



Today

May/June 2019

refresh, refocus, renew

THE EARLY CHURCH:
THE PATH TO CHANGING
THE WORLD

ALSO: HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN

Friends:

What path are you on? The Bible is full of advice about the road to walk. Psalm 1:1 famously begins, “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take. . . .” Jeremiah 21:8 warns, “This is what the LORD says: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death.” And Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).



Before they were called Christians, people who believed in Jesus were known as followers of “the Way” (Acts 9:2; 24:14). One of the earliest Christian writings we have outside of the New Testament, called the *Didache* (The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles), begins, “There are two Ways, one of Life and one of Death, and there is a great difference between the two Ways.” You may be saved by grace, and yet the path you walk makes a great difference to you and those around you.

This June, Jul Medenblik will walk us through the story of the followers of the Way as found in the book of Acts, and how they literally walked (and sailed) the highways of the ancient world to introduce others to Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life.

But first, in May, Joel Vande Werken starts with an exploration of events surrounding the ascension of Christ into heaven. Jesus may be bodily in heaven now, but how does that affect our daily lives here on earth?

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God’s Word!

—Steven Koster

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**“He Ascended
into Heaven”**
Joel Vande Werken



**“The Early Church: The Path
to Changing the World”**
Jul Medenblik

Managing Editor: Jeff Bulthuis
Executive Editor: Steven Koster

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ReFrame
Media

june

The Early Church: The Path to Changing the World

Jul Medenblik

In *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony* we read, “The Spirit gathers people from every tongue, tribe, and nation into the unity of the body of Christ. Anointed and sent by the Spirit, the church is thrust into the world, ambassadors of God’s peace, announcing forgiveness and reconciliation, proclaiming the good news of grace” (paragraph 30).

Last year, in May 2018, Pastor Jul Medenblik helped us see, through the prism of Ascension Day, Pentecost, and the early chapters of Acts, how the church has existed from the beginning of the world as God has been at work to gather and build his people.

We asked Pastor Jul to continue working through the rest of the book of Acts to help us see the story of the church unfold. (To find the earlier parts of the story, visit todaydevotional.com and search the author’s name.)

Rev. Jul Medenblik is a former attorney who was called to pastoral ministry and became the founding pastor of a church in New Lenox, Illinois. He is currently serving as president of Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Jul and his wife, Jackie, are blessed with a son, Joshua, and a daughter, Julianne.

WORD AND DEED MINISTRY

Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.
—Acts 6:8

Not long after Pentecost, the unity of the church was being threatened. Widows from a Greek background were being left out in the daily distribution of food for needy persons. So the twelve apostles who were leading the church gathered the community together to discuss a solution to this problem.

Seven people were then chosen to lead in the service ministries of the whole community. The unity of the church was restored, and the Word of God continued to spread.

Stephen's work is especially highlighted in this chapter of Acts. His ministry of helpful deeds is also marked by a ministry of words. Stephen helps us understand that God calls us to be his witnesses with our actions *and* our words. By God's grace and power, Stephen both did great wonders and spoke great wisdom.

Stephen's work was full of power because it was a testimony of integrity and truth. He walked among fellow Christians as a disciple of Jesus, and he talked to others and invited them to follow Jesus.

But some powerful leaders outside the church saw Stephen as a threat. They persuaded false witnesses to speak against him, and yet Stephen remained a witness for Jesus. Even his face—looking like the face of an angel—was a sign of his close relationship with God.

Lord of the church, empower us by your Spirit to be your witnesses in word and deed. May even our faces—in joy or sorrow—show our love for you and others. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

THE STORY OF GOD'S PROMISES

"As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt had greatly increased."

—Acts 7:17

Many members of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish ruling council) saw Stephen as an outsider. He was from a Greek background. They charged him with speaking against the temple, Moses, and the law of Moses.

In his defense, Stephen summarized the people's history. Stephen stated that Abraham, the patriarch of the Jews, was their father in the faith. Stephen used phrases like "our people" to place his faith and his story within the story of all that God had done and promised for the descendants of Abraham.

Stephen showed how God kept his promises to Abraham. A couple with no children was promised descendants. One who did not even own a patch of ground was promised land. Over time, his family grew throughout many generations

but were eventually enslaved in Egypt.

Stephen's retelling of those stories shows that he had respect for all who had gone before him. The history of Abraham's descendants focuses on what God accomplished; *God's work* was the most important part of the story. God worked in the lives of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and all the others to fulfill his promises.

In Stephen's description of Joseph we find a theme that summarizes the whole story: "God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles."

God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we turn to you and ask you to continue keeping your promises. Make us your people by faith in Christ. Amen.

WHERE DOES GOD REALLY LIVE?

"The Most High does not live in houses made by human hands."

—Acts 7:50

Continuing with his story, Stephen responds to the false charges of the religious leaders. He shows how God worked through people and events to fulfill his promises. And as we often see in our own lives, God did this despite the people's rebellion against him.

