

40 Days through Acts

Week Four

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 12th

Acts 15:1-35

¹While Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch of Syria, some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the Christians : "Unless you keep the ancient Jewish custom of circumcision taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." ²Paul and Barnabas, disagreeing with them, argued forcefully and at length. Finally, Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem, accompanied by some local believers, to talk to the apostles and elders about this question. ³The church sent the delegates to Jerusalem, and they stopped along the way in Phoenicia and Samaria to visit the believers. They told them--much to everyone's joy--that the Gentiles, too, were being converted.

⁴When they arrived in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas were welcomed by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. They reported on what God had been doing through their ministry. ⁵But then some of the men who had been Pharisees before their conversion stood up and declared that all Gentile converts must be circumcised and be required to follow the law of Moses.

⁶So the apostles and church elders got together to decide this question. ⁷At the meeting, after a long discussion, Peter stood and addressed them as follows: "Brothers, you all know that God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles so that they could hear the Good News and believe. ⁸God, who knows people's hearts, confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he gave him to us. ⁹He made no distinction between us and them, for he also cleansed their hearts through faith. ¹⁰Why are you now questioning God's way by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? ¹¹We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the special favor of the Lord Jesus."

¹²There was no further discussion, and everyone listened as Barnabas and Paul told about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

¹³When they had finished, James stood and said, "Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴Peter has told you about the time God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for himself. ¹⁵And this conversion of Gentiles agrees with what the prophets predicted. For instance, it is written:

¹⁶

Afterward I will return,
and I will restore the fallen kingdom of David.
From the ruins I will rebuild it,
and I will restore it,

¹⁷

so that the rest of humanity might find the Lord,
including the Gentiles--
all those I have called to be mine.
This is what the Lord says,

¹⁸

he who made these things known long ago.'

¹⁹And so my judgment is that we should stop troubling the Gentiles who turn to God, ²⁰except that we should write to them and tell them to abstain from eating meat sacrificed to idols, from sexual immorality, and from consuming blood or eating the meat of strangled animals. ²¹For these laws of Moses have been preached in Jewish synagogues in every city on every Sabbath for many generations."

²²Then the apostles and elders and the whole church in Jerusalem chose delegates, and they sent them to Antioch of Syria with Paul and Barnabas to report on this decision. The men chosen were two of the church leaders--Judas (also called Barsabbas) and Silas. ²³This is the letter they took along with them:

"This letter is from the apostles and elders, your brothers in Jerusalem. It is written to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. Greetings!

²⁴"We understand that some men from here have troubled you and upset you with their teaching, but they had no such instructions from us. ²⁵So it seemed good to us, having unanimously agreed on our decision, to send you these official representatives, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷So we are sending Judas and Silas to tell you what we have decided concerning your question.

²⁸"For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these requirements: ²⁹You must abstain from eating food offered to idols, from consuming blood or eating the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. If you do this, you will do well. Farewell."

³⁰The four messengers went at once to Antioch, where they called a general meeting of the Christians and delivered the letter. ³¹And there was great joy throughout the church that day as they read this encouraging message.

³²Then Judas and Silas, both being prophets, spoke extensively to the Christians, encouraging and strengthening their faith. ³³They stayed for a while, and then Judas and Silas were sent back to Jerusalem, with the blessings of the Christians, to those who had sent them. ³⁵Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch to assist many others who were teaching and preaching the word of the Lord there.

Points of Interest:

- 'Unless you keep the ancient Jewish custom of circumcision taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.'—This summarizes the view of the Judaizers, Jewish followers of Jesus who were upset that the many Gentile converts under Paul and Barnabas' ministry throughout Galatia were not required to follow the Jewish laws for Gentile conversion which included circumcision. They were so upset that they had traveled around to all the new churches and convinced many of these Gentile converts that they needed to become Jewish in order to attain salvation.
- 'Paul and Barnabas, disagreeing with them, argued forcefully and at length.'—Paul fought tooth and nail for his view on this. He knew that the whole mission to the Gentile world was at stake. To require Gentile believers to follow Jewish law meant to force them to reject their own culture. Much of the way Jewish law was interpreted then forbade contact with Gentiles. So even though the pain of adult male circumcision was bad much worse was the pain of complete ostracism from one's family, friends and culture. Paul knew that this would bring an end to the work among Gentiles.
- 'They reported on what God had been doing through their ministry'—rather than jump into theological debate they started by reporting the work of God. They seem to be saying something like: "Look and see what God is doing through us. The fruit is godly. God doesn't seem to have a problem with our theology."
- 'So the apostles and church elders got together to decide this question'—known as the council of Jerusalem this meeting held huge consequences for the whole history of Christianity. Its clear that the leaders of the early church understood the weight of this meeting from the fact that this is the first reported gathering of all the leadership since Pentecost. Many of the apostles had left Jerusalem to plant churches in other areas but for this meeting they have all reconvened.
- 'God, who knows people's hearts, confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he gave him to us.'—Peter's words are the direct result of his encounter with Cornelius years previously. Its Peter's experience not Paul's that is referenced as the key speech in all of the debate, not only because of Peter's seniority, but also because Peter was viewed by the Judeizers with more authority and more likely to see their side. We know from the letter Paul sent to the Galatians that he had confronted Peter earlier when Peter was visiting Antioch and under the pressure of the Judeizers had withdrawn from mingling with the Gentiles. So, Peter could have taken the Judeizers position, but because of the supernaturally arranged meeting with Cornelius Peter knew that he could not. Its also important to remember that the main evidence he points to is the evidence of the outward manifestations of the Holy Spirit in the Gentiles.
- 'We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the special favor of the Lord Jesus.'—the debate has led Peter to clarify for the Jewish believers that they must not forget that their salvation does not rest on the religion of their upbringing but only on God's grace through Jesus. This theological declaration helps us today to distinguish between aspects of our faith that are largely cultural and aspects of our faith that are essential to connection with God. Peter addresses the dangerous tendency to confuse these and to require people outside our culture to make such changes in their lives that they decide its not worth following Jesus—this is called ethnocentrism and has been prevalent in every culture and church throughout history. Let's watch out for it!
- 'Peter has told you about the time God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for himself'—James is the apostle running the show and demonstrates this authority and his gifting for wisdom through his statement. God is doing with the Gentiles what he once did with the Jewish people. This is a more radical statement than it at first seems for what it does is it frees the message of Jesus forever from being contained by any one culture. James says it is God's choosing a people that will determine their status as his people, not a people's conversion to a culture. James then goes on to quote an Old Testament prophet, Amos, to seal the deal and prove the point that God has chosen the Gentiles for himself.
- 'tell them to abstain from eating meat sacrificed to idols'—James is leading this group of powerful leaders because he knows how to work an effective compromise. Even though theologically Paul

and Peter's position is incontrovertible there are ways to soften the blow for the Judeizer believers. This list of things for Gentiles to follow are some of the rules that are most offensive to Jewish believers and are probably overall unhelpful practices. Even these are not being laid down as requirements for salvation. As we see later Paul is willing to bend on most of these except sexual immorality.

- 'And there was great joy throughout the church that day as they read this encouraging message.'— a lot of time and energy went into this debate. Luke summarizes much of the council that, most likely, took days of debate. Here we see that the result is a good one, the young Gentile church is most relieved that their faith in Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit were not going to come with a big liability. We see here an example of what Paul later describes as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, peace.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* There are probably things that bug you about people you know, including people you are on the same page with in terms of faith. There are probably things that bug you about the Cambridge Vineyard. Paul was really bugged by a group of Jewish believers that saw things differently than him. Paul had a huge following and lots of clout and he very well could have led a large church split. Instead, Paul takes time and energy to work things out with others. In the end he isn't even the one to speak the conclusive words. He trusts the leadership and their relationship to God. At the same time he doesn't back off from what he considers the truth. Think about some of the things that bug you about your friends, about your church and lift them up to God. Ask him to give you the gift of peace. Ask him to give you practical and loving ways to work out your differences with others.
- *Through your six:* People newer to faith often have fewer cultural hang-ups when it comes to following Jesus. They are a big gift to those of us who have been following Jesus for a longer time because they remind us of what is essential. Peter reminds the Jewish believers that they are only saved by Jesus' favor, not by being part of the right religious group. Pray as Jesus touches your six they would help renew others' and your core faith in Jesus' favor.
- *Through our church:* Doctrines, culture, and leadership differences: there are many things that can divide churches. Pray that our church would grow in being a church that deals with problems honestly, lovingly, and with every attempt to listen to God in the process. Pray that our church would be used to help unite churches in the Cambridge/Boston area around the purposes of Jesus.

Tuesday, April 13th

Acts 15:36-16:10

³⁶After some time Paul said to Barnabas, "Let's return to each city where we previously preached the word of the Lord, to see how the new believers are getting along." ³⁷Barnabas agreed and wanted to take along John Mark. ³⁸But Paul disagreed strongly, since John Mark had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not shared in their work. ³⁹Their disagreement over this was so sharp that they separated. Barnabas took John Mark with him and sailed for Cyprus. ⁴⁰Paul chose Silas, and the believers sent them off, entrusting them to the Lord's grace. ⁴¹So they traveled throughout Syria and Cilicia to strengthen the churches there.

