. Our Daily Walk.

Acts 2:1-8

"THE NEW HARVEST"

I was visiting a friend in a Midwest farming community during harvest season. Huge combines churned through his fields, depositing soybeans into waiting wagons. My friend leaped onto one of the wagons to check out his "firstfruits." What he saw was encouraging. Despite the worst corn crop in 40 years, the soybeans gave him reason to thank God for a good harvest.

Pentecost, which we remember today, has its roots in an agricultural setting. Fifty days after Passover, Jewish farmers celebrated the Feast of Weeks (Lev. 23:15-22), in which they recognized the hand of God who gave the crops.

Centuries later, the Lord chose the Day of Pentecost to celebrate a new harvest. Fifty days from Passover, the Holy Spirit came on a small group of believers and moved through Jerusalem, bringing in a different kind of crop. These firstfruits were men, women, and children added to the church (Acts 2:38-46).

Pentecost's historical farming connection reminds us that a world of lost souls is ready for harvest (John 4:35). As believers in Christ, we are God's fruit, but we are commanded to be His farmers as well.

Are we helping to bring in the new harvest? -M R De Haan II [Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI.](#)

There's surely somewhere a lowly place
In earth's harvest fields so wide,
Where I may labor through life's short day
For Jesus, the crucified. -Gabriel

Without the Holy Spirit there would be no harvest. - Our Daily Bread.

Acts 2:17

THE PROMISE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT (F B Meyer. Our Daily Walk)

"And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of My Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams."-- Acts 2:17

IN HIS sermon, on the Day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter quoted the latter part of this prediction by the Prophet (Joel 2:28). Not much is known of this prophet, who probably lived in Judah during the reign of Uzziah. But evidently his anticipation of the outpouring of the Divine Spirit had its fulfillment in those memorable scenes in which the Christian Church was born.

Before the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit had descended only upon the elect souls of the Hebrew race---upon Abraham and Moses, upon Samuel and Elijah, upon Isaiah and others of the prophets. This supreme gift of God was reserved in those days for the spiritual aristocracy of Israel, for the men who were called to eminent office and responsibility, as kings, prophets, or leaders. But Joel said that the time would come when the Holy Spirit who had been reserved for the few, was to be poured out upon the many--the young men and maidens would prophesy; even the slaves and the most despised classes of the community would partake of the Divine experience.

Whatever Pentecost means--it is open to the reception and enjoyment of us all, "Every one of you," said St. Peter, "shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." To you is the promise, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call (Act2:38-39). Let us take this to heart.

Some years ago, electricity was the perquisite of the few, but now the poorest girl or lad may utilize it and be carded along in the electric car; and it is the boast of our scientists and inventors that they are able to bring the benefits of their discoveries within the reach of the most needy amongst us. And Pentecost resembles this, in that the forces and gifts of the Eternal Spirit are now within the grasp of the feeblest hand which is stretched out to appropriate them. But there must be first the putting away of evil, the emptying of our hearts, the hunger and thirst of the soul for righteousness, before God can give us our share in the Gift which was made once for all to the Church, but must be claimed by each successive believer.

PRAYER - Let Thy Holy Spirit dwell in me continually, and make me Thy temple and sanctuary. AMEN. - F B Meyer. Our Daily Walk

Acts 2:22-39

"Jesus of Nazareth ... you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death" (Acts 2:22-23).

The question of who killed Jesus has fired controversy that has raged through the centuries. During the Middle Ages, the unruly Crusaders sometimes killed Jews on their way to free Jerusalem from the Turks. They considered them guilty of Christ's death and referred to them as "Christ-killers." Even today feelings run deep on this issue. A few years ago a Jewish professor objected to a brief reference in Our Daily Bread that the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day were partly to blame for the Savior's death.

According to Matthew's account, it appears that the Romans were responsible. The Roman governor Pilate delivered Jesus to death, even while declaring His innocence. And Roman soldiers led Him down the Via Dolorosa and publicly executed Him. Yet Peter, preaching several weeks later in Jerusalem, accused the Jews of crucifying Him (Acts 2:22-24).

People who receive Christ as their personal Savior do not argue about who killed Jesus. They know He died for every sinner (2 Cor. 5:15). On the cross, He paid the penalty for the sins of both Jews and Romans, as well as for ours (1 Peter 2:24). Ultimately, then, we are all responsible for His death.

Christ died for us. Our sins cost Him His life. By trusting Him, we receive forgiveness and eternal life. —D. C. Egner [Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved\)](#)

**Jesus took our place that we might have His peace;
He took our sin that we might have His salvation.**

Acts 2:33

THE INDWELLING SPIRIT (F B Meyer. Our Daily Walk)

"I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you for ever."-- John 14:16.

"Having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:33)

THE GIFT of the Holy Spirit was due to the intercession of our Lord, and St. Peter refers to it when he says: "Having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:33). In 1Jo2:1 (R.V.) marg. the word Comforter is translated Advocate--"One who makes us strong by His presence, as Helper, Guide, and Instructor." Think what this means, to have always beside us, not a vague influence, but a Divine Person, who waits to be our strength in weakness, our peace in trouble, our wisdom in perplexity, our conqueror in temptations, our consoler in sorrow. The Lord meant that the Holy Spirit should be to us all that He Himself had been. This is the meaning of Another. There are two Advocates, or two Paracletes. When the One ascended to the glory, the Other descended into the hearts of His disciples. "He abideth with you, and shall be in you."

"I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you." Christ had been speaking of sending Another; now He says, I am coming Myself, so that we learn that He is so indissoluble One with the Holy Spirit, Whom He sends, that the coming of the Spirit is His own coming. Do not look for the Spirit apart from Jesus. As the sun comes in the light, so does Jesus come in the Spirit. When we are filled with the Spirit, we shall not think of Him, but of Jesus to whom He bears witness, and when our hearts are taken up with the Lord, we may know that we have received Him, who is the Gift of gifts.

Open your whole nature to the entrance of the Holy Spirit. Unlock every door, uncurtain every window, that entering He may fill you with the glorious indwelling of the Father and the Son. "I will prepare a mansion," Jesus said; and, "We will make the holy soul Our Mansion."

"He shall teach you all things." His lesson-book is the life and words of our blessed Lord. We may think that we are fully informed of all that He has said, but as we study the Bible, the Holy Spirit brings us back to them again and again, always revealing new light, and undreamt of depths. Never let a day pass without reading some of the words of Jesus under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

PRAYER -Thou hast not left us comfortless, O God. May life be renewed in its springs, by the gracious operation of Thy Holy Spirit dwelling within us, and leading us from grace to grace. AMEN.

F B Meyer. Our Daily Walk.

Acts 2:33

F B Meyer

Acts 2:33 He hath poured forth this, which ye see and hear. (r.v.)

What a sublime commencement! As Jacob's heart revived, and he was assured that Joseph lived when he saw the wagons that his sons had sent, so the heart of the Church revived when the Spirit came. It was the promised sign that the Master had reached the Father's throne, and was fulfilling the unforgotten promise that He would ask the Father for another Paraclete to fill his place, and abide until He should come again in glory.

It was as though, when the Son ascended on high, leading captivity captive, He passed through all heavens, till He came where no creature had ever come, or could come. There He prayed the Father, as He had said. It was as though He spoke thus "Father, I have glorified Thee on the earth; I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do."

And the Father answered: "Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Ask of Me,... and I will give Thee."

It was as if He said: "Father, I ask nothing for Myself; for all thine are mine, and mine are thine. But for others I ask that I may have the power of giving to my own the same anointing and power which Thou gavest Me when I stood on the threshold of my work. I was then filled with the Spirit; grant unto Me the power to fill the hearts of all who believe with that same Spirit. It was in the power of that Spirit that I wrought, died, and rose; let my Church be quickened and endued with the same sacred power."

And it pleased the Father that in Him all the fulness of the Godhead should dwell, bodily. And the glorified body of Jesus became the reservoir of the Divine fulness, from which we all might receive.

Meyer, F. B. Our Daily Homily

Acts 2:42

In his book *Why Christians Sin*, J. Kirk Johnston tells about a young Russian woman who, before the collapse of the Iron Curtain, was allowed to visit her relatives in Canada. She was a devout Christian, and her friends assumed that she would defect and seek asylum in Canada or the US because of the religious oppression in the USSR. But they were wrong. She wanted to go back to her homeland.

This Russian woman said that people in the West were too busy acquiring material things and not concerned enough about their relationships. In her homeland, Christian fellowship was essential to their faith because it provided the support and encouragement they so desperately needed.

Genuine Christian fellowship involves much more than visiting over a cup of coffee in the church kitchen. It is loving one another, caring for one another, bearing one another's burdens. —R. W. De Haan ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP IS ESSENTIAL TO SPIRITUAL GROWTH.

ACTS 3

Acts 3:1-26

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob... has glorified his servant Jesus. - Acts 3:13

TODAY IN THE WORD

Evangelist Mike Silva points out that unbelievers don't have to do anything special to qualify for salvation. All they have to do is be in need of Jesus Christ. "If your house is on fire," Silva says, "you qualify for the fire department!"

The crippled man who encountered Peter and John at the temple gate certainly didn't do anything special to qualify for the miracle he received that day. He wasn't even expecting much, just a coin or two. Instead, he was completely healed (v. 16) and could walk for the first time in his life. Since the beggar was a familiar sight around the temple, and since he was jumping around so excitedly, the healing created quite a scene.

The book of Acts records many miracles performed by the apostles in continuation of the ministry of Jesus. And each miracle had specific purposes of verifying the words of the apostolic messengers and showing compassion to those in need. For instance, Jesus' miracles were performed to validate His claims to be Israel's Messiah. The miracles in Acts were also signs to validate God's power through the apostles and their close associates, and to establish God's new work in the church.

It's obvious from what happened in Acts 3 that Peter did not initiate a healing ministry. When a crowd gathered, he immediately resumed the message he had delivered at Pentecost. Jesus of Nazareth, rejected and condemned by Israel, is "the Christ" (v. 20), and forgiveness of sins is found in Him alone.

Imagine yourself as a Jew hearing Peter make pointed references to Jesus as your Messiah, and your need to call on Him in repentance. Whatever else you might think about the recent commotion in Jerusalem, you have to come to terms with this miraculous healing--and you have to decide something about Jesus.

According to Acts 4:4, many people in the crowd believed in Jesus. Peter's sermon pricked hearts again, and the body of Christ grew to about five thousand. But Peter's message also drew the attention of the religious authorities in Jerusalem, and persecution--the church's trademark for most of its 2 years--was about to begin.

APPLY THE WORD

From time to time we've focused on the need to pray for our persecuted fellow Christians around the world. They need our prayers now as much as ever.

Today, let's pray for believers in the troubled and violent Russian region of Chechnya. Chechen Christians are undergoing a horrible "evangelical cleansing"--kidnapping and murder--by radical Muslim gangs. Remember the persecuted church in Chechnya as it struggles for survival.

Acts 3:1-4:22

It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him. - Acts 3:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

Marie Antoinette is frequently (though wrongly) credited with declaring, "Let them eat cake!" when told that the French people had no bread. This attitude long predated the French aristocracy. An ancient Chinese emperor, when told that his subjects were starving for lack of rice to eat, replied, "Why don't they eat meat?"

Christians are called to a different way of living. We have been entrusted with the greatest riches and power ever known—the gospel. It has the ability to transform people from hungry to full, both spiritually and physically.

The past two days we've examined the words of Jesus to understand the full scope of the gospel as both belief and action. Our reading today covers one of the earliest incidents in the church. Peter and John were headed to prayer meeting when they were interrupted by a beggar (3:1). The needs of others often intrude upon us at seemingly inconvenient times. Will we be too caught up in our habits and routines to see an opportunity?

Peter and John shared with the man what they had and what he needed most—healing for his body and soul in Jesus' name. This act of faith allowed Peter and John to boldly proclaim the power of Christ first to the crowd in the temple courtyard, then twice to the rulers and elders (3:16; 4:10, 20). This healing also prompted praise from the beggar and those who witnessed or heard about it (3:9; 4:21).

Finally, showing concern for the beggar's physical condition resulted in his spiritual healing. And he wasn't the only one—Scripture records that this event led to the conversion of thousands of people (4:4). We cannot overestimate how God may use our expressions of help and concern for others to do His mighty work that is more than we could imagine. It is both humbling and empowering to realize that we can be part of the spread of the gospel in this way.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Many organizations offer ways for believers to meet the physical needs of people as a way to address spiritual needs as well. Prison Fellowship, for example, offers Bible studies, mentoring, and pen pal relationships to prisoners. They also sponsor Angel Tree Christmas, where people buy Christmas gifts for the children of prisoners as a way to help reconnect families and open the door to sharing faith in Christ. If you would like to participate in meeting these needs, visit www.prisonfellowship.org.

Acts 3:1-10

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! - 2 Corinthians 5:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

Lulu Cecilia Fleming was born in Florida in 1862, the daughter of a slave who died at the close of the Civil War. This remarkable woman received training in theology and became the first black person commissioned for career missionary service by the Woman's American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society. Miss Fleming's first term of service was in the Congo, after which she came home and completed medical school. She returned to the Congo as a medical missionary, but contracted African sleeping sickness and died in 1899.

Dr. Fleming did not have much in the way of "silver or gold" to give the people God called her to serve. But what she had, she gave freely. She gave of her love for Christ and of her abilities as a teacher and physician. Ultimately, Dr. Fleming gave her life in service to the Lord.

The same could be said of many of God's servants. Though Peter and John did not have what the crippled man at the temple gate was looking for, they certainly had what he needed.

It's interesting that while this man's healing was recorded, his salvation is not specifically mentioned. But the events that follow make it obvious that this hungry beggar received the Bread of Life when he encountered the two apostles that day.

This story, and a number of incidents in the Gospels, illustrate a fact we mentioned at the beginning of the month. A passion for souls involves caring about the whole person, body and spirit. Combining evangelism with care for human needs has been a successful ministry formula for many centuries.

Some people in church history have focused on the physical and social side of ministry, to the neglect of people's eternal needs. But the pattern for us is established in Scripture. Peter and John did not simply heal this man and leave him in his sins. He became another witness to Israel of God's saving grace in Christ (see Acts 3:11-26).

Jesus also cared for the whole person. He said to a sinful woman, "Your faith has saved you" (Luke 7:50), and to a suffering woman, "Your faith has healed you" (Luke 8:48). Interestingly, "saved" and "healed" are the same word in the original language.

APPLY THE WORD

When we are passionate about souls, we will view people the way Jesus saw them, as whole persons with physical, material, and spiritual needs.

There are probably people in your community, or in your own church, who have needs you can help meet. Maybe you can help them through a family project, or through your Sunday school class or prayer group. Your church leaders are a good resource for this type of information. Why not ask about the possibilities this weekend?

Acts 3:1-26

TODAY IN THE WORD

As a teenager, the great pastor and writer A. W. Tozer was standing on a street corner in Akron, Ohio, one day when he heard an evangelist pleading with passersby to come to Christ. Knowing he must be brief and clear, the street preacher called out Luke 18:13, "God have mercy on me, a sinner" and urged his hearers to call upon God. The words struck home in young Tozer's heart. That same day he went home to wrestle with God. God won!

That evangelist didn't mince words in reaching A. W. Tozer for Christ. Neither did Peter of Jerusalem mince any words. The apostle simply invoked the name and authority of Jesus (v. 6), and it was enough. His words caught the attention of a lame man who often begged at the temple gate. His miraculous healing was so animated that it created quite a scene!

But Peter wasn't looking to set up a healing ministry. He had only one message to deliver. When he saw a crowd gathering, he immediately resumed the message he had proclaimed at Pentecost: Jesus of Nazareth, whom Israel had rejected and condemned, is God's "Holy and Righteous One" (v. 14). In Him alone is the forgiveness of sins.

Imagine that you were in that crowd—a proper and religiously observant Israelite. What would you have thought of Peter's message (vv. 11-26)? His pointed references to Jesus as your Messiah, your treatment of Him, and your need to repent would be impossible to miss! No matter what you might have thought about all the recent commotion in Jerusalem, you would have had to come to terms with this miraculous healing—to do something with this Jesus.

Acts 4:4 tells us that many in the crowd decided for Jesus that day. Peter's sermon pricked people's hearts and led to several thousand individuals receiving Christ.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Spiritually, things haven't changed since Peter's day. People all around us are reaching out for help and hope.

Acts 3:11-26

He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. - Isaiah 9:6

TODAY IN THE WORD

In the streets of a Russian Jewish community in one Israeli city in the summer of 1994, a woman came running up to Moody student Yvonne Townley. 'Do you have a Russian Bible?' the woman asked. When Yvonne said that she did, the woman hugged her, kissed her, and cried. 'A Bible in my own language!'

'That was humbling,' says Yvonne. 'I was thinking about all the different versions and Bible study resources available to me back in the States, and she was crying over one Bible.'

In our Jewish Studies program, Moody students are trained to share the gospel completely through Old Testament Messianic prophecies. On summer trips to Israel, they distribute Messianic Jewish literature in at least six languages, sell Christian books door-to-door, and seek opportunities for relationship evangelism. Though opposed at times by Orthodox Jewish 'anti-missionaries,' the students persevere in witnessing.

That Samuel may be numbered among the Messianic prophets is one of the better-kept secrets of the Bible. In fact, none of his Messianic prophecies have been specifically recorded, so we are dependent on today's New Testament reading for this information.

The context was one of Peter's early evangelistic sermons, following the healing of a man crippled from birth. The purpose of the miracle was to glorify Jesus, the Messiah whom the people had killed but God resurrected. The coming of a suffering Christ is in fact a fulfillment of Jewish prophecy, and one day this Christ will come again.

Samuel is specifically cited (v. 24) as a prophet who has 'foretold these days.' This would make sense, since Samuel had the honor of anointing David, from whose family line Jesus traced His descent. How exciting to think that Samuel had a 'bigger picture' of what God was doing in history!

Peter's listeners (and we) are 'heirs of the prophets,' including Samuel. We must respond in faith to the message of Christ, for we are part of the ongoing story of His salvation.

APPLY THE WORD

The coming of the Messiah was a world-shaking event foretold throughout the Old Testament. God sent His Son to save us from sin!

Have you accepted God's incredible gift of salvation? If so, you are His child, destined to spend eternity with Him. Hallelujah!

If not, we urge you to trust Christ today and accept God's gift of eternal life (John 3:16). You might pray a prayer like this: 'God, I know I'm a sinner and deserve a punishment of death. But I believe your Son took that punishment for me and I trust His name alone for salvation. I invite Him to live in my heart, to change me, and to be my Lord forever. Thank you. In His name, Amen.'

Acts 3:2

F B Meyer

Acts 3:2 Whom they laid daily at the door of the temple which is called Beautiful. (r.v.)

Is not this thyself? Thou art of the Israel of God. There is no doubt of thy name being enrolled in the pedigree of elect and regenerate souls; but thou art lame, needing to be carried by the strong support of minister and friend; never able to leap, and walk, and praise God; and at the best only able to reach the outer side of the Beautiful Gate that conducts to the richest, gladdest life. Through that gate of entire consecration there come snatches of holy melody; glimpses of white-vestured souls; visions of ideals of life which thou hast not attained but thou art excluded, condemned to live on the alms of those that enter. How great the pity! Why shouldst thou not have the very best that God can give?

But look up! expect to receive something; open thine ears to hear and thine heart to receive immediately strength, just where thou lackest it most sorely. The feet and ankle-bones of this helpless cripple only needed strength; they were perfectly formed, but paralysed. Similarly thine ideals of Christian living are true and accurate, but thou art deficient in power. Thou must receive strength.

But this strength can only be had by union with the risen Lord. His name (that is, his nature) alone can make thee strong, and give thee perfect soundness in the presence of those who have hitherto only pitied thy weakness. Believe in Him! All that have ever risen up to obey his lead have had perfect health and strength. Open thine heart to receive them. Claim and appropriate the power and grace of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of Life which is in Christ Jesus shall make thee free from the law of sin and death, from weakness and failure.

Meyer, F. B.. Our Daily Homily

ACTS 4

Acts 4:1-37.

TODAY IN THE WORD

The fact that the church is undergoing persecution in many parts of the world today should not surprise us. Suffering for Christ has been a way of life for His people since the days of the apostles.

One of the most beleaguered parts of Christ's body is the African nation of Sudan. There a violent Islamic regime has killed many believers and inflicted great hardship. But despite this persecution the Sudanese church is growing! One church leader estimates that seventy-five percent of the people in southern Sudan are now Christians, compared to fifteen percent a little over a decade ago.

Acts 4 records the very beginning of this 2-year record of faithfulness to the Lord. This story also shows us the real motivation behind those who seek to stamp out the witness of the church.

Notice for example that what riled up the authorities was that Peter and John were preaching Jesus (v. 2). Since they had condemned Jesus to death (v. 10), they didn't want anybody mentioning His name again. They were hoping the whole incident of the cross and the claims of Jesus' resurrection would quietly blow over!

This determined opposition to Jesus Christ tells us who was directing this persecution behind the scenes. Satan was determined to prevent Christ from going to the cross. Having failed that, he turned his rage on the body of Christ.

Verses 5-21 further reveal the evil motives of those who tried to silence the infant church. The next day when the Jewish ruling council called for Peter and John to appear, the healed beggar was standing right there with them. Did they rejoice that one of their own had been made whole? No, they were only interested in stopping this “Jesus business” before it got out of hand.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The prayer of the church (vv. 23-31) is remarkable. Believers there did not ask for ease or safety, but for boldness to preach the Word and to be faithful to Christ.

ACTS 4:1-12

What is it that discourages you from witnessing? During China’s Boxer Rebellion of 1900, insurgents captured a mission station, blocked all the gates but one, and in front of that one gate placed a cross flat on the ground. Then the word was passed to those inside that any who trampled the cross underfoot would be permitted their freedom and life, but that any refusing would be shot. Terribly frightened, the first seven students trampled the cross under their feet and were allowed to go free. But the eighth student, a young girl, refused to commit the sacrilegious act. Kneeling beside the cross in prayer for strength, she arose and moved carefully around the cross, and went out to face the firing squad. Strengthened by her example, every one of the remaining ninety-two students followed her to the firing squad. (Today in the Word, Feb. 89). What do I risk in witnessing? Possibly rejection or persecution from someone. Whatever the risk may be, I must realize that nothing done for Christ is ever wasted.

Acts 4:1-31

The kings of the earth take their stand ... against the Lord. - Psalm 2:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

The June 1988 issue of Mission Frontiers, the bulletin of the U.S. Center for World Mission, describes the arrest of Xu Yongzhe, an itinerant evangelist from China, who risked coming to Beijing so that he might meet Billy Graham. Xu Yongzhe was a fugitive for refusing to follow a government policy designed to prevent itinerant evangelists from preaching the gospel. Yet despite persecution, house churches overseen by Xu Yongzhe had grown from 200 to more than 3,000 during the previous eight years.

Acts 4 records the church's first imprisonment for “unauthorized” preaching, but sadly the past 2,000 years have witnessed countless other such arrests, such as Xu Yongzhe's case.

The religious authorities, the Sadducees, were particularly offended by teaching about the resurrection, which they denied. They probably also didn't like the idea of “lay people” instructing the masses, who were clearly responding (v. 4)!

The ruler's question to Peter and John is crucial (v. 7). Certain that they acted on God's behalf and spoke with His authority, they couldn't imagine what power Peter and John might be drawing upon.

Considering that this same court convicted Jesus just weeks earlier, Peter's boldness is unbelievable. Although already indwelt by the Holy Spirit, he was given a special filling at this point. Recall Jesus' own promise: “When you are brought before synagogues, rulers, and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say” (Luke 12:11-12).

Upon hearing what had happened to Peter and John, the whole community praised the Sovereign Lord. Recognizing the fact that the rulers of the world rage against God, the early disciples prayed for more boldness to preach and power to perform signs and wonders in the name of Jesus.

APPLY THE WORD

We should be encouraged from Peter and John's example that being an effective witness doesn't require going to seminary! The most essential qualification for evangelism is available to every believer—reliance upon the Holy Spirit. Although a seminary degree is certainly appropriate for some ministries, God is more than happy to use “untrained” individuals with willing hearts. Peter and John are also an example of the importance of teamwork in ministry. They were no doubt encouraged by each other's presence.

Acts 4:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

Coins in the United States have the phrase “In God We Trust” stamped upon them. But to which God does this refer? It is true that many who framed the Constitution shared common values shaped by their Judeo-Christian heritage, but the American religious scene is now far more pluralistic than it was when the United States was founded. While many still acknowledge Jesus Christ as

God's Son and believe that the Bible is the Word of God, Christians must compete in the marketplace of ideas along with Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and countless other religious views. The United States is one of the most religiously diverse countries on earth.

This tradition of religious pluralism offers at least one advantage. It has allowed the church to worship and proclaim the gospel in freedom. But it also poses a danger. Because we live in a culture that celebrates religious diversity, we face the temptation of becoming religious pluralists ourselves. With so many views existing side by side, how do we protect ourselves from embracing false views of God?

The children of Israel were confronted with a similar problem. Moses warned that once they settled in the land God had promised to give them, their faith would be constantly challenged by the pagan beliefs of the surrounding nations. False prophets would come claiming to have special insights directly from God and demonstrating the ability to perform miraculous signs. Friends and relatives could be deceived by their teaching and might tempt others to adopt the same views. Entire towns might be drawn into false worship.

APPLY THE WORD

In order to "guard the good deposit" of truth that has been entrusted to us, we must first know the truth. Obtain a copy of your church's doctrinal statement from your pastor or a church leader and study it. What does it tell you about the truths your church believes are essential to the Christian faith? What does it say about Jesus Christ and His work? The Moody Publishers catalog has many books about Christian doctrine, such as *Basic Theology* by Charles Ryrie and *Foundational Faith* edited by John Koessler.

Acts 4:13-31

Stevie brought home a paper from kindergarten that was not up to his usual stellar performance—he had failed to color the picture completely. Mom talked to him and explained how important it is to do his schoolwork well. Then, expecting a promise of better things, she asked, "So, what are you going to do about it tomorrow?" "I'm going to stay home!" he replied.

Maybe you've been criticized for something you said or did. Perhaps you've taken on a project that didn't go as planned. Maybe you've gotten involved in a relationship that fell apart. When a new opportunity comes along that might put you in a situation similar to one in which you've not been successful, what do you do? Do you try to improve on your record, or do you run away from it like Stevie wanted to do?

Giving up is always the easy way out of difficulty, but eventually we all need to learn what Peter learned. Just before Jesus was crucified, Peter denied that he was one of Christ's disciples (John 18:15-18). But the story doesn't end with this failure. Later, Jesus encouraged Peter to serve Him, and what happened to Peter? The early chapters of Acts tell us that he was leading the early church and boldly proclaiming the Gospel. Peter had learned how to build on failure, not get buried in its rubble.--J D Brannon ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

Acts 4:20

C H Spurgeon

Acts 4:20 "We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard."

1976 What said John Bunyan after he had lain in prison many years simply for preaching the gospel? The magistrates said, "John, we will let you out, but you must promise not to preach again. There are the regular clergymen of the country; what have you, as a tinker, to do with preaching?"

John Bunyan did not say, "Well now, I can see that this preaching is a bad thing. It has got me into prison, and I have had hard work to sell enough laces to keep my wife and that poor blind child of mine. I had better get out of this place and stick to tinkering."

No, he did not talk like that, but he said to the magistrates, "If you let me out of prison today, I will preach again tomorrow, by the grace of God." And when they told him that they would not let him out unless he promised not to preach, he bravely answered, "If I lie in jail till the moss grows on my eyelids, I will never conceal the truth which God has taught me." - C H Spurgeon

Acts 4:31

F B Meyer

Acts 4:31 They were all filled with the Holy Ghost.

They had been filled on the Day of Pentecost, and Peter had been suddenly and mightily infilled for his encounter with the Sanhedrim (Acts 4:8); but here again they were all privileged, whilst in the attitude of prayer and praise, to be once more most blessedly infilled. From this we gather that we may claim repeated fillings of the Holy Spirit.

But let us remember that it is not necessary for the place to be shaken, or for the air to be filled with the outward phenomena of Pentecost as the necessary condition of this heavenly gift. Mr. Fletcher reminds us that the Lord may be pleased to come softly to our help. He may make an end of our corruption by helping us to sink gently to unknown depths of meekness. Like Naaman, we are full of prejudices. We expect that the Penecostal gift will come to us with as much ado, pomp, and bustle, as the Syrian general looked for. But the blessed Paraclete often disconcerts all these preconceived notions. When we are looking for the hurricane, He comes as the zephyr. When we are expecting the torrent to pour into and fill the well, He fills it by single drops.

But the results will always be the same — great boldness in witness-bearing, much liberty in prayer and praise; great grace and beauty of character; self-denying love for those in need; great power through union with the risen Lord. If the second chapter of this book had been lost from the first MS., we must still have inferred something like the Pentecost. In no other way could we have accounted for the marvellous change which passed over the followers of Jesus, delivering them from the cowardice, wrangling, and prejudices of former days. Oh for a similar transforming experience for us all!

Meyer, F. B. Our Daily Homily

Acts 4:32

WHO WILL DO THE WORK?

Those who believed were of one heart and one soul. --Acts 4:32

The following letter, which speaks for itself, was circulated in a large congregation.

Dear Friend:

Our church membership... 1400
Nonresident members... 75
Balance left to do the work... 1325
Elderly who've done their share... 25
Balance left to do the work... 1300
Sick and shut-ins... 25
Balance left to do the work... 1275
Members who do not give... 350
Christmas and Easters members... 300
Balance to do the work...
Members who are overworked... 300
Balance left to do the work... 325
Members with alibis... 200
Balance left to do the work... 125
Members too busy with other things.123
Balance left to do the work... 2

Just you and me, friend, and you had better get busy, because it's too much for me!

The historian Luke said the members of the first-century church were of one mind, they cared for each other, and God was working among them. He will work in our church too if we will let His Spirit work through us. -H W Robinson ([Our Daily Bread. Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

The church is made up of just two kinds of folk;
No matter how you and I view it --
The ones who just talk about what should be done,
And those who get busy and do it. — Anon

Acts 4:32-37

You are His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you (1 Peter 2:9).

As newsman Clarence W. Hall followed American troops through Okinawa in 1945, he and his jeep driver came upon a small town that stood out as a beautiful example of a Christian community. He wrote, "We had seen other Okinawan villages, ... down at the heels and despairing; by contrast, this one shone like a diamond in a dung heap. Everywhere we were greeted by smiles and dignified bows. Proudly the old men showed us their spotless homes, their terraced fields, ... their storehouses and granaries, their prized sugar mill."

Hall saw no jails and no drunkenness, and divorce was unknown. He learned an American missionary had come there thirty years earlier. While he was in the village, he had led two elderly townspeople to Christ and left them with a Japanese Bible. These new believers studied the Scriptures and started leading their fellow villagers to Jesus. Hall's jeep driver said he was amazed at the difference between this village and the others around it. He remarked, "So this is what comes out of only a Bible and a couple of old guys who wanted to live like Jesus."

The great power of God's Word leads to salvation through faith in Christ, creating a "special people," a community of believers who love one another, exhort one another, and serve God together. We need to pray that our churches will be an example of God's power to a watching world. —H. V. Lugt ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

The world at its worst needs the church at its best.

Acts 5

Acts 5:1-42.

TODAY IN THE WORD

As celebrated violinist Erica Morini, ninety years old and nearly blind, lay dying last fall in a New York hospital, her Manhattan apartment was robbed.

But this was no ordinary thievery. Morini's prized possession was taken: a 268-year-old Stradivarius violin worth \$3.5 million. Morini had willed any profits from the sale of the violin to charity, along with the rest of her estate. She died two weeks after the robbery, never knowing that her beloved violin was gone.

Reports such as this make us shake our heads in amazement at the coldness of human hearts. But then, we shouldn't wonder why someone would steal from a dying woman. Ananias and Sapphira, members of the church at Jerusalem and witnesses to incredible events, stole from the living Lord!

Just as persecution from without has a way of spurring the growth of the church and the spread of the gospel, so does the cleansing of the church from within. The sin of this couple and the severity of their judgment need to be seen in the context of a church where all the believers (Acts 4:32) rallied in the face of persecution and poverty.

Ananias and Sapphira tried to deceive the apostles and lied to God. When the church is at its strongest and most dynamic, when the body of Christ is committed to proclamation and worship and true fellowship, sin is taken very seriously. Purity is a priority. Acts 5:11 records the result of these two deaths, but fear did not cause the church to cringe or pull back. Just the opposite. The church emerged from this act of judgment to resume and increase its witness, even as persecution grew.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Look at the words of the Jewish elder named Gamaliel in verses 38-39.

His observation is a fact that no one in Jerusalem could deny. Whatever they thought of Peter and his fellow apostles, something unexplainable was happening in their lives.

Acts 5:1-16

Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. - Acts 5:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

Reciting the text of Deuteronomy 32:35, 38-year-old Jonathan Edwards opened what would become his most famous sermon: "Here the Lord warns us that sudden destruction falls upon the wicked. There is nothing that keeps wicked men at any one moment out of hell but the mere pleasure of God. O sinner, consider the fearful danger you are in." The sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," left the congregants of Enfield, Connecticut, quaking with fear, some even crying aloud for God's mercy.

That's the kind of fear inspired by today's story. Luke, the author of the book of Acts, records for us a turning point for the early Christian church. The followers of Jesus were just beginning to understand their new identity in Jesus. They were figuring it out day by day as they met together for meals and worship and to sit under the Apostles' teaching. They knew the gospel of Jesus Christ demanded a sharing of resources, and they became radically generous with one another. Wealthy disciples sold property and donated the proceeds to the church. The poor were being cared for in their midst.

Ananias and Sapphira saw this generous outpouring. They, too, sold property, but rather than donate all of the proceeds (which was not commanded), they chose to hold back a portion. Their sin was not in withholding some of the money from the sale; rather, their sin was in claiming that they had turned over all the proceeds to the disciples.

The consequence for their sin was swift and severe. It sent shivers down the spine of every believer and nonbeliever alike. God knew the secrets of men's hearts. And not only that, He was revealing those secrets to the Apostles! The church was altered by this event, for now it was unmistakable that the gathering of believers in Jesus was a holy assembly where God's presence was real.

APPLY THE WORD

What would it look like for the church today to walk in the fear of the Lord? What would change if we became acutely aware that God was witness to all we said and did? Pray for the leaders in your church today, that they would walk in the fear of the Lord. Pray that your church would experience growth as the result of new believers being added to your numbers when they marvel at the visible work of God in your midst.

Acts 5:12-16 Esther 8:15-17

The fear of the Lord teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honor. - Proverbs 15:33 Read Acts 5:12-16, and note the similarities between the Jews in Esther's day and the early Christian church in Acts. Both groups inspired others to put their faith in God.

TODAY IN THE WORD

J. R. R. Tolkien, a Christian and author of the Lord of the Rings trilogy, never defended his stories as biblical allegory. Instead, they were what he called "true myth." By this, he was emphasizing the mythological nature of the plot and characters and the "truth" of the themes. One such theme in the Lord of the Rings is the triumph of good over evil, a clearly Christian idea.

This theme resounds in the final chapters of Esther, helping us to see the place of this book in the canon of Scripture. Early on, we noted that many people question the relevance of Esther. Why would a book that never explicitly mentions God be included in the Bible? Now we begin to see that its themes of the triumph of good and the blessings of obedience are essential for strengthening our Christian devotion.

Today's key verse reiterates this theme and provides a framework for today's reading. This proverb compares two synonymous phrases to say that the fear of the Lord is, in essence, humility. Just as the fear of the Lord teaches wisdom, it also assures honor.

It's helpful to think back to the stark contrast between the two characters, Haman and Mordecai. Haman followed the road of foolishness, not the path of wisdom. He lived for himself, pursuing his pleasures and ambitions. He was greedy for his own honor. In the end, all that he had desperately wanted and aspired to was taken from him. Mordecai, on the other hand, went the way of wisdom. He feared the Lord with humility and faith. He did not seek his own honor. He was never climbing any ladders of personal fame or prominence. And look at his reward in today's reading!

Mordecai was dressed like the king. He was wearing "royal garments," a "crown of gold," and a "purple robe" (v. 15). This regal picture of Mordecai echoed Haman's earlier ambitions for his own personal glory (cf. 6:7-9). And now Mordecai enjoyed not only the king's favor but also the favor of the entire kingdom. Ultimately, however, the favor Mordecai received served to glorify God, causing many to become "Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them" (v. 17).

APPLY THE WORD

Read Acts 5:12-16, and note the similarities between the Jews in Esther's day and the early Christian church in Acts. Both groups inspired others to put their faith in God. We've already learned that we will suffer for Christ and His kingdom. Here we learn that at times we will be honored for our Christian devotion and lead others to God! How many people have seen God's work in your life and

placed their trust in Christ? Pray for God's glory to be seen in you, as well as the boldness to declare His glory.

Acts 5:12-42

Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. - 2 Timothy 3:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

Experts tell us that the church is facing more persecution now than ever before. In several central Asian countries, laws ban churches that aren't legally recognized, but make it virtually impossible for churches to become legal. New Christians are often accused of forsaking family and culture and can be "brainwashed," isolated, and even beaten to force them to renounce Christianity. And yet, despite death threats, martyrdom, and intense opposition, the church is growing in Central Asia, just as it often does with persecution.

Recall that the church prayed for bold preaching and more signs and wonders in the name of Jesus (see Sept. 5). Here we see this prayer powerfully answered.

It's not surprising that once again the Sadducees feel threatened. But physical power is never effective against the power of the gospel. Prison doors are no obstacle for an angel who also gives the apostles a fresh commission to preach. Once again we see that ultimate allegiance can only be given to God. Other places in the Bible (such as Rom. 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-14) exhort believers to submit to the governing authorities. Yet when governments require believers to deny the Lord or to commit immoral acts, believers must choose to obey God and suffer the consequences.

As we've seen before, Peter used the event at hand as an opportunity for preaching the gospel. The truth about Jesus enraged the Sanhedrin, who would have killed the apostles, if not for the council of Gamaliel, perhaps the greatest teacher of his time. His "wait and see" advice spared the apostles, although flogging was a brutal punishment that could result in death.

Yet the disciples didn't pity themselves, but rejoiced for suffering dishonor for the Name. Renewed by the very punishment that was intended to silence them, the disciples increased their efforts to share the good news that Jesus is the Messiah!

APPLY THE WORD

For those of us who may not experience direct persecution, it's crucial that we stay informed and pray for our brothers and sisters who are oppressed. To help get started, visit www.bibleleague.org for a 21-day prayer guide for the persecuted church. Yet perhaps some of us need to ask why we aren't persecuted. Consider the following words from evangelist Ajith Fernando: "Evangelism provokes persecution, while persecution energizes evangelism." A lack of evangelism may account for a lack of persecution.

Acts 5:29 Exodus 1:15-22

We must obey God rather than human beings! - Acts 5:29

TODAY IN THE WORD

Martin Luther King Jr., one of the most courageous leaders in recent American history, faced threats and opposition, eventually giving his life in the fight for civil rights. Fear, however, would not dissuade him. He wrote, "There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must do it because Conscience tells him it is right."

The Hebrew midwives faced just such a moment in our reading today. The Pharaoh of Egypt had given them a direct command: kill every Hebrew boy at his birth. This is exactly the kind of moment to inspire knee-knocking fear. Pharaoh held all the power, and he had every advantage over the midwives. He was a man; they were women. He was an Egyptian; they were Hebrews. He was king, and they were commoners. If they defied him, the midwives would likely lose their lives. The risk was so great—it was a matter of life and death.

But the midwives knew of Someone greater than Pharaoh. Perhaps they had learned of Him on their mothers' knees, hearing stories told of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They knew of the miraculous rescue of Jacob's family from the famine. And as with Noah and Abraham, the midwives saw more than just the obvious dangers presented by Pharaoh. They saw God, and they feared Him. They would defy the one who had authority to kill them, because ultimately they had to trust the One who had power to protect them.

They had reasons to trust. The narrative has this relentless forward movement, starting from the very beginning of Exodus 1. As a people, the Hebrews were multiplying. Pharaoh strategized about ways to oppress them, to control them, and to enslave them. But they simply wouldn't be subdued. And we of course know why. God was on their side, fighting for them!

The Hebrew midwives trusted God despite the danger, and their lives were preserved and blessed.

APPLY THE WORD

When we are ruled by fear, we demand safety and security. We're unwilling to take risks. But the life of following Jesus is a life full of risk. Which character in the Bible wasn't asked by God to do something extraordinarily risky? Our Lord Himself faced the ultimate danger, that of losing His life. He did it willingly because He knew of God's greater plan. Faith means trusting God in the face of risk, and it requires we see God's protection over us even in the midst of danger.

Acts 5:42 Acts 7:30--8:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

Richard Wurmbrand, author of *Tortured for Christ*, was a pastor and leader of the underground church in communist Romania during the years after World War II. Imprisoned for his faith, Wurmbrand met a young communist lieutenant who was thoroughly indoctrinated by Marxism and believed he was creating a better world by arresting and persecuting Christians. The young officer scoffed at Pastor Wurmbrand's sincere expression of love for his enemies. But after many conversations about Christianity, Wurmbrand finally had the privilege of leading this officer to faith in Christ in the pastor's prison cell.

That zealous young lieutenant reminds us of the zealous young Saul. Saul fervently believed that Christians presented a menace and a threat to the religion in which he had been trained so thoroughly. This rabbi desired to prove his dedication to the traditions of his Jewish faith by becoming the chief persecutor of Christians.

Before Saul appeared on the scene, Stephen delivered a powerful indictment to the elders of Israel. He reminded the Jewish council that the nation's forefathers failed to obey Moses despite the miracle of the exodus from Egypt. Stephen then charted Israel's rebellion and idolatry all the way from the golden calf to the worship of idols that led to the Babylonian exile. One of the worst examples was the worship of Molech, which required child sacrifice.