The people's own history reveals the hypocrisy of people who recite *part* of the story of Moses but ignore the *rest* of the story. The religious leaders absolutely revered Moses, yet they would not admit that—as a people—they turned against Moses. They lifted Moses up as a great leader, but they failed to remember that Moses had also murdered a man. It was *God* who redeemed Moses and gave him his calling to lead the people out of slavery.

Moses received God's living words to pass along, but the people refused to obey. They

rejected God and Moses in their hearts, saying they would rather be back in Egypt. They made a golden calf as an idol and worshiped that instead of God.

Stephen links the ancient history of God's people to their current time. The religious leaders see the temple as a place of worship, but they have not recognized Jesus as the one worthy of worship. They prize a building, but they have failed to see that God wants their hearts.

Similarly, we may think that God loves our church structures, but he still really wants our hearts as his dwelling place.

Lord over all, forgive us for not giving you our whole hearts. Forgive us for ignoring you. Guide us to listen to you and worship you only. Amen.

A DISCIPLE'S PRAYER

"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. . . . Lord, do not hold this sin against them."
—Acts 7:59-60

As Stephen finishes his defense against false accusations, he notes that many prophets in the past were persecuted and killed—and that his accusers did the same to Jesus. At this, the crowd becomes an angry mob that drags Stephen out of the city and begins to stone him.

Why does the crowd become so violent? When Stephen says he sees heaven open and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, that means Jesus is in the place of ultimate authority. And the leaders who wanted Jesus dead and gone cannot bear to hear this testimony, so they rush to silence Stephen by killing him.

In the midst of his suffering, Stephen prays. The link between Stephen and Jesus is clear and dynamic. His words are similar to some words Jesus said while he was suffering

on the cross (Luke 23:46; see Psalm 31:5).

And because of the link between Jesus and Stephen, the testimony of Stephen continues. A martyr's death continues the work of God.

On the sidelines in this story we meet someone else whose life will be changed by an encounter with Jesus. Saul, a young leader who approves of this stoning, will one day understand how Stephen's prayer, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them," was answered that day.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thank you for being with me in times of suffering and trouble—just as you were with Stephen. Help me also to pray as a disciple of Jesus. Amen.

THE CHURCH IN SAMARIA

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.
—Acts 8:1

Jesus promised that his disciples would receive power when the Holy Spirit came on them, and he said they would be witnesses for him in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and across the earth (Acts 1:8). As Saul and many others begin persecuting the church, we see a clear movement of the church from being centered in Jerusalem to spreading out to Samaria. But even though believers in Jesus are suffering persecution, God's church continues to grow.

Philip, one of the seven new leaders chosen in Acts 6, begins a ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing in Samaria. Many people believe and are baptized, including a man named Simon who had practiced sorcery. Peter and John visit to see what God is doing there, and as they pray and lay hands on the new be-

lievers, they receive the Holy Spirit.

Simon, however, offers money, saying he wants to buy the ability to give people the Holy Spirit. And he receives a lesson in grace. Peter instructs him to repent and pray for forgiveness. God's power cannot be bought. Grace is not for sale.

Simon was impressed with the power he saw in Philip, Peter, and John. But following God is not about gaining power. Simon needed a heart change. Peter saw bitterness lurking in Simon's heart, and until that was gone, he could not be part of the Lord's ministry.

God of abundant, amazing grace, cleanse and renew our hearts, washing away all our sins. By Christ's power, Amen.

CHURCH ON THE MOVE

They came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?"

—Acts 8:36

I once attended a conference in which we visited a church called "Church on the Move." It was a congregation that was quite different from the tradition I am used to, and the church's name has stuck with me. I have come to appreciate the meaning behind the name of that church.

Church life can be static and stale for many of us. We have our routines. We may even sit in the same chair or pew, week after week. Though Christ has intended his church to be a community that is always growing, inviting all kinds of people to come to know Jesus, the church can become rather stationary if we let that happen.

In our reading for today, the Spirit sends Philip in a certain direction, and Philip soon meets an Ethiopian who is reading from the book of

Isaiah in his chariot. The man does not understand what he is reading. God has sent Philip for this moment, and a new disciple is born out of this encounter.

The Spirit of God soon took Philip to another place, and the Ethiopian man went back home, bringing the good news of Jesus with him. Though this man was a eunuch who could no longer have children, the church in Ethiopia today points back to him as a spiritual father.

As a disciple of Jesus, where and how are you helping to keep the church "on the move"?

Lord and God, we thank you for the way the Spirit moves into our lives and hearts. May we follow the Spirit faithfully, moving in line with your will each day. Amen.

AN UNLIKELY STORY

[They] were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners . . . ?"

—Acts 9:21

As my children were growing up, they sometimes told stories that made me ask, "Really? Did that really happen?" I have to admit that I also told similar stories to my parents.

