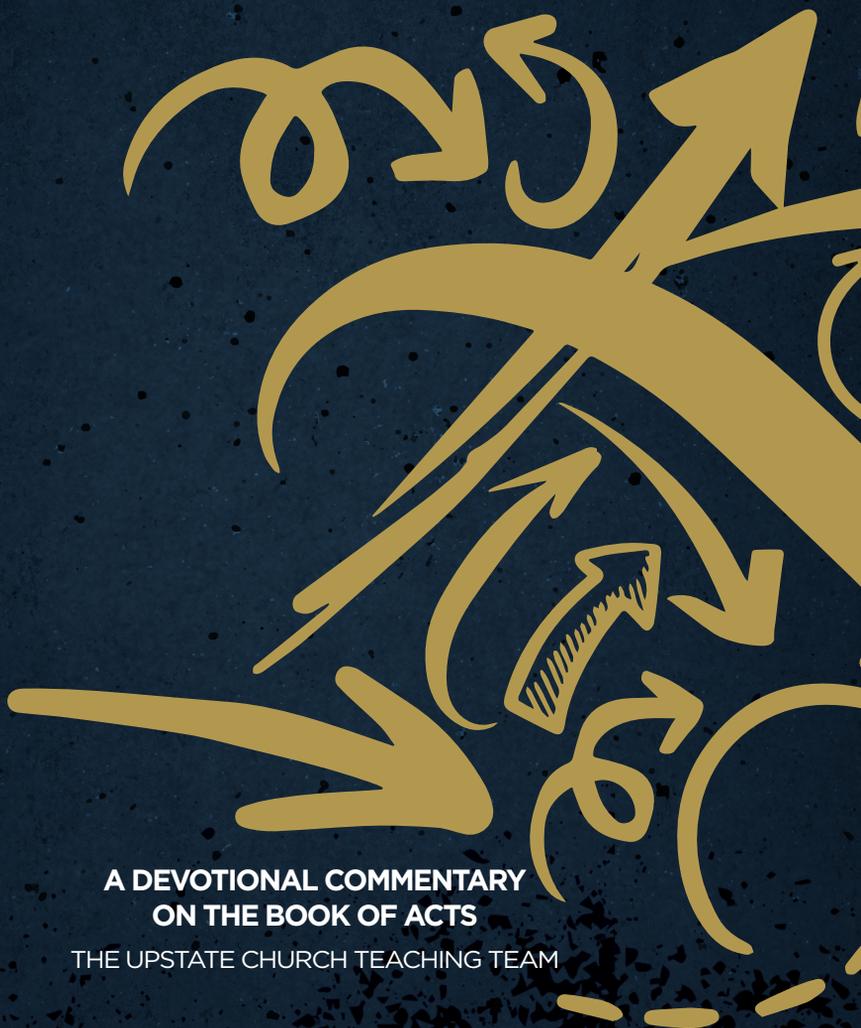


SENT

CHRIST'S MISSION IN THE FACE OF OPPOSITION



A DEVOTIONAL COMMENTARY
ON THE BOOK OF ACTS

THE UPSTATE CHURCH TEACHING TEAM

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PREFACE

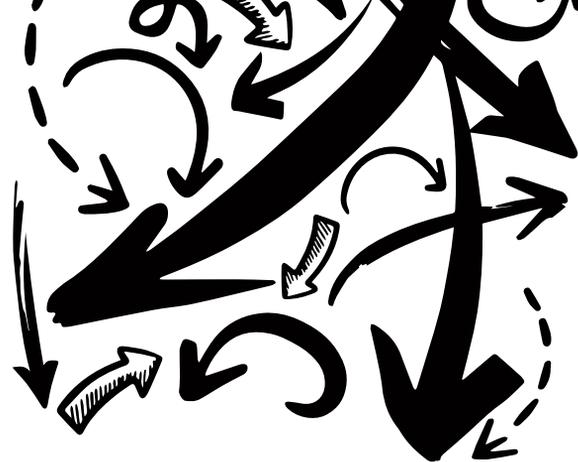
The gospel of Jesus Christ cannot be slowed down. It cannot be overcome. It cannot be hemmed in. Jesus Christ destroys every obstacle that stands in the way of His message of salvation and redemption going forward. This is the reality that is put on display in the book of Acts.

In the opening pages of Luke's account the disciples are told they are going to be witnesses for Christ to the ends of the earth. By the end of the book of Acts we find the Apostle Paul preaching the Gospel in Rome. The gospel goes forward just as Jesus said it would. Throughout the Acts of the Apostles we see countless obstacles arise that seem to be big problems for Jesus and the church. However, time and time again we see that, Christ sits enthroned in heaven and uses every obstacle that comes against the church to further the proclamation of the gospel. Saul was persecuting Christians. Jesus saved Saul and made him the greatest missionary in Church History. The church was persecuted in Jerusalem. Jesus used the persecution to spread the gospel to Samaria. Paul was arrested. Jesus used the arrest of Paul to take the gospel to Rome. Opposition isn't really opposition when someone opposes Jesus. The gospel goes forward, no matter what stands in the way.

The Teaching Team at Upstate Church has been emboldened by the message of Acts. It's brought us great confidence to know that the gospel will go forward in the Upstate and around the world no matter what comes against Christ and His Gospel. We hope this book will be an encouragement to the congregation of Upstate Church. We have a mission and there is nothing that can prevent us from accomplishing the mission if we go with Jesus. As we study the book of Acts we pray that you will be convinced to live SENT.

