

40 Days through Acts

Week Three

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 April 5th

Acts 10:1-23

¹In Caesarea there lived a Roman army officer named Cornelius, who was a captain of the Italian Regiment.

²He was a devout man who feared the God of Israel, as did his entire household. He gave generously to charity and was a man who regularly prayed to God. ³One afternoon about three o'clock, he had a vision in which he saw an angel of God coming toward him. "Cornelius!" the angel said.

⁴Cornelius stared at him in terror. "What is it, sir?" he asked the angel.

And the angel replied, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have not gone unnoticed by God! ⁵Now send some men down to Joppa to find a man named Simon Peter. ⁶He is staying with Simon, a leatherworker who lives near the shore. Ask him to come and visit you."

⁷As soon as the angel was gone, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier, one of his personal attendants. ⁸He told them what had happened and sent them off to Joppa.

⁹The next day as Cornelius's messengers were nearing the city, Peter went up to the flat roof to pray. It was about noon, ¹⁰and he was hungry. But while lunch was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹He saw the sky open, and something like a large sheet was let down by its four corners. ¹²In the sheet were all sorts of animals, reptiles, and birds. ¹³Then a voice said to him, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat them."

¹⁴"Never, Lord," Peter declared. "I have never in all my life eaten anything forbidden by our Jewish laws."

¹⁵The voice spoke again, "If God says something is acceptable, don't say it isn't." ¹⁶The same vision was repeated three times. Then the sheet was pulled up again to heaven.

¹⁷Peter was very perplexed. What could the vision mean? Just then the men sent by Cornelius found the house and stood outside at the gate. ¹⁸They asked if this was the place where Simon Peter was staying.

¹⁹Meanwhile, as Peter was puzzling over the vision, the Holy Spirit said to him, "Three men have come looking for you. ²⁰Go down and go with them without hesitation. All is well, for I have sent them."

²¹So Peter went down and said, "I'm the man you are looking for. Why have you come?"

²²They said, "We were sent by Cornelius, a Roman officer. He is a devout man who fears the God of Israel and is well respected by all the Jews. A holy angel instructed him to send for you so you can go to his house and give him a message." ²³So Peter invited the men to be his guests for the night. The next day he went with them, accompanied by some other believers from Joppa.

Points of Interest:

- 'He was a devout man who feared the God of Israel'—among some of the Jews who lived throughout the Roman Empire there was an effort to win converts to Judaism. For Gentiles to convert to Judaism it was quite an ordeal and included circumcision for the men, public self-baptism and the offering of sacrifices in the Temple. Because of these intense requirements there were few full converts, called proselytes, to Judaism. However, there were many Gentiles who were strongly attracted to the Jewish code of ethics and their belief in one God. These "God-fearers" did their best to adhere to the food laws and to the observing the Sabbath and in exchange were allowed to affiliate with the local synagogue, and given space (though still separate from the Jews) to worship the God of the Jews. Of all the peoples, Jews and Gentiles alike, that the early followers of Jesus came across these "God-fearers" tended to be the most open to hearing and receiving the message of Jesus (Wagner 224-5).
- "'Never, Lord,' Peter declared.'—It is very difficult for us to imagine the cultural-religious gulf between Jews and Gentiles. Peter's strong refusal to eat the non-kosher food presented to him by God in a vision is the same refusal Peter would have made to inviting Gentiles into his home, or even more so to entering a Gentile home himself. To do so meant to make oneself unclean – unfit to come into contact with other Jews, to worship God in any form and utterly unfit to come into the presence of God.
- 'The voice spoke again,'— for the message of Jesus to cross over the huge gulf from the Jewish followers of Jesus to the Gentile world it will require persistent supernatural revelation. Angels visit Cornelius. Then Peter gets what appears to him a horrific vision and command from God, not once but three times. This seems to imply that Peter might be tempted to dismiss the vision as preposterous. This is followed by immediate direct instructions from the Holy Spirit to welcome Cornelius' men.
- 'So Peter invited the men to be his guests for the night.'—Peter's willingness to obey the Holy Spirit and to invite these men, against every cultural and religious taboo, into his residence marked a huge transition in the mission of the early church. Even though Peter will play a very small role in actually

bringing the message of Jesus to the Gentiles – this will be Paul’s main focus - his role as the main leader of the church will be crucial to backing the extremely controversial ‘outreach to the Gentiles.’

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* God asks Peter to do something he thought he’d never do in order to forward Jesus’ cause. What might God be asking you to do that you never thought you’d do? Ask God to speak supernaturally so that there would be no mistake about what He wants you to do.
- *Through your six:* As with Cornelius Jesus often speaks supernaturally to those who have yet to experience Jesus’ goodness but are spiritually hungry. Pray that God would give supernatural visions to your six to prepare them for receiving all Jesus has for them.
- *Through our church:* The church’s assumed culture is often the biggest block to welcoming those who’ve never been part of a church. God shows Peter that what he considered essential elements of his faith were actually negotiable for the sake of reaching those in another culture. Pray that God would use our church to reach those outside of church culture in America and around the world.

Tuesday April 6th

Acts 10:24-48

²⁴They arrived in Caesarea the following day. Cornelius was waiting for him and had called together his relatives and close friends to meet Peter. ²⁵As Peter entered his home, Cornelius fell to the floor before him in worship. ²⁶But Peter pulled him up and said, "Stand up! I'm a human being like you!" ²⁷So Cornelius got up, and they talked together and went inside where the others were assembled.