¹Paul and Silas went first to Derbe and then on to Lystra. There they met Timothy, a young disciple whose mother was a Jewish believer, but whose father was a Greek. ²Timothy was well thought of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium, ³so Paul wanted him to join them on their journey. In deference to the Jews of the area, he arranged for Timothy to be circumcised before they left, for everyone knew that his father was a Greek. ⁴Then they went from town to town, explaining the decision regarding the commandments that were to be obeyed, as decided by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. ⁵So the churches were strengthened in their faith and grew daily in numbers.

⁶Next Paul and Silas traveled through the area of Phrygia and Galatia, because the Holy Spirit had told them not to go into the province of Asia at that time. ⁷Then coming to the borders of Mysia, they headed for the province of Bithynia, but again the Spirit of Jesus did not let them go. ⁸So instead, they went on through Mysia to the city of Troas.

⁹That night Paul had a vision. He saw a man from Macedonia in northern Greece, pleading with him, "Come over here and help us." ¹⁰So we decided to leave for Macedonia at once, for we could only conclude that God was calling us to preach the Good News there.

Points of Interest:

- 'But Paul disagreed strongly, since John Mark had deserted them in Pamphylia'—Paul and Barnabas part company over Barnabas' decision to take his cousin John Mark with them. Though in the moment the conflict was certainly not pleasant the long-term results for everyone seem quite good. John Mark later writes the book of Mark most likely under Peter's guidance and Paul later in a letter to Timothy asks him to bring Mark with him, a sign of his obvious approval of Mark (either Mark changed or Paul's disagreement to bring him along had more to do with Mark's gifting and ability to do the spiritual warfare type missions work than Mark's character, Wagner 371). Paul ends up choosing a new mission partner, Silas, whose recent affiliation with the Jerusalem church will add credibility to Paul's efforts to explain to Jewish believers the Jerusalem council's decision regarding Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas both have the gift of apostleship, which means leadership over a number of churches. It's hard to have two peer leaders with the exact same gift on the same mission team whereas Silas was gifted in prophecy a nice complement to Paul's gifting.
- 'he arranged for Timothy to be circumcised'—this seems odd given Paul's recent fight to make circumcision unnecessary for Gentile conversion. His reasoning isn't theological rather it is pragmatic. As we know Paul always begins his ministry in the Jewish quarters of any town he visits. Given Timothy's half Jewish identity Paul's reasoning seems to be that once circumcised Timothy would, like him, be able to easily minister to both Jews and Gentiles. This is again an example of contextualization, of making self-conscious decisions to more easily bring the gift of Jesus to all people groups. In this case we see that contextualization is not always pain free!
- 'the churches were strengthened in their faith and grew daily in numbers.'—Paul's work is to encourage churches to keep growing and planting new churches. The constant growth of the churches under his care seem to be a big reason we hear so much about Paul's work and is a reminder of the Jesus' words to go to all ethnic groups and to make committed followers everywhere.
- 'again the Spirit of Jesus did not let them go'—the process of hearing God's voice for direction in our lives is not always straightforward and we can make mistakes. Here we witness a series of misfires at hearing God's voice by Paul, the greatest missionary who ever lived. His original plan, which we can assume was carefully prayed through, changed several times.
- 'we could only conclude that God was calling us to preach the Good News there.'—Paul finally gets a vision from God telling them to go to Greece. This was a big change of plans and only arrived out through a process of hearing from God and discussing among themselves. It is also notable that so far the narrative in Acts has been in the third person plural "they" and it changes here to "we"—the obvious implications is that Dr. Luke the author of Acts has joined Paul's team at this point.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Paul's example of making mistakes as he tried to hear God's voice is an encouraging one for us. It also gives us a model for listening to God: Listen, hold it lightly, talk with others, try it out and listen again. As you seek God during this 40 Days of Faith and try to hear his voice regarding your future use this model.
- *Through your six:* Paul invites several new people to join him in his work: Silas, Timothy and probably Luke. His invitation to join him powerfully changes each of their lives. What are things you can invite your six to do with you? These things don't need to be super-churchy, maybe its exchanging help with house projects or joining you in your book club or . . . As they spend time with you the things God is doing in your life will rub off on them and change their lives.
- *Through our church:* Going to areas that have not yet experienced Jesus' goodness is a one of the dreams of our church. In Paul's case these areas involved going from the Middle East to Europe. In our case we feel God has called our church to contribute to efforts in bringing Jesus back to the Middle East, starting in Lebanon. Pray for those already there and also ask God what part he would have you play whether to more seriously support from here or to take a part in going over.

Wednesday, April 14th

Acts 16:11-24

¹¹We boarded a boat at Troas and sailed straight across to the island of Samothrace, and the next day we landed at Neapolis. ¹²From there we reached Philippi, a major city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman

colony; we stayed there several days.

