

Read Acts 1

"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." Acts 1:8

When I was in seminary I made friends from all over the world that had come to be trained as ministers. My friend Rony came from Indonesia and planned to go back there to help start a Baptist seminary in his own country. There were other guys from Alabama, Mississippi, and several other states who all had the same idea: let's go back home. Now with Rony it made sense because there was a real need in his home country. But for many of these other men, they simply planned to return home because that's what they were comfortable with.

Being called and being comfortable rarely seem to go together. I don't want you to have a negative view of these ministers, because they're just people. We all tend to choose what's comfortable over what God is calling us to do. And in verse 8 we have a very specific call from our Lord Jesus: GO! They were to share in Jerusalem, which was the town they lived in. They were to share in Judea, which was the larger region around them. Also, they were to share in Samaria, which was full of people that the Jews didn't really get along with or like very much. Finally, they were told to go to the ends of the earth and get the gospel out to people who have never heard. **Are you following this command today? Are you reaching people right in your own neighborhood? Are you considering ways you can be involved in mission work outside of your own town? And have you identified your Samaritans? These could be co-workers, neighbors, or even family that you just don't like? Jesus didn't ask us to share with the people we liked. He asked us to share with everyone. So today, will you try to live comfortably or called? Ask God to give you clear opportunities to share with people today.**

Read Acts 2

"But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel" Acts 2:16

We get a lot of phone calls at the church. Now when it's one of you, it's great. However, I get less excited about telemarketers. One has been calling pretty frequently from a Christian company that produces Bible study material. I just kept putting them off because after examining their products at various times over the years, I always had the same complaint. Recently I got another call from them trying to get me to purchase their newest Bible study on teenagers and relationships. I told them I wasn't interested and would prefer not to be contacted for any of their future studies. When asked why, I said as nicely and politely as I could, "You're not allowing Scripture to drive your studies."

There is so much to talk about here in Acts 2. You might wonder why I picked verse 16 about an old word from the prophet Joel, when there is an account of people speaking foreign languages they didn't know in order that others could hear the gospel. Or maybe you hoped for a look at the relationship that Christians had to one another in the early church. While those things are great, it is important to note the Peter's sermon in this chapter is considered to be one of the greatest sermons ever preached. What creative message does he share with the people? The scriptures. He also does this in verse 25 by

referencing the words of David in the Psalms. He's not asking the people to take his word on salvation, but points them to the Word of God. All they had was the Old Testament, but it was sufficient for 3,000+ people to come to know Jesus in a personal way. **Where do you get your direction? From the words of a TV preacher? From Dr. Phil? From your friends? The most meaningful words are God's. You need ensure that you are allowing the mind of God to speak in your life louder than the mind of man. Why was Peter's sermon so great? He simply repeated words that God had already spoken. Jump back in the Word tomorrow. Think about this passage through the day. Investigate questions you have on certain subjects. Let the words of God have their way in your life, and follow the teachings of God over the guesses of man.**

Read Acts 3

Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, Acts 3:19

Hydrogen peroxide has been a source of terror in my life for years. How many times did I skin my knee and come running inside looking for a hug as a child, only to be rudely met with peroxide poured over my knee. I don't know if it really hurt, but all the foaming and bubbling convinced me it did. Years later, my fear turned to fascination during a hospital visit. There was a small bit of blood that had gotten onto the carpeting of the hospital room, and a janitor came in and poured hydrogen peroxide on the spot. I watched in wonder as that blood came right up out of the carpet fibers and then was blotted away by a simple rag.

Sin gets so easily entangled in our lives. When I first began to understand what sin was, it seemed unlikely that I would ever get rid of it. But that's exactly what Jesus does. Just like the blood on the hospital floor, Jesus comes to those who seek forgiveness by repentance and he separates us from our sin. While there may still be some moments in your future that you fall to temptation and remake the choices of your old life, Jesus keeps you as a new creation. When we come before the Lord, we should always come knowing that we are sinners who have been cleaned up by a perfect Savior. We can come into the presence of God and experience refreshing knowing who He is and who we are not. **Do you find yourself dreading Sunday morning worship services? Are you unwilling or uncomfortable in your prayer times? This may be because you have sin in your life that Jesus is trying to pull out of you, but that you're allowing to keep putting a stain on your life. Believers live as forgiven people even in moments that we may think we don't deserve it. Why don't you confess your sins today with the same sorrow that you did on that day you gave your life to Him? Remember how clear your sin was to you then? Don't try to justify your sin or make excuses. Let Him blot them out in your life, and experience the refreshing and acceptance that comes from our Lord Jesus.**

Read Acts 4

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus. Acts 4:13

Recently I read an article about the founder of Microsoft, Bill Gates. The guy is just brilliant, but I found it interesting that he didn't graduate from college. He attended Harvard for a while, but simply used the time to mess around on their computers. He never finished his formal education, but that may have been because he knew more about computer science than all the professors at Harvard combined. He had a real love for computers, desiring to see them become easier to use with greater functionality. He quickly became the best at what he did because of his passion for the subject. There was no doubt that he knew what he was talking about.

Acts 4 continues to show the tremendous ministries of the disciples Peter and John. They are preaching to the people, and the people are listening. This becomes a great concern to the Jewish teachers and so they call Peter and John before them only to discover these men are uneducated! They didn't go through all the training and instruction on how to be a mouthpiece for God. But verse 13 says the teachers realized these two guys had been with Jesus. And isn't that the greatest complement we could ever receive as believers? They weren't considered religious. They weren't considered holier-than-thou. There was just something different about them, and the difference was they had been with Jesus. **Would people say that same of you? If I went to your workplace and asked 10 people, "Tell me what you think of when I say _____'s name?" would there be any mention of Jesus? Would they mention a faith that is lived out in front of them? Do the people around you realize that you've been with Jesus? If not, today can be your day! Ask God to give you the boldness and readiness to be a witness for Him. Never be ashamed of the name of Jesus.**

Read Acts 5

"While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." Acts 5:4

There is a mantra in the Army that I assume may have bled over into the other armed forces. It goes, "You can lie to a civilian about what you did in the war when it's over, but never lie to a soldier." The Army constantly strives to develop soldiers not just into warriors, but into men of character. If someone makes a mistake, it needs to be corrected instead of covered up. When you're talking about life and death, you tell the truth about every detail of every conflict. Once honesty is lost between soldiers, the entire system begins to break down.