²⁸Peter told them, "You know it is against the Jewish laws for me to come into a Gentile home like this. But God has shown me that I should never think of anyone as impure. ²⁹So I came as soon as I was sent for. Now tell me why you sent for me."

³⁰Cornelius replied, "Four days ago I was praying in my house at three o'clock in the afternoon. Suddenly, a man in dazzling clothes was standing in front of me. ³¹He told me, 'Cornelius, your prayers have been heard, and your gifts to the poor have been noticed by God! ³²Now send some men to Joppa and summon Simon Peter. He is staying in the home of Simon, a leatherworker who lives near the shore.' ³³So I sent for you at once, and it was good of you to come. Now here we are, waiting before God to hear the message the Lord has given you."

³⁴Then Peter replied, "I see very clearly that God doesn't show partiality. ³⁵In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right. ³⁶I'm sure you have heard about the Good News for the people of Israel-- that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷You know what happened all through Judea, beginning in Galilee after John the Baptist began preaching. ³⁸And no doubt you know that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. Then Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the Devil, for God was with him.

³⁹"And we apostles are witnesses of all he did throughout Israel and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by crucifying him, ⁴⁰but God raised him to life three days later. Then God allowed him to appear, ⁴¹not to the general public, but to us whom God had chosen beforehand to be his witnesses. We were those who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴²And he ordered us to preach everywhere and to testify that Jesus is ordained of God to be the judge of all--the living and the dead. ⁴³He is the one all the prophets testified about, saying that everyone who believes in him will have their sins forgiven through his name."

⁴⁴Even as Peter was saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who had heard the message. ⁴⁵The Jewish believers who came with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles, too. ⁴⁶And there could be no doubt about it, for they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter asked, ⁴⁷"Can anyone object to their being baptized, now that they have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?" ⁴⁸So he gave orders for them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Afterward Cornelius asked him to stay with them for several days.

Points of Interest:

- 'Stand up! I'm a human being like you!'—Cornelius is so open and eager for what God is doing that he mistakes the messenger with the message. Peter’s fame as the leader of the new Jesus movement must also proceed him. Peter does not allow his perceived ‘superior’ position one inch of wiggle room. He quickly sets the record straight and accords Cornelius peer status.

- 'I see very clearly that God doesn't show partiality'—Peter goes on to make clear that God is the one that has orchestrated these events--through supernaturally speaking to both of them God has made his impartiality completely clear.
- 'They put him to death by crucifying him'—up till now when speaking of Jesus' death Peter has focused on the *accusations* brought against Jesus. Now he focuses on the *physical killing* of Jesus. The only difference is the audience to whom Peter is speaking. Jews brought the accusations against Jesus and Roman soldiers, just like Cornelius, drove in the nails that killed Jesus. This is a small but important example of contextualization. The cross-cultural message seems to be that everyone shares the blame for Jesus' death (Wagner, 233).
- 'And there could be no doubt about it'—the baptism of the Holy Spirit with its unmistakable outward signs is the event that seals the deal for the Jewish believers present that God in fact did want to reach the Gentiles. Their amazement also reminds us of what an incredibly big deal it was for God's Spirit to be so available and so active.
- 'Can anyone object to their being baptized'—Peter knows what is happening is radical and will raise objections, but he is set on this new course with a firm hand. Water baptism, in addition to being the obvious next step for new believers, is the most concrete and public way for Peter to show everyone there that what has just happened to these Gentiles is more than enough for them to be fully accepted into Jesus' church.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Peter declares once again the good news that despite our complicity in Jesus' death we are 'forgiven in his name.' Reflect on ways you might need Jesus' forgiveness. Pray that in addition to receiving forgiveness you will become a means for others to receive this incredible gift.
- *Through your six:* This story of Peter meeting Cornelius is the longest story in the book of Acts. God seems to spend lots of His time and energy reaching out to people *across cultural barriers* that haven't heard about Jesus or received the gift of the Holy Spirit. In addition to preparing Peter for this God prepares Cornelius who also happens to be a leader in his community. His conversion to Jesus and his experience of being filled by the Holy Spirit is immediately shared by his close friends and relatives and will likely have a larger effect in his town. Pray that your six would be leaders among their networks of friends and families so that when God's gift comes to them it will have a large ripple effect.
- *Through our church:* The event that most impressed the Jewish believers was the way that the gift of the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles. Pray that our church would never take for granted the gift of the Holy Spirit. Pray that we would continue to look to the Holy Spirit to fill us and lead us into praising God.

Wednesday, April 7th

Acts 11

¹Soon the news reached the apostles and other believers in Judea that the Gentiles had received the word of God. ²But when Peter arrived back in Jerusalem, some of the Jewish believers criticized him. ³"You entered the home of Gentiles and even ate with them!" they said.

⁴Then Peter told them exactly what had happened. ⁵"One day in Joppa," he said, "while I was praying, I went into a trance and saw a vision. Something like a large sheet was let down by its four corners from the sky. And it came right down to me. ⁶When I looked inside the sheet, I saw all sorts of small animals, wild animals, reptiles, and birds that we are not allowed to eat. ⁷And I heard a voice say, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat them.'