Verses 44-50 are important because Stephen showed that God's work and His presence were not limited to the temple in Jerusalem. In other words, God's Spirit was at work in the new beginning called the church, and these "stiff-necked" men were resisting it just as their ancestors resisted God (v. 51).

No one nodded off during Stephen's sermon! The violent reaction of the elders and the execution of Stephen demonstrated that the hatred directed toward the church was of more than human origin.

God knew that hostility would come. The "Hound of heaven" was pursuing Saul, and Stephen's death was part of the plan to compel Saul to face the truth.

APPLY THE WORD

Most of us can recall people whom God used to awaken us to our sin and our need of a Savior.

You can probably name several people like this in your own life. Why not send them a new year's greeting and a word of appreciation, if that's still possible? Whether it's a phone call, a note, or a personal visit, your contact may be just the spark of joy or encouragement someone needs in these opening days of 2000. Is there someone you can contact even today?

Acts 5:4

F B Meyer

Acts 5:4 Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God.

Achan, Belshazzar, and Ananias, met the same fate, because of their persistent use of devoted things. When once we have devoted aught to God, He counts it as his own, and strikes down the hand that would abase it to common and profane use. The Lord our God is a jealous God; He will brook no perversion of his rights. Beware that you take back nothing which you have laid on God's altar, least of all yourself. Each gathering of believers is endowed with mystic and extraordinary importance, because the Lord, through the Eternal Spirit, is literally present. The true President is not the minister, however distinguished by his gift or grace, but the Divine Spirit Himself; and any sin against the Church is really against Him. It is this Divine presence that invests a gathering of the simplest, humblest believers with such unique importance. It is this which gives them the mysterious binding and loosing power, which is recognized and ratified in heaven. Behind Peter was the real Head of the Church; and so with every faithful minister. Honor the Personality, the Presidency, and Deity of the Holy Spirit, as set forth in this narrative.

Dr. Gordon told me on one occasion that he had in his church a man who, like a very crooked stick, obstructed all its work. He spoke to him alone, and before his brethren; but to no purpose. Then he bethought himself; and remembered that not himself, nor his church officials, was the true Head of the Church, but Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. He therefore handed the whole matter

over to the Divine Spirit, as the Executive of the Godhead. In a fortnight this man had left the city, and necessarily ceased the obstruction in which he had persisted.

Meyer, F. B. Our Daily Homily

Acts 5:41

In ancient Rome, crowds by the tens of thousands would gather in the Coliseum to watch as Christians were torn apart by wild animals. Paul Rader, commenting on his visit to this famous landmark, said,

"I stood uncovered to the heavens above, where He sits for whom they gladly died, and asked myself, 'Would I, could I, die for Him tonight to get this gospel to the ends of the earth?'"

Rader continued,

"I prayed most fervently in that Roman arena for the spirit of a martyr, and for the working of the Holy Spirit in my heart, as He worked in Paul's heart when He brought him on his handcuffed way to Rome."

Those early Christians

"lied on the threshold of heaven, within a heartbeat of home, no possessions to hold them back." [Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

ACTS 6

Acts 6:1-7:19.

TODAY IN THE WORD

A policeman noticed a poor-looking older lady picking things up off the street and putting them into her apron. Afraid that she was up to no good, he approached her and said gruffly, "What is it you're hiding there in your apron? Open it up or I'll run you in."

Smiling, she opened her apron and showed him bits of broken glass, nails and other sharp objects. "Why are you gathering those?" the policeman asked.

"I pick them up every day," she answered. "Many barefooted children come this way every day and are liable to cut their feet."

That lady had a willingness to serve, a heart that looked for ways to meet others' needs. That's the same attitude shown by Stephen and the six other men chosen to administer the food given to widows in the church at Jerusalem. They were putting others before themselves; they wanted to give, not to take.

These men were acting in much the same role as the later church office of deacon. While their task seems to have been a temporary assignment to meet a specific need, it is nevertheless one of the earliest examples of administration in the young church.

The division of labor apparently settled the dispute and allowed the apostles to give their attention to their primary calling (6:4). This was an important step in the governing of the church, as evidenced by the permanent office of deacon.

In verse 7 Luke reports on the growth of the young church (see also 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14). As a careful historian, Luke notes key times of expansion and other important events and their effect on the church (see 9:31).

But the focus in today's text is clearly on Stephen. The hostility building against the disciples settled for this moment on Stephen. The false witnesses bringing false charges reminds us of the trial of Jesus Himself.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The neglect of the widows in the Jerusalem church reminds us of how easy it is to overlook important things in our busyness. Since that's true, we can be grateful for people such as Stephen who are willing to serve others. These people see to the details that are often passed by in our hurry to accomplish "important" things. You probably have several such people in your life.

Acts 6:1-7

Choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. - Acts 6:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

The Pacific Garden Mission in Chicago has been ministering to the hungry and the homeless since 1877. Founded by George and Sara Dunn Clarke, it ministers to both physical and spiritual needs through meals and Bible studies. It also provides clothing, free medical and dental care, and job counseling and placement. Other ministries include English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in the Polish community, a jail ministry, and the award-winning Unshackled! radio program, which features inspiring testimonies of faith.

The Pacific Garden Mission follows in the footsteps of the original deacons in Acts 6. This is the only New Testament narrative we have of church leaders being chosen (except Jesus' call of His disciples prior to the actual establishment of the church). Intriguingly, the entire episode began from conflict within the church—serious conflict rooted in racial and socioeconomic causes. The good news was that the church was taking care of widows (see March 15). The bad news was that the Grecian Jews felt that the resource distribution favored the Hebraic Jews (v. 1).

Mediating the crisis, the Apostles went straight to the heart of the matter. They implicitly admitted that better administration could more equitably meet the need, but their ministry calling and priorities meant that they were not the ones to do it. They needed to focus on preaching and prayer, so they delegated the urgent responsibility of physical ministry to seven deacons. Notice that despite the different assignment, spiritual leadership remained spiritual leadership—the deacons' qualification was not "managerial talent" but rather "full of the Spirit and wisdom," and they were formally commissioned in prayer and with the laying on of hands. We don't know the selection process, but it was clearly Spirit-blessed since it came up with such notables as Stephen and Philip. All the men chosen had Greek names, acknowledging the justice of the Grecian Jews' complaint (vv. 5-6). Out of this critical conflict emerged justice, leadership, and unity.

APPLY THE WORD

As today's reading shows, the original deacons were chosen as a matter of social justice—to resolve racial tension and distribute resources fairly. In the same spirit, the church has often been involved in issues of social justice, such as the civil rights movement in the United States. How the African American church was at the heart of the movement is an oft-neglected story in mainstream history books, but you can learn more by watching the documentary film, *We Shall Not Be Moved* (2001).

Acts 6:1-15

Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders. - Acts 6:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

The right tools and equipment make all the difference. No matter how talented, no one wants to demolish a building with just a hammer. A hockey goalie wears the protective pads and mask for his position. An expert seamstress won't use an upholstery needle when she's doing a delicate embroidery.

For the next few days we'll examine what it means to grow in extending grace. Stephen provides an example of how God's grace enables us to serve the body of Christ and to proclaim the message of Jesus.

Stephen was selected for ministry because he was known as someone who was "full of the Spirit and wisdom" (v. 3). The church needed men who were willing and prepared to engage in the growing ministry of aiding the needy, especially distributing food to the widows. This was not just a sideline ministry; Scripture connects this work with the spread of the gospel (v. 7). Even here we see a precursor to the images that Paul would use in his letters, describing the church as one body with many parts (see 1 Corinthians 12).

Additional information is provided about Stephen, who is described as "full of God's grace and power" (v. 8). What follows is a marvelous picture of someone who has grown in the grace of God: this man selected for ministry to those in need becomes a powerful example of boldness for Christ.

The miraculous signs done by Stephen first attracted the attention of Greek-speaking converts to Judaism, who began to debate him—in vain (vv. 9-10). Flustered by their inability to win, they convinced some others to lie about Stephen, leading to his arrest by the religious court in Jerusalem (v. 12). When given the opportunity to speak, Stephen delivered an impassioned history of God's work with His people culminating in Jesus (see Acts 7). This bold presentation of the gospel incited the crowd to stone him to death.

Even in death, Stephen was full of God's grace: following the example of Jesus, Stephen's final words were an intercession for his enemies (Acts 7:60). A life full of God's grace ministers to others, proclaims the gospel, and extends forgiveness.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Sometimes we make a distinction in the church between the "important" roles and the "behind-the-scenes" work. God makes no such distinction. Every act of service is seen by Him and is valuable for the ministry. Whether caring for children in the nursery,

maintaining the church food pantry, teaching a Bible study, or working in the sound booth, your contribution to the body of Christ is important. We all can and should be described as full of wisdom, power, grace, and the Holy Spirit.

Acts 6:1-10

Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. - Acts 6:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

Scientists are working to perfect a new kind of "battery" that could be used in cell phones, notebook computers, and other portable electronic devices. A fuel cell using inexpensive liquid methanol could be easily recharged from a carry-along flask or cartridge. Such a power source would be environmentally friendly, producing only heat, carbon dioxide, and water as waste products. Fuel cells are not a new idea, but barriers such as consumer habits and methanol's current classification as a dangerous substance stand in the way of widespread use.

In today's reading, God's grace was Stephen's inexhaustible power source. We've already seen that grace brings forth godly qualities and actions, and we see here that it can also result in powerful miracles. These miracles that Stephen and others worked by grace were signs given by God to validate the truth of the gospel being preached (cf. Rom. 15:18-19; Heb. 2:4).

The context here is the early history of the Jerusalem church. An ethnic squabble had led to the choosing of deacons as part of the evolving leadership structure. While the apostles would focus on prayer and preaching, the deacons were to take charge of acts of practical service, such as distributing food to widows (vv. 2-4). These seven men—apparently all Grecian Jews in order to help ease the racial tensions—were chosen by the group and commissioned by the Twelve for this new office.

The deacons were described as full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, and Stephen specifically was said to be full of faith, grace, and power as well. Clearly, their abilities weren't limited to practical service, as both Stephen and Philip are recorded in Scripture as having significant evangelistic ministries. Once again, we see an example of grace being linked inseparably with wisdom, faith, power, and the Holy Spirit.

APPLY THE WORD

Stephen debated with Greek Jews, who "could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke" (vv. 9-10). Grace gives us the boldness and ability to share and defend our faith. Even if you feel like the most timid person, the grace that empowered Stephen is the same grace available to you.

Pray today for the opportunity to share the good news of the gospel of grace with someone in your life.

Acts 6:1-15; 7:54-8:3

Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. - Revelation 2:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

In his commentary on Acts, Ajith Fernando writes, "The story is told of a Christian martyr smiling as he was being burned at the stake. His persecutor ... asked him what there was to be smiling about. He replied, "I saw the glory of God and was glad." Consider also John and Betty Stam, Moody Bible Institute graduates, who were missionaries to China and were martyred in 1934. Shortly before his death, John wrote, "Take away everything I have, but do not take away the sweetness of walking and talking with the King of Glory!"

Such was also the experience of Stephen, who was full of the Spirit and wisdom (6:3), faith (6:5), and God's grace and power (6:8). Not surprisingly, such godliness encounters opposition, this time from the Synagogue of the Freedman, descendants of freed Jewish slaves taken earlier by the Romans. Like the Sanhedrin with Peter and John, these synagogue members were no match for Stephen.

Unable to defeat Stephen in debate, they secretly drummed up false charges against him, specifically blasphemy against Moses and God. Apparently, Stephen had been elaborating on Jesus' teaching that He, not the temple, was the true place where God met with His people (see John 2:19-22) and that He Himself fulfilled all that the law had anticipated (see Matt. 5:17-18). Such truths infuriated the Jewish religious leaders.

There couldn't be a greater contrast between Stephen's face (like an angel) and the faces of the Sanhedrin (like ferocious wild beasts)! While they snarled and stoned him for blasphemy, Stephen looked upward, beholding Jesus in glory, standing to welcome him to heaven. The many parallels between Stephen's death and Jesus' crucifixion show how closely Stephen followed Jesus. Stephen prayed for Jesus to receive his spirit, just as Jesus prayed to the Father. Stephen also prayed for forgiveness for his

murderers. Stephen's death is tragic, yet his witness had a profound impact on others, especially one man, Saul.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Take time this weekend to read through Stephen's speech (7:2-53)—the longest one in Acts! He stressed two key points. First, God often worked redemptively outside the Promised Land, and thus worship of God is possible outside the temple. Therefore, Jesus' teaching about the temple is consistent with God's actions in the Old Testament. Second, the Israelites repeatedly rejected God's appointed leaders and God's commands. So, it's the Jews, not Stephen, who have spoken (and acted) blasphemously.

ACTS 6:1-7

What do you consider to be qualifications for spiritual leadership in the Church?

Topic: Leadership

E. Stanley Jones told of a missionary who lost his way in an African jungle. He could find no landmarks and the trail vanished. Eventually, stumbling on a small hut, he asked the native living there if he could lead him out. The native nodded. Rising to his feet, he walked directly into the bush. The missionary followed on his heels. For more than an hour they hacked their way through a dense wall of vines and grasses. The missionary became worried: "Are you sure this is the way? I don't see any path." The African chuckled and said over his shoulder, "Bwana, in this place there is no path. I am the path." (Today in the Word, May, 1996, p. 24).

Acts 6:8-7:60

Stephen ... looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God. - Acts 7:55

TODAY IN THE WORD

Many associate the term prophet with a person who predicts the future, but this is not the primary meaning of the biblical designation. A biblical prophet is a messenger of the Lord, sent to proclaim God's will for His people and for restoration of the world. Prophets often called people to repentance and foretold the coming Messiah. Today's study looks at a New Testament prophet with an important message.

Stephen was prominent among the seven men chosen to oversee daily ministries in Jerusalem (6:1-6). He received recognition for his wisdom, faith, grace, and power and is known as being full of the Holy Spirit (6:5, 8, 10; 7:55). Throughout Acts, "filled with the Holy Spirit" describes someone enabled by the Spirit to bear bold witness to the risen Christ (cf. 4:8, 31). As believers in Christ, the same Spirit indwells us, leading and empowering us to bear fruit of great faith and gospel ministry.

In our passage today, Stephen was falsely accused before the Jewish court. The scene looks similar to the trial of Jesus including false witnesses and a hostile crowd (cf. Matt. 26:57-68). When given the opportunity to defend himself, Stephen defended God's work of salvation throughout history. The focus of his speech was a scathing indictment. The accused became the accuser who charged his audience with rebellion against God, which was displayed most definitively through their rejection of Christ. The crowd's violent response confirmed the allegation; Stephen's response was Spirit-filled and exemplary. His eyes remained fixed on Christ, his King and Advocate.

Stephen learned from Christ to face death, committing himself to Jesus (cf. Luke 23:46) and praying for forgiveness toward his executioners. Saul is specifically mentioned in attendance, and his later conversion became a living testimony to effective prayer (9:17; 22:3-21). That Stephen peacefully "fell asleep" in conclusion to a horrific scene demonstrated the Spirit's presence in his life and death. Stephen is truly a model of great faith-ready to witness to Christ and courageous to face suffering.

APPLY THE WORD

Stephen is considered the first Christian martyr. Following his death, the church in Jerusalem was persecuted and scattered. Since his death in a.d. 31/32, many Christians have suffered for the name of Christ. Tertullian, a leader of early Christianity, asserted, "The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church." Indeed, Stephen's death ignited the flames of the gospel to go out beyond Jerusalem among the Gentiles (see Acts 8). For more information on the persecuted church of today, go to www.persecutedchurch.org.

Acts 6

Satan uses many methods to hinder the work of the Lord. Chapters 6 through 8 of Acts contain three illustrations of how he does his evil work through people and circumstances.

1. Satan creates dissension within the church. "In those days ... there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists" (Acts 6:1). When a church becomes known for its bickering and backbiting, its witness in the community will be damaged.

2. The enemy tries to divert ministers and teachers from their main purpose of preaching the gospel. The apostles were feeling pressured to "leave the Word of God and serve tables" (6:2). Satan employs a similar tactic today by getting a pastor so involved in church programs that he has little time for prayer and the study of the Word.

3. In every age Satan seeks to destroy God's people. In Acts 7 and 8 we read that Stephen was martyred, and that Saul "made havoc of the church" (8:3).

We need to be aware of Satan's tactics and be on guard against his attacks. We don't want to be a cause of dissension and diversion in the church. Instead, let's prayerfully focus on Christ's purpose for our lives. --R W De Haan ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

I want to live above the world,
Though Satan's darts at me are hurled;
For faith has caught the joyful sound,
The song of saints on higher ground. --Oatman

Know Satan's strategy to avoid sin's tragedy.

Acts 6:4

F B Meyer

Acts 6:4 We will give ourselves continually to prayer.

If ever there was a sacred work, it was that of caring for these poor widows; and yet the apostles felt that even such duties might interfere with the continual ministry of intercession. No doubt they always lived in the atmosphere and spirit of prayer, but they rightly felt that this was not enough either for them or their work. So they sought a division of labor, that while some specially served tables and ministered the alms of the church, others might be set free for steadfast continuance in prayer. This would keep the communication with the King on the throne clear and fresh, would draw down the power and blessing of the heavenly world, and be the means of procuring wisdom and strength for their great responsibilities.

There are many courses of usefulness open to each of us in this world, and we must choose the one, not only most suited to our idiosyncrasies, but in which we can best serve our day and generation. It may be that in our incessant activities we are neglecting the one method by which we may contribute most largely to the coming of our Father's kingdom. Notice that word give. It is as though the Spirit of prayer were seeking natures so pure, so devoted, that without hindrance He might form Himself into them. Give yourself to Him for this!

"In that day," said our Lord, speaking of the Day of Pentecost, "ye shall ask in my name." It is only when we are full of the Holy Spirit that we can experience the true power to plead with God, and use the name of Christ so effectively as to receive the richest blessings for ourselves and others. Much prayer, much blessing; little prayer, little blessing; no prayer, no blessing. "The Word of God increased."

Meyer, F. B. Our Daily Homily

ACTS 7

Acts 7:20-8:3.

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TODAY IN THE WORD

When Martin Luther was summoned to the Diet of Worms in 1521 to answer charges of heresy, he thought he would be allowed to defend his biblical views.

To his dismay, he was given no opportunity to defend his beliefs. Instead, he was ordered to recant. Luther asked for a day to think about his decision, which he knew could mean his life. He prayed for courage, then came back the next day and made his stand on the truth of Scripture. On his way back to Wittenberg, Luther was "kidnapped" by friends and taken into safe hiding.

There are times when we must take a stand—perhaps a difficult but necessary one. That was true for Luther, and in today's reading for Stephen as well. Stephen made a lengthy defense. His message is, in fact, the longest recorded sermon in Acts. But, unlike

Luther, Stephen did not escape his persecutors.

Today we pick up Stephen's remarkable message with the birth of Moses (v. 20). As he outlined the events of Israel's exodus from Egypt, the wilderness wanderings, and the giving of the Law, he began to build toward the point he wanted to make to the assembled leaders of the nation.

He reminded these elders that their forefathers failed to obey Moses (v. 39). Stephen then charted Israel's rebellion and idolatry all the way from the golden calf to the worship of idols that produced the Babylonian exile. Verses 44-50 are important because in them Stephen shows that God's work and His presence are not limited to the temple in Jerusalem. In other words, God's Spirit was at work in this new manifestation of His will called the church, and these "stiff-necked people" were resisting it just as their ancestors resisted God (v. 51).

No one nodded off during this sermon! The violent reaction of these elders and their summary execution of Stephen demonstrate that the hatred directed toward the church was of more than human origin.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The story of Stephen reminds us that whatever the situation, the last word hasn't been said until God has spoken.

Acts 7:1-29

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good. - Genesis 50:20

TODAY IN THE WORD

Martin Luther appeared at the Diet of Worms in 1521 to answer charges of heresy because he challenged the Roman Catholic Church's established teachings. Luther was not allowed to defend his biblical views, but instead was ordered to recant. He asked for a day to think about his decision, which he knew could cost him his life. Luther prayed for courage, then came back the next day and made his stand on the truth of Scripture, "I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand. God help me, Amen."

This great tradition of courage in the face of dire threats began in the church's earliest days with the apostles and their close associates--

people like Stephen. God chose Stephen for the difficult task of answering false charges and facing persecution, for the greater purpose of expanding His new work known as the church.

Stephen's arrest was motivated by fear. The Jewish establishment felt its religious system and its power being threatened, and its members struck back to deal with this new "sect" which followed Jesus Christ. Stephen found himself standing before the same Jewish council that had condemned Jesus.

Today's reading begins in a deceptively mild way. The high priest simply asked Stephen if the charges against him were true. When Stephen saw he was being allowed to speak, he used the occasion to deliver the longest recorded sermon in Acts. The portion we are studying today is the first half of a pointed message on Israel's history and disobedience.

Stephen obviously knew the Old Testament, but his powerful preaching was probably also a fulfillment of Jesus' promise that when His followers were arrested and brought to trial, the Holy Spirit would give them the words to say (Mark 13:11).

Stephen's eloquent defense began with God's call of Abraham and His promises to the man who was the father of Israel. As Stephen reviewed the lives of the patriarchs, the slavery of Israel in Egypt, and the rise of Moses, no one on the council had any objections. But Stephen had a point to make with this message, and they weren't going to like his conclusion.

APPLY THE WORD

Stephen's story reminds us that whatever the situation, the last word hasn't been said until God has spoken.

That means it may be too early for us to give up on a problem that seems to hold no hope. Try this experiment. Write out your biggest frustration, then set the card aside for a while. Now ask God to show you a new way of seeing the problem or a possible solution, and what He wants you to learn from it. Once you've spent some time praying about the situation, go back and read what you wrote. You may find God's purpose in your problem.

Acts 7:30-8:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

Richard Wurmbrand, author of *Tortured for Christ*, was a pastor and leader of the underground church in communist Romania

during the years after World War II. Imprisoned for his faith, Wurmbrand met a young communist lieutenant who was thoroughly indoctrinated by Marxism and believed he was creating a better world by arresting and persecuting Christians. The young officer scoffed at Pastor Wurmbrand's sincere expression of love for his enemies. But after many conversations about Christianity, Wurmbrand finally had the privilege of leading this officer to faith in Christ in the pastor's prison cell.

That zealous young lieutenant reminds us of the zealous young Saul. Saul fervently believed that Christians presented a menace and a threat to the religion in which he had been trained so thoroughly. This rabbi desired to prove his dedication to the traditions of his Jewish faith by becoming the chief persecutor of Christians.

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God knew that hostility would come. The "Hound of heaven" was pursuing Saul, and Stephen's death was part of the plan to compel Saul to face the truth.

APPLY THE WORD

Most of us can recall people whom God used to awaken us to our sin and our need of a Savior.

You can probably name several people like this in your own life. Why not send them a new year's greeting and a word of appreciation, if that's still possible? Whether it's a phone call, a note, or a personal visit, your contact may be just the spark of joy or encouragement someone needs in these opening days of 2000. Is there someone you can contact even today?

Acts 7:57-8:3; Philippians 3:1-1

As for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. - Philippians 3:6

TODAY IN THE WORD

Are we living "successful" lives? Writer and cultural critic Francis Schaeffer once answered: "Only one thing will determine that—whether this day I'm where the Lord of lords and King of kings wants me to be. To win as many as I can, to help strengthen the hands of those who fight unbelief in the historical setting in which they are placed, to know the reality of 'the Lord is my song,' and to be committed to the Holy Spirit—that is what I wish I could know to be the reality of each day as it closes."

Paul would say "Amen!" to this ... but it took some doing for God to bring him to that point. Our study this month is titled, "Paul: A Life of Purpose That Changed the World," but before he met Christ his life was filled with the wrong purposes. He was born in Tarsus, a city northwest of Israel, and raised in a Jewish family that probably ran a successful tentmaking business. Perhaps named after King Saul, an illustrious fellow Benjamite, he was theologically trained under the rabbi Gamaliel and became a zealous Pharisee. As such, he thoroughly approved of Stephen's execution, and afterwards became the Sanhedrin's "enforcer," actively persecuting the early church. Since the persecution helped spread the church beyond Jerusalem and toward fulfilling the Great Commission, this was actually Paul's unwitting first contribution to world missions!

Paul later said he had been a "blasphemer" and the "worst of sinners" (see 1 Tim. 1:12-16) and used his background to argue against legalism. To have "confidence in the flesh" is to trust in the wrong road to salvation and dishonor God's grace. He counted his past religious pedigree as a total "loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. 3:).

Our devotions this month will progress mostly in chronological order, interweaving historical narratives and readings from Paul's letters. We'll begin with the story of his spiritual rebirth, taking four days to examine how God changed him. This will help set the stage as we study this unlikely hero whom God set apart to preach the gospel (Gal. 1:13-16).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

What were you before God broke through your darkness? Where would you be today if He had not reached out to you? What might you have become without His grace and love in your life? Give praise and thanks for the answers to these questions. Doing so will

help prepare your heart for this month's study. Pray as well that as we examine the life of the apostle Paul, God will transform your thoughts, words, and actions in ways that glorify Him.

Acts 7:51-60

PEOPLE who announce bad news sometimes get blamed for causing it. It is difficult to be the one who bears unwelcome news. The meteorologist can upset people by predicting rain on the Fourth of July. It's not the forecaster's fault, yet he or she still takes the heat for bringing the message.

On a much more serious note, when Stephen addressed the religious leaders of Israel, he incurred their wrath because he boldly told them the truth about themselves. He criticized their ancestors and implicated the whole council in the murder of Jesus Christ.

Everything he said was true. So what did they do with this indictment? They "gnashed at him with their teeth" (Acts 7:54). They threw him out of the city and killed him. Because he told the truth, Stephen died under a barrage of stones.

When we speak out for purity, righteousness, and godliness in a sinful, pleasure-loving world careening toward destruction, we too will be criticized. But no matter what happens to us, we belong to God, and ultimately He will vindicate us, if not in this life, in the life to come.—J D Brannon ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

Acts 7:51-60

TELL IT LIKE IT IS

You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. --Acts 7:51

It is difficult to be the one who bears unwelcome news. The TV meteorologist can upset people just by predicting that it's going to rain on the Fourth of July. It's not his or her fault, yet the forecaster still takes the heat for bringing the message.

On a much more serious note, when Stephen addressed the religious leaders of Israel, he incurred their wrath because he boldly told them the truth about themselves. He criticized their ancestors and implicated the whole council in the murder of Jesus Christ. Everything he said was true. So what did they do with this indictment? They "gnashed at him with their teeth" (Acts 7:54). They threw him out of the city and put him to death. Because he told the truth, Stephen died under a barrage of stones.

When we speak out for purity, righteousness, and godliness in a sinful, pleasure-loving world that seems destined to self-destruct, we too will be criticized. But no matter what happens to us, we can call on God as Stephen did. We can take comfort in knowing that we belong to Him and that ultimately He will vindicate us.

As God's people, let's pray that we will have the courage to tell it like it is. - J D Brannon ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

Lord, give us courage to speak out

Against the evils of our day;

For only when the truth is known

Can sinners choose the better way.--D J De Haan

**It's better to declare the truth and be rejected
than to withhold it just to be accepted.**

Acts 7:55

F B Meyer

Acts 7:55 Being full of the Holy Ghost.

The blessed characteristic of Stephen lay in his being perpetually full of the Holy Ghost. It is said of others, even Peter, that they were filled, as though they needed some special and over-mastering inducement for special service. But Stephen is more than once described as full (Acts 6:5), as though he were always kept brimming, like a lake from the hills.

Those who are full of the Holy Spirit are always Looking steadfastly upwards. — They look not at the things which are seen, but at those which are not seen. Across the valleys, they catch sight of the Delectable Mountains, rising like the Himalaya above the plains of India. Whilst others look around for help, they lift up their eyes to the hills whence cometh their help; and to them heaven stands always open.

Those who are full of the Holy Spirit see and are transfigured by the glory of God. — What wonder that those who sat in the Council beheld Stephen's face, as it had been the face of an angel. The light that shone there was not as when Jesus was transfigured in that case, the light of the Shechinah broke out from within — but here the glory of God shone from the open door of Heaven. So the sunrise smites the highest peaks.

Those who are full of the Holy Ghost see the Lord Jesus, in his glory, as their Priest. — It is the special work of the Holy Spirit to direct the gaze to Jesus. Those who are full of the Spirit may hardly be aware of his gracious presence, but they are keenly alive to their Lord's. The Spirit takes of the things of Jesus, and reveals them to the loving and obedient; specially those that concern his priestly work on the cross and in heaven.

Meyer, F. B. Our Daily Homily

ACTS 8

Acts 8:1-2 James 1:1; John 7:1-5;

Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother. - Mark 3:35

TODAY IN THE WORD

Jesus' answer in John 7:1-5 must have seemed harsh to those around Him. It was early in the Savior's ministry, and His mother and brothers had come to see Him (Mark 3:31-35). Jesus said His true family was spiritual, made up of those who followed and obeyed Him. He was not being harsh, but simply saying that anyone who wanted to come to Him must recognize Him as Savior and Lord. Among Jesus' brothers standing there that day was James, later the author of the New Testament book that bears his name. Most conservative Bible scholars believe James was one of Jesus' four half-brothers, born to Joseph and Mary after Jesus' virgin birth (Matt. 13:55). During the Lord's earthly ministry, these men didn't believe that their older brother was also their Messiah.

We know this because the apostle John described an incident in which the brothers urged Jesus to go to Jerusalem and show Himself to the nation. Then John wrote, 'Even His own brothers did not believe in Him' (John 7:5).

James was in that group of 'brotherly doubters.' But then something happened. After Jesus rose from the dead, He appeared to James (1 Cor. 15:7). From that time on, the skeptical sibling became a devoted follower of Christ and the acknowledged leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:12-21).

We have tremendous insight into the heart of this man through the letter he wrote to his fellow Jewish believers, 'the twelve tribes scattered among the nations' (James 1:1). James' remarkable letter is the focus of our studies this month. That means we are in for thirty-one days of intensely practical Christianity.

The first indication of James' attitude comes in the very first sentence of his letter. Here was the leader of the first church in the Christian world. He was an associate of Peter and Paul. And he was the half-brother of Jesus on top of that. Talk about someone with friends in high places!

But James pushed all that aside and adopted the most humble title possible. He was merely a 'servant' (v. 1). Sounds like his older half-brother, doesn't he (see Mark 10:45)? It's an understatement to say that James understood the role of a believer.

APPLY THE WORD

It's possible some of our Today readers are like James the day he and his brothers expressed their unbelief in Jesus (see John 7:5). In other words, we may think we are in Jesus' family when in fact, we have never come to Him in repentance and faith and trusted Him as our Savior. If that's the case for you, we urge you to put your faith in Jesus Christ today. And if He is your Savior, join us in praying that the Holy Spirit will draw others to the Lord.

Acts 8:4-8, 26-40

Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. - Acts 8:35

TODAY IN THE WORD

When Luka was just an infant his mother died, causing his father to abandon him. He was then given to his grandmother, who didn't want him either and tried to sell him ... twice. Finally, after eight years of being passed around to various foster families, he ended up at the Good Samaritan Orphanage in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. At first, Luka was withdrawn and continued to steal and lie. But

as time went on, Luka began to realize that God did have a plan for his life, which was found in the Bible.

In the eyes of many, a child such as Luka is a social outcast who would only end up causing trouble. But Luka looks much different in the eyes of God, who cares about everyone, but especially those who are orphaned and cast aside. It's exciting to consider that the spread of the gospel that began at Pentecost in Jerusalem (see yesterday's study) eventually spread to a young boy in Cambodia named Luka.

After the events recorded in Acts 2, the next chapters of Acts show how the gospel began to spread through the Judean region (see Acts 1:8). Ironically, the persecution that led to Stephen's death helped to spread the gospel into these outlying areas as followers of Jesus were scattered by the Jewish authorities. This explains why Philip was in Samaria, proclaiming Christ (v. 4).

From Samaria, Philip was led by an angel to the southern area of Gaza, where he met an Ethiopian eunuch, returning from worship in Jerusalem. Although this man held a very important royal post, eunuchs were generally treated as social outcasts. So Philip's encounter with him shows that not only does the gospel transcend cultural barriers, but it also transcends class and social distinctions.

Far from being rejected by God, we see that the Spirit supernaturally brought Philip to the eunuch to explain the Scriptures and to share the good news of Jesus Christ. Once this key mission had been accomplished, the Spirit redirected Philip to other areas that needed to hear about the gospel.

APPLY THE WORD

Like the Ethiopian eunuch, people still rejoice to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. Through the efforts of the Bible Society in Cambodia and the Good Samaritan Orphanage, children like Luka are being transformed by God's love. Numerous Bible societies throughout the world are committed to bringing the Bible to millions. If you are interested in learning more about the work of various national Bible societies, you can visit the American Bible Society Web site at www.americanbible.org.

Acts 8:4-40.

TODAY IN THE WORD

The April 3 plane crash in Croatia that took the life of U.S. Commerce Secretary Ron Brown and thirty-four others revealed shortcomings in the navigation equipment on military aircraft.

The pilots, attempting to reach the airport at Dubrovnik in pouring rain, were navigating with a compass and a radio receiver, which one official likened to working with a typewriter in the computer age. Officials at the Pentagon said they would improve safety and navigation equipment on military passenger planes in the future.

What a difference an excellent guidance system can make! Contrast, for example, the guidance given to evangelist Philip and to Simon the sorcerer. Although Luke doesn't say so explicitly, we know that Philip was led of the Holy Spirit to go to a city in Samaria (v. 5). Later he was directed by an angel and "caught away" by the Holy Spirit.

Simon, on the other hand, was under the guidance and control of Satan. He used magic and sorcery to beguile people. But when Simon tried to add the power of the Spirit to his bag of tricks, Peter warned him that he was heading for spiritual disaster.

Even though persecution was the surface cause of Philip's going to Samaria, we see in his ministry the next stage in the fulfillment of Jesus' mandate (Acts 1:8). Peter and John arrived to validate the authenticity of Philip's revival, and the apostles bestowed the gift of the Spirit on the Samaritan believers.

By the way, this is another important evidence of the transitional nature of the book of Acts. By the time we come to the epistles, Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit is given at the moment of conversion (1 Cor. 12:13).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We'll never duplicate Philip's "travel arrangements," but we can imitate his faithfulness.

Remember, Philip didn't start out as an evangelist. He was one of the seven original table-servers in Jerusalem. Because he was faithful where God called him, he was tapped for wider service.

Acts 8:5-25

Jews do not associate with Samaritans. - John 4:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

Most people associate the words Jew and Palestinian with images of tanks and bullets. The picture of Messianic Jews calling their Palestinian brothers and sisters caught in the crossfire of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to encourage them or to donate food and money is quite different. Yet despite the deep hostility between these groups, the gospel's power is greater. Says Salim Munayer, founder of the reconciliation group Musalaha, "There is an opportunity for reconciled Jews and Arabs to be an example ... to the whole Israeli society."

For many, reconciled Jews and Palestinians are hard to imagine. That's what it must have been like when the Samaritans received the gospel. A huge divide existed between Jews and Samaritans. Samaritans were viewed as worse than Gentiles because they were "half-breeds." They were considered heretics because they rejected the Jerusalem temple and only accepted the first five books of Moses as Scripture. Only the gospel could breach this great divide.

Because the Samaritans already had an expectation of a messiah, Philip used this foundation to proclaim the Good News. As we've seen, the gospel's advance is accompanied by signs and wonders. Because the occult was extensive in this area, it's not surprising that numerous exorcisms occurred (v. 7). But Philip wasn't the only one performing wonders. A magician named Simon had quite a following. Yet whereas Philip preached the kingdom of God, Simon was apparently preaching the "kingdom of Simon." It's hard to know at what level he believed (v. 13), but his response to Peter's rebuke (v. 24) suggests that he'd never really accepted Jesus as Lord.

The hardest part about today's passage is understanding why God delayed giving the Holy Spirit to the Samaritans until Peter and John arrived. Luke gives no indication that anything was lacking in Philip's sermon. Instead, delaying the outpouring of the Holy Spirit assured the Samaritan believers that they were full participants in the early church with the full blessing of the Jerusalem leaders.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It's interesting to notice that Peter and John follow Philip's lead by continuing to evangelize Samaritan cities on their return to Jerusalem (v. 25). This should encourage us that powerful advances for the gospel are not always initiated by church leaders. In fact, many racial reconciliation efforts are at the grass-roots level. As we continue our study in Acts, prayerfully ask the Spirit to show you ways that you can help bring down the walls that still divide the body of Christ, whether they are ethnically or economically based.

Acts 8:26-40

Without faith it is impossible to please God. - Hebrews 11:6

TODAY IN THE WORD

After listening to a sermon one Sunday, Queen Victoria wondered if she could be absolutely sure that she was saved. Unfortunately, her chaplain couldn't give her such assurance. This became known to a commoner named John Townsend. After much prayer and consideration, Townsend wrote a letter in which he urged the Queen to read John 3:16 and Romans 10:9-10. A few weeks later, he received a reply from Her Majesty confirming the assurance that she'd received from God's Word.

Centuries before, the Lord also used another humble servant to bring salvation to another high-ranking official. Yesterday we saw how the gospel breaks down ethnic barriers; today we see how social and economic barriers are similarly eroded. We also see God's care for both entire cities as well as one individual.

Directed by an angel, Philip traveled from northern Samaria to the southern area of Gaza. We have no idea what Philip thought about this, but his obedience was immediate. Out in the desert, Philip met a very important official, the Ethiopian Secretary of the Treasury. Ethiopia at this time included modern southern Egypt and northern Sudan and was considered the ends of the earth (see Acts 1:8).

A eunuch at that time could refer to a castrated male or a high court official under a female ruler. If this official were a Jewish proselyte, then the latter is likely; otherwise, he would have been prohibited from entering the temple (see Deut. 23:1). He was also educated because he was able to read. (It was customary to read out loud at that time.) And he was well-off; only wealthy people could afford a chariot.

Most importantly, however, he was teachable. When queried by Philip, he welcomed the opportunity for instruction. Using Isaiah 53 as a springboard, Philip shared the gospel with this man. The eunuch's immediate desire to be baptized is heartening. Clearly, here's someone who had been supernaturally prepared for the gospel!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's passage offers helpful guidelines for evangelism. First, Philip's bold witness to the eunuch followed his obedience to the

Spirit's prompting. In other words, we shouldn't wait for boldness before witnessing—it comes when we're obedient. Second, Philip began with a question that opened a door. He allowed the eunuch to express a need and to invite discussion. Questions can be powerful tools of evangelism. Finally, he used Scripture to explain the Good News. At some point, we need to get people into the Bible

Acts 8:26-40

Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. - Acts 8:35

TODAY IN THE WORD

The late Dr. Paul Freed, founder of the global gospel broadcasting ministry Trans World Radio, told of traveling in remote bush country in India. Freed's party came to a roadside stand and decided to try an experiment. They asked the proprietor if he had ever heard of Trans World Radio. He smiled, reached under the counter, and held up his transistor radio. He was a regular listener to TWR's programs, and even knew who Dr. Freed was.

The wonder of the gospel is that it can reach anyone on any dusty road, anywhere in the world. The same Holy Spirit who directs the message of Christ to the hearts of listeners today sent Philip to the desert area south of Jerusalem to meet an African court official.

This man worshiped Israel's God, though he may not have been a full-fledged convert to Judaism. But he was thirsty for the water of life, and the Spirit used Philip to quench that thirst.

Philip's ability to preach Christ from Isaiah 53 is remarkable, especially since he had no New Testament passages to refer to as proof of the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. But Philip no doubt had witnessed Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, and could speak with personal passion.

This official opened his heart to Christ and was saved. As evidence of his conversion, he requested baptism. Philip baptized him, and then was immediately "snatched away" by the Holy Spirit for service elsewhere. The official went home, and the gospel spread to Africa.

Philip next appeared at Azotus, the same city as the old Philistine capital called Ashdod in the Old Testament. This area was about twenty miles north of Gaza, and Philip realized that God wanted him to carry the gospel to other cities also. It would be hard to miss the point when God suddenly snatched you from one place and set you down somewhere else.

Philip's story ends on a great note, with him preaching the gospel everywhere he went. He may have finally settled in Caesarea, but he didn't give up the work. Years later, he was known in Caesarea as "Philip the evangelist" (Acts 21:8).

APPLY THE WORD

What are you known for in your work, family, church, etc.?

A convicting question, but a good one to spend time answering. Think about how your fellow workers, friends, and family members might characterize you if they were asked to describe your commitments and character. If you're a parent and/or grandparent, this is an especially good question to ask concerning your children and grandchildren. Pray that God will help you keep first things first.

Acts 8:26-40

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations. - Matthew 28:18-19

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 1947, the astrophysicist Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar was scheduled to teach an advanced seminar at the University of Chicago. He was living in Wisconsin at the time and doing important research but agreed to drive the 100 miles twice a week to teach. The professor carried on with his plans, even though only two students enrolled in the course. He gave them his best, and ten years later these two students won the Nobel Prize in physics, rewarding Dr. Chandrasekhar's work. Dr. Chandrasekhar himself won the award in 1983. It seems to make sense at the moment but that proves their worth later in history. The Holy Spirit's command to Philip to leave Samaria and go down to the desert might fall under that category. Twelve disciples (see Acts 6:5), was at the center of a magnificent revival in a city of Samaria (Acts 8:4-25) when the order came. He was one of the believers scattered by persecution in Jerusalem as Saul stirred up fierce opposition against the church. Spirit was doing such a wonderful work in Jerusalem and the church was growing at an almost unbelievable rate. He determined that it was time for the Word to go to the ends of the earth. He allowed persecution to arise, scattering the disciples. grumbling. Then, the Spirit commanded Philip to head south, out into the middle of nowhere. It was there that Philip met the reason for his trip, the Ethiopian official whose heart was open to the gospel. and, through him, helped carry the gospel into a new area of the world. Even then, the Spirit wasn't finished with Philip, catching him away

and sending him on another preaching tour (Acts 8:39-40). Philip is another great example of what one believer can do when he or she is willing to be used by the Lord. (Acts 6:3). Is there anything happening in your life that can only be explained as the Holy Spirit working within you? Take inventory today and if necessary repeat the commitment you made yesterday. God is eager to use you!