The story of Saul's conversion caused a lot of people to ask, "Really?" Saul was a well-known persecutor of Christians. But that was before he met Jesus in a blinding vision on the road to Damascus. Then, after Saul was brought into the city by the men traveling with him, Jesus told a disciple named Ananias to bring Saul a message and restore his sight. Ananias responded, "Really?" He reminded the Lord that Saul had come to arrest believers in Jesus.

Ananias's fear was joined later by the astonishment of others. Even the disciples of Jesus in Jerusalem could not believe the

news. Only the courage and kindness of Barnabas helped Saul get an introduction to the apostles. What changed?

Saul changed. Saul had met Jesus. He had been blind, but now he saw the truth. An unlikely instrument—a persecutor of the church—became a preacher and teacher for Jesus.

Maybe you have thought about using a gift for God and have heard Satan whisper, "Really?" Don't be discouraged. We are all unlikely instruments of God's grace.

Lord, help us to know that by your grace and through your Spirit, you bring unlikely sinners to service in your kingdom. May we be bold for you. Amen.

ONE LIFE AT A TIME

[Peter] took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive.
—Acts 9:41

Today's story in Scripture provides a glimpse into the Spirit of God's work through the apostle Peter. The book of Acts tells of big moments like Pentecost, but it also highlights how individuals' lives are changed by the ministry of Jesus' disciples.

A man who was paralyzed and had been bedridden for eight years hears Peter say, "Jesus Christ heals you. Get up. . . ." His life was changed, and many people in the local area turned to Jesus.

Another person whose life was changed was Tabitha, also known as Dorcas. She became sick and died, and many people mourned. When Peter arrived, many widows showed him the clothing Dorcas had made for them. Peter prayed to the Lord, and God brought her back to life again. Mourning

turned into dancing, and more people came to believe in Jesus as Lord.

Are these merely good stories of a distant time in the life of the church, or are they something more? God is still at work in this world. The news media may not pay attention, but we know that the church of Jesus is still called to touch the lives of others—one life at a time. We can come alongside people who are hurting and point them to the healing and hope that come through Jesus.

God of healing and hope, empower us to enter into the lives of others so we may weep with those who weep and also wipe away tears as we witness to your love, hope, and healing in Jesus' name. Amen.

A VISION THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."
—Acts 10:15

Cornelius, a centurion in the Roman army, was "God-fearing" and gave generously to people in need. He was not a full convert to the Jewish faith, so he was considered a Gentile by all who followed the laws of the Jewish community. This meant he could not associate with anyone who was Jewish.

Our Scripture for today declares a message that was whispered throughout the Old Testament. God had told Abraham that his descendants would be a blessing to "all peoples" (Genesis 12:3). And now God called Peter to participate in bringing that blessing as God also worked through Cornelius.

For centuries the Jews were taught that certain foods, as well as people who were non-Jews (Gentiles), were "unclean," but now God changed all that in a vision he gave to Peter. A sheet coming down

from heaven had all kinds of animals on it, and a voice told Peter to eat. Though Peter was hungry, he said he would not eat anything that was "unclean." But the voice said that if God had made it all clean, no one should call it unclean.

The vision came three times, and then Peter was invited to visit Cornelius. Peter understood that the Spirit of God was changing things and that he needed to follow where the Spirit would lead. On this Pentecost Sunday, we remember that the Spirit is still at work to shape and mold the church.

God of heaven and earth, we confess that we still divide this world into "us" and "them." Help us to see all people as loved by you and worthy of your grace. Through Jesus we pray. Amen.

NO FAVORITES

The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles.
—Acts 10:45

Our family has strong connections with Canada. I had the privilege to be a student intern pastor in Calgary, Alberta. Our daughter was born there, so she enjoys citizenship in both Canada and the United States. Because of so many good experiences there, it's hard to narrow down what our favorite memory from Canada is.

In the middle of this story about crossing Jewish and Gentile boundaries we read, "I now realize . . . that God does not show favoritism." Peter has learned important lessons about God's generous grace. He not only received a startling vision, but he also heard the amazing testimony of Cornelius.

While Peter and Cornelius are at the center of this story, we should also notice the other people there. Cornelius has

gathered a large crowd of relatives and friends, and Peter has brought along some circumcised (Jewish) believers. In the midst of this gathering, the Holy Spirit breaks down barriers and draws these groups together. The Holy Spirit is poured out on the Gentiles, and the circumcised believers are in awe. They did not expect this!

God breaks through stereotypes and separation, and—by the waters of baptism—everyone is sealed as children of God and as brothers and sisters in faith together. No favorites!

God of all, forgive us for putting up walls to divide ourselves from others of your children. May your Spirit pour out afresh on all who call on the name of Jesus. Amen.

WHAT DID YOU DO?

“Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’”

—Acts 11:16

Is good news ever not good news?

Peter and six others had witnessed how the Holy Spirit was poured out on Gentiles in the home of Cornelius. But when they returned to Jerusalem, they faced a lot of questions, like “What did you do?” and “How could you have done that?” They were criticized and called out for eating and staying with “those” people.

