

40 DAYS OF FAITH 2004

40 Days through the book of Acts

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40 Days through Acts

Week One

Over the next 6 weeks, we will study together the biblical story, 'The Acts of the Apostles,' which gives the history of the first 30 years of the church and tells how the message about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection spread throughout the Roman Empire within the lifespan of the first generation of Jesus' followers. Acts was probably written by Luke, who is also the author of one of the Gospel accounts. Luke was a medical doctor and a close companion of Paul, one of the main characters of our story. Luke was probably an eye witness to much of what he wrote in Acts, and he had direct, personal access to the main actors in these stories. He's also a very talented writer of history. So, what we have in Acts is a gripping, well-written, contemporary account of what happened after Jesus ascended to heaven.

Each day's guide is broken into three sections:

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.

Monday, March 22nd

Acts 1

¹Dear Theophilus: In my first book I told you about everything Jesus began to do and teach ²until the day he ascended to heaven after giving his chosen apostles further instructions from the Holy Spirit. ³During the forty days after his crucifixion, he appeared to the apostles from time to time and proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive. On these occasions he talked to them about the Kingdom of God. ⁴In one of these meetings as he was eating a meal with them, he told them, "Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you what he promised. Remember, I have told you about this before. ⁵John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

⁶When the apostles were with Jesus, they kept asking him, "Lord, are you going to free Israel now and restore our kingdom?"

⁷"The Father sets those dates," he replied, "and they are not for you to know. ⁸But when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will receive power and will tell people about me everywhere--in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

⁹It was not long after he said this that he was taken up into the sky while they were watching, and he disappeared into a cloud. ¹⁰As they were straining their eyes to see him, two white-robed men suddenly stood there among them. ¹¹They said, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing here staring at the sky? Jesus has been taken away from you into heaven. And someday, just as you saw him go, he will return!"

¹²The apostles were at the Mount of Olives when this happened, so they walked the half mile back to Jerusalem. ¹³Then they went to the upstairs room of the house where they were staying. Here is the list of those who were present: Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James (son of Alphaeus), Simon (the Zealot), and Judas (son of James).

¹⁴They all met together continually for prayer, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, several other women, and the brothers of Jesus. ¹⁵During this time, on a day when about 120 believers were present, Peter stood up and addressed them as follows: ¹⁶"Brothers, it was necessary for the Scriptures to be fulfilled concerning Judas, who guided the Temple police to arrest Jesus. This was predicted long ago by the Holy Spirit, speaking through King David. ¹⁷Judas was one of us, chosen to share in the ministry with us." ¹⁸(Judas bought a field with the money he received for his treachery, and falling there, he burst open, spilling out his intestines.

¹⁹The news of his death spread rapidly among all the people of Jerusalem, and they gave the place the Aramaic name *Akeldama*, which means "Field of Blood.") ²⁰Peter continued, "This was predicted in the book of Psalms, where it says, 'Let his home become desolate, with no one living in it.' And again, 'Let his position be given to someone else.'" ²¹So now we must choose another man to take Judas's place. It must be someone who has been with us all the time that we were with the Lord Jesus--²²from the time he was baptized by John until the day he was taken from us into heaven. Whoever is chosen will join us as a witness of Jesus' resurrection."

²³So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. ²⁴Then they all prayed for the right man to be chosen. "O Lord," they said, "you know every heart. Show us which of these men you have chosen ²⁵as an apostle to replace Judas the traitor in this ministry, for he has deserted us and gone where he belongs." ²⁶Then they cast lots, and in this way Matthias was chosen and became an apostle with the other eleven.

Points of Interest:

- 'Do not leave Jerusalem'—there would be good reason to leave Jerusalem. First of all, the disciples were not actually from Jerusalem: their home was in Galilee. They had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover at the Jerusalem Temple, and the circumstances of Jesus' arrest, death, and resurrection had kept them there for an extra 40 days; but it would have been natural on their parts to assume that eventually, and soon, they would go home. Secondly, they would be in some danger as followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. The same people who killed Jesus would undoubtedly have some interest in squashing whatever following he had as well. In Jerusalem, they were within easy reach of these people; back home in Galilee, they would be at a comfortable distance. Nonetheless, Jesus commands them to wait here. God has a great gift to give them: his very presence in the form of the Holy Spirit. They had been promised this gift quite a while ago, on the very first day that Jesus began to gather followers. Now, it was finally going to be delivered, but they had to endure a little bit longer, in this uneasy place of potential trouble far from home, in order to get it.

Often, we find that we have to go through a period of uncomfortable waiting before we see God's promises fulfilled. Are there any promises for which you are waiting? How does it feel to wait? The apostles and the 120 respond to their period of waiting by turning to God in prayer. Take your promises to the Lord in prayer. Ask him for the endurance to wait, and ask him to fulfill his promise.

- 'Are you going to free Israel now?'—the apostles must have spent much of these 40 days wondering what would happen next. They'd watched their lord get killed and then rise again from the dead. It was now undeniably certain to them that this person they had been following was in fact the Son of God and the long-expected Savior. They would probably be asking themselves, 'Now that he has overcome death, what new and amazing thing will Jesus do next?' Everything that they had been taught from the prophets led them to think that what would come next would be the freedom of Israel from foreign oppression and its restoration to a glorious golden age. Nothing less than a 'happily ever after' future for Israel would be expected as Jesus' next feat. Jesus has a very surprising answer for them: what's next has more to do with them than him. Jesus lets them know that the Father does indeed have plans for a glorious end to history, but that right now his death and resurrection has more to do with equipping them for a mission. On the night before his death, Jesus had told his followers that it is actually better for them that he goes away (John 16:7), and that they would end up doing even greater things than him (John 14:12). The key to it all is the Holy Spirit. Jesus' next big feat will be to 'baptize' his followers with the Holy Spirit—that is, he will actually dunk them in the presence of God. And that immersion in the Holy Spirit will give them the power they need for their new mission, a mission to spread the story of Jesus. It might not be going too far to say that God's major purpose for Jesus' death and resurrection is to make possible the sending of the Holy Spirit, who would empower Jesus' followers to fulfill the task to which they are called.
- 'and to the ends of the earth'—it's hard for us to understand what a new and surprising thing this must have been for the believers. As we can tell from their question about the restoration of Israel, they probably regarded Jesus' ministry to do almost entirely with the Jews; and during Jesus' earthly ministry, he actually had very little contact with non-Jews. But that is not the way it was to remain. Long ago, God spoke through the prophet Isaiah saying, 'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant . . . to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth' (Is. 49:6). Jesus sees that this prophecy is finally going to be fulfilled. His death and resurrection would do more than just restore Israel: it would bring salvation to the whole earth. And this would happen through the disciples. Perhaps bringing the good news about Jesus to the nations was what Jesus had in mind when he said that they would do even greater things than him.
- 'and he disappeared into a cloud'—The prophet Daniel (7:13-14) saw a vision in which a human being ascends on a cloud to the Father, who gives him lordship over all people. Here we see this vision fulfilled.
- 'now we must choose another man to take Judas's place'—We don't know exactly why Simon felt it was necessary to replace Judas. Perhaps it was so that the 12 apostles could represent the 12 tribes of Israel. Perhaps it was simply in order to have enough leaders to effectively care for the 120 followers who were gathered. Regardless of the reason, what is clear is that Simon and the other apostles finally understand that they have work to do: they are going to need fellow workers to accomplish what Jesus has in store for them.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Jesus' followers are all from Galilee, but he tells them to stay in Jerusalem and to begin their work of spreading the message from there. Perhaps you aren't from Boston: you might be here in school or for a short-term or temporary job. It could be tempting to wait until you are home or you've reached your permanent destination before you start sharing what you've received from Jesus. Take a moment this morning to commit yourself to sharing Jesus' story in Boston as long as you are here.
- *Through your six:* Jesus' followers had a very particular idea of what he should do now that he had risen from the dead: he should restore the fortunes of Israel. It wasn't a bad thing to hope for: their nation had been under foreign domination for hundreds of years now, and it was natural and right that they would want freedom—it was even something that God had led the Jews to expect. However, it wasn't the next step in God's plan. Jesus asks his disciples to trust the Father with their hopes for Israel, and in the meantime to dedicate themselves to his mission. Each one of your six probably has some way in which they are looking for justice to come about in this world. Pray that

they would be able to trust God with these hopes. Pray that the fact that these hopes are unrealized would not get in the way of them responding to what they have received from Jesus.

- *Through our church:* Telling Jesus' story requires more than mere words: it requires spiritual power. Ask God to immerse us in his Holy Spirit, giving us the power to show others the reality of God's presence.

Tuesday, March 23rd

Acts 2:1-13

¹On the day of Pentecost, seven weeks after Jesus' resurrection, the believers were meeting together in one place. ²Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm in the skies above them, and it filled the house where they were meeting. ³Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. ⁴And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability. ⁵Godly Jews from many nations were living in Jerusalem at that time. ⁶When they heard this sound, they came running to see what it was all about, and they were bewildered to hear their own languages being spoken by the believers. ⁷They were beside themselves with wonder. "How can this be?" they exclaimed. "These people are all from Galilee, ⁸and yet we hear them speaking the languages of the lands where we were born! ⁹Here we are--Parthians, Medes, Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, the province of Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, and the areas of Libya toward Cyrene, visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), ¹¹Cretans, and Arabians. And we all hear these people speaking in our own languages about the wonderful things God has done!" ¹²They stood there amazed and perplexed. "What can this mean?" they asked each other. ¹³But others in the crowd were mocking. "They're drunk, that's all!" they said.

Points of Interest:

- 'and it filled the house where they were meeting'—this windstorm filling the house—and then the people themselves—is reminiscent of the cloud of God's glory filling the holy tabernacle during the times of Moses and filling the temple in the times of Solomon. The implication seems clear: whereas in the past, God chose to dwell in the special buildings his people made for him, now he dwells in and among the community of Jesus' followers. There is one big difference between the previous times God's glory fell and this time. In the previous times, God's presence was like a dark cloud that was so thick that no one could enter the temple and the priests could not do their work. This time, it comes in the forms of tongues of fire which sends the believers out to speak God's words.
- 'seven weeks after Jesus' resurrection'—that would be about ten days after he ascended in the cloud.
- 'speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability'—the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Jesus' followers brings dramatic changes to their relationship with God in many ways: the Spirit is a comforter and an encourager; the Spirit brings greater intimacy with God—they were filled by and surrounded by God's presence; and the Spirit brings the power to do many miracles we will see over the course of the story of Acts. But it is significant that the first manifestation of the filling of the Holy Spirit is the ability to speak about God in other languages. Despite the mockery of some people in the crowd, the believers were not merely babbling: they were miraculously speaking in actual languages. From the very beginning, a clear sign of the Holy Spirit's primary purpose is given: the Holy Spirit wants to enable Jesus' followers to spread Jesus' message. When Jesus tells his followers to tell about him to the ends of the earth, it could be asked, 'How exactly are 120 Galileans going to be able to spread this message all over the world?' Here is the answer: the Holy Spirit will make them able. In fact, on the very first day that they are filled with the Spirit, without even leaving the house where they are staying, they get a picture of the fulfillment of their mission: they do, in fact, tell Jesus' story to people from all over the world—or, at least, from all over the part of the world they know about.
- 'Jews from many nations were living in Jerusalem at that time'—there were probably millions of Jews spread throughout the Roman Empire and surrounding nations. Significant numbers of them would travel to Jerusalem for the Passover: every pious Jew would want to celebrate the festival in Jerusalem at least once in his or her life. Many, especially those who had traveled a long way or those for whom this was a once-in-a-lifetime trip, would stay in Jerusalem until the next festival Pentecost, which was 50 days later.

- 'Godly Jews from many nations'—although these people come from all over the world, they are all of Jewish descent. This day's preaching brings Jesus' story past language barriers, but it hasn't yet crossed beyond ethnic barriers. Following Jesus is still overwhelmingly a Jewish affair.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* on this day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit gave Jesus' followers the ability to speak in other languages so that everyone could hear about the wonders of God. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you the ability to speak in other languages, whether literally or figuratively, so that you can pass along the stories of the wonders of God
- *Through your six:* God demonstrates to everyone who hears the believers that he knows them specifically and cares that they hear about him, by speaking to them in their own languages. He didn't settle for just the Aramaic and Greek that most of them would understand; but he spoke in their own home languages. Pray that God would draw your six into his purposes by speaking to them in their unique heart languages.
- *Through our church:* just like Jerusalem, Boston is filled with people from many places: Haitians, Brazilians, Vietnamese, Irish, Chinese, people from many African nations, Central Americans, Canadians, and basically people from most nations of the world and every state in the U.S. gather here in Boston. Pray that God would always be increasing our ability to tell of his wonderful deeds to all the residents of Boston in their own language.

Wednesday March 24th

Acts 2:14-41

¹⁴Then Peter stepped forward with the eleven other apostles and shouted to the crowd, "Listen carefully, all of you, fellow Jews and residents of Jerusalem! Make no mistake about this. ¹⁵Some of you are saying these people are drunk. It isn't true! It's much too early for that. People don't get drunk by nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, what you see this morning was predicted centuries ago by the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ `In the last days, God said,

I will pour out my Spirit upon all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
and your old men will dream dreams.

¹⁸In those days I will pour out my Spirit
upon all my servants, men and women alike,
and they will prophesy.

¹⁹And I will cause wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below--
blood and fire and clouds of smoke.

²⁰The sun will be turned into darkness,
and the moon will turn bloodred,
before that great and glorious day of the Lord arrives.

²¹And anyone who calls on the name of the Lord
will be saved.

²²"People of Israel, listen! God publicly endorsed Jesus of Nazareth by doing wonderful miracles, wonders, and signs through him, as you well know. ²³But you followed God's prearranged plan. With the help of lawless Gentiles, you nailed him to the cross and murdered him. ²⁴However, God released him from the horrors of death and raised him back to life again, for death could not keep him in its grip. ²⁵King David said this about him:

`I know the Lord is always with me.

I will not be shaken, for he is right beside me.

²⁶ No wonder my heart is filled with joy,
and my mouth shouts his praises!
My body rests in hope.

²⁷For you will not leave my soul among the dead
or allow your Holy One to rot in the grave.

²⁸You have shown me the way of life,
and you will give me wonderful joy in your presence.

²⁹"Dear brothers, think about this! David wasn't referring to himself when he spoke these words I have quoted, for he died and was buried, and his tomb is still here among us. ³⁰But he was a prophet, and he

knew God had promised with an oath that one of David's own descendants would sit on David's throne as the Messiah. ³¹David was looking into the future and predicting the Messiah's resurrection. He was saying that the Messiah would not be left among the dead and that his body would not rot in the grave. ³²This prophecy was speaking of Jesus, whom God raised from the dead, and we all are witnesses of this. ³³Now he sits on the throne of highest honor in heaven, at God's right hand. And the Father, as he had promised, gave him the Holy Spirit to pour out upon us, just as you see and hear today. ³⁴For David himself never ascended into heaven, yet he said,

The LORD said to my Lord,
Sit in honor at my right hand

³⁵until I humble your enemies,
making them a footstool under your feet.

³⁶So let it be clearly known by everyone in Israel that God has made this Jesus whom you crucified to be both Lord and Messiah!"

³⁷Peter's words convicted them deeply, and they said to him and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?"

³⁸Peter replied, "Each of you must turn from your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹This promise is to you and to your children, and even to the Gentiles--all who have been called by the Lord our God." ⁴⁰Then Peter continued preaching for a long time, strongly urging all his listeners, "Save yourselves from this generation that has gone astray!"

⁴¹Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church--about three thousand in all.

Points of Interest:

- 'Peter stepped forward with the eleven other apostles'—besides bringing the power to speak in other languages, the Holy Spirit gives the apostles new boldness. Until now, the apostles have been hiding in a locked room (John 20:26), but now they are standing up in front of a crowd testifying to Jesus.
- 'predicted centuries ago by the prophet Joel'—Joel 2:28-32. Peter is telling the listeners that they have just participated in a history-making moment. They have just seen before their very eyes a centuries-old prophecy fulfilled. And it is a prophecy of major importance. With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, world history has just entered a new era, called the Last Days.
- 'I will pour out my Spirit upon all people'—the major hallmark of this new era of history is the availability of the Holy Spirit for everyone: young and old, men and women. Before this time, the Holy Spirit's power was available only to a few prophets and kings. Now, starting at the very moment of Pentecost, everything was different. Everyone could be filled with the Holy Spirit. Everyone could hear from God. Everyone could be filled with his presence and power. Peter knew that when Jesus told the apostles to wait for the Holy Spirit, he wasn't saying that the Spirit was coming just for the 12, or even for the 120. The Holy Spirit was coming to inaugurate a new way of life, in which the presence and power of the Holy Spirit were accessible to all. The call that Jesus gave to the apostles, the call to go everywhere and tell his story, is a call for everyone; and the power that he promised the apostles, the power of the Holy Spirit, is available to everyone. Peter understands from this prophecy from Joel that the whole way in which humanity interacts with God has been changed forever.
- 'you nailed him to the cross and murdered him'—it is possible that some of the people listening were actually directly involved in the crucifixion of Jesus. Most likely not everyone was; nonetheless, Peter holds them all guilty as the community who allowed this person clearly blessed by God to be killed.
- 'David was looking into the future and predicting the Messiah's resurrection'—Peter proves from the psalms (16 and 110) that David was expecting a resurrection and an ascension, and that they were not his own. David was foreseeing someone greater than himself who would come. The apostles, who spent 40 days with the risen Jesus, are witnesses to the fact that Jesus is this greater one. The title given to this greater one was the Messiah, which means, 'the anointed one, or the one who is set apart.' From Joel, among other places, we can see that one of the primary roles of the Messiah is to save people from trouble.
- 'God has made this Jesus whom you crucified to be both Lord and Messiah!'—the good news is that the long-awaited Messiah, the savior of the world, has come; and he brings with him the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to pour on everyone. The bad news is that you killed him.
- 'Brothers, what should we do?'—they've seen a miracle. They've heard how the miracle fits in with God's plan for history, pointing to Jesus as the Savior and marking the beginning of a whole new relationship between God and humans. And they've discovered that apparently they are on the wrong side. It must have been sobering news. Yet, somehow they don't despair, as Judas did. They

hold out hope that these people who have just been telling them of the wonders of God will know something that they can do.