Acts 8:26

F B Meyer

Acts 8:26 The same is desert.

Desert means uninhabited. It seemed a strange providence that took Philip thither. He had been chosen to the honorable office of deacon, and there was probably plenty of work to do in connection with the scattered Church. Moreover, he had just completed a most successful mission in Samaria, where the multitude had given heed with one accord to the things he had spoken; but now he was suddenly landed in these lonely solitudes, where only chance travellers could be encountered. Did he not count it strange, and wish to get home to his four little daughters (Acts 21:9)?

There are many deserts in life! The solitude of a new country, in which you do not know the language. The solitude of a sick-chamber, in which the earnest worker suddenly discovers the limitations of physical weakness. The solitude of suspicion and dislike, which contrast strangely with some large and devoted circle. Thither God brings us not infrequently. No flower can thrive in unbroken light.

But in every solitude, if we wait patiently on the Lord, there are opportunities of service. There is always some inquiring soul in need of the precise help we can give. There is an old story of some monks to whom the Book of Revelation was being read. At the end each was asked to choose the promise he loved best. One said I will take this, "God shall wipe away all tears." Another chose, "To him that overcometh I will give to sit on my throne." The third replied, "I would choose, 'His servants shall serve Him.'" This latter was Thomas à Kempis, who afterwards wrote "The Imitation."

"Not caring how to serve Thee much, But to please Thee perfectly."

Meyer, F. B. Our Daily Homily

ACTS 9

Acts 9:1-31.

TODAY IN THE WORD

When Cambridge University student Thomas Bilney bought a Greek New Testament, his interest was purely academic. But when Bilney opened God's Word, he encountered the gospel and was transformed.

The Protestant Reformation was underway, so Bilney joined the Cambridge Protestants. He began preaching, but was arrested in 1527 and threatened into silence. But Bilney could not keep quiet. He was arrested, released, and in 1531 arrested one last time. Condemned as a heretic, Bilney died at the stake for the gospel of Christ.

Like Bilney, Saul (later to be known as Paul) wasn't interested in the truth of the gospel when he first encountered Christ. But even though Saul was a brilliant theologian and scholar, his interest wasn't simply academic. He had murder in his heart toward the followers of Jesus.

The narrative of Acts 9 is not complicated; and if you've been a Bible student for very long, you may know the details by heart. Let's make some observations from the standpoint of our theme this month: the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church.

First, it is beyond question that in Paul the church gained its greatest champion. Missionary, evangelist, theologian, writer of Scripture—Paul did it all. His conversion was the driving force behind the spread of the gospel to the edges of the known world.

Paul's zeal is worth noting. He didn't do anything halfheartedly, even as a persecutor of the church. He inspired fear in that role, as Ananias could attest. And as a powerful preacher of the gospel, Paul inspired such hatred that his life was threatened even before the ink on his baptismal certificate was dry!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Do you make an impact for Christ? Does the intensity of your commitment and love for the Lord make others sit up and take notice?

You may say, "Well, I'm no Paul." True, there will probably never be another Paul. But God doesn't need another Paul to make a lasting impact. He just needs us to give Him everything we have in everything we do for Him.

Acts 9:1-9

I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. - Ephesians 3:7

TODAY IN THE WORD

When Jesus Christ decided it was time to go after the man who would, more than any other, lay the foundation of His church, He knew exactly what it would take to get Saul's attention. The Lord had to knock Saul's legs out from under him and put him on his face before the great persecutor was ready to become the great apostle. Just to get the creature to look at him. The man who was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians was going with his face and his heart set like flint. That the followers of Jesus were dangerous threats. But this banty rooster of an educated Jew was really the dangerous one. He had approved of Stephen's stoning (Acts 8:1), and his threats against the other disciples were murderous (Acts 9:1). The voice from heaven didn't mince words, either. In response to Saul's question, Jesus identified Himself by name and revealed the true nature of Saul's persecution. By harming Jesus' disciples, Paul was persecuting Jesus Himself. But when he got his Christology straight, he made an instant and complete turnabout. In Acts 22, where Paul recounted the story of his conversion, he said that he asked Jesus, "What shall I do, Lord?" (v. 10). Architect of the church, and the one whose writings form the backbone of Christian theology. Although we tend to put him in a higher league, Paul was the one who constantly reminded us that he was simply a sinner who had experienced God's grace and had gladly given up everything to follow Jesus. And he has called us to do the same. The problem with studying a sterling example like Paul is that too many of us figure that since we can't be like him, we can't do much. That he could reproduce a bunch of little Pauls, but so that we would be brought to the place of total surrender to Christ. Wherever you are on that journey today, determine that in 1998 you will not settle for anything less than full obedience to Christ.

Acts 9:1-19

TODAY IN THE WORD

Ulysses S. Grant's first command in the Civil War was over a regiment of Illinois volunteers. As he led his troops into battle against the Confederates in northern Missouri, Grant reflected later: "My heart kept getting higher and higher until it felt to me as though it was in my throat. I would have given anything then to have been back in Illinois." But then the thought occurred to him that the enemy had as much reason to fear him as he had to fear the enemy. Buoyed by his new insight, Grant laid aside his fears and went forward into the battle.

Ananias of Damascus wished he could have stayed home the day he heard God's voice calling him into "battle." This otherwise unknown disciple is usually remembered for his hesitation to obey God's instructions concerning Saul. Ananias didn't have advance knowledge that Saul was no longer an enemy to be feared, but a brother to be embraced (v. 17).

This is not an excuse for Ananias' reluctance to obey, but his objections show him to be thoroughly human. Saul's reputation as a persecutor of the saints had preceded him. Evidently Ananias had heard that Saul was coming to Damascus, and he wanted nothing to do with this Jewish zealot.

God's answer to His reluctant hero included more information about Saul, who came to be known as Paul (Acts 13:9). But God also repeated His command, and Ananias didn't need to be told again. His obedience is admirable, and God rewarded Ananias by using him to perform a notable miracle.

As he walked to the house of Judas on Straight Street, perhaps Ananias rehearsed what he would say. He may even have realized the importance of what had happened to Saul and become excited about his new brother.

We don't know if he greeted Saul with firm or with trembling voice, but Ananias delivered his message faithfully before he disappeared into history. Most of us can identify with Ananias because we don't consider ourselves particularly brave or heroic by the world's standards. But God measures heroism by a different standard: obedience. That's encouraging! Why? Because while we may not have the strength or the skill to perform heroic feats, all of us can obey God.

Acts 9:1-19

Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? - Acts 9:4

TODAY IN THE WORD

Scientists at Oak Ridge National Laboratories in Tennessee believe spinach may help cure some forms of blindness. When they extract certain proteins from this deep green vegetable and add them to retinal nerve cells, tests indicate the cells react to light in

ways that could give formerly blind people black-and-white vision. As part of photosynthesis, these spinach proteins send an electrical impulse in response to light, which is what is needed for sight as well.

To heal Paul from his temporary blindness, God didn't use spinach; instead, He sent His servant Ananias not only with healing but also with a prophetic message.

How did all this come about? Paul decided to take his crusade against Christians 150 miles away to Damascus, and was on his way there when Christ appeared to him personally. He asked Paul, "Why do you persecute me?" (v. 4). Paul knew from the Pentateuch that he was experiencing the glory of God, but it stunned and confused him to find Jesus speaking to him. Hadn't He started the heresy that Paul was intent on stamping out? The Lord gave him a few days as a blind man to think it over and absorb the fact that the truth was 180 degrees different from what he had been pursuing.

When Ananias received his assignment, he must have been stunned and confused as well. What—go do a healing miracle for Christian Enemy #1? He expressed his doubts honestly in prayer, but ultimately he obeyed and did what the Lord said. He visited Paul, lifted the physical blindness as Christ had removed the spiritual blindness, and prophesied that this persecutor would become God's "chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel" (v. 15). Paul was also filled with the Holy Spirit and baptized (v. 18).

Paul came to take prisoners, but God took him prisoner. He came in bondage, but God set him free. He came to cause suffering, but joined the ranks of the sufferers. He believed in his own righteousness and worthiness, but found instead the righteousness and worthiness of Christ.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Easter Sunday may be past already, but in light of Paul's remarkable testimony, re-reading one of the Passion narratives would be a timely activity. Gospel passages to choose include Matthew 26-28; Mark 14-16; Luke 22-24; or John 18-20. Remember that the crucified and risen Christ you find here is exactly the same Christ who met Paul on the Damascus road. And He's exactly the same Christ whom you can trust, follow, and obey today!

Acts 9:1-19

By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. - 1 Corinthians 15:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

In the mid-1700s, David Brainerd worked tirelessly to reach Native Americans with the gospel. Dying at the age of 29 after only five years of ministry, he left behind journals which have inspired many later missionaries.

Brainerd suffered much for the gospel, both physically and spiritually: "It seemed to me I should never have any success among the Indians. My soul was weary of my life; I longed for death, beyond measure." Though his inexperience and lack of language skills contributed to his problems, he persisted and was eventually blessed with converts.

Paul was also willing to endure hardship and suffering for the sake of the gospel. But he didn't start out that way. When Christ met him on the Damascus road, the future apostle's life required radical changing. He was, in fact, an enemy of the fledgling church. The believers had begun to carry out the Great Commission in the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul, a devout Jew, bitterly opposed and persecuted them (cf. Phil. 3:4-7).

God did what we have seen Him do time and time again in Scripture. He met Paul, spoke to him personally, and transformed his life. From that one encounter flowed consequences for most of the known world at that time—life-giving consequences ordained by God as part of His eternal plan (cf. Gal. 1:15).

On a "hunting trip" to persecute more Christians, Paul saw a light from heaven. One thinks of Isaiah's vision, or Jacob's dream, or the Transfiguration of Christ. And it was Christ Himself who appeared to Paul, for by persecuting His church, he was persecuting the Lord. Christ mercifully revealed Himself to a man headed in the totally wrong direction, and gave him an opportunity to accept His grace.

APPLY THE WORD

On the Damascus road, Christ met and transformed His enemy. He Himself commanded: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44).

Acts 9:1-19

You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. - Acts 1:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 1996, retiree and widower Reese Hurley from Cambridge, Maryland, got up from his rocking chair and headed for Africa. He'd been pondering how best to spend his remaining years, but at first had resisted God's call to missions.

When he answered the call, he went all-out! He has been on short-term trips to Zimbabwe, Zambia, Kenya, Guatemala, Albania, and other destinations, working to help orphans and others in need. He has also used his skills as an electrician on missions building projects.

Reese is obeying the Great Commission, doing what Jesus Himself commanded us to do (Acts 1:8). To take the gospel to the world is to confront others with Christ's reality, grace, and glory, a lesson shown in unforgettable fashion in today's reading. Sometimes we omit the fact that imitating Christ means we can also imitate His one recorded appearance after His Ascension—to Paul on the road to Damascus.

Paul was ignorant, misguided, and zealous, a dangerous combination. But the risen Christ met him personally and powerfully, leaving him physically and spiritually stunned. The blinded man had several days to think things over and completely reorient his spiritual compass. He was transformed from a fervent persecutor to a sold-out believer, from a Pharisee to an apostle, and from a Jesus-hater to a Jesus-lover. He would later share this very testimony before kings (see Acts 26).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

How are your witness skills these days? If a friend, co-worker, or neighbor asked you about the gospel, how would you answer? Here are two suggestions: Learning an evangelistic method can be helpful. If you've never done so, find out how to share the "Romans Road," the "Bridge," or another effective gospel presentation. Practice with someone who knows the approach well.

Acts 9:1-31

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. - 1 Timothy 1:15

TODAY IN THE WORD

In his autobiographical work, *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis describes how the Lord persistently "closed in on" him. "You must picture me alone... night after night, feeling ... the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me ... I gave in and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed; perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."

As influential as C. S. Lewis's conversion has been, John Stott rightly notes that "Saul's ... is the most famous conversion in church history." In fact, Saul's conversion is recorded again in Acts 22 and Acts 26.

Somewhere along the 150-mile road between Jerusalem and Damascus, the one who was going to stamp out "the Way" was instead stamped forever by the Lord Jesus. Notice the organic connection between Jesus and His body in the question, "Why do you persecute me?" To persecute believers is to persecute Jesus Himself.

Having met the risen Jesus, it was time to start meeting His body, beginning with a devout believer, Ananias, who understandably had reservations about meeting Saul. The Lord's assurance to Ananias (v. 15) revealed His purposes for Saul: to carry the name of Christ before the Gentiles and to suffer much for that Name. Ananias's assurance to Saul was also profound—placing his hand on Saul, he called him "Brother."

Saul's characteristic zeal found its intended goal in his passion to preach Jesus, to the astonishment of many! But evidently not everyone was excited, and the first of several murder plots was hatched.

From Damascus, Saul went to Jerusalem where the disciples were also understandably hesitant to receive him. In an echo of what happened in Damascus, Saul was once again protected by believers from another murder plot. Clearly, Saul had become part of the body of Christ!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Even though Paul's conversion was the most famous in the church's history, two powerful lessons from his experience apply to all believers. First, Saul shows that clearly no one is beyond the Lord's reach! We should never give up praying because God is able to reach even those violently opposed to Christianity. Second, we may not all suffer as much as Paul did, but we must never forget that suffering is a normal part of the Christian life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "Suffering ... is the badge of true discipleship."

Acts 9:19-31

[God] commands all people everywhere to repent. - Acts 17:30

TODAY IN THE WORD

Thomas Webb was a fearless British soldier who was severely wounded on September 12, 1759. Though he recovered from near death, he lost an eye. Webb fought in the Revolutionary War, and later came to know Christ through the preaching of John Wesley. Webb became passionate about spreading the gospel in America, and helped build the first Methodist chapel in New York City. He wore a green eye patch and a dangling sword the rest of his life, which may help to explain why those who met Thomas Webb said he was unforgettable.

There was nothing striking about the apostle Paul's appearance. But his conversion was as radical and life-changing as any in church history, and everyone around him was immediately influenced by him. Paul's passion to ""destroy the church"" (Acts 8:3) was turned into a passion to proclaim the truth that ""Jesus is the Son of God"" (9:20).

Not every new convert can begin preaching with the power and authority Paul demonstrated in Damascus. But he was a well-trained Jewish rabbi who knew the Old Testament thoroughly. And his fiery dedication complemented his learning.

Paul's ferocious reputation had preceded him to Damascus, as evidenced by Ananias's fearful response to the Lord's command (vv. 11-14). Even after Paul had been a believer for ""many days"" (v. 23), his very presence still struck fear in the hearts of the other disciples (v. 26). It took the courageous friendship of Barnabas to convince the church that Paul's commitment was true.

We said earlier this month that a passion for souls is not always appreciated or understood by everybody. This was true in Paul's case. His bold preaching about Christ stirred up so much opposition, and downright rage, that his life was soon on the line. He escaped a death plot in Damascus only to encounter another one in Jerusalem. The disciples had to whisk Paul away again to save his life.

Notice the final verse in today's reading. Luke says the church enjoyed peace after its persecutor, Saul of Tarsus, was taken out of action by divine intervention. What an interesting insight into the passionate, devoted character of this man. Paul didn't do anything halfway. His passion marked his life.

APPLY THE WORD

In a story such as this, most of us probably would identify more with Barnabas than with Paul.

That's okay, because everybody needs a Barnabas, an encourager. You can serve that purpose in another person's life with a well-placed word of encouragement. Look around you this week. Is there another believer you can uplift? Be alert especially to a younger Christian who may need someone to say, ""I can see God at work in your life.""

Acts 9:20-31; 11:19-30

He was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. - Acts 11:23

TODAY IN THE WORD

In the apostle John's account of the calling of the first disciples, the supporting role played by Andrew is notable. Responding to John the Baptist's "Lamb of God" announcement, Andrew and John followed Jesus and spent the day with Him. "The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "'We have found the Messiah' (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus." Jesus, of course, renamed Simon as "Peter," and Peter became the leader of the Twelve (see John 1:35-42).

Like Andrew, Barnabas played a key supporting role by encouraging Paul in his early ministry. Following his conversion, Paul appears to have spent about three years (prior to the events in 9:26) in or around Damascus, including a trip to nearby Arabia (Gal. 1:17). These years were a "ministry internship," the beginning of his calling and career as a preacher and evangelist. From the start, he acted boldly, entering the synagogue to proclaim and defend what he had until recently believed a heresy. Despite the fact that his about-face must have been personally embarrassing, he was eager to argue that Jesus was the Messiah. His ministry aroused both belief and opposition, a pattern that would continue throughout his life.

Barnabas then entered the picture and made a key introduction of Paul to Peter and James in Jerusalem (Gal. 1:18-19). While others were understandably skeptical, he vouched for the genuineness of Paul's testimony and attested to his ministry in Damascus. We don't know exactly how Barnabas gained confidence in Paul's testimony and character, but what he did was the kind of purposeful encouragement that can be a model for us all. Appropriately, his name means "son of encouragement" (4:36-37).

When the first openly cross-cultural missionaries preached to Greeks in Antioch (11:20-21), Jerusalem sent the open-minded Barnabas to check it out. He helped the work develop and personally recruited Paul to use his gifts to help plant a church there. As

an encourager, he wanted to see Paul maximize his gifts for God's kingdom and did everything he could to bring it about.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

How can you imitate the example of Barnabas? Today, encourage at least one fellow believer in faith and service. Be intentional through a phone call, e-mail, or note. Also be specific, perhaps by giving the person an example of how you are grateful for their service in your church, or by sharing a specific Bible verse or attribute of God with them, or by serving them in a concrete way. Encouragement comes in many shapes and sizes!

Acts 9:23-43

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. - 1 Timothy 1:15

TODAY IN THE WORD

When the U.S. government decided to build the first transcontinental railroad, two railroad companies were commissioned to do the work. The Central Pacific began laying track east from Sacramento, California, while the Union Pacific began working west from near Omaha, Nebraska. The two lines met at Promontory, Utah, in May 1869, and drove the last spike to connect the continent.

The church began with two lines moving toward each other, each having a separate beginning point but destined to meet and be joined. These lines were the Jews and Gentiles, two great bodies of people God was bringing together to make one new unified body (Eph. 2:15). And the two "foremen" He was using were Peter and Paul (Gal. 2:7).

We can see God preparing the church for this unification in the last portion of Acts 9. Paul, who was still called Saul at this point (note Acts 13:9), stirred up so much hatred that he had to leave Damascus secretly. He had come as the persecutor of Christians, and now he was the target of murderous persecution.

Paul came to Jerusalem, but his reputation preceded him. Barnabas befriended Paul and helped him gain acceptance among the believers, but Paul couldn't get away from his Jewish enemies. He had to be sent to Caesarea, and from there he went to his hometown of Tarsus.

Luke then closes this portion of the church's history with another progress report (v. 31), which indicates just how strong Jewish opposition to Paul had been. With Paul away, the church "enjoyed a time of peace."

Although Paul became the apostle to the Gentiles, it was Peter who first brought the gospel to non-Jews. Acts 9 records Peter's healing of Aeneas and his raising of Dorcas from the dead--wonderful miracles that attested to God's power on Peter. These areas, Lydda and Joppa, were partially Gentile in makeup. God was preparing Peter for his historic ministry to the household of the Roman commander Cornelius, a ministry to the Gentiles.

APPLY THE WORD

Peter was an apostle who had known Jesus intimately. Paul was a leading Pharisee and one of the rising stars of Judaism. These men might have been tempted to live in the past.

We can be tempted to live in the past too. Maybe you can look back to a time when you were closer to the Lord, more active in your witness, and really hungry for spiritual things.

This devotional is committed to helping you keep your love for Christ strong. Are you spending time each day in the Word and in prayer?

Acts 9:32-43

The church ... was encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord. - Acts 9:31

TODAY IN THE WORD

People naturally thought James Fraser was headed for fame and success. An extremely gifted musician, it was no surprise that he decided to pursue music, although he graduated from London University in engineering. Yet Fraser eventually felt called to bring the gospel to the wild border region between China and Burma. "What a waste of talent and training!" exclaimed many. Little did people know that the Lisu language is one of the world's most tonal, using about 20 different tones. Only someone with Fraser's background could ever have succeeded in learning Lisu well enough both to share the gospel and to devise a Lisu writing system.

It's easy to think that highly gifted people should have high profile ministries, but today's passage records a gifted woman whose ministry was devoted to unnamed, needy individuals. We also see Peter engaged in the "hands-on" pastoral work of "visiting the Lord's people," giving us a glimpse into his day-to-day ministry. During his travels, however, two miracles occurred, paralleling ones

performed by Jesus. The account of Aeneas reminds us of Jesus healing the paralytic in Capernaum (see Luke 5:17-26).

From Lydda (about 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem), Peter traveled 10 miles further to Joppa, now a suburb of modern Tel Aviv. This was a largely Gentile area—notice that the Jewish Tabitha was also known by the Greek name Dorcas. In both languages her name meant “gazelle,” a fitting image for this dear woman. Considering how many lives she had touched, it's no wonder that her death was so grieved. We don't know if those who sent for Peter were expecting a miracle, but the account of Tabitha parallels the account of Jesus raising Jairus's daughter (see Luke 8:41-56).

The effect of both miracles was the same—many saw and believed. By preaching or by miracles, the book of Acts chronicles the unstoppable spread of the gospel!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In many ways, Tabitha is a model disciple, “always doing good and helping the poor.” Tabitha's example challenges us to consider that for which we want to be remembered. Imagine being famous for our kindness or for helping the poor! Not everyone may be a gifted seamstress, but there are countless other ways we can minister to the needy, including making and serving meals, helping with home improvement, or just lending a sympathetic ear. How might the Spirit use you to show Christian kindness?

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Acts 9:32-43.

TODAY IN THE WORD

Racial strife in America is a tough issue, especially within the body of Christ. We are to be unified under one Head, Jesus Christ, but too often that is not the case.

What's the answer? In the preface to their pioneering book, *Breaking Down Walls*, Raleigh Washington and Glen Kehrein write: "The racial situation in our nation today cries out for Christians to 'pick up our cross,' step out of our comfort zones, and build relationships across cultural barriers...Jesus Christ reconciled us to God and gave us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:17-21). We are attempting to imitate that."

Racial division—between Jews and Gentiles—was also an issue in the early church. Although we know that Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, it was Peter who first brought the gospel to non-Jews. Not that he would have volunteered for the job. Peter was an observant Jew and would have considered contact with Gentiles improper and impure (see 10:14, 28).

But the Spirit of God was readying the church for the worldwide expansion of the gospel and preparing Peter to play a significant role. The church would soon be teeming with Gentile converts, and as leader of the apostles Peter had to see the hand of God in this move.

The latter part of Acts 9 records Peter's healing of Aeneas and his raising of Dorcas from the dead—wonderful miracles that attested to God's power through Peter. These areas, Lydda and Joppa, were also partially Gentile in makeup. God was laying the foundation for His vision to Cornelius and the call for Peter to come to preach the gospel to Gentiles under a Gentile roof—episodes we'll read and consider tomorrow.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Although it's tempting to look back to the good old days, Jesus wants us to fix our eyes on Him (Heb. 12:2).

Maybe you can look back to a day when you were closer to the Lord than now, more zealous in your witness, and insatiable in your desire for spiritual things.

Acts 9:36-43

Stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. - Titus 3:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

During the days of the Depression Era, a New York Congressman named Sol Bloom made it a practice each morning to drop pennies, nickels, and dimes along the way as he walked up the steps to the Capitol building. When the congressional doorkeeper asked Bloom about it one day, he explained, Let the little children find them when they come to see the Capitol. In this Depression, someone has to show them that good things can happen. Scattered good works among the poor and needy to such an extent that

she became locally famous for doing good. This is an unusual account, because Tabitha was already dead by the time she was introduced into the story of Acts (vv. 36-37). Everything we know about her came from the testimony of people who had been touched by her life. It's obvious that Tabitha's death was a blow to the disciples in Joppa. The testimony of Scripture is that she was a giving person who shared whatever she had with those who were most in need. Although we don't know if Tabitha was a widow herself, she had a great ministry to the widows in Joppa through her ability as a clothesmaker. heart and hands of the church from that day until today. Even though she never spoke a word that was recorded, her life was a testimony that did not need words to support it. was arranging events that would further the growth of the church, something Tabitha would no doubt have approved of as a loyal disciple of Jesus Christ. Her death became the occasion for a great miracle by Peter, and as a result many people believed in the Lord (v. 42). Christians in Joppa. Their desperate call for help to Peter reflects the depth of their grief and of their sense of loss over Tabitha's death. And God's mercy in raising her from the dead testifies to the quality of her life. Sometimes the best testimony that can be given about us is what other people say. spoke of her love and service. Would you like to have that kind of impact on the world? You can! It comes from a daily commitment to love and serve the Lord. Pray that this day and this week will find you faithful.

Acts 9:1-9

TWO CRUCIAL QUESTIONS

Who are you, Lord? ... Lord, what do you want me to do? Acts 9:5-6

Receiving Jesus as our Savior from sin brings us into a life changing relationship with the Son of God. Although we may not know at the time all the far reaching implications of our commitment to Him, we cannot escape the fact that because He is God, He has a right to be Lord of every area of our lives. Sooner or later we must come to that point where we confess, in the words of Thomas, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28)

In Saul's conversion experience, he recognized Jesus as both Savior and Lord. When Saul heard Jesus' voice on the Damascus highway, he asked the crucial question: "Who are you, Lord?" From the answer, "I am Jesus," Paul instantly realized that the One he had been persecuting truly was the Savior. In that moment he cast himself on His mercy. Trembling in the divine presence, he asked a second crucial question, "Lord, what do you want me to do?" He was, as Oswald Chambers put it, "giving up his right to himself."

Believer, you've trusted Jesus as your Savior. You've settled the issue of who He is. But have you asked that second crucial question, "Lord, what do you want me to do?" Say to Him today, "Lord, I'll do whatever You ask!" - D J De Haan ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

Take my life and let it be

Consecrated, Lord, to Thee;

Take my hands and let them move

At the impulse of Thy love. - Havergal

Because Christ purchased us, he has the right to possess us.

Acts 9:6

"WHAT'S NEXT?"

Having just received the Lord Jesus as his Savior from sin, an enthusiastic young boy blurted out, "Now what do I do? What's next?" He had the right idea! Although nothing further had to be done to receive salvation, there was much more to do to serve God.

The Bible, in Ephesians 2:8-9, makes it crystal-clear that we are saved by grace through faith. We could never do anything to deserve salvation. The best we have to offer is not good enough to meet the Lord's holy standards. We experience forgiveness of sin, find peace with God, have the promise of heaven and become possessors of everlasting life by trusting the Lord Jesus and Him alone. It is impossible for anyone to earn these favors!

Following conversion, however, we should respond as that young boy and the apostle Paul did, "Now what do I do? What's next?" Immediately after stating that we are not saved by works, Ephesians 2 tells us, "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (v.10).

Find there's faith, then comes service. We believe to become Christians. We serve because we have been saved. That's what's next! - R W De Haan ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

Oh, what can I give to the Master,

The One who from sin set me free?

I'll give Him a lifetime of service

To thank Him for dying for me.- K. De Haan

**We cannot work for salvation,
but salvation is followed by works.**

Acts 9:31

F B Meyer

Acts 9:31 The Church had peace, being edified; and ... was multiplied.

The Church grew not simply by addition, but by multiplication. Three added to three make six; three multiplied by three, nine. That is the Pentecostal ratio of increase. These are the conditions of Church growth:—

First, there must be peace. — Let us endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. As far as it lies in our power, let each of us live peaceably with all men. Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and railing, be put away out of our hearts, with all malice, and let us be kind one to another, tender-hearted, and imitating God the great Peacemaker.

Next, the Church must be edified. — We must build ourselves up on our most holy faith. And, indeed, such growth in grace and the knowledge of God is almost inevitable where the Holy Ghost breaks up the reign of apathy and stagnation. When its foundations are deeply laid in righteousness and peace, the City of God arises into the pure air.

Moreover, the members of such a Christian community must walk in the fear of the Lord. To walk means the daily plodding, routine life — full of commonplaces, somewhat prosaic — but always ruled by the fear of grieving the heart that was pierced on Calvary. Lastly, we must walk in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, or, as the words might be rendered, in the paracletism of the Paraclete. The Holy Spirit is our Advocate, Teacher, Guide; and we should habitually dwell in his radiant and helpful environment. What a difference there is between sea weeds and sea flowers expanding in their rock surrounded aquariums, and the same when taken into common air! Such is the contrast wrought by the Spirit.

Meyer, F. B. Our Daily Homily

Acts 9:36-42

A CHRISTIAN businessman picked up a young man who was hitchhiking in lightweight clothing on a very cold day. This small kindness eventually led to the salvation of the young man, his family, and some of his friends.

A twelve-year-old boy named Cliff Miller went daily to the fence surrounding the athletic field at Georgia State Penitentiary to talk with and witness to inmate Harold Morris. These contacts played a large part in Harold's eventual conversion. Since receiving a pardon, Harold has spoken to thousands of young people around the country about Jesus Christ.

We sometimes think that if we can't do something big for Christ we might as well do nothing. But even a smile can make someone's day go better. In the name of Jesus we can say an encouraging word, run an errand, mow a lawn, take a meal, care for a baby, or do a variety of other small favors. They will make an impact. Even if they do not produce immediate and spectacular results, God takes note of them. —H V Lugt ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

Acts 9:36-43

ONE day while driving down a country road, a woman named Ruth passed a small, wooden house with a sign outside that read "Quilts for Sale." She stopped, knocked on the door, and was greeted by a little old woman in a faded gingham dress.

"Hello, my name is Ruth. I'm here to see your quilts," the visitor said.

The woman smiled and answered, "You and I both have Bible names. Mine is Martha."

Martha led Ruth to a large cupboard and showed her beautiful quilts of every color and pattern imaginable. Pinned on each one was a blue ribbon.

"I make quilts, too," Ruth said, "but I've never been able to win a blue ribbon."

Martha replied, "My child, maybe your quilts don't have heart. Do you only want the blue ribbon? Every one of mine was made with

someone special in mind."

We live in a day of shallow superlatives. Entertainers and athletes perform feats hailed "the greatest" by the world. But truly great human endeavors are those done for Jesus with some needy person in mind. And they bear the mark of eternal excellence. Such was the labor of Dorcas of Joppa. Her loving, charitable heart was seen in the clothes she had made for the poor (Acts 9:39).

When we give our best out of love for Christ and others, our efforts become blue-ribbon service.—D A D [Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

ACTS 10

Acts 10:1-6

Your prayers... have come up as a memorial offering before God. - Acts 10:4

TODAY IN THE WORD

A. B. Simpson, founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, wrote concerning today's verse: ""What a beautiful expression the angel used with Cornelius... It would almost seem as if the supplications of the years had accumulated before the Throne, and at last the answer broke in blessing upon the head of Cornelius.""

The amazing thing about the prayer life of Cornelius, which God commended along with his giving, is that at this point in his life Cornelius was not yet a Christian. Nevertheless, Cornelius's prayers served as a memorial, a reminder to God, of his sincere heart. And when the time was right, God remembered that sincerity by providing the way for Cornelius and his household to be saved.

Today, as we observe Memorial Day, it's appropriate that we offer up prayers that serve as a memorial to those who have given their lives to preserve our freedom. One of the powerful effects of prayer is what we might call its ""reminding"" ability. A serious, regular prayer life will help us remember the milestones in our spiritual journeys, such as God's goodness to us in days past and His promises for the future.

Even though Cornelius was a member of the occupying Roman army and thus in the enemy camp, his devotion to the God of Israel became the dominant theme in his life.

The Old Testament speaks of a memorial offering (Num. 5:26) that was part of the test for adultery, using the term because the offering brought the alleged iniquity to mind. And the Israelites were to blow trumpets as a memorial over certain offerings (Num. 10:10).

One way we remember those who have fallen in battle is by building memorials. But in addition to these visible remembrances, we can keep their memory alive by thanking God for their sacrifice and committing ourselves once again to the principles of God's Word on which this country was built.

Cornelius was building a memorial in heaven by his fervent prayers. Obviously, God does not need a reminder in the sense that He might forget who we are. But our prayers keep us and our requests before His throne. And judging by the case of Cornelius, our prayers incline God to act on our behalf.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Even if this Memorial Day observance does not touch you and your family directly, all of us have benefited from the sacrifices of others.

Because God has stretched His protective hand over this country, we are able to enjoy so much. Today, let's join together as His people to praise Him for His care, and to pray for His comfort on behalf of the families who are remembering loved ones lost in battle.

Acts 10:1-23

Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too. - Romans 3:29

TODAY IN THE WORD

Maggy Barankitse grew up in Burundi, which shares a border with Rwanda. There, 600,000 people were massacred during ethnic violence between Hutus and Tutsis. After Maggy witnessed the murder of 72 friends and coworkers in 1993, God gave her the vision

for Maison Shalom (House of Peace) where Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa people would build a new community together, reconciled to one another through God's love. Maison Shalom embodies God's deep healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation between enemies.

Yesterday we learned about God's initiative to reconcile humanity to Himself. Today we encounter His desire for reconciliation between people who are alienated from one another. At the beginning of Acts 10, we meet Cornelius, a God-fearing Gentile who received a vision from God and obeys immediately (vv. 1-8). Little does Cornelius know that Peter also experienced a vision from God. While praying, Peter saw a sheet containing all kinds of unclean animals and birds. A voice commanded him three times to kill and eat and proclaims, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (vv. 11-16). Nothing could shock Peter more! How can religious distinctions between clean and unclean be abolished? Before Peter discerned the meaning of the vision, Cornelius' men arrived at his house (vv. 17-19).

The Spirit instructed Peter to greet the Gentile visitors and accompany them without hesitation (v. 20). In the original language of the New Testament, the word translated as hesitate means to evaluate, discriminate, or mistrust. Jews were prohibited from mingling with "unclean" Gentiles. Here, however, the Spirit commanded a righteous Jew not to discriminate with respect to Gentiles.

Like Cornelius, Peter obeyed immediately. He even invited the "unclean" visitors to be his guests (v. 23). The message of Peter's vision becomes clear; He removed the distinction between clean and unclean foods, and even destroys the barriers between Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:11-22).

APPLY THE WORD

Have you experienced a ruptured relationship? Have you determined that "things will never change" with a person or group? Maybe you have heard God's call to pursue reconciliation, but your first response was like Peter's: "Surely not, Lord!" (v. 14). Forgiveness and peacemaking is work. The journey to reconciliation for God first took Jesus to the cross before He ascended into glory. As you pursue God's reconciliation in your relationships, ask God for strength for the difficult road ahead and to relinquish your discriminations.

Acts 10:1-48.

TODAY IN THE WORD

The famed Social Register, which one writer calls "the white pages of the blue-blooded," is 110 years old this year—and it's still hard to crack. A person usually has to be born into the elite group, marry into it, or be recommended by others on the list and judged for suitability by an advisory committee. "It's private and we want to keep it that way," says a spokesman. How elite is the SR? Less than one-tenth of one percent of the U. S. population is represented.

On the opposite end of this spectrum is the "heavenly register," the book of the redeemed. God's family includes people from every social, economic and ethnic group: rich and poor, young and old, Jew and Gentile.

This last couplet is hardly news to us, but we have a 2-year advantage over those first believers. The fact that God had extended His grace to Gentiles was a stunning revelation to the church at Jerusalem. The idea of a new body made up of both groups would take some getting used to.

Philip's ministry to the Ethiopian official as recorded in Acts 8 was one hint of what was ahead. But it remained for Peter as the leader of the Twelve to lead the way in taking the gospel to the Gentiles. God had to do a little spadework in the heart of this ex-fisherman to get him to "fish for men" in Gentile waters.

On the roof of Simon's house in Joppa, Peter puzzled over his vision, but the mystery wasn't long in unfolding. When the men came from Cornelius, Peter was ready to go. The apostle's statement in verses 28-29 sums up the theology behind this new work called the church that would unite Jew and Gentile in one body (see Eph. 2:11-18). The old rules had been superseded.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The unity of the church is a biblical reality, but making it real in our lives takes commitment. While divisive issues are different today, the church still struggles with this important matter.

Here are some simple yet important steps you can take to help promote unity in the body of Christ: 1. If you have a problem or a disagreement with another Christian, discuss it with that person first. 2. If you disagree with a decision your church leadership has made, take it to the Lord first and then to the appropriate leader. 3. If someone comes to you with gossip, challenge the speaker to go with you to the person being talked about to get at the truth.

Acts 10:1-48

God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. - Acts 10:34-35

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 1861, revivalist William Booth started the Hallelujah Band, a group of believers who had a questionable reputation in society's eyes. Said Booth, "We invited a converted poacher, a couple of prize fighters, a jailbird." This formed the basis for the eventual founding of the Salvation Army, famed worldwide as an organization dedicated to reaching the poor in practical ways.

Working mostly in London, William and his wife, Catherine, preached the gospel and campaigned for social reform. Their military uniforms and radical philosophy attracted both ridicule and admiration. Volunteers pledged, "For Christ's sake, to feed the poor, clothe the naked, love the unlovable, and befriend the friendless."

The Booths reached out to those regarded as "impure" by society. They knew that God sees with different eyes, a truth reinforced in today's reading.

Cornelius was a good man. He feared God, prayed regularly, and gave generously to the poor. But being a moral person is not enough, so God made a way for Cornelius to hear the gospel. First, though, God had to change His messenger's thinking. As a good Jew, Peter would never have entered a Gentile's home, not even that of a godly Gentile. Once again, God was working to broaden the church's concept of missions!

That's the purpose of Peter's vision. A sheet full of animals considered unclean under the Law was lowered from the sky and Peter was invited to eat. He refused, but was admonished, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (v. 15). After he saw the vision three times, Peter puzzled over its meaning.

Thanks to Cornelius's prompt obedience in sending messengers, the interpretation of Peter's dream was soon at the door. After a little extra nudge from the Spirit (vv. 19-20), Peter took the revolutionary step of inviting Cornelius's men into the house as his guests, and later entered Cornelius's house as a guest himself (vv. 23-25). In faith, Cornelius had gathered family and friends to hear Peter, and many were saved that day (vv. 34-48).

APPLY THE WORD

If you are tempted to treat people based on merely human standards, memorizing Bible verses is a good way to resist temptation. Here are two good verses to help you fight against the sin of favoritism: "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism" (James 2:1).

Acts 10:1-11:18

I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth. - Acts 13:47

TODAY IN THE WORD

It's been said that "Sunday morning is the most segregated time in America." After everything we've studied this month--how all humans are created to worship God, how the promise to Abraham includes all peoples, how the Incarnation restores broken fellowship, and how the Spirit enables worship across language barriers--this is indeed a sad observation. Today's passage will challenge us further to pray for integration within our churches.

The first Christians were nearly all Jews, as was Jesus. Joel's prophecy said that the Spirit would be poured out on all people (Joel 2:28; cf. Acts 2:17), and the events of Acts 2 confirmed this. Still, it was hard for the early church to understand how Gentiles fit into God's plan. It was probably impossible to envision a unified church with Jewish and Gentile Christians. But God faithfully guides His church in the direction in which He wants it to go.

Cornelius was a Gentile who feared God, but God was about to reveal Himself further to this faithful man, and He was going to use Peter to accomplish this.

God used a vision to prepare Peter for this new assignment. In this vision, the strict Jewish division between ritually clean and unclean foods was broken down (v. 15). This removed one of the stumbling blocks that a devout Jew like Peter would have had about sharing a meal with a Gentile like Cornelius. It also symbolized what God was about to do in the church (vv. 34-35). As Peter preached the gospel in Cornelius's household, the Spirit descended, just as He had at Pentecost (v. 45).

APPLY THE WORD

In *Welcoming the Stranger*, Patrick Keifert writes, "Many congregations are adept at proclaiming the gospel but inept at welcoming and assimilating people." This is particularly true when we have to cross ethnic or cultural lines. Revelation 4-5 presents a beautiful

picture of people from every tribe and nation worshiping together. Think of how rich our worship could be if we were experiencing even a fraction of the diversity reflected in Revelation!

Acts 10:1-11:18

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. - James 2:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

In his commentary on Acts, evangelist Ajith Fernando describes the Maltose people who live in a mountainous area of India. Without access to water, bathing was very difficult. The tribespeople often smelled so bad that outsiders avoided them. Mortality rates were so high that extinction was a real danger. Remarkable changes, however, came when missionaries reached out and lived with the Maltose. By 1996, more than one third had become Christians. Better hygiene has led to higher mortality rates. Yet this barrier was crossed with a high price—some of the missionaries died from diseases common among the Maltose.

Some prejudices seem almost impossible to overcome—even for the apostle Peter. Today's long passage divides into seven scenes. In scene one (10:1-8), a devout, God-fearing Gentile, Cornelius, has a vision in which he is commanded to seek out Peter in Joppa. In scene two (10:9-16), Peter also has a vision, in which he sees the animal world divided into clean and unclean. As a devout Jew, Peter would have been repulsed by the idea of eating anything unclean. But the vision represented the four corners of the earth and a humanity divided between Jew (clean) and Gentile (unclean).

Scene three (10:17-23) brings Cornelius's servants to Peter. To invite these Gentile men into a Jewish home hints at the radical work that the Lord was about to do! In scene four (10:23-33), Peter finally meets Cornelius and his household. Scene five (10:34-43) records Peter's first proclamation of the gospel to Gentiles.

Remarkably, even while Peter was still speaking the Holy Spirit came upon this group (scene six, Acts 10:44-48). These were hearts prepared for the gospel! In Acts 11:1-18, we see how hard it is for old barriers to come down. But once the Jerusalem church heard all that Peter had to say, they, too, were convinced that even Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The reality of the Gentiles becoming believers was nearly impossible for some in the early church to grasp. But what about us today? Are there people we consider beyond the gospel's reach? For some, the thought of the gospel transforming Muslims is hard to imagine. For others, gang members may seem out of reach. Yet there's no barrier the gospel cannot overcome! Ask the Spirit to use today's passage to show where you need to be challenged in this regard. Pray for openness to those whom you might consider hopeless.

