

BUILDING THE CHURCH

Unstoppable

Church

REACHING THE NATIONS

WHAT'S INSIDE

Intro Week Week Week Week Week Week Jesus

1 2 3 4 5 6 ?

Welcome to
the Study pg. 6

Group
Gathering #1 pg. 8

Acts 13-15
Overview
& Devos pg. 16

Group
Gathering #2 pg. 58

Acts 16-18:17
Overview
& Devos pg. 64

Group
Gathering #3 pg. 97

Acts 18:18-21:15
Overview
& Devos pg. 102

Group
Gathering #4 pg. 143

Acts 21:16-23:10
Overview
& Devos pg. 150

Group
Gathering #5 pg. 186

Acts 23:11-Ch. 26
Overview
& Devos pg. 192

Group
Gathering #6 pg. 232

Acts 27-28
Overview
& Devos pg. 238

Group
Gathering #7 pg. 272

Have You Decided
to Follow Jesus?
pg. 278

**LET'S
GET
STARTED**

Welcome to the Study!

This Study is for Your Spiritual Growth and to Motivate You to Action!

At Thomas Road Baptist Church, we pray the message about the Lord spreads widely and has a powerful effect upon your life and upon everyone with whom you come in contact (Acts 19:20)! All the effort and energy put forth in this Bible study should serve as a demonstration to you the reader that Thomas Road Baptist Church is committed to preparing its membership to fulfill the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) and to be “witnesses...to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8)!

This study adopts a balanced approach of providing instruction, guided recommendations for prayer, and recommendations for further study for the individual while also being intentional to promote spiritual growth, discussions, deliberation, and prayer among believers within groups. This study calls believers into action. It reflects upon what we will learn (Head), what we should feel (Heart), and what we should do (Hands). Therefore, approach this study with the desire to learn the text, experience the text, and do something for the Lord based upon the text.

This study is our best attempt to assist the church in fulfilling the Mission of Thomas Road Baptist Church, “to change our world by developing Christ-followers who love God and Love people.” Anything derived from this Bible study that is deemed beneficial and positive should be attributed to the Lord God because of His pure and impactful Word. Any deficiencies should be attributed to the fallible human instruments who were given the blessing to engage this study, who simply want to “finish [our] race with joy, and the ministry which [we] received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24)!

What To Expect Each Week

Whether the reader has an extensive knowledge of the book of Acts or has never studied it, the devotions within this study will educate, inspire, and motivate the reader to grow in his/her worship for the Lord and motivate the reader to action based upon what was read.

Weekly Overview: *Each week begins with a Weekly Overview that provides a brief summary of the entire portion of the book of Acts that will be covered during a particular week. It lists the key moments and themes that will be addressed in each devotional. After reading the Weekly Overview, the reader will have the necessary context that supports each devotional.*

Five Devotionals: – *Each week contains five devotionals that highlight a particular portion of the book of Acts. In each devotional, the reader will learn what the passage teaches, discover new insights, and apply its teachings in very specific ways. The Devotionals provide vivid explanations of the text which include cultural, historical, literary, and grammatical insights. The reader is then encouraged to “Ponder and Pray” over what was just presented. The reader is then given a potential activity to prepare for when the reader next meets with his/her group. And should the reader desire to further engage in the teachings and/or applications of the text, s/he is invited to interact with the “Dig Deeper” section. This optional but recommended section provides additional in-depth insights which can be applied to strengthen one’s faith. And finally, each devotion provides a link to a sermon on the portion of Acts or the theme presented in the Devotional by either Dr. Jerry Falwell, Sr. or Pastor Jonathan Falwell, Senior Pastor, Thomas Road Baptist Church.*

Group Gathering: *After the last devotional is completed for the week, this study provides instructions that guide a group in reviewing, discussing, and praying over the week’s devotional content. It provides a brief summary of each devotional and reminds the group member of the group activity that was presented. The group members then have the opportunity to select which activities they wish to discuss and pray over when they meet.*

Our Prayer for You

We have prayed over this Bible study from the moment of conception to the moment it was placed in your hands. Now, we pray that you will be “full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3) as you ponder the beautiful truths found within the book of Acts. Just as the Apostle Paul entrusted the precious people of Ephesus to God for Him to develop them through the message of His grace, we also “commend you to God and to the word of His grace” (Acts 20:32). We pray that after you complete this study, you will have grown in passion to serve and worship the Lord, created deep bonds of friendship with other believers, and that everyone who engaged in it will have a stronger conviction to “preach the kingdom of God and teach the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence” (Acts 28:31)! And in doing so, we pray that we would join together to “change our world by developing Christ-followers who love God and love people!”

GROUP GATHERING #1

Welcome to the first Group Gathering!
Today will be slightly different from every
other time you gather with your group
but will still be equally rewarding!

Note to Group Members:

For all of the upcoming Group Gatherings, each group will be encouraged to discuss the five devotionals that were read by each member prior to gathering. But for today's Introduction to the study, each group will be encouraged to discuss, ponder, and pray over a few of the major themes that you will be exposed to throughout this Bible study.

You do not have to have read any portion of the Bible study, nor do you have to be familiar with the book of Acts in order to contribute to today's discussion. The spiritual themes discussed today are relevant to every believer regardless of how long the person has been a believer.

Be encouraged! Your contribution is valuable to your group and will most assuredly edify the members of your group and your group leader. But should you need to sit and listen today, just to take in the entire discussion and prayerfully process the spiritual discussion quietly, that is OK too! You will not be pressured to speak publicly. We are glad you have joined us today!

Welcome to the First Day!

Today, your group leader will rehearse the following **Four Encouragements** that provide helpful information about our Bible study in order to familiarize you with the structure of this Bible study, review **Four Facts** about the book of Acts that will provide you with some good foundational knowledge about the book, and present **Seven Themes** taken from the book of Acts from which each group will be encouraged to choose from to discuss, ponder, and pray over today.

Four Encouragements...as you begin this Bible study!

1. **This Bible study is written for everyone!** This study is arranged to allow anyone at any knowledge level to engage the Bible study without difficulty and to actively participate in group discussions. Everyone is a learner and a worshiper while engaging this Bible study!
2. **You decide how much you want to get out of this Bible Study.**
The devotionals are written to provide you with options:
 - **Option 1:** You can read the devotional and simply think and pray about what you just read as each devotional ends with a “Ponder and Pray” section.
 - **Option 2:** You can also begin preparing early about what you will share in your group as a result of reading our “Next Time You Meet with Your Group” section.
 - **Option 3:** You also have the option to listen to a sermon preached by either Dr. Jerry Falwell Sr. or Pastor Jonathan Falwell on that particular portion of the book of Acts or the identical theme of the devotional. Just scan the QR code provided within each devotional.
 - **Option 4:** And if you want to really dig deeper into this subject and applications of the devotional, you can engage our “Want to Dig Deeper” section which provides additional in-depth insights into the portion of Acts and supporting Scriptures. In addition, it will call for the reader to give serious consideration as to how to live out the spiritual applications unearthed in each devotional!

3. **It is impossible to fall behind in this Bible study!** This Bible study is written in such a way for each devotional to stand alone while providing enough context for you to understand each devotional. In addition, a brief summary is provided of each devotional on the day the group meets. Also, the group discussion topics are familiar and relevant to all believers that makes it possible for everyone to participate. So, do not quit! Engage your group as much as you are able!
4. **If you are unable to complete any of the reading or additional activities in a given week, you will never be shamed.** This Bible study does not shame anyone who was unable to complete any of the reading or engage any of the additional activities during the week. Nor will anyone who feels they simply need to sit and listen during the group discussions be asked to speak or pray publicly. Know that you are able to take in the entire discussion and prayerfully process the spiritual discussion quietly if you so choose.

Four Facts...about the book of Acts.

1. **The book of Acts covers the unique details for a one-of-a-kind generation.** The book of Acts describes the generation that lived both pre-cross *and* post-cross. This generation has never existed before and will never exist again. The people depicted in the book of Acts lived both before and after the death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and before the coming of the Holy Spirit. Some people were believers in Jesus before he died and rose again, and some people were not believers until after the resurrection. Therefore, it is important to remember that some details that are described in the book of Acts are unique to this one-of-a-kind generation that believers today should not expect to experience.
2. **The book of Acts is a divinely God-breathed, inerrant, infallible, and inspired history book!** The Holy Spirit chose to document the details of the birth and growth of God's Church just as a history book would document past events. It is full of descriptive details of names, places, travel locations, and numerical growth. Like a good history book, it details the victories and challenges experienced by believers during this generation. Therefore, while there is a good portion of the book of Acts that is "prescriptive," (meaning, believers today should mimic the exact words and actions of these first-generation believers), an equal amount of detail is "descriptive" (which means we today

are not called to mimic their specific actions but should be inspired and motivated by their example and attempt to identify the truths and the spiritual principles upon which they stood and to emulate their convictions to live out the truth in our current context 2000 years later)!

3. **The book of Acts follows a very simple outline taken from Acts 1:8**, “ But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
 - **Acts chapters 1-7** – How the believers were witnesses in “Jerusalem.”
 - **Acts chapters 8-12** – How the believers were witnesses in “Judea and Samaria.”
 - **Acts chapters 13-28** – How the believers were witnesses “to the end of the earth.” This Bible study covers Acts chapters 13-28!
4. **The book of Acts provides the fulfillment and specific details of God’s declaration, “I will build My Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18b).** And while we will certainly be inspired by the example of the many faithful believers presented in the book of Acts, remember the purpose of the book of Acts is to point us to how great God is, how merciful He is to save anyone, and how He is building HIS Church!

Seven Themes...to choose from to discuss, ponder and pray over today!

Knowing you have not yet begun this Bible study, read the following themes that are prevalent in the book of Acts (there are many more themes than these, by the way!) and discuss with your group.

Seven Themes Taken from Acts Chapters 13-28:

1. **Prayer** – In virtually every chapter of the book of Acts, believers are seen praying to God for wisdom before a decision, for strength to attempt something big for God, for direction on what the will of God is for their lives at that moment, or for others to remain faithful and not to give up on God. In the book of Acts, prayer seems to always accompany a spiritual victory, internal joy, enduring strength and supernatural peace.

2. **Encouragement** – Often in the book of Acts believers and Christian leaders are described as being discouraged and in need of encouragement. The book of Acts stresses the importance of being honest with yourself when you need encouragement and being very quick to give encouragement to those who are discouraged.
3. **Boldness** – The book of Acts describes countless believers who exhibit unimaginable boldness and courage to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the face of slander, social pressure, passionate opposition, and intense persecution. In fact, at one point they were even proclaiming the Gospel while they were running for their lives! Many inspiring examples are found within the book of Acts.
4. **Humility** – The book of Acts is full of extraordinary and miraculous acts of God that resulted in many people coming to faith in Christ. On many of these occasions, the believers had opportunities to draw the peoples' attention to either their great God who just performed the miracles through them or to themselves in order to accept the applause and steal God's glory. Fortunately, the faithful believers in the book of Acts committed never to steal God's glory as they had a healthy level of fear and reverence for God. They had a spirit of humility knowing that their purpose in life was to bring God glory in all of their actions.
5. **Selflessness** – In the book of Acts, faithful believers looked out for each other and sincerely cared for each other. It is a common occurrence to read of believers being excited to receive reports from other believers. It is also common to read of how believers in one area heard of another believer's needs and sent a messenger to deliver provisions to help him out. They were always on the lookout for how they could support the interests and needs of others.
6. **God's Priorities Come First** – In the book of Acts, many believers sacrificed their own physical comfort, financial resources, and their time to make sure the Gospel was proclaimed, that new converts were disciplined properly, and that churches were growing in a healthy way.
7. **God's Providence (God's perfect timing in our lives)** – God's providence is his unalterable ability to weave every physical detail and moment of our lives to fulfill His divine purpose for us and for those around us. In the book of Acts, God often turns a scenario

that looks hopeless into a miraculous blessing for the believers. Sometimes He takes believers to the brink of their faith before He provides deliverance. But it takes believers trusting God's power and timing in their lives to see and fully appreciate God's providence.

Today's Group Activities:

- What theme(s) are you hoping the Holy Spirit teaches you more about in this Bible study so as to become stronger in your faith?
- Take time to pray for each other that they would be stronger in their faith by the end of this Bible study in these particular spiritual areas.

1

ACTS 13–15 OVERVIEW

This week covers the following ways in which the members of God’s Church can grow in their faith as God grows His Church:

1. An Inspiring Description of the **Church** God Uses to Reach the World!

2. An Inspiring Description of the **People** God Uses to Reach the World!

3. To do whatever God has empowered me to do and to usher all glory to God.

4. To be equally committed to the evangelizing of the lost and to the discipling of the saved.

5. To do my part to cultivate a healthy church and healthy relationships with other believers.

Memory Verse

Acts 1:8

But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

A Summary of Acts Chapters 13 – 15

The moment has come in the history of Christianity for the Gospel message of salvation through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to begin to be spread across the “uttermost parts of the earth” (Acts 1:8b)! First, believers “filled Jerusalem with their teaching” (Acts 5:28b). Their message was simple: “Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12)! They became recipients of great persecution and scattered beyond the borders of Jerusalem. But even amid persecution, they continued to preach the Gospel to the regions of Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1). And in Acts 13, the details of Paul’s efforts to do his part to spread the Gospel to the untouched areas, supported by a spiritual healthy church, led by spiritual healthy leaders, are unveiled.

The home base for this exponential spread of the Gospel was an unassuming church of faithful believers in a city called Antioch in Syria. God appointed this city to serve as the common gathering place for the majority of Christian leaders and Gospel messengers to connect, refresh, regroup, and from which to launch meaningful traveling efforts to spread the Gospel to the known world.

While the mission was a success, it was not without its challenges and significant opposition. Paul and Barnabas first traveled to Cyprus (Acts 13:4-12) where they were immediately confronted by a “false prophet” (Acts 13:6b) who both antagonized them but actively attempted to cause the Governor of the city, who was interested in hearing what Paul and Barnabas had to say, not to listen and to turn his attention away from their teaching (Acts 13:8b). Paul, being controlled with the Holy Spirit, pronounced blindness upon the false prophet and the Governor “believed, when he saw what had been done, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord” (Acts 13:12).

From there, Paul and Barnabas traveled to Perga (Acts 13:13) then to Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:14-52). Here, Paul preached about how Jesus Christ was the one spoken about in the Old Testament as the Messiah and the sinless Son of God (Acts 13;14-41). The Gentiles made passionate requests of Paul to return to the synagogue to teach them more about Jesus Christ (Acts 13:42). The Jews however were “filled with envy; and contradiction and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul” (Acts 13:45b). In response, Paul and Barnabas “grew bold and said, ‘It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourself unworthy

of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles” (Acts 13:46). The Gospel spread (Acts 13:49a) but many of the Jewish leaders persuaded the city leaders to expel them from the city (Acts 13:50). So, Paul and Barnabas left and traveled to Iconium.

Acts chapter 14 documents how the persecution against Paul and Barnabas escalated from hateful thoughts and words to “violent attempts” (Acts 14:5) to physically hurt them in Iconium, to actual hands-on beatings of Paul in Lystra (Acts 14:19). Paul and Barnabas left Iconium and arrived in a city called Lystra and began preaching (Acts 14:6-7). As they were preaching, they witnessed a man who was unable to walk. They eventually learned that the man had been in this condition all his life and had never walked (Acts 14:8). Paul healed the man and he “leaped and walked” (Acts 14:9-10). Immediately, the people declared that Paul and Barnabas were gods and should be worshipped (Acts 14:11b-13). This outraged Paul and Barnabas and they insisted that no one worship them (Acts 14:14-18) but to “turn from these useless things to the living God” (Acts 14:15b). After some time, the persecutors ultimately accomplished their goal of physically beating and stoning Paul and “dragged him out of the city supposing him to be dead” (Acts 14:19). Paul recovered and the next day he and Barnabas traveled to Derbe (Acts 14:20). And after preaching in Derbe and experiencing positive results (Acts 14:21), Paul and Barnabas decided to return back to Antioch in Syria by way of all of the previous cities they had visited in order to strengthen the believers, affirm the spiritual leaders, and do all they could to support them to grow spiritually in their absence (Acts 14:21-27).

While in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas “reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27). As a result of this influx of Gentile (i.e., non-Jewish) believers, every believer thought it best to gather most of the Apostles and Christian leaders in Jerusalem to affirm the pure Gospel message and to confirm that every believer would present the same, clear Gospel message (Acts 15:1-17). They affirmed that the Gospel was through faith alone in Jesus Christ, by His grace alone, and no additional works were required to be saved. At the same time, they requested the Gentile believers to remain sensitive to the Jewish believers who needed some time to come to grips with this reality, and to demonstrate Christian love and unity (Acts 15:22:29). Acts chapter 15 ends with Paul traveling with Silas and Barnabas traveling with John Mark. After a tense moment of debate, it ended with two groups of leaders launching to return to these cities and other cities (Acts 15:36-41) to further support the believers in these areas, along with sharing the Gospel with all who will listen.

Timeline & Key Events

This week, our daily devotionals will focus upon five **key moments** within **Acts chapters 13 – 15**.

Acts 13:1-5 (pt.1)

An Inspiring Description of the **Church** God Used to Reach the World!

Acts 13:1-5 (pt.2)

An Inspiring Description of the **People** God Used to Reach the World!

Acts 13:6-14:7

Paul and Barnabas in Cyprus, Perga, Antioch of Pisidia, and Iconium

Acts 14:8-18

Paul and Barnabas Refuse to Steal God's Glory in Lystra

Acts 14:19-23

Paul and Barnabas Risk Their Lives for Evangelism *and* Discipleship

Acts 14:24-28

Paul and Barnabas back in Lystra, Iconium, Antioch of Pisidia, and Antioch of Syria

Acts 15:1-35

A Beautiful Example of Christian Unity in Doctrine and in Conduct

Acts 15:36-41

The Disagreement in Antioch

Acts 13:1-5 – The Beginning of “Being witnesses... to the uttermost parts of the earth.” Pt.1

1. An Inspiring Description of the *Church* God Uses to Reach the World!

We begin this Bible study at the long-awaited moment where God encouraged the expansion of the Church! Building upon the Church’s miraculous inauguration on the Day of Pentecost approximately 15 years before, the Church was now about to experience something it had never yet experienced, a massive escalation and swift expansion to areas that had never been touched by the Gospel of Jesus Christ! The situations were different than what they experienced in Acts chapters 1-12. The level of attack came from more angles. The spiritual debates were more complex since the attacks did not primarily come from one theological vein of Judaism, but rather from Greek Philosophy, Roman superstitions, cults of mythical gods, centers of worship of angelic beings, undefinable philosophical teachings, and the all-too-familiar persistence of Jewish antagonists. Unlike the early days of the Church, when it was possible to get far enough away from Jerusalem to be safe from a singular passionate persecutor, the vitriolic opponents followed believers from town to town, only providing the believers, in some cases, a few days to sow spiritual seeds before they were forced to flee to the next town. At times, believers evaded physical persecution but at other times it became unavoidable as they experienced the full wrath of angry mobs. Believers at every turn had to keep aware of many who looked to do them harm and who restricted many opportunities the believers had to present the clear message of the Gospel.

Yet, through it all, God provided divinely open windows of opportunity for these believers to share the Gospel that was nothing short of miraculous. They witnessed God hold back the attacks long enough for the Gospel to be clearly presented, for follow up to occur, and for many conversions to take place. They even saw how God providentially orchestrated the actions of the ones attacking the believers to be the very ones who unknowingly facilitated their protection in the city. They took them to court only to see that the magistrates found no fault in them. They spread lies and caused them to be put in prison, only to see God shake the bars loose and bring about the conversion of the prison guard. They paid lawyers to present their case before three of the highest regional leaders

only to hear all three leaders, in unison, declare that they were innocent of committing any crimes. And they even saw God providentially use the words and actions of a demon to bring about the conversion an entire city from the worship of demonic magic!

The acts of the Holy Spirit presented in Acts 13-28 that afforded the believers to spread the Gospel of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ across the known world and for His Church to expand at exponential levels were nothing short of miraculous. Every situation at the beginning of this section of Acts was novel for the church. They worked together to determine how to approach various scenarios they had never experienced before. But the unity of the believers was beautiful as they worked towards one mission and one vision given to them by the Lord Jesus Christ, “Be witnesses...to the uttermost parts of the earth” (Acts 1:8b) and “Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Acts chapter 13 begins approximately 15 years after the death, burial, resurrection (Luke 23-24), ascension of Jesus (Acts 1), and the arrival of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-41). It is approximately 10 years after Paul’s conversion experience (Acts 9:1-22). And the global expansion phase of the Church addressed in Acts 13-28 covers approximately 20 years and specifically focuses upon the efforts of Paul and those with whom he engaged.

This new phase of expansion of the Church started in a city called Antioch. While the regions of Judea, Samaria, Galilee served as significant locations whose citizens saw first-hand the miracles and messages of Jesus during His earthly ministry. The city of Jerusalem in Judea hosted significant events like the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ along with the coming of the Holy Spirit, to begin establishing the Christian Church. But Antioch was God’s appointed city to serve as a home base and was the common gathering place for the majority of Christian leaders and Gospel messengers. Here they connected, refreshed, regrouped, and launched meaningful travel efforts to spread the Gospel to the known world. But why Antioch? What was so special about this city?

There were characteristics of this city that made it conducive to serving as the home base for the launch of this final phase of expanding the Church to the ends of the earth. But it must always be remembered that God will use the Church to reach the world, and the Church is the collection of believers in the world. So, while God providentially orchestrated the development of the city of Antioch to provide believers with all they needed to launch successful ministry outreach efforts, it has been and will always be the Church, comprised of believers who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ, through whom God uses to change the world to the “uttermost parts of the earth” (Acts 1:8b)!

But let’s take a look at the city that God developed, over time, to serve as home base in this final phase of God’s mission to reach the world with the

The Gospel that was preached to the “uttermost parts of the earth” (Acts 1:8b)!

The Gospel is clearly presented in Scripture!

Read in order:

Romans 3:10a

Romans 3:23

Romans 6:23

John 3:16

Ephesians 2:8-9

Titus 3:5

Romans 5:8

Romans 10:9, 13

Romans 5:1

Romans 8:1

Romans 8:38-39

I Peter 1:3-4

Gospel. Antioch (specifically, Antioch of Syria) was positioned approximately 200 miles north of the most northern Galilean region and approximately 300 miles north of Jerusalem in the region of Judea. It was the third most populated city in the Roman world (third only to Rome in Italy and Alexandria in Egypt). Its citizens were diverse. They were multicultural, multireligious and only had a moderate Jewish influence. It was a city whose citizens reflected a good cross-section of the Roman world as a whole. Thus, this expansion of the Gospel was not just to spread the gospel geographically but also to spread the Gospel beyond the Jewish people to people of all backgrounds and nations.

In addition, the believers in Antioch were time-tested and trial tested. Meaning, the believers in Antioch had experienced persecution for their faith before Acts 13. The church in Antioch was established approximately three to five years prior to Acts 13 by believers who had fled violent persecution against them while in Jerusalem (Acts chapters 7-9). They scattered from the Jerusalem area and went to Antioch and beyond (Acts 11:19a). They were passionate about their faith. They did not recant their Christian faith in persecution but rather chose to continue spreading the Gospel as they fled (Acts 11:19-21)! And their faith remained strong over this time leading up to Acts 13. As a result, these convicted believers in Antioch were strong in their faith, good students of the Word of God, and spirit-controlled (Acts 11:19-25). They were known for their belief that Jesus Christ was the incarnate God come to earth and the Savior offered to all people. So much so that local citizens had begun referring to them as “Christians” (i.e., “Little Christs”). This nickname had never been used before to describe believers in Jesus Christ (Acts 11:26). It was an excellent home base for Christians to meet, fellowship, be edified, to share the Gospel to both Jews and Gentiles (i.e., non-Jewish people), and to gather to review how the Gospel message was spreading (Acts 15).

What did the church building in Antioch look like?

Church buildings, as we would know them today, were not utilized until the mid-third century. So, when you hear of a “church” in a particular city, it was an established, organized gathering of believers with appointed church leaders and elders who met primarily in houses within the city. But some believers would meet in public gathering areas, public buildings, or even in rural areas of nature (by lakes, in caves, or fields).

Let’s reflect upon the characteristics of the church that God used to launch into this new and final phase of outreach (we will look further into the *people* who embraced these characteristics with conviction in our next devotional). The church was 1) solid in the foundational doctrines of Christianity, 2) practiced spiritual disciplines that focused their hearts and minds on God’s will and not

their own, and they were 3) filled with the Holy Spirit. As we do, also reflect upon our wonderful home church, Thomas Road Baptist Church, and how we have the privilege of worshiping, serving and supporting in a church that embraces these same characteristics! Then, take a moment to offer up a word of thanksgiving to the Lord for what He has done in the life of our precious church to make it this way!

The church in Antioch had a solid doctrinal foundation. The believers received sound teaching and clear declarations of how to apply God's truth (Acts 13:1a). They had proven spiritual teachers who were spiritual practitioners. Meaning, they did not just teach spiritual doctrine; they based their own actions and behaviors on the doctrine and practiced what they preached (Acts 13:1b). The church in Antioch practiced spiritual disciplines that focused their hearts and minds on God's will and not their own. Notice the first two spiritual activities listed in Acts 13:2, "[T]hey ministered to the Lord and fasted" (Acts 13:2b). While the act of "ministering to the Lord" will be covered in length in our next devotional, "fasting" in the New Testament was to focus one's mind for a spiritual reason (Acts 13:2, 14:23) and is often linked in the New Testament to prayer (Luke 2:37, 5:33a). And while it is OK for believers to inform people they are fasting, they should not bring attention to it for self-centered purposes (Matthew 6:16-18). Lastly, and most significantly, the believers and their leaders in Antioch were "filled" with the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:2, 4, 9; and 11:24). Continually through the book of Acts and in its description of the church in Antioch, the Bible describes the believers as being "filled" (or better, "controlled") by the Holy Spirit (If you cannot wait to learn more about what it means to be "filled" with the Spirit, see our forthcoming Devotional on Acts 19:1-7!). Because they instilled sound doctrine and focused their minds on God's purpose and will for them, the Holy Spirit was able to guide their prayers, thinking, and their very actions because they were so in tune with the heart and mind of God.

The church of Antioch was grounded on God's truth, pure in their worship, controlled by the Holy Spirit, committed to Jesus Christ's mission, and selfless in service. It is no wonder that God was able to work so freely through this church to reach the world. And as a result, the church was able to get a front row seat to the power and providence of God in reaching the world with the Gospel (Acts 11:24, 12:24, 13:49, 14:1, 21, 16:5, 17:4, 12, 18:8). And a front row seat is available for any church who commits to do the same!

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect on how greatly the Lord was able to use the people in the church at Antioch to fulfill the final phase of His mission to reach the world with the Gospel, not because of fame, fortune, or reputation, but simply because they remained controlled by the Holy Spirit and remained pure vessels that the Holy Spirit is able to use with ease. Think about how amazing it must have been for them to receive reports of how so many people, from all types of backgrounds and locations, put their faith in Jesus Christ. Think about how they celebrated

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

these exciting moments knowing this was what they had been praying and preparing their hearts for since they congregated in Antioch. Now, reflect on moments that you experienced first-hand. How God brought about spiritual growth or salvation in someone's life you have been praying for. Review how it made an indelible impression upon you, even up to today.

Pray for our precious church members and our leaders at Thomas Road Baptist Church. Thank Him for all He has done and is doing through our church as a result of standing upon the truth of the Word of God, preparing our hearts to be pure and singularly focused upon God's will to be accomplished, and striving to be controlled by the Holy Spirit every day. Devote this week to lifting up your church in prayer.

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Take some time to share a very memorable moment for you while attending church that you either witnessed God change a life or heard a testimony of someone who got saved and experienced amazing life-change. Then, take some time to pray for the leadership of our wonderful church, Thomas Road Baptist Church, who strives to lead the church in the same way the church in Antioch did in Acts 13. As you pray, consider doing a "digital prayer walk!" Meaning, just like some Christians take a walk through their neighborhoods as they pray in their hearts over their neighbors' houses as they walk past them, consider going on a "Prayer Scroll" on your phone. Go to www.trbc.org/staff and look over the names and titles of our wonderful leadership team, at all levels, at Thomas Road Baptist Church. And ask the Holy Spirit to lay one or two people on your heart to pray for them: 1) Thank the Lord for them, 2) Ask the Lord to protect them in every way, and then 3) Consider emailing them letting them know that you prayed for them today! In addition to the name(s) you choose, pray specifically for our Senior Pastor, Jonathan Falwell. Thank God for him and ask the Lord to protect him in every way and to infuse him with spirit-controlled wisdom to continue to lead our leadership team and our church family according to the will of God and by the direction of the Holy Spirit!

Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

Listen & Grow!

Be inspired to live out the truths of this portion of the book of Acts by listening to a sermon clip presented by our Founding Pastor, Dr. Jerry Falwell Sr.



Want to Dig Deeper?

Optional but Recommended!
“Dig Deeper” provides added insight into this portion of Acts with supporting Scriptures. Be encouraged to reflect on how to live out the spiritual applications unearthed in this devotional.

1. Read the four occasions where the Scriptures say the people who comprised the church of Antioch allowed the Holy Spirit to control their hearts, thinking, and actions. Even though no one verse shares the full detail of how they were controlled by the Holy Spirit, summarize in your own words what each verse said about these church leaders and/or what they did that allowed the Holy Spirit to control them:

- Acts 13:2

- Acts 13:4

- Acts 13:9

- Acts. 11:24

2. In order for a believer to be spirit-controlled, Colossians 3:16a says it is necessary for the believer to “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” The word “richly” is translated from a Greek word “ploo-SEE-ohs” which means, “In large quantities, expansively, or in a wide-ranging way” and it only occurs only four times in the Greek New Testament (Colossians 3:16; I Timothy 6:17; Titus 3:6; II Peter 1:11). Obviously, God intended for the word “richly” to be included in Colossians 3:16a to make His instructions on how a believer can be Spirit-controlled more vivid. This word was obviously included to add intentional emphasis on what it takes for a believer to be Spirit-controlled. So, read the following two phrases and answer the question: What is the different between these two phrases? “Let the word of Christ dwell in you” and the phrase chosen by the Holy Spirit, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you *richly*.” What important distinction does this word make when included in the sentence?

3. If believers are supposed to allow the Word of God to dwell in us “in large quantities, expansively, or in a wide-ranging way,” what does this say about the difference between having mere Biblical knowledge vs. allowing the Word of God to affect a believer’s thinking, choices, and actions?

4. Have you ever experienced seasons of your Christian life where you were more engrossed in learning the Bible and doing ministerial activity rather than allowing the Word of God to affect your thinking, choices, and actions?

5. How can you tell when you yourself are just gaining knowledge and simply involving yourself in church-related activity rather than allowing the Word of God to affect your thinking, choices, and actions? What are some of the signs you see in your life? What do you feel when you are in this season?

6. Now, how can you tell when you are allowing the Word of God to affect your thinking, choices, and actions? What are some of the signs you see in your life when you are engaging God’s Word as you should? What do you feel when you are allowing His Word to affect you in this way?

Take a moment to ponder your last two responses. Really dig deep and ask yourself why there are times you may not consume God’s Word to experience a change of thinking, choices, or actions, but rather just for knowledge. Take another moment to recall how good it is to allow the Word of God dwell in you richly. Reflect on how your interactions with people throughout the day are different and positive when you find yourself in proper alignment with God through His Word.

7. Now, take a moment to pray to God and tell Him you desire to allow the Word of God to dwell in you richly and that you will remain close to the Holy Spirit Who you know is the One Who can empower you to do it!

8. Now, find some “focal points.” Meaning, identify people who can inspire you to live out your faith who allow the Word of God to dwell in them richly. Read Philippians 3:17 and describe in your own words who the two types of spirit-controlled people are that you should be on the lookout for to inspire you. Does it just say to look at church leaders? Popular Christians? “Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern” (Philippians 3:17).
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9. Notice the word “note” in this verse. It is translated from the Greek word, “skaw-PEH-oh.” The word means to “zoom in,” “hone in,” “study/examine.” It also implies that this action should be done continually. In fact, if you spell this Greek word in English, you spell it, “SKOPEO.” It is easy to see the word “Scope” (telescope, microscope, etc.). Focus on them. Take a moment to write down a couple of names of people that you believe could inspire you with their testimonies of faith and consistent walk with the Lord.
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- Then, if possible, take a moment to approach them and tell them that you are inspired by their testimony and to keep it up because it is inspiring you to allow the Word of God to dwell in you richly! I am sure you will make their day too!
10. Lastly, do you think anyone could have written your name down? Ultimately, the goal is for you to be able to repeat what the Apostle Paul said to the believers in Corinth, “*Imitate* me, just as I also *imitate* Christ” (I Corinthians 11:1). Wrap this time up by praying to the Lord that through this Bible study, you will allow the Word of God to dwell in you richly and be an inspiration to others to do the same!

Acts 13:1-5 – The Beginning of “Being witnesses... to the uttermost parts of the earth.” Pt.2

2. An Inspiring Description of the **People** God Uses to Reach the World!

Who does God use? Anyone! From anywhere! With any level of skill, talent, personality or giftedness. God uses those who have put their faith in Christ and who, out of a grateful heart, have committed their lives to use their skills, talents, and giftedness to be witnesses to world and to make disciples. But the most amazing part of seeing God’s plan fulfilled is that He has chosen to use *people*! God wants you and me to be the ones who witness to the world (Acts 1:8). God has “given us the ministry of reconciliation” (II Corinthians 5:18b) to declare how someone can have peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ. He commissions us to “make disciples” and then celebrate the spiritual conversions by “baptizing them” in His name (Matthew 28:19-20)! In all of His infinite wisdom, power and strength, God is building His Church, and He has divinely chosen to use people – you and me – to fulfill this great mission.

Just as was mentioned in our previous devotional over Acts 13:1-5 pt 1, the citizens of Antioch were of various cultures and reflected a good cross-section of the Roman world as a whole. It was not uncommon to meet people of all backgrounds and nations in Antioch. Thus, it is no surprise that the believers listed in Acts 13:1 are identified in unique and diverse ways. Some of the individuals are identified only by a singular name which assumes the first-century reader was familiar with the person. Some are identified by their full name (two names) assuming they might not have been widely known to the first-century reader. And some are identified by their home cities to provide further information about the person. This information allows today’s reader to become familiar with the person(s).

It is significant that these details are provided in the very first verse of Acts 13 as the chapter serves to describe the launch of the Christian effort to spread the Gospel to the world. This information on the cultural diversity of the believers in Antioch confirms that God determined to launch this expansive, evangelizing phase of the church into a diverse world. It also serves as a glimpse of how God’s Church, as a whole, will ultimately be filled with “all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues” (Revelation 7:9-10).

Names are all relative in the 1st Century. In the Bible, people were often identified by their tribe or lineage (“Aaron the Levite”), their birthplace (“Judas Iscariot,” which stands for the town of Kerioth), where they dwelt predominately (“Jesus of Nazareth”), their vocation (“Simon the Tanner (leatherworker)”), or a notable characteristic (“Jesus Christ,” the one who is the Christ/Messiah/Anointed One; or, “Joseph Barnabas,” who is an Encourager).

To better understand the people mentioned in Acts 13, it is helpful to know a little bit about how one got his/her name(s). In the first century, one’s name would be different depending on the area where s/he lived. A Roman family would provide a birth name, a name of their tribe/province/heritage, and occasionally a descriptor name or some notable quality. Various provinces around the Roman world may have opted for only two names (usually their birth name and their father’s first name). Slaves would usually only receive one name. It would often be a name the master gave the slave that would serve as a descriptor of what he did or his work ethic (e.g., “Onesimus” means “useful/profitable” in Philemon verse 10 and is only identified by this one name).

The diverse and multicultural group of believers and Christian leaders listed in Acts 13:1b included, “Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.”

1. Barnabas, was actually named “Joseph Barnabas.” Barnabas means “an encourager.” He was Levite by birth, which implies he had a good grasp of the Old Testament. He was born on the island of Cyprus (Acts 4:36-37).
2. “Simeon” (Greek: “soo-meh-OWN”; English: “SIMMY-enn”) was also named Niger (Greek: “knee-GAIR”; English: “NIGH-ger”) which means “dark/black” which probably referred to his dark completion. Some have speculated that Simeon was from the African country of Cyrene. If so, he most likely was a Jewish man who very well could have been converted while in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41). It is unclear whether he was “Simon the Cyrene” who carried the cross of Jesus on His way to Calvary.
3. “Lucius of Cyrene” (Greek: “LOO-key-oss”; English: “LOO-see-us”) was from the city of Cyrene on the African continent.
4. “Manaen” (Greek: “ma-na-AIN”; English: “ma-NAY-en”) is said to have been “brought up” with Herod the tetrarch. The Greek word that is translated “brought up” could mean that he was “nursed or raised” or simply a very close family friend. His testimony of conversion must have been extraordinary as he was exposed to the early days of Christianity knowing he was

extremely close to the man who would someday kill James, the brother of John (Acts 12:1-4) and kill other believers (Acts 12:1). Manaen was familiar with the Jewish teachings and traditions along with the political landscape and how it intersected with the Jewish people. In fact, we see him again in Acts 21:16 connecting with Paul and the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

5. “Saul.” Saul’s full birth name was “Saulos Paulus” “Saulos” (SOW-loss) was his Hebrew/Jewish name given to him at birth. “Paulus” (PAUL-loos) was his Latin/Roman/Gentile name.

- It is important to note that unlike what is commonly purported today, “Saul” was not his evil, sinful, prior-to-salvation, name. God did not rename Saul to Paul (like He did with Simon to “Peter (Rock)”). God did not switch his name to Paul after salvation nor choose to avoid calling him Saul after his salvation. In fact, Paul is referred to as Saul over a decade after his salvation in the book of Acts chapter 13 verses 1, 2, 9. The most significant occurrence is in Acts 13:9 when referring to him 10 years after his salvation, “When Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:9a). “Saul” is just as honorable a name as “Paul” (see “Want to Dig Deeper?” below for more details and to learn the reason why there is confusion).
- “Saul” is the most familiar name to most of the group. He was a persecutor of Christians (Acts 9:1-2), he miraculously encountered Jesus (Acts 9:3-9), he was feared by the Christians (Acts 9:13-14), he was called “Brother Saul” in Acts 9:17, he immediately connected and fellowshiped with other believers (Acts 9:17-19), then he “Immediately preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God” (Acts 9:20). “Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 9:22). And He had been ministering in this fashion for 10 years leading up to Acts 13.

Is Saul his evil/unsaved name and Paul his Christian/saved name? Dig deeper to explore this!

Most of these people listed above are not too popular. But God uses the usable, not necessarily the popular! God used them to teach the believers how to apply the established Old Testament Scriptures and show how they point to and are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. And God used them to support believers in sending them out to literally reach the world with Gospel.

Not only were these believers diverse in their backgrounds, most importantly, they were Spirit-controlled. Notice the Scriptures identify these people as either being “filled with the Holy Spirit” or hearing from the Holy Spirit three times in the first nine verses of Acts 13:

- Acts 13:2 – “As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said...”

- Acts 13:4 – “So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia...”
- Acts 13:9 – “Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him.”

Their hearts were pure, their sins were confessed, they focused upon God’s will and not their own will to be done, and the Holy Spirit was able to guide them and provide them with wisdom and boldness to be used to fulfill His purposes.

And as a result, they “ministered to the Lord” (Acts 13:2a). This phrase is an extremely significant phrase in Acts 13 for it is the result of one being Spirit-controlled. And it is also the way you can know that God will use you in His work to build His Church. The word “minister” is not the most used word in Scripture when talking about ministering to someone. The word “ministered” (Greek; “layt-tour-GAY-oh”) is taken from a Greek word where we get our word “liturgy.” And this word “minister” is the same term and concept used of the priests who served God in the Tabernacle and offered Him the sacrifices as their worship to God (Exodus 28:35, 43; 29:30; 30:20; 35:19; 39:26). Thus, when the believers in Acts 13 “ministered to the Lord,” it means they got to the point where everything they said and did was done as an offering of worship and praise to the Lord! Whether big or small, spiritual or mundane, in front of crowds or in front of none, they functioned in their daily lives in such a way that every action was their spiritual offering of worship to God! They produced daily offerings of worship to the Lord!

And immediately after they offered every action as an offering of worship to the Lord, God was able to use them in supernatural ways! God used them to launch a massive escalation and swift expansion of His Church “As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’” Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away” (Acts 13:2-3)!

These are the types of people God uses to reach the world!

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect on how God has saved so many people from so many diverse backgrounds and journeys. First, think about your own background and how God saved you. Take time to remember some major moments in your life (where you grew up, who raised you, the people you met that influenced you, the various locations you lived, the jobs you had, etc.), any moment that influenced you, that contributed to making you the person you are today. And then think about how God saved you and at what point along that journey. Now, think about the believers with whom you currently fellowship. Are they the same as you or not even close? Are their stories different in little or major ways? Then, take a

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moment to thank God for loving and saving you and your friends even though you are so different.

Pray and thank God for being the God who loves the diverse, multicultural world. In your own way, thank Him for saving you and thank Him for saving your friends that you fellowship with every week. Then tell Him you want a heart for people that reflects His. And tell Him you would like the Holy Spirit to do regular spiritual check-ups in your heart to remind you to love others as He loves you (John 13:34a).

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Take a moment to celebrate the diversity within your group. Reflect upon how the Gospel gripped your heart while living in your unique context. The group leader can open the floor and invite whoever would like to share their background and how they came to Christ. Consider sharing where you grew up, anything appropriate about your family dynamic, if you went to school in a different location than your birthplace, and any other cultural influences that shaped how you are today (e.g., did you marry someone from a different culture, did you make friendships with people from another background that made an impact upon you, etc.). Feel free to engage with those who shared by asking questions to learn more about their backgrounds. Then take a moment to reflect on how much your group resembles the diverse, multi-cultural church that the Spirit-controlled believers in Acts 13 prayed would emerge. Offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God that He does not show favoritism and does not prefer any one over the other (Romans 2:11 and Acts 10:34).

Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

Listen & Grow!

Be inspired to live out the truths of this portion of the book of Acts by listening to a sermon clip presented by Senior Pastor, Jonathan Falwell.



Want to Dig Deeper?

Optional but Recommended!
“Dig Deeper” provides added insight into this portion of Acts with supporting Scriptures. Be encouraged to reflect on how to live out the spiritual applications unearthed in this devotional.

1. Barnabas’ hometown was Cyprus (Acts 4:36). When Paul and Barnabas left to share the Gospel, they first went to Cyprus (Acts 13:4). And when Barnabas partnered with John Mark to begin another journey to minister to the cities in the Roman world, the first place he returned to was his hometown, Cyprus (Acts 15:39). Why do you think he set his evangelistic travel itinerary to start in his hometown?

Like many of us, he probably had a deep love for his own countrymen, even though Jesus promised that it would be difficult (Mark 6:4). One can only imagine what type of reception he received, even if he was known for being a positive encourager.

2. Read Romans 9:1-3 and how Paul also had a personal burden for his own countrymen. Paraphrase his words below and then take a moment to ponder the significance of what he just said:

3. In addition to wanting his countrymen to be saved, read Philippians 1:20-23 about the internal struggle Paul had about the precious people at a church he founded and how much he wanted them to grow spiritually (you would think they are his countrymen after you read the level of emotion and struggle he has to want to see them grow). Summarize his love and emotional struggle in your own words.

4. Now, what about you. What city do you consider your hometown today or a special place you are familiar with, know the people well, are very familiar with their way of life, mentality, and approach to certain things, etc. (it may/ may not be your birthplace). Or is there a place where for some reason the people there have stolen your heart, and you have a deep connection with them. Name the people/place and share why you have such a special bond with them.

5. How much do you love them? Enough to pray for them (as we should)? Enough to visit them like Barnabas? Enough to be willing to stay on earth and minister to them rather than go to heaven, which would be much better for you? Or, enough to swap your position as a Child of God and apply it to their souls (even though that is not possible)? Write down how you are going to remember them in prayer this week and possibly think of a way you could engage them if the Lord wills it.

6. Regarding Acts 13:2, if we are to focus on “ministering to the Lord” and making sure all of our actions please Him and are offered up as a spiritual offering of worship to Him, why do you think so many ministers fall in the trap of sometimes catering to the complaints of people and ministering to please people rather than “ministering to the Lord” and concerning themselves with pleasing God? Suggest some reasons why ministers stop focusing on what God wants and often consume themselves with focusing on what man wants.

7. What is the natural result if we consume ourselves with worrying about what people say and demand instead of focusing on ministering to the Lord? What will become of that minister and the ministry in which s/he is involved?

8. Knowing that ministering to people is part of what the Lord would have each believer and minister to do, what is the proper balance to make sure we do not allow the sentiments of man to keep us from doing what we know God wants us to do?

9. Take a moment to pray for your church leadership that the Lord would give them wisdom to strike the proper balance so that nothing distracts from their commitment to focus on doing what the Lord wants them to do and to always be “ministering to the Lord!”

And lastly, as promised in the devotional, here's a little more context regarding Saul Paul's (Saulos Paulus) full name.

Unlike Simon being called Peter ("Rock") to reflect the character required for God's ministry purposes for him (Matthew 16:18-19), many people are referred to by separate names for no reason other than the audience at hand prefers one name above the other.

With Saulos Paulus, there is no such change. It is common to have two (and sometimes three) names in various cultures in the first century. In fact, Paul would probably be sad to learn that believers 2,000 years later are referring to his cherished birth name as an "evil" name. His names are not to be understood as "Saul the Persecutor" and "Paul the Apostle." And, no, you would not be struck by lightning if you even called him, "Apostle Saul."

"Saul" was a regal name revered by Jewish people as he was named after King Saul. But to Gentile people, it was not revered because the root of the name carried a connotation of "prancing" or "dancing" and that was not readily respected among Gentiles, philosophers, or educated Gentiles. So, why does his name seem to change in Scripture? The reason is that whenever the apostle was primarily engaging Jewish people or in a prominently Jewish city, they referred to him by his Jewish name, "Saul" (probably in honor of King Saul in the Old Testament). But when the apostle was primarily engaging Gentiles or in a prominently Gentile city (which most of his ministry is because God called him to the Gentiles), they referred to his Greek name, "Paul" which is taken from his Roman/Gentile name's Latin spelling, "Paulus." And after his salvation he is sometimes called "Saul" and sometimes he is referred to as "Paul" for no obvious reason.

Acts 14:8-18 – Paul and Barnabas Refuse to Steal God’s Glory in Lystra

3. Two Requirements of All Believers: Do What God has Empowered Us to Do and Usher All Glory to God!

God is wonderful (Psalm 139:14)! He is Creator (Isaiah 40:25-26), Sustainer (Isaiah 42:5), and the Giver of all good things (James 1:17). He blesses (Malachi 3:10), protects and provides (Psalm 121:7-8), and judges righteously (Psalm 18:24-25). As a result, all believers are invited to join the chorus of heavenly hosts in declaring, “You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created,” (Revelation 4:11)!

No one is like God nor can do what God can do. As a result, He does not share His glory (Isaiah 42:8). So, how could any believer attempt to persuade other people to divert their praise away from God but redirect it towards themselves? How could any creation of God think they could steal even a sliver of the glory due to God and believe God would give them a pass on such an action? It is hard to imagine but unfortunately this occurs frequently within the church and regrettably in every believer’s heart. Being tempted is not a sin but giving into the temptation is a sin. But even the strongest believers will be tempted to steal God’s glory. It is how the believer responds that makes all the difference. Paul’s and Barnabas’s responses to receiving undeserved praise in Acts 14 serves as a vivid example to all believers to respond with equal conviction to not steal any glory due to God alone.

Paul and Barnabas arrived in a city called Lystra and started preaching (Acts 14:6-7). As they preached, they witnessed a man who was unable to walk. They eventually learned that the man had been in this condition his whole life and had never walked (Acts 14:8). After witnessing the man’s faith, Paul shouted loudly at him to stand up and the man “leaped and walked” (Acts 14:9-10). Immediately, the people shouted in their own “Lycaonian language” (Acts 14:11a). They gave Paul and Barnabas glory calling them gods Zeus (Barnabas) and Hermes (Paul) (Acts 14:11b-13). This would have immediately outraged Paul and Barnabas but they did not understand what was being said. This was evidenced by their delayed response when they heard and saw that a parade and sacrifices were arranged in their honor (Acts 14:14).

Immediately, and with even greater passion than the people, they insisted that they were just men who were not due any praise and that all praise must be directed “to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them” (Acts 14:15). Just as Paul reminded the believers in Philippi that anything we do should be attributed to God empowering the believer (“I am able to do/accept all things by means of Christ who empowers me” Philippians 4:13, original translation). He insisted that the people of Lystra acknowledge the same thing about this miracle. In fact, they had to work hard to persuade the people not to sacrifice themselves! “And with these sayings they could scarcely restrain the multitudes from sacrificing to them” (Acts 14:18). They did not simply say “stop it” once and then allowed it to continue while claiming they tried to get the people to stop praising them, but it did not work. Paul and Barnabas were convicted that God would receive all His due glory and praise, and they were not going to stop instructing the people until this occurred!

This encounter in Lystra was not the only time Paul insisted that the Lord receive His due glory from believers. Paul first practiced this in Lystra when he later preached to the Philippians. Approximately 15 years after Acts 14, Paul was imprisoned for two years (Acts 28:30-31) and wrote to the believers in Philippi. He declared once again that the Lord Jesus Christ should be given the highest position of praise and glory in all things! Philippians 2:9 says, “Wherefore God has also highly exalted Him” and teaches that the Lord should receive the highest level of exultation over-and-above anyone or anything. The words “has highly exalted” is taken from one Greek word “hoo-pair-oops-SAH-oh” that occurs only once in the Greek New Testament. It is a unique word that refers to the highest level of glory being reserved for Jesus Christ in the Bible. It is a compound word “hoo-pair” or better, “hyper” means “to exceed the limits” and “oops-SAH-oh” means “to exalt” or “to lift up.” Therefore, Paul emphasized that Jesus Christ alone is the only one who receives “hyper-exaltation” over and above anything and anyone. And while “oops-SAH-oh” is used when God says He will “exalt” or “lift up” any believer who remains humble (James 4:10; I Peter 5:6), Jesus is the only One Who is worthy to be hyper-exalted above measure!

Paul and Barnabas probably taught in Greek which was commonly known across the Roman world for the purposes of trade and travel. But they probably did not understand the local Lycaonian (lie-CONE-ee-um) language as it was distinct to this highly Gentile city.

Knowing that no detail is accidentally placed in Scripture, why did the Holy Spirit include the detail about the people who spoke in “Lycaonian” language? Most likely it was to allow all readers of Scripture to understand the unique challenges the first-century believers faced in spreading the Gospel to the “uttermost parts of the earth” (Acts 1:8), beyond just believing they traveled and preached with great ease.

Why Zeus and Hermes? *The people believed Paul was Hermes and Barnabas was Zeus because they had temples in the city devoted to these and other gods and were very familiar with the stories about them. They saw the miracles and believed that these gods had visited them. They heard Paul speak so they thought he was Hermes who was known to the one who spoke for the gods. And they thought Barnabas was Zeus probably due to a strong stature. Unfortunately, they did not listen to what Paul was saying about how the true God came to earth, dwelt among people in human form and was named Jesus (John 1:9-14).*

Of course, when believers adopt a proper perspective on giving God glory in all things, the Evil One who desires that people not accept the truth attempts to distract, confuse, and distrust the truth of the Word of God (Matthew 13:19; John 8:44; II Corinthians 4:3-4; I John 3:7-8). He is only successful in persuading the already undisciplined and disinterested hearts who readily open themselves to sinful and/or imbalanced perspectives (Ephesians 2:1-2; James 1:14). But when this is not successful, he attempts to silence the messenger (II Corinthians 12:7; Ephesians 6:12-13). At the climax of these spiritual victories in Lystra, Paul and Barnabas experienced familiar opposition. Antagonists from previous cities where they had ministered followed them to Lystra intending to finish the persecution they had started in the previous cities (Acts 13:49-52; 14:3-7). In Lystra, they were able to accomplish their goal by persuading local opponents of Paul to catch him, overwhelm him, and throw stones at him to the point that they assumed he was dead (Acts 14:19). Then they dragged his seemingly lifeless body out of the city. Paul recovered from the beating, regained his energy, and departed with Barnabas to his next scheduled city (Acts 14:20).

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect on God's greatness and goodness and how He is due a level of praise that is unparalleled to anyone or anything, in any circumstance. Ponder how no one is like God or can do what God can do. Assess how much glory and praise you give to God during your day. Do you express your passionate praise during your worship to the Lord in church or in your worship of Him during your daily commute? Ponder how you can usher all praise to God when receiving compliments and commendations from others. Is your praise of the Lord a whole-hearted expression of your gratitude for His Salvation, His greatness, and His goodness? Or do you simply tithe your praise to Him and express just a fraction of what your heart really feels?

Pray today a prayer of praise to the Lord! Just this once consider not asking Him for anything in your prayer but devoting your prayer time to praising Him and giving Him His due glory. You can do this by reviewing a characteristic of His greatness and why that captivates your mind when you think about it. Then you can continue by thanking Him for His provision, His protection, His perfect Word that offers guidance in your life, and for Your salvation, etc. Thank Him that "in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28a). Then commit to Him that you will dedicate moments in your future prayers to simply focus on praising Him and giving Him His due glory!

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Prepare to share characteristics or attributes of God that causes your heart to well up in praise every time you dwell upon it. Share why the mere thought of these characteristics of God are so meaningful to you. Listen to your group members share and then think of verses and experiences that could further encourage your group to praise the Lord for who He is or what He has done!

Listen & Grow!

Be inspired to live out the bold missionary calling found in Acts 13–14 by listening to a sermon clip preached by our Founding Pastor, Dr. Jerry Falwell Sr. Let the powerful example of Paul and Barnabas—who proclaimed the gospel with courage, endured persecution, and saw lives transformed—encourage you to step out in faith and share the good news wherever God leads you.



Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

**Optional but
Recommended!**

*“Dig Deeper” provides
added insight into this
portion of Acts with
supporting Scriptures.
Be encouraged to
reflect on how to
live out the spiritual
applications unearthed
in this devotional.*

Want to Dig Deeper?