- 'This promise is to you'—Peter tells them that it is indeed still possible for them to turn to God; there is still a chance for them to be saved and to avoid being humbled as Jesus' enemies. But he goes even further than that: he tells them that the Holy Spirit is meant for them. Jesus submitted himself to death, rose again, and ascended into heaven so that the very people who killed him could have access to the Holy Spirit. This great gift of the Holy Spirit has their name on it. And Jesus went through death to heaven to save them from their guilt so that he could give this gift to them. What an amazing thing! This is a truth that Peter must have known very deeply himself: he denied even knowing Jesus three times in order to keep his distance from Jesus as he was dying; yet here he is, Jesus' primary spokesperson at this turning point in history.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Peter boldly steps forward and explains to others what he sees God doing. Pray that the Holy Spirit would give you the same boldness.
- *Through your six:* Peter says that now is the time when the Holy Spirit is available to everyone. Where do you see a need for the Holy Spirit in the life of your six? Have you offered them the gift of the Spirit?
- *Through our church:* Pray that God would use our church to bring the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit to Boston in a new way. Ask God to fill us up more and more with his presence and power, and ask him to use us to offer this same spirit to thousands and thousands of others.

Thursday March 25th

Acts 2:42-3:10

⁴²They joined with the other believers and devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, sharing in the Lord's Supper and in prayer. ⁴³A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. ⁴⁴And all the believers met together constantly and shared everything they had. ⁴⁵They sold their possessions and shared the proceeds with those in need. ⁴⁶They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity--⁴⁷all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved. ¹Peter and John went to the Temple one afternoon to take part in the three o'clock prayer service. ²As they approached the Temple, a man lame from birth was being carried in. Each day he was put beside the Temple gate, the one called the Beautiful Gate, so he could beg from the people going into the Temple. ³When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for some money. ⁴Peter and John looked at him intently, and Peter said, "Look at us!" ⁵The lame man looked at them eagerly, expecting a gift. ⁶But Peter said, "I don't have any money for you. But I'll give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, get up and walk!" ⁷Then Peter took the lame man by the right hand and helped him up. And as he did, the man's feet and anklebones were healed and strengthened. ⁸He jumped up, stood on his feet, and began to walk! Then, walking, leaping, and praising God, he went into the Temple with them. ⁹All the people saw him walking and heard him praising God. ¹⁰When they realized he was the lame beggar they had seen so often at the Beautiful Gate, they were absolutely astounded!

Points of Interest:

- 'a deep sense of awe came over them all'—the community of believers knew that what they were experiencing was special. Normal life ceased to be for them, and they lived with a sense of gratitude and of awe at the new life available. They were experiencing a whole new way of living, a life filled by the Holy Spirit. It affected their attitude toward life, and the way they lived. Their lives were characterized by joy and praising God. And their awe and joy at the privilege of living this new life with God overflowed into a generosity toward one another.
- 'they worshiped together at the Temple each day [and] met in homes for the Lord's Supper'—the new community of believers had a rich and full life together, which seems to have included both large group and small group experiences: they all met together for worship and prayer in the temple, and they ate together in smaller groups in homes.
- 'they worshiped together at the Temple'—eating the Lord's Supper together in homes was a distinct new element to their faith which would have distinguished them as followers of Jesus, but it is also

important to notice that they don't stop living as Jews. When they worship together, it is at the Temple where all Jews worship.

- 'I'll give you what I have'—Peter may not have any money to give the man. But he does have the power of the Holy Spirit, and he knows that there is enough of the Spirit for everyone. This is what he shares with the beggar.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Pray that the Holy Spirit would give you eyes to see the wonder of the life he has given you. Ask him to increase your sense of awe and joy at the blessings and promises within your grasp. Ask him to give you a life that overflows in praise to him and generosity toward others.
- *Through your six:* God wants to astound people by the change he brings to the life of your six. Pray that they would be healed, strengthened, and transformed in such ways that it causes others to do a double-take.
- *For our church:* Pray that the Holy Spirit would empower us to be a church which brings healing to others. Pray for more physical healings in our midst during prayer ministry times, Healing Rooms, small groups, and other places we pray for physical healing. Pray also for emotional healing, that more people would receive the joyful release that the beggar in today's story experienced; pray especially for Living Waters, Transformation Weekend, and Healing Rooms.

Friday March 26th

Acts 3:11-26

¹¹They all rushed out to Solomon's Colonnade, where he was holding tightly to Peter and John. Everyone stood there in awe of the wonderful thing that had happened. ¹²Peter saw his opportunity and addressed the crowd. "People of Israel," he said, "what is so astounding about this? And why look at us as though we had made this man walk by our own power and godliness?" ¹³For it is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of all our ancestors who has brought glory to his servant Jesus by doing this. This is the same Jesus whom you handed over and rejected before Pilate, despite Pilate's decision to release him. ¹⁴You rejected this holy, righteous one and instead demanded the release of a murderer. ¹⁵You killed the author of life, but God raised him to life. And we are witnesses of this fact! ¹⁶The name of Jesus has healed this man--and you know how lame he was before. Faith in Jesus' name has caused this healing before your very eyes. ¹⁷Friends, I realize that what you did to Jesus was done in ignorance; and the same can be said of your leaders. ¹⁸But God was fulfilling what all the prophets had declared about the Messiah beforehand--that he must suffer all these things. ¹⁹Now turn from your sins and turn to God, so you can be cleansed of your sins. ²⁰Then wonderful times of refreshment will come from the presence of the Lord, and he will send Jesus your Messiah to you again. ²¹For he must remain in heaven until the time for the final restoration of all things, as God promised long ago through his prophets. ²²Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up a Prophet like me from among your own people. Listen carefully to everything he tells you.' ²³Then Moses said, 'Anyone who will not listen to that Prophet will be cut off from God's people and utterly destroyed.'²⁴Starting with Samuel, every prophet spoke about what is happening today. ²⁵You are the children of those prophets, and you are included in the covenant God promised to your ancestors. For God said to Abraham, 'Through your descendants all the families on earth will be blessed.'²⁶When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you people of Israel, to bless you by turning each of you back from your sinful ways."

Points of Interest:

- 'You rejected this holy, righteous one and instead demanded the release of a murderer'—again, Peter points out that the people of Jerusalem ignored all of the evidence that Jesus was sent from God. They were so far off in their perceptions that they preferred a murderer to the author of life.
- 'Then Moses said . . . '—found in Deuteronomy 18:15,18,19. In the last sermon, Peter focuses on what David has to say in the Psalms about Jesus as the Messiah. Here, he mentions the prophets, and he focuses on what he finds about Jesus in the writings of Moses. The promise to Abraham is also found in one of the books of Moses, in Genesis 12:3. The combination of the two sermons amounts to a claim that Jesus is the fulfillment of all of the promises of the Jewish scriptures, the biblical Old Testament.
- 'Anyone who will not listen to that Prophet will be cut off'—of course, they had not listened to the Prophet; they'd killed him. However, Peter chooses to focus instead on the fact that they are the heirs of the prophets, and the heirs of the promise to Abraham, that all the families of earth would be blessed through him. God's intention toward them is to bless them, forgive them, fulfill promises to

them, and fulfill promises through them; it is not to punish them for their sinful rejection of him. If they choose, they can turn their back on punishment and turn their face toward God's promises.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Peter asks his listeners, 'And why look at us as though we had made this man walk by our own power and godliness?' It was clear that what happened to the beggar is not something that Peter and John could have done themselves. Their action necessarily points toward Jesus. Often, people will respond to our acts of kindness or generosity by saying, 'You're such a nice person,' or 'You're so amazing.' But we don't want to bring acclaim to ourselves. We want to connect people to a source of forgiveness and power far beyond us. Ask God to work through you in such a way that it is clear it is his power, and not your own goodness, that is responsible.
- *For your six:* One of the benefits of the Holy Spirit mentioned here is 'wonderful times of refreshment.' Pray that your six would experience this sort of refreshment from God. However much they have been able to experience the sweetness of God's presence, ask that God would bring them one step deeper in their times with him this week.
- *For our church:* Peter tells his listeners that they are heirs to the promise that all of the families of the earth will be blessed. We too, as we've turned from our sins and toward God, have been incorporated into this promise. Ask God that we would experience God's forgiveness profoundly, and that we would be a source of blessing to the world.

Saturday March 27th

Acts 4:1-22

¹While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the leading priests, the captain of the Temple guard, and some of the Sadducees came over to them. ²They were very disturbed that Peter and John were claiming, on the authority of Jesus, that there is a resurrection of the dead. ³They arrested them and, since it was already evening, jailed them until morning. ⁴But many of the people who heard their message believed it, so that the number of believers totaled about five thousand men, not counting women and children. ⁵The next day the council of all the rulers and elders and teachers of religious law met in Jerusalem. ⁶Annas the high priest was there, along with Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and other relatives of the high priest. ⁷They brought in the two disciples and demanded, "By what power, or in whose name, have you done this?"

⁸Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Leaders and elders of our nation, ⁹are we being questioned because we've done a good deed for a crippled man? Do you want to know how he was healed?"

¹⁰Let me clearly state to you and to all the people of Israel that he was healed in the name and power of Jesus Christ from Nazareth, the man you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead. ¹¹For Jesus is the one referred to in the Scriptures, where it says, 'The stone that you builders rejected has now become the cornerstone.' ¹²There is salvation in no one else! There is no other name in all of heaven for people to call on to save them."

¹³The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men who had had no special training. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus. ¹⁴But since the man who had been healed was standing right there among them, the council had nothing to say. ¹⁵So they sent Peter and John out of the council chamber and conferred among themselves. ¹⁶"What should we do with these men?" they asked each other. "We can't deny they have done a miraculous sign, and everybody in Jerusalem knows about it. ¹⁷But perhaps we can stop them from spreading their propaganda. We'll warn them not to speak to anyone in Jesus' name again." ¹⁸So they called the apostles back in and told them never again to speak or teach about Jesus.

¹⁹But Peter and John replied, "Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him? ²⁰We cannot stop telling about the wonderful things we have seen and heard."

²¹The council then threatened them further, but they finally let them go because they didn't know how to punish them without starting a riot. For everyone was praising God ²²for this miraculous sign--the healing of a man who had been lame for more than forty years.

Points of Interest:

- 'They were very disturbed that Peter and John were claiming, on the authority of Jesus, that there is a resurrection of the dead'—There were two main parties among the religious leaders in Jerusalem: the Pharisees and the Sadducees; the more numerous Pharisees dominated among the teachers of the law; the smaller party of the Sadducees controlled the higher offices at the Temple and among the priesthood. The council, mentioned in verse 5, is the religious government of the Jews and the government of Judea; it was headed by the high priest, who was a Sadducee, but both Sadducees and

Pharisees were represented. One of the major differences between the Sadducees and Pharisees was that the Sadducees didn't believe in life after death. These people who overhear Peter and John are Sadducees.

- 'By what power, or in whose name, have you done this?'—A very similar question (Luke 20:2), from the exact same group of people, is what eventually led to Jesus' death. But the Holy Spirit fills Peter, giving him the boldness and the words he needs to face them.
- 'are we being questioned because we've done a good deed for a crippled man?'—Peter points out that they are being interrogated because they've healed someone who was crippled. It's not exactly a scandalous crime, and it's not usually the kind of thing one gets told not to do.
- 'he was healed in the name and power of Jesus Christ'—after pointing out that they haven't actually done anything wrong, they go on to answer the questions of the council: Jesus gave them the power and authority to do what they did. Perhaps the council wishes at this point that they hadn't asked the question: they gave Peter and John a perfect opportunity to use the miracle that they have just performed as proof that Jesus, whom they had condemned to death as a blasphemer, is risen from the dead, the source of salvation and power, and honored by God above everyone else.
- 'Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him?'—the council thought of itself as the only legitimate authority over what happened in the Temple, but Peter appeals to a higher authority. Jesus, the one they rejected, is the cornerstone of the Temple (Psalm 118); he has commanded them to tell people of his wonderful deeds.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Peter and John know that their consciences are clear. Though they are being accused, they've done nothing wrong. This confidence that they've done nothing wrong means that the council has no leverage on them. Ask God to keep your thoughts and actions pure, so that you can stand without fear in the face of any accusations you may face.
- *Through your six:* Even though they are ordinary men with no special training, Peter and John are able to say exactly the right words in their trial in front of the Jewish governing council. Pray for the words of your six, that they would have the right words to say at the right time to show the power and love of Jesus.
- *Through our church:* Ask God to give us the clarity and courage to obey his call on us, rather than bowing to pressures from others who might set themselves up as authorities on what we should and shouldn't do.

Sunday March 28th

Acts 4:23-5:11

²³As soon as they were freed, Peter and John found the other believers and told them what the leading priests and elders had said. ²⁴Then all the believers were united as they lifted their voices in prayer: "O Sovereign Lord, Creator of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them--²⁵you spoke long ago by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor King David, your servant, saying,

'Why did the nations rage? Why did the people waste their time with futile plans?

²⁶The kings of the earth prepared for battle; the rulers gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.'

²⁷"That is what has happened here in this city! For Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate the governor, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel were all united against Jesus, your holy servant, whom you anointed. ²⁸In fact, everything they did occurred according to your eternal will and plan. ²⁹And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give your servants great boldness in their preaching. ³⁰Send your healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus." ³¹After this prayer, the building where they were meeting shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. And they preached God's message with boldness.

³²All the believers were of one heart and mind, and they felt that what they owned was not their own; they shared everything they had. ³³And the apostles gave powerful witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and God's great favor was upon them all. ³⁴There was no poverty among them, because people who owned land or houses sold them ³⁵and brought the money to the apostles to give to others in need.

³⁶For instance, there was Joseph, the one the apostles nicknamed Barnabas (which means "Son of Encouragement"). He was from the tribe of Levi and came from the island of Cyprus. ³⁷He sold a field he owned and brought the money to the apostles for those in need.

¹There was also a man named Ananias who, with his wife, Sapphira, sold some property. ²He brought part of the money to the apostles, but he claimed it was the full amount. His wife had agreed to this deception.

³Then Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart? You lied to the Holy Spirit, and you kept some of the money for yourself. ⁴The property was yours to sell or not sell, as you wished. And after selling it, the money was yours to give away. How could you do a thing like this? You weren't lying to us but to God."

⁵As soon as Ananias heard these words, he fell to the floor and died. Everyone who heard about it was terrified. ⁶Then some young men wrapped him in a sheet and took him out and buried him.

⁷About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸Peter asked her, "Was this the price you and your husband received for your land?"

"Yes," she replied, "that was the price."

⁹And Peter said, "How could the two of you even think of doing a thing like this--conspiring together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Just outside that door are the young men who buried your husband, and they will carry you out, too." ¹⁰Instantly, she fell to the floor and died. When the young men came in and saw that she was dead, they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹Great fear gripped the entire church and all others who heard what had happened.