So, in a summary of what had happened, Peter explained step by step that God had shown him a vision and that God had wanted him to meet with Cornelius.

Peter pointed out that when he began to speak at Cornelius’s house, the Holy Spirit came on the Gentiles who were there. To Peter, it had felt like Pentecost all over again (see Acts 2).

Up to this point, Peter told the story frame by frame. But now he widened the focus and said he remembered that Jesus had promised they would baptize with the Holy Spirit. And that had come true in the home of Cornelius—a Gentile!

As Peter finished describing this event, he turned to everyone gathered there and said, “Who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?”

And the people—including the ones who were critical—praised God. No further objections!

God of good news, thank you for sharing your grace through the power of the Holy Spirit. Prevent us from ever opposing you; help us to be ready to give you praise! Amen.

BARNABAS: GOD'S BRIDGE BUILDER

Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch.
—Acts 11:25-26

The expansion of God's family to include the Gentiles did not stop with Peter's encounter with Cornelius. The scattering of believers because of persecution led to more and more Jews hearing about Jesus, and in Antioch some believers began sharing the good news with Greeks and other Gentiles.

The church at Jerusalem wanted to equip these new believers in Antioch. And the person whom they chose to do this was Barnabas, whose name means "son of Encouragement" (Acts 4:36). Barnabas began ministering in Antioch, and many people came to believe in the Lord.

God also motivated Barnabas to look for Saul and to bring him into the work in Antioch. Barnabas had introduced Saul earlier to the apostles (Acts 9:27), and now he became a bridge builder again. For the

next year, Saul and Barnabas "taught great numbers of people." And the believers there became so identified with Jesus that a term of ridicule, *Christians* — meaning "little christs" — became a badge of honor.

The final verses of our passage show us that the bridge works both ways. When a severe famine came into the region and Judea was hit hard, the church in Antioch sent Barnabas and Saul with gifts for the people in Judea. Bridge building is the way God wants us to work together.

God of all people and places, may we be challenged to live as bridge builders who desire to serve whomever we meet. May our eyes be opened and our hearts be in rhythm with yours. Amen.

WHO IS THE KING?

Peter . . . said, "Now I know . . . that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches. . . ." —Acts 12:11

The church was facing a hard time of persecution. James, the brother of John and one of the disciples closest to Jesus, was put to death by King Herod. And now, it seemed, Peter would be next.

Herod was trying to show that he was in charge. His political allies, the Jewish authorities, didn't want the followers of Jesus around, so Herod began persecuting them. And he liked how this improved his ratings!

But at night in Peter's prison cell, an angel woke Peter up, released him from his chains, and led him outside. Peter had no idea what was going on. He thought it was a dream. Even the believers who were praying for his release were stunned when he showed up at their door. But God's work through Peter was not finished, so God gave more time to serve.

This prison-break story closes with Herod's deadly anger at the prison guards—and then we hear of Herod's self-satisfaction when political allies from Tyre and Sidon praise him. So God strikes Herod down. His body becomes a meal for worms, but the Word of God continues to spread and flourish.

I have been privileged to see believers serving behind prison walls. Did you know that God still shows up inside prisons and other places to set hearts free? After all, he is the true King.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we praise you. We confess that we are like Herod more often than we like to think. May we always see you as Lord, no matter the circumstances. In Jesus' name, Amen.

DIFFERENT NAME, SAME MESSAGE

"My friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you."
—Acts 13:38

The Holy Spirit and the Antioch church send Saul and Barnabas to preach about Jesus, the Savior. (The rest of the book of Acts presents a lot of missionary travel like this, so, to keep pace, most of our Bible readings for the rest of this month will be long and cover lots of ground.)

In the account of their trip through Cyprus, we learn that Saul is "also called Paul." In those days, lots of people had more than one name, probably because many languages were spoken (Greek, Latin, local dialects). John, for example, is "also called Mark." Barnabas is also named Joseph. *Saul* is a Hebrew name, and *Paul* derives from a Roman family name (Paulius). We learn later in Acts that Paul was born a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28), so *Paul* may be his registered Roman name. As a mission-

ary in the Roman Empire, Paul likely preferred to use this name as he worked among Gentiles. One thing we know for sure is that the message he shared was the same. It was always about Jesus.

In Pisidian Antioch (in present-day Turkey) the missionaries visit a synagogue and show how salvation history points to Jesus. Some of the Jewish people believe, and some do not, and yet Paul and Barnabas keep sharing the good news with both Jews and Gentiles. To a world lost in sin, these missionaries brought the good news of forgiveness and new life through Jesus—and the world has not been the same since.

Lord, help us to see opportunities you give us to speak with others, and give us the boldness to point people to you. Amen.