Now I'm not advocating dishonesty, but I'm emphasizing the importance of being genuine. The problem that ruined Ananias and his wife Sapphira wasn't how much money they gave to the church, but their willingness to deceive. They had sold a piece of land and made a certain amount of money for it. However, they claimed less money and then presented that amount to the church. The problem was that they were being dishonest for no good reason. God doesn't want our money...He wants our hearts. Ananias and Sapphira were making a choice that could ruin the early church. There were many new believers in their midst and these two were as bad as the Pharisees who used to have trumpets blown to announce they were giving their tithe. Ananias and Sapphira were giving with pride, attempting to receive the praise of man, instead of being content with the approval of God. **When you give your money to the church, how do you**

make the decision on how much to give? If you're using a calculator to work out exactly 10%, you've missed the meaning. It is important for us to give financially to the church in support of the work. But, God will never ask for more than you can bear. Don't view your offering as a bill to be paid, but a gift to be given. I write that check first after I receive my paycheck, and I pray for our church to use wisdom in using the money that I am giving out of my love for Him. If giving back to God out of what He has given you as been an issue in your past, just repent, pray, and ask Him what you should be giving and doing. It's not a show to impress people; it is an act of worship and obedience to our Lord.

Read Acts 6

And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. Acts 6:10

While we were home for Thanksgiving some years back, my brother-in-law took Tyler and I back into a field with his gun arsenal. Tyler learned how to shoot a bb gun over that summer, but this was his first time shooting a real gun. He fired a couple of different rifles and a handgun, but he soon noticed a new element that was missing from his bb gun. Every time he fired, there was an empty shell casing left over. I explained to him how the casing holds both the bullet and the power to project it forward.

Stephen is one of the great early believers, and the first person to be killed because of his unwavering faith in Jesus Christ. But it wasn't the words of Stephen that made him noteworthy, but his willingness to be a vessel of the Holy Spirit. The reason people couldn't oppose his words, was because they were simply from the Spirit speaking through Stephen. We need to be careful that we recognize the power and working of the Holy Spirit in our lives. When we share our faith and a person trusts in Jesus Christ, we sometimes say that we led them to Lord. While you may have been obedient to share, really the Holy Spirit is the one who did the leading. He was working on the person's heart as well as working through you. When we accept praise for leading someone to the Lord or for a lesson taught or some deed done for the Lord, we fail to recognize the sending power of the Spirit. He gifts and enables us to serve more effectively than we ever could without Him. **Are you trying to work alone for God? When we try to do good without praying and seeking God's help in our lives, we are trying to accomplish God-sized goals by human effort. That equation will never work out. Thank God today for the talents and gifts He has given you. Recognize that anything good in your life came from Him, and always remember that the Holy Spirit lives within you to make use of you at ANY MOMENT. Prepare yourself today to be used.**

Read Acts 7 (Don't skip over stuff!)

When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. Acts 7:54

Logan Valley is a fantastic Christian retreat area in Southern Missouri that I have taken youth groups to on multiple occasions. The toughest part of any trip is figuring out which adults to take as leaders during the time these kids are away from their parents. Samantha had been out of the youth group for a couple of years and wanted to go along. She

seemed like a good choice, but I soon realized that her primary tool of authority was yelling. If the teenagers stepped out of line even for a moment, Samantha was all over them. I knew I had to say something because her anger was way out of line. I quietly pulled her aside and said, "These kids won't always make the perfect choices, but when they see us making a choice to scream and be angry we're going to lose their willingness to listen." I didn't know how she would take it, but she responded well. She said she understood, softened up incredibly, and held no resentment towards me for bringing it up. Exactly how a Christian should handle it.

Think if you were Stephen. He's standing before the religious leaders of the day, the very same men who worked diligently to get Jesus on that cross. If you were Stephen, would you try to justify your ministry or point out that you had committed no acts against the Scriptures? I'm sure I would have, but instead of defending himself, Stephen takes the opportunity to speak to these men while their ears are wide open. They may have wondered why he was giving them a history lesson on ancient Israel until he points out that these men are no different than those who chased after idols in the desert and resisted the Lord at almost every turn. Verse 54 says they were cut to the heart, or convicted. When you hear a sermon on lying and you suddenly feel sorrow for your lack of honesty, that's being cut to the heart. But instead of resisting and repenting, which would mean they would have been accepting everything Stephen was doing, they literally gnashed at him with their teeth. These were supposed to be people who cared about pleasing God, but when confronted with their sin, they chose to silence the messenger. **What would you do if someone came to you today and showed you a sin that they learned you were living in? What if they brought up a sin to you that you didn't even realize you were committing? How would you react? Sin is always sneaking around, but we have a hard time seeing it in our own lives. God may show it to you by the Holy Spirit alone, or He may do so through a friend or your spouse (He's done both with me). You need to pray today not only to see your sin, but to be ready to listen to someone who brings something to you. Realize that those kinds of conversations between believers are motivated by love.**

Read Acts 8

Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, "Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is desert. Acts 8:26

I'm far too trusting of the gps. I've nearly driven off a cliff (ok, maybe more of a large slope) and made turns I clearly knew weren't right simply because the authority of my gps made me do it. As a result, I spend a few minutes now looking at the route before I go and ensuring that it's taking me the best way without any surprises over the horizon. A gps hasn't earned the right for unquestioned trust.