Points of Interest:

- 'give your servants great boldness in their preaching. Send your healing power'—the believers have just faced their first trouble with the ruling council. While Peter and John make it clear that they don't intend to disobey God, you could imagine that they might be tempted to tone things down a bit for a while, or that they might pray that God would protect them from the attacks of the council. But they pray no such thing. Instead, they basically pray, 'More!—do more of what Got us into trouble. Make us more bold and do more miracles through us.' One thing that gives them confidence that they have nothing to fear from the council is the example of Jesus: the council tried to stop Jesus, but all they did was further his purposes and lead to his resurrection and his glory. The believers see from the example of Jesus that the safest thing they can do is follow Jesus' example and remain firm in pursuing God's purposes.
- 'the building where they were meeting shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit'—being filled with the Holy Spirit is not a once-and-for-all event. The Spirit's power and presence can be renewed and increased. Here, the believers receive a new dose of the Holy Spirit which sends them into a new phase of teaching, healing, and inviting people into the community.
- 'people who owned land or houses sold them and brought the money to the apostles to give to others in need'—the believers in this early Jerusalem community seem to be especially good at valuing people over possessions. They are unwilling to allow someone else in the community suffer, merely for the sake of holding on to their property. Their very deep awareness of Jesus' mercy for them which gives them a clear-headed compassion toward others.
- 'He brought part of the money to the apostles, but he claimed it was the full amount'—Ananias and Sapphira are looking for a way to manipulate the system to take care of themselves: they want whatever affirmation or reputation would come from giving all of their property, but they don't want to give it all up—they are either greedy for more, or afraid that they won't be taken care of. Ananias and Sapphira want to be known as people of faith and generosity, but their scheme shows that they are limited in both. They're trying to grab for themselves a reputation for something they are not.
- 'The property was yours to sell or not sell, as you wished'—Peter makes it clear that the community was not operating under an enforced, communist system. People were making voluntary choices to sell and to give. They could have not sold their property, or sold it but only given part to the community, and presumably remained accepted members of the community. What they wished to do was try to have their cake and eat it too.
- 'You lied to the Holy Spirit'—Ananias and Sapphira seemed to have left God out of the picture. They had decided to try to deceive the apostles and the rest of the community, but this community is the place where the Holy Spirit was dwelling. They lied to the presence of God.
- 'he fell to the floor and died. Everyone who heard about it was terrified'—it's a bit shocking to read that Ananias and Sapphira immediately fall down dead. We know that Jesus offers forgiveness even to the people who crucified him; why would he not be willing to forgive Ananias and Sapphira? And if these two fell down dead, why doesn't everyone who lies to the church or manipulates it for their own end? It's important to recognize that we don't know ultimately what happened to Ananias and Sapphira in an eternal sense; but it's also clear that being struck dead is not a good thing—it's a strong act of judgment. One reason why they might have been judged so harshly and immediately is as a warning to us: in this early example, God shows us clearly with them just how big the stakes are when we lie to God or try to manipulate his people for dishonest gain. Even if not all of us are immediately struck dead, we can be sure that we will not ultimately be able to get away with lying to God.

Another reason Ananias and Sapphira might have immediately died is because the presence of the Holy Spirit was so strong on the community: in chapter 2, everyone is in awe at the power of their Holy Spirit in their midst to bring salvation, miracles, and wonders; here in chapter 4, everyone is in awe at the fact that the Holy Spirit causes two people to die. Perhaps the strong presence of the Holy Spirit brought more immediate judgment just as it brought more immediate power for healing. The Holy Spirit is nothing to trifle with.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* the community of the believers here showed a great value on people over possessions. That is often a difficult priority to remember and act according to. Pray that the Holy Spirit would give you a deep compassion for the people around you, and that the Spirit would give you the faith and provision you need to be generous with them. Pray that God would give you a much deeper love for people and a much lighter hold on possessions.
- *Through your six:* The community of believers was able to be so bold in their preaching because many of them had actually witnessed the resurrection of Jesus. They knew that they could have complete confidence that not even death has the final say. Pray for you six that they would be protected from any fear of death. Pray that God would increase their confidence in the fact that Jesus actually rose from the dead and that he has the power to raise us as well.
- *Through our church:* Pray on behalf of our entire church that God would keep giving us more: more of the Holy Spirit, more boldness, and more miracles.

Week 1 Family Devotional Ideas

The explosion of Jesus' followers in sheer numbers and regional impact is an exciting story for your family to track with this week! Remember, Jesus left it in his disciples' hands to keep faithful to him after he left earth and to do everything he told them...and it actually ended up working! Also, the amount of love, power, and excitement among Jesus' followers due to the Holy Spirit's baptism on Pentecost, is noteworthy. Highlight and trace the growth of the church within the following passages with your family: Acts 1:1-15, Acts 2:1-13, Acts 2:36-47, Acts 4:1-4, Acts 4:21-35

- With older kids: Start to create a huge wall map on butcher paper that shows the Mediterranean region. As you read together the highlighted excerpts above from this week's passages, label each location named and its significance (example: Jerusalem – 120 believers praying on Pentecost). Keep this map throughout the 40 Days as a way to track God's miraculous stories recorded in this book! This week, you might also talk about what it might be like to live in a community of friends following Jesus as described in Acts 2:42-47.
- With younger kids: Read Acts 1:3-5. Tell your kids that these are among Jesus' last words on earth to his followers. The Holy Spirit was so important to wait for that Jesus told them to stay in one place until He came! Talk with your kids about what is hard for each of you to wait for (lines, birthdays, Christmas, school's end, etc.). What would happen if you didn't wait for these things? Pray as a family asking "Father God, send your Holy Spirit to our family this week – we want more of your love and power!" and see what happens.

40 Days through Acts

Week Two

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

1. **The story for the day.** The entire story of Acts has been divided into 6 week's worth of daily stories. Rather than dividing the daily passages into equal lengths, they are divided into logical story units. Some days will be quite short, others a bit longer; but, hopefully, it will always be a manageable length of passage telling a satisfying episode in the life of the church. For your convenience, we've included the text of the story in the *New Living Translation* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1996). We've found this translation to be in fresh, modern language that has really helped us to do what we most want to do: enter into the story ourselves. As you read the passage, try to read it from the perspective of the disciples and the other people who interact with Jesus. Really get inside the story. What is it like to go through this experience with these early followers of Jesus?
2. **Points of Interest.** This section briefly explores aspects of the day's story that might be especially interesting or potentially confusing. It offers some historical notes and references that might help to interpret the story, frames some of the issues or questions addressed, and gives suggestions of ways to look at the story and what it might mean for us.
3. **Taking it home.** In this section, we offer some suggestions for how the day's reading apply practically to your life and the life of our church. Each day, we will ask 3 questions:
 - a. **What does Jesus want to do through you?**—During these 40 days, we are all asking God for 'a thousand-percent return' on our lives: when we invest our lives in his purposes, he has told us to expect to see the impact and the satisfaction of our lives multiply by a thousand percent. Each day, we will ask ourselves how our passage helps us to understand how to invest well or what we can expect when we do.
 - b. **What does Jesus want to do through your six?**— In the Cambridge Vineyard, we encourage everyone to have a list of six people for whom they are *seeking spiritual blessing*. These six people are local friends, family members, colleagues, and acquaintances who aren't presently actively seeking God, but in whom we see some spiritual interest, or in whose lives we see God at work. Even if you aren't quite sure there is a God yourself, we encourage you to pray for more spiritual blessing for your six, perhaps saying something like, 'God, I'm not even sure you're there, but if you are, please give more peace to my next door neighbors.' Then, watch and see what happens. It can't hurt. If nothing happens, no harm has been done. If something does happen, your six will have more blessing in their lives, and you will have experienced an answer to prayer.

Over the course of this guide, we will see that Acts makes the stunning claim that God not only wants to bless your six, but he has a high calling on them and a big destiny. Each day, we'll consider ways that we can pray for that destiny to be fulfilled in their lives.
 - c. **What does Jesus want to do through our church?**—God not only has big purposes he wants to pursue through each of us, he also has big purposes for us a church. We'll also pray each day that these dreams God has given us as a community will be fulfilled.
4. **Family Devotional Ideas.** At the end of each week's Bible study guide you'll find a paragraph suggesting themes and ideas you can explore with your children ages preschool through middle school at home. They'll be divided into two mini-sections, one for kids approximately ages 2-7 and one for kids approximately ages 8-12. The ideas apply to the entire week's bible text, so to make the most use of these suggestions you'll want to read them at the beginning of each week.

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

Monday March 29th

Acts 5:12-42

¹²Meanwhile, the apostles were performing many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And the believers were meeting regularly at the Temple in the area known as Solomon's Colonnade. ¹³No one else dared to join them, though everyone had high regard for them. ¹⁴And more and more people believed and were brought to the Lord--crowds of both men and women. ¹⁵As a result of the apostles' work, sick people were brought out into the streets on beds and mats so that Peter's shadow might fall across some of them as he went by. ¹⁶Crowds came in from the villages around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those possessed by evil spirits, and they were all healed.

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

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

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

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

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

³³At this, the high council was furious and decided to kill them. ³⁴But one member had a different perspective. He was a Pharisee named Gamaliel, who was an expert on religious law and was very popular with the people. He stood up and ordered that the apostles be sent outside the council chamber for a while. ³⁵Then he addressed his colleagues as follows: "Men of Israel, take care what you are planning to do to these men!"

³⁶Some time ago there was that fellow Theudas, who pretended to be someone great. About four hundred others joined him, but he was killed, and his followers went their various ways. The whole movement came to nothing. ³⁷After him, at the time of the census, there was Judas of Galilee. He got some people to follow him, but he was killed, too, and all his followers were scattered. ³⁸So my advice is, leave these men alone. If they are teaching and doing these things merely on their own, it will soon be overthrown. ³⁹But if it is of God, you will not be able to stop them. You may even find yourselves fighting against God."

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

Points of Interest:

- 'many miraculous signs and wonders among the people'—in last week's passages, the apostles perform one miraculous healing, and it gets them into trouble with the Council. In response, they ask God to do more miracles; and that's exactly what they get. In fact, the power of the Holy Spirit rests so strongly on the apostles that, apparently, even Peter's shadow is performing miracles.
- 'an angel of the Lord came at night, opened the gates of the jail, and brought them out'—Peter and John, when commanded to stop by the Council, invoked the higher authority of God. Here, this angel gives a clear sign that God is indeed with them: the Council throws them in jail, but God releases them and commands them to go back immediately to what they had been doing. God overturns the verdict of the Council.
- 'the men they had jailed were out in the Temple'—I imagine that this ruined the effect that the Council was hoping for. They'd put the apostles in jail overnight to give them a chance to think about

the repercussions of what they'd been doing. But instead of dragging them into court after a terrifying night in jail, the Council loses their prisoners, only to find them unperturbedly doing what they'd been doing when they were arrested. In the face of the Holy Spirit's power, these powerful men appear to be powerless and rather foolish.

- 'You may even find yourselves fighting against God'—in point of fact, they have been fighting against God ever since they tried to shut Jesus up, and—as Gamaliel predicts—they have not been able to stop him. They've even had someone killed before, only to see it expand Jesus' message rather than stopping it.
- 'rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus'—interestingly, they are not rejoicing at the fact that Gamaliel's advice has allowed them to escape. They are rejoicing at the fact that they have been allowed to suffer. Not so long ago, they all ran away in order to avoid being brought to this very courtroom with Jesus. The apostles had followed Jesus, but weren't capable of following him to persecution. Here, they are given a second chance. This time, the Holy Spirit has given them the boldness to persevere. They have just been given the opportunity to follow Jesus one step further. For Jesus, suffering led to exaltation: God put him in the place of honor at his right hand. The disciples have been given the privilege of sharing in that honor.

Taking it home:

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

Tuesday March 30th

Acts 6

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

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

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

⁸Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs among the people.

⁹But one day some men from the Synagogue of Freed Slaves, as it was called, started to debate with him.

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

Points of Interest:

- 'Those who spoke Greek'—these would have been Jews who were born and raised somewhere else in the eastern Roman Empire, rather than in the Palestinian region. Some of them may have come for the feasts and ended up staying in Jerusalem when they became followers of Jesus. Others may have lived their lives in other cities, but retired to Jerusalem—it may have been a common desire among pious Greek-speaking Jews to end their lives in the holy city of Jerusalem (Wagner p. 138).
- 'their widows were being discriminated against'—the elderly, unless wealthy, would have been largely dependent upon the social network of extended families to provide for them. The Greek-speaking widows, being far from home, would be separated from these social networks and therefore could have been more dependent on the community of believers—it would be their only social network, their family away from family. The discrimination against the Greek-speaking widows was probably not intentional. The apostles were all Hebrew-speaking Jews. They were probably simply more familiar with the other Hebrew-speakers. The language barrier probably also played a part in keeping the needs of the Greek-speaking widows from being made known as efficiently to the apostles. To make matters more complicated, it is highly possible that the Greek-speakers were giving a disproportionately large amount of money to the common pool from which the apostles were drawing. The fact that they were able to leave their homes to travel to or move to Jerusalem may mean that they were on average wealthier than the Hebrew-speakers (Wagner p. 138). Barnabas, the one named example of a generous giver, was a Greek-speaker. Thus, the Greek-speakers would have been giving more toward the common pot, have a higher proportion of elderly widows in need of the community's help, and be under-represented in the distribution of the community's resources.
- 'not administering a food program'—this statement from the apostles does not necessarily mean that they considered the food program unimportant. What it does show is that things have reached a point where the apostles can't do it all. Up until now, preaching, teaching, and food distribution have all been part of the job description of the twelve (people would give their offerings to them, and they would distribute it as people had need, 4:35). This situation makes clear that the community has become too large and too complex for them to do everything well: they could put their efforts toward repairing the problems with the food distribution; but if they did so, they would no longer have the time to preach or teach—which Jesus had commanded them to do. Leaving things as they were, with the Greek-speakers being discriminated against, or stopping the food distribution program were also not options, though. They couldn't stop their preaching in order to serve the poor, but it would be contrary to their message to preach at the expense of the poor. For the kingdom of God to continue to advance, the only option is for the twelve to share their job with others.
- 'among yourselves'—this probably refers specifically to the Greek-speakers. The apostles respond to those who have brought the complaint by putting them in charge of the program. It is also possible that the entire community is involved in the selection process, in which case the entire community decides to put the situation in the hands of the Greek-speakers—the names and what we know of the home towns of the seven chosen men indicates that they are all Greek-speakers.
- 'in ever-widening circles'—the expansion of the community's leadership team and the resolution of the discrimination against the Greek-speakers leads to a new phase of growth in numbers and influence. It might be expected that one of the circles of expansion would be among the Greek-speakers, but surprisingly the group that is particularly mentioned is the priests. These priests are probably not the top-level priests who were on the Council, but rather the lower-order priests of whom there would be many in Jerusalem. Perhaps the way the problem with the widows was resolved was particularly impressive to these priests who would probably play some role in the Temple's distribution to the poor.
- 'Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs'—Stephen and the other six were particularly chosen to be in charge of the food distribution, but very quickly his ministry expands into the roles of teaching and preaching as well.
- 'from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and the province of Asia'—these are other Greek-speaking Jews. In Jerusalem, there were synagogues which particularly served the Greek-speaking population. The apostles have been primarily preaching at the Temple. Apparently, Stephen has expanded the reach of Jesus' message by bringing it to these Greek-speaking synagogues as well. The leaders in these synagogues react much the same as the high priests did to the apostles, and in fact the two groups end up banding together against Jesus' followers here.
- 'persuaded some men to lie about Stephen'—these lies are very similar to the ones spoken about Jesus during his mock trial. They have to resort to lies because there is no real legitimate case against him.

Taking it home:

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

Wednesday March 31st

Acts 7:1-8:1

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

²This was Stephen's reply: "Brothers and honorable fathers, listen to me. Our glorious God appeared to our ancestor Abraham in Mesopotamia before he moved to Haran. ³God told him, 'Leave your native land and your relatives, and come to the land that I will show you.' ⁴So Abraham left the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran until his father died. Then God brought him here to the land where you now live. ⁵But God gave him no inheritance here, not even one square foot of land. God did promise, however, that eventually the whole country would belong to Abraham and his descendants--though he had no children yet. ⁶But God also told him that his descendants would live in a foreign country where they would be mistreated as slaves for four hundred years. ⁷'But I will punish the nation that enslaves them,' God told him, 'and in the end they will come out and worship me in this place.' ⁸God also gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision at that time. And so Isaac, Abraham's son, was circumcised when he was eight days old. Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob was the father of the twelve patriarchs of the Jewish nation.

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

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

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

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

²³"One day when he was forty years old, he decided to visit his relatives, the people of Israel. ²⁴During this visit, he saw an Egyptian mistreating a man of Israel. So Moses came to his defense and avenged him, killing the Egyptian. ²⁵Moses assumed his brothers would realize that God had sent him to rescue them, but they

didn't.

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

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

³⁰"Forty years later, in the desert near Mount Sinai, an angel appeared to Moses in the flame of a burning bush. ³¹Moses saw it and wondered what it was. As he went to see, the voice of the Lord called out to him,

³²'I am the God of your ancestors--the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.' Moses shook with terror and dared not look.

³³"And the Lord said to him, 'Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground. ³⁴You can be sure that I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries. So I have come to rescue them. Now go, for I will send you to Egypt.' ³⁵And so God sent back the same man his people had previously rejected by demanding, 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us?' Through the angel who appeared to him in the burning bush, Moses was sent to be their ruler and savior. ³⁶And by means of many miraculous signs and wonders, he led them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and back and forth through the wilderness for forty years.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁵⁷Then they put their hands over their ears, and drowning out his voice with their shouts, they rushed at him.

⁵⁸They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. The official witnesses took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul.