CHARGE ON!

The Teaching Team of Upstate Church



WEEK 1

God's Plan and God's Power

Read Acts 1:1-26

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

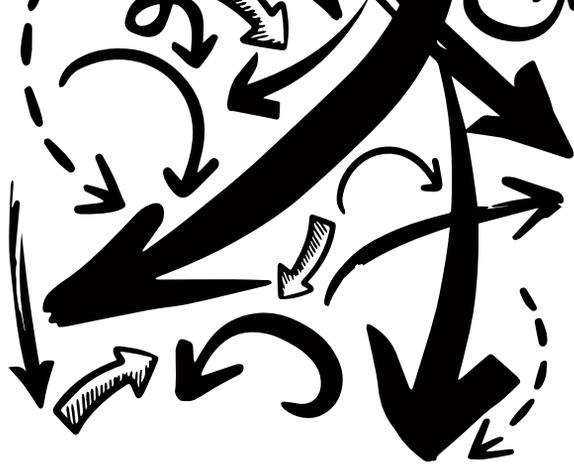
We've all been there, the point of confusion and desperation. Things did not go according to our plans, and we felt vulnerable and exposed. In Acts 1, The disciples found themselves in a similar situation. Virtually everything in their lives had been turned upside down in a matter of days. They had left everything to follow Jesus and had been His faithful disciples for three years.

The disciples learned, like so many of us have learned, to follow Jesus is to walk toward the cross. These disciples watched their Master die publicly. They witnessed his body being placed in a tomb. They were in the depths of despair, but within a couple of days everything changed. They saw his resurrected body standing before their eyes. Imagine the roller-coaster of emotions and what they must have been thinking. What were their first questions and greatest concerns?

Familiarity with a passage of scripture often causes us to miss some of its most beneficial lessons. For example, consider Jesus' words in Acts 1:8, just before His ascension into heaven. He is about to leave the disciples and issue the Great Commission. He says, "But you will receive power." The word "but" is there to signal a contrast to something earlier. By looking back to verses 6 and 7, we learn a valuable lesson.

Acts 1:6-7 tells us that when Jesus gathered with his disciples, they wanted answers. "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" Perhaps they believed Jesus owed them an explanation, because they had followed him so faithfully. Christ's answer was likely a surprise, "It's not for you to know." The plan belongs to the Father, and it's above our pay grade.

WEEK 2



The Power of Divine Restoration

Read Acts 2:1-41

“But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them...”

We all mess up sometimes. None of us is perfect, and we prove it often. Failure is something we all have in common, but, as Christians, our response to that failure is what separates us from the rest of society. Most people do one of two things: they deny their faults, or they blame them on someone else. A follower of Jesus, however, realizes that falling is a prerequisite to being lifted up. Loss is an imperative condition for redemption. Without pain there can be no healing. What separates us from the rest of the world? In one word, restoration.

Peter was a disciple we can relate to. His spiritual walk was a combination of exceptional highs and dramatic lows. He was often the disciple with the greatest passion and faith, while lacking the depth and spiritual endurance to finish strong. Consider a few significant events in Peter’s life story.

You’ve likely read Matthew 16, where Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” This is one of those mountaintop experiences when Peter spoke up and got the answer right. In verse 16 he said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus then confirmed Peter’s answer in dramatic fashion in verses 17-19.

In a self-confident manner, standing in the Upper Room with Jesus and his disciples, Peter declares that he is willing to die for Jesus. I’m sure in the back of his mind Peter thought this would be another opportunity for Jesus to brag on his faithfulness. Instead, Luke 22:33 records that Jesus gives Peter some bad news. He predicts that Peter will deny him three times.

Sure enough, Peter fulfilled the prophecy of Christ by denying Jesus three times that very night (Luke 22:54). The prophet Isaiah said, "All we like sheep have gone astray" (Isaiah 53:6). Then Paul reinforced this truth in Romans 3:10, "None is righteous, no, not even one." Peter must have felt like his world had come crashing down. He had not only failed, he had denied Jesus. He must have thought he had fallen too far for redemption.

Despite all of Peter's failures, John 21:15 records a beautiful story of the resurrected Jesus surprising Peter by cooking him breakfast on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. In this moment Jesus asked Peter an odd question, but he didn't just ask the question once, but three times. "Peter, do you love me?"

Just as Peter had denied the Lord three times, Jesus provided an equal number of opportunities for Peter to declare his love for the Savior. This is a beautiful picture of restoration. What is the result of this supernatural restorative power?

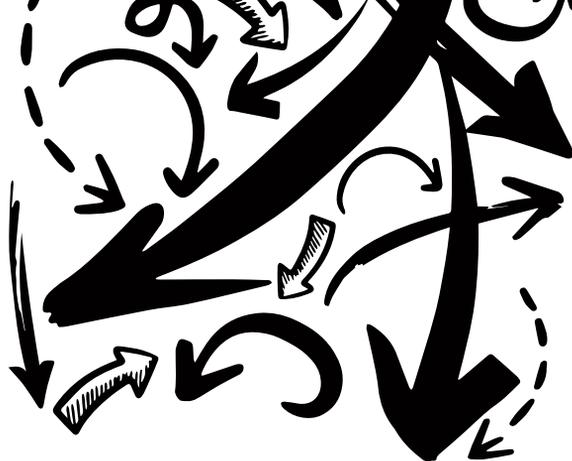
I think it's fitting to remember this background as you read the sermon of Peter in Acts 2. Yes, in Luke 22, Peter FALLS flat in fear unable to even whisper faith in Christ. But in Acts 2 Peter is STANDING tall, lifting up his voice with a holy boldness. What is the difference? Peter had not only been filled with the Spirit (Acts 2:4); he had also been restored by the Master. His private restoration led to a public transformation. How about you? Are you in need of restoration?

