

THE  
**7 LOVES**

THAT WILL DEFINE YOUR LIFE





YOUR  
FAMILY

THE  
LOST  
WORLD

YOUR  
NEIGHBOR

+



THE  
HOLY  
SPIRIT

THE  
CHURCH

GOD

JESUS

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# JESUS

W E E K O N E

# IN THE END, IT'S WHO AND WHAT YOU LOVED THAT MATTERS.

Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints. Psalm 116:15

As your pastor, it has been my privilege to be a part of hundreds of people's last moments in this world. Whether in a hospital room or in their own homes, these last hours or days are some of the most sacred in all of life. God is present in every moment of our lives; He cares about us on every day we will live, but there is something significant about those final moments on this earth and our transition to the next. The Psalmist says they are "precious."

These moments are also clarifying. They reveal the truth about the lives we have lived and the ways we have invested our moments. We see the trivial things. We may even feel some regret for missed opportunities. We certainly see the good and beautiful gifts that God has given us.

Sometimes people who have had traumatic experiences that almost brought about their untimely death, speak of their lives flashing before their eyes. What matters most suddenly becomes obvious.

If today were your last day on this earth, how would you feel about how you have lived and loved? How do you want to feel about the whole of your life when your life is done? Are there some things you could do today that would change that moment?

I believe there are.

Over the next several weeks, I want to invite you to join me in thinking about how you can love the right things in this life and love them well. We will journey through the key loves that will and are right now defining your life. At each stop we are going to ask God to show how we might live and love more deeply the best things and people in our lives.

As God speaks to our hearts, I encourage you to listen to what He says.

Trust His perspective and love for you.

See the picture He has for your future, then find the courage to act and change if necessary.

At the end of your life what you love and how you love will define your life. May these weeks help us all to better love God and the people we say we love. May today be the beginning of a season that will rewrite the ending of your story.

Good and Wise God,

I feel the importance of my life and the short nature of my days. It's easy for me to get caught up in day-to-day matters and fail to really think through how I'm spending my hours. Across these weeks, help me to "number my days." Help me see that my opportunities to love well and live a meaningful life are finite, and today is the right time to lean toward the life you have called me to live and the loves you have invited me to embrace.

Today, I invite you to speak to me, challenge me, affirm my right steps, and help me find better ones where I'm missing the path. At the end of my life, I want to know that I have loved the right people and the right things in the right ways. If I'm ever good at anything in this life, I want to be good at loving you and the people you've placed in my life. I'm so grateful that you love me and are willing to help me on my journey. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

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# 40 DAYS

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God." Acts 1:1-3

Jesus can do a lot with 40 days. Between the resurrection and the ascension Jesus would meet with his disciples on multiple occasions. Each time, he taught them new things and reminded them of things he'd already said, which now had new and deeper meaning. His words moved them from fear to great faith. He set their hearts on fire and set their sights on the growth of the Kingdom of God. He used these 40 days to prepare these few ordinary men and women and provide them what they would need to launch the church. That church would become the greatest movement in the history of the world. Today over 2.6 billion people claim Jesus Christ and seek to follow his Gospel of love and grace.

What might God do with these next 40 days in your life?

What does he want to do in the heart of our church? Our church family stands at a crucial crossroads. The needs in our county are great. The growth of our county is almost overwhelming. We need to know God's power and direction as surely as the first disciples did. We desire to see God move and to know that He is guiding us into the future.

Would you join me in praying for such an encounter and empowering among us and in your own life?

Jesus, thank you for loving me and creating me for this moment in history. I know the world is a mess, and the community I live in needs disciples who are willing to listen to Jesus and follow His call on their lives. I want to live well. I want to love well. So, here I am Lord, send me! I believe in you, and I'm ready to hear your plans for my future and the Kingdom of God in this place where you have placed me. In Jesus' name, Amen.





# ANTICIPATING THE PROMISE

On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. Acts 1:3

Can you imagine how the minds and hearts of the disciples must have raced as Jesus spoke? If it wasn't enough that the risen Lord was sitting in their midst, Jesus reaffirmed His commitment to giving the disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit he had often promised them.

We often find ourselves in moments like this. What great anticipation must have accompanied the disciples as Jesus promised the gift of the Holy Spirit, and then He told them they must wait a little longer to receive this gift.

I hope you can approach these coming days with a similar sense of eager expectancy.

God wants to speak to us in the coming days. He wants to ready our hearts for the next important phase of our lives and the life of our church family. Would you join me in praying for the gifts that God wants to give us? Specifically, let's pray for a fresh working of the Holy Spirit in our church. Let's pray that we will open our arms and hearts toward whatever God has in store for us.

Prayer: Lord. We want to live and live well, but we know we can't do it alone or in our own power. As surely as the ancient world needed the Holy Spirit unleashed, we too, need your power for the challenges before us.

We confess our tendency to seek to do too much in our own strength. Forgive us and remind us across these weeks that your Spirit is the great force behind all we do that matters. In Jesus' name, Amen.



# PRAYERFUL PREPARATION

"Sabbath day's walk from the city. ...They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) and said, "Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus. ... Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us..." Acts 1:12-15 & 21

What new person might God bring into your life across these weeks? Some of those that God intends to accomplish His work through, haven't been called to our church, yet.

Others who should help lead us haven't surrendered to God's call yet.

Perhaps you, like Matthias (who would be called upon to take Judas's place) need to be open to God's next new calling on your life.

I don't know all these next weeks will hold, but I do know that the first church set us an example of prayer.

Let's again ask God to provide us what and who we need.

Prayer:

Lord, we want to be used by you to love our neighbors and growing community well, but we need your help. Today we follow the example of the first church and come to you in prayer asking you to provide us the leaders we need for the work that is ahead. Give us good men and women who love you and can lead us to build your Kingdom of hope and faith in the place where we live. In Jesus' name, Amen.



# WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

"When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" Acts 2:1-12

It means...God wants to empower us to love others in His name. As surely as he wanted to empower the first church to love a lost world, God wants to empower you. Perhaps because of some of the excesses of Pentecostalism, many Christians live as if they are afraid of the Holy Spirit. We rarely ask the Holy Spirit to do new things in our lives or to guide our steps. Even more rare is the Christian who urgently prays that the power of the Holy Spirit will be rich and real in their daily lives.

Some have noted that the Holy Spirit is often the forgotten member of the Trinity. We pray to God. We love Jesus, but too often, we forget to seek the power and help of the Holy Spirit. However, this was clearly the prayer and great hope of the first church. This was exactly what the first disciples of Jesus were praying for in the moments leading up to this great outpouring of God's power!

I want to ask you to find the courage to do just the same today. Would you ask the Lord to empower your life? If you are a Christian, the Holy Spirit already lives within you. Ask the Lord to increase the Holy Spirit's role in your life and to increase the supernatural power He exerts in and through you.

There are 7 great loves that will define your life and you can't love any of these fully without the



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**G O D**

**W E E K T W O**

# THE COMING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” mazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.” Acts 2:1-13

Just as a fleet of ships can be launched by a breeze, and a small spark can ignite a forest fire, so does the coming of the Holy Spirit to a small group of confused and scared individuals on the day of Pentecost launch the early Church across the world. Wind and fire both mark the entrance of the Spirit into the house where the followers of Christ are gathered.

There is a lot to get through in this short passage. Pentecost, rushing wind, flaming tongues, and maybe most supernaturally of all, the fact that everyone understands what is being said in their native language. Have you ever listened to a speech through an interpreter or watched a movie with subtitles? It becomes apparent pretty quickly that it would be much simpler to hear in your own language. On the day of Pentecost, translation was done for everyone simultaneously! Acts 2:12 tells us how those who were gathered there were amazed, and yet there were others there who said the followers of Christ were drunk.

