

## John 8 – July 1

Another day: new mercies. Amen? Let's see what grace the Lord gives us through John 8 on this first day of July.

Before we jump in to the chapter, though, let's determine just what *is* this chapter. In your bible, you will see brackets around verse 53 of chapter 7 and verse 11 of chapter 8. Your bible might make a comment or two about it, or maybe not, but allow me to explain.

John 7:53-8:11 is likely not actually a part of John's gospel. All the earliest Greek manuscripts (copies of the original letters) exclude this portion of Scripture and no early church father comments on it until the twelfth century (1100 A.D.). In other words, the super old copies of Scripture that our modern English bibles are translated from don't include this portion of writing. It's possible that it really happened, but it is highly likely that John did not originally include it in his gospel.

So, what do we do with it? Well, the moral of the story aligns with Scripture, so it's not heretical, but I would simply use other verses when trying to get the point across. What I mean is that the moral of the story is "don't judge lest ye be judged" (Matt. 7:1-3), so instead of using John 8 to teach that truth, I would use Matthew 7. I hope that makes sense! Another way of saying it is that if this story (John 8:1-11) was taken out of Scripture we wouldn't lose any key truth or central tenet of the faith. It's a good story, but we know already that Jesus is merciful and that we should not be arrogant and judgmental when we have "logs" in our own eyes. So, let's move on and spend our remaining time discussing the rest of John 8!

The rest of John 8 is no less controversial than the beginning. Verses 12-47 document disputes about Jesus' testimony, identity, and followers. Then, verses 48-59 record Jesus teaching that he is God (what the whole gospel of John is about) and almost getting stoned for it! So, controversy is everywhere at this point in Jesus' ministry.

In verse 37, Jesus says to the crowd, "you are looking for a way to kill me, because you have no room for my word." Let me end this devotion by asking you, do you have room for Christ's word in your heart? This chapter clearly tells us who Jesus is. He is God! He was living and active even before Abraham was born! If Jesus is God, then he deserves to be your Lord. But, do you have room for him? Or, are you looking for loopholes? Ways to get around this truth? Jesus says that you're either for him or against him, there is no in-between. Unlike the inn in Bethlehem, there must be room in your heart for Jesus to dwell. But, so often we fill our hearts with the crumbs and table scraps of the world that we forsake the feast that is the Bread of Life, Jesus Christ. Hebrews 12:1-4 tells us to lay aside everything that might hinder us from running the race. What might you need to lay aside today so that you might run harder after Christ? What is in your heart that might be blocking out Christ? I encourage you to seek Christ today. Ask the Spirit to show you yourself *in light of* Christ's glory. Look to Christ and be healed!

## John 9 – July 2

Fun fact: John 9 is the text of the first sermon I (Joe) ever preached. It was in front of a class in college and, let me tell you, it was terrible! But... moving on!

John 9 is really a simple story. As with just about everything else in John's Gospel, the point of chapter 9 is to reveal Jesus' identity. Long story short, Jesus heals a man who was blind from birth, the Pharisees investigate the healing, and Jesus tells them that they're blind because they can't see Him for who He really is: the Son of Man (verse 35).

The application of this story is quite simple: believe in the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, and take heed lest you fall (1 Cor. 10:12). Here's the thing, my friends. I can tell you, "believe! believe!" until I'm blue in the face! But I can't open the eyes of your heart so that you may actually see Jesus. That's the whole point of this story: A guy who was born blind can "see" Jesus, but the Pharisees who have had physical sight for their entire lives are actually the blind ones!

Don't be the blind ones! I don't really know what else to say about this text. Plead to God that he might open your eyes *each and every day*. Yes, justification is a one-time thing, but we need the gospel's sanctifying work every single day. The devil, the flesh, and the world are trying to harden my heart and fog up my sight every moment that I'm breathing. I desperately need Christ's Spirit to continually soften my heart and wipe my eyes clear. So, friends, even if you're reading this today as a Christian please take heed lest your heart slowly harden and your sight slowly fade. We must stay desperate for Jesus until we see Him face to face. I fear that far too many Christians lose that mindset. Or, rather, far too many Christians think that they're "good to go" and that they're "mature" and don't really have all that much more to learn. God forbid! Our perpetual posture should be that of humility and utter reliance on Christ's Spirit.

Does this make sense? Do you know what I mean? Let me try to give you some concrete examples.

Do you make more statements than you ask questions? It should be the other way around. When was the last time you really took the blame for something? I hope recently. When was the last time you confessed that you were inadequate for something? I hope recently. When was the last time you answered a question with, "I don't know." I hope recently. When was the last time you considered that someone who disagrees with you might just have a different viewpoint that would be helpful for you to see from? I hope recently.

I'm not trying to make you feel terrible today. Maybe you're the blind man in this story and not the Pharisees. Maybe all you know is that you love Jesus and you're thankful for His grace each day because, God knows, you need it. I hope that's you. But, maybe you're dismissing all of this and sarcastically saying, "What? Am I blind too?"

