

Preparing For Pentecost



Reading Plan | 18 Apr - 3 Jun

INTRODUCTION

What is Pentecost?

When we go back and read the Old Testament, we will discover that Pentecost was one of the Jewish feasts called the Feast of Harvest or the Feast of Weeks. Pentecost was the celebration of the beginning of the early weeks of harvest, 50 days after First fruits, and because 50 days equals seven weeks, it always became a 'week-of-weeks' or the Feast of Weeks.

On the day of Pentecost, seven weeks after the resurrection of Jesus, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon those followers of Jesus who had gathered together in Jerusalem. What happened on the first Pentecost continues to happen to Christians throughout the world today. God wants to pour out the Spirit upon all who put their faith in Jesus Christ and become His disciples (Romans 8:1-11).

Christians are meant to live in the presence and power of the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit helps us to confess Jesus as Lord (1 Cor 12:3), empowers us to serve God with supernatural power (1 Cor 12:4-11), binds us together as the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12-13), helps us to pray (Rom 8:26), and even intercedes for us with God the Father (Rom 8:27). The Spirit guides us (Gal 5:25), helping us to live like Jesus (Gal 5:22-23).

Celebrating Pentecost presents us with an opportunity to consider how we are living each day. Are we relying on the power of God's Spirit? Are we an open channel for the Spirit's gifts? Are we attentive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit? Is the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, etc.) growing in our lives? Pentecost also offers a chance to confess our failure to live by the Spirit and to ask the Lord to fill us afresh with his power.

As we consider the beginnings of Pentecost and read through the Book of Acts. I pray you will experience the adventure of the early church—the miracles, the struggles and the persecution. You will join Peter, Barnabas, Priscilla and Aquilla, Philip, Lydia and the apostle Paul, as well as the nameless heroes of the first century church as they spread the gospel.

Let's journey together turningpoint!

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MONDAY 18 APRIL

THE ORIGIN OF PENTECOST | LEVITICUS 23

The word Pentecost comes from the Greek, meaning 50 days, but it refers to the Jewish feast called Shavuot, meaning week or seven. These terms refer to the fact that this Feast, the second of Israel's three holy feast seasons, comes after a week-of-weeks or seven weeks after Passover, and is celebrated on the day after, or the 50th day.

Shavuot is a harvest festival and marks the time that Israel came out of Egypt (a 10-day journey), and waited another 40 days at the foot of Mt. Sinai for Moses to come down and give them the Law. In the Northern Hemisphere, it is a Summer festival and coincides with the wheat harvest. Shavuot (Passover) was celebrated with the offering of new grain and a wave offering of two loaves of bread. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit was poured out on the early believers on the day of Pentecost that came 50 days after Jesus was crucified as our Passover lamb.

As we prepare to observe Pentecost it is good to have this imagery in mind: the giving of the Law, the grain harvest, the offerings, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Jews count the Omer, which is a literal and verbal counting of each of the 49 days before Shavuot. It is their way of preparing for Pentecost. Today we can prepare ourselves for another Pentecost by counting the days and looking forward to this feast with the expectation of receiving afresh from the Lord. Turningpoint, what are we expecting from the Lord? A fresh revelation of Himself, a harvest of blessings or a fresh outpouring of His Holy Spirit? Prepare for Pentecost! Devout Jews today spend the entire night of Pentecost awake, reading the Torah. There is an air of expectancy at Pentecost that God is going to give us something like He gave the Law and then the Spirit.

In Acts 2, I imagine the 120 disciples in the upper room (all Jews) were waiting on the Lord all night. Jews, unlike us, consider that a day begins and ends at sundown. They were probably in the upper room in an all-night Shavuot vigil of prayer and reading of the Word. These 120 Jewish disciples were reliving the expectancy to receive the Law, but as disciples of Jesus, they were waiting to be baptised with the Holy Spirit.

As we prepare for Pentecost let us be aware that God is a God of times, seasons, and festivals. The Christian Pentecost happened 2000 years ago and fulfilled the Old Testament feast. Today we don't have to 'tarry' for the Holy Spirit because He is already poured out. We can receive the Holy Spirit anytime. But, let us prepare to receive from the Lord afresh at this time as we meditate on Pentecost. As we wait for the Second Coming, could it happen on the Day of Pentecost? What has God promised you? Let's expectantly receive from the God of Pentecost!

The first Pentecost marked the giving of the Law, written on tablets of stone, that Moses received inscribed by the very hand of God. It should have been a glorious event, for the Law reveals God's righteous requirements and is the very embodiment of God. But ironically, at the very time it was to be received by the people, they were breaking many of those laws. So aptly, the Law is described as the Law of Sin and Death (Romans 8:2). Paul teaches us that the Law, even though good, provokes our sinful nature to break it and to sin. This Law was given to account for sin even though sin happened before the giving of the Law. Three thousand people were executed at the giving of this Law, a Law that was good but revealed our own sinfulness and our inability to keep it in our own strength.

The second Pentecost in the Book of Acts is in marked contrast. It commemorated not the giving of the Law which was powerless to transform us, but the giving of the Spirit—the Spirit that transformed fearful believers into bold evangelists when they were filled on that day. What a contrast: 3,000 people died at the first Pentecost; 3,000 people were saved at the second.

There is a great contrast between the first Pentecost at Sinai and the New Testament Pentecost in Acts 2. The first one involved a nation of freed slaves journeying for 10 days and waiting at Mt Sinai for 40 days. The second involved 120 disciples journeying with the risen Christ for 40 days and waiting in Jerusalem for 10 days. Both had manifestations of the presence of God with fire, violent wind and other happenings.

In the first instance, only Moses was allowed to go up and meet with God; in the second, God comes down to fill the disciples. In the first, we have people getting weary in waiting and turning to idolatry and revelry. In the second, we have the 120 gathered together in one place and in one accord.

The first Pentecost ends in disaster with Moses smashing the tablets of the Law and the Levites killing 3,000 sinners. The second Pentecost results in 120 disciples becoming filled with the Holy Spirit and seeing 3,000 people getting saved. 120 is an interesting number in the Bible. It speaks of the end of all flesh. Is there an application for us today? They gathered together and they were of one mind and one accord. Hebrews 10:25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

The purpose of Pentecost is that the people of God make Him known throughout the world. Are you fulfilling this purpose?

WEDNESDAY 20 APRIL

THE MOST DRAMATIC GOODBYE | ACTS 1

Acts 1:3 says Jesus appeared to His followers “over a period of forty days” after His resurrection. Can you imagine spending time with Jesus after He came out of the tomb? His disciples saw His pierced hands and feet. They listened to Him teach about the kingdom of God. Then He gathered them for a final conversation. Like a general speaking to his officers, He gave them specific orders not to leave Jerusalem—but “to wait for what the Father had promised” (v. 4). Something special was coming. He said they would be “baptized” (which means “saturated”) with the Holy Spirit in a few days.

The disciples had no idea what this saturation would look like. Jesus gave them no preview of Pentecost. He doesn't always give us the details we crave; He simply requires obedience. He told them, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (v. 8). And then He told them they would be witnesses in 1) Jerusalem; 2) in all Judea; 3) in Samaria; and 4) in the remotest part of the earth. Then Jesus ascended into a cloud and vanished. The last words Jesus uttered while on this earth were these: “...the remotest part of the earth” (v. 8). Where is that? Indonesia? Bolivia? Ethiopia? I am sure Jesus had all nations in His mind. His mission is global and He calls us to join Him to reach the world. If you truly want to know Jesus, listen to the last thing He said. He came to save the whole world, even the remotest, hardest to reach place. He plans to take His love there, and He will use us to do it!

THINK ABOUT IT

- Jesus said we would be His “witnesses” (v. 8). The Greek word used here is “martus,” from which we get the word “martyr.” Being a witness for Jesus requires bravery—who is the best example of a “witness” for Christ?
- The disciples were “continually devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14). Prayer seems to precede power. How can you be more devoted to prayer?
- Many of Jesus' disciples are named in this chapter. But this is the first time we hear of the disciple Matthias, and we never hear about him again. Also, many women were in the upper room but only Mary is named. Many people who serve the Lord are not publicly recognized. Are you willing to serve in the background?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, make me a bold witness. Whether I'm in my neighbourhood, my city, in another part of my country or on the other side of the planet, give me the power to tell others about Jesus. You died on the cross to save the whole world, and You rose again to prove that You are the true God. Here I am, send me to tell others about Your love and forgiveness.

Jesus told His followers they would be baptized in the Holy Spirit, but He gave them no clues about when or how. While they were gathered together they heard the sound of wind, they saw flames of fire, and they all began to speak in languages they didn't know. And the holy commotion attracted a huge international crowd. After Peter preached his sermon, heavy conviction fell on the audience and 3,000 people decided to believe in Jesus.

Don't overlook the supernatural element of this special day. Heaven literally came down. Human beings cannot manufacture Pentecost. The disciples needed heavenly power to do an impossible task. The same is true today. We cannot reach the world for Christ with human ability. Notice the Holy Spirit "filled" the room (v. 2) and "filled" the disciples (v. 4). The church cannot do its job if we are filled with ourselves; we must be empty and surrendered so God can work. We often focus on the sensational aspects of Pentecost. We love the fireworks. But notice that after the supernatural flames appeared, Peter stood and spoke with great confidence about Jesus. He used the Scriptures to prove that Jesus is the Messiah. Peter said: "God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified" (v. 36). Peter was not just speaking eloquent words—his message produced eternal results because of the Spirit's power.

