



The Summit
Green Campus of Canton Baptist Temple

Resources for Your Life

The Book of Acts
36 Sessions

www.thesummitgreen.com
tomhogsed@gmail.com

Resource Guide

This resource was compiled from the personal Bible study and blog entries created by Tom Hogsed, pastor of the Summit in Green. You can find the original blog entries at www.tomhogsed.com.

The **introduction** to this book has been written so the reader has a better understanding of the Biblical author, his purpose in writing, and important points to understand before reading.

Following the introduction, each new page represents a **verse by verse overview** of the Scripture passage. The best way to study is to first read the Scripture verses from your Bible relying on the Holy Spirit to provide understanding and then to support your understanding with the commentary written below.

At the end of each Scripture commentary, there is a short **prayer** written so the reader can personally apply what has been discovered; however, it is suggested that you also pray from your heart in response to God's Word.

Feel free to make your own personal notes in your Bible, on this page, or even in a journal.

If this resource has helped you or you have further questions, please send an e-mail to tomhogsed@gmail.com.

Introduction to Acts

Of all the New Testament writings, the book of Acts has the most unique title. All the other books in the NT are named primarily based on their author or the one receiving the writing. However, this book has been referred to as "Acts" and "Acts of the Apostles" meaning that it is a record of all the amazing works which took place by the apostles through the power of the Holy Spirit. Specifically, Acts is a documentation by Luke (also wrote the gospel which bears his name) of the early church and its carrying out of the great commission given by Jesus Christ in Matthew 28:19-20. Following His resurrection, Jesus had commanded the disciples (and those who would follow them) to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you...."

The writing of Acts covers three decades of ministry (AD30-late AD60's) highlighting both the ministry of Peter (Acts 1-12) and Paul (Acts 13-28) as well as their spreading of the gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Although Peter and Paul are the primary stories of the book of Acts, the church is really the focus as the Holy Spirit fills the apostles and they in turn entrust the gospel into the hands of local churches in dozens of cities. The reader is able to see firsthand the rapid spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the explosive growth of the church throughout all these regions. On the negative side, Luke also documents the hardships of the church as they face severe persecution for spreading this radical message of Jesus Christ (see Acts 4-8, 11-12). Peter boldly declared this message saying; "there is no other name [other than Jesus Christ] under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Luke's writing serves as an accurate, historical record of God's commissioning of the church to take His message to all people. Reading Acts should cause the reader to closely examine what made the early church great and to use those things as guidelines for the modern-day church. In the end, I believe we will find the book of Acts to be one of challenge, inspiration, and motivation to become the church God has called us to be.

Acts 1:1-8

To introduce this writing, Luke points the reader back to his "former account" that he made "of all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God" (1:1-3, see also 1 Corinthians 15:1-8). Of course Luke is referring to the gospel which bears his name where he documented the life and teachings of Jesus Christ including His death, burial, and resurrection. Following Jesus' resurrection He spent 40 days speaking about the kingdom of God which is defined as God's rule over all things and is also the "designation for the sphere of salvation" which is entered into at the new birth according to John 3:5-7. When a person puts their faith in Jesus Christ alone for salvation, he is allowing God to set up His ways in his heart and have lordship over all things in his life. This kingdom not only has a current application, but also future implications when Christ will return to earth for 1,000 years and reign in righteousness over all things (millennial reign, see Revelation 20:4-6). At the end of this reign, God will destroy all evil and only those things which are a part of His kingdom will remain (Revelation 20:7-21:4).

Jesus was assembled together with His apostles in Jerusalem and commanded them not to leave until the "promise of the Father" had come. The promise spoken of was given by Christ in John 14:16, "And I will pray the Father and He will give you another Helper, that he may abide with you forever..." Upon Christ's departure, God the Holy Spirit would come alongside them and dwell in them to accomplish the work of God (1:4-5). The apostles, still misunderstanding the timing of God's kingdom, asked Jesus if He was going to "restore the kingdom to Israel" to which He responded that they should not concern themselves with the timing (1:6-7). Instead, soon they would receive power from the Holy Spirit who would enable them to "be witnesses...in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (1:8). In essence, Jesus was leaving them with the incredible responsibility of spreading the message that He died on the cross for the sins of all and those who, by faith, believe in His sacrifice will receive eternal life (John 3:36). The events which follow these introductory verses are a record of the apostles carrying out that mission.

Dear God, teach me what it means to be Your witness and may You use me to effectively communicate salvation through Jesus Christ to all people.

Acts 1:9-26

After declaring that the apostles would become witnesses of Him in all the world, Jesus ascended into heaven as they watched. Luke documents the details surrounding Jesus' ascension, "He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven'" (1:9-11). So as Jesus was ascending into heaven, two angels appeared beside the apostles bringing confidence to them that He would also return to them one day to set up His kingdom. Although they were sorrowful about the departure of Jesus, they now would begin their mission to spread the life-changing message of His death, burial, and resurrection for the sins of mankind. I wonder if they recalled Jesus' words to them around the same time He promised the Holy Spirit, "He who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do because I go to My Father. And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (John 14:12-13). The time of "greater works" was upon them as they would now be taking the good news about Jesus Christ to all people and establishing the church which has influenced every generation to follow.

After Jesus ascended into heaven at Mount Olivet, the apostles returned to Jerusalem to wait for the promise of the Holy Spirit to be fulfilled (1:12-13). Luke writes that the apostles stayed in the upper room "continuing with one accord in prayer, and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and with his brothers" (1:14). During this time of waiting Peter, the leader of the apostles, spoke up to the apostles as well as some of Jesus' other followers who were gathered (120 people) reminding them of Judas' betrayal of Jesus and that Scripture called for a replacement (reference Psalm 69:25 and 109:8). Peter then declared that Judas' replacement should have "accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection" (1:21-22). Peter wisely knew that whoever would represent the message of Jesus Christ must have spent the last three years walking with Jesus and witnessing His death, burial, and resurrection. Without that firsthand knowledge, that person's testimony would not be strong. In response to Peter's words, two men were presented as candidates: Joseph and Matthias (1:23). Those who were gathered prayed that God would reveal which one they should choose (1:24-25) and they also cast lots (Old Testament practice of determining God's will) which "fell on Matthias...and he was numbered with the eleven apostles" (1:26).

I find it pretty amazing how the apostles' lives were characterized by obeying God's will. They had received much instruction by Jesus before He left and they were careful to submit to His leadership in order to fulfill His will. Since they were now the sole representatives of Jesus on earth, they needed to be fully surrendered to follow His plans. Spreading the message of salvation through Jesus Christ alone would prove to be a difficult task, but the apostles were convinced of God's love for all and were willing to risk everything to declare that message.

Dear God, make me sensitive to Your will in every step I take. May I receive guidance from the word of God and obey it by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2:1-39

The book of Acts is the second writing of Luke and describes in detail the events following the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus had recently been put to death but then victoriously rose from the dead proving He was truly God. But before returning to heaven, Jesus spent a little over a month (1:3) teaching and instructing His followers about their responsibility once He departed. He commanded them to spread the message of forgiveness and salvation through His sacrificial death on the cross and to also be witnesses of His miraculous resurrection to all people (1:8). Their passion to share salvation with the world would be empowered through the Holy Spirit who had been promised by Jesus; however, they were told to wait for His coming before they began spreading this message (1:4-8). Their waiting led them to the upper room in Jerusalem where they chose Matthias to replace the betrayer, Judas (1:12-26).

Luke then writes, "When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting" (2:1-2). This supernatural occurrence continues and Luke describes what happens next: "Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues [known languages], as the Spirit gave them utterance" (1:3-4). The event Jesus had told them to wait for had finally come and now the Holy Spirit filled each follower of Christ. This sign was evidenced by the apostles speaking in languages in which they had no formal training. Their words were not gibberish, but true languages. This fact is confirmed when those who were nearby heard the apostles speaking in languages other than their native tongue (2:5-5-6). People from every language declared, "Are not all these who speak Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born...we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God" (2:7-11). The miracle of speaking in tongues was that the apostles were speaking of the work of God through Jesus Christ, but each person was hearing in their own language. God enabled them through the Holy Spirit to do this so that the message of Jesus was accessible to all without language being a barrier.

The people who witnessed this phenomenon were confused and even thought the apostles were drunk (2:12-13), but Peter stood up with the other apostles and proclaimed, "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words. For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day" (2:14-15). Peter goes on to describe that the coming of the Holy Spirit was prophesied in part by the prophet Joel (see Joel 2:28-32) but most importantly that "whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (2:21). When they are saved, they will receive the Holy Spirit. As Peter is preaching to the people, He goes on to describe Jesus Christ as the One sent by God whom "you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it" (2:23-24).

Peter continues pointing to the Old Testament prophets and refers to David "knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, he would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades [place of the dead], nor did His flesh see corruption" (2:30-31). For hundreds of years, men of God had been prophesying that these things would take place and now their words have finally been fulfilled. Jesus was the Messiah and God miraculously raised Him from the dead. In a bold conclusion to these people who had witnessed the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as well the coming of the Holy Spirit, Peter said "let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (2:36). "When they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said...'what shall we do?'" Peter responded, "Repent and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission [forgiveness] of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (2:38).

Peter reveals the key to having a relationship with God - repentance. Repentance is a change of mind about sin and God. Our sin separates us from God and is only forgiven through death (Romans 3:23). So, God sent Jesus Christ to take our sin upon Himself and stand in judgment for the things we had done (2 Corinthians 5:21). His sacrifice satisfied the wrath of God upon our sin and enabled Him to grant forgiveness to those who repent and believe (Romans 10:9-13). The message of the church is still the same as it was 2,000 years ago. Repent of sin and believe that Jesus alone died to grant us forgiveness and eternal life (John 3:16).

Dear God, thank You for the Holy Spirit who came and empowered Peter to preach repentance and forgiveness to all who would believe. May the church also have that same passion to call people to repentance so that they will receive the forgiveness of God.

Acts 2:40-47

So far the book of Acts has proved to be eventful. Already the reader has experienced Jesus' final instructions before He ascended into heaven (1:1-11), the choosing of another disciple to replace Judas (1:12-26), the Holy Spirit coming to dwell inside believers (2:1-13), and finally Peter preaching Jesus to those who had gathered (2:14-39). Although this was a sad time for Jesus' followers because they missed His fellowship, they found new strength in the very presence of the Holy Spirit who now dwelt inside them. Instead of wasting their time mourning Jesus' departure, they immediately began the work to which Jesus had called them (1:8). As Peter finished his first sermon (2:14-39), those who were listening responded to his message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Luke writes, "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them" (2:41). The reaction of the crowd to Peter's message was incredible, but let us consider that he was enabled by the power the Holy Spirit. As Jesus had reminded them before His death on the cross, "without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

At this point the church is born and three thousand people begin to provide a picture of what that early church looked like. Luke paints a picture for us:

- Scripture was their foundation for faith and practice (2:42a)
- the Lord's Supper or Communion was celebrated (2:42b)
- they prayed together (2:42c)
- great miracles were performed by the apostles (2:43)
- money and possessions were used to meet the needs of others (2:44-45)
- they were joyful (2:46)
- they were unified through Jesus Christ (2:47a)

The result of the church's passion for God and each other allowed Him to add people to the church (2:47b). As the church focuses on the mission which God has given (Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8), His presence accomplishes much and the lives of people are changed. Again, we must recall the words of Jesus before He was put to death on the cross, "he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father. And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (John 14:12-13). Jesus told His followers that they could accomplish greater things than even He did here on earth. Jesus was not referring to the miracles which He performed, but rather the power to spread the gospel to all people through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. As a result of their willingness to be used by God, many who were far from God would be brought near through the blood of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:13).

The church's goal is not to build bigger buildings and bigger crowds to be recognized by the world around them; however, the goal of the church should be to build worshippers of God who are seen by the world around them. When Jesus preached His sermon on the mountain (Matthew 5-7), He spoke these words which should apply to the church: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). Peter also adds, "having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles [unbelievers], that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation [judgment]" (1 Peter 2:12). David wrote something similar in the Old Testament in Psalm 40:3: "He has put a new song in my mouth-- Praise to our God; Many will see it and fear, and will trust in the Lord." The church should take special note of what made this early church great.

Dear God, fulfill Your plans in the life of the church and may we be submissive to Your mission and not our own. Let us learn from the early church that we might also see Your works done in this generation.

Acts 3:1-26

Three thousand people have just repented of their sin and placed their belief in Jesus Christ as the only way for salvation and forgiveness of sin (2:40-41). This all transpired because the Holy Spirit had empowered the apostles (2:1-4) to speak the truth about Jesus Christ being the Messiah and as a result the church was established (2:41-47). Luke now begins documenting some of the occurrences in the lives of the apostles and those who came in contact with them.

Peter and John go to the temple to pray, which Jews did three times a day, and there at the gate is a lame man begging for money. Peter speaks to him saying, "Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk" (3:6). Peter takes the lame man's hand and lifts him up as he received strength in "his feet and ankle bones." The healed man enters the temple "walking, leaping, and praising God" (3:8). The people in the temple see this man recognizing him as the one who was earlier sitting at the gate of the temple begging for money (3:9-10). The onlookers "are filled with amazement at what happened to him."