Acts 10:9-16

Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love - Galatians 5:13

TODAY IN THE WORD

The Pharisees once challenged the Lord about why His disciples did not ceremonially wash their hands before eating, an accusation of uncleanness. Jesus responded strongly, calling the religious leaders "hypocrites" and quoting Isaiah about the contrast between outward rituals and inner heart attitudes. He condemned them for holding on to tradition while letting go of God's commands. And He taught those watching that spiritual uncleanness was defined not by such things as food, but rather by sinful actions that flow out of sinful thoughts (Mark 7:1–23).

Peter should have remembered this episode that afternoon on the rooftop in Joppa. While praying, he saw a puzzling vision of animals lowered from heaven in a sheet. He refused to eat them because at least some of them were unclean according to the Mosaic Law. This tradition and cultural conditioning initially proved stronger than the very voice of God! What Peter couldn't see was that God was already at work through the Roman centurion Cornelius to open the door of the gospel to the Gentiles.

Peter's experience provides a contrast to Eve. She added to God's command and was drawn into sin; he resisted God's command, but God persisted and he eventually obeyed. What if he had stubbornly insisted on following the rules for the purity he knew, or thought he knew? What if he had said, "Better safe than sorry"? To choose obedience and freedom, he had to open his mind to new concepts and new practices. Later, when Peter allowed himself to be pressured into legalism, Paul confronted him in defense of the faith (see Gal. 2:11–21).

APPLY THE WORD

We'd like to present today our final reading application for the month. Leland Ryken started from a Puritan perspective in his

excellent book, *Redeeming the Time: A Christian Approach to Work and Leisure* (Baker Books).

Acts 10:24-48; 11:15-18

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. - 2 Corinthians 5:18

TODAY IN THE WORD

Since television shows have started making entire seasons available on DVD, some people have sat down intending to watch just one episode-only to find themselves hooked to find out what happens next with the characters and plot lines. Hours later, they're still eagerly watching one episode after another.

Acts is better than that show "you just can't miss," and yesterday's reading left us in suspense. In the middle of the story of Peter and Cornelius, we were left wondering if Peter will fully obey God's command not to discriminate against Gentiles. Will God's reconciliation be worked out, or will these two groups remain separate and alienated from one another? Today we'll discover the outcome.

"The next day," Peter took his first big steps toward reconciliation: he traveled to Cornelius' house and entered into Gentile space. God had transformed Peter's prior understanding; Peter declared it himself (v. 28). The good news is that through Jesus, God reconciles all people to Himself, Jews and Gentiles (v. 35). This is why Peter calls Jesus "Lord of all" (v. 36). Peter's conversion of understanding occurs, and then Cornelius' conversion to faith.

While Peter continued to tell about Jesus, he was interrupted by the Holy Spirit. Echoes of Pentecost resound, but this time, to the astonishment of Peter and his companions, the Spirit anointed Gentiles, who began "speaking in tongues and praising God" (vv. 44-46). If the message wasn't clear before, the Holy Spirit certainly sealed the deal: God "accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (v. 35; 11:17).

He is not God of one people group, but God of the whole world. Therefore, all who trust in Jesus Christ are members of one family, brothers and sisters despite all diversity and difference and barriers of hostility the world erects. Peter and Cornelius represent all Jews and Gentiles respectively. Reconciled first to God, now they must be reconciled with one another.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Immediately after his visit to Cornelius' house, Peter traveled to Jerusalem where he recounted the entire episode to the Jewish Christians there (Acts 11:1-18). The story of reconciliation and the Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit is so astonishing that Luke records it twice. It is important for us to hear and tell stories of reconciliation. They remind us of the truth, power, and hope of the gospel. If Maggy Barankitse can extend forgiveness and reconciliation, surely through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit we can, too.

Acts 10:24-48

God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. - Acts 10:34-35

TODAY IN THE WORD

Greeting cards tend to present a sugar-sweetened picture of reality. Perhaps you've seen the series of cards and pictures with little boys and little girls dressed up in grown-up outfits. The boy's giving the girl a rose, or the girl is kissing the boy on the cheek. Maybe a "Just Married" sign is on the back of their little red wagon.

In reality, these pictures just don't ring true. For the most part, little boys and little girls can't stand being together. A little girl wouldn't want to kiss a boy any more than she'd want to kiss a frog, and boys would rather hand out snakes and lizards instead of roses. They have no idea that as the years go by, that greeting-card picture will resemble reality. But as boys and girls mature, their hearts open up to ideas like love, togetherness, and acceptance.

At the foundation of the church, picturing Jews in fellowship with Gentiles seemed unrealistic too. The Jews and the Gentiles had both grown accustomed to living completely apart with their own customs and lifestyles. The idea of a new body made up of both groups would take some getting used to.

Philip's ministry to the Ethiopian official in Acts 8 was one hint of what was ahead. God used Peter to lead the way in taking the gospel to the Gentiles. God had to work in the heart of this ex-fisherman to make him "fish for men" in Gentile waters. Peter scratched his head over the vision he had on Simon's roof in Joppa, but as he arrived in Caesarea and preached the gospel to Cornelius and his household, the mystery was revealed.

Peter's statement in verses 28 and 34-35 summed up the theology behind this new beginning called the church. Later, Paul would fill

in the details about this new entity that united Jews and Gentiles in one body (Eph. 2:11-18). The old rules had been superseded.

Even as Peter spoke, the Holy Spirit was given to the hearers. Peter's Jewish companions were literally "beside themselves" with astonishment (v. 45) at this clear evidence of Gentiles being equal with Jews in Christ.

APPLY THE WORD

Paul tells us to keep the unity of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3). The church's unity is a biblical reality, but keeping it takes commitment.

Here are three steps you can take to help promote unity in the body of Christ: 1. If you have a problem or disagreement with another Christian, discuss it with that person first. 2. If you disagree with a decision your church leadership has made, take it to the Lord first and then to the appropriate leader. 3. If someone comes to you with gossip, challenge the speaker to go with you to the person being talked about to get the truth.

Acts 10:37-38

TODAY IN THE WORD

Every four years, on January 20, the President of the United States is inaugurated, taking an oath to uphold the presidential office and the Constitution. Although the outcome of the November election determines who will be president, this individual doesn't officially become President until the inauguration. The inaugural oath and ceremony mark the official beginning of what has already been determined by election.

This provides a helpful parallel to Jesus' baptism. John's baptism of Jesus didn't in any way make Jesus the Messiah or qualify Him for His office. Jesus was already the Messiah, and John's baptism marked the public beginning and divine anointing of His atoning work.

Jesus has always been and will always be the Messiah. But since He was taking on human flesh fully, He needed to identify completely with humanity. His baptism showed His total dependence upon God's Spirit and power. It was only when John understood this that he consented to baptize Jesus (Matt. 3:15).

The Gospels make it clear that Jesus relied upon the Spirit before His public ministry began. But the Gospel accounts don't record any significant ministry or miraculous activity in Jesus' life prior to Spirit's descent and the public declaration of His divine sonship. Jesus' baptism showed that He willingly chose to depend on God's Spirit, even to the point of death. Recall how Isaiah predicted that God's promised Servant would be completely led by His Spirit, promises fulfilled in Jesus' life.

Notice that John's water baptism was inferior to the baptism that Jesus would perform with the Holy Spirit (John 1:33). There is a connection between John's baptism of Jesus and Pentecost (see Acts 2). At the first event, God showed His pleasure with His Son by sending His Holy Spirit. At the second event, God showed His pleasure with His Son's spiritual body—the church—by sending the Holy Spirit.

APPLY THE WORD

If Jesus, eternally God, humbled Himself to live fully dependent upon God's Spirit, how much more should the same be true for us, His followers? The Holy Spirit confirmed Jesus' ministry during His baptism. Have you ever embarked on a ministry project in your own strength and power without seeking the guidance of the Spirit? When we are following His call and living obediently to His commands, the Spirit will indeed confirm that our ministry is well-pleasing to Him.

Acts 10:38

TODAY IN THE WORD

In the "tell all" atmosphere of our culture today, some gossips try to feed the public's hunger for inside information on celebrities by finding people who knew these famous folks before their fame. Former neighbors, teachers, baby-sitters, and others from a celebrity's hometown are asked for juicy, revealing stories about the celebrity's past.

Jesus had achieved fame by the time He returned to Galilee after successfully defeating the Devil in the desert (vv. 1-13). People had already heard about Him, and the synagogues where He taught were probably packed. But the real gauge of popular opinion came when Jesus entered His hometown of Nazareth and went to the synagogue. That wasn't surprising, since the Bible says that it was His custom (v. 16). It also wasn't surprising that Jesus was invited to read the Scriptures and address the congregation as a visiting teacher. The people in Nazareth wanted to see if what they had heard about this "local boy made good" was true.

Jesus chose His text deliberately, a passage from Isaiah 61:1-2 that described the ministry of Israel's Messiah. He also stopped deliberately, ending His reading in the middle of verse 2, which speaks of the day of the Lord's vengeance. This is a wonderful

witness from Jesus Himself about the difference between His first and second comings. He came the first time to heal, deliver, and announce the day of God's favor. The second time He will come in wrath to judge the world.

By the time Jesus finished, the synagogue attenders were staring at Him in amazement. And when Jesus announced that He was the fulfillment of this messianic prophecy, they took offense at "the carpenter's son" claiming greatness (v. 22). Jesus reminded His hearers of two instances when God bypassed Israel and instead blessed Gentiles who trusted in Him.

It's true. The hometown crowd can be the toughest to influence for Christ because these people know us better than anybody.

Acts 10:6

F B Meyer

Acts 10:6 He lodged with one Simon, a tanner.

This lodging must have been somewhat distasteful to the apostle; not only because of its insalubrious odors, but because of the association with death that rendered him liable to the ceremonial pollution which a religious Jew, as Peter was, peculiarly dreaded. Probably he was only driven to it by the sternest necessity. But was it not remarkable that he who had been the chief apostle of the Church, and who had but recently come from a most successful tour, should suddenly be isolated from all his happy and holy associations, and be stranded for many days in the tanner's house (Acts 9:43)?

Yet such dealings on the part of the Lord with his servant are easy of explanation. We are all apt to substitute work for God instead of communion with Him. We become strong in our own strength; elated with success; puffed up by the adulation of our friends. It is needful, therefore, that we be withdrawn from the madding crowd and the career of unbroken prosperity; that the glare of the sun should be tempered, and confidence in ourselves be brought low. There is only one resort. To be hidden in the quiver; to become dependent on the widow-woman of Zarephath; to spend forty years in the desert, till the passionate impulses of our own life subside; to go apart into Arabia; to spend the slowly-moving weeks in the tanner's house.

Whilst Peter waited, he maintained his habits of prayer; left his heart open to the impressions and teachings of the Holy Spirit; awaited the next movements of the cloudy pillar; set himself to acquire lessons which, though subversive of his past experience, reacted on his whole after-life; and from his retirement went forth to unlock a new era.

Meyer, F. B. Our Daily Homily

ACTS 11

Acts 11:1-30.

TODAY IN THE WORD

When the New York Giants won the 1991 Super Bowl to claim the title of National Football League champions, the first item on the postgame agenda was whether the city of New York would hold a victory parade for the champs.

Such parades have become an American sports tradition, but then-New York mayor Ed Koch wasn't feeling very traditional. "Let New Jersey give them a parade," he growled, referring to the team's decision to vacate New York a few years earlier and play its games in a new stadium in suburban New Jersey.

We can be grateful that the leaders of the church in Jerusalem did not react with New York's sense of wounded pride. Why? Because within a relatively short time after the events of Acts 11, Jerusalem would be replaced in the spotlight of the unfolding history of the church by the Gentile city of Antioch, some three hundred miles to the north.

Antioch, not Jerusalem, would soon become the home base for the missionary activity of the church, which would become the sending church of the apostle Paul. In today's reading we see the stage being set for this momentous shift.

Peter was criticized by his fellow Jewish believers for violating the Law of Moses by going into a Gentile's house. But when the brethren heard Peter's account of God's leading, they dropped their objections—although the issue of Jewish/Gentile relationships was not yet fully settled.

The question of Gentiles receiving God's grace in Christ was no longer in doubt. Luke suspends this portion of the story at verse 19 and turns his attention to the spread of the gospel in Gentile territory.

The Jerusalem church, hearing of the fruitful work in Antioch, sent Barnabas to help. It was Barnabas who went to Tarsus and brought Paul to Antioch, doubtless the best decision ever made by a “pulpit committee”!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Do you ever feel yourself suffering from a “hardening of the categories”?

This is a common ailment in the church, leading to statements such as “We don’t do things that way” or “We really don’t have anything in common with those people.” When God’s people start thinking and talking like this, it can limit the work He wants to do through us.

Acts 11:9-23

Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. - Mark 16:15

TODAY IN THE WORD

Bombardier Jacob DeShazer, part of Jimmy Doolittle’s World War II bombing raid on Japan, afterwards parachuted into China, where he was captured and imprisoned. For years, he suffered torture and deprivation at the hands of the enemy.

At one point, they eased up and provided more food and one Bible to share. When his three-week turn to have the Bible came, he read the Word through several times, studied it, memorized large portions, and finally prayed to receive Christ!

DeShazer immediately began to show Christ’s love to his enemies by befriending a guard. After the war, he and his wife returned to Japan as missionaries. A tract that included his testimony was widely distributed, and many came to hear the man who had forgiven his enemies.

Jacob DeShazer had the freedom and boldness to cross barriers of distance, prejudice, and culture with the good news of salvation in Christ. This is one of the joys of the journey!

Peter’s vision in today’s reading was the Holy Spirit teaching the apostle to think outside his “Jewish box” and take seriously the “all the nations” part of the Great Commission. He saw a sheet full of animals, unclean by the standards of the Mosaic Law. Though the voice from heaven said, “Kill and eat,” Peter’s cultural and religious conditioning made him resist the command. The voice responded: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (Acts 10:9; cf. Matt. 15:17–20).

The vision’s application was close at hand (Acts 10:28, 34–35; cf. Acts 15:7–11). The Spirit tapped Peter on the shoulder and let him know that the Gentiles at the door had been sent by God. Peter invited them in, which culturally was a very significant thing for him to do. He returned with them to Cornelius’ house and preached the gospel. When the household responded, the Holy Spirit descended on them, showing that their faith was genuine and the same as that of Jewish converts.

APPLY THE WORD

In response to today’s reading, begin supporting a cross-cultural missionary through prayer and giving. If you’re not sure where to start, ask the missions committee at your church for information and suggestions. Af

Acts 11:19-26

When he ... saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord. - Acts 11:23

TODAY IN THE WORD

Green Bay Packers wide receiver Don Hutson practically defined the position as we know it. The forward pass was not common in football in his day, but he altered the game almost single-handedly to make it a standard weapon on offense. After revolutionizing college football at the University of Alabama, he went on to the NFL and caught an 83-yard touchdown pass on his first play from scrimmage. Fast and agile, he was the first receiver to gain 1,000 yards in a season (just 11 games at the time) and set records that stood for decades. He had 488 career receptions, more than doubling the total of his nearest rival in those days!

A talented pioneer can change things permanently. We read today of some unnamed spiritual pioneers (v. 20) who were the first to reach out to Gentiles with the gospel. The fingerprints of God’s grace are all over this episode. First, grace transformed something bad into something good—persecution in Jerusalem led to the spread of the gospel. Second, the message of grace spread beyond cultural and racial boundaries to the Gentiles. Third, “a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord,” accepting His grace (v. 21). Fourth, when Barnabas arrived and saw all this “evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged” the growth of the church at Antioch (v. 23). And finally, through Barnabas’ mentorship, God graciously reached out to Saul, the former persecutor, and brought him into the ministry mainstream.

Barnabas played a remarkable role. As the representative of the Jerusalem church, he could have wielded his authority and stopped things. But because he was a man “full of the Holy Spirit and faith” (v. 24), he recognized God's grace at work and joined it. As a result, Antioch was the first predominantly Gentile church, the first place believers were called “Christians” (“belonging to Christ”), and the starting point for Paul's career of missionary journeys.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

How can you be like Barnabas? He was an encourager, so perhaps you can offer someone a cheerful word. Or you could mentor a younger believer, as he did Saul. He was also humble, thankful, joyful, faith-filled, evangelism-minded, and Spirit-guided, so you have many qualities to choose from! Ask the Lord to show you in which area you can bring Him glory and serve others like Barnabas.

Acts 11:19-26

The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch. - Acts 11:26

TODAY IN THE WORD

Muhammed Omar was forced to relocate to Kenya after violence spread in his native Somalia. He converted from Islam to faith in Jesus, and says this about reaching his people with the gospel: “Fifty years ago, Christians the world over were challenged to go to more difficult places like Somalia. Then the war started in 1991 and now with still no central government, many Somalis had scattered all over the world, mainly to Kenya. Today, we do not need to go to Somalia to reach Somalis. I thank the Lord that they come for treatment to Kenya's Kijabe Hospital where I work as a volunteer chaplain.”

From the beginning, believers in Jesus have followed the Great Commission to spread the gospel to others (Matt. 28:19-20). God has redeemed even such evil as persecution and displacement in order to reach people with the good news that He loves them enough to send Jesus to die for their sins. Just as Muhammed Omar found that he could reach people from Somalia, people in our text for today spread the gospel to cities across the known world.

After Stephen's death, persecution was unleashed against the church in Jerusalem (see Acts 8:1). One result is that Christians began to flee Jerusalem, taking the message of Christ with them to Phoenicia (in present-day Lebanon), Cyprus, and Antioch (in modern Turkey). Christianity was going global! The initial converts were Jewish, but then they shared the faith with their Gentile neighbors, who also believed (v. 20).

When the Jerusalem church heard about Gentile converts, they sent Barnabas to Antioch to investigate. Barnabas found that these believers exhibited the grace of God, the mark of all followers of Christ throughout time (v. 23). Whether Jew or Greek, American or Somali, evidence of God's grace will identify true Christians.

This grace verified that Gentile converts were part of the family of God, and it also encouraged Barnabas. He committed a year to teaching the believers in Antioch so they could grow in the faith. The grace of God allows us to cross all social and cultural boundaries to share the gospel, and then embrace our brothers and sisters.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Missions has been part of the identity of the church from the beginning. Are you connected with a missions program or missionaries? Missionaries who have traveled from their homes need financial support and spiritual encouragement—even birthday cards or regular e-mails can be tremendously helpful. You don't have to leave home to share the gospel. Do you have a heart for your own family or neighbors to know Christ? Pray that the grace God has given you will bring others to faith.

Acts 11:19-26

God has even granted the Gentiles repentance unto life. - Acts 11:18

TODAY IN THE WORD

The evening of June 14, 1910, saw the start of the momentous World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland. More than 1,200 delegates, mostly from Britain and North America, came to discuss wide-ranging issues related to world evangelization, including interacting with other religious faiths and preparing or training missionaries.

Historian Mark Noll singles out this conference as a milestone in church history. From this point on, the tide would turn from missions as a phenomenon of Europe and North America to Christianity as a faith being indigenized in many cultures around the globe. This trend would be recognized at the 1974 Lausanne Conference on World Evangelization, at which 2,700 delegates from 151 countries, at least half from developing nations, met to discuss the Great Commission.

Today's reading marks a defining moment in the history of Christian missions. We have said that Paul was chosen as the Apostle to the Gentiles, but anonymous Christians fleeing persecution did the first truly cross-cultural missions work, as evidenced in today's reading. Paul may have done cross-cultural work in Arabia, (cf. Gal. 1:17), but if so we are not told in Scripture.

Following the martyrdom of Stephen, persecution intensified for the early church, and many believers left Jerusalem. In their new homes, they went to local synagogues and continued to evangelize Jews. But a group of men from Cyprus and Cyrene went a step further and witnessed to Greeks in Antioch (v. 20). These Greeks were different from the Jews in every way—culturally, philosophically, and religiously.

The work of these early cross-cultural missionaries was successful, and the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to investigate this unconventional ministry. He found evidence of God's grace, and encouraged the new Gentile believers to be devoted fully to the Lord (v. 23).

APPLY THE WORD

Mark Noll, the historian cited in today's illustration, wrote an excellent, readable book on church history, entitled *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*.

Acts 11:24

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT--GOODNESS (F B Meyer. *Our Daily Walk*)

"He was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost, and of faith."-- Acts 11:24

GOODNESS IS the radiance or out-shining of a pure and happy Christian soul. It is quick to see and magnify whatever is good in others, as Barnabas was: It is incapable of jealousy or envy, else he would never have gone to Tarsus to seek Saul. The goodness of this man was evinced in his generous donation of the proceeds of his patrimony, and in the ministry of consolation which he exercised among the disciples.

Such goodness is not natural to us. It is the fruit of our union with the true Vine, whose sap may be compared to the Holy Spirit. Before we can be the good man, for whom some would even dare to die, we must become grafted into Christ, that His goodness may make its way through our sour dispositions.

The most difficult thing of all is to continue to manifest this goodness when our lives are united, as Abigail's was, to that of a churl (1Sa25:3). She was a beautiful woman, of good understanding, and full of tact. Her speech, which arrested David when about to avenge himself on Nabal, is a model of good sense. He heartily thanked her for it, as having saved him from a hasty deed, which would have filled his after-life with regret. Nabal was a churl, evil in his doings, and as his servants said, "such a son of Belial, that none could speak to him"--a man who did not know what it was to be merry. Nabal was his name and his nature! What a constant pain it must have been to this noble woman to be united to such a churl! That is a test of real goodness; it is a triumph of God's grace.

Guard against stinginess and niggardliness. Give liberally and generously to every good cause. Be very careful of going back on your first intentions, which in the Matter of giving are probably more trustworthy than the proverbial after-thoughts. Be always careful to dwell on and extol whatever you find admirable and noble in the character of others.

It was said of Charles Kingsley: "No fatigue was too great to make him forget the courtesy of less wearied moments, no business too engrossing to deprive him of his readiness to show kindness and sympathy. To school himself to this code of unfaltering high and noble living was truly one of the great works of his life."

PRAYER

Teach us to exert a wholesome gracious influence on those with whom we come in contact, diffusing in every look and gesture the sweet savour of Christ, and shedding in every act the genial light caught from His face. May the world be really better because we are living in it to-day. AMEN.

F B Meyer. *Our Daily Walk*.

Acts 11:24

F B Meyer

Acts 11:24 He was a good man.

This is the Holy Spirit's verdict on the character and life of Barnabas. Very different to the magniloquent inscriptions on the tombs of

warriors and statesmen; but it were better to deserve this at the lips of the blaster than to have the longest list of titles ever appended to a mortal's name. For a good man like this some would even dare to die. The characteristics of this good man were these:

He could see the good it movements outside his own church-order. — The Church at Antioch originated, as this paragraph proves, in the preaching of a number of unknown, unordained refugees, who were fleeing from the iron hand of persecution. All we know of them is that they were men of Cyprus and Cyrene. They had broken through the barrier of the ages by preaching to the Gentiles, great numbers of whom had been saved. The Church in Jerusalem was somewhat suspicious of this new departure, and sent Barnabas to report; but when he came he was forthwith convinced of its genuineness, saw the evidence of the hand of the Lord, and was glad. No jealousy, nor narrow bigotry, nor suspicion, warped his judgment.

He was willing that another should share with himself the joys of harvest. — He went off to Tarsus to seek his old acquaintance, and perhaps fellow-student, Paul, and for a whole year the two wrought side by side in loving fellowship, and taught much people.

He was eager that people should be added to the Lord. — Too often good men seek a following for themselves, and rejoice in those who are added to their church or organization. This is not the noblest style of work. It is better far to imitate the Baptist who was content to be the Bridegroom's friend.

Meyer, F. B. Our Daily Homily

Acts 11:19-26

The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. --Acts 11:26

During an interview, the great Polish pianist Ignace Paderewski said, "It is not from choice that my life is music and nothing more, but when one is an artist what else can he be? When a whole lifetime is too short to attain the heights he wants to reach, how then can he devote any of the little time he has to things outside of his art?"

The interviewer then inquired, "And you have not yet attained the heights you seek?" "I am nothing!" replied the artist shaking his head. "If you could know the dream of what I would like to be, you would realize how little I have accomplished."

Paderewski's words spoke to me of the goal and attitude that every Christian should have. He had declared, "When one is an artist, what else can he be?" I would ask, "When one is a Christian, what else can he be?"

In the early church, the disciples were called Christians, which means "those belonging to Christ." Their love and service for the Lord was obvious. If a great pianist can recognize who and what he is, and give his entire life to the development of his art, how much more should we strive to be like our Lord and Savior! With the noted pianist we should be able to say, "What else can we be?" --R W De Haan ([Our Daily Bread. Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

O to be like Thee! blessed Redeemer,

This is my constant longing and prayer;

Gladly I'll forfeit all of earth's treasures,

Jesus, Thy perfect likeness to wear. --Chisholm

Every child of God should grow in likeness to the Son of God

ACTS 12

Acts 12:1-19

O God, you who have done great things. Who, O God, is like you? - Psalm 71:19

TODAY IN THE WORD

In *Waiting for Godot*, the play by Samuel Beckett, two characters wait for Godot to arrive. Day after day, they anticipate his coming, and day after day he does not appear. The play ends with frustrated anticipation—they will return the next day, but the audience has the distinct unease that Godot will not show up.

In contrast, our story today depicts a group who hopes for someone to show up, but when he does, they don't believe it's really him!

King Herod realized that his popularity rating went up when he persecuted the followers of Jesus. He had executed James and

intended to kill Peter after Passover. In response, “the church was earnestly praying to God for him” (v. 5). The night before the trial, an angel of God appeared to Peter and miraculously delivered him from Herod’s maximum-security prison.

We’ve seen dramatic announcements by the Lord or an angelic messenger several times in our study this month. Unlike others, though, Peter didn’t question or object. He first thought he was having a vision; when he was outside the prison walls alone, he realized that his body—not just his mind—had been freed (v. 11). He immediately went to the house of Mary, where he knew the church would be gathered to pray.

What follows is one of the great comic moments in the book of Acts. The servant girl, Rhoda, recognized Peter’s voice—but was so excited that she forgot to open the door! When she told the believers that their prayers were answered, they first accused her of being delusional and then concluded that perhaps Peter’s ghost was there following his execution.

Peter, who had just escaped from Herod’s prison, can’t get anyone to let him into Mary’s house! He continued knocking, and finally those assembled must have decided that either a ghost wouldn’t knock that loudly or that they couldn’t all be hearing things. They opened the door to find Peter standing there, their prayers answered in a way they had barely believed possible.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Zechariah prayed for years before God granted his request. Today we saw the church praying for Peter’s release, and their request was granted before their prayer meeting had even finished. We don’t know when God will resolve our requests or grant our petitions. We do know that His timing is perfect. He loves His people, and He hears the prayers of the righteous. “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Phil. 4:6; see Eph. 6:18).

Acts 12:1-19

The church was earnestly praying to God. - Acts 12:5

TODAY IN THE WORD

Hans Christian Andersen’s fable “The Emperor’s New Suit” tells of a vain emperor who loved clothes. Two swindlers promise to make him the most glorious suit, but it will require much money. They pocket the money and pretend to weave on empty looms and sew imaginary garments. No one, including the emperor, is willing to say they see nothing, for they all fear being thought stupid. Finally, the emperor parades through the city in his new “suit” to great celebration—until a young child announces, “But he has nothing on at all!”

Sometimes those with less status are more willing to recognize the truth that others find uncomfortable or impossible. In our passage today, the servant girl Rhoda recognized the reality of God’s miraculous power. It took the rest of the believers a bit longer to accept that the “impossible” was standing in person outside the door.

King Herod decided to gain political favor with the Jews by persecuting the followers of Jesus. The apostle James was executed, and Peter was arrested with the intent to kill him after the Passover (v. 4). Herod had a tenuous claim to his position, and was desperate to pacify the Jewish leaders and prevent any uprising that might upset Rome. To secure his prized prisoner, he ordered that Peter be guarded by four groups of four soldiers.

The believers responded with prayer (v. 5). In dramatic fashion, God sent an angel to deliver Peter from depths of Herod’s security system. When Peter realized what had happened, he knew that Christians would be gathered in prayer. But here the story is presented with some humor—Peter escaped from Herod, but he can’t get into Mary’s house!

Rhoda heard Peter’s voice, and immediately recognized the significance of his presence. Filled with joy that God had answered prayers and delivered Peter, she ran to tell the others but forgot to let Peter in. Though the believers were praying for Peter’s deliverance, they couldn’t believe that the answer to their prayer was actually outside the door. Peter kept knocking, and Rhoda’s faith in God’s miraculous deliverance was vindicated.

APPLY THE WORD

Have you been praying for something that deep down feels impossible? You know God can do anything—but your situation seems so bleak. Perhaps a devastating illness threatens you or a loved one. Or you long for a friend or family member to come to Christ. God’s deliverance often doesn’t look the way that we expect. Pray that God would give you the faith of Rhoda so that you can recognize His answers to your prayers.

Acts 12:1-25

Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation? - Hebrews 1:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

The End of Spear is the moving account of five missionaries martyred in Ecuador in 1956, written by one of the martyr's sons, Steve Saint. Years later, Steve and his family spent several years among the Waodani, the people who killed his father. During this time, Steve learned from Mincayani, one who participated in the massacre, about the presence of angels escorting the young missionaries into glory: "We saw them. Your father saw them, too. Shining ones!"

There are numerous other accounts in history of angels ministering to believers, including today's passage. The Herod we meet here was Herod the Great's grandson. He spent his youth in imperial Rome, and, as a ruler, was anxious to remain in Rome's good graces. He was also eager to please the Jews, because Jews objected to the Herodian mixed ancestry. Thus, when Herod saw that beheading James pleased the Jews, he wanted to kill Peter too.

This account is filled with irony. First, while the Jews were celebrating Passover, a preacher of God's final act of deliverance through Jesus Christ was languishing in prison. Second, Herod took extraordinary precautions so Peter couldn't escape, yet the power of Herod's prison was no match for the power of prayer and an angel! Notice Peter's profound faith—the night before his likely execution, he was sound asleep. Notice also the irony that, despite their fervent prayers, the believers in Mary's house couldn't believe their prayers had been answered! (The comment about Peter's angel indicates the common Jewish belief in guardian angels.)

It's possible Herod left Jerusalem for Caesarea out of frustration over Peter's escape. We get a glimpse into his true character from the flattery used on him by the desperate representatives of Tyre and Sidon. Herod's death (in A.D. 44) is also recorded by the Jewish historian, Josephus. Both Luke and Josephus indicate that Herod died because he received glory intended only for God.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It's natural to see God's sovereignty in events such as Peter's miraculous rescue. Yet what about James? Or the five missionaries in Ecuador? Is God still sovereign in these events? The martyrdom of Steve Saint's father and his colleagues eventually opened the door for the Waodani to receive the gospel. God is no less sovereign when circumstances turn out differently than we would like. A good example of this is the book or video End of the Spear, available in local Christian bookstores.

Acts 12:1-25.

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TODAY IN THE WORD

Last Friday we outlined events at the Diet of Worms, the 1521 tribunal that forced reformer Martin Luther to go into hiding. After refusing to recant his biblical convictions, Luther set out to return to Wittenberg. But now he had a price on his head. Every subject of the emperor was ordered to seize Luther and turn him over to the authorities. So Luther's friends staged a kidnapping and took him to Wartburg Castle, where he hid for more than a year, even growing a beard to help disguise his appearance.

Peter was rescued from his persecutors too, but in this case he didn't need any help from his friends. His release came by divine intervention, although in the sovereignty of God his fellow apostle James was put to death by King Herod.

To many of us the story of Peter's miraculous escape is so familiar that we almost forget the context. The name of the servant girl who answered Peter's knock has become a Bible trivia answer. But this is not an isolated account of God's deliverance; it's part of the history of the church. Luke didn't lose sight of this fact in his narrative.

For example, James and Peter were arrested because they belonged to the church (v. 1). These events pleased the Jewish authorities who sought to stamp out the church. Rhoda's part was important because she was part of a church prayer meeting. And Peter's concern was to keep the other church leaders informed of his status (v. 17). The arrogance of Herod is evident in his cruel command to execute Peter's Roman guards, a move designed to placate his anger and deflect his embarrassment.

But Herod paid for his pride. The Jewish historian Josephus also recorded Herod's death, saying he was struck down while in the middle of his speech and died after five days of suffering.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The difficulty of the church in believing its prayer was answered makes us smile because we can see ourselves doing the same thing.

Acts 12:10

The Departing Angel (by George H Morrison)

"And they [Peter and the angel] went out, and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed from him" (Acts 12:10).

I wonder if you grasp, then, what I should venture to call the helpful doctrine of the departing angel? I think it is a feature of God's dealing that has been somewhat neglected in our thought. It means that in extraordinary difficulties we may reasonably look for extraordinary help. It means that when we are shut in prison walls, and utterly helpless to extricate ourselves, God has unusual powers in reserve, that He is willing to dispatch to aid His own. But when the clamant need goes, so does the angel. In the open street, under the common sky, do not expect miraculous intervention. It was better for Peter's manhood, and it is better for yours, that only the hour of the dungeon should bring that. The angel departs, but the law of God abides. The angel departs, but the love of Christ remains. And I think that all God's leading of His people, and all the experience of the Christian heart, might be summed up, with not a little gain, in the departing angel and the -- George H Morrison

Acts 12:10

F B Meyer

Acts 12:10 The Iron Gate

There are iron gates before most of us. We are not specially anxious about the first or second ward, but ah, that iron gate! The iron gate of supreme difficulty; of a parent's prohibition against entering the mission-field; of some obstinate circumstance which seems to forbid the execution of our plans; of some barred and locked prohibition; of death at the end of all. It may be that in his strange bewilderment, between waking and sleeping, Peter anticipated this iron gate with a good deal of dread. That at least would bar his progress; but lo, it opened of its own accord! So shall it be with many of the evils that we anticipate.

Not before we come to them, but at the moment of reaching them; when heart and flesh threaten to fail — in the dim light we shall find them standing open, set back for us to pass. The tram-line is not cleared from end to end before the tram starts. Were the driver to wait for this, he would never start at all. But as he comes to each van, or drag, or carriage, it moves, and allows him a free course; or, if it seems dilatory, his whistle hastens it. Thus, when we arise to follow the angel of God's purpose, who has suddenly entered the dark cell of our life, we shall discover that apparently insuperable difficulties, which we have long dreaded, shall open to us, and allow us to pass; when we come to the object we have dreaded most, we shall find it gone.

Let there be plenty of prayer, "prayer without ceasing." Let there be prompt obedience to the angel's touch and summons; the willingness to gird the relaxed loins, and follow; and as you go through life, you will find yourself escorted by an invisible Companion, who holds the key to all doors.

Meyer, F. B. Our Daily Homily

Acts 12:16

UNBELIEVING PRAYER

... when they ... saw him [Peter], they were astonished. Acts 12:16

The story is told about a church in a small town which seemed to have everything going its way. There were no gambling casinos, no liquor stores, and no "beer joints" in the entire area. After several years, however, a night club was built right on Main Street. The congregation was very much disturbed and held several all-night prayer meetings in which some members specifically asked God to burn the tavern down. Well, a few days later, during a tremendous thunderstorm, lightning did strike the drinking establishment and fire completely demolished it. The owner, knowing how the church had prayed, sued them for damages. His lawyer claimed that it was their prayers which caused the loss. The church, however, hired their own lawyer and fought the charges. After many hearings and much deliberation, the judge declared: "It is the opinion of this court that wherever the guilt may lie, the tavern owner is the one who really believes in prayer, while the church members do not!" Doesn't this suggest how faithless we often are? Even those in the early church were guilty of such unbelieving prayer. Acts 12 tells us that Peter, having escaped from prison, went to the house of Mary the mother of John where many Christians were gathered together praying for his release. He knocked, and Rhoda went to the door; but, hearing his voice, she was so thrilled that, without opening it, she ran to the "prayer meeting crowd" and told them that Peter was outside. "Thou art mad!" they said. As she insisted that it was really Peter, they concluded, "It is his angel." As the apostle continued knocking, they finally opened the door. Seeing him, they "were astonished." How often we are like that: surprised at the way God answers prayer.

When we pray, let us be confident that God "is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Ep 3:20). [Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

God answers prayer; shouldst thou complain?
Be not afraid, thou canst not ask in vain.
He only waits thy faith in Him to prove,
Doubt not His power e'en mountains to remove! —Anon.

Have faith to believe that where prayer focuses, power falls!

Acts 12:25-13:3

COCA-COLA seems to be everywhere. But how does it get there? This motto, posted in the company's headquarters, explains it: Think Globally, but Act Locally.

What this slogan is to Coke, the Great Commission is to the church. A church that wants to obey the Lord's command to make disciples of all nations must first be faithful locally.

The early church's missionary outreach began when a group of sinners, changed by God's Spirit and united in a unique body, began ministering to the Lord (Acts 13:2).

The word minister can also be translated "worship." As early believers gathered to worship and pray, the Holy Spirit told them to send out Barnabas and Saul. Responding to God's love in worship led them to take His love to the world. That's God's plan for the success of His work. Through our worship, the Holy Spirit gives us discernment to recognize those whom He calls as missionaries. He also gives us the responsibility to support them financially and with prayer.

If we're worshipping the Lord properly we'll be sending out missionaries regularly.—D J De Haan ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

ACTS 13

Acts 13

Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. - Acts 13:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, the American government, fearing an invasion of Alaska, built a supply road all the way to the territory. The Alaska Highway ran through the Canadian Rockies and Yukon Territory, some of the roughest and most remote land on the continent. Yet in only about six months an enormous force of 16,000 engineers, surveyors, soldiers, and construction workers accomplished the job, carving a 1,422-mile-highway out of the wilderness.

This incredible engineering feat began with a single shovelful of dirt, just as any long journey must begin with a single step. That's how Paul's first missions trip began—with a single step. A step forward to say, "Yes, Lord." He had served on the leadership team in Antioch, which may be where he met Luke (tradition says Luke was from Antioch). The time had come for the church there to take its own next step in obeying the Great Commission, so at the right time the Holy Spirit moved and called Paul and Barnabas specifically to go.

One key point here is the community context for missions and purpose. Barnabas and Paul didn't take a strategy to the church and ask them to rubber-stamp it. Rather, God revealed His will to the church during a time of worship and fasting (v. 2). Fasting is done in order to hear God's voice more clearly, and He honored that desire. By laying hands on the two missionaries, the church identified with them, taking corporate responsibility for sending them out. Paul and Barnabas found their purpose in the context of the body of Christ. If you're wondering about your own purpose, this would be an excellent place to start.

A second key point to notice is the historic shift in ministry focus from Jews to Gentiles (vv. 45-48). By quoting Isaiah 49:6 in verse 47, Paul showed an awareness that God's love is for all peoples as well as of his own specific calling to preach to the Gentiles. The good news must be proclaimed "first for the Jew," but must just as surely be shared and declared globally (Rom. 1:16-17).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Are you familiar with the missionaries your church supports? How are missionaries chosen and commissioned? In what ways are

they accountable to your church for reporting back about their ministry? Who in your church stays in touch with and prays for these missionaries?

If you haven't been personally involved, prayerfully consider if God leads you to take steps to get to know these missionaries better, whether through serving on the missions committee, writing letters, or faithfully praying for their work.

Acts 13:1-25

[God] is patient... not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. - 2 Peter 3:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

The Olympic Games in 1896 were not very spectacular by modern standards. The Games had been suspended in 384 A.D. by the Roman emperor Theodosius, making the revived Games in Athens, Greece, the first in more than 1■ years. The competition drew 200 athletes from 14 countries, a contrast to the thousands of athletes who compete in the Olympics today. An American won a medal in the triple jump, the first medal awarded in the 1896 Games.

There's a parallel between the beginning of the modern Olympics and the beginning of the church's missionary outreach. Compared to the size of the worldwide missionary movement today, the early church's missionary effort was small--just a few men traveling by ship and on foot in one corner of the world. But what results!

In Acts 13 we begin to trace the famous missionary trips the apostle Paul made with various co-workers. In fact, we'll spend the rest of the month following these first missionaries, and close our study with the end of Paul's third journey.

This is another pivotal event in the church's history book. Beginning here, the spotlight shifts from the original twelve apostles to Paul and his companions. Many of the events in Acts happened during one of Paul's amazing missionary trips.

When he and Barnabas were set apart and sent out on a mission, they started on the island of Cyprus, where they dealt with Elymas the sorcerer. From there, the trio (including John Mark) sailed to Perga, from where John Mark returned home. (We'll meet him again in Acts 15.)

Then it was on to Pisidian Antioch in Asia Minor (different from the larger Antioch in Syria, which Paul and Barnabas had just left). Pisidia was known as dangerous territory, a hangout for bandits. Some Bible teachers believe this was the area Paul had in mind later when he said that he faced danger from bandits (2 Cor. 11:26).

In this city Paul found an attentive audience in the Jewish synagogue, and his message produced quite a reaction. We'll look at the rest of his sermon tomorrow.

APPLY THE WORD

By stepping out and courageously preaching the gospel, Paul became a target for opposition and criticism.

Spiritual leaders have always been targets for criticism and hostility, but it's going to take more courage than ever to stand for the truth of God's Word in the twenty-first century. Your pastor would probably appreciate a message of encouragement from you this week. You could write a note today to give him this Sunday.

Acts 13:1-52.

TODAY IN THE WORD

John Mott was a sophomore at Cornell University when a speaker came to talk about world missions. John was interested, but didn't want anything to interfere with his plans. Although he hesitated on that winter evening in 1886, something compelled him to enter the lecture hall. There he heard a stirring missionary challenge, and later he yielded his heart to Christ.

Mott poured his life into missions and became a statesman known around the world. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946 but said, "When John Mott is dead, remember him as an evangelist."

John Mott had the heart of an apostle Paul. From the moment of his salvation until his death, Paul never ceased preaching the gospel and doing the work of an evangelist. Today, as we trace the first of Paul's three famous missionary journeys, we come to the text that tells of the launching of his missionary career.