Either way, keep chasing Jesus. Pursue Him with everything you've got. Feast on the Scriptures every day, live within the community of the Body of Christ, and take up your cross daily for the mission of the Kingdom of God.

## John 10 – July 3

“The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.” Psalm 23:1

“For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand.” Psalm 95:7

“I am the good shepherd.” John 10:11

Do you ever feel like you need a Good Shepherd? Do you ever feel like a stray sheep, wandering about aimlessly, looking for still waters and green pastures? Sometimes we just need a green pasture, amen? Sometimes I’m tired of the wilderness, of the valley, of the precarious mountain side. Well, thankfully for you and for me, Jesus is our shepherd. Jesus leads us by still waters and green pastures; he restores our souls. He welcomes the weary and heavy-laden and gives them rest. Even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we have nothing to fear because Jesus is for us. And, if Jesus is for us, who can be against us? We are Christ’s sheep. He knows us and we know Him. What can a wolf do to us? The wolf comes to steal, kill, and destroy, but Jesus, our Good Shepherd, came that we may have abundant life and fullness of joy.

No other shepherd throughout all of history could do what Jesus did. King David was a lowly shepherd, and he shepherded Israel as their king for forty years; he failed. Moses was a shepherd for many years before God called him to lead the Israelites in the wilderness; he died. In the fifth chapter of his second letter, Peter urges under-shepherds (pastors) to shepherd the flock (the church) well; Peter vehemently denied Jesus three times in His hour of need. Shall I go on? Man after man after man has failed to save God’s people. Oh, they might succeed for a time. Maybe even for a generation! But no other man on this earth could shepherd the flock like Jesus Christ. No shepherd could die for his flock and rise again on the third day defeating sin and death and the grave like Jesus did. We have a *good* shepherd. We have *the* good shepherd.

Our good shepherd, with his blood, bought for us an eternity in green pastures where the still waters never end. From that moment until the end of time, Jesus is working on this earth through His Spirit in His people to call out sheep from every tribe, language, people, and nation. And no one can snatch these sheep out of their Good Shepherd’s hand. For the Father has given them to the Son and they are His—cherished and loved—forever.

Run to Jesus today. What John said about Him was true—He is the Son of God. Trust and obey and find life, abundant and full.

## John 11 – July 4

Happy Independence Day! I'm grateful that 243 years ago, America won its independence from Britain. What this day also reminds me of, if you don't mind me saying, is the freedom won by Christ a couple thousand years ago when he sacrificed his body on the cross and rose again victoriously three days later! Today, as you reflect on the glorious freedoms that we have in this country because of the sacrifices made by men, women, and children so many years ago, also make time to meditate on the everlasting freedom you have in Christ because of his sacrificial death.

In John 11, it is precisely Christ's death that is foreshadowed. You probably know the story of John 11 well. Lazarus, Mary and Martha's brother, dies from an illness and lies in a tomb for a few days. Jesus comes and brings him back to life. On a side note, pardon me for the least compelling rendition ever told of that story, but we've got limited space here, so bear with me.

Verses 24-25 clue us in to the meaning of the whole story. Martha gets mad at Jesus for not arriving sooner (to save Lazarus from dying in the first place) and Jesus says, "Chill out, Martha. He's going to rise again." Martha, in her arrogance, says, "yeah, yeah, Jesus, I know that. I'm a good Jew with good theology. I know about the resurrection."

But Martha left one little detail out, didn't she? (Hint: IT'S JESUS). Friends, there is no "good theology" where Jesus is not the center. If you have a theology that makes little of the Lord, then your theology is, at the very least, not biblical.

Jesus gently tweaks her theology by placing himself in the center! In verses 25-26, Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die."

The whole point of Lazarus' death was for Jesus to teach his followers (and us today!) that physical death has no hold on him or his people. We will *live* real, flesh-and-blood lives for ETERNITY if we are in Christ! John Piper says it this way: "Christians don't die! We go from life to better life!"

Now, this doesn't mean that Jesus doesn't mourn the reality of death in a broken world. Verses 33-35 show us that He clearly does. Jesus was legitimately saddened and even angered by death and the reality of brokenness. There is no doubt that in this moment he was thinking of *his* death soon to come that was necessary to restore the world from its fallen state and overcome the sting of sin and death.

Lazarus died so he could be raised. Jesus died so he could be raised. We who are in Christ die that we might be raised to endless life on a new earth with new heavens all around.

Resurrection, like freedom, scares people. That's why we have wars over it! And that's why after Lazarus was raised, the plots to kill Jesus only intensified.

Drink deeply from this chapter, my friends. It deserves much more than a few hundred words of amateur commentary.

## John 12 – July 5

Is there a more messianic chapter in all the Scriptures than our chapter for today? I assume you've heard the term "messianic" before. It's usually applied to Old Testament chapters and passages that point to Jesus (especially in the Psalms). But, I'm not sure any chapter in the whole Bible points to Jesus as Messiah more than John 12! In John 12, Jesus is called the "King of Israel" and the "Son of Man." In John 12, God's voice thunders down from heaven in approval of Jesus. In John 12, a man once dead (Lazarus) is hanging out with Jesus. And, on a side note, if that kind of miracle doesn't prove Jesus' deity to you then nothing will! Also, in John 12 we have Jesus predicting his death (that would provide salvation for the world) and connecting himself explicitly with God the Father (verses 44-50).

