



PRAXIS

THE EARLY CHURCH

GRACEWAY COMMUNITY CHURCH

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On

The Early Church

Acts of The Apostles

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Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptures are taken from the English Standard Version Bible.

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Welcome to this monthly edition of Praxis!

The readings are brief, in order to cover the Scripture, present the thought, and allow time to take it in through *meditation, contemplation*, and *prayer*. We encourage you to record your responses and the things that the Holy Spirit shows you. The readings are set up according to the ancient practice of the *daily office*, with a reading for morning hours, and a reading for evening hours. Of course, when and how you do this is completely up to you, but we do encourage you to do it at the same time and place each day, in order to simplify and develop the habit.

Take your time to soak in the Word. Invite the Holy Spirit to speak to you each day. Even the simplest of things can bring revelation when we dedicate attention to the Spirit and the details.

This compilation has been designed to lead us into the Scripture each day, to help empower us in the Holy Spirit and Truth, and to culminate in the Home Church experience.

Make special note of the pages given to each Sunday, take time to review your readings and responses from the week. This will help prepare you for a richer experience in Home Church, through both sharing and receiving.

If you are not yet part of a Home Church, we would love to have you experience it for yourself! Find out more from the person who gave you this book, or reach us at www.GracewayRI.org

The commentary that accompanies each reading is written by Ed Pichette Sr., who serves as an elder and a Home Church Leader at Graceway Community.



The book of Acts is Luke's attempt to tell the story of what the Apostles did after Jesus ascended and the Holy Spirit came to them.

*As you read, remind yourself of what these men were like before the day of Pentecost. They were confused and acted cowardly during the time of Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion. After His resurrection, they constrained themselves to stay quietly in Jerusalem as He had commanded them **to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me."***

The contrast between the apostles' behavior before and after the coming of the Spirit is beyond remarkable. Once the Spirit indwells them, they become assured and confident in what they should do and say. They live out their convictions, willingly putting themselves into direct conflict with the Jewish leaders. It is a testament to the power of the Holy Spirit within a believer.

*This book then, is more than a history of what the apostles did. **It is a demonstration with power of what every believer is capable of doing** if s/he will walk in step with the Lord's leading each moment of every day.*

¹ In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ²until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." ⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." ⁹ And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. Acts 1:1-9

As Luke begins the story, he tells about how Jesus showed Himself after the resurrection to prove that He was alive. Notice in v. 6, His disciples question Him about when He will "restore the kingdom." They are still thinking in their old ways. They believe that Jesus is the Messiah. They still believe, as they'd always been taught, that when the Messiah came, He would restore Israel's political fortunes. Jesus' suffering and death was not at all what they had expected. Now that He had overcome death, surely He would at last restore Israel as they hoped. Jesus tells them not to concern themselves with such matters. He tells them that the Father has fixed the time for those things by His authority. Rather, He tells them, to receive the power that is to be given to them and to be His witnesses.

We are still waiting for that day when He will return to establish His kingdom on earth. We're waiting, but we are not like a plane circling an airport waiting for an available runway to land on – wasting gas and accomplishing nothing. We are still very much actively employed in the work of spreading the good news of the gospel. There is nothing wrong with wanting the kingdom of God to come to earth. There is, however, something wrong with sitting on your hands and doing nothing as you wait for His return. The book of Acts tells the story of how His disciples allowed the Spirit to work in them and to empower them to use their spiritual gifts for God's purposes.

This same principle is still in effect today. What is the story about the work of the Spirit in and through your life?

¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." ¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. ¹³ And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. ¹⁴ All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. ¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said, ¹⁶ "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷ For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." ¹⁸ (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. ¹⁹ And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their own language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) ²⁰ "For it is written in the Book of Psalms, "'May his camp become desolate, and let there be no one to dwell in it'; and "'Let another take his office.' Acts 1:10-20

We see that the apostles have heard Jesus' words and are beginning to take appropriate steps. There are twelve apostles – the number also of the twelve tribes of Israel. Judas has made his decision to betray the Lord and his calling, there is a need for a replacement. The apostles are still waiting for the Spirit, but they are, even now, preparing the way for the work that lies ahead.

We rejoice at harvest time for the bounty that God provides. Before the harvest comes planting and caring for the garden. Before the planting of the seed, comes the tilling of the ground. Once the Spirit comes upon them, they will be sent out to spread the seed of God's word. But even now, before the giving of the Spirit, there is work to do. Everything must be prepared for the ground to receive the seed. Take some time to read the verses below in context.

²⁵ May their camp be a desolation; let no one dwell in their tents. Psalm 69:25

⁸ May his days be few; may another take his office! Psalm 109:8

²¹ So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²² beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us-- one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection." ²³ And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. ²⁴ And they prayed and said, "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵ to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." ²⁶ And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles. Acts 1:21-26

To find a replacement for Judas, the apostles first determine what requirements any candidate must meet. There are two. Firstly, the person must have accompanied them from the time of John's baptism. Secondly, he must have been a witness of the resurrection. Two men are presented to take the role. One is Barsabbas, also called Justus, and Matthias is the other. Unsure about which to choose, they pray and ask God to show them whom He has chosen by casting lots.

This concept of casting lots to determine God's will is a concept that finds its roots in the OT. The Urim and Thummim were some sort of means of casting lots to know God's will. They were worn by Aaron, high priest, above his heart as part of his priestly garb. Their position over his heart indicate the trust that he places in the Urim and Thummim to accurately indicate God's choice.

Here is a list of those places in the OT where Urim and Thummim are mentioned: Ex. 28:30; Lev. 8:8; Num. 27:21; Deut. 33:8; 1Sam 14:41, 28:6; Ezra 2:63 and Neh. 7:65

²⁸ When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. ⁵ Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. ⁶ And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. ⁷ And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? ⁹ Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, ¹¹ both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians-- we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." Acts 2:1-11

When the Day of Pentecost arrives, the apostles are still together waiting. The Spirit arrives with a powerful wind that fills their house. Tongues of fire appear and rest upon each of them. The Spirit fills them and they begin to speak in languages they don't know. These signs serve God's purpose to indicate that He is doing something new. Those from other lands who were in Jerusalem to celebrate the feast hear the apostles speaking their various languages and praising God. As you might imagine there is amazement and confusion about what is actually going on here.

¹² And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³ But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine."

Acts 2:12-13

Some who were present on Pentecost kept a more open mind and sincerely asked about what was going on. Others, more cynical, chose to simply believe that these men were drunk. And drunk on cheap new wine at that! The world is full of all sorts of evil. Everywhere there are phonies who will try to cheat and steal wealth. We can tend to grow cold and indifferent in such a world.

When something new does happen, we can respond by asking how someone might be using this circumstance to defraud us. However it is a gift from God to be able to allow the possibility that this occurrence may really be something genuinely good! Jesus understood how easy it is to become cynical. He also knew how precious it can be to hold on to a more innocent and accepting view. The balance between the two can be very difficult and tricky to maintain.

¹⁶ "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Matthew 10:16

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. ¹⁵ For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. ¹⁶ But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ "'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; ¹⁸ even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹ And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; ²⁰ the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day. ²¹ And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Acts 2:14-21

When Peter hears these people mocking the apostles speaking in foreign languages, he stands up to preach the first simple sermon pointing people to Jesus to find their salvation. (Such a sermon whose highlight is the person of Jesus Christ and the fact that salvation is found only in His name is known as a kerygma.) Do you remember the last chapter of John's gospel where Jesus restores Peter? Here we see the transformation that the Holy Spirit is working in Peter. He is no longer ashamed or fearful about confessing his beliefs about who Jesus is. Motivated by the Spirit, he is bold and assertive. As soon as the Spirit enters into him, he begins to fulfill the last command that Jesus had given. He is now bearing witness to Jesus in Jerusalem. He would continue to bring the gospel everywhere he traveled. Once the Spirit indwells a believer nothing more needs to be added. The Spirit filled believer has all that is necessary for him or her to successfully do the work that God has assigned to them.