THINK ABOUT IT

- The people who heard Peter's sermon were from 16 regions of the ancient world. Because God loves people from all nations, He timed the moment of Pentecost so that these foreign visitors would be in Jerusalem. Are you aware of what international visitors live in your city? How can God use you to reach them?
- In Peter's sermon, he quoted the prophet Joel to say that the Holy Spirit will empower men and women, old and young, Jew and Gentile, and even male and female slaves (v. 17-18). How was this revolutionary from the views of traditional Jews in those times?
- When Peter preached, he urged the people to "repent" (v. 38) and "be saved from this perverse generation" (v. 40). He also mentioned "forgiveness of your sins" (v. 38). Those words seem politically incorrect today. How have we watered down the message of the gospel?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, send Your wind and Your fire. I want the true power Pentecost in my life. I know I cannot be filled with Your Spirit if I'm full of myself. I choose to empty my life of all distractions, personal agendas, unholy desires, and unconfessed sin. Burn up the dross and purify my heart so I can be a vessel of Your Spirit. And send a fresh fire to Your church globally!

Luke doesn't tell us the name of the lame beggar who sat outside the temple every day in Jerusalem. I'm sure he had a name, but to most people he was "the crippled guy" they avoided when passing the gate. Maybe a few people threw coins in his cup, but most people ignored him. It is incredibly sad that this poor man sat near the temple every day unchanged. Religion could not cure him. But Pentecost changed everything for this man. After Peter and John were filled with the Holy Spirit (in Acts 2), they had something that dead religion couldn't offer. They had seen Jesus heal paralysed people. Today they did the same miracle Jesus did! They pulled the lame man up on his feet and he walked! And then he began jumping and shouting inside the temple, creating quite a stir.

The miracle must have been embarrassing for Jewish leaders, since they didn't do anything to help this man even though he had been lame all his life (Acts 4:22 says he was more than 40 years old). But Peter used this healing miracle to open the door for his next sermon. He declared boldly: "It is the name of Jesus that has strengthened this man whom you see and know" (v.16). Peter also confronted the people, reminding them that this Jesus they had crucified was "the Christ" (v. 20), which means "the anointed one" or "the Messiah."

THINK ABOUT IT

- Peter and John were supposed to be at a prayer meeting at 3 pm that day, but on the way the Holy Spirit led them to pray for the lame beggar. Has the Lord ever interrupted your schedule so you could minister to someone? We could actually miss a miracle because we are so locked into our schedule.
- Peter did not want people to make him into a celebrity because of this miracle. He said: "...Why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk?" (v.12). Some ministers actually like it when they are admired or worshiped by the crowds. Why do you think Peter was able to remain humble?
- Peter was extremely confrontational in his sermon. He told the people they had "disowned" God's Son (v. 13), he commanded them to "repent" (v. 19) and he mentioned their "wicked ways" (v. 26). People today don't particularly like confrontational preaching. Why is confrontation necessary?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, I know You can still make lame men walk. We want to see Your healing miracles again. Send Your supernatural healing anointing so people can see that You are the true God. Anoint me with your Holy Spirit so that I can lay hands on the sick and see the demonstration of your power. Amen.

Just a few months before the events of Acts 4, Peter had made the worst mistake of his life. In a moment of weakness he denied Jesus—not once but three times. He felt awful. He had failed, so he went back to fishing. Fast-forward to Acts 4, and Peter is a different man. The guy who denied Jesus three times is now preaching his third bold sermon in front of a hostile crowd. The coward became a champion! What changed Peter? Peter was “filled with the Holy Spirit” before he preached to the Jewish leaders. He was not intimidated by their official robes, their positions, their power or their threats. When they told Peter and John to stop teaching about Jesus, the two disciples flatly refused and said, “...We cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard” (v. 20). Peter’s courage came from the Holy Spirit.

The other disciples received the same courage after they prayed together. When they asked God for confidence (v. 29), they experienced another infilling of the Spirit and the building where they were meeting was supernaturally shaken. We don’t know if this was a physical earthquake or a strange local phenomenon—all we know is that the physical realm was affected by their prayers. Prayer can shake a city! Notice that spiritual intensity is building in Jerusalem. In Acts 2 we see a crowd of 3,000 converts. In this chapter that group has grown to 5,000 (v. 4). And after Peter and John bravely defend the faith in front of their opponents, all the believers in that supernatural prayer meeting “began to speak the word of God with boldness” (v. 31). The Holy Spirit transforms timid people into risk-takers and proclaimers!

THINK ABOUT IT

- How would you gauge your level of spiritual boldness? On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being “extremely timid” and 10 being “extremely bold,” where are you? Are you willing to pray for more boldness?
- The devil fights against the church and stirs up persecution. Yet God can use persecution to strengthen the church. What are some ways persecution can be a blessing in disguise?
- Luke introduces Barnabas to us in v. 36-37. He became an important leader in the early church, and his ministry was marked by encouragement. How can you be a better encourager to believers who are connected to you?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, I want to be bold for You. I surrender my fears and my timidity. I don’t want to be quiet about my faith, or afraid of people’s reactions. Fill me with the Holy Spirit so I can have the courage to speak for you. Show me who I should talk to, open the doors of opportunity, give me the words and make me louder for You. Amen.

God always raises up generous people to support the work of ministry. But in Acts 5, we meet two people who devised an evil scheme. Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, wanted to buy the apostles' favour. It wouldn't have been wrong for them to give only part of the sale; but it was wicked for them to pretend to give it all. If this corruption hadn't been exposed, Ananias and his wife could have controlled the church. But the church doesn't belong to men; it must be under the full control of the Holy Spirit. Peter asked Ananias: "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit...?" (v. 3). In Acts 2 the early disciples were filled with the Spirit. Here in Acts 5 two people were filled with Satan! Where God is working, the devil will be lurking. Our enemy wants to stop the gospel from spreading. God swiftly judged Ananias and Sapphira to teach everyone a lesson. We must protect our hearts from Satan's influence so the fire of the Spirit won't be quenched.

Holiness is not an option. Thankfully Peter could not be bought. His character was solid and his devotion to Christ was steadfast. He and the other apostles became bolder than ever. More and more people were converted, healed and delivered from demons. Peter would not have been able to heal people with his shadow (v. 15) if he had come under the dark, sinful shadow of Ananias and Sapphira. The church cannot be powerful in the Spirit if we are corrupted by pride or greed. A holy church cannot be stopped. Even though Satan was raging, and the Jewish officials threw the apostles in prison, an angel opened the prison gates! Peter and the disciples boldly announced: "We must obey God rather than men" (v. 29). The gospel saturated the city, and crowds "from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem" were now converting to Christ. And despite the opposition, the disciples "kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ" (v. 42).

THINK ABOUT IT

- Ananias and Sapphira tried to buy control and make themselves look good. Have you ever seen this happen? Why did God take such harsh action to stop them?
- Many miracles happened as the early disciples prayed for the crowds. Many people were healed and set free from demons, and an angel intervened to help them. Why do you think we don't see more miracles like this today?
- After being flogged by the Jewish officials, the disciples rejoiced that they were "considered worthy" to suffer for Jesus (v. 41). How does their attitude inspire you?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, You want Your church to be holy. Send Your refining fire and purify my heart of any wrong attitudes or motives. Guard me from temptation and deliver me from evil. Make me more like Jesus every day, and don't let me be a stumbling block to anyone. I want to please you in every way. Amen.

WEDNESDAY 27 APRIL

THE CHURCH CONTINUES TO GROW | ACTS 6

Two phrases stand out in this chapter—“the disciples were increasing in number” (v. 1) and “the word of God kept on spreading” (v. 7). God never planned for the church to sit idly in neutral gear. We must advance. Christ’s kingdom is ever expanding, growing from a tiny mustard seed to a giant tree. The gospel was destined to multiply until it fills the whole earth—but growth always has its challenges. Here we see that many Hellenistic Jews, who spoke Greek, have come to know Christ, but a conflict arose because they felt their widows were being overlooked in the church’s daily food outreach.

The 12 apostles offered a wise solution. They called the congregation to choose some new leaders who could focus on the feeding project. Just as Jethro advised Moses to delegate his work, the apostles delegated this task to capable men. The church cannot grow properly without new recruits. But these new leaders must be exemplary role models who are “full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (v. 3). We cannot sacrifice quality just because the quantity increases.

All the men listed in verse 5 have Greek names. This shows us how the gospel spread to the Greek-speaking regions near Jerusalem. We also see that Stephen, one of the seven, carries a special anointing. He was “full of grace and power” (v. 8), he was a fervent preacher and he performed miracles. When the church is growing the way it should, it will produce a strong, younger generation. However, Stephen’s gift also made him a target of the enemy—and he was falsely accused and dragged before the Jewish officials. This special man will pay a huge price to follow Jesus.

THINK ABOUT IT

- Most likely the tensions in Chapter 6 arose because of cultural differences between Israelite Jews and Hellenistic Jews. Why does Satan use ethnicity and culture to divide the church?
- The early church had an outreach to the needy. How can you be more involved in showing Christ’s compassion? Why do we need to both preach and do good works?
- Verse 15 says Stephen had “the face of an angel” when he was dragged before his accusers. Just like Moses’ face glowed because of God’s glory, Stephen’s face must have been shining. Why do you think this happened?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, the early church was led by true servants. I pray I can serve Your people with a humble heart. Deliver me from pride and from the need for attention, position or title. Help me to remember that leadership is about servanthood. And give our churches humble leaders whose only agenda is to glorify Jesus and not themselves. Amen.

THURSDAY 28 APRIL

A SEED MUST DIE IN THE GROUND | ACTS 7

From the previous chapter we know Stephen was passionately devoted to Jesus, and he was a preacher and miracle worker. Even though he was from a Greek-speaking family in Israel, he knew the Scriptures so well that that he quoted 15 passages from memory in his sermon in this chapter—and he brilliantly summarized the entire Old Testament. It is perhaps the most eloquent sermon in the Bible, covering Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David and Solomon. Yet Stephen was stoned to death before he could even finish. Luke doesn't say if anyone made a decision to follow Jesus because of this sermon. Instead of repenting, the angry crowd went berserk after Stephen confronted them for killing God's prophets. Religious Jews would have been especially offended when he told them they were "uncircumcised in heart and ears" (v. 51). They chased him out of the city and crushed his body with stones—as if they could kill his message.