It is interesting what happens next. The people rush to Peter and John to see by what power and authority they have healed this lame man (3:11). Peter seizes this opportunity to do what Jesus had commanded them to do (Acts 1:8) - be witnesses of Jesus death, burial, and resurrection for the sins of men. Instead of taking credit for the miracle or using the incident as a chance to promote themselves, Peter proclaimed that it was God alone who performed this healing through them (3:12-13). The apostles went on to confront them with the God behind this supernatural work. Peter declares that the same God who performed this miracle through them is the same one who sent Jesus "whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life [Jesus], whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses" (3:13-15). Peter is in essence accusing them of the murder of Jesus Christ. Doesn't sound very politically correct, does it?

Before you begin to think that Peter has no compassion on his audience, listen to what he says next, "Yet now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance...but those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled" (3:18). Jesus' suffering and resulting death was part of God's plan to forgive sin. However, Peter then boldly speaks to them, "Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord..." (3:19). Even though they did not really know that Jesus was the One sent from God, they were still responsible to seek His forgiveness through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for sin. Peter was calling them to turn from sin to God, in faith that He would "blot out" their sin. Thousands of years earlier God had promised Abraham that through his descendants, all the earth would be blessed (Genesis 22:18). Ultimately, Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of that promise offering forgiveness and eternal life to all who would believe (3:25-26).

The message of the church is identical to the one which Peter proclaimed 2,000 years ago. Repent of sin and trust Jesus Christ as the One who forgave sin through His death on the cross. May the church not lose sight of calling sinners to repentance.

Dear God, give the church boldness in calling people to repentance.

Acts 4:1-31

Peter and John had healed a lame man who was sitting at the gate of the temple begging for money (3:1-10). Upon performing this miracle, Peter spoke to the crowd which had gathered to see by what power they had done this thing. He quickly deferred attention from himself to God (3:12-13) who had empowered them through the Holy Spirit to do this great work, but also was calling them to repent of sin and believe in Jesus Christ (3:14-26). Not everyone was happy that Peter and John had brought healing to this lame man and were preaching repentance to the people. The "priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them, being greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead" (4:1-2). Because of their displeasure, this group arrested Peter and John; however, Luke writes that still "many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand" (4:3-4). This was a huge choice for the people to make considering that preaching this message had landed Peter and John in jail. In the days of the early church, placing your belief in Jesus Christ could result in going to prison or possibly even result in death.

The day following the apostles' imprisonment, the Sanhedrin (ruling body of the Jews) gathered together and asked the apostles, "By what power or by what name have you done this?" They wanted to know who gave them permission to heal this lame man. Instead of apologizing for their offensive message and the power given to them by the Holy Spirit to heal the lame man, Peter declares that there is not "salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (4:12). This was an extremely bold statement considering that they were already being held captive for their radical message. It would have been easier for them to back down, but they knew the resurrected Christ had given them a mission to spread the message of salvation to all people. Apologizing for their exclusive claims of salvation through Christ alone would have destroyed this very important message to the world.

The Sanhedrin reacted to the courage of Peter and John by recognizing that they were uneducated and untrained men; however, "they had been with Jesus" (4:13). The apostles' time with Jesus had provided them with a bold faith and commitment to the truth. These men realized that there was something different about these men even though they were not educated according to worldly standards. The Sanhedrin decided that they could not deny the miracle which had taken place, but they also wanted to make sure that the message Peter and John were spreading would go no further. Luke writes that the Sanhedrin "called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus" (4:18). Peter and John answered that they would not stop preaching Christ (4:19-20). The Sanhedrin threatened them a little more thinking they would give in, but Peter and John remained committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ and were released (4:21-22).

The two apostles returned to their friends reporting what had happened to them and praised God for His power and protection (4:23-28). They prayed together with other Christians that God would give them more boldness to speak the truth and that He would continue to enable them to perform miracles in the name of Jesus Christ (4:29-31). This incident should empower us to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) to those who need to repent and place their belief in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin. In a world which scoffs at the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation (John 14:6), we must be bold in our witness of His death, burial, and resurrection for our sins (1 Corinthians 15:1-7). Most of us who live in the United States do not even have to fear physical persecution for our faith in Jesus Christ, but we fear what others may think if we speak up. May God grant us boldness to call people to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as He gave the apostles courage.

Dear God, grant me the courage to speak up about the salvation which is offered through Jesus Christ. Help me not to give in to the inclusiveness around me, but may I speak the truth in love.

Acts 4:32-5:11

After the questioning from the Sanhedrin, Peter and John were released from prison and returned to the other followers of Christ (4:1-22). They praised God and prayed together that He would provide them with more opportunities to speak the truth about Jesus Christ even if it resulted in persecution (4:23-31). The apostles could not keep silent because they believed with all their heart that Jesus Christ had paid for the sins of men through His death on the cross and evidenced that He was truly God by resurrecting from the grave.

Following this incident, Luke focuses on some characteristics of the early church which made them great. He writes, "Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common" (4:32). Since they were convinced that God had given them all things they possessed, they kept a loose hold on their possessions in case someone else had a need. The spirit of giving was so prevalent in the early church that Luke says, "Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need" (4:34-35). The early church was filled with people from differing economic backgrounds; however, money was not what unified them as a people. Those who owned land or houses would sell them if someone had a genuine need. Luke even mentions that Barnabas, who later becomes a companion of Paul on his journeys, sold land so that others could be helped (4:36-37). This is a pretty radical thing. I wonder how this attitude toward giving would change the modern-day church.

I'm not sure that the chapter break between Acts 4 and 5 is located in the best place because the theme of people selling their land and houses is continued in the Acts 5:1-11. At any rate, a man named Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, sell a piece of their land and lay the money at the feet of the apostles so they could use it to help those who were in need. Ananias appears to be the one who brings the money to the apostles, but Luke points out that "he kept back part of the proceeds..." (5:2). Scripture seems to indicate that Ananias had made it appear as if he had given the entire amount of profit from selling his land because Peter gets very angry saying, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?" I'm certain that Peter exposing this fact caught Ananias by surprise because he did not even have a chance to respond. Instead, Luke records that when Ananias heard these words, he "fell down and breathed his last" (5:5a). Upon hearing about this, great fear came upon the church (5:5b) which is very understandable. Why did God kill Ananias for just lying? Well, Ananias made it seem as if he was giving the entire amount of his profit to the church when, in reality, he was only giving part. In essence, Ananias was lying to God and this is a serious offense (5:4). When a commitment or promise is made in the name of God, we must always fulfill it. The death of Ananias would have served as a great reminder of the seriousness of lying to God.

After Ananias had been carried out of the presence of the apostles, Sapphira comes walking in to see Peter not knowing what had just happened to her husband (5:7). Peter directly asks her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" Sapphira responds by saying, "Yes, for so much" (5:8). Peter confronts her lie saying, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look the feet of those who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out" (5:9). Sapphira "fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband. So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things" (5:10-11).

Sin is a very serious thing and God wanted the church to know that they could not get away with hypocrisy. I really believe the specific sin here is lying, but the heart condition which caused the death of Ananias and Sapphira was hypocrisy. They desired others to see them as "spiritual" when in reality they were selfish. This couple did nothing wrong by giving the amount they gave but they wanted people to think they had sacrificed the whole profit, so they lied believing no one would find out, but God knew. The example of Ananias and Sapphira should challenge us to be honest in our hearts as well as in our actions. The church cannot be tainted by those who perform works with false motives because God will eventually bring His judgment upon them.

Dear God, keep my heart pure and free from false motives. Remind me often of the example of Ananias and Sapphira so that I may serve You with a clean conscience.

Acts 5:12-42

Luke has just detailed the generosity of the early church and their willingness to give to those who had need. It seems as if many who had houses and land were selling what they had in order to provide for the needs of those who lacked the basic necessities of life (4:32-37). However, in the midst of this spirit of giving, there is one couple mentioned by Luke who lied about the amount they were giving to help the poor and it cost them their life (5:1-11). Peter made it clear that lying to God would not be tolerated which brought great fear upon the church.

Following this incident with Ananias and Sapphira, the apostles continued doing many signs and wonders among the people which gave them authority in speaking about the works of God (5:12). Although many unbelievers were seeing the supernatural acts of the apostles, Luke writes that "none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly" (5:13). They knew that making a commitment to Jesus Christ could possibly cost them their life, so while having respect for the followers of Christ, they also counted the cost and walked away. Even though some were rejecting the truth, "believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them" (5:14-15). Scripture never indicates that Peter's shadow had the ability to heal, but this must have been an expression of the people who witnessed his miraculous works through the power of the Holy Spirit and had faith that they could be healed by even Peter's presence being near. When the happenings were noised throughout the region, multitudes gathered to Jerusalem bringing many who were sick and possessed by demons and they all were healed (5:16).

Of course the so-called religious crowd was not happy with Peter and the apostles (5:17) so they put them in prison (5:18). "But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, 'God, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of life.' And when they heard that, they entered the temple early in the morning and taught" (5:19-21a). This action by the apostles took real courage. They had just been thrown into prison for speaking of the works of Jesus Christ and now the angel was asking them to go right back to what they were doing. When the religious council gathered together the next morning, they called to have the apostles brought to them from prison (5:21b) but they did not find them there (5:22-24). Someone finally came to the council and reported that the apostles were in the temple teaching the people (5:25). The apostles were brought back before the council and they said, "Did we not strictly command you not to teach in His name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man's blood on us!" The apostles respond by saying, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (5:29). The apostles had great boldness in proclaiming the truth and did not fear the ramifications which man could bring on them. They were only consumed with fulfilling God's command to be His witnesses (Acts 1:8).

The council became angry and Luke even writes that they "plotted to kill them" (5:33); however, a Pharisee named Gamaliel stands up and addresses the council. Gamaliel reminds them of several people who had risen up in rebellion against the religious system of the Pharisees but had eventually met their demise because what they did was not of God (5:34-37). Gamaliel recommends that they council "keep away from these men [apostles] and let them alone" (5:38a). Why did he advise the council in this action? He states, "for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it - lest you even be found to fight against God" (5:38b-39). The council decided to listen to Gamaliel's advice, so they beat the apostles and sent them away commanding them not to teach in the name of Jesus (5:40).

The apostles departed rejoicing that they were able to suffer for the name of Christ (5:41), but they ignored the command of the council continuing to teach and preach Jesus in the temple and in every house (5:42). There was something deep within the apostles which caused them to obey God rather than fear what men could do to them. The mission with which they were entrusted was a burning passion in their hearts that could not be extinguished. Their passion should also be our passion - preaching and teaching Christ in the churches and every house.

Dear God, give me a burning passion to preach and teach Christ to all who will listen. May I not fear what men can do to me!

Acts 6:1-15

The apostles' boldness in speaking the gospel through the power of the Holy Spirit had resulted in many people repenting of sin and believing in the work of Jesus Christ. Thousands were being added to the church and the apostles, no doubt, became overwhelmed in their daily responsibilities. In fact, Luke writes that the number of Christ followers were multiplying so fast that some began complaining of neglect (6:1). Specifically, a group was upset with the apostles for not providing food for their widows. According to 1 Timothy 5:3-16, the church helped widows by providing the necessities of life if they had no other family around to assist them.

The apostles decided to address this problem so they gathered the many followers of Christ saying, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the word" (6:2-4). Some may think the apostles are not fulfilling their duties in being servants, but God had commanded them to give their time to preaching/teaching the word and prayer. Being men of God's word and prayer were the ways they served the people. The people were to care for the needs of others and not expect the apostles to do all the work.

The people responded positively responded to the apostles' advice so they chose seven men, whom Luke mentions in Acts 6:5. As a result of people serving each other and the apostles being free to witness of Jesus Christ, the word of God continued to spread and many people were added to the church (6:7). Luke even mentions that many priests were also being converted (6:7b). One of the men who was chosen to assist the apostles in ministering to the people was named Stephen who was said to be "full of faith and power, [doing] great wonders and signs among the people" (6:8). Maybe because so many priests were being converted to Christ, the leadership of several synagogues became upset and seemingly engaged Stephen in a debate (6:9). This debate probably surrounded his teachings about Jesus Christ; however, because of Stephen's wisdom and the "Spirit by which he spoke" the leaders were not able to overcome him (6:10).

The leaders decided to spread lies about Stephen saying that he had spoken blasphemous words against Moses and God (6:11). As a result of their deception, "they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council" (6:12). A false witness rose up saying, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us" (6:14). This was a lie since Jesus was not referring to destroying the temple, but that His own body would be destroyed (John 2:19-22). As the council peered at Stephen, Luke writes that they "saw his face as the face of an angel" (6:15). Even on the verge of persecution, Stephen remained calm and focused on the truth about Jesus Christ. He was not willing to give in or compromise.

Dear God, thank You for raising up men of faith and boldness in the early church who stood firm even in the face of opposition. May You fill the modern day church with men of faith and power who will also stand against attacks on the truth.