Notice how Peter uses the OT beginning in v. 16. The Holy Spirit is working in Peter as Jesus had said that He would.

²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. John 14:26

God has done all that we need to accomplish His purposes. All that remains is for us to make ourselves available and responsive to His call.

²² "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know-- ²³ this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. ²⁴ God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. ²⁵ For David says concerning him, "I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken; ²⁶ therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; my flesh also will dwell in hope. ²⁷ For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption. ²⁸ You have made known to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.'

Acts 2:22-28

After beginning by explaining that what is happening is an outpouring from the Father of the Holy Spirit, Peter turns his attention to Jesus and His work. Peter declares that everyone in this crowd is guilty of delivering Jesus up to be crucified. Truly all of us have sinned; our sins are the reason that Jesus had to be killed. We are all guilty of the blood of Christ, and yet it is through His grace and shed blood that we are saved.

²⁴ So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." ²⁵ And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" **Matthew 27:24-25**

Peter continues quoting the Psalmist David from Psalm 16.

²⁹ "Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰ Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, ³¹ he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. ³² This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. ³³ Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. ³⁴ For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, "'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, ³⁵ until I make your enemies your footstool."' ³⁶ Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." Acts 2:29-36

Peter continues his sermon declaring that the Father has raised Jesus from the dead. He tells the crowd that he and all the other apostles are eyewitnesses of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Peter concludes this first kerygma by declaring a) you are the ones who put Jesus to death and b) God has made Jesus to be both Lord and Messiah.

In this first sermon, Peter has held back no punches. He places the death of Jesus squarely on the shoulders of his listeners. He clearly displays their need to put their faith and trust in Jesus – the one they rejected but the one that the Father approved.

Filled now by the Holy Spirit, Peter is a new creation in Christ. What was impossible for him before, he now does to the glory of God.

The same Spirit that filled and motivated Peter is now living in you. Allow Him to use you as Peter did. You will be completely amazed to see all that God can do.

³⁷ Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" ³⁸ And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." ⁴⁰ And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." ⁴¹ So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. ⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. Acts 2:37-43

The crowd is so moved by Peter's words that they beg him to help them and tell them what to do. Peter tells them that they need to repent and be baptized. Then, he says, they will receive the Holy Spirit. He tells them that this is for them and their children wherever they may be. That day three thousand believers were added to the church.

Importantly, we're told that the people devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer. In other words, the very early church did life together! They didn't gather once a week to listen to a sermon, they daily devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. They spent time together; they ate together; they prayed together. Doing church as the early church did takes huge amounts of time and energy. It also provides for tremendous spiritual growth.

⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Acts 2:44-47

The members of the early church gave up all claims to individual rights. They lived as one huge integrated family unit. Their love for one another is clearly displayed in their willingness to share all their possessions to meet each other's needs. When outsiders saw their love for one another and the joy that filled their hearts, they too left the world behind and became followers of Jesus. To live as they did, you must first die to yourself. It's a high price to pay, but the results are truly amazing.

²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him. John 12:24-26

¹ Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. ² And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple. ³ Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms. ⁴ And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." ⁵ And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶ But Peter said, "I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" ⁷ And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. ⁸ And leaping up, he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. ⁹ And all the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰ and recognized him as the one who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, asking for alms. And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. Acts 3:1-10

Luke tells us about an example of the Holy Spirit working in Peter and John. Notice how boldly Peter tells the lame man, "Look at us" in v. 4. Surely Peter knows how he and John will be used by the Spirit to heal this man. The major point of this miracle, as it is with all miracles, is not the healing itself. Rather, the point is found in vv. 9-10. When people see the miraculous work of God, they are filled with wonder and amazement. The miracle draws people's attention to who God is and how He wants to bless us. It causes people to want to know more about God. Certainly the healed man was very much blessed by God on this occasion. But more importantly, God demonstrated His power to many that day. Some were probably already believers whose faith was strengthened by what they saw. Others were unbelievers – some of whom perhaps became believers because of what they saw! The healing of this lame man was a great miracle. The greater miracle that day was the salvation of those who became believers because of the healing.

¹¹ While he clung to Peter and John, all the people, utterly astounded, ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's. ¹² And when Peter saw it he addressed the people: "Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk? ¹³ The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. ¹⁴ But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, ¹⁵ and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. ¹⁶ And his name-- by faith in his name-- has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all. ¹⁷ "And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. ¹⁸ But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. ¹⁹ Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, ²⁰ that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, ²¹ whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago. Acts 3:11-21

Here we see Peter take advantage of what is going on following this miracle. He tells the people that this has occurred because the Spirit of God has responded to their faith and has worked this miracle. He broadens the subject beyond the miracle to the greater work of God in Christ. He tells them plainly that they, and their rulers, demanded the death of Jesus. He then softens that accusation admitting that they had acted in ignorance. He then calls for repentance. This section closes with a reminder of the coming end. When it is time "for restoring all the things..." then Jesus will return.

We live in between. When Jesus came to earth, the kingdom of God began its invasion of a broken world – a world broken by sin. The kingdom of God will come in all its power and fullness when Jesus returns. We are in the between time. The kingdom has come but not yet fully. This is the time when people can still turn from their sin and find redemption.

Allow God to use you in this in-between time. Salvation will not be offered to people forever. There will be an end to our age. Let the Spirit, who lives within you, work through you to accomplish God's goals in this in-between time.

²² Moses said, 'The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you.' ²³ And it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people.' ²⁴ And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaimed these days. ²⁵ You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' ²⁶ God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness." Acts 3:22-26

Peter ends this speech (really another kerygma) by demonstrating from the OT how God had spoken through Moses about the coming Messiah. He tells them that the coming of the Christ had been foretold through all the prophets. He reminds them that they, being Jews, would be the first to whom the Christ would be sent. He goes on to tell them that through Abraham "all the families of the world would be blessed." God's purpose, he tells them, is to turn all of them from their wickedness.

*Note the quote from Deut. 18. Moses says here that a prophet like him will be coming. The Hebrews of Moses day were often rebellious and did not listen to him. They often suffered for their rebellion. But in v. 23 here we read that those who would not heed the coming prophet would be **destroyed**. People are free to reject Jesus, but they do so at their own peril. This message is the real point of the miracle.*

¹⁵ "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers-- it is to him you shall listen-- ¹⁶ just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.' ¹⁷ And the LORD said to me, 'They are right in what they have spoken. ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. ¹⁹ And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.'" Deuteronomy 18:15-19

¹ And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, ² greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. ³ And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. ⁴ But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand. ⁵ On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, ⁶ with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. ⁷ And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" ⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹ if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead-- by him this man is standing before you well. Acts 4:1-10

In v. 1 we read how the Sadducees, who believe there is no resurrection from the dead, among others met Peter and John. The Sadducees are upset because the apostles are preaching that Jesus has risen from the dead. They have Peter and John arrested. The stage is set for a public confrontation. In v.4 we read that the number of believers has now grown to some five thousand. When questioned about the power through which this miracle has come, Peter answers that it was wrought in the name of Jesus Christ. He accuses the assembled Jewish leaders of having crucified Jesus. Peter confirms that God has indeed raised Jesus from the dead. This same Jesus is, Peter tells them, the one who has brought about this healing. Peter's words and his boldness in speaking angered the Jews greatly.