It's sad that one of the early church's most promising new leaders was slain so early in his ministry. But Stephen's death was a defining moment for the church. Not only did this incident scatter the disciples to all regions of Judea (thus spreading the gospel farther), but an angry Pharisee named Saul heard Stephen's piercing words that day. No doubt Saul was haunted by the sermon and perhaps more tormented when Stephen tenderly forgave his murderers as his face glowed. With his death, Stephen planted a seed that would soon bear incredible fruit.

THINK ABOUT IT

- Stephen's message covers much of the Old Testament, but he doesn't say much about Jesus—probably because the angry crowd stopped him before finishing. What do you imagine he would have said in his conclusion?
- Before Stephen was killed he saw Jesus "standing at the right hand of God" (v. 55). The Bible typically describes Jesus as being seated next to the Father. Why do you think was He standing?
- Those who murdered Stephen laid their robes at Saul's feet. Scholars believe this may have been because Saul was the instigator of this stoning. Why did he and the other attackers feel justified in killing this righteous man?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, we pray for Christians around the world who face persecution, mistreatment, and martyrdom. Strengthen them with your presence. Let them see your glory when they face danger, just as Stephen did. And we pray their deaths will not be in vain. We pray that the blood of the martyrs will be like a seed that will bear much fruit in the days to come. Amen.

Peter and John eventually joined Philip to see the Samaritan revival. This time, instead of calling down the fire of judgment, the two apostles prayed for many Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit! Peter also faced a serious dilemma: Simon, a sorcerer, chose to follow Jesus and was baptized. Yet he wasn't free of his deception; he asked if he could buy God's power so he could impress people! Peter rebuked him sternly and told him to repent of his "wickedness" (v. 22). Peter would not allow a charlatan to mix witchcraft with the gospel.

The devil wants to infiltrate the church so he can hinder the Holy Spirit's work. Through discernment, Peter saw what was in Simon's heart. If he hadn't been exposed, Simon could have led the Samaritan believers astray. His story shows us the challenges we will face when the gospel penetrates new areas; we will encounter demons, sorcery and all kinds of spiritual darkness. We must be full of the Holy Spirit to overcome this.

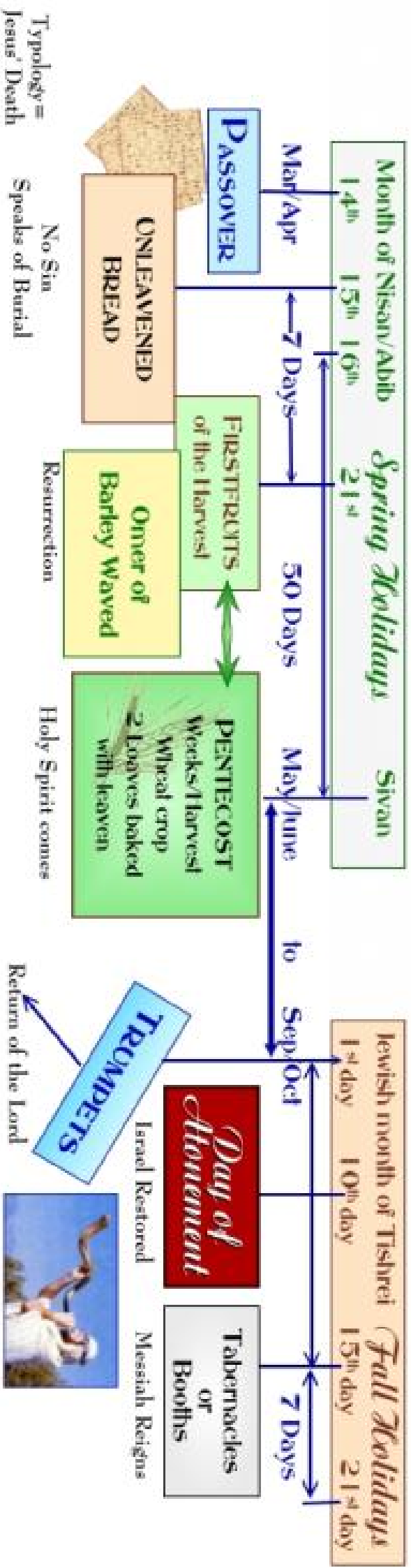
On Philip's journey back to Jerusalem, an angel directed him to witness to an Ethiopian. This man was most likely a convert to Judaism, but after listening to Philip's teaching, the man declared: "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (v. 37). He wanted to be baptized immediately, so Philip fulfilled that request. Then the Spirit "snatched Philip away" (v. 39) to an area on the Mediterranean Sea, where he preached "in all the cities" until he stopped in Caesarea, the capital of Roman Judea. (v. 40). We will find Philip there 25 years later.

THINK ABOUT IT

- This chapter focuses on Philip, who was part of the "second generation" of leaders in the church. We should not be intimidated when younger people think creatively and innovatively. How can you encourage young Christians to grow in their faith and even surpass you?
- Philip was willing to go to Samaria, a place Jews avoided, and he climbed in an Ethiopian's chariot to witness to him. Are you willing to cross cultural and racial barriers to share your faith?
- Philip went extremely out of his way to talk to the Ethiopian man. Yet history tells us that this convert probably planted the church in Ethiopia. Pray that the Lord will arrange your schedule so that your "chance encounters" will have huge impact.

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, You called the church to take the gospel to Samaria—the places we tend to avoid. Help me to have compassion for people who are not like me. Break all walls of racism and discrimination in my heart. Give me Your love for those who live in my city, yet who have a different racial or class background. Let me carry Your love where it is needed most.

CHART OF BIBLICAL FEASTS AS DESCRIBED IN LEVITICUS 23



Note that the first three feasts occur within an eight day period. Fifty days following the after Passover the Feast of Pentecost occurs. It is also known as the Feast of Weeks. The beginning of the Jewish Holiday Years, or Feast Year, is reckoned from the first day of Nisan.

Saul was truly a bloodthirsty leopard. He was “breathing threats and murder,” hell-bent on wiping out this sect of Christians he was investigating. But on his way to Damascus he came face to face with the Jesus he was persecuting. The heavenly light was so bright it blinded him, and in an instant he was changed. In hearing Jesus’ audible voice, Paul realized the Son of God had indeed been raised from the dead. Even though he was temporarily blinded, he saw the light of the gospel for the first time. He would become a preeminent apostle who would write much of the New Testament and carry the gospel all the way to Caesar. He would articulate the doctrines of Christianity like no other human being who ever lived, and like Abraham he would become a true father of our faith. But he had to be born again. Paul’s journey began with surrender, repentance and a 180-degree turnaround.

Paul’s dramatic entrance into God’s kingdom couldn’t have been possible without the humble Ananias, who is only mentioned twice in the Bible. Some people serve in great ways, but they receive little earthly recognition. Ananias was like a midwife; he aided in the birth of a spiritual giant. Through a vision he understood that Paul was a “chosen instrument” who would take the gospel to the Gentiles (v. 15). Ananias encouraged Paul, prayed for the healing of his eyes and fed him. But most importantly he prayed for him to be filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 17), because Paul could never have accomplished his ministry without the Spirit’s anointing.

THINK ABOUT IT

- The disciples were afraid of Saul at first, because he had persecuted the church. It was Barnabas who befriended him and encouraged his ministry. Who in your life has served as a Barnabas to encourage you in your ministry and spiritual growth?
- When Peter prayed for Dorcas to be raised from the dead, he asked everyone to leave the room (v. 40). This is what Jesus did when He raised Jarius’ daughter (Mark 5:40). Why did Peter copy Jesus like this?
- When Peter went to Joppa he stayed with a “tanner” named Simon (v. 43). A tanner made leather, and observant Jews despised this profession because they refused to touch dead animals. Why is it significant that Peter was with this man?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, we need more dramatic conversions like Saul’s. We pray that the blinding light of your presence will reach the hardest of sinners. Bring strong conviction and the revelation of Jesus Christ to those who are running from you. (You can mention the name of someone you know who is running from God.) We pray you would reach those who seem unreachable, and then turn them into bold preachers like the Apostle Paul.

Peter was an observant Jew, he kept the Sabbath, he honoured the Scriptures and he stayed away from unclean foods. He didn't eat pork or shellfish—and certainly not bats, camels, rabbits, falcons or vultures. So imagine the shock when Peter fell into a trance during his morning prayers and saw a sheet coming down from heaven filled with all types of repulsive animals, including reptiles! For a Jew this was the most grotesque smorgasbord imaginable! Yet he heard a voice saying, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy” (v. 15).

The Holy Spirit must offend our religious traditions when He is doing a new thing. Three men ended up at Peter's door in Joppa; they were Gentiles asking him to come to the house of a Roman officer named Cornelius, in nearby Caesarea. Peter must have suspected that God had sent these non-Jewish guests. He agreed to go with them on the 30-mile journey. When he arrived, he found a house full of foreigners. Peter's sermon about Jesus that day was the same gospel, but his audience was totally different. He said: “... everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins” (v. 43). Everyone! Jew and Gentile, white, black, Asian, Hispanic, Indian—all races. The gospel has broken down all walls of separation.

This is the same Peter who had cast his nets on the other side of the boat when Jesus told him to do so. It is the same Peter to whom Jesus had given “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 16:19). In Cornelius' house, Peter opened a wide door with this key—and the nations streamed into God's house. Peter let down his nets in a different spot, and the catch was overwhelming. A glorious new day has begun for the church. There is no turning back.

THINK ABOUT IT

- Why do you think God had to tell Peter three times to eat the unclean foods?
- Peter had to overcome obvious fears before going to Cornelius's house. Think about your own culture. Why are some people afraid of other races?
- Notice that Peter stayed with the Italian converts for a few days after they were baptized (v. 48). Authentic ministry involves more than just preaching; we must be willing to spend time with people. How do you think this time of fellowship affected everyone there?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, the gospel is for all races, cultures, tribes and tongues. Give me the same love You have for all people. Uproot all racism in my heart so that I will be willing to cross any cultural barrier for You. I want to take Your message to every “Cornelius” in my city until everyone has heard. Amen.