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

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

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

Points of Interest:

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

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Stephen could clearly see the things in his heritage that helped him to pursue God and the things that inhibited him from pursuing him. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you the same insight into your family, and an ability to embrace what is helpful and turn away from what is unhelpful. Unfortunately, Stephen's listeners angrily rejected what he had to say. Pray for your families that they would have soft hearts and listening ears toward the things Jesus has given you to tell them.
- *Through your six:* Moses had a passion for justice for his people. When he responded to that passion in his own strength, the results were disastrous. But God gave him a second chance, a chance to live out the same passion with God's power following God's plan. In this way, Moses was able to do far more for his people than he ever could have imagined. What godly passions do your six have? Ask God to give them the chance to follow those passions with his power and his plan.
- *Through our church:* David's idea of a building a Temple was intended to be an act of worship of God, but in the end their offering to God became an idol instead. Pray that God would preserve us from turning our worship or our ministry, the work of our own hands, into things we worship instead of God.

Thursday April 1st

Acts 8:2-40

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

⁴But the believers who had fled Jerusalem went everywhere preaching the Good News about Jesus. ⁵Philip, for example, went to the city of Samaria and told the people there about the Messiah. ⁶Crowds listened intently to what he had to say because of the miracles he did. ⁷Many evil spirits were cast out, screaming as they left their victims. And many who had been paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸So there was great joy in that city.

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

¹⁴When the apostles back in Jerusalem heard that the people of Samaria had accepted God's message, they sent Peter and John there. ¹⁵As soon as they arrived, they prayed for these new Christians to receive the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them, for they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷Then Peter and John laid their hands upon these believers, and they received the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸When Simon saw that the Holy Spirit was given when the apostles placed their hands upon people's heads, he offered money to buy this power. ¹⁹"Let me have this power, too," he exclaimed, "so that when I lay my hands on people, they will receive the Holy Spirit!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"He was led as a sheep to the slaughter.

And as a lamb is silent before the shearers,
he did not open his mouth.

³³He was humiliated and received no justice.

Who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth."

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

³⁶As they rode along, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "Look! There's some water! Why can't I be baptized?" ³⁷He ordered the carriage to stop, and they went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁸When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away. The eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰Meanwhile, Philip found himself farther north at the city of Azotus! He preached the Good News there and in every city along the way until he came to Caesarea.

Points of Interest:

- 'believers who had fled Jerusalem went everywhere preaching'—the believers in Jerusalem scatter to places that aren't under the direct authority of the Jerusalem Council. However, rather than stopping the message, this persecution actually spreads it. The believers don't let the experience of persecution in Jerusalem stop them from doing what Jesus had told them to do: go and tell my message. In fact,

up until this point, Luke talks mostly of the apostles (and Stephen) doing the preaching—now all of the scattered believers are becoming preachers.

- ⁴Philip, for example, went to the city of Samaria—here is the second of the seven Greek-speakers who has branched out from food distribution to preaching and teaching.
- ‘to the city of Samaria’—The Samaritans and the Jews had, during the time of David and Solomon (about 1000 years before), been one nation, and they were all descended from the same ancestor. When they split into two nations, the Samaritans had mixed more with the surrounding people, taking on their gods and their religious practices. Later, they’d been forcibly mixed with other nations by the Assyrians, who had conquered them. Thus, at least as far as the Jews were concerned, the Samaritans were, both religiously and ethnically, long-lost, renegade Jews. The Samaritans and the Jews shared a common heritage and many common beliefs, but they disliked one another and fought bitterly with one another as only feuding relatives can.
- ¹⁶‘The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them’—being filled with the Holy Spirit is not something automatic. It is a separate event from deciding to follow Jesus. It is available to everyone, but that does not mean that everyone experiences it. It is not exactly clear why Philip does not himself baptize the Samaritans with the Holy Spirit. Perhaps he lacks the ability. Perhaps he simply doesn’t think of it—he is, after all, new to being a preacher. Or perhaps he feels as if he would like the authorization of the apostles before he goes further. This is a big step for the church—for the first time since Jesus’ commission to his followers, a mass movement of believers has begun among non-Jews.
- ‘May your money perish with you’—these are hard words from Peter, but not necessarily an ultimate condemnation of Simon. At one point, Jesus rebukes Peter equally harshly, calling him ‘Satan’ (Mark 8:33). So, Peter knows that such rebukes can lead to repentance and redemption. Perhaps he offers Simon such a stern warning because he sees him at a crucial crossroads between doing things God’s way and doing things in a human way. He is hoping to intervene in Simon’s life at that moment the way Jesus did in his.

The fact that Simon is offering money for the Holy Spirit shows that he doesn’t really understand what the Holy Spirit is for. The Holy Spirit is for everyone, for the sake of offering them connection with God and power to share Jesus’ story; but Simon is looking at it as a special gift that will bring him power. Indeed, power seems to be a very important thing for Simon. Before Philip comes around, he is the most powerful person in town; in fact, his nickname is, ‘The Power of God.’ He uses his magic abilities to get prestige and influence for himself. Then, Philip, operating in the power of the Holy Spirit, outdoes Simon. Everyone, including Simon, is persuaded by Philip’s greater ability and begins to follow him instead. But the arrival of the apostles opens up a new opportunity. Apparently, the apostles have access to a power which Philip doesn’t. Maybe Simon thinks that if he gets that power from the apostles, he will be the top man in town again.

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

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* the Holy Spirit puts Philip in the right place at the right time to tell Jesus’ story to someone who is ready and eager to hear it. Ask the Holy Spirit to put you in the path of people like the Ethiopian eunuch. Of course, it took Philip doing a few odd things before he got to the right place: he had to leave a thriving ministry and go to a desert road, run alongside a chariot, and ask the passenger what he was reading. Be prepared to follow the Holy Spirit’s instructions, even if they seem a little silly.
- *Through your six:* So far in Acts, Peter has had to severely correct fellow believers twice. Both times, money was a big part of the problem: Ananias and Sapphira try to keep back some of the money they

say they are giving to the community; and Simon tries to buy the Holy Spirit. Money seems to have a powerful ability to keep people from the life God has for them. Pray for your six, that money would not have a hold over them.

- *Through our church:* The Holy Spirit puts Philip into contact with the Ethiopian official, a person with a unique ability to bring Jesus' message to a new culture and a new socioeconomic class. Ask God to put our church in contact with these potential bridge people. Ask him to give us what we need to equip these people to carry Jesus' message to their friends.

Friday April 2nd

Acts 9:1-19

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

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

⁵"Who are you, sir?" Saul asked.

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

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

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

"Yes, Lord!" he replied.

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

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

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

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

Points of Interest:

- 'to the synagogues in Damascus'—Saul is no longer content to persecute the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. He asks for permission to follow the people who had dispersed to neighboring regions.
- 'Why are you persecuting me?'—Rather than striking Saul dead or commanding him to stop, Jesus asks a question. And it's a great one. Why exactly is Saul so passionately and violently angry against Jesus' followers?
It is significant to note that Jesus considers attacks against his people as a personal attack against him. Saul here encounters the startling truth of Gamaliel's warning: 'You may even find yourselves fighting against God.' Saul has been fighting against God, and now God fights back. Ironically, Saul is a pupil of Gamaliel; Gamaliel's own student most vigorously ignores his advice and discovers the truth of his warning.
- 'he found that he was blind'—Saul's spiritual blindness, his inability to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, is now matched by physical blindness. Both the physical and the spiritual blindness fall away when Saul is able to hear the message of Jesus from one of the people he has been so violently trying to prevent from speaking.
- 'But Lord'—Ananias seems to wonder whether the Lord knows exactly who this Paul is. Ananias may very well have moved to Damascus to avoid Paul's persecution, and now the Lord is asking him to seek him out voluntarily—and to heal him! Ananias may be worried for himself or surprised by the lengths of God's mercy. But either way, he wants to make sure that God is sure this is what he wants

to do. To his great credit, after this small initial protest, Ananias listens to God and obeys what he says.

- 'Saul is my chosen instrument'—God has great plans even for Saul, this great persecutor of the believers. Peter said to the crowd at Pentecost, who had taken part in killing Jesus, 'The promise is for you.' And the same applies to Saul. The promise of the Holy Spirit is for him. In fact, God has prepared a very special role for him in his plans.
- 'I will show him how much he must suffer for me'—Saul will experience the same sort of suffering that he inflicted on others.

Taking it home:

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

Saturday April 3rd

Acts 9:20-31

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

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

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

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

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

Points of Interest:

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

Taking it home:

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

Sunday April 4th

Acts 9:32-43

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

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

³⁹So Peter returned with them; and as soon as he arrived, they took him to the upstairs room. The room was filled with widows who were weeping and showing him the coats and other garments Dorcas had made for them. ⁴⁰But Peter asked them all to leave the room; then he knelt and prayed. Turning to the body he said, "Get up, Tabitha." And she opened her eyes! When she saw Peter, she sat up! ⁴¹He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then he called in the widows and all the believers, and he showed them that she was alive. ⁴²The news raced through the whole town, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³And Peter stayed a long time in Joppa, living with Simon, a leatherworker.

Points of Interest:

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

Taking it home:

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

Week 2 Family Devotional Ideas:

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

40 Days through Acts

Week Three

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

1. **The story for the day.** The entire story of Acts has been divided into 6 week's worth of daily stories. Rather than dividing the daily passages into equal lengths, they are divided into logical story units. Some days will be quite short, others a bit longer; but, hopefully, it will always be a manageable length of passage telling a satisfying episode in the life of the church. For your convenience, we've included the text of the story in the *New Living Translation* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1996). We've found this translation to be in fresh, modern language that has really helped us to do what we most want to do: enter into the story ourselves. As you read the passage, try to read it from the perspective of the disciples and the other people who interact with Jesus. Really get inside the story. What is it like to go through this experience with these early followers of Jesus?
2. **Points of Interest.** This section briefly explores aspects of the day's story that might be especially interesting or potentially confusing. It offers some historical notes and references that might help to interpret the story, frames some of the issues or questions addressed, and gives suggestions of ways to look at the story and what it might mean for us.
3. **Taking it home.** In this section, we offer some suggestions for how the day's reading apply practically to your life and the life of our church. Each day, we will ask 3 questions:
 - a. **What does Jesus want to do through you?**—During these 40 days, we are all asking God for 'a thousand-percent return' on our lives: when we invest our lives in his purposes, he has told us to expect to see the impact and the satisfaction of our lives multiply by a thousand percent. Each day, we will ask ourselves how our passage helps us to understand how to invest well or what we can expect when we do.
 - b. **What does Jesus want to do through your six?**— In the Cambridge Vineyard, we encourage everyone to have a list of six people for whom they are *seeking spiritual blessing*. These six people are local friends, family members, colleagues, and acquaintances who aren't presently actively seeking God, but in whom we see some spiritual interest, or in whose lives we see God at work. Even if you aren't quite sure there is a God yourself, we encourage you to pray for more spiritual blessing for your six, perhaps saying something like, 'God, I'm not even sure you're there, but if you are, please give more peace to my next door neighbors.' Then, watch and see what happens. It can't hurt. If nothing happens, no harm has been done. If something does happen, your six will have more blessing in their lives, and you will have experienced an answer to prayer.

Over the course of this guide, we will see that Acts makes the stunning claim that God not only wants to bless your six, but he has a high calling on them and a big destiny. Each day, we'll consider ways that we can pray for that destiny to be fulfilled in their lives.
 - c. **What does Jesus want to do through our church?**—God not only has big purposes he wants to pursue through each of us, he also has big purposes for us a church. We'll also pray each day that these dreams God has given us as a community will be fulfilled.
4. **Family Devotional Ideas.** At the end of each week's Bible study guide you'll find a paragraph suggesting themes and ideas you can explore with your children ages preschool through middle school at home. They'll be divided into two mini-sections, one for kids approximately ages 2-7 and one for kids approximately ages 8-12. The ideas apply to the entire week's bible text, so to make the most use of these suggestions you'll want to read them at the beginning of each week.

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

Monday April 5th

Acts 10:1-23

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Points of Interest:

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

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

Taking it home:

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

Tuesday April 6th

Acts 10:24-48

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Points of Interest:

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

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

Taking it home:

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

Wednesday, April 7th

Acts 11

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Points of Interest:

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

Taking it home:

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

Thursday, April 8th

Acts 12:1-24

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Points of Interest:

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

Taking it home:

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

Friday, April 9th

Acts 12:25-13:12

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

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

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

Formatted: Bullets and Numbering

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

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

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

Points of Interest:

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

Taking it home:

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

Saturday, April 10th

Acts 13:13-52

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴⁸When the Gentiles heard this, they were very glad and thanked the Lord for his message; and all who were appointed to eternal life became believers. ⁴⁹So the Lord's message spread throughout that region.

⁵⁰Then the Jewish leaders stirred up both the influential religious women and the leaders of the city, and they incited a mob against Paul and Barnabas and ran them out of town. ⁵¹But they shook off the dust of their

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

Points of Interest:

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

Taking it home:

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

Sunday April 11th

Acts 14

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Points of Interest:

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

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

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

Taking it home:

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

Week 3 Family Devotional Ideas:

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

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

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

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.

¹⁸

This is what the Lord says,

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 babbler 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 Spirit," 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?

40 Days through Acts' Good News

Week Five

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

5. 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?

6. 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.

7. 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:

d. **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.

e. **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.

f. **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.

8. 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 19th

Acts 18:18-19:7

¹⁸ Paul stayed in Corinth for some time after that and then said good-bye to the brothers and sisters and sailed for the coast of Syria, taking Priscilla and Aquila with him. (Earlier, at Cenchrea, Paul had shaved his head according to Jewish custom, for he had taken a vow.) ¹⁹ When they arrived at the port of Ephesus, Paul left the others behind. But while he was there, he went to the synagogue to debate with the Jews. ²⁰ They asked him to stay longer, but he declined. ²¹ So he left, saying, "I will come back later, God willing." Then he set sail from Ephesus. ²² The next stop was at the port of Caesarea. From there he went up and visited the church at Jerusalem and then went back to Antioch.

²³ After spending some time in Antioch, Paul went back to Galatia and Phrygia, visiting all the believers, encouraging them and helping them to grow in the Lord.

²⁴ Meanwhile, a Jew named Apollos, an eloquent speaker who knew the Scriptures well, had just arrived in Ephesus from Alexandria in Egypt. ²⁵ He had been taught the way of the Lord and talked to others with great enthusiasm and accuracy about Jesus. However, he knew only about John's baptism. ²⁶ When Priscilla and Aquila heard him preaching boldly in the synagogue, they took him aside and explained the way of God more accurately.

²⁷ Apollos had been thinking about going to Achaia, and the brothers and sisters in Ephesus encouraged him in this. They wrote to the believers in Achaia, asking them to welcome him. When he arrived there, he proved to be of great benefit to those who, by God's grace, had believed. ²⁸ He refuted all the Jews with powerful arguments in public debate. Using the Scriptures, he explained to them, "The Messiah you are looking for is Jesus."

¹⁹ While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul traveled through the interior provinces. Finally, he came to Ephesus, where he found several believers. ² "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" he asked them.

"No," they replied, "we don't know what you mean. We haven't even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

³ "Then what baptism did you experience?" he asked.

And they replied, "The baptism of John."

⁴ Paul said, "John's baptism was to demonstrate a desire to turn from sin and turn to God. John himself told the people to believe in Jesus, the one John said would come later."

⁵ As soon as they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶ Then when Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in other tongues and prophesied. ⁷ There were about twelve men in all.

Points of Interest:

- 'they arrived at the port of Ephesus'—Ephesus was the largest and most important city in the province of Asia (present-day Turkey), with a large commercial port. Perhaps as many as 300,000 people lived in Ephesus.
- 'Paul left the others behind'—Ephesus is a new city for Paul. Ephesus may have been where he was trying to go when the Lord gave him a vision to direct him toward Macedonia instead. This time, he's just stopping through on his way to Antioch and Jerusalem, but apparently he is intending return; so, while he continues his trip, the rest of his team stays in Ephesus, either to prepare the way for Paul or simply because the trip to Jerusalem doesn't involve them.
- 'visited the church at Jerusalem'—the type of vow Paul had taken, called a Nazirite vow, required a trip to Jerusalem at its completion. The Nazirite vow was a spiritual act of thanksgiving to God.
- 'explained the way of God more accurately'—Apollos seems to have heard about the Messiah from the teachings of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin who had a preaching ministry whose intention it was to prepare the way for Jesus. He was acting on and teaching everything he knew, persuasively leading people toward Jesus even though he knew nothing of Jesus' actual ministry. Aquila and Priscilla fill in the blanks for him. Aquila and Priscilla could have looked down on Apollos because of his ignorance; but instead they use their greater knowledge to equip him for even more powerful ministry.
- 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?'—to Paul, it's not enough to believe the story of Jesus. He wants them to experience the benefits of having the Holy Spirit fill them.
- 'The baptism of John'—perhaps these are people who had learned from Apollos before Aquila and Priscilla told him about Jesus, or perhaps they had heard the teachings of John independently. John

the Baptist had only ever preached in Judea, but his words have apparently spread far and wide, preparing the way for Jesus' message among several of the first people Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila meet in distant Ephesus.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* John the Baptist had a tremendous impact with his ministry. Many years after his death, and hundreds of miles away from where he preached, his message was still leading people toward Jesus. You too can have such a lasting impact. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you the gift of John the Baptist, the ability to lead people you never even know toward Jesus.
- *Through your six:* Apparently, Apollos was a more gifted teacher and evangelist than Priscilla and Aquila; but he needed Priscilla and Aquila to mentor him in order to reach his full potential in using his gifts for Jesus' purposes. In what ways do you see that your six are more gifted than you? Look for ways to show them how Jesus can make that gift come alive.
- *Through our church:* Paul doesn't want people simply to believe in Jesus; he wants them to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Today, there are many people who believe in Jesus but have never been baptized in the Holy Spirit. Ask God to make us into a church that brings the filling of the Holy Spirit to these people as we encounter them.