¹¹ This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. ¹² And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." ¹³ Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus. ¹⁴ But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. ¹⁵ But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, ¹⁶ saying, "What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. ¹⁷ But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name." ¹⁸ So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹ But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, ²⁰ for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." Acts 4:11-20

In v. 13 we read that the Jewish leaders were amazed by the words spoken by "uneducated common men." We need to remember that when we act by the Spirit He will provide all that is needed to make us successful. The Jews are silent because the healed man is right there. The Jews send everyone out and then confer about what to do next. They decide to threaten the apostles and try to silence them. Peter answers with a well known reply, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."

God never asks any more of a believer than to confess the truth about God as that believer knows it. It takes boldness to speak that truth out. It does not take genius or great wealth or tremendous strength. We simply need to be willing to obey the leading of the Spirit. God is one who provides all the rest.

²¹ And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened. ²² For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old. ²³ When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴ And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, ²⁵ who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, "'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? ²⁶ The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed'"-- ²⁷ for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. ²⁹ And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, ³⁰ while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." ³¹ And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

Acts 4:21-31

The Jews threaten the apostles again and then send them out. The healed man was over forty. That fact reinforces the idea of how great a miracle had been performed. This was not someone who had recently been hurt in an accident and as a result become lame. This was a man lame for years and approaching old age as measured in his day.

The apostles return to their friends and tell of all that has happened. When they do, they all rejoiced and quoted scriptures that spoke of the things that were now taking place before their very eyes. Remember that they had been very dull and slow to pick up on Jesus' teaching when He was with them. Now, filled with the Spirit, He brings to mind scriptures that deal explicitly with the circumstances they are now experiencing. When they finish their prayer of thanks, the Spirit shakes the place where they were. They were all, once again, filled by the Spirit. Consequently they went out and continued speaking the word of God boldly.

³² Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶ Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, ³⁷ sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. Acts 4:32-37

Chapter 4 concludes by discussing how the community of new believers were living together. First of all, they were "of one heart and soul." Their love for Jesus demonstrated itself in their love for one another. They willingly gave up any claim to individual property. Each saw his/her possessions as belonging to the community. The apostles were testifying to the resurrection of Jesus. They knew a great grace was present among them. No one had any need that went unmet. They truly did life together. Each survived and thrived only as the community survived and thrived.

¹ But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ² and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. ³ But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God." ⁵ When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. ⁷ After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." ⁹ But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." ¹⁰ Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things. Acts 5:1-11

Immediately following the story of life in community, we read a story about a couple who do not live honestly in that community. The story serves as a warning to all. No one will force you to live in community and it is not necessarily sinful to reject that lifestyle. It is, however, sinful to lie about how you are living. You must not reject true communal living while claiming that you are living in community. Their sin was more than just a lie. What they did constituted an act that, when it became known in the church, might serve to undermine the integrity of the church. Others might be emboldened to live falsely claiming to be true members of the community while acting in such a way as to benefit themselves over the community. If you are going to claim to be part of the church, then let all your behavior demonstrate the reality of that claim.

¹² Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. ¹³ None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. ¹⁴ And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, ¹⁵ so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. ¹⁶ The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed. ¹⁷ But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy ¹⁸ they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. ¹⁹ But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, ²⁰ "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life." ²¹ And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach. Now when the high priest came, and those who were with him, they called together the council, all the senate of the people of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. ²² But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, ²³ "We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside." Acts 5:12-23

As the story goes on we read about the miracles that the apostles continued to perform. Luke records that the believers were held in high esteem. The church grew even faster than it had before. The sick were brought near to Peter in the hope that his shadow might fall on them. The Sadducees become jealous because so many are turning away from their leadership and becoming Christians. So they arrest the apostles and put them in prison. God sends an angel to free them from prison and encourage them to continue spreading the gospel. So the apostles enter the temple and preach Jesus. Later that day, the high priest sends to the prison to have the apostles brought before him. Those who go to get the apostles find that they are not there. They report back that the apostles are missing from prison.

You might expect that the Jewish leaders might come to realize that they are fighting a losing battle against God Himself. But they do not. As we read on, we'll see that they will remain obstinate in trying to stop the apostles. Satan, our spiritual enemy, will never willingly quit. No matter how well things may seem to be going in doing God's work, he will continue striving to turn the tide in his own favor. He knows that he will lose in the end, but he won't give up until he's forced to do so.

²⁴ Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them, wondering what this would come to. ²⁵ And someone came and told them, "Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people." ²⁶ Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people. ²⁷ And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, ²⁸ saying, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." ²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. ³⁰ The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." ³³ When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. Acts 5:24-33

The temple guards are confused. They hear that their former prisoners are teaching in the temple. The guards find them in the temple and bring them before the Sanhedrin. Note v. 26. They brought the apostles to the Jewish leaders but NOT BY FORCE. They too were afraid, because of all the favorable attention that the apostles were getting, to mistreat the apostles. On the other hand, the apostles were more than happy to accompany the guards without putting up any resistance. They could witness in the temple to the people or before the Sanhedrin. They didn't care where! They were simply going to bear witness to what God had done through His Son Jesus Christ!

When they did do so the Sanhedrin lost all self-control and wanted to kill them. Satan hates us because we are believers. If we remain faithful when he threatens us, then we can be sure that he will redouble his efforts to stop us. Hold fast when he attacks. Though the enemy tries to attack with everything he's got, by the grace of God we are able to resist.

⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. James 4:7

³⁴ But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while. ³⁵ And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. ³⁶ For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. ³⁷ After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. ³⁸ So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" So they took his advice, ⁴⁰ and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. ⁴¹ Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. ⁴² And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus. Acts 5:34-42

While most of the Sanhedrin is prepared to take drastic action against the apostles, Gamaliel, who is held in high respect within the Sanhedrin, manages to get the situation under control. He reminds the others of a few other messiah pretenders who had come through Jerusalem. He tells them how these men ended up dead without the Sanhedrin having to get involved. Gamaliel also tells them that if the apostles really are acting on God's direction, then the Sanhedrin risks working against God Himself by opposing the apostles. The Sanhedrin takes his advice. They beat the apostles and tell them once again to stop preaching about Jesus. Then they let the apostles go.

For their part, the apostles leave and then rejoiced that they were considered worthy by God to suffer dishonor for Jesus' sake.

Have you ever been belittled for witnessing about Jesus? How did you respond to that situation? Were you, like the apostles, thankful for the opportunity to witness even though it caused you pain?

¹ Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷ And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. ⁸ And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. ¹¹ Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." Acts 6:1-11

Luke next tells a story about how the new church community resolves an internal problem. You'll remember that the community held all things in common and together met the needs of all. The widows of the community were all cared for by the community. Apparently some dispute arose where Gentile widows felt they were being treated more poorly than Jewish widows. When the apostles learn about the issue they decide to create a team to oversee the matter and correct any real problems. The people agree to the apostles decision and choose seven men to address the matter. The apostles pray over these men and lay hands on them. Luke goes on to note that Stephen, one of the seven, was full of grace and power. He was performing great signs among the people. Some were upset by this and disputed with Stephen. They were unable to silence Stephen on their own. So they instigated others to falsely claim that they had heard Stephen speaking blasphemy against Moses and God. Satan had been unable to stop the apostles by working directly against them. So he switches tactics and now tries to disrupt the church from within. If he can't get through you, he'll try to go around you. He won't quit so neither can you.