WEDNESDAY 4 MAY

FINALLY BREAKING THE RACIAL BARRIER | ACTS 11

The first Gentile church was born in that Italian house, when Cornelius' relatives received the Holy Spirit's power. But Jewish believers in Jerusalem weren't happy about it they said to Peter: "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them" (v. 3). These were baptized followers of Christ—but their religious traditions made their hearts cold. Thankfully Peter's testimony convinced them: "God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life" (v. 18). Many early believers were still locked into old mindsets of limitation, fear and racism. But notice verse 20. It represents a game-changing moment: "Some of them ... came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus." I can imagine that angels began rejoicing that day. Finally, so long after Jesus had told His followers to "go therefore into all the world," they are finally doing it.

The brave barrier-breakers who risked criticism to preach to Greeks are not named here. They are simply called "men of Cyprus and Cyrene." Oftentimes the people who do the hardest kingdom work are humble heroes who get no credit. Yet we can be sure they got a heavenly reward. It's also significant that Antioch became a headquarters of Christian faith, and that the church got the "Christian" label for the first time there. Antioch was the third most important city of the Roman Empire, dwarfed only by Rome and Alexandria, and it was filled with idols and immorality. It wasn't a place you or I would choose for a missionary base! Yet it was there that Barnabas and Saul became partners to reach the Gentile world.

The Holy Spirit wants us to spread the gospel everywhere, even to the worst places. Those who are "full of the Spirit," like Barnabas, are eager to go where others won't. This missionary spirit propelled the church into the darkest regions. We need the Spirit's fire today to melt our racism and to push us out of our comfort zones.

THINK ABOUT IT

- Have you seen situations when Christians stayed away from certain types of people because of race or ethnicity? How can we overcome these attitudes today?
- Barnabas was a gifted leader, but he knew he would be more effective in Antioch with help from Saul. He was willing to work alongside another leader, because "two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labour" (Eccl. 4:9). Why is teamwork better than the "one-man show"?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, there is still so much racism and division in Your church today. We have been afraid of each other. There are so many walls of suspicion and mistrust. Break the walls of culture and division, and heal our hearts so we can show the world the true love of Jesus. Amen.

King Herod arrested some of the disciples, “and he had James the brother of John put to death” (v. 2). James was one of the first men Jesus called from the shores of Galilee to follow Him. Of the original disciples, he was first to be martyred. The king who beheaded him, Herod Agrippa, was the grandson of the Herod who terrorized Bethlehem so he could kill the infant Jesus. This Herod is also the nephew of Herod Antipas, who beheaded John the Baptist and oversaw the scourging of Jesus. Something sinister was operating in this royal family. The same devil who slaughtered the babies in Jerusalem wanted to snuff out those who carried the gospel. Imagine Peter weeping for his beloved friend. Following Christ isn’t easy for those who suffer martyrdom, or for those left behind.

After the miracle of Peter’s release, Luke tells us that God judged King Herod for his wickedness. While he delivered an address from his throne, his subjects praised him as if he were a god. As he soaked up the adoration, “an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory” (v. 23). The heathen will rage, and Satan will use government leaders to hinder the church, but Psalm 2:10-12 says: “Take warning, O judges of the earth. Worship the Lord with reverence ...for His wrath may soon be kindled.” God laughs at His enemies. King Herod “was eaten by worms” (v. 23), yet the gospel “continued to grow and to be multiplied” (v. 24). Despite our setbacks and tragedies, evil will be crushed and good will prevail. Jesus always leads us to victory.

THINK ABOUT IT

- The believers in Mary’s house were praying for Peter’s release, but they didn’t believe the servant girl when she told them he was at the door. Why do you think they doubted it?
- When Peter tells his friends to report his release to “James,” he is referring to James the brother of Jesus, who didn’t become a Christian until after the resurrection. James became a leader of the Jerusalem church, and he wrote the epistle of James. Why do you think he didn’t follow Christ before He was crucified?
- The “Mark” who is mentioned twice in this chapter is the author of the gospel of Mark. He was Barnabas’ cousin, and he travelled with Barnabas and Paul. Why was it important for the apostles to take a younger leader with them?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, we know the church will suffer persecution in this world. Sometimes even government leaders will oppose the church. Give us the courage to stand for You, no matter what kind of opposition we face. And we pray that You, the Ruler and Judge of all the earth, will deal with leaders like King Herod. Amen.

After Saul and Barnabas sailed to Crete, they encountered a dark, demonic force. A magician named Elymas, who didn't want to lose his entrenched influence, tried to stop them. But Saul broke the power of this Satanic spell and sent the sorcerer away with temporary blindness. Because of the miracle, the island's Roman leader believed in the gospel.

Notice the secret of Saul's anointing—he was “filled with the Holy Spirit” (v. 9) before he dramatically unplugged Elymas' evil power source. From Crete, Saul and Barnabas went to a place called Pisidian Antioch, in what is now Turkey. Archeologists say this city is 3,600 feet above sea level, and the two missionaries would have had to cross the Taurus mountain range on a treacherous road that was famous for robbers. (The difficulty of this journey could be why the young Mark quit and went home.) We need extra courage when God calls us to cross barriers and face dangers. The apostles met with a different kind of resistance than what we saw in Crete. Here, religious Jews stirred up resistance and drove Paul and Barnabas out of their district. Satan doesn't just work through witchdoctors; he also uses religious people to hinder the gospel. Paul made a dramatic announcement in v. 46 that signals a major shift in his mission. He said: “Behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.” He will keep visiting synagogues wherever he goes, but the entire world became his parish.

THINK ABOUT IT

- The group of leaders who prayed for Barnabas and Saul in Antioch were from various racial backgrounds. Simeon was black, and Lucius was from Libya. What does this say about how the early church was changing?
- Saul's sermon to the Jews in Pisidian Antioch is very similar to the sermon Stephen preached before he was martyred. Although Stephen was killed, his message lived on in Saul's life. What are you doing right now for Jesus that might live on after you are gone?
- After the disciples were persecuted, verse 52 says they were “continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.” Describe a time when God's joy helped you overcome difficulty.

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, give us discernment to know when Satan is opposing us. We don't want to be ignorant of the devil's schemes. Give us the power of the Holy Spirit to unmask wicked people like Elymas, who tried to use deception to stop the spreading of the gospel. Let the truth of Christ prevail against all false prophets and occult power. Amen.

After they preached in Lystra, the Jews stoned Paul and left him for dead. “But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city” (v. 20). Stoning was similar to lynching. Normally the victim would be thrown off a cliff, and then others would hurl rocks from at least 3 meters away until the person was dead. Stephen died, yet Paul miraculously survived this ordeal. He told the converts in Lystra: “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (v. 22). When Paul wrote later about his hardships, he said: “Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep” (2 Cor. 11:25). His reference to stoning was the incident in Lystra. He would never forget it; he likely received permanent scars. But he didn’t quit. British preacher Charles Spurgeon once wrote: “Perseverance is the badge of true saints.” We see this kind of steadfast perseverance in Paul and Barnabas. We never hear them complaining; in fact, they constantly encouraged their new converts as they went from place to place. Finally when they returned to Antioch, where they began their journey, they rejoiced as they told of God’s miracles.

The pagans living in Lystra thought Paul and Barnabas were the incarnations of Zeus and Hermes. Archeologists have found many temples to these gods in that region. In his sermon, Paul described the true God as one who “gave you rains from heaven” (v. 17). It is interesting that Zeus was considered the god of rain, and he was often portrayed with a lightning bolt. Paul was telling them that Zeus was not the true god, nor the true source of blessing. He challenged the spiritual darkness and introduced them to the true God!

THINK ABOUT IT

- God performed a significant miracle of healing in Lystra when the lame man walked (v. 8). Why do we not see more miracles like this today? Are you willing to step out in faith and pray for miraculous healings?
- Paul wrote later about an out-of-body experience in which he saw a glorious vision of heaven that God wouldn’t allow him to talk about (2 Cor. 12:2-4). Many scholars believe these visions occurred when Paul was stoned in Lystra. If that is true, his horrible ordeal was also a blessing. Have you been able to see God’s hidden blessings in your worst experiences?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, give me the strength to persevere in all situations. Paul faced many tribulations - even a stoning - yet he kept going. Life’s hardships did not stop him. I don’t want to faint when life gets hard. You promised that those who wait on You will receive new strength. Thank You for the grace to run my race with endurance. Amen.

There was much to celebrate after Paul completed his first missionary journey. A wide door of faith had opened to the Gentiles. Yet an ugly problem arose, the devil couldn't stop the gospel from spreading outwardly, so he tried to stop it with an internal church dispute. Certain Jewish disciples, known as Judaizers, were spreading the idea that Gentiles couldn't be saved unless they followed the Jewish Law. They demanded that the Gentile converts must be circumcised. Paul, with his adventurous heart, would surely have preferred to go on his next trip and ignore this dispute. But sometimes we must stop the work of ministry to deal with problems. Jesus Himself warned his disciples to beware of "the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matt. 16:6). That leaven of legalism was spreading, and the Pharisees wanted to impose their control.

Thankfully the early church leaders "came together" and "listened" (v. 6, 12) as Peter, Barnabas and Paul shared how Gentiles experienced God's grace. Christian unity prevailed in the tense meeting. Peter eloquently summarized the gospel: "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are" (v. 11). Then James, the half-brother of Jesus, quoted the prophet Amos and decreed that the Judaizers should stop troubling the Gentile believers. James announced that Gentiles are welcome in God's kingdom without restrictions. The nasty dispute was resolved, but the devil keeps trying to divide even today.