¹³On the Sabbath we went a little way outside the city to a riverbank, where we supposed that some people met for prayer, and we sat down to speak with some women who had come together. ¹⁴One of them was Lydia from Thyatira, a merchant of expensive purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. As she listened to us, the Lord opened her heart, and she accepted what Paul was saying. ¹⁵She was baptized along with other members of her household, and she asked us to be her guests. "If you agree that I am faithful to the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my home." And she urged us until we did.

¹⁶One day as we were going down to the place of prayer, we met a demon-possessed slave girl. She was a fortune-teller who earned a lot of money for her masters. ¹⁷She followed along behind us shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, and they have come to tell you how to be saved."

¹⁸This went on day after day until Paul got so exasperated that he turned and spoke to the demon within her. "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her," he said. And instantly it left her.

¹⁹Her masters' hopes of wealth were now shattered, so they grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them before the authorities at the marketplace. ²⁰"The whole city is in an uproar because of these Jews!" they shouted. ²¹"They are teaching the people to do things that are against Roman customs."

²²A mob quickly formed against Paul and Silas, and the city officials ordered them stripped and beaten with wooden rods. ²³They were severely beaten, and then they were thrown into prison. The jailer was ordered to make sure they didn't escape. ²⁴So he took no chances but put them into the inner dungeon and clamped their feet in the stocks.

Points of Interest:

- 'If you agree that I am faithful to the Lord,' she said, 'come and stay at my home.'—Jesus had commanded his disciples to look for receptive people and to stay in one person's home when in a new town rather than move around. Here we see Paul using this strategy. The fact that Luke gives us more details about Lydia leads us to believe that she will play a key role in establishing the new church movement in Philippi. Her influence is already seen from the fact that her whole household was baptized.
- 'we met a demon-possessed slave girl. She was a fortune-teller who earned a lot of money for her masters.'—the original Greek says that she had the spirit of Python, a famous spirit of the area also known as the oracle of Delphi, a place known for giving accurate predictions of people's futures. Though many in the West are tempted to discount all such traditions as myths and superstitions, this is not how much of the world sees reality now nor how Paul viewed it then. Wagner believes this is an example of what might be called a territorial spirit, meaning a demonic spirit that controls a whole region (Wagner, 400). The fact that this slave girl earned her masters lots of money means she was very accurate in her fortune telling, more evidence that she was being controlled by a powerful regional spirit.
- 'Paul got so exasperated that he turned and spoke to the demon within her.'—The fact that the demon was speaking true statements does not mean it was on Paul's side. Being a spirit of fortune-telling the demon was clearly used to using the truth to the gain people's allegiance. Paul took several days before he addressed this demon. Most likely he realized the magnitude of this spirit's control in the area and wanted clear direction from God and more prayer backing (we can assume that Paul and his team had been praying a lot before this encounter) before addressing it. Also, he probably wanted a large public example of God's power defeating this regional spirit in order to more quickly open up the way for Jesus' message.
- 'Her masters' hopes of wealth were now shattered'—more evidence that this girl was truly connected to a powerful demonic spirit.
- 'They were severely beaten, and then they were thrown into prison.'—Heavy consequences as a result of engaging in such a big spiritual battle. The loss of money was a big motivator for the persecution but its clear the way Luke tells the story that this persecution comes directly following the defeat of this powerful demonic spirit. This does raise the question of whether engaging in such spiritual battles is wise. Paul was not a novice at this—remember his encounter with Bar-Jesus, and yet he went into knowing the potential consequences. We know that Paul later talks about suffering being part of following Jesus, something even worth rejoicing over.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Lydia will have a large role to play with the establishment of the church in Philippi; she starts her ministry by offering what she has, her large home, to these missionaries whom she just met.

She is faithful with what she has and as a consequence is given more. What can you offer right now? Your time, money, and personal possessions are all things you can offer to God's work in some way whether that's volunteering in the church's tutoring program or helping host a small group. Ask God to show you how to concretely share what you have for his purposes.

- *Through your six:* One of the senses prayer types have had about the Boston area is that there is a spirit of 'grim drivenness' that seems to affect a lot of people. Is this a regional demonic stronghold? Perhaps. Either way, it can't hurt to pray that your six would be free from 'grim drivenness' and able to pursue all that God has for them.
- *Through our church:* People's desire for a fortune-teller seems to derive out of a fear that their lives will turn out badly. In 20th Century America there are still plenty of fortunetellers but there are also more innocuous means to control our lives out of fear. Our church hopes to be a place that points people to trust Jesus with their lives rather than money, or education, or family, or careers. Pray that together we could trust Jesus more and more every day to give us the best lives without our need to control the outcome.

Thursday, April 15th

Acts 16:25-40

²⁵Around midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening. ²⁶Suddenly, there was a great earthquake, and the prison was shaken to its foundations. All the doors flew open, and the chains of every prisoner fell off! ²⁷The jailer woke up to see the prison doors wide open. He assumed the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword to kill himself. ²⁸But Paul shouted to him, "Don't do it! We are all here!"