PRAYER

Lord, forgive me and restore me where I have fallen short. Please take my failures and use them for Your glory and my good. Amen.

NOTES

WEEK 3



Church As It Was Meant to Be

Read Acts 2:42-48

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

One of the greatest desires of the human heart is to be known. Each of us are wired in such a way that in the depths of our hearts and souls we crave a sense of belonging. We want people in our lives that we can run to in times of trouble. We want friends we can laugh with and do life with, that encourage us and feed our souls. No matter how imperfect relationships can be, each one of us wants community.

The greatest community a follower of Jesus can have is **the church**.

At the end of Acts 2, we see a lot of what the community looked like in the early church. The body of Christ was sharing meals, caring for one another, worshiping together, and praying together. The early church took community seriously. It wasn't just an occasional event or gathering on a Sunday morning. It was regular and repetitive, and not just when they had the time. The followers of Christ valued spending quality time together, and they did it frequently.

As they gathered, they focused on what mattered most—the Word of God, fellowship, worship, and prayer. What we read about and see is not a group of people nonchalantly attending worship here and there, but a powerful group of believers unified around the message of Jesus. The church wasn't just a building with programs that provided entertainment. Instead, it was a community of believers who poured into each other and the outside world. As a result of this powerful community, not only did the early believers continue to mature in their faith, they became gospel-minded in reaching others.



WEEK 4

We Cannot Be Silent

Read Acts 3:1-4:31

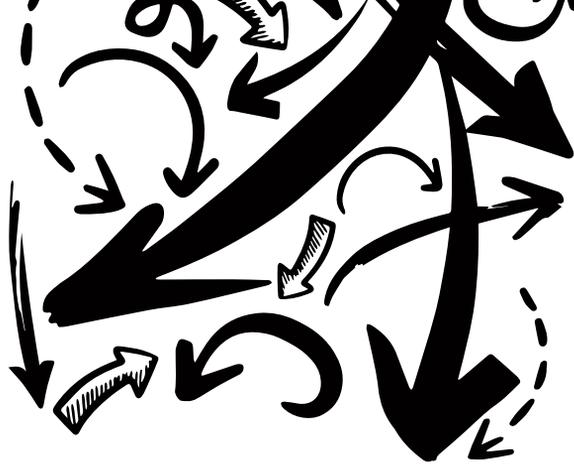
But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."

Peter and John find themselves in a problematic situation in Acts 4, despite the fact that they hadn't done anything wrong. In Acts 3, they healed a lame beggar. Then, as was becoming his custom, Peter taught the people about the true spiritual healing that Christ offered by his life, death, and resurrection.

Well, it seems no good deed goes unpunished. Shortly after the miracle they are taken into custody by the Sandhedrin, the Jewish authorities. These Jewish elites are annoyed because Peter and John have been teaching in the name of Jesus and proclaiming His death, resurrection, and saving power. Despite the Sandhedrin's annoyance, there isn't much that they can do. The Sanhedrin is handcuffed by the fact that the disciples have just healed a man who couldn't walk, and this miracle has left the crowds in awe at the disciples' teaching and power. Talk about the ultimate trump card. How do you know your message is the right one? It has the power to heal the lame! This also produces a great amount of fear in the Jewish authorities. If they do not put a stop to this message, then all Israel will go after Jesus! What are the authorities to do?

In a rather weak attempt to squelch the disciples' proclamation, they bring them before the council and charge them to stop preaching and proclaiming Jesus. The disciples' answer is the stuff of legend!

"WE CANNOT BE SILENT" they answer.



WEEK 5

A Plot for Two

Read Acts 5:1-11

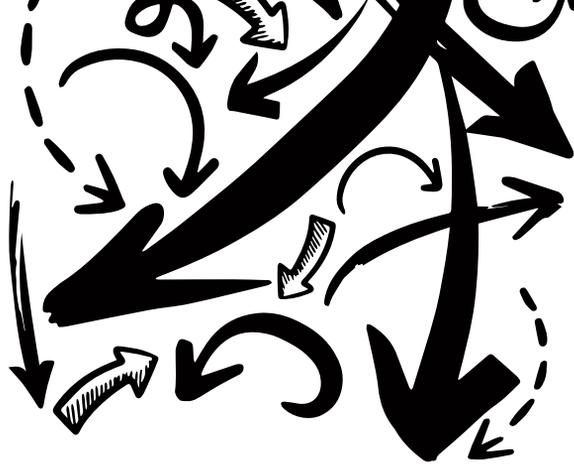
But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira still strikes fear into the hearts of those who read it thousands of years later. The fateful duo privately conspired out of selfishness and agreed to withhold a portion for themselves from the sale of “a piece of property,” publicly offering a generous gift for the cause for all to see. In light of the generous gift from Barnabas in chapter four, this selfish plot designed for their benefit led ultimately to a burial plot!