Since the start of the Church, there have been those who mock, criticize, and question the authenticity of what is happening. As the Church lives on, so do the critics.

Which side of this story do you find yourself on? Do you most often criticize what the Church



# BEND US, O LORD!

“When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter replied, “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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.” Acts 2:37-41

In Blaenannerch, Wales (1904) Pastor Joseph Jenkins was leading a group of young people in a prayer meeting. He asked those in his little group, “What does the Lord Jesus mean to you?” A young man spoke up, “The Lord Jesus is the Savior of the world.” Jenkins, wanting something more, responded, “Yes. But what does he mean ... to you?” Out of the quiet of the room, 19-year-old Florrie Evans, a convert of only some weeks, rose to her feet. “I love the Lord Jesus with all my heart,” she said. The sincerity of her simple testimony captured all present. They were “cut to the heart.” The seed of revival had been planted.

Soon after, in October of 1904, Pastor Seth Joshua was leading an early morning youth Bible study and prayer meeting. Among the group sat Evan Roberts (1878-1951), one of Pastor Joshua’s students from a nearby Bible School. Only 26 years of age, Roberts had already been praying for revival for 13 years. He was devoted to prayer, Bible reading, and studying revival. Roberts would later report of Seth Joshua’s prayer: “He prayed, ‘Lord, do this, and this, and this ... and ... bend us, Lord, bend us.’”

The Holy Spirit laid it upon Roberts that “This is what you need.” He left the meeting praying, “Bend me, O Lord! Bend me!” Immediately, God was at work in his life in a way that he never had known before. He began to pray for and have the vision of 100,000 people coming to Christ in a great revival. Indeed, in less than a year hundreds of thousands of souls were won to Christ in Wales and the United Kingdom in what became known as the Welsh Revival (1904-1905), with Roberts being a central figure in the movement.

I have heard distinguished Christians of high position and education say that revival always burns out, it doesn’t last, emotional decisions are made and then fail.

The truth is that when true revival comes (with or without career evangelists or special services) people are converted by tens, twenties and more, lives are changed, marriages healed, the lost seek out Christians asking how to be saved, and Christians spontaneously share the gospel.

Sinners repent. Those who don't think that they are sinners repent! Men and women hear a call to missions or to preach the gospel, prayer and evangelism teams arise, and missionary movements are birthed. Crime rates drop, alcoholics get clean, rough men stop swearing, abusive husbands become tender and repentant, students are converted and begin prayer meetings, and churches double and more in attendance.

Brothers and sisters, what shall we do?

Would you be cut to the heart? Would you join the prayer of Evan Roberts? "Bend me, O Lord, bend me."

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# FEAR AND AWE OF GOD

Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God." When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price." Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events" Acts 5:1-11

When was the last time you experienced the fear of the Lord? I do feel that we overuse the word "awesome", so when something truly is awesome it doesn't land with the weight it should.

In the book of Acts it may feel like we are hearing about the fear of God falling on the people at an enormous rate. Consider though the Book of Acts covers a time span of over thirty years from the beginning of the Church. I don't know about you, but when I read passages like these in Scripture, I find myself asking a lot of questions. What seems at first glance an extreme case of church discipline shaped this infant Church for centuries.

This event recalls the situation with the deceit of Achan in the Old Testament Book of Joshua. Achan took for himself articles from the destruction of Jericho that were to be dedicated to the Lord as holy. Just like Ananias and Sapphira, Achan was called out for his lack of regard for the things that were holy. Achan was part of the generation's that was about to enter the Promised Land after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness because of the previous generations lack of faith. This occurred during the era of the birth of the nation of Israel, and Acts is recounting the birth of the Church.

Ananias and Sapphira's deceit also needed to be dealt with so that this type of behavior would not become the norm in the Church going forward. And just as Achan had not shown reverence for the things that were dedicated to the Lord, but took some for himself, Ananias and Sapphira kept back a portion of the money but desired to receive praise from others for the generous gift. In keeping back some of the profits, they were holding on to some of their previous life. They were not all in as the others were. Peter tells them that they have allowed Satan, not the Spirit, to fill their hearts. The couple had held back some of the proceeds but lied saying they had given all the proceeds of the sale of their land. They were not merely lying to men, but they were lying to the Holy Spirit who is ever present in the Church.

Both Ananias and Sapphira instantly dropped dead at the feet of Peter. The very place where they had laid their offering. Drastic? Yes, but God wanted to set a precedence with this newly established Church. He gave us His best, not withholding His own Son. Jesus paid the ultimate price for His Bride, the Church.

We can experience the awe of God every day, in a sunrise or sunset, the change of seasons, newborn babies, or salvation given to sinners like me. Let us ask the Lord to give us eyes to clearly see all He is doing.

Precious Father, you are holy, and we are awestruck by who you are and all you have provided for us. It is your desire for your children to look and act like you in every way. Lord, guide our steps this day to reflect your holiness to a world in need of it today. Amen.

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# GOD IS A GOD OF ALL PEOPLE

“The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.” Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. 6 I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. Then I heard a voice telling me, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’ “I replied, ‘Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ “The voice spoke from heaven a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again. “Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man’s house. He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.’ “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with[a] water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?” When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

Acts 11:1-18

It seems like we are being bombarded daily with new thoughts and ideas. When you are introduced to new ideas in the Christian faith what is your first response? Do you carefully weigh those things against the Word of God?

The events of Acts may seem to us as obvious but to this infant Church, it was imperative that the early Church fathers got things right according to the instructions Jesus had given them. In this text we are shown a disagreement between two “groups” of Christians, one was the circumcision party. They held tightly to the belief that anyone coming to faith in Christ must also abide by the law of circumcision which was the mark confirming the covenant between God and Abraham. In other words, Jesus and circumcision were their requirement to becoming a believer.

To eat with anyone who was not, was considered unclean in their opinion. They criticized



Peter for eating with such men. Have you ever been criticized for hanging out with people that were not like you?

Peter begins by telling the group that while he was in Joppa he was praying, and he saw a vision of a sheet descending from heaven by the four corners. Peter witnessed Jesus model this type of behavior over the three years they were together. Many times, Jesus withdrew to pray to the Father seeking guidance prior to a decision He had to make. Peter also heard a voice from heaven telling him that what God has made clean is not to be called common. This happened three times and after it was drawn up into heaven and three men arrived at the house and the Spirit told Peter to go with them making no distinction. As Peter and his companions arrive at the home of a man that was visited by an angel telling him to bring Peter who would declare the message to his household what they must do to be saved. Peter explained the men of the circumcision party that as he spoke the Holy Spirit fell on them just as it had done on them "in the beginning". Peter continued to tell them he remembered the words of the Lord and how He said that they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit. It was clear that God made no distinction between Gentile or Jew those that were being saved and coming to faith. God gave them the same gift, Peter asks "who was I that I could stand in God's way?"

I believe the Lord would want us to have the same attitude as Peter today. If we are to carry out the Great Commission, proclaiming the Good News to every corner of the world, we too must see all people as equal in the sight of God.

Precious Father thank you that it was your plan to include Gentiles in Your family. Your Word tells us that you so loved the world that you gave your only Son, so that whosoever believed in Him, would be saved. Whosoever is all inclusive. There is not a person you overlook or exclude. Thank you, Lord, for providing a way for all people to come to you.

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# PAUL & SILAS WORSHIP IN PRISON

“Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.” She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, “In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!” At that moment the spirit left her. When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. They brought them before the magistrates and said, “These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.” The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!” The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household. When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: “Release those men.” The jailer told Paul, “The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace.” But Paul said to the officers: “They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out.” The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia’s house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. Then they left.” Acts 16:16-41

Evangelist Jon Randels loved to use the metaphor of an orange to talk about what is inside of all of us. When you squeeze an orange, what comes out? Orange juice, because that's what is on the inside. When we are squeezed, what comes out of us? What's on the inside is what comes out. If we are filled with bitterness and anger, it overflows. If we are filled with gentleness and patience, that will show too.