Acts 13 is another pivotal text in this "history book" of the church. Here the spotlight shifts from the original twelve apostles to Paul and his companions. And in Acts 13:46 we have the first announcement of a major shift in the "target audience" for the gospel. Paul tells the Jews in Pisidian Antioch, "We now turn to the Gentiles."

This chapter marks the true beginning of the worldwide outreach of the church. When Barnabas and Paul were set apart and sent out, the action started right away on the island of Cyprus, where they encountered and dealt with Elymas the sorcerer.

From there the trio (including John Mark) sailed to Perga, from where John returned home. (We'll meet him again in Acts 15.) Then it was on to Pisidian Antioch, so named to distinguish it from Antioch in Syria, the city Paul and Barnabas had just left.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

By stepping out from the crowd and boldly preaching the gospel, Paul became a target for opposition and criticism.

Acts 13:4-13; 15:36-41

Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. - 2 Timothy 4:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

At the age of 22, Franklin Graham was drinking, partying, and smoking marijuana and had been expelled from a Christian school and college. His father, Billy Graham, confronted him, "I want you to know that your mother and I sense there is a struggle for the soul of your life, and you're going to have to make a choice." After re-reading the Gospel of John, Franklin committed his life to Christ. Today he heads Samaritan's Purse, an international relief organization, as well as the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

Thankfully, a slow start to our spiritual journey doesn't end the story. Today we're studying the story of John Mark, whose first foray into ministry didn't go well.

John Mark grew up in a home of Christ-followers (see Acts 12:12). He accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey as a helper and stayed with them through their time in Cyprus, but then left to return home to Jerusalem (13:13). We aren't told specifically why he quit and failed to continue on in this ministry (15:38).

When Paul and Barnabas decided to embark on another trip, Barnabas suggested taking John Mark along again. But Paul had no interest in another repeat of John Mark's desertion. They decided to part ways; Barnabas took his cousin John Mark and followed the original plan to visit the places from their first journey, and Paul took Silas and went to Syria.

The willingness of Barnabas to give him another chance bore fruit in John Mark's growth in ministry. In Paul's letters, references to John Mark grow increasingly warm. He sent greetings and instructions to the church in Colossae to welcome him (Col. 4:10); he identified John Mark as a fellow worker (Philem. 24); and at the end of his life he requested that John Mark visit him, because "he is helpful to me in my ministry" (2 Tim. 4:11). John Mark was also close to the apostle Peter—many scholars believe this enabled him to write the Gospel of Mark (see 1 Peter 5:13).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Barnabas was known as a great encourager (see Acts 4:36; 11:22). His willingness to encourage and mentor John Mark helped to transform him from spiritual failure to spiritually fruitful. Is there a young person in your life who needs encouragement? Can you extend a second chance to someone who feels rejected or worthless? Rather than pointing out the flaws and weaknesses, try to help someone see his or her strengths and potential for Christian service. Willingness to invest in someone's life will pay spiritual dividends.

Acts 13:4-14:28

Pray ... that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly. - 2 Thessalonians 3:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

At first glance, Lake Itasca isn't all that impressive. The 1.8-square-mile lake looks like many other glacial lakes in northwestern Minnesota. The lake's outflow is crossed by only a few stepping stones. Yet remarkably, this small stream marks the source of the mighty Mississippi River, winding 2,340 miles south to the Gulf of Mexico. In many ways, the spread of Christianity is like the inauspicious beginning of a great river.

Cyprus, Barnabas's birthplace, was a natural place to start. The team began by preaching in the local synagogue, a pattern they followed wherever they went. Along the way, they encountered a Jewish sorcerer, Bar Jesus. Apparently, he was like a court astrologer to Sergius Paulus. Yet the gospel is no match for occultic powers, and the combination of miracles and preaching (13:12) persuaded the first known convert from the upper levels of Roman society.

From Cyprus, Paul and Barnabas sailed to the coast of modern Turkey and traveled inland about one hundred miles. We're not told here why John Mark left them in Pamphylia, but we'll hear more about this later. Once in Pisidian Antioch, Paul began by preaching

in the synagogue. His long sermon (13:16-41) overviews Israel's history, showing how it points to Jesus Christ, David's greater Son. Opposition from the Jews, however, became the opportunity for Paul to offer salvation to the Gentiles. Yet with the spread of the gospel came increased opposition, forcing Paul and Barnabas to move on to Iconium, some ninety miles away. Once again, Paul's preaching in the synagogue was followed by severe opposition, forcing the team to flee further east. Neither Lystra nor Derbe were important cities in the Roman Empire, yet we'll see later that one important convert came from Lystra.

Today's passage also shows a great balance between evangelism and follow-up. Notice that the team retraced its steps (probably at some risk) to ensure that the newly planted churches were strengthened and well-established.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Twice now in our study, we've encountered a long sermon tracing Israel's history. Clearly, this was essential for sharing the gospel with Jews. Yet many Christians mistakenly believe that the Old Testament isn't important for them. This is too bad, because knowing how God worked with His people in the past helps us understand how He works now. We're part of the ongoing story of God's redemptive work! This month, use the speeches in Acts to help you learn about this essential part of God's Word.

Acts 13:16-22 1 Samuel 25:1

For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord. - 1 Samuel 1:28

TODAY IN THE WORD

When King Hussein of Jordan died earlier this year, many observers felt that it marked the end of an era in the Middle East.

Hussein's grandfather, King Abdullah, was assassinated by a Palestinian extremist as he walked into a mosque with his grandson. The young Hussein pursued the gunman, and narrowly escaped death himself when a medal on his uniform deflected a bullet. He took over the reins of the kingdom at the age of 17. 'I would never be a schoolboy again,' he later said.

Despite these tentative beginnings, Hussein became a respected statesman, doing an intricate balancing act among the pressures of the Cold War, Arab-Israeli conflict, Western-style economic development, and democratic political reforms. His legacy? Jordan is politically stable, economically strong, and at peace with its neighbors.

Samuel's death in today's reading marks the end of an era in the history of Israel. The announcement was made rather quietly, without grand statements, yet the depth of his impact may be seen in the nation's mourning.

What a career a miraculous birth, a divine calling, and a long life of righteous service! He led in political, military, and spiritual matters. He represented His people to God, and presented God to His people.

From the reading in Acts, we can get a 'big picture' sense of the influence of Samuel's life. During a sermon on his first missionary journey, Paul summarized Israel's history, recognizing Samuel's life as a pivotal point in history, the link between the judges and the kings (Acts 13:20).

He was buried in Ramah, his hometown, where his life had begun as an answer to his mother's prayer. He had come full circle both physically and spiritually, for he lived his life, as his mother had vowed he would (today's verse), committed absolutely to the love and service of God.

APPLY THE WORD

We have said that Samuel's death marks the 'end of an age.' How much do you know about Old Testament history? Do you know the order of people and events, who did what when and why? Or does all this sometimes blur together in your mind? To improve your knowledge of Bible history and archaeology, we recommend that you enroll in Survey of the Old Testament, an Independent Studies course available through Moody. (Call 1-800-DL MOODY for more information.)

Another way to learn Old Testament history and content is to take one of the participatory seminars offered by Walk Thru the Bible Ministries. Ask your pastor to look into having one at your church in the near future.

Acts 13:26-52

I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David. - Acts 13:34

TODAY IN THE WORD

Risk-takers are, by definition, a daring group of people. The risk-taker may be the person who tackles the assignment no one else wants, or who is willing to work with people everybody else is afraid to associate with. You may have come across these four

characteristics of risk-takers in God's kingdom: they are vulnerable, putting themselves in a place where they can be hurt; available, since it's hard to help people from a distance; obedient, doing what God has called them to do even when it doesn't seem to make sense; and broken, since God doesn't use prideful people.

This definition fits the apostle Paul completely. Paul was certainly available and obedient; his pride was broken on the road to Damascus. Also, he was willing to put himself in places where he could be wounded, both emotionally and physically.

Paul's risk-taking wasn't just some personal adventure. He was doing the will of God, going where he was sent by the Holy Spirit. The pioneers of any movement usually pick up bruises and scars while blazing a trail, and that was the case with Paul and his fellow missionaries who first carried the gospel into the Gentile world.

Yesterday we left the apostle in the middle of a stirring message in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch. Paul's sermon reminds us of Stephen's message in Acts 7, which also included a review of Israel's history. Paul mentioned a number of key Old Testament events, from slavery in Egypt to the kingship of David. Mentioning David, Israel's greatest king, a type of Christ, gave Paul a good transition into the heart of his message. God had fulfilled His promises made through David by raising Christ from the dead and exalting Him to the throne in heaven.

The sermon closed with two main themes in Acts: the need for forgiveness of sins and a warning that rejecting Christ means facing judgment. The people responded, but the Jewish leaders "talked abusively" (literally, "blasphemed") against the gospel. So Paul and Barnabas made the historic announcement, "We now turn to the Gentiles" (v. 46). The Jewish leaders then used their clout to stir up persecution and drive the missionaries out of the city.

APPLY THE WORD

Do you have the qualities of a risk-taker?

It's obvious from the list of characteristics above that God can do powerful things with people who are willing to leave their comfort zone. For most of us, taking a risk may simply mean overcoming our fear of rejection or embarrassment and speaking to that neighbor or co-worker about Christ. If you're willing to take a risk for the Lord, tell Him that--and then watch for your opportunity.

Acts 13:42-48; Romans 1:16-17

The gospel... is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. - romans 1:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

It takes only a few minutes of reflection to realize that the church of Jesus Christ today is primarily Gentile. It wasn't that way at the beginning. The church was born in Jerusalem, the capital of Judaism, and its earliest converts were Jews.

There are other contrasts between Christianity's early days and today. There is a lively debate going on at this time as to whether Jewish converts to Christ should give up their Jewish practices and observances. But the big debate in the early church was whether Gentile converts should be urged to adopt certain Jewish practices to make themselves acceptable (Acts 15).

However you look at history, it's obvious that a huge shift has occurred in the makeup of the church. The mission to the Gentiles got its start when Peter was called to witness to the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:23-48), and Paul was specifically called to be the apostle to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:13).

But God's intention that the gospel be offered to His chosen people did not change with this shift in church demographics. Paul himself stated the principle that the gospel is ""first for the Jews"" (v. 16). We saw yesterday why the Jewish people have a special priority in God's plan. They are the natural branches from the tree of God's blessing.

Paul practiced what he preached in his own ministry. Even as God's special envoy to the Gentiles, he made it a habit to seek out the Jews first in any city he entered. At least three times in the book of Acts, including the Scripture for today, he turned to the Gentiles only after the Jews in a particular city had rejected his message (two other occasions are Acts 18:6 and 28:25-28).

Historically, this priority of the Jews first in the presentation of the gospel was fulfilled in the ministry of Paul and the other apostles. And it's true that in Christ, there is no distinction between Jew and Greek because we are all one in Him (Gal. 3:28).

But our commission is to preach Christ to everyone (Mark 16:15). It is our obligation and privilege to share the good news with the Jewish people.

APPLY THE WORD

The gospel is still being offered to the Jewish people today. There are a number of faithful ministries that are sharing Christ with

God's chosen people. Moody Bible Institute offers students a major in Jewish studies that helps equip them to present the Messiah to the ""lost sheep"" of Israel. Today, let's pray that God will continue to bless the work of Jewish evangelism around the world, especially in light of reports that the response among Jews to Christ is growing stronger.

Acts 13:47

TODAY IN THE WORD

It's been said that "Sunday morning is the most segregated time in America." After everything we've studied this month--how all humans are created to worship God, how the promise to Abraham includes all peoples, how the Incarnation restores broken fellowship, and how the Spirit enables worship across language barriers--this is indeed a sad observation. Today's passage will challenge us further to pray for integration within our churches.

The first Christians were nearly all Jews, as was Jesus. Joel's prophecy said that the Spirit would be poured out on all people (Joel 2:28; cf. Acts 2:17), and the events of Acts 2 confirmed this. Still, it was hard for the early church to understand how Gentiles fit into God's plan. It was probably impossible to envision a unified church with Jewish and Gentile Christians. But God faithfully guides His church in the direction in which He wants it to go.

Cornelius was a Gentile who feared God, but God was about to reveal Himself further to this faithful man, and He was going to use Peter to accomplish this.

God used a vision to prepare Peter for this new assignment. In this vision, the strict Jewish division between ritually clean and unclean foods was broken down (v. 15). This removed one of the stumbling blocks that a devout Jew like Peter would have had about sharing a meal with a Gentile like Cornelius. It also symbolized what God was about to do in the church (vv. 34–35). As Peter preached the gospel in Cornelius's household, the Spirit descended, just as He had at Pentecost (v. 45).

APPLY THE WORD

In *Welcoming the Stranger*, Patrick Keifert writes, "Many congregations are adept at proclaiming the gospel but inept at welcoming and assimilating people." This is particularly true when we have to cross ethnic or cultural lines. Revelation 4–5 presents a beautiful picture of people from every tribe and nation worshiping together. Think of how rich our worship could be if we were experiencing even a fraction of the diversity reflected in Revelation!

Acts 13:44-52

But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy (Acts 13:45).

Envy and jealousy are feelings of discontent and resentment aroused by thinking about another person's desirable qualities or possessions and wanting them for ourselves. Here are some classic examples: Rachel envied Leah because she bore children (Gen. 30:1); Joseph's brothers resented him for his dreams (Gen. 37:11); Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and two hundred fifty princes envied Moses (Num. 16:1-3); Saul was jealous of David because the women praised him (1 Sam. 18:7-9); and in Acts 13:45, the Jews opposed Paul's preaching for the same reason—envy.

Any advantage held by another—intelligence, good looks, a slim figure, popularity, a good job, or even a person's spiritual insight—may trigger this feeling. The most devout Christian is not immune to its subtle attack. When F. B. Meyer first held meetings at Northfield, Massachusetts, large crowds thronged to hear his stirring messages. Then the great British Bible teacher G. Campbell Morgan came to Northfield, and the people flocked to hear his brilliant expositions of Scripture. Meyer confessed that at first he was envious.

He said, "The only way I can conquer my feeling is to pray for Morgan daily—which I do."

A negative reaction toward anyone who possesses what we lack quenches the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts. That's why we must root out all envy and jealousy from our lives. We know we are gaining victory when we desire good for the one we envy. —R. W. De Haan ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

A daily dose of Christlike love will heal the disease of jealousy.

Acts 13:2

F B Meyer

Acts 13:2 Separate Me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.

The Holy Spirit, as the representative of the ascended Lord, is supreme in the Church. It is his sovereign voice that summons his chosen workers to undertake missionary or home enterprise. Dr. Ryland, who at first opposed Carey's idea of going to India, said

afterwards, "I believe God Himself infused into the mind of Carey that solicitude for the salvation of the heathen which cannot be fairly traced to any other source." And the same is true of all missionaries. The true call is always of the Divine Spirit. Whom He wills to call, He calls. Whom He calls, He separates. Whom He separates, He endows and sends forth.

But, Divine and absolute though the selection is, the Spirit seeks the concurrence of the Church. It was in answer to the Church's prayer for direction that the Spirit designated Barnabas and Saul for the great work of world-evangelization; and it was when the Church had fasted and prayed, and had offered these two to God as their wave-offering, that they were sent forth by the Holy Ghost. Thus the Spirit and the Bride co-operate.

In determining whether you have been called by the Holy Spirit to be a missionary, you must certainly call in the advice of Christian friends, and specially of the church with which you worship. If the Spirit of God is in you and them, they will ratify the movements of your heart. It is right, too, to consider whether you have been specially gifted and qualified for the work. In this also, the advice of the Church is most valuable. Of course, the Church herself must fast, i.e., be separate from known evil and indulgence, that she may hear God's voice, and be able to advise her children.

Meyer, F. B. Our Daily Homily

ACTS 14

Acts 14

They ... reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. - Acts 14:27

TODAY IN THE WORD

A technology news service recently reported that religious spam is on the rise. Spam, unsolicited junk or even fraudulent e-mail, is a growing social irritant and is actually illegal. But religious spam is exempt from spam laws because it seeks no economic payoff. One such e-mail, entitled "Only believe," invites people to receive Christ and includes a version of the "sinner's prayer."

Despite the good motive behind religious spam, such "evangelism" is missing something at the heart of Paul's approach: personal relationships and contact. We see that whenever Paul could, he ministered in person; when he couldn't, he sent a friend who often brought a letter from him. The events of Barnabas and Paul's first missionary journey set this tone and show us an even more important key to missions—the power of God. Yesterday, we read about a dramatic encounter with a sorcerer and the believing response of the Roman proconsul. Today we find three examples of the power of God at work in the spread of the gospel.

First, both Gentiles and Jews believed in Jesus (v. 1). When Barnabas and Paul reported back to the church in Antioch, they emphasized all that God had done, especially opening the door of faith for the Gentiles (v. 27). Converts were won and churches were planted.

Second, their evangelism aroused opposition and brought on hardship, just as Jesus had said it would (v. 22; Luke 21:12). And as with Jesus, the enemies could find no just or legal basis for persecution, so they poisoned minds and incited mob action. Far from stopping God, though, their actions led to the healing (possibly even resurrection) of Paul, who was left for dead after being stoned.

And that is the third point—God enabled His missionaries to work miraculous signs and wonders, the purpose of which was to bring people to faith. Through them, God "confirmed the message of his grace" (v. 3). Although the healing of a lame man in Lystra initially led to a cross-cultural misunderstanding, Paul and Barnabas managed to use creation and providence as a bridge from this mistake and local tradition to God's truth (vv. 15-17).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

As anyone who's ever served in missions can tell you, encouragement is incredibly important. If there are missionaries whom you support personally, send them an e-mail or letter.

Be sure to share prayer requests of your own, remembering that the sending relationship should be a two-way street. If you're not sure to whom to write, choose someone from your church's missions bulletin board, or ask a church leader if there's one missionary in particular who might be encouraged by a special note

Acts 14:1-10

Speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders. - Acts 14:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

The Cassidy family of Dundee, Illinois, work as “missionaries” without ever leaving home. They serve as World Relief hosts, welcoming refugees into their home and helping them adjust to their new life in the United States. As reported last year in Christianity Today, they have aided Bosnians, Iraqis, Sudanese, Cubans, and Serbians. As the father, Wes Cassidy, said, “It’s our hope to impact our guests with a sense that we’re living for Christ in a real way.” Althea, a teen-aged daughter, added, “People staying with us has helped me understand suffering. I can’t believe what a step of faith it must be to start over.”

World missions comes in many shapes and sizes, but in all of those shapes and sizes God’s grace is at the center. We’re a bit further on in Acts today than in yesterday’s reading. Paul and Barnabas had been sent out by the church at Antioch on a missionary journey, one that took them to such places as Cyprus, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. As with Stephen, we see that the spread of the gospel of grace came with powerful miracles of grace. The purpose of these miracles is summarized in today’s verse—they confirmed the gospel, the message of grace.

As with Stephen and the other deacons, the results for Paul and Barnabas were both success—converts and the growth of the church—as well as opposition and persecution. The two missionaries had to flee Iconium for their lives, but God continued to bless their ministry, as seen in the miraculous healing of the crippled man (vv. 8-10). Jesus did not encourage people’s desire for signs and wonders as sensationalism or entertainment, but He did work miracles in response to true faith, and His followers did the same (see John 4:46-50; 14:11-12). Given that the ultimate evidence of grace is the miracle of His resurrection, we shouldn’t be surprised!

APPLY THE WORD

As we’ve seen in yesterday’s and today’s readings, God’s grace reveals itself in powerful ways to strengthen our faith. What’s one way that you’ve recently seen His grace and power in your life? It’s all too easy to forget such times, so take steps to help yourself remember. You may write about it in your spiritual journal, share the story with others, or create something that will bring God’s power to mind when you see it. These remembrances can help us live in the reality of God’s grace.

Acts 14:1-28.

TODAY IN THE WORD

Renowned 19th-century archaeologist Sir William Ramsay was a skeptic about the Bible. But on a trip to Asia Minor, Ramsay made an amazing discovery about Acts 14:6.

Luke says in Acts that Iconium and Lycaonia were in separate districts, but Ramsay believed they were in the same district. During his explorations, Ramsay discovered that although the two areas were in the same district one hundred years before Luke, they were in separate districts in his day.

Luke’s accuracy stunned Ramsay, who became a believer—probably the only person ever to come to faith on the basis of Acts 14:6! Ramsay’s experience is a welcome testimony to the truthfulness of God’s Word. Luke’s accuracy as an historian is vital to the account of the beginnings of the church. Every detail in Acts is important, recorded for a reason.

Today’s text is filled with such details, including not only Luke’s careful notations of districts but several accounts of God’s miraculous power in the ministry of Paul and Barnabas. The reaction to their preaching in Iconium is typical of the faith and the religious passions that the gospel aroused. The city was divided over those newcomers and their message (v. 4). There were many believers, but also fierce enemies—including some who plotted to kill the evangelists.

Paul’s miraculous healing of the crippled man at Lystra with the frenzied reaction of the people gives you some idea of the misguided religious beliefs of the pagan Gentiles to whom Paul ministered. The only thing more amazing than the people’s desire to worship Paul and Barnabas was their willingness to stone Paul a short time later!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Paul’s harrowing experience at Lystra reminds us that following Christ is anything but a religious game. It’s a commitment that demands all we have

Acts 14:3

F B Meyer

Acts 14:3 Granted signs and wonders to be done by their hands

There is no source of encouragement more fruitful of help than the co-witness and co-working of the Holy Spirit. Those who are filled

with the Spirit are called into communion, i.e., partnership, with Him in his work. Whilst they work from the outside, He works from within; whilst they sow the seed, He waters it abundantly. We must be very careful to be such in character and teaching that He may cooperate with us. Our hands must be very clean, if He, with an infinite condescension, is to grant signs and wonders to be wrought by them. But when we work with Him, and He with us, the results are beyond measure astonishing, and his alone.

"We are now seven years in this land," wrote one of Gossner's missionaries from the land of the Kohls in India; "but through these long years it was but trial of our patience and endurance... Everything seemed to be in vain, and many said the mission was useless. Then the Lord Himself kindled a fire before our eyes; and it seized not only single souls, but spread from village to village; and from every side the question was borne to us, What shall we do? How shall we be saved? And I thought it was no more a heathen land I was in, but a Christian, and at home."

Deus habet horas et moras, says the old proverb. God has his seasons and delays. We do not at once see the result of our sowings, toils, and tears; but we are conscious that our work is with our God — we know that we have our petitions, and we rejoice in hope. We must go on uttering "the word of his grace" — the grace that chooses such rebels to be his children; that cleanses them from sin; that restores and keeps and sanctifies.

Meyer, F. B. Our Daily Homily

ACTS 15

Acts 15:36-41

Although we can never undo a failure, we can learn from the experience and profit by it. A baseball pitcher who loses a game because he throws a fastball right where the batter wants it may come back four days later and hurl a shutout. He'll never erase the lost game from his record, but his failure can teach him valuable lessons that will help him to chalk up more wins than losses.

In Acts we read that John Mark accompanied Paul and Barnabas when they started their first missionary journey (Acts 13:5), but he soon departed from them (Acts 13:13). While he was at home, he apparently regretted what he had done, so he asked to be included the next time his older friends set out. Barnabas wanted to give him another chance, but Paul didn't, so they parted company and formed two teams—Barnabas taking Mark, and Paul taking Silas. Young Mark couldn't erase his first failure, but he must have learned from it because he became a respected Christian leader of his clays. Further-more, God used him to write one of the four gospels; and Paul, in his second prison epistle to Timothy, asked for Mark, saying, "He is useful to me for ministry."

It doesn't do any good to brood about what went wrong. Wishing we could do something over is an exercise in futility. Each day is new. With God's help we can succeed, if we learn from yesterday's failure.

Christians live in "the land of beginning again." —H. V. Lugo ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

**Failure doesn't mean you'll never succeed;
it will just take longer.**

Acts 15:1-35

I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? - Galatians 5:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

Imagine that you're interested in becoming a Christian and you ask a respected church member what you should do. You're told: "Get rid of everything in your wardrobe that isn't white. Stop sleeping on a soft pillow. Sell your musical instruments. You cannot, if you're sincere about obeying Christ, take warm baths ... "

Sounds crazy, doesn't it? Yet it's an actual quote from a second-century Christian leader! The temptation to try to earn one's salvation has plagued the church from the beginning. During the first century, some Jewish believers were telling Gentiles interested in Christianity that they had to be circumcised to be saved. The core doctrine of justification by faith alone was at risk.

This threat was so serious that the church called the first church council to settle the question. The council began with Peter's recollection of Cornelius's conversion (see Sept. 13). Peter's insistence that both Jews and Gentiles were saved by faith, not Mosaic Law, shows how far Peter had come in understanding God's grace. The next speakers were Barnabas and Paul, who recounted all that God had been doing among the Gentiles. The final speaker was James, the half-brother of Jesus, who had become a prominent leader in the Jerusalem church.

James appealed to Scripture to support what Peter, Barnabas, and Peter had been testifying. Quoting from Amos, James understood that the restoration of David's tent pointed to the resurrection of Jesus and the inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God. The four recommendations that James suggested had nothing to do with salvation, but rather concerned issues that would be offensive to Jewish believers on the part of Gentiles. The letter was sent out to promote unity between Gentile and Jewish believers.

The letter was to be delivered by two representatives to confirm the letter's authenticity and to make it less impersonal. Notice the wisdom of sending a Jewish believer, Judas, and a Greek believer, Silas.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Bible scholar Lloyd Ogilvie writes: "The struggle for faith alone never ends. It's a part of our own inability to accept a gift. And deeper than that, we want to be loved because of what we do for God." The second-century church's legalism may be laughable, but what about our own rules? For some, it may be smoking or drinking alcohol. For others, it may be body piercings and tattoos. It's wise to avoid certain behaviors, but we must never confuse doing—or not doing—something and salvation by faith alone.

Acts 15:1-35

For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him. - Romans 10:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

One Sabbath day, Jesus and His disciples walked through the fields. His hungry followers picked grain to eat and were immediately criticized by the Pharisees: "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath." Jesus refuted the charge with two examples from Scripture focusing on the true purpose of the Sabbath, then asserted His authority as "Lord of the Sabbath" to rebuke them for their legalism. The Pharisees stood condemned for following the letter but not the spirit of the Law (Matt. 12:1-8).

Legalism and freedom in Christ were core themes in Paul's ministry, especially in the early days of taking the gospel to the Gentiles. He had already preached that Christ justified where the Law could not (13:38-39), but church policy needed to catch up. When Judaizers appeared in Antioch to teach the Mosaic Law, a formal council was called in Jerusalem for decisions and clarifications regarding doctrine and practice. What was the role of the Law?

The apostle Peter gave the key speech, in essence telling the council that God had already revealed His will on this matter. He reminded them of his vision and experience with Cornelius and the irrefutable evidence that God had poured out His Holy Spirit on Gentile believers. If the gospel is all about faith and grace, why would anyone want to return to the inadequacy of the Law (vv. 9-11)? Barnabas and Paul followed up with an account of their recent journey.

The leaders recognized that both Scripture and experience supported extending the gospel to Gentiles (v. 14). James even quoted Old Testament prophecy to prove that God has always had a global vision. Circumcision and keeping the Law were rejected as unnecessary for salvation. Still, four stipulations were laid down, three of which were cultural and temporary. These food prohibitions were probably designed to ease social interaction between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Cultural sensitivity was also shown in how this was communicated to the affected churches—in a simply written letter delivered by a racially mixed group of messengers.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Yesterday, we recommended that you write a personal letter. Today, why not read a personal letter from Paul? The epistle to Philemon, written about 60 A.D., while Paul himself was imprisoned, requests freedom for an escaped slave (and close friend of Paul's) who came to faith in Christ after his escape. As we study the heady theological topics of legalism and freedom today and tomorrow, it would also be good to keep in mind what the Apostle had to say about freedom in the context of everyday life.

Acts 15:1-35.

TODAY IN THE WORD

Few truces have been as hostile as the one that halted the Korean War. Truce talks began on July 10, 1951; but a series of disagreements over prisoners and stall tactics by the Communists all but stopped the peace talks.

The death of Soviet dictator Josef Stalin in March, 1953, spurred efforts toward a settlement. The armistice was signed on July 27, 1953, in Panmunjom. There were no handshakes, and a permanent peace treaty was never signed. Numerous hostile incidents have occurred in the years since the truce.

What a contrast to the Jerusalem council held by the early church! The issue was important and potentially divisive, yet it was resolved with an openness and a level of spiritual maturity that the church has sought to duplicate many times since.

At stake was the status of Gentile believers—hardly a new issue, but one that was still not settled permanently. The men from Judea who showed up in Antioch insisting that Gentiles be circumcised were believing Pharisees still clinging to the Law of Moses.

Paul and Barnabas challenged them because they knew that God had justified the Gentiles by faith apart from the Law, just as He had done with the Jews. Therefore, Gentile Christians were not second-class kingdom citizens.

In his speech to the council (vv. 7-11), Peter acknowledged the same truth. The generally accepted date of this council, 49 A.D., means that about ten years had elapsed since Peter's ministry to Cornelius. But the apostle had not forgotten what God had taught him.

The problem with circumcision, as Paul later wrote to the Galatians (Gal. 5:2-3), was that accepting circumcision obligated the person to keep the whole Law. Not even the Jews had done that perfectly (Acts 15:10).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

This formula for problem-solving from Acts 15 can also work on the individual level among Christians who disagree.

Last Tuesday we suggested three ways you could help to maintain unity in the church. Let's expand on point one: what to do when you have a dispute with another believer.

Acts 15:11 Acts 10:1-23

We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved. - Acts 15:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

When God decides to bring two people together for His kingdom, their differences don't really matter. That was the case with Dwight L. Moody and his successor at Moody Bible Institute, Reuben A. Torrey. Moody was seventeen years older than Torrey. Torrey was a brilliant intellectual, a graduate of Yale University who knew Greek and Hebrew, and was also fluent enough in German to study theology at two of Germany's top universities. Moody was a grade-school dropout who spelled words the way they sounded.

But Moody had a tremendous spiritual influence on Torrey, and persuaded Torrey to come to his school in Chicago.

Moody and Torrey couldn't have been more different in background and training. The same could be said for Peter the Jew and Cornelius the Gentile, who was a member of the occupying Roman army on top of that. Given the ordinary course of events in first-century Palestine, these two might have never met.

But according to God's magnificent plan, Cornelius was saved, and his story is one of the key turning points in the beginning of the church. The doors of the church were about to swing open wide for Gentile converts--and God wanted Peter to be the first Jewish believer to welcome them.

God had already prepared Cornelius for the gospel when Peter had his famous vision the next day. That's what it took to get Peter's attention, since God knew that Peter would not likely volunteer for the job of opening the kingdom to the Gentiles. Peter was an observant Jew, as indicated in his three refusals to eat animals that the Law of Moses declared unclean.

This was at least the third time Peter had said no to God's will. He rebuked Jesus for prophesying His rejection and death in Jerusalem (Matt. 16:22). And at the Last Supper, Peter declared to the Lord, "You shall never wash my feet" (Jn. 13:8).

Peter was reprimanded on each occasion, and here on the roof of Simon's house in Joppa, Peter was left to wonder what the vision meant. The men sent from Cornelius arrived at that moment, and to his credit Peter obeyed the Holy Spirit. The church would soon be full of Gentile converts, and as leader of the church, Peter needed to see God's hand behind this growth.

APPLY THE WORD

Too many of us have said, "Surely not, Lord!" at one time or another in our lives.

But that statement is not only a contradiction in terms. Spiritually, it is impossible for us to say this to God when we know what He wants us to do. As someone has pointed out, we either need to cross out the "no" or the "Lord" any time we are not willing to obey God. This weekend would be good time to search your heart before Him and make sure your "obedience quotient" is what it should be.

Acts 15:36-16:40.

TODAY IN THE WORD

Last spring a federal jury convicted an Arizona man of illegally selling Navajo religious artifacts. His case was the first to go to trial under a 1990 law designed to prevent commercial trade in tribal relics considered sacred. Prosecutors charged the defendant with purchasing twenty-two ceremonial masks from the widow of a Navajo medicine man. The masks were later seized from a gallery in New Mexico by federal undercover agents and charges were filed.

Turn back the date on this story about nineteen hundred years, change the dateline from America to Philippi, and you will see that profiteering from false religion is an ancient practice. The “owners” of the slave girl in Philippi were selling her fortune-telling services (16:16).

Their racket was broken up not by undercover agents but by the power of Jesus Christ. This incident triggered the beating of Paul and Silas and their trip to jail, where the Philippian jailer and his family became well-known converts.

Once again we are in a text that is filled with familiar names, places and happenings. It's the start of Paul's second missionary journey, but the names on several of the “passports” are different this time. Paul's dispute with Barnabas over John Mark led to the choice of Silas (see 15:22) as the apostle's new ministry companion. Paul also added a young man named Timothy to the traveling team (16:1-4), and Luke joined up soon after. We know this because in verse 10 for the first time he uses the pronoun “we.”

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

On Friday we will conclude our study of Paul's great witnessing trips (called his missionary journeys).

Acts 15:36--16:18

I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last. - John 15:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

After the communists, with Mao Zedong at the head, gained control of China in 1949, the Chinese church went underground to escape severe persecution. For years, missionaries who were forced to leave China wondered about the status of the church they left behind. The church in China seemed to disappear. But decades later, a thriving church has emerged as the fruit of many years of sacrificial missionary work in that country.

Paul also had the kind of ministry that produced lasting fruit. His second missionary trip proved that as he revisited the places where he had preached the gospel and established churches on his first trip (vv. 36-37). Paul expected to find healthy disciples and thriving churches in those cities, and he was right.

The council held in Jerusalem reached very important decisions. It resolved some of the issues concerning Jewish-Gentile relations in the early church, but for many believers this area continued to be a challenge (see Gal. 2). You can read more about the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15:1-35.

The second missionary journey began with Silas replacing Barnabas as Paul's companion. Barnabas took the dropout John Mark (Acts 13:13) and made a “helpful” servant out of him (2 Tim. 4:11), and Paul worked successfully with Silas, so the dispute worked out for the good of the gospel.

Paul added Timothy to his traveling team (Acts 16:1-4) in Lystra, where Paul had previously been stoned. This was followed by the famous “Macedonian call” (v. 9) which led him to Philippi, a Roman city of Macedonia (part of modern-day Greece). There we meet Lydia, Paul's first convert in Europe (v. 14).

Then in Acts 16:10, Luke used the pronoun “we” in reference to the missionary effort for the first time, indicating he joined the work at Troas. Now the missionary team included Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke.

In Philippi the missionaries met opposition once again--this time stirred up by the owners of a demon-possessed, fortune-telling slave girl who lost their income when Paul healed her. The situation in Philippi was about to explode.

APPLY THE WORD

The only way to produce “fruit that will last” is to start with planting and nurturing seeds.

With that in mind, can you point to another believer you are discipling in the faith? We're not talking about a formal ministry as much as a relationship in which you are helping another Christian grow in the knowledge of God and His Word. You don't need a theology degree to pass on what you are learning in your Christian life. Pray for your disciple today, or ask God to give you one.

Acts 15:36-16:5

Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. - Philippians 2:22

TODAY IN THE WORD

When fifteen-year-old pitcher Joe Nuxhall took the mound for the Cincinnati Reds on a June day in 1944, he became the youngest player in baseball history. Many athletes had been drafted for the war, which is why a scout had offered the junior-high student a contract. Joe was supposed to play on a minor league team and only practice with the Reds. But on this particular day the Reds' pitching staff was being hammered, and Nuxhall was one of the few pitchers left on their bench. Though he had a horrible outing that day, eventually he enjoyed a solid big league career that spanned sixteen seasons and two all-star teams.

Timothy is also known as a young man who made a big splash. Paul had probably met him in his hometown of Lystra on the first missionary journey. When the ministry partnership with Barnabas ended due to a personnel disagreement, Barnabas took John Mark and went in one direction, while Paul formed another ministry team and headed out on his second missionary journey (50-52 A.D.).

Paul would enjoy a rich and enduring mentoring relationship and friendship with Timothy, who joined his team early on this second trip, when Timothy was probably still a teenager. He was the son of racially and religiously mixed parents. His father was a pagan Greek, while his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois were sincere Jewish Christians (cf. 2 Tim. 1:5). Paul became Timothy's spiritual father, calling him "my true son in the faith" and "my son whom I love" and holding him up as an example of Christlike love and service (1 Tim. 1:2; 1 Cor. 4:17; Phil. 2:19-22).

Given Paul's strident opposition to legalism, you may be surprised to read that he had Timothy circumcised. Apparently he did this out of simple expediency, to make sure that despite Timothy's family background he would have no trouble ministering among Jews. At another time, he refused to have Titus circumcised because the purity of the gospel was at stake (see Gal. 2:3-5). Sometimes context determines the right thing to do (cf. Gal. 5:6; 1 Cor. 7:19).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Take some time near the end of your devotions today to reflect on the lessons you've learned so far in this month's study. If Paul lived "a life filled with purpose," what have you discovered about the nature of those purposes and the effects of that filling? Have you identified any specific ways in which you would like to imitate Paul? If you keep a spiritual diary or journal, write down your reflections, perhaps in the form of a prayer.

Acts 15:35-16:10

In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps. - Proverbs 16:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

After his first term as a medical missionary in Ethiopia, Dr. Tom Lambie (who became the personal physician of Emperor Haile Selassie) returned to Philadelphia and received a lucrative offer to join a successful medical practice. Dr. Lambie had decided to accept the offer, when one night he had a dream. In it, a foul leprous hand arose out of the heart of Africa: "Take that hand!" he was ordered. Nauseated, even in his dream, he reluctantly took the hand. And as he did, it became the pierced hand of Jesus, leading him back to his calling to Ethiopia. How remarkably the Lord leads His people!

Following the time in Jerusalem, Paul was eager to visit the churches established on his first missionary journey. It's here we learn that Paul viewed John Mark's departure from Pamphylia (Acts 13:13) as a desertion. It's painful to read about the sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas, although elsewhere we find they eventually reconciled (see 1 Cor. 9:6 and Col. 4:10). The immediate result of their dispute was the formation of two teams, one that returned to Cyprus and another that returned to Syria and Cilicia.

Paul's decision to have Timothy circumcised has been harshly criticized as contradictory with the decision made in Jerusalem not requiring circumcision of Gentile converts. Yet Paul's action showed wisdom, not inconsistency. Although Timothy's father was Greek, his mother was Jewish. To remain uncircumcised would have hindered Timothy's ability to minister to Jews. Notice also that Timothy was already a believer, so his circumcision had nothing to do with his salvation.

Eager to move on, the team continued traveling west, probably intending to visit Ephesus, but they were prevented by the Spirit. They then tried to go north, but were again hindered by the Spirit. Paul's vision of a man urging him to come to Macedonia was the supernatural means God used to bring the gospel to Europe.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Paul writes, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). Although Timothy

wasn't required to be circumcised, doing so was essential for effective ministry. Similarly, we might need to do things that aren't required so that we can share the gospel. For example, we might have to wear long-sleeved clothes when ministering to those who find bare arms offensive. Or we might avoid make-up or be clean-shaven among those for whom such customs aren't permitted.

Acts 15:4, 1

F B Meyer

Acts 15:4, 12 They rehearsed.

There is a difference between these two assertions. They are in exquisite harmony, but each contributes a different note. In the first we have the co-operation of the Holy Spirit with every faithful worker whom He sends forth; so that, while the servant speaks to the outward ear, the Lord simultaneously addresses the heart. In the second, we have the work of the Holy Spirit wrought through a yielded life which has become his pure channel and mouth-piece. This is his twofold ministry.

His witness with us. — As we speak of Jesus crucified, risen, ascended, the blessed Spirit convicts men of sin, righteousness, and judgment. To every faithful word of testimony there is a deep resonant affirmation from this hidden but mighty Co-operant. If we say, "Behold the Lamb of God!" He adds, "He takes away the sin of the world." If we say, "He died in weakness," the Spirit adds, "He was raised in power." If we say, "Repent and believe the Gospel," He adds, "Now is the accepted time. The Holy Ghost saith Today." If the Bride says Come, the Spirit joins his voice to hers.

His witness through us. — "The word which ye hear," said our Lord, "is not mine, but the Father's who sent Me." And that which was his glory may be ours also. We speak not of ourselves. This is the secret of a fruitful life — to be the yielded channel; the cleansed vessel; the bugle at the castle gate on which the King may sound his summons; the lute on whose strings the Divine hand may play. Oh, be sure that the most lasting work in this world is only possible when we can say with Paul that we will not boast of anything save what Christ has wrought through us to make men obedient to the Gospel.

Meyer, F. B. Our Daily Homily

ACTS 16

Acts 16:1-5

But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. - Philippians 2:22

The first seven chapters of Proverbs are believed to have been written by King David for his son Solomon. David was about to hand over the kingdom to his son, and he wanted to take the opportunity to share wise advice and counsel, exhorting his son to pursue wisdom and to live righteously.

This month we will study the books of 1 and 2 Timothy, letters written by the apostle Paul to his spiritual son, Timothy. In a similar way to Proverbs 1-7, Paul wants to pass along wise advice, helping to prepare Timothy for the ministry that he had been given.

It's likely that Timothy became a believer when Paul first passed through Timothy's hometown of Lystra on his first missionary journey (cf. Acts. 14:8-20), meaning that Paul was Timothy's spiritual father since he introduced Timothy to Christ. Although Timothy and his mother were believers, his father was not (Acts 16:1). Paul was a Christian mentor, entrusting ministry responsibilities to Timothy and viewing him as the successor to his own legacy of ministry. Paul and Timothy exemplified a father-son relationship through Christ that still provides a model for believers today.

