

The Acts of the Apostles – a daily Bible guide

Week Three

Week 3 Optional Family Activities

At home:

- **With younger kids:** If your kids like play acting and costumes, you might act out together the drama of how Cornelius and Peter, two men who should hate each other, end up being friends because of how God talked to each of them. The story is in Acts 10.
 - Roles include: Cornelius, God's angel/God's voice/God's Spirit, Cornelius' servants, Peter, other Jewish believers.
 - Simple props to help understand what's happening could include: 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 sets of three cards 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.
- **With older kids:** This week's Acts passages record the spread of the gospel beyond the Jewish culture and the first journeys of Barnabas and Paul. Continue mapping the spread of Jesus' followers throughout the Mediterranean region, particularly starting at Acts 13.
- **Conversation topics with older kids might include:** How do you relate to people you know who are different from 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 NEVER have associated with him. 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? 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? You might pray together: 'God, help me see this person/these people as you see them and welcome them into my life as you did.'

Monday, March 4th

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

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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. Non-Jews converting to Judaism was quite an ordeal, including 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 non-Jews who were strongly attracted to the Jewish code of ethics and belief in one God. These "God-fearers" did their best to adhere to the food laws and to observing the Sabbath--the Jewish day of rest--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. Over the course of Acts, we'll see that of all the people, Jews and non-Jews 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 non-Jews in Peter's time and place. Peter's strong refusal to eat the non-kosher food presented to him by God in a vision would be the expected pious reaction of any Jew. Peter would feel similarly about inviting non-Jews into his home, or even more so to entering a non-Jewish home himself. To do so would be unthinkable; it would make him ritually unclean, that is, unfit to come into contact with other Jews, to attend synagogue, or to worship in the Temple.
- 'The voice spoke again,'— for the message of Jesus to cross over the huge gulf between the Jewish followers of Jesus and the wider world, it requires repeated supernatural revelation.

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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 marks a huge transition in the mission of the early church. Even though Peter will end up playing a very small part in actually bringing the message of Jesus beyond the Jews, this experience of his, along with his status as the main leader of the church, will lend crucial support to Saul and others whose main work will be in a non-Jewish context.

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 to you in a way that leaves little room for misunderstanding.
- *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 let them know that God sees them and has good things in store for them.
- *Through our church:* God shows Peter that what he considered essential elements of his faith were actually negotiable for the sake of welcoming and blessing those in another culture. Pray that God would use open our eyes to ways we can change how we do things to include those outside of church culture in America and around the world.

Tuesday, March 5th

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

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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. Maybe, Peter's fame as the leader of the new Jesus movement also proceed him. Peter quickly sets the record straight. Under God, he is no different from Cornelius; like Cornelius, Peter is just a man who needs Jesus' help.
- 'into a Gentile home like this'--*gentile* is the Jewish term for non-Jews. It literally means, 'the nations,' but it also usually has something of a negative connotation, along the lines of, 'the others,' or, 'the outsiders,' or 'the rabble.'
- '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--the people they might think of as rabble, but whom God apparently sees as 'the rest of the world.' Their amazement also reminds us of what an incredibly big deal it was for God's Spirit to be so available and so active.

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■ '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:* In addition to preparing Peter, the leader of the overwhelmingly Jewish Jesus-followers, for this, God prepares Cornelius who is likewise a leader in his own 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 Jewish believers who accompany Peter are amazed once again at the generosity of God, who continues to generously give the great gift of the Holy Spirit to a wider and wider circle of people. 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, March 6th

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

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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 non-Jews.
- '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, but rather a profound privilege that God has given them as a gift, a privilege now clearly available to other people 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 is just the beginning of God's plan for the early church to embrace non-Jews on a broad scale. Though there are many of believers still reaching out to the large Jewish population throughout the Roman Empire, there is a new

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phenomenon taking place: certain Jewish believers are purposefully reaching out to people who aren't Jews.