Acts 7:1-60

In Acts 7 Stephen was left standing before the religious council. He had been falsely accused of blasphemy against Moses and God (6:14); however, Stephen kept his composure because he believed with all his heart that Jesus Christ was the One sent from God to save mankind from sin. The leaders and rulers of the synagogue did not like the message of Jesus Christ being spread Stephen and the apostles so they were looking for ways to eliminate them (5:33). As Stephen faced this council, they inquired of him whether his blasphemy of God and Moses was true. Instead of answering the question of the council, Stephen's lengthy response detailed the story of Abraham (7:2-8a), the twelve patriarchs (7:8b-16), and Moses leading the children of Israel out of Egyptian bondage (7:17-36). As Stephen concluded the story of Moses he said to the council, "This is that Moses who said to the children of Israel, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear.'" Stephen is quoting from Deuteronomy 18:15 and is declaring that the Messiah (Deliverer) spoken of by Moses in the Old Testament is Jesus Christ. Of course this would have been scandalous to the council who did not believe Jesus Christ was the Messiah.

Stephen continues to indict Israel as they had, throughout history, rejected God's prophets and messengers of truth including Moses (7:38-50). This would have greatly angered the council but Stephen continues to speak, "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it" (7:51-53). Ultimately, Stephen was exposing the fact that they had always rejected those whom God sent to testify of Him and the implication is that they had done the same with Jesus Christ, God's Son.

When the council heard what Stephen was saying "they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth" (7:54). Their response to his words indicated an evil heart of unbelief toward Jesus Christ, but their reaction did not seem to faze Stephen. Luke writes that "he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, 'Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!'" His words caused more anger from the council so they "cast him out of the city and stoned him...as he was calling on God saying, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit...Lord, do not charge them with this sin.' And when he said this, he fell asleep [died]" (7:57-60). Stephen became the first recorded martyr of the early church. It was Tertullian (AD160-225) who said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." Many in the early church were willing to give their lives (even unto death) for Jesus Christ, so why can't we (who don't have to fear death) live our lives for Him?

Dear God, protect me from mediocrity and apathy. Help me to do my part in spreading the truth about Jesus Christ no matter the consequence.

Acts 8:1-24

After Stephen had been stoned to death for preaching Christ (Acts 6:8-7:60), Luke introduces a man named Saul who becomes the major focus in the remaining chapters of Acts. As Saul is introduced to the reader, Luke describes that the church at Jerusalem was experiencing a "great persecution" and many Christians were "scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria..." (8:1). The only ones who remained in Jerusalem were the apostles because they did not fear man and were passionate about delivering the message of Jesus Christ to all people. It is apparent that this man, Saul, was heavily involved in persecuting the church because Luke says "he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison" (8:3). Those who persecuted the church thought they could silence it through physical punishment; however, those who were scattered preached the word to the regions beyond Jerusalem (8:4). In fact, Luke mentions that Philip preached the gospel to Samaria where many responded with great joy to his message (8:5-8).

In Samaria, Philip encountered a man named Simon who was a well-respected sorcerer in the city (8:9). The people obeyed him and Scripture reveals that they believed his power was from God (8:10). When many in Samaria believed in Jesus Christ and were baptized, Simon also believed and was baptized (8:12). After his supposed conversion, Simon "was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done" (8:13). When the apostles heard that many were being converted in Samaria they sent Peter and John to them and when they arrived they prayed for the Holy Spirit to fall upon them (8:14-16). "Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit" (8:17). When Simon witnessed the power of the Holy Spirit coming down on the people through the laying on of hands, he immediately offered the apostles money so that he could have this same power (8:18-19). Peter rebukes Simon for his selfishness and commands him to "Repent therefore of your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity" (8:22-23). Simon became fearful of the consequences for his sin and begged for mercy; however, his words only seem to indicate a fearfulness over his punishment, not his sinfulness (8:24).

I believe that this instance reveals that there are people who simply make a loose, verbal commitment to Jesus Christ for selfish gain, not because they are truly repentant of their sin. Although the Bible declares that Simon believed (8:13), it also makes clear that his belief was driven by selfish motives and therefore not genuine (8:18-23). A person who desires to be saved must first repent (express regret for sin because it offends God) and trust in Jesus Christ who took the punishment for sin (death) upon Himself (2 Corinthians 5:21). If an individual approaches Christ with any other motives for salvation - better life, success, removal of problems, financial gain, etc. - than his heart has not been truly converted and he is still in his sin. Paul says it best in Romans 10:9-10, "That 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. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."

Dear God, help those who come to You for salvation to be truly repentant of their sin.

Acts 8:25-40

Following the preaching of the gospel in Samaria, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem preaching along the way throughout villages (8:25). Upon their return to Jerusalem, the angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, "Arise, and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. This is desert" (8:26). Upon hearing the command of the angel, Philip left and as he was on his way he encountered an Ethiopian eunuch (official) who had also been in Jerusalem to worship (8:27a). Luke notes that this Ethiopian had "great authority under Candace the queen of Ethiopians..." (8:27). Apparently, this Ethiopian official was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah when the Spirit prompted Philip saying, "Go near and overtake his chariot" (8:28-29). When Philip arrived at this man's chariot he inquired if he understood what he was reading. The Ethiopian responded by saying, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" The Scripture being read was Isaiah 53:7-8 which says, "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so He opened not His mouth. In His humiliation His justice was taken away, and who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth" (8:32-33). Upon reading this Scripture, the Ethiopian official asked Philip if this prophet was referring to himself or someone else (8:34). There was much confusion amongst people of that day as to whom Isaiah was referencing. Was the sheep an illustration of Israel, the prophet Isaiah, or the Messiah? Philip quickly seized this opportunity to clarify the identity of this sheep to the official because Luke writes that he began preaching Jesus to him (8:35). Philip was confirming the slaughtered sheep to be Jesus, the Messiah. As Philip and the Ethiopian went down the road they came upon some water and the official asked Philip what hindered him from being baptized (8:36). Baptism was an outward symbol of belief which had already taken place in the heart of an individual; in other words, faith in Jesus Christ alone as the sacrifice for sin led to an outward display of this belief through water baptism. In early church culture, I believe salvation and baptism were so closely linked that one immediately led to the other. Does that mean a person must be baptized to be saved? No. A person can never be saved through any work of his own (Ephesians 2:8-9); however, why wouldn't a person want to be baptized to publicly declare his faith in Jesus Christ? Philip commanded the chariot to stop and they both went down into the water and the Ethiopian man was baptized by immersion (8:38). When they came up out of the water, Luke writes that the "Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away" meaning that he was miraculously transported from where he was to another place, which was Azotus (8:39-40).

Baptism is an important part of a believer's faith and ultimately is the first step in obedience toward God. Even Jesus Christ was baptized, not because He needed to be but because He willingly identified Himself with sinners and submitted Himself perfectly to the will of God the Father (Matthew 3:13-17). Not only did Jesus' baptism identify Him with sinful humans, but also symbolized His future death and resurrection for sin (Luke 12:50). Now when a person is baptized, they are also acknowledging their belief in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for sin.

Dear God, like the Ethiopian official, may those who have been saved through faith in Jesus Christ publicly declare their belief through baptism.

Acts 9:1-19

Luke initially introduced his readers to a man named Saul who appeared to be an active participant in the stoning of Stephen, a preacher of Jesus Christ (Acts 7:58-60). After a small diversion about the apostles' work in Samaria (Acts 8), Luke turns his attention back to Saul who is still seen "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord..." (9:1). From other Scriptures, we understand that Saul (Hebrew name) was born in Tarsus as a Jew (9:11) and studied under the great rabbi, Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Saul was also a Pharisee, as was his father, making him a part of one of the most stringent Jewish sects of Jesus' day (Acts 23:6). The Pharisees were known for their obedience to the Old Testament ceremonial law and felt that the apostles' doctrine was in direct contrast to Judaism; therefore, Saul did everything in his power to destroy the teachings of Christianity by persecuting the church.

In his best effort to put fear into the hearts of Christians, Saul approaches the high priest asking for "letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem" (9:2). Saul felt that he could play an important role in eliminating Christianity; however, God had different plans for Saul. As he was on his way to Damascus, a light came down from heaven and he heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Saul responded by asking a question, "Who are You, Lord?" " Then the Lord said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting'" (9:3-5). Saul was fearful of this voice and said, "Lord, what do You want me to do? Then the Lord said to him, 'Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do'" (9:6). There were men who were traveling with Saul, but they were astonished because they had also heard the voice but did not see anyone (9:7). Faced with a choice, Saul decided to obey the voice of God so, temporarily blinded, he was led to Damascus (9:8-9).

In Damascus, a man named Ananias had received a vision from the Lord saying, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight" (9:11-12). Ananias was fearful of this vision because he knew that Saul of Tarsus was a persecutor of the church, but God comforted him saying, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake" (9:15-16). After this conformation from God, Ananias obeyed the Lord and found Saul in the house of Judas. He laid his hands on him and Saul received his sight as well as the Holy Spirit (9:17-18). After being baptized, Saul was strengthened and spent some time with the disciples at Damascus (9:19).

This is a wonderful illustration of God taking a hardened man and changing his heart to serve Him. No one is ever too far gone or too far out of reach for God to bring conviction of sin and life change. May we never give up on praying for those whose heart seems far from God because God has the power to transform a hard heart in a moment.

Dear God, may Your Holy Spirit bring conviction into even the most hardened hearts (John 16:7-9).

Acts 9:20-31

In the first part of Acts 9, Saul was confronted by God about his persecution of the church. Saul was fearful at first but then responded to God with faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah sent to save him from sin. He was taken to the house of Judas (not Iscariot) and a man named Ananias received a vision to go and visit Saul. When Ananias arrived, he laid his hands on Saul and he received the Holy Spirit and was baptized (9:11-19). Luke then writes that Saul immediately "preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God" (9:20). We must stop and realize that Saul's new message of salvation through Jesus Christ was a death sentence upon him; after all, weeks earlier Stephen had been martyred for preaching Jesus. Saul must have been absolutely convinced that Jesus Christ was the promised One to bring forgiveness of sin and salvation to sinners, otherwise he was risking his life for nothing.

When others observed that Saul, formerly a persecutor of the church, was now declaring that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, they were all amazed (9:21). So, "Saul increased...in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ" (9:22). Following the events of Acts 9:22, Saul retreats to Nabtean Arabia which is in the outlying area of Damascus. Luke writes that "many days were past" and we know by reading Galatians 1:17-18 that, in fact, three years pass before Saul's first visit to Jerusalem in Acts 9:26.

After his harrowing escape from the Jews (Acts 9:24-25), Saul decides to visit the disciples at Jerusalem, but he is met with much skepticism (9:26). "But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus" (9:27). The apostles must have been satisfied with Saul's testimony of conversion, so he continued his ministry in Jerusalem but the Jews "attempted to kill him" (9:30). When the other disciples found out about the plot to kill Saul, they sent him away to Tarsus (9:30).

After Saul's escape to Tarsus, several years pass and Luke documents that during this time "the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied" (9:31). Even though there was a time of intense persecution for the church, they did not compromise and eventually this boldness led to the growth of the church. Although there was much turmoil in the future of the church, God blessed their faithfulness to Him and began shaping those who professed belief in Jesus Christ.

Dear God, thank You for exposing us to the boldness of Saul and the church as they faithfully proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ in the midst of persecution. Give the modern-day church the same boldness as we stand against those who would try to silence our message. May we proclaim the truth in love as Your Holy Spirit brings conviction upon the heart.

Acts 9:32-43

Saul, who was once a persecutor of the church, was now boldly preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, but his message disrupted the teachers of Judaism. We know that they were plotting to kill him so others took him away to a safe place in Tarsus (9:29-30). Luke then writes that the church experiences a time of peace which was made possible through some changes which were happening in the region. During this period of rest for the church, they grew in numbers and in their faith.

Luke, the author of Acts, shifts his focus back to Peter for a brief time in the later half of Acts 9 through Acts 12. In Acts 9, Luke documents two healings which took place by the power of the Holy Spirit through the hands of Peter. One was a man named Aeneas who had been bed fast for eight years and was also paralyzed. Peter commands him to get up and make his bed and the man immediately rose up (9:32-34). When those who were in the city saw that Aeneas had been healed, they "turned to the Lord" (9:35). The second healing which followed was a little more dramatic than the first. A woman named Tabitha (which is translated, Dorcas) who was "full of good works and charitable deeds...became sick and died" (9:36-37a). The people placed her body in an upper room (9:37b) which was not really customary for a culture which usually buried their dead immediately. It is as if the believers in the church had great faith that Peter could do something about this woman's death. The disciples in Joppa sent for Peter in Lydda (about 12 miles apart) and he was brought to the upper room where this woman's body was laid (9:38-39a).

As Peter entered this circumstance, he found widows weeping and showing him the tunics and garments Dorcas made for the poor (9:39b). Peter asks them all to leave the room where he "knelt down and prayed...and turning to the body he said, 'Tabitha, arise.' And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up" (9:40). Peter calls for the people who were waiting outside the room and "he presented her alive" (9:41). The raising of Dorcas to life is the first place in the early church where a person is brought back to life and this miracle brought much attention to the ministry of the apostles and "it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed on the Lord" (9:42).