If you want to find a guy who was willing to trust, it was Philip. God sends an angel to give Philip very easy instructions. "Hey, take the road south that goes from Jerusalem." This road went into the desert, and even though he wasn't sure how far he was supposed to go or even why, He went. We don't know how far he walked, but he decided to keep going until something happened. How much more willing are you to trust a GPS over God? The GPS is there guiding us (hopefully) at every turn. Sometimes, God just tells us where to go and we just have to walk in that direction until He says stop. A great man of

God once told me, “If you haven’t heard anything new from God lately, then just go off the last thing He told you.” I’m sure that’s what Philip had to do, and even when the barren area he was walking through looked like a dumb place to be, he continued to trust in what God had told him to do. **Are you looking for turn by turn directions from God for your life? He is happy to give them, but make sure you haven’t simply ignored or glossed over the directions He’s already given. If He says go to the desert, and you don’t go, you can’t just wait around for Him to give you a better location. His plans are His plans, and He desires obedience from us. Ask God for His will in your life. He will not play hide-n-seek with those who are diligently seeking Him. And if you already know what the instruction is, do it. Whether it’s changes you need to make in your marriage, sin you need to leave behind, or a spiritual discipline you need to build (sharing your faith, praying, etc), then it’s time to stop waiting and start walking. He will give you the power, but you have to take the steps.**

Read Acts 9

And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. Acts 9:26

Russ could have crushed me with his bare hand, but fortunately he never did. He was a huge hulk of a man in our first church, and if you looked at him you might not think of him as a very friendly person. But I counted Russ a friend who helped me out many times with great generosity in my college days. Our pastor later told me about when he first met Russ. Pastor had just moved to town and started going to local sporting events, trying to meet people in the community. Russ was easy to spot. He came to the high school games and always brought his own cooler of beer. He let the umps know when they got it wrong, and was the kind of person many Christians never share the gospel with because they think “He would never want to accept Christ.” But Russ not only wanted to accept Christ, but became a totally different person as a result.

I’m sure that Paul was the “Russ” of the area. If there was ever someone who didn’t seem like he would give his life to Christ, it was Paul. He had overseen the death of Stephen and put many believers in jail as he tried to stomp out Christianity. Now he came to Jerusalem and tried to join the church and the local believers said, “You’ve got to be out of your mind.” But over time, it became clear he had met Jesus and undergone a miraculous transformation in his life. Do you sometimes wonder if your past can be forgiven? Do you wonder if you’ll just always be the same old person with the same old vices? Let me tell you, if Paul could get over his past, so can you. Conviction is an act of the Holy Spirit, and He will remind you when you are beginning to fall into the habits of the old life. His desire is that you will be the new creation that Christ wants you to be. Guilt is an act of the Devil, and his only desire is to make you feel that you don’t deserve Christ and to keep you from believing that you can serve Him. **Are you dwelling on the mistakes of your past? Well God isn’t. He saved you from your past to give you a hope and a future. I’m sure Paul had to deal with the pain he caused the Lord in his old life, but Paul left yesterday behind so he could be effective today. If you have past issues that are still following you around, talk to God about it one last time today. Let him know your desire to be a different person, your repentance over your past, and your desire to serve Him in your future. Cut the cord on your past today.**

Read Acts 10

While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are seeking you." Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them." Acts 10:19-20

There is so much in this chapter, it was hard to try to focus on one part. The vision that Peter saw on his roof must have seen so strange, but it was immediately used to show him that God has as much desire for Gentiles (non-Jews) to be saved as He did for the nation of Israel. The incredible way that God worked in the life of Cornelius, Peter, and many of Cornelius' friends and family is just a wonderful testament to how God works on so many levels and fronts at once. Sometimes we only see what's going on in our lives, and we don't have any sense of how God is working out His will even when we can't see it. But in verses 19-20, we get a very definite picture of exactly who was working in the lives of these people.

If the FBI were to look for the person missing most from the church, it wouldn't be a vacationing church member. It would be the Holy Spirit. Not because He's not working, but because we so rarely reference Him. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all distinct persons of God, all working together for one purpose. I'm not going to try to explain the unexplainable, namely the Trinity, but the important point to remember is that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit will never contradict one another. However, the Holy Spirit is the person of God who takes residence in our hearts at salvation. We often say that you're asking Jesus into your heart, but in fact we are asking Him to forgive us and be the Lord of our lives, while the Holy Spirit takes up residence to accomplish the will of God in our lives. In these verses we see that the Holy Spirit spoke to Peter and told him the three men were waiting for him. The Spirit then says in verse 20, "...I have sent them." In fact, a professor once told me we should probably just say "Holy Spirit" instead of "the Holy Spirit". Dropping "the" communicates Him as a person instead of a thing like "the car". **Are you listening to Holy Spirit? When you pray, take moments of silence and say nothing. Ask Holy Spirit to show you who or what to pray for that you've forgotten. Ask Him to show you sin that you need to root out of your life. You'll be surprised at the prayer priorities He will give you. Remember that He is with you always. We are so fortunate to know that we are never alone, but always in the presence of a personal God.**

Read Acts 11

And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. Acts 11:26

I can't stand the lack of creativity that goes into most high school mascots. How hard is it to name your team the Bulldogs, Tigers, or Wildcats? Occasionally you find a mascot that's given for a reason, like my high school mascot. Hickman High School had its first boys' basketball team in 1904; in their first game ever they lost by nearly 100 points. The local newspaper said that the Hickman boys came off the court "smiling like Kewpies" just so happy to have finally played. So the big, fat, naked Kewpie doll became the mascot of our high school. And we wouldn't have had it any other way.