⁸" 'Never, Lord,' I replied. 'I have never eaten anything forbidden by our Jewish laws.'

⁹"But the voice from heaven came again, 'If God says something is acceptable, don't say it isn't.'

¹⁰"This happened three times before the sheet and all it contained was pulled back up to heaven. ¹¹Just then three men who had been sent from Caesarea arrived at the house where I was staying. ¹²The Holy Spirit told me to go with them and not to worry about their being Gentiles. These six brothers here accompanied me, and we soon arrived at the home of the man who had sent for us. ¹³He told us how an angel had appeared to him in his home and had told him, 'Send messengers to Joppa to find Simon Peter. ¹⁴He will tell you how you and all your household will be saved!'

¹⁵"Well, I began telling them the Good News, but just as I was getting started, the Holy Spirit fell on them, just as he fell on us at the beginning. ¹⁶Then I thought of the Lord's words when he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷And since God gave these Gentiles the same gift he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to argue?"

¹⁸When the others heard this, all their objections were answered and they began praising God. They said, "God has also given the Gentiles the privilege of turning from sin and receiving eternal life."

¹⁹Meanwhile, the believers who had fled from Jerusalem during the persecution after Stephen's death traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch of Syria. They preached the Good News, but only to Jews.

²⁰However, some of the believers who went to Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene began preaching to Gentiles about the Lord Jesus. ²¹The power of the Lord was upon them, and large numbers of these Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord.

²²When the church at Jerusalem heard what had happened, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³When he arrived and saw this proof of God's favor, he was filled with joy, and he encouraged the believers to stay true to the Lord. ²⁴Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and strong in faith. And large numbers of people were brought to the Lord.

²⁵Then Barnabas went on to Tarsus to find Saul. ²⁶When he found him, he brought him back to Antioch. Both of them stayed there with the church for a full year, teaching great numbers of people. (It was there at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians.)

²⁷During this time, some prophets traveled from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸One of them named Agabus stood up in one of the meetings to predict by the Spirit that a great famine was coming upon the entire Roman world. (This was fulfilled during the reign of Claudius.) ²⁹So the believers in Antioch decided to send relief to the brothers and sisters in Judea, everyone giving as much as they could. ³⁰This they did, entrusting their gifts to Barnabas and Saul to take to the elders of the church in Jerusalem.

Points of Interest:

- 'When the others heard this, all their objections were answered'—you may have noticed that Luke, the writer of Acts, here repeats what he has just written. He could have simply written, "Peter told them everything that happened to him." Instead, it seems that Luke wants us to take notice, so he has us reread the whole story. The fact that "all their objections were answered" reminds us that just about everything Peter did was controversial and that only a story like his, with God's obvious supernatural intervention, would overcome the strong cultural-religious barriers between Jews and Gentiles.
- 'God has also given the Gentiles the privilege of turning from sin and receiving eternal life.'—a key to getting past the cultural prejudices of the early followers of Jesus is the deep humility and thankfulness they feel about their experience of God's grace through Jesus. They received the gift of eternal life not because it was their 'right' for belonging to the right religious group, rather a profound privilege that God has given them, a privilege now clearly available to the Gentiles as well.
- 'some of the believers who went to Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene began preaching to Gentiles'—We now see that Peter's experience with Cornelius foreshadows God's plan for the early church to reach the Gentiles. Though there are many of the believers still reaching out to the large Jewish population throughout the Roman Empire, there is a new phenomenon taking place: certain Jewish believers are purposefully reaching out to Gentiles.
- 'Both of them stayed there with the church for a full year'—Barnabas initiates bringing Saul along to help out with the new Gentile church in Antioch. Saul (who will soon be renamed Paul) is at the early stages of his ministry and it seems clear that Barnabas wanted Saul to learn how to minister to Gentiles. Saul's calling to the Gentiles is known (Acts 9:15) but he has not moved forward in it until Barnabas invites him to partner with him.
- 'some prophets traveled from Jerusalem to Antioch'—the gift of prophecy has not been given much attention in the story of the start of the church. The main gifts that have been emphasized have been gifts needed for starting new churches – evangelistic, apostolic and cross-cultural (missionary). We know from Paul's letters that the gift of prophecy was commonly practiced in the early church.
- 'So the believers in Antioch decided to send relief to the brothers and sisters in Judea'—here we see the amazing fruit of the gift of prophecy – both its ability to see into the future but perhaps more importantly its role in bringing encouragement from one part of the church to another. In this case the prophetic word leads the new Gentile believers to reach out to their fellow believers in Judea in the form of money for famine relief. This was done in faith before the famine actually hit!
- 'everyone giving as much as they could'—when God moves in the lives of people attitudes towards money spin 180 degrees. Rather than giving what felt safe to give everyone gave their maximum. Also, they gave with no promptings from Barnabas and Saul. They saw their fellow believers need as their opportunity to take part in God's generosity.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* In this section we see the main characters of the story shift from well-known apostles like Peter to "the believers who fled Jerusalem" and "some of the believers who went to Antioch." What kind of stuff did these unnamed believers do? The same stuff as the apostles. They went to new areas bringing the good news of Jesus and starting new churches. Who are your heroes of faith and what kind of things did God do through them? Ask God to give you the same kind work regardless of your sense of how well known you'll ever become.
- *Through your six:* We are all tempted to live life keeping track of all the things we are owed, all the things that we have "rights to," whether from society or from our close relationships. As we receive more of what God has for us we begin to see our life as a great gift from God. Pray that God would transform your six's mindsets. That they would more and more see life as a gift from God and that they would begin to ask what God intends for their life.
- *Through our church:* Barnabas is a great example of an encourager. He is sent to the fledgling church in Antioch to help them get their church off to a solid start. He also has leader's eyes to bring Saul along in this work. My guess is that Barnabas is a huge reason Saul was able to start moving towards the vision God gave him at his conversion. Pray that our church would grow in the gifts of encouragement and mentoring, that we'd be a place where countless people would be initiating with others to bring them along in the calling God has for them.