¹² And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, ¹³ and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." ¹⁵ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. Acts 6:12-15

Luke tells us the false charges that these men brought against Stephen before the council. All the members of the council saw that Stephen's face appeared like that of an angel.

There were those who tried to defame Stephen, but, clearly, God was with him. God made his very appearance shine as a testimony to Stephen's innocence and his faithfulness in his ministry.

Stay faithful and true in the midst of any trials you may face as you live out your role in God's kingdom. However things may turn out, you can be assured that God is with you and will keep you eternally safe and secure.

¹ And the high priest said, "Are these things so?" ² And Stephen said: "Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, ³ and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.' ⁴ Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. ⁵ Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child. ⁶ And God spoke to this effect-- that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years. ⁷ 'But I will judge the nation that they serve,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.' ⁸ And he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs. ⁹ "And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him ¹⁰ and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. ¹¹ Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. ¹² But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit. ¹³ And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. ¹⁴ And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all. ¹⁵ And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers, ¹⁶ and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem. Acts 7:1-16

When Stephen is questioned about the charges these false witnesses have brought against him he replies by recounting the history of the Jewish people. In these first 16 verses of chapter 7, Stephen tells the ancient history from Abraham to the death of Joseph and Jacob and the return of their bodies to Palestine for burial.

The history of Israel was very precious to the Jewish leaders so they no doubt listened intently as Stephen went on. Perhaps they expected him to honor them as he did the ancient forebears of Israel.

Stephen is setting the stage for his condemnation of Israel's current leadership. The leaders see themselves in line with the forefathers. Stephen saw things differently. He will make his point clear enough very shortly.

¹⁷ "But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt ¹⁸ until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph. ¹⁹ He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive. ²⁰ At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God's sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house, ²¹ and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. ²² And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds. ²³ "When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. ²⁴ And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. ²⁵ He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. Acts 7:17-25

When Stephen is telling the story of Moses, he, very interestingly, includes the story of Moses killing an Egyptian to avenge a Hebrew man who had been wronged. He tells about how Moses assumed that the Hebrews would see that God was going to use him to deliver them from the mistreatment they suffered from the Egyptians. But, Stephen says, they had it wrong.

Sometimes the very people you are desperately trying to help will think you are, in fact, trying to do them harm. Rather than receive you and your message, they reject you and try to do you harm. This is the very thing that the Sanhedrin are doing. Stephen wants them to understand who Jesus is and what He wants to do for them. But they will remain stubborn and refuse to see things as they are.

The world wants to believe that they are in good standing with God. They want salvation and they want it on their terms. If you try to tell the truth that salvation can be had but only on God's terms they will hate you for it. As Stephen comes to the end of his recitation, he will pull no punches. The Sanhedrin's response will be murderous.

²⁵ And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them, saying, 'Men, you are brothers. Why do you wrong each other?' ²⁷ But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?' ²⁸ Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' ²⁹ At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons. ³⁰ "Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. ³¹ When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: ³² 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.' And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. ³³ Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. ³⁴ I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.' ³⁵ "This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?'-- this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. Acts 7:26-35

When Moses returns the next day and finds the man he had avenged arguing with another Hebrew man, he intervenes. He tries to make peace between these brothers but the man he'd avenged threatens to make it known that Moses had killed an Egyptian. Afraid for his life, Moses flees to a life of exile in the desert. Stephen goes on to tell how forty years later God would call Moses to lead His people out from lives of slavery. Stephen has set the stage to make his main point. Israel has a history of rejecting those who God sends to deliver them. Just as the ancient Hebrews had at first rejected Moses, the Jewish leaders of Stephen's day rejected Jesus.

³⁶ This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. ³⁷ This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.' ³⁸ This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us. ³⁹ Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, ⁴⁰ saying to Aaron, 'Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' ⁴¹ And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. ⁴² But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: "'Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices, during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? ⁴³ You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship; and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.' ⁴⁴ "Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. ⁴⁵ Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, ⁴⁶ who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷ But it was Solomon who built a house for him. ⁴⁸ Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, Acts 7:36-48

Note v. 37 here. Moses told his people that God would raise up another prophet like him – another deliverer. Just as the people rejected Moses so they would reject Jesus. As his speech continues, Stephen emphasizes the faithfulness of Moses to his call and the obstinacy of the people. Stephen continues painting a picture of thousands of years of Israelite history marked by a few shining stars of faith but, for the most part, defamed by the unbelief and idolatry of the masses.

Stephen wants his hearers, the members of the Sanhedrin, to clearly see how they are continuing in the footsteps of the many Hebrew people who refused to believe God and to trust Him. The message is harsh and will become even more so. But Stephen's goal is not to offend. Rather he wants to open their eyes so they can understand the grace and mercy of God that has only recently been made manifest in Jesus' suffering. He shows them Jesus and tells them what He has done. But they won't see and they refuse to listen.

⁴⁹ "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? ⁵⁰ Did not my hand make all these things?" ⁵¹ "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it." ⁵⁴ Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. Acts 7:49-54

Now Stephen makes his point openly. The same rebellious spirit that held sway throughout Israel's history is still present in the land. The Jewish leaders are no different than their forebears. They are just as stubborn as any of their ancestors. Despite God's reaching out to them time and again, they refuse to look into their own hearts. They are sure that they are right. They claim that they see things accurately when the truth is that they are blind and deaf. The obstinacy of their insistence on their innocence demonstrates all the more fully that they are guilty sinners. Take a look at the verse below. Spend a minute or two to read it in its context. Do you see the point that Jesus is trying to get across?

⁴¹ Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains. John 9:41

God does want us to be confident in our beliefs as His followers. But in order to be faithful followers we need, from time to time, to stop and check ourselves. We need to go back to the source and ensure that we are still living and behaving appropriately. The Sadducees and Pharisees did not do that. They persisted in their claims that they saw things accurately when they were truly blind. If they could have admitted their blindness, they would have put themselves in a place where God's grace and mercy could reach them.

It's ironic. By claiming to be correct and refusing to reexamine themselves, they guaranteed the outcome that they were in the wrong. By insisting that all truth lay within them, they condemned themselves in the eyes of God.

When Stephen confronted them with these truths, did they relent and take a step back to reconsider? No, as we'll soon see they instead gave in to their rage and multiplied their sins.

⁵⁵ But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." ⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. ⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Acts 7:55-60

In v. 55 Luke tells us how God strengthened and supported Stephen as the time for his death draws near. When Stephen rejoices, overcome by the vision God gives him, the Sadducees and Pharisees literally stop their ears - make themselves deaf! They drag Stephen outside the city and murder him. Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, asks God to forgive them with his dying breath.

Notice again v. 57 where the Sadducees and Pharisees block their ears. Stephen had just finished telling them that they were, like their ancestors, blind and deaf. Stephen was speaking of their spiritual condition. By blocking their ears, they make a truth about their spiritual condition also become true of their physical condition. They refused to hear God's word spiritually. That led them to block their ears so they could not hear Stephen's words physically.

Sometimes we see bits of evidence that show how the physical world and the spiritual world are perhaps a bit more connected than we might at first think. The details going on in the physical world are shaped by the things going on in the spiritual world. I think this happens on the level of people living out their individual lives as well as on the level of nations living out their corporate lives.

¹ And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ² Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. ³ But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. ⁴ Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. ⁵ Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. ⁶ And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. ⁷ For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸ So there was much joy in that city. Acts 8:1-8

Stephen's martyrdom touches off a great persecution of the church. Notice that v. 1 tells us that the persecution was in Jerusalem. The end of the verse tells us that the effect of the persecution was to scatter believers from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria. The attempt by the authorities to end Christianity would lead only to its spread and growth in new as yet unreached areas.

