

40 Days through Acts

Week Two

Each day's guide is broken into three sections, with a special 4th section at the end of each week:

1. **The story for the day.** The entire story of Acts has been divided into 6 week's worth of daily stories. Rather than dividing the daily passages into equal lengths, they are divided into logical story units. Some days will be quite short, others a bit longer; but, hopefully, it will always be a manageable length of passage telling a satisfying episode in the life of the church. For your convenience, we've included the text of the story in the *New Living Translation* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1996). We've found this translation to be in fresh, modern language that has really helped us to do what we most want to do: enter into the story ourselves. As you read the passage, try to read it from the perspective of the disciples and the other people who interact with Jesus. Really get inside the story. What is it like to go through this experience with these early followers of Jesus?

2. **Points of Interest.** This section briefly explores aspects of the day's story that might be especially interesting or potentially confusing. It offers some historical notes and references that might help to interpret the story, frames some of the issues or questions addressed, and gives suggestions of ways to look at the story and what it might mean for us.

3. **Taking it home.** In this section, we offer some suggestions for how the day's reading apply practically to your life and the life of our church. Each day, we will ask 3 questions:

a. **What does Jesus want to do through you?**—During these 40 days, we are all asking God for 'a thousand-percent return' on our lives: when we invest our lives in his purposes, he has told us to expect to see the impact and the satisfaction of our lives multiply by a thousand percent. Each day, we will ask ourselves how our passage helps us to understand how to invest well or what we can expect when we do.

b. **What does Jesus want to do through your six?**— In the Cambridge Vineyard, we encourage everyone to have a list of six people for whom they are *seeking spiritual blessing*. These six people are local friends, family members, colleagues, and acquaintances who aren't presently actively seeking God, but in whom we see some spiritual interest, or in whose lives we see God at work. Even if you aren't quite sure there is a God yourself, we encourage you to pray for more spiritual blessing for your six, perhaps saying something like, 'God, I'm not even sure you're there, but if you are, please give more peace to my next door neighbors.' Then, watch and see what happens. It can't hurt. If nothing happens, no harm has been done. If something does happen, your six will have more blessing in their lives, and you will have experienced an answer to prayer.

Over the course of this guide, we will see that Acts makes the stunning claim that God not only wants to bless your six, but he has a high calling on them and a big destiny. Each day, we'll consider ways that we can pray for that destiny to be fulfilled in their lives.

c. **What does Jesus want to do through our church?**—God not only has big purposes he wants to pursue through each of us, he also has big purposes for us a church. We'll also pray each day that these dreams God has given us as a community will be fulfilled.

4. **Family Devotional Ideas.** At the end of each week's Bible study guide you'll find a paragraph suggesting themes and ideas you can explore with your children ages preschool through middle school at home. They'll be divided into two mini-sections, one for kids approximately ages 2-7 and one for kids approximately ages 8-12. The ideas apply to the entire week's bible text, so to

make the most use of these suggestions you'll want to read them at the beginning of each week.

We owe a debt of gratitude in the formation of this guide to C. Peter Wagner's *Acts of the Holy Spirit* (Regal Press, 2000). Over the course of this guide, we will point out insights which come directly from Wagner's commentary; but it also most certainly influenced our thoughts on Acts more broadly in ways we aren't even completely aware of. If you'd like to read more about Acts, this book would be an excellent place to start.

Monday March 29th

Acts 5:12-42

¹²Meanwhile, the apostles were performing many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And the believers were meeting regularly at the Temple in the area known as Solomon's Colonnade.

¹³No one else dared to join them, though everyone had high regard for them. ¹⁴And more and more people believed and were brought to the Lord--crowds of both men and women. ¹⁵As a result of the apostles' work, sick people were brought out into the streets on beds and mats so that Peter's shadow might fall across some of them as he went by. ¹⁶Crowds came in from the villages around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those possessed by evil spirits, and they were all healed.

¹⁷The high priest and his friends, who were Sadducees, reacted with violent jealousy. ¹⁸They arrested the apostles and put them in the jail. ¹⁹But an angel of the Lord came at night, opened the gates of the jail, and brought them out. Then he told them, ²⁰"Go to the Temple and give the people this message of life!" ²¹So the apostles entered the Temple about daybreak and immediately began teaching.

When the high priest and his officials arrived, they convened the high council, along with all the elders of Israel. Then they sent for the apostles to be brought for trial. ²²But when the Temple guards went to the jail, the men were gone. So they returned to the council and reported, ²³"The jail was locked, with the guards standing outside, but when we opened the gates, no one was there!"

²⁴When the captain of the Temple guard and the leading priests heard this, they were perplexed, wondering where it would all end. ²⁵Then someone arrived with the news that the men they had jailed were out in the Temple, teaching the people.

²⁶The captain went with his Temple guards and arrested them, but without violence, for they were afraid the people would kill them if they treated the apostles roughly. ²⁷Then they brought the apostles in before the council. ²⁸"Didn't we tell you never again to teach in this man's name?" the high priest demanded. "Instead, you have filled all Jerusalem with your teaching about Jesus, and you intend to blame us for his death!"

²⁹But Peter and the apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than human authority. ³⁰The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead after you killed him by crucifying him. ³¹Then God put him in the place of honor at his right hand as Prince and Savior. He did this to give the people of Israel an opportunity to turn from their sins and turn to God so their sins would be forgiven. ³²We are witnesses of these things and so is the Holy Spirit, who is given by God to those who obey him."