1. Read the following verses and summarize the unique contribution each verse makes to the topic of God receiving His due glory and indicate what our heart attitude should be about ushering all praise to Him.

- Isaiah 42:8

- Jeremiah 9:23-24

- I Corinthians 10:31

2. Notice how other believers throughout Scripture reacted in a similar way to how Paul and Barnabas did in Acts 14:15 and to those who attempted to attribute praise and glory to them. Rewrite or summarize what each individual said to the person(s) who attempted to give them glory when they should have been praising God. Also, describe how passionately they told the person(s) not to give them glory (e.g., Were they calm and tranquil about this? Did they shout? Did they insist it should not occur?)

- Acts 3:11-16

- Revelation 19:1-10

- Revelation 22:1-9

3. In addition to ushering God all glory and praise, the Scriptures instruct all believers to actively boast about the greatness and goodness of God. Read the following verses and identify what aspects of God believers should praise!

- Jeremiah 9:24

- Galatians 6:14

- I Corinthians 1:31

4. Now, let's expand the topic from stealing God's glory to the temptation to steal God's "authority." Notice the following verse in the short book of Jude where Michael the Archangel and the Devil were engaged in a dispute over the physical body of Moses (details are left unknown about what/how/why this was and why it occurred). The powerful Archangel Michael knew that not only should he give God all His due glory, but he should not attempt to steal God's authority. Thus, during this dispute, He did not dare to personally rebuke the devil, did not attempt to declare that he could bind any power of the devil, or assume he could act on behalf of the Lord Himself. He knew that the devil only listens and obeys one individual and that is the Lord God alone! Read Jude verse 9 and rewrite what Archangel Michael's response was to the devil during the spiritual warfare he was experiencing and circle the word of the One who rebuked the devil.
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5. Just as mighty angels acknowledge that they have no power to instruct the devil and his demons, but rather defer and submit to God Himself to engage in spiritual warfare (see also Matthew 28:18; II Corinthians 10:4), we too must not attempt to steal God's authority in a situation. In what ways do we as humans attempt to steal the authority of God in our lives (e.g., In any specific decisions we make? In any commands we give to people? In any of our attempts to engage the spiritual realm if we believe we are experiencing spiritual warfare?, etc.).
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6. Philippians 2:9 says that we should exalt Christ. The phrase in Philippians 2:9, “has highly exalted” that is translated from the one Greek word “hoo-pair-oops-SAH-oh” that means to “hyper-exalt” Christ. Look up Philippians 2:9 on www.biblehub.com and write down 3-4 different ways translators have attempted to translate the full meaning of this very unique word. Notice how they attempt to capture the essence of the word “hyper-exalt” in order to convey the idea that Jesus is to receive the highest level of glory.
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7. Now, give the word your own translation! First, think about what “hyper” implies in our language, then apply that to a word that conveys “exalting” or “lifting up.” Write down a translation that would convey the meaning of this one word (e.g., “hyper” in our language means to exceed the limits, like “hyper-ventilate,” “hyper-extend,” and for all the parents or children’s workers engaging this Bible study, we occasionally describe a precious child as, “hyper-active!”).
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8. Now write down what you could specifically do today that could bring Jesus more glory than you have previously given Him (e.g., Maybe think of responding in a specific way when someone compliments you today, share with someone how wonderful you believe God is as you are talking with a friend or loved one today, etc.).
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Acts 14:19-23 – Paul and Barnabas Risk Their Lives for *Discipleship*

4. Risking it All for Evangelism *and* Discipleship!

Sharing the Good News (“Gospel”) that a person can have his/her sinfulness forgiven and can experience God’s salvation that provides peace with God both immediately and eternally in heaven, is the most important message a believer is able to share with a person. It is the most important decision anyone can make. That is why the Apostles and the believers risked their lives to share the Gospel with those who needed to be saved. The book of Acts is filled with examples of believers risking their lives to share the Gospel with unbelievers. All believers today should likewise commit our lives to do whatever it takes to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth! But there was a second reason the Apostles and first century believers also risked their lives in the book of Acts – to *disciple* these new believers! To them, they knew that fulfilling God’s command for all believers in Matthew 28:19-20 and Acts 1:8 required them not just to see a person accept Christ, but to also see that same person “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (II Peter 3:18a). Just as they traveled to new towns and were beaten within an inch of their lives for sharing the Gospel (Acts 14:19), they also risked their lives to *return* to those cities to make sure new Christians were being properly disciplined and that the churches were establishing strong leadership to mature the believers in those communities!

We see Paul’s conviction to share the Gospel and to risk a lot for people to hear the Gospel for the very first time. While in Iconium, they were “speaking boldly in the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace” (Acts 14:3b), but the ones who opposed his message of God’s grace grew violent and attempted to “abuse and stone them” (Acts 14:5b). As a result, they fled to “Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding region. And they preached the Gospel there” (Acts 14:6b-7a). Then these same violent opposers followed Paul to Lystra, “stoned Paul, and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead” (Acts 14:19b). After being revived and strengthened after his injuries, Paul then “departed with Barnabas to Derbe” (Acts 14:20b). It was obvious that Paul was convicted to evangelize the unsaved world and share the Gospel message to the “uttermost parts of the earth” (Acts 1:8b).

Then, the unthinkable happens. Paul decides to *return* to these same cities (Acts 14:19)! Wait! What?! Are you sure, Paul? You already accomplished your goal of sharing the Gospel there, why would you need to return? But for Paul, the mission of the church was not only to evangelize the lost but to also disciple and spiritually strengthen the believers! On his way back to Antioch to report to the other Christian leaders how the Gospel was received in the Gentile cities he has visited, he felt compelled to return to these cities and disciple them. He actually returned to where he once experienced abuse and persecution for the purpose of making sure these new Christians were being properly disciplined and that the churches were establishing strong leadership who would further mature the believers in that community.

Paul had an intentional agenda to accomplish when he revisited these towns. He wanted to offer his support to spiritually strengthen the believers. Acts 14:22-23 shares where he returned to and what needed to be accomplished in these fledgling churches in order to be spiritually strong and effective witnesses in their communities. Paul and Barnabas sought the Lord through prayer and fasting as they proceeded with the following discipleship process (Acts 14:23b):

1. Strengthen the believers through words of affirmation and further teaching (Acts 14:22a).
2. Encourage them not to quit (Acts 14:22b).
3. Remind them that being an active and passionate believer in Jesus will not be easy (Acts 14:22c).
4. Appoint spiritual leaders in each church (Acts 14:23a).
5. Charge them to continue the mission of evangelism and discipleship and to entrust their spiritual care and ministry to the Lord before they departed (Acts 14:23c).

To these believers who were committed to “being witnesses...to the uttermost parts of the earth” (Acts 1:8b), discipling brand-new believers should be held at equal weight to evangelizing people in their community. In fact, approximately 15 years after Paul visited these cities to further disciple and strengthen the believers, he was imprisoned for two years (Acts 28:30-31). During this two-year imprisonment, he wrote to the believers in Ephesus about the importance of both evangelism and discipleship. He emphasized that believers must know the power of their position in Christ (the Gospel) and the equally important priority to grow and live as members of the family of God (Discipleship).

After spending the first three chapters of this Letter to the Ephesians explaining how deep and profound a believer’s position in Christ is because of being saved, Paul then spends the last three chapters explaining that it is equally as important to grow and live spiritually after salvation. Paul accomplished

this by using a vivid Greek word to describe that both elements of evangelism and discipleship should be given equal emphasis in a believer's life. In order to transition from the Gospel section of the letter to the discipleship portion of the letter, Paul's first sentence of the discipleship section reads: "I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy ["OX-ee-oh-s"; "in equal weight to"] to the calling with which you were called" (Ephesians 4:1a). In the book of Acts, Paul risks his life to both reach unbelievers with the saving Gospel and to return to those very dangerous areas in order to do whatever he could to support the Christian leaders and believers in their spiritual maturity and growth.

The "Missionary Journeys" (as many call them today) of Paul and other believers in the book of Acts were actually both evangelistic *and* discipleship endeavors. In the book of Acts, evangelism was the beginning of the celebration of new life and the first step of fulfilling God's great commandment (Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8) and discipleship was the second required spiritual activity that allowed these new believers to experience the fullness of this new life in Christ!

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect upon how important sharing the Gospel was to the first century believers. Give serious thought to exactly how much you would sacrifice to see any non-believer accept Christ. Now, ponder how much you would sacrifice to see current believers continue to grow in their spiritual walk.

Pray over two specific people with which you engage on a weekly basis: 1) A person that you know has not accepted Christ as his/her Savior. Plan now how you could encourage this person to give serious consideration to accepting Christ this week. 2) A believer that is currently growing spiritually or a believer that needs to begin actively growing stronger spiritually and engage either person appropriately with love. Offer any support you can to help them in their spiritual journey this week.

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Regarding the discipleship process that Paul and Barnabas adopted in Acts 14:22-23, consider discussing ways your group members could edify each other when you gather and throughout the week:

1. Strengthen each other through rehearsing and reaffirming the truth of God's Word to each other. Meaning, is there anyone in need of receiving Biblical assurance because of their current life situation? For example, does anyone need to be assured once again that God is in control? Or, that God will not bring about anything in their life that is too difficult to bear? Or, that God's timing is always perfect, etc.? (Acts 14:22a).

2. Does anyone need to receive confident encouragement not to quit (Acts 14:22b)?
3. Collectively acknowledge that being an active and passionate believer in Jesus will not be easy this week but it is important to stay on God's spiritual course (Acts 14:22c)!
4. Take a moment to thank God for His appointed spiritual leaders in Thomas Road Baptist Church or in the church you attend and pray for their continued spirit-filled growth (Acts 14:23a).
5. Pray over each member and entrust his/her spiritual care and engagement with believers and non-believers to the Lord this coming week (Acts 14:23c).

Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

Listen & Grow!

Be encouraged to share the gospel with boldness and clarity by listening to a sermon clip preached by our Senior Pastor, Jonathan Falwell. His passionate message reminds us that the call to proclaim Christ is not reserved for a few—it's a mission for every believer. Let this powerful word ignite your heart to speak truth and hope into the lives of those around you.



Want to Dig Deeper?

Paul and Barnabas revisited a few towns in Acts 14:21-22a and did everything they could do to help them become even stronger and more effective ministries, “After preaching the Good News in Derbe and making many disciples, Paul and Barnabas returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch of Pisidia, where they strengthened the believers. They encouraged them to continue in the faith.” There was never a spirit of competition among these churches. Spirit-controlled first century believers just wanted the Gospel to be preached, souls saved, and all believers to grow in their faith. Now, let’s give serious thought to how we should feel about other Bible-teaching, Gospel-preaching churches around the world that are really conducting themselves in a God-glorifying way. Do we rejoice over how the Lord is blessing these churches? Just ponder this thought as you engage the next two activities.

Optional but Recommended!
“Dig Deeper” provides added insight into this portion of Acts with supporting Scriptures. Be encouraged to reflect on how to live out the spiritual applications unearthed in this devotional.

1. Share some of the many positive characteristics of Thomas Road Baptist Church that you are justifiably proud of and praise the Lord for because you can see the hand of the Lord clearly working within our church. Finish this sentence: “I praise the Lord for what HE is doing at Thomas Road Baptist Church. Some examples of the Lord’s obvious activity in our church are...”

2. Now, identify another Bible-teaching, Gospel-preaching church in the world that is really conducting itself in a God-glorifying way and offer one or two reasons why you praise the Lord for what He is doing within that church.

3. Have you had a loved one move away from home and your home church and find another Bible-teaching, Gospel-preaching church that was conducting itself in a God-glorifying way? Describe how you felt when you received updates of their spiritual growth as a result of their active involvement at this church.

4. Take a moment to offer a prayer of thankfulness to God for this church and ask the Lord to continue to bless it as they continue to conduct themselves in a God-glorifying way.

5. When Paul and Barnabas departed from the believers for which they risked their lives to evangelize and disciple, they came to the sobering realization that they would no longer be the ones who would directly disciple them. Rather, they had to entrust these precious believers to the spiritual care of the Lord as they departed (Acts 14:23c). The moment probably resembled the moment when Paul had to leave the previous believers at Ephesus later on in Acts 20:36-37. Paul and Barnabas had to grapple with the same emotions that many people today have when they have to part ways with a group, church family, or family members they deeply love. Try to experience this moment in your mind. What words of encouragement would you have given Paul and Barnabas in order to give them the confidence that God was going to take care of these precious Ephesian believers in their absence? What truths about God do you believe you would share with them to bring them the most comfort in this scenario?
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6. Paul felt these very same feeling when he ended his letter to the believers in Philippi. Read the following verses in this letter and make a note of the spiritual truths Paul wanted them to remember in his absence to ensure their faith would remain strong:

- Philippians 1:27-30
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- Philippians 2:11-12
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- Philippians 4:6-8
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- Philippians 4:9
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7. The moment Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch after this very demanding journey (approximately one and a half years of traveling), the believers in Antioch encouraged Paul and Barnabas with the very same words of affirmation and confirmation that Paul and Barnabas had provided for all the believers during their travels. Read Acts 14:26 and describe in your own words how Paul and Barnabas felt after this strenuous season of ministry and how much these words of affirmation must have made them feel and how it undoubtedly ministered to their hearts.

8. Reread Acts 14:22c along with II Timothy 3:11-12, II Corinthians 12:9-10, Matthew 5:10-12, John 15:19-20, and I Peter 4:12-14 about how being an active and passionate believer in Jesus will not be easy while on this earth. Share how your soul will feel when you hear Jesus' words of affirmation and confirmation found in Matthew 25:21 when you stand before Him in heaven.

9. Paul and Barnabas confidently encouraged the new believers in these cities not to quit (Acts 14:22b). Now notice specific aspect of their ministry that the believers in Antioch chose to focus their encouragement on when they showered Paul and Barnabas with their words of affirmation (Acts 14:26, "for the work they had _____!"). Reflect upon a time in your life where you were commended for not giving up and how it made you feel and motivated you to be stronger in future challenges.

10. Identify a believer who has endured many challenging circumstances but remained faithful to God and even possibly ministered to other people while going through his/her own challenges. Write down the name(s) and briefly describe the circumstances they endured.

- Consider reaching out, in some way, to this believer(s) and sharing with him/her the same type of affirmation and words of encouragement for not quitting as the people of Antioch lavished upon Paul and Barnabas.

11. How often do you think a believer is allowed to feel weak and require encouragement from other believers to not be discouraged in ministry or quit? Is there a limit to how many times a believer should be encouraged not to quit, or does there come a time where a believer should get stronger and require less amounts of encouragement? Do you believe the feeling of discouragement and wanting to quit ever goes away? As you develop your thoughts on this important subject, consider how God Himself provided the Apostle Paul with encouragements not to quit while he was in Corinth (Acts 18:9-10a) and consider the multiple times in Scripture the Holy Spirit offers examples and encouragements not to quit (II Chronicles 15:7; Isaiah 41:10; Luke 18:1; I Corinthians 9:24; Galatians 6:9, II; Timothy 4:1-8).
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Acts 15:1-35 – A Beautiful Example of Christian Unity in Doctrine and in Conduct

5. What a Biblically Healthy **Church** and a Biblically Healthy **Relationship** have in Common!

What does a Biblically healthy *relationship* and a Biblically healthy *church* have in common? They have a clear understanding of and are in alignment with the essential Biblical foundational doctrines of Christianity and they make sure their fellowship is Spirit-controlled as evidenced by unity, humility, and selflessness! This is true of any group of believers – small group, friend-group, personal relationship, or family. And not only has God told us in His Word that this is the clear goal for our churches and relationships, He has also provided clear instructions on how to accomplish this and has even provided positive examples in Scripture on how it was established among other believers. Acts chapter 15 serves as a positive, vivid example of how these characteristics were established in a local church and cultivated among the larger community of believers.

Upon returning to Antioch after a year and a half of travel (Acts 14:26-28), Paul and Barnabas were eager to share of the positive reception the Gospel had among the Gentiles (Acts 14:27b). And while this was welcomed news to all believers (Acts 15:3b), the local church and many believers outside of Antioch finally came to grips with something that had never happened before – there was an influx of Gentile believers entering the church (Acts 10) as opposed to experiencing mass conversions of Jews. And while the believers were used to Gentiles getting saved, it had never occurred at this level. Although they knew that to be saved required faith alone in the deity of Jesus Christ (Jesus is God), His atoning death (only Jesus' death was an acceptable sacrifice to pay for one's sinfulness), and resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, there was a question of if Gentiles still had to adopt Jewish practices that served as a sign of the Lord's covenant with the nation of Israel (i.e., circumcision) in order to be saved (Acts 15:1). They needed clarity on this essential foundation of the Christian faith. So, the church of Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to engage the most influential apostles and key leaders of Christianity (Acts 15:1-5) to prayerfully rehearse all of the relevant Scriptures, all relevant prophecies

Why Meet in Jerusalem? Acts 8:1 explains that during the persecution of Christians by the hand of Paul before he became a believer, many believers scattered both near and far away from the city and continued to preach except for the Apostles. They still remained in Jerusalem at this time.

(Acts 15:15-18), and the messages from the Lord (Acts 15:7-12a, 14) in order for all to affirm what was required for a person to be saved.

This counsel of Apostles and Christian leaders (Acts 15:6), which is commonly referred to as the “Jerusalem Counsel” today, rehearsed Scriptures, shared testimonies of the Word of the Lord they had received, and relayed the experiences of Gentiles accepting Jesus Christ as their Savior. After much debate, Peter spoke (Acts 15:7-12a), then Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:12b), then James (Acts 15:13-19). The conclusion was that one must confess their sin and put their faith in Jesus Christ, believing in the deity of Jesus Christ, His atoning death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead in order to be saved (Acts 4:12). It was also determined that no one should teach that anyone – Jew or Gentile – needed to perform any physical acts or be required to obey the Mosaic Law in order to solidify their salvation as this would place an unnecessary burden upon a person (Acts 15:19). They all were pleased (Acts 15:22), agreed, and wrote the decision down in letters and sent them in the hands of some Apostles and Christian leaders to deliver this affirmation of the Gospel back to Antioch as well as Syria, Cilicia, and the surrounding areas (Acts 15:22-35).

The Gospel of how a person can have their sins forgiven and experience salvation and peace with God their Creator now and for eternity in heaven was reaffirmed in a passionate yet unifying way that brought great joy among believers and great glory to God! The believers relied on the Holy Spirit to guide them on interpreting the Scriptures and to control their interactions with each other in this important discussion. From here, the Apostles and Christian leaders focused on reinforcing this correct understanding (see Galatians and Romans) and to contend for the Gospel message at all costs (II Timothy 2:1-16, 4:1-5).

Acts chapter 15 is popular for how believers were spiritually healthy by having a clear understanding of and being in alignment with the essential Biblical foundational doctrines of Christianity. But an extremely significant and often overlooked emphasis made in Acts chapter 15 was how they also made sure their fellowship was Spirit-controlled as evidenced by unity, humility, and selflessness! To get their doctrine accurate without honoring the Lord in showing Spirit-controlled love for each other in the process would not have honored the Lord (see Revelation 2:1-5) nor brought about the joyous celebration that occurred on that day.

Their spirit-controlled fellowship evidenced by unity, humility, and selflessness was on display when they all agreed to ask the Gentile believers to do three things that seem to totally contradict their original decision. They did not require Gentiles to obey the Mosaic Law, but after confirming that salvation was by faith alone through grace alone, they did ask all Gentile believers “to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath” (Acts 15:19-21).

What?! Did they just go back to their initial decision? Is this political flip-flopping for the purpose of appeasing everyone? And how is it that all the Christian leaders “came to a complete agreement” about this (Acts 15:25)? And how is it that when the Gentile believers received this news, they “were glad for its encouraging message” (Acts 15:31)? The reason is that these three requests had nothing to do with salvation but everything to do with maintaining the *fellowship* of believers in a spirit of unity, humility, and selflessness.

In Acts 15, the believers who had the most difficult time with being told no Gentile believer had to be circumcised, were strict, legalistic, former-Pharisee believers (Acts 15:5) who, for the longest time, only believed that Gentiles were spiritually depraved people who acted opposite of everything taught by legalistic, orthodox Jewish teachers. So, in their minds, they worried that this influx of Gentile believers who had never been called before to be disciplined in their spiritual walks would negatively influence all other believers to have a great disregard for spiritual discipline. In essence, they needed time to see that these new believers who accepted the Gospel of Jesus Christ in faith and who came out of their sinful lifestyles would truly live according to God’s truth when there is no physical law to hold them accountable (John 1:17; Romans 2:29; Colossians 2:11; Philippians 3:3).

Therefore, to support their fellow Jewish believers in the spirit of unity, humility, and selflessness and not to be a stumbling block to them as they are sincerely attempting to mature in their faith, the Gentile believers were asked to publicly acknowledge that, yes, they would “abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:20b). And the Gentile believers agreed knowing that as unbelievers, they had the reputation of engaging in this conduct without any regard to their testimonies. They also agreed that they would not come close to eating “food polluted by idols” (Acts 15:20a) sold by those who were from the false religions that they themselves might have once been a part. And they agreed that they would forego something that was completely acceptable to do, “[to eat] from the meat of strangled animals and from blood” (Acts 15:20), knowing their Jewish brothers lived a lifetime of avoiding eating this type of meat.

These brand-new Gentile believers were asked to do what many mature believers today have a very difficult time doing, that is, to make temporary concessions so that spiritually weaker believers can have some time to “be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man” (Ephesians 3:16) so that they can overcome some of the strong feelings and passions they adhered to in their former lives. But at the same time, agreeing to these requests also provided a safeguard for these new Gentile believers so they would not return to their formerly sinful lives since they were living as “new creations” (II Corinthians 5:17) in the same cities where they lived out their formerly sinful lives. Thus, in conceding to help their weaker believers grow stronger, they too matured in their spiritual lives in the process!

Philippians 2:4, “Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”

Psalms 133:1, “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!”

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect upon where you would be if the Lord had not saved you from your former way of life. Ponder how wonderful the love of God was that He forgave you from all unrighteousness and brought you into the family of God. Also, consider selecting a praise & worship song to play today when you drive in your car that focuses your heart and mind on how good God is to offer His unparalleled grace and mercy to you (singing out loud is optional!).

Pray to God and thank Him for making the Gospel so clear and simple to understand. Thank Him for saving you. Then pray for some people you know who have not accepted Jesus as their Savior. Pray they will hear the clear message of the Gospel from you or someone else. And, if they have already heard the clear message of the Gospel, ask the Lord to make today the day they accept Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Prepare to share an example of you or a believer you know who has made concessions for a weaker believer that resulted in both parties growing in their faith. Share how it contributed to a strong spirit of unity among all involved. Also, take a moment to express your appreciation to the members of your group for the spirit of unity, humility, and selflessness that has been cultivated among your group.

Prepare to share a positive example of how a church or group of believers had a productive conversation over significant doctrinal questions and handled it with truth, grace, and unity.

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

Listen & Grow!

Discover the vital role of the local church in spreading the gospel by listening to a sermon clip preached by our Founding Pastor, Dr. Jerry Falwell Sr. Acts 15 reveals how the early church came together to affirm the message of salvation and support the mission of evangelism. This powerful moment in church history highlights the importance of unity, clarity, and boldness as we continue the work of reaching the world for Christ.



Want to Dig Deeper?

Optional but Recommended!
“Dig Deeper” provides added insight into this portion of Acts with supporting Scriptures. Be encouraged to reflect on how to live out the spiritual applications unearthed in this devotional.

1. Many Gentiles who accepted Christ got saved out of a sinful lifestyle that went against everything that was holy. Conversely, some Pharisees got saved out of a legalistic religion steeped in tradition and human works. Based on your own life experience or based upon your engagement with people who have come out of either of these backgrounds before they got saved, share who you think has the biggest challenge in maturing in their faith (someone coming out of a sinful background or a legalistic background)? Share the reason(s) why you think this.
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2. Even though it is easy to fault the believers who were former Pharisees in Acts 15 about not accepting the influx of Gentiles into the church, consider how similar some believers today can be when they become comfortable in church, complacent in their spiritual walks, and do not want their church routine interrupted. Ponder this thought and let's get real for a moment. Today, in our churches we pray, “Lord, let us reach our world for Jesus!” Okay, so what if God actually answers that prayer request! What if he fills the pews of your church with an influx of saved people who are former “Gentiles” with zero-knowledge of how church works, who are unaware of the finer points of doctrine, and previously lived a blasphemous lifestyle? Or what if He fills the pews of all the churches with an influx of saved people who are former “Pharisees” who still has some rough edges and prefer rules, regulations, liturgy, orthodoxy, and who have had a deep misunderstanding of Scriptures and default to legalism as being the true demonstration of if someone is truly holy before God? Be honest, how would you feel this Sunday, if all of these new converts sit shoulder to shoulder with you. Would you celebrate the influx of new converts whose backgrounds and stories are vastly different than yours? Or would you have to ask the Lord to make adjustments in your heart toward this influx of people to align with the Lord's love for these people? Take time to pray as you write this response as these are very important questions of the heart.
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3. Read Revelation 2:1-4 to see an example of the church that focused primarily on making sure its doctrine was *accurate* but did not make *applying* doctrine a high priority. Summarize how the Lord felt about this imbalance and what He told this church to correct it.

4. God's plan all along was for the salvation of the Gentiles (i.e., the "world") in addition to individuals from the Jewish nation. Read these verses and note how believers in the Old Testament, during Jesus' time, and during the growth of the church were given clear statements and occurrences of Gentiles being saved before Acts 15. Summarize in one sentence what each verse(s) says about Gentiles being saved.

- Isaiah 56:7

- Matthew 21:13

- Matthew 28:18-20

- Luke 14:15-24

- John 4:39-42

- Acts 2:6-8

- Acts 8:5-8
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- Acts 10:23b-48
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5. The very last two verses of the book of Acts (Acts 28:30-31), Paul is imprisoned in Rome. During this two-year house arrest, Paul wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. In writing to these churches, he often rehearsed the spiritual principles that he experienced as documented in the book of Acts. In writing to the believers in Philippi, he stressed the importance for all believers to conduct themselves in the spirit of unity, humility, and selflessness. Read Philippians 2:2-5a and identify any parallels in this teaching and how the apostles, Christian leaders, and believers conducted themselves in Acts 15.
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Group Gathering is a time to reflect together upon **what we learned** (Head), **what we felt** (Heart), and **what we should do** (Hands).

GROUP DISCUSSION #2

Note to Group Members:

Be encouraged! Your contribution is valuable to your group and will most assuredly edify the members of your group and your group leader. But should you need to sit and listen today, just to take in the entire discussion and prayerfully process the spiritual discussion quietly, that is OK too! You will not be pressured to speak publicly. We are glad you have joined us today!

All of the discussion topics are taken from this week's devotionals along with a brief summary of each devotional!

Discussion Topics

Choose **one or two** topics to discuss today!

Taken from Day One: *"Acts 13:1-5 – The Beginning of 'Being witnesses...to the uttermost parts of the earth.' Pt. 1: An Inspiring Description of the Church God Uses to Reach the World!"*

Acts 13 describes the long-awaited moment where God swiftly expanded the church in areas that had never been touched by the Gospel of Jesus Christ! It was the perfect city, in God's perfect time, using the right people. The church of Antioch was solid in the foundational doctrines of Christianity, focused their hearts and minds on God's will and not their own, and were filled with the Holy Spirit. The church in Antioch serves as a positive example of a healthy church that God can use to reach the world. And it makes us appreciate our own home church, Thomas Road Baptist Church, which is committed to these same spiritual disciplines and continues to see God reach the world through the people of the church.

1. Take some time to share a very memorable moment for you while attending church that you either witnessed God change a life or heard a testimony of someone who got saved and experienced amazing life-change.
2. Then, take some time to pray for the leadership of our wonderful church, Thomas Road Baptist Church, who strives to lead the church in the same way the church in Antioch did in Acts 13.

As you pray, consider doing a "digital prayer walk!" Meaning, just like some Christians take a walk through their neighborhoods as they pray in their hearts over their neighbors' houses as they walk past them, consider going on a "Prayer Scroll" on your phone. Go to

www.trbc.org/staff and look over the names and titles of our wonderful leadership team, at all levels, at Thomas Road Baptist Church. And ask the Holy Spirit to lay one or two people on your heart pray for them: 1) Thank the Lord for them, 2) Ask the Lord to protect them in every way, and then 3) Consider emailing them letting them know that you prayed for them today! In addition to the name(s) you choose, pray specifically for our Senior Pastor, Jonathan Falwell. Thank God for him and ask the Lord to protect him in every way and to infuse him with spirit-controlled wisdom to continue to lead our leadership team and our church family according to the will of God and by the direction of the Holy Spirit!

Taken from Day Two: “Acts 13:1-5 – The Beginning of “Being witnesses...to the uttermost parts of the earth.” Pt.2: An Inspiring Description of the People God Uses to Reach the World!

Who does God use? Anyone! From anywhere! With any level of skill, talent, personality, or giftedness. God uses those who have put their faith in Christ and who, out of a grateful heart, have committed their lives to use their skills, talents, and giftedness to be witnesses to world and to make disciples. The people in Antioch were diverse and multicultural. But what they had in common was why God chose to reach the world through them. Their hearts were pure, their sins were confessed, and they focused upon God’s will and not their own will to be done. As a result, the Holy Spirit was able to guide them and provide them with wisdom and boldness to be used to fulfill His purposes. No wonder they experienced reports of God blessing their efforts to reach the world with the Gospel!

3. Take a moment to celebrate the diversity within your group. Reflect upon how the Gospel gripped your heart while living in your unique context.

The group leader can open the floor and invite whoever would like to share their background and how they came to Christ. Consider sharing where you grew up, anything appropriate about your family dynamic, if you went to school in a different location than your birthplace, and any other cultural influences that shaped how you are today (e.g., did you marry someone from a different culture, did you make friendships with people from another background that made an impact upon you, etc.). Feel free to engage with those who shared by asking questions to learn more about their backgrounds.

4. Then take a moment to reflect on how much your group resembles the diverse, multi-cultural Church that the Spirit-controlled believers in Acts 13 prayed would emerge.

Offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God that He does not show favoritism and does not prefer anyone over the other (Romans 2:11 and Acts 10:34).

Taken from Day Three: “Acts 14:8-18 – Paul and Barnabas Refuse to Steal God’s Glory in Lystra: Two Requirements of All Believers – Do what God has Empowered You to Do and Usher All Glory to God!”

God is wonderful. He is Creator, Sustainer, and the Giver of all good things. He blesses, protects and provides, and judges righteously. He is “worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power,” (Revelation 4:11a)! No one is like God nor can do what God can do. As a result, He does not share His glory. So, how could any believer attempt to persuade other people to divert their praise toward God but redirect it towards themselves? How could any creation of God think they could steal even a sliver of the glory due to God and believe He would give them a pass on such an action? As they served the Lord in their ministry, Paul and Barnabas made sure they never directed an ounce of God’s glory towards themselves, and we should do the same today.

5. Prepare to share characteristics or attributes of God that causes your heart to well up in praise every time you dwell upon it. Share why the mere thought of these characteristics of God are so meaningful to you.

Listen to your group members share and then think of verses and experiences that could further encourage your group to praise the Lord for who He is or what He has done!

Taken from Day Four: “Acts 14:19-23 – Paul and Barnabas Risk Their Lives for Evangelism and Discipleship!”

Paul and Barnabas traveled for a year and a half to accomplish two goals: Evangelize Jews and Gentiles and disciple them so they could grow spiritually in Paul and Barnabas’ absence. God saved many people in these cities, but Paul and Barnabas experienced relentless persecution as they preached the Gospel. At one point, Paul was beaten so badly and stoned that he was left for dead. Then after recovering, Paul and Barnabas chose to return to these very same cities to disciple these new converts, once again risking their lives to disciple believers just as they risked their lives to evangelize the lost.

6. Regarding the discipleship process that Paul and Barnabas adopted in Acts 14:22-23, consider discussing ways your group members could edify each other when you gather and throughout the week:
 - Strengthen each other through rehearsing and reaffirming the truth of God’s Word to each other. Meaning, is there anyone in need of receiving Biblical assurance because of their current life situation? For example, does anyone need to be assured once again that God is in control? Or, that God will not bring about anything in their life that is too difficult to bear? Or, that God’s timing is always perfect, etc.? (Acts 14:22a).
 - Does anyone need to receive confident encouragement not to quit (Acts 14:22b)?

- Collectively acknowledge that being an active and passionate believer in Jesus will not be easy this week but it is important to stay on God's spiritual course (Acts 14:22c)!
- Take a moment to thank God for His appointed spiritual leaders in Thomas Road Baptist Church or in the church you attend and pray for their continued spirit-filled growth (Acts 14:23a).
- Pray over each member and entrust his/her spiritual care and engagement with believers and non-believers to the Lord this coming week (Acts 14:23c).

Taken from Day Five: *“Acts 15:1-35 – A Beautiful Example of Christian Unity in Doctrine and in Conduct: What a Biblically Healthy **Church** and a Biblically Healthy **Relationship** have in Common!”*

Paul and Barnabas traveled to Jerusalem to report on the positive news of the influx of Gentile believers the Lord had saved during their travels over the past year and a half. There were some Jewish believers who believed the Gentiles had to also abide by the Mosaic Law to be saved. Some met with many Apostles and Christian leaders to prayerfully rehearse what God required for a person to be saved. All the believers resolved the questions in agreement and unity. In the spirit of unity, the Gentile believers also agreed to remain sensitive to their fellow Jewish believers and to conduct themselves in a way that would not give the Jewish believers any concern about the sincere faith held by the many Gentile believers.

7. Prepare to share an example of you or a believer you know who has made concessions for a weaker believer that resulted in both parties growing in their faith. Share how it contributed to a strong spirit of unity among all involved. Also, take a moment to express your appreciation to the members of your group for the spirit of unity, humility, and selflessness that has been cultivated among your group.
8. Prepare to share a positive example of how a church or group of believers had a productive conversation over significant doctrinal questions and handled it with truth, grace, and unity.

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ACTS 16–18:17 OVERVIEW

This week covers the following ways in which the members of God’s Church can grow in their faith as God grows His Church.

1. To approach my circumstances with faith and wisdom, not fear.
2. To instill in my friends and family that God’s way is the best way.
3. To encourage those around me that God can use them to fulfill His will.
4. To be used by God to give life-altering encouragement to those who are discouraged.
5. To always be on the lookout for the many ways God puts his supernatural power on display.

Memory Verse

Acts 16:30-31

And he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” So, they said, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.’”

A Summary of Acts 16 – 18:17

After gathering with the prominent leaders of Christianity to confirm that they all are relaying the clear, pure, and unadulterated Gospel message, Paul prepared to devote a prolonged amount of time to revisit existing churches he started in order to reaffirm that they were remaining strong in their faith, accurately sharing the Gospel, and to encourage them as they live the Christian life in their communities. After determining who would travel with whom (Acts 15:26-41), Barnabas and John Mark traveled to the churches located westward beginning in Greece (Acts 15:39) and Paul and Silas traveled to churches closer to them in the east region of Asia Minor (Acts 15:40-41).

Paul chose to return to cities that contained people who ran him out of the city and who often threatened his life. In fact, Paul returned to one city named Lystra (Acts 16:1-5) where just one year earlier he was beaten so badly that the citizens left him in the street believing he had died (Acts 14:19b-20). It was obvious that Paul took Christ's Commission very seriously to share the Gospel and to make disciples (Matthew 28:19-20). The reader of this portion of Acts quickly realizes that Paul not only risked his life to preach the Gospel, but also risked his life to disciple existing believers. Upon returning to Lystra, Paul and Silas invited a young man named Timothy to join them in the ministry trip and to be mentored by Paul.

As Paul proceeded in following his own travel plans, the Holy Spirit in some natural or supernatural way prohibited Paul and the team from continuing to pursue their original travel plan (Acts 16:6-8). Paul had a vision (Acts 16:9-10) that pleaded with him to proceed to Macedonia, an area that was not on Paul's original itinerary. Paul, who was conditioned to remain flexible, nimble, and agile to run to the center of God's activity, "immediately" (Acts 16:10) changed course and traveled to Macedonia.

In Macedonia, Paul and Silas began sharing the Gospel with the people of Philippi (Acts 16:11-34). And while they experienced a couple converts, they were met once again with opposition as they were beaten and placed overnight in prison (Acts 16:19-23). While in prison, Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises to God to the extent that everyone could hear (Acts 16:25). Around midnight, the Lord caused an earthquake that made all of the prison doors to open. Then God miraculously caused their chains to fall off (Acts 16:26). And through this experience, the Philippian jailer and his entire household accepted Christ (Acts 16:27-34). Paul and Silas were released from prison and were encouraged by

the city leaders to leave the city (Acts 16:35-39). They gathered with the handful of brand-new believers, encouraged them, and then left Philippi (Acts 16:40).

Paul and Silas then traveled to Thessalonica and preached the Gospel for three weeks, experienced many converts, and were met with strong opposition as a result (Acts 17:1-9). An angry mob was unable to find Paul and Silas as they departed the city, so they took their anger out on some who were sympathetic to Paul's teaching (Acts 17:6-9). Paul and Silas traveled to Berea and witnessed how the people heard Paul's teachings, took time to research the Scriptures for themselves to confirm if what he was saying was accurate, and as a result, accepted Christ (Acts 17:10-12). Unfortunately, the angry Thessalonian opposers of Paul traveled to Berea to cause Paul more trouble (Acts 17:13). In response, the believers in Berea safely assisted Paul and Silas out of the city and on course to Athens (Acts 17:14-15).

After Paul observed the religious practices of the people in Athens, he preached to the people presenting Jesus Christ as the one true and only God (Acts 17:16-31). He received a mixed response as some people believed, some mocked, and some delayed their decision on the Gospel until they could hear more (Acts 17:32-33). Next, Paul traveled to a sinful city named Corinth (Acts 18:1-6) and witnessed firsthand the power of God to save people whose lives had been tarnished by grotesque sin, a sinful culture, or religious tradition (Acts 18:7-8). In addition, he witnessed how God protected his ability to continue to preach the Gospel in a divinely providential way (Acts 18:9-17). While in Corinth, God provided the encouragement that Paul needed to continue to serve the Lord with renewed energy and passion.

Timeline & Key Events

This week, our daily devotionals will focus upon five **key moments** within **Acts 16 – 18:17**.

Acts 16:1-5

Paul Recruits Timothy at Lystra

Acts 16:6-12

God Redirects Paul towards Philippi

Acts 16:13-40

Paul Establishes a Small Community of Believers in Philippi

Acts 17:1-9

Paul and Silas in Thessalonica

Acts 17:10-15

Paul and Silas in Berea

Acts 17:16-34

Paul in Athens

Acts 18:1-11

Paul Arrives in Corinth for the First Time

Acts 18:12-17

Paul Needs No Defense in Court in Corinth

Acts 16:1-5 – Paul Recruits Timothy at Lystra:

1. When Conviction Meets Fear, Meet Fear with Faith and Wisdom

Paul returned to Lystra and recruited Timothy to join him in his Gospel ministry. What a great opportunity for young Timothy, right?! Timothy gets invited to spread the Gospel of the resurrected Jesus Christ alongside one of the most popular Christians on the planet! Timothy will get to join Paul in spreading the Gospel, establishing churches that will serve as examples to all churches for all time, and assisting Paul in discipling believers and church leaders that were already established by Paul. What an opportunity! There was just one problem.

Timothy's parents had to consider one major reality: To take advantage of this opportunity could be extremely dangerous and even life-threatening for their son! Do they allow him to leave the safety of their home and travel with a guy who just one year previously visited their city (Acts 14:8-20) and was beaten badly by some of the citizens because of his message and ministry. In fact, they beat Paul so badly that the only reason they stopped beating him and walked away was because they believed they had killed him (Acts 14:19). Because of this, Timothy's parents were probably even shocked to see Paul back in their city. And they quickly realized that Paul was not afraid to return to extremely dangerous areas for the sake of the Gospel. And now, this fearless minister approaches them and requests that Timothy (approximately 18-20 years old) join him full-time to experience all that comes with spreading the Gospel, establishing churches, and discipling believers and leaders.

Moreover, unlike Timothy's mother who was a believer, Timothy's father was not a believer (Acts 16:1). It makes one wonder, was Timothy's father part of the angry mob the year before? Even if he did not throw any stones, was he at least in agreement with the mob that Paul's message was to be ignored? Or, maybe he objected to the despicable actions of the mob? We do not know. But whatever Timothy's father's position was on what happened, one still has to ask, "What loving father, regardless of his religious beliefs, would ever feel comfortable blessing the choice of his son to travel with a man who attracts this level of persecution?" And what of his believing mother?

Timothy's mother (Eunice) and his grandmother (Lois) devoted themselves to the spiritual development of Timothy (II Timothy 1:3-5). As a result, he came

to faith in Jesus under their tutelage and was already a believer before Paul met him (Acts 16:2). They undoubtedly prayed for young Timothy to be used by God in a great way. But even they must have been conflicted about Timothy traveling with Paul. They probably were very proud that the Apostle Paul asked Timothy to join him. While at the same time, they must have been naturally hesitant to agree with the situation.

Ultimately, Timothy willingly and without any known conflict from his parents joined with Paul and ministered with him until Paul's death approximately 20 years later. They must have settled in their minds the correct balance between his conviction to spread the Gospel and their natural concern for Timothy's safety. Nowhere in Scripture are his parents rebuked for any dishonorable thoughts or actions while deliberating their decision. They struck the right balance that allowed them to claim that they served the Lord with all their hearts while honoring the Lord in their deliberations about the true danger that could come in Timothy's life.

What is the God-honoring balance? It seems that a balanced believer should be willing to endure persecution, but not pursue it. Hope that no persecution comes as you do the Lord's work, but should it come, consider it a blessing. If believers are to serve the Lord with conviction, they should commit to serve Him with all their hearts and be open to leave the comfort of their current life situation. At the same time, they are able to acknowledge their fears, anticipate realistic dangers, and be prepared for dealing with various trials. In fact, Paul avoided persecution when he was able, not as a coward but as a wise minister (Acts 9:23-25, 17:5, 10). Even the Apostle Peter emphasized this very point in I Peter 4:12-16.

God is honored by believers who have an unconditional commitment to His mission and who exhibit God-given wisdom in pursuing His calling. Timothy and his family provide inspiration that should motivate all believers to dismiss the mere thought of being the recipients of suffering, slander, or false accusation. These possibilities should not keep believers from actively engaging in spreading the Gospel, establishing churches, and discipling believers and leaders in our generation.

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect on the times in your life when you chose to follow the Lord's clear direction, and it was fulfilling, even if you experienced challenges in the process. Even though it was hard to obey God's will at that time, think about how you are glad today that you followed through and accomplished what you knew God wanted you to do.

Consider the Culture. *News did not travel fast in the 1st Century. There was no easy way to speedily deliver news. Timothy's parents experienced long seasons of silence while Timothy was away. There was no email or text messaging, and the Imperial message delivery system was only for official governmental use. Timothy would have had to ask friends, strangers, or hire an individual to deliver a letter of his travels either by foot, boat, horse, etc. Timothy's parents would be forced to do what believers today are called to do in normal everyday circumstances – To trust God that He is caring for their son and not allow their hearts to become anxious in the waiting (Psalm 121:3b-4a; Philippians 4:6-7).*

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

Pray for yourself, your loved ones, and your group members that you would remain in tune with the Holy Spirit. Pray that you would know when you should act and when you should pause and wait. And pray for wisdom that you would not attempt to rationalize a self-serving decision in any way but would be quick to obey God's will when He impresses upon your heart to act.

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Share the names and stories of people you believe resemble the heart of Timothy – who have a good reputation among believers, who desire to serve the Lord with all their heart, and who are willing to follow the Lord's leading wherever He directs. Try to be vivid in your details so that the group members can best relate with any struggles or tension they experienced along the way in their decision-making process. And after your group shares these encouraging testimonies, encourage each other that you will pray for the family members of your group members that they too would exhibit faith like Timothy in any decisions they are currently facing. Consider collecting the names of the family members while in your group and tell them that your family will pray for their family by name this week.

Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

Listen & Grow!

Explore how God moves through ordinary moments to accomplish extraordinary gospel impact by listening to a sermon clip preached by our Founding Pastor, Dr. Jerry Falwell Sr.



Want to Dig Deeper?

Optional but Recommended!
“Dig Deeper” provides added insight into this portion of Acts with supporting Scriptures. Be encouraged to reflect on how to live out the spiritual applications unearthed in this devotional.

1. Throughout his ministry, Paul describes himself as a spiritual “father” to Timothy and Timothy as his spiritual “son.” Read I Timothy 1:2, 18, Philippians 2:19-22, I Corinthians 4:17, II Timothy 1:2-5, 2:1, and II Timothy 3:14-17. In your own words, share how valuable this special “father-son” relationship with Paul must have been to Timothy considering Acts 16:1.

 2. Six months before Paul died and after 20 years of ministering together, Paul made a request of Timothy to come quickly near him before it was too late. It is safe to assume Paul grew to dearly love Timothy as a father would love his own son. In addition to the verses above, read II Timothy 4:9-10. Share in your own words why you think Paul wanted Timothy near him in his last days? How do you think Timothy felt about receiving this request from Paul?

 3. Isn’t it amazing that Paul and Timothy could enjoy such a deep, special relationship as brothers-in-Christ that would rival the relationship of actual family members? Read Galatians 6:10, Ephesians 2:18-19, and John 13:34 and summarize in your own words what the family of God should be like for all believers.

 4. Identify anyone in your own life that has made a significant contribution to your spiritual development (a parent, sibling, loved one, friend, or group leader). For how long of a season did the Lord bring each person into your life in order to make a contribution to your spiritual life? (FYI: Do not be surprised if you realize that the Lord did not bring you one person for a long period of time, but rather multiple believers during different moments of your life).

- Consider reaching out to this person(s) and offering a word of thanks for their commitment to your spiritual development!

Acts 16:6-12 – God Redirects Paul Towards Philippi:

2. Man Makes His Plans, but God Directs His Steps!

“If one remains flexible, he will never get bent out of shape.” While it is difficult to discern who should receive the credit for originating this cliché, it is a catchy way to make an important point. Put another way, one’s heart attitude will not become discouraged or disgruntled if he accepts the reality that God is in control, changes in life happen, and we are able to both adjust with the circumstances and even enjoy the journey. As believers, the more we remember that our gracious, loving, sovereign, and providential God is in control, we can rest well when God alters the plans of our lives.

Acts 16:6-12 provides a description of the very first time Paul arrived at Philippi. From this encounter, the Holy Spirit through the ministry of Paul, established a church that has encouraged believers through the centuries. But if it was not for the Lord’s divine intervention, Paul would not have visited Philippi. Philippi was not on Paul’s travel itinerary.

The way in which God intervened and redirected Paul was either by altering normal details of life that prohibited Paul from progressing with his own plan or instilling a prompting in Paul’s spirit that progressing with his own plan was not to be pursued. The Scriptures do not explicitly say how “they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia (Acts 16:6b), but we know that Paul remained sensitive to the Holy Spirit’s prompting and was also flexible, nimble, and agile to run to the center of God’s activity and to act immediately when he saw the Lord’s clear plan. In this scenario, the Spirit-imposed pause to Paul’s plans came first. Paul’s trust in the Lord stayed intact. Then God delivered His clear direction (Acts 16:6-9). At night, God provided clear direction to Paul in a vision of a man from the region of Macedonia saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16:9). Paul’s reaction was to “immediately” (Acts 16:10a) respond to the clear direction of the Lord because his heart was in a spiritual state-of-readiness to respond to the calling of the Lord. “Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them” (Acts 16:10).

“We can make our plans, but the Lord determines our steps” Proverbs 16:9 (NLT)

What seems like a change of plans to believers is just another divine step in God’s providential plan.

God does not call for us to know His plan perfectly. But he does call us to remain flexible, nimble, and agile to run to the center of God’s activity when we discover His plan!

What is important to note is that Paul's initial plan was not bad. Paul should not have felt any embarrassment for changing his plans based upon what God revealed to him. Unfortunately, it seems that people today are quick to conclude that any change of plans is a sign of a poor planning. But if the Lord redirects, believers should stand confident that they are obedient to the Lord's plans. Changing plans – any plans – is not a sign failure! It is not a sign of indecisiveness. If the Lord clearly redirects, believers should hold their heads high knowing they remained obedient to the Lord and made the *better* choice to follow the Holy Spirit.

Paul's approach to making plans for his life and ministry was a God-honoring approach. Paul took what information he received from the Lord, the Word of God, and from the counsel of wise believers and ran with it. Yet, he remained open to God's redirection. And when the Lord provided new information, Paul recalibrated his plans and followed God's new plan.

It is important for believers to know their level of responsibility and what a believer is not responsible for when making their plans. Believers are responsible to faithfully act upon all of the direction and insights that the Lord has provided for them up to that point. Yet, believers are also called to recalibrate plans should the Lord provide additional insight. If believers live holy, righteous, and pure lives before the Lord and if their prayer lives are intimate, frequent, and full of praise and confession, then their hearts will be best prepared to sense the guidance of the Holy Spirit and willing to adjust their plans, knowing they received guidance from the Lord.

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect upon how often you pray to God and ask Him to reveal His specific and perfect plan for you, then reflect on how you respond when God does indeed reveal His plan. Do you tend to respond in gratitude and praise? Or, does your reaction tend to involve complaining that His plan did not align with your initial plan? Reflect also upon any moments where you accepted God's plan and followed His leading and it resulted in something much better than what your plan would have accomplished. Have you ever returned to God in gratitude and praise for not permitting you to continue following your own plan?

Pray for God to work in your life in two ways: Tell the Lord that you will attempt to live according to the very familiar truths found in Proverbs 3:5-6 when making plans for your life. Then, thank God retroactively for all the times He guided the plans in your life that resulted in a better conclusion than your own plans.

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Share inspiring testimonies of how you followed God's plan rather than your own plans. Take time to share the details vividly so that your group members can best experience your story and feel how good it was to experience the goodness of God directing your life. And if you feel comfortable, share a current decision you have yet to make and ask your group to pray for you so they can undergird you in prayer immediately. And in the coming weeks, be quick to share the outcome with your group.

Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

Listen & Grow!

Reflect on the power of surrender as you listen to a sermon clip preached by our Founding Pastor, Dr. Jerry Falwell Sr. His message calls us to submit fully to God's will, trusting that obedience—even when costly—opens the door for the gospel to reach hearts and transform lives.



Want to Dig Deeper?

Optional but Recommended!
“Dig Deeper” provides added insight into this portion of Acts with supporting Scriptures. Be encouraged to reflect on how to live out the spiritual applications unearthed in this devotional.

1. Believers are to be active in serving the Lord in any situation in life while remaining open to God’s insertion of new information that has the potential to change the course of their plans. Read Philippians 1:12-13. Consider Paul’s words to this same church 10 years after Acts 16 and notice that the church at Philippi heard that Paul’s plans changed and he was put in prison. This church was presented with answering the question if God’s change of plans for Paul was a good thing or a huge disappointment for his ministry. Writing from prison instead of being on the road preaching, Paul encouraged the believers in Philippi about all that God had done in this new God-ordained plan. Summarize what Paul shared with them about the result of him following God’s plan.

2. Read Philippians 2:12-13 about how God instructs believers to work hard in growing in their faith and how, at the same time, God works through them. It seems that God guides, works, and redirects believers who are active in their spiritual walk. And the more we actively grow in our faith, the more we should expect God to guide, redirect, and work through us. Write down what these verses share about how God works through the conduit of a submissive heart that is actively serving Him.

3. As a result, how should we encourage a believer who is uncertain about how to discover God’s specific plan for his/her life?

4. If Acts 16:6-12 illustrates that the Christian life is guided by the Lord and requires the believer to be flexible, nimble, and agile, what does this say about one’s desire to enjoy a Christian life that is calm, stable, and predictable? Should all believers adopt a flexible, nimble, and agile approach to obeying God’s plan for our lives or is that only for church leaders like Paul?

5. In order to experience God's best plan for your Christian life, examine yourself to identify what areas of your life you believe you need to adopt more of a flexible, nimble, and agile acceptance of God's guidance. What areas/ desires/decisions/plans would you identify as being more stiff, ridged, and unyielding?

6. Write a prayer to the Lord thanking Him for his loving patience with you as you commit to Him to begin to ask the Holy Spirit to cultivate a spirit of flexibility and trust in your heart and to accept God's plan for your life as being the best for you.

Acts 16:13-40 – Paul Establishes a Small Community of Believers in Philippi:

3. God Can Use Anyone!

Some people get chosen first on the playground to be on the kickball team. Some people get chosen last (No, we will not put you on the spot and ask you to circle the word “first” or “last” in a survey question that best describes your story!). On many occasions, this selection process is based simply upon people making unfair judgement calls on the skills of a person without ever seeing them play. They look at the stature, assumed strength, and demeanor of a person and are hasty to make a judgement call on their abilities. We have seen this in the Old Testament in the selection of David (I Samuel 16:7) and we also see a New Testament example when we look at the people who would compose the charter membership of the church of Philippi. But what seemed like a hodgepodge group of individuals turned out to be a spiritually strong, vibrant church which stands to this day as an example of a unified body of believers from which we should draw inspiration.

Paul, who was joined by Silas at this time, would not have been surprised that there was no synagogue in Philippi (Acts 16:13) as Philippi was considered a Roman Colony (Acts 16:12). He met a woman who traveled much to sell her very expensive product of purple-dyed cloth. Whether she was a permanent citizen of Philippi or taking temporary residence there until she exhausted her connections to the wealthy citizens, one does not know. But God providentially had Lydia and her household in Philippi at that moment for her to become the first recorded female convert in Macedonia (Acts 16:13-15).

Paul and Silas continued preaching the Gospel even as a local demon-possessed woman continually followed them (Acts 16:18a) shouting words meant to be sarcastic, as if mere men can come into a town and declare they know the way to God, “These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17b)! Paul was “greatly annoyed” and cast the demon out of her in the power of the name of Jesus (Acts 16:18b).

How annoyed was Paul? Acts 16:18b says Paul was “greatly annoyed” after hearing the demonic girl’s words spoken out of impure motives. “Grieved in his spirit based on hearing blasphemy” is a fuller understanding of the Greek word translated “greatly annoyed.” Even though her words were true, her motives were not pure and that is never acceptable in cultivating a healthy church. See Acts 4:2 where the only other use of the same Greek word occurs to describe deep anger that is felt after hearing something one believes to be blasphemous.