We find out here in Acts 11 where the term Christian comes from. It was first given to the disciples and followers of Jesus while they were in the city of Antioch. One pastor likens the term Christian to “little Jesus”. Our point and our purpose is to be like Jesus Christ at every turn. However, the question remains, “Who actually gave us the name?” Was it the believers themselves, who previously had been calling themselves “The Way”? Was it the locals who lived in Antioch? Actually the word “called” literally indicates a divine nomination, meaning that God gave this name to His people. We are called Christians because we are Christ followers. We’re not Bearsians, or Cubsians. We are followers of Christ...Christians. **Let our conversations be about Him today. Let us speak with the same passion about Him in our lives as we do our favorite sports team. Let us today remember that we don’t primarily represent First Baptist Church...we represent Jesus Christ. People will gain their impressions of Him from us.**

Read Acts 12

But they said to her, "You are beside yourself!" Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, "It is his angel." Acts 12:15

When we made the move to seminary, it was a tough go for several months. Nikki prayed that God would give me one job that would meet all of our needs. We had just moved from a situation where I served a church in addition to having another job and serving in the National Guard. So she kept praying for it, but I never did. I just saw no way that this would happen, but Nikki kept on praying. After a few months of God giving me enough odd jobs to keep us afloat, as well as several unexpected checks in the mail, a church in Arkansas pursued me to be a minister to their children and youth. They were willing to bless us with a full-time salary and parsonage, despite the fact I was gone four days a week commuting back and forth 3 hours round trip for school. After the church officially called me to serve them, I went to Nikki and apologized for doubting the prayers she was lifting up. Then I apologized to the Lord.

I’m sure the local believers in Jerusalem were devastated when Peter was arrested. So the believers did what they were supposed to do; they prayed...or at least they were trying. Many didn’t really believe that Peter was going to get out of prison, so when Peter comes knocking on their door, they don’t believe it. They even attribute it to being Peter’s angel. This doesn’t mean that people die and become angels, but the Jews believed that everyone had a guardian angel, and that angel took on the appearance of the person they guarded. But I would have asked, “Is it easier to believe Peter was knocking on the door, or his angel?” **Have you ever prayed, but not really meant it? Maybe you thought God couldn’t do it or wouldn’t do it. Why do we try to answer our own prayers instead of giving God a chance? Sometimes we pray because we know we’re supposed to, but our prayers are to be joined with our faith. Otherwise, we’re just complaining or offering up wishful thinking. The Lord is clear in James 4:2 that “You do not have because you do not ask.” Think about some of the items you’ve been praying about, and whether you’ve really been trusting and believing that God will accomplish what you’re asking. Faith is trusting and believing in Him even when it doesn’t make sense to us.**

Read Acts 13

Now when they had gone through the island to Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew whose name was Bar-Jesus Acts 13:6

David Copperfield came to my school when I was probably in 5th grade. It was a big deal for a well-known performer to visit our small Missouri town and his show was simply amazing. He performed incredible illusions, and I'm sure that 90% of us walked out of the gym that day wanting to be magicians. But about the time I got to high school, there were people on TV who started to show how the illusions of people like Copperfield worked. Suddenly I realized that the magic wasn't magic at all. It was the art of misdirection mixed with gullible people.

Does the name David Kotkin mean anything to you? It's David Copperfield's real name, later changed to make it more presentable. We also see a stage name here in Acts 13:6. Paul and Barnabas run into this man who called himself Bar-Jesus, which means "Son of Jesus". His real name was Elymas (v.8), but he went with the name that would get him more attention. Elymas was a false prophet, performing his magic and illusions, attempting to prove He was tapping into the power of God. And people believed him, until Paul showed up. Paul was moved by the Holy Spirit to declare blindness on this man, which the Holy Spirit then struck him with. Suddenly, this false prophet lost his following. **Just because someone talks about God, doesn't make them trustworthy. Just because a book is sold in a Christian bookstore doesn't mean it honors Jesus. People are willing to deceive others in order to make money and gain notoriety. Examine the Bible teachers you listen to on the radio or watch on television. Examine the authors who you read most often. What do they really believe? When you hear a teacher say something about Jesus or our faith that you have never heard before, look for that truth in the Bible. God has given scripture to us as a final revelation of Himself as we wait on His return. God doesn't only speak to special people. He speaks to everyone who is willing to listen and learn.**

Read Acts 14

Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. Acts 14:19

Crowds can be a fickle bunch. I am a fan of the St. Louis Cardinals, but living in Pennsylvania, we had to attend a game at an opponent's stadium. After a search, we finally found ticket in Pittsburgh to watch the Cardinals take on the Pirates. During the pre-game festivities, the Pirate's faithful were cheering their players and clapping at the scoreboard videos. Pittsburgh fans were happy until the 6th inning when the Cardinals broke the game open on a couple of home runs on their way to eventually winning. Suddenly, the fans turned on their team. They yelled at their players about how bad they were. Many of them booed a normally outstanding pitcher having a bad day. I remember thinking, "Even though you make a lot of money to play this game, it can't be fun to be booed in your own ballpark."

If you want to see a fickle crowd, look no further than Acts 14. At one moment, the crowd is so enamored with Paul, they call him a god. But, when opposing Jews showed

up to change the mind of the crowd, Paul found himself drug outside the city and pelted with stones until he appeared to be dead. Verses 19-20 are easy to gloss over. Paul was nearly killed, but actually wasn't dead. He regained consciousness, got up, and moved onto the next town. But don't you think he probably had some broken bones? Don't you think he probably had some scars that were with him the rest of his life? There are moments the crowd may turn against us. The Christian life doesn't guarantee we'll go through our days unscathed. Some of my deepest hurts have occurred since I came to know Jesus, and some have even come from people that attended church and claimed to be Christians. In those moments, remember who our constant companion is. **The Holy Spirit keeps showing up in Acts as our constant and powerful friend. And when the crowd may throw stones and walk away, He is still there with us. The crowd may boo us, but God is still our biggest fan. What hurt has really stuck with you? Who are you having a hard time forgiving? Today is the day to put that old stuff behind you. Let the scars remind us to avoid the past, but let's not live there.**

Read Acts 15

"But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they." Acts 15:11

If there were ever a joke to describe Baptists, it would be the story of the Christmas Ham. A mother was preparing a Christmas ham and as she did, she cut both ends of the ham off and then set it into the baking pan. Her daughter was watching intently and asked, "Mom, why do you cut the ends off your ham?" Here mother replied, "That's how my mother used to do it." So the daughter then called her grandmother and asked her the same question. Her grandmother replied, "That's how my mother used to do it." So the daughter calls her great-grandmother and asked her why she cut the ends off of her ham. The great-grandmother replied, "Because my roasting pan was too small."