In short: this chapter is clearly trying to show that Jesus is God in the flesh come to die for humanity's sins and we must believe in him. Seems like a recurring theme in John's Gospel, no?

Speaking of recurring themes, do you remember me telling you about "value at every level"? I'm not sure any chapter has as much value at various levels as does John 12. The "big picture" aspect of this chapter is huge, obviously. The "big picture" is what I mentioned just a moment ago: that Jesus is God in the flesh come to die for humanity's sins, to reconcile people to God, and we must believe in him.

However, the smaller pieces of the puzzle that eventually add up to the "big picture" are plentiful in this chapter, too. We've got Jesus' words to Judas about the poor, Jesus' triumphal entry, Jesus' radical teaching in verses 23-26, and the rest of Jesus' teaching from verse 26 to chapter's end. Frankly, one page (or a half page, at this point) is nowhere near enough to tackle all the value at these levels. I can only give you the "big picture" and pray that the Spirit helps you understand the smaller pieces in light of the whole.

Let me encourage you, though, to spend a lot of time on this chapter. Yesterday, I told you to drink deeply; I reiterate that comment for you today. The symbolism of the first 19 verses (Mary anointing Jesus and Jesus' triumphal entry) is enough to write a book about! And the powerful teaching in the rest of the chapter is no less deserving. Seek the glory of the Lord in this chapter! Pray that the Spirit would open your eyes to see Christ in all his magnificent splendor! And pray that you would be transformed by that sight. Pray that, in reading this chapter, you would be strengthened to radically follow Jesus wherever he may lead you. Pray that the glory you see in this chapter would inspire you to "hate your life in this world" that you may inherit life eternal. Thank Christ Jesus for his sacrificial death on the cross (foreshadowed and foretold in this chapter) and his victorious resurrection. Pray for Christ's Spirit to open blind eyes and soften hard hearts like he's been doing for centuries. After you pray, get up and go. Go and make disciples! God be with you today, my friends.

## John 13 – July 6

Have you ever thought about what people would say at your funeral? Would people say that you were gentle and kind, patient and loving? Would they say you were rough around the edges? Maybe they'd tell some stories about you that'd make grandma blush. Or, maybe they'd say you were the most Christ-like person they'd ever known. Who knows? What we do know is what Jesus' followers said after he left them, and our chapter for today gives us that insight.

In the first verse of John 13, John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, lovingly reflects on his Lord for a moment before continuing the story. Says John, "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." Remember, now, that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John didn't write their gospels during their time with Jesus. I'm sure they took notes here and there, but these weren't moment-by-moment captures. John wrote his gospel after Jesus had ascended to the Father's side. Thus, in all four gospels, we see places where the authors insert an explanatory comment or two as they are retelling the story. John 13:1 is an example of this type of commentary.

Jesus loved his people to the very last second. When he was in the garden, stress-sweating drops of blood, he loved his people still. When he was hanging on the cross, the Father's wrath poured out on him, he loved his people still. Can we say that about anybody else in history? No one has loved like Jesus has loved, and like he continues to love even now as you read these very words.

Just take a moment to imagine John writing these words. He *had* to be weeping at this point, right? Right after this reminiscent comment in the first verse, he tells the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Looking back on this moment, now knowing everything he knows about whom Jesus was/is, John's breath has to be taken away. Thinking about the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, washing his dusty, dirty feet... yeah, that ought to make us pause for the cause.

Can you just take a minute to put yourself in John's shoes? Think on the countless times that our Good Shepherd has led you by still waters (Ps. 23). Think about the love of Christ that hasn't failed you through thick and thin, and how it will never fail you. Think about those saints who have gone on before us and the testimony that Christ loved them until the very end and then some! Think about the fact that Christ did *more* for you than wash your nasty feet. He *died* for you. He *willingly* endured beating and crucifixion for you. He did it all for people "better" than you and people "worse" than you. Imagine that love!

Now dwell on the sovereign plan of God with me for a moment. In verse 18 of this chapter, Jesus says that these things must happen to fulfill the Scriptures. So, follow this logic: Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are the greatest acts of love in history—by far. And, these acts were apparently planned from the very beginning (John 13:18; Eph. 1:4-10). Thus, God's love was there before the world was formed and it will be there long after. He loves us from eternity past and eternity future. What a love! Enjoy that love today. Show it off to the world today. God be with you!