³³At this, the high council was furious and decided to kill them. ³⁴But one member had a different perspective. He was a Pharisee named Gamaliel, who was an expert on religious law and was very popular with the people. He stood up and ordered that the apostles be sent outside the council chamber for a while. ³⁵Then he addressed his colleagues as follows: "Men of Israel, take care what you are planning to do to these men! ³⁶Some time ago there was that fellow Theudas, who pretended to be someone great. About four hundred others joined him, but he was killed, and his followers went their various ways. The whole movement came to nothing. ³⁷After him, at the time of the census, there was Judas of Galilee. He got some people to follow him, but he was killed, too, and all his followers were scattered. ³⁸So my advice is, leave these men alone. If they are teaching and doing these things merely on their own, it will soon be overthrown. ³⁹But if it is of God, you will not be able to stop them. You may even find yourselves fighting against God."

⁴⁰The council accepted his advice. They called in the apostles and had them flogged. Then they ordered them never again to speak in the name of Jesus, and they let them go. ⁴¹The apostles left the high council rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus. ⁴²And every day, in the Temple and in their homes, they continued to teach and preach this message: "The Messiah you are looking for is Jesus."

Points of Interest:

- 'many miraculous signs and wonders among the people'—in last week's passages, the apostles perform one miraculous healing, and it gets them into trouble with the Council. In response, they ask God to do more miracles; and that's exactly what they get. In fact, the power of the Holy Spirit rests so strongly on the apostles that, apparently, even Peter's shadow is performing miracles.

- 'an angel of the Lord came at night, opened the gates of the jail, and brought them out'—Peter and John, when commanded to stop by the Council, invoked the higher authority of God. Here, this angel gives a clear sign that God is indeed with them: the Council throws them in jail, but God releases them and commands them to go back immediately to what they had been doing. God overturns the verdict of the Council.
- 'the men they had jailed were out in the Temple'—I imagine that this ruined the effect that the Council was hoping for. They'd put the apostles in jail overnight to give them a chance to think about the repercussions of what they'd been doing. But instead of dragging them into court after a terrifying night in jail, the Council loses their prisoners, only to find them unperturbedly doing what they'd been doing when they were arrested. In the face of the Holy Spirit's power, these powerful men appear to be powerless and rather foolish.
- 'You may even find yourselves fighting against God'—in point of fact, they have been fighting against God ever since they tried to shut Jesus up, and—as Gamaliel predicts—they have not been able to stop him. They've even had someone killed before, only to see it expand Jesus' message rather than stopping it.
- 'rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus'—interestingly, they are not rejoicing at the fact that Gamaliel's advice has allowed them to escape. They are rejoicing at the fact that they have been allowed to suffer. Not so long ago, they all ran away in order to avoid being brought to this very courtroom with Jesus. The apostles had followed Jesus, but weren't capable of following him to persecution. Here, they are given a second chance. This time, the Holy Spirit has given them the boldness to persevere. They have just been given the opportunity to follow Jesus one step further. For Jesus, suffering led to exaltation: God put him in the place of honor at his right hand. The disciples have been given the privilege of sharing in that honor.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* 'give the people this message of life!'—The apostles have become tireless in spreading the good news about Jesus. Ask God to give you a new vigor in sharing Jesus' message with others. Ask God to follow your words with his power, actually bringing life to the people who listen to you. Two things might stop us from becoming bolder in talking about Jesus: too little confidence in the power of Jesus' story, and too little love for people around us. Ask God for greater faith that he will give life to the people around you, and ask him to increase your love for them.
- *Through your six:* 'if it is of God, you will not be able to stop them'—ask God to make the lives of your six a testimonial to his reality and his power. Pray for a deep, true, and visible transformation in the lives of your six, one that shows that God is truly at work.
- *Through our church:* 'everyone had high regard for them'—Pray for our relationship with the wider community. Ask that God would give us a good reputation with the community, particularly with our new neighborhood. Pray that the good reputation would come from the fact that we bring healing, freedom, and other good things from God to the people in our neighborhood.

Tuesday March 30th

Acts 6

¹But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. Those who spoke Greek complained against those who spoke Hebrew, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food. ²So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers. "We apostles should spend our time preaching and teaching the word of God, not administering a food program," they said. ³"Now look around among yourselves, brothers, and select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. We will put them in charge of this business. ⁴Then we can spend our time in prayer and preaching and teaching the word."

⁵This idea pleased the whole group, and they chose the following: Stephen (a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit), Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas of Antioch (a Gentile convert to the Jewish faith, who had now become a Christian). ⁶These seven were presented to the

apostles, who prayed for them as they laid their hands on them.

⁷God's message was preached in ever-widening circles. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem, and many of the Jewish priests were converted, too.

⁸Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs among the people. ⁹But one day some men from the Synagogue of Freed Slaves, as it was called, started to debate with him. They were Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and the province of Asia. ¹⁰None of them was able to stand against the wisdom and Spirit by which Stephen spoke. ¹¹So they persuaded some men to lie about Stephen, saying, "We heard him blaspheme Moses, and even God." ¹²Naturally, this roused the crowds, the elders, and the teachers of religious law. So they arrested Stephen and brought him before the high council. ¹³The lying witnesses said, "This man is always speaking against the Temple and against the law of Moses. ¹⁴We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the Temple and change the customs Moses handed down to us." ¹⁵At this point everyone in the council stared at Stephen because his face became as bright as an angel's.