Church is often a place of traditions, some good and some bad. The Jews who had come to know Jesus in a personal way were having a problem with how easy it was for the Gentiles (non-Jews) to be able to accept their Jewish Savior. These Jews began to say that Gentiles had to be circumcised in order to honor both Jesus and the laws of Moses. The apostles met together to discuss the issue, and Peter was there. Remember, he had just learned a big lesson from God regarding the Lord's willingness to save everyone when Peter led Cornelius to faith in Jesus Christ. Peter finally stands up and says in verse 11 that Gentiles are saved in the same way as those believing Jews...through the grace of Jesus Christ. It's easy to get stuck in traditions because that's how "we've always done it." But what if the way we've always done it is wrong? There are many issues, some which are simply issues of tradition, which we sometimes argue about as Christians. There are really only two that are worth the conflict: the truthfulness of the Word of God, and the person of Jesus. These Jews were challenging the person of Jesus, in the fact that they were saying His gift of salvation wasn't enough. They felt there had to be a checklist of good deeds to add to the gift. But there is no checklist. **Examine today the things you find yourself sometimes arguing with other Christians about. Are these issues worth it, or do they create conflict and strife where there is no need? Many Southern Baptists passionately stood for the integrity of the Bible through the 70's. Many times they were told to stop causing trouble, but it was a discussion worth having. Arguments about the color of church carpeting or worship style are not.**

Read Acts 16

Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them. Acts 16:10

Dr. May was the first one to introduce me to the idea of a “divine appointment”. Our seminary required that we witness to one person every week, and for some of us who weren’t as experienced, we needed guidance. He told us that we should pray that God would give us divine appointments to share our faith with others. Appointments that would be so clear, it would be impossible for us to miss them. But, he made it clear that we shouldn’t pray this prayer unless we meant it, because it’s a prayer that God answers. So I prayed it and was amazed at the random people who walked into my office, or whom I met at the nursing home, or other unexpected opportunities. I realized that God had specific gospel appointments just for me.

There is a lot that would be great to cover in Acts 16, but I think the most questions would come from verse 6 when these missionaries were forbidden to share the gospel in Asia. Why would God not allow them to go and share to anyone that they could? Paul and these men seek several different places to go, but each time the Holy Spirit shut them down. Finally, they get the call to go to Macedonia and they find that everything has been prepared for them. Why did God hold them back from Asia? Because He had been preparing Macedonia (though they would share in Asia later). God had a divine appointment and while sharing the gospel anywhere is good, God had a specific place for them. **Think about the people that you have contact with your day at work, school or even at home. Think about how many of them seem to have no Christian influence in their lives, except for you. Instead of wondering when a good moment is to share, ask God to arrange it. Tell Him that you will be prepared to share. Ask Him to show you the people and moments that He has set up just for you. And be ready!**

Read Acts 17

These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily *to find out* whether these things were so. Acts 17:11

On Christmas Eve, 1968, the Apollo 8 astronauts read from the first part of Genesis 1 during a live broadcast while orbiting the moon. A Japanese correspondent was staying at a local hotel to cover the mission and called the NASA Public Affairs office to get a copy of the speech the astronauts were reading. The NASA official confirmed the correspondent was at his hotel room, and then told the reporter to open his desk drawer and read from page one of the book that he found in there. The reporter found a Gideon Bible and later reported, “NASA public affairs is very efficient—they had a mission transcript waiting in my room.”

Just as this reporter went to the scriptures to confirm what he was hearing, so did the Jews at Berea. Now which Scriptures did they examine? Remember that their story is in the New Testament, so they didn’t have the Gospels to examine and believe. They had the Old Testament scriptures to examine, and in doing so they found that all of Paul’s statements of Jesus were true. That’s an amazing thing. I love the Gideons, but I’ve

always been struck by the fact that they give a New Testament, usually including the Psalm and Proverbs. Sometimes people are probably under the impression that the New Testament is the more important part, but the entire Bible is worth your time. God has given the entire book as a revelation of Himself, and the Old Testament was enough for these Jewish believers to see that there was a promised Messiah to trust in for salvation. **Do you examine the scriptures? What if you wanted to know what the Bible says about money, marriage, or forgiveness? You can ask your pastor and just accept his answer, or you can seek it yourself. The best knowledge is the kind that you have to go mining for yourself. If you don't understand your Bible, then get one that you do understand, or see your pastor for help on a good translation and study bible. Christians have to be men and women of the Bible. When we fail to examine it for ourselves, we lose all that so many before us gave their lives for...that any person could read the Bible for themselves and that it wouldn't just be a treasure of priests and ministers.**

Read Acts 18

So Paul still remained a good while. Then he took leave of the brethren and sailed for Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila *were* with him. He had *his* hair cut off at Cenchrea, for he had taken a vow. Acts 18:18

I'm pretty sure it was easy to tell I was the new guy back from basic training when I first joined my National Guard unit. It wasn't because my uniform looked so new, or because I was a bit tenser than many of the other soldiers around. It was because my hair was still so short. One of the great freedoms of leaving basic training is that you have the option to let your hair grow back a bit more than before. Most soldiers long for this because they don't want to be mistaken for basic trainees, but unfortunately I had been required to get my hair mutilated one more time before I was able to go back home. And yes, I do blame those military barbers for my continuous hair loss.