Luke goes on here to tell about Saul – a young and very devout Pharisee who made it his personal task to put an end to the spread of Christianity. Next, Luke tells about Philip who brought the gospel to Samaria. In v. 3 Luke says that Saul was ravaging the church. But in v. 6, we read about crowds of people listening to what Philip had to say. Philip was also involved in many miracles of healing. Luke makes it plain that God was with Philip and other believers during this persecution. Individuals within the church might suffer and be put to death, but the church would do more than simply survive, it would grow through such times. The blood of the martyrs waters the seedbed of new church growth.

⁹ But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. ¹⁰ They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great." ¹¹ And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. ¹² But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. ¹³ Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed. Acts 8:9-13

Luke mentions a local man named Simon. He practiced magic and gained a reputation of being a great man. The people said that he was "the power of God that is called Great." Of course, whatever power he did have originated with Satan – not God. Simon himself, when he sees the miracles that God worked through Philip, becomes a believer. He, too, was amazed at the power of God.

Even those who are under the control of Satan recognize the presence of God in the world. They are amazed by what God can do. Sometimes, as we'll see in the case of Simon in just a few verses, they try to obtain God's power to use it for their own purposes. Of course, God will not allow Himself to be used in that way.

Simon provides an example of a new believer who, while sincere in his conversion, fails to realize what it truly means to become a believer. But God is faithful. He does not leave Simon in this confused state. He will bring about circumstances that will force Simon to see the inconsistencies in his spiritual condition. We'll see shortly how God will force Simon to choose whom he will serve.

¹⁴ Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, ¹⁵ who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶ for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹ saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." ²⁰ But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! ²¹ You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. ²² Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³ For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." ²⁴ And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me." Acts 8:14-24

When the apostles hear that the Samaritans have received the gospel, they send Peter and John to check things there. They did not simply assume that all was well. They spent time and energy to make sure that the doctrines and activities going on in Samaria were in keeping with the scriptures.

When they arrive they learn that none of these new believers has received the Holy Spirit. They lay hands on them and pray that they might receive Him. When Simon sees this, he wrongly thinks that this power is something that the apostles possess and control themselves. He tries to bribe them to give him this same power. The apostles rebuke him and call on him to repent. He quickly does so and asks for prayer to be delivered from any harm.

Compare this story with the story in chapter 7. There we read how the Pharisees and Sadducees refused to repent when Stephen confronted them with their sin. Even after becoming believers we still can and do misunderstand and misjudge situations and we may sin. But God is faithful! He will not abandon us in such situations. Nothing will be allowed to force its way into our lives and separate us from Him. We have and keep the ability to accept or reject Jesus of our own free accord. But God will never allow anything outside us to come against us and separate us from His love.

³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:38-39

²⁵ Now when they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans. ²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. ²⁷ And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." Acts 8:24-29

Luke continues on, quickly moving to a new story about how the Spirit is leading the apostles to spread the good news. The apostles returning to Jerusalem preach the gospel "to many villages of the Samaritans." And Philip is led south to a desert place for an encounter with an Ethiopian. Apparently this Ethiopian had been a Jewish proselyte. He'd gone to Jerusalem to worship. As he's returning home, the Spirit leads Philip to join him. Philip is obedient to the words of the Holy Spirit, "Go over and join this chariot."

Imagine what may have run through Philip's mind. Luke simply records for us the details of what happened. It might have been that Satan tried to stop Philip by bringing other thoughts into his mind. Perhaps Satan tried to convince Philip that it wasn't really the Holy Spirit talking to him. Perhaps Satan tried to tell Philip that he'd only get himself into a bad situation going out alone into the desert.

Following God can be a risky business, yet we can know with full confidence that He will never let us down!

¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Matt.hew 28:19-20

¹⁷ So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth." ³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." ³⁴ And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" ³⁷ ³⁸ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹ And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea. Acts 8:30-40

Philip catches up with the Ethiopian and asks him if he understands what he's reading. When the Ethiopian says he needs help, Philip begins with the verse where the Ethiopian is reading and preaches Jesus Christ crucified and risen from the dead. The Ethiopian receives the message joyfully. When they come along some water, he asks to be baptized. After this, Philip and the Ethiopian part company. Philip continues spreading the word wherever he goes.

The apostles, once filled with the Holy Spirit, were ready and willing to go wherever whenever. Their openness to the leading of the Spirit was all they needed. It was God Himself who opened and prepared hearts to receive His gospel. The apostles were merely willing tools in God's gracious hands. You and I are no different. When we live as completely surrendered to God as they were, then, in His time and in His ways, we will see the results that they did.

¹ But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" ⁵ And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸ Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. Acts 9:1-9

Next, Luke turns his attention back to Saul. The first eight chapters of this book have been about the work of the other apostles. From this point on, Saul, or rather Paul as he will be renamed after his conversion, will become the major actor in Luke's book. The importance of Paul's role is implied by the lengths that God goes to in order to reach him. Paul's desire is to serve Yahweh. He had dedicated his whole life to learning about God so that he might better serve Him. While he was not yet a believer, he was a man of integrity. God is always looking for people of integrity.

When Paul was not a follower of Jesus, he used all his strength and abilities to oppose the new church. Once converted, he used all the same strength and abilities to nourish and grow the church. Before being a believer and after becoming a believer, he always wanted only to please God in all that he did. Nothing ever mattered more to Paul than serving God.

⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith-- ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Philippians 3:8-11

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹ And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, ¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." ¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. ¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ¹⁷ So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; Acts 9:10-18

God calls Ananias to go to Saul and restore his sight. Ananias knows Saul's reputation and is understandably afraid to go. God responds to Ananias telling him how He intends to use Saul for His glory. Note especially how God says, "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." Do you see the implication here? If you will be greatly used by God then you open yourself up to suffering for His name's sake. Paul was more than willing to take on the challenge. In fact, he was thankful for the opportunity.

¹⁹ and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. ²⁰ And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." ²¹ And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?" ²² But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. ²³ When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, ²⁴ but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, ²⁵ but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. ²⁶ And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. ²⁷ But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹ And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. ³⁰ And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. Acts 9:19-30

Once he has received back his sight, Saul becomes a force for God. He immediately begins preaching Jesus as the Son of God in the synagogues. Believers are amazed at the change in his behavior. The Jews are also aware of his change of course and respond by trying to kill him. When this happens, some disciples help Saul to escape. He goes to Jerusalem and tries to join in with other disciples. His conversion is not known in Jerusalem so the believers there are afraid of him. Barnabas explains to the apostles how Saul has changed. Then Paul was able to travel in Jerusalem and preach Jesus. He did so to such an extent that, again, threats were made against his life. When they learn about this, the brothers bring Saul down to Caesarea and send him to Tarsus – his home town.

³¹ So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied. ³² Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. ³³ There he found a man named Aeneas, bedridden for eight years, who was paralyzed. ³⁴ And Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed." And immediately he rose. ³⁵ And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord. Acts 9:31-35

Finally the church returns to a time of relative peace. It continues to grow. Luke recounts for us the ongoing story of the apostles traveling about and spreading the gospel in various places. Many seeing the signs and wonders that the apostles are performing turn to the Lord.

Luke presents this story as a model of the kind of thing that was becoming more and more typical of the early church. It had taken persecution to get the church beyond Jerusalem, but having learned the lesson, they were beginning to travel further and further outside the city to spread the word more widely as Jesus had commanded them to do in the last verses of Matthew's gospel. The church was continuing to grow – whether it met with times of peace or persecution, believers continued to spread the word effectively.