Upon seeing this, the citizens dragged Paul and Silas to the city leaders and made the claim that the message and the disturbance caused by Paul and Silas constituted illegal actions against Roman law. As a result, they both were bound and beaten before being thrust into prison (Acts 16:19-24). The only problem was that their actions did not constitute a violation of Roman law. And in disciplining Paul and Silas by publicly beating them, the rulers of Philippi actually broke a Roman law that prohibited any Roman citizen from being publicly beaten (Acts 16:37).

Until this realization was made known to the Philippian leaders, Paul and Silas remained in prison and chose to openly pray and sing hymns to the Lord so loudly that people could hear them (Acts 16:25). The Lord miraculously caused an earthquake to occur while simultaneously opening the prison doors and causing their chains to fall off. Through these circumstances, after hearing Paul and Silas sing praises all night, and after asking the simplest, clearest question, “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:25-31) the Philippian jailer believed the Gospel message. After this, his family followed suit and also accepted Christ (Acts 16:32-34).

The next morning, the leaders of the city told the jailer that Paul and Silas may be released from jail (Acts 16:36). Paul knew that the law was on their

Is there any occasion where a Roman citizen could be flogged (whipped) publicly or privately? Yes. *The law was not absolute, but the offense would have to rise to an extreme level. The principle of the law was to shield any Roman citizen from shameful forms of bodily punishment (flogging/whipping, stoning, crucifixion, etc.). Even then, one’s social status would be subjectively considered by the present leader to determine if the individual would receive bodily injury as a form of punishment for even a serious infraction. But if a Roman citizen committed, say, treason, Rome would permit flogging but usually in a private setting. Roman soldiers had to fear shameful bodily punishment more than the average Roman citizen. Military insubordination at a low level would call for a flogging in front of peers but it was deemed as military discipline and unrelated to citizenship. But the primary purpose of the whipping of insubordinate soldiers was done to more humiliate soldiers rather than to cause major physical harm. But should there be a more serious offense, like spying or defection, soldiers could receive a beating by a few other soldiers with sticks in front of other soldiers and even a death penalty of stoning or drowning.*

side, so he informed the jailer to tell the city leaders that they broke the law by beating them publicly. They were both Roman citizens and it was illegal to beat Roman citizens (Acts 16:37). The city leaders, fearful that they broke the law, came personally to ask them to leave, per Paul's request (Acts 16:37-39). So, they left rejoicing that God brought about more salvations from this situation and that the law protected them from future illegal actions against them (Acts 16:40a). Then they left Philippi (Acts 16:40b).

After the dust settled on all this excitement, Paul and Silas left the city and left behind a scant group of brand-new Christians to carry on the Gospel ministry through their witness and testimonies. The church of Philippi began with a Philippian jailer and his household, a traveling merchant (Lydia) and her household. And while it's probable that others accepted Christ, we have no idea who, if any, came to Christ because no additional people are recorded as having accepted Christ in this account.

That's it! That is the scant, unimpressive team God left to develop and grow a church in Philippi. Who would give this team strong odds of being successful? Who would believe this group could become a winning team? What church planting organization would want to launch a brand-new church plant effort with a couple families full of baby-Christians and another family full of brand-new Christians who may not be in the city too long? If viewed through human eyes, these are fair questions. But when God Himself is the builder of His Church (Matthew 16:18), He can take the most unlikely group of devoted believers and through them produce supernatural accomplishments (Ephesians 3:20)!

How did they do? Paul actually wrote this church 10 years after the founding of the church in Acts 16. Read Philippians 1:1 to see if the church grew and established spiritual leaders! Were they even strong enough to assist other churches? Read Philippians 4:15, II Corinthians 8:1-5, and 11:9 to see if they were known for helping other churches in need! Did the Lord bless them for their faithful and mature service to the Lord and His people? Read Philippians 4:19 to find out!

God can use anyone! Never count any person out. Fight the temptation to dismiss the impact that any believer can have upon the Body of Christ. The whole of Scripture testifies that little is much if it is being controlled by the power of God (I Corinthians 1:27; Zechariah 4:6; John 6:9, 11; Psalm 20:7). The church established at Philippi is a vivid example of this beautiful reality.

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect upon these many spiritual blessings: How God has saved you, indwelt you with the Holy Spirit, provided you with the privilege of sharing the life-changing truth of Gospel of Jesus Christ, given you the ability to witness God change a life eternally, and invited you to serve Him and encourage other

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

believers to do the same. God can use you beyond what you ever imagined (Ephesians 3:20)!

Pray a simple yet profound prayer of thanksgiving to the Lord. Thank Him for providing all of these spiritual blessings as a child of God. Tell Him that you intend to take full advantage of all these spiritual blessings while you are here on earth.

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Identify one or two people that you know have grown in their faith and let them know that you were thinking about them this week. Tell them you are inspired by their testimony and spiritual journey to grow in your own faith. Encourage them to continue strong in their walk with the Lord and assure them that they are making a positive impact in other peoples' lives, even if they do not think anyone is watching – Just like the believers at Philippi!

Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

Listen & Grow!

Gain clarity on how to seek and follow God's will by listening to a sermon clip preached by our Senior Pastor, Jonathan Falwell.



Want to Dig Deeper?

Optional but Recommended!

“Dig Deeper” provides added insight into this portion of Acts with supporting Scriptures. Be encouraged to reflect on how to live out the spiritual applications unearthed in this devotional.

1. In Acts 16:12, Philippi was referred to as a “colony.” A colony was a piece of Rome established far away from Rome for the purpose of keeping the peace and protecting the interests of Rome in distant locations. Philippi would be populated with loyalists to Rome, former high-level employees and military figures from Rome, and those who were stalwartly faithful to their emperor in order to guarantee that this outpost would never revolt against Rome. In return, all of the citizens of a colony were given all the rights, privileges, and protections of Rome, even though they were far from home. Read Philippians 3:20 and describe how Paul drew a comparison to their current living situation in Philippi to the believers’ heaven.

2. As a believer, how does it make you feel when you compare all the privileges afforded to a Roman citizen who is living far from home in Philippi to the reality that you as a believer are a recipient of all the provisions and protections of heaven while here on this earth?

3. The Letter to the Philippians was written 10 years after Paul first visited Philippi in Acts 16. Read Philippians 1:1, 2:12, 4:15-6 and summarize how you perceive the people of Philippi developed spiritually. Then read Philippians 1:3-8, 22-26, 2:16, and 4:1 and summarize Paul’s positive thoughts about these precious people.

4. Take a moment to think about how proud Paul was of the Philippian church and how he freely expressed his joy and love for these people. Knowing the details of the founding of the church in Acts 16:13-40 and what he wrote to them 10 years later, why do you think he felt so positive about these people?

5. Are there any takeaways about how we should feel about the people that have grown in the Lord as a result of us pouring into their lives? More specifically, how have you felt when you have witnessed someone you have helped grow stronger in their faith begin to exhibit spiritual maturity?

6. Consider reaching out to a person who has demonstrated spiritual growth and expressing your great joy for all that the Lord has done in their lives over time. Write their name(s) down. Pray for them. Then connect with them in this meaningful way.

7. It does not get any easier to share the Gospel with someone who directly asks us, “What must I do to be saved” (Acts 16:30)? Would you know how to answer this accurately? Read the following verses in order that provide a clear and simple explanation on how one can accept Christ as his/her Savior. Take a moment to summarize the main point of each verse so you will have these notes for future reference!

- Romans 3:10a

- Romans 3:23

- Romans 6:23

- John 3:16

- Ephesians 2:8-9

- Titus 3:5

- Romans 5:8

- Romans 10:9

- Romans 10:13

- Romans 5:1

- Romans 8:1

- Romans 8:38-29

- I Peter 1:3-4

Acts 18:1-11 – Paul Arrives in Corinth for the First Time:

4. Everyone Needs Encouragement, Give it Freely

Encouragement can be delivered in many forms – words, one’s presence, and even through a gift. Then, there are encouragements that only God can give. In I Corinthians 18:1-11, Paul desperately needed encouragement because of experiencing a lot of opposition and persecution for sharing the Gospel. Fortunately, he received all the encouragement he needed from God and God’s people.

Prior to arriving in Corinth in Acts 18, Paul had been traveling and passionately sharing the Gospel. Unfortunately, at every turn he experienced persecution. Hostile people who hated Paul’s message followed him from town to town attempting to silence him and/or even physically injure him (Acts 16:16-24 in Philippi; Acts 17:5-9 in Thessalonica; Acts 17:13-15 in Berea; Acts 17:32 mocked and ignored in Athens). So, when he arrived in Corinth, he needed his spirit to be lifted and given assurance that God was with him in this difficult season of his life and ministry. This pain is seen in the letters he wrote to the believers in Thessalonica while in Corinth. Paul cautioned them against feeling the same feelings he was grappling with, “But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary in doing good” (II Thessalonians 2:13). Paul also wrote the Letter to the Galatian believers to persuade them to heed the exact same advice, “And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart” (Galatians 6:9). Paul needed encouragement.

Paul entered a very well-known city named Corinth (Acts 18:1). He connected with Jewish friends, Aquila and Priscilla, who had relocated to Corinth because of an edict by Emperor Claudius that all Jews and Jewish Christians should leave the city of Rome (Acts 18:2).

Because Paul was low on ministry funds, he joined Aquila in making tents while he actively continued to minister as much as he could, even though he could not currently minister full time due to finances. He shared the Gospel with both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 18:3-4). Ultimately, the Jewish people had enough with Paul’s message that Jesus was the Christ/Messiah (Acts 18:5) and began to oppose Paul and blaspheme Christ. It was at this moment that Paul declared that he would focus his primary attention on sharing the Gospel to the

Gentiles (Acts 18:6). Upon making this declaration, many people who, despite the Jew's boisterous opposition, continued to listen to Paul's Gospel message and came to faith in Jesus Christ - both Gentiles and some Jews (Acts 18:7-8)!

That night, the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision, gave him a specific command, and provided him specific encouragement. His commandment was to not be afraid, to not be silent, but to continue speaking the Gospel message (Acts 18:9). His specific encouragement to Paul was that God was with him and no one will be allowed to harm him (Acts 18:10). Then God reminded Paul of His sovereign knowledge and plan when He informed Paul that He had many people in the city of Corinth who would come to faith in Him (Acts 18:10). Paul obeyed with confidence and remained in Corinth for one and a half more years both sharing the Gospel and discipling the new Christians (Acts 18:11).

Notice three ways in which God delivered his encouragement to Paul in Acts 18:1-11.

1. The presence of Christian friends (Acts 18:1-4).
2. The gifts from distant Christian churches (Acts 18:5).
3. The salvation of new Converts (Acts 18:7-8).

Paul received encouragement from his good Christian friends Aquila and his wife, Priscilla (Romans 16:3; I Cor. 16:19; II Tim. 4:19), who generously opened their home and gave him a job that provided for him until he could again receive funding that would allow him to minister full time (Acts 18:3; see I Thessalonians 2:9 and II Thessalonians 3:8). They lived out the selfless care and love for Paul that resembled the Lord Jesus Christ Himself (see Philippians 2:4-5).

Paul also received encouragement from the gifts from distant Christian churches that allowed him to return to full-time ministry involvement once again. Acts 18:5 says nothing about gifts being given to Paul. It only says that Silas and Timothy came to Corinth to see Paul "from Macedonia." But after reading some additional New Testament Scriptures (Acts 17:15-16; I Thessalonians 3:1-2; Philippians 4:15), one can see that Silas and Timothy came to Corinth from Macedonia with a financial gift, "And when I was with you and did not have enough to live on, I did not become a financial burden to anyone. For the brothers who came from Macedonia brought me all that I needed" (II Corinthians 11:9a, NLT). And this financial gift allowed Paul to immediately return to full-time ministry work! Notice that Paul was a tentmaker, he had a work schedule, but he still ministered when and where he could as much as his schedule would allow, "Each Sabbath found Paul at the synagogue, trying to convince the

Did Rome really expel Christians out of the city? If so, why? *Not all Christians. Only Jewish Christians and Jewish non-Christians. Approximately one year before Acts 18:2, Emperor Claudius was frustrated with all the Christians (Jewish and non-Jewish) causing an uproar in the city by declaring Jesus was the Jewish peoples' true Christ ("Messiah"). Christians were met with angry Jewish people who did not believe that Jesus was the Christ. As a result, angry mobs frequently broke out all around the city to oppose the Christians who were declaring this Gospel publicly. Not being familiar with the distinct differences between Judaism and Christianity, Rome just assumed all this was being caused by Jewish people arguing with other Jewish people about their religious teachings and traditions. Thus, Rome expelled all Jewish people out of the city because of the civil unrest their preaching caused. It was obvious from his decree that Claudius did not understand the composition of the Roman church. He did not expel any non-Jewish Christians believing the entire problem was caused by Jewish people only. What remained was a heavily populated Gentile (non-Jewish) church in Rome for the next five years until Claudius' death. This is not the first time a Roman emperor attempted to eradicate Christians from Rome (research Emperor Tiberius's actions against the Jews in Rome in 19 AD).*

Do not tithe your encouragement! Give 100%. Give it freely. Don't hold back! Because everyone needs encouragement!

Jews and Greeks alike” (Acts 18:4). But when he received the necessary financial support from the Christian churches, “Paul spent all his time preaching the Word” (Acts 18:5b, NLT)! As a result of the encouragement, Paul regained his boldness and energy.

Still, Paul received the most impactful encouragement from God Himself through seeing the salvation of new converts (Acts 18:7-8) – A gentile (non-Jewish) man named “Justus” (Acts 18:7), the ruler of the Jewish synagogue, Crispus, and his entire household (Acts 18:8a), and many more citizens of Corinth (Acts 18:8b). God put his saving power on open display for Paul to see so that he would never doubt that God was still at work in his life regardless of how he interpreted his circumstances! Paul was reminded that God is not affected by discouragement, He never stands in a state of doubt, nor is He hindered by what seems to be difficult circumstances. As a result, Paul spoke this encouraging truth to his own heart the same way the Psalmist spoke to his once discouraged heart, “Why are you downcast, O my soul...put your hope in the Lord” (Psalm 42:11a)! As a result, Paul was encouraged to stay in the very same environment and preach the Gospel with renewed energy as “he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them” (Acts 18:11).

And after experiencing all these encouragements, the Lord summarized the spiritual take away that Paul needed to hide away in his heart and pull out every time he felt discouragement in the future, “Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city’”(Acts 18:9-10).

Don't miss what God was saying to Paul! *In Acts 18:10, the phrase “I am with you” is written in the ancient language in such a way to be understood emphatically, “I myself am with you!” God Himself promised to be with Paul in his life circumstance. As a result, Paul experienced the spiritual boldness and renewed confidence that is similarly reflected in the words of Psalmist, “The Lord is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me” (Psalm 118:6)? See also Joshua 1:9; Isaiah 41:10, 46:4; Deuteronomy 31:8; Psalm 121: 3-4; 139:7-12; Romans 8:38-39).*

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect on a time that the Lord delivered you through a season of discouragement. Attempt to return to that moment in your mind in order to remember vividly how you felt before you experienced God's deliverance. Then, reflect on how you felt when God delivered you out of that challenging season and restored your joy.

Pray a prayer of thanksgiving to God for delivering you out of that challenging season of discouragement and then recommit to God that in the future you will try to never forget that He is always with you and you will trust in Him.

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Consider engaging in one of the following exercises:

1. Knowing that the testimony of new converts should encourage the heart of believers, reflect upon one of your favorite baptisms you have observed at Thomas Road Baptist Church and/or any report of life change that you have heard while attending church. Rehearse this moment with your group and share why that moment still resonates with you and causes you to celebrate in your heart even today.
2. Share a testimony of how you, your family, or loved ones received a gift of support from another person or family and explain how it lifted your spirit and allowed you emotional freedom from the discouragement you might have been feeling prior to receiving the gift.
3. Invite any group member to share their testimony of their salvation and/or spiritual growth with the group for the purpose of encouraging everyone that God is always at work in peoples' lives.

Listen & Grow!

Learn what it means to truly see and respond to the needs of those around you by listening to a sermon clip preached by our Founding Pastor, Dr. Jerry Falwell Sr. His message challenges us to live with spiritual awareness and compassion, reflecting Christ's love in practical ways as we engage with our community.



Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

**Optional but
Recommended!**

*“Dig Deeper” provides
added insight into this
portion of Acts with
supporting Scriptures.
Be encouraged to
reflect on how to
live out the spiritual
applications unearthed
in this devotional.*

Want to Dig Deeper?

1. The testimonies of the Corinthian converts encouraged the heart of Paul to continue to preach in Corinth for the next year and a half. Something about their testimonies restored the joy in Paul’s heart to continue preaching. But Acts 18:8 does not tell us what their testimonies were or what their life’s journey was like prior to accepting Christ as their Savior. All it says is that “many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized” (Acts 18:8b). Read I Corinthians 6:9-11 and learn what you can about what their lives were before they accepted Christ. Describe in your own words what God miraculously saved them out of and elaborate on how much that probably motivated Paul to continue ministering to the Corinthian people.

2. Acts 18:8b describes not only that some Corinthian citizens accepted Christ but also *how* they came to salvation in Jesus Christ. Circle the three words that described a person before/during/after getting saved:

- Acts 18:8b, “And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized.”

3. Describe the significance of the order of these words. What does this word order tell us about the function of baptism in a believer’s life?

4. In Acts 18:9-11, the Lord communicated to Paul in a vision in order to encourage him to stop being discouraged as a believer, to continue serving the Lord, and not to stop preaching the Gospel. But before Paul became a Christian, God’s communication to Paul was much different. Return to the very first time the Lord miraculously communicated to Paul in Acts 9:1-16. Summarize what the Lord was telling Paul to stop doing in this situation and what the Lord told him to begin doing as a result of this divine encounter?

5. Look ahead and notice that the Lord will soon communicate to Paul once again within a very challenging and turbulent circumstance. Notice how God provides him with same hope that He is with Paul and that Paul will fulfill God's divine plan (Acts 23:11). Thus, Paul did not have to fear the evil intentions of those that opposed him regardless of how resolute they were to kill him (Acts 23:12). Take a moment to pray to God and tell Him that you are also going to take His words to heart as you go through this week, as you may possibly face some challenging times ahead.

Paul Needs No Defense in Court in Corinth – Acts 18:12-17

5. Be on the Lookout for Open Displays of God's Sovereignty and Providence All Around You!

There are times to stand up and speak up. Then there are times to stand down, be still, and watch God take over the situation. Even though we are commanded to “be ready always to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15a), there are times we

recognize that God has divinely orchestrated the details of a scenario so that we do not even have to speak. And while our hearts desire to speak God's truth as He has commanded us to do, in these particular moments we quickly realize that God is up to something and we would do well to simply sit back and watch the providential hand of our sovereign God work in our circumstances.

Acts 18:12-17 provides a scenario where Paul was prepared to fulfill his responsibility to testify about the Gospel, but our sovereign God providentially orchestrated the circumstances so that he did not have to speak. In fact, God made it so he was unable to get a word inserted into the conversation. God did this because He had a divine plan for Paul in that moment in a Roman courthouse.

This court case was an extremely significant case that had the potential of silencing Christianity forever. Should Paul be found guilty of breaking Roman law in this courtroom, Christianity would be considered illegal to be practiced throughout the entire Roman empire. Usually, cases related to civic disturbances would be taken to a judgement seat that was placed in the public marketplace. There, one of the many local magistrates would hear the case and judge it. But hearings in front of local magistrates would not be able to set any precedence in society. They simply heard one-off cases, resolved that situation, and then moved on to the next case. Knowing that the normal procedure of dealing with the disturbances that Paul was causing would not rid them of this problem forever, if they followed the normal course of action, the opponents of Paul desired for the case against him to go straight to the highest

Theology Made Easy. *What is the difference between God's "sovereignty" and God's "providence?" God's sovereignty is a term that describes how God has the authority, right, and the ability to do whatever He wants to do (Job 42:2). God's "providence" is a term that is used to describe how God in His sovereignty lovingly orchestrates all human and natural events to serve His divine purpose (Psalm 103:9, Proverbs 16:9, Acts 16:7, Romans 8:28, Philippians 1:6).*

Roman ruler in the region. There the cases were judged by the “proconsul” (Acts 18:12) or “Governor” of the entire region. And if the governor ruled on a case, his ruling would set a precedent for all jurisdictions. In their minds, if they could get a sitting governor to cast judgement against the preaching of the Gospel by Christians, then preaching would be immediately illegal everywhere in the Roman world. And unless it was overturned on appeal, that would be the end of the legal preaching of the Gospel. This was their chance to once-and-for-all silence the preaching of the Gospel!

Knowing the weight that this case could have upon the Gospel ministry of Paul and every single one of his fellow apostles and ministers, it is safe to assume that Paul probably prepared all night to present a solid case for why his preaching was legal. But Paul was going to quickly learn that God was going to fight this battle, and all Paul had to do is stand down, sit back, and watch the power of God orchestrate all of the circumstances to fulfill His will.

Gallio was the governor of this region and he was in this area of the region at the time of this court case. Gallio was known for being kind and fair. In addition, Roman courts only heard legal cases of breaking the Roman law. They were not interested in settling religious debates. That is why the Jews began their opening statement with a false claim that, “This fellow persuades men to worship God contrary to the [Roman and Jewish] law” (Acts 18:13). This was their only way to attempt to keep the Governor’s attention on the case. They had to frame their charge as a legal infraction. They had to claim that Christianity was a religion that had not been sanctioned by the state and thus be declared by Rome as “*religio illicita*” (Latin), which means “illegal religion.” Knowing Judaism was an approved religion sanctioned by Rome (“*religio licita*” = legal religion), they had to demonstrate that Christianity was different than Judaism and thus breaking Roman law. But Gallio saw right through the Jews’ argument for what it was – they did not like hearing the name “Jesus” and did not like hearing Paul proclaim that “Jesus is the Christ [“Messiah”]” (Acts 18:5). Hearing this, Paul was ready to present his well-prepared defense for Christianity that he had done many times already in his ministerial career. But God did not let him. Rather, God allowed Paul to be interrupted and silenced. He was forced to stand down, sit back, and watch the miraculous providence of God play out for all to see.

Acts 18:14 starts off by saying, “And when Paul was about to open his mouth,” but that is as far as Paul was able to get. God directed Gallio himself to speak up and declare that this was a frivolous case against a man based upon religious disagreements. “Gallio said to the Jews, ‘If it were a matter of wrongdoing [legal wrongdoing] or wicked crimes [something the law forbids in principle without the law already specifying the action], O Jews, there would be reason why I should bear with you. But if it is a question of words and names [Jesus, Messiah] and your own law [religious law], look to it yourselves; for I do not want to be a judge of such matters’” (Acts 18:14b-15) and dismissed the

case. In that one moment, not only was Gospel ministry spared extinction for Paul and so many others, but the case was officially dismissed. This demonstrated that for now Rome was going to allow the preaching of the Gospel throughout its land. And God brought about this monumental declaration without Paul ever having to open his mouth! And not only did Christianity receive a favorable judgement, but the accusers of the Gospel also received their just reward.

After the case was dismissed, the Jews were furious. Acts 18:16 implies that the Jews kept on insisting that Gallio should rule in their favor, and as a result, Gallio had to “drive them from the judgement seat.” Then the ones who put their hope in a man named Sosthenes (SOSS-then-knees), who must have played a major role in their attempt to quell the Gospel message, “took Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him before the judgement seat. But Gallio took no notice of these things” (Acts 18:17). For once, Paul was not the individual getting beat up after standing for his convictions! As a result, “Paul still remained a good while” (Acts 18:18a) in Corinth free to preach the Gospel.

It would be a safe assumption that while all of this was occurring, Paul was smiling as he recalled to mind what his sovereign, providential God told him earlier in his ministry there in Corinth, “Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, “Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city” (Acts 18:10-11).

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect on how powerful, sovereign, and providential God is and has been in your life. Review how he has delivered you in the past. Remind yourself how many times He has demonstrated his love towards you, your family, and your loved ones. Then identify the situations or the moments in your life that you find difficult to trust the Lord protection and His perfect timing.

Pray and confess to God where you could be stronger in your daily trust in Him. Tell the Lord you desire to trust Him more and will put it into practice today. Tell Him you will remember how He protected Paul and the Gospel ministry in Acts 18:12-17 and that you will also stand down, sit back, and trust His sovereign, providential hand to lead your life when you do not know what to do. Read and pray Psalm 139 to the Lord to seal this commitment.

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Share an instance when you really stretched yourself and chose to trust God when your human flesh was screaming at you to take matters into your own hands. Express the specific emotions you felt and thoughts you grappled with that were working against your waiting on the Lord. Then share how you feel today about your decision to trust the Lord in that situation.

Have You Ever Noticed? *The man named Sosthenes who brought these charges against Paul in Acts 18 is seen one additional time in Scripture. See this week's "Dig Deeper" to learn the rest of his story!*

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

Discuss some specific ways in which your group members can best encourage you and each other to trust the Lord throughout this year. What could each group member say or do for you that would motivate you to continue to trust the Lord throughout the week. Think of what you could say to your fellow group members that would fulfill Hebrews 10:24, “And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works.”

Listen & Grow!

Gain a deeper understanding of the church’s purpose and power by listening to a sermon clip titled “Why the Church Is Important,” preached by Senior Pastor Jonathan Falwell.



Scan for a sermon clip related to today’s devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

**Optional but
Recommended!**

*“Dig Deeper” provides
added insight into this
portion of Acts with
supporting Scriptures.
Be encouraged to
reflect on how to
live out the spiritual
applications unearthed
in this devotional.*

Want to Dig Deeper?

1. Sosthenes was one of the Jewish men who brought charges against Paul for preaching his Gospel message in Acts 18:17. In the book of Acts, he is last seen getting beaten for his unsuccessful case against Paul that would have made it illegal for all Christian preaching to stop on that day. His name is seen only one other time in the Bible approximately two years after Acts 18. Read I Corinthians 1:1 and describe what the spiritual outcome was in Sosthenes’ life.

2. In I Corinthians 1:1, Paul is with Sosthenes during his missionary journey, why do you think Paul would travel with a man who once passionately persecuted Christians and him personally? And how should Paul’s example motivate us to embrace those who were once consumed with performing the same sins that we once committed but found forgiveness? (Read portions of Paul’s own testimony in Galatians 1:13-16a, Philippians 3:4-8, Acts 22:6-20, 26:9-18 that may assist you in seeing the reason why Paul would travel with such a person like Sosthenes.)

3. Have you ever wondered what Paul would have said if he had been allowed to open his mouth and speak to the judge, his accusers, and everyone listening in? Read about three other occasions where this very scenario occurred, except in these instances he was permitted to speak. Summarize in your own words the main points of his defense before these Roman leaders (Acts 22:6-20, 24:10-21, 26:9-18) as this is probably what Paul had prepared to say in Corinth.

4. It is a fair question to ask of God, “How do I know when I should act or when I should sit back and let You act on my behalf?” The answer would be to pray and actively do what the Lord has clearly commanded you to do. And if he interrupts your plans, accept it as coming from the Lord. In this case, you are properly applying two truths: 1) I need to look for ways to grow spiritually and serve the Body of Christ, all the while remembering that 2) God is sovereign and has a providential plan. As a result, do not get discouraged if God changes your plans. Embrace that God calls you to be active and moving, but he may choose to turn the wheel and redirect you. Read Proverbs 3:5-6, 16:9, Philippians 2:12-13, 4:6-7, I Peter 3:15, II Timothy 4:2, and Acts 16:6-10. Based on these Scriptures and your Christian experiences, what additional spirit-led advice could you offer to someone who approached you with the same question?
- Also, pray and ask the Lord if the problem is that you do not know what to do because you do not have enough clarity or if you lack the courage to do what you know God is calling you to do. If your challenge is the former, wait on the Lord. If your challenge is the latter, then get up and go.
5. Consider two popular passages in the Old Testament that illustrate our need to trust our sovereign God’s providential plan in our time of need. Take time to ponder these two passages and relish the feeling of how good it is to know this very God in a personal way:
- **Consider Exodus 14:13-14.** This principle of standing down, sitting back, and watching the providential hand our sovereign God work in our circumstances is seen when the people of Israel were being chased by the Egyptian army. Israel hit a dead end being blocked by the waters of the Red Sea. They were confronted with the reality that they were trapped and unable to remedy their dilemma. The people blamed Moses for the predicament they were in for they could see no way they could possibly fix the problem they were in. Then Moses instructed them to stand down, cease their striving, and rely on the sovereign and providential God to deliver them from their circumstance. “Moses answered the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still” (Exodus 14:13-14 (NIV).

- **Consider Psalm 46**, when the Psalmist rehearses a frightening scenario that is beyond the control of any human being. He describes how all of creation is shaking and trembling, how nations are turning hostile towards His people, and how cataclysmic environmental conditions are occurring all at the same time. He does this to place us in a spiritual simulator to see how the believer would react. Would the reader attempt to fight all the battles himself? Would the reader spend hours attempting to figure out how to calm the raging seas or how to cause the mountains from rumbling? Would the reader actually believe he could be victorious against any of the cataclysmic perils that are above him, below, and all around him. Or, would the believer simply stand down, sit back, and appeal to God to calm the raging environments that he is unable to handle himself? The Psalmist then describes how one should simply rely on the Lord and watch God command both the believer and the chaos to be still and acknowledge that He is the sovereign, providential God. “Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth” (Psalm 46:10). And when the believer sees His mighty God’s hand at work, his natural reaction is one of comfort, praise, and worship, “The Lord of hosts is with us; The God of Jacob is our refuge” (Psalm 46:11).

GROUP GATHERING #3

Group Gathering is a time to reflect together upon **what we learned** (Head), **what we felt** (Heart), and **what we should do** (Hands).

Note to Group Members:

Be encouraged! Your contribution is valuable to your group and will most assuredly edify the members of your group and your group leader. But should you need to sit and listen today, just to take in the entire discussion and prayerfully process the spiritual discussion quietly, that is OK too! You will not be pressured to speak publicly. We are glad you have joined us today!

Discussion Topics

Choose **one or two** topics to discuss today!

All of the discussion topics are taken from this week's devotionals along with a brief summary of each devotional!

Taken from Day One: *"Acts 16:1-5 – Paul Recruits Timothy at Lystra: When Conviction Meets Fear, Meet Fear with Faith and Wisdom."*

Timothy and his family had a difficult decision to make to allow Timothy to join Paul's ministry team, even after Paul was almost killed in their hometown one year prior for sharing the Gospel. Timothy ended up traveling with Paul and being mentored by him for approximately the next 20 years.

1. Share the names and stories of people you believe resemble the heart of Timothy – who have a good reputation among believers, who desire to serve the Lord with all their heart, and who are willing to follow the Lord's leading wherever He directs.

Try to be vivid in your details so that the group members can best relate with any struggles or tension they experienced along the way in their decision-making process. And after your group shares these encouraging testimonies, encourage each other that you will pray for the family members of your group members that they too would exhibit faith like Timothy in any decisions they are currently facing. Consider collecting the names of the family members while in your group and tell them that your family will pray for their family by name this week.

Taken from Day Two: *"Acts 16:6-12 – "God Redirects Paul towards Philippi: Man Makes his Plans, but God Directs his Steps!"*

God divinely prohibited Paul from continuing to travel to the cities he had originally planned to travel to and redirected Paul to travel to Macedonia where in Philippi, Paul experienced spiritual victories beyond what he ever anticipated!

Acts 16:6-12 emphasized the need for believers to remain flexible, nimble, and agile (instead of desiring a calm, stable, and predictable Christian life) in order to run to the center of God's activity to act immediately in order to experience the fullest blessing of the Lord.

2. Share inspiring testimonies of how you followed God's plan rather than your own plans.

Take time to share the details vividly so that your group members can best experience your story and feel how good it was to experience the goodness of God directing your life. And if you feel comfortable, share a current decision you have yet to make and ask your group to pray for you so they can undergird you in prayer immediately. And in the coming weeks, be quick to share the outcome with your group.

Taken from Day Three: "Acts 16:13-40 – Paul Establishes a Small Community of Believers in Philippi: God can Use Anyone!"

The Philippian church was established by what was seemingly a hodgepodge group of individuals who turned out to be a spiritual strong, vibrant group of believers who stand to this day as an example of a unified Body of believers from which we should draw inspiration.

3. Identify one or two people that you know have grown in their faith and let them know that you were thinking about them this week.

Tell them you are inspired by their testimony and spiritual journey to grow in your own faith. Encourage them to continue strong in their walk with the Lord and assure them that they are making a positive impact in other peoples' lives, even if they do not think anyone is watching – Just like the believers at Philippi!

Taken from Day Four: "Acts 18:1-11 – Paul Arrives in Corinth for the First Time: Everyone Needs Encouragement, Give it Freely!"

Paul needed his heart to be encouraged after a very demanding season of life and ministry. Acts 18:1-11 provided three ways in which God delivered His encouragement to Paul, through 1) The presence of Christian Friends (Acts 18:1-4), 2) The gifts from distant Christian Churches (Acts 18:5), and 3) The salvation of new Converts (Acts 18:7-8).

4. Knowing that the testimony of new converts should encourage the heart of believers, reflect upon one of your favorite baptisms you have observed at Thomas Road Baptist Church and/or any report of life change that you have heard while attending church. Rehearse this moment with your group and share why that moment still resonates with you and causes you to celebrate in your heart even today.

5. Share a testimony of how you, your family, or loved ones received a gift of support from another person or family and explain how it lifted your spirit and allowed you emotional freedom from the discouragement you might have been feeling prior to receiving the gift.
6. Invite any group member to share their testimony of their salvation and/or spiritual growth with the group for the purpose of encouraging everyone that God is always at work in peoples' lives.

Taken from Day Five: *"Acts 18:12-17 – Paul Needs No Defense in Court in Corinth: Be on the Lookout for Open Displays of God's Sovereignty and Providence All Around You!"*

Paul was dragged into court and prepared to testify in a case that could have made the preaching of the Gospel illegal. But before Paul could open his mouth, his sovereign God providentially orchestrated the circumstances so that he never had to open his mouth. This resulted in allowing Paul to continue to preach the Gospel freely and without restraint!

7. Share an instance when you really stretched yourself and chose to trust God when your human flesh was screaming at you to take matters into your own hands.

Express the specific emotions you felt and thoughts you grappled with that were working against your waiting on the Lord. Then share how you feel today about your decision to trust the Lord in that situation.

8. Discuss some specific ways in which your group members can best encourage you and each other to trust the Lord throughout this year.

What could each group member say or do for you that would motivate you to continue to trust the Lord throughout the week. Think of what you could say to your fellow group members that would fulfill Hebrews 10:24, "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works."

3

ACTS 18:18-21:15 OVERVIEW

This week covers the following ways in which the members of God's Church can grow in their faith as God grows His Church:

1. Giving guidance graciously and taking advice with humility.
2. A beautiful portrait of how the Gospel spread to all types of people who lived both pre-cross and post-cross!
3. Use every available means to reach every available person at every available time with the Gospel!
4. No matter how hard people try to thwart the providence of God, God's will always prevails!
5. If goodbyes are difficult, it means you care.

Memory Verse

Acts 4:12

"Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

A Summary of Acts 18:18-21:15

Paul stayed in Corinth after he was exonerated in court from any wrongdoing after Sosthenes attempted to imprison him for preaching the Gospel (Acts 18:18). After which, Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla traveled to Ephesus (Acts 18:21b). Paul then left Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus as he continued to travel to Galatia to “strengthen the brethren” (Acts 18:23b). While Aquila and Priscilla ministered in Ephesus, a good and spiritual man named Apollos visited Ephesus in hopes to join the believers there to assist in continuing the spread the good news (Acts 18:24). Excited to meet another believer who was eager to join them in proclaiming the Gospel to the Gentiles, they noticed that the Lord had blessed Apollos with helpful gifts and talents that would serve them well in effectively communicating the Scriptures. Hearing that Apollos was a follower of John the baptizer, Aquila and Priscilla lovingly updated Apollos on all that had happened in the coming of the Holy Spirit in light of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Apollos took the instruction with humility and continued to preach the Gospel!

In Acts 19, Paul engaged twelve disciples of John the baptizer in a very similar way to how Aquila and Priscilla engaged Apollos in the previous four verses (Acts 18:23-26). Afterward, Paul withdrew from the Synagogue as hostilities grew and he rented a lecture hall within the city to teach during the day for two years (Acts 19:10). During this time, the Lord empowered Paul to perform many miracles (Acts 19:11). This drew the attention of many jealous people who wanted to be known for wielding that kind of power. But they did not know Jesus the way Paul knew Jesus. So, when they attempted to mimic what Paul did to cast out demons, it was not successful (Acts 19:11-16). The word spread of what the Lord brought about in that moment and many people accepted Christ (Acts 19:17-20).

Riots broke out in Ephesus and many of people protested to their local government leader that Paul’s teaching should not be allowed in their city. The governmental leader calmed them down and Paul and his friends left Ephesus (Acts 19:21-41).

Paul traveled to Greece, then Troas, and then to Miletus (Acts 20:1-16). While at Miletus, Paul invited the Ephesian elders to meet him and he had a tender time of reflection with them. He warned them of people who would rise up from among them to attempt to scatter the believers, and encouraged them to remain vigilant. Then they had an emotional farewell with heavy tears (Acts 20:17-37).

On his way to Jerusalem, Paul was cautioned by many well-intended believers to avoid Jerusalem because of the persecution that he would inevitably experience. But after they talked with Paul on a couple of occasions, they sensed it was the will of God that Paul travel to Jerusalem, “So when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, “The will of the Lord be done” (Acts 21:14). And “after those days we packed and went up to Jerusalem” (Acts 20:15).

Timeline & Key Events

This week, our daily devotionals will focus upon five **key moments** within **Acts 18:18-21:15**.

Acts 18:18-23

Paul in Cenchrea, Ephesus, Antioch of Syria and Galatia

Acts 18:24-28

The Body Supports the Body in Humility in Ephesus

Acts 19:1-7

The Gospel Makes Progress in a Very Unique Way

Acts 19:8-10

Paul gets Kicked out of the Synagogue in Ephesus, so he brings Christ into the Classroom

Acts 19:11-20

Demons Testify of the Greatness of God in Ephesus

Acts 19:21-41

People of Ephesus worship Artemis

Acts 20:1-12

Paul in Greece and Troas

Acts 20:16-38

Paul Performs a Spiritual Check-up with the Ephesian Leaders in Miletus

Acts 21:1-15

○ Paul in Tyre, Ptolemais, and Caesarea

The Body Supports the Body in Humility in Ephesus – Acts 18:24-28

1. Giving Guidance Graciously and Taking Advice with Humility

We all have friends who seem to have a unique strength, a special skill, or a level of luck over and above anyone else we know. Sometimes, people equate this as their “superpower.” For example, some people have the ability to find an incredible sale for whatever they are looking to purchase. And even though you may surf the internet for days, they just seem to immediately find the deals. Along the same lines, some people have an innate ability to negotiate a price down for almost any product or service. Their superpower is the art of the deal. Some hunters have the exceptional ability to spot a deer in the thickest brush from hundreds of yards away without binoculars. And if we ever want to know what is happening around the city or even in our neighborhoods, there always seems to be that one person who knows all the current events before anyone else (not as a busybody, just a good superpower!). And some people just have a way with words. Still, some have great listening skills. They have kind hearts and listen to us ramble on our thoughts and feelings and then have the ability to put in their own words our thoughts and feelings right back to us in a way that effectively captures exactly what our hearts were feeling. In all these funny yet meaningful ways, we see how God has uniquely equipped each one of us in ways that the entire Body of Christ can benefit. In Acts 18:24-28, we get a glimpse of a believer named Apollos who was gifted by God in unique ways that benefited the body of Christ and also demonstrated an ability that blessed the believers the most. It is a “superpower” that every believer should exercise – humility.

Paul stayed in Corinth for a good while after he was exonerated in court after Sosthenes attempted to imprison him for preaching the Gospel (Acts 18:18). After which, Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla traveled to Ephesus (Acts 18:21b). Paul then left Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus as he continued to travel to Galatia to “strengthen the brethren” (Acts 18:23b). While Aquila and Priscilla ministered in Ephesus, a good and spiritual man named Apollos visited Ephesus in hopes to join the believers there to assist in continuing the spread the good news (Acts 18:24). Excited to meet another believer who was eager to join them in proclaiming the Gospel to the Gentiles, they noticed that the Lord had blessed

Apollos with helpful gifts and talents that would serve them well in effectively communicating the Gospel message.

Aquila and Priscilla quickly noticed that Apollos was a very smart man and was able to not only recite the Old Testament Scriptures with ease but to also interpret them through the lens that Jesus Christ was the Messiah (Acts 18:24b, Apollos was “...mighty [i.e. powerful, victorious] in the Scriptures.”). This was encouraging to them because they realized that in addition to the Apostle Paul, they had another believer who could be used by God to effectively dissect the most acute points of Christian doctrine, expose the weaknesses of any false teachings and religions, and help teach others how to accept Jesus Christ as their Savior. They were encouraged that in Paul’s absence, they would have a teacher who was well-versed in the Old Testament. In addition, they noticed that Apollos was an effective communicator (Acts 18:24). He was “eloquent” (Greek: LOG-ee-oss) which was word used only one time in Greek New Testament. The Greek word conveyed that not only he had a way with words, but his explanations were “clear to understand, rational, and full of wisdom.” They thought it was a great gift from God to bring them someone like Apollos.

John the “Baptist” (Matthew 3:1) would better be known as John the “baptizer” as the Greek word translated the “Baptist” is a word that describes one who administers the rite of baptism. Plus, the Baptist denomination was not an established denomination until the early 17th Century. The reason why it is written as “baptist” (Matthew 3:1) is because if you spell the Greek word into English, it virtually spells the word “baptist” (Greek: “baptistēs”). When you simply spell a word from another language into one’s own language, it is called transliteration. But it is not a translation (i.e. meaning of the word). So, when they transliterated the word as “baptist,” it confused believers in the 21st Century because the word “Baptist” carries a significant meaning today.

Even though Apollos was “mighty” (i.e. produced powerful substance) in the Scriptures and “eloquent” (i.e. able to argue persuasively using effective use of his language) in his speech, his true “superpower” was his humble spirit. He welcomed two members of the body of Christ to offer him some clarity on his teaching in order to be provided the most accurate and effective Gospel message (just as the Apostles and Christian leaders gathered to receive affirmation and clarity when they met in Jerusalem in Acts 15). Apollos “spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John [the baptizer]” (Acts 18:25b). Meaning, John the baptizer preached that everyone should repent of their sins and look to God’s appointed Messiah to come. He believed Jesus was that Messiah and the Lamb

of God (John 1:29). Apollos preached an accurate but limited message that John the baptizer preached, but probably did not know the full significance of Jesus’ death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. In addition, Apollos probably did not know of the coming of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-12) and that the role of the Holy Spirit is to indwell believers upon salvation (Acts 1:8; 2:1-13, 38). Apollos probably also needed to be educated on the final commandment that Jesus gave for the Gospel to be preached to all nations (Matthew 28:18-20) and spread to the “uttermost parts of the earth” (Acts 1:8) which included the Gentiles and not only to the Jewish people (Ephesians 2:14-22). Apollos was an Old Testament saint but did not understand what made Christians totally distinct from the Jewish faith. So, right after Apollos spoke

“boldly” (Acts 18:26a) in the synagogue, Aquila and Priscilla, “took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26b) to explain all this to him.

The big question was how did Apollos receive the words from Aquila and Priscilla after he just preached so boldly in the synagogue without the insights that they provided him? Was he going to get embarrassed because he just preached publicly without knowing all of the additional details they would soon tell him? Out of pride would he not listen to them, being such an intelligent man? Would he give into his flesh and respond sarcastically and tell them that they could not possibly teach him anything he does not already know? Was he going to play the leader-card and suggest that Aquila and Priscilla ought to just stay-in-their-own-lane and allow him to do the teaching? Or, was he going to welcome and warmly receive the encouraging words from these two spirit-controlled believers?

To the praise of the Lord, Apollos not only received their words with appreciation, but he also incorporated them into his teaching! As a result, Apollos’ teachings were complete and he was able to preach with full clarity that Jesus was both the Risen Lord God and the true Messiah, and that the Father sent the Holy Spirit to be the teacher of all believers (John 14:6). Because of what he learned, he can now add to his sermons that the salvation Jesus provides is irrevocable because He died and was raised once and for all to intercede for all believers who put their faith in Him (Act 2:24, 30-36; I Corinthians 15:55-57; Hebrews 7:25).

And Apollos wasted no time to get back to preaching the Gospel! Apollos did not wallow in embarrassment or grapple with anger because of any pride, he evidenced his love for the truth by wanting to travel even more to preach the Gospel. And so he immediately traveled Achaia to engage more Jewish people so that he could exercise what he had learned, “For he vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 18:28)!

And not only was the humility of Apollos encouraging to witness but so was the obviously unifying manner in which Aquila and Priscilla shared their encouragement and instructive words with Apollos. They even addressed him privately rather than publicly while in the synagogue. They invited Apollos to their home (Acts 18:16) to have a respectful conversation. For a minister to be that encouraged to minister with a renewed passion and energy immediately

Unique Details for a One-of-a-kind Generation:

Once again, we see a unique detail that only occurred in this first generation of Christians in Acts 18:25-26. Some people needed to be caught up on the full details of the death, burial, resurrection, ascension of Jesus, and the coming and relevance of the Holy Spirit. Fortunately, we do not have this challenge today as we have the entirety of God’s Word that explains everything to us!

Notice the intentional emphasis on “grace” in this account with Apollos. Acts 18:27 says, “When he [Apollos] arrived, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed.” Do not miss the intentional insertion of the word “grace” that the Holy Spirit included here. It serves as a reminder that “by grace we have been saved through faith” (Ephesians 2:8). The word is probably inserted here because Apollos just recently fully understood this concept of grace after he talked with Aquila and Priscilla and the Holy Spirit wanted to emphasize that point once again as He described the believers Apollos just met after that conversation.

Apollos did not just “vigorously refute” false teaching about Jesus Christ, he “destroyed” their arguments. “Vigorously refute” is taken from one Greek word (dia-kaht-eh-LEG-kaw-my) used one time in the Greek New Testament to mean “overpower with substantiation; to substantiate with undefeatable strength.”

after a conversation such as this one, Aquila and Priscilla undoubtedly shared their words with Apollos in a way that motivated and supported rather than causing discouragement, bitterness, or embarrassment. Any senior pastor reading this account will confirm that for a preacher to respond as positively as Apollos did after the conversation with renewed energy, will testify that their words were most assuredly delivered in a spirit of encouragement love, and support for the preacher (I Corinthians 13, Ephesians 4:29). This is the proper way to offer one's thoughts to a pastor or teacher, in a sincere and tender way that conveys unconditional love and support for the leader, and that motivates the leader to want to continue fulfilling their calling with renewed energy and passion.

Pray and Ponder Today...

Reflect on a moment where a kind person (or people) took the time to graciously and sincerely offer you correction, guidance, or advice that ended up helping you to be more effective in fulfilling your goal/task/job/plan. And today, you are better for it and are glad that this person talked to you. Reflecting back, did you initially receive his/her words with joy? Did you initially resist accepting his/her words of advice? Did you adopt his/her advice immediately or hold off for a while until you realized it actually was helpful guidance? Think about where you would be if that person had not shared his/her words with you. Are you grateful today for his/her kindness and courage to talk to you? Now ask yourself if there is someone you need to encourage and offer advice and guidance to in the same kind and supportive way.

Pray and thank God for bringing this person into your life at that particular time. Take time to praise the Lord for equipping faithful servants in this world who have the courage and kindness to help other people in this way. Then ask Him to make you the type of person who cares for others so much that you sincerely desire to help others grow in their faith.

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Just as Aquila and Priscilla pulled Apollos aside privately and graciously offered him supportive insights that made his teaching more accurate, share a moment when a kind person (or people) took the time to graciously and sincerely offer you correction, guidance, or advice that ended up helping you to be more effective in fulfilling your goal/task/job/plan. How are you better for it and are you glad that person talked to you? Discuss your level of receptivity to accepting loving and gracious correction from a spirit-controlled believer. Then pray for each other that every member of your group would be humble to receive this type of support from another believer. Pray also that each member would always adopt this supportive, Spirit-controlled manner in delivering words of encouragement, advice, and guidance to others.

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

Listen & Grow!

Today's sermon is delivered by our Founding Pastor, Dr. Jerry Falwell Sr., and focuses on the powerful truths found in Acts 18–21. This message is filled with timeless biblical wisdom, offering insight into the challenges and triumphs of early church leaders as they faithfully carried out their mission. Dr. Falwell's teaching continues to resonate today, reminding us of the relevance and strength of God's Word in every generation.



Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

**Optional but
Recommended!**

“Dig Deeper” provides added insight into this portion of Acts with supporting Scriptures. Be encouraged to reflect on how to live out the spiritual applications unearthed in this devotional.

Want to Dig Deeper...

Consider some additional context on Apollos that speaks to his humility: Apollos’ humble example is inspiring because he could have been very prideful because of his education and skills. Acts 18:24 speaks to the strong academic environment in which he grew up and studied. He was “born in Alexandria” which was one of three locations that contained the Roman universities (in addition to Tarsus and Athens). Alexandria is the location where the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek (called the “Septuagint” pronounced “sept-TOO-ah-jint” or “SEPT-ah-jint”). Alexandria was known for having one of the largest libraries in the world (Yes, this is the same library referred to in Disney World’s “Spaceship Earth” when the narrator says, “Then we hit a road-block. Rome falls. And the Great Library of Alexandria is burned.” It is difficult to get that burning smell of simmering embers out of your mind, isn’t it?!). He was “mighty” in the Scriptures (i.e. produced powerful substance) and “eloquent” in his speech (i.e. able to argue persuasively using effective use of his language). So, he lived in a college town where there were many professors, professionals, and people who would come to study similar to Lynchburg, VA. He was trained to be a master of the art of rhetoric with a command of his language, and he spoke with substance and not just with flamboyancy. Still, he humbly received correction and instruction from people less educated than him but who had truth to communicate to him.

1. Read the following verses and share how Apollos adopted the spiritual truths found in these verses – most all of them from the Old Testament with which Apollos was familiar:

- Proverbs 1:7

- Proverbs 9:9

- Proverbs 19:20

- Proverbs 16:18

- Proverbs 23:12
-

- Psalm 25:9
-

- James 4:6
-

- 2.** Evaluate how humble and teachable you currently are. Write down what areas the Lord has given you victory to be humble and teachable and what areas you need to ask the Lord to continue to convict you to be humble and teachable. Then pray to God and thank Him for these victories He has done in your life, and ask Him to give you victory in the remaining areas.

(This may be challenging to answer, but this type of activity is exactly why we as a church go through a Bible study like this, for the purpose of allowing the Holy Spirit to bring about life-change in us. We do this to bring glory to God! Prayerfully, open your heart to the Holy Spirit to do His perfect work within you. You will quickly realize that God's way is the best way, and He will bless you for it!)

Consider the humility of Paul. Paul was also trained by the best, was raised in a town with one of three Roman universities Tarsus, and taught and debated Jewish and non-Jewish scholars all throughout his ministry. Read Acts 22:3 and notice similar qualities Paul had to Apollos in reference to his educational background. So, one has to wonder how Paul was going to react knowing there is another equally educated minister traveling town to town preaching the Gospel like he is currently doing.

- 3.** To find out if Paul embraced Apollos' ministry or if he had a prideful spirit of competition with Apollos, read the following verses and summarize in your own words how Paul felt about Apollos: I Corinthians 3:5-6; 4:6; Titus 3:13.
-

Paul had God's mission on his mind to "be witnesses...to the uttermost parts of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Thus, to have another strong communicator traveling and spreading God's truth was a welcome blessing to him and they joined together in the ministry effort!

Consider the humility of Peter. Approximately 30 years after the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, the Apostle Peter expressed his hope and desire for all believers to continue to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (II Peter 3:18). This is a very impactful statement coming from a man whose mistakes and missteps are out in the open for all to read in the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But he matured in his faith and adopted a spirit of humility. 30 years after ministering with Jesus, Peter wrote, “be clothed with humility, for ‘God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.’” (I Peter 5:5b). Recall any one moment where Peter did not demonstrate humility during his time with Jesus (consider Matthew 26:31-35 for starters), and then notice how he instructed people to choose humility (I Peter 5:5).

4. Describe how Peter must have felt to have received God’s forgiveness and restoration to preach against the very mistakes he once committed.

- Notice Peter does the same thing when he condemns the Jewish people for “denying” Jesus (Luke 22:54-62 and Acts 3:11-16)!

5. Knowing God can use a person’s testimony of victory over mistakes to encourage others to grow in their faith, what areas of your life could you offer as a testimony of victory? What spiritual lesson has God taught you and how could you now encourage others to live life God’s way in this area based on your own experience?

The Gospel Makes Progress in a Very Unique Way – Acts 19:1-7

2. A Beautiful Portrait of How the Gospel Spread to all Types of People Who Lived both Pre-Cross and Post-Cross!

All Spirit-controlled believers find it exhilarating to learn how to accurately and thoroughly study the Bible. In fact, that is probably why you are going through this Bible study right now! And when Spirit-controlled believers discover how they can know God's Word, apply God's Word, and learn how to teach others to do the same, it produces an insatiable joy in their hearts to continue growing. And when this happens, it strengthens the entire Body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12-13). Acts 19:1-7 is a passage that offers an example of how believers learn some profound principles about salvation, care for peoples' souls, and to evangelize the world but also how to serve fellow believers by accurately teaching them.

Today's devotional is unique in that we will read a portion of Scripture that is primarily descriptive in its purpose but contains some profound principles to adopt for today's believers.

This passage addresses how Paul shared the complete message of the Gospel with disciples of John the Baptist (i.e. the baptizer). These believers had an incomplete understanding of the Holy Spirit, among other things, which Paul corrected. Further, there were unique experiences and one-of-a-kind scenarios that no longer occur today. And while these circumstances are unique to the believers in the first century, Acts 19:1-7 is not without some guiding principles that believers should look to adopt in their lives today.