In this story of Paul and Silas in prison, after they've been arrested, stripped, beaten, and squeezed, what comes out of them is praise! It's midnight, and they're not sleeping, weeping, or pouting. They are praying and singing hymns of praise. And another beautiful thing about this is found in 16:25b - and the prisoners were listening to them! After the earthquake, no one leaves, and as a result of the worship of Paul and Silas, the jailer and his household are saved.

Sometimes our moments of deepest worship come from our moments of deepest woe. It is in our challenges that we draw near to God. It is when we are overwhelmed that we call out to Him. It's also worth noting that when we're being squeezed, others are watching. We can bear witness to the goodness of God in our lives, or ruin our testimony.

What comes out of you when you're squeezed? Will it point others toward or away from Christ?

Father, help us be the kind of people who praise you in our difficulties. Let it be known that when we are squeezed, what comes out is worship for You as a testimony of Your goodness.

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# THE CHURCH

W E E K   T H R E E

# FELLOWSHIP OF THE BELIEVERS

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts...” Acts 2:42-46

We are all familiar with what a physical drought looks like in terms of the soil. Here in Texas, we have large cracks and crevices that form during those hot and dry seasons. Have you ever experienced a season of spiritual drought? A time when it felt like you weren’t hearing from God. As we continue to watch the birth of the Church as told by Luke in the Book of Acts, we need to be mindful of the context of the time. The men and women who made up the first Church, were not just a little thirsty they were starving for all the things that true fellowship in Christ brings. They had been bound to the empty systems of the temple priests and ruling authorities that only made their lives more difficult instead of lifting their burden. The things they were being taught were so drastic to anything that they had ever heard.

N.T. Wright makes the statement in his study on the book of Acts, “Imagine a world without any Christian Church and then you are introduced to this new pattern of life and teaching, breaking of bread and prayer.” A community of people that truly cared for the needs of others and not in superficial ways, but deeply. So much that people were selling their belongings so that there was not a person that had a need among them. Can you imagine how appealing that kind of fellowship was to people who had never experienced such a way of life? The new believers were gathering daily in the Temple courts to hear the teachings of the apostles, fellowshiping with one another, breaking bread in each other’s homes and praying. They received their food with glad hearts and praised God. This appealing way of living was how the Lord added to their numbers day by day those who were being saved. This was the way the Lord had wanted His people to treat each other since the beginning. There was no distinction among them, they were all brothers and sisters sharing in every aspect of their lives, they had all things in common and there was not a need among them. Jesus had taught the disciples the true mark that they were His disciples, would be their love for one another, by that love all people would know. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” John 15:12

Is there someone that you can show God's love to today? Does someone have a need that you can meet? I think in our society today the greatest need people have is to be part of a true community of Christ followers.

Precious Father, thank you for Your Word and the lives of these faithful men and women of the past and those brave and radical members of the early Church. Help us to live with eyes and hearts wide open to the people and needs around us. Give us Your heart. In Jesus name, amen.

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# THE CHURCH IS A PLACE OF HEALING

“The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon’s Colonnade. No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter’s shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed.” Acts 5:12-16

Have you ever thought of the Church as a hospital? When we consider the deadliest of all diseases is sin. Sin is dealt with, and we are offered healing that only comes through the forgiveness Jesus offers in the Church. Sin is the greatest disease in need of healing in our lives. Think about how many times Jesus pronounced the person forgiven of their sins before He healed their physical need. But what other physical healings take place in the Church today?

Our text for today says that many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. They were gathered all together in the temple courts daily. Jesus’ prayer in Mount of Olives was for the apostles to be unified and they were fulfilling His prayer for them. The work at hand, to establish the Church, required that there be no division among them. People were coming to them to be healed of sickness and unclean spirits and all who were brought to the apostles were healed. They even thought if Peter’s shadow was cast on them, they would be healed. Just as the people were healed by the apostles when Jesus sent them out in pairs, they were healed in the streets and Temple courtyard, it was because Jesus had provided them the power to do many miracles. It was the disciple’s hands and feet doing the work, but God was working through them to bring healing to the hurting world. They were simply the instruments in His hands.

So, it is today in the Church. People come in need of hope and healing. and they find community. The Church body gathers around them to walk through life, helping each other find healing from our past hurts and brokenness. It is where we all find hope and wholeness through the work of the Holy Spirit in each person’s life.



When was the last time that you witnessed something miraculous? It is sometimes difficult to comprehend the healings that we read about in the New Testament. In our fast-paced world we may dismiss or overlook the work of God all around us. I do believe that the Lord is still working miracles today in the lives of people. Have you ever considered the life that is radically changed by Jesus a miracle? I do. Today may we look for the places that we see God at work and join in His work.

Precious Father, thank you for your Church. Thank you for the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through us to bring healing to a hurting world. Lord, just as you were the source of power working in the early Church, you are the source and power working in your Church today. Amen.

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# THE INCLUSIVE FAMILY OF GOD

“The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.” Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. Then I heard a voice telling me, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’ “I replied, ‘Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ “The voice spoke from heaven a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again. “Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man’s house. He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.’ “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with[a] water, but you will be baptized with[b] the Holy Spirit.’ So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?” When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.” “Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.” Acts 11

Have you ever had an experience that might be considered a “paradigm shift”? You thought something was right, but then you got some facts that prompted you to completely change your opinion. Perhaps you thought that living in a small town would limit your opportunities, but then you moved to Kaufman County and found a great community with lots to offer.

It’s a change of heart, a change of mind, a change of perspective. This is what is happening

to the Jews who are hearing from Peter and Cornelius in this passage.

The first part of Chapter 11 of Acts is one of those “wow” moments. It starts out by informing us that Peter is returning to Jerusalem after meeting with Cornelius and his household and observing God’s saving grace for them. He is met by some of the Jewish Christians from the Jerusalem church and they confront him about what he did. “Why did you eat with them?” Peter’s explanation follows. In fact, Peter goes into step by step detail about the event. He had a strange vision and then went to Cornelius’ house and shared the good news with them. While he was speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon the listeners and they understood the Good News. Then in verse 16, Peter remembered the word of the Lord. Remembering Jesus’ word and teaching allowed Peter to realize that all people can have a relationship with God. The vision, Cornelius’ invitation, and remembering the word of Christ allowed Peter to share the gospel with the Gentiles. He had received a call to minister to all people: there are no unclean people. Peter drew the obvious conclusion, “God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ (v 17). The response of Peter’s listeners was amazing. They praised God because they understood that even Gentiles could experience God’s unfailing love. This is the “wow” moment. This strange rooftop dream of a Galilean fisherman turned the religious establishment on its head and redefined thousands of years of religious thought. We can now understand that a relationship with God is inclusive, not exclusive. It was revolutionary and changed the history of all of mankind. All people, not some, are now able to be included in the family of God.

Sometimes God can completely change your perspective if you give Him a chance to show you new facts. It would be a shame to keep old ideas and attitudes when God clearly wants to give you a new thought and a change of heart.

Are you open to God showing you something new that is completely different from what you knew in the past? Are you willing to allow things to change in your peaceful, comfortable world to allow Him to do great things in a new way?

Father of the Good News, help us to accept those who respond to your gospel and welcome them into fellowship with us.

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# PICK YOUR BATTLES!