³⁶ Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity. ³⁷ In those days she became ill and died, and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. ³⁸ Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him, urging him, "Please come to us without delay." ³⁹ So Peter rose and went with them. And when he arrived, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them. ⁴⁰ But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, "Tabitha, arise." And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. ⁴¹ And he gave her his hand and raised her up. Then, calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. ⁴² And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³ And he stayed in Joppa for many days with one Simon, a tanner. Acts 9:36-43

Luke gives us yet another story about a miracle performed in another city that leads to many new believers. Tabitha is Aramaic; Dorcas is Greek; both names mean Gazelle in English.

As Luke develops his book, he writes more and more stories about the apostles' activity outside Jerusalem. The church is growing and developing a better understanding about how God wants His word to expand beyond the Jews into the entire world. Paul will soon champion the cause of the Gentiles like none before him. But the way is being prepared as God, sometimes in subtle ways and sometimes in not so subtle ways, guides His disciples out of their comfort zone to bring the gospel to the world.

¹ At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, ² a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. ³ About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, "Cornelius." ⁴ And he stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵ And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. ⁶ He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea." ⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, ⁸ and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

Acts 10:1-8

Next in line is the story of a Roman centurion who feared God along with his whole family. Luke presents him as a devout generous man who prayed continually. God sends this man, Cornelius, a vision and tells him to send for Simon Peter. God's angel tells Cornelius that Peter is staying at Simon the tanner's house. Cornelius does as God has asked.

*We see here that God, as the church is growing outside Jerusalem, is at work as much in the hearts of Gentiles as He is in believers. **God is bringing together those who have the good news of the gospel with those who see their need for it.***

If you have people who are willing and able to spread the gospel but no one to receive it, then there is no church growth. Conversely, if you have people ready to hear and receive the gospel but no one to preach it, then again there is no church growth. In the days of the early church, God is bringing the two camps into contact with each other – sometimes sending angels to invite the parties to come together!

⁹ The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. ¹⁰ And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance ¹¹ and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. ¹² In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³ And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." ¹⁴ But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." ¹⁵ And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common." ¹⁶ This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven. ¹⁷ Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood at the gate ¹⁸ and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there. ¹⁹ And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. ²⁰ Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them." Acts 10:9-20

Having prepared Cornelius for the meeting with Peter, God now sets about the task of preparing Peter. Peter is unaware of his own prejudices against the Gentiles. He is also extremely zealous to serve God as He leads him. So God provides an experience for Peter that will make him very aware of his fault. As we'll see, Peter is receptive to God's leading.

God sends Peter a vision of a sheet filled with all sorts of unclean food descending from heaven. Peter hears the command to kill and eat. Peter is dismayed. He has always been a faithful Jew and would never knowingly eat anything unclean. The vision repeats and God adds, "What God has made clean, do not call common." The scene repeats a third time. And then it is all taken up to heaven. As Peter is wondering what this was all about, the men sent by Cornelius arrive at Simon's house and ask for Peter. God has now completed all the groundwork to prepare for Cornelius and Peter to finally meet.

²¹ And Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?" ²² And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say." ²³ So he invited them in to be his guests. The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him. ²⁴ And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. ²⁶ But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man." ²⁷ And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. Acts 10:21-27

Peter arrives at Cornelius' house. Both Peter and Cornelius know that God has directed them to this meeting, but neither is quite sure about what to expect next. Cornelius has invited many friends and relatives to be present when Peter arrives. I'd expect that they were all expectant and anxious about what might happen next. For his part, Cornelius worships Peter as though he himself were God. Peter responds by immediately raising Cornelius to his feet and telling him that he is nothing more than another man.

Each man knows how God has spoken to him. Neither man knows how God has spoken to the other. They will soon share their experiences with one another and only then will it become clear to all how God is working through this circumstance.

²⁸ And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me." ³⁰ And Cornelius said, "Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing ³¹ and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. ³² Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' ³³ So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord." ³⁴ So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. Acts 10:28-35

Peter begins the conversation by telling those present that it is unlawful for Jews to associate with Gentiles. He tells them how God has shown him that this is a wrong idea. That, he says, is why he came to them. Then Cornelius explains to Peter how an angel had appeared to him and told him to send for Peter. Now Peter gets it. God is trying to tell Peter that He has no partiality. Rather, "in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." Prejudice has been a common fault among people seemingly forever. It is no easy task to try to be aware of and overcome your own prejudices. All of us need to be self-aware enough to see our own prejudices when they rear up. By the grace of God we will be able to overcome sin in all its forms. Through faith in Jesus we are no longer slaves of sin.

⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. Romans 6:6

³⁶ As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), ³⁷ you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." ⁴⁴ While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. Acts 10:36-44

Peter now shares the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Peter is coming to the end of his message, the Holy Spirit falls on all those present to hear the word. God intervenes in this miraculous way to reinforce the point on Peter that He offers His salvation to all people. Peter would struggle with his prejudice against Gentiles. Paul would, much later, have to confront Peter about this. (See Galatians 2:11-14.) So God continued to have the gospel spread throughout the world. As He did so, He is also teaching His disciples more about who He is and how He wants His followers to behave.

When God is working, everyone benefits. Those who hear the message and become believers gain salvation through the blood of Jesus. Those who preach the word gain greater insight into God's love and grace for all people.

⁴⁵ And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, ⁴⁷ "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" ⁴⁸ And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days. Acts 10:45-48

Because God had poured out His Spirit on these Gentile believers, the Jews present had to acknowledge that God was indeed offering salvation to the Gentiles. So Peter commands that these Gentiles should be baptized with water as well.

The story ends with the Gentiles asking Peter to remain with them longer. No doubt the Gentiles wanted to learn all they could from Peter about life as believers. Before this story began, Peter knew that the law could be summed up with two demands: 1) Love God and 2) Love you neighbor as yourself. What Peter had learned through this story is that the Gentiles were His neighbors too!

¹ Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, ³ "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them." ⁴ But Peter began and explained it to them in order: ⁵ "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. ⁶ Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. ⁷ And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸ But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹ But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' ¹⁰ This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. Acts 11:1-10

When Peter arrives back in Jerusalem he is confronted by the brothers who had heard that Peter had gone to the Gentiles and had eaten with them and shared the gospel. Peter explains the vision that God had shown to him. He tries to make them understand that God used this vision to show Peter that the gospel is meant for all people and not just the Jews. Peter tells them that the vision was repeated three times.

The fact that the vision was repeated three times indicates that this matter is settled in God's mind. When Peter tells them that the vision repeated three times, he is, in essence, telling them that if they wish to argue then they will be arguing with God not Peter.

¹¹ And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. ¹² And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³ And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; ¹⁴ he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' ¹⁵ As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. ¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" Acts 11:11-17

Peter continues his story. He tells how the men sent from Cornelius showed up just as the vision was concluding. As the Spirit commanded him, Peter went with them. Peter tells them about the vision that God had sent to Cornelius. Then Peter tells them the most significant part. He tells them that God sent His Holy Spirit upon them in the same way they they had received the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Having explained all this, Peter asks them how they could stand in the way and prevent these new believers from being baptized.

This story demonstrates powerfully how great a prejudice the Jews held against Gentiles. The problem of prejudice was not just Peter's problem. Having been taught that they were God's chosen people all their lives, many Jews were convinced that they were of more value in God's eyes than the Gentiles.

As God's people we need to be very self-aware. We need to search our own heart to be sure that we don't allow prejudice to blind us. God's love for all people is the same. We need to imitate Him in how we love people as well.