As with any miracles we read about in the Bible, the emphasis should not be on the specific miracle(s) being performed; however, our focus should be on the God of the miracle. The miracle is not worthy of worship, but God is. Whenever we read about these miraculous things which God has done through His apostles and prophets of old, we should be reminded that our God can do anything. Nothing is impossible with God. Although I do not believe that God desires everyone to be healed of their sicknesses and infirmities, I do believe that He will draw those close to Him who see beyond what He has done to who He really is. Whether you have been healed of some life-threatening sickness or you are still struggling with a debilitating disease, may you see that God is all-powerful and His desire is that many would believe on the name of Jesus Christ...maybe through your healing or through the strength God has provided you to endure trials.

Dear God, thank You for preserving these miracles for all generations that we might witness Your great power and might. Help us to see that You are all-powerful, no matter if You choose to heal or not.

Acts 10:1-16

Luke had documented two instances of Peter healing people in Acts 9:32-43 and at the very end of the chapter the reader is told that he remained in Joppa in the house of Simon, a tanner. It is interesting to note that Peter, a Jew, was staying with a tanner who handled the skin of dead animals, which would have been very offensive to the Jews (Leviticus 11:40).

While Peter was taking up residence with Simon, Luke introduces the reader to a Gentile man named Cornelius who was an officer in the Roman army (10:1). Cornelius is described as "a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always" (10:2). In the middle of the afternoon, Cornelius sees a vision when an angel of God calls out his name and he responds by saying "What is it, Lord?" The angel begins to inform him that his prayers have been heard by God and that he was to send men to Joppa who could bring back Peter from the house of Simon the tanner (10:3-6). Cornelius obeyed the voice of the angel and sent two servants and a soldier to bring Peter from Joppa (10:7-8).

As this group journeyed to Joppa, Peter retreated to the housetop to pray. "He became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance" (10:9-10). Peter saw "heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air" (10:11-12). God then speaks to Peter saying, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat" (10:13). Since Jews still followed the Old Testament dietary laws (Leviticus 11:24-47), touching or consumption of an unclean animal would cause them to be unfit for worship. In the Old Testament law, God used clean and unclean animals to give a visual reminder to Israel about the difference between what is holy and what is not holy meaning that there were certain things which were acceptable to God and certain things which were not. Peter was a Jew and felt like he should adhere to the law God had given to the Jews, so he responded to the voice of God's command to eat of the unclean animals, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean" (10:14). The voice answers Peter, "What God has cleansed you must not call common [or unclean]" (10:15). What Peter did not fully understand is that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, "abolished...the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both [Jew and Gentile] to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity" (Ephesians 2:15-16). Jesus' sacrifice on the cross not only did away with the ceremonial law of the Jews, but also made unity of the Jew and Gentile possible within the church. God was about to do something incredible in unifying the Jew and Gentile in their worship of God, but it would not be without its difficulty.

Dear God, bring further unity to Your church and may race or nationality never divide us. May Peter's vision challenge us not to call anyone unclean or unworthy of worship because Your offer of salvation through Jesus Christ is available for all.

Acts 10:17-48

Cornelius, an officer in the Roman army, had received a vision from an angel of the Lord who commanded him to send people to the house of Simon and bring Peter back to the Gentile officer (10:1-8). Cornelius sent people to fetch Peter from the house of Simon and while they were on their way, Peter fell into a trance and saw a sheet bound at all four corners descending from heaven to the earth. Within the sheet were all kinds of clean and unclean animals and the voice commanded Peter to "kill and eat" (10:9-13). Peter objects to this command because Jewish law prohibited the eating of certain animals (10:14a). The voice speaks back to Peter saying, "What God has cleansed you must not call common [unclean]" (10:14b-16).

"Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant, behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate. And they called and asked whether Simon, whose surname was Peter, was lodged there" (10:17-18). Luke writes that while Peter was still contemplating the meaning of this vision, the Spirit of God informed him that three men were seeking him and that he should go with them in faith (10:19-20). Peter descends from the housetop to meet the men and asked, "For what reason have you come?" They answered Peter by saying that Cornelius, "a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house and hear words from you" (10:22).

On the next day, Peter departed with these Gentile men to the house of Cornelius (10:23). When they arrived, "Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends" and as Peter entered the home Cornelius "fell down at his feet and worshipped him" (10:24-25). However, "Peter lifted him up, saying, 'Stand up; I myself am also a man'" (10:26).

Upon entering the house, Peter found all kinds of people gathered to see him and he said, "You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation.

But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean" (10:28). The vision was now clear to Peter. The sheet which contained clean and unclean animals represented the Jews (clean animals) and Gentiles (unclean animals) coming together in worship of God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross for sin. Cornelius recounts the vision he had received about seeking Peter in the house of Simon and then turns to Peter saying, "we are all present before God, to hear all things commanded you by God" (10:30-33).

Peter speaks to the Gentiles who had gathered at the house of Cornelius saying, "...God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him" (10:34-35). In many more words Peter preaches Christ to them - how He had been killed and then raised up by God on the third day (10:36-40). Peter continues to speak that after His resurrection, Jesus showed Himself to a few people who have now become witnesses "that through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission [forgiveness] of sin" (10:41-43).

As Peter was speaking these words to the Gentiles, "the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard his word" (10:44). When the Jews who had accompanied Peter on this journey saw that the Holy Spirit had also been poured out on the Gentiles, they were astonished (10:45-46). Following their faith in Jesus Christ and receiving the Holy Spirit, the Gentiles were baptized (10:47-48). Although the gospel had been preached to the Gentiles in the past (Genesis 12:3; Jonah), this happening brought new meaning to the church. God's intention has always been to bring the gift of salvation through the Jewish nation (Jesus Christ) to the entire world and now God's desire was being fulfilled in a miraculous way! God was eliminating the long-time partiality of Judaism and bringing Jew and Gentile together into one church.

Dear God, thank You for the promise You made to Abraham thousands of years ago that through him all the world would be blessed (Genesis 12:3). We now know that Jesus Christ brought the forgiveness to all people that we so desperately needed in order to restore our relationship with You. Use the church to spread this message to the entire world!

Acts 11:1-18

A monumental occurrence had just swept into the house of Cornelius when the Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentiles after they had believed (Acts 10:34-48). So far in Luke's record of the early church, only believing Jews had received the filling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-13; 4:8, 31; 6:5; 7:55; 8:17). The Gentiles, now being filled with the Holy Spirit, brought unity of all nations into the church empowering them to be God's witnesses of Jesus Christ. The church was now God's people being comprised of both Jews and Gentiles.

The apostles and other believers in Judea heard that the Gentiles had received the Word of God and the filling of the Holy Spirit, so when Peter returned to Jerusalem "those of the circumcision [Jewish believers] contended with him, saying, 'You went in to uncircumcised men [Gentiles] and ate with them!'" (11:1-3). We can assume that they were not necessarily angered by Peter preaching Jesus to them, but they were upset that he had eaten with them. A Jew eating in the house of a Gentile signified fellowship and even Jesus was condemned by the Pharisees for this practice (Mark 2:16). The Jews had a hard time accepting Peter's breach of a long-time Jewish custom and also embracing the Gentiles as fellow brethren.

Peter was quick to give an answer and explain to them how he had received a vision of a sheet bound in four corners containing clean and unclean animals (11:4-6). He also told them that a voice told him to "kill and eat" these animals, but at first he resisted until the voice responded to his refusal saying, "What God has cleansed you must not call common [unclean]" (11:7-10). Peter further explains that at the conclusion of the vision, three men sent by Cornelius were standing there asking him to go with them (11:11). Furthermore, the Spirit told Peter to go with them and he took six men with him to the house of Cornelius (11:12) and when Peter arrived, Cornelius detailed a vision he had received saying that Peter "will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved" (11:13-14). In conclusion, Peter informed those who were questioning his fellowship with the Gentiles that when he began speaking the word of God "the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us [Jews] at the beginning [Acts 2:1-13]" (11:15). Peter then presented those who were listening to his explanation with this question, "If God therefore gave them the same gift He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" (11:17) "When they [apostles and Jewish believers] heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, 'Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life'" (11:18). This acknowledgment by the Jewish believers fulfilled that which was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament (Isaiah 42:1, 6; 49:6). Even Simeon revealed this truth in a vision he had received about the coming Messiah (Luke 2:25-32) and Jesus evidenced the salvation which would be brought to the Gentiles when He spoke to a Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:25-26). Ultimately, we must not forget Jesus' words to His disciples following His resurrection, "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:18-20) and repeated before His ascension into heaven, "you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

It is time for the church to rise up without prejudice and be witnesses to all nations of the salvation offered to all who will repent of sin and believe in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross!

Dear God, may Your church rise up and tell the world of the mercy You have provided to them through the death of Your Son, Jesus Christ!

Acts 11:19-26

Luke had just documented one of the biggest happenings in Scripture. The Jewish and Gentile believers were now being brought together in unity to worship God and would comprise the church. This message of salvation through Jesus Christ to all had been entrusted to both peoples and now they were to spread out into all regions to share this good news with everyone. Cornelius (a Gentile) and Peter (a Jew) had both received visions from God about the future of the church and were eyewitnesses to the Gentiles' conversion and receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 10). After this great move of God, Peter returns to Jerusalem and explains what he had witnessed, but the Jews reacted with skepticism (11:1-3). However, Peter explained that God had commanded him to go to the Gentiles and they finally rejoiced that God had "granted to the Gentiles repentance to life" (11:4-18).

Luke's next words review the result of the persecution (Acts 8:1-3) which had occurred after the martyrdom of Stephen. Many believers in Jesus Christ had fled into various regions to escape persecution by the Pharisees and so-called religious people, but now they were preaching salvation to the Jews in those outlying areas and many were turning to the Lord (11:19-21). Luke even mentions that among those being saved were Hellenists (Greek speaking non-Jews) who were residing in Antioch. When the church at Jerusalem heard of all that was transpiring in Antioch, they sent Barnabas to them (11:22). Luke writes, "When he [Barnabas] came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord" (11:23). Barnabas departed Antioch to find Saul and upon finding him, they returned to Antioch (11:25). Saul and Barnabas remained in Antioch for one year, assembling with the people and teaching them about their new found faith in Jesus Christ and the "disciples were first called Christians in Antioch" (11:26). For anyone wondering where the term "Christian" first began, it was here in Antioch. This name, meaning "of the party of Christ," was not a self-given label, but rather a name of scorn given by those who opposed the message of the church.

To be called a "Christian" meant that an individual stood against false gods and erroneous systems of worship (Judaism) in order to embrace forgiveness of sin offered through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Being a Christian was not popular, often resulting in rejection by family and friends as well as persecution. Although I am certain these people feared what may happen as a result of accepting Jesus Christ as the Messiah (Savior), the fear of rejecting Jesus' payment for sin weighed heavier on their hearts. In our modern society, a Christian may be rejected, despised, and belittled by others; however, we must remember that this life is not the end for us. And may those of us in America not forget about those whose persecution is not just verbal, but each day they face imprisonment, physical abuse, and even death for being a Christian. I believe this is why Jesus warned His disciples about the world's reaction to their message: "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:18-19).

Dear God, thank You for those who courageously evidenced their faith in Jesus Christ and did not value the opinion of those surrounding them. Give Your church courage as we give our loyalty to You alone and may we ignore the voices of those who would try to silence our message.

Acts 11:27-12:24

Continuing to focus on the Christians at Antioch, Luke writes about a certain prophet named Agabus (also see Acts 21:10-11) who came from Jerusalem to Antioch. While standing before the people in Antioch, Agabus "showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar" (11:27-28). Since Claudius was the emperor of Rome from AD41-54, we can safely estimate that this famine took place during that time; in fact, most historians record multiple famines in the Roman empire around AD 45-46. When the disciples heard about this upcoming need, Luke writes that each of them "determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea" and the "sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul" (11:29-30). This action by the church at Antioch was a wonderful expression of partnership between churches. There was not an attitude of competition, but a unity through love for God and love for others.

About the time that all this was transpiring, Herod (king of northern Palestine) and the Jews displayed their hatred for the church. Luke documents that Herod "stretched out his hand to harass some from the church...then he killed James the brother of John with the sword" (12:1-2). History tells us that Herod sought to gain favor with the Jews by antagonizing the church, whom the Jews hated. Seeing that his actions persecution and murder pleased the Jews, Herod "proceeded further to seize Peter. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread [week long feast immediately following Passover]. So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison...intending to bring him before the people after Passover (12:3-4).

The church was informed of what had happened to Peter so "constant prayer was offered to God for him..." (12:5). The night before Herod was to take Peter before the Jews, an angel of the Lord delivered him from his chains and led him outside the city gates (12:6-10). Luke records that Peter thought he was seeing a vision and did not know what was happening until the angel departed from him. When he finally realized that his deliverance by the angel was real he said, "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people" (12:11).

Peter flees to the house of Mary, who was the mother of John Mark, where "many were gathered praying. And Peter knocked at the door of the gate, girl named Rhoda came to answer" (12:12-13). When Rhoda heard the voice of Peter, instead of opening the gate, she went back to the house and told all the people that Peter was there (12:14). At first, the people who were gathered together praying for Peter's release did not believe it was him. They told the girl, "You are beside yourself! It is his angel" (12:15). This whole time Peter continued knocking at the gate for someone to let him in and they finally let him in, being surprised to see him (12:16). Although their only hope was in God, the people still didn't really believe He would actually respond to their prayers for Peter's deliverance. Peter entered the house and explained how the Lord delivered him from prison and then he commanded them to go tell James and the brethren (12:17).