Thursday, April 8th

Acts 12:1-24

¹About that time King Herod Agrippa began to persecute some believers in the church. ²He had the apostle James (John's brother) killed with a sword. ³When Herod saw how much this pleased the Jewish leaders, he arrested Peter during the Passover celebration⁴ and imprisoned him, placing him under the guard of four squads of four soldiers each. Herod's intention was to bring Peter out for public trial after the Passover. ⁵But while Peter was in prison, the church prayed very earnestly for him.

⁶The night before Peter was to be placed on trial, he was asleep, chained between two soldiers, with others standing guard at the prison gate. ⁷Suddenly, there was a bright light in the cell, and an angel of the Lord stood before Peter. The angel tapped him on the side to awaken him and said, "Quick! Get up!" And the chains fell off his wrists. ⁸Then the angel told him, "Get dressed and put on your sandals." And he did. "Now put on your coat and follow me," the angel ordered.

⁹So Peter left the cell, following the angel. But all the time he thought it was a vision. He didn't realize it was really happening. ¹⁰They passed the first and second guard posts and came to the iron gate to the street, and this opened to them all by itself. So they passed through and started walking down the street, and then the angel suddenly left him.

¹¹Peter finally realized what had happened. "It's really true!" he said to himself. "The Lord has sent his angel and saved me from Herod and from what the Jews were hoping to do to me!"

¹²After a little thought, he went to the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many were gathered for prayer. ¹³He knocked at the door in the gate, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to open it. ¹⁴When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the door, she ran back inside and told everyone, "Peter is standing at the door!"

¹⁵"You're out of your mind," they said. When she insisted, they decided, "It must be his angel."

¹⁶Meanwhile, Peter continued knocking. When they finally went out and opened the door, they were amazed. ¹⁷He motioned for them to quiet down and told them what had happened and how the Lord had led him out of jail. "Tell James and the other brothers what happened," he said. And then he went to another place.

¹⁸At dawn, there was a great commotion among the soldiers about what had happened to Peter. ¹⁹Herod Agrippa ordered a thorough search for him. When he couldn't be found, Herod interrogated the guards and sentenced them to death. Afterward Herod left Judea to stay in Caesarea for a while.

²⁰Now Herod was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon. So they sent a delegation to make peace with him because their cities were dependent upon Herod's country for their food. They made friends with Blastus, Herod's personal assistant, ²¹and an appointment with Herod was granted. When the day arrived, Herod put on his royal robes, sat on his throne, and made a speech to them. ²²The people gave him a great ovation, shouting, "It is the voice of a god, not of a man!"

²³Instantly, an angel of the Lord struck Herod with a sickness, because he accepted the people's worship instead of giving the glory to God. So he was consumed with worms and died.

²⁴But God's Good News was spreading rapidly, and there were many new believers.

Points of Interest:

- 'King Herod Agrippa began to persecute some believers in the church'—there are 4 generations of King Herod's mentioned in the New Testament. This Herod is the grandson of "Herod the great," the King who tried to have the baby Jesus killed and the son of Herod Antipas who had John the Baptist beheaded. His son King Agrippa will face off against Paul in Acts 25. The Herod's were the official rulers under the Roman Empire over Judea. Despite their Roman allegiance politically they also wanted to be accepted by the Jewish leaders and people. The Herod's had converted to Judaism and as proselytes were accorded every Jewish right except the right to rule. As we will see their "illegitimate status" in the eyes of the Jewish people was a big reason for their persecution of the early church. King Herod Agrippa hoped to win the people's favor by persecuting this new religious sect.
- 'But while Peter was in prison, the church prayed very earnestly for him.'—This is the key line to understanding this whole section. (Wagner, 265). The church's response to pray for Peter when he was arrested is an example of what is today called intercessory prayer. This is the believers' only response to Peter's imprisonment and it gives us a picture of what is really taking place between King Herod Agrippa and the early church – a spiritual power encounter.
- 'an angel of the Lord stood before Peter'—Peter was under extremely heavy security. The connection between the believer's prayers and the appearance of the angel to free Peter is unmistakable.
- "You're out of your mind,"—the believer's experience of seeing intercession really work is still new. This is a huge miracle that their prayers' help bring about, at the same time they are clearly in awe of God's power to defeat the most powerful enemies.
- 'he was consumed with worms and died.' This section started with Herod killing James, one of the twelve apostles, and attempting to do away with Peter. It ends with Herod dying at the hands of an angel. His acceptance of the people's worship as a 'god' indicates the extent to which Herod had come under what many believe to be demonic oppression. Allowing himself to be exalted as a god mimics Satan's primal rebellion of equating himself to God. One read on Herod's death is that his failure to kill Peter and stem the tide of the growing Jesus movement left him useless to the demonic forces and vulnerable to a sudden death.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Praying fervently for God to work is a major part of following Jesus. What we see with our physical eyes is not the whole picture. There is a large spiritual battle taking place over the furthering of the work of Jesus. We learn two lessons from how the believers prayed for Peter--pray fervently and pray for specific results. Ask God for something you can pray for in this way.
- *Through your six:* Herod is an extreme case of what seems to be demonic oppression. What a terrible end to his life. Though Herod's is an extreme case, every one of us does and will encounter spiritual oppression in our lives. Even as you have been praying for God to work through the lives of your six pray that God would free them from spiritual oppression.
- *Through our church:* As we move forward as a church trying to bring all the benefits of Jesus to this area we will encounter significant spiritual opposition. Pray that we will become like those believers praying for Peter – fervent and effective!