Points of Interest:

- 'Those who spoke Greek'—these would have been Jews who were born and raised somewhere else in the eastern Roman Empire, rather than in the Palestinian region. Some of them may have come for the feasts and ended up staying in Jerusalem when they became followers of Jesus. Others may have lived their lives in other cities, but retired to Jerusalem—it may have been a common desire among pious Greek-speaking Jews to end their lives in the holy city of Jerusalem (Wagner p. 138).
- 'their widows were being discriminated against'—the elderly, unless wealthy, would have been largely dependent upon the social network of extended families to provide for them. The Greek-speaking widows, being far from home, would be separated from these social networks and therefore could have been more dependent on the community of believers—it would be their only social network, their family away from family. The discrimination against the Greek-speaking widows was probably not intentional. The apostles were all Hebrew-speaking Jews. They were probably simply more familiar with the other Hebrew-speakers. The language barrier probably also played a part in keeping the needs of the Greek-speaking widows from being made known as efficiently to the apostles. To make matters more complicated, it is highly possible that the Greek-speakers were giving a disproportionately large amount of money to the common pool from which the apostles were drawing. The fact that they were able to leave their homes to travel to or move to Jerusalem may mean that they were on average wealthier than the Hebrew-speakers (Wagner p. 138). Barnabas, the one named example of a generous giver, was a Greek-speaker. Thus, the Greek-speakers would have been giving more toward the common pot, have a higher proportion of elderly widows in need of the community's help, and be under-represented in the distribution of the community's resources.
- 'not administering a food program'—this statement from the apostles does not necessarily mean that they considered the food program unimportant. What it does show is that things have reached a point where the apostles can't do it all. Up until now, preaching, teaching, and food distribution have all been part of the job description of the twelve (people would give their offerings to them, and they would distribute it as people had need, 4:35). This situation makes clear that the community has become too large and too complex for them to do everything well: they could put their efforts toward repairing the problems with the food distribution; but if they did so, they would no longer have the time to preach or teach—which Jesus had commanded them to do. Leaving things as they were, with the Greek-speakers being discriminated against, or stopping the food distribution program were also not options, though. They couldn't stop their preaching in order to serve the poor, but it would be contrary to their message to preach at the expense of the poor. For the kingdom of God to continue to advance, the only option is for the twelve to share their job with others.
- 'among yourselves'—this probably refers specifically to the Greek-speakers. The apostles respond to those who have brought the complaint by putting them in charge of the program.

It is also possible that the entire community is involved in the selection process, in which case the entire community decides to put the situation in the hands of the Greek-speakers—the names and what we know of the home towns of the seven chosen men indicates that they are all Greek-speakers.

- 'in ever-widening circles'—the expansion of the community's leadership team and the resolution of the discrimination against the Greek-speakers leads to a new phase of growth in numbers and influence. It might be expected that one of the circles of expansion would be among the Greek-speakers, but surprisingly the group that is particularly mentioned is the priests. These priests are probably not the top-level priests who were on the Council, but rather the lower-order priests of whom there would be many in Jerusalem. Perhaps the way the problem with the widows was resolved was particularly impressive to these priests who would probably play some role in the Temple's distribution to the poor.
- 'Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs'—Stephen and the other six were particularly chosen to be in charge of the food distribution, but very quickly his ministry expands into the roles of teaching and preaching as well.
- 'from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and the province of Asia'—these are other Greek-speaking Jews. In Jerusalem, there were synagogues which particularly served the Greek-speaking population. The apostles have been primarily preaching at the Temple. Apparently, Stephen has expanded the reach of Jesus' message by bringing it to these Greek-speaking synagogues as well. The leaders in these synagogues react much the same as the high priests did to the apostles, and in fact the two groups end up banding together against Jesus' followers here.
- 'persuaded some men to lie about Stephen'—these lies are very similar to the ones spoken about Jesus during his mock trial. They have to resort to lies because there is no real legitimate case against him.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* What started as a complaint on the part of the Greek-speakers quickly became a mission. Have you recently noticed a gap or an imperfection in the life of our community that really bothers you? Perhaps it is a sign of a call from God on your life. Would you be willing to devote yourself to meeting this need? Ask God if he would have you step forward. Also, ask that God would give you the wisdom and the filling of the Holy Spirit necessary to lead in this area. If you feel that God is encouraging you to do so, consider approaching one of your leaders with your idea. In the example of the Greek-speakers in this passage, what could have been a source of division became a place of partnership in the expansion of God's kingdom. Ask the Holy Spirit for the same harmony among us in the area of your concern.
- *Through your six:* The apostles asked Stephen to oversee the distribution of food, but he quickly became a powerful preacher as well. Sometimes, as people step forward into whatever necessary tasks at hand, God takes it as an opportunity to unleash new gifts and passions. Are there concrete tasks for the sake of Jesus' good news that your six are capable of into which you could invite them now? Perhaps, if they attend your small group, you could ask them to help with the hosting duties. Perhaps, you could pursue some ministry to the poor together. Invite them into partnership in ministry with you, and ask God to use it as an opportunity to call out new spiritual gifts and passions in them.
- *Through our church:* In this passage, there was a fault in the life of the community that was keeping back the spread of Jesus' message. Ask the Lord to reveal any blind spots in our ministry that keep us back from spreading his message as he would like. Pray that God would give us the grace to respond well to what is revealed. Particularly pray that God would give us an eye to the needs of the poor, wisdom about how to meet those needs, and more and more of the right people to lead us in these areas.

Wednesday March 31st

Acts 7:1-8:1

¹Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these accusations true?"

²This was Stephen's reply: "Brothers and honorable fathers, listen to me. Our glorious God appeared

to our ancestor Abraham in Mesopotamia before he moved to Haran. ³God told him, 'Leave your native land and your relatives, and come to the land that I will show you.' ⁴So Abraham left the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran until his father died. Then God brought him here to the land where you now live. ⁵But God gave him no inheritance here, not even one square foot of land. God did promise, however, that eventually the whole country would belong to Abraham and his descendants--though he had no children yet. ⁶But God also told him that his descendants would live in a foreign country where they would be mistreated as slaves for four hundred years. ⁷'But I will punish the nation that enslaves them,' God told him, 'and in the end they will come out and worship me in this place.' ⁸God also gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision at that time. And so Isaac, Abraham's son, was circumcised when he was eight days old. Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob was the father of the twelve patriarchs of the Jewish nation.