As day breaks, the soldiers discover that Peter is missing and Herod demands that the guards who were watching Peter be put to death (12:19). Then Herod departed from Judea and went to stay in Caesarea. It appears that during this time, Tyre and Sidon had done something to anger Herod so they decided to attempt to make peace with him "because their country was supplied with food by the king's country" (12:20). Then one day while Herod was giving a speech to the people, they began honoring him as a god (12:21-22). "Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And was eaten by worms and died" (12:23). In spite of the attempts of Herod and the Jews to silence the church, Luke writes that "the word of God grew and multiplied" (12:24). It is pretty amazing that the church remains faithful in prayer and faith in the face of persecution.

Dear God, help the church to pray for those who are being persecuted for their faith in Jesus Christ and may we not be surprised when You choose to deliver Your servants from the hands of evil men. May the message of salvation through Jesus Christ continue through trials and temptations that You may receive glory!

Acts 12:25-13:41

Although the church was suffering persecution from all sides (Acts 12:1-4), God was still empowering people to do His work. Having seen the miraculous deliverance of Peter from imprisonment, the church grew and multiplied as the word of God was taught (12:24). There seemed to be no hesitation in carrying out the mission given to the disciples of Jesus Christ (Acts 1:8). Luke switches his storyline from the happenings of Peter and now focuses his attention on Saul and Barnabas. The last time he mentioned them (Acts 11:27-30), they were being sent from Antioch to Jerusalem with financial support for the Christians who were experiencing a famine. They fulfilled this duty following the death of Herod (Acts 12:20-23) and then returned to the church at Antioch (12:25).

Luke lists several men who were ministering as prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch (13:1), but when they had fasted and prayed the Holy Spirit commanded them to "separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work which I have called them" (13:2). In other words, the Holy Spirit had a special work for Saul and Barnabas, so when the leaders again "fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them [support for ministry], they sent them away" (13:3). This special work for Saul and Barnabas was taking the gospel to other places, known as missionary work. Acts 13:4 begins what is often termed as Paul's first missionary journey and it continues through Acts 14.

Saul (or Paul, his Roman name), Barnabas, and John Mark (see 13:5b) began their ministry on the island of Cyprus, which was Barnabas' home (13:5). Luke directs the reader's attention to an incident which occurred in a place called Paphos where they encountered a man named Bar-Jesus (13:6). Bar-Jesus is described as a sorcerer, a false prophet, and a Jew "who was with the proconsul [Roman official serving as a governor over a certain area], Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man" (13:6-7). Sergius Paulus had called for Saul and Barnabas in order to hear the word of God; however, Bar-Jesus, also called Elymas (Greek name) sought to "turn the proconsul away from the faith" (13:8). But Saul, called Paul, boldly stood up against Bar-Jesus calling him a man of deceit and one who perverted the ways of God (13:9-10). He then pronounced a sentence of blindness upon him "and immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand" (13:11). When the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, observed what had been done, he believed and was "astonished at the teachings of the Lord" (13:12).

Barnabas, Saul, and John Mark leave Paphos and sail to Perga in Pamphylia; however, John Mark abandons them for some unknown reason (see Acts 15:36-40, Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11) and departs to Jerusalem (13:13). When Paul and Barnabas left Perga, they went to Antioch in Pisidia where they gathered with the Jews in the synagogue on the Sabbath (13:14). After the reading of the Scriptures, the rulers of the synagogue said, "Men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on" (13:15). So, Paul stood up and began preaching Jesus to the Jews (13:16-41) and in his words Paul recounted the history of Israel and how God had promised a Savior to them (13:23). Instead of receiving Jesus as the promised One from God, they rejected Him and had him crucified on a cross and buried in a tomb (13:24-29). But then Paul declares that "God raised Him from the dead" and "He was seen for many days by those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are His witnesses to the people (13:30-31). Furthermore, "through this Man [Jesus Christ] is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified [freed] from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses" (13:38-39). This is the heart of what Paul was trying to say - keeping the law of Moses (works) could never bring forgiveness of sin, but the death of Jesus Christ paid the penalty God demanded because of sin (death); therefore those who believe in the sacrifice of Jesus for sin will be saved from sin and granted eternal life. Paul's message was contrary to the message which was being preached in the synagogue, but he was convinced that belief in Jesus Christ was the only way to a relationship with God. The message of the church has not changed!

Dear God, we again pray that You would help us to preach Jesus Christ alone as the only way to salvation and eternal life.

Acts 13:42-14:28

Paul finished speaking to the Jews at Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:13-41) and when they exited the synagogue, "the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath" (13:42). When the next Sabbath arrived, "almost the entire city came together to hear the word of God" (13:44). However, the preaching of the apostles was not without opposition because when the Jews observed how many people had gathered to hear the message about Jesus Christ "they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming..." (13:45). The Jews were set in their ways, believing a relationship with God was automatically given to them because they were God's chosen people, but when Paul preached repentance and belief in Jesus Christ they felt threatened. Instead of backing down from speaking about Christ, Paul and Barnabas boldly spoke to the Jews saying, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you [Jews] first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us: I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, that you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth" (13:46-47). The Jews were God's chosen people, but they had rejected Jesus as God's payment for sin and therefore Paul was going to focus his efforts on the Gentiles, who desired to hear about Him. Over and over Israel had their chance to repent and receive salvation through Jesus, but they were more comfortable in their obedience to the law of Moses.

When the Gentiles heard that they would also receive the gospel, "they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord" (13:48). The message of Jesus Christ continued throughout the region, but the Jews "stirred up the devout and prominent women and the chief men of the city" and brought persecution upon Paul and Barnabas who were forced to leave the region (13:49-52). This rejection by the Jews did not stop Paul and Barnabas from preaching, so they journeyed to Iconium where they spoke in the synagogue about the Jews and Gentiles who had believed (14:1); but the unbelieving Jews were angered and deceived the minds of the Gentiles (14:2). Paul and Barnabas stayed in Iconium for a "long time, speaking boldly in the Lord...but the multitude of the city was divided: part with the Jews, and part with the apostles" (14:4). The multitude became so angry against Paul and Barnabas that they attempted to "abuse and stone them" but when they found out about the plot they fled to Lystra and Derbe and the surrounding region" (14:5-7).

In Lystra, Paul healed a man who had been crippled from birth (14:8-10) and when the people saw the miracle they began worshipping Paul and Barnabas as gods (Hermes and Zeus). Their reaction to this supernatural work was related to the some false beliefs in the city of Lystra. When Paul and Barnabas began to understand that they were being worshipped as gods, they were sorrowful and said, "We are also men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things [worship of false gods] to the living God..." (14:14-17). When the pagans at Lystra heard what the apostles were saying, they could "scarcely restrain the multitudes from sacrificing them" (14:18).

About this time, the Jews from Antioch and Iconium found Paul and Barnabas in Lystra so they convinced the multitudes to stone Paul (14:19). Apparently, Paul's stoning was so bad that they thought he was dead, but when the disciples gathered around his badly beaten body, he rose up and went to Derbe in the power of the Holy Spirit (14:20). After preaching the gospel there, he returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch to strengthen those who had believed saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God" (14:21-22). They set elders in every church along the way to oversee the believers and continued into other cities to preach Christ (14:23-26). This would conclude Paul's first missionary journey.

Dear God, please empower those who are preaching Jesus Christ in places where their message may not be well received. Help them not to be discouraged, so that the gospel will continue to go forth to all nations!

Acts 15:1-29

The first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas recorded by Luke in Acts 13-14 began on the island of Cyprus and ended in Antioch of Syria. Their travels took them to many places where they shared the life-changing message of Jesus Christ and salvation through His death on the cross; however, they were also met with much opposition along the way. In fact, the later half of their journey was filled with persecution and challenge from Jews as well as pagan people. When their first journey was completed, they reported to the church at Antioch "all that God had done with them, and that He opened the door of faith to the Gentiles" (14:27). Through Paul and Barnabas' faithfulness in the ministry, many were saved and churches were strengthened. While they settled for a time at Antioch, men who taught salvation through works "came down from Judea teaching that "unless you are circumcised according to the law of Moses, you cannot be saved" (15:1). In order to understand the false teachings of these men, we must look back to Genesis 17:10-12 where God commanded that every Jewish male be circumcised (cutting away of the male foreskin) as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham. The covenant stated that out of the descendants of Abraham would come a great nation and through his seed, all people would be blessed (see Genesis 12:1-3). Of course this promise was fully realized when God sent Jesus Christ, who was eventually born through Abraham's family line, to pay the penalty of sin through death, therefore enabling all people to be forgiven. When a male was circumcised, it was symbolic of cleansing as well as of sin being cut away because through the male organ, sin was passed on to the next generation. So circumcision was simply an outward symbol of cleansing from sin, but was never meant as a means to salvation. Salvation was promised through the seed of Abraham, not through the act of circumcision. In reality, the whole reason circumcision had become an issue in the ministry of the apostles was because the Gentiles (who were being converted) were uncircumcised. Some of the Jews felt that circumcision was a necessity for salvation and that the Gentiles could not receive it without being circumcised. With these thoughts in mind, Paul and Barnabas were disturbed by this teaching of salvation through works and confronted these teachers (15:2a). The church at Antioch "determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question" (15:2b). Upon their arrival in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas appeared before the leaders of the Jerusalem church and the Pharisees also appeared saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them [Gentiles], and to command them to keep the law of Moses" (15:3-5). In response to this, Peter stands up saying, "a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them [Gentiles] by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us [Jews], and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith" (15:7-9). Peter then makes a bold statement about salvation being by faith alone in Jesus' work on the cross, "But we believe that through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ we [Jews] shall be saved in the same manner as they [Gentiles]" (15:11).

Agreeing with Peter and the Old Testament prophet Amos, James declares that in the millennial kingdom Gentiles will be saved (Amos 9:11-12) without being circumcised as the Jews; therefore, they should also not be required to be circumcised in this present age (15:13-18). Rather than asking the Gentiles to become Jews through circumcision, James suggested that following faith in Christ the Gentiles keep themselves from food offered to idols, sexual immorality, and certain foods prohibited by Mosaic law (15:19-21). Abstaining from these things would help the Gentiles not to offend the Jews and would assure that the Gentiles did not cause Jews to violate their conscience.

The saying of James and the testimony of Peter pleased the Jerusalem church so they sent a letter with leaders from the church, as well as Paul and Barnabas, to the Christians at Antioch (15:22). The letter written to the Gentile brethren at Antioch declared "we have heard that some who went out from us [false teachers] have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, 'You must be circumcised and keep the law' - to whom we gave no such commandment..." (15:23-24). This declaration from the church at Jerusalem put an end to the false teachers troubling the Gentiles with additional works in order to receive salvation.

Dear God, thank You that salvation is a free gift to all who will receive the forgiveness which was offered through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. May those who are teaching a false system of legalism for salvation be silenced through the truth of Scripture and those standing against false teaching.

Acts 15:30-16:15

False teachers had infiltrated the church at Antioch and began teaching that the Gentiles must be circumcised in order to be saved (Acts 15:1-5). This command to the Jewish nation under the law of Moses was only meant to be a symbol of cleansing from sin, not a ritual necessary for salvation (Genesis 17:10-12). This conflict between the apostles and false teachers was taken to the church at Jerusalem where they decided that circumcision was not necessary for the Gentiles to be saved (Acts 15:6-21); therefore, the council sent a letter to the Gentiles in the church at Antioch declaring them free from any rituals to receive salvation (Acts 15:22-29). The decision by the Jerusalem council was a reinforcement that salvation is only found through believing that Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for sin and resurrected to guarantee our eternal life.

When the Gentiles in Antioch received this declaration from the church at Jerusalem, they rejoiced and were strengthened in their faith (15:30-34). Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch "teaching and preaching the word of the Lord" (15:35). After ministering for several days, Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing" (15:36). Although Barnabas desired to go with Paul, he also suggested taking John Mark, who had earlier abandoned them on their first journey (see Acts 13:13). Luke does not provide the detailed reasoning of John Mark's departure from Paul and Barnabas, but apparently it caused deep division between them both. "Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one [John Mark] who had departed from them...and had not gone with them to the work" (15:38). The disagreement between Paul and Barnabas became so contentious that they actually decided to part ways - Barnabas and John Mark go to Cyprus while Paul chooses Silas and goes to visit the churches (15:39-41). There are points in ministry where two well-meaning people may disagree about a circumstance. Instead of trying to prove a point, it is sometimes best to agree to disagree and move on with ministry. This is exactly what happened in this circumstance.

As Paul and Silas begin their second missionary journey, they encounter a young man named Timothy in Lystra and Derbe. Timothy's mother was a Jew and his father was Greek (Gentile) enabling him to minister to both groups of people along the way (16:1). Timothy had a good reputation with all the people, so Paul chose him to accompany him and Silas on this missionary journey (16:2-3a). Since Timothy had not been circumcised, Paul "took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew his father was Greek" (16:3b). Timothy was not circumcised in order to be saved, but in order to make him accepted by the Jews in that region. Paul's reasoning was justified because he did not want there to be any hindrances as they would minister to Jews and Gentiles and circumcision was a worship barrier for the Jews. "So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily" (16:4-5).