THE CHURCH OF HARDSHIP

"We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.
—Acts 14:22

Why does the gospel ("good news") threaten some people to the point where they break out in violence? This is a common response in the book of Acts. In our Bible reading for today, we see that some people believe in Jesus, but others pick up stones to try to kill Paul and Barnabas and their companions.

Violence does not have the last word. The stoning of Paul leads to his getting up and going back into the city. The violence of the cross did not have the last word either. Jesus' resurrection and ascension to heaven assure us of his victory over all our sin.

The good news of Jesus presents a threat to our usual way of living. When people hear the message of Jesus, they often sense that their systems are being threatened. And when people feel threatened, they often turn to violence.

I have been in churches where people left and slammed the door behind them. I have been in churches where verbal assaults decimated the unity of the body. Although these examples do not show the same level of violence that we see in Acts 14, they reveal a lot of conflict and tension. How do situations like that affect you?

Waiting and working for the kingdom of God takes patience. We may experience hardships, but they are not the end of the story. Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

God of good news, forgive us for any violence we have shown to others. Forgive our anger, selfishness, and pride. May we experience the fruit of the Spirit—day by day. In Jesus, Amen.

THE CHURCH UNIFIED

"It is my judgment . . . that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God."
—Acts 15:19

The stories in Acts are the stories of a church dealing with persecution from the outside and threats from within. Today's passage is about a threat from within. Believers who also held on to the law of Moses visited the church in Antioch. They believed that circumcision and following the law of Moses were needed for salvation. These additional burdens on Gentile believers led to a dispute. Paul and Barnabas entered into this conflict and returned to Jerusalem for wisdom and direction at a meeting of church leaders.

Peter and the other apostles and elders were there. Even James, the brother of Jesus, was there. Peter recalled the story of Cornelius (Acts 10-11), and Paul and Barnabas shared from their travels. The Spirit of God began to move hearts. A church that could have been segre-

gated along lines of ethnicity—Jews here, and Gentiles there—became a unified body again.

This story tells us something about the people who wanted strict requirements for everyone: they were Pharisees. Faced with the unknown and the uncomfortable, the Pharisee disciples wanted to control Gentile believers by making them follow the Pharisees' laws.

Acts 15 shows the radical nature of the gospel and the community that results. Gentile and Jewish believers are unified around the grace of Jesus alone.

Dear God, forgive us when we divide the body and separate from other believers. Draw us together by the grace of Jesus and the movement of the Spirit. Amen.

IN STEP WITH GOD

After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

—Acts 16:10

Missionary work is hard. To enter a new community and join in with the work of God takes wisdom and a heart in rhythm with God. As we try to keep up with all the places where Paul goes, we see changes. Paul and Barnabas have a dispute about including John (Mark) in their next journey, and they separate. Silas and Timothy join with Paul's traveling group. It seems also that Luke, the writer of Acts, joins them a little later (see Acts 16:10, where the narration suddenly changes to "we").

Paul remembers the churches that he helped to start and grow. Paul knows the value of strengthening faith communities, but he also follows the Spirit's direction. Stopped from going into one area, Paul obeys a vision from the Spirit and turns toward Macedonia. Paul seeks to be in step with God.

In Macedonia, God was already preparing the hearts of people when Paul showed up. For example, a woman named Lydia was already a worshiper of God when "the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message" about Jesus. Even the resistance of a hardened jailer crumbled. Trembling before Paul and Silas, he asked, "What must I do to be saved?"

As we walk in this world, do we trust that the Spirit is going before us? What does it mean for you to be in step with God?

Dear God, you invite us to join you in your work in this world. Help us to follow you and to join our hearts to yours. In Jesus' name, Amen.

BEING TROUBLED FOR THE RIGHT REASONS

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. —Acts 17:16

Paul followed a general pattern as he traveled. Upon entering a city, he would go first to the local Jewish synagogue. At some point, he would explain from the Scriptures about Jesus, the Messiah. Some Jews and God-fearing Gentiles would come to faith, but others would oppose Paul and stir up crowds against him as he taught in the marketplace.

To quiet the mobs and stay safe, Paul often had to leave, and the pattern would repeat when he went to another town. In Acts 17 we see a change in the pattern, though. Paul went to Athens while Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea a little longer.

In Athens, Paul went to the synagogue and then to the marketplace, and some philosophers brought him to the Areopagus, where ideas were debated. Paul took this oppor-

tunity to draw people's attention to the "UNKNOWN GOD" that was mentioned on an altar nearby. Paul was "greatly distressed" at seeing so many idols in Athens, and he wanted to tell everyone about the true God whom they all needed to know.

When was the last time your heart was troubled in this way? We live in a world of idols today too. The idols of social networks, technology, individualism, materialism, greed, money, power, and so much more are all around us. We can follow Paul's pattern of engagement, but we also need a distressed heart—in tune with God's love for the world.

Dear God, may our hearts long for everyone to know you as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

NOT ALONE

"I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." —Acts 18:10

As you probably have noticed in his travels as a missionary, Paul regularly has companions who share in the work of bringing the good news of Jesus and starting churches. Paul is not alone.