⁹"These sons of Jacob were very jealous of their brother Joseph, and they sold him to be a slave in Egypt. But God was with him ¹⁰and delivered him from his anguish. And God gave him favor before Pharaoh, king of Egypt. God also gave Joseph unusual wisdom, so that Pharaoh appointed him governor over all of Egypt and put him in charge of all the affairs of the palace.

¹¹"But a famine came upon Egypt and Canaan. There was great misery for our ancestors, as they ran out of food. ¹²Jacob heard that there was still grain in Egypt, so he sent his sons to buy some. ¹³The second time they went, Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers, and they were introduced to Pharaoh. ¹⁴Then Joseph sent for his father, Jacob, and all his relatives to come to Egypt, seventy-five persons in all. ¹⁵So Jacob went to Egypt. He died there, as did all his sons. ¹⁶All of them were taken to Shechem and buried in the tomb Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

¹⁷"As the time drew near when God would fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt greatly increased. ¹⁸But then a new king came to the throne of Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph. ¹⁹This king plotted against our people and forced parents to abandon their newborn babies so they would die.

²⁰"At that time Moses was born--a beautiful child in God's eyes. His parents cared for him at home for three months. ²¹When at last they had to abandon him, Pharaoh's daughter found him and raised him as her own son. ²²Moses was taught all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he became mighty in both speech and action.

²³"One day when he was forty years old, he decided to visit his relatives, the people of Israel.

²⁴During this visit, he saw an Egyptian mistreating a man of Israel. So Moses came to his defense and avenged him, killing the Egyptian. ²⁵Moses assumed his brothers would realize that God had sent him to rescue them, but they didn't.

²⁶"The next day he visited them again and saw two men of Israel fighting. He tried to be a peacemaker. 'Men,' he said, 'you are brothers. Why are you hurting each other?'

²⁷"But the man in the wrong pushed Moses aside and told him to mind his own business. 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us?' he asked. ²⁸'Are you going to kill me as you killed that Egyptian yesterday?' ²⁹When Moses heard that, he fled the country and lived as a foreigner in the land of Midian, where his two sons were born.

³⁰"Forty years later, in the desert near Mount Sinai, an angel appeared to Moses in the flame of a burning bush. ³¹Moses saw it and wondered what it was. As he went to see, the voice of the Lord called out to him, ³²'I am the God of your ancestors--the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.' Moses shook with terror and dared not look.

³³"And the Lord said to him, 'Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground. ³⁴You can be sure that I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries. So I have come to rescue them. Now go, for I will send you to Egypt.' ³⁵And so God sent back the same man his people had previously rejected by demanding, 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us?' Through the angel who appeared to him in the burning bush, Moses was sent to be their ruler and savior.

³⁶And by means of many miraculous signs and wonders, he led them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and back and forth through the wilderness for forty years.

³⁷"Moses himself told the people of Israel, 'God will raise up a Prophet like me from among your own people.' ³⁸Moses was with the assembly of God's people in the wilderness. He was the mediator between the people of Israel and the angel who gave him life-giving words on Mount Sinai to pass on to us.

³⁹"But our ancestors rejected Moses and wanted to return to Egypt. ⁴⁰They told Aaron, 'Make us some gods who can lead us, for we don't know what has become of this Moses, who brought us out of Egypt.' ⁴¹So they made an idol shaped like a calf, and they sacrificed to it and rejoiced in this thing they had made. ⁴²Then God turned away from them and gave them up to serve the sun, moon, and stars as their gods! In the book of the prophets it is written,

'Was it to me you were bringing sacrifices during those forty years in the wilderness, Israel?

⁴³ No, your real interest was in your pagan gods-- the shrine of Molech, the star god Rephan, and the images you made to worship them. So I will send you into captivity far away in Babylon.'

⁴⁴"Our ancestors carried the Tabernacle with them through the wilderness. It was constructed in exact accordance with the plan shown to Moses by God. ⁴⁵Years later, when Joshua led the battles against the Gentile nations that God drove out of this land, the Tabernacle was taken with them into their new territory. And it was used there until the time of King David.

⁴⁶"David found favor with God and asked for the privilege of building a permanent Temple for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷But it was Solomon who actually built it. ⁴⁸However, the Most High doesn't live in temples made by human hands. As the prophet says, ⁴⁹'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Could you ever build me a temple as good as that?' asks the Lord. 'Could you build a dwelling place for me? ⁵⁰ Didn't I make everything in heaven and earth?'

⁵¹"You stubborn people! You are heathen at heart and deaf to the truth. Must you forever resist the Holy Spirit? But your ancestors did, and so do you! ⁵²Name one prophet your ancestors didn't persecute! They even killed the ones who predicted the coming of the Righteous One--the Messiah whom you betrayed and murdered. ⁵³You deliberately disobeyed God's law, though you received it from the hands of angels."

⁵⁴The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen's accusation, and they shook their fists in rage. ⁵⁵But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily upward into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God's right hand. ⁵⁶And he told them, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's right hand!"

⁵⁷Then they put their hands over their ears, and drowning out his voice with their shouts, they rushed at him. ⁵⁸They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. The official witnesses took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹And as they stoned him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰And he fell to his knees, shouting, "Lord, don't charge them with this sin!" And with that, he died.

¹ Saul was one of the official witnesses at the killing of Stephen.

A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem, and all the believers except the apostles fled into Judea and Samaria.