“And God, who can’t be fooled by any pretense on our part but always knows a person’s thoughts, gave them the Holy Spirit exactly as he gave him to us. He treated the outsiders exactly as he treated us, beginning at the very center of who they were and working from that center outward, cleaning up their lives as they trusted and believed him. So why are you now trying to out-god God...?” Acts 15:8-10

Pick your battles! Did your Mom ever tell you that? That’s some sage advice to give to married couples as well as parents and sometimes siblings. But, what does it mean? The phrase is often used when there is a decision to be made; maybe one choice will be a fight and the other choice will seem like you gave in.

Acts 15 is the summary of the Council of Jerusalem. The council was convened to address the issue of whether Gentile converts to the Church should be required to obey the law of Moses to be saved. After much discussion, the leaders determined that Gentile believers did not need to be circumcised or follow the specific pieces of the Mosaic law to be saved. In the passage we see how the early Church grappled with cultural and religious differences and how the Lord guided His Church by revealing His will to His prophets. It seems they determined that some things were worth fighting for, but that other issues were more about individual freedoms and not a condition of salvation.

Be encouraged, friend, that the most important battle - the battle for our salvation - has already been won. His victory on the cross and His resurrection powerfully demonstrate that our struggles, though real and daunting, are in His hands. Hold fast to the truth that we are more than conquerors.

## **You’ve already won by Shane and Shane**

I'm fighting a battle  
That you've already won  
No matter what comes my way  
I will overcome  
I don't know what You're doing  
But I know what You've done  
I'm fighting a battle that  
You've already won

Do you have a battle you need to consider? Use discernment and wisdom in choosing which challenges will help or hurt your relationships as well as your own spiritual journey.

Father, we stand in awe of the battle You fought and WON on our behalf. You secured our salvation offering us freedom and life eternal. Help us to remember that the greatest battle has already been one.

Guide our steps and decisions, empowering us to live boldly and confidently in Your grace. Teach us to prioritize our battles, focusing on what truly matters and letting go of what doesn't, all the while trusting in Your sovereignty and perfect plan. Thank You for the victory we have in Jesus, a victory that no struggle or hardship can overshadow. IN HIS name, Amen!

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# THE CHURCH FAMILY HELPS ME GROW

“Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor[a] and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately. When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers and sisters encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. When he arrived, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. For he vigorously refuted his Jewish opponents in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah.” Acts 18:24-28

We all have people that have poured into our lives through discipling us and helping us grow in our faith. These people are critical to moving the Church forward for the future generations. Who are those people in your life that have walked along beside you on your journey?

Luke tells us about a situation where an eloquent Jewish man competent in the Scriptures came and began speaking and teaching boldly in the synagogues in Ephesus. His name was Apollos and he seemed to know many things but didn't fully understand the way of God. He knew of John's baptism, but he lacked in the knowledge of the Holy Spirit. Priscilla and Aquilla heard him speak and took him aside and explained to him more accurately the way of God. What a beautiful and loving thing to do. They didn't call him out in front of the crowd, but they also didn't allow him to speak in ignorance. Their desire was for him to grow in the full knowledge of Christ and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It seems that at once, they had built him up and equipped him for the mission of evangelism. The brothers encouraged him by sending him to Achaia with their recommendations. When he arrived in Achaia, he was a great help to those who were there. He powerfully refuted the Jews in public showing through the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus. Apollos was equipped to do the work God had planned for him. Each person that receives Jesus Christ as Savior also receives the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit working in us that enables us to do what we are incapable of doing in our natural self. The Lord draws together. The kind boldness to correct Apollos' thoughts and teachings by Priscilla and Aquilla should be our approach to mentor those who are new to the faith.

The work that Priscilla and Aquilla performed is what we as the family of God are to be doing for one another today. Do you have someone that is pouring into your life as mentor? And do you have someone that you are mentoring? We should all be teaching and correcting one another so we can be equipped to carry the Good News to those who need to hear it.

Precious Father, thank you for giving us the godly example of Pricilla and Aquilla who cared deeply about Your truth, but also cared enough to correct the wrong teachings of Apollos. Lord, open our eyes to those that need to hear Your Truth today. Help us know and understand your truth so we are able to discern between them and wrong teachings. Amen.

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# THE HOLY SPIRIT

W E E K F O U R

# A PHILOSOPHY OF EVERYTHING

“Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. David said about him: “I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand. I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest in hope...” Acts 22:-26

Do you have or have you pondered at some time a “philosophy of everything?” A lens through which you look at all the world and by which you might interpret events or “know what matters?” There are verses in the Bible to which one might look besides Acts 2:24 for such a philosophy (I like 2 Co 5:19), but in seven words from Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost, Luke captures something that points us in the direction of all that we need to know: “But God raised him from the dead.”

Peter and Paul tell us that it is the resurrection—“raised from the dead”—that demonstrates to us that Jesus is Lord, Christ, Son of God, Savior of the world (Ac 2:36;Ro 1:4;1 Co 15:3-8,20-21). Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead (Jn 11). Peter raised Tabitha from death (Ac 9), and Paul raised Eutychus after he fell from a window (Ac 20). But none of these were raised to a “resurrection body” as Jesus was. Each of them would die again. But not Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus stands unique in history and shows him to be greater and more powerful than the greatest, most powerful curse of Satan—death itself. Jesus is truly Lord over all. Nothing can keep him down!

Because God raised him from the dead, Jesus Christ was able to ascend into heaven and from there he poured and still pours out the Holy Spirit. Today, that same Spirit guides you into all truth (Jn 16:12), is a downpayment on the kingdom of heaven that is to come (Eph 1:13,14), and gifts you with spiritual gifts for service and work to the common good of the church (1 Co 12). This Holy Spirit is God’s “incomparably great power for us who believe.” The same resurrection power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in you (Eph 1:19,20;3:20). Nothing can keep you down!

Because God raised Jesus from the dead, there is hope (certainty) for all who call upon him. Peter preached: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Paul tells us that—in his resurrection—Jesus was the “firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Co 15:20,23).

In the same way that Jesus was resurrected, you will be resurrected (transformed, if you are alive at his coming), and with a body like that of the resurrection-body of Jesus himself. The resurrection of Jesus is unique in history ... so far. Your day will come!

Does that explain everything? Maybe not. But, “Nothing can keep him down!” “Nothing can keep me down!” And “My day will come!” Really, after that, everything else is just sprinkles.

Would you pray this prayer with me? Father in heaven, in the name of the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth, pour out your Spirit upon me and our church. Amen.

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# THEIR FAITH WAS FRESH

“All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.” Acts 4:32-37

Arriving at today’s passage, we do not have a count of days that have passed since the day of Pentecost. As Luke moves forward from that day, he describes the rapid formation of a style of life among the fellowship of believers (2:42-47;4:32-37); he tells that “one day” as Peter and John were going up to the temple there was the miraculous healing of a lame beggar—and he tells of the arrest, jailing and interrogation of Peter and John that followed (3:1-4:22). His manner of telling has shifted from describing events in a moment-by-moment, day-by-day fashion to describing “the ongoing” of how the fellowship of believers was now living, and how on “one day” out of many an event had taken place.

All of this to say, that while we do not have a day-count, it is clear that the events of our passage are more than just a few days yet still only some weeks post-Pentecost. The fellowship of believers is of one heart and mind, the apostles are testifying to the resurrection ... with great power (that, different from boldness), and much grace is upon them all.

The Passover meal in the upper room, the trials of Jesus and his crucifixion are fresh in memory and ready in telling. The resurrection, appearances, and ascension are in bold relief in the minds of all who had witnessed them. The sense of awe following the events of the day of Pentecost continues. Just now, the place where they were meeting was shaken after they had prayed. And, for most of those present, profound conviction of sin, repentance, salvation, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Spirit are only days ago. Their faith was fresh.