THINK ABOUT IT

- In Peter's message to the council, he criticized the Judaizers for "placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke" which no one can bear (v. 10). He was speaking of the heavy burden of the Law, which no imperfect human being can obey. What did Jesus say about His "yoke"?
- The letter from the apostles tells Gentile Christians to abstain from fornication, from eating meats contaminated by idols and from eating meats that were not properly drained of blood, according to Jewish tradition. The apostles were basically saying, "Be sensitive to your brethren." How might this apply today to Christians from various cultural or ethnic backgrounds?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, the devil often tries to divide Your church. He uses doctrine, politics, opinions and personal offenses. Make me an instrument of peace and reconciliation. Use me to build bridges instead of walls. I pray for unity in the body of Christ. Let us be on the same page with the Holy Spirit, and in harmony with each other. May the love of God overcome all divisions. Amen.

Paul must have felt frustrated. As he prayed about which region to visit, the Holy Spirit kept closing the door. The Spirit forbade them from going to “Asia” (a region on the eastern coast of Turkey, v. 6); He wouldn’t let them go northeast, to Bithynia (v. 7). The Holy Spirit had a plan, and Paul knew he had to follow it. We can’t do ministry by relying on our own instincts; running ahead of God is foolish. We must wait for God’s GPS coordinates.

The breakthrough came when Paul saw a vision of a man from the Macedonian region of Greece. He was saying: “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (v. 9). This must have surprised the apostle, since he wasn’t planning to go there. Yet Paul “immediately” (v. 10) got a ship and sailed across the Aegean Sea to the Roman city of Philippi. Never be surprised by God’s detours. This was where God wanted a new church. In Philippi, a wealthy woman, Lydia, was crying out to know the true God. The soil in that rocky place, and in her heart, had been prepared. When Lydia heard the gospel, “the Lord opened her heart” (v. 14). She became Europe’s first convert. That triggered a public uproar, and Paul and Silas ended up in prison. The devil wasn’t happy that the light of the gospel had invaded his territory. Yet God had the last word. He sent an earthquake to shake the city, and every door in that prison was opened, and every chain was unfastened. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty—and this chain-breaking freedom was destined to spread throughout Greece. The jailer and his family believed in Christ—and the other prisoners (who listened to Paul and Silas singing in captivity) probably believed too. A city that had been on spiritual lockdown became a headquarters for faith in Christ.

THINK ABOUT IT

- Timothy became Paul’s spiritual son and closest colleague. God knows how to connect people when He wants them to work together. Have you seen God connect you with someone He wanted you to do ministry with?
- In verse 11, Luke begins saying “we” in his narrative. This must have been when Luke joined the team and became an eye-witness. Because Luke was a doctor, some people believe he joined the team to help care for Paul, who had some physical ailments. This is a beautiful picture of Christians using their gifts to care for each other. How does God use you to help others in a team situation?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, there are so many places in the world today that are still closed to the gospel. Like Macedonia, there is no gospel witness in these places. Open the spiritual doors and send your witnesses into those cities and regions. Give us the land! We pray You will send Your messengers into the neediest mission fields. Amen.

Paul and his team planted a church there that became a strong base for evangelism. Even though angry mobs staged a violent protest, the gospel took deep root. Paul later bragged about the believers there, saying, “For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you ...” (1 Thess. 1:8). The persecution he endured was worth the hassle, because the Thessalonian church grew strong! Nothing stopped Paul. He could have been killed in Thessalonica, but the disciples sneaked him out and he went to nearby Berea, where more people believed. After more resistance he was escorted to Athens, the famed capital of the Greek empire. There, Paul felt agitated because of the city’s many idols. Everywhere he looked there were statues of Zeus, Hera, Aphrodite, Ares and Poseidon. This would have been difficult for a former Pharisee like Paul, who hated false gods. Yet he didn’t speak in anger or self-righteousness when he addressed the leading citizens of the city. He talked to them about a loving Creator who is willing to forgive sinners. He even quoted their own poets to make his message relevant to a secular audience.

Paul’s sermon in Athens got three different reactions. 1) Some people “sneered,” meaning they rejected him (v. 32); 2) Another group delayed any decision, saying they would hear more about it; 3) But there were people who responded and followed Christ. This reminds us of Jesus’ words about the seed when it is sown. Not all will believe, but there will be those who receive the Word, if it is not first eaten by birds, choked by thorns, or hindered by hard ground. Paul planted the seed of the gospel in hostile, foreign soil, and it produced a harvest.

THINK ABOUT IT

- Luke mentions that “leading women” believed in Jesus in Thessalonica (v. 4). He also says “women” believed in Berea, and that “a woman named Damaris” believed in Athens. Why do you think Luke mentions women so often?
- Paul’s message to the Athenians was very different from what he typically spoke to Jews. He did not quote any Bible verses, but he did quote the poets Epimenides and Aratus. What could we learn from his communication strategy today?
- Paul saw the altar to an unknown god during his journey to Athens, and this became the inspiration for his sermon. Not all sermons are written down and carefully rehearsed. Has God ever given you instantaneous inspiration for something you needed to say?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, our nation today is so much like Athens. There are so many idols in our culture. Many people have never even heard of the true God. Give us the same wisdom that Paul had. Help us to preach a relevant message that will open eyes and hearts to the truth of the gospel.

Paul set up his tent making business and taught the gospel for 18 months. Dealing with his business would have been tough; yet he also had to deal with church problems and persecution from angry Jews. Maybe this is one reason the Lord Jesus appeared to him in a vision one night, and Paul heard His audible voice promising divine protection (v. 9-10). One word from God changed everything! Paul had already faced unimaginable hardships, but after hearing the reassuring voice of Jesus saying, “I am with you,” he could go on for years with that fresh inspiration.

Thankfully Paul didn't do his work alone. The Holy Spirit raised up many new leaders to shoulder the responsibility of the growing movement. Silas and Timothy were there to help; we now meet Aquila and Priscilla, who became Paul's close ministry partners after they arrived from Rome. We also meet Sosthenes, who became a leader in the Corinthian church, and Apollos, a well-educated Alexandrian who would become a powerful apostle. Paul wasn't threatened by strong leaders; he knew the gospel couldn't expand without new recruits who could plant, water and harvest. The last verse of the chapter reveals how eloquent a preacher Apollos was. Yet Paul was a humble team player, so he would never feel threatened by a younger leader's success.

THINK ABOUT IT

- Acts 18:9-10 is one of the few places where the words of Jesus are recorded in the Bible after His resurrection. Jesus still speaks to us today. Can you remember a time when the Lord spoke to you and you were significantly strengthened or refreshed?
- The disciples in Ephesus asked Paul to stay longer, but he refused (v. 20). The demands of ministry are great, but we cannot let people control our schedule. Paul knew he had to go back to his home base in Antioch. Why is important to rest, even when people need us?
- Apollos was naturally talented, but that wasn't enough. He only knew the baptism of John, so Priscilla and Aquila “explained to him the way of God more accurately” (v. 26). That means he was baptized in water and filled with the Holy Spirit. After than his preaching had a stronger anointing. What spiritual gifts began to emerge in your life after you were born again and filled with the Spirit?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, thank you for my church family. I know I'm not supposed to live my life in isolation. You have put specific people around me to help me and support me. Teach me to open my life to others. Help me to open my heart, so I can allow mentors and friends to encourage me and strengthen me in my spiritual journey. Amen.

Ephesus was not only a strategic commercial hub; it was also a headquarters of pagan worship. The massive temple of Artemis was there, and it was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Legend said that the hideous stone image of the goddess had fallen from heaven, perhaps in the form of a meteorite. Because her body was covered with many breasts, she was considered a goddess of fertility. People came from all over the region of Asia, on the eastern coast of Turkey, to buy images of Artemis and to participate in her perverted sexual rituals. Because of the high level of occult activity in Ephesus, Paul also cast out many demons. The sons of a certain Jewish exorcist named Sceva became so jealous of Paul's power that they tried to cast out an evil spirit, but they were attacked—proving that true freedom over the demonic realm is found only in the name of Jesus. The residents of Ephesus realized the witchcraft they trusted in had no power, so they burned their books and turned to the Lord (v. 19).

The craftsmen who made the idols of Artemis got angry at Paul, because he challenged the goddess' power and they lost money when people stopped buying their idols. They gathered in an outdoor theatre and shouted, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" for two hours (v. 35). The town clerk quelled the riot, the people went home, and the gospel continued to spread. Luke says: "So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing" (v. 20). It's fascinating that Paul's most eloquent words about spiritual warfare were written to the Ephesians, who lived in this nest of demonic worship. He told them: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). He most likely had Artemis in mind when he penned those words. The gospel of Christ prevailed against this idol.

THINK ABOUT IT

- The Ephesian men Paul met in verse 2 were religious men who believed in God, but they had never experienced true conversion. They had gone as far as Old Testament law could take them, but they needed to be born again. Have you ever met religious people like this? What would you say to them?
- When the demon spoke in verse 15 it said, "I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" What does this tell us about Paul's spiritual authority?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, I want to see the same kind of spiritual awakening in my city that occurred in Ephesus. I want to see lots of people repenting and turning from their idols, and believing in the gospel. Send a revival, Lord. Break the strongholds of darkness and free the captives.

Paul showed us how to be truly Christ-like. First of all, a true leader invests time in others. Paul spent time with the disciples in Corinth (v. 1), then he gave “much exhortation” to the disciples in Macedonia, and then he spent three months teaching the churches in Greece. When it was time to leave there, we learn that he was traveling with a team that included Sopater, Aristarchus, Secundus, Gaius, Timothy, Tychichus and Trophimus. Almost all of these men are mentioned in Paul’s letters. He poured his life into them, and they became gifted leaders. Just as David produced his mighty warriors, Paul did the same. A Christ-like leader is not threatened by successors. Paul left a lasting legacy.

Secondly, we see that true leaders have compassion. In Troas, Paul was so eager to invest in his disciples that he taught late into the night. Eutychus, who is called both a “young man” and a “boy,” got drowsy, fell out a third-floor window and died. Some commentators believe he was a slave. He may have worked 12 hours before coming to that meeting, but he wanted to be there. Notice how much care Paul had for this lad! Paul “fell upon him” (v. 10) after the accident, which means he embraced him with desperation. Genuine leaders care, even for the “least of these.”