Understanding this relationship provides the lens through which we can read and understand Paul's letter. First Timothy provides important and urgent instruction for the church, but it isn't a formal church document. Rather, it's a personal letter meant to cheer, instruct, and strengthen a young pastor-missionary. Although Timothy was certainly a man held in high esteem both by Paul and the churches in which they had ministered together (Acts 16:2-3), he was altogether "ordinary," just as we are. Young and timid, he needed Paul's encouragement (cf. 2 Tim. 1:7). Raised by an unbelieving father, he didn't have the perfect Christian heritage we might expect. We learn how God often delights to work powerfully through the most unlikely candidates.

Acts 16:1-5, 2 Timothy 1:5-6

My son ... do not forsake your mother's teaching. - Proverbs 1:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

John Wesley is renowned as a great evangelist. Charles Wesley, his brother, also preached the gospel and penned numerous hymns, including “And Can It Be” and “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.” But their significant Christian contributions should be considered in light of the influence of their mother, Susanna Wesley. Mother of 19 children, she endeavored to teach her sons and daughters Greek and Latin and instruct them in the faith. One biographer said, “John Wesley and Charles Wesley, as children consciously or unconsciously will, applied the example and teachings and circumstances of their home life.”

The godly impact of parents and grandparents can be seen in the life of Timothy. This preacher and missionary was valuable in the spread of the gospel and the growth of the early church. He was dearly loved by the apostle Paul and considered indispensable in ministry (Phil. 2:22). Scripture takes care to note that Timothy inherited a rich legacy of faith that helped to prepare him for his calling.

First, Timothy chose to follow God as a young man. His father was not a believer, and his mother Eunice was (Acts 16:1). At some point prior to meeting Paul, Timothy had already decided that he would embrace the faith of his mother, and his reputation among the believers testified to his commitment.

Second, Timothy demonstrated his faith through his obedience. To remove any distraction from their ministry, Paul circumcised his son in the faith, and Timothy complied. He left his home in Lystra to accompany Paul and Silas, and God blessed their work with new believers coming to Christ daily.

Finally, as Paul neared the end of his life, he wrote letters to Timothy to encourage and exhort him to remain faithful as a minister of the gospel. He described Timothy's “sincere faith,” and noted that Timothy was blessed with a mother and a grandmother who had this faith. The previous generations had poured themselves into Timothy, and in light of their faithfulness and Timothy's calling, Paul urged him to “fan into flame the gift of God” (2 Tim. 1:6).

APPLY THE WORD

If you would like to know more about Susanna Wesley and her impact on the faith of her children, her letters and commentaries have been collected in *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*, which is available from bookstores or libraries. Several biographies have been written, including *Susanna Wesley* by Arnold Dallimore. Spend time in prayer today for the generation following you, and seek to model the kind of life-changing faith of Lois and Eunice through the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 16:6-15

Come over to Macedonia and help us. - Acts 16:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

On February 25, 1870, Hiram Revels became the first African American to serve as a U.S. Senator. Revels spent most of his life as an itinerant preacher, and took leadership roles in politics and education. After the Civil War, Mississippi elected him to serve out the unexpired term of Confederate President Jefferson Davis. On the day of his swearing in, said one newspaper, “there was not an inch of standing or sitting room in the galleries, so densely were they packed.”

On that day, Hiram Revels crossed racial boundaries and made history. In today's reading, the apostle Paul did the same, taking the gospel to Europe for the first time in recorded history. We've returned to the time of his second missionary journey, but things had not been going well. The Spirit had been blocking their path in Asia. Paul, Timothy, and Silas knew that God must have something special planned, and they expressed an attitude of expectant readiness. Then God spoke, giving Paul a vision of a man saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (v. 9). Luke joined them, and the group made their historic entry into Europe.

Traveling on the nearly 500-mile-long Via Egnatia between the two continents, they arrived in Philippi, one of four districts of Macedonia. There must have been fewer than ten Jewish males in the city, for there was no synagogue there. Instead, the missionaries met a group of women at a place of prayer outside the city. Lydia, a businesswoman, and her household believed and were baptized. She had been a worshiper of the true God already, and when the gospel arrived, He opened her heart to understand and respond immediately. She at once offered Paul and his friends hospitality.

Lydia's gracious response remains an instructive model for how we should practice hospitality, particularly toward those in ministry. This is not an onerous task, but something that should bring them encouragement and us great joy (see 1 Peter 4:9).

With regard to our year's theme of purpose, we can meditate on Paul's passion for evangelism, his sensitivity to the Spirit's leading, and the fact that God is always at work around and ahead of us.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

You may not have been called to the same ministry as the apostle Paul, but it's clear from our reading that he had many partners in ministry with different gifts, all working together to glorify God. Perhaps, like Lydia, you can extend hospitality to missionaries who visit or to your pastor and his family through sharing a meal together. This doesn't have to be grand, stressful entertaining, but a way of meeting needs and supporting God's work.

Acts 16:11-34

I will praise you among the nations, O Lord. - Psalm 18:49

TODAY IN THE WORD

Several days ago (see November 8), we read Moses' great song of praise after the miraculous parting of the Red Sea. Then we read how God called the Israelites to be a holy nation that would bear witness to God. Sandwiched in between these passages is today's account of Moses' father-in-law. Notice Jethro's response when Moses recounted God's actions: "Now I know that the Lord is greater than all other gods" (v. 11). This is a confession of faith! In other words, Jethro came to know who the Lord truly is because of Moses' gratitude. In today's passage from Acts, we see a similar connection between thanksgiving and witness.

Yesterday we read that Paul wrote to the Philippians while in prison. This was certainly not Paul's first imprisonment. Paul had even been in the jail in Philippi! In Acts 16, we read about the first convert in Philippi, Lydia. As Paul and Silas continued to share the gospel, they were followed by a girl possessed by some spirit that enabled her to predict the future.

After several days of being followed by her, Paul rebuked the evil spirit within her. Although this poor girl was set free, those profiting from her were very angry. Eventually, Paul and Silas were flogged and bound in leg irons. For many people, such circumstances would not prompt praise songs! But this is exactly what Paul and Silas were doing.

Under Roman law, the jailor could have been executed had any of the prisoners escaped. This is why Paul assured him that none have fled (v. 29). The jailor's question to Paul about how to be saved reflects his understanding that his own life had been spared because the prisoners were all present. It seems that he had also been affected by Paul's and Silas's praise. Like the example of Jethro and Moses, gratitude to the Lord opened the way for others to respond to the Lord.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Several days ago, we suggested that sharing your gratitude for something that the Lord had done in your life with a nonbeliever might be a good way to share the gospel. Today's passages, especially Acts 16, also encourage us that when we respond to our circumstances, particularly the difficult ones, with gratitude to our Lord, we bear witness to others around us of His existence and His goodness. For many, gratitude to God and hardship do not go together, so our unexpected attitude offers food for thought.

Acts 16:11-15

TODAY IN THE WORD

One of Britain's most famous queens, Victoria, was delighted with her visit to the childhood home of her beloved husband, Prince Albert. The prince's birthplace and boyhood home was a small castle in Bavaria known as Schloss Rosenau. Queen Victoria was so charmed by the welcome of the castle that she wrote, "'How happy and how joyful we felt on awakening to feel ourselves here.'" The queen never forgot the warmth of her husband's childhood home.

Paul must have felt the same kind of warmth and welcome in the home of Lydia, the first European convert to Christianity. This praiseworthy woman was successful in business and generous in heart, as well as a person of obvious spiritual hunger and depth.

Lydia was identified as a "'worshiper of God,'" a term used of Gentiles who worshiped the true God and followed the teachings of Scripture (see Acts 10:2 concerning Cornelius). Lydia was not yet, however, a believer in Christ when Paul and his helpers came to Philippi. But God had prepared her heart to hear and believe the gospel (Acts 16:14).

Lydia's first actions after receiving Christ testified to the genuineness of her conversion. She immediately shared the gospel with her entire household, just like the Philippian jailer (16:32), and they were all saved.

Then Lydia presented herself and her family for baptism, a strong and in that day a costly step of obedience and identity with Christ. Finally, Lydia opened her home to Paul and his companions.

Even showing hospitality was a step of Christian courage for Lydia, given the very hostile reaction Paul later received in Philippi. We don't know how long the apostle and his friends stayed with Lydia, but it must have been a number of days.

APPLY THE WORD

Hospitality has taken on a different meaning in our day. Hotels take away the need for believers to open their homes to visiting missionaries or to other servants of Christ.

But if you have ever hosted someone who came to your church to minister, you know the joy of hospitality. And if you've never done it, you don't know what you're missing.

Acts 16:11-15

Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. - 1 Peter 4:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

The “domestic arts” have become big business. Magazines and books focused on cooking and home improvement have experienced soaring sales, and millions of viewers tune in to the Food Network and Home & Garden Television (HGTV) for dining tips or decorating insights. One downside to all this homey preoccupation relates to reported levels of contentment; increasingly Americans cite their own homes as “inadequate” and describe themselves as “overwhelmed” at the prospect of having family and friends invited into their homes.

Scripture gives several exhortations to believers regarding hospitality. Of course, God does not expect all of His children to live in homes that could be featured on television or cook like award-winning chefs. Our notions of hospitality must be shaped by God's Word rather than the definitions given by our culture. The example of Lydia in our passage today can help us.

When Paul and Silas came to Philippi, they discovered no synagogue—apparently the city didn't have the minimum number of Jewish men required. Instead, they found a group of women gathered by the river to pray on the Sabbath. One of these, Lydia, is described as a businesswoman from the city of Thyatira; she was a dealer in purple cloth. While purple cloth was considered a luxury (see Luke 16:19), scholars note that it's not clear whether Lydia herself was wealthy. The Greek word for “dealer” could include both rich merchants as well as poorer tradesmen.

The most important facts about Lydia, however, were God's work in her life and her response to it. “The Lord opened her heart” and she accepted the gospel (v. 14). She and her household were baptized, and then she immediately offered hospitality to Paul and his companions. Lydia's invitation to her home was more than just a cultural politeness; her offer was motivated by her belief in the Lord and desire to serve others. Lydia's house became the meeting place for the growing number of believers in Philippi (v. 40), and the basis of the church in that city.

APPLY THE WORD

Lydia connected the practice of hospitality with her faith in the Lord Jesus. Also consider the link between hospitality and the gospel in Romans 12:13 and 3 John 8. How can you extend hospitality to others? The purpose is not to impress others but rather to meet their needs, whether the need is for shelter, food, companionship, relationship, or a safe place to feel cared for and loved. Ask the Lord to shape your attitude toward hospitality and to give you opportunities to offer this blessing to others.

Acts 16:13-15, 29-34

TODAY IN THE WORD

In her book *Open Heart—Open Home*, Karen Burton Mains writes: “I am firmly convinced that if Christians would open their homes and practice hospitality as defined in Scripture, we could significantly alter the fabric of society. We could play a major role in its spiritual, moral and emotional redemption.

“For the Christian, hospitality is not an option. It is an injunction... In Webster's dictionary, the definition for hospitable is wedged between the word ‘hospice,’ a shelter, and the word ‘hospital’ a place of healing. Ultimately, this is what we offer when we open our home in the true spirit of hospitality. We offer shelter; we offer healing.”

This book is right. Hospitality should be the hallmark of every family that has been truly touched by Christ. Once you have tasted the Savior's love, acceptance and blessing, it is only natural for you to want to extend those gifts to others.

Midway through the book of Acts, a chapter details the conversion of two individuals. Paul and his entourage are led by the Spirit of God into Europe (16:9), where they meet Lydia, an upwardly mobile businesswoman. She believes in Christ (v. 14) and immediately insists that her new missionary friends come home with her to be her guests (v. 15). No specifics of that stay are included in the text; however, we get the idea that Lydia made every effort to make her guests feel at home. Perhaps Lydia's home even became a kind of hostel—a place for weary workers to find spiritual and emotional nourishment.

Later, Paul and Silas find themselves in a Philippian jail. Following a midnight praise service and a God-ordained earthquake, the

men lead the jailer and his family to Christ. What does the new convert do? He tends to their wounds (v. 33), brings them into his home, and feeds them (v. 34).

Acts 16:16-34

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. - John 8:32

TODAY IN THE WORD

According to a 2004 report from the U.S. State Department, human trafficking is the third most profitable criminal activity. Each year, around 600,000-800,000 people are trafficked—and 50 percent of those are children. Sometimes children are kidnapped; others are lured with false promises of lucrative work. Instead, they become indentured servants in mines, sex workers, child soldiers, or sweatshop slaves.

Exploiting children for profit is not new, and our reading today includes the story of a slave girl whose owners were making a great deal of money from her demon-possessed powers.

As the book of Acts recounts how Paul and Silas started the church in Philippi, we are introduced to a diverse assortment of people. First was Lydia, the wealthy woman who believed the gospel and opened her home to the missionaries; second was the slave girl, who could not have been more opposite to Lydia. She had no control over the fortune she was producing, and no status in the city. The work of God in both Lydia and the slave girl reminds us that the gospel can transform anyone, whether rich or poor, slave or free.

The spirit that controlled this girl was known as a truth-telling spirit, and her owners used her to tell fortunes. But this spirit also began proclaiming the truth about Paul and Silas; day after day the girl would follow Paul and his companions shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved” (v. 17).

This was, in fact, the truth. But Paul was not content to let the truth about him and his mission be proclaimed as a means to support evil and to profit from this girl's slavery. In the name of Jesus, he commanded the spirit to leave her, freeing her from her demon-possession. But freeing her from the spirit also meant depriving her owners of their profits. Furious, they brought legal charges against Paul and Silas. They valued greed over deliverance.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Paul understood the value of this girl's life—not just her profits. Will we stand for the value of life, even when others profit from its abuse and destruction? Abortion destroys thousands of lives every day in the United States, and many people profit from it, whether financially, socially, or politically. We certainly need to be prayer warriors on this issue. Perhaps you could also support a crisis pregnancy center in your area by volunteering, donating needed supplies, or giving financially.

Acts 16:16-34

He was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family. - Acts 16:34

TODAY IN THE WORD

One spring evening in Chicago, choir director Joseph Richardson was taking a walk with his four-year-old daughter, Kaniyah. Suddenly, a red Chevy Cavalier jumped the curb and hurtled toward them, speeding out of control with a drunk driver at the wheel. The father had only a split second to react. Richardson grabbed his daughter and lifted her out of the way, just before the car pinned him against an iron fence. He was killed—Kaniyah was injured, but she lived. Richardson made the ultimate sacrifice, giving his own life to save the life of his daughter.

Christ loved each of us that much. When the force of this truth hits us, we cannot help but respond with heartfelt joy—whether tears of joy or shouts of joy, it is deep, powerful joy.

In today's reading, Paul and Silas had been carrying out a successful ministry in Philippi, and the church there grew to a size that “disturbed” the city. The trouble began when Paul cast out a demonic spirit from a slave girl who had been following them around, calling out that these men knew the truth (see James 2:19). Since her owners had profited from her fortunetelling abilities and lost out economically from her liberation, they took revenge by dragging the missionaries into court on trumped-up charges.

Paul and Silas were stripped, beaten, and imprisoned. They responded by singing hymns (v. 25). For them, faith was not simply the absence of discouragement, or the courage to pray for release, but the presence of godly joy. They felt so secure in Christ that when an earthquake hit and the prison doors sprang open, they felt no need to run. They sensed a greater work of God taking place, and indeed the jailer and his entire household were ripe for saving faith. Within a single, roller-coaster ride of a night, this jailer went from

suicidal (because he assumed the prisoners had escaped) to offering hospitality to two former inmates and receiving the joy of eternal life (v. 34).

APPLY THE WORD

The Philippian jailer asked one of the most significant questions in Scripture: "What must I do to be saved?" And Paul and Silas gave one of the most significant replies: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (vv. 30-31). It is the prayer of all of us at Today in the Word that all of our readers trust in Christ for salvation (John 1:12). If you have never been delivered from sin and experienced the joy of faith in Christ, we pray that you will trust the saving work of Jesus today!

Acts 16:16-34

Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. - Acts 16:16-34

TODAY IN THE WORD

Thomas Watson, a Puritan pastor and writer in 17th century London, had this to say about suffering:

"As the hard frosts in winter bring on the flowers in the spring, as the night ushers in the morning star, so the evils of affliction produce much good to those who love God... Afflictions work for good in that they make way for glory... As plowing prepares the earth for a crop, so afflictions prepare and make us fit for glory. As the painter lays his gold upon dark colors, so God first lays the dark colors of affliction, and then He lays the golden color of glory. The vessel is first seasoned before wine is poured into it; the vessels of mercy are first seasoned with affliction, and then the wine of glory is poured in."

Paul and Silas had this same attitude, and counted it an honor to suffer for the name of Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 11:23-28; Phil. 1:29-30). They'd gotten into trouble in Philippi specifically for doing God's work. Their persecutors had economic motivations, abetted by spiritual blindness and a fear of foreigners. These factors came together to cause the two men to be beaten and imprisoned without a trial.

Sometimes God's will takes us to hard places. One minute Paul and Silas were casting out a demon, the next minute they were sitting helplessly in jail, but it was all part of God's sovereign plan.

God sustained His missionaries, not just to survive or endure, but to thrive. His grace to them filled them with such joy that they could praise Him, even from a jail cell. By doing so, they became channels of divine mercy to the other prisoners and to the jailer. The other prisoners were listening to them singing, perhaps in amazement. No doubt they heard the truth about Christ in their songs. When God sent an earthquake, the jailer and his family also heard the way of salvation, and gladly received the gift of new spiritual life.

APPLY THE WORD

Rejoicing in suffering is not a natural response—it's a supernatural one. How can we learn to share the attitudes displayed by Thomas Watson, Paul, and Silas?

Acts 16:16-40

Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. - Acts 16:25

TODAY IN THE WORD

Jean S. Munro, a medical missionary in Zaire, noticed that her water had been tasting bitter. Her water supply, commonly enough in that area, was collected rainwater kept in a sealed storage tank. When her dog and cat refused to drink it and the stench from her tap became overpowering, she asked a colleague to check it out. When the tank was unsealed, the decomposing body of a large, poisonous snake was found.

What had happened? A local witch doctor, angered at losing influence, had by some devilry put the dead snake inside the tank. When its poison sacs burst, he thought that the missionary would surely die, proving his power. But Munro didn't die ... God miraculously saved her from the deadly venom in her drinking water! God delights to exercise His power on behalf of His people. He did so in today's reading as well, powerfully rescuing His servants from a Philippian jail.

What was the crime of Paul and Silas? They cast a demon out of a slave-girl. It was referred to as a "python spirit," associated with fortune telling. Why did she cry out a testimonial to Paul and the gospel (v. 17)? It seems that proximity sometimes causes some demons to confess the truth (see Luke 8:28; James 2:19). At any rate, this girl brought in a tidy income for her owners, so Paul's action was a direct hit in their pocketbook. They had the two missionaries beaten and thrown into prison.

Paul and Silas responded with joy despite their circumstances (cf. Rom. 8:28). They praised the Lord, praying and singing hymns. When Paul later wrote to the Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always" (Phil. 4:4), they knew he really did mean always! Since the other prisoners listened, this was also evangelism. After God sent an earthquake to free them, Paul and Silas didn't miss a beat, sharing the gospel with the warden and his family. When they accepted the gospel, it's no surprise to find them also "filled with joy" (v. 34)!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Do you have a joyful heart? Let's put it another way: would you praise the Lord and sing hymns if you found yourself unjustly thrown into prison today? Paul later wrote to the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" The secret lies in turning all our anxieties over to the Lord in prayer. If we do that, our hearts will be guarded from worry by the ocean-deep peace of Christ, and we'll be liberated to trust and joy (Phil. 4:4-7)!

Acts 16:11-17:15

The Lord opened her heart. - Acts 16:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

In the 1930s, American missionary to India, J. Waskom Pickett, wrote about "mass movements" in which entire communities came to Christ simultaneously. He noted that where individuals were knit into families and communities, effective evangelism must focus on the whole group. Each person still had to make an individual decision about Jesus, but Pickett discovered that few conversions occurred apart from the family or community. We see similar "mass movements" in the New Testament where entire households come to faith (see Sept. 13).

Because there was no synagogue in Philippi, God-fearers met beside the river, just outside of town. The first convert, Lydia, was likely a widow and was probably wealthy, as the purple dye she sold was very valuable.

What a stark contrast between Lydia and the slave girl! To understand Paul's rebuke, we need to know that "God most high" also applied to Zeus or the Egyptian goddess, Isis. Philosophers called "the way of salvation" the release from fate. Any association between the gospel and the demonic couldn't be tolerated.

We don't know the circumstances of the other prisoners, but they had probably never heard fellow prisoners singing in the night, nor had they experienced an earthquake that set them free! Notice that the jailor's concern was "What must I do to be saved?" Now notice how clearly Paul stressed salvation by faith alone!

As Roman citizens, Paul and Silas never should have been treated as they were. Yet Paul's concern wasn't for himself; a dangerous precedent would be set for the Philippian church if such arbitrary treatment were tolerated.

From Philippi, Paul and Silas traveled to Thessalonica. Once again, some Jews stirred up opposition. City officials would have been anxious to avoid any trouble. After Philippi and Thessalonica, the Bereans' reception of the gospel must have greatly encouraged Paul.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Although Berea was a small town off the beaten track, its inhabitants exhibited an approach to Scripture that remains a model for believers everywhere. They received Paul's message about Jesus with eagerness and examined the Bible to see if what he said was true. This week, consider taking notes during the Sunday morning sermon so that you can do further study when you get home, or listen to a daily Bible study via podcast or radio for another opportunity to examine the Bible.

Acts 16:19-40

Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household. - Acts 16:31

TODAY IN THE WORD

A person's last words are often worth remembering. So are some of the things people say in the moment of extreme testing and hardships. One example from American history is a seven-word sentence that is written in gold in the chapel of the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. This statement marks the grave of the War of 1812 naval hero John Paul Jones, who said "I have not yet begun to fight" as his ship was burning beneath him.

The apostle Paul made many memorable statements, preserved for us in the Word of God. Take today's verse, for example. It was uttered during a trial of persecution as Paul encountered a suicidal, trembling man in the middle of the night. Maybe that's why the

apostle's words to Philippian jailer reveal the gospel's simplicity.

We read yesterday that Paul healed a demon-possessed slave girl in the Roman colony of Philippi. Today let's look at the rest of the story. The girl's owners were incensed at Paul and Silas because their "profit center" was now gone. So they gathered a mob and dragged the missionaries before the city magistrates on trumped-up charges.

Since Philippi was governed by the Romans, Paul as a Roman citizen was entitled to a fair trial according to Roman law. But apparently the officials gave in to the crowd's frenzy. Paul and Silas were subjected to a severe flogging without any legal grounds. But even that wasn't enough, because afterwards the two were imprisoned. They were kept in prison with their feet in wooden stocks.

We don't know why God ordained this set of painful circumstances that brought Paul in contact with the jailer. It's obvious Paul was thankful for the opportunity, and he didn't question God's wisdom. He and Silas were singing God's praises in a difficult situation and afterwards they saw the conversion of the jailer and his family. An entire household was saved because Paul and Silas were faithful and obedient in the heat of battle.

Let's pray that likewise, we would be faithful and obedient under any circumstances.

APPLY THE WORD

Most of us would agree the suffering Paul and Silas endured in Philippi was a big obstacle. But in the power of God, they cleared it and hit the ground running on the other side.

What's the biggest obstacle you face in being faithful to God this week? You could pull up short and turn back. Instead, why not ask God for the strength to overcome your obstacle, for His glory?

Acts 16:10

"LED" INTO PRISON

we endeavored to go... assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us Acts 16:10

In a vision, Paul saw a man of Macedonia who said, "Come over... and help us." Assured that the Lord Himself had thus called him to preach the Gospel in that area, he and Silas — and evidently Dr. Luke — set out at once for their new "mission field." But what a reception they received! The record tells us that the "multitude rose up together against them" and "beat them" and "thrust them into the inner prison, and made their feet fast in the stocks." If they would have reacted like many of us today, Paul would probably have complained, "Well, isn't this just fine: led by God into prison! Here we were obedient to the heavenly vision, and this is our reward!"

Was this Paul's attitude? I should say not! Listen to the story in Acts 16:25: "And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God." Singing in prison! Paul knew that "all things work together for good to them that love God." With the eye of faith he could see some future good, and in that confidence was happy even while enduring severe trial. When the Lord had accomplished His purpose, demonstrated His power, and saved the jailer and his family, then Paul and Silas were commanded to "depart and go in peace."

Sometimes we find ourselves in troubling situations as the result of our service for the Lord. Doing that which we believe to be right and according to His will, we seem to end up in the "prison" of suffering, hardship, and loss, and are tempted to complain, "Lord, is this what I get for my faithfulness?" Then He comes and assures us that He "doeth all things well," and that Romans 8:28 is still in the Book! When all has been accomplished, we shall be able to look back and clearly see His hand and purpose in it all. "Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well-doing, as unto a faithful Creator" (1Pe 4:19). ([Our Daily Bread. Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

There's One who will journey beside me,
In weal, nor in woe, will forsake;
And this is my solace and comfort,
"He knoweth the way that I take!" —Anon.

Every lock of sorrow has a key of promise to fit it!

Acts 16:14, 27

F B Meyer

Acts 16:14, 27 - A certain woman named Lydia.... The Keeper of the prison.

These are typical cases, put here in juxtaposition for the teaching and comfort of believers in every age. Each of them needed Christ, and each was brought into his true light; but each came in a different way. Lydia's heart opened as a flower beneath the touch of the sun, so gradually and imperceptibly that it was impossible to say the precise moment of her new life. The jailer came to Christ suddenly, startlingly, amid the crash of an earthquake. The one was drawn by love; the other driven by fear. A distinguished missionary says, "The Lord awakened me with a kiss" — it was so that Lydia's heart was won. Another tells us that the Lord sprang on him like a lion — it was thus with the jailer.

Lydia. — Do not always be looking out for signs and manifestations, for marked experiences. We do not notice the lines of longitude and latitude as we cross the ocean of life. Without knowing it, your character may be in the process of transfiguration. By insensible gradations the work of God may be proceeding in your heart. The tide is rising daily by tiny wavelets that appear to recede as fast as they advance. Do not measure progress by experiences; only be yielded to God, and let Him do his will.

The Jailer. — Do not undervalue the influence of fear. There are some natures that never will be awakened unless they are startled by being brought face to face with the consequences of sin. If men will not come by the highest motives, be thankful that they come by any. Remember it is not belief about Christ, about his death or resurrection, but trust in Him as a living Person, that saves from the power and penalty of sin. "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ." He is a living Person. Trust Him now.

Meyer, F. B. Our Daily Homily

ACTS 17

Acts 17

What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. - Romans 1:19

TODAY IN THE WORD

Intelligent design theory argues that the purpose and order evident in nature cannot explain themselves. Some natural systems are "irreducibly complex" and could never have evolved on their own. Mathematician and philosopher William Dembski of Baylor University has even put together a scientific method for determining the probability of whether an object is a product of design or random chance. Many Darwinian scientists, wary of the obvious supernatural implications, heap scorn on intelligent design theory as "creationism in a lab coat."

Yet the evidence of the created world remains strong. Paul used creation as evidence for God's existence in today's reading, a point actually granted to him by his audience, the philosophers of the Athenian Areopagus. What they stumbled over and most couldn't believe was the miracle of the Resurrection.

Paul and his friends had gone on from Philippi to preach in Thessalonica and Berea. Although the Bereans studied the Scriptures intensely to test the gospel, some troublemaking Thessalonians followed Paul there in order to stir up trouble. Paul, the lightning rod, was sent away while Silas and Timothy remained, which is how Paul ended up alone in Athens. A city in decline at this point in history, Athens was still a philosophical and religious center and Paul, being who he was, engaged with it fully, witnessing wherever he could. His activities eventually got him invited to the Areopagus, a kind of philosophical debate society addicted to the newest ideas (v. 21).

These scholars were curious about Paul, but not respectful, referring to him as a "babbling," implying he was someone who stitched together a philosophy from ill-fitting scraps picked up at random. Nonetheless, Paul made the most of his opportunity. He used a cultural entry point—their altar to an unknown god. His point about general revelation—creation and providence—argued that people need to seek God, and judgment awaits those who don't. The way to seek God is through repentance. When he asserted Christ's Resurrection as proof, however, only a few people then believed (cf. 1 Cor. 1:22-24).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

By closely observing the culture around him, Paul found an entry point for sharing the gospel.

You can do the same! Watch a television news program tonight—millions of Americans do; it's a cultural fixture. Look for a news item that might provide an entry point for sharing the gospel, such as a science report (showing design in creation) or a war story (contrasting with the Prince of Peace). If you were chatting with a neighbor, how might you use this news as a conversational bridge to eternal truths?

Acts 17:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-3

TODAY IN THE WORD

When Paul visited Thessalonica around 49-50 A.D. on his second missionary journey, the city was a center of travel, commerce and communication. Cassander, one of Alexander the Great's army officers, had founded the city in the fourth century B.C. and named it after his wife (one of Alexander's half-sisters).

As the capital city of the province of Macedonia, Thessalonica boasted a strategically-located harbor filled with ships from throughout the Roman Empire. The main highway from Rome to the East passed through the city as well, and the nearby hot springs of Therma were world-famous.

Paul, Silas and Timothy walked into this major port city of 200 people with a revolutionary message--the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ!

The story of Paul's experience in Philippi (Acts 16) is so familiar that we often forget to read on and find out where he went next. The answer is in Acts 17:1. He headed for Thessalonica, making that city only the second place in Europe where the gospel was preached!

The wounds on Paul's back from his beating in Philippi (Acts 16:23-24) may still have been hurting when he arrived in Thessalonica. He was treated roughly there, too (17:5), eventually having to leave town under cover of darkness (v. 10).

But some great things happened first! After Paul preached Jesus as the Messiah to the Jews for three Sabbaths, many people believed (vv. 2-4). Paul may have stayed several more months in Thessalonica, ministering among the Gentiles. However long his ministry, Paul planted a church there and felt a deep love for the Thessalonian believers.

APPLY THE WORD

Paul's threefold commendation in 1 Thessalonians 1:3 is one any sincere believer would be pleased to receive.

The Thessalonians were known for their diligent work in spreading the gospel and for their endurance under severe trial--all of which were inspired by their faith, love and hope in Jesus Christ.

Acts 17:1-15; 1 Thessalonians 1:1

We boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring. - 2 Thessalonians 1:4

TODAY IN THE WORD

On November 9, 2007, Christianity Today interviewed Carl Moeller, president of Open Doors USA, part of the organization founded in 1955 by Brother Andrew. Moeller shared: "I just became aware of a story of a family in Indonesia whose daughter was one of three girls who were attacked by Muslim extremists in 2004... [The mothers'] effort on behalf of the cause of Christ to forgive those who had done the most horrible things to their families and their daughters is a testimony of the way the Christians are called to respond... When people die in the name of Jesus Christ, it presents a strong testimony to the culture... The church is correspondingly growing."

For two thousand years, persecuted Christians have attested the reality of the gospel. Consider today's reading. Thessalonica was a commercial city located on a major Roman road. Paul's efforts here reflect his pattern of planting churches in strategic cities. Thessalonica had a large Jewish population and at least one synagogue. It's unclear how long Paul stayed in Thessalonica. Acts 17 mentions three Sabbaths, but it's likely that Paul was in Thessalonica a bit longer. The Philippians sent at least one monetary gift to Paul during this time (Phil. 4:16), which also suggests a longer stay. Paul's success in Thessalonica, however, was not without opposition. Some Jews became jealous of the number of Gentile converts to Christianity. Because Thessalonica was a free city, its rulers were eager to avoid any disturbance that would threaten its independence from Rome. The pledge required of Jason may have included some type of guarantee that Paul and Silas would leave the city.

The Thessalonian church was formed in such circumstances. Paul's two letters to this church—our focus this month—were likely written from Corinth around a.d. 50 or 51. Although he was forced to leave Thessalonica, Paul deeply cared about this young church, as these two letters reveal.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The opening verse of 1 Thessalonians contains valuable insights. First, notice the importance of team ministry. Written by Paul, the letter's salutation shows the important part played by Silas and Timothy in the work of the gospel. Next, despite persecution, the position of the Thessalonians—in God and in Christ—was secure. Finally, consider the greeting "grace and peace." Grace is God's unmerited gift, which results in peace. Grace and peace come only from being in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Acts 17:1-34.

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TODAY IN THE WORD

Osaki Neesima was a bright Japanese student, sent to school to study the classics. One day he casually opened a Bible and read, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Osaki was stunned. He had searched in vain for God. He read more and prayed, "O unknown God, if you have eyes look upon me, if you have ears hear me, and lead me to yourself." Osaki heard that in America this God could be known, so he boarded a ship bound for Boston. The ship's owner adopted Osaki and gave him an education—and Osaki came to know the "unknown God" through faith in Christ.

This all happened in the last century, but it still qualifies as a modern-day version of the ancient Athenians' attempt to reach out to the true God, who was unknown to them. Making this God known was the reason Paul, Silas, Timothy, Luke and the other members of their missionary team set out in Gentile territory.

Thessalonica is another name that has a familiar New Testament ring to it. When Paul and Silas arrived, they headed for the synagogue, where they knew they would find an audience well-versed in the Scriptures. It was Paul's custom to begin there.

Paul's intention to go to the Gentiles did not mean he never shared the gospel with Jews again. In fact, he went to the Jews first in Corinth; and when they opposed him, he restated his plan to reach out to Gentiles (18:6). But Paul loved his people and longed to see them saved (Rom. 10:1).

The tenderness Paul felt toward the Thessalonian church (see 1 Thess. 2:6b-12) probably reflects the welcome he received among those who believed. But true to form, the unbelievers stirred up a riot. Paul and Silas moved on to Berea, where the real Bible students lived.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's text reminds us of how crucial it is to know our audience when it comes to sharing the gospel effectively.

Acts 17:16-34

I will not give ... my praise to idols. - Isaiah 42:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

In August 2004, thousands of spectators converged upon Athens to watch 11,099 athletes compete in the Games of the XXVIII Olympiad. Visitors and athletes alike delighted in such famous sights as the Parthenon and the Agora. Yet one ancient visitor had a much different reaction to this city. Instead of relaxing, he was agitated. Instead of beautiful buildings, he saw countless idols. His heart burned that the Lord God was denied His rightful praise and glory.

Paul's "strange ideas" caught people's attention. Epicureans sought a life of tranquility, free from pain, disturbing passions, or superstition. Stoics tried to live in harmony with nature and rational principles. Intrigued, these philosophers brought Paul to the Areopagus (meaning "Mars Hill"), a common location for public debates.

Altars to unknown gods (v. 23) dated back six centuries before Christ when a plague struck Athens. Fearful that some god was offended, people erected altars to "unknown gods" to end the pestilence.

Notice how Paul took advantage of this "open door." First, he proclaimed that God could indeed be known through the visible display of His creation. Moreover, He created all humanity and directed the course of human history (v. 26). The correct response to the true God wasn't temples and idols, but repentance (v. 30). Although God had been patient, He would not allow the sin of idolatry to go unpunished forever.

It seems that Paul intended to say more, but was cut off by the crowd when he mentioned resurrection. Epicureans denied any possibility of resurrection, and others thought that bodily resurrection was abhorrent.

Some have criticized Paul's speech because it lacks references to Scripture or Jesus. Yet this was a thoroughly pagan crowd. He had to begin by establishing the existence of the One God. Moreover, he must have talked about the Cross at some point because he talked about the Resurrection. In any event, at least two people repented and received Christ as a result.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We can learn a lot from Paul's time in Athens. First, notice Paul's flexibility. In the synagogue, he urged those with a religious

background to a complete understanding of God through Jesus Christ. On the street, he shared Christ with those with no Bible background by beginning with what all humans have in common—being created by God. Second, notice that Paul avoided two common extremes: he neither refused contact with other religions, nor gave uncritical approval in an attempt to earn favor.

Acts 17:16-34

Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen ... so that men are without excuse. - Romans 1:20

TODAY IN THE WORD

One of the great apologists of recent times, C. S. Lewis, has this to say about defending the faith:

"One of the great difficulties is to keep before the audience's mind the question of truth... One must keep on pointing out that Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance... They are simply not interested in the question of truth or falsehood. They only want to know if it will be comforting, or 'inspiring,' or socially useful."

Lewis could just as easily have been talking about the Athenians of Paul's day. This episode is the only recorded "sermon" that defends Christianity from a purely rational perspective, as opposed to a historical argument or fulfilled prophecy (cf. Acts 2). In other words, this is a concrete example of philosophical apologetics. From Jerusalem, the city of faith, we have arrived now in Athens, the city of reason.

Distressed by the city's paganism, Paul preached and defended the gospel to anyone willing to listen. He got the attention of some local philosophers—Epicureans and Stoics, whose philosophies are still studied in philosophy courses today. They brought Paul to a meeting of the Areopagus, a sort of philosophical society or discussion seminar, where people would hear and debate the latest philosophical ideas (vv. 19-21).

How could Paul convince these radically different people? He began with respect for their religiosity, using the altar to an "unknown god" he'd seen earlier as a cultural connection. He also quoted one of their poets (v. 28).

He then presented the one true God, starting from creation (vv. 24-26). The true God is the Creator, the maker of all things, all beings, all life. He is all-powerful and self-sufficient. He rules over human history and has taken the initiative to reach out to people (v. 27). One day God will hold everyone accountable for whether they worshiped Him or worshiped idols (vv. 29-31).

Acts 17:22-31

God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him. - Acts 17:27

TODAY IN THE WORD

Tracing one's family tree is a popular hobby for many Americans. In fact, in 2001, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution declaring October as Family History Month. It stated, "Within the last month some 14,167,329 people researched their family history and 24 million people have used the Web and e-mail to locate or hunt for family or friends." Kim Farah, a spokesperson for the Family History Library, says that it touches a fundamental need: "It crosses faith and cultures. The positive benefits of knowing our heritage ... gives us a sense of responsibility and self-esteem."

As believers, our self-esteem can and should be directly linked to our relationship to God. In today's passage, Paul is giving a speech in Athens, a city filled with idols (v. 16). Paul stressed the distinction between being religious and knowing the true God, and he detailed how his own God was the one true God who created the heaven and the earth (vv. 23-24).

This God is not "served by human hands" (v. 25). In other words, God does not need us in order to survive. He made us and made the world—what could He need? Yet, in this passage, Paul revealed what God desires. God made all of this "so that men would seek him" (v. 27). God loves us, but He does not manipulate our minds and hearts. He made us, and it is His desire that we would want to know Him, to find Him, and to have a relationship with Him. He does not view us as puppets on His string.

"For in him we live and move and have our being" (v. 28). Our heritage is directly linked to the divine Creator. It is natural for offspring to want to know their parents. It is natural, then, that since we are God's offspring, we will want to find our image in Him. Only in God—not in our own accomplishments, possessions, personality, or family history—can we find the source of our true identity.

APPLY THE WORD

What part of you resembles your ancestors? You might have your mother's eyes or your grandfather's nose; those attributes are an unmistakable link to your heritage. Spend some time today considering what attributes you have that link you to God, your heavenly

Father. Your list might include patience with a difficult loved one, generosity toward the needy, or forgiveness of someone who hurt you. Pray that the Holy Spirit will strengthen you as you mature to look more like your Father every day.

Acts 17:24-31

[God's grace] teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this ... age. - Titus 2:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

Christians in Romania today belong to either the Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, or the "Repenters." The "Repenters" are the evangelical contingent of Romanian believers who earned their nickname during the Communist rule of Romania. The Communists meant the name as an insult, but the Romanian Christians could have taken it as quite a compliment. They were accurately preaching and portraying what it means to be a Christian.

In today's passage from Acts, Paul calls on people not just to believe, but to repent (v. 30). By this, he wasn't advocating salvation by works. Belief in Christ is enough to save us. Jesus proved this when speaking to the thief on the cross (cf. Luke 23:42, 43). However, one of the marks of genuine faith is repentance. That's why a call to salvation has always included both a call to belief as well as to repentance.

They are two sides of the same coin of faith. Has our belief and confession in Jesus Christ generated a new life (cf. John 3:3, 2 Cor. 5:17)? If our belief in Christ is sincere, repentance makes this evident.

We learn from Paul's sermon two reasons God is building His church. He is merciful and is making a way for men and women to find Him and enjoy the relationship they were created to have with Him (v. 27). Moreover, God is also building the church to spare people from the judgment that is sure to come to all at the end of time. This judgment will be meted out with exact fairness (v. 31), and if it's justice we're promised, we surely have no hope apart from Christ. This is the urgency of repentance.

Today's key verse explains that repentance is a change in direction. As sinners, we once followed our own whims and desires. Now in Christ we must yield to God, seeking His will for our lives.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Reflect back to the different times in your life when you've repented and actually changed directions in order to follow God. Thank God for His grace that made those decisions possible. Now consider the areas of sin with which you're struggling now. Do you find yourself in a cycle of sin, confess, sin, and confess without any move towards real repentance? Ask God for an overflow of His grace to help you definitively turn from this sin and turn toward righteousness.

Acts 17:24-28

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth. - Acts 17:24

TODAY IN THE WORD

A theater critic once claimed, "Playwrights are architects ... and actors are the inhabitants." Only the author of a play or the architect of a building know all the hidden details—they designed the blueprint! Those who see a play or a building may appreciate its beauty, yet never comprehend how it holds together.

Following this analogy, the book of Esther reads like a very good play. On one level, we are reading a narrative "structure," or storyline. At first, Esther can be read like just another great story of love, greed, murder, power, and revenge. In fact, because Esther never explicitly mentions God, many would argue that this is all that the book of Esther has to offer.

This isn't the architect's view. For since Esther has been included in the canon of Scripture, we can argue that God is its author and "architect!" Throughout our study of Esther we'll be answering questions about the why's and how's and so what's in order to learn two things: more about the "Architect" and more about how He builds.

We find ideas about God and His kingdom that have existed since the psalmist's time, as we saw yesterday, to Esther's time, to Paul's time, and even to today. Paul's text for his sermon from today's reading in Acts emphasizes many of the same themes that we'll see in the book of Esther.