After preaching and strengthening the churches in the region of Galatia, Paul attempted to go to Asia Minor (modern Turkey), but the Holy Spirit did not want him to go there (16:6). No reason is given for the Spirit's leading. Then, Paul desired to go to Bithynia but the Holy Spirit also redirected his steps so that they ended up in Troas (16:7-8). While in Troas, Paul received a vision and a man of Macedonia said, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (16:9), so they immediately departed to Macedonia (16:10a). From this vision they concluded "that the Lord had called us [them] to preach the gospel to them" (16:10b). It appears that Luke, writer of Acts, also joined them in ministering because of the use of we in Acts 16:10.

While in Macedonia, the team met a woman named Lydia who sold purple fabrics and was described as one who worshiped God (16:13-14). When she heard Paul speak, "she and her household were baptized" (16:15). Although she believed in the God of the Old Testament, at this time she believed in Jesus Christ as the One who was sent to forgive her sins. Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke were having a tremendous impact on the region of Macedonia already as they obeyed the Spirit's leading. This should challenge us that when we are confused by the Spirit's direction, He knows what is in waiting for those who obey Him.

Dear God, although we do not always understand Your leading or why things work the way they do, so please remind us that You know the opportunities awaiting those who follow You.

Acts 16:16-40

On his second missionary journey, Paul was accompanied by Silas as they took the gospel to many people and also strengthened other churches which had been started on Paul's first journey. Their preaching took them to the city of Philippi where they met a Gentile woman named Lydia (Acts 16:11-15). She willingly put her faith in Jesus Christ and the rest of her household was also convinced that Jesus was the One sent to forgive sin and so they were baptized (Acts 16:15).

As they were in the region, they came across a girl who was a fortune-teller (16:16a). Her "skill" apparently brought great financial gain to a group of men whom Luke refers to as her masters. When this girl encountered Paul, she began following him around saying, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation" (16:17). This went on for many days until Paul became "greatly annoyed" so he turned to the girl and commanded that the unclean spirit come out of her (16:18). The demon spirit immediately left the girl. Although this girl was now freed from the demon who had possessed her for so long, the men who depended on her fortune-telling for income did not appreciate Paul's actions. So when they saw that the spirit was gone out of the girl, they became very angry and had Paul and Silas thrown into jail (16:19-24). Luke is very careful to mention that Paul and Silas were placed into the most secure place within the jail and their feet were fastened in the stocks (16:24).

While they were in the prison, Paul and Silas were "praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them" (16:25). There was joy in their hearts in spite of their imprisonment because their faith was in God, not in circumstances. We have much to learn from this. As this singing and praying was going on around midnight, a great earthquake shook the foundations of the prison so that the doors swung wide open and all the chains fell off of the prisoners (16:26). The ruckus caused the prison guard to awake and when he saw that the doors were opened, he assumed the prisoners had also escaped so he was going to kill himself (16:27). If the prisoners had escaped, his punishment would have been death anyway so he decided to take his life into his own hands; however, before the prison guard could commit suicide, Paul called out saying, "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here" (16:28).

The guard, who had earlier heard them singing and praying, fell before Paul and asked, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul then gives one of the clearest answers written in the Bible as to how a person is saved from sin and death when he says, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household" (16:31). Belief in God or a god does not bring saving faith, but only faith in Jesus Christ alone brings salvation from the power of sin and death. What must a person believe about Jesus Christ in order to be saved? Jesus Christ came to earth to pay the penalty needed to satisfy the wrath of God on sin, which was death. Instead of demanding the death of the sinner, God the Father loved mankind so much that He sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, to pay the penalty for us (John 3:16). Therefore, those who will accept by faith Jesus' sacrifice on their behalf will be made righteous and avoid paying for their sin for all of eternity in hell (John 3:36). Paul writes to the church at Corinth, "For He [God the Father] made Him [Jesus Christ] who knew no sin to be sin for us [mankind], that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). We then find Paul preaching to the Philippian jailer and his household, who express faith in Jesus Christ, and they are baptized (16:33-34).

As morning dawns, the city officials (not knowing what had happened the night before) call for the prisoners to be let go (16:35). We can safely assume that the prison guard brought Paul and Silas back to the jail, but when he told Paul and Silas that they were free and to depart in peace, Paul refused to go quietly (16:36). He boldly spoke saying, "They have beaten us openly, uncondemned Romans, and have thrown us into prison. And now do they put us out secretly? No indeed! Let them come themselves and get us out" (16:37). It was illegal for the city officials to punish and imprison a Roman citizen, so they became fearful "when they heard they were Romans" (16:38). To cover up their wrongdoing, the city magistrates begged Paul and Silas to depart from Philippi so they went to the house of Lydia (16:39-40).

This is an amazing story of the power of God to protect those who belong to Him. May we never forget that we serve the same God who delivered Paul and Silas in their time of trial and He is also able to deliver us. Although God does not *always* bring deliverance in the ways we expect, He will provide the strength to endure. As Paul and Silas had joy in the midst of their trial, we must find joy in God, not circumstances.

Dear God, give me joy in the midst of circumstances because my eyes are on You.

Acts 17:1-34

Paul and Silas departed from the house of Lydia, whose family and friends had miraculously been changed through the gospel of Jesus Christ (Acts 16:11-15, 40), and they continued to the city of Thessalonica (17:1). Paul was currently embarking on his second missionary journey, accompanied by Silas, after Paul and Barnabas had separated ways over the ministry of John Mark (Acts 15:36-41). This second journey to preach the gospel and strengthen churches had already proven to be challenging as they were wrongly beaten and imprisoned in Philippi (Acts 16:16-24). Through a supernatural work of God, an earthquake released them from prison and many were saved as a result of the miracle (16:25-40).

Upon their arrival in Thessalonica, Paul entered the synagogue where he "reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus whom I preach to you is Christ'" (17:2-3). His teaching continued for three Sabbaths until some who were hearing were convinced that what he said was true; in fact, Luke writes that "a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas" (17:4).

However, some Jews gathered a mob against Paul and attacked the house of Jason where Paul may have been residing (17:5). "But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, 'These who have turned the world upside down have come here too'" (17:6). This is an amazing statement, by those who did not believe in Christ, which proves that the message being preached by the apostles was changing the world! This mob continued to stir up the crowd against the Christians, but they finally let Jason and the other Christians go free (17:8-9).

Since Paul and Silas were in danger those who knew where they were sent them away and they departed to Berea (17:10). Luke describes the people in Berea as "more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. Therefore many of them believed" (17:11-12). It seems that the Jews from Thessalonica found out that Paul had fled to Berea, so they followed him there and "stirred up the crowds" because of the message they preached about Jesus Christ (17:13). The Christians immediately sent Paul away to Athens, but Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea (17:14-15).

While Paul waited for Silas and Timothy to meet him in Athens, "his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols" (17:16). After all, Athens was the center of Greek culture and religion and great philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates were centered there. Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered Paul as he was teaching in the synagogue (17:17-18a) and since their culture was largely pagan, they did not know this Jesus of whom Paul was speaking (17:18b). These philosophers took Paul to the Areopagus (the court where the Athenian council met) so that they could know this "god." Their interest was not necessarily in knowing salvation, but in possibly learning about a new "god" of whom they had never heard (17:19-21).

Instead of backing down from speaking to these pagan people, Paul willingly talked to them about Jesus. Since those whom Paul was addressing had no knowledge of the God of Creation, he approached them differently than his previous encounters with those who did not believe (see Acts 13:13-41). When he began speaking, Paul acknowledged that they were very religious worshipping many gods, but when he found an altar with the inscription "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD" he declared that the God of whom he was speaking was the God they did not know (17:22-23). Paul goes on to explain that the one, true God was not made with hands, but rather the One who gives life to all (17:24-29). He declared to them that this God was calling them to repent or else they would be judged "by the man whom He [God] has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead (17:30-31). When those who listened heard Paul speak of the resurrection, they mocked him because Greek philosophy did not believe in physical resurrection (17:32). "So, Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed..." (17:33-34).

These different circumstances Paul encountered evidenced that he was equipped to speak in any situation through the power of the Holy Spirit. This should challenge us to be ready and willing to converse with those who may be far from God, so that the Holy Spirit can use our words to bring conviction in the heart. Even though Paul did not see throngs of people put their faith in Jesus Christ, he was still faithful to proclaim the truth.

Dear God, help us to proclaim Jesus Christ crucified to any who will hear the message we speak. May we do so in love and leave the results to You.

Acts 18:1-28

While Paul had been separated from Silas and Timothy, he spent his time speaking with the Greek philosophers in Athens (17:16-34). Although many who were listening did not receive his message about God being the Creator of all and Jesus Christ being His offspring who was sent to call us to repentance (17:22-31), a few men joined Paul and believed that what he said was true (17:34). After spending some time in Athens, Paul departed to the city of Corinth where he met a Jewish couple named Aquila and Priscilla (18:1-2). This couple had arrived from Rome because Claudius had commanded all Jews to leave Rome in about AD 49. Luke reveals that Paul met them because they worked in the same trade - tent making (18:3). In addition to tent making, Paul also continued to preach the gospel in the synagogue every Sabbath persuading Jews and Greeks of salvation through Jesus Christ (18:4).

Silas and Timothy finally came from Macedonia (Acts 17:14) to meet Paul in Corinth where he was "compelled by the Spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ" (18:5). Of course the Jews did not receive his message, so he declared, "Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles" (18:6). Paul had fulfilled his duty in presenting the truth about Jesus Christ to the Jews, but they had consistently rejected and blasphemed the name of Jesus. The Jews were now fully responsible for what they had heard from Paul and must accept the consequences which await them.

Upon departing the synagogue, Paul went into the house of a Gentile man named Justus, who worshiped God (18:7). "Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized" (18:8). Paul received a vision from the Lord and God promised His protection upon Paul as he spoke the truth, so he continued teaching the word of the Lord at Corinth for a year and a half (18:9-11). You can read more about Paul's communication with the church at Corinth in both of his letters which bear their name.

While in Corinth, the Jews rose up against Paul and brought him before Gallio, a Roman proconsul (governor of Achaia), saying, "This fellow persuades men to worship God contrary to the law" (18:12-13). As Paul was about to respond to their accusation, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of wrongdoing or wicked crimes...there should be reason why I should bear with you. But if it is a question of words and names and your own law, look to it yourselves; for I do not want to be a judge of such matters" (18:14-15). Gallio commanded them to leave the judgment seat (18:16). This circumstance was significant. The Jews in Corinth were angry at Paul for teaching that which they thought opposed Judaism. Since they rejected Jesus as the Messiah, they saw Paul's message as distinct from their own; however, Roman rulers looked at Christianity and Judaism as the same. The Jews were ultimately trying to get the Romans to see this distinction so that Christianity would be made illegal by Roman law. Their attempt failed.

After his time in Corinth, Paul visited Ephesus with Aquila and Priscilla and they ended up staying there (18:18-21) while Paul continued his journeys visiting many churches (18:22-23). Luke breaks away from Paul's travels to reflect on what was happening in Ephesus in the ministry of Aquila and Priscilla. A Jew named Apollos came to Ephesus teaching the ways of the Lord, but he only knew the baptism of John (18:24-25). Apollos knew the Old Testament, but did not fully understand the New Testament truths such as the meaning of Christ's death (although he believed Jesus was the Messiah), His resurrection, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and Jesus' commission to be witnesses in all the earth. Aquila and Priscilla took him aside privately and explained the significance of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection (18:26). Receiving this truth with gladness, Apollos began to minister and help those who had believed (18:27). Luke also writes that Apollos "vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ" (18:28).

The life of the church was taking off and many were being converted; however, Paul was careful to entrust the leadership of each church into the hands of faithful people. Paul realized it was impossible for him to effectively minister to the churches in all these cities, so he spent time preparing certain individuals to strengthen the church. The modern day church must also do well at passing on the truth to the next generation. Without the training of the next generation, the church is on danger of losing its' effectiveness. Paul reminds Timothy, "You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also."

Dear God, help those who lead the church today to train up men and women who will lead the church tomorrow.

Acts 19:21-20:24

Paul had caused quite a stir in Ephesus and throughout Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). His faithfulness in preaching the gospel and equipping believers to spread the message of Jesus Christ had resulted in everyone dwelling in the region hearing the word of the Lord (19:10). Even those in Ephesus who were workers of evil had been convinced of their sinfulness before God and repented of their wicked ways (19:11-20). Good seemed to be overcoming evil.

After this time, Paul began to desire to travel to the churches at Macedonia and Achaia on his way to Jerusalem, but he also desired to visit Rome in the future (19:21). To prepare for his arrival in Macedonia, Paul sent Timothy and Erastus who collected an offering for the church at Jerusalem (19:22). But "about this time there arose a great commotion about the Way [Christianity]. For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Diana, brought no small profit to the craftsmen" (19:23-24). Diana, also known as Artemis, was a goddess whose center of worship was located in Ephesus. Paul's message to worship God alone caused many to turn their backs on the worship of false gods such as Diana. This began affecting the purchase of silver shrines being crafted by Demetrius and obviously cut into his profit. So Demetrius gathered the other silversmiths in Ephesus and accused Paul of three things: telling people that idols are not gods (19:26), diminishing the reputation of all silversmiths (19:27a), and causing people to turn away from worshiping Diana (19:27b).