Thirdly, we hear the heart of Jesus in Paul’s farewell to the Ephesian elders. He reminds them that he didn’t use the gospel to make himself rich. As a mentor he modelled unselfishness. When he prayed for his disciples and said goodbye, they wept, hugged and kissed because they loved him like a father. He had wept many times when admonishing them; now they are weeping for him. New Testament leadership is marked by authenticity, affection and sacrificial love.

THINK ABOUT IT

- Paul’s plan was to “sail past Ephesus” (v. 16) because he was in a hurry to get to Jerusalem. Yet he decided to stop at Miletus and call the Ephesian leaders to come there for an important farewell meeting. Are you willing to allow the Holy Spirit to interrupt your plans so you can fulfil God’s mission?
- We see deep emotion and close fellowship in the meeting with the Ephesian elders. Sometimes our fellowship today can be cold and formal. Why do you think our love for each other may not be as warm as what believers in the first century experienced?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, make me more sensitive to the Holy Spirit’s direction. Just as Paul was willing to change his itinerary so he could visit the Ephesian leaders, help me to listen to Your plan. I don’t want to be so busy with my own schedule that I miss Your leading. Make me flexible so You can guide me, even if You want to take me on an unexpected detour.

The apostle Paul told the Philippians he wanted to know Jesus Christ “and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings” (Phil. 3:10). In this chapter we see Paul living this out. When he left the Ephesian elders in Chapter 20, they wept when he told them he would never see them again. He knew serious trouble lay ahead. When he was with the disciples in Tyre they warned him not to go to Jerusalem (v. 4). And when he was in Caesarea, the prophet Agabus confirmed that Paul would be bound and captured in Jerusalem (v. 11).

Yet Paul didn't hide or run away. With tenacious determination he was bent on reaching the city. He told his friends: “For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (v. 13). Like Jesus when He drank the cup of suffering, Paul was resigned to God's will even if it meant death. And sure enough, when he arrived in the city, visiting Jews from Asia devised a plot to have him arrested. They falsely accused him of taking Trophimus, his Ephesian disciple, into areas of the temple that were off limits to Gentiles. When they shouted, “Away with him!” (v. 36), that didn't just mean take him away—they meant, “Kill him!”

Notice how many similarities there are between Jesus' and Paul's arrests. Like Jesus, Paul said he was willing to die. Both Jesus and Paul faced an angry mob. Both Jesus and Paul were beaten. Jesus was crucified between two thieves, and Paul was bound with two chains (v. 33). The crowd that condemned Jesus also shouted, “Away with him!” (John 19:15). We see in Paul a heart of sold-out devotion. Paul was willing to carry the cross of Christ. His heart's cry was, “Not my will, but yours be done.” Paul's gospel was not soft or risk-free. He knew that suffering is part of the Christian life. He modelled courage for us all.

THINK ABOUT IT

- When Paul and his team left the Ephesian leaders in verse 1, Luke says, “When we had parted...” This actually means, in the Greek, “When we tore away from them...” How do you explain the deep love the disciples had for each other?
- We learn in this chapter that Philip the evangelist has been living in Caesarea since he went there almost 25 years earlier (see 8:40). Why do you think Luke mentions in v. 9 his four daughters who were prophets?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, I want to be willing to follow You anywhere, no matter the cost. I want to be a living sacrifice. Just as Jesus prayed “Not My will, but Yours be done,” I say, “Have Your way, Lord.” I surrender my will to You. I will not put conditions on my obedience. I know there are risks in serving God, but I will not let any risk stop me from following You fully.

Do you ever get nervous before you speak publicly? Some people break out in hives when they have to talk to a small group. Even the most gifted preachers say they get queasy before they go to the platform. We don't know how Paul felt when he stood in front of this angry crowd in Jerusalem. He knew they were hostile, yet he didn't flinch. A strange hush came over the crowd as he began speaking. God gave him the words—and the courage to say them. We should expect to receive the same supernatural boldness when we share our faith with others.

Paul didn't dance around his subject or hide the truth. He pulled the sword of the Spirit out of its sheath and waved it. After telling of his proud Jewish heritage, admitting that he was a persecutor of Christians, he made Jesus Christ the focus of his message. He described how a bright light flashed around him, and he heard a voice saying: "I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting" (v. 8).

Paul didn't give the people empty words. He told them how he had a face-to-face encounter with the Messiah. He told how he heard Jesus' voice. He told how he was baptized. He admitted that he was wrong for approving of Stephen's murder. He spoke with humility, yet with commanding authority. And in all his humble admission, he was telling the Jews that they too had been resisting God.

Paul's words cut deep. But the crowd didn't go berserk until Paul quoted Jesus saying, "I will send you far away to the Gentiles" (v. 21). That was the last straw. Pride and racism were deeply ingrained in the Jewish people. They couldn't stand the idea that God would accept non-Jews into His kingdom. This was Paul's life message, and he knew he would die for it. Thankfully, his life was spared in this tense situation because God had more work for him to do.

THINK ABOUT IT

- In Paul's sermon, he said he put "both men and women" into prisons when he was persecuting the disciples. As we have mentioned before, Luke included women in his narrative. Why is this important?
- Paul may have assumed that he would die at this moment. The crowd would have stoned him, but God miraculously spared him. Why is the issue of Paul's Roman citizenship so important at this point?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, You called me to be Your witness. I don't want to be afraid to speak for You when the door opens. Please deliver me from shyness. I know the Holy Spirit can give me the courage to stand up for You when the time is right. Make me a bold witness. Amen.

Paul had many mountaintop experiences. He was literally blinded by the light of Christ's presence on the road to Damascus. During his three missionary ventures he planted churches and saw miracles. And he was supernaturally delivered from many dangerous situations. His chains even fell off while he was imprisoned in Philippi!

Yet in that dark valley Paul heard the voice of Jesus again. Verse 11 says Jesus stood by Paul's side in the night and said: "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also." The Greek for "Take courage" can be translated "Be of good cheer." How could Paul be happy when his countrymen had rejected his message? I'm sure his heart was weighed down by fear, anguish and discouragement. Then Jesus spoke! Paul may have felt he failed by not turning the Jews to faith in Christ, but Jesus encouraged him by saying, "You have solemnly witnessed to My cause." And Paul's fear of dying in that place was crushed when Jesus said he would preach in Rome! Jesus was saying, "You've done what I asked you to do, and I have more for you to accomplish!"

Have you ever received a word from God that totally turned your situation around? This happened for Paul. As soon as Jesus spoke, the plot against Paul's life was exposed, and he was safely escorted to the Herod's praetorium in Caesarea. (How ironic that the building that sheltered Paul was built by the evil tyrant who murdered the infant boys of Bethlehem.) The Roman leaders in charge of Paul's case gave him favour. Claudius wrote in his letter that Paul was innocent, and Felix the governor promised Paul a fair trial. God was with Paul even in his worst moments.

THINK ABOUT IT

- Can you remember your worst moment? How did God speak to you or comfort you in that dark time?
- In Chapter 22, the crowd went crazy when Paul mentioned "Gentiles." In this chapter, the Pharisees and Sadducees were divided when Paul used the phrase "resurrection of the dead." Why is this significant?
- Forty men vowed to fast until they killed Paul. This is how much hatred some of the Jews had for the Christian message. Why do you think they were so determined to kill him?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, it's true that one word from God makes all the difference. Thank You for being there for me in my darkest moments. And I pray that when my family members or friends are experiencing tough times, I will also be there to provide the Lord's words of comfort and support. Use me as a vessel of encouragement to others. Amen.



PATHWAY TO MISSIONS

**CONNECTING, TRAINING AND RESOURCING
YOUR MISSIONARY JOURNEY**

Paul being falsely accused by his Jewish brethren. The trial is a mockery of justice. The lawyer, Tertullus, called Paul a “real pest” (v. 5), and claimed that he desecrated the temple. He also labelled Christianity a “sect.” Tertullus used that negative term to convince the Roman governor, Felix, to squash all Christians in the empire. The angry Jews wouldn’t be happy until Paul was dead.

Paul’s experience in Caesarea reminds us that those who stand for Christ will suffer in this life. Jesus told us we would be hated and killed. Paul told Timothy: “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). Paul was hated by religious people and by corrupt pagan leaders. Felix, who was a corrupt opportunist, had some knowledge of Christianity (v. 22). After all, the first Gentile church began in Caesarea, in the home of a Roman military leader, Cornelius. By now Christianity had taken deep root in the city, and Felix had probably heard the gospel several times. We sense there is a spiritual battle for his life. He was thirsty for power and money, yet the Holy Spirit must have been convicting him.

Paul ended up preaching to Felix and his Jewish wife, Drusilla—who was the granddaughter of Herod the Great (who tried to kill the infant Jesus), the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa 1 (who killed the disciple James) and the niece of Herod Antipas (who beheaded John the Baptist). We sense spiritual danger when we consider her dark heritage, yet God arranged for Paul to preach about “righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come” to this powerful couple. Paul’s message was so sobering that Felix “trembled” (KJV) as he considered eternity. Sadly, Felix did not convert to Jesus. Historic record reveals that Drusilla was buried in lava during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D., and there is no evidence that she converted to Christ before that tragedy.

THINK ABOUT IT

- There were many Christians in Caesarea by the time Paul was imprisoned there. How do you think Paul’s suffering affected the believers there? How does God use persecution to strengthen the church?
- After Tertullus attacked Paul in the trial, Paul stood and said, “I cheerfully make my defence” (v. 10). The Holy Spirit obviously was helping him to stay calm in a very tense situation. How has God helped you to stay composed in a time of great stress?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, thank You that Paul could “cheerfully” share the gospel even when he was in an uncomfortable situation. Your joy is the source of my strength. I pray You will fill me with the joy of the Holy Spirit—a joy that is not affected by my circumstances. Amen.