Tuesday, April 20th

Acts 19:8-20

⁸Then Paul went to the synagogue and preached boldly for the next three months, arguing persuasively about the Kingdom of God. ⁹But some rejected his message and publicly spoke against the Way, so Paul left the synagogue and took the believers with him. Then he began preaching daily at the lecture hall of Tyrannus. ¹⁰This went on for the next two years, so that people throughout the province of Asia--both Jews and Greeks--heard the Lord's message.

¹¹God gave Paul the power to do unusual miracles, ¹²so that even when handkerchiefs or cloths that had touched his skin were placed on sick people, they were healed of their diseases, and any evil spirits within them came out.

¹³A team of Jews who were traveling from town to town casting out evil spirits tried to use the name of the Lord Jesus. The incantation they used was this: "I command you by Jesus, whom Paul preaches, to come out!" ¹⁴Seven sons of Sceva, a leading priest, were doing this. ¹⁵But when they tried it on a man possessed by an evil spirit, the spirit replied, "I know Jesus, and I know Paul. But who are you?" ¹⁶And he leaped on them and attacked them with such violence that they fled from the house, naked and badly injured.

¹⁷The story of what happened spread quickly all through Ephesus, to Jews and Greeks alike. A solemn fear descended on the city, and the name of the Lord Jesus was greatly honored. ¹⁸Many who became believers confessed their sinful practices. ¹⁹A number of them who had been practicing magic brought their incantation books and burned them at a public bonfire. The value of the books was several million dollars. ²⁰So the message about the Lord spread widely and had a powerful effect.

Points of Interest:

- 'so Paul left the synagogue'—it was always Paul's custom to go to the synagogue first. But just because the synagogue refused to hear the message doesn't mean the message was stopped.
- 'power to do unusual miracles'—earlier, the Holy Spirit filled Peter so powerfully that his shadow was causing miracles. Similarly, Paul's handkerchiefs are causing miracles here. The Holy Spirit is using Paul to reach Ephesus and Asia just as he used Peter to reach Jerusalem and Judea.
- 'But who are you?'—Jesus' name is powerful, but it's not a magic incantation. The sons of Sceva learn the hard way that you need legitimate authority and real power to cast out demons by the name of Jesus. Fortunately, Jesus is very generous with his authority and his power. To receive his authority, all you have to do is become his follower. To receive his power, you only have to be filled with his Spirit. In chapter 2, Peter says that Jesus desires everyone to receive this power. The Holy Spirit is available to the sons of Sceva, but they haven't turned toward Jesus and received it.
- 'burned them at a public bonfire'—it seems like the people of Ephesus learn two very important lessons from the sons of Sceva: they learn just how big a difference it makes to be filled with the Holy Spirit; and they learn that evil spirits are not to be toyed with. In response to these lessons, they turn

to Jesus, and they firmly and permanently reject forms of spiritual power that come from a source other than the Holy Spirit.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* The Holy Spirit had already given Paul the power to perform miracles, but here he takes it to a whole new level. Ask God to bring you to a whole new level in hearing his voice, in healing, in prophecy, or in any way you have already experienced his power before.
- *Through your six:* Are any of your six seeking spiritual power apart from Jesus? Ask the Holy Spirit to preserve them from being overpowered like the sons of Sceva, and to draw them to himself instead.
- *Through our church:* Peter experienced an outbreak of the Holy Spirit that totally changed Jerusalem, and Paul saw Ephesus transformed by the name of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. Pray that we would have the chance of seeing such an outpouring of the Holy Spirit here in Boston.

Wednesday, April 21st

Acts 19:21- 20:6

²¹Afterward Paul felt impelled by the Holy Spirit to go over to Macedonia and Achaia before returning to Jerusalem. "And after that," he said, "I must go on to Rome!" ²²He sent his two assistants, Timothy and Erastus, on ahead to Macedonia while he stayed awhile longer in the province of Asia.

²³But about that time, serious trouble developed in Ephesus concerning the Way. ²⁴It began with Demetrius, a silversmith who had a large business manufacturing silver shrines of the Greek goddess Artemis. He kept many craftsmen busy. ²⁵He called the craftsmen together, along with others employed in related trades, and addressed them as follows:

"Gentlemen, you know that our wealth comes from this business. ²⁶As you have seen and heard, this man Paul has persuaded many people that handmade gods aren't gods at all. And this is happening not only here in Ephesus but throughout the entire province! ²⁷Of course, I'm not just talking about the loss of public respect for our business. I'm also concerned that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will lose its influence and that Artemis--this magnificent goddess worshiped throughout the province of Asia and all around the world--will be robbed of her prestige!"

²⁸At this their anger boiled, and they began shouting, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" ²⁹A crowd began to gather, and soon the city was filled with confusion. Everyone rushed to the amphitheater, dragging along Gaius and Aristarchus, who were Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia. ³⁰Paul wanted to go in, but the believers wouldn't let him. ³¹Some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, also sent a message to him, begging him not to risk his life by entering the amphitheater.

³²Inside, the people were all shouting, some one thing and some another. Everything was in confusion. In fact, most of them didn't even know why they were there. ³³Alexander was thrust forward by some of the Jews, who encouraged him to explain the situation. He motioned for silence and tried to speak in defense.

³⁴But when the crowd realized he was a Jew, they started shouting again and kept it up for two hours:

"Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

³⁵At last the mayor was able to quiet them down enough to speak. "Citizens of Ephesus," he said. "Everyone knows that Ephesus is the official guardian of the temple of the great Artemis, whose image fell down to us from heaven. ³⁶Since this is an indisputable fact, you shouldn't be disturbed, no matter what is said. Don't do anything rash. ³⁷You have brought these men here, but they have stolen nothing from the temple and have not spoken against our goddess. ³⁸If Demetrius and the craftsmen have a case against them, the courts are in session and the judges can take the case at once. Let them go through legal channels. ³⁹And if there are complaints about other matters, they can be settled in a legal assembly. ⁴⁰I am afraid we are in danger of being charged with rioting by the Roman government, since there is no cause for all this commotion. And if Rome demands an explanation, we won't know what to say." ⁴¹Then he dismissed them, and they dispersed.

¹When it was all over, Paul sent for the believers and encouraged them. Then he said good-bye and left for Macedonia. ²Along the way, he encouraged the believers in all the towns he passed through. Then he traveled down to Greece, ³where he stayed for three months. He was preparing to sail back to Syria when he discovered a plot by some Jews against his life, so he decided to return through Macedonia.

⁴Several men were traveling with him. They were Sopater of Berea, the son of Pyrrhus; Aristarchus and Secundus, from Thessalonica; Gaius, from Derbe; Timothy; and Tychicus and Trophimus, who were from the province of Asia. ⁵They went ahead and waited for us at Troas. ⁶As soon as the Passover season ended, we boarded a ship at Philippi in Macedonia and five days later arrived in Troas, where we stayed a week.

Points of Interest:

- 'this magnificent goddess worshiped throughout the province of Asia'—Ephesus was indeed famous for its temple to Artemis. It was the world center for worship of Artemis, one of the major Greek goddesses.
- 'also concerned that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will lose its influence'—just like in Jerusalem, the followers of Jesus in Ephesus encounter widespread, violent opposition when the temple is threatened. When worship of Jesus begins to grow in a city, the existing religious institutions are threatened, and they lash out. In the case of both Jerusalem and Ephesus, the people who gain power, prestige, and wealth through these religious institutions naturally fight back to protect their interests. But perhaps there is more to the story than simply a human response. In Paul's later letter to the Ephesians, he says, 'For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Ephesians 6:12, NIV). Perhaps there is a spiritual power behind the Artemis cult in Ephesus which is actively fighting against Jesus, his message, and his people, trying to maintain control over this city.
- 'whose image fell down to us from heaven'—it is thought that the main image of Artemis at the temple in Ephesus was a comet.
- 'Paul sent for the believers and encouraged them'—Paul, who was an accuser in the Jerusalem persecution, is now an encourager. The temptation to scatter and lay low must have been very strong, but Paul wisely gathers them together: 'A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken' (Ecclesiastes 4:12).
- 'he encouraged the believers in all the towns he passed'—Paul probably did many things as he passed through these towns: taught, corrected, selected leaders. But Luke chooses to focus on Paul's role as an encourager. It's as if the biggest threat to their life in Jesus is that they would lose heart or give up. Paul goes back through these cities, reminding the believers there of the goodness of following Jesus, and telling them that it is worth it to keep following, and that they are able to keep following.
- 'he discovered a plot by some Jews against his life'—Syria is the province in which the controversy that leads to the Council of Jerusalem began. Apparently, Paul's role in approving that Gentiles do not have to become Jews has earned him enough hatred that some Jews (it is unclear whether or not they claim to be followers of Jesus) are willing to murder him. Paul's life is in danger twice in this passage, and his reactions are intriguing. In Ephesus, he has to be convinced not to go into the amphitheater, but here he avoids an entire province because of a death threat. Paul doesn't seem to be too afraid of danger, but he also doesn't ignore it. In both of the instances in this passage, he ends up deciding that the situation is not worth risking his life.
- 'Several men were traveling with him'—the spotlight of this story is frequently on Paul, but it is significant to notice that Paul does not pursue his ministry alone: he has an entire team who supports him in his church-planting mission.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Church-planting is something that is best done in teams; even Paul couldn't have accomplished what he did without the team which traveled with him. If God has given you the desire to plant a church, ask him to provide you with people to go with you. If you don't feel ready to or called to play a lead role in a church plant, ask God if he has a part for you to play on someone else's team.
- *Through your six:* Have any of your six taken steps toward Jesus recently? Look for an opportunity to offer an encouraging word to them. Frequent, well-timed encouragement can make a huge difference as a person tries to follow Jesus.
- *Through our church:* Hopefully, as we prayed yesterday, God will allow us to play a part in revolutionizing Cambridge and Boston with Jesus' good news. If we do, we are certain to threaten the religious and spiritual powers that have been used to being in charge. Pray that God would protect us from these spiritual forces, and that he would give us the power by the Holy Spirit to withstand their attacks in Jesus' name.

Thursday, April 22nd

Acts 20:7-38

⁷On the first day of the week, we gathered to observe the Lord's Supper. Paul was preaching; and since he was leaving the next day, he talked until midnight. ⁸The upstairs room where we met was lighted with many flickering lamps. ⁹As Paul spoke on and on, a young man named Eutychus, sitting on the windowsill, became

very drowsy. Finally, he sank into a deep sleep and fell three stories to his death below. ¹⁰Paul went down, bent over him, and took him into his arms. "Don't worry," he said, "he's alive!" ¹¹Then they all went back upstairs and ate the Lord's Supper together. And Paul continued talking to them until dawn; then he left. ¹²Meanwhile, the young man was taken home unhurt, and everyone was greatly relieved.

¹³Paul went by land to Assos, where he had arranged for us to join him, and we went on ahead by ship. ¹⁴He joined us there and we sailed together to Mitylene. ¹⁵The next day we passed the island of Kios. The following day, we crossed to the island of Samos. And a day later we arrived at Miletus.

¹⁶Paul had decided against stopping at Ephesus this time because he didn't want to spend further time in the province of Asia. He was hurrying to get to Jerusalem, if possible, for the Festival of Pentecost. ¹⁷But when we landed at Miletus, he sent a message to the elders of the church at Ephesus, asking them to come down to meet him.

¹⁸"When they arrived he declared, "You know that from the day I set foot in the province of Asia until now ¹⁹I have done the Lord's work humbly--yes, and with tears. I have endured the trials that came to me from the plots of the Jews. ²⁰Yet I never shrank from telling you the truth, either publicly or in your homes. ²¹I have had one message for Jews and Gentiles alike--the necessity of turning from sin and turning to God, and of faith in our Lord Jesus.

²²"And now I am going to Jerusalem, drawn there irresistibly by the Holy Spirit, not knowing what awaits me, ²³except that the Holy Spirit has told me in city after city that jail and suffering lie ahead. ²⁴But my life is worth nothing unless I use it for doing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus--the work of telling others the Good News about God's wonderful kindness and love.

²⁵"And now I know that none of you to whom I have preached the Kingdom will ever see me again. ²⁶Let me say plainly that I have been faithful. No one's damnation can be blamed on me, ²⁷for I didn't shrink from declaring all that God wants for you.

²⁸"And now beware! Be sure that you feed and shepherd God's flock--his church, purchased with his blood--over whom the Holy Spirit has appointed you as elders. ²⁹I know full well that false teachers, like vicious wolves, will come in among you after I leave, not sparing the flock. ³⁰Even some of you will distort the truth in order to draw a following. ³¹Watch out! Remember the three years I was with you--my constant watch and care over you night and day, and my many tears for you.

³²"And now I entrust you to God and the word of his grace--his message that is able to build you up and give you an inheritance with all those he has set apart for himself.

³³"I have never coveted anyone's money or fine clothing. ³⁴You know that these hands of mine have worked to pay my own way, and I have even supplied the needs of those who were with me. ³⁵And I have been a constant example of how you can help the poor by working hard. You should remember the words of the Lord Jesus: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' "

³⁶When he had finished speaking, he knelt and prayed with them. ³⁷They wept aloud as they embraced him in farewell, ³⁸sad most of all because he had said that they would never see him again. Then they accompanied him down to the ship.

Points of Interest:

- 'continued talking to them until dawn'—Paul is really trying to make the most of his time on this final evening. He doesn't even let the fact that someone fell asleep, fell to his death, and had to be raised again stop him from finishing what he has to say.
- 'But my life is worth nothing'—Paul has found something more valuable even than life itself: the mission Jesus has given him of telling others the good news.
- 'the Good News about God's wonderful kindness and love'—Paul has only one message, about the necessity of turning from sin, but he doesn't speak this message out of a desire to judge or condemn. It's a message of wonderful kindness and love, focusing on God's abundant mercy and goodwill.
- 'Be sure that you feed and shepherd God's flock'—Paul has been a faithful shepherd of this flock. He is leaving now and officially placing the responsibility for the flock in the hands of the elders. It's their flock now.
- 'Watch out!'—Paul, at great cost to himself, has faithfully led the people of Ephesus toward Jesus; but not everyone has such pure intentions. Even the Ephesian elders themselves will be tempted to preach a message that draws people to themselves rather than Jesus. If the elders are going to continue the good shepherding of Paul, they need to keep a watch on their own heart and on the motivations and intentions of other teachers who come along.
- 'They wept aloud'—Paul preached to them with tears, and they say good-bye to him with tears. Paul and the Ephesian elders have let one another into their hearts.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* One of the fruits of Paul's decision to devote his life to bringing Jesus' message to others is deep, heart-felt connection with others. As you give yourself to Jesus' purposes, ask that he bless you with the best friendships you have ever had.
- *Through your six:* Paul had a clear conscience concerning his relationship with the Ephesians. He knew that he had faithfully passed on to them the whole message God had for them. Has God given you any message for your six that you have been holding back on delivering? Ask God to give you the boldness and the opportunity to pass along everything he wants for your six. For them, it could mean a chance to receive God's wonderful kindness and love. For you, it brings the blessing of a clear conscience.
- *Through our church:* Paul here tells the elders that it is a very real temptation to become a wolf rather than a shepherd. Pray that God would protect us from ever changing Jesus' message to gain something for ourselves. Pray that God would keep us from selfishness and that we would always remember that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Friday, April 23rd

Acts 21:1-16

¹After saying farewell to the Ephesian elders, we sailed straight to the island of Cos. The next day we reached Rhodes and then went to Patara. ²There we boarded a ship sailing for the Syrian province of Phoenicia. ³We sighted the island of Cyprus, passed it on our left, and landed at the harbor of Tyre, in Syria, where the ship was to unload. ⁴We went ashore, found the local believers, and stayed with them a week. These disciples prophesied through the Holy Spirit that Paul should not go on to Jerusalem. ⁵When we returned to the ship at the end of the week, the entire congregation, including wives and children, came down to the shore with us. There we knelt, prayed, ⁶and said our farewells. Then we went aboard, and they returned home.

⁷The next stop after leaving Tyre was Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and sisters but stayed only one day. ⁸Then we went on to Caesarea and stayed at the home of Philip the Evangelist, one of the seven men who had been chosen to distribute food. ⁹He had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy.