Points of Interest:

- 'our ancestor Abraham'—the witnesses have accused Stephen of being the creator of a new faith which directly contradicts their traditions. Stephen here stresses his common ancestry with his accusers and the Council. Stephen doesn't tell the story of the patriarchs in order to teach them something that they don't know, but rather to demonstrate to them that his message comes out of the exact same histories and traditions that they know so well.
- 'Moses was born--a beautiful child in God's eyes'—Stephen has particularly been accused of teaching contrary to Moses. In response to this false claim, Stephen bases almost his entire sermon on Moses. The story of the patriarchs comes from the writings of Moses, and then the life and ministry of Moses himself serve as the centerpiece of the sermon. Stephen wants to make very clear that he is following Moses' teaching, not rejecting it.
- 'God will raise up a Prophet like me from among your own people'—'How can preaching about Jesus be against Moses if Moses himself predicted the coming of just such a Prophet?' seems to be what Stephen is saying.
- 'our ancestors rejected Moses'—Stephen here goes on to point out that the history of the people of Israel is in many ways a long series of rejections of the leaders God sent to them—this was especially true of Moses. Stephen essentially turns the charge against him on its head: the accusers have been saying that he has gone against tradition by rejecting Moses; he says it is more likely true that he is going against tradition by accepting Moses' teaching. This point would probably be hard for the Council to argue with, but infuriating to hear.
- 'asked for the privilege of building a permanent Temple'—the other charge against Stephen is that he is speaking against the Temple. Whereas he strongly defends himself against the accusation that he is speaking against Moses, he seems to admit that he is speaking against the Temple; but then he goes on to defend his attitude toward the Temple. The Temple, he says, was David's idea, not God's. God basically had the same attitude toward the Temple that a parent has toward her child's drawing of a house: he enjoyed the love and the creativity that it expressed, but it's not as if he could actually live there. But the people of Israel made this children's art project into the centerpiece of their relationship, and indeed of God's activity on earth. Meanwhile, while elevating the importance of the Temple, they reject any words from God about the Messiah and eventually kill the Messiah himself. They make too big a deal about the Temple, and they completely ignore what God really cares about—the Messiah. In short, Stephen says that the people have made an idol of the Temple and chosen to worship it rather than Jesus. The Sadducees go into a rage because the Temple is not only their most sacred object, but it is the center of their power.
- 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's right hand!'—while he is in an earthly courtroom, Stephen is also given a glimpse of the heavenly courtroom. Apparently, while the Council is judging Stephen, Jesus is judging the Council. At the same time as the Council is condemning Stephen to death, Stephen is asking Jesus for leniency on them.
- 'Lord, don't charge them with this sin'—Stephen's final words, committing his soul to Jesus and asking for mercy on his killers, echo Jesus' own final words. He is following in Jesus' footsteps, in death as in life.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Stephen could clearly see the things in his heritage that helped him to pursue God and the things that inhibited him from pursuing him. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you the same insight into your family, and an ability to embrace what is helpful and turn away from what is unhelpful. Unfortunately, Stephen's listeners angrily rejected what he had to say. Pray for your families that they would have soft hearts and listening ears toward the things Jesus has given you to tell them.
- *Through your six:* Moses had a passion for justice for his people. When he responded to that passion in his own strength, the results were disastrous. But God gave him a second chance, a chance to live out the same passion with God's power following God's plan. In this way, Moses was able to do far more for his people than he ever could have imagined. What godly passions

do your six have? Ask God to give them the chance to follow those passions with his power and his plan.

- *Through our church:* David's idea of a building a Temple was intended to be an act of worship of God, but in the end their offering to God became an idol instead. Pray that God would preserve us from turning our worship or our ministry, the work of our own hands, into things we worship instead of God.

Thursday April 1st

Acts 8:2-40

²(Some godly men came and buried Stephen with loud weeping.) ³Saul was going everywhere to devastate the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into jail.

⁴But the believers who had fled Jerusalem went everywhere preaching the Good News about Jesus.

⁵Philip, for example, went to the city of Samaria and told the people there about the Messiah.

⁶Crowds listened intently to what he had to say because of the miracles he did. ⁷Many evil spirits were cast out, screaming as they left their victims. And many who had been paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸So there was great joy in that city.

⁹A man named Simon had been a sorcerer there for many years, claiming to be someone great. ¹⁰The Samaritan people, from the least to the greatest, often spoke of him as "the Great One--the Power of God." ¹¹He was very influential because of the magic he performed. ¹²But now the people believed Philip's message of Good News concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. As a result, many men and women were baptized. ¹³Then Simon himself believed and was baptized. He began following Philip wherever he went, and he was amazed by the great miracles and signs Philip performed.

¹⁴When the apostles back in Jerusalem heard that the people of Samaria had accepted God's message, they sent Peter and John there. ¹⁵As soon as they arrived, they prayed for these new Christians to receive the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them, for they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷Then Peter and John laid their hands upon these believers, and they received the Holy Spirit.

¹⁸When Simon saw that the Holy Spirit was given when the apostles placed their hands upon people's heads, he offered money to buy this power. ¹⁹"Let me have this power, too," he exclaimed, "so that when I lay my hands on people, they will receive the Holy Spirit!"

²⁰But Peter replied, "May your money perish with you for thinking God's gift can be bought! ²¹You can have no part in this, for your heart is not right before God. ²²Turn from your wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive your evil thoughts, ²³for I can see that you are full of bitterness and held captive by sin."

²⁴"Pray to the Lord for me," Simon exclaimed, "that these terrible things won't happen to me!"

²⁵After testifying and preaching the word of the Lord in Samaria, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem. And they stopped in many Samaritan villages along the way to preach the Good News to them, too.

²⁶As for Philip, an angel of the Lord said to him, "Go south down the desert road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza." ²⁷So he did, and he met the treasurer of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under the queen of Ethiopia. The eunuch had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸and he was now returning. Seated in his carriage, he was reading aloud from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

²⁹The Holy Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and walk along beside the carriage."