Upon hearing this, the silversmiths were angered and said, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" This outcry caused so much confusion throughout the city of Ephesus that Paul's traveling companions (Gaius and Aristarchus) were taken captive (19:28-29). Paul wanted to rush to their defense, but the other disciples would not allow him (19:30-32). This crowd became out of control and the Jews wanted to make sure that they were not caught in the middle so they made Alexander their spokesman (19:33); however, the riotous crowd did not want to hear a Jew so they began crying out, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians" for two hours (19:34). Finally, the city clerk quieted the crowd and explained that they had improperly brought Paul's companions before the assembly so he dismissed everyone (19:35-41).

Following the riot, Paul called together his disciples and departed to Macedonia and then to Greece (probably in city of Corinth) where he stayed for three months (20:1-3a). The Jews plotted against him as he was about to sail to Syria, so he decided to return to Macedonia (20:3b). Luke mentions the details of Paul's travels throughout Greece (20:4-6). Paul finally reunited with his team in Troas where they celebrated the resurrection of Jesus Christ together (20:7a).

Paul continued to speak to those gathered in Troas until midnight. Luke provides the details of what happened during this gathering, "There were lamps in the upper room where they were gathered together. And in a window sat a certain man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep" (20:8-9a). Eutychus was probably affected by the fumes in the room, so he fell asleep while Paul was speaking and fell out the third story window to his death (20:9b). Paul ran to Eutychus and fell on him, embracing him, and life was restored to him (20:10-12).

From Troas, Paul departs for Miletus (20:13-16) where he addresses the Ephesian elders (20:17). When they gathered together to Paul in Miletus, he recounted how he had attempted to be faithful in preaching the message of salvation through Jesus Christ in spite of opposition (20:18-21). Then Paul makes one of the greatest statements regarding faithfulness in the work to which he has been called: "None of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" (20:24). We also have been entrusted with the gospel of Jesus Christ and should be faithful to share it, even when we face opposition. God has given us life so that we might speak to others about the grace of God given through His Son, Jesus Christ. We cannot be silent.

Dear God, use me to faithfully testify of the grace of God provided through Jesus Christ that I might also finish this life with joy.

Acts 20:25-21:36

Paul is in Miletus speaking to the Ephesian elders who have gathered together (Acts 20:17-18) and he uses this opportunity to challenge them to be faithful in the ministry God has given them. The church was under much pressure and persecution so Paul was preparing them for what may lie ahead. Using his own ministry as an example, Paul declares that he has served the Lord "with all humility, with many tears and trials..." so that he could "preach repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (20:19, 21).

Paul now turns his words toward the Ephesian elders and urges them to be faithful in preaching the truth because there are many who will seek to destroy the church through false teaching (20:25-30). These leaders, whom Paul refers to as *overseers*, had a responsibility to protect the people entrusted to them by closely guarding the word of the Lord. There have always been those who twist and misuse the Bible to fit their own belief system; however, the church must stand against the compromise of truth. Paul commands these leaders to "watch" (20:31).

After giving a few more words of challenge, Paul prays with all of these men and they are sorrowful to see him depart (20:32-38). Paul boarded a ship bound for Jerusalem and on his journey they stopped in Tyre where he found some disciples who told him through the Spirit not to go to Jerusalem (21:1-4). They had foreseen the persecution Paul would face in Jerusalem, so they were attempting to stop him from encountering this hardship. Even though Paul understood their concern, he felt that he needed to go to Jerusalem so he departed and eventually arrived in Caesarea where he stayed in the house of Philip (21:5-8). While staying at the home of Philip, a prophet named Agabus (see Acts 11:27-30) came there and warned Paul of his upcoming imprisonment at Jerusalem (21:9-11). Many began pleading with Paul to suspend his journey to Jerusalem, but he told them that he was "ready not only to be bound, but also die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (21:12-13). Paul was on a mission and willing to do whatever it took to spread the message of hope and salvation through Jesus Christ. With all of his heart, Paul desired to be used by God for the furtherance of the gospel even if preaching would cost him his life. *How far am I willing to go for the sake of Jesus Christ?*

Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, Paul met with the disciples and told them of all the things which had been occurring among the Gentiles (21:15-19). The people rejoiced for all the Gentiles who were being saved, but they quickly warned Paul about the Judaizers (believed salvation comes through obedience to the law of Moses), who knew he was in Jerusalem (21:20-21). Paul was not against the law of Moses, but he did not believe keeping it could bring salvation. Throughout his ministry, Paul always tried to be respectful to the Jewish traditions such as making Timothy, a Gentile, get circumcised so that he could more effectively minister to the Jews (see Acts 16:1-3).

Since the leaders in the church at Jerusalem were concerned for Paul, they asked him to take a Nazarite vow (symbolized a total commitment to God) and go through a Jewish purification ritual in order to show them that he "walk[ed] orderly and keep the law"(21:22-24). James was not requiring Paul to disregard the decision of the Jerusalem council (see Acts 15), but was only asking him to be respectful of Jewish tradition. Paul began this seven day purification ritual and on the final day he entered the temple but they immediately took him captive and began beating him with every intention of putting him to death (21:26-31). When a Roman commander heard what was happening, he took soldiers to the scene, but could not discern why they were beating this man so he commanded them to imprison him (21:32-34). The crowd became so violent against Paul that he had to be carried by the soldiers to the barracks while the mob shouted, "Away with him!" (21:35-36)

When I see Paul's passion for Jesus Christ, I am convicted of my lack of devotion to Him. Although I profess belief in His saving power, I struggle with making my life fully available to Him to be used however He sees fit.

Dear God, use my life in whatever way You want.

Acts 21:37-22:29

Paul had arrived in Jerusalem and was well received by the Christians; however, they warned of possible persecution because many were saying that he ignored Jewish customs and traditions (21:15-21). Although Paul was careful to respect the law of Moses, he did not believe obedience to the law could bring salvation. Throughout his ministry, the Jews had often opposed Paul because of his message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Regretfully, the Jews did not accept Jesus as Savior and therefore rejected Paul's teaching and sought to silence him. Paul was aware of the danger he faced from the Jews, but this did not hinder his teaching and preaching.

When the leaders at Jerusalem made Paul aware of the dangers facing him, he decided to honor Jewish tradition by engaging in a seven day purification ritual (21:22-26). This ritual reflected a cleansing after a Jew had traveled to a Gentile city. Paul entered the temple on the seventh day, but was immediately taken captive by a mob of people and the angry multitude sought to kill him (21:27-31). A Roman commander and his soldiers stepped in and took Paul captive, but while he was being taken he asked the commander to speak to the people (21:32-39). The Roman commander agreed so Paul motioned to the people and when they became silent, he began to speak saying, "Brethren and fathers, hear my defense before you now" (21:40-22:1). The people listened intently because he spoke in Aramaic, the common language of the Palestinian Jews (22:2).

Paul begins by telling them about his life before being converted saying, "I am indeed a Jew...but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today. I persecuted this Way [Christianity] to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women..." (22:3-4). In essence, Paul was declaring that he used to be just as antagonistic toward Christianity as they were. But then Paul retells the story of his journey to Damascus, where he was going to imprison more Christians, and how the Lord confronted him about his persecution of God's followers (22:6-9). Continuing to tell the story, Paul says that the Lord told him that he would now be a witness to all people about Jesus Christ and especially to the Gentiles (22:10-21).

Upon hearing Paul's defense, the crowd responded with raised voices saying, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live!" (22:22) In preparation to stone Paul, the people began tearing their clothes and throwing dust in the air because of their intense anger at Paul (22:23-24). As they were securing Paul to be beaten and stoned, he said to the centurion, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?" (22:25) Since Paul was a Roman citizen, it was illegal for the Romans to beat him. When the commander became aware of this, they withdrew from Paul for fear that they themselves would be put to death for breaking Roman law (22:26-29).

Again, Paul evidences tremendous courage in the face of imminent danger and God spares him from certain death.

Dear God, give strength to those who continually must stand strong in the face of persecution. I know there are people all over the world who fear for their lives each day because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Help the church to pray for their strength.

Acts 22:30-23:35

Paul had narrowly escaped his encounter with the angry Jewish mob at Jerusalem and his resulting captivity by Roman authorities (22:22-24). Only through his revelation to the Roman centurion about being a Roman citizen saved him from impending death (22:25-29). The Jews had stirred up the crowds at Jerusalem by spreading lies about Paul's treatment of Jewish tradition. They believed he was teaching those Jews who came to faith in Jesus Christ to discontinue Jewish rituals; however, this was nothing but a lie (21:20-21). Paul never taught Jews to disrespect or forsake their Jewish heritage, but he did warn them that obedience to their traditions would never bring salvation. Only faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for sin could bring salvation from the power of sin and death.

After making his defense to the crowd at Jerusalem, Paul called for a meeting with the Sanhedrin (the council) so they could explain "why he [Paul] was accused by the Jews" (22:30). Paul spoke first saying, "I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day" (23:1). When Ananias, the high priest, heard Paul speak he commanded those who stood nearby Paul to "strike him on the mouth" (23:2). Paul reacted to this treatment by saying, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?" (23:3) His angry reaction to the high priest, whom Paul probably did not know was the high priest, caused those who stood around to say, "Do you revile [insult] God's high priest?" (23:4) Jewish law did call for the respect of the high priest, so Paul was wrong in his reaction and quickly admitted his wrongdoing saying, "I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people'" (23:5, also see Exodus 22:28). Even though Paul was being falsely accused, he recognized that he had violated the law by talking disrespectfully to the high priest. This action showed Paul's outstanding character and sensitivity to God's law.

The council gathered to hear Paul was comprised of both Sadducees and Pharisees. Normally these two groups did not get along because they differed on their belief in the resurrection. The Sadducees only viewed the first five books of the Old Testament as Scripture and did not believe in the resurrection; however, the Pharisees did believe in the resurrection and afterlife (23:6-8). Since Paul was aware of this difference, having been a Pharisee himself, he raised one of the most foundational teachings of Christianity - the resurrection. When the Pharisees and Sadducees heard Paul speak of this, the Pharisees rushed to defend Paul but now he was caught in the middle of these two feuding groups and had to be taken by force by the soldiers to prison (23:9-10).

No doubt exhausted by the occurrences over the last several hours, Paul found himself locked in a Roman prison when the Lord appeared to him saying, "Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome" (23:11). God's appearance to Paul in this vision must have been a huge encouragement to him; after all, he was facing some harsh persecution for speaking the truth. God seems to know just the right time to show up and bring comfort to a weary soul.

Although you would assume things get better from here, things continue to get worse. Forty Jews made a pact that they would not eat or drink until Paul was killed, so they conspired with the council to bring Paul in for more questioning, but they would kill him while he was en route (23:12-15). Paul's nephew became aware of the plot and warned Paul in prison (23:16). A centurion then ended up taking Paul's nephew to the commander and the boy revealed this plot against Paul (23:17-22).

The commander decided that Paul needed to leave Jerusalem for his own safety, so he provided "two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen" (23:23) to escort him to Caesarea where Felix the governor resided (23:24). The commander, Lysias, wrote a letter to Felix to be delivered with Paul saying, "This man was seized by the Jews...and when I wanted to know the reason they accused him, I brought them before their council. I found out that he was accused concerning questions of their law, but had nothing charged against him deserving of death or chains" (23:27-29). The letter concluded with Lysias saying, "And when it was told me that the Jews lay in wait for the man, I sent him immediately to you, and also commanded his accusers to state before you the charges against him" (23:30). So, the letter and Paul were delivered to Felix and he was kept in Herod's Praetorium (Felix's residence) until his accusers arrived (23:31-35). Paul continued to be protected by God even under some of the most adverse circumstances a person could face.

Dear God, we delight in the times You bring encouragement into our lives in order to provide hope. Please be near to those who are broken, confused, and fearful.

Acts 24:1-27

Imprisoned inside the residence of the governor, Felix, Paul awaited his Jewish accusers to arrive so he could give his defense (23:31-35). The Jews had falsely accused Paul of ignoring Jewish law and traditions so they formed an angry crowd to basically kill him without a proper trial. The Roman commander, Lysias, became aware of the situation and rescued Paul from certain death, even though he did not know all the details (21:30-36). Paul gave a defense before the Sanhedrin (council of Jewish leaders) but they were divided amongst themselves over the doctrine of the resurrection (22:30-23:10). Paul was sent back to prison in Jerusalem, but a plot was formed between 40 Jews and the religious leaders to kill Paul (23:11-15); however, Lysias was privately informed about the conspiracy against Paul and sent him to a safe haven, away from the Jews, with Felix until a proper examining could take place (23:16-27).