As the cause of Christ multiplies and the Kingdom of God expands, there will always be those who seek to leverage its impact for their own advancement. What should be an intensely spiritual venture is twisted into an opportunity to increase a constituent base, attract a larger following on social media, build a prospect file, or expand the customer base for a new business. It may be tempting to use Jesus to build our own kingdom. However, Annias and Sapphira remind us that the Kingdom of God is not something that can be manipulated for human gain. Those who are serious about following Jesus must be content with Jesus getting all the glory.

PRAYER

God, give us the type of boldness that makes us unable to be silent in a world that needs to hear about Jesus. Amen.



WEEK 6

Obstacles are Opportunities

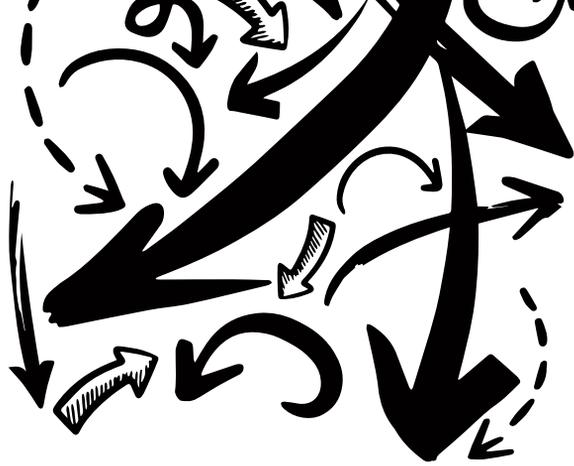
Read Acts 5:12-42

And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women

What is the thing that would prevent you from sharing the Gospel with others? God has given us all a story to tell, and it is one of a Redeeming God who loves us enough to send His Son to a cross. Yet for most of us, the thing that may hold us back from sharing this Good News is simpler than we may like to admit.

In these verses in Acts, the Church is progressing and growing. Thousands have decided to follow Jesus a short time ago and the disciples are now empowered to display the glory of God to all people. While God has given us His complete Word today, He is still moving in incredible ways that often go far beyond our own ability to understand. In the midst of these signs and wonders that the disciples are performing, the religious leaders of the day decide to lock them up to prevent them from preaching. When the authorities go to check on Peter and John they realize that God had released them from prison and the disciples had returned to teaching others about Jesus.

The Apostles were brought before the Sanhedrin for a strong correction. This creates a quandary in and of itself... to kill these disciples makes them martyrs of a fastly growing group of people. A member of the Sanhedrin quickly asserts that in other man-made movements, they were dispersed easily through this option - but should this be of God they may not find that decision as simple. They certainly don't want to fan the flame of their followers either. To release them may mean that these men continue to tell others about Jesus. The High Priest and his men feel as if they're stuck, but make the decision to flog the disciples.



WEEK 7

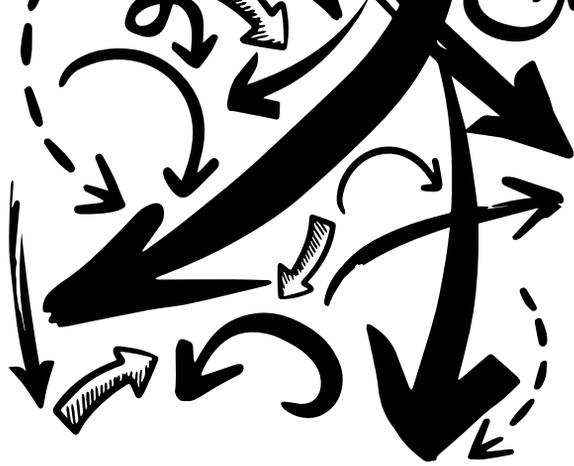
Hold the Line

Read Acts 6:1-7:60

Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.

People have always resisted the work of the Holy Spirit. Shortly after his appointment as one of the first deacons in the early church, Stephen is put on trial for preaching the Gospel. In his speech, Stephen demonstrates the way that the Holy Spirit has always been working in and through God's people. He points to the way that all of salvation history is connected by God's presence and His deliverance of His people.

Then Stephen turns on his audience. He says that they are in a long line of people who have rejected the work of the Holy Spirit. At Stephen's rebuke, the crowd, in outrage, takes up stones to kill him! There has always been opposition to the work of God. His Kingdom will always have enemies. This is why the Apostle Peter says, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12). Persecution is not strange for Christians. Opposition to the work of God is not unusual. We should not be surprised when our culture rejects Christianity. We should not be surprised when carrying out the work of the Holy Spirit becomes difficult in our workplaces, schools, homes, and neighborhoods. God's work has always faced opposition. However, in the face of opposition God has always raised up men and women like Stephen to stand up and speak boldly. We have to decide if we will stand in the way of God's work or stand up for God's work, like Stephen.



WEEK 8

Setback or Set Up?

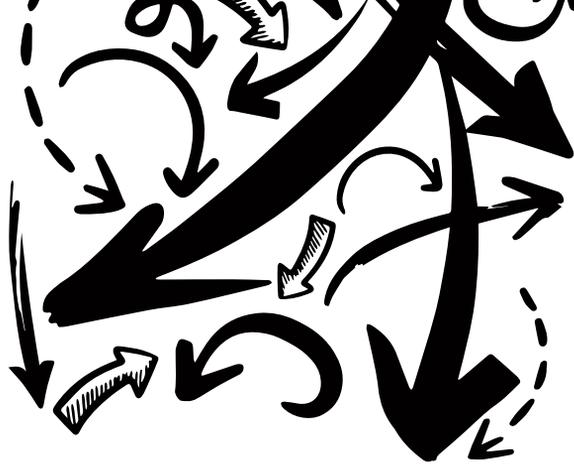
Read Acts 8:1-25

Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.