³⁰Philip ran over and heard the man reading from the prophet Isaiah; so he asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

³¹The man replied, "How can I, when there is no one to instruct me?" And he begged Philip to come up into the carriage and sit with him. ³²The passage of Scripture he had been reading was this:

"He was led as a sheep to the slaughter,
And as a lamb is silent before the shearers,
he did not open his mouth.

³³ He was humiliated and received no justice.

Who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth."

³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, "Was Isaiah talking about himself or someone else?" ³⁵So Philip began with this same Scripture and then used many others to tell him the Good News about Jesus.

³⁶As they rode along, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "Look! There's some water! Why can't I be baptized?" ³⁸He ordered the carriage to stop, and they went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away. The eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰Meanwhile, Philip found himself farther north at the city of Azotus! He preached the Good News there and in every city along the way until he came to Caesarea.

Points of Interest:

- 'believers who had fled Jerusalem went everywhere preaching'—the believers in Jerusalem scatter to places that aren't under the direct authority of the Jerusalem Council. However, rather than stopping the message, this persecution actually spreads it. The believers don't let the experience of persecution in Jerusalem stop them from doing what Jesus had told them to do: go and tell my message. In fact, up until this point, Luke talks mostly of the apostles (and Stephen) doing the preaching—now all of the scattered believers are becoming preachers.
- ⁵Philip, for example, went to the city of Samaria'—here is the second of the seven Greek-speakers who has branched out from food distribution to preaching and teaching.
- 'to the city of Samaria'—The Samaritans and the Jews had, during the time of David and Solomon (about 1000 years before), been one nation, and they were all descended from the same ancestor. When they split into two nations, the Samaritans had mixed more with the surrounding people, taking on their gods and their religious practices. Later, they'd been forcibly mixed with other nations by the Assyrians, who had conquered them. Thus, at least as far as the Jews were concerned, the Samaritans were, both religiously and ethnically, long-lost, renegade Jews. The Samaritans and the Jews shared a common heritage and many common beliefs, but they disliked one another and fought bitterly with one another as only feuding relatives can.
- ¹⁶The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them'—being filled with the Holy Spirit is not something automatic. It is a separate event from deciding to follow Jesus. It is available to everyone, but that does not mean that everyone experiences it. It is not exactly clear why Philip does not himself baptize the Samaritans with the Holy Spirit. Perhaps he lacks the ability. Perhaps he simply doesn't think of it—he is, after all, new to being a preacher. Or perhaps he feels as if he would like the authorization of the apostles before he goes further. This is a big step for the church—for the first time since Jesus' commission to his followers, a mass movement of believers has begun among non-Jews.
- 'May your money perish with you'—these are hard words from Peter, but not necessarily an ultimate condemnation of Simon. At one point, Jesus rebukes Peter equally harshly, calling him 'Satan' (Mark 8:33). So, Peter knows that such rebukes can lead to repentance and redemption. Perhaps he offers Simon such a stern warning because he sees him at a crucial crossroads between doing things God's way and doing things in a human way. He is hoping to intervene in Simon's life at that moment the way Jesus did in his. The fact that Simon is offering money for the Holy Spirit shows that he doesn't really understand what the Holy Spirit is for. The Holy Spirit is for everyone, for the sake of offering them connection with God and power to share Jesus' story; but Simon is looking at it as a special gift that will bring him power. Indeed, power seems to be a very important thing for Simon. Before Philip comes around, he is the most powerful person in town; in fact, his nickname is, 'The Power of God.' He uses his magic abilities to get prestige and influence for himself. Then, Philip, operating in the power of the Holy Spirit, outdoes Simon. Everyone, including Simon, is persuaded by Philip's greater ability and begins to follow him instead. But the arrival of the apostles opens up a new opportunity. Apparently, the apostles have access

to a power which Philip doesn't. Maybe Simon thinks that if he gets that power from the apostles, he will be the top man in town again.

- 'down the desert road'—Philip is in the middle of an amazing new movement in a large and influential city. It must have been difficult for Philip to believe that it would be better for him to leave it and go to a road in the middle of the desert instead. But when he hears God's voice, he obeys.
- 'the treasurer of Ethiopia'—in popular thinking among the Jews of the time, Ethiopia was considered the end of the earth—it was the last major civilization they were aware of in a southern direction. Jesus calls his followers to tell his story in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Up until now, the apostles have brought the message to Jerusalem and Judea. In this passage, Philip, prompted by Saul's persecution, carries it to Samaria and to this Ethiopian who will bring it to the 'ends of the earth.' The reach of Jesus' message continues to grow. Of course, Jesus' mission has not been fulfilled because Philip shares Jesus' story; Jesus really wants the whole world to hear his story. But, this is a foretaste of what Jesus has in mind. In fact, it is the second such foretaste. The first happened at Pentecost, in which Jesus' story was told in the languages of Jews from all over the world. Now, through Philip's ministry, it is actually spreading beyond the Jews and beyond Jerusalem.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* the Holy Spirit puts Philip in the right place at the right time to tell Jesus' story to someone who is ready and eager to hear it. Ask the Holy Spirit to put you in the path of people like the Ethiopian eunuch. Of course, it took Philip doing a few odd things before he got to the right place: he had to leave a thriving ministry and go to a desert road, run alongside a chariot, and ask the passenger what he was reading. Be prepared to follow the Holy Spirit's instructions, even if they seem a little silly.
- *Through your six:* So far in Acts, Peter has had to severely correct fellow believers twice. Both times, money was a big part of the problem: Ananias and Sapphira try to keep back some of the money they say they are giving to the community; and Simon tries to buy the Holy Spirit. Money seems to have a powerful ability to keep people from the life God has for them. Pray for your six, that money would not have a hold over them.
- *Through our church:* The Holy Spirit puts Philip into contact with the Ethiopian official, a person with a unique ability to bring Jesus' message to a new culture and a new socioeconomic class. Ask God to put our church in contact with these potential bridge people. Ask him to give us what we need to equip these people to carry Jesus' message to their friends.