What about you? Does the courage of Jesus on the road to Jerusalem still move you? Does the payment of your debt at the crucifixion remain a fresh relief in your heart?

Do those dark days in the grave cause you to ponder what once was your hopeless condition? Does Christ in some way rise off the pages of the New Testament as you read? Does the resurrection bewilder you with fresh hope?

Holy Spirit, shake me in prayer! Give me boldness to speak God's word and may your miraculous power be seen through the name of Jesus. Father in heaven, take me to the cross where I may see the sacrifice that was poured out for me. Take me to Jesus rising from the tomb and let the Power that raised him rise up in me. In some way, Lord, consistent with your word and by the power of your Spirit, appear in my life. Impress upon my heart what is on your heart. And may your grace be great upon me and my house. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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# GOD'S POWER CANNOT BE BOUGHT

“Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, “This man is rightly called the Great Power of God.” They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery. But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money and said, “Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” Peter answered: “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.” Then Simon answered, “Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me.” After they had further proclaimed the word of the Lord and testified about Jesus, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.” Acts 8:9-25

If you're an American citizen who votes, odds are you have been inundated with election ads this time of year. While they assume you will vote for their candidate, what are they really after? Your money. Using email campaigns, mailers, and texts, candidates are in a non-stop run to build up the coffers and deploy the resources to win. And herein, lies a tempting message: if you want government power, all you have to do is buy it. If you want things to go your way, spend some money and you will have what you want.

In ancient times, a man named Simon faced a similar dilemma. He spent time seeking to be the most powerful sorcerer that none could rival. In fact, Acts records, “this man is called the great power of God” (Acts 8:10).

Yet, all of sudden, he becomes yesterday’s news when a new power breaks onto the scene—

the apostles of Jesus arrive. They proclaim the good news, baptize people into the faith, and pray for people to receive the power of the Holy Spirit to live a godly life. Simon is confused, bitter, yet amazed all at once. Not wanting to be old news, he approaches Peter. He offers silver to buy this new power. Immediately, Peter rebukes him. God cannot be bought. Simon's heart is backwards.

He is told to repent because he is "poisoned by bitterness and bound to wickedness" (Acts 8:23). He wants to use God for his own power, not submit to the power of God to change his heart.

Unfortunately, we are more like Simon than we want to admit. We desire power and control. We want to shape the way things should go. And if we can get there by God's power, we will use it. We want God to advance our politics, get us that new car, or make our children behave. We want Him to provide that dream job, that retirement we deserve, or take away painful suffering. While these requests are on the surface, understandable, God has a greater purpose for us.

He sees our helpless state as "poisoned by bitterness and wickedness" and by his power, through the work of Jesus, he purchases us and cleans us. We don't buy him. He buys us back. However, this cannot happen unless we repent. We must own the fact that we are trying to use God instead of love and follow God. Through this action, God's power and leadership have their full effect, and we find ourselves paradoxically satisfied.

In what ways are you trying to use God and his power for your own ends? How can you repent (change direction) and submit your life to His loving leadership instead?

Prayer: Oh Lord, make us aware of the ways we attempt to use your power for our own ends. Instead, help us to submit to you, your power, and your plans for our life. Only then will we be truly satisfied. Amen!

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# GRACE-ENABLED GRIT

“They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said. “ Acts 14:21-22

After proclaiming the Message in Derbe and establishing a strong core of disciples, they retraced their steps to Lystra, then Iconium, and then Antioch, putting grit in the lives of the disciples, urging them to stick with what they had begun to believe and not quit, making it clear to them that it wouldn't be easy: “Anyone signing up for the kingdom of God has to go through plenty of hard times.” (The Message).

I like to try new things. I like a challenge, but not a really hard challenge. I'm not a fan of discomfort or embarrassment and really hard, new things often have an element of uncertainty about them. Ever sign up for something because it was advertised as difficult? That it required GRIT (passion, perseverance, tenacity, resilience, staying power toward a mission...often in the face of insurmountable odds)? Probably not. I know I'd lean toward something that didn't necessarily require that I “push through” to be successful. In 2024, we have the luxury to pick and choose what we want to try, but we notoriously shy away from things that are too hard. But what if God is calling us to step out of our comfort zones to advance the Kingdom?

Acts 14 is a description of Paul's first missionary journey. He and Barnabas had traveled, preached, healed, been persecuted, even been confused for Zeus and Hermes...and all in some of the same locations! Despite the hard stuff they encountered, Paul and Barnabas persevered (showed GRIT) and even put some “grit in the lives of the disciples”. They persevered in the face of adversity empowered by the grace of Jesus. They spread the Gospel and strengthened the early Church. There was certainly a cost involved in the work of the early missionaries, but aren't WE (the Church in 2024) the result of their steadfastness?



This theme of GRIT (perseverance, resilience, stick-to-it-ness) remains relevant today. In the midst of modern challenges like a pandemic, political differences, social media, church-related concerns, the need to advance the Gospel is as important as it was for Paul and Barnabas.

The call to faithfulness, resilience, and perseverance endures. Applying the concept of GRIT to advancing the kingdom means that we obey God in the hard things, put them in His hands and watch what happens.

“What could we accomplish for Christ if we applied GRIT to whatever he’s calling us to?”

Father, we are eager to serve You, but we often shrink back when we’re faced with the unknown or the uncomfortable. Remind us of the grace-enabled GRIT that Paul and Barnabas had in establishing Your Church, even in the face of trials. Guide us to step out of our comfort zones, to push through hard things with a spirit of resilience, and to trust in Your plan! May we accomplish great things for Your glory, not by our strength, but by the power of Your Spirit within us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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# DID SOMETHING HAPPEN?

“While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” So Paul asked, “Then what baptism did you receive?” “John’s baptism,” they replied. Paul said, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all. Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. ut some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.” Acts 9:1-10

Paul comes to Ephesus in A.D. 52 (Pentecost plus 22 yrs), where he will remain teaching for two years. He finds there a group of disciples whom we might call “disciples of John,” in that they had not yet been baptized into Christ. Paul baptizes them with what appears to be a second water-baptism—this time—baptism “into the name of the Lord Jesus.” Likewise, they had not yet received the Holy Spirit—as had been poured out at Pentecost, and later upon the household of Cornelius—the Holy Spirit who now came upon them “... and they spoke in tongues and prophesied” (10:44-46,19:6).

It has been my observation that we Baptists tend to avoid passages such as this one. When we deal with them, we often dilute them, like weak Kool-Aid—a bit of color and no flavor. But it is clear here and in numerous other passages (Ac 2:4;10:46;19:1-10;1 Co 12:1-11,27-31;14:1-40) that speaking in tongues and greater marks of supernatural working of the Holy Spirit were common in the early church. People knew that the Holy Spirit had come upon them, and it was observable to others. I have yet to find a clear New Testament reference telling me that such gifts and workings have ceased. “Perfection” has not yet come (1 Co 13:10).

In his gospel, Luke quotes our Lord as saying, “How much more will the Father give his Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Lk 11:13).

And John writes at length assuring us of the active, powerful presence of God in the form

of “another Counselor,” the “Spirit of truth” who testifies about Jesus, teaches all things, convicts of guilt, righteousness, and judgement, and guides into all truth (Jn 14-16).

Are we to be cautious about manifestations of the Spirit? Absolutely! Paul warned the Ephesians themselves that “from [their] own number men [would] arise and distort the truth” (Ac 20:30). He instructed the church at Corinth regarding gifts of the Spirit (1 Co 12-14), noting too that “there are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit (12:1-11;27-31). And he told the church at Thessalonica, on one hand, “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire,” and on the other, “Test everything. Hold on to the good” (1 Th 5:19-20).