There is a small verse here stating that Paul had his hair cut off because he had taken a vow. We don't know what kind it was. The Nazarites were Jews in the Old Testament who were under many vows, including one to never shave their head, so this isn't that. The most likely option, is that Paul did it as a thank offering. The thank offering was just what it sounds like; an opportunity to give something to God. It was not seeking forgiveness for sins, but to thank Him for something He had done. It may have been for the salvation of Crispus and many other Jews and Gentiles that had happened at Corinth. But he was ready and willing to give thanks in a very public way. We are under the impression in America that our faith is a very personal and private thing. While it's true that the details of our faith may be personal, the fact that we serve Jesus Christ should never be private. He's not just one choice of many, but the only choice. He's not just a name we say on Sunday, but the name above all names. He's the one who works out the unworkable in our lives. He is the one who saves the unsaveable. He deserves our praise and our thanks. **Have you thanked the Lord for how He's working in your life? I don't mean that you give him a quick thumbs up, but you do something with your life to express your gratitude to Him. Think about how you can express your thankfulness to God today for all that He has done for you. If He had done nothing other than save our souls, He would deserve us thanking and praising Him 24/7.**

Read Acts 19

And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and *began* burning them in the sight of everyone; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. Acts 19:19

I have a friend named Steve whom I would recommend in a heartbeat to any church ever looking for a minister. During seminary, Steve often challenged me in his zeal for sharing the gospel and we were instant friends from almost our first day to together. Steve had one minor inconvenience in his life: he didn't have internet access at his apartment. You can imagine how much studying and research is required while you're working on a Master's degree, and having internet access is a great benefit. But Steve had battled pornography before he became a Christian, and was unwilling to tempt himself in that way. So to keep him accountable to only use the internet for study purposes, he only used the computers in the seminary library.

Saying that we want to avoid sin, and then actually taking steps to avoid sin are two different things. We often confess how sorry we are to God, but we don't always repent of our sins. While Paul was at Ephesus, many people were coming to know Jesus as Savior, including many people who practiced or studied witchcraft and sorcery. So those people brought all their books together and burned them. The value was around 50,000 pieces of silver. There is some question as to how much this was worth, but the consensus is that 1 piece of silver was equal to a day's wages, so you do the math. **What do you need to get rid of that leads you to sin? In my past I have thrown movies and video games away in my house. Some people told me to trade them in at stores that deal in used movies and video games, but I didn't see that trying to get value for them and giving them to someone else was God's will in the situation. Leaving sin behind, especially life-long sin, can be tough. But, if we are willing to take steps to remove the sin, and we then follow them, we find it's not impossible. So just like these new believers burned their magic books, what needs to burn in your life?**

Read Acts 20

"In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.**' " Acts 20:35**

It's better to give than to receive. I heard this so many times growing up, but I can tell you that around my birthday and Christmas time, this wasn't a mantra I was willing to live by. Stuff was my god before I met Jesus. I grew up much of my life very poor, and so even having a worn-out pair of name brand tennis shoes handed down from someone else was a joy. When my mom married my step-father, our financial situation improved, but we made a big decision as a family for Christmas when I was about 14: We didn't buy each other presents. As a family, parents and siblings, we decided to give our money to a ministry that would help children that wouldn't have much of a Christmas that year. And we were actually excited about it. Other family members thought it was ridiculous that my parents bought us no presents, but we were fine with it. (Sidenote: I think we actually received more presents that year than any other I can remember anyway.)

Paul quickly went from loathed to loved by the disciples. The reason is because he loved them. We see him stopping and investing his life as long as it took to see people saved and come together as a local church. And he didn't beg them for money. They provided for Him, and he always had just enough. The believers at Ephesus loved Paul and he loved them. They understood that when they gave to Him, they were helping him minister to others just as he had ministered to them. **Are you a giver or a receiver? Do you look to build your own accounts, while ignoring the needs of those around you? God will often put the financial needs of others on our minds and hearts, and at first we think how wonderful it would be to help them out. Then we start doing the math and thinking about all we could do for ourselves if we were to keep that money. Haven't we done enough for ourselves? What would happen if we truly became selfless instead of selfish? And not just with our money. What if we gave up our time to help our neighbor who's dealing with a huge project at their home? Or we offered to watch the kids of a single mom while she just got out of the house for an afternoon? Let's look for opportunities to give of ourselves today. Maybe you'll bless a co-worker by picking up their lunch tab, or investing some of your time to help them on a project that's swamping them. Just look for ways to be a blessing. It will cause people to be more willing to listen when you talk of your faith.**

Read Acts 21

Then Paul answered, "What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." Acts 21:13

When I finished college and we had made the decision to leave Missouri for Memphis, I didn't have the happiest father-in-law. He knew I felt the call to ministry and that I had already served one church. So he took it upon himself to find a church local to him that was in a need of a minister, and he called Nikki to tell her. I had to tell him that I appreciated him making the effort, but I was confident that God's will for us was to make the move to seminary. He remained unhappy about our decision, and it made it even harder to move my family away knowing that I was leaving behind some disappointed people.

Paul was carrying a very difficult burden. I believe he knew exactly what would happen to him in Jerusalem, but he also knew it was God's will. You'll notice in this chapter that people were realizing this trip was going to turn out badly. It seemed that all of Paul's friends were begging him not to go to Jerusalem because it had been revealed to them by the Holy Spirit that Paul would be arrested when he arrived. Paul knew this and he asks his friends to stop breaking his heart over the matter. We have godly friends around us to give us godly advice and counsel, but that should only help us in our decision-making process. Our decisions should always be made ourselves as we get a sense of peace from the Lord. Whether you're buying a house or going on the mission field, it's amazing how God gives us peace when we are on the right path. On the other hand, when we're making a mistake, we often know it. God has not promised that His will for your life will always be the easiest choice. People will sometimes try to talk you out of God's will for your life telling you that you're sacrificing too much. But if God is asking us to sacrifice, then there is a reason for it. **Do you wonder what God's will is for your life? Have you asked? There are two things that God promises He will always give if we ask for it:**

forgiveness (1 John 1:9) and wisdom (James 1:5). Have you asked for God's will, or are you just walking around hoping to fall face first into it?