Friday April 2nd

Acts 9:1-19

¹Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath. He was eager to destroy the Lord's followers, so he went to the high priest. ²He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them--both men and women--back to Jerusalem in chains.

³As he was nearing Damascus on this mission, a brilliant light from heaven suddenly beamed down upon him! ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?"

⁵"Who are you, sir?" Saul asked.

And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! ⁶Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

⁷The men with Saul stood speechless with surprise, for they heard the sound of someone's voice, but they saw no one! ⁸As Saul picked himself up off the ground, he found that he was blind. ⁹So his companions led him by the hand to Damascus. He remained there blind for three days. And all that time he went without food and water.

¹⁰Now there was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, calling, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord!" he replied.

¹¹The Lord said, "Go over to Straight Street, to the house of Judas. When you arrive, ask for Saul of Tarsus. He is praying to me right now. ¹²I have shown him a vision of a man named Ananias coming in and laying his hands on him so that he can see again."

¹³"But Lord," exclaimed Ananias, "I've heard about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem! ¹⁴And we hear that he is authorized by the leading priests to arrest every believer in Damascus."

¹⁵But the Lord said, "Go and do what I say. For Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. ¹⁶And I will show him how much he must suffer for me."

¹⁷So Ananias went and found Saul. He laid his hands on him and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you may get your sight back and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸Instantly something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized. ¹⁹Afterward he ate some food and was strengthened.

Points of Interest:

- 'to the synagogues in Damascus'—Saul is no longer content to persecute the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. He asks for permission to follow the people who had dispersed to neighboring regions.
- 'Why are you persecuting me?'—Rather than striking Saul dead or commanding him to stop, Jesus asks a question. And it's a great one. Why exactly is Saul so passionately and violently angry against Jesus' followers?
It is significant to note that Jesus considers attacks against his people as a personal attack against him. Saul here encounters the startling truth of Gamaliel's warning: 'You may even find yourselves fighting against God.' Saul has been fighting against God, and now God fights back. Ironically, Saul is a pupil of Gamaliel; Gamaliel's own student most vigorously ignores his advice and discovers the truth of his warning.
- 'he found that he was blind'—Saul's spiritual blindness, his inability to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, is now matched by physical blindness. Both the physical and the spiritual blindness fall away when Saul is able to hear the message of Jesus from one of the people he has been so violently trying to prevent from speaking.
- 'But Lord'—Ananias seems to wonder whether the Lord knows exactly who this Paul is. Ananias may very well have moved to Damascus to avoid Paul's persecution, and now the Lord is asking him to seek him out voluntarily—and to heal him! Ananias may be worried for himself or surprised by the lengths of God's mercy. But either way, he wants to make sure that God is sure this is what he wants to do. To his great credit, after this small initial protest, Ananias listens to God and obeys what he says.
- 'Saul is my chosen instrument'—God has great plans even for Saul, this great persecutor of the believers. Peter said to the crowd at Pentecost, who had taken part in killing Jesus, 'The promise is for you.' And the same applies to Saul. The promise of the Holy Spirit is for him. In fact, God has prepared a very special role for him in his plans.
- 'I will show him how much he must suffer for me'—Saul will experience the same sort of suffering that he inflicted on others.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Jesus takes on the persecution of his people as persecution of him. Are there ways you are experiencing suffering or persecution because you are following Jesus? Ask him to be with you and to protect you in the midst of that suffering.
- *Through your six:* Are there ways any of your six are currently actively fighting against Jesus, his people, or his purposes? Ask Jesus to have mercy on them just as he did on Saul. Ask him to turn them away from this fight, and to give them a special purpose for him instead.
- *Through our church:* Ask the Lord to make us a church characterized by trusting in his guidance. Ask him to allow us to play a part in calling people into the special purposes he has for them.

Saturday April 3rd

Acts 9:20-31

Saul stayed with the believers in Damascus for a few days. ²⁰And immediately he began preaching about Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is indeed the Son of God!"

²¹All who heard him were amazed. "Isn't this the same man who persecuted Jesus' followers with such devastation in Jerusalem?" they asked. "And we understand that he came here to arrest them and take them in chains to the leading priests."

²²Saul's preaching became more and more powerful, and the Jews in Damascus couldn't refute his proofs that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. ²³After a while the Jewish leaders decided to kill him. ²⁴But Saul was told about their plot, and that they were watching for him day and night at the city gate so they could murder him. ²⁵So during the night, some of the other believers let him down in a large basket through an opening in the city wall.

²⁶When Saul arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to meet with the believers, but they were all afraid of him. They thought he was only pretending to be a believer! ²⁷Then Barnabas brought him to the apostles and told them how Saul had seen the Lord on the way to Damascus. Barnabas also told them what the Lord had said to Saul and how he boldly preached in the name of Jesus in Damascus. ²⁸Then the apostles accepted Saul, and after that he was constantly with them in Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹He debated with some Greek-speaking Jews, but they plotted to murder him. ³⁰When the believers heard about it, however, they took him to Caesarea and sent him on to his hometown of Tarsus.