- 'Both of them stayed there with the church for a full year'—Barnabas initiates bringing Saul along to help out with the new non-Jewish church in Antioch. Saul (who will soon be renamed Paul) is at the early stages of his ministry and it seems clear that Barnabas wants Saul to learn how to work with non-Jews. Saul's calling to the nations is known (Acts 9:15) but he has not moved forward in it until Barnabas invites him to be his partner.
- 'some prophets traveled from Jerusalem to Antioch'—the more established church in Jerusalem sends some people to the newer Antiochene church, to train them in a supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit in which they don't have much experience yet. *Prophecy* is the offering of supernatural insight into a situation. Here, the prophecy even gives insight into the future.
- 'So the believers in Antioch decided to send relief to the brothers and sisters in Judea'—the believers in Judea send people to help the Antiochene believers spiritually. In response, the Antiochene believers send money to help out their new Judean friends. Amazingly, they send the money in response to a famine that hasn't even hit yet. They are so convinced of the truth of this prophecy that they're willing to put money on it.
- 'everyone giving as much as they could'—when God moves in the lives of people, attitudes toward money spin 180 degrees. Rather than giving what felt safe to give, everyone gives their maximum.

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 of 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. As the people in this passage receive more of what God has for them, they begin instead to see how much they have to give. Pray that your six would experience God's generosity, and that it would overflow to the people around them.
- *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, March 7th

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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 four generations of King Herods mentioned in the New Testament. This Herod is the grandson of

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'Herod the great,' 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 Herods were what the Romans called 'client kings'; the Roman Empire essentially outsourced the government of Judea to them. As much as their authority depended on their Roman connections, it was also extremely important to the Herods to be popular with their Jewish subjects, who tended to look at them as unwelcome outsiders. King Herod Agrippa hopes to win his Jewish subjects' favor by persecuting this new religious sect.

- 'But while Peter was in prison, the church prayed very earnestly for him.'—the believers don't look at this as merely a political problem. To their eyes, it's a spiritual conflict. Who is really in charge here, God or Agrippa? God has told Peter to tell people about Jesus; Agrippa is trying to stop him. The believers ask God to rule in Peter's favor.
- 'You're out of your mind'—they don't quite believe that God has answered the very prayers they've been praying. God is still surprising them by just how responsive, good, and powerful God is.
- 'he was consumed with worms and died'—Herod Agrippa just can't keep up in his competition with God. By the end of the story, Jesus' mission is still going forward, Peter is free and alive and well, and Herod Agrippa is no more.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* 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:* What a terrible end to Herod Agrippa's life. It's as if Herod is playing out of his league, and he gets chewed up and spit out because of that. Pray for your six, that they wouldn't become casualties of the larger spiritual conflict that might be happening around them.
- *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, March 8th

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

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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.'"—what Saul and Barnabas are being sent out to do turns out to be pretty bold. I imagine it was comforting to them to know that it wasn't their idea, but the Holy Spirit's.
- 'He had attached himself to the governor, Sergius Paulus,'—like with Herod Agrippa in yesterday's passage, I think we set yet again a spiritual struggle at work in the political realm. Will Sergius listen to and give influence to the Holy Spirit in his life and in his governing, or to this other--seemingly more destructive--spirit instead?
- 'He was trying to turn the governor away from the Christian faith.'—the stakes are larger than just one man. If Elymas succeeds in dissuading Sergius from listening to Saul and Barnabas, a whole region may be closed off from hearing Jesus' good news.
- 'Saul, also known as Paul'--Paul picks up a nickname here. It's what he'll be known as from here on.
- 'Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked the sorcerer in the eye'—Paul takes Elymas' challenge head on. Once again, like with Herod and Peter, we will see who has the greater spiritual power.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* During this Leap 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 is clearly spiritually interested. His desire for spiritual connection initially gets him mixed up with spiritual power that means him no good, but to his credit he is

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quick to switch allegiances when he sees the Holy Spirit's goodness and power. Through the governor's decision to follow Jesus, many in Paphos are 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:* Paul is able to see through the schemes of a spiritual power trying to hold back an entire region from receiving the goodness Jesus has in store for those people. Pray that we as a church would grow in the area of spiritual discernment so that we too could, in Jesus' name, remove any spiritual impediments to the Holy Spirit pouring out goodness on our city and region.