Acts 19:1-7 provides a vivid portrait of the unique factors that went into sharing the Gospel in the one-of-a-kind, never-to-occur-again generation of people. They not only lived pre-cross (they actually knew Jesus Christ on earth), but they continued living post-cross after the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven. They also experienced the arrival of the Holy Spirit upon the earth (which sounds pretty amazing, doesn't it?). The primary purpose of descriptive passages like Acts 19:1-7 is to offer believers today a description of what occurred and not necessarily to provide us with specific commands and spiritual prescriptions we should adopt. But do not worry, there are many spiritual principles that can be extracted from this scene that should be adopted into every believer's

heart. This is not uncommon throughout the Bible as the Holy Spirit inspired a significant portion of the Old Testament to offer historical descriptions of how God worked in the land at the time (I & II Samuel, I & II Kings, I & II Chronicles, etc.). Occasionally, the book of Acts provides vivid, historical descriptions of the unique factors the Gospel preachers were presented with as they fulfilled the mandate Jesus gave to spread the Gospel to the “uttermost parts of the earth” (Acts 1:8). But again, that is not to say that these portions of the book of Acts have no significant purpose today. Far from it!

In Acts 19:1-7, Paul engages twelve disciples of John the baptizer similar to how Aquila and Priscilla engaged Apollos in the previous four verses (Acts 18:23-26). These men also had an incomplete understanding of Jesus’ words, actions, and ministry (For a refresher on what disciples of John the baptizer believed but also did not know, see the devotion covering Acts 18:24-28). They were different from the Jews who were steeped in the Mosaic Law, Samaritans who adopted portions of Judaism, or Gentiles who were not strongly influenced by Judaism. They were similar to all Old Testament saints who believed God in faith and in His promise for the coming of His Messiah to deliver His people (Romans 4:1-3; Luke 2:25-38). Whereas, every believer who was saved after the Resurrection has a clear understanding of all of Jesus. He is the true Deliverer and suffering Savior to all. He is the One who rose again and sent the Holy Spirit to indwell every believer immediately upon salvation. But their understanding of the words and work of Jesus Christ was limited. They were unaware about the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and the role He now has in believer’s lives (Acts 19:1-4). In essence, they were Old Testament saints with the added advantage of possibly having met Jesus while physically on this earth.

So, when these believers advanced in their understanding about Jesus’ work on the cross and the full significance of the resurrection and ascension and acknowledged these new details about Jesus Christ, they immediately received the Holy Spirit just as believers today receive the Holy Spirit immediately upon believing in Jesus Christ with full understanding (Acts 19:5). In essence, the moment these disciples of John the baptizer declared their full understanding of the Jesus’ work, they received the Holy Spirit and were changed from Old Testament saints to Christians!

One detail that has caused some confusion in 21st Century church denominations is the fact that these men received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and prophesied approximately 20 years after the Day of Pentecost (Acts 19:6). As a result, some church denominations today believe that believers can be saved but may not receive the entire indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit until later on in their Christian journey. Some also suggest that based on this passage, a true believer must demonstrate the ability to speak in tongues and prophesy to confirm one’s salvation. The problem with basing these positions upon Acts 19:6 is that this portion of God’s Word is only meant to be understood

descriptively (simply to share what occurred) rather than prescriptively (to mimic every detail and do it this way today). But when one understands that receiving the Holy Spirit after personal belief in Acts 19:1-6 is unique to these saints who lived pre-cross/post-cross transitional generation, then there is no confusion. This was a description of what happened to disciples of John the baptizer who lived pre-cross and then post-cross and how they came to have their theology enhanced so they could preach about Jesus Christ with the utmost accuracy.

So, why did they experience the miraculous speaking in tongues and prophesying? What exactly happened in Acts 19:6? This was the exact same experience that the believers who were in Jerusalem had on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11). It was similar to the what the Samaritans experienced in Acts 8:14-17. And it was the same circumstances that the Gentile believers experienced in Acts 10:43-48! The disciples of John the baptizer divinely and uniquely had the same experience. Meaning, there were 1st Century Jewish people who believed in the coming Messiah (pre-cross) just like the Old Testament saints who were not present at the Day of Pentecost (post-cross). And in God's divine plan, the Lord provided these believers with a delayed Pentecost experience! When an apostle shared the full teachings of Jesus Christ and the role of the Holy Spirit, their faith expanded, and they understood with perfect clarity the words and work of Jesus Christ. When they matured in their faith from being an Old Testament saint to becoming a Christian, they too experienced speaking in known languages (Acts 19:6) just like on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:4-11a). They also prophesied (Acts 19:6), "speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God" just like the Jewish believers did 20 years previously (Acts 2:11b).

Why did this occur then and but not now? God allowed this unique demonstration to occur so they could experience it as if they were present on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11) and to assure them that the reality of the Holy Spirit was true. Paul told them the Holy Spirit had come but this demonstration provided infallible proof. The Lord provided these men with the same experience that even Gentile converts received when the Apostle Peter preached the truth of Christ to them (Acts 10:43-48)! Thus, the reason why this demonstration was allowed to occur in these early stages of the development of the church was to make it clear to all that the Holy Spirit would come upon anyone who had a clear understanding and sincere belief in Jesus Christ, whether Jew, Gentile, Samaritan, or Old Testament saint! For Paul wrote in Galatians 3:26-29, "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

And once this was clearly demonstrated early in the birth of the church as documented in the book of Acts, these experiences no longer had to occur.

Thus, it should be no surprise that after Acts 2, these occurrences became infrequent in the book of Acts (Acts 2, 10, and 19) as this unique generation received clarity about the work of Jesus and the role of the Holy Spirit. In fact, it should be noted that Acts 19:6 contains the very last occurrence of this demonstration of one getting saved and speaking in tongues and prophesying. The account ends very anticlimactically by simply saying that “now the men were about twelve in all” (Acts 19:7). The reason there was such an anticlimactic ending to such a demonstration of the Spirit’s power was because the era of the

A believer receives 100% of the Holy Spirit upon salvation when what? *A believer is “indwelt” immediately and fully by the Holy Spirit upon salvation. And after salvation, a believer is to allow the Holy Spirit to “control” him/her on a daily basis. Unfortunately, being “Spirit-controlled” is often translated as being “filled with the Holy Spirit.” This causes unnecessary confusion as if there is another arrival or indwelling of the Holy Spirit upon a believer or another “coming upon” a believer somehow/ somehow more than the believer living a pure life that the Holy Spirit can direct and guide through prayer and the reading of God’s Word. Thus, once again Acts 19:1-7 illustrates a unique detail that only occurred in this first generation of Christians who lived pre-cross and post-cross.*

An Important Conversation! *The population of Ephesus was approximately 250,000 people. Paul devoted his time and attention to make sure the theology of twelve men was accurate (Acts 19:7). That is only 0.0048% of the population! However, it was the most important conversation he could have had at that moment.*

Holy Spirit demonstrating His indwelling presence was over. Now, the evidence of believer is their faith in Jesus Christ and a heart that is convicted to obey God’s Word by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit!

As of today, the Holy Spirit immediately and fully indwells a person upon salvation. And if the book of Acts is interpreted accurately there are no other subsequent indwelling or “coming upon” or “second-giving of the Spirit” events that occurs or is necessary for believers today. And while the occurrence in Acts 19:1-7 is not the norm for believers today, and never occurs again in the New Testament, the way in which Paul engaged these precious disciples of John the baptizer provides some valuable spiritual principles for believers today. The descriptive account of Acts 19:1-7 provides believers today with at least five spiritual prescriptions that should be adopt in practice:

1. We should know the Scriptures and be on-the-ready to share the accurate truth of the Gospel (Acts 19:4; I Peter 3:15a; II Timothy 4:2a).
2. Make sure both repentance and faith in Jesus Christ is included in your salvation message (Acts 3:19; 4:12, 11:18, 19:4; 20:21; 26:20).
3. We should take a sincere interest in the spiritual condition of people (Acts 19:1b-2).
4. If people sincerely want to learn more about what God’s Word teaches, we should always present God’s truth with patience (II Timothy 4:2b) and with gentleness, and respect (I Peter 3:15b).
5. We must be committed to do all of the above with anyone who engages us when God gives us the opportunity, even if a group is small or if no one ever finds out.

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect upon your salvation experience and how you are growing spiritually today. Think about how many questions you needed to ask before you came to faith in Christ. Was there someone who explained the Gospel to you and helped you come to a clear understanding? Or, did you accept Christ the first time you heard the Gospel, say, in church? Did you have to return home and ponder what you heard and the implications of it or was your heart ready to immediately accept it? And now as a believer, are you open to learning more about the Bible in order to serve and worship God more accurately? Do you enjoy learning how to study God's Word for yourself? Have you taken steps to learn the Word of God with other believers?

Pray and thank the Lord for your salvation. Thank Him for the precious people who took the time to explain the Gospel to you and to those who live spiritual lives that inspire you to grow in your spiritual walk.

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Take a moment to reflect upon where you were spiritually before you joined your current group. Share how you have grown spiritually as a result of the helpful discussion and prayer times you have experienced in your group. Feel comfortable among your group members to share what you have appreciated learning from your group meetings that have made a positive difference in your spiritual walk. Be specific. Think of specific contributions people have made that you internalized. Share that moment with the group, thanking the person(s) for their contribution to your spiritual life. Then, take time as a group to pray and thank the Lord for the blessing that your group offers as a valuable spiritual support system.

Listen & Grow!

Listen to a powerful sermon clip preached by our Sr. Pastor Jonathan Falwell, centered on the call to make disciples who grow in their walk with Christ and boldly share the story of redemption. This message reminds us that discipleship is more than knowledge—it's a journey of transformation.



Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

**Optional but
Recommended!**

“Dig Deeper” provides added insight into this portion of Acts with supporting Scriptures. Be encouraged to reflect on how to live out the spiritual applications unearthed in this devotional.

Want to Dig Deeper?

Here are some additional insights on how to apply the book of Acts to one’s life today. An important principle to remember when one wants to apply the book of Acts to everyday life is to know what portions of an account are “prescriptive” and what portions were written for the only purpose of being “descriptive.” Remember, *both* types of statements are the *inspired* Word of God. It is just that at times the Holy Spirit chose to provide a description of an event and at times He chose to prescribe an action all believers at all times ought to obey (just like the Holy Spirit inspired poetic language in Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, or proverbial language in Proverbs, or apocalyptic language in Revelation, etc.).

1. “Prescriptions” – Are commands to be followed or a theological truth to be adopted. Put another way, it is a teaching that should happen among believers and/or should be adopted in a believer’s life. Read the following very small sample of “prescriptive” verses in the book of Acts that all believers at all times should adopt and summarize its prescription to all believers:

- Acts 1:8
-

- Acts 4:12
-

All believers at all times should spread the Gospel. Circumstances should not hinder believers from sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Local churches should be established to accomplish Jesus’ mandate to “be witnesses...unto the uttermost parts of the earth” (Acts 1:8b)! And the salvation message of Acts 4:12 is the basis for salvation and will never change. In addition, these prescriptive commands are repeated in many other books of the Bible!

2. “Descriptions” – Are an explanation of an event that occurred. In this case, we are to be inspired by these first century believers’ example by 1) identifying the theological truths that are on display or being acted upon in a given situation within the book of Acts, 2) locating the principles within the description of what happened and how they responded, and 3) adopting the characteristics and principles in your own unique life situation and church context. Read the following verse that contains *both* “descriptive” and “prescriptive” portions and identify what are descriptive details that believers today were never commanded to adopt and what portions are prescriptive details and spiritual truths that believers today should adopt.

- Acts 20:17-21 (descriptive details):

- Acts 20:17-21 (prescriptive principles):

3. Now, try the same exercise on a very popular passage in Philippians 2:2-8. It has a clear divide between its prescriptive and descriptive section. Think about where you would literally draw a line and divide the prescriptive and descriptive sections of this passage (and don't look at verse numbers when you draw your dividing line). On what verse did you place your dividing line?

4. Why did you identify everything before your dividing line as prescriptive?

5. Why did you identify everything after your dividing line as descriptive?

6. What would happen if you attempted to mimic everything in your descriptive portion? And would you actually have a difficult time being able to accomplish all of the descriptive section (like verse 6)?

7. Some people want to make a connection between the twelve disciples of John the baptizer and the twelve disciple of Jesus in Acts 19:1-7. But there is no significant connection with the number twelve here. So, why is the number twelve inserted in this text? Read Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-2 and summarize what Luke's goal was in writing the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts and how thorough he was in reporting all the finer details.

8. Luke, the author of the book of Acts, was successful in researching and providing very specific and vivid details of the accounts he documented even down to the headcount of some groups in Acts 19:7. But this is not the first time an author shared details for this purpose. Read John 2:6 and Acts 20:8 and identify the finer details provided in these verses.

9. Now read two testimonials, one from the Apostle John and the Apostle Peter (1 John 1:1-3; 2 Peter 1:16). What do these finer details and testimonials say about the accuracy of Scripture describing the biblical event?

10. How does this make you feel about the accuracy of the Scriptures when someone suggests the Bible is just a bunch of fairy tales?

Paul gets kicked out of the Synagogue in Ephesus, so He brings Christ into the Classroom – Acts 19:8-10

3. Use Every Available Means to Reach Every Available Person at Every Available Time with the Gospel!

Liberty University was founded with a vision by Dr. Jerry Falwell Sr. to develop “Christ-centered men and women with the values, knowledge, and skills essential to impact the world.” Its motto is to “Train Champions for Christ!” Every student studying in any discipline is encouraged to be a witness in their respective fields. They are trained to be excellent at their craft to gain the respect of their colleagues in the field in order to earn the right to be heard when they share the Gospel. And to the praise of the Lord, testimonies of students and alumni who have taken this mission and calling to heart are myriad! Thousands of people who work with these Liberty University students in their employment sector and spheres of influence have testified of these students, that “we hear them speaking...the wonderful works of God” (Acts 2:11)!

Liberty University was established by the founding church, Thomas Road Baptist Church, which was led by Dr. Jerry Falwell Sr. From its inception, the church has remained faithful to Word of God and the preaching of the Gospel. The church still maintains its passion to use “every available means to reach every available person at every available time” with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There has never been a time where an individual has heard mixed messages about the Gospel of Jesus Christ from either institution. The message remains clear and has been consistently proclaimed since the inception of both intuitions. It is safe to say that there will never be a day where a student or congregant, faculty member or pastor will be persecuted for accurately and sincerely presenting the true Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul would have loved to experience such a welcoming environment in both synagogues and centers of learning in his day. Unfortunately, the locations dedicated to spiritual discussion (i.e., synagogues) often expelled Paul out of their midst or pressured him to leave for sharing his interpretations of the Scriptures. Paul was driven out of the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:42-47), in Iconium (Acts 14:1-7), in Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-9), in Berea (Acts 17:10-15),

in Corinth (Acts 18:4-7), and in Ephesus (Acts 19:8-9a). He was also stoned in Lystra, by those from Iconium (Acts 14:19), arrested by Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue in Corinth (Acts 18:12-17) and arrested by the leaders of the Jerusalem temple (Acts 21:26-30). Paul did not receive a warm reception in an environment where one would think spiritual discussions would be welcome.

Usually in these instances, Paul had to flee the city for his safety. But on two occasions the Lord provided environments of protection with a willing audience. In Corinth, Paul walked right next door into a Gentile's house and ended up leading many Gentiles and Jews to Christ, including ultimately the leader of the synagogue (Acts 18:7-8)! And in Ephesus (Acts 18:8-9a) Paul withdrew from the synagogue and received a warm reception to share his views in, of all places, a school lecture hall!

Paul was permitted to lecture for two straight years on his view of how the Old Testament spoke of Jesus Christ being the suffering servant and the Risen Lord and how the Old Testament foretold of Jesus being the Messiah sent from God the Father in whom all should place their faith. Admittedly, while this arrangement of utilizing church/school facilities sounds like common place for anyone familiar with the ministries that sit upon Liberty Mountain, this was a unique arrangement for Paul that was not witnessed before in the book of Acts.

The School of Tyrannus was a school of Philosophy located in Ephesus. It was either owned and named after a philosopher named Tyrannus who lived in Ephesus or named after a philosopher known among the Ephesians named Tyrannus but owned by another. While it was not on the level of the three sanctioned universities by Rome located in Alexandria, Rome, and Athens (see the Devotional on Acts 18:24-28), it was a well-established and recognized place of learning among the Ephesians. It was treated with respect by the community as there is no record of Paul being interrupted by disagreeable Jewish people during the two-years he lectured there. Most likely, Paul rented out the facility between the hours of 11:00am-4:00pm (as some ancient manuscripts make comment) during the established cultural time the Ephesian community took off work to rest during the heat of the day. Many would work until 11:00am and then return to work at 4:00pm up to midnight or later. In addition, it is very likely that the school itself held philosophical views in disagreement with Paul, but to them he was merely a renter of their facility and a source of additional revenue. Paul took advantage of every available means to reach every available person at every available time with the Gospel!

Now, let's really put ourselves into this moment and experience this text. If you do the math, it is very possible that Paul lectured for five hours a day, six days a week, for two years! This was a lot of lecturing! We know lectures sometimes get a bad reputation because they are synonymous with "boring." Sure, the attendees received a thorough education in the Scriptures from a formally trained scholar, Paul. But can you also imagine the inspiring dialogues that took place with him and others in class? Can you hear Paul's masterful treatment

of how Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies including His suffering and death and resurrection? Can you picture seeing some of your classmates begin to experience the conviction of the Holy Spirit and come to grips with the reality that they need Jesus? Can you imagine the real-life illustrations Paul offered from his own experiences to illustrate some of his most poignant points in the lecture? Can you hear the growing emotion in Paul's voice as he lectured on the Old Testament Scriptures that foretold how the Messiah and His followers would be persecuted for their faith, knowing that it came from His own hand? And how would you have felt when you heard Paul's voice quiver as he expressed his deep, sorrowful regret for the part he played in fulfilling those prophecies? And could you see yourself smile with laughter and joy when he finally arrived at the point in his testimony where he proclaimed, "But this is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners'—and I am the worst of them all. But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in Him and receive eternal life. All honor and glory to God forever and ever! He is the eternal King, the unseen one who never dies; He alone is God. Amen" (I Timothy 1:15-17, NLT)! What an unforgettable experience of exponential spiritual growth that happened in that lecture hall during two years of deep, meaningful teaching of the Word of God from God's faithful servant.

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect on a sermon or a lecture on the Bible that you listened to that you still can remember after all these years. Ask yourself, why did that particular message resonate with you so profoundly? How many years ago did you hear that message? Are you able to recall some of the points that were made in the message? Now think back and ask yourself if that message was something you intentionally sought out to listen to or did God surprise you by bringing it across your path in church, online, in a podcast, etc.? Rehearse the Biblical truths you learned from that message that you still embrace in your life today.

Pray to God and thank Him for His truth that affected your life so profoundly over these many years. Tell God about the lessons you have learned from His Word that have made a profound impact upon your spiritual life. And share with Him how these truths have helped you grow spiritually, and if you have been able to encourage other believers with them. Then, tell Him you are going to keep your heart open to glean from any truths and lessons that you are exposed to through His Word and are preached in your church.

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Consider sharing with your group a sermon or a lecture on the Bible that you listened to that you still can remember after all these years. And just as you were encouraged to do during the “Ponder and Pray” section, share with the group why you believe that particular message resonated with you so profoundly. Share how many years ago you heard that message. Attempt to recall some of the points that were made in the message. Also share if that message was something you intentionally sought out to listen to or did God surprise you by bringing it across your path in church, online, in a podcast. Rehearse the Biblical truths you learned from that message that you still embrace in your life today.

Reflect on this account of how Paul had to be open to unconventional means to continue his teaching and evangelistic ministry in Ephesus. Review Paul’s forfeiture of his personal sleep time in order to teach in a rented lecture hall during the heat of the day. Recall how Paul abandoned his customary practice of teaching in the synagogue when arriving in a city. Then ask your group if anyone could share how they might have experienced similar drastic changes in format, planning, or schedule in order to continue in a ministry. Or, maybe one of your group members witnessed an unsaved co-worker leave the company but the group member still wanted to witness to him/her. Find out how your group member pivoted and adjusted his/her efforts to continue his/her ministry to the person. Then ask your group member to share why s/he went through all of those adjustments in order to continue their ministry to the person. Then, take a moment to encourage your group member for remaining faithful to the ministry God impressed upon him/her.

Scan for a sermon clip related to today’s devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

Listen & Grow!

In today’s compelling sermon clip, our Founding Pastor, Dr. Jerry Falwell Sr., introduces the bold concept of a Big Hairy Audacious Goal—a vision so large and faith-filled that it can only be accomplished through complete dependence on God. Drawing from biblical principles and the mission of the church, Dr. Falwell challenges us to think beyond comfort and convention, urging believers to pursue God-sized dreams that advance the gospel and transform lives.



Want to Dig Deeper?

One of the most meaningful and spiritually significant activities you can do this week is to thank God in your daily prayers for what He has done in and through Thomas Road Baptist Church and Liberty University. After you thank Him, ask for God's continued blessing upon these two ministries; asking, first, that God would continue to provide countless opportunities for the people of Thomas Road Baptist Church "to change our world by developing Christ-followers who love God and love people." Pray that the believers in the church would take full advantage of these opportunities. Then, ask God to continue to bless Liberty University as it comes alongside the local church to assist the Church in fulfilling the Great Commission. Lastly, ask for God's protection upon both ministries, the leadership, the ones who preach, teach, and guide people in their worship, the staff, and for all the members of these ministries that each one of them will never cease to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (II Peter 3:18). Commit for the next seven days to include these specific prayer requests in your daily prayers.

For Paul to pivot from his normal routine and rent a lecture hall does not seem too out of character for him, especially when he was very committed to meeting whenever and wherever people would listen. In the very next chapter of Acts, Paul requests to meet with the elders from Ephesus. They had a very emotional meeting and parting as Paul had to make his way to Jerusalem and they knew that it may be the last time they would see him (Acts 20:38). In this conversation, Paul made a statement that, in light of his long hours of teaching in the lecture hall on top of his work schedule, he really showed his commitment to discipling believers and sharing the Gospel.

1. Read Acts 20:20 to learn of how Paul taught even more(!) while in Ephesus in addition to his work schedule and the long hours of lecturing in the lecture hall. Put in your own words why this statement in Acts 20:20 is inspiring considering his already extremely long days of teaching and working.

2. Knowing the work and lecturing schedule Paul undoubtedly adopted in Acts 19:8-10 and after reviewing Paul's testimony of his commitment to them in Acts 20:20, what do you think was the one thing he sacrificed the most in his personal life? (A hint: It starts with an "s" and ends with a "leep"). He sacrificed very valuable personal time. This is descriptive of what Paul did. It is inspiring indeed. Of course, there is a balance that honors the Lord as it is not wrong to sleep. In fact, sleep is one of the most productive things a person can do. And sleep is the God-ordained means

Optional but Recommended!

"Dig Deeper" provides added insight into this portion of Acts with supporting Scriptures. Be encouraged to reflect on how to live out the spiritual applications unearthed in this devotional.

by which the Lord chooses to rejuvenate the human body. So, there must be a healthy balance. Read the following passages and their surrounding contexts and see how there is a value to sleep.

- Psalm 3:5

- Psalm 127:2

- Mark 4:37-38

It is safe to assume that Paul struck the right balance while in Ephesus and made sure he received enough sleep (although the Holy Spirit did not provide us with any detail of his sleeping habits). Nevertheless, even Paul was human and probably had to learn like every other human how to balance good ministry and necessary rest.

3. How are you balanced with doing what you know God wants you to do and getting the proper amount of rest that God desires you to receive?

4. Are there any adjustments you feel you need to make to honor him more by being balanced in this area?

Be encouraged today, if Psalm 121:3-4 is indeed true that God “neither slumbers nor sleeps,” you can rest well knowing He’s got you fully covered (Psalm 139:5). Think about it, if He never sleeps, then why should there be two of you staying up all night!

Demons Testify of the Greatness of God in Ephesus – Acts 19:11-20

4. No Matter How Hard People Try to Thwart the Providence of God, God's Will Always Prevails!

There is nothing more miraculous to witness than the “providence” of God in one’s life. God’s providence is his unalterable ability to weave every physical detail and moment of our lives to fulfill His divine purpose for us and those around us. And while the Lord calls for all believers to grow in their faith and actively serve Him, God also informs believers that He is in ultimate control. You are not alone or left to rely on your own strength as you attempt to grow and serve Him (Philippians 2:12-13; Proverbs 16:9). God’s providence also comes into play in protecting you (Ephesians 6:10-17), protecting your good reputation as a believer (1 Peter 3:16), and thwarting the plans of the Evil One who desires to halt all evangelistic efforts or at the very least, agitate believers in the process (Acts 19:11-20). But no matter how much the Evil One attempts to thwart the plan of God to reach people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God’s will always prevails. And every time He evidences His mighty providence in Scripture, believers should take heart to know that God does the same for each and every believer.

In Ephesus, “God was performing uncommon, extraordinary, purposeful and on-point miracles through the hands of Paul” (Acts 19:11; original translation). Meaning, while all miracles performed by the apostles were uncommon and by nature extraordinary, some of the miracles God did through Paul in Ephesus were unique and unseen in previous miracle accounts of the apostles. In that “even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them” (Acts 19:12). The Greek word in Acts 19:11 (toog-KAHN-oh) normally translated “unusual,” “extraordinary,” or “special” also connotes that the action fulfilled its purpose perfectly. Hence the translation, “uncommon yet purposeful and on-point miracles.” God divinely empowered Paul to perform some pretty fantastic miracles, that were not seen before, to fulfill His divine reason.

One has to wonder why God chose to allow Paul to perform such unusual miracles in addition to the miracles he was accustomed to performing through God’s power. It was to capture the attention of a culture that was so steeped

in cults, superstition, magical incantations, and the spiritual realm, and to demonstrate that Paul was not just another traveling sorcerer whose God is not just another god, whose name that was invoked in order to make an incantation sound impressive. Rather, to promote that Paul was a messenger of the Creator God who has providential control over everything including the entire spiritual realm (Isaiah 45:5a, Colossians 1:16-17). God wanted these unique miracles to capture the attention of people so that they would look into them and into the Gospel more thoroughly. But not only did these miracles extraordinarily persuade the Ephesian people, they were for the purpose of providentially setting up the demons to make a huge mistake – to do something that would actually bring an exorbitant amount of glory to Jesus Christ and assist the believers in their effort to shut down the false cults and convert hundreds of people to faith in Jesus Christ! Yes, you heard that correctly. God in His providence orchestrated all the details to bring people to faith in Him and set a trap that He knew the demons would fall into resulting in them bringing glory to God!

After watching the Apostle Paul perform these extraordinary miracles in the name of the Lord Jesus, seven sons of Sceva (SKEE-vah) wanted a piece of the action (Acts 19:14). They wanted to share in Paul’s unique popularity that would also set them apart and elevate their status in the community of sorcerers. They felt that if they could just recite what Paul often said before he performed a miracle, that must be the magical “incantation.” The problem was that they had never heard it before Paul arrived in Ephesus and they certainly did not know anything about the “Jesus” Paul referred to. They became familiar with Paul but had no idea who Jesus was. But they concluded that if it worked for Paul, it should also work for them. So, in their attempt to cast a demon out of a man, they had to tweak their “incantation,” and said, “We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches” (Acts 19:13). The result? Silence. It did not work. Then all of a sudden, the man looked up at all seven of them and the demon publicly insulted them and exposed them as frauds through the voice of the man.

Who was Sceva? Acts 19:14 says, “there were seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest.” Odds are Sceva (SKEE-vah) was actually never a chief priest for the Jews. There is no record of him ever holding that office. There is no documented history of his lineage nor that he was ever a priest. He probably was a scam artist impersonating a religious leader. He probably chose to impersonate a Jewish chief priest because Rome had an openness to the thought that the spiritual realm could engage the physical realm and thus would extend a little respect for those who are so bold as to claim they understand that spiritual-physical dynamic, while never bothering to attempt to understand the Jewish religion or check his credentials.

Now, let’s pause the story here to explain how God in His providence orchestrated all the details of this moment. Here is how God would bring people to faith in Him and set a trap that He knew the demons would fall into that would result in them bringing glory to God. It appears in Scripture that the Evil One in the past had allowed his demons to appear as if the Jewish people and fraudulent magicians (like the sons of Sceva) were successful in casting demons out (Luke 11:14-26). But of course, this illusion was just for the temporary moment to give the onlookers the assurance that they did not need to follow Jesus Christ because men who did not follow Jesus could seemingly do the same thing as, say,

the apostles. Interestingly, this tactic provides a very short-term gain for the Evil One but a long-term loss. Jesus confirmed this in Matthew 12:25-26 and Luke 11:14-17 if demons are permitted to be cast out by the power of the Evil One, then that house will eventually become divided and will not be strong. And this is true, but Satan is not all-wise. There are times Satan can act in counter-productive ways for his cause. And while Satan often attempts to appear as an angel of light who does good (II Corinthians 11:14), this practice of allowing frauds to cast his own demons out was about to finally backfire.

It backfires in Acts 19:15-16 because these frauds attempted to sound just like the apostles who were sent out by Jesus Christ and invoked the very “name that is above all names” (Philippians 2:9). Now, Satan had a dilemma. Because, if Satan made it look like invoking Jesus’ name worked in peoples’ eyes and they saw that invoking the name of Jesus commanded the demons to flee, people would begin to be drawn to the message of Jesus Christ, even though it was proclaimed by a group of frauds and unbelievers. In addition, the demons hate – HATE – obeying a command given by or sanctioned by Jesus Christ! So, they were not about to comply with this command. Their bitterness and hatred for the Lord Jesus Christ got the better of them and they reacted in such a way that demonstrates that both Paul was the true messenger of Jesus Christ and that one could not just speak the name of Jesus and expect any level of power or authority to be demonstrated unless one was a true follower of Jesus Christ. Back to the story.

The man looked up at all seven of them and the demon publicly insulted them and exposed them as frauds through the voice of the man, saying, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you” (Acts 19:15)? Or, in a fuller sense, borrowing from the Greek language, the demon conveyed, “Jesus, yes, I know Him very well, and Paul, I am acquainted with who he is, his story and his ministry, but who are you” (Acts 19:15; original expanded translation). As if he was saying, “How dare you begin to invoke the name of Jesus upon us! We made you who you are today! We’ve been giving you your success behind the scenes. But you had to want just a little more fame and invoked the one name that we despise and tremble at” (see James 2:19)! They were not happy that the sinful frauds attempted to invoke the name of Jesus. And not wasting a moment of time, “the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, overpowered them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded” (Acts 19:16). And not just “wounded” but “traumatized” (as the Greek word is “trauma-TIDZ-oh”)! That display of anger over the invocation of the name of Jesus brought a bigger influx of attention to Paul’s Gospel message than any other event in that city had done to date. “This became known both to all Jews and Greeks dwelling in Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified” (Acts 19:17)! In essence, the demon made the Gospel message go viral in Ephesus!

Then those who had been involved in the cults for years publicly repudiated their false beliefs and placed their faith in Jesus Christ, “And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds. Also, many of those who had practiced magic brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and it totaled fifty thousand pieces of silver” (Acts 19:18-19). This was a big statement of repentance and repudiation of their former ways, especially when you do the math. One piece of silver is approximately a day’s wage for an average worker in Ephesus! It illustrates how steeped in false beliefs they were and how many people out of the 250,000 residents were potentially involved in this sinful practice.

God’s providence was on full display in Ephesus on that day. He divinely orchestrated the words and actions of His faithful messenger Paul, the popularity-hungry arrogance of seven fraudsters, and the wicked demons themselves to fulfill His perfect will. It is only fitting that the Holy Spirit ended this section of Acts 19 with the words, “So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed” (Acts 19:20)!

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect on this specific devotional and how God divinely orchestrated both the spiritual and the carnal things of this world to bring about His perfect will. Ponder the reality that God’s plan brought about an outcome that Paul probably never would have imagined happening in his wildest dreams. Take a moment to dwell on the fact that God’s way is the best way and that His way “prevails” (Acts 19:20b) over any other way or effort of man. Ponder the reality that God’s way is the best way in our lives and better than any of our own plans.

Pray the following verse back to the Lord. Convert the following verses into a prayer and pray, “Lord, I will be responsible to make thoughtful and judicious plans, but I pray you will ultimately direct my steps” (taken from Proverbs 16:9). “Lord, there are many plans in my heart right now that I am looking into, but ultimately I want your will to prevail” (taken from Proverbs 19:21). “Lord, I will trust in you and promise to do only good things. I will delight in you, and I humbly ask that you would plant within me the proper desires my heart should feel. I will commit everything I do to you, Lord, and I will trust you. Thank you for your promise that you will help me” (taken from Psalm 37:3-5).

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Prepare to share a time that you were able to clearly trace the providential hand of God in your life. Then describe what you initially felt as the details of the situation were unfolding, even if you did not yet have an explanation of what and why things were happening the way they were (e.g., Were you confused? Did you initially get angry at God? Did you share your frustrations with God? Did

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we’ve just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God’s Word to your heart!

your faith in God weaken or become stronger during this season of your life? Or, were you at peace as a result of being in the situation before and seeing God bring you through?). Then share how much of God's providential plan in that situation was different than the plan you had initially set out to follow. Attempt to predict where you would be today and how things would have gone if God had allowed you to live according to your plan.

Listen & Grow!

Consider what it means to take the next step in your walk with Christ as you listen to a sermon clip preached by our Sr. Pastor Jonathan Falwell. Whether it's stepping into obedience, deepening your faith, or embracing a new calling, this message challenges you to move forward with purpose.



Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

**Optional but
Recommended!**

*“Dig Deeper” provides
added insight into this
portion of Acts with
supporting Scriptures.
Be encouraged to
reflect on how to
live out the spiritual
applications unearthed
in this devotional.*

Want to Dig Deeper?

How God’s Providence and our human responsibility coincide with each other is a spiritual dynamic that many have been pondered over the centuries. Many have attempted to harmonize the two while trying to find the proper balance. And of course, believers want to know how one should then live in light of this dynamic. Here is a healthy approach to understanding doctrines in the Bible. The safest way to understand a doctrine in the Bible is to read all the verses that speak to a particular doctrine, simply state what the Bible clearly says about the doctrine, and then put all of the pieces together. And if there is a gap in our understanding of that doctrine, the Holy Spirit intended it. Then believers have to ask, “How does God tell me to live and what to do in these passages?” What clear instructions does He give us. And after we identify it, we do it. And if we are left with a mystery, we trust that maybe God will either reveal more understanding in time through His Word but we always trust that God Himself knows everything and everything He does is right and good. And we trust Him. Believers must do this regardless of a paradox between what God tells us to do and what He reveals to us about His perspective on the matter. When God gives a glimpse of His perspective, we should joy in His amazing glory, power and authority, but should remember that He only holds us responsible to do what He has clearly commanded us to do. And in time – or in heaven – we may understand more of how the paradox comes together. Again, while it is nice to know what God is doing in the spiritual realm, believers are responsible to obey the clear commands of God.

1. We should trust that He is in ultimate control of our steps and our lives. Based on this, look up the following verses and identify the one or two points each passage makes about God’s providence and/or our human responsibility. Simply state the facts, then you will have an opportunity to summarize your thoughts below.

- Philippians 2:12-13
-

- Ephesians 2:10
-

- Proverbs 3:5-6
-

- Proverbs 16:3

- Proverbs 16:9

- Proverbs 19:21

- Jeremiah 29:11

- James 4:13-15

- Luke 14:28-30

- Isaiah 30:1-3

- Philippians 1:6

- Matthew 6:33

- James 1:5

- Psalm 37:3-5

2. In summary, it seems that we should make plans, be wise stewards of the knowledge, wisdom, and resources the Lord has provided us, but always be open to God imparting new information to change our thinking or our course of action. His purpose may be unknown to us, but He knows His reasoning. And through it all, we are to trust a holy, righteous, providential God as we go through life. What additional thoughts would you add to this summary from your Scripture reading?

3. Acts 1:8 says, “You will be witnesses...to the uttermost parts of the earth.” Here in Acts 19:17-20, we received a progress report on how the Gospel ministry was doing. Read Acts 19:17-20 and identify who heard the Gospel, where it was spreading to, how popular Jesus’ name was becoming in the area, and what types of people were getting saved.

4. Read ahead in Acts 19:25-27 and summarize what the unsaved people of Ephesus said about how Paul’s Gospel ministry spread and was received.

5. Now, reflect on Acts 5:28 and recall how they saturated this Gentile area with the Gospel similarly to what believers did in the city of Jerusalem! If you had to apply a grade to the level of commitment, courage, and confidence these first century believers had in fulfilling Jesus’ command of them to be a bold witness in the world (Acts 1:8), what grade would you give them thus far (A+, A, A-, B+, B, B-...F)? And provide a brief explanation of why you graded them in this way (students always appreciate a professor’s feedback!).

6. Now, share with them how you believe you would have felt if you were on this missions trip to Ephesus with them and witnessed first-hand what occurred in front of their eyes. What would you have thought/felt and how would it have affected your faith? And what would you be eager to tell your friends and family once you returned to Lynchburg from your experience?

Paul Performs a Spiritual Check-up with the Ephesian Leaders in Miletus – Acts 20:16-38

5. If Goodbyes are Difficult, it Means You Care.

It is always good for a church and its leadership to perform spiritual check-ups. Reflecting upon what God has done, observing what He is doing, and attempting to envision what He will do provides necessary reflection, introspection, and inspiration incumbent upon any healthy church. Evaluating the past, assessing the present, and preparing for the future is a good practice for any person or organization.

It is necessary for the health of the church to do all three. But in churches and with various leaders, there is a temptation to focus more on one aspect of the ministry and not all three aspects. For example, a church that focuses too heavily on the past tends to become imbalanced and stagnate in their effectiveness to reach their current communities with the Gospel. And, if left unchecked, the precious people of this type of church will end up being more passionate about how things have always been done and run, more than *being* the church today. Ultimately, God will bring about a divine course correction for this type of ministry. Of course, one does not want to fully ignore the lessons from the past. As it is commonly said, “Ignore the past and you are destined to repeat it.” Similarly, a church is imbalanced if it consciously ignores the lessons from the past and attempts to focus only on today. Famous eccentric fashion designer, Edna Mode (of “The Incredibles” fame), is quoted as saying, “I never look back darling, it distracts from the now.” To ignore the lessons from the past is as if a person enters into the middle of a five-hour meeting believing he does not need to know all that was said and decided upon before entering the meeting. It is impossible for him to engage with the same level of understanding as the other individuals. Lastly, there are strong visionaries who enjoy focusing on the future and who can cast future vision for a church, but the most effective vision casters are the ones who have a good handle on the past while not being allowed to get stuck in the past. In addition, they know clearly where things currently stand. They both evaluate the church’s current state of readiness to progress in the future but assess to what level the church can withstand being stretched in its capacity to attempt greater things for God. Therefore, a healthy

relationship with the past, present, and vision casting for the future are all necessary to maintain a healthy church.

Paul maintained this healthy balance and rehearsed all three aspects of the church in Ephesus with its leaders as they met in a neighboring city, Miletus. Paul was hustling to make it to Jerusalem for the Day of Pentecost so he had to sail past Ephesus, but he requested that the Ephesian leadership be so kind as to meet him in Miletus (Acts 20:16) so he could both save time in his travels and also connect to these church leaders that were beloved to him.

While with the Ephesian church leaders, Paul was not bashful to share his heart with them. Paul's tone was very pastoral and friendly. He did not lecture them as he had lectured to them over two years for hours a day in Ephesus, in the school of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9-10). This was a conversation of mutual affection. He was both their pastor and their friend. In talking with them, Paul reflected upon what God had done in Ephesus, he rehearsed what God was currently doing, and forecasted what would come their way, and how to best prepare.

Paul summarized his unwavering commitment to them and how he ministered among them with courage and passion (20:18-21). He admitted that there were moments that brought him to tears (Acts 20:19, 31). He remembered how he ministered in such a way that he could not be blamed should anyone falsely say they never heard the Gospel preached or that it is his fault they did not believe it (26:26-27). He then reflected upon how he selflessly served them by not desiring silver or gold and how he worked with his own hands while in Ephesus (Acts 20:33-35). And while this seems like a list of Paul's accomplishments and credentials, remember that Paul was doing a spiritual check up to make sure they were healthy and equipped to lead in the future without him. Paul reviewed his example so they would have a good model to follow in the future. This approach parallels what Paul told the believers in Corinth to when Paul wrote them while he was recently in Ephesus, "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ" (I Corinthians 11:1).

Then Paul reviewed his current situation and the current state of the church (Acts 20:22-25, 28, 32). Paul explained tenderly that it would be their final meeting (Acts 20:25). He mentioned that he was awaiting persecution upon his arrival at Jerusalem (Acts 20:22-24). He encouraged them that the church needed continual feeding and shepherding by these leaders (Acts 20:28).

And before their meeting was over, he discussed what the church in Ephesus would inevitably experience. Paul warned them of false teachers that would attempt to draw people away from the church (Acts 20:30b). But his warning took a little different and concerning twist. He told them to watch out because these false teachers would "from among yourselves men will rise up" (Acts

Did Paul believe he still has to attend the Jewish feast of Pentecost as a Christian? No, he does not believe this (including honoring the Jewish Sabbaths). Paul believes Jesus fulfilled this particular feast after ascending into heaven in Acts 1 and the Holy Spirit touched down in Acts 2 to establish His Church. Most likely, Paul wanted to be there to once again remember it as the day the Holy Spirit touched down on the earth and established the Church that ultimately led to his conversion. In essence, it was the church's birthday.

20:30a). Meaning, he warned them that the people would “rise up” from within the church who desire to draw away the Ephesian believers and persuade them to follow after them! And that it probably had already begun the moment Paul personally left, “For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock” (Acts 20:29). And while this unfortunately happens even in ministries today, Paul must have sensed something that concerned him about this reality all the while he was in Ephesus, not just after he left, “Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears” (Acts 20:31)!

After three years of ministry in Ephesus, Paul felt this meeting had to take place for the health of the church. He felt it was important to review where they had been and where they currently were, in order to prepare them for courageous and prosperous ministry in the future. But it was more than a business meeting. It was more than an organizational post-mortem meeting or an after-action debrief. It served as an opportunity for a pastor who profoundly loved his people to express his deep love and affection for them. It enabled the people to see that the three years God gave them together was not just a job, but a heart-felt calling. Paul used this opportunity to express his sincere love for them.

And the most difficult part of ministering to people you love is to place them in the hands of God and trusting that the loving, all-powerful Head of the

Church (Colossians 1:18) will care for them and bring them the spirit-controlled leaders they need to encourage spirituality among the church and to mature them. It is hard for a pastor to separate from precious believers. But Paul had to tell them, and they needed to hear, that he had to “commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32).

It is therapeutic to the soul to be able to express one’s feelings of appreciation with deep, heart-felt emotion to those who hold a special place in our hearts, especially those who have positively contributed to our spiritual growth. And it is good and right for a leader to sincerely express how much s/he cares for people. This moment for Paul provided all these friends this precious opportunity. It was a bitter sweet moment yet very special. “And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. Then they all wept freely and fell on Paul’s neck and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship” (Acts 20:37-38).

This is not a first for Paul. Just as Paul expressed his sincere, heartfelt feelings for the precious believers in Ephesus, he expressed almost the exact same sentiments to the precious believers in Philippi, “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling...holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain” (Philippians 2:12, 16).

Why are men crying this hard? Acts 20:37, they wept “freely” [Greek: hick-con-OSS] could be understood as “much, openly, without restraint.” They did not care who was around or who was watching. Why the huge expression of emotion? And among men?! God used Paul to speak the truth of the Gospel to these men, to teach them day after day the truths of God found within His Word. Most likely he led some of them to the Lord out of the snares of the mystic cults that infiltrated Ephesus, and now they were leaders of the Lord’s church and many better husbands and fathers at home! God did miracles in their lives and He used a faithful minister who sacrificed much to bring about these spiritual victories in their lives. God’s power to convert and mature a soul will move most all spirit-controlled men to tears!

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect on a time you had to say goodbye to a dear fellow believer. Think about what you appreciated most about the person. Was it someone who encouraged your spirit every time you were with him/her? Were you able to be yourself around him/her and share your honest thoughts without judgement? Did the person allow you to be human while still pointing you to Christ in their own special way? Or was it a church congregation that was extremely special to you but you had to part ways? What do you most appreciate about that church that makes you smile even after you are away? Ponder what made this individual or believers so special to you.

Pray and thank God that He brought these people into your life for a season. Thank God for the spirit-controlled attitude and testimony they maintained around you. Thank God that they pointed you to Christ. And also thank Him for the funny and memorable times God allowed you to have that encouraged your spirit so many times. Then pray for the Lord to “bless [name] and protect [name]. May the Lord smile on [name] and be gracious to [name]. May the Lord show [name] his favor and give [name] his peace” (Numbers 6:24-26).

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Consider sharing a time you had to say goodbye to a dear fellow believer. Share with your group what you appreciated most about the person. Do you best to convey how your spirit was encouraged every time you were with him/her. Or share about a church congregation that was extremely special to you, but you had to part ways. Share do you most appreciated about that church that made it difficult for you to part ways. Share what makes you smile about that church even now that you are away. Share what makes this individual or believers so special to you. And should there be any group member who is looking for a church or has a loved one who is looking for a church, pray for them that they would find a Bible-believing church like Thomas Road Baptist Church and also a church that would hold a special place in their heart for years to come.

Consider reviewing the past/present/future spiritual journey of your group. Take time and enjoy remembering when each group member entered the group. Reflect on where each member was in their stage of life (what major events happened at the time, any significant details stick out in your mind at the time you joined the group, etc.). Then bring the discussion to present day and review how each of you have grown spiritually and what dynamics in your life have changed from the time you entered the group up to today that caused you to mature in life and in your faith. Then share how you believe your group and you should progress spiritually in the coming year. Do you have any spiritual goals for yourself that the group members could support you in? Does the leader of

the group have any goals for the group for this upcoming year. Then join in prayer thanking God for all He has done for the members of your group and ask Him for His blessing and clear direction for your group this coming year.

Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

Listen & Grow!

Experience the work of the Lord Jesus Christ in action by listening to a sermon clip preached by our Founding Pastor, Dr. Jerry Falwell Sr. Acts 20 captures the heart of gospel ministry.



Want to Dig Deeper?

Goodbyes can be very emotional especially if the person with whom you are parting ways is a very special friend or loved one. To have a strong bond of friendship is beautiful in the sight of God. God created us with emotions, and it is fine to express our emotions in a God-honoring way. Crying upon leaving a dear friend does not send any negative message to the Lord that you are disappointed in His guidance or providence in any way. Your heart is simply moved with emotion. Jesus understands this (John 11:35). The good news is that wherever we are – whether near our friends or far away – we can pray for them. In fact, our prayers for them should occur while they are present and then should continue in our absence. Thus, praying for your friend is not a last-resort that is your replacement for being away from them. Praying for them should be a constant practice in your life and should continue whether you are nearby or far away.

1. Read the following prayers from Scripture and rewrite the Scriptures to read as a personal prayer for someone who is special for you. Place their name throughout if it helps. And then make it a practice to pray these prayers for your friend each day this week.

- Ephesians 3:14-21

- Philippians 1:9-11

- Colossians 1:9-14

Optional but Recommended!
“Dig Deeper” provides added insight into this portion of Acts with supporting Scriptures. Be encouraged to reflect on how to live out the spiritual applications unearthed in this devotional.

- I Thessalonians 3:11-13

2. Friendships and relationships that are centered around Christ are great gifts the Lord provides for us. And we need to be quick to thank the Giver of the Gift. Read the following verses that Paul wrote to his friends, and write down the answer to this question, “How many times did Paul thank *people* in these verses?” I Corinthians 1:4, Philippians 1:3, Colossians 1:3, I Thessalonians 1:2, II Thessalonians 1:3, II Timothy 1:3, and Philemon verse 4.

- Paul thanked people _____ times.
- Paul thanked God _____ times.

And while it is perfectly fine to thank people directly (and you should!), this exercise is simply to illustrate how we cannot forget to thank the Giver of all good things – especially the good gifts of our friends and loved ones!

3. Take some time to pray and thank God for some friends and loved ones by name. Write their names down and take time to thank God for them in prayer this week.

- Friends:

- Loved Ones:

GROUP GATHERING #4

Group Gathering is a time to reflect together upon **what we learned** (Head), **what we felt** (Heart), and **what we should do** (Hands).

Note to Group Members:

Be encouraged! Your contribution is valuable to your group and will most assuredly edify the members of your group and your group leader. But should you need to sit and listen today, just to take in the entire discussion and prayerfully process the spiritual discussion quietly, that is OK too! You will not be pressured to speak publicly. We are glad you have joined us today!

Discussion Topics

Choose **one or two** topics to discuss today!

All of the discussion topics are taken from this week's devotionals along with a brief summary of each devotional!

Taken from Day One: Acts 18:24-28 – “The Body Supports the Body in Humility in Ephesus: Giving Guidance Graciously and Taking Advice with Humility.”

The very intelligent and talented Apollos humbly and graciously received words of correction from Aquila and Priscilla that were delivered in a spirit of encouragement, love, and support for Apollos. They did not discourage him but rather infused Apollos with renewed energy to minister even more passionately about Jesus Christ.

1. Just as Aquila and Priscilla pulled Apollos aside privately and graciously offered him supportive insights that made his teaching more accurate, share a moment when a kind person (or people) took the time to graciously and sincerely offer you correction, guidance, or advice that ended up helping you to be more effective in fulfilling your goal/task/job/plan. How are you better for it and are you glad that person talked to you? Discuss your level of receptivity to accepting loving and gracious correction from a spirit-controlled believer. Then pray for each other that every member of your group would be humble to receive this type of support from another believer. Pray also that each member would always adopt this supportive, Spirit-controlled manner in delivering words of encouragement, advice, and guidance to others.

Taken from Day Two: Acts 19:1-7 – “The Gospel Makes Progress in a Very Unique Way: A Beautiful Portrait of How the Gospel Spread to All Types of People who Lived Both Pre-Cross and Post-Cross!”

This devotional was unique in that we read a portion of Scripture that is primarily descriptive in its purpose but contains some spiritual principles to adopt for today’s believers. It described how Paul shared the complete message of the Gospel with disciples of John the baptizer who had an incomplete understanding of the Holy Spirit among other things, how Paul corrected their understanding, but also how there were unique experiences that happened to them because they were one-of-a-kind scenarios that no longer occur today. And while these circumstances were unique to the believers in the first century, it was not without some guiding principles that believers should look to extract from the text to adopt today.

2. Take a moment to reflect upon where you were spiritually before you joined your current group. Share how you have grown spiritually as a result of the helpful discussion and prayer times you have experienced in your group.

Feel comfortable among your group members to share what you have appreciated learning from your group meetings that have made a positive difference in your spiritual walk. Be specific. Think of specific contributions people have made that you internalized. Share that moment with the group, thanking the person(s) for their contribution to your spiritual life.

3. Then, take time as a group to pray and thank the Lord for the blessing that your group offers as a valuable spiritual support system.

Taken from Day Three: “Acts 19:8-10 – Paul Gets Kicked Out of the Synagogue in Ephesus, so He Brings Christ into the Classroom: Use Every Available Means to Reach Every Available Person at Every Available Time with the Gospel!”

Paul experiences major hostility at the Ephesian synagogue so he rents a lecture hall and lectures daily for two years and provides an unforgettable educational experience and seasons of exponential spiritual growth for the believers in Ephesus. This devotional imagines what some of the lectures must have been like believing Paul integrated his personal experiences while expounding on profound doctrinal truths.

4. Consider sharing with your group a sermon or a lecture on the Bible that you listened to that you still can remember after all these years. And just as you were encouraged to do during the “Ponder and Pray” section, share with the group why you believe that particular message resonated with you so profoundly.

Share how many years ago you heard that message. Attempt to recall some of the points that were made in the message. Also share if that message was something you intentionally sought out to listen to or did God surprise you by bringing it across your

path in church, online, in a podcast. Rehearse the Biblical truths you learned from that message that you still embrace in your life today.

5. Reflect on this account of how Paul had to be open to unconventional means to continue his teaching and evangelistic ministry in Ephesus. Review Paul's forfeiture of his personal sleep time in order to teach in a rented lecture hall during the heat of the day. Recall how Paul abandoned his customary practice of teaching in the synagogue when arriving in a city.
6. Then ask your group if anyone could share how they might have experienced similar drastic changes in format, planning, or schedule in order to continue in a ministry. Or, maybe one of your group members witnessed an unsaved co-worker leave the company but the group member still wanted to witness to him/her. Find out how your group member pivoted and adjusted his/her efforts to continue his/her ministry to the person.
7. Then ask your group member to share why s/he went through all of those adjustments in order to continue their ministry to the person. Then, take a moment to encourage your group member for remaining faithful to the ministry God impressed upon him/her.

Taken from Day Four: *"Acts 19:11-20 – Demons Testify of the Greatness of God in Ephesus: No Matter How Hard People Try to Thwart the Providence of God, God's Will Always Prevails!"*

God's providence was on full display in Ephesus on this day. He divinely orchestrated the words and actions of His faithful messenger Paul, the popularity-hungry arrogance of seven fraudsters, and the wicked demons themselves to fulfill His perfect will. It was only fitting that the Holy Spirit closed off this section of Acts 19 with the words, "So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed" (Acts 19:20)!

8. Prepare to share a time that you were able to clearly trace the providential hand of God in your life. Then describe what you initially felt as the details of the situation were unfolding, even if you did not yet have an explanation of what and why things were happening the way they were.

(e.g., Were you confused? Did you initially get angry at God? Did you share your frustrations with God? Did your faith in God weaken or become stronger during this season of your life? Or, were you at peace as a result of being in the situation before and seeing God bring you through?)

9. Then share how much of God's providential plan in that situation was different than the plan you had initially set out to follow. Attempt to predict where you would be today and how things would have gone if God had allowed you to live according to your plan.

Taken from Day Five: “Acts 20:16-38 – Paul Performs a Spiritual Check-up with the Ephesian Leaders in Miletus: If Goodbyes are Difficult, it Means You Care.”

After three years of ministry in Ephesus, Paul felt that meeting with the leadership had to occur for the health of the church. He thought it was important to review where they had been and where they currently were, in order to prepare them for courageous and prosperous ministry in the future. Paul then informed them this would be their last meeting together, then he commended their care to God and departed. They openly and unashamedly expressed their great emotions and appreciation for each other with tears before parting ways.