Friday, April 9th

Acts 12:25-13:12

²⁵When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission in Jerusalem, they returned to Antioch, taking John Mark with them.

¹Among the prophets and teachers of the church at Antioch of Syria were Barnabas, Simeon (called "the black man"), Lucius (from Cyrene), Manaen (the childhood companion of King Herod Antipas), and Saul.

²One day as these men were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Dedicate Barnabas and Saul for the special work I have for them." ³So after more fasting and prayer, the men laid their hands on them and sent them on their way.

⁴Sent out by the Holy Spirit, Saul and Barnabas went down to the seaport of Seleucia and then sailed for the island of Cyprus. ⁵There, in the town of Salamis, they went to the Jewish synagogues and preached the word of God. (John Mark went with them as their assistant.)

⁶Afterward they preached from town to town across the entire island until finally they reached Paphos, where they met a Jewish sorcerer, a false prophet named Bar-Jesus. ⁷He had attached himself to the governor, Sergius Paulus, a man of considerable insight and understanding. The governor invited Barnabas and Saul to visit him, for he wanted to hear the word of God. ⁸But Elymas, the sorcerer (as his name means in Greek), interfered and urged the governor to pay no attention to what Saul and Barnabas said. He was trying to turn the governor away from the Christian faith.

⁹Then Saul, also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked the sorcerer in the eye and said, ¹⁰"You son of the Devil, full of every sort of trickery and villainy, enemy of all that is good, will you never stop perverting the true ways of the Lord? ¹¹And now the Lord has laid his hand of punishment upon you, and you will be stricken awhile with blindness." Instantly mist and darkness fell upon him, and he began wandering around begging for someone to take his hand and lead him. ¹²When the governor saw what had happened, he believed and was astonished at what he learned about the Lord.

Points of Interest:

- 'the Holy Spirit said, "Dedicate Barnabas and Saul for the special work I have for them."'—The Holy Spirit will direct us when we seek him with others through prayer and fasting. This is the example set by this group of leaders in Antioch. Later, if there is any question about why Saul and Barnabas went out, they can all look back to that clear instruction from the Holy Spirit.
- 'He had attached himself to the governor, Sergius Paulus,'—what kind of power did this sorcerer have? It seems that his attachment to the highest political power in the region probably reflects on a high level of spiritual backing.
- 'He was trying to turn the governor away from the Christian faith.'—His aim was demonic and strategic: he not only wanted to stop the advance of the gospel, he also wanted to turn the governor against Saul and Barnabas in order to prevent the whole region from experiencing the good news.
- 'Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked the sorcerer in the eye'—this is a direct power encounter not only between Paul and the sorcerer but also between the Holy Spirit and Satan. By looking him in the eyes Paul looks at the demons possessing the sorcerer.
- 'you will be stricken awhile with blindness'—the precision of these words and their immediate effect speak of the Holy Spirit's direct involvement in this encounter and the obvious superiority of the Holy Spirit's power. The governor needs no more convincing.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* During this 40 days of faith as you ask Jesus what he wants to do through you, consider gathering with some friends to pray, worship and fast in order to hear clear direction for your next steps. Ask God if there is anything he wants you to do today? If you hear something try doing it.
- *Through your six:* The governor was clearly a seeker. His desire for spiritual connection got him mixed up with the wrong sort of power, but to his credit he was quick to switch allegiances when shown the obvious supremacy of the Holy Spirit. Through the governor's decision to follow Jesus many in Paphos were given a chance to follow Jesus. Pray that your six would encounter the greater power of the Holy Spirit (compared to any other spiritual or worldly power) and that through this encounter they would become conduits for God's power to many others.
- *Through our church:* Through the Holy Spirit's leading, Paul is able to quickly address the spiritual stronghold of the whole area embodied in this one sorcerer. Pray that we as a church would grow in the area of spiritual discernment so that we could, in Jesus name, tear down those demonic powers that hold sway over large areas and groups of people.

Saturday, April 10th

Acts 13:13-52

¹³Now Paul and those with him left Paphos by ship for Pamphylia, landing at the port town of Perga. There John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem. ¹⁴But Barnabas and Paul traveled inland to Antioch of Pisidia. On the Sabbath they went to the synagogue for the services. ¹⁵After the usual readings from the books of Moses and from the Prophets, those in charge of the service sent them this message: "Brothers, if you have

any word of encouragement for us, come and give it!"

¹⁶So Paul stood, lifted his hand to quiet them, and started speaking. "People of Israel," he said, "and you devout Gentiles who fear the God of Israel, listen to me.