¹⁸ When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life." ¹⁹ Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. ²⁰ But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. ²² The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, ²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. Acts 11:18-24

As Peter finishes his story, the men who had opposed him relent. They recognize that God is offering His salvation to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews. They stop opposing Peter and glorify God for showing grace and mercy to the Gentiles as well.

Luke tells us how the persecution had led to believers from Jerusalem traveling to other cities and preaching the gospel there. Luke includes a quick note that some men had gone to Antioch and preached to Hellenists (Gentiles) as well. So, even as God was at work in Peter to bring him to the place of understanding that His salvation is for all people, God was also sending other believers to the Gentiles. God was making His point on several fronts so that His message would be even more clear to all the Jews – God’s sacrifice of His Son for the forgiveness of sins is for all mankind. When it became known in Jerusalem that Gentiles were being converted in Antioch, the Jews sent Barnabas to Antioch. When Barnabas arrived there and saw what God was doing there he rejoiced over it. Luke tells us that Barnabas was “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.” With this story, Luke is continuing to reinforce that idea, novel in its day, that the gospel is for all people.

²⁵ So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians. ²⁷ Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). ²⁹ So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. ³⁰ And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. Acts 11:25-30

Barnabas is aware now that the gospel is to be presented to the Gentiles. You'll remember that he had come to Saul's aid earlier when Saul was facing opposition in Jerusalem. So Barnabas goes to find Saul, no doubt in the hope that Saul will be willing to build a ministry to the Gentiles. Saul, of course, will be more than happy to do so.

In this passage, Luke also tells us about a believer in Antioch, Agabus, who predicted a famine. In response to this, the disciples there decided to send relief to the believers in Judea.

There is an interesting give and take here. By sending Saul to Antioch, the apostles, through Barnabas, send a great blessing to the Gentiles in Antioch. By sending a collection from Antioch to Jerusalem, the Gentiles send a great blessing to Jerusalem to help believers there endure the coming famine. Believers in each city show love to believers (or future believers) in the other city. Here we see a pattern of how God works. Each receives what is needed from God through the other. At the same time, each gives, as God supplies, to the other what is needed. Everyone is blessed and God is glorified. That is what life in the Kingdom of God is like.

¹About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. ²He killed James the brother of John with the sword, ³and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. ⁴And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. ⁵So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church. ⁶Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. ⁷And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. ⁸And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." ⁹And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. Acts 12:1-10

We are not told why, but apparently Herod becomes very angry with the church or perhaps with the apostle James, John's brother. He has James killed. The people are pleased with this and so Herod has Peter arrested. This arrest happened during the feast of Unleavened Bread. So Herod planned to bring Peter out after the feast. So Peter is kept in prison and the church begins to pray for him. Just before Herod is ready to bring Peter from jail, God sends an angel who helps Peter to escape prison. Once outside the prison, the angel disappears and Peter is left to fend for himself.

Do you remember the last chapter of John's gospel where Peter asked the Lord if John would remain alive until Jesus' return? Jesus answered Peter,

Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!" John 21:22

Here in Acts, we see that James would not survive until Christ's return. But Peter is going on following Jesus as He had commanded him. Rather than being overly concerned with the fate of others, we can simply keep our trust focused on Jesus alone. Jesus' response to Peter's question applies to us as well. "You follow me!"

¹¹ When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." ¹² When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. ¹³ And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴ Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. ¹⁵ They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!" ¹⁶ But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. ¹⁷ But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell these things to James and to the brothers." Then he departed and went to another place. ¹⁸ Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. ¹⁹ And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there. Acts 12:11-19

When Peter realizes what has happened he goes to the home of Mary, John Mark's mother, where a group of believers has gathered to pray for him. Peter knocks on the door and a servant, Rhoda, comes to open it. When she does, she is so amazed to see Peter that she closes the gate and locks Peter out again. She runs to tell everyone that Peter is at the gate. The people inside don't believe her and an argument develops as to whether Peter is there or not. Meanwhile, poor Peter is still knocking at the gate! When they finally open the gate, there is Peter! Everyone is amazed. Another irony! Here these people have been praying to God asking that He would deliver Peter. God does so and sends Peter to them. When they see him, they can't believe their eyes. We are told that they were amazed. We are not told that they thanked God for answering their prayer. I'm afraid this is all too common a picture of what we believers are like at times! In any case, Peter quiets the crowd and tells them what has happened. He asks them to let James and the brothers know as well. Then Peter left.

When Herod sends for Peter, he cannot be found. Herod examined the soldiers who were guarding him and has them executed.

²⁰ Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food. ²¹ On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. ²² And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" ²³ Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last. ²⁴ But the word of God increased and multiplied. ²⁵ And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark. Acts 12:20-25

Next Luke tells us how quickly the Lord avenged James' murder on Herod. Because the people of Tyre and Sidon needed food from Herod, they asked for an audience with him. They intend to do all they can to assuage his anger. Herod knows what's going on and dresses in his best royal clothes for the occasion. The emissaries from Tyre and Sidon practically worship Herod. Just as Herod is joyfully receiving this praise, God sends an angel to strike him down. While the wicked may enjoy honor and riches for a time, their end is sure. The story ends with a comment on how the church is continuing to grow.

¹ Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. ⁴ So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. ⁵ When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them. ⁶ When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. ⁷ He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. ⁸ But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. ⁹ But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him ¹⁰ and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? Acts 13:1-10

Luke next tells us how some saints in Antioch were praying. As they are worshiping and fasting, the Spirit tells them to set apart Barnabas and Saul for a special work. The saints lay hands on Barnabas and Saul and send them on their way. In Salamis they proclaim the word of God in the synagogues. When they reach Pamphos, they meet a false prophet, a magician named Bar-Jesus (son of Jesus or son of the savior). This magician was apparently a sort of counselor to the proconsul Sergius Paulus. When the proconsul asks for a meeting with Saul and Barnabas, the magician, Elymas, opposes them, trying to prevent the proconsul from hearing the gospel. Saul understands the spiritual battle that is occurring and calls Elymas out.

Clearly, Satan had possessed Elymas and through him tried to control Sergius. God intervenes through Saul and Barnabas. In His love for Sergius, God first breaks the influence that Elymas has on him. We'll see how this develops for Elymas and Sergius.

God works in our lives through our relationships. Pray that He would help you by providing good influences and removing those that are harmful. Did you notice how, in v. 9, we are told that Saul was also known as Paul? It was not unusual for people to have multiple names like this. From this point on, we will see only Paul used. The name change in Acts comes at the start of Paul's first missionary journey. Saul is a Hebrew name. Paul is a Roman name.

¹¹ And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. ¹² Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord. ¹³ Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem, ¹⁴ but they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. ¹⁵ After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it." ¹⁶ So Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said: "Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen. ¹⁷ The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm he led them out of it. ¹⁸ And for about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness. ¹⁹ And after destroying seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance. ²⁰ All this took about 450 years. And after that he gave them judges until Samuel the prophet. ²¹ Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. ²² And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, 'I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will.' Acts 13:11-22

Through Paul, God blinds Elymas. This is enough to convince Sergius Paulus to become a believer. The story moves on quickly. Paul and his companions sail on to Perga. There they visit a synagogue and the leaders ask if they have a word of encouragement. Paul takes the opportunity to address the people. Notice how he begins his remarks with a recitation of Israel's history. This is reminiscent of Acts ch. 7 where Stephen answers the charges that the Sanhedrin brought against him. These passages emphasize the importance that their history had on the Jews. It helps us to understand why the Jews were looking for the type of Messiah they expected. The reigns of David and Solomon were the high points of Israel's history. The Messiah was going to be David's descendant. Surely the Messiah would restore Israel's former glory. Surely He would reign over Israel as a triumphant king at least as formidable as David and Solomon had been if not more so. The Israelites were not wrong. When Jesus returns He will reign over all the world. What the Jews missed was the fact that the Messiah would come first as the suffering servant. He would sacrifice Himself for us and so prove that He is more than worthy to be our Great King.