## John 14 – July 7

“Do not let your hearts be troubled... I will come back and take you to be with me... You know the way to the place where I am going.” –Jesus (John 14:1, 3-4)

Are there more comforting words in the world? Because of Jesus, things won't always be like this. Sin, death, brokenness, rebellion, pain, shame, and fear will not always reign. In fact, they are losing their grip on us with every passing second. Satan (and all evil) is a lion on a leash and his leash is shortening with every heart that is softened by the infinitely powerful and inexpressibly gentle Word of God. With every eye that is given a sight of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Cor. 4:6), Satan's kingdom shrinks. When Jesus was in the grave those three days, things looked mighty bleak. But God is often doing his greatest work when things look darkest. The bridegroom might not be with us at the moment (Luke 5:35), but he's preparing something for us beyond our wildest imaginations, beyond all we can think or ask (Ephesians 3:20).

An understanding of this history-spanning plan of God helps us make sense of verse 14 in this chapter. Verse 14 infamously records Jesus saying, “you may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.” What is implied in that verse is that what you're asking is in line with God's plan that Jesus describes in the preceding verses! If what you ask is in accordance with the way, the truth, and the life then it will be granted! Likewise, verses 15-16 and following help to rightly interpret the oft-misunderstood truth of verse 14.

John 14:15-16 says, “If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth.” In short, if you're not, by the Spirit's help, keeping Christ's commands, well, he's not likely to answer your prayers in the affirmative! Not so much because you don't have enough credibility before God or something like that, but because your prayers won't be in line with God's will if you're not walking with Christ!

Let me say it this way: it's not so much about obedient peoples' prayers carrying more clout with God based on the person's degree of obedience. It's about the reality that a more righteous person will (super)naturally pray things more in line with God's will. As usual, it's about God's plan and His glory, not about us. So, the more obedient you are, the closer communion you have with Christ, the more your prayers are God's prayers. And, thus, the more they will be answered.

Let me end with some more indescribably comforting words from Jesus in John 14:23. Jesus says, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” It's Christ's very own Spirit that indwells us both to work and to will (and pray!) (Philippians 2:13). We're not left to obey Jesus's teaching all by ourselves. It's His Spirit that enables our obedience! In other words, take a deep breath, get yourself situated, and keep pressing on because God's got you. And, one day, He will return and make His home with us once more. God be with you today!

## John 15 – July 8

You probably know this portion of Scripture well. John 15 records Jesus' famous extended metaphor, "the vine and the branches." The meat of this chapter can be tasted in verses 4-5. John 15:4-5 says, "Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

This devotion could go so many different directions because this metaphor is so packed with meaning! We could focus on why Jesus called himself the "true" vine and not just "the vine." See, He says that He's the "true" vine because throughout the Old Testament, Israel is compared to a fruitless vine, a worthless vine (Ps. 80:8-16; Isa. 5:1-7, 27:2-6; Jer. 2:21; Ezek. 15:1-8). Jesus came to be the true and better Israel. No longer do people have to join up with Israel to be part of God's people. Now, if we want to be a child of God, we "join up" with Christ! How much sweeter of a deal is that? Israel is no longer God's chosen people, for that is Christ's privileged position! That's why we no longer follow the Old Testament dietary and sacrificial laws. That's why we can shave our beards, eat shellfish and pork, wear clothes made of whatever fabric we want, and, yes, even why tattoos aren't forbidden any longer. It's why Paul says in Galatians 6:2, "neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation [in Christ]." It's why we don't offer blood sacrifices anymore! Christ, the true vine, is also the true lamb, the true priest, the true king; the way, the truth, and the life! Well, now, isn't it quite clear why we must abide with Him?

Let's circle back to verses 4-5. We've taken just a moment to look at some of what Jesus means in calling himself the "true" vine. Now, let's wrap up this devotion looking at what it means to abide in, or remain in, Christ.

First off, I can't go a step further without drawing your attention to verse 16. Jesus says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you." This hearkens back to John 14. The point, very clearly, is: we have a duty to bear fruit (verse 16), to pray rightly (verse 16), and to love each other (verse 17). But, thank goodness, we aren't meant to fulfill that duty in our own strength! God himself chose us and appointed us and therefore equips us for the task at hand! All we must do is hold on to Christ. All we must do is lift the sails, so to speak, that the wind of the Spirit might blow through.

These truths remind me of a hymn entitled, "All I Have is Christ." The chorus sings, "Hallelujah! All I have is Christ! Hallelujah! Jesus is my life!"

Hallelujah, indeed! Jesus is all we have... and that's a very, very good thing. Cling to Him today!



## John 16 – July 9

John 16, like the last couple chapters, is jam-packed with deep, meaningful truth. You've probably heard many verses from this chapter quoted at some time or another. Numerous verses talk about the Holy Spirit and His function in believers' lives (vv. 7-15). Other verses talk about persecution that believers will surely face (vv. 1-4). In verses 22-24, John hits us again with overwhelmingly comforting words: "Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. In that day you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete" (NIV).

And, last but not least, verse 33 serves to sum up the entire chapter: "I have told you these things," Jesus says, "so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." What a beautifully fitting end to this chapter!