²⁹Trembling with fear, the jailer called for lights and ran to the dungeon and fell down before Paul and Silas.

³⁰He brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

³¹They replied, "Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with your entire household." ³²Then they shared the word of the Lord with him and all who lived in his household. ³³That same hour the jailer washed their wounds, and he and everyone in his household were immediately baptized. ³⁴Then he brought them into his house and set a meal before them. He and his entire household rejoiced because they all believed in God.

³⁵The next morning the city officials sent the police to tell the jailer, "Let those men go!" ³⁶So the jailer told Paul, "You and Silas are free to leave. Go in peace."

³⁷But Paul replied, "They have publicly beaten us without trial and jailed us--and we are Roman citizens. So now they want us to leave secretly? Certainly not! Let them come themselves to release us!"

³⁸When the police made their report, the city officials were alarmed to learn that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. ³⁹They came to the jail and apologized to them. Then they brought them out and begged them to leave the city. ⁴⁰Paul and Silas then returned to the home of Lydia, where they met with the believers and encouraged them once more before leaving town.

Points of Interest:

- 'Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God'—in human terms Paul and Silas had every reason to complain but instead they choose to praise God. Its hard to overstate the power of praise but this story goes a long way in showing us the power of praising God in all circumstances.
- 'Trembling with fear, the jailer called for lights'—the jailor's initial fear is that the local Roman authorities would kill him for allowing a prison escape. This turns into fear of a greater spiritual power. First the jailor surely knew that Paul was the winner in a spiritual power encounter. Then he wakes to find that an earthquake has freed all the prisoners' hands from chains and opens all the doors but does no harm. His fear of the supernatural leads him to convert to Jesus.
- 'Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with your entire household.'—As in Lydia's case the jailor's whole household followed his decision to believe in Jesus. In our individualistic culture it's hard to understand this tribal attitude; however, it is indeed how much of the world works. Even in our culture I believe certain people play important roles of influence within their relational networks.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* What has been getting you down lately? Have any of your decisions to put Jesus first brought more pain into your life? Often we are tempted to believe that God gives us second best.

Praise is the only anti-dote for it reminds our spirit that God is not only good in the abstract but also good to you personally. Practice praising God today for the good things and the hard things in your life.

- *Through your six:* God can and does work dramatically in people's lives to forward his larger purposes in an area, as with the Philippian jailor. He had quite a story to tell! Ask God for soul saving drama for your six in order that they can play their part in God's bigger plans in this area.
- *Through our church:* Paul and his team model two important traits in successful church planting: encouragement and release. They constantly come back to churches they've started to encourage them and then they leave them to do it on their own. Pray for all the ministries in our church and those who head these ministries that we would grow in encouraging and releasing new leaders in those ministries.

Friday April 16th

Acts 17:1-15

¹Now Paul and Silas traveled through the towns of Amphipolis and Apollonia and came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. ²As was Paul's custom, he went to the synagogue service, and for three Sabbaths in a row he interpreted the Scriptures to the people. ³He was explaining and proving the prophecies about the sufferings of the Messiah and his rising from the dead. He said, "This Jesus I'm telling you about is the Messiah." ⁴Some who listened were persuaded and became converts, including a large number of godly Greek men and also many important women of the city.

⁵But the Jewish leaders were jealous, so they gathered some worthless fellows from the streets to form a mob and start a riot. They attacked the home of Jason, searching for Paul and Silas so they could drag them out to the crowd. ⁶Not finding them there, they dragged out Jason and some of the other believers instead and took them before the city council. "Paul and Silas have turned the rest of the world upside down, and now they are here disturbing our city," they shouted. ⁷"And Jason has let them into his home. They are all guilty of treason against Caesar, for they profess allegiance to another king, Jesus."

⁸The people of the city, as well as the city officials, were thrown into turmoil by these reports. ⁹But the officials released Jason and the other believers after they had posted bail.

¹⁰That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas to Berea. When they arrived there, they went to the synagogue. ¹¹And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to check up on Paul and Silas, to see if they were really teaching the truth. ¹²As a result, many Jews believed, as did some of the prominent Greek women and many men.

¹³But when some Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God in Berea, they went there and stirred up trouble. ¹⁴The believers acted at once, sending Paul on to the coast, while Silas and Timothy remained behind. ¹⁵Those escorting Paul went with him to Athens; then they returned to Berea with a message for Silas and Timothy to hurry and join him.