Do you want all that God has for you? I do. I pray today, a prayer so similar to what I recall from my youth: “Father, I surrender all that I know of me to all that I know of you. I place my life in your hands; mold me and shape me according to your will. And Lord, give me all of your Holy Spirit and his gifts that I can have and use to your service and your glory. Lord, I want it all. I ask for ‘the much more!’ Much more, Lord! In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

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# YOUR NEIGHBOR

W E E K F I V E

# BETTER THAN EXPECTED

“One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!” So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.” Act 3:1-10

Likely we’ve all experienced that awkward moment when a gift was given, and upon opening the recipient feigned appreciation while attempting to mask the obvious feelings of disappointment. (Feel free to ask my wife Melanie about the roasting pan she opened one Christmas). In those situations, the giver thought they hit the target, only to find they had not.

In this account by Luke, it was just the opposite. The recipient thought he was asking for the appropriate gift. After all, he had no way to earn money to provide for his daily needs. The text tells us he was carried daily to this spot to beg, in essence asking for gifts was most of his existence. Imagine his excitement when Peter and John, “looked straight at him.” After being ignored by so many entering the temple day after day, finally some attention! Surely, he must have thought that a shekel or two was headed his way. That feeling of elation was quickly quenched when Peter bluntly told him he didn’t have any money. Oh, but what he did have! “Rise and walk!”

Peter had received the gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4) and spent the rest of his life giving through the power he received. Immediately the lame man went into the temple praising God, boldly showing others the gift God had given him causing the onlookers to be, “filled with wonder and amazement...”

God will put us in the position of Peter and John. Quickened by the Holy Spirit we are moved to meet the need of another. It might be a meal prepared and delivered, or assistance in finding employment or a hand extended to help another up. Acting when prompted shows our love for those God loves.

A careful re-reading of this passage may lead to questions. Luke tells us this man sat at the same spot entering the temple every day. These same gates Jesus went through. Did Jesus not see him? Why did Jesus not stop and heal? Giving the right gift often entails timing. It is possible to give a good gift at the wrong time (you wouldn't give a 10-year-old a new sports car!) God's timing is perfect. The healing of this man by Jesus' followers proved that His authority and power had been given to them!

Heed the prompting of the Holy Spirit when directed to 'give' in love to others. Let God use your gift to impact lives.

Who do you see daily that you can impact?

Father in heaven, use us to show your love to others. Help us be givers of good gifts that point to you. Multiply those gifts in others' lives to bring glory to your son, Jesus. Amen.

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# PROBLEM SOLVED!

“In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.” Acts 6:1-7

Of the thousands of books written throughout history on leadership and management, perhaps this account in the record of the early church should be used as an example for all leaders. Problems arise in every organization, including the church. How that problem is handled will go a long way in determining the future of that organization! Colin Powell, Army 4-Star General said, “Leadership is solving problems. The day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them. They have either lost confidence that you can help or concluded you do not care. Either case is a failure of leadership.” Isn’t it just like the opposition of the church to cause strife? As in our lives and our community when things are moving forward unhindered, something occurs to cause folks to choose a side. And then one side starts questioning the motives or actions of the other side. Suddenly, seemingly overnight division exists.

The first 5 chapters of the account of the early church relate great harmony and forward movement for the cause of Christ. Now, however, things get a bit off kilter. Followers of Christ start grumbling, apparently for good reason. Believers from a Greek background believed that the widows in their midst were being denied their share of the daily food rations. This task was historically handled by the Jewish leadership and there is a suggestion here that the leaders were punishing those with the lowest societal standing who had chosen to follow Jesus. The Apostles quickly decided they needed to address these concerns, lest they grow and cause ongoing damage to the movement.

The response is clearly motivated by love for the people being wronged and a strong desire to continue the work of Christ.



The apostles were fully devoted to prayer and teaching but needed to meet the basic needs of the flock. So, they asked the congregation to identify servant leaders to handle the task at hand. The 7 chosen, all with Greek names had shown themselves to be devoted followers and workers. The nuance of their names exhibited the willingness to address the specific concern, specifically. The result? "The Word of God prospered." (v.7)

We all desire to see the cause of Christ move forward, unhindered. Pray for answer to problems. Be known as a devoted follower willing to serve the needs of the church. Let us each see the Word of God prosper in Kaufman County.

Where can you meet a need within the body today, this week, this month?

Father, help us love each other enough to raise our hand to serve others where you lead. Raise up those willing to do the work of feeding widows and others in need. Open our eyes to needs our hearts to service. Amen.

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# RESURRECTION IN AN UPPER ROOM

“In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor. About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, “Please come at once!” Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them. Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, “Tabitha, get up.” She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive. This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord.” Acts 9:36-42

In a world of virtual reality and artificial intelligence it can be difficult to determine what's real and what's been created by a machine to appear real. We see humans fly or 'shape-shift' on a movie screen. We saw Forrest Gump play football for Alabama (he didn't). Imagine life in the first century and seeing something that was beyond comprehension. Thus, the account of Dorcas.

It's important to remember the author of Acts is Luke, a physician. In this account of Dorcas, he presents the facts of what occurred. He doesn't attempt to explain the physiological complexity of the transition from death to life. Why? Because the only explanation is that a God ordained miracle caused lungs to start inhaling and exhaling oxygen and the heart to start circulating blood.

Dorcas is noted by Luke to not only be a good person but a person who acted (“did”) in kindness and charity. The folks who were with her had heard that Peter was nearby and had healed a paralytic, so they sent for him to come. What a remarkable personal story is Peter. Peter – who jumped out of a boat to meet Jesus; cut off an ear to protect Jesus; tells Jesus he will not let him go to the cross; denies Jesus three times. That Peter is now known as one completely devoted to the cause of Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit is healing people.

The raising of people from the dead is not an event described many times in scripture. It happened 3 times in the Old Testament and Jesus raised 3 during his ministry. It's an indescribable work of God that only God knows why and for what purpose these miracles occurred.

Peter followed Jesus' example when he raised the daughter of the synagogue official in Mark by saying "Talitha (little one) kum (get up)!" To Dorcas, Peter said, "Tabitha, kum!" Imagine Peter's joy in that moment remembering his teacher's encounter, replicated!

Peter was ever willing to respond in love to need; to show love to those who needed it most. He steered people into relationships with the Father. We read no more about Dorcas in the pages of scripture. Her role in history was to show kindness, die, and return to life to continue charity. Our task is to show kindness and charity like Dorcas, and be willing to do as God commands, as Peter did.

Who in your sphere needs kindness? Where is God leading you to act?

Good God in heaven, create in us a willingness to exhibit kindness and charity. Create a willingness to say yes when our presence in ministry is requested. Compel us to go when called. May all we do bring glory to you. Amen.

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# IN THE STORM

“On the fourteenth night we were still being driven across the Adriatic Sea, when about midnight the sailors sensed they were approaching land. They took soundings and found that the water was a hundred and twenty feet deep. A short time later they took soundings again and found it was ninety feet deep. Fearing that we would be dashed against the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight. In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they were going to lower some anchors from the bow. Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, “Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved.” So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it drift away. Just before dawn Paul urged them all to eat. “For the last fourteen days,” he said, “you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food—you haven’t eaten anything. Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head.” After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. Altogether there were 276 of us on board. When they had eaten as much as they wanted, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea. When daylight came, they did not recognize the land, but they saw a bay with a sandy beach, where they decided to run the ship aground if they could. Cutting loose the anchors, they left them in the sea and at the same time untied the ropes that held the rudders. Then they hoisted the foresail to the wind and made for the beach. But the ship struck a sandbar and ran aground. The bow stuck fast and would not move, and the stern was broken to pieces by the pounding of the surf. The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping. But the centurion wanted to spare Paul’s life and kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land. The rest were to get there on planks or on other pieces of the ship. In this way everyone reached land safely.” Acts 27:27-44

The 27th chapter of Acts was NOT written by the public relations director for the cruise ship industry. Truth be told, this scenario is the exact reason Melanie, and I aren’t ‘cruise people.’ We know scores of people who love going on cruises. I read this scripture and am more than happy to eat buffet meals, listen to people sing and swim in pools while firmly attached to the earth. This is a real-world experience that Gilligan’s Island can’t come close to matching. (Apologies to all of you under the age of 50 who likely didn’t understand that reference.)