It's a fact, plain and simple, that there are times in life when we don't understand what God is doing. Things don't go the way we planned, or worse, everything in life seems to fall apart at the seams. In those times, it's very easy to doubt God. The truth is that we very seldom have the whole picture. From where we sit, with our human minds and our sinful natures, there are times when we can't see all that God is doing.

This is the situation in Acts 8. Thus far, the church has been centered in Jerusalem. After Christ ascended, the Holy Spirit came down and the church was growing rapidly. From a human perspective things were going great! People are being saved. The church is growing. God is blessing. Could it get any better? Then one day it all came crashing down. A man named Saul was in town, and he hated these new Christians proclaiming that Jesus was the Messiah. He wanted nothing more than to shut these people up for good. Eventually, Saul would get his wish.

It all started when Stephen went before the Sandhedrin. The Jewish religious leaders of the day were stiff-necked and rebellious in heart. Stephen preached a sermon and told them just that. By the end of the sermon the people were irate and began to throw stones at Stephen. It was Saul, the persecutor of Christians, who was overseeing Stephen's stoning.



WEEK 9

Ready and Willing?

Read Acts 8:26-40

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go"

Philip, one of the early believers spreading the good news of Jesus throughout Samaria (Vv. 13-14), is asked by an "angel of the Lord" (v. 26) to go on a desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza. No instruction is given other than to go towards Gaza via a desert road. Philip's response might have been one of fear, anger, hesitation, doubt, or pride. Instead, his response was simple. Verse 27 says, "he rose and went."

Philip's humble obedience to God's instruction led to his providential encounter with a high-ranking official in the Ethiopian government. This encounter then led to the official's salvation and baptism. Coincidence? Not a chance.

God orchestrated the conversion and baptism of the Ethiopian official through the reading of scripture, the leading of the Spirit (Vv. 29, 39) and the humble obedience of His servant, Philip.

While certainly Philip couldn't take credit for this, God used his humble obedience to change the eternal direction of this official. We will never know this side of heaven the impact that our own obedience to the Lord will have, but our motivation remains the same... obedience for the praise and glory of Jesus.

Our response to the clear leading of the Spirit has significant implications. Are we ready and willing, like Phillip?



WEEK 10

God Showed Up

Read Acts 9:1-43

Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him.

In Acts 9, we see that Saul was so blinded by lies that he was unable to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. It required God's intervention for Saul to truly see Jesus. Saul was completely convinced that he was right to persecute followers of Christ. He was so determined in his endeavor that he sought out permission to pursue followers of Christ in other cities. It seemed like he was never going to stop the hateful and brutal acts unless something radical happened.

That's when God showed up.

How many times do we go through life with something blinding us from really seeing Jesus? It might be anger, bitterness, pride, hate, or selfishness. The reality is that sin is blinding. Sin gets in the way of us truly experiencing Jesus and the life God desires us to have. Sin distorts our hearts and destroys everything in its path.

In the same way that Saul needed Jesus to show up, we desperately need Jesus to show up for us.

As Saul met Jesus face-to-face and his eyes were opened from his sin to see Jesus, his life was transformed. He realized the purpose of his life was no longer to bring Christians to death, but instead, to bring others to life. After his conversion, Paul's tenacity was pointed to sharing the gospel.



WEEK 11

Clean, Unclean, and Everything In Between

Read Acts 10:1-11:48

"The next day he rose and went away with them,"

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. From a Jewish point of view, Cornelius, a Gentile, was a bad guy. He ate the wrong food, hung out with the wrong crowd, and swore allegiance to the wrong leader, Caesar. He didn't quote the Torah or descend from Abraham. He was uncircumcised, unkosher, and unclean.

For centuries the Jews were taught that certain foods, as well as people who were non-Jews (Gentiles), were to be considered "unclean." In Acts 10, God shows up in a vision to Peter, a Jew, and changes the cultural way of thinking. In this vision, God revealed that He showed no partiality...to the Jew or the Gentile. While Peter was pondering this vision, a few men from Cornelius' house came.

As a result, Peter went to Cornelius' home and preached the gospel. In Acts 10:29, we see an incredible response from Peter, "so when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection." Peter's attitudes and beliefs were passed down to him over many generations, but Jesus' calling was bigger than any of his past. No matter what cultural trends or social norms of the day, Peter obeyed the Lord.

Naturally, we tend to gravitate in our relationships to people who have common interests. Without a doubt, those relationships bring encouragement and

fellowship. Nevertheless, we must ask ourselves, how do you interact with people who are not like you? Do you have people in your life that have different interests? How do you treat people with different political views, religious beliefs, or worldviews?