In this world, we will face trouble. You can take that one to the bank. Jesus told us so. Our daily experience tells us so. The news tells us so. History tells us so. This life ain't easy, amen? That reality isn't hard to prove. But what separates the hard-knock life of most people and the sufferings of Christ's people is, well, Christ. While we wait on Him, His Spirit is with us. His Spirit convicts us, opens our eyes, shows us the way, and strengthens us; and that makes all the difference in the world! That's why we can "take heart" and "be of good cheer."

Friends, what brings glory to the Father, what really shows off the worth of Christ to a watching world is taking heart, being of good cheer, in the midst of suffering. It shows off Christ because it's something they don't have and *can't* have on their own. That's why accruing things that the world already has doesn't show off the value of Christ. The world has plenty of money. You making tons of money in your life and saving and investing really well doesn't show off Christ. I'm not saying it's wrong—it's not—I'm just saying don't expect your beefy savings account to win anyone to Christ. They've tried money, and it didn't work. They don't need more money. Trust me when I say that. Trust me, also, when I say that they need to see joy in suffering! That's what shouts to the world, "*I'm different because of Jesus!*"

We think that listening to K-LOVE and wearing cheesy Christian t-shirts sets us apart; it doesn't. Neither does going to church. You know how many drunks go to church? You know how many abusers go to church? You know how many people in church are addicted to pornography? A whole bunch. We still need to go to church, don't get me wrong. But if your *everyday life* isn't markedly different then non-believers won't want any part of it! And, to sum up, what is the best way to show that you are different? By maintaining joy in the midst of suffering. By crying out, with Job, "The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21, CSB).

You want to be different? You want to bear fruit? You want your grief turned to joy? Cling to Christ. Abide in Christ. Let Him have every dark corner of your heart. God be with you.

## John 17 – July 10

John 17: the high priestly prayer, as some call it. Really, this portion of Scripture (Jesus' longest recorded prayer) ought to own the title, "the Lord's Prayer." There's nothing wrong with ye old, "Our Father in Heaven" (Matt. 6:9-13; Lk. 11:1-4), but that is a model prayer for believers. This prayer recorded in John 17 is, dare I say, how Jesus "actually" prays. Therefore, unlike "the Lord's Prayer" in Matthew 6, this prayer in John 17 is not necessarily a model for how we should pray.

For instance, in verse 1, Jesus prays for his own glory. I hope you know this, but... we shouldn't pray for our own glory. That's pretty basic, right? You knew that already, didn't you? I thought so.

However! That doesn't mean that we can't pray *anything* in this chapter. For instance, we ought to pray for ourselves, that we would be obedient, joyful followers of Christ. We ought to pray for other believers. And, as in verse 20, we ought to pray for those who will believe in Jesus because of the message that Jesus' disciples bring to them. That's a long-winded version of saying we need to pray for ourselves, other believers, and lost people.

Now that that's cleared up, let's shift our gaze to some of the specific words of Christ. Take a look at verses 13-19. (And, by the way, please read the chapter before you read this devotion. It's not healthy to only ever jump around passages. It was written as a story and you need to read it in the flow of a story—start to finish).

Verses 13-19 reveal to us that Jesus has no desire to take His people "out" of the world. He simply desires them to be sanctified *by* the Word *while* they are *in* the world. Get what I'm saying? Or, rather, get what Jesus is saying? That means that, as much as I appreciate some of their products, I think Amish- and Mennonite-type people get it flat-out wrong. We're not supposed to act (and dress) like we're from another world (or time period); we're not. It's okay to wear jeans and t-shirts and use electricity. That's the world we live in. What's *not* okay is when we live in this world in a *non-sanctified* way. That means that we use things of this world, like clothes or technology, in a way that dishonors (instead of honors) the Lord.

Let me use technology as an example. I'm typing this devotion on a computer. It will be sent to your email (on your phone or computer) through the internet. That's a whole lot of technology going on! And, I pray, it's all pleasing to the Lord! But pornography also uses the internet and it's a trillion-dollar industry. That's obviously *not* pleasing to the Lord. So, what's the problem? Well, the internet isn't the problem. The technology isn't the problem. The problem is and has always been *our hearts*. Thus, Jesus prays that we would be *sanctified* by the Word of God (applied to our hearts by the Spirit of God as John 16 tells us). This might feel a little "off topic," but this passage actually tells us a lot about how we're to operate in this world. We are here for God's mission and we better not try to escape until God calls us away! We cling to Christ in the world while we proclaim Christ to the world. Take heart, my friends. Things are not as hopeless as they may seem. Don't run and hide. Christ is in you and for you and behind you and in front of you. He is interceding for you. What can the world do to you? God be with you!

## John 18 – July 11

And so it begins. What started in a garden all those years ago (Gen. 1-3) is being renewed in a garden in John 18. Coincidence? I think not. We'll see an important garden pop up again in a few days... but for now we focus on the Garden of Gethsemane.