- 10.** Consider sharing a time you had to say goodbye to a dear fellow believer. Share with your group what you appreciated most about the person.

Do your best to convey how your spirit was encouraged every time you were with him/her. Or share about a church congregation that was extremely special to you, but you had to part ways. Share what you most appreciated about that church that made it difficult for you to part ways. Share what makes you smile about that church even now that you are away. Share what makes this individual or believers so special to you. And should there be any group member who is looking for a church or has a loved one who is looking for a church, pray for them that they would find a Bible-believing church like Thomas Road Baptist Church and also a church that would hold a special place in their heart for years to come.

- 11.** Consider reviewing the past/present/future spiritual journey of your group. Take time and enjoy remembering when each group member entered the group.

Reflect on where each member was in their stage of life (what major events happened at the time, any significant details stick out in your mind at the time you joined the group, etc.).

- 12.** Then bring the discussion to present day and review how each of you have grown spiritually and what dynamics in your life have changed from the time you entered the group up to today that caused you to mature in life and in your faith.

- 13.** Then share how you believe your group and you should progress spiritually in the coming year.

Do you have any spiritual goals for yourself that the group members could support you in? Does the leader of the group have any goals for the group for this upcoming year.

- 14.** Then join in prayer thanking God for all He has done for the members of your group and ask Him for His blessing and clear direction for your group this coming year.



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ACTS

21:16–23:10

OVERVIEW

This week covers the following ways in which the members of God’s Church can grow in their faith as God grows His Church:

1. Knowing when to concede for the sake of peace and when to proceed knowing you are in good standing with God.
2. Always be in a state-of-readiness to present the Gospel.
3. People can never unhear what they have heard.
4. A willing heart gets a front row seat to the activity of God.
5. Trust the process – God’s process!

Memory Verse

Acts 27:25

“Therefore, take heart, men, for I believe God that it will be just as [He] told me.”

A Summary of Acts 21:16 – 23:10

Acts 21:16 begins with Paul traveling towards Jerusalem. Upon his arrival, the believers received Paul warmly. After Paul informed them of all that God was doing through him and others to reach the Gentiles, the leaders rejoiced while at the same time cautioned him that there are some Jewish believers who were troubled by the gossip and rumors swirling around about Paul, suggesting that he had not respected the Jewish customs. Paul went through great measures to demonstrate that he was still supportive of the Jewish believers who still had emotional struggles with Gentile believers not needing to obey the Mosaic Law upon conversion (Acts 21:16-25).

Upon arriving at the Temple, Paul was grabbed by a mob. They lied about Paul bringing a Gentile into the Temple area that was reserved for only Jewish worshipers (Acts 21:26-30). They took him out of the Temple with the intention of killing him (Acts 21:30-31). The Roman soldiers were alerted of the disturbance of the peace and hustled to see what was happening. Immediately, they took Paul into their custody and attempted to usher him out of the public area (Acts 21:30-36).

As they walked up the staircase, Paul asked the Roman Commander if he could address the crowd. And amid the security of the Roman soldiers, Paul spoke to the people in his/their Hebrew native language (Acts 21:37-40). The crowd was quiet up to the point Paul said that the Lord Himself told him to go the Gentiles to share the Good News with them. At which point the crowd erupted with anger once again. Then Paul was brought inside the Roman barracks (Acts 22:1-25a). After Paul clarified to the Roman Commander why they were angry, the Roman Commander brought Paul to the Sanhedrin so they could judge his religious statements about Jesus Christ (Acts 22:22-30).

The next day, Paul stood in front of the Sanhedrin and was asked to present his position on Jesus Christ and the Gospel. Paul mentions that he was judged based upon his view that there was indeed a resurrection of the dead, which was a hot-button issue among the Sanhedrin. Much of the Sanhedrin did not believe in a resurrection (called Sadducees) while some did believe in a resurrection (called Pharisees). The argument got so heated that the Roman Commander instructed his men to go into the building and retrieve Paul “fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them” (Acts 23:10).

Timeline & Key Events

This week, our daily devotionals will focus upon five **key moments** within **Acts 21:16-23:10**.

Acts 21:16-26

Paul Engages a Timeless Situation in Jerusalem

Acts 21:26-40

Paul Goes from His Life being Threatened to Receiving Imperial Protection in Jerusalem

Acts 22:1-24a

Paul Silences a Mob by Sharing His Testimony in Jerusalem

Acts 22:24b-29

Ministry Opportunities Open up for Paul While in Custody in Jerusalem

Acts 22:30-23:10

Paul Stands Before the Jewish Sanhedrin in Jerusalem

Acts 21:16-26 – Paul Engages a Timeless Situation in Jerusalem

1. Knowing When to Concede for the Sake of Peace and when to Proceed Knowing You are in Good Standing with God.
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The previous devotional mentioned that Paul was hustling to make it to Jerusalem for the Day of Pentecost. And while Paul, as a Christian, did not believe he still had to attend the Jewish feast of Pentecost, he most likely wanted to be there to remember that day as the day the Holy Spirit touched down on the earth and established the Church. Ultimately, it led to his conversion. It was the birthday of the Church. Paul arrived with a couple days to spare, and he was received by the believers there with gladness (Acts 21:17).

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Paul connected with James and the Jerusalem elders. “When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry” (Acts 21:19). Not only is this a wonderful praise report of what the Lord was doing in the lives of people, it provided a positive progress report of how the apostles and believers were spreading the Gospel to the “uttermost parts of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Statements like this are important to take note of when reading the book of Acts because Luke intentionally documents the apostles’ obedience to the Lord’s command before He ascended into heaven (Acts 1:8). We first read that Paul told those in Antioch how he took full advantage of the “open door” to witness to the Gentiles in Acts 14, “Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27). Then in Acts 15, Luke documented that Paul informed believers that as “they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria,” he was “describing the conversion of the Gentiles” (Acts 15:3). And then Luke documented that Paul informed the other apostles and Christian leaders in Jerusalem that “they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them” (Acts 15:4) to reach the Gentiles. This was approximately eight years previously, back in Jerusalem (Acts 21:19). And yet again here in Jerusalem, Paul once again was able to celebrate the many conversions among the Gentiles. Then the Christian leaders in Jerusalem revisited that topic that had been addressed approximately eight years before in Acts 15 with Paul and the

apostles. How should Gentile believers remain sensitive to Jewish believers who were still tied to their Jewish traditions, even though they were Christians? Were they still to do or not do certain things that would keep the peace among the Jewish and Gentile believers (see our Devotional on Acts 15:1-35 for context)?

There were still Jewish Christians who had a difficult time with some Christians who were not required to obey the Mosaic Law, in order to solidify their salvation. Also, they informed Paul that some Jewish believers had made up their minds, locked in their decision, and gave no indication that they were going to change their position, as “they are all zealous for the law” (Acts 21:20b). As a result, fear had struck the hearts of these Christian leaders concerning how these Jewish believers may feel and what they may do (Acts 21:20-22) when they saw Paul, the one who was teaching about this Gentile freedom from having to follow the Mosaic Law. So, they wanted Paul to make some concessions in order to keep the peace.

This is the age-old question of how much Christian leaders: How much are we to cater to the feelings and emotions of the believers who are under our care and oversight (It happened at the inception of the church and still occurs today.). How do we find the right balance of responding appropriately (Acts 6:1-7)? Should mature believers concede for a time so weaker believers may mature (Acts 15:1-35)? Is it possible to go too far with the concessions? And can conceding too much possibly contribute to their stunted spiritual growth (Acts 21:20-22)? What is the answer? A Christian leader should focus on the Lord, fast and pray, and allow the Holy Spirit to guide his/her actions, whether the precious people are pleased or displeased with the decision. It is interesting that one of the first descriptions about the healthy church of Antioch was that they made sure “they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said...” (Acts 13:2a) (see our Devotional in Acts 13:1-5 pt. 2). Now, to be fair to the Jerusalem leaders, they were also concerned about the number of people who were in attendance for the Day of Pentecost, “You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are” (Acts 21:20b). So, it could be said that they were fine with Gentiles living in Christian liberty now that it had been over eight years since Acts 15, but they asked for a concession on Paul’s part, just for this trip. Unfortunately, the problem with this is that it was clear that they were primarily concerned about the rumors that were being spread about Paul. And a church leader acting/reacting/working around rumors is never healthy. For if they were asking Paul to concede based upon the presence of gossip and rumors, they

would undoubtedly forever ask Paul and others to concede, as rumors would be present until the end of time (Acts 21:21). Ultimately, they were most worried about how these people would think and react (Acts 21:22).

Before we discuss what Paul chose to do, it would be beneficial to ask, “Why were they so slow in their spiritual growth in this area?” It had been approximately

According to Romans 14:1-15:57, it was acceptable if the Jewish believers wanted to continue practicing their customs just as long as they did not believe that anyone was made more righteous for doing so. It was not imposed upon any other believer and did not cause disunity within the Body of Christ.

eight years since the apostles and Christian leaders settled the way all believers would conduct themselves to give the Jewish believers time to mature in their understanding of the Lord's plan to reach the world with the Gospel (Acts 15:1-25). There are two possible explanations. Scriptures and ministerial experience support the notion that either they were recent Jewish believers just now grappling with the same challenge that previous believers grappled with in Acts 15, or most likely, these were the same decade-old Jewish believers that were still stuck in their immature state. They had not attained as many experiences of miraculous conversions and had not heard as many testimonies of salvations and changed lives of both Jewish people and Gentiles (as in Ephesus when people burned their magic books in mass in Acts 19:17-20). Should they had been exposed to some of these moments of God-glorifying conversions, they might have matured more swiftly in their understanding of how the Lord was developing His Church aside from traditional, Jewish requirements. We are reminded on a couple of occasions in Scripture that remaining immature in one's faith is not a good place to be. Hebrews 3:11-14 reminds of this reality when it says, "There is much more we would like to say about this, but it is difficult to explain, especially since you are spiritually dull and don't seem to listen. You have been believers for so long now that you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things about God's word. You are like babies who need milk and cannot eat solid food. For someone who lives on milk is still an infant and doesn't know how to do what is right. Solid food is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong." See also I Corinthians 3:1-3.

Returning to the account, Paul actually conceded and followed the recommendation of Jerusalem's leaders (Acts 21:23-26; Numbers 6) so as to attempt to keep the peace. But it is noteworthy that in all of Paul's ministry, he was never motivated to make concessions in reaction to carnal and sinful gossip or rumors. When Paul made concessions, he did so to maintain his effective witness (Acts 16:3; 18:18; I Corinthians 9:19-23) but never out of placating sinful rumors or gossip.

The result? They still got angry.

Consider This! *Here's an interesting fact based upon the chronological order in which the books of the Bible were written and distributed. The Letters to the Romans and Galatians were written and distributed approximately one and three years respectively before this moment in Acts 21:16-26. These letters explain what salvation is, what it is not, and what is required for one to be in right standing with God as a saved person. Did these Jewish believers receive copies of the letters? Probably not. But approximately 11 years after Acts 21:16-26, the book of Hebrews was written for the purpose of freeing any Jewish believer from feeling a deep-seated obligation to still follow the Mosaic Law. Of course, approximately 1-3 years after the book of Hebrews was written, the Temple was utterly destroyed by Rome in 70 AD, which made it physically impossible to worship per the original Jewish customs.*

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect on how the conversation between Paul and the Jerusalem leaders started, with the wonderful report of all that God was doing and had done in the past few years in countless cities across the Roman world (Acts 21:19). Recall how the news produced a spontaneous worship moment for these Christian leaders, "And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord" (Acts 21:20)! Yet, the scene

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

evolved into these Christian leaders expending time and energy addressing sinful rumors and gossip among the Body of Christ. Consider how discouraging that would have been to be celebrating how the Gospel was spreading to the “uttermost parts of the earth” (Acts 1:8) only to be stifled by the need to address sin among some believers.

Pray and commit to God that you will never contribute to disunity among the Body of Christ or do anything to quell the excitement of what God is doing in the Church and in spreading the Gospel. Tell Him you will always strive to contribute to the exciting worship of what God is doing by keeping yourself pure from sin and never being involved in the unity-fracturing act of gossip. Lastly, pray that God would keep you accountable for the commitments made in this prayer. Ask Him to bless you when you honor these commitments and to remind you when you break them.

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Process with your group this very important topic of when it is wise and necessary to concede doing something for the sake of peace among believers and when you should feel at peace not conceding. Process together what the factors are that one needs to weigh when making this weighty decision. And if any group member has been in this situation before, share whatever details you are able to discuss about the situation. Describe your thought process and the factors you had to consider, the decision you ultimately made, the outcome, and what you learned from the experience. In addition, discuss which personality types would have an easier time dealing with oversensitivity to the feelings of others and which would be too hardened and desensitized to other people's feelings. And time permitting, share with your group where you would plot yourself in this scenario. How do you believe you would personally respond to the request to concede for the sake of peace? And, if you feel you are imbalanced, in what ways would you want to improve your approach to a similar situation?

Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

Listen & Grow!

Discover foundational principles for living a life that honors God by listening to a sermon clip preached by our Sr. Pastor Jonathan Falwell.



Want to Dig Deeper?

Optional but Recommended!
"Dig Deeper" provides added insight into this portion of Acts with supporting Scriptures. Be encouraged to reflect on how to live out the spiritual applications unearthed in this devotional.

1. How has your own life experiences seasoned your perspective on talking about spiritual matters with other believers? Have you found that a little more life experience matures you? You do not get shocked any more by peoples' actions or you have learned to look past certain words and look for the heart attitude behind the words? What additional ways have you seen your own personal experiences affect how you talk and process spiritual matters with another believer?

2. Should Paul have conceded and shaved his head to keep peace before the Jewish believers (Acts 21:20-25)? Was it a sin to do so? Was it necessary for him to do so? Or do you believe he was right to do so to keep peace?

3. Is there ever a time when mature believers can say that they are done conceding for the sake of a weaker brother who never seems to mature in his faith about a particular spiritual issue? Is it OK for a mature believer to return to enjoying their Christian freedoms even though he knows that his weaker brother says he is still uncomfortable with the stronger believer's actions? Grapple with this question and write out your thoughts on what spiritual principles should guide your decision making on this question.

4. Many people will say "Don't fear man, only fear God." What is the proper balance of caring what man thinks of your actions as opposed to not allowing man's feelings to affect what you do? How do one's motives come into play in answering this question?

5. Even though the facts make it clear that these Jewish believers no longer needed to adhere to the Mosaic Law (Romans 10:4; II Corinthians 3:6-11; Galatians 3:10-25; Hebrews 8:1-13), it seems that sometimes weaker believers argue more on an emotional-level rather than on a factual-level.

Similar to how a family member may need a hug from her father rather than for her father to fix a problem, it seems in dealing with weaker believers, that sometimes, mature believers should focus on the weaker believer's emotional struggles with an issue rather debating the facts. You can see this emotional imbalance in vivid detail in Mark 5:1-17. Read this account and write down what the peoples' reaction was to Jesus miraculous display of power. Why do you think they did not immediately accept Jesus? Why do you think they asked Him to leave? Don't people usually get saved by the hundreds when something like this happens? Share your initial thoughts.

6. When Jesus cast 6,000 demons out of a possessed man in the Decapolis region, they went into 2,000 pigs and they all jumped off the cliff. And after they saw Jesus so powerfully solve one of their biggest social problems that they were unable to manage (that is why they simply sequestered this possessed man to the coast to dwell in a graveyard), they asked Jesus to leave! What?! Why didn't they welcome Jesus with open arms and invite Him into their city to clean up many more problems? Their emotions. It was overwhelmingly emotional for them to be in the presence of one so powerful. It profoundly affected their emotions. It was no longer about the facts of what occurred. They simply needed to take it in and ponder what happened. The same occurs today when we witness to people. The wise believer must discern how best to approach a person most effectively – address the facts or address the emotions. Have you ever had to discern what a person's issues are that keeps him/her from accepting Christ – facts or emotions? Think back to people you have had spiritual conversations with and list their names and write down whether it was “emotions” or “facts” that you believe were keeping them from accepting Christ or maturing in their faith about a particular spiritual issue. Share what you learned from these conversations about how you can more effectively engage other people in the future.
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7. Some offer Acts 25:8 and 28:17 as support for why they believe Paul's concession in Acts 21:26 was justified. Meaning, it is believed that Paul conceded here in Acts 21:26 so that he could always say what he said in Acts 25:8 and 28:17. And while it might have been nice for Paul to concede in order to be able to claim that "I have done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers" (Acts 28:17), was it necessary? Did it work according to Acts 28:18-19? Should you as a believer always concede regardless of whether it is effective or not?
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8. Recall how the new Gentile believers were glad to concede for the sake of peace (Acts 15:31). Reflect on how the legalistic Jewish believers in Jerusalem were not eager to concede on their end (Acts 21:20b). How does it make you feel when you read how brand-new Christians act in such a spiritually mature way (even stronger than some mature Christians today would act)?
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Acts 21:26-40 – Paul Goes from His Life being Threatened to Receiving Imperial Protection in Jerusalem:

2. Always be in a state-of-readiness to present the Gospel.

In business, many have claimed that “luck favors the prepared.” Meaning, the more one is prepared to immediately jump on a good opportunity when it presents itself, the more confidence the person will have about not missing out on big opportunities, even if the window of opportunity presents itself for just a brief moment of time. Being in a state of readiness affords a person with more opportunities to take advantage of than that of a person who has not prepared for the big moment.

For those in business, these big opportunities sometimes come at the oddest times. Sometimes they come as you engage with people you meet on an airplane, meet at a wedding reception, talk to while in line at a coffee shop, or while sharing an Uber ride. And because one’s mind has already thought through what is needed to make a business dream come true or has already assessed what organizational needs exist, s/he is always thinking of what will provide for his/her needs or solve a problem. Thus, one is so mentally prepared that all s/he needs to hear is a keyword to know who to contact that may hold the key to the next big opportunity. And s/he jumps at the chance to take full advantage of the opportunity.

Paul preached this very principle when it comes to sharing the Gospel. Paul wrote to Timothy to always “be ready in season and out of season” (II Timothy 4:2b). Even the Apostle Peter emphasized the importance of “being ready always to give an answer to every man that asks you of the hope that is in you,” (I Peter 3:15). And in Acts 21:26-40, we see how Paul demonstrated that he was in a state of readiness to share the Gospel at one of the oddest times. As a result, Paul took advantage of a unique window of opportunity to present the Gospel to a large, diverse audience who heard this life-changing truth.

Paul arrived at the Temple and followed the common procedures he should follow after traveling and being away from Jerusalem over the past five years. This season of absence defiled him, and he had to complete a seven-day purification process. This allowed him time to secure his animals for the multiple sacrifices he was required to make (Numbers 6). During this time, he could walk around the city with his friends, which he did (specifically Trophimus the Ephesian; Acts 21:29). On the last day, and near the end of the time of worship,

Paul came alone to the priest to inform him that he had satisfied his season of purification (Acts 21:26). And immediately Paul was met with opposition to his very presence at the temple (Acts 21:27). They accused him of bringing his Greek friend, Trophimus, into the Jewish-reserved portion of the temple and defiling it (even though they had only seen Paul walking around the city with him). They accused Paul of speaking blasphemously against the Jewish people, the Torah, and the Temple (Acts 21:28-29). Interestingly, these final three accusations were very similar to what the Jewish leaders accused Stephen of approximately 20 years earlier in Acts 6:13-14 and Jesus all throughout his ministry. Immediately, the Jewish people grabbed Paul in riot mob fashion and dragged him out of the Temple area (Acts 21:30) and their intent was to kill him (Acts 19:31a).

In response to the quickly escalating riot (Acts 21:30a), the commander of the Roman garrison immediately came to quell the riot (Acts 21:32-33a). Upon their presence, the Jewish people immediately stopped beating Paul (Acts 21:32b). The Roman soldiers bound Paul for the moment and attempted to learn the reason for the uprising from the raucous crowd (Acts 21:33-34). Being unable to discern the reason, they decided to take him inside the garrison. The mob pushed on them so much that Paul was unable to walk up a staircase quickly enough. The soldiers actually picked him up and carried him up the stairs (Acts 21:35). But when they were still outside, about to enter the building, Paul made a very unexpected request of the Roman Commander (Acts 21:37).

At that moment, Paul was about to make a request of the Roman Commander that he undoubtedly had never received before from a person who was literally being carried away from a mob for his safety. Paul saw an opportunity to be able to share the Gospel with the people that wanted to kill him, and he wanted to take full advantage of it! After he requested to speak to the Commander (Acts 21:37), Paul asked if he could address the mob (Acts 21:39). Before granting permission, the Roman Commander needed to make sure Paul was not a criminal. He asked Paul, “Are you not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a rebellion and led the four

Did the Jews really intend to kill Paul in Acts 21:31a? Yes! And they would have been supported by Rome to do so, under a few conditions. In order to keep the peace with the Jews, Rome allowed the Jews to have a say in just a few things that were very important to them. Mainly, permission to run the Temple as they wished. Rome allowed the Jews to execute capital punishment in the extremely rare exception against a non-Jew or unclean Jew who intentionally and flagrantly entered the Jewish-reserved area of the Temple. But Rome would stop it if they knew about it and/or it was going to become a scene that could escalate into a riot. While their effort to kill Paul probably would have been successful during most other times of the year, (when the crowds are low and Roman security forces are also low in number) there were simply too many Roman soldiers around to guarantee they would not be able to follow through with beating and eventually stoning Paul. Rome had learned over the 50+ years of occupation of Jerusalem that riots can spark quickly, and they were always prepared to keep the order (Acts 21:30-36).

The Roman military presence was an impressive force. According to Acts 23:23-26, we learn the name of the Roman “Commander” or sometimes called “Tribune” (Claudius Lysias, “KLAUD-ee-oss LOO-see-us”) and that there were at least 200 soldiers present. This can be deduced by the fact that there were at least two centurions present in Acts 23:23 who are over 100 soldiers each. In addition, there are 200 more “spearmen” who were able to throw javelins mentioned, and 70 additional soldiers who rode on horseback at Claudius’ disposal. In actuality, this entire number is probably only half of the population of Roman soldiers who were present in Jerusalem at the garrison at Fort Antonio as Rome traditionally housed 1,000 soldiers during the Jewish Feasts.

thousand assassins out into the wilderness” (Acts 21:38)? At that moment, the commander got two different criminals confused. There was a Jewish-Egyptian man who three years prior claimed to be a prophet, garnered a few thousand followers, went up on the Mount of Olives, and prepared to take over Jerusalem. He was famous for believing that upon his command, the walls of the city of Jerusalem would fall and grant him unobstructed access to the city. When he and his followers congregated on top of the Mount of Olives, the Roman brigades marched up the mountain and slaughtered a few hundred of them and captured a couple hundred of them, but the Jewish-Egyptian man fled. Then there was a separate incident in the recent past where Jewish extremists called Sicarii (“sick-CAR-eye” named after their weapon of choice, “a curved blade dagger”) assassinated the High Priest Jonathan and were continually on Rome’s radar as they would approach in stealth, kill, and then conceal their dagger and identity again. Either way, the Roman Commander was not about to give a known killer and leader of a revolt a platform. But Paul simply informed him that he was a Jewish man who lived in Tarsus, far from Egypt in Cilicia, a city that is significant (Acts 21:39). Paul said this to demonstrate that he was intelligent, studied, and somewhat sophisticated compared to what was expected from the criminals the Roman Commander referred to.

Being granted permission, Paul stood on the staircase, utilizing it as an elevated stage, and in the Hebrew language known by the entire crowd, began to speak. Of course, it is very likely that the Roman Commander and his soldiers were unable to understand what Paul was saying. So, they were forced to judge the threat level of this moment only by the tone of the crowd. And it was silent. Completely silent.

What was Paul about to say?! And why would Paul think this is an opportune time to talk to his would-be killers? What was Paul thinking?! Probably something like, “These conditions are perfect for me to proclaim the Gospel! I’m surrounded by approximately 200 Roman soldiers. I’m flanked by two centurions and I’m standing right next to the Roman Commander. The Roman soldiers are not going to stop me from preaching as they probably will not even know what I am saying. And the Jews are not about to rush me as it would be at their peril to do so. So, why not jump at the opportunity?! I’m ready! I’m prepared. But I only have a few seconds to decide, or I will miss my window of opportunity. This window of opportunity goes away if I am taken into that building...”

Acts 21:40, “So when he had given him permission, Paul stood on the stairs and motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great silence, he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, saying...”

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect on a very meaningful conversation (spiritual, business, relationship, family, etc.) you had in your life. Ponder the significance of it. And then ask yourself how your life would be different if you had not engaged in that conversation at that very moment. Ask yourself how your life would be different if you had not engaged in that conversation at that very moment. Lastly, is there a spiritual conversation that you know needs to occur with someone? Are you prepared to have it when the window of opportunity presents itself? If not, ask yourself what you need to do to prepare for when the opportunity arises.

Pray and thank God for the past conversations you had that improved your life. Also, tell Him that you regret the times when you failed to engage when you knew the time was right. But you are now going to allow those moments to motivate you to never miss an opportunity again. And then ask God to empower you with courage and wisdom to prepare you for any upcoming spiritual conversation you know you need to have with someone. Then promise Him after you successfully meet the opportunity, you will return to Him in prayer to thank Him for preparing you to take full advantage of the opportunity.

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

Next Time You Meet with Your Group

Look back upon an opportunity that you took full advantage of to either share the Gospel, share much needed spiritual advice or counsel, or enter an important spiritual discussion with a person, and you were so glad you did. Share the outcome from taking advantage of that opportunity. Now, share an example of an opportunity that arose, but you chose not to speak? What reflections do you have now about that missed opportunity? Discuss if anyone else has ever experienced the same thing. Then share what you believe your reason was for not speaking. Was fear of not knowing what to say the motivating factor for not taking advantage of the opportunity? Were there other reasons why you didn't speak at that moment? Solicit encouragement and advice from any member of your group who has had success in being prepared to take full advantage of opportunities. Then pray for each other that you would be ready to engage people with the truth of God when the opportunity presents itself.

Listen & Grow!

Be challenged to live with readiness and conviction as you listen to a sermon clip preached by our Sr. Pastor, Jonathan Falwell. This message calls every believer to be prepared to proclaim the truth of God's Word—whether in season or out of season—with clarity and urgency.



Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

**Optional but
Recommended!**

“Dig Deeper” provides added insight into this portion of Acts with supporting Scriptures. Be encouraged to reflect on how to live out the spiritual applications unearthed in this devotional.

Want to Dig Deeper?

Just a look ahead: Here in Acts 21:26-40, Paul was accused of bringing Gentiles past a dividing wall that separated Gentiles from continuing any further in the Temple area. More historical context about this wall of division is discussed in our Devotional entitled “Acts 28:30-32 – Paul in a Roman Prison for Two Years & Writes Ephesians: Ephesians Comes Alive after Studying the book of Acts!” for those of you who do not want to wait until the end of our Bible study to learn more about this beautiful image of salvation!

1. This was the fourth occasion in the New Testament where it was recorded that an angry mob yells this phrase, “Away with him” (Acts 21:36) as Paul was dragged out of the temple to be stoned by the Jewish people. Paul knew they did not just want him to leave the Temple; they wanted him killed. And in case there was any doubt, Luke includes this fact for the reader (Acts 21:31). Read these previous occasions where an angry mob shouted the same thing at two different individuals. Then, identify to whom the crowd was shouting and the reason why they were shouting it.

- Luke 23:18
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- John 19:15
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- Acts 7:54-8:1
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2. Paul might have had flashbacks to these events when he heard the words directed towards him in the Temple in Acts 21:36. Knowing Paul was present at one of these events (probably all of them) as a persecutor of Christians, how do you think he felt at that moment when they were now shouting these words at him?
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3. Now imagine how those emotions he felt yet again when he wrote down his testimony in detail approximately 30 years after he got saved. Read I Timothy 1:12-17 and identify which words you believe probably made Paul very emotional when he wrote them. Just as a speaker shares his/her testimony

and certain words cause him/her to pause and get himself/herself together because it is very emotional/meaningful; write down those words from I Timothy 1:12-17 that you think made Paul very emotional.

4. Put yourself in this moment, what would you have said to this crowd if given the chance? Would you have even asked to talk to them? Would your words to them have been about the physical treatment you did not deserve? Or something different, if at all?
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5. Without reading ahead to Acts Chapter 22, what do you think Paul specifically said to them?
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- Proceed to our next devotional on Acts Chapter 22 to see how accurate your guess was!

Here are some additional insights on Acts 21:40 where it says that Paul spoke to the crowd in “Hebrew” (NKJV), while other translations say “Aramaic” (NIV). Go to biblehub.com and type in each Scripture reference and you can see which versions of the Bible use which word and which word is adopted the most. Hebrew and Aramaic are not the same language, though they are very similar. The Greek word used to translate either “Hebrew” or “Aramaic” is the word “heh-brah-ISS” which sounds like “Hebrew.” For those translators who simply want to translate the word and include no historical context, they say “Hebrew.” For those translations who desire to bring in cultural and historical context into their translation, they say “Aramaic” because the native language sometimes uses the word “heh-brah-ISS” in a general sense of the Jewish people’s native language (i.e., the “Hebrew peoples’ native language”) which at the time of Paul was Aramaic. But some suggest the word should be understood as the literal Hebrew language because Hebrew was spoken in the Temple and this mob just exited the Temple moments ago. Which language then did Paul address the mob? It seems that the majority of Biblicists lean towards translating the word “Hebrew” based upon the spelling of the Greek word, “heh-brah-ISS.” But Paul would have been able to speak both of these languages. In fact, did you notice that Paul also spoke Greek to the Roman Commander (Acts 21:37-39). Paul was probably trilingual.

Acts 22:1-24a – Paul Silences a Mob by Sharing His Testimony in Jerusalem

3. People can never unhear what they have heard.

In Acts 22:1-24a, we find Paul standing on the staircase of Fort Antonia in Jerusalem, the temporary quarters for over 1,000 Roman soldiers who arrived in Jerusalem during every major Jerusalem Feast to keep peace in the city. Thousands of Jewish Pilgrims flocked to this building to hear what Paul was going to say after he requested the Roman Commander to speak to the mob. This raucous mob was out for Paul's blood but paused to hear what he had to say. The mob became deafeningly silent as Paul opened his mouth to speak. So, when given permission, Paul stood on the stairs and motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great silence, he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, saying..." (Acts 21:40).

Paul shared the Gospel by means of sharing his testimony. It seemed to Paul that the most effective way to reach these people with the Gospel was for them to experience how a person (in this case, Paul) *experienced* hearing and receiving the truth of the Gospel rather than simply lecturing to them. This turned out to be an effective approach to engage these people, because they were captivated by his presentation. They were forced to process the details of the story, consider what they would do in the same scenario that Paul was in, and were given an education on how Paul got to his point of belief in Jesus. It made Paul human and not necessarily as a renegade and abandoner of the Jewish faith as they had initially concluded. In essence, they *experienced* the Gospel message rather than simply receiving a lecture about it. Paul struck the right balance of sharing details about his past while making every detail about what God did in his life. And they initially connected to what he was saying.

They immediately heard Paul speak like a Jew. For in fact, he was a Jew. Just like them. And they found themselves in the awkward position of actually agreeing with what he was starting to say, though no one would dare admit this openly. It was for this reason Paul frontloaded his testimony with details of his life he knew they would connect to and could easily agree with.

He stated that he was a Jew (Acts 22:3a), born in Tarsus—home to one of the top three universities (Acts 22:3b), he was brought up in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3c), he was mentored by the popular and respected Jewish teacher, Gamaliel (Acts

Want to learn how to be balanced in preparing and sharing your own testimony? Make sure you "Dig Deeper" this week to learn!

Paul's example of sharing his testimony in order to witness to people serves as an encouragement to believers when they too may feel reluctant to admit that they made mistakes in their past. Remember, "While it's true that you can't change the past, you can change the meaning of it!"

22:3d), he was taught the law in the strictest fashion (Acts 22:3e), and he grew up to be equally as eager as them to protect everything he was ever taught just as the people standing before him (Acts 22:3f). Then Paul added vividness to his testimony that was immediately relatable to these people. Paul described how he too had literal hands-on experience of persecuting people of “this Way” (Acts 22:4a). He too wanted to put them to death. He physically participated in the binding of Christians and delivered men and women to prison (Acts 22:4). He even received letters of extradition from the chief priest and the Sanhedrin (i.e., the Jewish Supreme Court) to travel as far as Damascus (approximately 150 miles away) to extract Christians from their homes to return them back to Jerusalem to be punished (Acts 22:5).

The people continued to hold their peace because they did not hear anything disagreeable. And knowing that either Paul was one of the 70 members of the elite Jewish Sanhedrin or, at the very least, had a very close relationship the popular and powerful ruling body, they probably began to cultivate a sliver of respect for him, though once again, they would never admit this publicly. This respect was shown in their continued silence as Paul explained his conversion experience.

Paul then explained the miraculous conversion he experienced while on his way to perform the Sanhedrin-sanctioned persecution of Christians. Paul explained that he experienced a great light that shone from heaven (Acts 22:6). And as he fell to the ground, he heard a voice say “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me” (Acts 22:7)? Wondering who it was, Paul asked and received his answer that it was Jesus of Nazareth” (Acts 22:8). At this point in Paul’s speech, one would expect the crowd to lose all control and want Paul to be killed because they all knew what the formal position of the Jewish leaders was on the person of Jesus of Nazareth. But miraculously, the crowd remained silent! Somehow, in some way they were captivated by Paul’s testimony. This made it easy for Paul to continue.

Paul continued sharing that after all this occurred, he did not know what to do while on the road to Damascus. Paul said that he asked the Lord for guidance on what he should do next. And Paul described the first command he received from the risen Lord, and he obeyed it. “Arise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do” (Acts 22:10). He described how he was struck with temporary blindness and had to be led by hand all the way to Damascus (Acts 22:11). Not knowing where this story was going but intrigued by the strong Jewish connection and miraculous confirmation, there was no way they were going to stop him from continuing.

When Paul arrived in Damascus, he received confirmation that all that happened to him was of God, relayed through a highly respected man in the Jewish community, “Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there, came to me; and he stood and said

Christians were commonly referred to as people of “The Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22) most likely because the powerful message that Jesus initially shared with his Disciples the night before He was crucified and probably repeated by the Disciples in their teachings, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6).

Paul effectively connected with people on another occasion by also sharing his testimony with people who believed they could work for their salvation in Philippians 3:4b-12. It’s very similar to the format here in Acts 22:1-21!

to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that same hour I looked up at him. Then he said, ‘The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth. For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard’ (Acts 22:12-15). The people were stunned at this development. Because not only is there seemingly no difference between them and Paul, and not only did he share their same zeal to persecute anyone who spoke against the Temple and the Jewish teachings, and not only did he experience a miraculous sign from heaven, but now he told them that an extremely respected Jew confirmed all that has happened to Paul was indeed from God! And God had personally chosen him to fulfill God’s plan on earth, that God promised Paul that he would actually see the true messiah (“Just One” Acts 22:14) and would be given a platform to speak about this very moment, on numerous occasions! They had to have thought at some point that maybe they got Paul all wrong. Maybe they were too hasty and rushed to judgement about him. Maybe he was not worth the persecution they doled out upon him. Maybe...

Paul continued and boldly testified that Ananias himself told Paul, “Now, why are you delaying [being baptized in Jesus’ name]? Having washed your sins away by calling on the name of the Lord, get up and be baptized” (Acts 22:16, original translation). What was the peoples’ reaction? Nothing. No reaction from the people. Just silence. Stunning. It is as if the Lord is performing here in front of Paul the same miracle the angel of the Lord did when he shut the mouths of the lions in the presence of Daniel in the lion’s den (Daniel 6:22). It is as if the Lord was once again silencing the raging storm just as Jesus did in Mark 4:39. What was crystal clear to Paul was that God wanted this formerly chaotic crowd to listen intently and clearly hear Paul’s salvation testimony. And that they did! And they could never unhear it.

So, now, Paul’s thought that he should tell them that this miraculous salvation testimony could be anyone’s story and tell them that God Himself desires that all mankind is able to enter this type of relationship with Him. So, Paul said that he returned back to the very Temple he was just dragged out of and prayed to God. And while he prayed, the Creator of the World Himself spoke to him and said, “Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me” (Acts 22:18b). But at the moment, Paul said that it did not make sense. Why would the Jewish people hate me so much, Lord? So, Paul described how he asked the Lord, “‘Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe in You. And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.’” (Acts 22:19-20; 9:23, 29-30). I do not understand, Lord. Why would the Jewish people hate me? Then Paul revealed the reason the Lord gave him for why the Jewish people hated him, “Then He said to me, ‘Depart, for I will send you far from here to the *Gentiles*’” (Acts 22:21, emphasis added). And that did it! The silence had been

broken. The crowd erupted in anger. Paul finally revealed what Ananias said in general, “For you will be His witness to *all men* of what you have seen and heard” (Acts 22:15, emphasis added), Paul defined them specifically as “Gentiles!”

“[T]hey listened to him until this word, and then they raised their voices and said, ‘Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live!’ Then, they cried out and tore off their clothes and threw dust into the air” (Acts 22:22-23). It did not matter that Paul was divinely redirected by God. It did not matter that the Sovereign God of the Universe, whom they served personally and directly, called Paul to be a witness to the Jews and Gentiles. It did not matter to them. There simply was no way they were going to include, let alone embrace, Gentiles as part of the same spiritual family.

The instant uprising with its screaming and shouting was all the Roman Commander needed to know it was time to remove Paul from the scene. The Roman Commander ordered that Paul be brought into the building (Acts 22:24a).

Why were they throwing “dirt into the air” (Acts 22:22-23)? *It is unclear what occurred here. Some suggest they were so outraged that they simply grasped handfuls of dirt because they did not have anything else to throw and they simply threw it somewhere (e.g., Like kicking the first thing out of your way as you angrily walk somewhere). Another view is that they actually wanted to stone him because of their uncontrollable anger but there were no stones, so they simply grabbed handfuls of the ground near them and attempted to throw something, anything at him. Notice they threw “off their clothes” (Acts 22:23) which is what happened at the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58). Some question this possibility by asking if they would have risked even throwing dirt in the vicinity of approximately 200 Roman soldiers and while being flanked by two centurions and the Roman Commander. But they were extremely angry and anger can make people do irrational things.*

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect on a couple of testimonies that you have heard of how someone came to faith in Christ. Ask yourself why you are able to still remember some of the details from the testimony when it might have been months or years ago. Think about what specific details from these testimonies still stick out in your mind. As you rehearse these testimonies again, how does it make you feel about the power/mercy/patience/love of God? What does your mind think about God when you hear how He changed a life after remembering these testimonies?

Pray and thank God for how powerful, merciful, patient and loving He is for changing a life. Ask Him to expose you to more testimonies of true life change so that you can be reminded of how great He has been to others and to you in saving your soul.

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we’ve just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God’s Word to your heart!

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

We are to draw all attention to God when we share our personal testimony of coming to faith in Christ. And while we will share details of the circumstances surrounding our conversion, we must strike the right balance to make sure listeners are focused solely on what God did versus drawing any attention to ourselves. Discuss what the proper balance is for sharing one’s testimony. Consider composing a list of what to do and what not to do when sharing a testimony that would help you keep all attention on God and deflect attention away from yourself. Discuss what details/actions/words one should avoid

sharing because they would do nothing but turn the listeners full attention on you rather than focusing on the greatness of God. Offer helpful ways you have found to keep listeners properly focused upon God and His power and grace.

Now, apply the same thing to sharing prayer requests. Unfortunately, prayer requests can also get commandeered by sinful motives of wanting to draw attention to ourselves. Sin appears in the sharing of a prayer request when a person wants everyone to know that s/he knows some unknown details. Or, when a person shares sordid details of a situation that are not for people to know. Share what the God-glorifying way is to share a public prayer request and what should be avoided.

Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

Listen & Grow!

Listen to a powerful sermon clip preached by our Founding Pastor, Dr. Jerry Falwell Sr., as he unpacks the life-changing message found in Acts 22.



Want to Dig Deeper?

Optional but Recommended!

“Dig Deeper” provides added insight into this portion of Acts with supporting Scriptures. Be encouraged to reflect on how to live out the spiritual applications unearthed in this devotional.

1. What is the ultimate goal in sharing one’s testimony?

2. What is an improper way to share one’s testimony?

3. How much detail should you share in your testimony about your past life?

4. How can you tell if you struck the right balance of sharing details about yourself and sharing what God has done in your life?

5. How would you gauge your testimony presentation if people walked away and talked more about you and less about what the Lord has done in your life?

6. Did you think Paul struck the right balance in sharing enough details to connect with the listener but not cause them to get fixated upon him?

7. Read the following verses and summarize the spiritual guidance each verse provides that can assist you in preparing to share your testimony:

- James 1:5

- Psalm 139:23-24

- John 16:13

Here are some Scriptures to consider that explain how God exposes positive/self-centered motives in people: While God equips Spirit-controlled believers with a level of discernment that is able to sense sinful motives (John 7:24; I Corinthians 12:10; Philippians 1:9; Philippians 1:12-17), it is ultimately the Lord who discerns the heart with perfect accuracy and acts accordingly (Proverbs 16:2; Romans 8:27; Galatians 6:7 and see our Devotional on **Acts 14:8-18**).

8. Now, how to deal with an all-too-common occurrence: How should you respond if your heart was in the right place, you presented everything properly, but you are still approached by someone who heard you share your testimony who really wants to make it all about you? What statements can you say that would redirect the person to focus more upon the Lord?
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- There are many good ways to redirect all the attention upon God. Interjecting phrases like, “Praise the Lord!” “God is great, isn’t he?” “To God be the glory!” are good. Consider asking the person questions to return the focus on the Lord where it should be, like “How did the Lord speak to you when you were listening?”, “I’m excited to know what the Holy Spirit taught you from what you heard?” Even pausing to pray a prayer of praise for His goodness and the miracles that He performs in peoples’ lives is excellent.
- Remember, it is perfectly fine to say “thank you” to a well-meaning compliment. But never forget that your flesh has an insatiable appetite to receive vainglory and its desire for it can easily overtake a person who is not spirit controlled. To integrate verbal safeguards into conversations early and often is a very effective way to keep from stealing any of God’s glory. And know that the Lord will always honor any sincere attempt to usher all praise to Him!

Acts 22:24b-29 – Ministry Opportunities Open up for Paul While in Custody in Jerusalem

4. A willing heart gets a front row seat to the activity of God.

Willingness is one of the most admirable and appreciated qualities one can ever have in a friend or loved one. While there are many wonderful qualities a person can possess, willingness to help, support, comfort, or serve another is one of the qualities that brings the most joy, peace, and comfort to the recipient. And this quality is often expressed by others when the person they care deeply about has a great need. People offer their willingness to help move people into their new homes. Many offer their willingness support their church should ever the need arise. And many willingly devote valuable time to help rebuild one's home when it has been devastated. Others offer both their condolences and unconditional willingness to support a grieving family upon the loss of a loved one. When a heart is willing to help, support, comfort, and serve, it demonstrates a quality that pleases the Lord and gives glory to God.

God is pleased with believers who respond willingly to obey Him and fulfill His will on the earth. And just like Isaiah who expressed his willingness to offer himself to the Lord when the Lord called for anyone to proclaim His truths to the world, "I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?' Then I said, 'Here am I! Send me'" (Isaiah 6:8), Paul responded with a willing heart even if he knew the task would be challenging.

Paul knew coming to Jerusalem would be difficult (Acts 21:4-14). But he also believed it was God's will (Acts 20:22-24). Paul demonstrated an inspiring level of willingness to God's mission for him (Acts 21:13). And while others thought their strong feelings against Paul going to Jerusalem were a prohibition to him going (Acts 21:4-14), Paul accepted God's mission with a clear head about the future. His willingness to serve God, even in challenging times, afforded Paul unparalleled opportunities to share the Gospel and unforgettable examples of God's supernatural provision and protection. God blessed his willing obedience in ways that he had not yet encountered in all his journeys.

After sharing his testimony with the chaotic mob (Acts 22:21), they desired to kill him all the more (Acts 22:22-23). Immediately, the Roman Commander took him inside the barracks and prepared to whip Paul. The reason being, the

Roman Commander did not have time to learn the cause of the riot or what Paul's offense was when they plucked him out of the chaotic mob (Acts 21:37-39). So, he provided an opportunity for Paul to speak to the people (Acts 21:40). He probably hoped to hear Paul share some details about what happened so he could know how to proceed. But when Paul began speaking in the Hebrew language to the people (Acts 22:22), the Roman Commander did not understand what he was saying. And after some time of silence, the crowd erupted in vitriol. The Roman Commander had to assume that something was majorly wrong with Paul that warranted punishment. Desiring an answer from Paul, he prepared Paul to be whipped (Acts 22:24). But they learned that Paul was a Roman citizen and knew they would be breaking Roman law to beat a Roman citizen (Acts 22:24-29). This detail stopped the whipping, and the Commander never got what he wanted. So, he made a third attempt to understand the cause of the mob riot. He decided to send Paul to the Jewish Sanhedrin (i.e., the Jewish Supreme Court) to provide a judgement on Paul's actions (Acts 22:40). Thus, God in His providence orchestrated the circumstances for Paul to receive the blessing to preach to a huge gathering of Jewish people in Jerusalem (Acts 22:1-21, engage a Roman Commander, a centurion, and hundreds of Roman soldiers (Acts 22:22-29), and eventually stand before the Jewish Sanhedrin (Acts 22:30-23:10), Roman Governors (Acts 23:26-25:12), and Rulers (Acts 25:13-27).

Paul willingly obeyed God. As a result, God not only gave him exponential witnessing opportunities beyond what he had ever had prior to this point, He also provided divine protection from the most unlikely source to make sure Paul was safely and securely delivered to these opportunities. God protected Paul from the mob of approximately 200 Roman soldiers (Acts 21:37-39) and was granted permission by the leaders of this protective force to address the people in order to share his testimony (Acts 21:40)! God provided Paul the necessary protection needed to avoid a brutal whipping by the Roman soldiers before he was even born, over 50 years before, when God allowed Paul to be born into a family whose father was a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28b).

Acts 22:25-28 describes how the Roman soldiers were about to beat Paul in order to receive more details as to why the riot occurred. "And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who stood by, 'Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?' When the centurion heard that, he went and told the commander, saying, 'Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman.' Then the commander came and said to him, 'Tell me, are you a Roman?' He said, 'Yes.' The commander answered, 'With a large sum I obtained this citizenship.' And Paul said, 'But I was born a citizen'" (Acts 22:25-28). Paul was loosed from being strapped down after he informed them of His citizenship. Yet again, God provides His divine protection for His obedient and willing servant.

How does one verify Roman citizenship in the first century? Did they just take Paul's word for it? Whatever happened, it obviously persuaded them to believe Paul. In Paul's day, the most popular way to verify one's citizenship was through generating witnesses to testify to someone's citizenship. The first century heavily relied on eyewitness testimony. Also, Roman citizens had a certain look (e.g., only Romans could wear a toga in Rome) or if one could speak Latin or seemed to be educated it helped verify a citizen. If one bore a Latin name like Paul did (e.g., Paul's full name was "Saulos Paulus." "Saulos" was his Hebrew/Jewish name (no, it was not his evil, sinful, prior-to-salvation name; God did not switch his name after salvation). "Paulus" was his Latin/Roman/Gentile name). Census records also were a means of verification if one had time to go and research them. Two copies were traditionally kept in either the regional Governor's house or with their tribe (town) of people. Some people made it a practice to carry a "diptych" (English: DIP-tūk, Greek: DIP-too-kay; Latin: DIP-too-koss) as they traveled. Within the first 30 days of birth, Roman families were given a wooden diptych (two 7x6 inch thin boards connected with a hinge of some sort) which contained a layer of wax on the inside with an official inscription of one's date of birth and names of at least seven witnesses. So, what persuaded the Roman Commander to believe Paul? Paul was in Jerusalem and probably had a lot of witnesses to concur that he was a Roman citizen, or he presented a DIP-too-koss to the Roman Commander or he simply looked the part since he had a Roman name, Paulus, spoke Latin, and confidently claimed his birthright. Paul was probably believed because the penalty for falsely claiming Roman citizenship in an official manner carried the death penalty often done by decapitation with an ax. And Paul was in the company of the very soldiers who carried out that type of action, so they probably believed Paul that he was telling the truth.

After this, Paul was going to soon experience the protection of 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen, and 200 spearmen (i.e., javelin throwers) to transfer him to speak in front of governors and kings (Acts 23:23-24). And while the common cliché is true, "Where God guides, He provides" it can also be expanded upon to say that the believers who have willing hearts to follow the instructions of God will experience spiritual miracles of provision and protection that many will never see! God provides to those who willingly allow Him to guide them in their lives and ministry to get a front row seat to the activity of God. And their only frustration is attempting to find the right words to describe the unforgettable experience to those who were not there to see it because of their lack of willingness to follow the Lord at all times!

Could someone legally purchase Roman citizenship? No, not unless you bribed someone who could somehow affect the citizenship records in your favor. Notice in Acts 22:28, the Roman Commander Claudius Lysias did not say he chose the formal purchasing option that Rome offered to secure citizenship, because there was no such option. Rather, he says, "With a large sum I obtained this citizenship." He probably offered a bribe to another who manipulated the citizenship records. Some think it was the Roman Emperor Claudius at that time or someone in his court. Many feel that Claudius Lysias adopted the emperor's name to honor him. And by adopting the emperor's very respected Roman name, it would divert attention away from his very popular Greek name, Lysias. Bribes were common in the first century. In fact, Luke records another mention of a bribe in Acts 24:26.

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect on the inspiring testimony of Paul's willing spirit. What if Paul was unwilling to obey God to go to Jerusalem because he knew it would be difficult. Sure, the will of God would have been accomplished regardless, but Paul would have missed out on unforgettable encounters that very few, if any, in his day had ever seen. Can you recall a spiritual experience God gave you, that you have never forgotten, because you were willing to do something God impressed upon your heart? Do you recall a time when you knew you should have been willing to obey God but did not. Do you still wonder to this day what you would have experienced if only you had been willing?

Pray and tell God that you want to be a person He can rely on to willingly obey and serve Him when He calls upon you. In your prayer, express your honest feelings as to why it is a challenge at times to willingly respond to his clear guidance and direction. Confess what has hindered you from willingly responding to Him. And then tell Him you want to experience a front row seat to His activity and witness Him supernaturally change lives that will, in return, change yours!

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Share an experience where you demonstrated a heart of willingness and followed through on something you knew God wanted you to do and, as a result, you were able to see God move in the situation very specifically and vividly. For example, did you reach out to a person to discuss spiritual matters or share the Gospel, and even though it was inconvenient for you, you witnessed God move in the life of the person? Or did you offer to serve in a ministry of your church that you were once reluctant to do, but the Lord blessed you and others more than you had anticipated? etc. Also, do you recall a time you knew you should have obeyed God but did not and you still wonder what you would have experienced if you had only been willing? Through this discussion, encourage each other in your group to always be willing to obey God immediately and with anticipation of what He could show you through the experience.

Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

Listen & Grow!

Find strength and hope amid life's challenges by listening to a sermon clip preached by our Sr. Jonathan Falwell. In this heartfelt message, Pastor Falwell reminds us that difficult seasons are not the end of the story—they are opportunities for God to reveal His faithfulness, power, and grace.



Want to Dig Deeper?

Optional but Recommended!
“Dig Deeper” provides added insight into this portion of Acts with supporting Scriptures. Be encouraged to reflect on how to live out the spiritual applications unearthed in this devotional.

1. Psalm 139 begins and ends with virtually the same verses with one exception. In Psalm 139:1a, David makes a statement about God. In Psalm 139:23a, David makes a request of God. Read these verses and ask yourself, “Why would someone request God to do something he knows God already does?” Expound on your thoughts below.

(Here’s a hint: It starts with a “W” and ends with an “illingness”)

2. What is the opposite of “responding willingly” to God? It is “responding _____.” Think about how you feel when someone under your care (a child, an employee, or someone under your supervision) responds begrudgingly to any of your requests. How does it make you feel?

3. When someone responds begrudgingly to your request, do you feel like blessing him/her? How do you think the Lord feels when we respond in this way? List a couple of ways you could respond with a willing spirit to your employer (e.g., Before you leave the office, stop by your supervisor’s door and ask, ‘is there anything else I can do for you before I leave?’ etc.). And then also identify what you could say to the Lord to let Him know that you desire to willingly serve Him?

4. How would you describe the difference between someone who is “compliant” versus someone who is “obedient” versus someone who is “willing/all in?” Are there any differences? Is there a preferred heart condition that brings the most honor to the Lord?

5. Read Psalm 139 for understanding and then read it again, converting it into a prayer of praise for Who He is and a prayer of willingness to welcome His perfect work into your heart.

Acts 22:30-23:10 – Paul Stands Before the Jewish Sanhedrin in Jerusalem

5. Trust the Process – God’s Process!

It seems impossible to believe that Paul walked up to the Jewish Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, the Supreme Court of Judaism who deliberate over all spiritual and theological matters and ultimate questions of practical application of the Jewish law, and was successful in securing a hearing with the entire Sanhedrin membership for the purpose of sharing his testimony and the Gospel! There would have to have been an exceptional circumstance for everyone to drop what they were doing to gather together to listen to Paul in this instance. The only way it could happen was if they had a unique motivation to gather and listen to him. Fortunately, God had already providentially orchestrated the process so Paul could receive an opportunity to speak to all of them.

On this day, the Sanhedrin received ample motivation to immediately gather and listen to Paul. For Claudius Lysias, the Roman Commander, commanded the Sanhedrin to gather and listen to Paul’s testimony to help Claudius understand what Paul might have done to cause a mob riot in Jerusalem. And even though Rome held no jurisdiction (nor interest) in this Jewish religious body deliberating over their own words and rules, Claudius needed to know what caused all of this commotion. And for political reasons, they jumped at his command (Acts 22:30).

Now, probably all of the Sanhedrin heard about the mob riot, but most of them did not know why it occurred with any specificity, as it had only occurred the day before this gathering (Acts 22:30a). So, God prompted Paul to tell them the reason why all the commotion occurred in two sentences: I am a Jewish man and a former Pharisee who follows Jesus as the Christ in good standing with God (Acts 23:1, 6a), and I believe Jesus Christ rose from the dead and when one dies s/he will be resurrected too (Acts 23:6b)! And just as the mob in the city was set off by one word, “Gentiles,” the Sanhedrin was set off after hearing one word, “resurrection” (Acts 23:6b). Paul said that the issue of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is why people were punishing him.