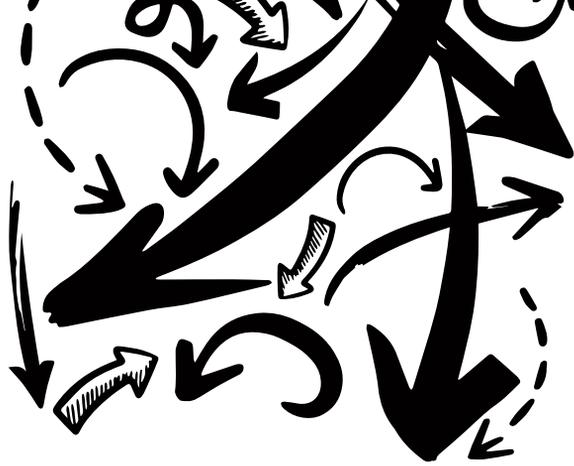
In the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 22:37-38, Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment. Jesus responded, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38 This is the great and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” No matter the differences, it is our responsibility to be ambassadors of Christ to the people we encounter.

Peter’s obedience to God led to not only Cornelius’ life being changed but paved the path for the Gospel message to spread to everyone. How are you reflecting and sharing Jesus with people not like you? Would you say you love others just as much as yourself? Take time today to think of people in your life that need Jesus and ways you can be obedient to God sending you.

PRAYER

Father, help me to see others the way You see them. Forgive me where my relationships are more about my desires than Yours. Help me to be intentional in sharing who You are and what You have done with people who are different from me by inviting them into my life. Amen.

NOTES



WEEK 12

Prison Break

Read Acts 12:1-25

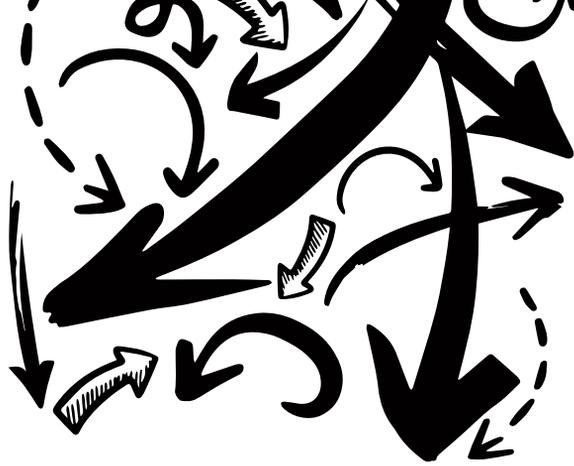
“About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.”

During the great famine in Judea, unrest was increasing and Herod responded by focusing attention on the apostles and the spread of Christianity. By “laying violent hands on some who belonged to the church” (v. 1), Herod probably hoped he could pin the blame of the famine on others, avoiding accountability from the people. James was killed and Peter was imprisoned.

In the meantime, the church was “earnestly praying for him (Peter)” (v. 5), and God responded. Peter, escorted by an angel out of prison to the city gate, shows up and breaks up a prayer meeting that was being held concerning his imprisonment.

Despite significant persecution against the leaders of the early church, God miraculously moved, the gospel expanded, and the church was emboldened. This is the theme of the book of Acts, and it continues to be the church’s story today. In times of intense persecution, God hears the prayers of His people and moves in His gospel-advancing purpose.

While our church may not be facing the same challenges as the early church, we are certainly faced with our own set of obstacles. What would you say are some obstacles the church does face? What is preventing you from following their example of boldness?



WEEK 13

His Promises Are True

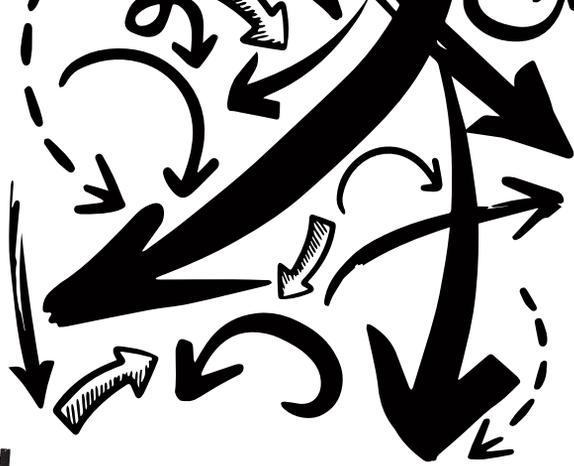
Read Acts 13:1-15:41

And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm,

In his sermon in the Synagogue, the Apostle Paul preached the basics of the Gospel. When he did so, he connected the work of Jesus to the prophetic witness and covenant storyline of the Old Testament. It's easy to think the Old Testament is unimportant or not worth the trouble of trying to understand. In his Gospel presentation in Acts 13, Paul shows us that the truth about Jesus is inseparable from the Old Testament. He points out the way that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promised Messiah in the Psalms. He reminds his audience that their fathers were waiting for a Savior sent from God. He shows them that Jesus is the eternal king promised to live forever among David's offspring. Jesus is the fulfillment of all of God's promises. Jesus is our ultimate deliverance out of our slavery to sin. He is the true son of Abraham who is with His people. He is the King of David who reigns above it all and throughout all eternity. This is why Paul could say in 2 Corinthians 1:20 that, "all the promises of God find their Yes in him." Everything that God has promised you is fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. You can count on them because you can count on Him.

PRAYER

Lord, help me to see that all of Your promises are true. Help me to trust in You and to trust in Your promises. You have said You'll never leave me or forsake me. You've said that You are coming back again. You've promised me life abundant and everlasting. Help me to believe that these things are true. The Cross is enough for me to see that all of Your promises are yes. Amen.