Read Acts 22

"Brethren and fathers, hear my defense before you now." Acts 22:1

The first time I gave my personal testimony in church as a college student, our associate pastor asked me to type it up and let him see it first. I wondered if he was checking for some sins that weren't ok to mention in Sunday morning service. After looking at it, Bro. John told me that I was a little short on what a personal testimony should look like. He told me it's not just about telling people all of your life before Jesus and your moment of conversion. Your testimony is more about who you are since Christ than who you were before.

As Paul is standing before this hostile crowd, it seems that his greater hope wasn't to secure his safe release, but to share what Jesus had done in his life. He shares a wonderfully complete testimony: Who he was in verses 2-5, his conversion to Jesus in 6-16, and his life and work since becoming a Christian in verses 17-21. Why would Paul share his personal testimony? It's the one thing you can't argue away. If you tell someone God has done a particular work in your life, they can't just say that He hasn't. And that was the case in Jerusalem. They couldn't argue with him, so they tried to silence him. **If you're ever unsure how to share your faith and hope in Jesus with others, just share your testimony. Tell them who you were, who Jesus is, and who you are now as a result. If you've never written your testimony down or told it to anyone, try it and see how easy it is to share the story of how Jesus has changed your life. After years of sharing my testimony with people, I can tell you there are lost people out there that will be relieved to know that you weren't perfect before Jesus and that you're still not!**

Read Acts 23

Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, *you* whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?" Acts 23:3

On one of our youth mission trips, we went into an area that the city would have preferred to forget. While many of these homes needed major repairs, the only thing we were really permitted to do by the city to help these people was to patch up problems that nearly caused their homes to be condemned. One home I worked on needed new siding, but I soon realized that we were often putting siding over the top of rotting wood. Nailing the siding to the walls took almost no effort, and I wondered on that particular home if we were really helping. The siding became the sturdiest part of the entire home.

Ananias was considered to be a man of God because he was a priest. But what makes someone godly? Is it going to church, or mentioning the "man upstairs" from time to time? Being religious is easy. Follow some rules and simply try to be better than most people around you. But Jesus Christ didn't die on a cross for outward change. He died to bring an inward change into our lives. He died to change not just the sinful work of our hands and sinful destinations of our feet, but He also died to change our thought life and

to change the desires of our hearts. A person who attends church and tries to appear as a Christian is no better than a rotten house covered by new siding. The outward changes that have come into my life came as a result of internal changes. With the power of the Holy Spirit I fought against the old person that I knew I was, to become more like the person Jesus wants me to become. **Are you focusing more on the outward or the inward? Have you been content to change the outside, but leave the inside alone? Our words and actions are an indication of our true hearts. We may act as if some of our sins are accidental transgressions, but they come as a result of the old life we continue to hold onto.**

Read Acts 24

Now as he reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and answered, "Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you." Acts 24:25

If you need help working on your car, don't call me. I can change an air filter, replace a taillight, and pay for an oil change and that's about it. Some friends turned me onto an NPR show called "Car Talk" with two guys that try to diagnose automotive problems over the phone by gathering information from the car's owner. Many times the car has a check engine light on, but these two mechanics determine that the problem is not necessary to fix. One guy asked them, "But what do I do about this check engine light? It's driving me crazy." Tom, the radio host, asked, "Do you have any black electrical tape? Just cover it up with that and forget about it!"

Felix felt like he needed some black electrical tape. This Roman governor had actually married a Jewish woman named Drusilla. Felix brought her with him on his first meeting with Paul, but never again. In fact, after several meetings with Paul, Felix finally ended these meetings out of fear and told Paul they would talk again later, but they never did. What was Felix afraid of? His wife Drusilla had previously been married to another man when Felix met her. He used a friend to convince Drusilla to divorce her husband and marry Felix instead. Drusilla even gave up her Jewish practices and turned to the pagan beliefs of her husband. It seems that Felix was afraid that his wife would have second thoughts because Paul was making a strong case for God's judgment in light of people's sin. So he shut his ears to the message. **Have you ever done that? Are you doing it today? I remember being confronted by a sermon on stealing. I thought I was home free on that message since I wasn't a thief. Then my pastor asked, "Have you ever been at work, but not working as hard as you should? That's stealing." I had a choice: acknowledge my sin and turn from it, or ignore it and give reasons about how I work harder than all my co-workers. Are you looking for the electrical tape, or are you willing to confess and repent? What sin have you been attempting to ignore that just won't go away. It's time to stop ignoring and to start dealing. Perhaps you need to find a friend and tell them of your struggles. Ask them to call you each week to keep you accountable and to encourage you to leave your sin. Sin is serious, otherwise Jesus wouldn't have died for it.**

Read Acts 25

"When the accusers stood up, they brought no accusation against him of such things as I supposed, ¹⁹ "but had some questions against him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive. Acts 25:18-19

When I was a kid, I believed in just about everything except God. Our small school had a very limited library and I'm sure I read every book on the Bermuda Triangle, the Loch Ness Monster, and aliens that I could get my hands on. Over time, it became clearer to me that these were nothing but stories. Every picture of the Loch Ness Monster was always grainy and rough. If we could get great still shots of World War II, I'm sure the film cameras of the 80's could get us a decent shot. The "missing" planes that had disappeared in the Bermuda Triangle were later recovered with modern technology. And no matter how much I love Star Trek, it appears that humans are the only flavor in the universe.