The Sanhedrin was comprised of Pharisees and Sadducees and “Sadducees say that there is no resurrection—and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both” (Acts 23:8). And that is all it took for Pharisees to hear that someone

was being punished for believing “the hope and resurrection of the dead” (Acts 23:6b). The conversation escalated from being divided (Acts 23:7b), to a loud outcry (Acts 23:9a), to standing and protesting (Acts 23:9b). The result was that the Pharisees believed Paul, or anyone for that matter, should not be punished for holding this view (Acts 23:9c). In fact, some of the academic scribes in the room even suggested that “if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God” (Acts 23:9d)! It ultimately escalated to “a great dissension” (Acts 23:10a) to the point that “the commander, fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring him into the barracks” (Acts 23:10b).

Now, let’s pause on this story and get into the mind of the Roman Commander, Claudius Lysias. What do you imagine he was thinking after seeing this display of passion and discord? Most likely Paul addressed the Sanhedrin in Aramaic or Hebrew. So, without any assistance, Claudius yet again would not know what Paul said to anger the Sanhedrin, just as he did not know what Paul said to the Jewish people in the city the day before. He most likely asked someone to interpret for him as he was not about to make the same mistake twice. Claudius needed answers and he very likely knew what was said. And to his utter shock, he heard that these Jewish people argued about one of their theological topics and yet again it escalated into a mini-mob riot right inside their Supreme courtroom!

Claudius was certainly not interested in their theological squabbling. He just needed to discern if Paul was a civic disturbance and a problem for Rome. And what Claudius witnessed was that for some reason, Paul pushed the right buttons to cause chaos among the Jewish people. And for whatever reason this chaos had to stop. He was here to keep peace.

Back to the story. The Sadducees held more positions in the Sanhedrin, in the Temple, and mostly were from the wealthy and elite families in Israel. Even the chief priests were Sadducees. The Pharisees held a minority number of seats, controlled the synagogues, and mostly came from the common families. Sadducees had a warmer but not perfect relationship with Rome as they welcomed some life-improving aspects that Rome provided its citizens. Pharisees were opposed to anything and everything Rome did and stood for. It was only near the end of Jesus’ ministry where the Sadducees and Pharisees temporarily put aside their differences to figure out a way to rid themselves of Jesus. But one topic that fired them up at all times was the topic of resurrection. And for some of the Sanhedrin to hear that a person who believed in the resurrection was getting punished for it was not acceptable.

But why did Paul bring up the resurrection at all in his speech? Most likely he sensed he was not going to receive a fair review by the Sanhedrin, so he decided to testify about

Consider how special Nicodemus was in Jewish leadership knowing that the minority of the 70 seats on the Sanhedrin were held by Pharisees. The majority of seats were held by Sadducees. Thus, to be a Pharisee on the Sanhedrin was very difficult to accomplish. Therefore, to learn that “there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews [Sanhedrin],” (John 3:1) means he was a very respected spiritual leader. Which also makes Jesus’ admonition to Nicodemus all the more profound about how all of the religious leaders – Pharisees and Sadducees – need to confess their sins and have faith in Him: “Do not marvel that I said to you [singular], ‘You [plural] must be born again.’” (John 3:7).

the most essential tenet of the Christian faith, the resurrection (I Corinthians 15:16-17). And by doing so, he knew this would divide the group in a passionate way and possibly divert attention away from him. And it worked. His last sentence in the room was what he would be known for by these Jewish leaders and it is what every believer would be known for, if we are sharing the Gospel (and our testimonies) properly, “concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged” (Acts 23:6b)!

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect upon how Paul saw God orchestrate his circumstances to provide him with an opportunity to speak in front of Jewish leaders at the highest level. And think about how he probably would never have gained this opportunity without trusting God’s process. Ponder the trustworthiness of God in the following verse, “Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep His promise” (Hebrews 10:23 NLT). Ponder this verse, “God is not a man, so He does not lie. He is not human, so He does not change His mind. Has he ever spoken or failed to act? Has He ever promised and not carried it through” (Numbers 19:23)?

Pray and meditate on these words: “God can be trusted,” “He does not lie,” and “Has He ever promised and not carried it through?” Allow this prayer to be free flowing. Let it start – and stop – and start again. Maybe start with thanking God that these things are true about Him. Tell Him how much each of these qualities make you feel. Tell Him why you appreciate each one. Praise Him for being like no other person or being. Then end with thanksgiving and your commitment to trust Him today.

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Prepare to share with your group a situation where you were able to clearly recognize God’s hand at work, but when you initially entered the situation, you did not understand what God was initially doing. Try to share, in vivid detail, what you were thinking and feeling during this season of life and the questions you asked of God as you were going through it. Then attempt to pinpoint the moment you realized exactly what God was doing and why things had to occur the way they did. Then have an honest discussion as to why it is still difficult at times to trust God’s plan and process in our lives, even though we have seen His providential hand work in the past? End this time in prayer together and ask God for the wisdom to trust Him when things initially do not make sense.

*Take a moment and
join the many people
who have read this
devotional today in
praying over what
we’ve just learned!
We believe this is how
the Holy Spirit will
help you apply this
portion of God’s
Word to your heart!*

Listen & Grow!

In this sermon clip, our Sr. Pastor, Jonathan Falwell, speaks to those moments when we find ourselves on a path that doesn't make sense.



Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

**Optional but
Recommended!**

“Dig Deeper” provides added insight into this portion of Acts with supporting Scriptures. Be encouraged to reflect on how to live out the spiritual applications unearthed in this devotional.

Want to Dig Deeper?

The theme for this devotional is “Trust the Process – God’s Process!” In Acts 22:30-23:10, Paul was eventually able to clearly recognize how all of these events were unfolding in God’s perfect timing and producing results that could not have been achieved aside from following God’s plan. Jesus’ followers experienced the exact same spiritual reality in play approximately 27 years before in John Chapter 11 – The Raising of Lazarus. The details of this drama did not make sense at first – in fact, it looked like there was no hope for their situation – then God acted in His perfect timing. And the results were unlike anyone could have ever imagined (and no, the biggest result was not that He raised Lazarus from the dead – it was even bigger than that!).

1. Read John 11:1-4 and attempt to describe the emotions that the people must have felt knowing Lazarus was very sick. But also, describe how you believe they must have felt comforted when they were able to finally get to Jesus and let Him know about his sickness (remember, these followers of Jesus had been with Him for three years straight, they had seen Him do some amazing miracles!):

2. They must have been so comforted to finally bring the news of Lazarus’ sickness to Jesus because they probably believed He would simply speak a word of healing from a distance and Lazarus would be healed immediately. They had seen Jesus do this before, for mere strangers! Identify below who they saw Jesus do this type of miracle for in the past:

- Mark 7:24-30

- Matthew 8:5-13

- John 4:46-54

3. Read John 11:5. Did you notice something unique about this verse that is different from the previous verses so far? Take a guess as to why it is different before we discuss it below.

In John 11:5, the Apostle John stopped telling the story and intentionally inserted a brief comment/fact/truth so that readers would better understand the story without being confused. First century writers of these types of letters were permitted to do this in case some details had the potential of not making sense unless a word of explanation was inserted by the writer. It is as if he put reading glasses on our eyes and told us to view everything from here on out through this truth so we will not be confused. That truth is, “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus” (John 11:5). So, no matter what comes next, we must remember that Jesus *loved* them! It sounds like if we were not told this, we may be tempted to believe that Jesus might not have loved them as much as we thought He did.

4. Also, did you notice that only we, the readers of the Gospel of John, are told the truth in John 11:5? The real-time participants in this drama did not hear that comment. They were called to trust Jesus and all they knew of Him. Do you think they would have believed if they were told that phrase? How does the teaching of John 20:29 apply to us/them here?

-
5. It does not take long to understand why the Apostle John included the truth in John 11:5. Read and summarize what happened next and the statements Jesus makes (and we may be glad we read the promise given to us in John 11:5 first!):

- John 11:6

-
- John 11:14-15a

-
- John 11:17
-

6. Jesus loved them all but allowed these things to happen. It must have been a challenging four days for His followers. Wondering what God is doing while in the waiting is very challenging for most believers. How would you feel at this moment if you were there?
-

7. Notice what everyone in the drama concluded about Jesus – Sure, they admitted He was very powerful, but can you see that they confessed that there might have been a limit to Jesus' power? Meaning, Jesus was powerful, but powerful only to a point?

- John 11:21, 32, 27
-

8. Let's ask ourselves an honest question: Why did they doubt that God could raise Lazarus from the dead? Didn't they already see Him raise two others from the dead during His ministry? Summarize what happened in these two instances:

- Luke 7:11-17
-

- Luke 8:49-55
-

9. Jesus made His way to the tomb, and before He raised Lazarus from the dead, He made a very poignant statement to Martha – write out the statement Jesus makes to Martha so that it gives you time to allow it to sink in:

- John 11:40
-

Take note that the “you” words in this verse are singular in the Greek language from which it was translated into English. Meaning, Jesus implied that Martha needed to make her own choice to trust Jesus, regardless of what others said or believed about Him. Also, it probably related to her influence because she probably negatively influenced her sister to doubt Jesus. See how Mary repeated the exact same statement about Jesus 11:32, as Martha had initially claimed in John 11:21.

10. Now, approach this revised verse below personally and write your name in the blank, then read it out loud:

- “Jesus says to _____, “Did I not say to you that if you would believe you will see the glory of God?”

And before we experience the glorious end of this story, pause for a moment and pray to God and share your heart with Him and tell Him you will stay close to the Holy Spirit and trust Him even when things do not make sense.

Finally, Jesus asks them to roll away the stone from the tomb, shouts for him to walk out, and Lazarus walks out of the grave (John 11:38-44)!

But the story is not over. While the raising of Lazarus was truly amazing, this was not the ultimate reason why Jesus delayed seeing Lazarus. The ultimate reason was He knew this miracle would be so dramatic and impactful upon the people that the peoples’ public praise of Jesus would escalate to a new, heightened level! Jesus knew it would capture the attention of all the religious leaders and, as a result, they would insist that Jesus would have to die. And in declaring this, they would unknowingly facilitate Jesus going to the cross so that He could provide salvation for all mankind!

11. In fact, compare these two verses – one the High Priest said, the other what Jesus said:

- Notice verse 50 within John 11:45-53
-

- Compare with John 3:16
-

But Jesus had to call upon His closest followers to trust Him and His plan, even in dark times. And trust that He loves them. “Trust the process – God’s process!”

Group Gathering is a time to reflect together upon **what we learned** (Head), **what we felt** (Heart), and **what we should do** (Hands).

GROUP GATHERING #5

Note to Group Members:

Be encouraged! Your contribution is valuable to your group and will most assuredly edify the members of your group and your group leader. But should you need to sit and listen today, just to take in the entire discussion and prayerfully process the spiritual discussion quietly, that is OK too! You will not be pressured to speak publicly. We are glad you have joined us today!

All of the discussion topics are taken from this week's devotionals along with a brief summary of each devotional!

Discussion Topics

Choose **one or two** topics to discuss today!

Taken from Day One: *"Acts 21:16-26 – Paul Engages a Timeless Situation in Jerusalem: Knowing when to concede for the sake of peace and when to proceed knowing you are in good standing with God."*

Paul returns to Jerusalem and reports on all that God did to save many Gentile believers. The Jerusalem leaders rejoiced but then asked Paul to make further concessions so that he and his travel companions would not offend the Jewish believers who are *still* struggling with Gentiles not being required to obey the Mosaic Law that the Jewish believers had followed all their life. Paul did make many concessions, but it did not seem to help much to keep the peace.

1. Process with your group this very important topic of when it is wise and necessary to concede doing something for the sake of peace among believers and when you should feel at peace not conceding. Process together what the factors are that one needs to weigh when making this weighty decision. And if any group member has been in this situation before, share whatever details you are able to discuss about the situation.

Describe your thought process and the factors you had to consider, the decision you ultimately made, the outcome, and what you learned from the experience.

2. In addition, discuss which personality types would have an easier time dealing with oversensitivity to the feelings of others and which would be too hardened and desensitized to other people's feelings. And time permitting, share with your group where you would plot yourself in this scenario.

3. How do you believe you would personally respond to the request to concede for the sake of peace? And, if you feel you are imbalanced, in what ways would you want to improve your approach to a similar situation?

Taken from Day Two: *“Acts 21:26-40 – Paul Goes from his Life being Threatened to Receiving Imperial Protection in Jerusalem: Always be in a state-of-readiness to present the Gospel.”*

Paul was grabbed out of the temple by an angry mob of Jewish people who falsely accused Paul that he took a Gentile past the dividing wall that restricts Gentiles from entering most of the Temple reserved only for Jewish people. This was a major violation for the Jewish people, and they took him out of the Temple to kill him. Roman soldiers came quickly and saved Paul’s life and escorted him to the Roman barracks for questioning. But halfway up the staircase, Paul asked the Roman Commander if he could talk to the angry mob. The Roman Commander agreed.

4. Look back upon an opportunity that you took full advantage of to either share the Gospel, share much needed spiritual advice or counsel, or enter an important spiritual discussion with a person, and you were so glad you did. Share the outcome from taking advantage of that opportunity.
5. Now, share an example of an opportunity that arose, but you chose not to speak? What reflections do you have now about that missed opportunity?

Discuss if anyone else has ever experienced the same thing. Then share what you believe your reason was for not speaking. Was fear of not knowing what to say the motivating factor for not taking advantage of the opportunity? Were there other reasons why you didn’t speak at that moment? Solicit encouragement and advice from any member of your group who has had success in being prepared to take full advantage of opportunities.

6. Then pray for each other that you would be ready to engage people with the truth of God when the opportunity presents itself.

Taken from Day Three: *“Acts 22:1-24a – Paul Shares His Testimony to a Mob Gone Silent in Jerusalem: People can never unhear what they have heard.”*

Paul takes advantage of a rare opportunity to share his testimony to a hostile mob turned silent. Being surrounded by Roman security, Paul was granted permission by the Roman Commander to address the crowd. Paul tactfully shared details that related to the listeners and was effective in keeping them quiet and listening. But the moment he declared that God called him to share the Gospel with the Gentiles, the crowd lost control and yelled again for him to be killed.

7. We are to draw all attention to God when we share our personal testimony of coming to faith in Christ. And while we will share details of the circumstances surrounding our conversion, we must strike the right balance to

make sure listeners are focused solely on what God did versus drawing any attention to ourselves. Discuss what the proper balance is for sharing one's testimony.

Consider composing a list of what to do and what not to do when sharing a testimony that would help you keep all attention on God and deflect attention away from yourself. Discuss what details/actions/words one should avoid sharing because they would do nothing but turn the listeners full attention on you rather than focusing on the greatness of God. Offer helpful ways you have found to keep listeners properly focused upon God and His power and grace.

8. Now, apply the same thing to sharing prayer requests. Unfortunately, prayer requests can also get commandeered by sinful motives of wanting to draw attention to ourselves. Sin appears in the sharing of a prayer request when a person wants everyone to know some fresh details of a situation that everyone desires to know. Or, when a person shares sordid details of a situation of that are not for people to know. Share what the God-glorifying way is to share a public prayer request and what should be avoided.

Taken from Day Four: *“Acts 22:24b-29 – Ministry Opportunities Open up for Paul While in Custody in Jerusalem: A willing heart gets a front row seat to the activity of God!”*

Paul was protected by the Roman Soldiers from the angry Jerusalem mob that wanted to kill him. Paul was taken to the Roman barracks where he continued his personal and direct interactions with the Roman Commander. Through their interactions, they learned Paul is a Roman citizen. As a result, Paul received multiple layers of security from the Roman soldiers throughout his time in Jerusalem. Paul would have never experienced this level of interaction with a high-ranking Roman Commander and the soldiers were it not for his willingness to go to Jerusalem, ask the commander for permission to preach to a mob, and then continue his conversations with him.

9. Share an experience where you demonstrated a heart of willingness and followed through on something you knew God wanted you to do and, as a result, you were able to see God move in the situation very specifically and vividly.

For example, did you reach out to a person to discuss spiritual matters or share the Gospel, and even though it was inconvenient for you, you witnessed God move in the life of the person? Or did you offer to serve in a ministry of your church that you were once reluctant to do, but the Lord blessed you and others more than you had anticipated? etc.

10. Also, do you recall a time you knew you should have obeyed God but did not and you still wonder what you would have experienced if you had only been willing?

Through this discussion, encourage each other in your group to always be willing to obey God immediately and with anticipation of what He could show you through the experience.

Taken from Day Five: “Acts 22:30-23:10 – Paul Stands Before the Jewish Sanhedrin in Jerusalem: Trust the Process – God’s Process!”

It seems impossible to believe that Paul on his own could have walked up to the Jewish Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, the Supreme Court of Judaism, and had been successful in securing a hearing with the entire Sanhedrin membership for the purpose of sharing his testimony and the Gospel. But that was exactly what God providentially orchestrated! And then, Paul was ushered away before any negative sentence was cast against him. Then Paul was protected by hundreds of Roman soldiers. Only God could orchestrate such an experience. But it took Paul’s trust in the Lord to know that all that proceeded in this moment came from the Lord and was part of His divine plan.

- 11.** Prepare to share with your group a situation where you were able to clearly recognize God’s hand at work, but when you initially entered the situation, you did not understand what God was initially doing.

Try to share, in vivid detail, what you were thinking and feeling during this season of life and the questions you asked of God as you were going through it.

- 12.** Then attempt to pinpoint the moment you realized exactly what God was doing and why things had to occur the way they did. Then have an honest discussion as to why it is still difficult at times to trust God’s plan and process in our lives, even though we have seen His providential hand work in the past?
- 13.** End this time in prayer together and ask God for the wisdom to trust Him when things initially do not make sense.

5

ACTS

23:11–26:32

OVERVIEW

This week covers the following ways in which the members of God's Church can grow in their faith as God grows His Church:

1. Sometimes we need our own personal "Let not your heart be troubled" moment from Jesus.
2. Taking a stand and putting God's interests first can be an effective witness.
3. Respond immediately to the truth before you fall back into complacency.
4. No matter the type of spiritual attack, just stand firm on God's unchanging truth.
5. Know your audience to be able to effectively and intentionally witness to them.

Memory Verse

Acts 5:29

*"But [they] answered and said:
We ought to obey God rather than men."*

A Summary of Acts 23:11 – Chapter 26

Even Paul needed encouragement throughout his ministry and travels. And God delivered His life-energizing encouragement to Paul directly. Paul had experienced a very stressful couple of days. Even though he was able to engage in some one-of-a-kind ministry opportunities, it was not without the heavy weight of being physically bruised and emotionally stirred at every turn.

Paul then received from God the exact encouragement he needed, at the exactly right time, and it empowered him for immediate challenges. The encouragement also empowered him as he prepared for the long-term challenge of witnessing in Rome. Paul was safely delivered to Felix who was the Procurator (i.e., Governor) of the region and presided in Caesarea with 470 Roman soldiers. Felix had received a memo from Claudius Lysias, the Roman Commander, informing him that Paul, a Roman citizen, was threatened for his life simply because of theological disagreements among the Jewish people. As a result, Lysias did not charge Paul with any wrongdoing.

Felix received Paul from the Roman Commander and called the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem to come and present any charges they believed Felix should act upon. The Sanhedrin came with their lawyer, Tertullus, and he presented the case against Paul to Felix. Paul clearly presented his side to Felix stating that he was in the current situation solely because of their theological disagreements about the Resurrection. Felix paused the hearing, claiming he needed to call the Roman Commander to come and share anything and everything he knew about the situation.

While waiting, Felix and his wife Drusilla met with Paul privately and inquired about his faith in Jesus. Paul, knowing their sinful past and current sinful lifestyle, did not withhold in speaking the truth about God's holiness, the need to have self-control, and about the judgement of God. They ended the conversation only to talk to him on more occasions, but Felix's goal was not to hear what Paul had to say but to receive a bribe from Paul to be released. Receiving none, Felix left him in custody for two years.

At around the two-year mark, Felix was removed from his position and replaced by Festus. The Jewish leaders sent him on his way to Caesarea, defamed Paul, and attempted to have Paul killed. Festus chose to meet with the Jewish leaders and Paul like Felix did. The case ended with Paul's appeal to present his case before Nero, the Roman Emperor.

Not knowing what to write to the emperor concerning the charges against Paul, Festus consulted with a very seasoned politician, King Agrippa. Agrippa

expressed interest in hearing what Paul had to say for himself. Paul stood in front of Festus, Agrippa and his sister Bernice, and many dignitaries in the main room. He shared his testimony and the Gospel. Knowing Agrippa's and his sister's deep roots with Judaism, Paul attempted to persuade Agrippa to put his faith in Jesus Christ right in the middle of his presentation. Festus and Agrippa recessed, returned, and stated that Paul was innocent of any crimes. But because Paul appealed to Caesar, they decided he must be sent to Rome. They returned and declared that Paul would be sent to Rome for his hearing before the emperor.

Timeline & Key Events

This week, our daily devotionals will focus upon five **key moments** within **Acts 23:11-chapter 26**.

Acts 23:11-35

God Miraculously Appears to Paul to Prepare Him for a Rough Yet Rewarding Ministry Ahead

Acts 24:1-23

Paul Testifies Before Felix

Acts 24:24-29

Paul Speaks Truth to a Husband and a Wife

Acts 25:1-12

Paul Experiences Déjà vu while Testifying Before Festus

Acts 25:13-26:32

○ Paul Testifies Before Agrippa

Acts 23:11-35 – God Miraculously Appears to Paul to Prepare Him for a Rough Yet Rewarding Ministry Ahead:

1. Paul receives his own personal “Let not your heart be troubled” moment with Jesus!
-

Everyone experiences hardships. Everyone experiences challenges. At some point everyone feels fear and pain strikes at the heart of every person. Even discouragement and doubt are an equal opportunity offender. The pain a person feels is real. The emotional struggles they battle with are real and no one should dismiss the significance of one’s challenges just because s/he may be a little stronger in particular areas in which another person is struggling. No one is immune and everyone needs encouragement.

And it seems that the more severe the pain the more believers need to be strengthened by God’s life-energizing encouragement. Just as a marathon runner needs to refuel his/her body with protein, energy bars, and electrolytes, throughout his/her long journey, believers in deep pain need to feed off the encouragement and spiritual refreshment delivered by other believers more frequently. In fact, it seems like the sharper the pain, the more swiftly we burn through the encouragement that had been deposited in our hearts, and we lean upon our loyal and faithful friends to get us through the journey (II Corinthians 7:5-7; Galatians 6:2; I Thessalonians 5:11; Hebrews 10:24-25).

Even Paul needed encouragement throughout his ministry and travels (see Devotional on Acts 18:1-11). And once again, God delivered His life-energizing encouragement to Paul directly. Two days before, Paul had been dragged out of the Temple by a chaotic mob desiring to kill him (Acts 21:26-36). Moments later, he found himself strapped down prepared to be whipped (Acts 22:24-25). The very next day, he stood in front of the Jewish Sanhedrin and some feared that he would be “pulled to pieces” (Acts 23:10) because of the outrage that broke out between the Pharisees and Sadducees. Those were a couple of very stressful days for Paul. Even though he engaged in some one-of-a-kind ministry opportunities, it was not without the heavy weight of being physically bruised and emotionally stirred at every turn.

That night, Paul received from God the exact encouragement he needed at exactly the right time that empowered him for immediate challenges. The encouragement also empowered him as he prepared for the long-term challenge of witnessing in Rome. “But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, ‘Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome’” (Acts 23:11).

In His Divine knowledge, the Lord knew that Paul not only needed a word of encouragement but also needed to experience the tangible presence and peace from God after all he had been through. Notice Acts 23:11a begins by saying, “The Lord stood by him” (Greek: “eh-FIST-ay-mee” meaning, “was present near him,” “positioned/placed himself by him”). Before God ever said a word to Paul, he came near to him. And while we know theologically God is always everywhere

at all times (Psalm 136:1-12), meaning we are always in His presence, this phrase is included to emphasize that Paul actually *experienced* God’s personal care, interest, and love He has for his child and messenger, Paul.

Then the Lord provided Paul with specific encouragement. Notice the Lord encouraged Paul to “Be of good cheer” (Greek: “far-SAY-oh,” meaning, “Be encouraged,” “take courage”). It is such a simple phrase, yet it is so profound. And while these words are encouraging in and of themselves, what really makes the words impactful to the receiver is the person who is saying them. Many people can say, “Hang in there, I’m here for you,” but if that person is a well-meaning stranger, s/he is appreciated but it is not as impactful as, say, being said by, say, one’s soulmate. Because when you know how much the person loves you, the words carry much more meaning. When you can testify that the person has been with you through thick-and-thin, how s/he has always stood up for you, has always granted you forgiveness when you deserved punishment, and s/he is the one who positions close to you, the words “be encouraged” are more impactful than coming from 10 well-intended strangers. You begin to feel that you can make it through another day. So, imagine how Paul must have thought about receiving the words straight from God

Himself! The God who had been with him in situations like these before and saw him through. God’s words had a significant impact upon Paul.

Then after God delivered this encouragement to Paul, he received another divine “attaboy” from Him. God acknowledged that He was pleased by Paul’s faithful work in Jerusalem, and He wants him to do the same thing in Rome, “for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome” (Acts 23:11c). In essence, God was saying, “You did such a great job

On this night, Paul experienced the presence and peace of God in a very unique way. *It was palpable. But how did this come about? Was it in a dream? Was he in a trance? Or was he in prayer? The Scriptures do promise that any believer whose heart is spiritually pure and is honoring the Lord with his/her prayers that, “the Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth.” And when this type of believer is hurting in his/her spirit, that “The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed” (Psalm 34:18, NLT). It is no wonder that Paul seems to experience the presence and peace of God, because his heart seems always to be postured in this God-glorifying way (see another occasion God “stood with [Paul]” near the end of his life in II Timothy 4:17-18). Now we can understand why Paul along with all spirit-controlled ministers are always quick to call upon the Lord daily. Because once you engage in intimate communion with God through prayer, righteous living, and a willing heart to serve Him and do His will, you know that God will allow you to experience His presence in your heart and mind. You will be assured that He is right there with you. “Because he bends down to listen, I will pray as long as I have breath!” (Psalm 116:2, NLT)!*

in Jerusalem, I want to you do the same thing in Rome!” Now, Paul might have responded that he did not do much really. Over just a couple days’ time, he tried to preach to the people of Jerusalem but did not get all the way through the presentation once he said, “Gentiles” (Acts 22:21-23). Then he attempted to testify to the Sanhedrin but did not get past the first sentence about the resurrection, and he got swiftly ushered out for his safety (Acts 23:6, 10). And of course, God would obviously have known all this. But God blesses willingness and faithfulness (Psalm 101:6) and He brings the increase (Mark 4:26-29; I Corinthians 3:6-8; and see our Devotional on Acts 22:24b-29). And while God was on the earth, He taught that “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much” (Luke 16:10a, NIV). God emphasized that Paul’s faithful commitment to the Lord was what He desired from him and that a willing and faithful heart is God’s chosen method and means to reach the world.

God also confirmed with Paul that he was aligned properly with the will of God, which gave Paul great confidence. Paul felt compelled that he should ultimately go to Rome to proclaim the Gospel and strengthen the believers (Acts 19:21; Romans 15:22-29). And while some well-intentioned believers felt strongly that Paul should not go to Rome because of the inevitable persecution that would come (Acts 21:7-13), they concluded that the will of God would be done in Paul’s life and they would cease attempting to persuade Paul and see what God did and did not allow (Acts 21:14). Maybe they thought that if the Lord did not want Paul to pursue his own plan, God would hinder him from proceeding just as the Spirit hindered Paul from proceeding with his plans in Acts 16:7. Yet in his encouragement to Paul, God confirmed that Rome was exactly where He wanted Paul to go (Acts 23:11c). And even though two Roman governmental leaders will admit, in the future, that Paul probably could have been released from custody if Paul had not appealed his case to the emperor in Rome (Acts 26:30-32), Paul was not troubled by this for he believed the Lord wanted him to go to Rome.

The Lord’s encouragement made a huge, positive difference in Paul’s life. It renewed his confidence to continue to minister. After receiving this encouragement from the Lord, it is no surprise that we do not read anything about Paul being disturbed or worried when he learned, yet again, that people were out to kill him and how the religious leaders were all in on a scheme to capture him (Acts 23:11-12). There is no indication that Paul even lost sleep upon hearing that more than 40 men made an oath that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed him (Acts 23:12, 21). In fact, it is recorded that the Roman officials were more concerned than Paul was about the news (Acts 23:17-22). The reason there is no mention of Paul’s anxiety level was that he received affirmation and confirmation from the Lord (Acts 23:11)!

The next day, Paul traveled with the Roman soldiers to what would begin a series of encounters with governmental leaders that eventually resulted in Paul going to Rome. And once again, God providentially orchestrated the Roman

army to provide 470 soldiers to protect Paul so that he could arrive safely to his next opportunity to share the Gospel along with his testimony (Acts 23:23-24; see Acts 21:37-40; 23:10). And with a smile while on the road, Paul probably rehearsed the encouragement he had received from the Lord, “Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome” (Acts 23:11)!

God is at work energizing believers to run the marathon of life. And just as He encouraged Paul, on that night, He allows us as believers to have the awesome privilege of delivering His life-energizing encouragement to others. And even though we may not know the reason why He wants us to deliver a word of encouragement to a particular person, we should respond immediately to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and deliver it anyway. God may eventually reveal to us the reason for why the encouragement was needed (and He may not until we all gather in eternity), but our responsibility as believers is to obey His prompting immediately. We are to remain mindful that God is at work and if He has impressed upon our hearts that we should deliver His life-energizing encouragement to another person, then we can experience the awesome privilege of being used by God to fulfill His will in our lives and in the lives of others.

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect on when you were once in a challenging situation where you received encouragement from a supportive friend that really got you through a stressful situation. Now think about when you were in a turbulent season of life, a period of time that you dwelt in a state of uneasiness or even great anxiety. Attempt to recall how many times you sought the encouragement of people who were meaningful during that time. Or remember how many times they intentionally reached out to you in order to provide you with encouragement because they felt compelled in their spirit to lift you up at that moment. Recall the value of their frequent, loving, and repetitive encouragement during your season of need.

Pray and thank God for these people. Thank God for delivering His life-infusing encouragement through these precious people. Then, ask God to make you an encouraging person. Ask Him to bring to mind someone who currently needs encouragement. Ask Him to bring a name to your mind either during this prayer or sometime today. Ask Him to provide you thoughts and ideas to prop up this person's heart in your own unique way. Then tell Him that when you receive His prompting, you will obey it immediately. Until then, tell Him you will prepare words of encouragement (or actions) for family members and loved ones knowing your priority is to encourage those with whom you do life together. Then, ask Him to continue to cultivate a spirit of encouragement within you.

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Consider sharing a challenging season of life or situation where you received encouragement from a supportive friend or loved one that really made a positive impact in that moment of your life. Describe how the encouragement positively impacted you and also how it makes you feel today as you reflect upon that moment. Share if that moment has made you become more of an encourager to others. Share if you have had the opportunity to encourage someone else who was in the very same situation with the exact same encouragement you yourself received. After which, think of ways you can encourage your group members. Possibly begin a practice within your group to follow up with the previous week's prayer requests to hear how the member who shared the prayer request is doing. This will help your group learn how each other is doing, how they can better encourage and support each other this week, and how they can pray more intelligently about each situation as it evolves.

Listen & Grow!

Listen to a compelling sermon clip preached by our Founding Pastor, Dr. Jerry Falwell Sr., as he explores the powerful truths found in Acts 23.



Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

**Optional but
Recommended!**

*“Dig Deeper” provides
added insight into this
portion of Acts with
supporting Scriptures.
Be encouraged to
reflect on how to
live out the spiritual
applications unearthed
in this devotional.*

Want to Dig Deeper?

The Lord told Paul in Acts 23:11, “Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome.” The Lord communicated to Paul to reaffirm His love and support for him. He promised Paul that he would not be alone and that He would always be with him. God’s encouragement to Paul in Acts 23:11, along with a few other recorded moments of divine encouragement, made an indelible, positive impact on Paul. In fact, Paul recalled at the end of his life how God’s encouragement carried him up to and through the final days of his life. Take a moment to read II Timothy 4:17. Paul reminisces upon how God provided divine encouragement to him in his life. Interpreters’ opinions vary concerning the exact occasion Paul is referring to in II Timothy 4:17. So, why don’t you offer your own opinion to this scholarly discussion! Read II Timothy 4:17 and offer your opinion on which occasion you believe Paul was referring to, or to neither of them, or if he was just making a general statement at the end of his life.

1. Let’s start with you first reading the following verses and then summarizing where Paul was and what he was doing at the time he received divine encouragement from God:

- Acts 9:15

- Acts 22:17-21

- Acts 18:9-10

- Acts 23:11

- Acts 27:22-24

- II Corinthians 12:7-10

2. Now, let's experience the text of II Timothy 4:17. Meaning, it is safe to assume when Paul penned those words, he probably took a deep breath, became filled with emotion, and began to reminisce on how the Lord carried him through a specific scenario (or all the occasions where God comforted him). If you were writing a paragraph that best described how you believe Paul felt at the moment he penned II Timothy 4:17, how would you describe that moment in your own words? Remember, II Timothy 4:17 was written from prison just a few months before he was martyred. He was cold, alone, and he had a pretty good idea that he would be put to death shortly after penning these words:

3. Now, have your own moment. Take a moment to reflect upon a specific occasion where God carried you through and provided you with support and encouragement. Write down how you feel right now as you reminisce on how the Lord carried you through. What thoughts of praise or thanksgiving are you feeling right now?

4. Take a moment to write a prayer of thanks to God for carrying you through with His divine support. Be sure to close your prayer by telling Him that you will remember for the rest of your life what He has done for you.

5. Consider these additional verses that offer insight on the purpose of God comforting us, what is expected of a person who receives comfort from God, and what is the goal of helping and comforting people spiritually:

- According to II Corinthians 1:3-5, what does God expect of a person who receives comfort for themselves?

- According to II Corinthians 2:6-8, a sinning church member has repented of his sin and has not proven he has changed. What is the reason the Scriptures provide in this context for making sure we do not wait too long to comfort a repentant sinner?

- According to Luke 22:32, Jesus comments to Peter about how he will deny Him. Then Jesus says that he expects Peter to do something after he commits these sins. From this account, what should a forgiven person do after they have experienced the comfort and peace of God after repenting and being forgiven from their sin?

- In Galatians 6:2, who is bearing the burden for whom?

- And in Galatians 6:5, what is the ultimate goal of helping someone initially bear their burdens?

Acts 24:1-23 – Paul Testifies Before Felix:

2. Taking a stand and putting God's interests first can be an effective witness.

Have you ever been in a healthy environment where the entire team is working towards the same mission, the same vision, and serving with a supportive spirit? The result is that morale is strong, productivity is high, and the retention rate of team members is unusually high. This is because people do not want to leave a healthy, productive, and supportive environment. But have you also witnessed a team that is not equally committed to the established mission and vision? Where everyone seeks their own interests and looks out for opportunities to promote themselves and get the most out of every situation regardless of if it hurts other people or puts them in an awkward situation? The former scenario is a blessing. The latter scenario is dysfunctional and burdens people. In Acts 24:1-23, Paul stood in front of a man (Felix) who had nothing but his own personal interests in mind. And the people he invited into the room also had their own interests in mind and did not care at all about Felix. Even the man who delivered Paul to Felix had his own priorities to get fulfilled out of the situation. Yet Paul was the only one who casted his own interests aside and made God's interests his priority.

Paul was safely delivered by 470 Roman soldiers (Acts 23:23-35) to Felix, the Procurator (i.e., Governor) of the region who presided in Caesarea. Felix had received a memo from Claudius Lysias, the Roman Commander, informing him that Paul, a Roman citizen, was threatened for his life simply because of theological disagreements among the Jewish people. As a result, Claudius did not charge Paul with any wrongdoing (Acts 23:27-29). Still, Claudius decided to send Paul to Felix because he learned that there was a plot on his life. Claudius had to get this Roman citizen out of town (Acts 23:30a). But also, Claudius informed Felix that he had arranged for Paul's "accusers to state before you the charges against him" (Acts 23:30b). And to avoid any additional conflict on this 65-mile-long journey from Jerusalem to Caesarea, Claudius' men transferred Paul under the cover of darkness (which would not have been the first time Paul was provided security by being whisked away during the nighttime hours. See Acts 9:29-30, 17:10).

It is easy to understand why Claudius wanted to get Paul out of town for his safety. But one has to wonder why Claudius arranged for all the parties involved to travel to Caesarea to hold a formal hearing on the legitimacy of their complaints when Claudius had already cast judgement on the situation. Christianity had already been recognized on numerous occasions as a legal religion. Gallio refused to hear the case in court (Acts 18:14-15). The Ephesian leadership declared that Paul had committed no crimes (Acts 19:40). Part of the Jewish Sanhedrin did not care for Paul's theological positions but did not cite that any crime was committed (Acts 24:17-21). And in Claudius' own words he admitted that he too did not see a reason to bring any charges against Paul (Acts 23:30b). So, why desire to have Felix hold a hearing to see if Paul committed any crimes?

Claudius had mostly self-serving motives for sending him to Felix in this manner. First, news probably had spread that there was a mob riot in Jerusalem, and this letter (Acts 23:25-30) gave Claudius the opportunity to show the Governor of the region that he had fully addressed the situation and performed due diligence in keeping the peace in the city. Second, the letter showed Claudius took proactive steps to investigate the situation by taking Paul to the Sanhedrin. Third, to get in front of any rumors about the chaos that broke out among the Sanhedrin and how there was a report that over 40 men plus the Sanhedrin were in on a plot to have Paul murdered (Acts 23:12-22). All this sounded like Claudius was not able to keep the civil peace. So, all this elevated it to a serious situation that should be investigated further. Fourth, Claudius probably needed official orders to follow his detainment of Paul or else Paul could have brought a civil complaint for illegally detaining him without receiving a stated reason. Rome would have probably won this case but the attention it would have drawn related to a Roman citizen who is a person of "The Way" would probably have turned public opinion negatively against Rome and Claudius for antagonizing such a person. As a result, Paul arrived to Felix and waited for the leadership and legal team of the Sanhedrin to arrive to hold a hearing (Acts 23:33-35).

At this point in this drama (and yes, there will be much drama with Felix), it is helpful to understand the background of Felix and his wife. Felix was known for being a man of low morals as he lived a life of sexual immorality and being cruel to the Jewish people. He was out for money, power, fame, and pleasure. Felix made political connections with the Roman leadership to secure his position and received a pass on his immoral lifestyle. He married a Jewish woman named Drusilla who was equally immoral and who was exposed to the Jewish faith growing up because her father was Herod Agrippa I (the grandson of the King Herod who 55 years earlier ordered all male children two years old and under to be killed. See Matthew 2:16-18). Drusilla undoubtedly had a decent knowledge of the Jewish faith and the complex problems that Christianity

caused the Jewish people and Roman leadership. Her father, Agrippa I, had three children, Drucilla, Bernice, and Agrippa II. We find that two years after Drusilla and Felix interrogated Paul in Caesarea (here in Acts 24), Agrippa II and Bernice arrived to do the same (Acts 26), as brother and sister in an incestual relationship! This relationship was commonly known yet never publicly talked about. Immoral living ran rampant in this family. In fact, when Felix met Drusilla, she was already married to the ruler of the region of Syria but Felix, with the help of another sinful man, persuaded her to leave her husband and marry Felix. This was the judge and jury in front of whom Paul would defend himself.

The Sanhedrin came with their lawyer, Tertullus, who is relatively unknown in Scripture but must have been very respected for the Jewish leaders to secure his services (Acts 24:1-9). His mission was to fill Felix's head with slander, rumors, and gossip about Paul that sounded substantive so Felix would act officially against Paul and Christianity as a whole. Tertullus began with flattery, thanking Felix for the peace and prosperity he had always provided the Jewish people (Acts 24:2-3). This of course was a lie, and Felix knew it, but he appreciated the public accolades. Then he attempted to make a case that there was cause to arrest Paul for civil disturbance of the peace. This was important to Roman leaders as Jews often threatened to travel to Rome to complain about the Roman leaders' lack of ability to keep the peace. In fact, John 19:12 describes how the Jewish people implied this veiled threat to complain to Rome that Pilate was not keeping the peace if he did not crucify Jesus (and historically this would have been the third strike against Pilate). Then Tertullus suggests that if Felix would just hand him over to the Jewish leaders, they would take care of it and take the issue off Felix's plate. That was what they initially wanted to do until Claudius interjected himself into the situation (Acts 24:6). It is noteworthy that Tertullus introduces a new name for Christians that had not been used before but actually carried on beyond this scenario. In Acts 24:5, he called Paul "a ringleader of the 'Nazarenes'" (plural). He probably adopted "Nazarenes" to very tactfully avoid calling them "Christians" (Acts 11:26) as it could imply that he was acknowledging that they are speaking about the followers of the Christ/Messiah. Or, he might have wanted to portray that they are far from home (90 miles), causing trouble in Jerusalem. Still, he could have attempted to relegate them to a distant area to show how they are not any different than the many other distant fringe groups who had claimed to follow the true messiah (Acts 5:34-39; 21:38; see our Devotional on Acts 21:26-40). There is a reason why the Scriptures utilize a one-time-used word in the Greek New Testament to describe Tertullus in Acts 24:1 that is translated "orator" ("rhō-TAIR" meaning, "an advocate with strong rhetorical skill"). Because he was slick and working from every possible angle.

But the significant reason why the Sanhedrin secured a lawyer was to once-and-for-all receive a binding legal judgement on the illegality of the existence of Christianity (see how the same attempt failed approximately six years previously in our Devotional on Acts 18:12-17). But Paul made a significant case that the Sanhedrin were angry simply for religious reasons. Paul shared simply that he believed all the Scriptures they do but also saw Jesus fulfilling the prophecies as he is a person who lives “according to the Way” (Acts 24:10-21). After hearing both sides, Felix withheld judgement until Claudius Lysias arrived to discuss this matter with Felix. He dismissed the Sanhedrin leaders and retained custody of Paul but commanded the centurion guarding him to give Paul freedom and liberty to engage any friends who came visit him (Acts 24:23).

But a few days after everyone left, the remarkable happened, “Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, [and] he sent for Paul and heard him concerning the faith in Christ” Acts 24:24)! And what Paul shared next took great courage...

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect on how difficult it is to live for the Lord when other people attack you personally, just like Tertullus and the Sanhedrin did towards Paul. It is difficult. Think about how hard it is to continue to live for Jesus, do exactly what He wants you to do while trying not to devote all your time to defending yourself and correcting all the slander and rumors. Frustration and anger would be a normal reaction. But ponder this reality – God holds us responsible to control only what we can control. And if we think about it, we realize that we do not control too much except our own hearts and our own reactions.

Pray to God and tell Him how hard it is to not totally and completely focus on protecting your own or to slow down or stop serving the Lord when people attack you. Tell Him how much something like this consumes your thinking when it happens. But acknowledge to Him that you know that is not what He wants you to do when this happens. And tell Him that you want your reactions to be controlled by the Holy Spirit beginning today so that you will be able to focus on honoring Him with your life, thoughts, and actions, and you will let Him fight your battles.

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

While we know we should always have God’s interests as our highest priority, sometimes we are falsely accused, just like Tertullus and the Sanhedrin accused Paul in this account. When this happens, we are tempted to focus more on defending ourselves and clearing our name than making sure the work of the Lord and His priorities are accomplished. Prepare to discuss this very real emotional struggle. Share an experience in life, in church, or in ministry (keep it general, no names please!) that you found yourself spending most of your

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we’ve just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God’s Word to your heart!

time wanting to correct all the false rumors and gossip about you, so your good name would not be tarnished. Yet, when you look back, you realized that God was already at work taking care of quelling all sinful gossip and rumors for you. As a group, work on developing spiritual advice that you could share with anyone going through this type of situation based upon what you have learned having gone through it yourselves.

Listen & Grow!

Watch a powerful sermon clip from Sr. Pastor Jonathan Falwell as he unpacks the courage and conviction of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace. This unforgettable moment from Daniel 3 reminds us that even in the heat of trial, God is with us—and faith that stands firm can change everything.



Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

**Optional but
Recommended!**

*“Dig Deeper” provides
added insight into this
portion of Acts with
supporting Scriptures.
Be encouraged to
reflect on how to
live out the spiritual
applications unearthed
in this devotional.*

Want to Dig Deeper?

1. In Acts 24:1-23, everyone sought their own interests with the exception of Paul. He was the only one seeking the interests of Christ. Fortunately, there are others in Scripture who provide believers with same positive example from which to receive inspiration. Read the following Scriptures and identify the person’s name, then briefly describe how this person was selfless in their faith, conduct, and attitude to do what God called them to do rather than to think about themselves:

- Philippians 2:25-30

- Philippians 2:19-24

- Philippians 2:4-8

2. What do the Scriptures teach that believers today should do when they identify a Spirit-controlled, selfless leader?

- I Corinthians 11:1

3. But notice, do the Scriptures only tell us to “imitate” or “mimic” Spirit-controlled, selfless *leaders*? Read the following verse and identify who, in addition to leadership, we should take note of and observe when it comes to imitating one’s Spirit-controlled, selfless example.

- Philippians 3:17

4. Who do you know who demonstrates a selfless attitude and always seems to point you to Christ with his/her faith, conduct, and attitude? Write down his/her/their name(s) and briefly describe what it is about their faith, conduct, and attitude that made you think of them.

Maybe consider writing them a note, texting them, or giving them a call just to let them know that you were studying Acts 24:1-23 today and you were reminded of how beautiful it is when believers obey Christ and live their lives selflessly before others, and they came to your mind. Tell them you took a moment to praise the Lord for them, and you just wanted to reach out to them and thank them for their inspiring testimony!

5. On the topic of dealing with gossip, false rumors about you, and slander as you are faithfully and selflessly serving the Lord, consider the Apostle Peter's words about remaining faithful to the Lord during slander. Read I Peter 3:15-16 and identify what the Lord calls us to do and the spirit in which we should do it (v.15). Then summarize how God uses your good conduct and clear conscience to convict slanderers (v.16).

"Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way. Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ" (I Peter 3:15-16, NLT).

The difficult thing is that we may never get the satisfaction of knowing how the Lord has worked in peoples' hearts, but we are called to obey and remain faithful to Him, and He will deal with the hearts of man that we are unable to affect. You can rest well knowing that your motives were pure, nothing was done with a sinful intent, and you obeyed exactly what God called you to do. If you really think about it, even though Scripture does not share too many things his opposers said about him personally, it is safe to assume that they spread rumors about his inaccurate teachings, his inability to lead, his inept approach to ministry, his seeming disregard for religious rules and traditions, along with bold and blatant lies. But Paul focused on what God had/is calling him to do and he gave the slanderers over to God for God to do His perfect work in their lives. And God gave Paul, and will give you, supernatural peace.

Also, take heart in the fact that God honors those believers who endure slander and persecution for their faithfulness to Him and their message! In fact, when this happens, God puts you in the same company with other honorable believers.

6. Read Matthew 5:11-12 and identify all of the encouraging statements He makes about how you should you experience slander for the right reasons and to whom he likens your conduct:

Acts 24:24-29 – Paul Speaks Truth to a Husband and a Wife:

3. Respond immediately to the truth before you fall back into complacency.

It gives great joy to a pastor, group members, church members, fellow believers to see a husband and wife commit to become closer to the Lord together. Regardless of if they started their marriage off with Christ as the center or if they had to confess their sins and begin to focus on the Lord, it is cause for rejoicing when a couple declares they are going to live life God's way! Equally as exhilarating is to witness a husband and a wife come to faith in Jesus Christ together. It is rare for this to occur, but when it does it is unforgettable. It inspires a pastor to continue to labor to the point of exhaustion (I Corinthians 15:58) because the Lord has provided a powerful testimony of spiritual victory. It elevates the joy of an entire group to new heights to have known the Lord allowed them to play a part in encouraging a couple to begin to live their lives as Christ followers. It causes joy in the hearts of believers to hear of a couple who has made this crucial decision and to know their lives and their children's lives will forever be positively affected by their decision to follow Christ.

But there is nothing so devastating as to find out that after people hear the truth about how to be forgiven for their sins, to no longer be in bondage to sinful passions, to understand how they can be washed clean, can be indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit, to gain spiritual victory in their lives, and to have peace with God...simply walk away. Nothing demoralizes a pastor more than seeing people walk away from the truth that can speak to all the challenges within their marriage. Many believers understand this pain. So many believers experience an aching in their spirit after they have poured their lives into discipling people, only to see them walk away. They have opened their hearts and homes to couples so they would experience the love of Christ and how their faith in Christ plays out in everyday life. They hope that after hearing the truth of the Word of God and how to have faith in Jesus Christ and witness first-hand how family relationships live out their faith, that the couple will also accept Christ as their Savior. But upon hearing that the couple has given up, the believers begin feeling deeply disturbed in their spirit. They wonder what this means about the couple's eternal future and wonder what type of guidance will now be given to the members of that family regarding Jesus Christ. It is never easy to

see people – especially couples – walk away from Jesus Christ. In Acts 24:24-29, Paul is afforded the rare opportunity to engage a prominent husband and wife privately and answer their questions regarding faith in Jesus Christ. And what started off promising resulted in disappointment.

We were given a thorough introduction to Felix and Drusilla, husband and wife, in our previous Devotional on Acts 24:1-23. We learned he was a lover of money, power, fame, and pleasure. He established key relationships in the Roman government that secured him the job of Procurator (i.e. “Governor”) over the region of Judea which contained many cities within it including Jerusalem. He was cruel to the Jewish people and was known to break the law without concern. We learned that Drusilla was a Jewish woman who grew up exposed to the Jewish faith along with Roman leadership. Her father was the grandson of Herod the Great who committed atrocities against the Jewish people in the region. She had a sister and brother who were living in a sinful relationship which we will see again in Acts chapters 25 and 26. She was married when Felix worked hard to persuade her to leave her husband and marry him. They both had made many mistakes in their lives and were not even remotely honoring God with their lifestyle choices. Yet, they were intrigued with Paul’s defense to Felix and in response to the Sanhedrin’s lawyer. It made them want to sidebar with Paul to privately discuss faith in Christ. Maybe Drusilla felt that she could finally talk to someone about all the religious questions she had been exposed to but never quite understood. Perhaps when Felix learned something new about the Way (Acts 24:22), he was intrigued to learn more about something of which people probably assumed he was already knowledgeable. Whatever the reason, after a few days passed, he sent for Paul and “heard him about faith in Christ” (Acts 24:24b; original translation).

It was here that Paul made a choice. He could think about himself, cozy up to them, and refrain from saying anything to which Felix would take offense. Paul knew that he was talking to the man who could call off this entire trial and send Paul home as a free man. He could speak 100% truth but only the truths that did not sting or offend them and still possibly try to get the full salvation message presented to them. Or he could remain faithful to the Gospel as he had been for over 25 years of his life as a messenger of Jesus Christ by speaking the truth in love and leave the outcome and his outcome up to God. So, Paul chose God’s will rather than his own - to present God’s unaltered truth. As a result, Paul chose to discuss three topics, “as he reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgement to come” (Acts 24:25). He discussed positional righteousness (being right with God because of His righteousness), practical righteousness (living a life that honors the Lord as evidence of a saved life), and how everyone will be judged based on their relationship to God.

Immediately, conviction set into Felix’s heart. Acts 24:25, “Felix was afraid” (Greek: “em-FOB-boss” meaning, “trembled caused by fear”). And immediately Felix said, “Go away for now; when I have a convenient time, I will call for

you” (Acts 24:25). He wanted to escape this moment as quickly as possible and attempt to forget all that he had heard. This is evidenced by the very next verse that illustrates that he returned back to his sinful mindset and did not experience the same level of conviction he felt in his initial conversation with Paul. From this point on he still met with Paul, but it was only to tease and/or frustrate Paul to the point that maybe Paul would offer him a bribe to set him free. “Meanwhile he also hoped that money would be given him by Paul, that he might release him. Therefore, he sent for him more often and conversed with him” (Acts 24:26).

Unfortunately, this scenario is an all-too-familiar scenario with people today when they encounter the Gospel. When people sincerely engage the truth about faith in Christ but choose not to accept and walk away, they will commonly return to their old, familiar ways that are more comfortable and non-judgemental. And they will embrace the old ways all the more. They no longer want to even think about the incredibly uncomfortable internal conviction they began to feel when they started to come to grips with the reality that they have been making choices that dishonor the Lord. It only demonstrates that they are not in right standing with God. They begin to realize that their spiritual condition is their fault and unless they confess and repent of their sins, they will be unable to receive eternal peace with God. And when they realize that there is a holy and righteous authority that they must reckon with, they simply want to escape the scenario. Just as Jonah wanted to mentally escape from the thought of God (“But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord...so he went down to Joppa...paid the fare and went down into [the boat]...and went down to the lowest part of the ship...and laid down and went fast asleep” (Jonah 1:3, 5b)), people want to stop the story and simply escape its reality. And that is exactly what Felix and Drusilla did.

The sad reality is how this story ends. “But after two years Porcius Festus succeeded Felix; and Felix, wanting to do the Jews a favor, left Paul bound” (Acts 24:27).

History details that Felix’s renegade life and approach to leadership caught up with him as he was summoned to Rome by Emperor Nero. Felix attempted unsuccessfully to explain away the many charges the Jewish people brought against him for being cruel, resorting to killing Jewish people to quell any large disturbances within the city, and even sanctioning the murder of a Jewish priest. He was convicted of these crimes and removed from his post, but he escaped capital punishment because of the intercession of some key friends who knew Nero well. Unfortunately, there is no record of him nor Drusilla ever repenting and coming to faith in Christ. He remained guilty of his sin before the judge of the universe, and he had no one to intercede on his behalf to the Father. He became the recipient of the eternal judgement of God. It was everything he was warned about by Paul just a couple short years before his death.