Points of Interest:

- 'Paul and Silas traveled through the towns of Amphipolis and Apollonia and came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue'—Jesus told his followers that their work of finding people ready to follow Jesus was like a farmer harvesting a crop. The key is learning how to find ripe crops. Paul found that the most receptive people to Jesus were the Gentile God-fearers, who by definition were found at the local synagogues. We see how important this strategy is to Paul since he skips two towns on his way to the capital of this region, Thessalonica where there is a synagogue, and thus many open people.
- 'including a large number of godly Greek men and also many important women of the city.'—his strategy for finding a ripe crop pays off again.
- 'They are all guilty of treason against Caesar'—The big hazard to this strategy is that it constantly gets Paul into trouble with those Jews who are not open to Jesus and who are jealous of Paul's effectiveness with the God-fearer Gentiles.
- 'That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas to Berea.'—Paul and Silas seem to be getting better at avoiding jail. This demonstrates that though Paul and Silas rejoiced and praised God when they were imprisoned in Philippi they weren't just running headlong into trouble.
- 'They searched the Scriptures day after day to check up on Paul and Silas, to see if they were really teaching the truth'—the Bereans were both Jews and Gentile God-fearers who knew a lot about scripture already. Their interaction with Paul and Silas around the scripture seems to come from a genuine openness and desire for truth rather than cynical questioning. Their humility and hard work in searching scripture is a model for us today.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Jesus promises a full harvest to his workers (Matthew 9:37). The key is that God is the only one who prepares people's hearts and makes them ready for faith. We need to constantly check in with God about who he is preparing and learn to follow his lead. God may give you a strategy like Paul's. Pray that God would show you people who are ripe for the harvest, like the God-fearers of Paul's day.
- *Through your six:* One example of openness to God is a humility in approaching knowledge especially knowledge about God. Pray that God would give your six openness and humility as they approach their questions of faith. Pray that God would give them a spirit like the Bereans had that led to a deep and genuine faith in the living God, based in a profound grasp of God's work throughout biblical history.
- *Through our church:* In many ways the synagogues were the centers of learning in their cities and attracted people interested in the search for truth. Pray for our efforts to engage the many God-fearers in all the institutions of learning in our city. Pray that through our church many who begin their search for truth at a University would complete it in a relationship with the Living God.

Saturday, April 17th

Acts 17:16-34

¹⁶While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city. ¹⁷He went to the synagogue to debate with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and he spoke daily in the public square to all who happened to be there.

¹⁸He also had a debate with some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. When he told them about Jesus and his resurrection, they said, "This babblers has picked up some strange ideas." Others said, "He's pushing some foreign religion."

¹⁹Then they took him to the Council of Philosophers. "Come and tell us more about this new religion," they said. ²⁰"You are saying some rather startling things, and we want to know what it's all about." ²¹(It should be explained that all the Athenians as well as the foreigners in Athens seemed to spend all their time discussing the latest ideas.)

²²So Paul, standing before the Council, addressed them as follows: "Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious, ²³for as I was walking along I saw your many altars. And one of them had this inscription on it--'To an Unknown God.' You have been worshiping him without knowing who he is, and now I wish to tell you about him.

²⁴"He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn't live in man-made temples, ²⁵and human hands can't serve his needs--for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need there is. ²⁶From one man he created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand which should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries.

²⁷"His purpose in all of this was that the nations should seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him--though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸For in him we live and move and exist. As one of your own poets says, 'We are his offspring.' ²⁹And since this is true, we shouldn't think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone. ³⁰God overlooked people's former ignorance about these things, but now he commands everyone everywhere to turn away from idols and turn to him. ³¹For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead."

³²When they heard Paul speak of the resurrection of a person who had been dead, some laughed, but others said, "We want to hear more about this later." ³³That ended Paul's discussion with them, ³⁴but some joined him and became believers. Among them were Dionysius, a member of the Council, a woman named Damaris, and others.

Points of Interest:

- 'he was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city.'—This is an unusually strong response for Paul to the idolatry in a city and reflects the enormous role that idol worshipped played in Athens. More than the wooden and metal images, the demonic spirits behind these idols bothered Paul for their role in blinding the inhabitants of this intellectual and cultural center of the Mediterranean region (Hellenist culture). The capital name itself is that of the goddess Athena known as the goddess of wisdom, fine and skilled arts- all good things in and of themselves but

huge obstacles when used by demonic powers. As we'll see Paul had a hard time finding people open to following Jesus.