¹⁰During our stay of several days, a man named Agabus, who also had the gift of prophecy, arrived from Judea. ¹¹When he visited us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands with it. Then he said, "The Holy Spirit declares, 'So shall the owner of this belt be bound by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and turned over to the Romans.'" ¹²When we heard this, we who were traveling with him, as well as the local believers, begged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.

¹³But he said, "Why all this weeping? You are breaking my heart! For I am ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem but also to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus." ¹⁴When it was clear that we couldn't persuade him, we gave up and said, "The will of the Lord be done."

¹⁵Shortly afterward we packed our things and left for Jerusalem. ¹⁶Some believers from Caesarea accompanied us, and they took us to the home of Mnason, a man originally from Cyprus and one of the early disciples.

Points of Interest:

- 'These disciples prophesied through the Holy Spirit that Paul should not go on to Jerusalem'—in yesterday's passage, Paul says that he is 'drawn [to Jerusalem] irresistibly by the Holy Spirit.' But in this passage, it is prophesied that Paul should not go there. Is the Holy Spirit contradicting himself? It is said that it is easier to receive a prophecy than to interpret what it means. Perhaps this is an example of that principle. The prophecy of Agabus clearly indicates that Paul will be imprisoned in Jerusalem. Paul also, while feeling compelled by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem, heard from God that suffering and imprisonment awaited him there. Perhaps the prophets in Tyre heard the same message as Paul—that he would suffer in Jerusalem—but they interpreted it differently, understandably assuming that it meant he shouldn't go. The Tyrians may not have even been aware that they were interpreting it. Because interpretation of prophecies can often be tricky, it can be a good idea to do what they do with Agabus' prophecy: they discuss it; then they leave the final decision about how to respond in the hands of the person to whom the prophecy is given. Paul acknowledges that it is true that he will suffer, but he believes that it is suffering with a purpose for the sake of Jesus.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* In this passage, we get to see Philip, the Greek-speaker who brought Jesus' message to the Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch, again; and we learn that he has four daughters with the gift of prophecy. Philip was able to raise up his family into God's mission, and to encourage them in a gift

of the Spirit different from his own. Pray that God would give you the opportunity to pass your love for Jesus on to the next generation—especially if you have children of your own—and that he would equip you to encourage them in their own gifts and ministry.

- *Through your six:* the Holy Spirit speaks to Paul, to guide him and to prepare him for what is coming. Because the Holy Spirit has prepared him, he won't be surprised when his time in Jerusalem is difficult. Ask God to speak by the Holy Spirit to your six, guiding them into the future or warning them about the future.
- *Through our church:* Pray for prophecy in our church. Ask the Holy Spirit to give us words of prophecy for the help and encouragement of others, and the wisdom and discernment to interpret those prophecies well.

Saturday, April 24th

Acts 21:17-39

¹⁷All the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem welcomed us cordially.

¹⁸The next day Paul went in with us to meet with James, and all the elders of the Jerusalem church were present. ¹⁹After greetings were exchanged, Paul gave a detailed account of the things God had accomplished among the Gentiles through his ministry.

²⁰After hearing this, they praised God. But then they said, "You know, dear brother, how many thousands of Jews have also believed, and they all take the law of Moses very seriously. ²¹Our Jewish Christians here at Jerusalem have been told that you are teaching all the Jews living in the Gentile world to turn their backs on the laws of Moses. They say that you teach people not to circumcise their children or follow other Jewish customs. ²²Now what can be done? For they will certainly hear that you have come.

²³"Here's our suggestion. We have four men here who have taken a vow and are preparing to shave their heads. ²⁴Go with them to the Temple and join them in the purification ceremony, and pay for them to have their heads shaved. Then everyone will know that the rumors are all false and that you yourself observe the Jewish laws.

²⁵"As for the Gentile Christians, all we ask of them is what we already told them in a letter: They should not eat food offered to idols, nor consume blood, nor eat meat from strangled animals, and they should stay away from all sexual immorality."

²⁶So Paul agreed to their request, and the next day he went through the purification ritual with the men and went to the Temple. Then he publicly announced the date when their vows would end and sacrifices would be offered for each of them.

²⁷The seven days were almost ended when some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul in the Temple and roused a mob against him. They grabbed him, ²⁸yelling, "Men of Israel! Help! This is the man who teaches against our people and tells everybody to disobey the Jewish laws. He speaks against the Temple--and he even defiles it by bringing Gentiles in!" ²⁹(For earlier that day they had seen him in the city with Trophimus, a Gentile from Ephesus, and they assumed Paul had taken him into the Temple.)

³⁰The whole population of the city was rocked by these accusations, and a great riot followed. Paul was dragged out of the Temple, and immediately the gates were closed behind him. ³¹As they were trying to kill him, word reached the commander of the Roman regiment that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. ³²He immediately called out his soldiers and officers and ran down among the crowd. When the mob saw the commander and the troops coming, they stopped beating Paul. ³³The commander arrested him and ordered him bound with two chains. Then he asked the crowd who he was and what he had done. ³⁴Some shouted one thing and some another. He couldn't find out the truth in all the uproar and confusion, so he ordered Paul to be taken to the fortress. ³⁵As they reached the stairs, the mob grew so violent the soldiers had to lift Paul to their shoulders to protect him. ³⁶And the crowd followed behind shouting, "Kill him, kill him!"

³⁷As Paul was about to be taken inside, he said to the commander, "May I have a word with you?"

"Do you know Greek?" the commander asked, surprised. ³⁸"Aren't you the Egyptian who led a rebellion some time ago and took four thousand members of the Assassins out into the desert?"

³⁹"No," Paul replied, "I am a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia, which is an important city. Please, let me talk to these people."

Points of Interest:

- 'have been told that you are teaching all the Jews living in the Gentile world to turn their backs on the laws of Moses'—actually, Paul has not been teaching the Jews to live like Gentiles. He's been

teaching Gentiles that they don't need to live like Jews. But wild rumors have spread about him, even among the church.

- 'So Paul agreed to their request'—as long as it does not compromise his mission to the Gentiles, Paul is perfectly willing to do what it takes to seek peace with the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. Even though Paul has a mission to the Gentiles, he is still himself a Jew and practices the Jewish law. In fact, he just recently took the same vow himself. So, he would have no problem doing what James asked of him.
- 'ran down among the crowd'—the Romans had a fortress on high ground near the Temple, from which they commanded the city and kept the peace.
- 'He couldn't find out the truth in all the uproar and confusion'—again, it seems that wild rumors about Paul are spreading around. There seems to be a climate of hysteria surrounding Paul during this Jerusalem trip: the Jewish believers think that he is preaching that Jews abandon the laws of Moses; some Asian Jews think he has brought a non-Jew into the Jews-only precinct of the temple; the Romans think he is an Egyptian guerilla fighter; and many people don't know what's going on, but they're still angry at Paul.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Rather than defend himself against unjust accusations and irrational fears, Paul puts aside his rights and does what he can to seek peace. Are you in a situation right now where there is a lack of peace? What can you do to bring about reconciliation? Consider the possibility that it might take laying down your right to completely defend yourself.
- *Through your six:* The Jews respond to Paul with irrational fear that comes out of entrenched prejudices. All of us make these sorts of blind assumptions about people who see things differently from us, and when we act out of them it can keep us apart from others and from Jesus. Ask God to protect your six from these negative effects of their fears and biases.
- *Through our church:* James and the other leaders of the Jerusalem church welcomed Paul and his team even though it was likely to cause trouble for them. Ask us to increase our ability to welcome other believers who do things differently from us, even if it causes us some trouble to do so.

Sunday, April 25th

Acts 21:40-22:29

⁴⁰The commander agreed, so Paul stood on the stairs and motioned to the people to be quiet. Soon a deep silence enveloped the crowd, and he addressed them in their own language, Aramaic.

¹ "Brothers and esteemed fathers," Paul said, "listen to me as I offer my defense." ²When they heard him speaking in their own language, the silence was even greater. ³"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, and I was brought up and educated here in Jerusalem under Gamaliel. At his feet I learned to follow our Jewish laws and customs very carefully. I became very zealous to honor God in everything I did, just as all of you are today. ⁴And I persecuted the followers of the Way, hounding some to death, binding and delivering both men and women to prison. ⁵The high priest and the whole council of leaders can testify that this is so. For I received letters from them to our Jewish brothers in Damascus, authorizing me to bring the Christians from there to Jerusalem, in chains, to be punished.

⁶"As I was on the road, nearing Damascus, about noon a very bright light from heaven suddenly shone around me. ⁷I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'

⁸" 'Who are you, sir?' I asked. And he replied, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, the one you are persecuting.' ⁹The people with me saw the light but didn't hear the voice.

¹⁰"I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord told me, 'Get up and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that you are to do.'

¹¹"I was blinded by the intense light and had to be led into Damascus by my companions. ¹²A man named Ananias lived there. He was a godly man in his devotion to the law, and he was well thought of by all the Jews of Damascus. ¹³He came to me and stood beside me and said, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And that very hour I could see him!

¹⁴"Then he told me, 'The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and hear him speak. ¹⁵You are to take his message everywhere, telling the whole world what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶And now, why delay? Get up and be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on the name of the Lord.'

¹⁷"One day after I returned to Jerusalem, I was praying in the Temple, and I fell into a trance. ¹⁸I saw a vision of Jesus saying to me, 'Hurry! Leave Jerusalem, for the people here won't believe you when you give them your testimony about me.'

¹⁹" 'But Lord,' I argued, 'they certainly know that I imprisoned and beat those in every synagogue who

believed on you. ²⁰And when your witness Stephen was killed, I was standing there agreeing. I kept the coats they laid aside as they stoned him.'

²¹"But the Lord said to me, 'Leave Jerusalem, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles!'"

²²The crowd listened until Paul came to that word; then with one voice they shouted, "Away with such a fellow! Kill him! He isn't fit to live!" ²³They yelled, threw off their coats, and tossed handfuls of dust into the air.

²⁴The commander brought Paul inside and ordered him lashed with whips to make him confess his crime. He wanted to find out why the crowd had become so furious. ²⁵As they tied Paul down to lash him, Paul said to the officer standing there, "Is it legal for you to whip a Roman citizen who hasn't even been tried?"

²⁶The officer went to the commander and asked, "What are you doing? This man is a Roman citizen!"

²⁷So the commander went over and asked Paul, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?"

"Yes, I certainly am," Paul replied.

²⁸"I am, too," the commander muttered, "and it cost me plenty!"

"But I am a citizen by birth!"

²⁹The soldiers who were about to interrogate Paul quickly withdrew when they heard he was a Roman citizen, and the commander was frightened because he had ordered him bound and whipped.

Points of Interest:

- 'When they heard him speaking in their own language'—Paul is a Hebrew-culture Jew, even a Pharisee; but they assume that he can't speak Aramaic because of their assumptions about him and his beliefs.
- 'a godly man in his devotion to the law —Paul is demonstrating to the crowd that he and the people from whom he learned all deeply respect the law.
- 'The crowd listened until Paul came to that word'—the mere word Gentile seems to confirm that everything they feared about him was, in fact, true. Or, perhaps, it makes clear that they aren't really angry because he is teaching Jews to act like Gentiles; they are angry because he has anything to do with Gentiles at all and because he believes that God cares about them.
- 'to make him confess his crime'—the commander assumes that Paul must have done something more than just say, 'Gentile.' So, he decides to beat it out of him.
- 'This man is a Roman citizen'—there are different levels of citizenship in the Roman Empire, with different privileges attached. Citizens of Tarsus, where Paul was born, are given the status of Roman citizen, the very highest level. Because of this Roman citizenship, Paul is protected against beating and has a more highly protected right to a trial. The commander at first doesn't believe that Paul has such a high status. Paul is only a Jew after all; and he is a commander in a Roman army, but even he had to spend a lot of money to buy this high status.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Paul has a great deal of faith in the power of his own story. He expects that even an angry mob will be convinced if they really hear his story of how he came to know Jesus. In this case, it doesn't quite have the effect for which he was hoping; but often it is true just how compelling our stories of encountering Jesus are. Look for an opportunity to share your story with someone in the next few days.
- *Through your six:* Paul is surrounded by an angry mob trying to kill him, but he sees in that crowd a commendable zeal to honor God. Are there ways in which any of your six attack you or persecute you that actually demonstrate a zeal for God? Look for ways to affirm those traits in them.
- *Through our church:* We are a church with many people who possess some sort of special social status, through our positions, our degrees, or even our citizenship. Ask God to give us as a church an ability to see how we can use that status to advance Jesus' message.

Week 5 Family Devotional Ideas:

Acts Family Devotions are not included this week.

Formatted: Bullets and Numbering

40 Days through Acts

Week Six

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 26th

Acts 22:30-23:11

³⁰The next day the commander freed Paul from his chains and ordered the leading priests into session with the Jewish high council. He had Paul brought in before them to try to find out what the trouble was all about.

¹ Gazing intently at the high council, Paul began: "Brothers, I have always lived before God in all good conscience!"

²Instantly Ananias the high priest commanded those close to Paul to slap him on the mouth. ³But Paul said to him, "God will slap you, you whitewashed wall! What kind of judge are you to break the law yourself by ordering me struck like that?"

⁴Those standing near Paul said to him, "Is that the way to talk to God's high priest?"

⁵"I'm sorry, brothers. I didn't realize he was the high priest," Paul replied, "for the Scriptures say, 'Do not speak evil of anyone who rules over you.'"

⁶Paul realized that some members of the high council were Sadducees and some were Pharisees, so he shouted, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, as were all my ancestors! And I am on trial because my hope is in the resurrection of the dead!"

⁷This divided the council--the Pharisees against the Sadducees--⁸for the Sadducees say there is no resurrection or angels or spirits, but the Pharisees believe in all of these. ⁹So a great clamor arose. Some of the teachers of religious law who were Pharisees jumped up to argue that Paul was all right. "We see nothing wrong with him," they shouted. "Perhaps a spirit or an angel spoke to him." ¹⁰The shouting grew louder and louder, and the men were tugging at Paul from both sides, pulling him this way and that. Finally, the commander, fearing they would tear him apart, ordered his soldiers to take him away from them and bring him back to the fortress.

¹¹That night the Lord appeared to Paul and said, "Be encouraged, Paul. Just as you have told the people about me here in Jerusalem, you must preach the Good News in Rome."

Points of Interest:

- God will slap you, you whitewashed wall!—Paul loses his temper here. It turns out he does not realize he is speaking to the high priest. Paul came to Jerusalem hoping for a warm reception and a quick send off to Rome. Instead, he finds himself imprisoned and interrogated by his own people. Paul considered himself completely faithful to his Jewish identity and yet those Jews in power only persecuted him. He may have been even more angry because it seems that none of the Jewish followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, and there was a considerable number of them, came to his aid.
- Brothers, I am a Pharisee, as were all my ancestors! And I am on trial because my hope is in the resurrection of the dead!—the Pharisees were a powerful minority on the high council and Paul knew that their theology differed with the Sadducees on some important points regarding belief in the resurrection of the dead and the existence of the spiritual world. Paul decided to divide the high council in order to weaken their case against him. His theology has remained the same as the Pharisees on the important point of the resurrection of the dead. He doesn't mention ways that his theology has evolved from there.
- 'Pharisees jumped up to argue that Paul was all right'—Paul strategy works temporarily. The fight that breaks out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees ends with the Romans intervening. Paul must have been very discouraged: he is saved only because his enemies can't agree.
- 'That night the Lord appeared to Paul and said, "Be encouraged, Paul.'—At what must have felt like one of the lowest ebbs in Paul's life, Jesus appears to him in a vision and encourages him in the mission He has given him. This time spent defending himself and waiting to continue with his life's work, the mission to the Gentiles, must have felt extremely frustrating and potentially depressing for Paul.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Have you felt thwarted in the plans you feel God has given you? Paul finds himself in a morass of religious and legal accusations that threaten to derail the clear direction God has given him. He is discouraged and angry. He even loses his temper. Jesus' response is to encourage Paul by supernatural visitation. Where do you feel the need for Jesus' supernatural visitation in your attempts to follow God? Cry out to God until you feel His encouragement.
- *Through your six:* Religious bodies often fight over theology and miss what God is actually doing. Your six may think of religion as a courtroom where participants fight over issues of theology. Jesus cares little about the religious debate Paul was caught between, he doesn't even mention it to Paul, instead Jesus encourages Paul to continue in the work of bringing hope to those who have not yet heard about

Jesus. Pray that your six would have the ability to see the difference between religion and the living Jesus who offers real hope.

- *Through our church:* Even though Paul was in the birthplace of the church, where many devout followers of Jesus lived, there seems to be no one around to help him. There is no mention of local believers praying for him. The issues surrounding his arrest, especially the false accusations that Paul was telling Jews they no longer needed to follow the Law, were so divisive in the Jewish community that Paul is left to fend for himself. Perhaps, it was good strategy on the part of the local Jewish believers or perhaps it was fear. Either way, Paul felt abandoned. The greater church in Boston and Cambridge is currently facing the divisive issue of gay marriage. Pray that whatever stances particular churches take on the issue there would be strong efforts put in to continue to communicate and support one another in the common mission to bring Jesus to this area.