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect on this situation and place yourself in Felix's position. Felix heard the truth, literally trembled, then left and chose never to engage Paul again. Paul's words pierced Felix's heart as the truth spoke against his sin, but he was not receptive to it because he did not want to change. Now ask yourself how receptive you are to hearing the truth and correction that goes against the choices you make. Do you see correction as something that will benefit you or do you fight correction, even if you know it is what you need?

Pray to God and acknowledge that you understand correction is hard, but you know it will help you grow stronger spiritually. And tell Him you also recognize that to take correction immediately will help protect you from making future mistakes. And then invite the Lord to speak the truth to your heart every day and that you will accept it. Pray Psalm 139:23-24 to God, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties; And see if there is any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting."

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Consider sharing a heartbreaking story of someone you know who clearly heard the Gospel, completely understood what it takes to put faith in Jesus Christ, and maybe even became very emotional knowing the need to commit his/her life to Christ, but still walked away from the conversations and never put his/her faith in Christ. Or share a story of a believer who knew s/he should return to obeying God after living their own way and came very close to returning but did not repent. After all this time, share the reason(s) why you believe each person walked away and never accepted Christ or chose to obey God's way. Share how this made you feel when it occurred and what your feelings about it are today. Take time to pray for each other. Pray that all members of the group would learn from these very sad testimonies and never be tempted to do the same. And also pray for the families of your group members that they would be convicted to live life God's way.

Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

Listen & Grow!

Watch a compelling sermon clip from Sr. Pastor Jonathan Falwell as he challenges the quiet danger of spiritual complacency.



Want to Dig Deeper?

Digging deeper into the technical detail of this story, Felix should have deferred to another governor to either preside over the trial or at the very least be a part of the trial. Felix is the Roman Governor of Judea and Samaria, two regions that contained multiple cities, including Jerusalem, where the events took place. But Felix asked Paul what city he was from (Acts 23:34), and Paul said “Cilicia” which was not a part of Felix’s immediate jurisdiction. But Felix declared he would hear the charges and try the case anyway (Acts 23:35). Technically, Felix should have called for Cilicia’s governor to join him in presiding over the case (just as Pilate called King Herod to consider the case as it was initially under his jurisdiction as seen in Luke 23:6-12). But Cilicia, being over 500 miles away and wanting to expedite the hearing, probably affected his decision to hear the trial without the governor of Cilicia. But there is an additional dynamic in play here with Felix. Probably the main reason why Felix did not send for the governor of Cilicia was because Felix was granted elevated authority by the Roman government because of his personal connections. This level of authority and influence was not normal to see among the governmental ranks, but he was a man who made connections to benefit himself. And it was well known that he had achieved his influence through very sketchy means. As a result, he was given more authority among many of the governors in the surrounding area. Thus, he was able to make this decision without any repercussions. Ultimately, though, it did not save him from losing his position two years later (See our Devotional on Acts 25:1-12).

1. Regarding Felix’s response to hearing truth, Acts 24:25 says “Felix was afraid” (“trembled caused by fear”) when he heard truth that spoke against his life-style. He immediately distanced himself from Paul to remove himself from hearing these truths. One has to wonder how he coped the next day to get his mind off what he heard. So, ask yourself how does one “escape” from a spoken truth. Do you lie to yourself and say it was not really true? Do you just try to get too busy in order to not have time to think about it? Do you just try to think about a bunch of other topics so that your mind is consumed by other things? Offer a couple suggestions as to how you think people “escape” from thinking about the effects of the truth that they have heard.
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Optional but Recommended!
“Dig Deeper” provides added insight into this portion of Acts with supporting Scriptures. Be encouraged to reflect on how to live out the spiritual applications unearthed in this devotional.

2. Now, apply that to the very familiar story of Jonah that was mentioned in the devotional. How do you think he attempted to forget what God told him to do? Attempt to experience his scenario and offer what you think may be the most likely description of how Jonah had to mentally justify his choice of disobeying God. Or do you think Jonah was never able to fully escape his choice of going against what God told him to do? Read Jonah 1:1-3.
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3. Notice how the Scriptures describe the spiritual digression that Jonah was on as he was going “*down*,” “But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish *from the presence of the Lord*...so he went *down* to Joppa...paid the fare and went *down* into [the boat] ...and went *down* to the lowest part of the ship...and laid *down* and went fast asleep” (Jonah 1:3, 5b). Jonah probably wanted to mentally get away from the Lord and even physically. Knowing that Tarsus was at the farthest west end of his known world at the time, do a Google search “How far was Joppa from Tarshish at the time of Jonah” and see just how far Jonah chose to go to mentally “escape” from the Lord.

- How many miles? _____
 - Take a moment to describe how a believer can get to the point believing they can mentally escape from an all-knowing, ever-present God?
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Sin left unchecked will get worse and worse. This reality is evidenced in the life of Felix when he no longer desired to hear the truth because it made him tremble. But when he talked to Paul the following times, he did not allow the truth to pierce his heart. Rather he listened to Paul speak truth for the purpose of receiving a bribe, not to be spiritually changed. Felix experienced spiritual digression, as his choices got worse and worse.

4. Read Ephesians 4:17-19 and notice that it describes how sin digresses (gets worse and worse). Circle the words/phrases that describe how a person begins sinning and then how it gets worse as the verses proceed:
- “*So this I say, and solemnly affirm together with the Lord as in His presence, that you must no longer live as the unbelieving Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds and in the foolishness and emptiness of their souls, for their moral understanding is darkened and their reasoning is clouded; they are alienated and self-banished from the life of God*

with no share in it; this is because of the willful ignorance and spiritual blindness that is deep-seated within them, because of the hardness and insensitivity of their heart. And they, the ungodly in their spiritual apathy, having become callous and unfeeling, have given themselves over as prey to unbridled sensuality, eagerly craving the practice of every kind of impurity that their desires may demand. Quench grieve spirit” (Ephesians 4:17-19, Amplified Bible).

Isn't it amazing how sin starts off “*in the futility of their minds*” that makes their “*moral understanding darkened*” which clouds their reasoning, which leads to their “*willful ignorance and spiritual blindness*” that begins to root itself in their hearts. And then the more one sins, they find they have “*hardness and insensitivity of their heart.*” They develop “*spiritual apathy*” because they have become “*callous and unfeeling.*” Which, at this point, they demonstrate “*unbridled sensuality.*” And it is no surprise that they “*eagerly crave the practice of every kind of impurity that their desires may demand.*”

Now apply what we just learned. If someone were to come to you and say, “did you know that someday you will actually live a life of “*unbridled sensuality and eagerly crave the practice of every kind of impurity,*” you probably would immediately respond, “No way! That something I would never do!” And that may be true, but did you notice that everyone who has “*unbridled sensuality that eagerly craves the practice of every kind of impurity*” has to start with simply following the “*futility of their minds*” (which is, simply trusting their own judgement and not leaning on God to help them make decisions and see life through God's eyes; opposite of Proverbs 3:5-6). Meaning, not every person will be a grotesque, out-of-control sinner, but every grotesque, out-of-control sinner must start with trusting their own judgement and not leaning on God to help them make decisions and see life through God's eyes!

5. In light of this reality, take a moment to pray and ask God to make you ultra-sensitive to the initial first step of sin so that you will confess it as soon as you experience it, so that it does not lead you to greater desensitizing sin. Knowing this is so important to pray as a believer, it is important to keep yourself accountable. Write down the date you made this very important prayer request to God (hopefully, today's date). Then return one week later to evaluate how you are doing spiritually. Then write the date you returned to pray this prayer once again to Him.

- Date of your initial prayer _____
- Date of your follow-up prayer _____

Acts 25:1-12 – Paul Experiences Déjà Vu while Testifying Before Festus:

4. No Matter the Type of Spiritual Attack, Just Stand Firm on God's Unchanging Truth.

It is normal to want to prepare for every scenario. A nation's military prepares potential war plans for various scenarios. Businesses prepare contingency plans should there be a disruption in its workflow. Families prepare their members for how to connect with each other should there be a breakdown in communication. People even overpack for a vacation to be prepared for any changes in the weather (Of course, some people just always overpack because, well, that is just what they do!).

But Scripture emphasizes that when any type of spiritual attack comes, we are to execute only one spiritual plan – Run to Christ! This is accomplished through prayer and standing firm upon God's Word! We are to be strong in prayer and take courage to stand on the same, unchangeable truth of the Word of God and repeat it again and again and again no matter what the circumstances. We run to Christ and embrace His Word because that is the only thing the Evil One and his demons listen to. They do not listen to or fear anything else. Paul never diverted from this one war plan – Run to Christ! Stand firm on God's Word. Be strong and take courage in prayer. Believers have this one war plan to combat spiritual attack, and there are no contingency plans.

It is actually foolish to think we are able to take on the evil spiritual realm ourselves. The Bible is clear that our human minds are not capable of understanding or successfully navigating the spiritual realm. Even the Scriptures must put supernatural visions and spiritual concepts into human terms (called, "anthropomorphic" language; "anthro" = man, "morphic" = form) so that our finite minds can even come close to grasping the spiritual concept (just read the book of Revelation). In fact, the only reason why there is a description of any kind of spiritual realm (Colossians 1:15-18, Ephesians 6:10-13) is to simply let us know that the evil realm is real, it is organized, and it is way out of our league to handle. The only aspect of the spiritual realm human beings are to personally engage is the Almighty God (God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit). God is the only One with whom we as human beings are called on to engage our hearts and minds. We are not called to bind demons, ponder the

intimate goings on of the demonic realm, nor communicate with any members of the spiritual realm. Demons only listen to God and God alone (Zechariah 3:2; Jude 1:9). That is because they are more powerful than us (Mark 14:38), are able to destroy us with ease if given their way (John 10:10; I Peter 5:8), and only listen to God (Job 1-2; Luke 22:31; II Thessalonians 2:6-7).

When Paul was in front of Festus to defend his case, he noticed that once again he was going to be attacked for his faith. But Paul resorted to the same approach. He focused everything on the truth of Christ, stood firm on God's Word, and was strong and courageous. In fact, he virtually repeated himself from two years prior when he stood in the very same hall defending himself in front of former Governor, Felix. Only this time, he was in front of a new governor named Festus.

The parallels of Paul's encounter with Festus and the Jewish people here in Acts 25:1-8 have many parallels with the encounter Paul had with Felix and the Jewish people in Acts 24:1-21 approximately two years earlier. Of course, when you repeat yourself, you find you are able to recite the same words a bit more succinctly and your presentation is often clearer. Paul rehearsed the same truths that he presented two years prior (Acts 24:10-21) while standing in the same location but just a bit more succinctly. "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything at all...To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you very well know. For if I am an offender, or have committed anything deserving of death, I do not object to dying; but if there is nothing in these things of which these men accuse me, no one can deliver me to them" (Acts 25:8, 10b-11). Paul simply knew to point people to Christ, to stand firm on the Word of God, and to be strong and courageous. And bold he was.

While standing in front of the new governor, Festus, Paul saw through his weaknesses. Paul knew Festus wanted to do well in his brand-new job and keep the peace. And he knew that Festus feared what people thought of him and how he did not want to offend anyone like his predecessor, Felix, was known for doing.

Paul had been in prison for two years and the Jewish leaders were still bitter about the impact Paul made upon the city. It implies that they had rehearsed for two years what went wrong in the previous case and what could have been done better. They were looking to see if in the future there were any forthcoming opportunities that could give them a strategic advantage, and were there any weak links in their plan that could threaten their success (a literal Sanhedrin S.W.O.T. analysis!). They would tighten them up for the next time they would see Paul in court. Their goal was to trap Paul and hopefully receive a legal verdict against Christianity once and for all.

Upon hearing that Felix was removed from his post (Acts 24:27) and that Festus was taking his place, the Jewish leaders realized this might be their opportunity to get to him first and cozy up to this new governor and express their support for him should Festus accommodate their wishes. So, while Festus was on his way to his new post, the Jewish leaders engaged him warmly

and invited him to spend some time with them (25:1-6a). Festus received their warm, welcoming invitation and spent approximately 10 days with them (Acts 25:6a). At which time, they informed Festus of their intention to ambush Paul and kill him and asked Festus to move the hearing to Jerusalem so that they could execute their plan (Acts 25:23). Their plan was similar to a plan that was concocted by 40+ men two years prior (Acts 23:12-22), but they were more brazen about admitting it. And they were hopeful that, in essence they were able to speak to the jury before the trial.

So, when Paul stood in front of Festus, he could sense that as soon as Festus offered to send him to Jerusalem (Acts 25:9), that this was simply a well-orchestrated plan to kill Paul (Acts 25:3), just as was the case two years prior (Acts 23:11-22). Festus also was tempted to compromise his position and be complicit in the killing of Paul (which Felix was guilty of when he hired assassins to take out a Jewish Priest named Jonathan because he was calling into question Felix's questionable reputation). And even though Festus had a

reputation for using fair judgement, he started his tenure as governor by demonstrating he was also able to easily be compromised.

But Paul did not worry about what type of attack was going to come his way this time. He knew what his war plan was for any and every spiritual attack: Run to Christ! Stand firm on God's Word. Be strong and take courage. Paul did not fear man. He knew the truth God wanted him to stand upon, and he knew what his mission was (Acts 1:8 and Acts 23:11). And while Paul delivered the same truth in various tones of voice and demeanors, he never shied away from speaking the truth. He spoke tenderly when the inquirer sincerely wanted to learn about Jesus Christ (e.g., I Thessalonians 2:8) but he maintained a bold

posture when people did not have sincere motives. On this occasion, it called for a strong and courageous response.

Ultimately, Paul declared that he was going to go to Rome just as the Lord told him he would. Simultaneously, Paul deflated the religious leaders' scheme of receiving a verdict from Festus upon which they could act immediately. Paul declared, "I appeal to Caesar" (Acts 25:11) which was a prerogative of every Roman citizen to have their case heard by the Roman Emperor. And in doing so, Paul secured his all-expense paid trip to Rome on Rome's nickel. Paul facilitated a trip to Rome which was a destination he not only wanted to travel to but knew God wanted him to minister there (Acts 19:21, 23:11; see also Romans 1:9-23, 15:23-28 which was written in Corinth during Acts 18:11).

In appealing to Caesar in Acts 25:11, Paul was not putting his faith in the wicked Emperor Nero to declare him innocent. But rather he saw this as the window of opportunity to fulfill God's calling to be His witness in Rome somehow, someway (Acts 23:11). Paul probably never thought that by obeying God

How to secure a change of venue. In Roman trials, the only way a change of venue could be achieved would be if both the one presiding over the trial and the one being accused agreed to the change of venue. Here, Paul does not agree to transfer the location of the hearing from Caesarea to Jerusalem. And while Paul did ultimately appeal to Caesar to hear his case, this should not have alleviated Festus from casting an official judgement on this case. The rules of change of venue also shine a light on the unfairness of Jesus' trials as He was moved from trial to trial without his consent (read in order: John 18:19-24, Matthew 26:57, John 18:28, Luke 23:7, Luke 23:11-12).

he would possibly get a hearing with the most powerful man in the Roman world, but he was very open to the opportunity. In addition, Paul was not at all interested in how Festus might have thought about being let-off-the-hook from making a difficult decision about his situation (Acts 25:12). Paul let God deal with Festus as he continued to put his focus on Christ, stood on God's Word, and was strong and took courage!

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect on how Paul was in prison for two years only to be called up to stand in front of another governor and the same Jewish Leaders and go through the same attacks that he experienced two years prior with Felix. Remember how swift, clear and decisive his response was as he knew exactly how to respond based on previous experience. Think about how God had given Paul repeated experiences to become stronger in his witnessing presentation. Now ponder how God might have allowed you to experience repeated scenarios. In what situations and scenarios do you think God could be equipping you to be stronger and prepared?

Pray to God and tell Him to open your eyes to the repeated situations He allows you to experience. Tell Him you will learn all you can from them believing He is using them to prepare you to become stronger in these areas in order to fulfill His divine purpose through you. Then thank Him for His continual teaching and guidance. Tell Him you welcome Him doing it in your life and will not ignore the repeated lessons He has chosen to teach you.

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Reflect upon how it must have been frustrating for Paul to experience virtually the same repeated attacks by the same people after being detained for two years. Then ask each other why God allows believers to repeatedly experience the same type of challenges. Listen to each other's experiences so that you can possibly discern why God allows certain situations to reoccur in your life. After discussing this, if you feel comfortable, apply what you heard to a current situation where you are experiencing a repeated action from God. Share with your group how you are now going to change the way you look at your situation.

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

Listen & Grow!

Watch a powerful sermon clip from Founding Pastor Dr. Jerry Falwell as he explores Paul's quiet preparation during two years of confinement in Acts 25:1-12.



Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

**Optional but
Recommended!**

“Dig Deeper” provides added insight into this portion of Acts with supporting Scriptures. Be encouraged to reflect on how to live out the spiritual applications unearthed in this devotional.

Want to Dig Deeper?

When things repeat in the Bible, they are intentional, and we better take note of what God is trying to say to us. When God’s Word repeats spiritual themes, concepts, or words in the Bible, it is intentional. There is a purpose for this divine emphasis upon a teaching or application that the Lord wants you to understand and adopt.

1. Read the following passages and identify the words, synonyms or concepts that repeat and then identify the point(s) God is emphasizing to us in these verses:

- Psalm 136

- Psalm 139:1-6

- John 21:15-17

- Luke 15

- Philippians 2:2

- Revelation 4:8

2. The following statements were written by Paul about how repetition helps the listener in various ways. Read the following verses and share why each teaches the benefit of repetition when teaching others:

- Philippians 3:1

- II Timothy 4:2

Let's return to a passage you read before in our study to reinforce its very profound teaching on this subject. II Corinthians 1:3-4 provides a beautiful picture of God's heart, God's love for us, and how God empowers us to comfort others after we ourselves needed comfort. But look again at II Corinthians 1:4 and ask yourself if God allows you to experience something repeatedly so that you can minister to others with a level spiritual expertise? Then consider why God does this. Maybe for it to become your ministry focus? For example, how many counselors do you know who have worked through something in their lives and now they are trained and passionate to help others who are dealing with the same issues.

3. Knowing this, what top three spiritual disciplines or attitudes have you repeatedly experienced where the Lord has strengthened you and now you feel you have something helpful to share with others (e.g., Trusting God's timing, not fearing what man says about you, being content with where God has you today, etc.)?

4. Take a moment to write out Philippians 3:1 in the New Living Translation just to remember once again that God brings about repeated things into your life to strengthen you, so you not only learn a spiritual lesson, but also make it part of your thinking and actions, and to protect you:

5. Take a moment to pray to the Lord and 1) Thank Him for His loving and comforting guidance throughout major situations you have experienced, and 2) Tell Him that you will be quick to recognize the lesson(s) He is teaching you through the reoccurrences He allows to come your way, and 3) Thank Him for His persistent care that you know is for your spiritual good and also for your protection.

Acts 25:13-26:32 – Paul Testifies Before Agrippa:

5. Know Your Audience to be Able to Effectively and Intentionally Witness to Them.

Being brand new to his position as Governor, being manipulated by the same Jewish leaders that got Felix disposed, and already having his first case get appealed to Caesar himself, Festus was nervous, disheveled, and unsure of himself. He needed help navigating this novel political situation. Fortunately, he found comfort in knowing he consult with a very experienced political leader who just so happened (providentially) to be visiting Festus at the same time, King Agrippa.

In his attempt to put himself in the best light in the presence of his new boss Agrippa, Festus framed the entire scenario in such a way to make him look judicious while omitting details that would incriminate or embarrass him. Festus shared how he got stuck dealing with this situation from Felix (Acts 25:14). He described all the details surrounding the Jewish leaders' motives, how their case against Paul had no legal merit, and how Paul defended himself

(Acts 25:18-20). He conveniently left out the part where he learned the Jewish religious leaders told him that they wanted to ambush and kill Paul and asked if Festus would be an accomplice by requesting a change of venue and transfer Paul to Jerusalem so they could execute their plan (Acts 25:2-3). He simply told Agrippa that he asked Paul if he would agree to move the case to Jerusalem (Acts 25:20) and he said Paul appealed to "Augustus (i.e. Caesar/Emperor)" (Acts 25:21). Once again, Festus conveniently omitted the detail that Paul had exposed the plan to kill Paul right there in open court (25:11).

After hearing this, Agrippa expressed his interest to hear Paul (Acts 25:22), not the Jewish leaders. In fact, the phrase "I also would like to hear the man myself" (Acts 25:22b) actually conveys a more intense interest in the heart of Agrippa than how it reads in English. The Greek verb in this verse actually conveys intense personal interest, "*I myself* was wishing to hear the man" (original translation). Put

So many names! Nero is the ruler of Rome at this time. So, is his name Nero? Caesar? Emperor? Or Augustus? The only birth name in this list is "Nero." The rest of these names are actually titles, and they all refer to the exact same position as the one who is the ruler of Rome. "Emperor" is the general title of someone who rules a large kingdom. "Caesar" is a name that anyone would receive when becoming the ruler of Rome (like we would say "president"). "Augustus" is an adjective used by Roman Caesars that means "one to be revered or worshipped." Many rulers of Rome bore the titles "Augustus Caesar [name]." Have you ever noticed how quick Luke was to point out that Caesar "Augustus" (i.e., "the one to be revered and worshipped") was the one God providentially moved to call a census that directed Mary to return to Bethlehem. In doing so, the self-proclaimed "Augustus" facilitated the birth of the One true "Augustus" Who was to be revered and worshipped as the prophecies foretold (Luke 2:1)!

this way, it conveys that Agrippa had developed a personal interest in hearing what Paul had to say in person. Whether because Paul was popular, or better, infamous among the Jewish community or whether he wanted to learn more specific details of Paul's message, Agrippa had a growing interest to hear Paul in person. And God providentially arranged for this to happen.

As Agrippa and his sister, Bernice, the woman with whom it was commonly known that he had an incestual relationship, entered the room, they entered "with great pomp/pageantry" (Acts 25:23). Festus summarized the case for Agrippa (Acts 25:24-25). But in doing so, framed it in such a way as to place Paul's fate on Agrippa, stating that after he received Agrippa's thoughts on the matter, he would use Agrippa's words to write to Caesar about the official charges against Paul (Acts 25:26-27).

Paul then eloquently shared his testimony of his former Jewish life and honorable adherence to the Jewish faith and practice (Acts 26:1-11). He then shared vivid details of his conversion and how he encountered the Risen Lord Jesus Christ himself (Acts 26:12-18). And then he shared how he was obedient to the directives that the Lord had given him (Acts 26:19-23). Then after being interrupted by Festus, who declared Paul was crazy and no longer made sense and was out of touch based upon too much lofty learning (Acts 26:24), Paul commanded the moment and began to speak to and about King Agrippa right in front of everyone in the room (Acts 26:25-29). And in front of all the finely dressed dignitaries, Jewish leaders, and Roman leaders, Paul attempted to evangelize King Agrippa and encourage him to put his faith in Jesus Christ!

To understand what gave Paul the courage to evangelize King Agrippa and tell Agrippa that he knew Agrippa understood all that he was saying, it is helpful to understand why Agrippa is commonly referred to as "King." Rome did not have a monarchy as we would know it today. The term "king" ("bahs-eh-LOOSE") translates as "king" but refers to positions appointed by Rome that were filled by people who were from the local cultural and/or religious context throughout Rome. These ruling positions were assigned to these local communities so that Rome could have an educated ruler navigate the often-complex customs, traditions, and religions that were adopted by these pockets of people. They were born and raised in the local area, but they remained loyal to Rome. They were provided with authority to rule on behalf of Rome. For example, Jerusalem and the Jewish areas were ruled by "kings" (or "client kings" as these individuals agreed to work for Rome to rule their own people) through most of the New Testament period for the purpose of assisting Rome in navigating what the Romans considered a very bizarre and complex set of traditions. "King Herod," who was also referred to as Herod the Great, was a client king during the birth of Jesus (Matthew 2; Luke 1). And here in Acts chapters 25 and 26, Agrippa was a client king over the region Festus was over, along with other regions. Agrippa's grandfather was King Herod, and his uncle was Herod Antipas who was the Herod who held a trial of Jesus before His crucifixion. Thus,

Agrippa knew the Jewish traditions and teachings very well. The question was if Agrippa was going to put his faith in Jesus now that he had heard how Jesus fulfilled all of the Jewish Scriptures?!

Agrippa's family members served as client kings over Jerusalem from the birth of Jesus to the birth of the church, up to this moment. The family of kings attempted to snuff out Jesus Christ at birth (Matthew 2), beheaded John the Baptist (Matthew 14), put Jesus on trial the night before his crucifixion (Luke 23), and persecuted the church and murdered James the son of Zebedee (Acts 12). But here, Agrippa has the opportunity to engage Christianity and its messenger in a very peaceful, tranquil way unlike any other family member. Still, he rejected the teaching about Jesus Christ. That is why Paul was comfortable in confidently saying, "For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe" (Acts 26:26-27). Paul knew he knew. And Paul had to wonder if this would be the King of Jerusalem who would break the chain of family rejection of Jesus and put his faith in Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, Agrippa was not close to becoming a Christian. Even though Acts 26:28 says, "Then Agrippa said to Paul, 'You almost persuade me to become a Christian,'" it initially sounds like Agrippa is on the brink of conversion and is gripped by guilt that he is not willing make this vital decision. Unfortunately, Agrippa actually said this statement as a form of mockery of Paul and his naïve belief that he would become a Christian after hearing one presentation from Paul. In essence, Agrippa was committed to deliberating over the facts of the case but not to have church nor to entertain his spiritual conversion. Agrippa probably felt like he had to reject Paul's attempt to demonstrate to all the people that he could not be manipulated. Agrippa was steeped in his sin being in an incestual relationship with his sister, Bernice. The examples of how his family persecuted the Church from its founding forward made an indelible impact upon him, and he currently enjoyed a revered life and the respect of Rome. Unfortunately, that favor ended as he learned that Agrippa was the very last one to rule from his family line. His family and his line fell out of favor with Rome.

Agrippa had expressed interest in seeing Jesus for some time as the verse reads, "I myself was wishing to hear the man" (Acts 25:22b; original translation) and conveys he had developed an interest in hearing what Paul had to say in person. But for what reason, we will never know. But he did give a gift to Paul and Christianity on that day, something no king from his family had ever extolled upon a Christian, a declaration of innocence in any way/shape/form. "This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains" (Acts 26:31b).

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect on your own spiritual life (or someone you know if this doesn't specifically apply to you) and ask yourself, how many times did you hear the Gospel and not accept it. What were the reasons you did not put faith in Christ in those moments? Reflect on what you thought about the people who were sharing the Gospel message with you. Did you appreciate them, but you just were not going to accept Christ that day? Or were you bitter towards them wishing they would stop talking to you? Or somewhere in the middle? And now that you accepted Christ, think back on those moments. How do you feel about them now? And how do you look at your decisions and reactions in those moments now?

Pray and thank God that He sent faithful messengers who cared enough for you to talk to you about the Gospel and how to follow the Lord in your life. Even thank God for those believers who were strangers to you, but you heard them preach a sermon or talk on a podcast and you internalized everything they were saying, and it helped point you to faith in Christ. Take a moment to thank God for all of people who prayed for you as you were going through this season of your life. And tell the Lord you now want to be one of those people who make a significant spiritual impact on someone else's life in the same way.

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Reflect on how helpful it was for Paul to know Agrippa's past exposure to and understanding of the Jewish culture and Christianity in witnessing to him in this moment. Discuss with your group how knowing about a person helps you connect with a person to whom you are witnessing (e.g. their background, interests, family culture, etc.). Does anyone in your group have a vivid example of how s/he spent time learning about a person to make a valuable connection that the Lord used to give them an opportunity to effectively witness to them? Be sure to expand the discussion to the importance of cultivating relationships with people in order to witnessing to them with your words and allowing them to observe your sincere care for them.

Listen & Grow!

Watch a moving sermon clip from Founding Pastor, Dr. Jerry Falwell, as he delivers some warnings and lasting encouragements drawn from Scripture in Acts.



Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

**Optional but
Recommended!**

*“Dig Deeper” provides
added insight into this
portion of Acts with
supporting Scriptures.
Be encouraged to
reflect on how to
live out the spiritual
applications unearthed
in this devotional.*

Want to Dig Deeper?

Here’s an additional detail regarding Agrippa’s frequently quoted question to Paul in Acts 26:28.

Acts 26:28 is a statement, not a question, that expresses disbelief that Paul attempted to persuade him to put his faith in Jesus Christ right there in front of everyone. And because we today often express disbelief in a form of a question, some translators feel they are able to best convey Agrippa’s disbelief in the form of an English question. The following translation captures the essence of each word and its implied meaning in this verse, “Then Agrippa said to Paul, “In just this short amount of time you actually are trusting/believing you are making a Christian of me” (Acts 26:28; original amplified translation). Now, insert body language of him shaking his head in disbelief while looking downward with a sarcastic smile and chuckle, maybe adding a palm to forehead for effect. This captures the essence of what Agrippa said and felt.

Now let’s dig even deeper and talk about if Agrippa actually did feel a little conviction in his heart. So, in the previous paragraph, we learned what the verse technically says, but it does not mean that Agrippa meant those words deep down in his heart. All words need their surrounding context in order to capture their full meaning. For if we examine the context of Paul’s interaction with Agrippa, it is very possible that Paul was getting through to Agrippa, but Agrippa just could not show it in order to continue to look like he was still the powerful one in the room and still in control in front of all the people he invited to hear Paul’s presentation. But because of his background and the fact that Paul stated that he knew Agrippa understood everything he was saying, it is possible that Acts 26:28 was one big facade of a man who actually experienced a little conviction. Or maybe it was a legitimate statement of hardened disbelief packaged in a sarcastic delivery. Ponder the following interesting details that the Holy Spirit made sure were in the book of Acts leading up to this account of Paul and Agrippa and see what you think.

1. First, in the book of Acts beginning from chapter 13 up to this chapter, Luke intentionally provided some examples of unlikely leaders and influential people in various cities who accepted Christ all during Paul’s travels. Read the following verses and identify the person(s) of influence and what it says about their conversation to Christianity:

- Acts 13:12
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- Acts 17:3-4
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- Acts 17:10-12
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- Acts 17:32-34
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- Acts 18:7-8
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2. And don't forget the Roman ruler who acted unaffected by Paul's presentation in front of a large group of people, but later sought to hear Paul for himself privately to discuss the tenets of the Christian faith. It occurs just one chapter before we read about Agrippa in the very hall Agrippa met with Paul. Read Acts 24:22-27 and identify the person of influence and how convicted he became after hearing the Gospel message from Paul.

- Acts 24:24-27
-

3. Now, knowing how Luke provides the reader with many examples of how Paul shared the Gospel in groups and to individuals and how God used it to either bring about conversions or conviction, it is likely that Paul was waiting with great anticipation to see what He would do to convict or possibly convert King Agrippa! Let's begin by reading Act 25:22. Write down what Agrippa's personal request was.
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- What could some of the reasons be for wanting to hear Paul personally?
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-

4. Knowing Paul took every advantage to witness to any leader in front of him, what do you think Paul immediately thought when he learned that he needed to prepare to stand in front of Agrippa at his personal request (Note: Client Kings would often take pride in announcing that everyone is coming “at the king’s request.”)?
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5. It never got lost that “Client Kings” were chosen by Rome from among the people who understood the traditions and complex cultures and could best relate to the people. Thus, Paul built upon the depth of knowledge he knew Agrippa had about Christianity and the writings and prophecies of the Jewish prophets. Paul obviously rehearsed it in such a way that he believed Agrippa could follow along and understand everything he said. Read Acts 26:22-27 and describe in your own words how Paul’s confidence was growing at this moment that he was getting through to Agrippa:
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6. We can clearly see that Agrippa understood exactly what Paul said when Luke recorded Agrippa’s response in comparison to Festus’ response. Festus did not understand any of Paul’s teaching while Agrippa clearly identified the teaching as a Christian’s teaching. Read their two responses and circle the significant words how each man described Paul’s teaching:

- Festus’s response in Acts 26:24: *“Festus said with a loud voice, “Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!”*
- Agrippa’s response in Acts 26:27: *“Then Agrippa said to Paul, “You almost persuade me to become a Christian.”*

Agrippa clearly understood Paul’s teaching and knew it was the *Christian* teaching.

And now that we have received all of this necessary context, we approach once again Agrippa’s public statement: “Then Agrippa said to Paul, ‘In just this short amount of time you actually are trusting/believing you are making a Christian of me’” [insert body language of him shaking his head in disbelief while looking downward with a sarcastic smile and chuckle, maybe adding a palm to forehead for effect] (Acts 26:28; original amplified translation). Do you think he really meant these words or was it a facade knowing he could never publicly admit he believed Paul’s words, but really did? If Agrippa did believe, it would have been a huge confession to make publicly.

7. In your own words, describe what you think would have been the repercussions if Agrippa admitted right there that he believed the Gospel message that Paul presented? What would the onlookers have done? Would others have confessed faith in Christ? What would he have to give up? What would the Jewish leaders do to Agrippa? What about his sinful lifestyle?
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Did Agrippa put his faith in Christ? Unfortunately, in history there is no record of him ever doing so. And while it is heartbreaking to see people come so close in conviction (like Felix and Bernice), the Lord calls us to remain burdened over the souls of people and to be faithful to share the Gospel. God will bring the increase (1 Corinthians 3:6-8)!

Group Gathering is a time to reflect together upon **what we learned** (Head), **what we felt** (Heart), and **what we should do** (Hands).

GROUP GATHERING #6

Note to Group Members:

Be encouraged! Your contribution is valuable to your group and will most assuredly edify the members of your group and your group leader. But should you need to sit and listen today, just to take in the entire discussion and prayerfully process the spiritual discussion quietly, that is OK too! You will not be pressured to speak publicly. We are glad you have joined us today!

All of the discussion topics are taken from this week's devotionals along with a brief summary of each devotional!

Discussion Topics

Choose **one or two** topics to discuss today!

Taken from Day One: *"Acts 23:11-35 – God Miraculously Appears to Paul to Prepare Him for a Rough yet Rewarding Ministry Ahead: Paul receives his own Personal "Let not Your Heart be Troubled" Moment with Jesus!"*

Paul needed encouragement in this season of his ministry and travels in Jerusalem. Once again, God delivered His life-energizing encouragement to Paul directly. Jesus stood by him and said, "Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome." Paul then learned his life was threatened by over 40 men who vowed to kill him. But God used Roman soldiers to protect him as he was transferred to Felix, the Roman Governor of Caesarea. All the while, Paul was at peace because of the encouragement he received from the Lord.

1. Consider sharing a challenging season of life or situation where you received encouragement from a supportive friend or loved one that really made a positive impact in that moment of your life. Describe how the encouragement positively impacted you and also how it makes you feel today as you reflect upon that moment.

Share if that moment has made you become more of an encourager to others. Share if you have had the opportunity to encourage someone else who was in the very same situation with the exact same encouragement you yourself received. After which, think of ways you can encourage your group members. Possibly begin a practice within your group to follow up with the previous week's prayer requests to hear how the member who shared the prayer request is doing. This will help your group learn how each other is doing, how

they can better encourage and support each other this week, and how they can pray more intelligently about each situation as it evolves.

Taken from Day Two: *“Acts 24:1-23 – Paul Testifies Before Felix: Taking a Stand and Putting God’s Interests First can be an Effective Witness.”*

Felix, the Roman Governor, received Paul from the Roman Commander and called the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem to come and present any charges they believe Felix should act upon. The Sanhedrin came and presented their case against Paul to Felix. Paul presented his side to Felix, and Felix paused the hearing. Everyone in the Governor’s Hall hearing this case had their own selfish agenda and specific goals they wanted to come from the case that would benefit them, except Paul. Paul just wanted the Gospel of Jesus Christ to be heard regardless of his own personal desires. Paul experienced slander and lies but relied on the Lord to defend him.

2. While we know we should always have God’s interests as our highest priority, sometimes we are falsely accused, just like Tertullus and the Sanhedrin accused Paul in this account. When this happens, we are tempted to focus more on defending ourselves and clearing our name than making sure the work of the Lord and His priorities are accomplished. Prepare to discuss this very real emotional struggle. Share an experience in life, in church, or in ministry (keep it general, no names please!) that you found yourself spending most of your time wanting to correct all the false rumors and gossip about you, so your good name would not be tarnished. Yet, when you look back, you realized that God was already at work taking care of quelling all sinful gossip and rumors for you. As a group, work on developing spiritual advice that you could share with anyone going through this type of situation based upon what you have learned having gone through it yourselves.

Taken from Day Three: *“Acts 24:24-29 – Paul Speaks Truth to a Husband and a Wife: Respond Immediately to the Truth Before You Fall Back into Complacency.”*

Felix and his wife Drusilla met with Paul privately while Paul’s case was on hold. They inquired about faith in Jesus. Paul, knowing their sinful past and current sinful lifestyle, did not withhold in speaking the truth. They ended the conversation only to talk to him on more occasions, but Felix’ goal was no longer to hear what Paul had to say about faith in Jesus, but to receive a bribe from Paul to be released. Receiving none, Felix left him in custody for two years. Yet, it is never recorded that Paul regretted his choice to tell the truth. Paul did not change his message whether in public or in private. Unfortunately, Felix and Drusilla did not put their faith in Christ.

3. Consider sharing a heartbreaking story of someone you know who clearly heard the Gospel, completely understood what it takes to put faith in Jesus Christ, and maybe even became very emotional knowing the need to commit his/her life to Christ, but still walked away from the conversations and never put his/her faith in Christ. Or share a story of a believer who knew s/he should return to obeying God after living their own way and came very close to returning but did not repent.

After all this time, share the reason(s) why you believe each person walked away and never accepted Christ or chose to obey God's way. Share how this made you feel when it occurred and what your feelings about it are today.

4. Take time to pray for each other. Pray that all members of the group would learn from these very sad testimonies and never be tempted to do the same. And also pray for the families of your group members that they would be convicted to live life God's way.

Taken from Day Four: *"Acts 25:1-12 – Paul Experiences Déjà vu while Testifying Before Festus: No Matter the Type of Spiritual Attack, Just Stand Firm on God's Unchanging Truth."*

Felix was removed from his position after two years and was replaced by Festus. The Jewish leaders strategically with connected him on his way to Caesarea and defamed Paul and shared their plans to kill Paul. Festus chose to meet with the Jewish leaders and the interaction was virtually identical to the trail Paul experienced before Felix. At the end, Paul appealed to have the Roman emperor hear his case. Here and throughout his ministry, Paul received very familiar, repeated attacks. But Paul did not worry about what the attack was or who was attacking him, he had one response, to simply point people to Christ, stand firm on God's unchanging Word, and to be bold and courageous and God would take care of the rest.

5. Reflect upon how it must have been frustrating for Paul to experience virtually the same repeated attacks by the same people after being detained for two years.
6. Then ask each other why God allows believers to repeatedly experience the same type of challenges. Listen to each other's experiences so that you can possibly discern why God allows certain situations to reoccur in your life.
7. After discussing this, if you feel comfortable, apply what you heard to a current situation where you are experiencing a repeated action from God. Share with your group how you are now going to change the way you look at your situation.

Taken from Day Five: “Acts 25:13-26:32 – Paul Testifies Before Agrippa: Know Your Audience to be Able to Witness Intentionally.”

Paul appeals to have his case heard by Caesar. Festus consulted with a very seasoned politician, King Agrippa, to help him with the wording on the charges as Festus did not think Paul committed any crime. Agrippa expressed personal interest in hearing what Paul had to say. Paul knew the background of Agrippa very well and made meaningful connections to Agrippa as he spoke. And even though Agrippa did not put his faith in Christ, Paul was certain he gave Agrippa a lot to think about as he went about his days. Paul stood in front of Festus, Agrippa, his sister Bernice, and in front of many dignitaries in the main room and shared the Gospel and his testimony. Festus and Agrippa believed that Paul was innocent of any crimes, but because Paul appealed to Caesar, they decided he must be sent to Rome.

8. Reflect on how helpful it was for Paul to know Agrippa’s past exposure to and understanding of the Jewish culture and Christianity in witnessing to him in this moment.

Discuss with your group how knowing about a person helps you connect with a person to whom you are witnessing (e.g. their background, interests, family culture, etc.).

9. Does anyone in your group have a vivid example of how s/he spent time learning about a person to make a valuable connection that the Lord used to give them an opportunity to effectively witness to them?

Be sure to expand the discussion to the importance of cultivating relationships with people in order to witnessing to them with your words and allowing them to observe your sincere care for them.

6

ACTS 27-28 OVERVIEW

This week covers the following ways in which the members of God's Church can grow in their faith as God grows His Church:

1. You are not out of God's will even if you do not experience smooth sailing while pursuing it!
2. Two Great Joys: Sharing the Gospel and co-laboring with supportive friends!
3. Ephesians comes alive after studying the book of Acts!
4. Philippians comes alive after studying the book of Acts!
5. Colossians & Philemon come alive after studying the book of Acts – Get in the Game!

Memory Verse

Acts 19:20

So, the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.

A Summary of Acts Chapters 27-28

This final week will take a slightly different yet exciting approach to studying the book of Acts! After we witness the many challenges that Paul experienced in his journey to Rome (Acts 27:1-28:16) and after learning how Paul took advantage of an open window of opportunity to preach the Gospel (again!), and after learning that he made this significant journey with two very special friends (Acts 28:17-29), we approach the last two verses of the book of Acts, “Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him” (Acts 28:30-31). And while this is the end of the book of Acts, Paul’s ministry continues in these two years of his Roman imprisonment.

In this two-year imprisonment, the Holy Spirit was very active in Paul’s teaching ministry through the writing of inspired Scripture. Paul believed that even if he was in prison, God’s Word was never chained down. During a completely different imprisonment, Paul wrote, “for which I suffer trouble as an evildoer, even to the point of chains; but the word of God is not chained” (II Timothy 2:9). During this Roman imprisonment, Paul wrote letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. And being able to read these four New Testament Letters that Paul wrote during this two-year imprisonment expands our understanding of what we have already experienced in the book of Acts as Paul teaches specific congregations the truths that he lived out as recorded in the book of Acts. And he undergirds his teachings in these four letters with his experiences that were written down for us in the book of Acts!

Many connections to the book of Acts can be easily seen throughout the letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. And it will be easy to understand why certain statements and phrases are used within these letters because of the correlation to the book of Acts. These Letters are commonly referred to as the “Prison Epistles” or “Prison Letters” because they all were written by Paul during this Roman imprisonment. And each letter mentions this imprisonment (Ephesians 3:1, 4:1; Philippians 1:13; Colossians 4:3, 18; Philemon verse 10). These and other connections to the book of Acts make the teachings of these letters very vivid and exciting to read. And as we examine each letter and make specific connections to the book of Acts for each letter, our understanding of the teachings found within each one will be even more vivid as a result of having studied the book of Acts!

Timeline & Key Events

This week, our daily devotionals will focus upon five **key moments** within **Acts chapters 27-28**.

Acts 27:1-28:16

Paul Experiences Numerous Hardships En Route to Rome

Acts 28:17-29

Paul Arrives in Rome Exhausted, Then Preaches Some More

Acts 28:30-31

Paul is in a Roman Prison for Two Years & Writes Ephesians

Acts 28:30-31

Paul is in a Roman Prison for Two Years & Writes Philippians

Acts 28:30-31

Paul is in a Roman Prison for Two Years & Writes Colossians and

○ Philemon – Get in the Game!

Acts 27:1-28:16 – Paul Experiences Numerous Hardships En Route to Rome:

1. You are Not Out of God's Will Even if You do not Experience Smooth Sailing while Pursuing It!
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As we come to the closing section of the book of Acts, there is one conclusion that can be made after reading virtually every chapter. Spirit-controlled people who serve the Lord with confessed hearts and pure motives still experience hardships. Hardships are not punishment or discipline from God, rather they are ways God brings about His divine plan, teaches believers what His will is, and sometimes serves as powerful occasions to reflect on and learn from and grow in faith. And while it is completely acceptable for a believer to admit s/he is exhausted after difficult circumstances and needs encouragement while in the difficult circumstance, experiencing hardships does not automatically mean that the believer is out of God's will in any way.

God had told Paul that He wanted Paul to be His witness in Rome just as he had in Jerusalem (Acts 23:11). God also provided Paul with the occasion to appeal to Caesar (Acts 25:11) which guaranteed that he would go to Rome. In addition, God made it so Paul would secure an all-expense paid trip to Rome on Rome's nickel. International travel was primarily done by sea because this trip from Caesarea to Rome on foot would have been almost 2,500 miles. By sea it reduced the length of travel to approximately 1,300 miles. Paul personally wanted to travel to Rome to minister and had the confidence that God wanted him to minister there (Acts 19:21, Acts 23:11; Romans 1:9-15, 15:23-28). So, when Paul along with the sailing crew and others experienced rough conditions and challenging circumstances en route to Rome, Paul never questioned if the Lord wanted him to go to Rome. He did not base his level of confidence on the physical details related to the mission – challenging or smooth sailing – as the ultimate gauge of if he was in God's will. He based his level of confidence on God's truth, character and promises.

Chapters 27:1-28:16 contain one of the most detailed accounts of a series of challenges Paul experienced while Rome transported him and others. While there are portions of Scripture that provide statements about various challenges Paul experienced throughout his ministry (e.g., II Corinthians 11:23b-28),

this chapter provides a play-by-play description of the details of sailing towards Rome. But even as they experienced storms and hunger, Paul never wavered in his confidence that he was in God's will and that God would keep His promise that Paul would be His witness in Rome (Acts 23:11). In fact, in the middle of the challenges, Paul infused confidence in the other 275 people (prisoners and soldiers) on board (Acts 27:37) by sharing yet another occasion where the Lord delivered a message to Paul while on this voyage. "Take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For there stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed, God has granted you all those who sail with you.' Therefore, take heart, men, for I believe God that it will be just as it was told me" (Acts 27:22b-25). This provided the people with much confidence and peace.

Paul offered this informative detail to everyone on the ship so that they would be emotionally prepared for what was about to come so they would not doubt that they were still doing what God wanted them to do. Paul mentioned there would still be more hardships to come on the voyage, "However, we must run aground on a certain island" (Acts 27:26). This happened near Malta (Acts 27:41). But this hardship ended up with Paul becoming an influential witness to the people of Malta (Acts 28:1-6), performing many miracles (Acts 28:1-10), and gaining continued favor with the Roman centurion who was over the entire expedition (Acts 27:43, 28:16). And it is no doubt that Paul used this occasion to share the Gospel as is recorded all throughout Acts chapters 13-28! Experiencing hard times are not an automatic sign that a believer is sinning or out of the will of God. Paul was saying that God allows these challenges for His divine purposes, and we are to learn from them and endure through them with the right heart attitude and continue pursuing what God wants us to do. And while God may never provide the reason why He allows certain circumstances to occur in our lives, believers are usually able to see after-the-fact of how and why God permitted them. But in the moment, we are to learn what we can about trusting God, obeying His will, and learning any lessons that mature us spiritually.

How does one know that s/he is not experiencing hardships as a result of sin? One needs only to evaluate his/her heart. If one's heart is pure in his/her worship of the Lord, motives pure and not self-serving, and he/she is ushering all glory to God, then hard times are not an indication of any punishment of any sins. In fact, they could provide you with the best direction on how to best serve the Lord in your endeavors. Even Paul began a trip to witness to many churches, but God through changes of plans and altered details, divinely redirected him towards Macedonia (Acts 16:6-10). In addition, difficult conditions can even be for nothing more than for God to receive glory in a unique and divine way (John 9:1-3)!

Sometimes people wonder if they are experiencing hardships because there is some sin in their life that they do not even know about, like believing someone

might have hidden an evil relic in their purse or backpack that causes bad things to happen everywhere they go. Fortunately, this is not how we are affected spiritually. The believer simply needs to pray Psalm 139:23-24 daily and ask God to expose anything s/he is unaware of. God will bless the believer who performs this level of spiritual evaluation, in that God disciplines the believers but does not punish the believer.

Spirit-controlled believers often know when hardships are not caused by any sin in their lives (Acts 27:23-25). And often times when hardships are caused by sin, spirit-controlled believers know as a result of the conviction He has placed in their hearts (Jonah 1:9-16). Spirit-controlled believers are never afraid to ask if a hardship occurs because of any sin in their lives, but after humbly and gratefully thanking God that there is no sin present, they turn to learning from each circumstance and then look forward to the Lord revealing the reason why they went through the circumstances.

After this three-month journey (Acts 28:11a), they finally landed in Rome. Paul was shown special favor by the centurion by granting him “to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him” (Acts 28:16) while the other prisoners were handed over to the captain of the guard for proper processing.

In his travel to Rome, Paul experienced both hardships (Acts 27:1-28:16) and the blessing of companionship (see our Devotional on Acts 28:17-29). Paul also experienced the peace of God of knowing that he was pursuing the Lord’s will with a pure heart and that God would guide him along the journey to Rome. And as he experienced all of the hardships and turbulent circumstances, he learned from them and even grew spiritually. And from it all, he strengthened other believers because of what he learned, as evidenced in his advice to the believers in Philippi when he wrote them in his forthcoming two-year imprisonment in Rome, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7).

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect on how you feel when you experience hardships. Do you have a difficult time discerning whether they are occurring for punishment, discipline, or are simply hardships from which to grow in your faith? Do you pretty much know deep down if the purpose of hardship is because of sin in your life or not? Think about what your common reaction is when hardships come into your life. Anxiety? Shaken faith in God? A loss of control of your emotions? Anger? Depression? Take a moment to remind yourself how to properly respond to hardships.

Pray and ask God that you would be Spirit-controlled and be able to discern when hardships serve as punishment, discipline, or simply events you need to learn from to grow in your faith. Ask Him to keep you from becoming bitter when

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

you encounter hardships. Commit to Him that you will run to Him in prayer with a trusting heart when you experience them. Feel free to respectfully tell Him what you feel when hardships come and be open to asking Him for help through them. But be quick to tell Him you trust Him in every circumstance because you want to grow in your faith.

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Discuss how you yourself discern if a difficult circumstance is a form of punishment, discipline, or simply a hardship from which you believe God wants you to learn a spiritual lesson. Then discuss if it is/is not difficult for some people to discern whether God is punishing them through hardships or just disciplining or teaching them. Somewhere in the discussion, talk about the role of conviction and how a spirit-controlled person is sensitive to conviction and a sinning believer is more desensitized to the Spirit's conviction, dulling one's senses. Then, talk about how we can know the different purposes of hardships so that we will not wonder what God is doing when hardships come in the future.

Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

Listen & Grow!

Watch a gripping sermon clip from Founding Pastor, Dr. Jerry Falwell, as he walks through the stormy voyage of Paul in Acts 27.



Want to Dig Deeper?

Optional but Recommended!
“Dig Deeper” provides added insight into this portion of Acts with supporting Scriptures. Be encouraged to reflect on how to live out the spiritual applications unearthed in this devotional.

1. Difficult circumstances should not be confused with punishment or discipline for sin. Difficult circumstances are just that, circumstances that are difficult. They are a part of life, and everyone experiences them, saved or unsaved. Read the following verses and summarize how each verse applies to the reality that difficult circumstances are not always a sign of how someone is living spiritually or sinfully or even saved:

- Matthew 5:45b
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- John 16:33
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- Psalm 73:3-5
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2. The Bible emphasizes that a person’s heart is always the issue of whether they are in good standing with God, not the circumstances of life. If someone is living a life pleasing to God, s/he should not worry about the presence of difficult circumstances. This type of heart will feel a real conviction if there is indeed something wrong and s/he will quickly make it right. And in any scenario the believer finds comfort in the Lord. Read Psalm 16:4, 7-8 and write out these brief, beautiful verses of how the spirit-controlled believer always welcomes the work of the Lord:

- Psalm 16:4, 7-8:
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3. Unfortunately, an unsaved person believes naively that because everything is going well, that all is well. But how many times do unsaved people shudder when hardships and tragedies occur. They oscillate in their emotions because their confidence is placed in ever-changing circumstances. But the pleasant circumstances are temporary, and judgement is forthcoming. Read Psalm 73:18-20 and summarize this unfortunate reality in your own words:
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4. The Apostle Peter addresses the topic of suffering hardships because of your faith vs. experiencing hardships because we simply act foolishly or sinfully. Read I Peter 4:12-16, 19 and summarize what type of suffering/hardships should be received with joy because they are due to being a Christian. What types of suffering should not at all be equated with suffering for the cause of Christ because they were caused by a foolish or sinful act we committed?
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5. Just like how some hardships are due to punishment or discipline while others are simply challenges that we live through and learn from, there are some physical ailments that are caused by sin and some that are not. Read John 5:1-14 and John 9:1-7 and identify the statements Jesus makes regarding each situation.
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6. And just an interesting observation, notice which individual took a stand for Jesus after he was healed, and which one returned to the Jews and to tattle on Jesus rather than thanking Him.

- John 5:13-15
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- John 9:8-38
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Acts 27:1-28:6 contains one of the most detailed accounts of a series of challenges Paul experienced while Rome was transporting him and others to Rome. While this portion of Acts provides a play-by-play description of the hardships experienced while sailing towards Rome, Paul offers a succinct list of his many different challenges since his conversion to Christianity.

7. Read II Corinthians 11:23-28 and circle the events you can recognize that were documented in Acts 13-28 (you will notice some are found elsewhere in Scripture and some were not documented in Scripture):

- *“Are they ministers of Christ? — I speak as a fool—I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fasting often, in cold and nakedness— besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches”*
(II Corinthians 11:23-28).

8. Finally, look into the caring heart of Paul for other believers: Did you notice the very last thing Paul lists as a burden and hardship that he bears every single day? Take a moment to underline that last burden in verse 28. And notice that while he experienced the rest of the hardships in a particular moment or over a season of his life, this final burden he listed affected him every moment of every day. Share in your own words how you feel when you think of how a pastor and/or Christian leader bears this level of burden for you and the congregation of the church, then lift up a prayer asking the Lord to strengthen your pastor even today.

Acts 28:17-29 – Paul Arrives at Rome Exhausted, Then Preaches Some More!