- 'He went to the synagogue to debate'—in every other account of Paul going to a synagogue there is a report of Jews and God-fearers believing in Jesus. Here the record is silent. We must surmise that the spiritual dynamics in this city were such that even in the place usually ripe for harvest the ground was hard.
- 'he spoke daily in the public square to all who happened to be there.'—Paul tries new approaches but to little avail. Usually Paul speaks and performs acts of power, like physical healing, to accompany the words. In Athens for whatever reason Paul does no acts of power.
- 'we want to know what it's all about'—the council of philosophers appear open and interested to hear about Jesus. In reality they have a very set idea on what is an acceptable philosophy.
- 'we shouldn't think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone'—Paul does not mince words here. He is directly confronting the blatant idol worship that consumes the citizens of Athens. He tells them quite bluntly that this practice is ignorant and now that they know dangerous! Calling a bunch of world-renown philosophers ignorant is audacious.
- 'When they heard Paul speak of the resurrection of a person who had been dead, some laughed'—talking abstract philosophy is one thing and talking about a God who acted miraculously in history is quite another. Paul is openly mocked and leaves with only a couple of converts. There is no talk of starting a church in Athens and we never hear Paul refer to any work of God here. Like Jesus in his hometown of Nazareth there seem to be some places where the timing is just not right yet no matter how great the evangelist. The seemingly intense demonic presence in Athens (the countless physical idols and the 8 yearly festivals each dedicated to a different god) seems to be enough to explain the almost complete deafness of the population to the story of Jesus.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Failure! No one likes this word but we all face it. Even the great apostle Paul faced failure. In his case failure is that no one seems to even want to pay attention to him or the life-changing message he brings. I think Paul would have much preferred to be thrown in jail than to be laughed at by philosophers. As you pursue your thousand percent return dreams you can count on people dismissing you as a joke. How will you respond? In Paul's case he does his best to talk to everyone he can find in the city. When it fails he leaves. Sometimes the best thing we can do with failure is move on. Is there failure in your past you are still living in? What will it mean for you to just leave it behind.
- *Through your six:* Charles Park recently gave a sermon in which he compared ancient idol worship with watching TV. Both seem to have a similar affect on us: we want to be what we see but we end up enslaved to it. For example many people become obsessed with their weight as they watch skinny, sexy people on TV. Ironically, the obsession with weight in the US has only led to greater and greater obesity. Idols fool us into thinking they can give us what we really want. Only God can make us truly happy. Pray for God's power to bring freedom to areas in the lives of your six where they feel bound to an "idol," whether body image, sex, money, fame, security . . .
- *Through our church:* Our church is made up of lots of smart people, its inevitable in a town with so many institutions of higher learning. I'm sure it would not be hard to argue that Boston is the modern day equivalent to Athens. Athens was the least receptive place to Jesus that Paul encountered. Smartness and education are gifts from God but they are also prone to leaving people spiritually blind. Pray for true humility for our "smart church" that we would keep our eyes open to the Living God of history. Pray that through our church Jesus would help many "see".

Sunday, April 18th

Acts 18:1-17

¹Then Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.²There he became acquainted with a Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently arrived from Italy with his wife, Priscilla. They had been expelled from Italy as a result of Claudius Caesar's order to deport all Jews from Rome. ³Paul lived and worked with them, for they were tentmakers just as he was.

⁴Each Sabbath found Paul at the synagogue, trying to convince the Jews and Greeks alike. ⁵And after Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul spent his full time preaching and testifying to the Jews,

telling them, "The Messiah you are looking for is Jesus." ⁶But when the Jews opposed him and insulted him, Paul shook the dust from his robe and said, "Your blood be upon your own heads--I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."

⁷After that he stayed with Titius Justus, a Gentile who worshiped God and lived next door to the synagogue.

⁸Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, and all his household believed in the Lord. Many others in Corinth also became believers and were baptized.

⁹One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision and told him, "Don't be afraid! Speak out! Don't be silent!

¹⁰For I am with you, and no one will harm you because many people here in this city belong to me." ¹¹So Paul stayed there for the next year and a half, teaching the word of God.

¹²But when Gallio became governor of Achaia, some Jews rose in concerted action against Paul and brought him before the governor for judgment. ¹³They accused Paul of "persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law." ¹⁴But just as Paul started to make his defense, Gallio turned to Paul's accusers and said, "Listen, you Jews, if this were a case involving some wrongdoing or a serious crime, I would be obliged to listen to you. ¹⁵But since it is merely a question of words and names and your Jewish laws, you take care of it. I refuse to judge such matters." ¹⁶And he drove them out of the courtroom. ¹⁷The mob had grabbed Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and had beaten him right there in the courtroom. But Gallio paid no attention.

Points of Interest:

- 'they were tentmakers just as he was.'—Paul's financial support varied, and in new cities with new churches he often liked to support himself. In this instance we know he did this until Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia at which point he returned to full time ministry. This implies that they brought a sizable money gift from the churches there.
- 'From now on I will go to the Gentiles'—Paul is still using the same approach of going first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles, but in this case he seems to be more abrupt in his change. Something changed quickly in his relationship with the synagogue. It seems to come right after his preaching about Jesus as Messiah.
- 'he stayed with Titius Justus, a Gentile who worshiped God and lived next door'—Paul seems to want to show the Jews in the community his position regarding Gentile conversion so that there is no confusion.
- 'Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, and all his household believed in the Lord.'—At one point Paul says that he wants to make the Jews jealous (Romans 11:13,14). Does this explain Crispus' decision to believe in Jesus only after Paul moved into a Gentile home?
- 'One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision and told him, "Don't be afraid! '—Up till now we have not gotten much information on Paul's inner life. These words from Jesus give us a sense that he in fact struggled with fear and perhaps hopelessness over the constant persecution he received, especially from his own people. I'm sure Paul was getting good at picking up the "Let's kick him out of the city and try to kill him" vibe. This word directly from Jesus must have been hugely comforting and played a big part in Paul's determination to stick around for so long in Corinth and work to build up the young church.
- 'Gallio turned to Paul's accusers and said . . . I refuse to judge such matters'—Jesus' words to Paul in the vision turn out to also prophecy a new day for Paul's ministry. The Jews, upset with Paul, were trying to get the Roman authorities to view the new Jesus movement as no longer connected to Judaism. If this was the case then the new movement would be forced to worship the newly deified Roman emperors, something Judaism was exempt from. In fact, Gallio's refusal to hear the accusations against Paul gave the young Jesus movement about a 12-year window of freedom from conflict with Roman law.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* 'Tentmaking' has come to mean different things in the Christian community. In Acts it seems to describe a job taken by a church planter/missionary in order to support himself. What if you started thinking about your 9-5 job as supporting you in whatever ministry you feel Jesus is calling you in. Much of your ministry may be in and through your job, but this change of mindset will widen your scope and willingness to see Jesus work through you.

- *Through your six:* Paul was quick to let people serve him. He stays with Justus Titius, one of the Gentile's open to hearing about Jesus. This was a strategic way for Paul to build relationship with Justus. What are things that your six have to offer you that through accepting you might deepen your relationship with them.
- *Through our church:* Jesus made a way for the young Jesus movement in the complex world of the Roman Empire. He opened and shut doors as needed for the rapid spread of his church. Pray for the Gallios in the Cambridge/Boston area that Jesus would move their hands to work on behalf of Jesus' movement in this area. Pray specifically as we renovate and move into our new buildings that the city of Cambridge would be supportive in every way possible.

Week 4 Family Devotional Ideas:

- With older kids: Focus on listening to and obeying God's voice and the importance difference between relationship with the Lord God versus unknown gods/spirits.
 - If you are creating a family map, this week's journeys of Paul and others are an exciting route to follow! Map these out on your Mediterranean region map, again noting key figures and events as the church grows and diversifies. Celebrate God's powerful love spreading.
 - Read together from Tuesday's passage Acts 16:6-10. Note the 3 separate times and ways that Paul and Silas changed or made plans based on direct communication from God: by "the Holy Sprit," the "Spirit of Jesus," and then a vision. If we are following Jesus, His Spirit lives inside of us and leads us through ideas planted in our minds, the scriptures, pictures, "gut feelings," and other ways. God also gives dreams and visions, or moving pictures in our mind like movies, to guide us. What a wonderful thing that we're not alone to figure out what He wants us to do! Share a time that you have felt guided by God and how you felt guided. Together as a family talk about any major plans (job changes, moving, going on a trip, buying a house, etc.) that *this week* you can ask God to guide your family. See how he speaks to you!
 - In several passages this week the apostles encounter demonic spirits and occultic practices – fortune-telling slaves and worship of "unknown gods." As American culture becomes more spiritually aware and hungry (a great thing for Jesus' good news) it is also much more common to have published books for kids on the "how to's" of the occult – witchcraft, sorcery, "white" magic, tarot cards, etc. While it is not necessary to be scared of these things (the one true God is more powerful than evil) there is real danger in opening ourselves up to even casual involvement with unknown spirits – they are, in fact, real spirits up to mess up our lives! Talk frankly with your kids about what they know about other spiritual powers than God. Let your kids ask questions. Highlight the important difference between seeking spirits who are unknown and manipulative (such as the slave master who was getting rich off his fortune telling business) and a God who "gives life and breath to everything and satisfies every need" (Acts 17:25). Encourage your kids to keep a healthy distance from occultic games without being scared of them.
- With younger kids: What excitement this week with people like Lydia, a merchant who accepts Jesus into her heart, worshiping God and loving people using everything she has!
 - Together read passages about a Greek businesswoman Paul and Silas met named Lydia, in Acts 16:13-15 and Acts 16:38-40. This was a rich woman who sold purple cloth (an expensive thing to trade) and who had a large home. When she believed in Jesus and the new life God wanted to give her, she invited other Christians to stay in her home, helped lead a church in Philippi, and gave Paul and Silas a place to stay when they got out of prison! As a family, talk about the blessings God has given you (a house, food, money, clothing, friends, toys, videos). What people do you know that your family can help this week? What needs do they have (money, friends, food, toys) that as a family you can share with them the blessings of Jesus during the 40 Days of Faith?