¹⁷"The God of this nation of Israel chose our ancestors and made them prosper in Egypt. Then he powerfully led them out of their slavery. ¹⁸He put up with them through forty years of wandering around in the wilderness. ¹⁹Then he destroyed seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to Israel as an inheritance. ²⁰All this took about 450 years. After that, judges ruled until the time of Samuel the prophet. ²¹Then the people begged for a king, and God gave them Saul son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, who reigned for forty years. ²²But God removed him from the kingship and replaced him with David, a man about whom God said, 'David son of Jesse is a man after my own heart, for he will do everything I want him to.'

²³"And it is one of King David's descendants, Jesus, who is God's promised Savior of Israel! ²⁴But before he came, John the Baptist preached the need for everyone in Israel to turn from sin and turn to God and be baptized. ²⁵As John was finishing his ministry he asked, 'Do you think I am the Messiah? No! But he is coming soon--and I am not even worthy to be his slave.'

²⁶"Brothers--you sons of Abraham, and also all of you devout Gentiles who fear the God of Israel--this salvation is for us! ²⁷The people in Jerusalem and their leaders fulfilled prophecy by condemning Jesus to death. They didn't recognize him or realize that he is the one the prophets had written about, though they hear the prophets' words read every Sabbath. ²⁸They found no just cause to execute him, but they asked Pilate to have him killed anyway.

²⁹"When they had fulfilled all the prophecies concerning his death, they took him down from the cross and placed him in a tomb. ³⁰But God raised him from the dead! ³¹And he appeared over a period of many days to those who had gone with him from Galilee to Jerusalem--these are his witnesses to the people of Israel.

³²"And now Barnabas and I are here to bring you this Good News. God's promise to our ancestors has come true in our own time, ³³in that God raised Jesus. This is what the second psalm is talking about when it says concerning Jesus,

'You are my Son. Today I have become your Father.'

³⁴For God had promised to raise him from the dead, never again to die. This is stated in the Scripture that says, 'I will give you the sacred blessings I promised to David.'³⁵ Another psalm explains more fully, saying, 'You will not allow your Holy One to rot in the grave.'³⁶ Now this is not a reference to David, for after David had served his generation according to the will of God, he died and was buried, and his body decayed. ³⁷No, it was a reference to someone else--someone whom God raised and whose body did not decay.

³⁸"Brothers, listen! In this man Jesus there is forgiveness for your sins. ³⁹Everyone who believes in him is freed from all guilt and declared right with God--something the Jewish law could never do. ⁴⁰Be careful! Don't let the prophets' words apply to you. For they said,

⁴¹ 'Look, you mockers,
be amazed and die!
For I am doing something in your own day,
something you wouldn't believe
even if someone told you about it.' "

⁴²As Paul and Barnabas left the synagogue that day, the people asked them to return again and speak about these things the next week. ⁴³Many Jews and godly converts to Judaism who worshiped at the synagogue followed Paul and Barnabas, and the two men urged them, "By God's grace, remain faithful."

⁴⁴The following week almost the entire city turned out to hear them preach the word of the Lord. ⁴⁵But when the Jewish leaders saw the crowds, they were jealous; so they slandered Paul and argued against whatever he said.

⁴⁶Then Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and declared, "It was necessary that this Good News from God be given first to you Jews. But since you have rejected it and judged yourselves unworthy of eternal life--well, we will offer it to Gentiles. ⁴⁷For this is as the Lord commanded us when he said,

'I have made you a light to the Gentiles,
to bring salvation to the farthest corners of the earth.'

⁴⁸When the Gentiles heard this, they were very glad and thanked the Lord for his message; and all who were appointed to eternal life became believers. ⁴⁹So the Lord's message spread throughout that region. ⁵⁰Then the Jewish leaders stirred up both the influential religious women and the leaders of the city, and they incited a mob against Paul and Barnabas and ran them out of town. ⁵¹But they shook off the dust of their

feet against them and went to the city of Iconium.⁵² And the believers were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

Points of Interest:

- 'Brothers--you sons of Abraham, and also all of you devout Gentiles who fear the God of Israel--this salvation is for us!' Even though Paul and Barnabas have entered into what is present-day Turkey, a long way from Jerusalem, they begin their ministry in the synagogue. This continues as a pattern for Paul for several reasons. First, he believed theologically that it was his first priority to tell the Jewish people of the good news. Second, this made strategic sense since he himself was Jewish and would get a quick reception. Third, it was also strategic because he was able to preach to the 'God-fearers', as we learned earlier, the most open people to Paul's message about Jesus. These Gentiles would then open the door to the rest of the Gentile population.
- 'Everyone who believes in him is freed from all guilt and declared right with God--something the Jewish law could never do.'—Up to this point in his sermon Paul has only focused on how Jesus completed the promises God had given the Jewish people, this is a big deal but not as controversial as saying that everyone can get free of their sins in a way that did not require the Jewish law. Within Judaism there was a yearly way to deal with sin – the Day of Atonement, but it was something that needed to be repeated every year. Paul's declaration meant that Gentiles could receive forgiveness without becoming Jewish. This was incredibly good news to the Gentile God-fearers since they were already eager to follow the God of Israel but were held back by the rigorous requirements.
- 'the people asked them to return again and speak about these things the next week.'—in other translations 'the people' clearly refers to the Gentile God-fearers. They seem the most excited about Paul's message.
- 'When the Gentiles heard this, they were very glad'—these are mostly regular Gentiles, not just the God-fearers. They show up to hear Paul and Barnabas most likely because during the preceding week Paul and Barnabas have been performing miracles and wonders.
- 'So the Lord's message spread throughout that region.'—Paul's strategy is clearly working. There is a growing people movement developing among the Gentiles.
- 'they shook off the dust of their feet against them'—Paul is following Jesus' instructions on what to do when a people reject the message about him. It also is a final way to send a clear signal to the fledgling Gentile church that they have no need to associate with the Jewish establishment that has rejected the good news of Jesus. This does not mean that Paul gives up on preaching in synagogues. He continues to go first to preach to the Jewish community in every city he enters and many Jewish people do follow Jesus. In general, it is the Jewish establishment along with Gentile power holders that rejects Paul and his message.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Some of your six may already be God-fearers, and, given an opportunity, they might eagerly want to hear more about Jesus. Pray for Paul-like strategies and then brainstorm ways you might invite them to your small group, to a service or to an event.
- *Through your six:* Your six, in turn, probably have a number of friends that may have little connection to anything of God. Pray for that time when your six get excited about Jesus and they begin to invite their friends to experience Jesus. Pray that there would be a multiplicative effect. Pray that when people hear the good news of Jesus they would "be glad and thank the Lord for his message" just like the Gentiles who heard Paul for the first time.
- *Through our church:* It is so easy to create neat categories of who is in and who is out when it comes to religion. The Christian church today does in many ways similar to the Jewish establishment in Paul's day. We often create a long list of requirements for people to sign-off on when they come in our doors. What does it look like for us to employ Paul's strategy of finding ways to communicate the good news of Jesus in such a way that the largest numbers of unchurched people hear the message? Pray that we would continue to find these strategies. Also, at the next church service you attend take time to welcome someone you don't know.

Sunday April 11th

Acts 14

¹In Iconium, Paul and Barnabas went together to the synagogue and preached with such power that a great number of both Jews and Gentiles believed. ²But the Jews who spurned God's message stirred up distrust among the Gentiles against Paul and Barnabas, saying all sorts of evil things about them. ³The apostles

stayed there a long time, preaching boldly about the grace of the Lord. The Lord proved their message was true by giving them power to do miraculous signs and wonders. ⁴But the people of the city were divided in their opinion about them. Some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles.

⁵A mob of Gentiles and Jews, along with their leaders, decided to attack and stone them. ⁶When the apostles learned of it, they fled for their lives. They went to the region of Lycaonia, to the cities of Lystra and Derbe and the surrounding area, ⁷and they preached the Good News there.

⁸While they were at Lystra, Paul and Barnabas came upon a man with crippled feet. He had been that way from birth, so he had never walked. ⁹He was listening as Paul preached, and Paul noticed him and realized he had faith to be healed. ¹⁰So Paul called to him in a loud voice, "Stand up!" And the man jumped to his feet and started walking.

¹¹When the listening crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in their local dialect, "These men are gods in human bodies!" ¹²They decided that Barnabas was the Greek god Zeus and that Paul, because he was the chief speaker, was Hermes. ¹³The temple of Zeus was located on the outskirts of the city. The priest of the temple and the crowd brought oxen and wreaths of flowers, and they prepared to sacrifice to the apostles at the city gates.

¹⁴But when Barnabas and Paul heard what was happening, they tore their clothing in dismay and ran out among the people, shouting, ¹⁵"Friends, why are you doing this? We are merely human beings like yourselves! We have come to bring you the Good News that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them. ¹⁶In earlier days he permitted all the nations to go their own ways, ¹⁷but he never left himself without a witness. There were always his reminders, such as sending you rain and good crops and giving you food and joyful hearts." ¹⁸But even so, Paul and Barnabas could scarcely restrain the people from sacrificing to them.

¹⁹Now some Jews arrived from Antioch and Iconium and turned the crowds into a murderous mob. They stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, apparently dead. ²⁰But as the believers stood around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he left with Barnabas for Derbe.

²¹After preaching the Good News in Derbe and making many disciples, Paul and Barnabas returned again to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch of Pisidia, ²²where they strengthened the believers. They encouraged them to continue in the faith, reminding them that they must enter into the Kingdom of God through many tribulations. ²³Paul and Barnabas also appointed elders in every church and prayed for them with fasting, turning them over to the care of the Lord, in whom they had come to trust. ²⁴Then they traveled back through Pisidia to Pamphylia. ²⁵They preached again in Perga, then went on to Attalia.

²⁶Finally, they returned by ship to Antioch of Syria, where their journey had begun and where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. ²⁷Upon arriving in Antioch, they called the church together and reported about their trip, telling all that God had done and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles, too. ²⁸And they stayed there with the believers in Antioch for a long time.