First, God is creator and Lord over everything (v. 24), the Grand Architect and the Great King! In Esther, God's presence and His power, though not explicitly mentioned, are unmistakable. Second, God has sovereignty over when and where we live as humans (v. 26). In Esther, God brings Esther to the throne of Queen of Persia by superintending the smallest details. Finally, God also hears and answers the cries of His people in Esther, proving that "He is not far from each one of us" (v. 27).

All of this reminds us that when we can't understand God's purposes for our lives, we trust by faith that He has the blueprint!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Verse 27 is a wonderful promise for us to grasp when we feel spiritually distant from God. He desires that "men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us."

If you find yourself in a spiritual wilderness, begin our study of Esther with this prayer of faith: "Father, I know You are near. I know You want to be found. Help me to see You at work, not only in the book of Esther, but in my life today."

Acts 17:11

PASTOR called my father one Saturday night and said, "I have my sermon prepared from a certain text, but I can't find it in the Bible."

"What is the text?" my father asked.

"Give me liberty or give me death," the pastor answered.

Although the idea expressed in the quotation is noble, it is not Scriptural. Those words were spoken by American Revolutionary leader Patrick Henry, not by any biblical character.

Many people, including that pastor, think they know the Bible, but don't. To assess your own biblical knowledge, determine which of the following are biblical quotations.

- Cleanliness is next to godliness.
- God helps those who help themselves.
- An honest confession is good for the soul.
- We are as prone to sin as sparks fly upward.
- Money is the root of all evil.
- Honesty is the best policy.

The answer? While some of these statements contain elements of truth, none of them are found in the Bible!

A thorough knowledge of God's Word comes by diligent study. To grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord, we must "let the word of Christ dwell in [us] richly in all wisdom" (Colossians 3:16). When we search and study Scripture, we find out that clever quotations are no substitute for biblical truth. —P R Van Gorder ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

Acts 17:28

"For in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

When life gets heavy, humor lightens the load. I have heard, for example, that in Russia peasant farmers enjoy telling this story: A commissar came to a farmer one day and inquired about the year's potato crop. "Oh, it was wonderful," replied the farmer. "Good, good," said the official. "Just how big was it?" "Oh, it was so big it reached up to the very foot of God." The commissar's countenance changed. With a scowl, he said, "But comrade, this is a communist state and we are atheists. You must not forget, there is no God!" "That's right, commissar, that's what I mean. No God—no potatoes."

A deep truth lies hidden in this humorous tale. God is the source of all things—whether we admit it or not. The apostle Paul went so far as to tell his pagan audience, "For in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). And he focused the great creating and sustaining work of God in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ (Col. 1:16-18). Without Him, we could not draw a single breath, our bodies could not function, and we would have no provision for our daily sustenance.

Atheists may have convinced themselves that God does not exist. Yet we who are His children through faith in His Son know otherwise. But do we show it by the way we live? That is the key question. Each day we must depend on Him, so that we recognize every blessing as coming from His gracious hand. —D. J. De Haan ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

**However long the chain of secondary causes,
the first link is always in God's hand**

ACTS 18

Acts 18:1-4; 1 Corinthians 9:12-15

We do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity. - 2 Corinthians 2:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

The great leader and educator Booker T. Washington told about the “entrance exam” he had to pass to enter the Hampton Institute in Virginia. The head teacher ordered the young Washington to sweep the classroom. He knew she wanted to see how hard he was willing to work, so he swept the room three times. He also dusted the furniture four times, until the teacher couldn’t find a speck of dust anywhere in the room. Washington was admitted to Hampton, and later said his years there were a turning point. He also said it was the best exam he ever passed.

The apostle Paul was also willing to work hard to gain an important entry. Paul was seeking to work for the gospel rather than an education, but the results of his hard work were the same as they were for Booker T. Washington. Paul’s work ethic helped prove his credibility in the sin-hardened city of Corinth, and the church was established there.

Today’s study follows our discussion yesterday. Although he argued that a minister of the gospel has the right to earn a living from the gospel, Paul also gave us an example of what to do when there is any question about a person’s motivation.

Paul supported himself by his trade of tentmaking when he first came to Corinth, preaching the gospel on the Sabbath. He later explained to the Corinthians why he did this rather than giving his full time to ministry right from the start--some people in Corinth questioned his motives, accusing him of using the ministry for personal profit (1 Cor. 9:3).

Therefore, Paul said he wouldn’t accept support from the believers at Corinth. His “boast” was that he preached the Word of God with sincere and pure motives, and he wasn’t going to give anyone the chance to prove otherwise.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Since we’re doing a follow-up study today, let’s add to the application we talked about yesterday.

Acts 18:1-17

Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. - Acts 18:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

Among the many painful events in last year’s brutal ethnic warfare in Kosovo was the damage inflicted by land mines. Even after the fighting was over, in some areas a number of people were killed or wounded by mines buried in places such as gardens and underneath the steps of homes. People were warned to be very careful where they walked, because some families’ property had become a minefield.

Paul must have felt like he was walking through a minefield each time he entered a new Gentile city to preach the gospel. He never knew exactly what was going to happen, whether his next step would set off a blast of fierce opposition.

Paul did have one great advantage, however. The Holy Spirit was his divine “mine sweeper,” guiding the apostle safely through such spiritual minefields as Corinth. This was a pagan city legendary for its immorality. It also had a large population of Jews, so Paul appealed to them to believe in Jesus as Messiah.

But the Jews became hostile and dragged Paul before Gallio, the ruler of Achaia, the district in which Corinth was located. This move could have triggered another explosion like the one in Philippi. But Gallio viewed the charges as a squabble over Jewish law, and he wasn’t interested. He apparently considered Christianity as a sect of Judaism, as did other pagans in the Roman world during the church’s early days.

Despite the opposition, Paul found such a response to the gospel that he stayed at least eighteen months in Corinth, which was at the time a major center of first-century commerce and culture.

It was there that Paul met his fellow tent-makers Aquila and Priscilla. They were so valuable to the work of the church that Paul took them with him on his way back to Antioch and left them in Ephesus (v. 19). It’s remarkable that this couple pulled up their tent pegs for the sake of the gospel and moved to Ephesus, another city loaded with spiritual land mines.

You may have noticed that both Crispus and Sosthenes are called “synagogue ruler” (vv. 8, 17). The latter could have replaced the former, one indication of how long Paul stayed in Corinth.

APPLY THE WORD

Moving to a city where you know you'll encounter fierce opposition is not the kind of new beginning most people would choose.

But Aquila and Priscilla were willing to lay down their lives for Christ. If God called you to do something hard for Him, would you respond by running in the other direction like the prophet Jonah? Or would you pull up your tent pegs, so to speak, and move out? This would be a good discussion topic for your next time together with family or friends.

Acts 18:1-17, 1 Corinthians 1:1-3;

TODAY IN THE WORD

A recent re-telling of the flight of Apollo 13 has spurred a renewed interest in the details of space travel. It is hard not to be fascinated by the prospect of journeying so far into space, beyond the borders of our familiar world.

After all, the farther an arrow has to travel, the less likely it is to hit the target. Sending a person to the moon is like aiming a grain of sand at a basketball several blocks away! The laws of space travel are, by necessity, very precise.

Scientists count on the consistencies of God's universe. But man-made rockets aren't quite so consistent. No matter how carefully scientists aim at the moon, they have to continually make mid-course corrections through steering jets that adjust the spacecraft's direction.

Life, as they say, is a lot like that. God gives precise directions, but we respond with imprecise obedience. It seems that even when we are traveling along the narrow way of living for God, we require constant mid-course corrections. The problems come not from God's inability to guide us but from the fact that we are ""spacecrafts with will."" We make bad choices and wander in flight. We need God's daily dose of correction and direction.

Acts 18 describes the launching of the church in Corinth, a city on the huge peninsula we now know as Greece. God used a team of five on that mission: Paul, Aquila, Priscilla, Silas and Timothy. Although Paul sought out the Jewish community as his evangelistic starting point, the gospel quickly outgrew the synagogue. In fact, a house church made up of Jewish and Gentile converts flourished next door.

The gospel was planted in very mixed soil in Corinth. The city was a moral, cultural and ethnic melting pot. Religions of every type competed for followers. From its earliest days the church was under constant pressure to compromise with practices forbidden by the Scriptures, to condone or accept sinful choices, practices and lifestyles.

Paul's letter addresses many of these issues. He wanted his Corinthian brothers and sisters to remain true to God's Word. His letter is a series of mid-course corrections.

APPLY THE WORD

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to ""all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ"" (1 Cor. 1:2). We are included in this greeting! We may not be struggling with the same specific issues that Paul confronted, but the principles he used still apply to us today.

With 1996 rapidly approaching its mid-way point, God may be offering us some mid-course corrections. As you study 1 Corinthians, purpose to apply the principles Paul used as he dealt with the pressing questions of people just like us. Praise the Lord for His Word!

Acts 18:1-17; 2 Corinthians 1:1-2

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. - 2 Corinthians 1:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

A recent report in the Los Angeles Times names Lanzhou, a city in China, ""the world's most polluted city."" The World Resources Institute surveyed this city of two million people in western China and found that coal smoke, car exhaust, and dust from the arid yellow mountains combine to make breathing the air in Lanzhou as harmful as smoking a pack of cigarettes a day.

Replace environmental pollution with moral filth, and you have an accurate picture of the conditions in ancient Corinth--a city in which the apostle Paul established a church on his second missionary journey. Several hundred years before Paul, Greek writers complained about Corinth's moral degradation. The city was destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C. and rebuilt a century later. But the new Corinth wasn't much of an improvement.

Paul poured a lot of time, prayers, and tears into the church at Corinth. These believers tested Paul's --and God's--patience to the limit. God had disciplined some of the members with illness, and even death, for their unholy behavior at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:30).

Besides this, the church not only tolerated a case of incest in its midst, but it became a source of perverse pride (1 Cor. 5:1-2)! Paul didn't see anything to brag about. He turned the offender over to Satan for severe discipline (vv. 4-5).

In fact, this sordid case may have been one of the things that led Paul to write 2 Corinthians, the book we will study this month. The church imposed discipline on the man and he repented. But instead of pulling back, the church was on the verge of driving him to despair (2 Cor. 2:5-7). So Paul had to urge the Corinthians to accept him back into fellowship.

Paul had a long relationship with the believers in Corinth. It began when he spent eighteen months there establishing the church. The place was such a hotbed of paganism and opposition to the gospel that God appeared to Paul in a vision one night to reassure him (Acts 18:9).

Acts 18:1-22.

TODAY IN THE WORD

According to the International Red Cross, there are some 110 million land mines buried throughout the world, waiting to kill or maim unsuspecting victims. About 10 people are killed by land mines each year; and another 20 are maimed, many of them children. But despite the grim numbers, participants at a recent U.N. conference on the problem balked at changing the rules for the sale and use of land mines. And those already in place remain among the most lethal weapons ever developed.

Each time he entered a new Gentile city to preach the gospel, Paul must have felt as though he was walking through a minefield. He never knew exactly what awaited or whether his next step would set off a blast of fierce opposition.

Paul did have one great advantage, however. The Holy Spirit was his divine "mine sweeper," guiding the apostle safely through spiritual minefields such as Corinth. This was a pagan city, legendary for its immorality. But it also had a population of Jews, so Paul made his customary appeal to them to believe in Jesus as Messiah.

The Jews became hostile and dragged Paul before Gallio, the ruler of Achaia, the district in which Corinth was located. This move could have triggered an explosion such as the one in Philippi. But since the charge appeared to Gallio to be a squabble over Jewish law, he wasn't interested.

Despite this, Paul found such a response to the gospel that he stayed at least eighteen months in Corinth. You may have noticed that two men are called synagogue rulers, Crispus and Sosthenes. The latter could have replaced the former, one indication of how long Paul stayed in the city.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

This is our third in a brief series of witnessing tips and ideas you can use even this week to tell others about Jesus.

If you've done much witnessing, you know that people sometimes raise the objection, "What about those who have never heard the gospel?" This is often a smokescreen to avoid facing their spiritual need, but you can answer it.

Acts 18:1-22

A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity. - Proverbs 17:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

In the time of Paul, Corinth—with a population of 250,000 citizens and 400,000 slaves—was one of the chief cities of Greece. Razed by Roman troops in 146 b.c., it was rebuilt about a century later by Julius Caesar and had since become a center of commerce, trade, and immorality. Sexual immorality flourished through temple prostitution in honor of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, to such an extent that "to play the Corinthian" became an idiom for fornication.

Paul brought the light of the gospel to this dark urban center, and met there his friends Priscilla and Aquila. They were originally from Rome, but when Claudius banished Jews from Italy about 49 a.d, they landed in Corinth. Bible scholar F. F. Bruce argues that when Paul arrived, he must have been feeling discouraged. After all, he'd been hounded from most cities and treated with polite amusement in Athens. Although some had believed in each place, his own Jewish people seemed resistant to the point that he began to minister to Gentiles exclusively.

God cheered up His downcast servant in at least three ways. He encouraged him in a vision, affirming that Paul's ministry was on

the right track and promising anew His protection and presence (vv. 9-10). He kept this promise immediately—Paul didn't even need to say a word when he was brought before Gallio. God also encouraged him by allowing him to stay in Corinth for eighteen months, his longest stint in one place since Antioch.

God's greatest encouragement to Paul was the gift of friendship. With Priscilla and Aquila he forged a strong bond based on their common faith, their common identity as expatriate Jews in a Gentile setting, their common experience of exile or suffering, and even their common trade of tentmaking (the word may refer generally to leatherworking). They also became his partners in ministry and would later work in Ephesus at the start of his third missionary journey (see tomorrow's reading). They were even willing to risk their lives for him (Rom. 16:3-4).

APPLY THE WORD

It's good to have friends who share our faith and stand with us when times get tough (see today's verse). Give thanks today for the gift of friendship!

One of the best ways to be a good friend is to follow the example of Paul and pray for those in our lives that we love. You can find a beautiful prayer in Philippians 1:3-11. Pray through these verses with your friends in mind—and then let them know that you are supporting them through prayer.

Acts 18:18-28

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season. - 2 Timothy 4:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

Our knowledge of history is generally filled with holes and highlights. The highlights consist of the summary information of events, but many times the holes represent very interesting and important information that we never learned. Radio personality Paul Harvey likes to fill in the holes. In his program, *The Rest of the Story*, Harvey recounts the intriguing stories that occurred before famous people entered the spotlight, and he often reflects on the rarely discussed aftermath of the most well-known events in history. *The Rest of the Story* forces us to look again at history and reform our perspective of the people we know.

In today's reading, the Jewish orator Apollos, from Alexandria in North Africa, gained an entirely new perspective on baptism, as Priscilla and Aquila gave him "the rest of the story." This new information perfectly illustrates the transitional nature of the events in the books of Acts.

Apollos came along at the start of Paul's third missionary journey. Today's reading straddles the second and third trips, both of which were crucial to the church's new beginning in Gentile territory.

After a long stay in Corinth, Paul left for Ephesus, where he found a good response to the gospel among the Jews. Paul cut his hair at the conclusion of a Nazirite vow he had taken (see Num. 6:18), although we're not told what his purpose was in taking the vow.

Paul left the husband-and-wife team of Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus and went back to Palestine, where he "went up" to the church at Jerusalem and greeted the believers there. Paul probably reported the good things God had done on the trip and also demonstrated his unity with the rest of the body. His arrival in Antioch completed his second trip.

It was at the beginning of Paul's third and final missionary trip that Apollos came to Ephesus. When Aquila and Priscilla heard this powerful preacher, they realized he did not know about the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the new work God was doing. So they invited Apollos home for dinner and completed his theological training. Far from being resentful, Apollos used this newly learned truth to increase his ministry.

APPLY THE WORD

It's not always easy to be gracious when you're being corrected. It requires a teachable spirit to accept instruction.

Are you teachable? Or do you feel you've got your Christian life pretty well under control and you don't need any help? You can find out how open you are if you consider the way you react when people tell you things you don't want to hear. Do you brush the comment off or look for something of value in it? We can learn a lot from other people if we're willing to listen.

Acts 18:23-28; Romans 16:3-4

TODAY IN THE WORD

Jeremiah Lanphier was a New York City businessman who became concerned for the masses in the city's tenements. At the age of forty, Lanphier left his job to become a missionary for a church in one of New York's poorest sections. But the more he tried to

evangelize the city's poorest people, the more discouraged he became. God led Lanphier to start holding noon prayer meetings for the lost; and on September 23, 1857, six people came to pray. In God's providence, that small meeting was the beginning of the great laymen's prayer revival of 1858.

Never underestimate what godly, praying laypeople can do! Priscilla and Aquila were two such people, and they helped shape the history of the early church. Although their names are more familiar than some others we are studying this month, they still qualify as unsung Bible heroes.

What this Jewish couple did as recorded in Acts 18 was not a headline-making piece of service. But God used them to support and encourage Paul and to help launch Apollos into an effective ministry for Christ.

These verses show the transitional nature of Acts, which explains why Apollos needed further instruction in the faith. He had "a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures" (v. 24). Yet it seems he had not yet received the Holy Spirit (see Acts 19:1-7), so his teaching was limited. Priscilla and Aquila heard Apollos speak in Ephesus, and they took him aside to fill in the gaps in his knowledge (18:26).

The fact that these two were in Ephesus is itself an indication of their commitment to Christ. Paul first met them in Corinth (18:2), from where they accompanied him to Ephesus (18:18). Then Paul greets them in Rome. Later, they seem to have moved back to Ephesus (2 Tim. 4:19).

APPLY THE WORD

When God decides to bless His people for their obedience, no power on earth can hinder Him. Wouldn't it be great to be known as the "help-bringer?" Priscilla and Aquila had a quality valuable to those who want to serve Christ: flexibility.

You may be thinking, "I'm not ready to start moving back and forth across the country as they did." God may not ask you to do that. But He may want you to go out of your way or vary your daily routine to serve someone in His name.

Acts 18:9

Are you discouraged because the work that God has called you to do is off to a slow start? Remember, some of our most wonderful inventions got off to slow starts as well.

The first electric light was so dim a candle was needed to see its socket. The first steamboat took 32 hours to chug its way from Buffalo to Albany a distance of 522 miles. Wilbur and Orville Wright's first airplane flight lasted only 12 seconds.

In his ministry at Corinth, the apostle Paul went every Sabbath to the synagogue and tried to persuade the Jews that Jesus is the Christ, but they refused his message. So he turned to the Gentiles, and many believed.

Don't let a rough beginning in your endeavor for the Lord get you down. When you know you're in God's will, stick with it! —D. C. Egner ([Our Daily Bread. Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

God can make a great finish out of a slow start.

ACTS 19

Acts 18:23-19:41.

TODAY IN THE WORD

In some parts of the world, going to a soccer match can cost you much more than the price of admission.

A soccer match in Dublin, Ireland, was stopped after English fans began cursing and breaking seats, throwing pieces of wood and metal onto the field. A bloody riot followed. This ugly incident came just a few weeks after a fan was stabbed to death during a riot between fans of rival soccer teams in Italy. In Brazil, six fans were killed before or during soccer games in one eight-month period.

The riot at Ephesus wasn't over a soccer game and no one was hurt, but it might just as easily have become violent. Judging from the text, it probably would have turned deadly if Paul had succeeded in his desire to speak to the enraged worshipers of the goddess Artemis.

The great Gentile city of Ephesus offers us another example of the tremendous spread of the gospel that is Luke's focus in the book of Acts. Paul's third missionary journey begins in 18:23 and ends with another riot in Jerusalem.

Today's verse is one of Luke's progress reports—summary statements that testify to the spread of the faith to the ends of the earth, in keeping with Jesus' instructions to His disciples in Acts 1:8. The first two portions of the account also reveal the transitional nature of this book, a sub-theme we talked about earlier this month.

Both Apollos and the twelve men in Ephesus knew only of John's baptism, and the twelve did not know the Spirit had been given. Apollos' fuller instruction by Aquila and Priscilla and the reception of the Spirit by these men completed their transition from John's ministry to the fullness of the promise in Christ and did not need to be repeated.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Often when we talk to non-Christians about their need of Christ, we discover that they have a light view of sin.

Acts 19:1-20

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. - 2 Corinthians 3:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

Author Ken Hutcherson says, "When the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, it wasn't dynamite, it was a dynamo! Dynamite makes a loud noise, kicks up a lot of dust, and it's over. A dynamo is a continual source of power. It builds and builds and builds, and the power never stops flowing."

We can see the truth of Hutcherson's statement in the events of Acts 19 which happened many months after Pentecost. The power unleashed when the Holy Spirit came to indwell the church still flowed when Paul arrived in the great Gentile city of Ephesus on his third and final missionary trip.

Paul found a group of twelve men in Ephesus who were disciples of John the Baptist, but it's hard to say for sure whether they were already believers in Jesus Christ. They were definitely limited in their knowledge of the truth, so Paul explained to them that John's ministry prepared for the coming of Jesus, the One in whom they needed to believe.

When they heard this, the men were baptized in Jesus' name, and they began speaking in tongues when Paul laid his hands on them. This was another case of the Holy Spirit validating the message about Christ through the gift of tongues, although the text does not indicate that every believer would have this experience after church was established.

Ephesus became Paul's headquarters during this trip as he spent time in the city making disciples. His pattern of ministry was to go first to the Jewish synagogue. Usually being rejected by at least some Jews, he would then turn to the Gentiles.

God gave Paul the confirming sign of miracles, so much so that even pieces of cloth he had touched caused "long-distance" healing. The frightening experience of the Jewish exorcists also served to glorify the name of Jesus Christ in a city where demonic activity and other forms of evil held tremendous power over the people. The voluntary confession and book burning that followed were serious setbacks to Satan's work in Ephesus.

Verse 20 is another example of Luke's summary statements to finish a section of the story and prepare the reader for the next chapter. In this case, things were about to explode.

APPLY THE WORD

Isn't it interesting that no one had to tell those new Ephesian believers they should get rid of their sorcery scrolls?

These people knew right away they needed to get rid of things that turned them away from Christ. We need to remember that too. It's a good idea to check your home and your own life to make sure you aren't being exposed to things that draw you away from Christ.

Acts 19:1-41

The province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. - Acts 19:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

Psychic Web sites are apparently big business. Dona Murphy was spending up to \$1,000 a month to find out her future online. Dona isn't alone. There's a growing problem with "prediction addiction." From Internet fortunetellers to good luck charms, the occult is often quite profitable. Just look at the Ephesians' sorcerers (v. 19) who burned magic scrolls worth 50,000 drachmas. One drachma was worth one day's wage, so with a \$20,000 annual salary, that's several million dollars!

Today's passage shows Paul's wisdom in targeting large cities. Thousands visited the Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the world. After two years in Ephesus, the gospel had spread throughout the province of Asia. The church in Colosse (about 150

miles from Ephesus) was planted by Epaphras, who was most likely converted by Paul in Ephesus.

The rest of today's passage might be summarized as a "power encounter" between the gospel and the occult. Because Ephesians specialized in magic objects, God allowed Paul's handkerchiefs and rags to have unusual healing power. The name of Jesus can never be reduced to a magic formula, as the sons of Sceva painfully found out. Even demons know that invoking the Name of Jesus is only possible by those who personally know Him.

The real "show down," occurred between the gospel and the local idol-makers. Although Demetrius was worried about the bottom line, he shrewdly appealed to the honor of Artemis to stir up the crowd. And it worked! Wisely, Paul's friends kept him from the mob, no doubt sparing his life.

God used another Roman official for His purposes. The city clerk made four key points: first, Ephesus's reputation was secure; second, Gaius and Aristarchus were innocent; third, any other grievances should go to judges or the city council; and, fourth, a riot could cause trouble with Rome. Such level-headed thinking enabled the gospel to advance in and around Ephesus.

APPLY THE WORD

Ephesus was in bondage to the occult ... probably not too much different from many of the cities in which we live. Horoscopes are prevalent in newspapers or grocery store check-out counters, and psychics are used to help solve crimes. Prayerfully conduct an honest inventory of any way the occult might be in your own life. Renounce and get rid of such things as good luck charms or horoscopes. Consider also how you might help others to see the danger of magic or the occult.

Acts 19:21-41

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. - Matthew 5:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

In his Men of Integrity, Earl Palmer describes a lesson he learned in a defensive driving course. The instructor asked the class whether they should put their foot on or off the brake if they saw another car coming in their rearview mirror and knew they were going to be hit. Most students said it was better not to apply the brake. But the instructor explained that by braking hard and bracing for the impact, the car would be better able to sustain the impact and the driver would sustain less injury. Otherwise, the crash would create a whiplash effect.

Palmer says his driving lesson has a parallel in the Christian life. When we are firmly planted on solid ground, anchored in Christ Jesus, we can sustain the crashes that life throws against us.

The apostle Paul's life is Exhibit A of this principle. Had he not been firmly anchored in Christ, the enemy's heavy blows would have decimated Paul many times during his pioneer missionary ministry. One of these blows came after Paul had sent Timothy and Erastus ahead to Macedonia to check on the churches there and collect the offering for the famine-plagued believers in Jerusalem.

The anger that Demetrius stirred up among his fellow silversmiths led to a riot that lasted several hours. These men professed to be guarding the worship and "divine majesty" (v. 27) of the goddess Artemis, whose temple in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. But the key to this story is the brisk business in silver statues that Demetrius and his friends enjoyed.

This was one of the few instances in the New Testament that Gentiles actively opposed the gospel message, the other being the beating Paul and Silas received in Philippi. Interestingly, that opposition also had to do with the fact that the gospel was destroying people's religious profiteering.

Paul's friends in Ephesus went to great effort to keep him out of the arena, maybe saving his life. Paul listened to them, but it's obvious he wasn't afraid of colliding with his opponents. After all, he was well anchored.

APPLY THE WORD

In the sea of hostility and opposition rising up against Christians, our anchor is Christ Himself; our stability is only in God. To withstand danger and face opposition we must, like Paul, be well anchored in Jesus. Sin, however, separates us from God. That's why it is so important for all Christians to open our hearts to God, be sensitive to His correction, and, if there is sin in our lives, confess it immediately.

Today, search your life and make sure you aren't harboring any unconfessed sin (1 Jn. 1:9).

Acts 19:17-41

Many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds. --Acts 19:18

Tite Tienow, a West African professor of missions and theology, was confronted by his physician during a medical exam. The doctor disagreed with the work of the professor and said that he was teaching Americans to "colonize" his native land. But Tienow pointed out that the aim of missionaries is not to change culture but to lead people to faith in Christ.

It's true that when people become believers they abandon some of the practices that mark their culture. But that's a result, not the goal. For example, when people of the Udek tribe in Chali, Sudan, became Christians, they rejected the practice of burying a live baby with its mother if she died during childbirth. These new Christians didn't set out to turn their culture upside down. But United Nations officials have publicly noted the difference between the Udek believers and their non-Christian neighbors.

The apostle Paul saw the gospel at work in the society of Ephesus. When sorcerers turned to Christ, they burned their occultic books valued at 50,000 days' wages (Acts 19:19). And the silversmiths who made shrines of Diana were almost put out of business (Acts 19:23, 24, 25, 26, 27).

It's not our responsibility to change our culture. Only the power of God through the gospel can do that! --H V Lugt ([Our Daily Bread](#), Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved)

Christ frees us from the penalty

And power of our sin,

And He will change society

As hearts are changed within. --Sper

The gospel produces a change within that breaks the chains of sin.

ACTS 20

Acts 20:1-12

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. - Philippians 3:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

Feeling tired? You might want to stop in at MetroNaps, a new company in the Empire State Building in New York City. A special sleeping pod (a kind of stylish cocoon) is available there for a midday power nap—in about twenty minutes, they say, you'll be fully recharged and ready to go. The nap costs \$14, but a one-year pass can be had for \$65 per month. A MetroNaps Pod itself can be bought for \$8,000. If only Eutychus had visited MetroNaps before heading off to hear the teaching of the apostle Paul!

If we had an opportunity to hear Paul preach and teach, we imagine that we might show up excited, pen and tape recorder ready so as not to miss a single syllable. On this particular night in Troas, Paul was in fine form ... he "kept on talking until midnight" (v. 7). What was the subject of his inspiring speech? We don't know. Not a single word of it is recorded for us. Not a main point, not a subpoint, not even an illustration or prophetic cross-reference. All we are told is that Paul "talked on and on" (v. 9). Interestingly, it seems that God's purpose for that night was not what Paul said, but what he would do later.

Through perfectly understandable circumstances involving warmth and sitting still for a long time, Eutychus dozed off as Paul "talked on and on." Unfortunately, he was sitting in a large open window on the third floor, and he was apparently a hard sleeper. When he fell fast asleep, he fell from the window down to the street and was "picked up dead." Paul went down and by the power of God raised this young man from the dead. Although he kept talking until morning, this was the part of Paul's visit through which God spoke the loudest!

Of course, this isn't permission to nap during your pastor's next sermon. But we should be sensitive to what God really wants to say and do through us. It may not be what we had originally planned or thought was important, but we can have the greatest impact on others when we are open to changing our plans in order to follow God.

APPLY THE WORD

The old adage says, "Actions speak louder than words." Clearly God uses the proclamation of His Word to change lives. But we can never get so caught up in our own speeches and sermons that we ignore opportunities to act in God's power.

We may not raise someone from the dead, but our actions can speak volumes about the power of the God we trust.

Acts 20:1-16

Since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. - 2 Corinthians 4:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

A few years ago a new trend started in professional sports. A well-known athlete would announce his intention to retire at the end of an upcoming season, making his last year in uniform something of a “farewell tour.” Some of these athletes, on their final visit to a particular city, would be showered with applause and gifts by fans and officials of the opposing team and asked to say a few words.

We could call Acts 20 Paul’s “farewell tour” of the cities in the Gentile world where he had established churches. Tomorrow’s story, his visit with the elders of Ephesus, certainly qualifies as a farewell speech.

At the beginning of the chapter, Luke mentions numerous places Paul traveled. Paul had to keep moving because of a plot against him by Jewish opponents, about which we have no other details. Luke includes himself in the narrative in verses 5-6. Apparently he had stayed behind in Philippi after the missionaries’ visit in Acts 16, and rejoined Paul and his party when they came back through Philippi.

Acts 20 also gives us several glimpses of the early church in action. First, we see the church meeting physical needs. The seven men accompanying Paul (v. 4) were carrying the offering for the relief of poor saints in Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8:1-6).

Second, Acts 20:7 shows us the church at worship, having established Sunday as its regular day of worship in celebration of Christ’s resurrection. The incident involving Eutychus has been the target of many church jokes. Luke the doctor said Eutychus died from his fall. Paul’s miraculous act in restoring this young man to his family and friends was a great comfort to the believers at Troas.

Third, Acts 20 gives us some information about the church’s organization and leadership. Paul wanted to avoid another stop in Ephesus because he knew if he arrived in town, he would never get away in time to make it to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. So he arranged to meet the Ephesian elders at Miletus, about thirty miles to the south. Paul’s farewell tour was quickly drawing to a close.

APPLY THE WORD

By comparing Acts 20 with Paul’s later explanation in 2 Corinthians 8, we conclude that the men in Paul’s party were carrying a financial gift with them.

The generosity of the Macedonian believers is striking. Even though they were poor, they were ready to give to help others. Do you know of anyone--perhaps an elderly person or someone in your church--who is in real need this month? Your pastor or church staff would probably know. Why not share some of your blessings with someone in need?

Acts 20:1-38

I have fought the good fight. - 2 Timothy 4:7

TODAY IN THE WORD

Toward the end of his life, missionary-explorer David Livingstone wrote, “People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply acknowledging a great debt we owe to our God, which we can never repay? ... It is emphatically no sacrifice. Rather, it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, danger, foregoing the common conveniences of this life—these may make us pause and cause the spirit to waver and the soul to sink, but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing compared with the glory which shall later be revealed in and through us.” The apostle Paul understood this sentiment well.

Following the riot in Ephesus, Paul traveled to Macedonia, encouraging believers along the way. Another plot on his life forced him to backtrack to Troas. Here we get a wonderful glimpse of life in the early church.

Because Sunday was a regular workday, believers met early in the morning for worship and then regathered for teaching and fellowship after a long workday. This explains why the teenager Eutychus fell into such a deep sleep ... a day of hard labor and a hot, smoke-filled room could make anyone doze off! Likely, it was Luke who confirmed that Eutychus was dead. But God had other plans, and in another “mark of a true apostle” (2 Cor. 12:12), Paul resuscitated the young man.

Leaving Troas, Paul and his team eventually arrived in Miletus, where Paul was able to say farewell to the Ephesians’ elders with whom he had no doubt spent much time during his long stay in Ephesus. Paul’s humility and honesty in this address is remarkable.

Clearly sad to say goodbye, Paul also knew that he had faithfully ministered to the Ephesians. Now the time had come to entrust these leaders to the Lord’s care and to urge them to persevere in their calling. Those final moments together must have been gut-wrenching.

APPLY THE WORD

David Livingstone and Paul clearly understood that suffering for the gospel was a privilege. For many of us, it's easy to lose sight of this. Our society tries to avoid pain and values comfort and ease. Yet the book of Acts challenges this mindset. Perhaps we need to buy less expensive items or forego some purchases altogether so we can give more to Christian ministry. Or perhaps we need to be willing to experience rejection by standing up for the truth of the gospel in an age of pluralism.

Acts 20:1-38.

TODAY IN THE WORD

For years pastor Henry Lyte battled tuberculosis, a dreaded disease in nineteenth-century England. Finally he was advised to leave his homeland for a warmer climate in Italy. For his final sermon, Lyte was so weak he almost crawled to the pulpit. He delivered his message in September and left, never to return. He did not live to see a new year.

But Lyte left his people with a comforting poem based on his final sermon. It was set to music, and we know it as the hymn "Abide with Me."

If Paul had been a poet or a hymn writer, perhaps he would have left the elders of Ephesus with a song to comfort them after his departure. Actually, what Paul gave these men was better: a powerful word of exhortation and warning concerning the ministry he had established among them at such great price.

In Acts 20 we get several glimpses of the early church in action. First, we see the church meeting physical needs. The seven men accompanying Paul (v. 4) were carrying funds for the relief of the poor saints in Jerusalem.

Second, Acts 20:7 shows the church at worship. The early church had established Sunday as its regular day of worship in celebration of Christ's resurrection. The incident involving Eutychus has been the subject of a lot of church humor. But it was a tragic event that gave rise to a great miracle and comforted the believers at Troas.

Third, we see the organization and leadership of the early church. Paul wanted to avoid another stop in Ephesus because he knew if he arrived in town, he would never make it to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. So he arranged to meet the Ephesian elders at Miletus, about thirty miles to the south.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Our final witnessing tip deals with one of the most common barriers keeping people from Christ: their trust in their own standard of goodness to get them to heaven.

Since we know that no one is saved by good works (Eph. 2:8-9), here's how you can approach this issue in your witnessing. First, ask the person whether he always lives up to his own standards. Few people will say "yes" to that.

Acts 20:17-38

I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race. - Acts 20:24

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 1993, Jim Valvano accepted an award for his fundraising efforts for cancer research, a disease that would soon claim his life. During his speech, a screen began flashing a warning for him to wrap up. He responded, "Like I care about that screen right now, huh? I got tumors all over my body. I'm worried about some guy in the back going, "'thirty seconds'?" The audience erupted in applause as he finished his now famous farewell.

Paul addressed Ephesus knowing it was his final opportunity to speak to them, and he exhibited a similar sense of passion, purpose, and personal abandon. But while Valvano's message was inspired by his fight against death, Paul's death was brought on by his refusal to sway from his message. Nevertheless, his audience was heartbroken by the knowledge that he was leaving them for good.

Paul had no regrets about his ministry, having faithfully proclaimed the Word every opportunity that he had. And he was emotionally invested in the people to whom he preached. Twice in this passage he said that he served to the point of tears (vv. 19, 31). We can see that the warning he gave the church at Ephesus came out of a deep love and desire for them to remain secure in Christ.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Paul's character is revealed in verses 33-35. Paul was one of the greatest, most beloved teachers and leaders in the church, but he worked with his hands to support himself. It is almost unthinkable in today's culture for such a renowned figure as Paul to work as a layman would and resist the temptation to profit from his position as a leader.

No wonder the disciples at Ephesus kissed him and wept with him as a brother. As we see in Paul's letters, he knew the people of the church by name and enjoyed a love from them that rose far beyond the adoration of a celebrity. Paul was a beloved friend and an example that any church leader can and should follow.

APPLY THE WORD

Leaders of the church, pay attention to this passage. Whether you're a Sunday School teacher or a pastor of a megachurch, your role in leadership is not an occasion for personal glory and elevated status. Love the people you serve; don't love the position. Even if you're not in a leadership position, this passage is very instructive as to how a relationship to a leader can be. Any good leader will crave your love and friendship more than your adoration and money. Pastors are people, too!

Acts 20:24

TODAY IN THE WORD

Chaim Potok, author of *The Chosen*, captures what it means to live well: "Human beings do not live forever... We live less than the time that it takes to blink an eye, if we measure our lives against eternity... A blink of an eye in itself is nothing. But the eye that blinks, that is something. A span of life is nothing. But the man who lives that span, he is something."

Second Timothy paints an incredible picture of the confidence we can have on the eve of our death when we have lived well. Paul had that kind of confidence. At the time that 2 Timothy was written, Paul was imprisoned for a second time in Rome (1: and was awaiting execution (4:6). Many of his closest friends and ministry partners had deserted him. His prison chamber was cold and dismal (4:13). Despite his bleak circumstances, Paul's joy and hope in Christ were not dimmed as he considered the "promise of life that is in Christ Jesus" (v. 1). Death awaited him, but it was not the end. Life in Christ is a promise for eternity.

So with this joy for the future, Paul began his letter with expressions of thanks, specifically thanking God for Timothy. Paul was obviously comforted by the friendship that he enjoyed with Timothy. He was thankful to know that while others had deserted him, Timothy remained faithful both to Paul and to the ministry. The tears Timothy had shed at their last parting assured Paul of the warmth and loyalty he felt for the apostle.

Yet Paul was not only comforted by Timothy's loyalty but also by his sincere faith (v. 5). When so many around him had shipwrecked their faith, Paul might easily have begun questioning his efforts as an apostle. But Timothy was a "success story," a reminder that sincere faith could indeed survive, and that Paul's ministry efforts had taken root, been blessed by God, and had in fact borne fruit.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Timothy was an incredible man of God. And notice how much importance Paul places on the influence Timothy's grandmother and mother had over him. They had taught him the Scriptures from infancy.

If you're a parent or grandparent, consider how you can sow the seeds of God's Word in your children. It's never too early to begin! You just might be raising a Timothy for the next generation of the church.

Acts 20:24

About 200 years ago in England there lived a great humanitarian named Jonas Hanway. In his travels in foreign countries, he had discovered the usefulness of what was then the little-known umbrella. He decided to introduce it to England, believing it would be readily accepted.

Many people poked fun at him, however, and young boys often pelted him with cabbages and rotten eggs because they considered him peculiar. Hanway never let this stop him, even though he was ridiculed for 30 years as "the umbrella man." Eventually people recognized the usefulness of the umbrella, and today few would want to be without one.

A spiritual parallel to this story is found in the perseverance and faithfulness of the apostle Paul. That "ambassador in chains" was kept in cruel Roman dungeons and endured terrible persecution; yet he confidently declared that none of these things moved him. In spite of all opposition, he clung to the truth of the gospel, which the Lord had commissioned him to proclaim to the world. —H. G. Bosch ([Our Daily Bread. Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

**GREAT ENDURANCE IS ESSENTIAL
TO GREAT ACHIEVEMENT.**

Acts 20:16-31

"I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears" (Acts 20:31).

Some people think crying is a sign of weakness. But our Savior wept. And the apostle Paul was not afraid to mention his own tears when he wrote to the Ephesian elders about his burden for the people he was trying to reach. Good servants or ministers of Jesus Christ will be like that—they will have tender, compassionate hearts. They will be so filled with concern and love that those feelings will often splash over as tears. If not tears on the cheek, certainly deep feeling in the soul.

One day D. L. Moody preached an especially moving sermon about the compassion of Christ. When a friend asked him how he had pre-pared such a message, he answered, "I got to thinking the other day about the compassion of Christ; so I took the Bible and began to read it over to find out what it said on the subject. I prayed over the texts as I went along until the thought of His infinite compassion overpowered me, and I could only lie on the floor of my study with my face in the open Bible and cry like a child."

As we stand in the shadow of the cross and let God's love in Christ flood our souls, our hard hearts will melt, and coldness will give way to warmth. If we allow the Holy Spirit to control us, He will produce in us a Christlike concern. Then His burden and His compassion for the unsaved will become ours. The love of Christ will cause us to reach out to others. And that caring attitude will be accompanied by timely tears. —P. R. Van Gorder ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

Tears flow freely from the fountain of a love-filled heart.

Acts 20:17-27

"Nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy" (Acts 20:24).

In religious art, the pelican has long been a symbol of self-sacrifice. Having observed these strange birds while fishing in gulf coast waters off Florida, I have a difficult time thinking of them as "self-denying saints." They seem more like lazy freeloaders. With pitiful stares that mask hearts full of envy, they look lustfully at every fish I catch. Once in a while, they even try to intercept one before I can reel it in.

Their behavior, however, is not the reason they have become symbols of self-sacrifice. The reason is their appearance. The tip of a pelican's huge beak appears to have been dipped in red dye. According to legend, when a mother pelican cannot find food for her young, she thrusts her beak into her breast and nourishes her little ones with her own blood. The early church saw in this tale a beautiful picture of what Christ did for us and what we in turn should do for one another.

The legend of the pelican, then, not only speaks of the Savior, but also of us, God's blood-bought children. As fallen humans, we are more generally known by our greed than by our self-sacrifice. But that can change. Through faith in Christ's atoning death, we are forgiven and transformed. Therefore, we should no longer be characterized by selfishness. As new creatures, we can, like Christ, practice the art of self-sacrificing love. —M. R. De Haan II ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

Nothing satisfies God but the voluntary sacrifice of love.