In the Garden of Eden, betrayal became the world's theme. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve turned their backs on God, rejected His plan, and went their own way, plunging the universe into death and destruction. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus had a similar choice. Drink the cup, obey the Father's plan, and save the world, or do as the first man had done and betray God. Well, a betrayal did take place in the Garden of Gethsemane, but unlike the betrayal in Genesis 3, this betrayal only paved the way for mankind's salvation. The betrayal that took place in the garden in John 18 was Judas'. Jesus, unlike Adam, acted like the man he was and drank the cup that God had given Him (v. 11). Jesus obeyed the Father and submitted to His will and thus began the end of His salvific journey. The story of the Bible really is the story of a journey from garden (Gen. 1) to garden (Rev. 22), isn't it? But, that's a story for another day.

In John 18, we get a glimpse of how the original garden scene (Gen. 3) should've gone. Coupled with that is a glimpse of humanity at its worst in the forms of Peter's denial and Pilate's cowardice.

Peter's denial(s) of Jesus has to be one of the saddest parts of Scripture. Can you just imagine how he felt after the rooster crowed? Matthew, Mark, and Luke record Peter weeping bitterly when he realized what had happened. Likewise, can you imagine Jesus' pain? Someone who professed to be your closest, most loyal ally denies you with *foul* language at the slightest sign of persecution. Talk about being stabbed in the back! But, how indescribably glorious does that make Jesus look? How sweet does that make Peter's restoration in John 21:15-19?

Grace is like that, you know, very scandalous. Just when you think you've figured it out—BOOM, like a rogue wave it knocks you off your feet and puts you in your place. Yet, at the same time it bends the knee to take your hand and lift you back on your feet. It's as if grace is something more than an ethereal reality. It's as if grace is a person. Indeed, I think it is a person, a divine person, Jesus Christ. Jesus is grace in the flesh. There is no grace apart from Him, and thank God that there isn't. Anything less than Jesus is an idol and will not satisfy. I want no part of "grace" if it's not Jesus!

But, grace isn't always peachy-keen. Sometimes it's quite ugly, bloody even. Was it anything less than grace that led Jesus to be flogged and beaten and ultimately crucified? I think not. In the trail of tears and blood lay grace enough to cover the whole, wide world. As Charles Spurgeon's favorite hymn goes, "There is a fountain filled with blood/ Drawn from Immanuel's veins/ and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains." It goes on, "E're since by faith I saw the stream/ Thy flowing wounds supplied/ Redeeming love has been my theme/ And shall be 'till I die."

Thank God today for the grace given us in Christ Jesus. Thank God that Jesus, as the second Adam (1 Cor. 15:45-49; Romans 5:12-21), made the right decision in the Garden.

## John 19 – July 12

They put a crown of thorns on him. In doing so, they sealed their fate. One day, that King will come back. But, instead of coming to die, He will come to conquer. He will burn every kingdom of this world to the ground. No thorn or thistle (or flag) will be left standing. Every crooked, cowardly ruler will bend the knee and give up their throne. I have a feeling that the chief priests will regret saying, “we have no king but Caesar.”

As John Piper said: Evil, in doing its greatest evil, committed suicide. How thrilling of a thought is that? The greatest evil ever committed was the killing of Jesus, the God-man. Yet, at the same time, Jesus’ death ensured that sin and death and evil were destroyed forever. Or, at least their fate is sealed and they will be destroyed forever when He returns. Satan thought that he had won! Or, at least somewhere deep-down he hoped he had. But, in delivering what he thought was a death-blow, he sentenced himself to eternal punishment. You could say that he struck Jesus’ heel, but Jesus crushed his head.

Where have I heard that before? Oh, yes. Genesis 3:15. All the way back at the beginning of this world’s history, God promised that Satan would be crushed and a Redeemer would triumph. So, you mean to tell me that God’s got all this under control and has had a plan to save the world from the beginning?? Yep, I sure do. And it couldn’t have been better timing.

That’s why Jesus could tell His followers things like, “take heart” and “don’t worry” and “trust me.” It’s why Jesus could carry his cross and endure the pain. He knew what lay ahead of Him—and it was paradise. If you’ll allow me to talk earthly here for a moment, I’m sure that Jesus could picture Revelation 21 and 22 while he endured crucifixion. Instead of visions of sugar plums and fairies dancing in His head, it was visions of a restored universe with a chosen, gathered, redeemed people of God in perfect harmony with their Creator and Savior.

I can’t help but think of Hebrews 12:1-4 when I read John 19. Hebrews 12:1-4 says, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and that sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. *For the joy set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.* Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (emphasis added).

I don’t want to reduce Jesus’ crucifixion down to motivation for us. God forbid! However, it’s certainly not less than that! We have Christ’s power in us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. That means (and I say this understanding the reality of a fallen world) that we can “beat” at least some sin in this life. We can have some victory! We won’t be perfect, sure, but we can grow like crazy! We can see hearts and lives changed by the power of the gospel. We can see real change effected, to a degree, even in our public and social lives. We can change our communities for the better! That won’t always happen. But don’t underestimate Christ’s power, my friends. The earth shook and the veil was torn in two. The Scriptures were fulfilled. That didn’t all happen so we could mope around and wait until we die. No, Christ’s death (and resurrection) gives us future hope *and* present hope. John 19 is a powerful chapter, but it’s not the last chapter. We are resurrection people; let’s act like it today. The risen Christ be with you!