Points of Interest:

- 'The Lord proved their message was true by giving them power to do miraculous signs and wonders'—in the Western world even if we do believe that supernatural healings and wonders can happen we don't often think of signs and wonders as proving the message. We are so used to believing in abstract theories as a society that we can make this mistake with our faith. God wants to use signs and wonders to prove himself.
- 'Paul noticed him and realized he had faith to be healed.'—Faith often, though not always, plays an important role in healings. Paul sees this man's faith while he is preaching to a crowd. He wants to see the Lord prove his message especially since he is with people who have little knowledge of the God of Israel.
- 'We are merely human beings like yourselves!'—The demonstration of God's power is almost too effective. The people's only category for power is their pantheon of gods. They are used to sacrificing to their local gods in order to gain security and prosperity. In their experience such a big miracle could only be attributed to the very highest-ranking gods. The issues are so different here than in reaching the Jews and the God-fearers. Paul attempts to contextualize the good news for these completely pagan Gentiles, and appears to have some success. By the time they leave there are a number of believers.
- 'some Jews arrived from Antioch and Iconium and turned the crowds into a murderous mob.'—As the success of the mission grows so does the persecution. There is now an active group traveling to

cities many miles away to try and kill Paul and Barnabas. This is evidence for the region wide influence they are beginning to have.

- 'They stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, apparently dead.'—its unclear from the text if Paul actually died or not. Either way, after being stoned and appearing dead, a number of believers surrounded Paul and then witnessed him getting up and returning to the city. At minimum this is an amazing healing and a sign of the Holy Spirit's close presence in Paul's life.
- 'Paul and Barnabas returned again to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch of Pisidia,'—they were almost killed in all of these cities. What are they doing going back? Besides great courage they are also motivated by the new believers they left in each city. This wider area was called Galatia and we know that soon after this trip Paul wrote his first letter to the Galatians. What started in Jerusalem 15 years before, as a completely Jewish movement, had now truly become a multi-cultural movement with clear evidence that the new Gentile church was not only started but also rapidly multiplying.
- 'Paul and Barnabas also appointed elders in every church'—when are people ready to lead? It seems Paul and Barnabas don't waste much time raising up indigenous leadership among these young churches. Most likely in each city there are networks of house churches that have begun, rather than one large church that met in one place. We know from the content of the letter of Galatians that these new leaders make many mistakes. Paul does not seem to regret this choice and probably feels that this in fact is the best way to train up new leaders – through actual experience.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* As we hear God's voice and follow his direction for our lives there are two things that are certain. We'll discover incredible rewards and we'll run into trouble. Pray for God's courage to fill you so that God can work greater works through you even in the face of hardship. Consider fasting from food for a meal a day or for a whole day once a week for the rest of the 40 Days. Fasting is a way to train us in depending on God for life rather than the comforts of food.
- *Through your six:* In Paul and Barnabas' ministry the transition time from people coming to know Jesus to when they were given leadership was short, probably less than a year. Some of your six may be leading others towards Jesus in a year. Pray in faith for God to bless this work in their lives.
- *Through our church:* What we are learning from Acts is that the Cambridge Vineyard is really a multitude of smaller churches networked together. Our small groups more closely resemble the early church movement's structure. Because of persecution Paul and Barnabas had to quickly turn over leadership to young new converts. This turned out to be one of the best leadership development tools ever. If you are not in a small group, seriously consider joining one. If you are in a small group, ask your small group leader how you can help lead. If you are a small group leader, ask God to help you raise up new leaders.

Week 3 Family Devotional Ideas:

- With older kids: This week's Acts passages record the amazing spread of the gospel to the Gentiles and the first missionary journeys of Barnabas and Paul.
 - Continue mapping the spread of Jesus' followers throughout the Mediterranean region particularly starting at Acts 13, using your wall map created in weeks 1 and 2.
 - Talk with your family about relationships with people you know who are different than you – particularly in cultural or spiritual backgrounds. Highlight the fact that before God showed Peter in a vision that he was supposed to befriend Cornelius the Roman, Peter would have NEVER associated with him (it was the extreme of an "in" and "out" crowd).
 - If you had people over for dinner that were rejected by all your other friends what kinds of things would you find it easy to talk about? What might feel more difficult to share in common? Be honest and share – what judgments about other people might you have to "get over" in order to get excited that God loves them as much as he does you? Pray together "God, help me see this person/these people as you see them and welcome them into my life as you did."
- With younger kids: Last week Paul, a man who became one of the biggest heroes of Jesus' team, was saved from being a mean and terrible murderer! This week, two men who should hate each other end up being friends because of how God talked to each of them. God's love through Jesus

can now be spread to all people. Act out together as a family the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10.

- Pick parts to play (some might have to double up) – Cornelius, God's angel/God's voice/God's Spirit, Cornelius' servants, Peter, other Jewish believers.
- Make simple props to help understand what's happening – a piece of tape dividing two sides of the room to start off, a blanket with stuffed animals for Peter's vision, water for baptism.
- Make 2 cards each that say "God's love (draw a heart)," "The Holy Spirit* (draw a flame)," and "God's peace (draw a dove)" that Peter and Jewish believers hold and at the end of the story hand one copy each to Cornelius to show how God broke down walls to spread his love between the two people groups.
- Exercise: Understanding 3 Persons in 1 God: 1) Explain that the Holy Spirit is God Himself who lives inside of us, the same God as God the Father and Jesus! 2) In the kitchen, take an ice cube. Place it into a cup and microwave it until it melts. Then watch as the hot liquid water steams up from the cup. The ice cube, liquid water, and steam are all made from water but exist in 3 forms. Like steam, the Holy Spirit can travel everywhere and touch people unlike the liquid water (Jesus on earth). This is how God lives in all people who love him anywhere in the world.