Why did I give up these beliefs? Because there was no evidence to back them up, even though I had spent so many years wanting to believe. Paul had some beliefs that the Jews hated, but they couldn't disprove them. Festus told King Agrippa of Paul's claim there was a man named Jesus who was alive, but the Jews claimed was dead. There would have been an easy way to answer this question: go to the tomb. The reason that Jesus' resurrection couldn't be disproved was there was no proof to the contrary. He hadn't been dead that long, and these priests were mostly the same ones who had helped condemn Jesus to the cross. If they had ever produced a body or taken Paul to the tomb, that would have been the end of it. Have you met people who call the Bible a fairytale? Does that cause you to get angry? **Remember that our faith is not validated by people telling us we are right, but it is validated by the Holy Spirit who gives us confidence. The Bible is proof. My changed life is proof. All of creation is proof. Our faith is not a mindless hope. It is a strong belief that comes not just from strong evidence, but from a mighty God. When people who don't believe the Bible challenge your beliefs, be ready to give an answer for why you believe (1 Peter 3:15). But, don't feel that you have to defend the entire faith...just your faith.**

Read Acts 26

"but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and *then* to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance. Acts 26:20

If you're not an officer, at some point in time you will be pulled out of your real job for KP ("Kitchen Patrol") and taught how to be an Army cook for a day. Mainly we help put the food into insulated containers, take it out to the field, and serve the units that are out there. Then we bring it all back to the rear and wash everything while the cooks supervise. That's bad enough, but one morning they needed us to help cook and I found out how scrambled eggs are made in the Army. They start with a large, pillow-sized bag of "egg product" that is put into boiling water. Several minutes later, you have one large bag of scrambled egg product that you break up into pieces. Not yummy, and definitely not what I signed up for.

As a soldier, there were certain actions that made sense for me to perform and some that did not. It's the same for us as Christians. Paul not only goes through his testimony again (which nearly convinces King Agrippa to convert), but he clearly shows the three-step process of the Christian life: repent, accept, and serve. Paul didn't just tell people to drop their sins and accept Jesus' forgiveness. He told them that they were called to a new and better life. A Christian who doesn't trade his/her acts of selfishness for selflessness is like an infantryman pulling permanent KP...that's not what they were set apart to be. Some believers wonder exactly how works and faith go together. We clearly don't get to Heaven by our deeds, but when we give our life to Jesus Christ, our deeds should undergo a change. **What are you doing now that you weren't doing before Jesus? Has your attitude towards your spouse or children changed? Has your attitude towards your parents changed? Are you making many of the same choices you made before you met Jesus? He expects us to make a change. Bad habits have to be replaced with good habits, otherwise there's room for the bad ones to come back. It's the same with sin. If you remove something from your life, you need to fill it with something positive or you will probably see the negative creeping right back in. That empty space becomes a foothold that the Devil will not stop putting his foot into (Ephesians 4:27).**

Read Acts 27

"saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you.' Acts 27:24

The hero of any story always has a nemesis: Batman vs. The Joker, Superman vs. Lex Luthor, or Spiderman vs. the Hobgoblin. Well if I may be so bold as to call myself a "hero", then my nemesis was College Algebra. I took that class three times at Mizzou and never could get the required C+ to allow me to move on. The third time I took it and could see it wasn't going to end well, I was complaining to Nikki about how pitiful I was. She reminded me we knew that God was calling me to go to seminary once I finished college, and that College Algebra was not going to stop God's plans for our family. Sure enough, I found another college where I could take the class and transfer the credit. In their class I got an A, thanks to an experienced professor.

In the last chapter we saw King Agrippa reveal that if Paul hadn't demanded to go before Caesar, he probably would have been released. But Paul demanded it because God wanted Paul to go to Rome. Now Paul finds himself on a boat, with diminishing supplies and a panicked crew and he may have wondered if he would get to Rome at all. God encourages Paul by sending an angel with a message to not be afraid. Literally the Greek phrase there means, "cheer up!" The angel confirmed to Paul that God's will was going to be accomplished and that Paul should not allow his current circumstances to cause any doubt on the matter. **Do you know God's will for your life? Maybe you don't know what He wants you to do in 20 years, but do you know what He's doing with you today? If He has made His will clear to you, never allow the circumstances that surround you to doubt that. Our responsibility is to live lives that are modeled after the Lord Jesus, so that our sin doesn't derail us. Cheer up and stop worrying. I once heard that 75% of all statistics are made up, so here's one I just cooked up for you that's probably pretty accurate: 90% of the stuff we worry about, never happens. Stop living in fear and start living in faith. Remember that if God has a plan for**

your life, and you're living to see that plan enacted in your life, then God will make it happen.

Read Acts 28

**And some were persuaded by the things which were spoken, and some disbelieved.
Acts 28:24**

There have been many times I have shared the gospel with the intent of seeing someone make a decision afterwards. In fact, if we tell the story of Jesus without giving the hearer a chance to respond, we have not really witnessed to them. Let me tell you, there have been times I have shared the gospel, sure I did a terrible job, only to hear the person readily give their lives to Jesus. Other times I thought I did a great job and the person walked away unsaved. I've realized over the years, that I am a tool of the Holy Spirit, and people choose to respond to His conviction over their sin or they choose to ignore it. I can share, but I cannot save.

Paul was speaking the same words to a multitude, and some believed and some did not. If we ever needed proof that it's the Holy Spirit and not our words, this would be it for me. Paul had the opportunity and he took it and that's what God wanted out of him. It is not the job of the believer to make everyone else believe. It is our job to share the message. My evangelism professor said something that I always pass along to people who are just beginning to share their faith regularly: "You never fail in your witness unless you fail to witness." People cannot hear unless we open our mouths. **Do you find yourself sometimes afraid to share your faith? Are you worried about the reaction or response of the other person? Then remember a couple of points: you are sharing the truth. They have a sin problem and an unpleasant eternity unless they hear the truth and believe. Remember also that God sets these appointments up. Pray that the Holy Spirit works ahead of you in preparing your divine appointments. And remember that if you share the gospel with a person and they do not accept, you are not the one being rejected...Jesus is. But in all of my years of sharing the gospel, I have never had anyone become hostile or threatening towards me for sharing my faith with them. Let's stop giving excuses and let's start sharing truth!**