In our reading for today we are reminded that the Lord is also always with Paul. At a time when Paul may have been especially needing encouragement, the Lord speaks to him in a vision. God notes that he is "with" Paul and will protect him. God also reveals that in Corinth there are many other believers in Christ. Paul is not alone.

As we read the book of Acts, we should take note of the people who work together with Paul. We sometimes find just a few words of background or history, but these people are crucial to the building up of the church. Aquila and Priscilla help Paul as fellow tentmakers even while

they are refugees from Rome. A synagogue ruler, Crispus, and his household become believers in Jesus and surely help to lead in bringing others to believe and be baptized.

We are also introduced to a learned man named Apollos who knew some of the story of Jesus and needed to learn more. Priscilla and Aquila mentored him, and then Apollos became a traveling missionary too.

The gospel of Jesus is shared and spread by many people. The Lord has many people at work in his church.

Lord, thank you for building the church and calling all believers to the work of sharing the gospel. Empower us by your Spirit. Amen.

A DIVIDED CITY

Some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. —Acts 19:9

Today's Bible reading shows that the gospel does not always unite people. There are times when it deeply divides. Maybe you have experienced that too.

In Ephesus, Paul worked tirelessly so that the Word of God went out to all who lived in the region around this bustling center of trade and travel. Handkerchiefs and aprons touched by Paul became precious because of their use in healing people. Seven sons of a Jewish high priest tried to deal with evil spirits by using Jesus' name without really knowing Jesus, and they were beaten severely. Even so, the name of Jesus became highly honored. Knowing Jesus makes all the difference.

While there are ministry highlights in Ephesus, opposition is still present. Jews who reject Jesus want to keep their old religious practices. Unbelieving

Gentiles want to protect their businesses. Some silversmiths stir up a mob and try to stop Paul and his fellow workers. A riot is averted and the uproar quiets down, but it's clear that deep divisions remain.

We often like stories to close with a sense of resolution and peace, but the Bible reflects everyday life. Today's passage does not give answers. It *does* show that we are not alone. God is with us in our struggles wherever we may be.

Dear God, we pray for people who live in divided families because of the gospel. Protect your believing children, and help them to show your love to everyone. Encourage and sustain them in keeping with your promises. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

COMPELLED BY THE SPIRIT

"Now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there." —Acts 20:22

As Paul moves along to return to Macedonia, he can look back and remember the churches that now exist in that area. The list of his current companions shows the breadth and depth of the impact the good news has made: "He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia."

As he reflects on all that God has done in these travels, which included bringing a dead young man back to life in Troas, Paul feels a tug from the Holy Spirit. The future does not look pleasant for Paul. The Spirit warns him that prison and hardships loom ahead, and yet Paul knows that the Spirit is also leading him to travel again to Jerusalem.

Before leaving, Paul calls for the elders of the Ephesian church to meet him in Miletus. Paul teaches them one more time about what it means to be shepherds of the church, urging them to be on their guard for wolfish leaders who will try to draw disciples away.

Paul's testimony calls for commitment even as he makes clear that persevering is never easy. And before he says goodbye with tears and words of prayer, Paul provides a parting memory from Jesus: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Father God, guide and compel our lives by the power of your Spirit. May we give with generosity. May we take steps with courage. May we know tears of love. Keep us faithful. In Jesus, Amen.

READY TO BE BOUND

"I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."
—Acts 21:13

"Are we there yet?" Many children ask this question as they travel to a destination. It's a question packed with anticipation, hope, and eagerness.

The apostle Paul's journey to Jerusalem weighs heavy with concern, foreboding, and dread. At each major stop along the way, people urge Paul not to continue this journey. We even meet a prophet who illustrates how Paul will be bound and arrested in Jerusalem. When Paul finally arrives, he is greeted warmly by the leaders of the church, but they also plan out how Paul might avoid being charged falsely by his enemies.

But when some fault-finding people see Paul at the temple, they stir up a crowd and try to kill him. Before they can succeed, though, the rioters are stopped and Paul is "rescued" by the Roman authorities, who

arrest him and bind him with two chains.

Amazingly, Paul is not afraid. He will do what needs to be done to serve the Savior, even in hostile Jerusalem. He is compelled by the Spirit and committed to doing God's will.

Paul's example is a picture of someone who is rooted in Jesus. He is ready to be bound as a prisoner because he is already bound to Jesus. No other name or loyalty brings life for Paul. No other avenue is an option.

Today, let us give thanks for Paul's example of commitment to follow the Lord, who is forever committed to saving us.

Lord Jesus, thank you for your everlasting commitment to us. When we are tired, strengthen us to keep following you. Amen.

WHAT MADE THE CROWD ANGRY?

"The Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"
—Acts 22:21

Paul has been arrested—and thus saved from being killed by an angry mob. He is about to be taken to the barracks when he asks the Roman commander to let him speak to the crowd. Receiving permission, Paul speaks in Aramaic, and the people quiet down.