Tuesday, April 27th

Acts 23:12-35

¹²The next morning a group of Jews got together and bound themselves with an oath to neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. ¹³There were more than forty of them. ¹⁴They went to the leading priests and other leaders and told them what they had done. "We have bound ourselves under oath to neither eat nor drink until we have killed Paul. ¹⁵You and the high council should tell the commander to bring Paul back to the council again," they requested. "Pretend you want to examine his case more fully. We will kill him on the way."

¹⁶But Paul's nephew heard of their plan and went to the fortress and told Paul. ¹⁷Paul called one of the officers and said, "Take this young man to the commander. He has something important to tell him."

¹⁸So the officer did, explaining, "Paul, the prisoner, called me over and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you."

¹⁹The commander took him by the arm, led him aside, and asked, "What is it you want to tell me?"

²⁰Paul's nephew told him, "Some Jews are going to ask you to bring Paul before the Jewish high council tomorrow, pretending they want to get some more information. ²¹But don't do it! There are more than forty men hiding along the way ready to jump him and kill him. They have vowed not to eat or drink until they kill him. They are ready, expecting you to agree to their request."

²²"Don't let a soul know you told me this," the commander warned the young man as he sent him away.

²³Then the commander called two of his officers and ordered, "Get two hundred soldiers ready to leave for Caesarea at nine o'clock tonight. Also take two hundred spearmen and seventy horsemen. ²⁴Provide horses for Paul to ride, and get him safely to Governor Felix." ²⁵Then he wrote this letter to the governor:

²⁶"From Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency, Governor Felix. Greetings! ²⁷This man was seized by some Jews, and they were about to kill him when I arrived with the troops. When I learned that he was a Roman citizen, I removed him to safety. ²⁸Then I took him to their high council to try to find out what he had done. ²⁹I soon discovered it was something regarding their religious law--certainly nothing worthy of imprisonment or death. ³⁰But when I was informed of a plot to kill him, I immediately sent him on to you. I have told his accusers to bring their charges before you."

³¹So that night, as ordered, the soldiers took Paul as far as Antipatris. ³²They returned to the fortress the next morning, while the horsemen took him on to Caesarea. ³³When they arrived in Caesarea, they presented Paul and the letter to Governor Felix. ³⁴He read it and then asked Paul what province he was from. "Cilicia," Paul answered.

³⁵"I will hear your case myself when your accusers arrive," the governor told him. Then the governor ordered him kept in the prison at Herod's headquarters.

Points of Interest:

- 'We have bound ourselves under oath to neither eat nor drink until we have killed Paul.'—Paul has clearly hit a raw nerve for a large portion of the Jewish population. For 40 men to take an oath to not eat until they kill him it means that there is a large latent pool of anger that has built up over Paul's commitment to bring Jesus to the Gentiles. It also indicates that up till now the Jewish followers of Jesus in Judea had been able to keep intact their Jewish religious identities. "Christianity" was still a branch of Judaism. Paul's ministry is making it more and more difficult for this to be true.
- 'Paul's nephew heard of their plan'—there is no indication as to how Paul's nephew heard of the plan, but without this information Paul would have most likely been killed that next day. God seems to be orchestrating Paul's rescue.

- 'I soon discovered it was something regarding their religious law--certainly nothing worthy of imprisonment or death.'—In this letter from the Roman commander Lysius to the Governor Felix there is no formal accusation. Under Roman law this should have led to Paul's immediate release when he arrived. It seems Felix's higher priority is to not want to displease the Jewish religious leaders. This is reminiscent of the Herod's posture towards the religious leadership.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* As Paul gets older the opposition to him seems to mount. I believe that this mounting Jewish opposition and the complicity of the Roman government to keeping Paul behind bars must be related to evil spiritual opposition to Paul's successful ministry. Paul's calling, his abilities, his focus and his passion could not be higher at this point in his life. He has reached a true life convergence. Even though the consequences of this seem to keep landing him in trouble it actually seems an incredibly inspiring problem to have – his life is so meaningful that whole groups of men are both trying to kill him and save him! If you dare, ask God for a life of such consequence!
- *Through your six:* 'something regarding their religious law'—the charges against Paul appear as religious trivia to the Roman commander. His contact with the religious authorities has not led him to a deeper desire to know the Living God of the Universe, unlike Cornelius' exposure to Judaism (see Acts 10) which does prepare him for an encounter with the Holy Spirit. Pray that your six would experience good religious exposure that could prepare them for an encounter with the Holy Spirit.
- *Through our church:* As our church grows in effectiveness at reaching people in the Cambridge-Boston area pray for spiritual protection against those forces that would want "to kill" God's work and those doing it!

Wednesday, April 28th

Acts 24:1-26

¹Five days later Ananias, the high priest, arrived with some of the Jewish leaders and the lawyer Tertullus, to press charges against Paul. ²When Paul was called in, Tertullus laid charges against Paul in the following address to the governor:

"Your Excellency, you have given peace to us Jews and have enacted reforms for us. ³And for all of this we are very grateful to you. ⁴But lest I bore you, kindly give me your attention for only a moment as I briefly outline our case against this man. ⁵For we have found him to be a troublemaker, a man who is constantly inciting the Jews throughout the world to riots and rebellions against the Roman government. He is a ringleader of the sect known as the Nazarenes. ⁶Moreover he was trying to defile the Temple when we arrested him. ⁸You can find out the truth of our accusations by examining him yourself." ⁹Then the other Jews chimed in, declaring that everything Tertullus said was true.

¹⁰Now it was Paul's turn. The governor motioned for him to rise and speak. Paul said, "I know, sir, that you have been a judge of Jewish affairs for many years, and this gives me confidence as I make my defense.

¹¹You can quickly discover that it was no more than twelve days ago that I arrived in Jerusalem to worship at the Temple. ¹²I didn't argue with anyone in the Temple, nor did I incite a riot in any synagogue or on the streets of the city. ¹³These men certainly cannot prove the things they accuse me of doing.

¹⁴"But I admit that I follow the Way, which they call a sect. I worship the God of our ancestors, and I firmly believe the Jewish law and everything written in the books of prophecy. ¹⁵I have hope in God, just as these men do, that he will raise both the righteous and the ungodly. ¹⁶Because of this, I always try to maintain a clear conscience before God and everyone else.

¹⁷"After several years away, I returned to Jerusalem with money to aid my people and to offer sacrifices to God. ¹⁸My accusers saw me in the Temple as I was completing a purification ritual. There was no crowd around me and no rioting. ¹⁹But some Jews from the province of Asia were there—and they ought to be here to bring charges if they have anything against me! ²⁰Ask these men here what wrongdoing the Jewish high council found in me, ²¹except for one thing I said when I shouted out, 'I am on trial before you today because I believe in the resurrection of the dead!' "

²²Felix, who was quite familiar with the Way, adjourned the hearing and said, "Wait until Lysias, the garrison commander, arrives. Then I will decide the case." ²³He ordered an officer to keep Paul in custody but to give him some freedom and allow his friends to visit him and take care of his needs.

²⁴A few days later Felix came with his wife, Drusilla, who was Jewish. Sending for Paul, they listened as he told them about faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁵As he reasoned with them about righteousness and self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was terrified. "Go away for now," he replied. "When it is more convenient, I'll call for you again." ²⁶He also hoped that Paul would bribe him, so he sent for him quite often and talked with him.

Points of Interest:

- 'you have given peace to us Jews and have enacted reforms for us.'—this was in fact not true. Felix was a particularly brutal governor. Tertullus was the lawyer hired by the Sanhedrin because of his knowledge and savvy regarding the Roman law system. He clearly displays this here.
- 'we have found him to be a troublemaker'—this first charge accuses Paul of leading a political movement of insurrection against the Roman government, something the Roman government watched vigilantly. Ironically, many Jews especially the Pharisees believed that it was their religious duty to politically oppose the Roman government. This charge was of course false and Paul flatly denies it and asks for Tertullus to present evidence which he of course cannot.
- 'But I admit that I follow the Way, which they call a sect.'—Paul admits to the charge that he is part of a group of people with a name, but he does not assent to the name given by Tertullus, the Nazarenes. Paul does not consider this a splinter group but believes that followers of Jesus are continuing in the true tradition of Judaism.
- 'Ask these men here what wrongdoing the Jewish high council found in me,'—in the end they have no case against Paul. They can produce no tangible evidence against him.
- 'He also hoped that Paul would bribe him, so he sent for him quite often and talked with him.'—Felix's interest in Paul seems purely selfish. When Paul first talked with him Felix was terrified, Felix was known to live a dissolute life. But, then Felix thought he might get money out of Paul so he kept inviting him to talk.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Integrity—Tertullus and Felix are both great examples of men with no integrity. Tertullus used his knowledge of the Roman system to try and bring about Paul's death through false accusations. Legal traditions dictated that Felix should release Paul as soon as he saw that there were no real accusations against him, but he does not. At work, at home and in society we are constantly tempted to cut deals, to posture, and to hedge the truth for personal advantage. Spend a few minutes asking God to examine your heart. Are there any areas in your life where there is a lack of integrity? What would it look like to pursue integrity knowing that God is the only one who can truly make your life work?
- *Through your six:* Sometimes Christians are accused of letting others "stomp all over them." What does it mean to "turn the other cheek" if not blind submission to attack? Paul here does not let himself get stomped on just for the sake of getting stomped on. He defends himself with integrity and claims every identity both Roman and Jewish that he can to hold up his case. At other times we see Paul heading right into violence. It seems that instead of following a simplistic moral rule, Paul is a man with a mission from Jesus heading straight for the goal he's been given. At times this requires submission to beatings and at other times this means using every means to get out. Pray that your six would come to realize that following Jesus means following a living being with greater purposes rather than submitting to moralistic rules.
- *Through our church:* Felix was only interested in Paul for his own entertainment and for his own gain. He was not open to hearing about Jesus. Pray for the gift of discernment in our church so that as we all interact with those who don't know Jesus we would know the difference between genuine interest and selfish ambition.

Thursday, April 29th

Acts 24:27-25:27

²⁷Two years went by in this way; then Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And because Felix wanted to gain favor with the Jewish leaders, he left Paul in prison.

¹Three days after Festus arrived in Caesarea to take over his new responsibilities, he left for Jerusalem, ²where the leading priests and other Jewish leaders met with him and made their accusations against Paul. ³They asked Festus as a favor to transfer Paul to Jerusalem. (Their plan was to waylay and kill him.) ⁴But Festus replied that Paul was at Caesarea and he himself would be returning there soon. ⁵So he said, "Those of you in authority can return with me. If Paul has done anything wrong, you can make your accusations."

⁶Eight or ten days later he returned to Caesarea, and on the following day Paul's trial began. ⁷On Paul's arrival in court, the Jewish leaders from Jerusalem gathered around and made many serious accusations they couldn't prove. ⁸Paul denied the charges. "I am not guilty," he said. "I have committed no crime against the Jewish laws or the Temple or the Roman government."

⁹Then Festus, wanting to please the Jews, asked him, "Are you willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial

before me there?"

¹⁰But Paul replied, "No! This is the official Roman court, so I ought to be tried right here. You know very well I am not guilty. ¹¹If I have done something worthy of death, I don't refuse to die. But if I am innocent, neither you nor anyone else has a right to turn me over to these men to kill me. I appeal to Caesar!"

¹²Festus conferred with his advisers and then replied, "Very well! You have appealed to Caesar, and to Caesar you shall go!"

¹³A few days later King Agrippa arrived with his sister, Bernice, to pay their respects to Festus. ¹⁴During their stay of several days, Festus discussed Paul's case with the king. "There is a prisoner here," he told him, "whose case was left for me by Felix. ¹⁵When I was in Jerusalem, the leading priests and other Jewish leaders pressed charges against him and asked me to sentence him. ¹⁶Of course, I quickly pointed out to them that Roman law does not convict people without a trial. They are given an opportunity to defend themselves face to face with their accusers.

¹⁷"When they came here for the trial, I called the case the very next day and ordered Paul brought in. ¹⁸But the accusations made against him weren't at all what I expected. ¹⁹It was something about their religion and about someone called Jesus who died, but whom Paul insists is alive. ²⁰I was perplexed as to how to conduct an investigation of this kind, and I asked him whether he would be willing to stand trial on these charges in Jerusalem. ²¹But Paul appealed to the emperor. So I ordered him back to jail until I could arrange to send him to Caesar."

²²"I'd like to hear the man myself," Agrippa said.

And Festus replied, "You shall--tomorrow!"

²³So the next day Agrippa and Bernice arrived at the auditorium with great pomp, accompanied by military officers and prominent men of the city. Festus ordered that Paul be brought in. ²⁴Then Festus said, "King Agrippa and all present, this is the man whose death is demanded both by the local Jews and by those in Jerusalem. ²⁵But in my opinion he has done nothing worthy of death. However, he appealed his case to the emperor, and I decided to send him. ²⁶But what shall I write the emperor? For there is no real charge against him. So I have brought him before all of you, and especially you, King Agrippa, so that after we examine him, I might have something to write. ²⁷For it doesn't seem reasonable to send a prisoner to the emperor without specifying the charges against him!"

Points of Interest:

- 'Three days after Festus arrived in Caesarea to take over his new responsibilities'—Felix was never able to decide what to do with Paul and after 2 whole years a new governor arrived, one with a much better reputation as an effective administrator. Perhaps, this is why a new way forward is finally found with Paul's case.
- 'But if I am innocent, neither you nor anyone else has a right to turn me over to these men to kill me. I appeal to Caesar!'—Paul knows the grave danger he is in if he returns to Jerusalem. Festus continues the tradition of indecisive and fearful (of Jewish disapproval) Roman rulers. Paul's only way out is to appeal to Caesar which he knows as a Roman citizen must be taken seriously by the authorities. It's also the way he will finally go to Rome which has been his long held hope for his next mission trip; this is obviously not the way he hoped to get there.
- 'But what shall I write the emperor? For there is no real charge against him.'—Though sending Paul to Caesar provides a solution there is still the small problem of providing a reason. This language is so reminiscent of the words used in Jesus' trial. Paul's life has come to imitate that of Jesus' in striking ways.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* 'Two years went by in this way'—sometimes we hit periods in following Jesus where nothing seems to change. The hard things in our lives just don't seem to go away and the vision we feel God has given us seems further and further away. If you are in such a place right now get in a small group (if you are not already in one) and share your situation with your group. Ask for prayer. If you are not in such a place pray that God would prepare you for such times by giving you a "marathoner's" approach to following Jesus.
- *Through your six:* God works through these obvious injustices to bring good to Paul's life and to His cause. God alone sustains Paul through this difficult time. Pray that your six would see God's work in areas of injustice in their own lives and in society and that they would experience God working through them to bring good to others.
- *Through our church:* As many in the early church Paul counted it as joy to endure suffering for the sake of Jesus' cause. Pray that our church would grow in rejoicing in suffering and that we would be found worthy to endure persecution. (Did I just write that???)

Friday, April 30th

Acts 26

¹ Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You may speak in your defense."

So Paul, with a gesture of his hand, started his defense: ²"I am fortunate, King Agrippa, that you are the one hearing my defense against all these accusations made by the Jewish leaders, ³for I know you are an expert on Jewish customs and controversies. Now please listen to me patiently!

⁴"As the Jewish leaders are well aware, I was given a thorough Jewish training from my earliest childhood among my own people and in Jerusalem. ⁵If they would admit it, they know that I have been a member of the Pharisees, the strictest sect of our religion. ⁶Now I am on trial because I am looking forward to the fulfillment of God's promise made to our ancestors. ⁷In fact, that is why the twelve tribes of Israel worship God night and day, and they share the same hope I have. Yet, O king, they say it is wrong for me to have this hope! ⁸Why does it seem incredible to any of you that God can raise the dead?

⁹"I used to believe that I ought to do everything I could to oppose the followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

¹⁰Authorized by the leading priests, I caused many of the believers in Jerusalem to be sent to prison. And I cast my vote against them when they were condemned to death. ¹¹Many times I had them whipped in the synagogues to try to get them to curse Christ. I was so violently opposed to them that I even hounded them in distant cities of foreign lands.

¹²"One day I was on such a mission to Damascus, armed with the authority and commission of the leading priests. ¹³About noon, Your Majesty, a light from heaven brighter than the sun shone down on me and my companions. ¹⁴We all fell down, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to fight against my will.'

¹⁵" 'Who are you, sir?' I asked.

"And the Lord replied, 'I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. ¹⁶Now stand up! For I have appeared to you to appoint you as my servant and my witness. You are to tell the world about this experience and about other times I will appear to you. ¹⁷And I will protect you from both your own people and the Gentiles. Yes, I am going to send you to the Gentiles, ¹⁸to open their eyes so they may turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God. Then they will receive forgiveness for their sins and be given a place among God's people, who are set apart by faith in me.'