Acts 20:24

THE name Mickey Thompson used to be one of the most recognized in auto racing. His team built the fastest cars on the track. But not one of those cars ever brought Thompson a checkered flag. Although his cars took the lead in the first twenty-nine races they entered, they never won a race. Why? Because they did not finish.

Thompson could make the fastest cars, but he couldn't build them to last. They all broke down during the race. Engines blew. Gearboxes broke. Carburetors failed. His cars were good starters and fast runners, but they were not good finishers.

As we run the race of the Christian life, we need to end well. The apostle Paul is an example of a good finisher. He received Christ on the Damascus road. He attended "seminary" in the Arabian desert (Galatians 1:17-18). He served Christ in spite of hardship and persecution. He opened Europe to the Gospel. And at the close of his life, he could say with confidence, "I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7).

What about us? What stalls our spiritual engines? What causes us to break down? When we find ourselves out of the running, we need to diagnose the problem, make the necessary repairs, and get back into the race. God needs people He can count on to cross the finish line.—D. C. Egner ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

ACTS 21

Acts 21:1-14

On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them. - Matthew 10:18

TODAY IN THE WORD

Hsi was a proud Chinese intellectual who hated foreigners. But in 1875 a severe famine brought missionaries with relief supplies to Hsi's province. Hsi was hungry, so when a British missionary named David Hill asked Hsi to teach him Chinese, Hsi accepted. One day Hsi picked up a Chinese New Testament, read about the Jesus of the missionaries--and was captivated. He read the story of the Savior over and over until he no longer saw Jesus as a foreign god, but as Lord. Hsi was saved and became a powerful witness in his province.

Hsi's openness to the truth, and willingness to receive Jesus as his Savior, remind us of what happened to countless numbers of people who heard the gospel for the first time from Paul and his ministry companions. Two thousand years later, the apostle's three missionary journeys are still impacting the world for Christ.

Our study of new beginnings in the book of Acts concludes today as we follow Paul back to Jerusalem at the end of his third and final missionary trip. He seemed to know that returning to the center of Judaism, and the center of Jewish opposition to the gospel, would result in his "be[ing] brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them," just as Jesus had said.

At each stop along the way back to Jerusalem, Luke records that there were believers to be found. The gospel had reached to the corners of the Gentile world.

Some have questioned Paul's actions in Acts 21. Should he have been so determined to go back to Jerusalem in the face of obvious danger? Agabus the prophet in Caesarea only confirmed what many people already suspected concerning the trouble that awaited Paul.

But Paul insisted, and we have no reason to believe he was simply being stubborn about the issue. And his friends eventually gave in to "the Lord's will" (v. 14). Plus, the Lord appeared to Paul and verified His will that Paul should preach the gospel in Rome (Acts 23:11).

For Paul, the new beginning God was bringing about was far more important than any other plans he or anyone else might have. Let's imitate his example in the new millennium.

APPLY THE WORD

Proverbs 16:9 says, "In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps." Paul's goal was that his plans would accomplish God's will.

If that is your goal too, why not try jotting down your plans for February? Rank them in order of importance and pray about them, asking God to reveal His will. You may find yourself removing some items and adding others. Whatever the case, if you want to please the Lord, He will honor that desire.

Acts 21:27-22:22

God ... has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. - Acts 22:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

Donnybrook has been defined as "a free-for-all or melee; a brawl that is out of control; an uproarious argument." This word originated from the Donnybrook Fair near Dublin, Ireland, held annually from 1204-1867. The fair was famous for its fights, bloodshed, and general mayhem and violence.

In today's reading, Paul landed squarely in the middle of a donnybrook, but he didn't let it stop him from sharing the gospel through his testimony. By this time he was a veteran evangelist and church planter and had just returned from his third extended missions journey. Acting on advice from the Jerusalem church leaders and to quiet some critical gossip, he joined several believers in special purification rites at the temple. When his enemies spotted him there, however, they roused a mob and started a riot. Roman troops swooped in to keep the peace, but since they could not understand why Paul was in trouble they just decided to cart him off to prison.

On the way, the Apostle asked to address the crowd, and the soldiers allowed him to do so from the barracks steps. He first focused on his common background with his listeners, including a good Jewish upbringing, education, and religious zeal. Then he narrated

his transforming encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Though many years had passed, he told it much as Luke had earlier in Acts. He emphasized that Ananias, like his attackers, had been a devout observer of the Law and skeptical of Paul's change of heart before God spoke to him.

To the Jews, the elements of power in Paul's story would have signified its truth. His rhetorical strategy in verses 19-20 is summarized by F. F. Bruce: "He seems to mean: They [Jews] know how hostile I was to you and your people [Christians]; they will therefore understand that my change of heart must have been the result of the most convincing proof, and so they will take my testimony seriously." Alas, they did not. When Paul mentioned that he was sent to the Gentiles, pride and prejudice reignited the crowd and the soldiers had to whisk him away again.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Sharing our testimony under calm, friendly conditions can be hard enough. How about when faced with an angry mob and the threat of imminent bodily harm? Would we have the courage to do what Paul did? Or would we be thinking of all possible ways to get out of there and save our skins?

Remembering that God is our true source of courage, pray today for renewed boldness and love in your evangelistic efforts. Pray that He will conquer our fears, pride, and any other barriers we have to sharing our faith with others.

Acts 21:13

The courage of Civil War leader Stonewall Jackson in the midst of conflict can be a lesson for the believer. Historian Mark Brimsley wrote,

"A battlefield is a deadly place, even for generals; and it would be naive to suppose Jackson never felt the animal fear of all beings exposed to wounds and death. but invariably he displayed extraordinary calm under fire, a calm too deep and masterful to be mere pretense. His apparent obliviousness to danger attracted notice, and after the First Manassas battle someone asked him how he managed it. "My religious belief teaches me to feel as safe in battle as in bed," Jackson explained. 'God knows the time for my death. I do not concern myself about that, but to be always ready, no matter where it may overtake me.' He added pointedly, 'That is the way all men should live, and than all would be equally brave.'" ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

ACTS 22

Acts 22:1-21

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth. - 1 Peter 1:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

No Compromise recounts the radical conversion of Christian singer and songwriter, Keith Green. As a young man trying to make his way in show business, Keith experimented with drugs and the free love lifestyle before coming to faith in Christ. After he was saved, his passionate zeal for Christ and personal holiness ignited spiritual fire in those who knew him and listened to his music.

The apostle Paul was also dramatically converted to Christ, and in our reading for today, he was addressing a crowd of Jews who had begun rioting in Jerusalem because he had appeared at the temple flanked by Gentiles. He had been accused of having defiled the temple and taken into custody. What he shared confirms everything he told the Galatians. Before his conversion, he was a Jew zealous for the Law. He opposed the message of Jesus Christ, going so far as to imprison those Jewish men and women who had converted to the Way.

Everything changed one day when Paul met Jesus Christ personally on the road to Damascus. He heard an audible voice address him by name, and the voice identified Himself as none other than Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus ordained Paul as an apostle, commissioning him specifically as the one to preach to the Gentiles.

This personal and visible encounter with Jesus Christ qualified Paul for ministry as an Apostle. Paul wasn't sleeping or experiencing a dream-like vision of Jesus. This encounter happened, and although Paul's companions with whom he was traveling did not hear the voice, they could confirm that Paul was blinded by the divine light and changed dramatically by the turn of events.

Paul's defense of his apostleship centers around this idea of revelation: what he knows of Jesus and what he preaches of Jesus have been revealed to him by God himself. Paul had not personally sought out Jesus, nor had he taken initiative to consider the

message of Jesus. Indeed, he was actively opposing Jesus when God suddenly intervened, radically turning him from hostility to faith in Christ.

APPLY THE WORD

Whatever the story of our conversion, whether dramatic or seemingly ordinary, the truth is always that God sought us and revealed Himself to us. His saving action and initiative in our lives is driven by His grace and mercy. In our sinful state, we could not acknowledge the truth of who He is and what He's done on our behalf. But God's gracious revelation of Himself leads us to confession in faith. For this we give Him praise!

Acts 22:1-29.

TODAY IN THE WORD

Leopold Cohn couldn't believe his eyes. The sign on the New York City church said in Hebrew, "Meetings for Jews." All of his life, the devout young rabbi had feared and shunned Christ's followers.

But, he thought, maybe these people know something about the Messiah. So Leopold visited the church. The pastor, a Hebrew Christian, gave Leopold a Hebrew New Testament. He raced back to his room, locked the door, and read for more than twelve hours. Then Leopold fell on his face and confessed Jesus as his Messiah. He began joyfully sharing the truth with others and formed the outreach group known today as Chosen People Ministries.

Leopold Cohn's encounter with Jesus Christ echoes the experience of his fellow Jews almost 2 years earlier. The people of Israel were compelled to face the truth through apostles such as Peter and John, then through Stephen, and finally through the ministry of Paul. But instead of falling on their faces and confessing Jesus as Messiah, the Jews in Jerusalem flew into a rage.

Given the murderous intent in the hearts of the mob that attacked Paul, it's a small miracle that they fell silent when Paul began to speak. He addressed them in Aramaic, the common language of the day. The apostle spoke clearly and forcefully as a herald of the truth.

Paul reminded his fellow Israelites that he was well-trained in the Law and more zealous than most for the Jewish traditions (cf. Phil. 3:4-6). The crowd listened quietly even when Paul raised the name of Jesus, the name that many of them were eager to stamp out. So why did the people explode with demonstrable rage when Paul mentioned the Gentiles (Acts 22:22-23)? Because Paul was suggesting that God had accepted the Gentiles on an equal footing with the Jews—the very issue that the church itself had struggled with years earlier.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

This is the sixth time in Acts that Paul's ministry started a riot. What a lesson in the power of words!

Our words are powerful too. We may not speak to multitudes, but the Bible urges us to be careful in what we say because the human tongue has the power to heal or to hurt (James 3:9-10).

Here's an exercise that will help you get a hold on your words. Using a Bible concordance, trace what the Word says about words. Write down a few verses that will help remind you of the power of speech.

Acts 22:10.

VISION AND PURPOSE (F B Meyer. Our Daily Walk)

"I said, What shall I do, Lord?"-- Acts 22:10.

"Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect: but I press on toward the goal."-- Phil 3:12, 13, 14.

WHEN THE Apostle Paul was suddenly brought into the presence of the Eternal, the whole course of his life was changed. In that flash of Light he saw the exalted Saviour, and learnt that he was antagonising the purposes of redeeming grace, and that vision altered the whole of his purposes and actions. From that great hour he forgot the things that were behind, and endeavoured to apprehend that for which he had been apprehended by Christ Jesus. It was his ambition to build his life on the pattern shown him on the mount.

Years after, as he reviewed his life-work, the churches he had founded, the cities he had evangelised, the epistles he had written, surely he might have reckoned that he had apprehended; but ever as he climbed, he envisaged heights beckoning beyond his attainments. Is not that the case with us, as we compare the vision of God's purpose with what we have realised? Oh, give us back the years that have gone, that we may do better, be more accurate and successful in the transmission to living fact of those fair

ideals, which called to us years ago! The vision in the sanctuary may never be perfectly realised by these bungling apprentice-hands. Yet God accepts and forgives the mistakes, as the mother accepts the cobbled stitches of her little girl who tries to help her with her sewing. "Not that we have already attained, or are already perfect, but we follow on," and God forgives and accepts our poor patchwork!

What must we do to achieve our ideals? We must be more often in the sanctuary, in fellowship with Christ, to whose image we are to be conformed. With the Psalmist we must say: "Whom have I in heaven but Thee, and there is none on the earth that I desire beside Thee." As we look on Him, we shall be changed into His likeness. As He is, so shall we become. Martyrs on the night before their agony; reformers hesitating at their tasks; scholars wondering whether their long self-denial was worth while; fathers and mothers; teachers and workers; preachers and missionaries, all these have stood in the sanctuary of God, until they have seen the vision and ideal. Then they have reckoned that what God had taught them to long for, He was prepared to enable them to effect. "All things are possible to him that believeth."

PRAYER

Grant unto me grace, O Lord, that I may both perceive and know what things I ought to do, and may also have grace and power faithfully to fulfil the same. AMEN.

F B Meyer. Our Daily Walk.

ACTS 23

Acts 22:30-23:35.

TODAY IN THE WORD

A suspect had finally been arrested.

The April, 1995, bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was met with such outrage that the entire nation buzzed with the news that police had arrested a suspect.

Cameras were rolling and a large crowd had gathered when Timothy McVeigh, shackled and surrounded by federal officers, appeared in public for the first time. The sense of anger that day was palpable. As McVeigh stepped into the sunlight, it was reminiscent of a day thirty years earlier when Lee Harvey Oswald first stepped before the cameras after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Judging by the angry reaction of the crowd, you would have thought the apostle Paul was an accused murderer. But he was innocent of any crime.

Luke makes it clear that Paul was on trial because of the gospel. In his hearing before the Sanhedrin, Paul was never able to communicate the heart of the gospel message. When the commander of the Roman garrison realized that the charges against Paul were Jewish in nature, he ordered Paul to appear before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council.

It quickly became apparent to Paul that the council was in no mood to sit still for a reasoned defense of the gospel. So he shrewdly appealed to the doctrine of the resurrection, knowing that it would divide the Sanhedrin.

He was right. The proceedings became so violent that Paul had to be forcibly rescued. It was here that the Lord appeared to Paul with a message of comfort (23:11). Paul was human, after all. Perhaps at this point he was beginning to wonder if he would ever live to see Rome. The plot formed against him shows that humanly speaking, Paul was as good as dead.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

For Paul, a conscience that was clear before God and man was an absolute necessity.

It's necessary for us too (1 Tim. 1:5, 19) for at least two good reasons. First, so that we do not wound the tender conscience of a weaker brother or sister (Rom. 14:15). Second, so that we do not give the world a reason to slander the gospel (1 Pe. 3:16).

Acts 23:1

F B Meyer

Acts 23:1 Brethren, I have lived before God in all good conscience until this day.

Conscience is what one knows with oneself. That at least is an exact translation of this Latin word. It is a man coming to himself, facing himself, looking deep into his own eyes as he stands before the mirror of God's truth. There are varieties of conscience — the weak conscience, which is ever questioning; the defiled conscience, which has a consciousness of neglected duty or unforgiven sin; the morbid conscience, which is perpetually discussing infinitesimal niceties, and splitting hairs. In contrast with these is the good conscience, of which the apostle speaks.

We have to live with our conscience, and if it is disquieted and restless, we find that it will make life almost unbearable. Like the restless sea, it frets and foams through the dark hours; and is always casting up the bitter memories and sad regrets of bygone days. As it was with King Ahab, so it is with all who have sinned against conscience, they get the vineyard of Naboth; but with it they get Elijah, standing like an incarnate conscience at the door, and taking pleasure and enjoyment from their possession.

Paul could not have made this statement unless he had been very accurate and careful in his daily walk and conversation; but he tells us that he perpetually exercised himself to have a conscience void of offence toward God and man. Let us subject ourselves to a similar discipline, and often expose ourselves to the searching scrutiny of the Holy Spirit, so that we may say with the apostle, "My conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost" (Acts 24:16; Romans 9:1).

It is a marvellous experience to stand before God; but how much more so to live before Him!

Meyer, F. B. Our Daily Homily

ACTS 24

Acts 24:1-27.

TODAY IN THE WORD

Earlier this year German millionaire and philanthropist Jan Philipp Reemtsma was kidnapped in front of his villa in Hamburg.

Reemtsma spent four weeks chained to a cellar wall while family and friends tried desperately to arrange for his release. But it wasn't until \$20 million in Swiss francs and German marks was left along a highway that Reemtsma was finally released unharmed. It was the largest ransom ever paid in Germany.

The Roman procurator Felix certainly didn't expect that sort of king's ransom from an itinerant Christian evangelist such as the apostle Paul. But Felix had his hand out nonetheless, hoping that either Paul or some of his friends would grease it (v. 26). He even gave Paul two years' worth of chances to bribe his way to freedom. We can certainly credit Felix with persistence.

But that's about all we can credit him with. And the same could be said of Paul's accusers. There is little if anything about this opening trial in Caesarea that was credible. It was obvious by now that the man who stood before Felix was innocent of any wrongdoing, by either Jewish or Roman standards.

Paul's defense to Felix was another clear and powerful statement of the falseness of the charges against him. Paul actually did a better job of detailing the accusations than did his counterpart Tertullus, a lawyer probably hired just for this purpose.

Tertullus spent most of his time flattering Felix, then made a series of wild and generalized accusations that Paul easily refuted. Felix listened to both sides, then adjourned the hearing without coming to a decision. Felix was probably already convinced of Paul's innocence, since he was "well acquainted with the Way" (v. 22). But he was eager to keep the peace in Jerusalem at all costs, so he kept Paul in prison (v. 27).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Paul knew that his ordeal was serving a greater purpose in the will of God, and he says so in Philippians 1:12

Acts 24:14

F B Meyer

Acts 24:14 - After the Way which they call a sect, so serve I the God of our Fathers.

For want of a better term by which to set forth Christianity — whether by friend or foe is immaterial — the new principle which it represented was called the Way.

“Saul asked for letters to Damascus, that if he found any that were of the Way, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:2, r.v.). At Ephesus some were “disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the multitude” (Acts 19:9). “About that time there arose no small stir concerning the Way” (Acts 19:23). “Felix had more exact knowledge concerning the Way” (Acts 24:22). “I persecuted this Way unto the death” (Acts 22:4).

It is a beautiful and significant phrase. Christ is Himself the Way. He has opened the way to God. Through the heavens He passed in his ascension, leaving behind Him at every step a way by which we may travel till every one of us appears in Zion before God. In Christ we have found the way to the Father, and have learnt a rule of life. The word Methodist is closely akin to this. The followers of Wesley have been obeying on a new method which their illustrious founder opened.

“Men of the Way”; such is the designation by which Christians should be known. They are pilgrims and strangers, wayfarers, having no abiding city, but always passing on. We may say of them as the psalmist did of the pilgrim hosts that went up yearly to worship at the feast, “Blessed is the man whose strength is in Thee; in whose heart are the highways to Zion” (Psalm 84:5, r.v.). And is not this the Way that Isaiah spoke of when he said, “An highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called the way of holiness” (Isaiah 35:8, 9, 10)?

Meyer, F. B. Our Daily Homily

ACTS 25

Acts 25:1-27.

TODAY IN THE WORD

Three years after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, his widow wrote this poignant plea in an attempt to gain a federal pension: “Surely the remembrance of my martyred husband will cause them to remember his widow in her ill health and sorrow!”

It took Mary Todd Lincoln two more years of wrangling to win her pension as the wife of a President—a benefit now granted to all former First Ladies.

Paul could tell us something about bureaucratic delays and government wrangling. By the time he appeared before Festus, the successor to Felix, two long years had passed with no apparent progress being made in his case. The imprisoned apostle was being held as an innocent man to keep the political and religious peace.

Today’s reading proves that some things never change. The Jews still wanted to kill Paul, and the Roman rulers were still committed to keeping a lid on things with their troublesome Jewish subjects. Festus wasted no time in going to Jerusalem (v. 1), which gave the religious authorities a chance to resurrect the charges against Paul.

Paul’s appearance before Festus was similar to his trial under Felix, with about the same results. Festus must have realized that Paul was innocent of the charges, but like his predecessor he did not want to get caught in the middle of a Jewish religious squabble.

Festus’ offer to transfer Paul back to Jerusalem for trial was more of a political ploy than a sincere effort at justice, and Paul knew it. Paul also knew that his chances for a fair trial in Jerusalem were nil. More than that, he knew that his chances of even making it to trial were also nonexistent. So he appealed to Caesar.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It’s safe to conclude at this point that life isn’t always fair—either to Paul or to us.

Have you been wronged lately? Maybe you’re the victim of bureaucratic red tape. Or perhaps you feel you’ve been wronged by another individual. If you’re nursing a wounded sense of justice, it may help to take another look at the situation from the standpoint we’ve been discussing the last few days: that of God’s larger purpose for you and the cause of the gospel.

Acts 25:19

F B Meyer

Acts 25:19 One Jesus, who was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive.

Festus talked lightly enough about Jesus. It was only a question in his mind of some Jewish superstition hardly worth debating.

What did it matter to him or his imperial master whether Jesus were alive or dead? And was it not a fact that he was dead, crucified under Pontius Pilate? How little Festus realized the importance of that death, not to the Jews alone, but to himself! How little he understood that his own continued life was due to that death of which he spoke so lightly! Generations of luxury and years of self-indulgence had blunted his perception: as for all religious questions — they were mere superstition! And with respect to religious enthusiasm, as it appeared in Paul, he could find in his own history nothing that could account for or explain it.

Contrast with this sated worldling — a flatterer, an office-seeker, prepared to sell his soul for gold — the noble apostle whose character stands out in unsullied light. Though Christ had died, according to the Scriptures, he knew that He had risen, and was alive for evermore. His faith did not go back to the cross, but rose perpetually to the throne. He who was dead, was living for evermore; sharing His servant's sorrows, and supplying hourly grace for his every need.

He affirmed that He was alive. On the abundant testimony of those who had spoken with Him after his resurrection; on the strength of his own vision when Jesus had laid an arrest on him hard by Damascus; because of the mighty works that emanated from his hand; because of the daily fellowship which brought him into the presence of his Lord, in spite of clanking chain and iron bar — he affirmed that Jesus was alive.

Meyer, F. B. Our Daily Homily

ACTS 26

Acts 26:19 - F B Meyer - Our Daily Homily

I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision.

To us, also, the heavenly visions come. On our summer holidays, rising between us and some soaring Alp, or meeting us in our walk beside the gently-breaking sea; on beds of pain and in chambers of watching; visions of the risen Lord; visions of his infinite grief and pain which we have caused; visions of the possibilities of our life as a minister and witness of the things which we have seen; visions of results far down the vista wherein dark souls should become light, slaves emancipated, the defiled saintly. Ah, visions of God! ye leave an indelible impression that moulds and ennobles all after-years! Pitiably the soul to which visions of a holier, sweeter life never come, or, if they come, are never seen.

The one important matter is our treatment of them. We may indolently refuse to follow the beckoning hand and obey the voice that calls. We may return to our evil courses and follow the devices and desires of our own hearts. We may cling to the prison cell, instead of following the angel that strikes us on our side, and bids us go forth into freedom. And if so, like Balsam, we shall become spiritually blind, and fail to see visions that the dumb creatures recognize, and that would fain arrest us in our perilous career.

On the other hand, if we will obey the vision, we shall not only retain the impression, and feel its prolonged and enthralling power, but shall receive still further manifestations of the will of God. "A witness both of the things wherein thou hast seen Me, and of the things wherein I will appear unto thee." To those who love and obey Him, He is ever drawing near with fresh and deeper thoughts of the Father.

Acts 26:1-32.

TODAY IN THE WORD

Does a trial by jury guarantee justice? Not according to Chicago Tribune columnist Eric Zorn: "Juries can be wrong. Dead wrong. Panel members can assemble in a little room after trial and agree as one to illogical, bigoted, emotional or just plain dull-witted conclusions that result in the administration of whimsy, not justice."

Citing dozens of examples, he continues: "Juries can and clearly have been known to acquit the guilty and convict the innocent. Sometimes they are overly skeptical, sometimes they are overly credulous. Sometimes prosecutors, defense attorneys or witnesses misrepresent the facts to them or hide facts from them."

As Paul also found, human justice is an uncertain and often flawed enterprise. No charge was ever proven against the apostle, and in today's reading Agrippa admitted that they had no reason to hold him except for his appeal to Caesar (v. 32).

Acts 24-26 are full of legal talk about accusations and hearings on guilt and innocence. But the overriding emphasis from Luke's standpoint and from Paul's was still the truth and the spread of the gospel.

That's why the apostle's defense before Agrippa was much more than just a protest of his innocence of the charges against him. It was a superb summary of the essence of Christianity in which Paul defended two key propositions.

First, he reminded the king that faith in a risen, divine Christ is the heart of Christianity (vv. 1-8). Paul was on trial because of his belief that God raises the dead, although such a proposition was actually part of the promise that God had made to Israel.

Second, Paul maintained that Jesus' resurrection was attested by his personal encounter with the risen Christ and by the Scriptures themselves (vv. 12-23). Paul wasn't alone in his testimony. Moses and the prophets also said that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's text is an example of how a believer can weave Scripture and experience to make a compelling witness.

We've spent a lot of time this month talking about the importance of your personal witness for Christ. Every time you tell someone about Jesus you are helping to write a new chapter in the unfinished story of the church.

Acts 26

I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light. - Acts 26:17-18

TODAY IN THE WORD

In Sumerian mythology, the hero Gilgamesh went to the island of Dilmun in search of eternal life. In 1953, archaeologist T. Geoffrey Bibby discovered the historical reality. Dilmun turned out to be a 4,000-year-old city buried under the current city of Manama, the capital of Bahrain, an island state off the coast of Saudi Arabia. Dilmun had been a rich, independent trading center strategically located between the Middle East and India. Despite these advantages, it still could not offer eternal life.

In order to truly find eternal life, there is only one Way—Jesus Christ. At this point, Paul was still in prison on vague charges stemming from the incident we read about yesterday. A new governor, Festus, had just arrived and was trying to figure out what to do with his mysterious prisoner. He scheduled a special hearing so King Agrippa and Queen Bernice could hear the man and so he himself could try to understand enough to write a coherent report to Rome.

The circumstances were different—a royal court instead of barracks steps—but one thing hadn't changed: Paul's enthusiasm to seize any and all opportunities to share the gospel. For the occasion, his style was more formal, but this testimony follows a similar arc that we saw yesterday. Because Agrippa understood Jewish culture, Paul described his background as a model Jew, explained how through the prophets God had promised the Messiah, and again was painfully honest about his early, hate-filled opposition to Christ.

He told his dramatic Damascus road experience, but telescoped the story in order to dwell more on the change itself (vv. 16-18). His life of ministry proved his personal integrity, as he emphasized his obedience, consistency in life and message, and dependence on God. The Resurrection was the stumbling block to his listeners, though—Festus found it insane and Agrippa could not accept the concept.

Two powerful testimonies ... and yet not a single convert. We can take encouragement from this—we don't measure success through the number of converts but from our faithful willingness to share the gospel.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Having seen several examples of Paul's testimony, given in various circumstances to various audiences, begin crafting a version of your own personal testimony. Choose an audience—perhaps a neighbor, co-worker, or extended family member—and consider how to present the gospel and the way you came to faith in a way that this person can understand clearly and might find attractive. Work on your testimony whenever you can, and later this month share it with the person you chose.

Acts 26:1-23

This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles. - Acts 9:15

TODAY IN THE WORD

David Livingstone is often credited with opening Africa to the West. His tombstone summarizes his life: "Missionary, traveler, philanthropist. For thirty years his life was spent in an unwearied effort to evangelize the native races, to explore the undiscovered secrets, and to abolish the slave trade."

When Livingstone died in 1873, his African friends buried his heart beneath a mpundu tree. His body was returned to England for a hero's funeral at Westminster Abbey. His legacy has been analyzed and debated for over a century.

Many men and women have followed in the footsteps of this man, dedicating their lives to missionary service in Africa. Livingstone

had followed in the footsteps of missionary giants before him, in a line stretching back to the apostle Paul.

It was Paul's special mission to take the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15)--all Gentiles, not just God-fearers like Cornelius. Today's reading recounts his testimony, not directly (see Acts 9) but as retold while on trial before Festus and Agrippa. Here we see not only the fact of his conversion, but, after years of faithful ministry, his own interpretation of his calling.

First, he recounted the "before" part of his life. He lived strictly, scrupulously obeying Jewish regulations (cf. Phil. 3:4-8). He zealously opposed and persecuted the church (cf. Gal. 1:13-14).

But all that changed one day on the Damascus road, so he next told what happened "after." Christ Himself commissioned him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:7-8), "so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Me" (v. 18). Paul had spent every day since that time fulfilling that calling--the "Missionary Journeys" maps in the back of your Bible will help you check how faithfully he did this (cf. 2 Cor. 11:23-31)!

APPLY THE WORD

In today's reading, Paul looks back on his original calling from the vantage point of years in ministry. He can share his testimony with special confidence and gratitude.

Acts 26:1-29

We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. - 2 Corinthians 5:20

TODAY IN THE WORD

Nineteenth-century pastor and Bible teacher Albert Barnes wrote, "'Sinners often treat God's messengers kindly, and do much to make them comfortable, and hear them gladly, while they themselves are unwilling to do the thing which is demanded of them--to repent and believe the Gospel. They expect that their kind intentions will be accepted in the place of what God demands--repentance and the forsaking of their sins.'"

We're not sure how much, if anything, King Agrippa did to make Paul comfortable during the apostle's imprisonment in Caesarea. But he did give Paul a full chance to present his defense and explain the real reason behind his arrest in Jerusalem and the controversy swirling around him.

Since Paul was passionate about the Person of Jesus Christ and the gospel ministry, it's not surprising that his defense before Agrippa was delivered with passion. Paul used all of his persuasive powers to present the truth to Agrippa, knowing that this king with a Jewish background was well-versed in "'Jewish customs and controversies'" (v. 3).

It is likely that what we have in Acts 26 is a summary of Paul's speech. He set the proceedings in the right framework when he told Agrippa that the heart of the issue was "'what God has promised our fathers'" (v. 6). Later, Paul explained this hope as the death and resurrection of the Messiah (v. 23).

Paul took the king step by step through his own Jewish background and upbringing. The apostle mentioned his zeal as a persecutor of Christians (vv. 9-11), and his conversion on the Damascus road. With eloquence and conviction, he explained the gospel to Agrippa and those listening as repentance for sin and faith in Jesus.

Paul knew that Agrippa was "'familiar with these things'" (v. 26), and so he spoke freely. But the apostle was not content with a solid defense. He wanted Agrippa and the whole audience to believe the gospel.

Paul's direct question to the king must have made him squirm a little. Agrippa's edgy retort reveals a man under the searchlight of conviction--maybe the closest the king ever came to believing in Christ. But Paul had done his part in presenting the gospel and asking for a decision.

APPLY THE WORD

Today's study reminds us that once we have presented Christ and given a person the opportunity to receive Him, the results are God's responsibility.

This brings us back to the place of prayer in evangelism. If we have a passion for souls, we will also be passionate in praying for the unsaved friends and relatives on our own list, and for a world of people who need Christ.

Acts 26:1-32.

TODAY IN THE WORD

Does a trial by jury guarantee justice? Not according to Chicago Tribune columnist Eric Zorn: “Juries can be wrong. Dead wrong. Panel members can assemble in a little room after trial and agree as one to illogical, bigoted, emotional or just plain dull-witted conclusions that result in the administration of whimsy, not justice.”

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Today’s text is an example of how a believer can weave Scripture and experience to make a compelling witness.

We’ve spent a lot of time this month talking about the importance of your personal witness for Christ. Every time you tell someone about Jesus you are helping to write a new chapter in the unfinished story of the church.

Acts 26:8

Resurrection is not an incredible, irrational idea. We can see illustrations of resurrection all around us in nature. For example, Egyptian garden peas that had been buried for 3,000 years were brought out and planted on June 4, 1844. Within a few days they had germinated and broken the ground. Buried for 3,000 years—then resurrected. That’s amazing!

Why then should it be thought incredible that God should raise the dead? That was the surprised question of Paul to King Agrippa (Acts 26:8). If God could take some dust and breathe life into it to create a man (Gen. 2:7), why would anyone think it incredible for this same God to raise someone from the dead?

Yes, it is most credible that Jesus would arise. It would be incredible if after the miraculous life He lived He had remained in the grave. Hallelujah! Christ arose! —M. R. De Haan. ([Our Daily Bread](#). Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved)

ONLY A LIVING SAVIOR COULD RESCUE A DYING WORLD.

ACTS 27

Acts 27:23–24 - F B Meyer - Our Daily Homily

There stood by me this night an angel of God, saying, Fear not, Paul!

Yes, the angels of God can find their way through the murkiest air, and alight on the most weatherbeaten vessel that ever ploughed its difficult way through the stormy seas. Wheresoever thou art, O child of God, God’s angels have their eyes fixed lovingly on thee; and in a moment, if it were God’s will to give thee eyes, thou wouldest behold them.

“How oft do they their silver bowers leave,
To come to succour us that succour want!
How oft do they with golden pinions cleave
The flitting skyes, like flying pursuivant,
Against fowle feandes to ayd us militant!

They for us fight, they watch and dewly ward,
And their bright squadrons round about us plant
And all for love, and nothing for reward
Oh, why should Heavenly God to men have such regard?"

But if, like Paul, we would have the angel ministry, with their assurances against fear, like him we must be able to comply with two conditions — of being owned and being loyal.

Whose I am. — We are His by creation, by purchase, by consecration. That sentiment of being owned, which in the case of slaves is inimical to the highest development, is the elementary condition of our truest growth and well-being. We belong to One who is infinitely worthy. We cannot do as we would with ourselves. We may not take our own course.

Whom I serve. — The word rendered serve is the deepest and most expressive term that Paul could employ of the prostration of the soul at the feet of God. It is employed of the glorified, who serve Him day and night in his temple, and of whom it is said that his servants shall do Him service. The heavenly life begins here; and following its course, angels minister to us, and the stars in their courses fight for us.

Acts 27:1-44.

TODAY IN THE WORD

Doomed voyages are a part of travel lore. But few trips went sour as quickly as the ill-fated balloon flight of Swedish explorer Salomon Andree and his two-man crew in July, 1897. Just minutes after launch, the balloon lost its drag ropes and drifted into oblivion. The men's fate was unknown until their bodies were found on an island three hundred miles from the launch site—in 1930! Andree's diary reveals that the crew had survived for at least three months on the ice after their craft went down, eating raw bear with salt (among other things) in a vain attempt to preserve life.

Paul's long-awaited voyage to Rome was also marked for trouble, and the apostle knew it (v. 10). But the Roman centurion, who was legally in charge of the ship, had prisoners to deliver. So he listened to the ship's pilot, owner, and the majority of those on board (v. 12). So much for the democratic process!

The ship set sail with Paul and 275 others but quickly ran into a storm. While the terrified crew did everything they could to save the ship, Paul turned to a resource they evidently knew nothing about. Fortunately for everyone, he found a receptive audience this time as the soldiers cut the lifeboat loose to make sure everyone stayed put.

When things looked their bleakest, Paul assured the men in specific terms that they would survive the ordeal (v. 34). What a sight that must have been—Paul giving thanks for the bread in front of this ragged collection of soldiers, sailors and criminals.

APPLY THE WORD

Here's a great example of why it's important to stand for your God-given convictions, even if you have to stand alone. The vote against Paul was impressive, but the majority was impressively wrong!

If God is leading you to take a stand on an issue of conscience at work or in the community, or if a clear biblical principle is at stake, don't be surprised if you find yourself standing alone. The advice of others may or may not be helpful, but majority opinion is seldom a reliable guide.

Acts 27:1-28:16

Those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good. - 1 Peter 4:19

TODAY IN THE WORD

Eddie Joe Lloyd was released from a Michigan prison in 2002 after serving seventeen years of a life sentence. He supposedly confessed to rape and murder to Detroit police while on medication in a mental hospital, but recent DNA tests proved he could not have been guilty. Assisted in his quest for freedom by the Innocence Project, Lloyd told reporters: "Lady Justice is blind. Sometimes she's deaf. Sometimes the wheels of justice grind very slowly, sometimes they grind in reverse." According to the Innocence Project, at least 110 inmates nationwide have been cleared in recent years by DNA testing.

Paul could relate to wrongful imprisonment. Following the end of today's reading, tradition tells us that after several years of injustice he was finally found innocent and set free. But as the wheels of Roman justice and God's sovereignty turned, first he had to travel to Rome. This Very Important Prisoner boarded a ship bound for the capital of the empire. Because Luke was on the voyage, we find in today's reading their detailed itinerary as well as an exciting, well-told first-hand narrative of their shipwreck.

Paul's purpose-filled life was an extraordinary witness under these extraordinary circumstances. We see a person's true colors in

crisis situations, and there was no doubt why and for whom Paul lived. He offered hope to his captors during the storm (27:21-26). He prayed for their lives. He earned the soldiers' trust to such an extent that they listened to him and cut short the sailors' plan to escape. He encouraged everyone to eat, and he set the example in a spirit of thankfulness (27:35). He gained such credibility with the centurion that he allowed the prisoners to swim to land, despite the fact that the soldiers' lives were forfeit if anyone escaped. On land, apparently none the worse for wear, Paul actually helped gather firewood, which is nearly as amazing as his miraculous escape from the poisonous snake.

In Rome, Paul was put under house arrest to await trial. During these years, he wrote letters to the Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, and Philippians, and continued sharing the gospel.

APPLY THE WORD

If you are interested in an authoritative study of the life of Paul that goes much farther and deeper than we can in one month of devotions, read *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, by New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce.

Originally published in 1977, this volume is regarded as a scholarly and spiritual classic and can easily be found at your local Christian bookstore. If not, check online at a Web site such as www.christianbook.com.

Acts 27:9-25

"Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid" (Isaiah 12:2).

An old seaman said, "In fierce storms we can do but one thing. There is only one way [to survive]; we must put the ship in a certain position and keep her there." Commenting on this idea, Richard Fuller wrote, "This, Christian, is what you must do. Sometimes, like Paul, you can see neither sun nor stars, and no small tempest lies on you. Reason cannot help you. Past experiences give you no light. Only a single course is left. You must put your soul in one position and keep it there. You must stay upon the Lord; and, come what may—winds, waves, cross seas, thunder, lightning, frowning rocks, roaring breakers—no matter what, you must lash yourself to the helm and hold fast your confidence in God's faithfulness and His everlasting love in Christ Jesus."

In the storms of life, we must place our trust in the Lord and cling firmly to the sure promises of His Word. Our confidence in God should be so steadfast that no matter how severe the trial, with Job we can resolutely affirm, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15). And to those who trust Him, He gives His "perfect peace" (Isa. 26:3).

With the psalmist we can say, "Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me! For my soul trusts in You; and in the shadow of Your wings I will make my refuge, until these calamities have passed by" (Psalm 57:1). —R. W. De Haan ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

**We realize the strength of the Anchor
when we feel the stress of the storm.**

Acts 27:27-44

"SAFE IN GOD'S CARE"

President Franklin D. Roosevelt loved the song we call the "Navy Hymn." It was sung at his funeral in Hyde Park, New York, on April 14, 1945. The words of the hymn were written in 1860 by William Whiting, who taught and directed a 16-voice boys choir. He penned them for a student who was about to set sail for America and who was apprehensive about the journey.

The beautiful tune was written by John B. Dykes and first published in 1861. He named the hymn tune "Melita," the Roman name for Malta, the island where Paul was shipwrecked.

The hymn is a simple prayer based on the profound truth that the eternal God who created the universe controls all the elements of nature and can protect His own no matter how great the peril. Wind and wave are subject to His command. The first verse reads:

Eternal Father, strong to save,
Whose arm doth bind the restless wave,
Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep;
O hear us when we cry to Thee
For those in peril on the sea.

When we or loved ones take a journey to some far-off destination, or if we only travel to and from work, we can be sure of His protection and care. -- D. C. Egner ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

We need not fear shipwreck with Jesus at the helm.

ACTS 28

Acts 28:1-31.

TODAY IN THE WORD

Five decades after their valor on the battlefields of World War II, seven black soldiers have finally been declared eligible to receive the Medal of Honor.

According to U.S. News & World Report, the seven nominees were identified in a fifteen-month study conducted by a team of military historians. "It's been late, but it's never too late to say it was a job well done," said the only living member among the seven. Four of the men died in action during the war.

Fifty years is a long time to wait for a well-deserved honor. For some people, no honor comes in this lifetime. That was true for Paul. He deserved a medal, but instead was rewarded with chains.

But that was fine with the apostle, because he was looking to heaven for his reward (2 Tim. 4:6-8). After a harrowing trip worthy of any good adventure novel, Paul arrived in Rome to the greeting of a small band of Christians. Once in Rome, Paul got the same basic treatment he received in Caesarea: confinement without the benefit of a trial. Apparently his accusers never bothered to present their case, so Paul remained under house arrest for two more years.

We would expect the great apostle to make the most of his time for the gospel's sake, and the final chapter of Acts doesn't disappoint us. He sought out the Jews in Rome and presented the gospel to them. True to form, some of the Jews believed and some rejected the truth, and Paul declared once more God's intention for him to take the gospel to the Gentiles. The only thing missing from this encounter was the riot.

APPLY THE WORD

Back on August 1 we encouraged you to spend time praying about a situation you are facing in which God's answer has been to wait.

Does today bring you any new insight into your situation? Perhaps your waiting is over because God has moved His hand in further answer to prayer. Or you may still be in spiritual limbo as God works His purposes.

Acts 28:20-31

F B Meyer

Acts 28:20-31 And he abode two whole years in his own hired dwelling, etc.

Thus, abruptly, does this fifth Gospel close. It has been well said that a close so abrupt suggests a continuance and a sequel. The curtain of silence falls when Paul's life is not brought to a close, and his work at Rome is still in process; and does not this indicate the design of the Holy Spirit that we should believe that the book of the Acts of the Apostles is never complete, but is really conterminous with the present age? Thus, every generation of every life adds its own gold link to the chain, which reaches from the upper chamber in the earthly Jerusalem to the bridal chamber of the New Jerusalem, uniting in one glorious succession all in whom Jesus continues by the Spirit to speak and work.

When the late Bishop of Ripon read of the labors and sufferings of John Williams in the South Seas, he laid down the narrative, exclaiming, "This is the twenty-ninth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles." May we not rather say the five hundredth or five thousandth? Between the stories of Paul and of John Williams, you must insert thousands which have been recorded of God's remembrancing angels alone, as well as those which are filling our shelves with missionary romance and biography, more interesting than novels, more wonderful than dreams.

"The book is left incomplete, as it always will be while one believer is left to teach and preach those things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, and to fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in his own flesh for his body's sake, which is the Church."

And the question arises, Have you wrought or suffered for Jesus in such wise as to add some verses to those chapters, which are now being written by angel scribes?

Meyer, F. B. Our Daily Homily