Why do they become quiet? Because Aramaic was the local language, and they realized that Paul was "one of their own." Paul begins his defense along those lines. "I am a Jew . . . thoroughly trained under Gamaliel . . . zealous for God."

It is amazing that the crowd remains quiet even through the account of Jesus appearing to Saul on the Damascus road. And then one line of that story pushes them from quiet to murderous rage.

What did Paul say? Paul said that Jesus sent him to bring

the good news of salvation to the Gentiles. This is the point where the silence is broken by shouts of "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!"

Why was this so threatening? In some ways, the people thought God belonged to them. And Paul was saying that God sent him to reach out to the people of other nations. This truth was often mentioned in the Scriptures but ignored by the people (see Genesis 12:3; Psalm 67; Isaiah 2:1-4; 25:6-8). It showed they were being selfish about God and needed to welcome Gentiles into God's family too.

God of all peoples, keep us from ever thinking we could tuck you into a box for our own purposes. Keep us from the sin of trying to limit your grace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

GOD'S PLAN TRIUMPHS

The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."
—Acts 23:11

The religious leaders were trying to stop Paul. They were willing to do whatever it took, even agreeing to a plot to kill him. More than forty people had taken an oath not to eat or drink till they had killed Paul. It seemed as if this could be the end of Paul and his earthly ministry.

But the Lord had encouraged Paul the night before, saying that he would also bring the good news of Jesus in Rome. God would provide a way for Paul. It might not be the way Paul initially thought it would be, but God's plan could not be stopped.

God's plans always triumph over the plans of people—especially when it comes to plots of destruction and death. God's plans may sometimes appear to be frustrated or even defeated, but there is al-

ways more to the story when people think they can do as they please, ignoring God or believing he has no power. Eventually and finally, God's plans prevail.

In the next few chapters, we will see Paul testify about Jesus in places and to people where he would not normally have an audience. As a prisoner under the protection of Rome, he may be in chains, but he is free to preach about Jesus and his love.

Dear God, today some of us especially need your encouragement and assurance that your plans will prevail. Give us hope, we pray, by your Spirit and in your promises. In Jesus' name, Amen.

FELIX: AFRAID OF THE TRUTH

As Paul talked about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, "That's enough for now! . . . When I find it convenient, I will send for you."

—Acts 24:25

As a prisoner of Rome, Paul is now in Caesarea, and the false charges against him come to the court of Governor Felix. Felix knows a lot about the Jewish religion, and he is "well acquainted with the Way"—the followers of Jesus Christ—because his wife is Jewish. Although Felix knows about Judaism and the Way, he is apparently not a follower of God.

In this court scene, it might be easy for us to picture ourselves in the position of Paul and hope that we would be brave like him. At the same time, my heart testifies that I am more like Felix than I care to admit. Felix stops the testimony and teaching of Paul. He is afraid of the truth. Paul has apparently brought the discussion a little too close to the truth about Felix's life. Hearing about righteousness, self-control, and

judgment, Felix calls for a recess.

Why? It was more convenient for Felix to continue living as he wanted to and not to change. He didn't care about justice; all he really wanted was a bribe, if he could get one. On the other hand, he could keep Paul's accusers happy if he simply kept Paul in prison.

What can we learn from Felix about how *not* to live?

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we confess that we often follow the god of convenience in our lives. We would rather live in self-righteousness than have the righteousness of Jesus. Forgive us, we pray. Amen.

FESTUS: PUZZLED BY PAUL

“They had some points of dispute with [Paul] about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive. I was at a loss how to investigate. . . .” —Acts 25:19-20

Two years have passed since Paul came to the palace prison in Caesarea. Festus is now the governor instead of Felix.

Felix thought he would be doing Paul’s accusers a favor by leaving Paul in prison, but they want more. Two years is a long time to wait for a decision from the court. Two years is also a long time to hold on to anger, but Paul’s accusers still want Paul to be killed.

Festus is puzzled about how to proceed with investigating the charges and the claim that Jesus is alive. He realizes he has been asked to decide a religious question about Jewish customs and practices, so he asks Paul if he wants to stand trial at Jerusalem. Rather than return to Jerusalem, Paul, as a Roman citizen, makes an appeal for his case to be heard by the emperor, Caesar.

Leading up to this, Paul says, “If I am guilty of anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die.” He is willing to die, but he has to be heard. He continues to follow the plan of God in order to be heard in Rome.

The twists and turns of Paul’s life are clarified by this truth: he is headed to Rome to testify about Jesus before the highest court in the world. Festus may be puzzled, but Paul is certain. Jesus is alive, and others need to know this good news.

Dear God, may the praise, testimony, and witness of our lives always be centered on this truth that puzzles people still today: Jesus is alive! In his name we pray. Amen.

AGRIPPA: ALMOST PERSUADED?

Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"
—Acts 26:28

The local King Agrippa and Bernice (who was his sister) are visiting Festus, the new governor of Caesarea. Festus discusses Paul's case with Agrippa. Agrippa is the son of the King Herod who had James killed and Peter imprisoned (Acts 12), so this family history is part of the background to Paul's appearance before Agrippa.

Paul tells how Jesus met him on the Damascus road and what it meant for him to be a witness for Christ to the Jews and Gentiles. When Paul declares that Jesus rose from the dead, Festus disrupts Paul's testimony, claiming that Paul is out of his mind.

Paul explains that Agrippa is familiar with all these things, and then he asks Agrippa this question: "Do you believe in the prophets? I know you do." How long does Agrippa pause before answering? We do not

know. But he dismisses Paul's question with another one: "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"

Let's think about that. How long does it take to become a Christian? It does not need to take long. It can be as sudden as meeting Jesus on the Damascus road.

At the same time, Paul leaves the court with a prayer asking that all who are listening may someday become believers in Christ.

Dear God, bring all who are reading these words into eternal life with you. Move in us and work through us to share your good news everywhere. In Jesus' name, Amen.

ON TO ROME, BY WAY OF STORM

“Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.”

—Acts 27:24

My first name is Julius. In our Bible reading today, we are introduced to a centurion named Julius who is in charge of soldiers and the prisoner Paul. Parts of this story make me glad to have the same name as this centurion. Julius is often kind to Paul. But then there is the part where Julius does not follow Paul's advice to stop sailing before the winter storm season.

A gentle south wind taking them out of Fair Havens soon becomes a hurricane. Day after day the storm wears on. After two weeks, as they approach land, some of the sailors try to escape. When the ship runs aground, the soldiers plan to kill the prisoners to keep any from escaping, but the centurion stops them, and eventually everyone safely reaches the shore.

In this world we often focus on some goal or agenda and pay

little attention to the people around us. We excuse our self-focused behavior by aiming to get where we are going as fast as we can.

Paul knows he has to reach Rome, so he is focused on his destination, but he is also aware of the people with him on the trip. Following Jesus' example, Paul cares for each one. He encourages everyone to eat, and he leads them in prayer, giving thanks to God. With God working in and through him, Paul is not distracted from witnessing for Jesus along the way.

Dear God, amid the hurry and storms of life, help us to be in step with you always. Wherever we may go, help us to love others along the way. In Jesus, Amen.

GOD WILL TAKE CARE OF YOU

When this had happened, the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured.
—Acts 28:9

When a viper attacks Paul, the local islanders think he will die. But Paul shakes the snake off, and no harm comes to him. When Paul does not die, the people think he is a god. But no, Paul is not a god. He does represent God, however.

Paul is almost all the way to Rome, but the witness of God through him continues every step of the way. Paul is on Malta because of a storm and a shipwreck. And God continues to take care of him in different ways. God also takes care of the people of Malta.

The chief official of the island opens his home to welcome the shipwrecked visitors. During this time, God heals the official's sick father through Paul. A moment of hospitality becomes the setting to see God's healing power, and many others are healed also.

At first glance, we see Paul shipwrecked on an island, delayed for three months on his journey to Rome. But soon we can see that God has brought Paul and the others there to bring healing and the good news of Jesus.

In addition, we see God taking care of Paul and the others by bringing them to Malta. But then we also see that God takes care of Malta by bringing Paul and the others there. And as they travel on to Rome, they meet other people and are welcomed and encouraged.

May we be people who look again and again to see the God who is always at work taking care of us and others.

Dear God, thank you for always taking care of us. May we have eyes to see this every day. Amen.

THE ONGOING STORY

He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!

—Acts 28:31

There are family stories that are worth repeating. They anchor us and bind us together. They help us to know where we came from and where we are going.

This devotional series concludes a two-month journey through Acts (May 2018 and June 2019) that you can retrace by going to the website *todaydevotional.com*. At the end of the book of Acts, we see Paul again meeting with local Jewish people to explain who Jesus is from the Law of Moses and the Prophets. Some of his listeners believe, and others do not. And again Paul notes that God's salvation is not limited to one group of people but is available to people of all nations.

At the end of this chapter, we see Paul under house arrest. To the eyes of people on the street, Paul is limited in what he can

do. But to the eyes of faith, Paul continues to reach out as he boldly preaches the kingdom of God and the good news of Jesus—even to us today!

I am part of the family of God formed by faith. This family is not to be segregated or separated. This family is to welcome strangers and be willing to take down walls of custom and tradition that can burden the newcomer. The ongoing story is about the Father's love, the Son's sacrifice, and the Spirit's testimony that still moves among people to create a new community. And the Lord calls this community his church!

Lord God, thank you for guiding your people, the church, all the way to the present day. Continue to build us up. In Jesus' name, Amen.



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Back to God
Ministries International

1700 28th Street SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407
800-626-3060
info@todaydevotional.com
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