Christianity began in an obscure corner of the world, in a small village in Israel. Jesus was born in a manger and was visited by poor shepherds and a few foreigners. Jesus' first disciples were uneducated fishermen. He was rejected by many of His own Jewish people, and was crucified like a criminal. Yet here in Acts 25 we see that the message of Christ could not be stopped. The mustard seed became a giant tree. Christ's message spread throughout the Roman Empire. When Paul stood in front of Festus, probably barefooted in rags and chains. Yet with confidence intriguing Festus about "a dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive" (v. 19). When Paul got an audience with King Agrippa and Bernice, they entered the auditorium "amid great pomp" (v. 23). King Agrippa, the son of the evil king who killed the disciple James, was also curious about Paul's message.

Can you see God's invisible hand behind these events? God can channel the hearts of kings. He rules in the affairs of nations, even when evil men rage against the truth. Festus seemed to want to protect Paul. And when Paul appealed to Caesar, we realize he will eventually stand before the most powerful ruler on earth. Centuries before Paul, the prophet Daniel stood before the king of Babylon and described a small stone that would crush the giant statue that represented the kingdoms of this world. Daniel said the small stone "became a great mountain and filled the whole earth" (Dan. 2:35). We see this happening in the Book of Acts. The Christian message started in obscurity, but it will impact the whole world.

THINK ABOUT IT

- The Jews had plotted to kill Paul in an ambush, but they couldn't convince Festus to bring Paul back to Jerusalem. A disaster was averted. Has there been a time in your life when God averted a disaster to protect you?
- When Paul appealed to Caesar, he knew Nero was the supreme leader of the Roman Empire. Paul probably knew Nero would not be sympathetic to the Christian faith, yet he still wanted to go to Rome. What does this show us about Paul's faith?
- King Agrippa was curious about Paul's message, but we never hear that he became a Christian. Have you ever shared the gospel with someone who seemed interested but put off making a decision? Why did they resist?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, we see in the Book of Acts that You wanted Paul to bring the gospel even to Caesar. You want the leaders of the world to hear the truth about salvation. I pray that the leaders of my nation will hear and respond to Jesus Christ. (You can mention their names to the Lord.) May the leaders of my nation serve You and honour You. Amen.

WEDNESDAY 25 MAY

PAUL SHOWS US HOW TO WITNESS | ACTS 26

Studies show that only a small percentage of Christians have led anyone to faith. 78% of churchgoers had not shared Jesus with anyone in six months. The Paul shows us many examples of personal evangelism, he was not nervous when he stood before King Agrippa. It was as if Paul had been born for that moment. With candour, confidence and persuasiveness, the brave apostle depended on the Holy Spirit's anointing to find the right words. Paul was bound with chains while he preached this message, yet the boldness of the Spirit made him free. The structure of his sermon provides a guideline for us when we witness to others. He used three strategies to defend his faith: (1) He shared his own testimony of how He saw Jesus on the road to Damascus; (2) He emphasized that Jesus was risen from the dead (v. 23), an indisputable fact that proved He is the true God; and (3) he mentioned the Old Testament prophets (v. 27), because they testified about Jesus years before He came. Notice also that in the very middle of his sermon, Paul quoted the Lord saying: "I am Jesus..." (v. 15). Jesus was always at the heart of Paul's preaching.

Notice how friendly and personal Paul was with the king. He said, "O King," or "King Agrippa," six times in his message. This was not a rote, memorized sermon. Paul knew how to reach hearts with warmth and courtesy. He probably made piercing eye contact with Agrippa, his wife and the governor, Felix. And the conviction of the Holy Spirit obviously bothered both the king and the governor. Felix accused Paul of being insane, and Agrippa said: "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian" (v. 28). Agrippa wasn't saying he would convert—he was taunting Paul for being aggressive. The king, Bernice, Felix and the others got up and left without making a decision, reminding us that some people will reject the gift of salvation.

THINK ABOUT IT

- In Paul's encounter on the road to Damascus, Jesus told him: "It is hard for you to kick against the goads" (v. 14). This phrase comes from a Greek proverb about a long spear used to prod oxen. Jesus was saying, "You are only hurting yourself when you resist Me." Did you resist God before you fully surrendered to him?
- Paul used the words "forgiveness of sins" (v. 18), "repent and turn to God" (v. 20) and "repentance" (v. 20) in his sermon. Why is it important to talk about these things when we share the gospel?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, it's obvious that Paul eagerly shared the gospel with King Agrippa because he wanted him to be saved. I want that kind of love for people. I want to feel Your heart for those who don't know You. Help me to love them so much that I would do anything to prevent them from stepping into eternity without God. Amen.

In Acts 27 we read about the violent storm off the coast of Crete, how the crew jettisoned the cargo, how the ship was tossed violently near the African coast, and how it crashed on a reef. In the midst of this nail-biting adventure, an angel visited Paul and said: “Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar” (v. 24). The angel also promised Paul that the lives of all 276 passengers would be spared. Greeks on the ship might have prayed to the god Poseidon, who supposedly ruled the waves. But Paul knew the true God was in charge of this voyage. This was not the first time Paul had been in a disaster at sea. In 2 Corinthians 11:25 he mentions three shipwrecks, and those words were written before the events of Acts 27. Travel was not easy in the first century. And yet the gospel kept spreading because brave followers of Christ were willing to risk death. This harrowing account shows us that carrying the message of Jesus will never be easy. We might face storms, angry mobs, sinister plots, iron chains and demonic resistance. Yet the wind of God’s Spirit is stronger than any hurricane.

In the Old Testament, the disobedient prophet Jonah set sail on a ship from Israel on a similar route across the Mediterranean Sea. Jonah didn’t want to preach to the Gentiles of Nineveh, so he tried to go to Tarshish, in what is now Spain. Jonah’s ship hit “a great storm” (Jon. 1:4), and the sailors realized the disaster had come because Jonah was fleeing from God. That’s why they threw the prophet overboard. In the case of Paul, the apostle was willing to carry the gospel to Rome—and because of his presence in the boat all the men were spared. God goes with His messengers. Even when we face dangers and disasters, He is in the ship with us.

THINK ABOUT IT

- Paul didn’t face this shipwreck alone. He had his disciple Aristarchus with him (v. 2) as well as Luke. Why is it so important for us to have strong friends to support us in difficult times?
- Before the ship ran aground, Paul encouraged the men to eat, and he broke the bread and led them in a prayer of thanks (v. 35). What does this remind you of?
- Roman soldiers would normally kill prisoners in a situation like this so they would not escape. Yet the centurion had compassion on the crew and protected Paul (v. 43). How do you think Paul’s faith may have affected him?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, thank You that You promised to be with me in all circumstances. Whenever I’m having a difficult time—when the storms of life are raging—help me to know You are in the boat with me. You are the Lord of the wind and the waves. You bring peace when I am anxious and afraid. Amen.

Paul had experienced God's detours before, so he must have been at peace about this unexpected stopover. While on the island a snake bit Paul, but he was not harmed; then he prayed for the father of the local governor, and the man was miraculously healed of a fever and dysentery. Jesus had said that those who believe in Him "will pick up serpents" and "lay hands on the sick, and they will recover" (Mark 16:18). Paul's message about Christ was confirmed powerfully, and the whole island was affected.

When Paul and his companions finally arrived in Italy, and Paul preached to them in their houses and churches. Paul's letter to the Philippians that there were even Christians in "Caesar's household" (Phil. 4:22). When Paul arrived in Rome, he was placed under house arrest, but he had the freedom to share his faith. As was his custom, he started by preaching to Jews first. Some believed, others scoffed, and a controversy erupted. That is when Paul defiantly announced his mission: "Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles" (v. 28). This has been the theme of the Book of Acts. Paul stayed in his rented house in Rome for two years, "preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered" (v. 31). This is amazing, considering the fact that the ruthless tyrant Nero was the emperor at the time.

BUT what happened after Chapter 28? We know the gospel continued to spread, in spite of persecution and hardships. Paul wrote many of his epistles from Rome, and Church tradition says he was beheaded by Nero in 68 A.D. Acts chose not to focus on Paul's death because this great apostle's message continued long after he was martyred. The flame that was ignited on the day of Pentecost cannot not be extinguished. We carry it today.

THINK ABOUT IT

- The great revival in Malta occurred during an unplanned stopover. Paul's ship was not even supposed to go there. Has God ever changed your plans so that you could minister to someone unexpectedly?
- When talking to the Jews in Rome, Paul quoted a passage in Isaiah saying that Jews had closed their hearts to God's message. Then Paul announced he was going to the Gentiles. Do you think Paul was giving up on his own people?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Lord, thank you that Your Word continues to spread around the world, in spite of opposition and persecution. Thank you for the fire that the apostle Paul and early Christians carried in the first century. And thank You that I can continue to carry that fire today. Help me to faithfully spread that fire to my generation. Amen.

In order to understand the Holy Spirit and His role in our lives, we have to first make sure we have the right perspective. The best way to do this is by studying God's Word to find out what it has to say. This helps us lay a strong foundation on this topic with truth straight from God's Word. It also helps us identify and change any mindsets or perspectives that don't line up with God's Word. These kinds of things can hold us back from experiencing all God has for us. Isaiah 55:8-11 tells us, "This plan of mine is not what you would work out, neither are my thoughts the same as yours! For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than yours, and my thoughts than yours. As the rain and snow come down from heaven and stay upon the ground to water the earth, and cause the grain to grow and to produce seed for the farmer and bread for the hungry, so also is my Word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It shall accomplish all I want it to and prosper everywhere I send it".

Simply put, throughout our lives as believers, we are continually renewing our minds so we can think like God thinks, which enables us to walk according to God's principles. When we do this, not only will we experience fulfilment deep within, but we'll also see God's blessings poured into our lives. If we want to experience all God has for us when it comes to the Holy Spirit and his work in our lives, it's important that we make sure we adjust our thoughts to match God's.