Saturday, March 9th

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

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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."⁴⁴ The 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. ⁵²And 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

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a pattern for Paul for several reasons. First, he believes theologically that it's his first priority to tell the Jewish people of the good news. Second, this makes strategic sense since he himself is Jewish and can get a quick reception. Third, it is also strategic because he is able to meet the local 'God-fearers,' who are, as we learned earlier, the most open people to Paul's message about Jesus. These non-Jews can then open the door to the rest of the non-Jewish 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 completes 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 does not require the Jewish law. Within Judaism there is a yearly way to deal with sin – the Day of Atonement, but it is something that needs to be repeated every year. Paul's declaration means that non-Jews can receive forgiveness without becoming Jewish at all; they can skip over the whole yearly Day of Atonement part. This is incredibly good news to the God-fearers since they were already eager to follow the God of Israel but have been held back by the rigorous ritual requirements of conversion to Judaism.
- 'the people asked them to return again and speak about these things the next week.'—in other translations 'the people' clearly refers to the non-Jewish God-fearers. They seem the most excited about Paul's message.
- 'When the Gentiles heard this, they were very glad'—I think Luke is summarizing the spread of the message to average, everyday, non-Jewish citizens, not just the God-fearers.
- 'So the Lord's message spread throughout that region.'—Paul's strategy is clearly working. There is a growing people movement developing among people without any Jewish connections..
- 'they shook off the dust of their feet against them'—Paul is following Jesus' instructions on what to do when people reject the message about him. It also is a final way to send a clear signal to the fledgling non-Jewish 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, right along with the non-Jewish stakeholders, who reject Paul and his message.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Some of your six may already be in a similar place to this passage's God-fearers; they have been interested in God for some time, but have found the cultural barriers too high to get over. They might eagerly want to hear more about Jesus, if it comes without unnecessary trappings. Pray for Paul-like ways of talking about God, Jesus, faith, and spiritual things with your six.
- *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

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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 in this passage.

- *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 is 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.

Sunday, March 10th

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.

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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’—Paul and Barnabas don’t just make good arguments. By the help of the Holy Spirit, they demonstrate what this good news they’re telling can actually do in a person’s life.
- ‘Paul noticed him and realized he had faith to be healed.’—faith often, though not always, plays an important role in healings. Paul picks this man out of the crowd as someone who especially has faith in what Paul is preaching. It seems like having this model of faith is particularly helpful here, where the people have pretty much no knowledge of the God of Israel. A sermon simply based on unpacking the Jewish scriptures would be particularly inadequate here.
- ‘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 working with the Jews or even the God-fearers.
- ‘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 opposition. There is now an active group traveling to cities many miles away to try and kill Paul and Barnabas. This is evidence of the region wide influence they are beginning to have.
- ‘They stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, apparently dead.’—it’s unclear whether Paul actually dies or only almost dies. Either way, it’s pretty amazing that he simply gets back up and goes back to work. By the Holy Spirit’s help, nothing can get in Paul’s way.
- ‘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? Apparently, they see it as God’s job to protect their lives--as God did indeed do at Lystra. Their job is to make sure that Jesus’ good news firmly takes root in this entirely non-Jewish region. What started in Jerusalem 15 years before as a completely Jewish movement, has now truly become a rapidly multiplying, multi-cultural movement. Paul and Barnabas want to make sure that the momentum continues.

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- ‘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. We know from the content of the letter of Galatians—a letter from Paul to this very group of churches-- 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:* If today’s passage is any indication, as we hear God’s voice and follow God’s 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. If you haven’t been doing so already, 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’ work, the transition time from people coming to know Jesus to when they are given leadership is short, probably less than a year. Who knows? 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:* Because of the nature of their mission and because of the opposition they faced, Paul and Barnabas quickly turn over leadership to relatively new members of their community and relatively recent followers of Jesus. This turns out to be one of the best leadership development tools ever. In our church, small groups are a great place for a similar quick turnaround in taking on leadership. 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.