³¹The church then had peace throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, and it grew in strength and numbers. The believers were walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

Points of Interest:

- 'the Jewish leaders decided to kill him'—these are the same Jewish leaders Saul hoped to convince to join him in persecuting Jesus' followers. He has indeed provoked them into persecuting the believers, but by his powerful arguments on Jesus' behalf. These leaders respond to Saul very much how Saul responded to Stephen. Jesus' prediction that Saul would suffer for his sake doesn't take long to begin to come true.
- 'some of the other believers let him down in a large'—they are now helping Saul, whose persecution they were escaping, to escape persecution.
- 'constantly with them in Jerusalem, preaching boldly'—what an amazing reversal! Saul, who drove all but the apostles out of Jerusalem, is now preaching alongside of them.
- 'sent him on to his hometown'—Saul has been on a rollercoaster ride, going from persecutor to preacher, receiving death threats, seeing friends become enemies and enemies become friends. Perhaps the apostles send him home so that he can rest a little and so that they can all gain their bearings.
- 'the church then had peace'—Saul's turnaround at least temporarily takes the steam out of the persecution of the church.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* In what ways were you an enemy of Jesus' message in the past? Saul ends up being a proclaimer of Jesus in the very places he was a persecutor. Is there a group of friends, a social group, or some sort of organization in which you were a voice against Jesus? Ask him if he would like you to speak of him in those very same places, and ask him for the opportunities to do it.
- *Through your six:* Saul needed a sponsor into the community of believers. Without Barnabas' recommendation, the Jerusalem church wouldn't have known whether or not to accept him, and they wouldn't have known of his gifts in preaching. Certainly, none of your six are in the same position as Saul. Nonetheless, they may be helped by someone who is willing to introduce them to the community. Are there ways that you can prepare the way for your six to find their place in the community? Perhaps it is just by introducing them to people they know, or mentioning some of their gifts or passions to people with whom they could partner.

- *Through our church:* In this passage, the church grew in both strength and numbers. Pray that God would be doing the same for our church: that he would always be pulling us together as a community, making us into better reflections of him, and adding more people into our midst.

Sunday April 4th

Acts 9:32-43

³²Peter traveled from place to place to visit the believers, and in his travels he came to the Lord's people in the town of Lydda. ³³There he met a man named Aeneas, who had been paralyzed and bedridden for eight years. ³⁴Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you! Get up and make your bed!" And he was healed instantly. ³⁵Then the whole population of Lydda and Sharon turned to the Lord when they saw Aeneas walking around.

³⁶There was a believer in Joppa named Tabitha (which in Greek is Dorcas). She was always doing kind things for others and helping the poor. ³⁷About this time she became ill and died. Her friends prepared her for burial and laid her in an upstairs room. ³⁸But they had heard that Peter was nearby at Lydda, so they sent two men to beg him, "Please come as soon as possible!"

³⁹So Peter returned with them; and as soon as he arrived, they took him to the upstairs room. The room was filled with widows who were weeping and showing him the coats and other garments Dorcas had made for them. ⁴⁰But Peter asked them all to leave the room; then he knelt and prayed. Turning to the body he said, "Get up, Tabitha." And she opened her eyes! When she saw Peter, she sat up! ⁴¹He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then he called in the widows and all the believers, and he showed them that she was alive.

⁴²The news raced through the whole town, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³And Peter stayed a long time in Joppa, living with Simon, a leatherworker.

Points of Interest:

- 'traveled from place to place to visit the believers'—the apostles now have communities spread throughout the Middle East that need teaching, training, and encouragement. It seems that while the apostles remain based in Jerusalem, they increasingly go on tours, like this one and the one to Samaria earlier, to encourage the work that is going on in other places.
- 'they heard that Peter was nearby'—these people had a lot of faith. Even though the woman is dead, they still believe it might be worthwhile to ask Peter if there is anything he can do.
- 'Peter asked them all to leave the room'—Perhaps all of the noise of the mourning was distracting. Peter could also simply be following Jesus' example. Jesus also made everyone leave the room before he raised someone from the dead (Mark 5:40). Peter was one of only a few witnesses of that miracle.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Again in this passage, we see the power of miraculous healings to bring joy to people's lives and to draw them to Jesus. Ask the Lord to give you the ability to cure the sick. If you have already seen him work in this way through you, ask for more consistency and for the ability to heal more serious illnesses.
- *For your six:* Tabitha had a tremendous impact on the people around her by acts of kindness, particularly to the poor. Ask the Lord to bless your six with overflowing kindness.
- *For our church:* Peter has become known as someone with the power to bring healing, and by the end of this passage his reputation (by the power of Jesus) has increased all the more. Ask God to make us a church where the sick, whether physically or emotionally, find healing. Ask him that we would become such a place of healing that people would know to seek us or ask for us when they have a need.

Week 2 Family Devotional Ideas:

- With older kids: This week continue to track the growth of the church within the following passages with your family: Acts 6:7, Acts 8:1, Acts 8:4-5, Acts 8:26-40, Acts 9:1-6, Acts 9:31-35, Acts 9:42-43.
 - Using the above passages, add to your wall map of the spread of Jesus' followers around the ancient Mediterranean region. Remember as you read together the highlighted excerpts from this week's passages, label each location named and its significance (example: Jerusalem – Stephen stoned; most believers run away to Judea and Samaria).
 - Also this week, talk together about what things you would find worth suffering for and perhaps even worth dying for. What's the scariest thing about being persecuted – physical pain, limits on your freedom (imprisonment), or social rejection?
 - Based on Saul's dramatic conversion from murdering Christians to following Jesus wholeheartedly, ask your family if you believe people can change that much and how you might treat people who did (think of Hitler or Saddam Hussein coming to church today...if they had ordered your best friend killed).
- With younger kids: Read Acts 9:1-20. Tell your kids that Saul was one of the biggest murderers of Christians and proud of it! Then Jesus came to him on the road to Damascus and changed his life as the story tells. Take a large piece of construction paper and fold it into 4 sections. Have your kids draw the 4 main highlights of the story:
 - Saul asking for letters telling people to throw Jesus followers in jail
 - Jesus meeting Saul on his horse on the road to Damascus
 - Ananias laying hands on Saul to bring his sight back, baptizing him, and feeding him
 - Saul believing in Jesus and preaching "He is the Son of God!"