## John 20 – July 13

What a JOY that we can celebrate Easter every day of the year! John 20 tells us that Christ has risen from the grave and I'm happy about it today! Because poetry captures feeling so much better than prose, let me quote a few stanzas from a song entitled, "Man of Sorrows" by Hillsong Worship<sup>1</sup>.

Now my debt is paid, it is paid in full,  
By the precious blood that my Jesus spilled;  
Now the curse of sin has no hold on me;  
Whom the Son sets free Oh is free indeed!

Oh, that rugged cross—my salvation!  
Where Your love poured out over me;  
Now my soul cries out, "Hallelujah!"  
Praise and honor unto Thee

See the stone is rolled away  
Behold the empty tomb  
Hallelujah! God be praised!  
He's risen from the grave!

I've said it once and I'll say it a million more times before I die (hopefully): *the resurrection makes all the difference in the world*. We have hope because of the resurrection. We have eternal life because of the resurrection. We are adopted as sons, forgiven as rebels, gathered as scattered sheep, pardoned as criminals, and clothed with Christ's righteous robes as those who were naked and destitute, made presentable before the Father, all because of the resurrection. See, the cross represents all of this, too. But, as we know, if Jesus died on the cross and then stayed dead, well, I don't think we'd be saying these kinds of things today.

But He didn't stay dead! He rose from the grave defeating sin and death! Now, as Christians, we don't have to fear death! It's become simply a passage from this life to a much better, everlasting life (understatement of the year, huh?).

I don't want to dog you today because the resurrection ought to come with sheer joy. But, I do want you to notice verse 9 of John 20. It says that some of the disciples, after seeing the empty tomb, still didn't understand what was going on. Why not? Because "they did not yet understand the Scripture that he must rise from the dead" (CSB). I just want to point out that the resurrection isn't necessarily an easy thing to grasp. Meaning, if it's all true, then that means the Scriptures are right and true *and* that you must submit your life to them. Oh, it means I must follow all the Bible's teaching? Yes, it very much does. Resurrection is *dangerous*. It enables you (and demands of you!) to follow God's plan with reckless abandon. Are you ready for that? If you are, celebrate today with John 20. But, also think about what it means. We'll end with another understatement: the resurrection is a BIG deal. The biggest in the universe, I'd say.

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<sup>1</sup> I do not agree with everything that Hillsong Church does and stands for, but this song is very accurate biblically and very good musically. Therefore, I can enjoy it for God's glory!

## John 21 – July 14

Would you recognize Jesus if he walked up to you today? John 21 tells us that the disciples, who spent nearly every waking moment for the past three years with Jesus, didn't recognize him post-resurrection. Why not? Another good question is, what changed? Why was John ("the disciple whom Jesus loved") able to declare to Peter, "It is the Lord!"?

Yesterday we talked about the resurrection and what it means to us (a LOT). Though there is so much we could discuss regarding John 21, I'd like to continue the theme of what the resurrection means for us and talk about what British theologian N.T. Wright mentions in his wonderful book, *Surprised by Hope*. And that is: what the nature of Jesus' post-resurrection body means for us today.

Jesus' resurrection was a foreshadowing, a foretaste, of ours. It was more than that, to be sure, but not less. What happened to Jesus' body will happen to our bodies. That's why Jesus is continually called the "first fruits" (1 Cor. 15:23). When you see the first apple of the season, you know others are sure to follow. Also, I believe that Jesus' glorified body, post-resurrection, is a taste of what the new heavens/new earth will be like. Notice that Jesus, in his glorified body, still ate food (verse 12-14). Notice that in yesterday's chapter, Jesus walked through a wall (as far as we can tell; John 20:26). So, Jesus obviously wasn't a spirit floating around—he walked on the ground as we all do—but he could nonetheless defy the natural laws of this universe. Likewise, it seems that his body was in some way(s) similar to his pre-resurrection self, but not completely so. For the disciples (and plenty of others) didn't recognize Him at first, but eventually did. Thus, there must be some continuity between this life and the next in our appearance.

The most important feature of this, though, is simply that Jesus, in His glorified state, was still *a body*. He wasn't a spirit floating around and we won't be either. I firmly believe that we will be in our somewhat recognizable, food-eating, ground-walking, handshaking-and-hugging, glorified bodies. This makes sense of 1 Corinthians 6:20, doesn't it? Paul says that we were bought with a price (the blood of Jesus), *therefore glorify God in your body*. Paul isn't being super spiritual here. He's talking about your physical body. Glorify God with it because *it matters*. The Corinthians must've talked a little too much about their physical bodies being "shells" that they couldn't wait to shed. Thus, they drank and ate as much as they wanted and engaged in illicit sexual relations because "who cares what happens to our bodies" right? Wrong. God cares. It matters what we do with our bodies because we are our bodies. Friends, Jesus' post-resurrection-self shows us that we aren't minds or souls trapped in bodies. That's not a biblical view! We are mind-body-souls, all in one. So, as Paul says, glorify God in your bodies—right here, right now.