In this account written firsthand by Luke, Paul has been charged with various infractions by the religious leaders including an attempt to profane the temple. Paul had defended himself and in a legal maneuver he, “appealed to Caesar.” At the conclusion of the trial King Agrippa conceded he found no guilt in Paul, but due to the appeal he must be sent to Rome. Thus, we find Paul on a ship in chapter 27 headed for Rome.

Paul, Luke and Aristarchus board a vessel full of wheat traveling from Egypt to Italy. We learn in verse 37 that a total of 273 people were aboard, many of whom were prisoners being sent to Rome to be killed in the Coliseum. Despite the circumstances (there were no state rooms aboard) Paul never ceased ministering.

The account in verses 27-44 has specific details with days (v. 9 mentions the “Fast” being over – likely the Day of Atonement fast on October 5, AD 59) and multiple ports where the ship stopped during the voyage. This isn’t a story created to make a point. It was real life, including Luke the physician hauling in ropes (v. 36).

Throughout the voyage, including the 14(!) days they were tossed to and fro at sea Paul continued to minister to his co-castaways by assuring them of God’s protection. He even encouraged them to eat in preparation for the ship breaking apart. It is accurate to say that while his equilibrium may have suffered on this journey, his steadfast belief in God’s protection and plan for his life did not!

An old hymn encourages us to, “turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of this earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace.” That’s the example Paul provides to each of us. Regardless of the storm, keep ministering. Keep providing hope. Fall into God and His promises.

You may be in the middle of a violent storm. You may be seeing one on the horizon, or just passed through one. What will sustain you for the benefit of others?

Father, only you can sustain. When the waves crash and the storms seem endless, make me a vessel of hope and encouragement. Amen.

Find opportunities to aid. Don’t ignore that internal nudge to go talk to someone who may need your help. It’s likely God’s Spirit directing you.

Who among us needs our strength? How do we impact Kaufman County for Christ by attending to the needs of the frail?

Father, open our eyes, our hearts and our hands to those in need. Renew in us a right spirit to meet people wherever they may be with whatever they may need. Teach us to give as you gave. Amen.

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# THE LOST WORLD

WEEK SIX

# THE MISSION OF GOD IS YOUR MISSION

Read Acts 1

“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.” Acts 1:8

Power is a word that we can use in a variety of ways. Our cars have horse power – and the more we have, the faster the car should be able to go. We have will power – or usually we struggle with not enough will power to resist chocolate cake. We exercise so that our muscles can become more powerful – so that we can lift things more easily. But the power that Jesus promises to the disciples is a power beyond anything we normally experience in an earthly situation. The POWER that Jesus promises is something that should propel us to become witnesses to what Jesus did on earth. That is a mighty power indeed!

This verse has been used through the ages to define the mission of every follower of Christ. As Jesus was departing the earth, these were important words that he shared with his disciples. He had taught them daily with parables and stories, he showed them countless miracles, he prayed with them and for them, and then he walked to the cross and rose again as the Son of God. After the resurrection, He spent time teaching them even more with the backdrop of the cross behind them. When it was time for Him to leave, he promised them the POWER of the Holy Spirit, but he gave them a task that accompanied that power. The power was to be used for something – not something to be stored up like a battery. The power was to enable them to be witnesses throughout the world. Christians were scattered all over the known world after Jesus’ resurrection, and those Christ followers took the name of Jesus with them wherever they were scattered. Starting close to home, then to the neighboring country, and then to the whole earth, these followers were to be witnesses of all Jesus did. We have the same task today. We are His witnesses, and we have all the power we need to be on mission with Him.



When Jesus promised us the Holy Spirit, it was not some gentle, soft, flowy sort of thing. It was a powerful rushing wind that would take His message to the ends of the earth.

We have the power within us to make a difference in our homes, in our neighborhoods, in our communities, and to the ends of the earth.

When was the last time you considered your “mission” in life? Jesus told us that we would be His witnesses...and we are, whether we know it or not. Are you thinking about how your life is a witness to those around you, and are you using the power that He provided through the Holy Spirit? How can you use that power today?

Dear Father, thank you for giving us the power of your Holy Spirit and for giving us a life purpose to be your witnesses to those around us. Help us be bold and courageous with the power you have provided. Amen.

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# GOOD NEWS FOR THE ALL THE WORLD

“Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. “We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” Acts 10:34-43

We recently spent time with our adult children, and they started telling stories of when they were younger. During several of those stories, I said “I don’t remember that at all.” They then sheepishly admitted that they never told us about that incident and thought they were hiding something from us. I couldn’t understand the story because I had no memory of it. As Christians, we may be tempted to think that everyone has a general knowledge of Jesus and the gospel story. Just like those family stories that are not shared with everyone, some people need the background context of the gospel story. That is what Peter is sharing with Gentiles in Acts 10 so that they all have the same background context before they can respond.

In Acts 10:34-43 Peter begins a sermon that is addressed to the Gentiles. The location is at the house of Cornelius and what Peter is about to say is revolutionary. God has revealed by a dream to a Galilean fisherman that the truth is that God shows no partiality. Jews and Gentiles are the same in the eyes of God. God desires a relationship with every nation (ethnos) and anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to Him. To the Jews, this would have been considered blasphemy. It is contrary to centuries of an-

cient tradition that states that Israel is where God’s heart lies and He has chosen her above all others. But through Peter, God completely dispels that idea. Anyone—Jew, Gentile, Samaritan, or Roman—anyone who fears God, is acceptable to God. This is God’s reality and He accomplished it through Jesus Christ.

The Good News of Jesus shared by Peter is inclusive and is a revelation to all that God yearns for unity among his creation. Peter goes on to share with the listeners that he and others were chosen as witnesses. What are the witnesses for? They were witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. They were there after the resurrection because they ate and drank with Him after he arose from the dead. They were the ones chosen by God as witnesses to testify about their experience of the risen Christ to others. The content of their message is that Jesus is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. Jesus is the Lord of everyone and everything. In summary, Peter’s message to the Gentiles has three bold points. First, Jesus was a historical figure who actually lived and did wonderful things. Second, Jesus is truly the promised Messiah whom God exalted. Third, believing in Jesus brings forgiveness of sins. And again, the Good News is all of us can be reconciled to God and experience peace just by believing in Jesus.

When Peter shared the gospel of the Good News of Jesus, these Gentiles could not help but respond. They understood that the good news of Jesus was for them as well as for the Jews.

Have you been shy about sharing the Good News with others because they have a different ethnic, cultural, or religious background? Perhaps all you need to do is share with them the story of Jesus. With this context, they are in a better position to respond to the Gospel.

Dear Father, help us to share the gospel with those who have never heard so that they can also have the joy of knowing the Good News of your salvation. Amen.

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# ASTONISHED AT THE POWER OF GOD

“Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. 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.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper. They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, “You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun.” Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.” Acts 13:1-12

The verses today have special meaning for us. We just returned from a trip to Cyprus (where our daughter serves as a missionary) and we went “as far as Paphos.” It was one of the most beautiful places we have ever seen, and there is a church in Paphos dedicated to Paul and Barnabas. The information about the ancient church states, “Paul was beaten here because he had introduced a controversial subject.” When you read the words that Paul spoke to the proconsul’s magician, you may think that is a slight understatement. This is the beginning of the good news being spread to other countries. There was no statue of the proconsul in Paphos, but there is a church that still stands where people still worship the living God. AMEN!!