THINK ABOUT IT

- Is the Holy Spirit a topic that you feel you have a solid Biblical foundation on, or is this an area that you are hoping to gain some clarity on?
- Are there some thoughts or perspectives about the Holy Spirit that you need changed to match God's thinking?
- 1 Corinthians 2:14-15 encourages us to be spiritually receptive to the truth in God's Word. If our hearts are closed off to the things of God, it's difficult to truly understand the truth we find in scripture. On the other hand, it tells us a spiritually receptive person "tries all things [he examines, investigates, inquiries into, questions, and discerns all things] ..." (AMPC). What are some practical things spiritually receptive people do to learn God's Word and understand its principles?

PRAY ABOUT IT: God, I want to experience everything You have for me. Teach me to think the way You think about the Holy Spirit. I choose to be spiritually receptive so that I can learn and grow in my relationship with You. Help my heart and spirit to have clarity to understand this great gift that You've given us in the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When we understand who the Holy Spirit is and how he functions, we can better embrace his role in our lives. There are several important aspects to who the Holy Spirit is. First, the Holy Spirit is a person. This one comes as a surprise to many people. However, just like Jesus, who is fully God and fully man, the Holy Spirit is fully God but also functions as a person. How do we know? Think about three of the qualities and characteristics you and I have as people. We have a mind; we can think. We have emotion; we can feel. We also have a will; we can choose.

The Holy Spirit has these three qualities as well. Scripture tells us the Holy Spirit has a mind (Romans 8:27), emotions (Ephesians 4:30), and a will (1 Corinthians 12:11). Second, the Holy Spirit is God. He is not part-God, but fully God. We believe there is one God, eternally existing in three persons: Father, Son (Jesus Christ) and Holy Spirit. These three are co-equal. Our God is a triune God, meaning three in one. Finally, the Holy Spirit is for today.

When we take all of these thoughts and put them together, we come up with a good description of who the Holy Spirit is: The Holy Spirit is the person of God in the now. The great news is, God has given us the Holy Spirit to dwell in all believers. As a result, he is with us—strengthening, comforting, and leading us every moment of our lives!

THINK ABOUT IT

- The Holy Spirit is the person of God in the now.
- Read John 16:7. Notice Jesus' description of the Holy Spirit: "the Comforter (Counsellor, Helper, Advocate, Intercessor, Strengthenener, and Standby)..." (AMPC). This verse shows us some of the roles the Holy Spirit plays in our lives, and the many ways he helps us. Which one resonates with you most and why?
- Refer back to John 16:7. What kind of relationship does God want us to have with the Holy Spirit?
- Life can get busy and there are so many sources of "input" telling us what to do, how to think and what to feel. It can be easy to let the other influences and voices in our lives become louder than the still small voice of the Holy Spirit. Are there things in your life that can distract you from the Holy Spirit's leading in your life? What are some practical changes you could make?

PRAY ABOUT IT: Thank You for sending us the Holy Spirit. I'm so grateful that in every season and in every situation, the Holy Spirit is with me to comfort, strengthen, and help me. Help me to recognize and deal with any distractions that are barriers to receiving the Holy Spirit's help.

Now that we've talked about who the Holy Spirit is and some of the ways he impacts our lives, let's talk specifically about the baptism with the Holy Spirit. Many people wonder where the expression; "baptized with the Holy Spirit" comes from. Jesus was the first one to say it, and his words are recorded in Acts 1:4-5: "On one occasion, while he was eating with them, [Jesus] gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

The word baptize essentially means "to immerse." We could describe the baptism with the Holy Spirit as an infilling experience that takes place when we ask Him (Jesus) to baptize (immerse) us with His Holy Spirit. When we are baptized with the Holy Spirit, our spirits become sensitized to the spirit realm and what God is doing. The book of Acts shows us several powerful accounts of believers being baptized with the Holy Spirit. As we look at these accounts, we find six things we need to know about the baptism with the Holy Spirit:

1. There was an overwhelming in breaking of God's presence.
2. The baptism with the Holy Spirit is an experience separate from salvation, although it can occur simultaneously.
3. Speaking in tongues is an indicator of Holy Spirit baptism.
4. The laying on of hands and prayer of a believer can be helpful but isn't essential.
5. Holy Spirit baptism was a normal and expected experience in the New Testament.
6. The experience is available for everyone!

THINK ABOUT IT

- The baptism with the Holy Spirit experience we read about in the New Testament, is available to all believers today.
- In John 7:37-39. What word picture does Jesus use to describe the Holy Spirit within us? What do you think this tells us about the Holy Spirit and his way of working in our lives?
- In Acts 1:4-5, Jesus refers to the baptism with the Holy Spirit as a "gift" and a "promise." What do you think the disciples might have been experiencing when Jesus reassured them with these words? How can these descriptions of the Holy Spirit give us confidence and comfort today, too?

PRAY ABOUT IT: God, I want to experience all You have for me. I know You give good gifts to Your children, and I believe the Holy Spirit is one of those good gifts. I know that Your Word says You'll give the Holy Spirit to all who ask. Help me to embrace what the Bible says about the Holy Spirit so I can receive every good gift You want me to have. Amen.

Praying in tongues is an incredible benefit of being baptized with the Holy Spirit. It's a God-given prayer language that enables you to communicate directly with God in a special way. It's given for the benefit of the believer, to "super-charge" your life and relationship with him. Unfortunately, it's one of the most misunderstood aspects of the baptism with the Holy Spirit. If this is something that you have had confusion or apprehension about, it's important to look directly at what God's Word says with fresh eyes and let it shape your thoughts about praying in tongues. Here are three foundational truths from the Bible that can help us better understand speaking in tongues:

1. It's a language. (Acts 2:3-8) Speaking in tongues may sound unfamiliar to us, but it's not gibberish. It's a language. When the Holy Spirit was poured out in Acts 2, one of the distinctions made in scripture is that these men were clearly speaking in another language.

2. It's a language of the spirit. (1 Corinthians 14:14-15) When we pray only with our own understanding, we are limited to what we know, or think we know, about a situation. When we pray in the Spirit, we have the ability to pray with greater effectiveness. The Holy Spirit always has far more knowledge about the situation than we ever could.

3. It's a prayer language. (Ephesians 6:18, Jude 20) As Paul concludes his writing on the Armor of God, he makes sure to give a final encouragement to pray in the Spirit, because it is a powerful spiritual weapon. God gave it to us because he knew we'd need it to help us stay strong and come through life's battles victoriously.

THINK ABOUT IT

- Praying in tongues is one of my greatest spiritual resources as a believer.
- Questions to Reflect On:
- What are some of the benefits of praying in tongues?
- According to Romans 8:26-27, what does the Holy Spirit do for us?
- In 1 Corinthians 14:2, Paul tells us that when we pray in the Spirit, we are speaking mysteries. In the original language, the word "mysteries" means hidden or unrevealed truth. What are some situations when this kind of prayer could be particularly powerful or helpful?

PRAY ABOUT IT: God, thank You for the incredible benefits that come into my life through the baptism with the Holy Spirit and the ability to pray in a spiritual language. Help me to grow in this gift and be able to experience the fullness of the benefits it can bring. Amen.

Now that we've studied who the Holy Spirit is, and the power of the Holy Spirit in our life, it's also important to know there are specific results that should be evident in our life when we're filled with the Spirit. The best place to look is the life of Jesus. In Luke 3:21-22, Jesus is being baptized in the Jordan and as He is praying, He has a powerful encounter with the Holy Spirit. In this story, we see two things that positioned Jesus for this experience with the Holy Spirit; spiritual hunger and prayer.

These same two things are important in our lives as well. The first is spiritual hunger. Jesus had a hunger that compelled him to pursue every experience that would help lead him forward spiritually. He sought out John the Baptist and pursued being baptized. The second thing is prayer. It brought an open heaven over Jesus' life and when heaven was opened, the Holy Spirit came. In the next chapter, Luke describes Jesus as "full of the Holy Spirit" (Luke 4:1). A spiritual change took place in Jesus' life, and that's exactly what can happen in our lives, too.

We often look at Pentecost as a festival wherein we receive something personally. While that is true, if we focus only on ourselves, we miss out on the broad purpose. Ultimately, all that God does is for His glory and for His name to be made known among all people. It may seem as though God is self-centred! But He knows that if people know Him and worship Him it will ultimately be the best for them. There is still a great harvest of souls for the Kingdom awaiting the revealing of the Holy Spirit in our lives. For the sake of this lost world let's live a "Spirit Filled life".

THINK ABOUT IT

- When we're full of the Holy Spirit, it brings results into our everyday lives.
- What is the first result of a spirit-filled life we see take place in Jesus' life (Luke 4:1)? What are some of the areas we need spirit-led direction in our lives?
- What is the second result of a spirit-filled life that is displayed in Jesus' life (Luke 4:14)? In Acts 1:8, what did Jesus tell His disciples the power of the Holy Spirit was for? Name some key things the Holy Spirit empowers us to do.
- What is the third result of a spirit-filled life, that we see Jesus living out (Luke 4:18)? As spirit-filled believers, what should be a main focus of our lives? What are some practical ways we can live a life of purpose like Jesus described in Luke 4:18?

PRAY ABOUT IT: God, thank You for all that comes into my life because of the Holy Spirit. I want to experience the direction, power and purpose that come as a result of a Spirit-filled life. Help me to use that direction, power and purpose to impact people and make a difference for eternity. Amen.

SUNDAY SERVICES

CRANBOURNE

1785 South Gippsland Hwy
9am / 11:00am / 6:00pm
(03) 5996 3048

HALLAM

25 Boland Drive, Lyndhurst
10:00am
(03) 9773 5551

FILIPINO OUTREACH

2:00pm
www.facebook.com/turningpoint-FilipinoOutreach

LILYDALE

197 Main Street
10:30am
(03) 9735 4419

KOO WEE RUP

335 Rossiter Road
10:30am
6:00pm Fortnightly
(03) 5997 2217

ROSEBUD

Cnr Jetty Rd and Morgan St
2:00pm
(03) 5910 4802

OFFICER

Currently running Connect Groups
(03) 5943 1555

SEAFORD

224 Seaford Road
2:00pm
(03) 9785 7229

WILDPATH

51/325 Nepean Hwy
FRANKSTON
10:30am
(03) 9785 7229

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