After five days of being held captive in the residence of Felix the governor, the high priest (Ananias) arrived with the elders and Tertullus (an orator) to give "evidence to the governor against Paul" (24:1). At this point, no one had found Paul guilty of anything worthy of imprisonment or death (23:27-29), so the Jews were going to make their best case against him. Tertullus arrogantly stood before Felix accusing Paul of causing "dissension among all the Jews throughout all the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes" (24:2-5); furthermore, Tertullus said that Paul even attempted "to profane the temple" (24:6). Paul was being accused of rebellion, teaching false doctrine, and blasphemy against God. At the core of their accusations was their hatred for Christianity and Paul's message of salvation through Jesus Christ. His teachings were a threat to the Jews and they were willing say anything to bring severe judgment upon Paul. According to Roman law rebellion would have been the most serious crime, possibly resulting in death. Of course all of their claims were false.

Paul finally has a chance to speak and denies all of their charges (24:10-13) but also confesses that he worships God "believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets" (24:14). The biggest difference between Paul and his accusers was not necessarily their acceptance of the Old Testament but the identity of Jesus Christ. Was Jesus Christ the Messiah, as Paul believed, or was He not the Savior promised in the Old Testament (Genesis 3:15)? Paul continues to explain that he did not come to Jerusalem with a "mob nor with tumult [riot]" but only to bring an offering to Jerusalem (24:17-18). When Felix "heard these things, having more accurate knowledge of the Way [Christianity]" he dismissed the proceedings until Lysias arrived (24:22-23).

After several days, Felix and his Jewish wife, Drusilla, "sent for Paul and heard him concerning the faith in Christ" (24:24). This is an incredible opportunity! Paul begins to talk about "righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come" but Felix becomes fearful and says, "Go away for now; when I have convenient time I will call for you" (24:25). Paul message of righteousness had brought conviction upon Felix, whose life was anything but righteous. He obtained his current wife, Drusilla, by stealing her from her husband. This moment of conviction quickly passed and then Felix began secretly hoping that Paul would give him money to be released (24:26). Two years passed and Felix was replaced by Porcius Festus as governor, but Paul was left imprisoned (24:27).

Paul's encounter with Felix is an unfortunate story. Paul took the opportunity to share the truth about Jesus Christ with him, but Felix's life of sin meant more to him than a relationship with God. Felix quickly dismissed his fear of judgment and pushed aside the voice of truth. Although God offers hope and forgiveness to those who repent of sin and turn to Him in faith, that moment of salvation may be lost when a person rejects the witness of the Holy Spirit (John 16:7-11). When Paul spoke to the people of Corinth he passionately declared, "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2b). There is no need to delay your faith in Christ. Because of His great love for mankind, God sent His only Son, Jesus, to pay the penalty for sin and those who by faith embrace His sacrifice will receive eternal life (John 3:16).

Dear God, thank You for offering forgiveness and hope to sinners. May those who are confronted with their sin turn in repentance to You and find mercy.

Acts 25:1-26:32

Paul has experienced much hardship over the last several weeks. Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Paul was arrested in the temple (21:26-29), taken captive by the Roman government (21:30-36), defended himself before angry Jews (21:37-22:29), and then made another defense before the Sanhedrin (22:30-23:10). None of the people who listened to Paul were satisfied with his defense which ultimately stemmed from their utter hatred for the message he preached. So many people were embracing the forgiveness of Jesus Christ and therefore turning their back on obtaining God's favor through obedience to the law of Moses. Although Paul was always respectful to Jewish law and never encouraged people to disobey it, he taught that adherence to the law could not bring salvation. However, the Jews would not tolerate what they considered to be an undermining of their religious system.

Paul was eventually sent to the governor Felix's house to be imprisoned, but in reality his imprisonment was for his own safety as a Jewish mob had formed to bring an end to Paul's life(23:11-35). Imprisoned in the house of Felix, Paul's accusers finally arrived but nothing was settled so he spent the next two years being held there (24:27). Festus succeeded Felix as governor and upon familiarizing himself with his province he traveled to Jerusalem (25:1). In Jerusalem he spoke with the high priest and chief men of the Jews who were obviously still bitter against Paul (25:2). Since they had not succeeded in their appeals to Felix, they decided to try their luck with the new governor. Luke writes that these men asked Festus for a favor which involved a plot to kill Paul (25:3); however, Festus did not give in and invited them to come to Caesarea to bring a charge against him (25:3-5). After more than ten days in Jerusalem Festus returned to Caesarea commanding Paul to be brought to him (25:6). The Jews began bringing many charges against Paul, but they could not prove anything that they were saying (25:7-8).

Wanting to do the Jews a favor, Festus asked Paul if he was willing to go to Jerusalem to be judged concerning the charges against him (25:9); but Paul declared his right as a Roman citizen to be judged in Rome, not Jerusalem (25:10-11). After conferring with the council, Festus agrees to send Paul to Rome (25:12). Several days later, King Agrippa and his sister Bernice come to greet Festus in Caesarea (25:13) and he informs them of Paul's case (25:14a). Festus declares, "There is a certain man left a prisoner of Felix, about whom the chief priests and the elders informed me, when I was in Jerusalem, asking for a judgment against him" (25:14b-15). Festus goes on to explain that it is not customary for Romans to sentence a man to punishment or death before he has had a chance to face his accusers, so he invited the Jews to bring charges against him (25:16). Festus then informs King Agrippa that the Jews brought nothing worthy of punishment or death for Paul, but that the dispute rested in "questions against him [Paul] about their own religion, and about a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive" (25:17-19). King Agrippa decided that he would also like to hear this man, Paul, so the next day he was brought into the auditorium (25:22-23).

King Agrippa permits Paul to speak and he recounts his entire life for him so that he can have a full understanding of the charges brought forth by the Jews (26:1a). Paul begins by reminding Agrippa that he also was raised a Pharisee (most strict group of religious Jews) and was familiar with persecuting the church for their belief in Jesus Christ (26:1b-11); however, Paul shares with King Agrippa how he was converted to Christianity on his way to Damascus (26:12-18). After telling Agrippa about his conversion, Paul tells how he was then commissioned by God to take the news about Jesus Christ to the Jews and Gentiles calling them to "repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance" (26:19-23).

Festus stands up following Paul's defense and is surprised that he could believe that anyone could rise from the dead (26:24), but Paul defends Jesus' resurrection saying that "this thing was not done in a corner" (26:25-26). Jesus' resurrection was widely known throughout Palestine and Paul even turned to King Agrippa saying, "Do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe" (26:27). King Agrippa speaks up declaring, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian" (26:28). Paul then expresses his desire for everyone hearing his voice to believe as he also believes (26:29). With these words Paul concluded his defense, so Festus and Agrippa privately discuss his fate and they decide that he has done nothing wrong, but that he must be kept captive (26:30-32).

Paul has experienced so much uncertainty in his ministry, but he refuses to give up. His persevering attitude should be an example to all those who follow Christ and give them hope in the midst of tough times. Although Paul seemed to continually face opposition to his message, he was faithful to proclaim the truth without compromise.

Dear God, make me a faithful follower who perseveres through trials and temptations so that hope through Jesus Christ can be proclaimed to all who will hear.

Acts 27:1-44

Paul was turned over to Julius (a centurion of the Augustan Regiment) as a prisoner and was joined by his close friend Luke, who is also the writer of Acts (27:1). Paul had done his best to defend himself against the unjust accusations of the Jews, but he had failed at each attempt and now found himself held captive. Although the Pharisees (23:9), the Jerusalem commander Lysias (23:29), the governor Festus (25:25), and King Agrippa (26:32) had all declared Paul's innocence, he was now a prisoner headed to Rome.

As their journey by ship began, they encountered very rough seas (27:2-8) until finally landing in a place called Fair Havens, near the city of Lasea (27:8). It seems that the sailors were not happy to spend much time in Fair Havens so they contemplated setting sail again, although the seas were almost impassable (27:12). Paul spoke up and warned about sailing on dangerous seas saying, "Men, I perceive that this voyage will end with disaster and much loss, not only the cargo and ship, but also our lives" (27:10). Contrary to Paul's advice, Julius decided to venture into the sea sailing close by Crete (27:13); however, a strong wind caught the ship and took it into the sea (27:14-15). The storm became so dangerous that the crew had to pull the lifeboat aboard (27:16-17) and throw all excess supplies overboard (27:18). Luke writes that after being caught in the storm for many days, they lost "all hope that we would be saved..." (27:20).

After finding themselves in a hopeless position, Paul says "You should have listened to me, and not have sailed from Crete and incurred this disaster and loss. And now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship" (27:21). How could Paul say this? During the night, an angel of God spoke to him saying, "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you" (27:23-24). This had to be an unexpected blessing to all those on board this ship.

After fourteen nights of being stuck in the storm being tossed back and forth, the sailors sensed that they were coming close to land so they were about to drop the lifeboat in the water (27:25-30); however, Paul warned that "unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved" so the men cut the ropes holding the lifeboat (27:31-32). This action was an evidence of faith in the God of Paul and now meant that they would have to stay on the boat no matter the outcome. As the day dawned, Paul encouraged the men to eat because they had not eaten in two weeks due to seasickness and possibly the difficulty in preparing food on a dangerous sea (27:33-34). Paul then took bread in the midst of all the men on board and gave thanks to God for His provision and protection (27:35-36). After they had eaten, they threw more supplies off of the ship as well as their food supplies (27:38).

When it was finally day, they did not recognize the land nearby but decided to try to run the ship aground (27:39). They nearly succeeded by wedging the ship in a place where the two seas met but the soldiers aboard had conspired to kill all the prisoners lest any of them would escape (27:40-42). Julius desired to save Paul so he "kept them from their purpose, and commanded those who could swim should jump overboard first and swim to land, and the rest, some on boards and some on parts of the ship" (27:43-44a). Because of this decision by the centurion, everyone on board escaped safely to land (27:44b).

As we read the harrowing events which happened at sea, we are truly able to see God at work in protecting Paul and all those around him. Even those who were pagan benefited from Paul's presence on the ship and were granted mercy. Paul's faith and testimony should be a challenge for us to trust God even when the circumstances seem bleak because our faith can be a light to those who are in darkness.

Dear God, help me to trust You in the difficult times so that others may see Your faithfulness to those who belong to You.

Acts 28:1-31

In this concluding chapter of Acts written by Luke, Paul was a prisoner aboard a ship which was headed to Rome. He had been taken prisoner several years before (Acts 21:26-36) when many of the Jews became angry about Paul's preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. In reality, the Jews falsely accused Paul of teaching people to disregard the law of Moses and stirred up this controversy wherever he preached (Acts 21:21). In order to defend himself, Paul had already made his case to the governor Felix (Acts 24:10-27), the governor Festus (Acts 25:1-12), as well as King Agrippa (Acts 26:1-32). All of his attempts at explaining his message landed on deaf ears and his imprisonment on this ship was his current circumstance. After many weeks on aboard the ship as a prisoner, God miraculously delivered the 276 passengers (27:37) from certain death as they weathered a fourteen day storm (Acts 27). Although their landing was not smooth, each person escaped to the island nearby (27:44).

When they escaped from the ship, they "found out that the island was called Malta" which is about sixty miles south of Sicily (28:1). This means that the storm had brought them approximately 600 miles from the island of Crete. Luke writes that the inhabitants of Malta showed them hospitality and even made them a fire to keep them warm (28:2), "but when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out...and fastened on his hand" (28:3). Upon seeing this, the superstitious natives thought Paul must have been a murderer (28:4), but he simply shook the snake from his hand and was not injured (28:5). The residents of Malta were waiting for him to drop dead, but when they witnessed that no harm had come to him they thought he was a god (28:6).

For the next three days Paul resided in the home of Publius, whose father became gravely ill (28:7-8a), so Paul prays and the man is healed (28:8b). When everyone on the island of Malta heard that Paul had healed this man, those who were sick also came and were healed (28:9). For the next three months, Paul was honored in many ways and the people "provided such things as were necessary" (28:10). When the weather made travel by sea possible again, Paul sailed on an Alexandrian ship to Rome and "the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him" (28:11-16). Acts 28:30 reveals that Paul's captivity arrangement was like being under house arrest.

After he had been in Rome for three days, Paul called for the Jewish leaders of the synagogue and again defended himself declaring that he was not guilty of disrespecting Jewish people or their traditions (28:17-19). Paul explained that the only reason he was a prisoner was for speaking the truth about the hope of Israel, meaning that Jesus Christ was the promised Messiah who had died and rose again for the sins of mankind (28:20). The Jewish religious leaders acted as if they did not know anything about Paul or the message he had been spreading in Jerusalem, so they provided him an outlet to speak (28:21-22).

When the day arrived, many came to Paul's residence to hear him teach about Jesus Christ - some believed what he was saying might be true and some did not (28:23-24). This disagreement amongst them caused them to leave, but before they departed Paul quoted from the prophet Isaiah saying, "...the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them" (28:27). Through his words to the Jews, Paul was exposing their refusal to believe in Jesus Christ as the Messiah and their rejection caused Paul to say, "Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it!" (28:28) Paul had preached to many Jews throughout his missionary journeys and most turned their back on his message, so the gospel would now be focused on reaching the Gentiles.

Paul spent the next two years in Rome receiving all who would come to him and "preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence..." (28:30-31). During this two year imprisonment, Paul also wrote the "Prison Epistles" which are Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, and Philipppians. So, at the conclusion of the book of Acts we find that Paul has successfully taken the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome bringing light to the world through the hope which is in Jesus Christ.

Dear God, make me a faithful witness of the gospel to all people, tongues, tribes, and nations.