2. Two Great Joys: Sharing the Gospel and Co-laboring with Supportive Friends!

Among the many names, places, and events that occurred during Paul's trip to Rome in Acts chapters 27 and 28, there are two significant details in these last two chapters that should bring hope to all believers who have read the book of Acts. Amid all the many fine details provided about this exhausting and treacherous trip Paul took to get to Rome (Acts 27:1-28:16), two final details should infuse the reader with confidence in the Lord that regardless of the circumstances He will build His Church. In addition, these two details should foster a spirit of gratitude to the Lord that He knows exactly what we need and He will provide for our spiritual and emotional needs. Acts chapters 27 and 28 describe how Paul 1) took advantage of an open window of opportunity to preach the Gospel (again!) and 2) that he made this significant journey with two extremely close friends.

One of the significant details that is commonly overlooked in Acts chapters 27 and 28 was that Festus allowed Paul to travel with some friends to Rome! While not extremely rare, it was not a common practice for all Roman prisoners. The governmental leaders along with the responsible Roman officer had this discretion. The main reason why a prisoner would be permitted to travel with a friend would be if the Roman leaders did not fear the captive fleeing, saw something in the person's character, or appreciated how s/he conducted her/himself during trial that persuaded officials that the person would not cause any trouble. In addition, you could travel with a friend if the crime did not warrant fear of any radical outbursts or irrational actions or, in some cases, if the prisoner was both wealthy and respected (had to be both) and offered to pay a friend to come on the journey. In Paul's case, all the Roman leaders (Felix, Festus, and Agrippa) thought he was innocent and saw a man of upright character during the past two years while being held per Felix's directive.

Recall that Felix felt there was no guilt to be found in what Paul did. So, even though he detained Paul, "He commanded the centurion to keep Paul and to

let him have liberty and told him not to forbid any of his friends to provide for or visit him” (Acts 24:23). Festus also agreed that he did not think Paul was guilty of breaking any civil laws (Acts 25:17-20) and Agrippa concurred (Acts 26:32). Thus, Festus probably sent Paul with limited restrictions to show Nero that he did not put too much credence in the accusations but was forced, by a technicality (i.e., Paul appealed to Caesar), to have to send him to Nero. As a result, Paul traveled with his friends, Aristarchus (Acts 27:2) and Luke, the author through whom the Holy Spirit chose to write the book of Acts. In Acts chapter 27 alone, the reader can easily see that the word “we” appears over 20 times, (sometimes multiple times in one verse) indicating that his friend Luke was with him (Acts 27:1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 26, 27, 29). In fact, Paul will be held for two years while waiting for his trial before Nero (Acts 28:30-31) and even there he will be allowed to welcome friends to come and go as they visit him.

Paul chose two friends to travel with him that understood what he was going through, Aristarchus and Luke. Not much is known about Aristarchus (Acts 27:22) but what is known is it always in the context of him serving Paul or a ministry team. Aristarchus was first mentioned in Acts 19:29 as one of “Paul’s travel companions” and who was grabbed by the angry Ephesian mob when the mob could not find Paul. Fortunately, they were spared from any beatings when the city leader calmed the mob down (Acts 19:35-41). After this, Paul took him and others, and they traveled back to Macedonia (Acts 20:4). Then, Aristarchus was in Caesarea when Paul appealed to Rome and was allowed to take friends with him (Acts 27:1-2). While in Rome, Paul was held for two years awaiting possible charges. During this two-year imprisonment (Acts 28:30-31), Paul wrote four letters of the New Testament (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon). When he wrote Colossians, he stated, “Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you” (Colossians 4:10). The last time he was mentioned was in his letter to Philemon (the man who was housing the church of Colossae in his own home). Paul wrote, “Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers” (Philemon v.23-24). Aristarchus obviously was a friend who understood the unique dynamics of ministry that Paul experienced, understood the ebbs and flows of ministry, and was also committed to the mission that Jesus gave his disciples and believers, to “be witnesses...to the uttermost parts of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

The same can be said about Luke, his second travel companion to Rome. Luke had also accompanied Paul at various moments during his ministry travels (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-8; 27:1-28:16). In his letter to the church of Colossae during Paul’s two-year imprisonment, Paul commented that Luke was with him, “Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you” (Colossians 4:14) and to Philemon, “Luke, my fellow laborers” (Philemon v.24). And after being released from his two-year imprisonment in Rome (Acts 28:30-31) and traveling

You probably do not think of yourself as a Spiritual Specialist, but you are! *God often puts you in situations to learn how to get through victoriously with God's power and to help others who are going through the same situation. But the Scriptures say that you are not only able to empathize with them but are able to offer powerful guidance based upon how God's power brought you through! You find the Lord has provided you experiences that, in return, allow you to relate in a very special way to the person who approaches you for help. You can share how you manage your emotions in a God honoring way by tapping into His power through prayer, submission, and Godly counsel like you received. God allows you to have a unique ministry to those with whom you can relate. In fact, many people will walk right by a pastor and go to you because you understand what they are going through. Thus, making you a spiritual specialist. See II Corinthians 1:3-5 that teaches this very truth!*

again, Paul found himself back in a Roman prison approximately five to six years later. And in the very last chapter of the very last New Testament book Paul ever wrote, and less than a year before he was martyred, Paul mentioned that only one person was currently with him, "Only Luke is with me" (II Timothy 4:11). Aristarchus and Luke were valued by Paul because they were faithful, trustworthy, and they understood what Paul was going through and ministered to Paul exactly as he needed.

And upon arrival in Rome, Paul also took advantage of an open window of opportunity to preach the Gospel (again!). After being exhausted, hungry, and physically drained, Paul took only three days to call all the Jewish leaders together (Acts 28:17) and began to share the exact Gospel message (Acts 28:17-20, 23-28) that he presented to the Jewish leaders in Acts chapters 24-26. So, you must wonder how Paul's travel companions reacted when Paul called the Jewish leaders to himself and began preaching to them in Rome. And not only preaching, but preaching to

Jewish leaders who adopted the very same theological positions as the Jews in Jerusalem and Caesarea who persecuted him and precipitated this very trip to Rome! Luke and Aristarchus probably leaned over to each other and, with a smile, said something to the effect of, "Well, you knew that was going to happen!" To which the other probably replied, "I'm just surprised it took him three whole days to do it!"

This time, Paul was welcomed by the Jewish leader since no one reported negatively about Paul in Rome, "We neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren who came reported or spoken any evil of you" (Acts 28:21). These must have been some refreshing words to hear! But at the same time, these Jewish leaders were not clean slates upon which to write a brand-new message about Christianity as they had already had some people influence their thinking, "But we desire to hear from you what you think; for concerning this sect, we know that it is spoken against everywhere" (Acts 28:22). It may be that they were simply, calmly reacting to Paul because they had gotten word that Paul was coming, and that the past two Roman governors of Jerusalem did not believe that Paul was guilty, and that King Agrippa did not believe he was guilty. And they quickly realized that no religious leader from that area dared to show their face in Rome. No one would bring a frivolous case to Caesar because they know how much Rome loathed people who brought frivolous cases into court with little to no evidence. So, it could be that they were simply responding with political savvy. Plus, there were many believers in Rome

(see the Letter to the Romans written to the believers in Rome approximately three years earlier) so they probably knew all about Christianity. But at the same time, some of these leaders seriously contemplated Paul's message. It was unknown where they stood with Christianity, but it was a welcoming environment for Paul to preach the Gospel.

After he preached to them, their opinions were split about Paul's Gospel message. "And when he had said these words, the Jews departed and had a great dispute among themselves" (Acts 28:29). This was a common occurrence after Paul had preached as seen throughout the book of Acts (Acts 14:4-10; 17:3-10; 18:5-8; 19:8-10). But what was not so common was that for the first time in a very long time, the Jewish leaders actually left and Paul no longer feared for his life. Aristarchus and Luke probably just shook their heads in disbelief and offered praise to the Lord that, once again, they witnessed nothing halting the Lord from building His Church and from protecting His messenger (Psalm 37)!

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect on a friend that God gave you who has been with you through thick and thin. Specifically, a friend who has spoken truth into your heart during challenging seasons of your life. Someone who has always pointed you to Christ through their words and their conduct. And someone who always encourages you to choose to honor the Lord in your actions and reactions no matter the situation. Think about how you feel when they are around and how they encourage you to be a stronger believer.

Pray and thank God for this special friend(s) and be specific with the reasons why you are grateful for him/her. Thank God for his/her testimony of remaining faithful through challenging times. Thank God for his/her commitment to always point you to Christ whenever you approach him/her about any of your challenges. Even think of a specific scenario s/he helped you navigate, remember their spirit-controlled advice and counsel to you, and how it was exactly what you needed to hear. Then ask God to protect your friend(s) and keep him/her Spirit-controlled knowing that s/he is only human. Then pray to the Lord and tell Him you want to be that type of friend to others.

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Share with your group about a special friend, but not just any friend. Talk about a close friend(s) who has specifically spoken into your life about spiritual matters or given your spiritual counsel during very demanding seasons of your life. Describe how s/he supported you and how s/he delivered their spiritual counsel to you at just the right moment (only share appropriate details, of course).

Describe for the group what gave you the most comfort when engaging with him/her. Was it that s/he had experienced a similar situation to yours? Was it that s/he had walked through many seasons of life and understood when you needed words and when s/he just needed to listen? Was it the way s/he never diverted from speaking God's truth to you and how s/he quickly and often lifted you up in prayer when you were together? Take time to pray and thank God for these types of friends. Ask the Lord to bless him/her for his/her Spirit-controlled heart and tell God you also want to be this type of friend to others.

Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

Listen & Grow!

Watch an inspiring sermon clip from Sr. Pastor Jonathan Falwell as he emphasizes the essential role of teamwork in the Christian life.



Want to Dig Deeper?

Friendships centered around Christ are one of the most precious gifts God provides for His believers. And while there are myriad verses that talk about the importance of community and the spiritual value we receive from our Christian community, the Bible provides many positive statements about how good it is to have friends for support, spiritual encouragement, and to do life with you. In addition, there are Biblical accounts of Paul dealing with different situations and he mentions friends encouraging him and supporting him. Enjoy digging deeper into these many verses and hopefully you will end this exercise refreshed and grateful to God for your good friends and group!

Optional but Recommended!
“Dig Deeper” provides added insight into this portion of Acts with supporting Scriptures. Be encouraged to reflect on how to live out the spiritual applications unearthed in this devotional.

1. Read the following verses and summarize their teachings about the benefits of having good friends, starting with the familiar verses then moving to some that may not be as familiar:

- Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

- Proverbs 17:17

- Proverbs 27:17

- John 15:13

- Proverbs 13:20

- Proverbs 27:5-6

2. Now read these portions of Scripture and extract the portions that refer to Paul’s loyal friends. Summarize how they ministered to him and/or the unique relationship Paul had with these friends:

- II Corinthians 7:5-7

- Philippians 1:12-18

- Philippians 1:19-26

- Philippians 2:19-24

- II Timothy 4:9-13

- 3.** It is always difficult to part ways with good friends. But the more the heart hurts to depart, the more it confirms how much you sincerely love your friends. Summarize the emotions felt in these verses as Paul leaves his dear friends from Ephesus.

- Acts 20: 32-37

And just take a moment to think about all the friends that he traveled with as recorded in the book of Acts (Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Titus, Luke, Aquila and Priscilla, Apollos, Aristarchus, Tychicus, Onesimus, and many others). It is also safe to assume that they shared many other personal moments (serious discussions, light-hearted moments, funny moments, exhausting moments, etc.) while traveling on these long journeys. Just take a moment and ponder how valuable their bond of friendship was as they traveled from city to city sharing

the Gospel, experiencing all the hardships they experienced along with some incredible spiritual victories God allowed them to experience.

If you have ever traveled to do ministry or were a part of a ministry team of some sort, you understand how valuable the bond of friendship is as you are doing the work of the ministry. Or, if you work with a team or someone else in any vocation or venture, you understand how helpful it is to do what you are doing with team members who are also supportive friends. And if you have a chosen few that you intentionally connect with on a regular basis for fellowship, you understand how valuable those relationships are as they prop up your heart in ways only friends can. Whether you hunt with them, golf with them, hang out with them, get together for game night with them (Rook, Uno, Euchre, Dutch Blitz, or Mahjong), or the next time you minister with these friends and/or work a long day with them, take time to thank God in your heart for them...and maybe tell them how much you appreciate them too!

Acts 28:30-31 – Paul is in a Roman Prison for Two Years & Writes Ephesians:

3. Ephesians Comes Alive after Studying the book of Acts!

During Paul's two-year imprisonment at the end of the book of Acts, believers were given a brief yet inspiring description of a man who continued to be "a witness...to the uttermost parts of the earth" (Acts 1:8) even while in lock-down. "Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him" (Acts 28:30-31).

During this imprisonment, Paul was allowed to choose his accommodation before the trial. If the prisoner was considered a "special" prisoner of some sort or if Rome felt the prisoner might experience imminent release, or they felt his hearing would be expedited, they would extend alternative options for housing rather than the damp, cold prisons of Rome (which Paul eventually stayed in six years later in Rome as seen in II Timothy 4:9-13). Of course, the prisoner had to have the financial means to pay for the special accommodation.

There were approximately 45,000 apartments (called "insulae," Latin: INN-sah-lie) in Rome at this time. They were located in three to five floor buildings above ground level shops. The lower-level apartments were more expensive (one-year rent was equivalent to approximately two years wages of the common laborer) and the upper levels were less expensive (one-year rent was equivalent to approximately one-month wages of the common laborer). Assessing Paul's financial situation, it is assumed that Paul could have afforded an apartment anywhere from the third to fifth level. Of course, the accommodation varied in amenities. Lower levels were closer to the community fountain to secure water, while the prisoners in the upper levels had to ask friends or hire servants to run errands, retrieve water, and dispose of garbage and waste from the apartments because the prisoner was not permitted to leave the apartment.

Of course, Paul could not choose just any apartment in Rome. Rome had dedicated insulae (apartments) for prominent prisoners that were located near the headquarters of the Roman soldiers that also took in the revenue from prisoner-renters. And the security in these apartments could safely be described as very low security. While it is true that "Paul was permitted to dwell by himself

with the soldier who guarded him” (Acts 28:16) upon his immediate arrival in Rome, some wonder if this description also applied to the two-year imprisonment that started over seven days after he arrived. The Bible does not link the details of Acts 28:16 to the conditions described in Acts 28:30-31, but historically it would have been a standard practice to have guards all throughout the insulae that were owned and operated by Rome for prominent prisoners. It also seems likely that Paul continued to be guarded by an appointed guard as he had been receiving very intentional protection all throughout his interaction with Roman officials (Acts 24-28). It is inconclusive though whether Paul was chained to a guard throughout this two-year imprisonment. Historians lean that way but cannot be conclusive about this detail.

Vivid Connections between The book of Acts and the Letter to the Ephesians

This study should not only add more vividness to portions of the Letter to the Ephesians and serve as a very helpful review of the book of Acts chapters 13-28, but it should also move us to action to live out the truths that Paul and the believers acted upon during the birth and growth of the Church!

Acts 21:27-29 adds vivid context to the beautiful analogy used by Paul regarding how salvation is available to all peoples in Ephesians 2:12-18

Acts 21:27-29 describes how the Jewish people wrongly accused Paul of “[bringing] Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place” (Acts 21:28b). Knowing there was a Court of the Gentiles that permitted non-Jewish worshipers to gather, they accused Paul of escorting a non-Jewish person past the wall that separated the Jews from the non-Jews (called a “Soreg,” Hebrew: “SOAR-egg”) and were intentionally held at a distance from the majority of the Temple worship areas. This was evidenced by their clear intention to kill Paul that was informally permitted by Rome should a non-Jewish person cross that dividing wall (see our Devotional on Acts 21:26-40). The Jewish people did not want any non-Jews to come near the presence of the Lord in the center of the Temple. This hostility caused anger and bitterness in the Gentiles as the Jews wrote signs in Latin and Greek warning the Gentiles that they would be killed if they crossed this dividing wall!

In Ephesians 2:12-18, Paul adopted this imagery from his experience in the Temple in Acts 21 to celebrate with the Gentiles in Ephesus that the Lord had “broken down the middle wall of separation” (Ephesians 2:14). And because of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, “you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2:13)! And now everyone, Jew or Gentile, has access to the Father, “For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father” (Ephesians 2:18). Paul himself experienced that “enmity” (Ephesians 2:15) that existed at the literal Soreg in the Temple. He felt the cruel and bitter vitriol that existed between the Jews and Gentiles (Acts 21:27-29). So, to celebrate this spiritual reality with the Gentiles

in Ephesus, using this analogy was a way to counteract the present-day negativity that the Jews had toward the Gentiles.

The beautiful reality of God bringing Gentiles into His family was seen in the ministry of Jesus (Matthew 8:9-12; Matthew 21:13; John 4:1-45), taught in Galatians 3:28, Hebrews 4:16 and mentioned and prophesied in Isaiah 42:6, Isaiah 56:7, and Micah 4:2!

Acts chapters 16, 21-28 adds clarity to the teachings found in Ephesians 6:10-17

Paul was detained and/or placed in prison by Rome on multiple occasions from his conversion in Acts 9 to the end of the book of Acts (Acts 28:31), in Philippi (Acts 16:16-40), in Jerusalem (Acts 21:26-23:30), in Caesarea (23:31-26:), en route to Rome (Acts 27:1-28:16), and in Rome (Acts 28:30-31). He saw his share of Roman soldiers, even the head of all the elite Praetorian Guard (Acts 28:16) called “captain of the guard” (formal title, “Praetorian Prefect”). It is reasonable to think that in the uneventful times of his travels and imprisonments, he simply examined their equipment and weaponry. He could have even asked questions out of curiosity about, say, if they ever had to deploy their weapons, etc., especially to the centurion who showed deference to Paul on the boat headed to Rome (Acts 27:43).

Because of his exposure to Roman soldiers for the past four years, Paul offered an effective and vivid analogy of likening six spiritual disciplines to the armor of the Roman soldier (Ephesians 6:10-17). And after years of studying the armor of many Roman soldiers, Paul was even able to get very specific in his description of the imagery. For example, he was probably told how the soldiers “quench” or “extinguish” flaming arrows that are shot at them by constructing some larger shields with wood and leather and soaking the leather in water so that when archers shoot flaming arrows, the fire would immediately extinguish the flame (Ephesians 6:16).

And while a particular piece of armor was not necessarily the most important part of his teaching, Paul occasionally made the correlation of a piece of armor to a spiritual discipline (e.g., Ephesians 6:14, “breastplate of righteousness” cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:8, “breastplate of faith and love”; or Ephesians 6:14, “having girded your waist with truth” cf. Isaiah 11:5, “Righteousness shall be the belt of His loins, And faithfulness the belt of His waist.”). The teaching of spiritual disciplines certainly came across in a very vivid way to the people in Ephesus.

Acts 18:9, 23:11, 27:24, and 28:31 along with Acts 13:46 and 14:3 allows us to experience the human dynamic to Paul’s request for boldness in Ephesians 6:18-20

Paul wrote the believers in Ephesus asking them to pray for boldness for him, “praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit... for me, that

utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak” (Ephesians 6:18a, 19a-20). On the surface, the prayer request was an honorable one, and after reviewing a few verses in the book of Acts, this prayer request also conveyed a very human side of Paul who, like believers today, required prayers for confidence and encouragement from other believers.

In the book of Acts, Paul spoke boldly in Antioch of Pisidia, “Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said...” (Acts 13:46), Paul spoke boldly in Iconium, “Therefore they stayed there a long time, speaking boldly in the Lord” (Acts 14:3), and he was recorded as speaking boldly in Ephesus when he was last with them, “he went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months” (Acts 19:8). And as Paul began his two-year imprisonment in Rome, his level of boldness was described as, “freely proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching the things about the Lord Jesus with confident boldness” (Acts 28:31, original translation). At the same time, we read how the Lord came to Paul three times during his travels and told him “Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent” (Acts 18:9), “Be of good cheer” (Acts 23:11), “Do not be afraid, Paul” (Acts 27:24). In addition, we read Acts 18, where Paul needed encouragement after experiencing many challenges in his ministry efforts up to that point (see our Devotional on Acts 18:1-11). So, in the book of Acts, there are times Paul demonstrated boldness along with moments where Paul was in need of encouragement to continue to be strong and take courage.

And even though it was only one year after we read that Paul proclaimed Jesus with “confident boldness” (Act 28:31b) he asked for the people of Ephesus to pray for him that he “may speak boldly, as I ought to speak” (Ephesians 6:19), we should not be discouraged. Rather, we should be encouraged that even though the Apostle Paul ebbed and flowed in his human emotions as we all do; he knew to run to the Lord in prayer to receive the necessary encouragement. In fact, he “boldly” approached God to give him boldness as the author of Hebrews says, “Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). In a word, the Apostle Paul was human. It should be encouraging to every believer no matter how strong one’s faith is; it is still OK to request prayer for continued spiritual strength!

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect on Paul’s own testimony – how at times he was extremely bold, and how at times he was discouraged and needed encouragement. Reflect on how this is a normal experience for any believer but sometimes we unfairly elevate Christian leaders to be superhumans. Now reflect on your own feelings and upbringing. Were you taught to always be confident and never show weakness? Would you have ever thought to ask someone to pray for you to have bold

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we’ve just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God’s Word to your heart!

confidence like Paul asked the Ephesian believers to pray for him? Or were you conditioned to be very open with your feelings and feel very comfortable sharing your challenges and struggles with people in order to solicit their advice and words of encouragement?

Pray to the Lord that 1) He would give you peace to be human and to become comfortable sharing how you are doing and feeling with other believers so as to receive their much-needed advice and encouragement, 2) Pray that the Lord would make you balanced in the way you instruct others to be unashamed to admit their weaknesses and to seek the prayers of other believers when they become discouraged, and 3) Ask the Lord for wisdom to run quickly to Him when you begin to feel discouraged and spiritually weak, and to “come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Reflect on all the times Paul was bold and confident and the times when he needed encouragement to remain bold and confident. Talk about how this seems to be a normal dynamic in our daily lives as believers. Reflect with each other on a season of your life where you witnessed the same ebb and flow. Ask each other if they think it is wrong to fluctuate in our confidence level like Paul did in his ministry. Ask each other how you can best support each other during times of low confidence. But also discuss what someone should do if they are in a strong spiritual state. How should s/he pray if s/he is strong? Talk about the healthy balance Spirit-controlled Christians should expect in their lives.

Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

Listen & Grow/Dig Deeper

Today's “Listen & Grow” is combined with our “Dig Deeper” section. You're encouraged to listen to Pastor Jonathan take the Thomas Road Baptist Church family into the book of Ephesians.

As you listen to the message, remember the back-drop, culture, and context that the book of Acts provides that directly links to the teachings that Paul shares in his letter to the Ephesians while he is sitting detained in Rome for two years in Acts 28:30-31!



Acts 28:30-31– Paul is in a Roman Prison for Two Years & Writes Philippians:

4. Philippians Comes Alive after Studying the book of Acts!

The last two verses in the book of Acts tell us that Paul was detained for two years in Rome, but he was able to continue teaching and meeting people in the secure quarters where he was being held. During this time, Paul wrote the Letter to the Philippians. Within this letter, Paul provided many teachings, statements, and illustrations, many of which linked back to the circumstances that Paul experienced as captured in the book of Acts. This devotional links many of these events to various statements, teachings, and illustrations within the Letter to the Philippians. The teachings of Philippians become even more vivid after rehearsing these connections between Acts and Philippians. This devotional should also move us to action to live out the truths that Paul and the believers acted upon during the birth and growth of the Church!

Acts Chapter 16:11-40 provides a vivid description of the birth of the church in Philippi which makes Philippians 1:1, 6, a testimony about God's greatness in building His Church!

One of the customary elements of writing a first century letter was to first identify the sender and then identify the recipients. Paul adopted this standard format in Philippians 1:1 (One can see this very format used in a letter from the Roman Commander, Claudius Lysias, to Felix the Roman Governor in Acts 23:26). Philippians 1:1 says, “Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.” This may come across as a mundane statement, but it is actually a testimony of the greatness of God and how He can use anyone to build His Church! Notice some key words in this verse, “saints” (notice it is plural) and “bishops and deacons” (notice these are official, authoritative titles of an established church). Now consider how the book of Acts provides a vivid context to Philippians 1:1 that allows us to celebrate God's greatness in building His Church.

Acts 16:11-40 is where the book of Acts records the first encounter Paul experienced in Philippi. Philippi was not even on his agenda, but the Lord

directed him there (Acts 16:9-10). He met Lydia, a woman from Thyatira who was in Philippi because of the trade she was in. She put her faith in Jesus Christ and her entire household became Christians. Then Paul cast a demon out of a girl who was constantly mocking them and Paul got put in prison. That night, Paul and Silas sang praises and God brought an earthquake that made the bars open and their shackles drop off them. The Philippian jailer saw and heard everything and asked how he could be saved. He put his faith in Jesus Christ along with his entire household. In the morning, they asked Paul and Silas to leave because they learned that they had beaten Paul, a Roman citizen, illegally (see also Acts 22:22-28). “So, they went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia; and when they had seen the brethren, they encouraged them and departed” (Acts 16:40). These few people comprised the charter membership of the church of Philippi. That was it! So, what is the likelihood of this church having a strong chance to survive, let alone thrive?

There would not be much of a chance if left alone to human effort. But when God is building His Church, nothing can stop it. Notice that the Letter to the Philippians was written 10 years after the founding of the church in Acts 16. And notice the key words he used in his greeting to them in the letter, “Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the *saints* in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the *bishops and deacons*.” There were many believers that comprised the church at Philippi, and there were official, authoritative titles that indicated mature leaders within the church! This reality really makes Philippians 1:6 a powerful testimony of the greatness of God in building His Church, “being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.”

Acts chapters 21-28 provide very detailed context for a simple phrase Paul wrote in Philippians 1:12.

Paul had heard that the people of Philippi were becoming discouraged because they heard that Paul was in prison and no longer able to travel. They had supported Paul so much with their finances and physical support to help him travel, but now they were beginning to doubt if Paul’s ministry had halted and lost all its positive effectiveness. To comfort them, Paul wrote Philippians 1:12, “But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel.” Notice the phrase, “things which happened to me.” The people of Philippi read this and only knew that he was in prison. They did not even know it would only be for two years, but they knew a year had passed by the time the letter was written to the Philippians. They wondered what “things” is Paul referring to. So, Paul attempted to share a little detail in Philippians 1:13 but was in no way able to capture all that we the readers of Bible know God did through Paul during this season.

The book of Acts chapters 21-28 provide the readers of the Bible with very detailed context behind the words “the things that have happened unto me” (Philippians 1:12a). While Paul endured through some pretty challenging times,

we now have learned through this Bible study how many amazing witnessing opportunities Paul engaged in because of being detained in Rome from Acts chapter 21-28 – things that would never have occurred if Paul was not in Roman custody! He was given Roman protection as he held a spontaneous preaching rally in the middle of the heart of Jerusalem (Acts 22); he stood in front of the entire Jerusalem Sanhedrin (the Jewish Supreme Court) and spoke on the resurrection (Acts 23); he stood before two Roman governors (Acts 24 & 25) and gave his testimony and presented the Gospel, he had private one-on-one talks with one of the Roman governors (Acts 24); he stood in the presence of King Agrippa and shared his testimony and the Gospel and made a bold attempt to ask the king if he would put his faith in Jesus (Act 26); he traveled to Rome and met with all the key Jewish leaders in Rome and some believed in Jesus (Acts 28); and while awaiting to appeal to the emperor himself, he led people to the Lord while in custody (Philemon verses 10, 15, 16), and wrote to instruct and encourage the Ephesian church, the Colossian church, along with Philemon! And Paul was given protection by literally hundreds of Roman soldiers to and from every destination to safely get to his next ministry opportunity. The book of Acts really amplifies what the Letter to the Philippians mentions in a simple phrase, “the things that have happened unto me” (Philippians 1:12a)!

And while this was a beautiful and inspiring context, notice that the actual believers of Philippi never fully learned about all this wonderful context like the readers of the entire Bible know. Therefore, because we have the entire counsel of God’s Word at our fingertips, our faith in God’s greatness and assurance that God will build His Church despite any forces that come against it, should be strong – even stronger than those who only had a fraction of the understanding of all the details that unfolded in the book of Acts.

Philippians 4:6-7 helps us understand the spiritual prayers of Paul while he was detained in Rome in Acts 28:30-31 and how he regained his boldness and confidence.

At the end of Paul’s letter to the Philippians, he encouraged them to pray to God in every possible way over every detail of their lives. He then promised that the peace of God would come after they placed it in God’s hands through prayer. “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7). Paul made it clear that they did not have to wait for the answer to their questions or for a resolution to the problems in order to receive peace. Their peace would come when they placed it in God’s hands through prayer.

This spiritual advice is undoubtedly what revived Paul’s spirit while being held in Rome for two years. Knowing Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians in the second year of his two-year imprisonment, after he wrote Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon, he had a lot of time to work out his spiritual challenges

and cultivate an even stronger prayer life. Thus, Philippians 4:6-7 provides for us a model of prayer coming from a very seasoned minister who had seen how placing all matters of life and ministry in God's hands can bring peace. At this season of life, Paul understood that circumstances are ordered by the Lord and that his responsibility was simply to remain faithful to God. So, it is no surprise that Paul explicitly omitted any comments about receiving an answer from God or coming to an agreeable resolution to problems with this advice. He intentionally emphasized that we are to run to Christ, place all our cares in His arms, and then rest well in His divine peace.

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect on how the book of Acts shed a lot of light on the backstory of Philip-pians 1:6. If you are honest, have you ever counted someone out or prejudged the way s/he would turn out based on first impressions or on one part of his/her story? Then you found out the person was so different than what you first thought. Or that maybe they were just as you had perceived but God did an amazing work in their lives and now it makes you a little ashamed for making a premature judgement about them? Has anyone ever done the same thing to you? Now ponder how God feels when people prejudge a person based on what they are and not what they could be with God's help and empowerment.

Pray and ask God to give you His eyes when meeting people for the first time. Ask Him to give your heart a gracious attitude towards them and a sincere hope that every person you meet will become strong believers who will do a lot for the cause of Christ. Ask Him to cultivate that very spirit in your heart today as you engage people at your workplace, around the community, and especially in your home. And then thank God that Philippians 1:6 applies to you and those believers with whom you come in contact.

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Related to our discussion on Acts 16:11-40 and Philippians 1:1, 6, share whether you or anyone in your group has ever formed a judgement about a person before engaging with that person. Or did you ever form an opinion about one's potential based on one action, statement, or first impression, but then you turned out to be wrong the more you got to know the person? Share what you can about these instances. Maybe you wondered how God would ever use the person but sooner (or later) you learned that God did an amazing work in his/her life, and it taught you never to rush to judgement. Reflect upon the lessons the Lord taught you from that experience. Then take time to pray and ask God to give you His eyes to see people how He sees people and to observe what He can do through anyone who is faithful and whose heart is open and willing to be used by Him.

*Take a moment and
join the many people
who have read this
devotional today in
praying over what
we've just learned!
We believe this is how
the Holy Spirit will
help you apply this
portion of God's
Word to your heart!*

Listen & Grow/Dig Deeper

Today's "Listen & Grow" is combined with our "Dig Deeper" section. You're encouraged to listen to Pastor Jonathan take the Thomas Road Baptist Church family into the book of Philippians.

As you listen to the message, remember the back-drop, culture, and context that the book of Acts provides that directly links to the teachings that Paul shares in his letter to the Philippians while he is sitting detained in Rome for two years in Acts 28:30-31!



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Acts 28:30-31 – Paul is in a Roman Prison for Two Years & Writes Colossians and Philemon:

5. Colossians and Philemon Come Alive after Studying the book of Acts – Get in the Game!”

The last two verses in the book of Acts (Acts 28:30-31) tell us that Paul was detained for two years in Rome, but he was able to continue teaching and meeting with people in the secure quarters where he was held. During this time, Paul wrote the Letter to the Colossians and a letter to a man named Philemon who owned the house in which the church of Colossae met. Within the letter to the Colossians Paul provided many powerful teachings about the person and work of Jesus Christ, a topic that Paul himself taught many times as illustrated in the book of Acts. Paul then wrote to Philemon, which encouraged him to forgive a person who had once personally hurt him. Philemon was asked to receive him as a fellow believer because the man got saved. In writing this letter to Philemon, Paul encouraged him to settle whatever spiritual issues he needed to resolve and get in the game of clearly proclaiming the truth of Jesus Christ to the world. This devotional ends by encouraging all believers to deal with challenges that trip them up spiritually, confess their sins, and then join the many believers who are focusing on what is most important for believers – proclaiming the Person and work of Jesus Christ to all who will listen in a hostile world!

During his imprisonment in Rome, Paul received a visitor from the church of Colossae named Epaphras. He probably wanted to encourage Paul while he was detained in Rome and to request that Paul help them deal with a serious situation that had significant repercussions on the church of Colossae and Christianity as a whole. Heretical teachers were attacking the church of Colossae and using very philosophical arguments attempting to teach against the deity and supremacy of Jesus Christ. And the believers in Colossae needed thorough instructions on how to combat this philosophy as they encountered terms that were unfamiliar to them and terms that were presented with partial truths that needed to be accurately parsed. In response, Paul wrote the Letter to the Colossians without delay and sent it to them via a man named Tychicus (Greek: “too-kick-COSS,” English: “TICK-keh-kiss”). He also made Tychicus

available to stay with them and help them understand these complex discussions and to reinforce the truth about Jesus Christ (Colossians 4:7).

But why did Paul devote so much time and attention to this fairly unknown church in the little town of Colossae? The answer is probably not found in the fact that Paul had a considerable amount of time on his hands to do so. It was the subject matter that compelled Paul to write to them. Interestingly, when Paul wrote the Letter to the Colossians, it marked the second time we saw Paul writing a church he had never personally visited. The first letter was the Letter to the Romans. He had not established the church in Rome either (even though he always wanted to go there and obviously did). Likewise, Paul had never visited the Church at Colossae (which was a small, far less significant place than Rome) (Colossians 2:1). So, why did Paul take the time to write to both churches? The answer is found in the subject matter of the letters. The subject matter was so profoundly important to the maturity of the church and Christianity as a whole, he felt compelled to address it. The Letter to the Romans spelled out what Salvation is and what it is not. The Letter to the Colossians explained how Jesus Christ is fully God and supreme over all things (Colossians 2:2). Paul had dealt with debates about Jesus over more than 20 years since his conversion (Acts 2:33-36; 5:31; 7:59-60; 9:14, 21; 13:13-38; 14:14-15; 22:16). So, he was postured and ready to assist this little church in defending the supremacy and deity of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote this church because these doctrines are essential to the Christian faith. They are non-negotiable.

In this little city, there was a prominent cult that promoted angel worship. This cult was a bit odd because it had a somewhat undefinable mixture of Jewish beliefs and Greek philosophy, along with the beginnings of what soon became Gnosticism in the second century. The cult held very complex, philosophical concepts of the angelic world and how humans were to interact with the divine realm. In essence, they believed (and prepare yourself to get very confused because it is a theological mess) that there was a being who was full-deity and perfect in all ways (i.e., fully God) but that God did not create the physical world because physical matter is evil, and a perfect, totally spiritual being like God cannot touch physical matter. So, the world was created by one of the many angels who came from this God who had enough deity power to create the world but was less perfect and spiritual than God to actually create and touch evil, physical matter. Thus, they believed the creator of the world was partially divine and partially physical, but less perfect than God so that it was able to touch the world.

Colossae was a little town. *The church of Colossae was a little church in a little town over approximately 120 miles due east of Ephesus during the first century. Even though it was in the vicinity of Laodicea, Smyrna, Pisidia Antioch, Philadelphia, and the other churches mentioned in Revelation chapters 2 & 3, at the time of Paul, it was considered smaller even though it attracted a diverse culture in the small city. Thus, they felt overwhelmed by the onslaught attack from an established angel-worshipping cult in the city.*

Paul gave the Colossians a new vocabulary. *In order to combat this complex philosophy, Paul wrote a letter to the Colossians telling them how to combat this philosophy using the exact terms of the philosophy itself. For example, Paul taught the Colossians how to redefine their understanding of “full-deity” and apply it to Jesus Christ. That’s why there are more than 50 words in the Letter to the Colossians that are not used anywhere else in any of Paul’s other letters. And over 30 words are only used once in the New Testament in Colossians. This explanation also assists scholars today who respond to skeptics who suggest someone other than Paul must have written the Letter to the Colossians because the vocabulary is so different from Paul’s standard pool of vocabulary.*

So, when people of this false philosophy heard Christians talk about Jesus being God Himself and the Creator of the world who dwelt among His creation, they had a problem with it. They attempted to correct the believers in Colossae saying if Jesus did indeed create the world as they said, then Jesus must have only been part-deity and not completely perfect. In summary, to them, Jesus was just one of many angelic beings who had enough imperfection within Him to be able to walk on the physical earth, but He is not fully God and He was not perfect. To them, Jesus must have been just one angelic being amid the ranks of many other angels.

Paul wrote to the believers in Colossae to teach them that not only was Jesus fully-God, perfect and holy in every way, but that this holy God was able to both create the world and dwell among His own creation. Read Colossians 1:15-20, 2:9 and see how Paul parsed his words well to demonstrate that Jesus was not only fully-God but fully perfect as a sinless human and that such a combination is possible. Therefore, Colossians is a masterful explanation of how Jesus is fully God but also fully-human who is free from sin.

But while all this was happening, there was an extremely practical situation that one of the members of the church in Colossae was grappling with. Philemon, who owned the house within which the church of Colossae met, was dealing with anger and bitterness over one of his slaves, Onesimus (Greek: “aw-NAY-sim-moss,” English: “oh-NESS-ah-miss”) who wronged him, stole from him, and ran off. Philemon was still struggling for months over his emotions about how someone hurt him deeply. So, when Paul wrote to the church in Colossae, he also wrote a very short, personal letter to Philemon encouraging him to forgive Onesimus.

Philemon was probably thinking, “Why should I forgive a man that, as far as I know, is not even repentant over his sin?!” But as Philemon read the letter, he learned something that changed everything. Onesimus had run away to Rome and somehow connected with Paul while in Rome. Paul spoke God’s truth to Onesimus, and he put his faith in Jesus Christ (Philemon verse 10)! And now Paul asked Philemon to receive him the same way he would receive the other believers who he met in his own house every week (Philemon verse 16)! Paul explained that sometimes people needed to wander to realize their need for Jesus (Philemon verse 15).

Therefore, Paul wrote that Philemon should forgive him and close the chapter on this hurtful season of his life and focus on more important priorities in his church – like the deity and supremacy of Jesus Christ!

Philemon had an immediate opportunity to demonstrate if he was going to obey God and forgive his brother or remain bitter towards Onesimus. Because not only did Tychicus deliver these two letters (Colossians and Philemon), but he was accompanied by Onesimus himself (Colossians 4:7-9)! But Paul knew Philemon would forgive him, probably knowing Philemon’s proven character from the past (Philemon verses 20-21).

That sad reality is that for months, Philemon was held back from fully engaging and supporting his local church in combatting an extremely serious attack on the foundational truth of Christianity – that Jesus is fully-God, fully-man, and Creator of the world who came to earth, lived a sinless life, took upon Himself all of the sin of mankind, died to pay the penalty for everyone’s sin, and rose again proving He could conquer the consequences of sin – all because Philemon could not get past the bitter feeling of how someone wronged him, hurt him, and got away with it. Think of it this way, Philemon is in his bedroom sulking about how somebody wronged him and having his own pity-party while the church leadership and all the membership are in his living room working feverishly to repel the onslaught of heretical attacks against them and against one of the foundational doctrines of Christianity, the deity and supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ!

You must wonder?! When Onesimus appeared to Tychicus to deliver the letter to Philemon (to forgive Onesimus), Onesimus had to hope Philemon had read the letter first before he laid eyes on him. Otherwise, Philemon could have severely and legally punished Onesimus. Tychicus must have planned a way for him to talk to Philemon first, made sure he read the letter, and then connected Onesimus and Philemon after. Otherwise, the situation could have turned out to be ugly.

Paul emphasized that it was time for Philemon to get his spiritual priorities in order, quickly resolve any spiritual issues, get over any petty feelings of “woe-is-me”, forgive who he needed to forgive, and get in that living room and get in the game! Paul had labored too hard over the past 20 plus years in ministry to get to that point and hear that not all of the believers were spiritually prepared to fully engage in the work of the Gospel ministry! The believers who sacrificed their lives to proclaim the Gospel, who had to run for their lives because of the cause of Christ, who preached as they were fleeing from persecution, and gave of themselves and their resources to make sure the Gospel continued to spread, had to compel all believers to join them with equal fervor and passion in the work of the ministry. Paul was not about to excuse any believer who showed a lack of total commitment and engagement in sharing the Gospel and making disciples. Paul felt that believers harmed the cause of Christ when they selfishly wallowed in their own personal world and consumed their thinking with things that only affected them, while the Gospel of Jesus Christ was under relentless attack every day. Paul sat imprisoned for two years because he put the cause of Christ and His Mission to preach the Gospel “to the uttermost parts of the earth” (Acts 1:8b) first and foremost in his life. Paul set aside his needs, wants, and desires to serve God and devoted his time to make an eternal impact. And he rightly believed that every believer should be equally committed.

Thus, Paul was telling Philemon to quickly settle what he needed to settle and get in the game because the world is dark, souls are dying without Christ, the attack against Christianity is real, and the Lord is calling for all believers, regardless of age, gender, personality, knowledge-level, nationality, or past spiritual journey to rise up and join the community of believers to devote their entire being to what matters: Share the Gospel (Acts 1:8) and to make disciples (Matthew 28:19-20)! And Paul’s words to Philemon are his words of encouragement to us today. Now that we have experienced what God has done through

Paul and so many other believers to build His Church in the book of Acts, it is now OUR turn! It's our turn to get in the game, focus on His priorities, remove all distractions, make an eternal impact, and devote ourselves to what really matters to the Lord: "To change our world by developing Christ-followers who love God and love people."

Take a moment and join the many people who have read this devotional today in praying over what we've just learned! We believe this is how the Holy Spirit will help you apply this portion of God's Word to your heart!

Ponder & Pray Today...

Reflect upon all that we learned through Acts 13-28. Compare all the challenges that Paul and the other believers faced to your commitment level to share the Gospel, support other believers, and to do what you can to strengthen fellow believers and pray for them. Ponder the level of commitment and personal conviction these first century believers had when they needed to put their self-interests aside and to make God's priorities their priorities. Look back on how the believers actively participated in, supported, and maintained a daily connection with the believers in their local community. How they lived together and how the believing community was their primary source of fellowship brought them joy.

Pray and ask God to have this level of love for the believing community with which you fellowship. Take time to thank God for your local church. Tell God that you will pray for your leaders regularly, support fellow believers intentionally, and serve your local church by using your skills and giftedness to help the church expand in its ministry outreach. Tell Him you will "get in the game" and do your part to continue what the first century believers started, "To change our world by developing Christ-followers who love God and love people."

Next Time You Meet with Your Group...

Take time to reflect upon all that we have learned in Acts chapters 13-28. Identify what portions of the book of Acts were very meaningful to you. What portions of the book of Acts did the Holy Spirit continue to swirl around in your thinking over the past few weeks. Where did He cause you to really think about its teaching or application? Share why you think that portion of the book of Acts captivated your attention. Then take a moment to reflect upon the amazing commitment level the first century believers had to sharing the Gospel and making sure the church was mature and free from sin. Think about the level of conviction these believers had that made some of them risk their lives to make sure everyone heard the Gospel and to make certain every church was maturing spiritually. Lastly, share what you believe you can do as a group to continue offering this same level of support for your local church, for your church leadership, and for each other as you serve Him together!

Listen & Grow/Dig Deeper

Today's "Listen & Grow" is combined with our "Dig Deeper" section. You're encouraged to listen to Pastor Jonathan take the Thomas Road Baptist Church family into the book of Philemon.

As you listen to the message, remember the backdrop, culture, and context that the book of Acts provides that directly links to the teachings that Paul shares in his letter to Philemon while he is sitting detained in Rome for two years in Acts 28:30-31!



Scan for a sermon clip related to today's devotional! Choose to listen in the car or and watch at home, whatever works best for you!

Group Gathering is a time to reflect together upon **what we learned** (Head), **what we felt** (Heart), and **what we should do** (Hands).

GROUP GATHERING #7

Note to Group Members:

Be encouraged! Your contribution is valuable to your group and will most assuredly edify the members of your group and your group leader. But should you need to sit and listen today, just to take in the entire discussion and prayerfully process the spiritual discussion quietly, that is OK too! You will not be pressured to speak publicly. We are glad you have joined us today!

All of the discussion topics are taken from this week's devotionals along with a brief summary of each devotional!

Discussion Topics

Choose **one or two** topics to discuss today!

Taken from Day One: *"Acts 27:1-28:16 – Paul Experiences Numerous Hardships En Route to Rome: You are Not Out of God's Will Even if You Do Not Experience Smooth Sailing while Pursuing It!"*

As we come to the closing section of the book of Acts, the reader receives the reminder that hardships do not have to necessarily indicate punishment or discipline from God. Rather, they can serve as ways God brings about His divine plan, how He teaches believers His will, and sometimes serves as very powerful occasions upon which to reflect, to learn from, and grow in their faith. In this devotional, we read about the numerous hardships Paul experienced on his way to Rome. But after three months of traveling by ship, being shipwrecked, and being threatened for his life (again), God shows how none of this was punishment but to work out His divine purpose.

1. Discuss how you yourself discern if a difficult circumstance is a form of punishment, discipline, or simply a hardship from which you believe God wants you to learn a spiritual lesson.
2. Then discuss if it is/is not difficult for some people to discern whether God is punishing them through hardships or just disciplining or teaching them.

Somewhere in the discussion, talk about the role of conviction and how a spirit-controlled person is sensitive to conviction and a sinning believer is more desensitized to the Spirit's conviction, dulling one's senses.

3. Then, talk about how we can know the different purposes of hardships so that we will not wonder what God is doing when hardships come in the future.

Taken from Day Two: “Acts 28:17-29 – Paul Arrives at Rome Exhausted, Then Preaches Some More: Two Great Joys: Sharing the Gospel and co-laboring with supportive friends!”

Amid the exhausting and treacherous trip Paul took to get to Rome, the Lord gave Paul two blessings. First, we see Paul did not endure the hardships alone but was allowed to endure these hardships with some trusted friends! Then, upon arrival to Rome, Paul takes full advantage of the special blessing to be able to preach the Gospel (again!).

4. Share with your group about a special friend, but not just any friend. Talk about a close friend(s) who has specifically spoken into your life about spiritual matters or given your spiritual counsel during very demanding seasons of your life.

Describe how s/he supported you and how s/he delivered their spiritual counsel to you at just the right moment (only share appropriate details, of course). Describe for the group what gave you the most comfort when engaging with him/her. Was it that s/he had experienced a similar situation to yours? Was it that s/he had walked through many seasons of life and understood when you needed words and when s/he just needed to listen? Was it the way s/he never diverted from speaking God’s truth to you and how s/he quickly and often lifted you up in prayer when you were together?

5. Take time to pray and thank God for these types of friends. Ask the Lord to bless him/her for his/her Spirit-controlled heart and tell God you also want to be this type of friend to others.

Taken from Day Three: “Acts 28:30-31 – Paul is in a Roman Prison for Two Years & Writes Ephesians: Ephesians Comes Alive after Studying the book of Acts!”

The last two verses in the book of Acts tell us that Paul was detained for two years in Rome, but he was able to continue teaching and meeting with people in the secured quarters where he was being held. This devotional describes in detail what this detainment was like. During this time, Paul wrote the Letter to the Ephesians. Within this letter, he provided many teachings, prayers, and illustrations, many of which linked back to the circumstances that Paul experienced in the book of Acts. This devotional links many of these events to various statements, teachings, and analogies within the Letter to the Ephesians. The teachings of Ephesians become even more vivid after reviewing the connections between Acts and Ephesians. This devotional examines Ephesians 2:12-18, 6:10-17, and 6:18-20 and the many links to the book of Acts.

6. Reflect on all the times Paul was bold and confident and the times when he needed encouragement to remain bold and confident. Talk about how this seems to be a normal dynamic in our daily lives as believers.

Reflect with each other on a season of your life where you witnessed the same ebb and flow. Ask each other if they think it is wrong to fluctuate in our confidence level like Paul did in his ministry. Ask each other how you can best support each other during times of low confidence. But also discuss what someone should do if they are in a strong spiritual state. How should s/he pray if s/he is strong? Talk about the healthy balance Spirit-controlled Christians should expect in their lives.

Taken from Day Four: “Acts 28:30-31– Paul is in a Roman Prison for Two Years & Writes Philippians: Philippians Comes Alive after Studying the book of Acts!

The last two verses in the book of Acts tell us that Paul was detained for two years in Rome, but he was able to continue teaching and meeting with people in the secured quarters where he was being held. During this time, Paul wrote the Letter to the Philippians. Within this letter, Paul provided many teachings, statements, and illustrations, many of which linked back to the circumstances that he experienced as captured in the book of Acts. This devotional links many of these events to various statements, teachings, and illustrations within the Letter to the Philippians. The teachings of Philippians become even more vivid after reviewing these connections between Acts and Philippians. This devotional also should move us to action, to live out the truths that Paul and the believers acted upon during the birth and growth of the Church. This devotional examines Philippians 1:1, 6, 12, 4:6-7 with many links to the book of Acts.

7. Related to our discussion on Acts 16:11-40 and Philippians 1:1, 6, share whether you or anyone in your group has ever formed a judgement about a person before engaging with that person. Or did you ever form an opinion about one’s potential based on one action, statement, or first impression, but then you turned out to be wrong the more you got to know the person?

Share what you can about these instances. Maybe you wondered how God would ever use the person but sooner (or later) you learned that God did an amazing work in his/her life, and it taught you never to rush to judgement. Reflect upon the lessons the Lord taught you from that experience.

8. Then take time to pray and ask God to give you His eyes to see people how He sees people and to observe what He can do through anyone who is faithful and whose heart is open and willing to be used by Him.

Taken from Day Five: “Acts 28:30-31 – Paul is in a Roman Prison for Two Years & Writes Colossians and Philemon: Colossians and Philemon come alive after studying the book of Acts – Get in the Game!”

The last two verses in the book of Acts tell us that Paul was detained for two years in Rome, but that he was able to continue teaching and meeting with people in the secured quarters where he was being held. During this time, Paul wrote the Letter to the Colossians and a letter to a man named Philemon who owned the house where the church of Colossae met. Within the letter to the Colossians Paul provided many powerful teachings about the person and work of Jesus Christ, a topic that Paul taught many times as illustrated in the book of Acts. Paul then wrote to Philemon, which encouraged him to forgive a person who had once personally hurt him. Philemon was asked to receive him as a fellow believer because the man got saved. In writing this letter to Philemon, Paul exhibited the love of Christ in a very vivid way. This devotional ends by encouraging believers to deal with challenges that trip them up spiritually, confess their sins, and then get back in the game and join the many believers who are focusing on what is most important for believers – proclaiming the Person and work of Jesus Christ to all who will listen in a dark world in need of salvation!

9. Take time to reflect upon all that we have learned in Acts chapters 13-28.

Identify what portions of the book of Acts were very meaningful to you. What portions of the book of Acts did the Holy Spirit continue to swirl around in your thinking over the past few weeks. Where did He cause you to really think about its teaching or application? Share why you think that portion of the book of Acts captivated your attention.

10. Then take a moment to reflect upon the amazing commitment level the first century believers had to sharing the Gospel and making sure the church was mature and free from sin.

Think about the level of conviction these believers had that made some of them risk their lives to make sure everyone heard the Gospel and to make certain every church was maturing spiritually.

11. Lastly, share what you believe you can do as a group to continue offering this same level of support for your local church, for your church leadership, and for each other as you serve Him together!

Jesus



HAVE YOU DECIDED TO FOLLOW JESUS?

Romans 10:17 says, *“So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”* If you have not already surrendered your heart to the Lord and asked Him to be your Savior, our hope is that the Holy Spirit stirred within you as you completed this study. Maybe you have been in church all your life and have never truly done this, or maybe this is the first time you have ever studied God’s Word and would like to accept Him now. If you have never encountered Jesus and trusted Him as your Savior, continue to read to discover how to do this.

Salvation Through Jesus

The first step on the road to Salvation through Jesus Christ is to acknowledge Romans 3:23 which says, *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* This means that all of humanity requires forgiveness from God for their sins. We are by nature born sinful and in need of a Savior.

God made a way for us to be forgiven and receive salvation through giving His Son, Jesus Christ, as a sacrifice for all. Jesus fulfilled the demands of God by His obedient life, died on the cross in full substitution and payment for the sins of all, was buried, and on the third day He arose physically from the dead. He ascended into heaven where He now intercedes for all believers. Romans 5:8 says, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Salvation is a gift and received by faith in Jesus alone. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, *“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”*

Romans 10:9 says, *“If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”* Faith is a choice made within your heart that is evidenced by the way you live. Although works are not required to be saved, there will be evidence of your faith as you begin to live according to Scripture.

Our Response

If you would like to take this next step to put your trust in Jesus and accept Him as your Lord and Savior, ask Him to be Lord of your life by praying a prayer similar to this:

Heavenly Father, I know that I am a sinner in need of a Savior. I believe that Jesus, your Son, was the sacrifice for all sin. Please forgive me for all of my own sins. I accept your offer of eternal life. Please fill my heart with your Holy Spirit. Thank you for giving me new life in you. I choose to follow you now and forever.

If you have never accepted this gift of salvation, please share your decision with your group leader or someone from the leadership team. When you encounter Jesus and ask Him to be Lord of your life, you are forever changed. We would love to guide you in your next steps to follow Him and live according to His will.

A 6-WEEK STUDY

Exploring Spiritual Disciplines from the Book of Acts, Chapters 13-28

Jesus promised He would build His Church and that He would accomplish this through His followers by the power of the Holy Spirit! But it was not always a smooth process. Learn the dramatic stories of how the early churches were started and grew, all while facing incredible challenges, passionate opposition, and intense persecution. First-generation Christians took every opportunity to declare the Gospel of Jesus Christ, disciple new converts, and establish local gatherings of believers all over the known world. This study not only unpacks the events surrounding the first century church, but also gives insight to the culture in which they were started, as well as a timeline of how these events impacted the letters we read from the Apostle Paul throughout the New Testament. The book of Acts provides a front row seat to the power of the Holy Spirit, the unbreakable commitment of early believers, and the inspiring testimony of the birth of what can only be described as - the **UNSTOPPABLE CHURCH!**



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