WEEK 14

The Macedonian Call

Read Acts 16:1-40

And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.

The familiar scene plays out easily in our heads. We've seen it before in movies and even in our real life. Something happens that is tragic or difficult - or there is simply a "No" when a "Yes" is desired. The response is a frustrated scream toward heaven... "Why me? Why now?" It's so easy for us to blame God when things seemingly go wrong in our lives or when we feel as if we have not received what we deserve.

In Acts 16, we see a similar situation play out, but with a much different response from Paul than what we might expect. Paul is one of the most influential individuals within Scripture. He not only wrote a large portion of the New Testament, but we even see his missionary journeys on display in the book of Acts - a book that is authored by the Apostle Luke. Paul loved to start churches and share the Gospel. With Timothy at his side, they traveled throughout Asia to spread the Good News. While traveling, something strange happened...Paul experienced the Spirit of God preventing him from going to certain places to share the Gospel. During this time, Paul sees a vision of a Macedonian man inviting him to bring the Good News to them. What an interesting turn of events! Paul had spent his time building and strengthening churches in Asia, but God was moving him through this Macedonian Call to pivot to Europe.

By heading to Macedonia, Paul was bringing the Gospel to Europe and many consider this the starting point of the Gospel's expansion to the western world as we know it.

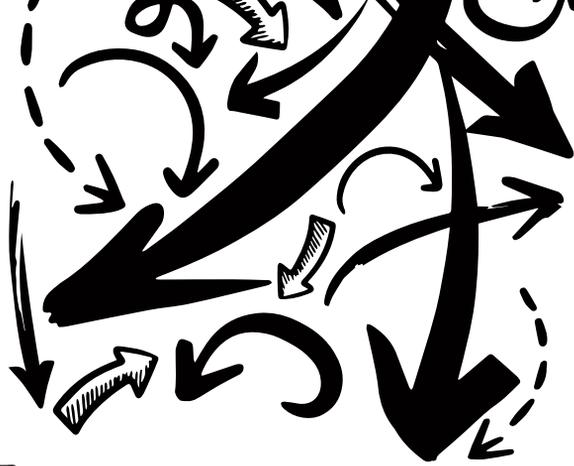
But this wasn't without its own set of challenges and victories. Paul and his crew experienced God doing some incredible things; Lydia's conversion, a possessed slave girl freed, but then Paul and Silas were arrested and found themselves in prison. Even while imprisoned, they found an opportunity to worship the Lord and the jailer was converted! They had a perspective that carried them through any circumstance - a faith that fueled them even in adversity. When they sensed a change in direction from the Lord, they simply obeyed.

It is so important for you and I to listen to the guiding of the Spirit through the Word of God. We will inevitably face times in our lives when we are face-to-face with a big fat "NO" when we want a different answer. And yet, His ways are higher than our own. His plan may be to use that challenge you're walking through to advance His agenda and His plan. We must be ever mindful of the fact that this one life we have to live on this earth must be spent surrendered to His purpose and not to serve our own.

PRAYER

Father, we thank You already for the times that we have been given a platform for Your glory. We know that with every challenge and with every victory we are given a unique voice to share Your Good News to the world. Help us to gain a glimpse into Your perspective when we feel as if we aren't getting what we think we should. We thank You that You have abundantly shown us grace and continue to sustain us daily. Amen.

NOTES



WEEK 15

You Give Life and Breath

Read Acts 17:1-34

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

Have you ever stopped to think about the fact that you are breathing? Your lungs take in oxygen then they expel carbon dioxide. Then, they do it all over again, over and over and over again, day after day without us thinking about it. We almost take this simple fact for granted. However, Paul reminds us that even this simple act is made possible because there is a God who created us and makes it possible for our lungs to breathe while we read these words.

This is actually amazing when you think about it. What a God! He gives us life. He gives us breath. If he decided to take away that oxygen, we would cease to exist in just a moment. In light of this, we realize how big he is and how small we are.

Acts 17 has always been a favorite passage of mine to preach because of the clarity it brings to the nature of God. I have first-hand experience with these verses that I will never forget. When my first daughter was due to be born,, I had spent a fair amount of time in Acts and reading this passage in particular.

The time came for my wife to give birth to our daughter and everything did not go as planned. It was a rather difficult experience as there were complications that were unexpected. All of the trouble came to the surface when she finally arrived and did not take her first breath. She entered the world and for a few minutes remained silent. You read that right, minutes.



WEEK 16

How to Finish Well

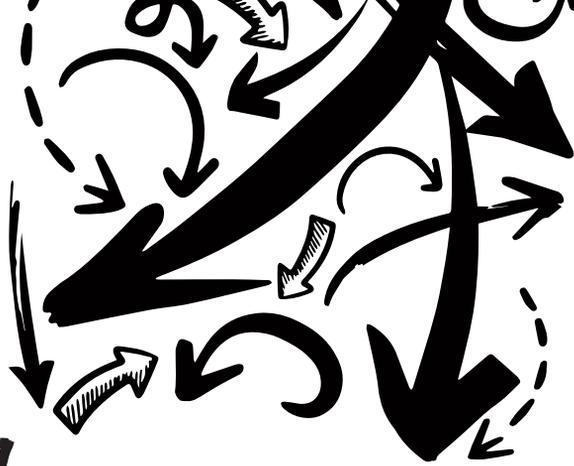
Read Acts 18:1-20:38

But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

Where is your life headed? There's an old saying by Zig Ziglar that says, "If you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time." Many folks lack direction in their lives because they are not pointing their life anywhere. While creating goals in life do help us create intentionality, we have all been given a Great Commission. No matter your gift set or interests, Jesus tells us all in Acts 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

For the past few chapters, Paul has been serving the people in the Macedonian area and sharing the Gospel. He has spent three years of his life admonishing them to grow through a love and understanding for God's Word. In spite of this, he still feels the call to continue on and bring the Gospel to more places. Everywhere he went, he knew he was facing afflictions or imprisonment, and yet he continues to pursue the completion of the Great Commission. 2,000+ years later we are still working hard to complete this great task, but it began with the early disciples.