²³ Of this man's offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised. ²⁴ Before his coming, John had proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. ²⁵ And as John was finishing his course, he said, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but behold, after me one is coming, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.' ²⁶ "Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation. ²⁷ For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him. ²⁸ And though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed. ²⁹ And when they had carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. ³⁰ But God raised him from the dead, ³¹ and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people. ³² And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, ³³ this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm, "'You are my Son, today I have begotten you.' Acts 13:23-33

Paul continues his address. He recounts the story of John the Baptist and his ministry that announced the Messiah's coming. Paul tells how the Jewish leaders did not understand who Jesus was and so rejected Him. He tells how they had Jesus put to death. He tells them about how God raised Him back to life. As Paul comes to the end of his argument he makes the point about salvation being offered to us on the basis of Jesus' resurrection. "We bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus."

³⁴ And as for the fact that he raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way, "I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David." ³⁵ Therefore he says also in another psalm, "You will not let your Holy One see corruption." ³⁶ For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption, ³⁷ but he whom God raised up did not see corruption. ³⁸ Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, ³⁹ and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. ⁴⁰ Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about: ⁴¹ "Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish; for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you." ⁴² As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath.

Acts 13:34-42

Paul goes on for a few more verses to expound on the fact of Jesus' resurrection. He does so because the resurrection is the single most important event in Christianity. Note v. 39, "By him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses." The people knew how constraining the law was. They understood how difficult (really impossible) it was to keep the law – to be legally clean. As you might expect, a message that claims that they can be GIVEN legal cleanliness proves to be a very popular message. The people beg to be told more about this on the next Sabbath.

If Jesus is not physically raised from the dead, then our faith is useless.

¹³ But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. 1 Corinthians 15:13-17

⁴³ And after the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who, as they spoke with them, urged them to continue in the grace of God. ⁴⁴ The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. ⁴⁵ But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him. ⁴⁶ And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. Acts 13:43-46

After the meeting, there are Jews and converts who want to know more of what Paul has been talking about. The following week just about the entire city gathered to hear Paul and Barnabas. The Jews responded with jealousy and try to contradict Paul. Then both Paul and Barnabas say that it was their duty to bring the word of God to the Jews first. But now, since the Jews reject the word, they will bring their message to the Gentiles.

Paul will repeat this pattern throughout his ministry. Whenever he entered a city for the first time, he would go to the synagogue there and bring the gospel message to the Jews first. When the Jews refused to hear him, he would then turn to the Gentiles and preach the good news to them.

Note v.45 where Luke tells us that the Jews became jealous because of the crowds. Why would the Jews become jealous? Was it because of the number of people who showed up? That's possible. Most of the population was Gentile. Since most of the city was there (see v. 44), the Jews may have been jealous because Paul and Barnabas had excited the entire city whereas they had seen very few people turn to Judaism in all their time there. Whatever the reason, the Jews resisted and Paul then feels he has been freed by God to go to the Gentiles.

⁴⁷ For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, "'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'" ⁴⁸ And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. ⁴⁹ And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region. ⁵⁰ But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. ⁵¹ But they shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium. ⁵² And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. Acts 13:47-52

When Paul and Barnabas tell the Gentiles that God has made them "A light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth," the Gentiles rejoice greatly. The word begins to spread "throughout the whole region." But the Jews incited people against Paul and Barnabas and persecuted them. In the end they drove Paul and Barnabas out. Paul and Barnabas leave and go to Iconium. But, importantly the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

This is a pattern we'll see repeated over and over again in the rest of Acts. Just about everywhere that Paul goes he makes new Gentile converts as well as a few Jews who convert. Following that, there is tension between the new believers and the Jews who do not convert. In some cases there are some converted Jews who want to hold on to their old Jewish customs and practices.

Then, as now, religious differences led to confrontation. Paul's devotion and public proclamation of the word would greatly stir up his hearers. Some for and some against. Paul was more than willing to face the persecution he brought on. All that mattered to him was that he would be the evangelist that God had called him to be.

¹ Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. ² But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. ³ So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. ⁴ But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. ⁵ When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, ⁶ they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, ⁷ and there they continued to preach the gospel. ⁸ Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. ⁹ He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, ¹⁰ said in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he sprang up and began walking. ¹¹ And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" Acts 14:1-11

Note vv. 1-7. We now see that the events that occurred with Paul and Barnabas here are very similar to those in Antioch of Pisidia. As had happened in Jerusalem, persecution did not stop the church from growing. Rather it drove the disciples into new areas. They brought the word of God with them. Satan tries to use persecution to stop the church from growing. But God uses it to spread the church further and faster than otherwise might have happened.

In vv. 8-10, we read a story of Paul's healing a lame man. This is not unlike the story of Peter and John healing a lame man in Jerusalem back in the 3rd chapter of Acts. In both stories we read about the apostle looking intently on the lame man and commanding him to rise and walk. These are similar miracles under similar circumstances in two very different places.

In the OT, God worked primarily through the Jews, His chosen people, to do His bidding in the world. After Jesus sacrifice, God begins to work in very similar ways both within and without Israel. Now we see God fulfilling His promise to Abraham. All are blessed through Abraham's descendant, Jesus Christ the Lord.

I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice." Genesis 22:17-18

¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. ¹³ And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. ¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, ¹⁵ "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. ¹⁶ In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. ¹⁷ Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." ¹⁸ Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them. ¹⁹ But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. ²⁰ But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. Acts 14:12-20

The people in Iconium are so amazed by this miracle that they assume that Paul and Barnabas are gods. They begin to worship them as Zeus and Hermes. When Paul and Barnabas learn what's going on they quickly act to stop it. They tell the people that they're ordinary people like them. They tell the people that God wants them to stop worshiping false gods and turn to Him. They tell them that, in the past, God had allowed them to "walk in their own ways." He blessed them even as they were. The implication is that now they should walk as faithful believers.

The scene changes quickly when Jews arrive from Antioch and Iconium. The crowd changes from worshiping Paul and Barnabas to trying to stone them. Escaping with their lives, they move on from Iconium and head to Derbe.

²¹ When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. ²³ And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. ²⁴ Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. ²⁵ And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia, ²⁶ and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. ²⁷ And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. ²⁸ And they remained no little time with the disciples. Acts 14:21-28

After preaching the gospel in Derbe, they returned to Antioch. There they encouraged the disciples. They told them, "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

It was persecution that spurred the disciples to bring the word beyond the limits of Judea. Once it began to spread, the preaching of the word seemed to always meet with resistance from both Jews and Gentiles. While many opposed the spread of the gospel, their resistance served only to hasten its spread. That is still true today.

Whatever Satan may do to try to prevent it, God will supply all that is necessary for His church to thrive until the full number of those who believe will have been saved.

Be the solid immovable rock (remember Peter means rock!). In the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, confess to the world that Jesus Christ is Lord!

¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Matthew 16:18

2nd Sunday of the Month

Notes from Home Church.

2nd Sunday of the Month

Community Prayer Requests & Praises

3rd Sunday of the Month

Notes from Home Church.

3rd Sunday of the Month

Community Prayer Requests & Praises

4th Sunday of the Month

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