Chapter 13 of Acts begins a second large section of the book that mainly focuses on the ministry of Paul to the Gentiles. It starts out with a group of prophets and teachers who are in Antioch which was a central location of Christian activity in the area.

The Holy Spirit comes to the people in the area and Saul and Barnabas are called out for a special task. Notice that the whole group participated in this calling.

Saul and Barnabas were going to be sent out to spread the gospel, but the others had an equally important task as well. The ones that were left behind placed their hands on the heads of Barnabas and Saul and sent them out to go to Cyprus. Once Saul and Barnabas arrived in Cyprus, they began their long journey (90 miles) across the island. They traveled from Salamis in the east to Paphos in the west. Along the way they confined their preaching to synagogues which was in line with Saul's belief that the gospel must be brought to the Jews first. Their influence was being felt by the people they shared with, especially a gentleman named Sergius Paulus who was the pro-counsel and an intelligent man. He wanted to hear about the gospel. But there was a Jewish magician named Bar-Jesus (also known as Elymas) who opposed the followers of Christ. But Paul, (notice the transition) steps up and confronts Elymas. He performs a miracle. Paul being filled with the Holy Spirit blinds him for a little while. This is an interesting turn of events. Usually, one expects a follower of Christ to heal blindness, but in this case the miracle performed was to cause temporary blindness. Elymas was trying to thwart the efforts of Paul and Barnabas, so he was blinded. This miracle did have a desirable effect. When the pro-counsel saw what happened, he understood the gospel and was astonished at the power of God.

Sometimes hard words have to be spoken to those who are opposed to the gospel. But, when truth is spoken, people are "astonished at the teaching of the Lord." It is our job to make the paths straight, not to confuse people with half-truths or a watered down version of the gospel.

Do you speak truth to people even when it may not be popular or easy? Consider who needs to hear truth from you more than they need to be soothed for their lack of understanding. It's a hard choice, but one that each of us must make.

Most Holy God, help us to speak the truth of your gospel with power and might. Remind us that the gospel is "amazing" and people yearn to know the truth. Amen.

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# A HEART FOR THE LOST

“Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you. “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.” When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” At that, Paul left the Council. Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.” Acts 17:22-34

When we were visiting Cyprus with our children, we went into dozens of churches and monasteries, some of which were thousands of years old. They were beautiful places, full of gold crosses, silver frames, intricate carvings, amazing paintings, and beautiful settings. Each of these churches were made by people who wanted to worship the one true God. While we contemplated the ornate surroundings, we could not help but think that the people who built these amazing structures were worshipping the same God that we worship today. God does not need us to build him a temple, but He does want us to recognize that he is the one who created us and gives us life.

In today’s passage, we are able to see another side of Paul. Throughout the book of Acts, Luke explains to us that Paul always goes to the synagogue and then to the marketplace. But here in Athens, Paul gets the opportunity to discuss faith issues with the philosophers of the day.

Notice that he starts the discussion by complementing them on their spiritual acuity. While

walking through Athens, he sees an altar with the inscription "To an unknown God." This altar gave Paul the perfect reason to discuss spiritual matters with the people. All people have a basic understanding that God exists. He began by laying out an argument based on reason that would lead the hearer to the obvious conclusion that God has created the world and everything in it and doesn't live in shrines or temples made by humans. He isn't served by the products of human hands such as idols of gold, or silver, or stone. This is God and he gives life and breath and all things to us.

Notice that as Paul is sharing the gospel with the philosophers that he never uses the name of Jesus. Instead, he describes Him and what He accomplished. The basic understanding of God that mankind possesses isn't enough. Therefore, God overlooked the past of human ignorance and sent "a man whom he has appointed." This man is the righteous judge who verifies our Creator by being raised from the dead. In summary, here is Paul's logic: God (Creator, Giver of Life) through intermediaries (Word of God, angels, Messiah) restores the relationship with all mankind (all nations of the earth). This is the Unknown god that you are seeking. This is God that can truly be known. The philosophical discussion ends with Paul's hearers divided. Some of them scoffed at the argument and were not impressed with the argument. Some of them wanted to continue the conversation. Some of them came to faith, including Dionysius and Damaris and their lives were changed. It is amazing that we can have a relationship with God who gives life and desires to be known.

Now that we know God created us and gives us our very life, we should spend time in worship of him. Where we worship is not as important as the way we worship. He is not an unknown god or someone who needs us to build him temples. He is the God who made us and asks us to worship Him in spirit and truth.

Paul used a local landmark to point people to God. They were confused and "ignorant" of the one true God, but Paul pointed them to Jesus. Can you think of ways that you can point people to Jesus through everyday conversations?

Mighty, Creator God – Thank you for creating such a beautiful world for us to enjoy. Help us to worship you and thank you every day for the way you created us and continue to give us life. Amen.

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# TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

“Three days later he called together the local Jewish leaders. When they had assembled, Paul said to them: “My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. They examined me and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death. The Jews objected, so I was compelled to make an appeal to Caesar. I certainly did not intend to bring any charge against my own people. For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain.” They replied, “We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, and none of our people who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you. But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect.” They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. He witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus. Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: “The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your ancestors when he said through Isaiah the prophet: “Go to this people and say, “You will be ever hearing but never understanding: you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.” For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.”“Therefore I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!” For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!” Acts 28:17-31

The most famous love songs reveal what a person would do to demonstrate their commitment. Perhaps you remember The Proclaimers' absurdly catchy song "I'm Gonna Be". It proclaims, “I would walk 500 miles and I would walk 500 more!” Or maybe you’ve heard of Bob Dylan’s anthem, recently covered by Adele, “Make You Feel My Love” where she resolves, “I’d go hungry, I’d go black and blue... nothing that I wouldn’t do, go to the ends of the earth for you, to make you feel my love.”



At the end of the book of Acts we find a man, Paul, who has gone to the ends of the earth for the sake of the One he loves. He has gone hungry, he has been beaten black and blue. He has endured shipwreck, loss, and much suffering. And he has finally made it to the epicenter of pagan culture: Rome. He crossed the whole of the Mediterranean Sea. The journey required at least 10,000 miles. In Acts 1:8, Jesus commands his followers to be his witnesses from Jerusalem (where Paul began) all the way to the ends of the earth. And now at the bookend of Acts, Paul has made it. And so we read in the end that he was, “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:30-31).

Our love fuels everything about us. It gives an average mother the power to lift a car off her pinned down child. It moves lovers to spend whatever means to fly across cities and states to see each other. It causes grandparents to relocate so they can be with their grandkids. It is the very reason someone will leave behind what they know, embrace uncertainty, danger, and even suffering for the sake of loving someone greater.

The call from Jesus, our Savior and King, is to be his witnesses. This is not the call of the pastor or the “super missionaries” out there. This is the call of Jesus, to you. It is to tell everyone near and far the good news of his rescue. Do you love Him? Would you go anywhere to obey His call? Would you give up power and position and money to send others? Would you go to the ends of the earth for Him? What would be a first step? It could mean getting serious about getting to know your neighbors and inviting them to church. Or stepping out in faith on a short-term trip. It could mean giving more money than you ever have to this cause. Whatever you do, don’t neglect this call on your life.

Prayer: Jesus, your love for us is overwhelming. You left heaven to come to a painful earth to get us. May we, in turn, love you and surrender our life to you. Help us to obey your call on our lives to be your witnesses to all people near and far. May your kingdom come and your will be done. Amen!

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