In Acts 20:24 Paul says, "But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God." Paul really knew how to be single-minded in his pursuit of the Lord! In the midst of sharing with the people he had been pouring into for the past 3 years, Paul tells them that he only wants his life to serve and be obedient to the command that God has given Him.



WEEK 17

Fizzled Out or Fired Up

Read Acts 21:1-26:32

"And Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?" And Paul said, "Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains."

The Apostle Paul's life is one worthy of great examination. He was an exceptional Jew, an exemplary Pharisee, and a teacher of the Law (Philippians 3:5). He had been trained at the highest of levels in an incomplete doctrine. He knew that a Messiah was coming, but Paul didn't know that He was already here. That all changed for Paul, then known as Saul, on the road to Damascus (Acts 9).

We all believe that Jesus Christ has the power to change lives. In fact, my own life is one that has been radically changed. Paul testifies to this power in 2 Corinthians 5:17 "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." This is the message of the Gospel; Jesus radically saves those who recognize they cannot save themselves. When we look around at what modern Christianity has become, it's easy to get discouraged. Radical life change seems to be more of a memory than an expectation, something God did then, but not now.

It seems most believers look at salvation more as an event that changed their eternal destination but not one that has any impact on their earthly struggles. The life of Saul/Paul shows us clearly what repentance looks like. Life change for Saul was more than agreeing to join a church or attend a small group. He gave up everything for Jesus. He walked away from everything that made him who he was, and he walked toward a skeptical group of Christians who were afraid of him. After all, he was an enemy of the church and he had persecuted the church for years.

This was no easy transition, and Paul would have had countless excuses for failure. He could have walked away and faded into oblivion. He could have fizzled out, and no one would have been surprised.

Instead, Paul presses on, walks through an intentional season of preparation and equipping, which was followed by a series of major missional advances for the cause of Christ. Paul literally pushed back the spiritual darkness in the world around him. Though extremely controversial, he took the gospel to the Gentiles. Ironically, it seems he met opposition everywhere he went, but not primarily from the Gentiles, but the Jews. They literally hated him and wanted him dead.

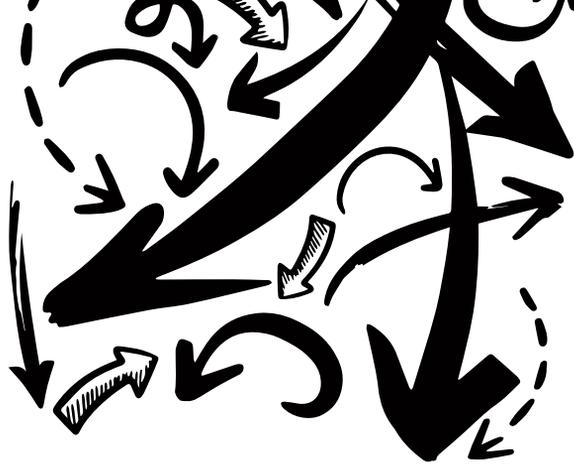
The story of Paul standing before King Agrippa is one of great significance, simply because he had not quit. He had not given up. He had resisted the temptation to back down under the pressure of both the Jews and Gentiles. He had taken the gospel to the Gentile world on three separate missionary journeys. He had devoted his life – He had risked his life for the cause of Christ. Somehow, he was able to stay fired up for Jesus. He seems just as convinced of the gospel in Acts 26 as he did in Acts 9.

He had not fizzled out; Instead, he was fired up to the very end of his life.

PRAYER

God help me give You all of myself. Forgive me when I have held back for fear of rejection and shame. Give me the strength to stand and help my faith to grow with each passing day. I want to be fired up until the day You take me home. Amen.

NOTES



WEEK 18

The Gospel Keeps Going

Acts 27:1-28:31

He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

The book of Acts ends with a simple but profound statement on the end of Paul's life. It says that Paul went on, "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance." Oh, for this to be said of us! God would have each of us to go about our lives proclaiming the Kingdom of God. When people think of us, it should be impossible to separate our lives from the work that God is doing. We should be so invested in knowing Jesus and making Him known that our lives are identified with this mission. If we are to live this way, then boldness will be required. Our cultural context, much like Paul's, is such that proclaiming the Gospel with our lives will not be easy. We will never drift into a life that boldly teaches about the Lord Jesus Christ. Intentionality and courage are absolute necessities for this kind of life. We can live this way knowing that the Gospel will go forward without hindrance. The mission is going to continue on with or without us. The Kingdom will stand without fail. We must decide if we will boldly proclaim God's Kingdom or if we'll miss out. We can share the Gospel, live boldly for Christ, and see lives changed without hindrance, but we can't do it from the sidelines.

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