¹⁹"And so, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to that vision from heaven. ²⁰I preached first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that all must turn from their sins and turn to God--and prove they have changed by the good things they do. ²¹Some Jews arrested me in the Temple for preaching this, and they tried to kill me. ²²But God protected me so that I am still alive today to tell these facts to everyone, from the least to the greatest. I teach nothing except what the prophets and Moses said would happen--²³that the Messiah would suffer and be the first to rise from the dead as a light to Jews and Gentiles alike."

²⁴Suddenly, Festus shouted, "Paul, you are insane. Too much study has made you crazy!"

²⁵But Paul replied, "I am not insane, Most Excellent Festus. I am speaking the sober truth. ²⁶And King Agrippa knows about these things. I speak frankly, for I am sure these events are all familiar to him, for they were not done in a corner! ²⁷King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do--"

²⁸Agrippa interrupted him. "Do you think you can make me a Christian so quickly?"

²⁹Paul replied, "Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that both you and everyone here in this audience might become the same as I am, except for these chains."

³⁰Then the king, the governor, Bernice, and all the others stood and left. ³¹As they talked it over they agreed, "This man hasn't done anything worthy of death or imprisonment." ³²And Agrippa said to Festus, "He could be set free if he hadn't appealed to Caesar!"

Points of Interest:

- 'Now I am on trial because I am looking forward to the fulfillment of God's promise made to our ancestors.'—Paul's theology was centered on living in an in-between time. God did two incredible things in raising Jesus from the dead and in pouring out the Holy Spirit on all who believe in His son, but Paul believed that there was much more yet to come. His hope rested on this future – the return of Jesus and His victorious reign on earth.
- 'Why does it seem incredible to any of you that God can raise the dead?'—Paul challenges their core assumptions of God's capabilities. Rather than his belief in the resurrection being incredible he confronts them with the absurdity of having a God that couldn't raise the dead.
- 'But God protected me so that I am still alive today to tell these facts to everyone'—Paul believes every moment of his life is pregnant with God directed meaning. He interprets for his enemies why

he is standing there defending himself, he is there for them to have one more chance to believe in the living God.

- 'Paul, you are insane. Too much study has made you crazy!'—Paul's insistence on a living God who raises the dead and has been working throughout history hits something deep in Festus. He shouts out what is a fairly illogical accusation against Paul. Why would too much study make a man insane? It seems Festus can't handle the life-changing implications of Paul's words.
- 'Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that both you and everyone here in this audience might become the same as I am, except for these chains.'—Paul has nothing more to lose. He is on his way to Rome and there is nothing the authorities can do to him. He gives his all and tries to convince these men of power that they need to bow down to Jesus. Agrippa could sense Paul's passion and obvious attempt to convert him. His question right before this statement was most likely a mocking question. Paul's statement given by anyone but Paul could appear arrogant, but Paul is speaking of the matter for which he has paid dearly.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* 'But God protected me'—Paul constantly viewed and interpreted his life as one for which God was deeply involved. It's tempting to think that our lives are mundane events with only occasional bursts of meaning. Paul views every moment of his life as a moment God cared about. Pray for God to give you faith to believe in His involvement in your past as well as your future.
- *Through your six:* For God to work through your six there will come a moment where their mindset shifts from thinking that the resurrection from the dead is absurd to believing that it is absurd to believe in any God that could not resurrect the dead. Pray for this paradigm shifting moment for them and for the radical life that will emerge from living the implications of this belief.
- *Through our church:* Its one thing to believe in the idea of the resurrection of the dead, its another to live as if that is true and to pray believing God is still the God who resurrects the dead. Pray that our church would become a center of resurrection power.

Saturday May 1st

Acts 27

¹When the time came, we set sail for Italy. Paul and several other prisoners were placed in the custody of an army officer named Julius, a captain of the Imperial Regiment. ²And Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, was also with us. We left on a boat whose home port was Adramyttium; it was scheduled to make several stops at ports along the coast of the province of Asia.

³The next day when we docked at Sidon, Julius was very kind to Paul and let him go ashore to visit with friends so they could provide for his needs. ⁴Putting out to sea from there, we encountered headwinds that made it difficult to keep the ship on course, so we sailed north of Cyprus between the island and the mainland. ⁵We passed along the coast of the provinces of Cilicia and Pamphylia, landing at Myra, in the province of Lycia. ⁶There the officer found an Egyptian ship from Alexandria that was bound for Italy, and he put us on board.

⁷We had several days of rough sailing, and after great difficulty we finally neared Cnidus. But the wind was against us, so we sailed down to the leeward side of Crete, past the cape of Salmone. ⁸We struggled along the coast with great difficulty and finally arrived at Fair Havens, near the city of Lasea. ⁹We had lost a lot of time. The weather was becoming dangerous for long voyages by then because it was so late in the fall, and Paul spoke to the ship's officers about it.

¹⁰"Sirs," he said, "I believe there is trouble ahead if we go on--shipwreck, loss of cargo, injuries, and danger to our lives." ¹¹But the officer in charge of the prisoners listened more to the ship's captain and the owner than to Paul. ¹²And since Fair Havens was an exposed harbor--a poor place to spend the winter--most of the crew wanted to go to Phoenix, farther up the coast of Crete, and spend the winter there. Phoenix was a good harbor with only a southwest and northwest exposure.

¹³When a light wind began blowing from the south, the sailors thought they could make it. So they pulled up anchor and sailed along close to shore. ¹⁴But the weather changed abruptly, and a wind of typhoon strength (a "northeaster," they called it) caught the ship and blew it out to sea. ¹⁵They couldn't turn the ship into the wind, so they gave up and let it run before the gale.

¹⁶We sailed behind a small island named Cauda, where with great difficulty we hoisted aboard the lifeboat that was being towed behind us. ¹⁷Then we banded the ship with ropes to strengthen the hull. The sailors were afraid of being driven across to the sandbars of Syrtis off the African coast, so they lowered the sea anchor and were thus driven before the wind.

¹⁸The next day, as gale-force winds continued to batter the ship, the crew began throwing the cargo

overboard. ¹⁹The following day they even threw out the ship's equipment and anything else they could lay their hands on. ²⁰The terrible storm raged unabated for many days, blotting out the sun and the stars, until at last all hope was gone.

²¹No one had eaten for a long time. Finally, Paul called the crew together and said, "Men, you should have listened to me in the first place and not left Fair Havens. You would have avoided all this injury and loss.

²²But take courage! None of you will lose your lives, even though the ship will go down. ²³For last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me, ²⁴and he said, 'Don't be afraid, Paul, for you will surely stand trial before Caesar! What's more, God in his goodness has granted safety to everyone sailing with you.' ²⁵So take courage! For I believe God. It will be just as he said. ²⁶But we will be shipwrecked on an island."

²⁷About midnight on the fourteenth night of the storm, as we were being driven across the Sea of Adria, the sailors sensed land was near. ²⁸They took soundings and found the water was only 120 feet deep. A little later they sounded again and found only 90 feet. ²⁹At this rate they were afraid we would soon be driven against the rocks along the shore, so they threw out four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight.

³⁰Then the sailors tried to abandon the ship; they lowered the lifeboat as though they were going to put out anchors from the prow. ³¹But Paul said to the commanding officer and the soldiers, "You will all die unless the sailors stay aboard." ³²So the soldiers cut the ropes and let the boat fall off.

³³As the darkness gave way to the early morning light, Paul begged everyone to eat. "You haven't touched food for two weeks," he said. ³⁴"Please eat something now for your own good. For not a hair of your heads will perish." ³⁵Then he took some bread, gave thanks to God before them all, and broke off a piece and ate it. ³⁶Then everyone was encouraged, ³⁷and all 276 of us began eating--for that is the number we had aboard.

³⁸After eating, the crew lightened the ship further by throwing the cargo of wheat overboard.

³⁹When morning dawned, they didn't recognize the coastline, but they saw a bay with a beach and wondered if they could get between the rocks and get the ship safely to shore. ⁴⁰So they cut off the anchors and left them in the sea. Then they lowered the rudders, raised the foresail, and headed toward shore. ⁴¹But the ship hit a shoal and ran aground. The bow of the ship stuck fast, while the stern was repeatedly smashed by the force of the waves and began to break apart.

⁴²The soldiers wanted to kill the prisoners to make sure they didn't swim ashore and escape. ⁴³But the commanding officer wanted to spare Paul, so he didn't let them carry out their plan. Then he ordered all who could swim to jump overboard first and make for land, ⁴⁴and he told the others to try for it on planks and debris from the broken ship. So everyone escaped safely ashore!

Points of Interest:

- 'we set sail for Italy'—Luke has again rejoined Paul to aid him in his journey.
- 'the officer found an Egyptian ship from Alexandria'—Egypt was known as the breadbasket of the Roman Empire and this ship was bringing grain to Rome. The broad reach of the Roman Empire and the incredible transportation that connected it cannot be underestimated in contributing to the rapid spread of the early followers of Jesus. All roads, at least in that part of the world, did in fact lead to and from Rome. The other helpful element was the role the Roman army played in keeping the peace. This was truly a perfect time in world history for God to bring his Son into the world.
- 'Paul spoke to the ship's officers about it'—it's unclear but probable that Paul heard from God that it was unsafe to proceed. Why else would an evangelist and tentmaker have knowledge helpful to an experienced seaman?
- 'I believe there is trouble ahead if we go on'—shipwreck, loss of cargo, injuries, and danger to our lives.—if Paul's words are a prophetic word from God then things do not bode well. In fact, most of what he predicts does come true except the loss of life.
- 'None of you will lose your lives, even though the ship will go down.'—why does the 'danger to our lives' part of the prophecy not come true though the rest does. One possible explanation is that Paul has been praying on behalf of the whole crew that God would spare their lives. It seems that God has answered his prayers (Wagner, 534).
- 'God in his goodness has granted safety to everyone sailing with you.'—this is language that indicates an answer to intercessory prayer and can encourage us in the power of focused prayer.
- 'the commanding officer wanted to spare Paul'—beyond just the goodness of his heart this seems an obvious tactical decision—don't kill the guy who has God on his side!

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Throughout the bible God describes himself as the God who wants to rescue us from danger and trouble. Paul hears from God in the midst of a life-threatening storm and then through his

faith he saves many others. As we learn to trust God with our biggest fears and problems and put ourselves in a place where only God can make a difference, we will then be used by God to do the same for others. What might God want you to trust him with today? Your money, your future, your relationships?

- *Through your six:* Julius was used by God because of his kind heart to serve Paul in his journey to Rome. God will often use people with open hearts to forward his work. Pray for your six that even as they begin to consider Jesus they will become partners (even if unintentionally) with those pursuing Jesus' cause.
- *Through our church:* Hearing God's voice and allowing it to guide our decisions is not an easy thing to do. Paul's example seems instructive. Tell others what you think God is saying and then pray like crazy for God to act. Even if at first people don't listen soon it's clear who is hearing from God. Pray for an increased desire for God's voice in our church.

Sunday, May 2nd

Acts 28

¹Once we were safe on shore, we learned that we were on the island of Malta. ²The people of the island were very kind to us. It was cold and rainy, so they built a fire on the shore to welcome us and warm us.

³As Paul gathered an armful of sticks and was laying them on the fire, a poisonous snake, driven out by the heat, fastened itself onto his hand. ⁴The people of the island saw it hanging there and said to each other, "A murderer, no doubt! Though he escaped the sea, justice will not permit him to live." ⁵But Paul shook off the snake into the fire and was unharmed. ⁶The people waited for him to swell up or suddenly drop dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds and decided he was a god.

⁷Near the shore where we landed was an estate belonging to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us courteously and fed us for three days. ⁸As it happened, Publius's father was ill with fever and dysentery. Paul went in and prayed for him, and laying his hands on him, he healed him. ⁹Then all the other sick people on the island came and were cured. ¹⁰As a result we were showered with honors, and when the time came to sail, people put on board all sorts of things we would need for the trip.

¹¹It was three months after the shipwreck that we set sail on another ship that had wintered at the island--an Alexandrian ship with the twin gods as its figurehead. ¹²Our first stop was Syracuse, where we stayed three days. ¹³From there we sailed across to Rhegium. A day later a south wind began blowing, so the following day we sailed up the coast to Puteoli. ¹⁴There we found some believers, who invited us to stay with them seven days. And so we came to Rome.

¹⁵The brothers and sisters in Rome had heard we were coming, and they came to meet us at the Forum on the Appian Way. Others joined us at The Three Taverns. When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage.

¹⁶When we arrived in Rome, Paul was permitted to have his own private lodging, though he was guarded by a soldier.

¹⁷Three days after Paul's arrival, he called together the local Jewish leaders. He said to them, "Brothers, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Roman government, even though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our ancestors. ¹⁸The Romans tried me and wanted to release me, for they found no cause for the death sentence. ¹⁹But when the Jewish leaders protested the decision, I felt it necessary to appeal to Caesar, even though I had no desire to press charges against my own people. ²⁰I asked you to come here today so we could get acquainted and so I could tell you that I am bound with this chain because I believe that the hope of Israel--the Messiah--has already come."

²¹They replied, "We have heard nothing against you. We have had no letters from Judea or reports from anyone who has arrived here. ²²But we want to hear what you believe, for the only thing we know about these Christians is that they are denounced everywhere."

²³So a time was set, and on that day a large number of people came to Paul's house. He told them about the Kingdom of God and taught them about Jesus from the Scriptures--from the five books of Moses and the books of the prophets. He began lecturing in the morning and went on into the evening. ²⁴Some believed and some didn't. ²⁵But after they had argued back and forth among themselves, they left with this final word from Paul: "The Holy Spirit was right when he said to our ancestors through Isaiah the prophet,

²⁶ 'Go and say to my people,
You will hear my words,
but you will not understand;
you will see what I do,

but you will not perceive its meaning.

²⁷ For the hearts of these people are hardened,
and their ears cannot hear,
and they have closed their eyes--
so their eyes cannot see,
and their ears cannot hear,
and their hearts cannot understand,
and they cannot turn to me
and let me heal them.'

²⁸ So I want you to realize that this salvation from God is also available to the Gentiles, and they will accept it."

³⁰ For the next two years, Paul lived in his own rented house. He welcomed all who visited him, ³¹proclaiming the Kingdom of God with all boldness and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ. And no one tried to stop him.

Points of Interest:

- 'they changed their minds and decided he was a god.'—Paul's supernatural resistance to snake bites leads the locals to deify him. The animistic pagan mindset unaffected by monotheistic Judaism leaves plenty of room for many gods and local deities.
- 'Then all the other sick people on the island came and were cured.'—As with many tribal cultures around the world the most effective tool of evangelism is power ministry involving healing and deliverance. This was no small event—it says that *all* were healed. What a day and what a stretch for all of us with a mindset so thoroughly influenced by Western modernistic assumptions of the totality of the natural world.
- 'The brothers and sisters in Rome had heard we were coming, and they came to meet us'—Paul is not the only effective missionary from the early church. The church in Rome is quite strong and clearly sending out its missionaries by this time. This must have been a huge comfort to Paul.
- 'Three days after Paul's arrival, he called together the local Jewish leaders.'—though he can't go to them Paul continues his strategy of preaching to the local Jewish people first.
- 'the only thing we know about these Christians is that they are denounced everywhere.'—a more accurate translation reads 'concerning this sect', which is consistent with the early movements sense that it was simply fulfilling God's purpose for Judaism.
- 'For the hearts of these people are hardened'—Paul is quoting an Old Testament prophet predicting what Paul has now found to be true of many of his own people. Paul must have spoken these words reluctantly and solemnly. What a warning! To think that we can get to a place where our hearts are too hard to receive what God has for us.
- 'this salvation from God is also available to the Gentiles'—the assumption of the day was that Jesus had died for the Jews to inherit the salvation promised by God. The great leap was to include the Gentiles in this salvation which Paul spent his life doing. Its tempting today to believe that salvation is for all those cultures that have been traditionally Christian. Paul would have exhorted us by saying: The salvation from God is also available to _____ (name any group of people or any person that does not follow Jesus). There are no boundaries for God's salvation – cultural, political, religious or national. God is actively pursuing every person on earth!

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Paul finished well. Despite harassments, persecution, internal disagreements, abandonment Paul continued to trust God and to push ahead with the mission God had given him. As we end the 40 Days of Faith what will it mean for you to finish well not only this 40 Days but in life. What do you want Jesus to do through you? Ask God once again to sharpened and focus your "1,000 Percent Return Dream" Vision Statement. Examine your statement and ask God to help you live it out.
- *Through your six:* Pray for the condition of your six's hearts. Pray that God would soften their hearts and make them receptive to all that He has for them.
- *Through our church:* As we pursue God's dreams for us individually and corporately pray that God would raise up more and more faithful followers of Jesus willing to give up their lives for God's purposes. Pray that they would do this out of a sense of God's overwhelming goodness to them personally.

Week 6 Family Devotional Ideas:

Please see accompanying sheet on Acts table for **Week 6 Family Devotional Ideas**.