Of course, this doesn't mean we should obsess about our image or purchase a gym membership and go twenty times a week. Our outer man is decaying, as Paul said. But physical appearance was never really the point. The point is that what we do with our physical bodies reflects what we believe in our hearts. It's simple. Do you say you love God? Do you say you love your neighbor as yourself? Well, what does your body say? Do you pick up the Bible and read it? Do you get yourself out of bed and go to church? Do you share the gospel with your mouth? Do you serve your neighbor? See what I'm saying? Glorify God in your bodies today, my friends.

## Acts 1 – July 15

The book of Acts is the second part of the sequel of Luke's Gospel. We see the connection between the two books right away as Theophilus is mentioned yet again. We do not know much about Theophilus but we do know that he evidently knew Luke and was most likely some sort of Roman dignitary. Regardless, the book is geared towards providing a historic record of the development and spread of the early church.

The name "Acts" is short for "Acts of the apostles". Literally, the book centers on the apostles of Christ (both the 12 and the late arriving Apostle Paul) as they execute God's redemptive plan of building and spreading the church to all people groups. This means that among other things the book of Acts is to be understood as a history of the beginning of missions. Chapter 1 reinforces this truth as it records Christ's last words of instruction to His apostles prior to His ascension. As Jesus is getting ready to ascend to the Father, He reminds His followers of two very important truths: the worldwide scope of their mission and the necessary empowerment to fulfill their call.

For our purposes today we are going to examine the first 8 verses of the chapter. While we will address them slightly out of order it is imperative to note that this text provides the marching orders and fuel for the rest of the book. First, let us notice the worldwide scope of the Apostles' mission. Jesus' followers were still somewhat in the dark as to their purpose and Jesus' mission at the time of His resurrection as illustrated by verse 6. Evidently, they expected Christ to restore Israel and this was in keeping with the common Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament regarding the work of the Messiah. Jesus' work in their minds was not finished and they were partly right. We know of course that Christ will physically return and establish His kingdom on this earth but, and this is incredibly important, His work on the cross was meant to usher in a new covenant era where many who were not even born at the time of His birth and death would be welcomed into His kingdom. Whereas the apostles thought the work of Christ would culminate immediately in earthly triumph, Christ was clear that there was work to do before the kingdom would be established on earth.

The obvious question of course then is what is the nature of this work? Well, verse 8 gives us explicit instruction. The work left to do is to tell others (literally every tribe, tongue and nation) of what Jesus has done on the cross. This task is left to the apostles and by extension, Jesus' followers today! Among other things, Christ's command illuminates the truth that God's redemptive plan includes all peoples. This, of course, is in line with God's promise to Abraham to bless all nations through his offspring and it is in line with the missionary journeys that comprise a large section of the book of Acts to follow. In fact, as we study Acts together, we will see this progression taking place as the Gospel moves from Jerusalem (3:1-8:1) to Judea and Samaria (8:1-12:25) and ultimately to the ends of the earth (13:1-28:31).

Notice here very quickly that Jesus calls the disciples to a very specific function as they spread the gospel; they are to be His "witnesses". A witness is someone who has seen or heard something of pertinent nature. In the court of law witnesses are called when they have valuable information related to the case on trial. These are men and women who know something first hand, they've experienced or seen evidence relevant to the case. In the same way, Christ is calling His disciples to testify to the truth of what they have experienced. In Acts 4:19-20 Peter and John demonstrate this as they are commanded by the religious elite to stop speaking about Jesus. Their response is one of a convicted observer saying "we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard." Do you hear the vernacular of a witness? Peter and John are not speaking about some theoretical belief; they are merely talking about what they've experienced and know to be true. In the same way, you and I share the Gospel as believers because we've seen the glory of God in the face of Christ as revealed in the Scripture and experienced the transformation that takes place as we come to believe and rely on those truths. The Gospel truly transforms and those who have been fundamentally changed have an obligation and the joy of telling others.

Finally, very briefly, let us examine the tools Christ promises to complete His mission. Jesus is explicit that the disciples are not to leave until the Spirit of God comes upon them. Their calling is one of supernatural importance and therefore it requires the very presence and wisdom of God indwelling them in order to bring the mission to completion. Simply stated, Jesus is teaching that the very Spirit of God is required to be a faithful witness to God. The giving of the Spirit is both necessary and indicative of God's love for us as His children. God not only called the disciples (and us!) to join Him in His work He also indwells us by the Spirit and provides all that we need in the way of wisdom, words, knowledge and comfort along the way.

## Acts 2 – July 16

If chapter 1 constituted the proverbial marching orders for the disciples of Christ, chapter 2 is our first example of their effort to carry out Jesus' command. Unfortunately Acts 2 has been hijacked by those with an agenda. Like many Scriptures, this text has been subject to twisting in order to prove the point of aberrant theologies. This means that we spend an inordinate amount of time debating about concepts that are honestly quite clear. For our purposes today I want to take a moment to look at the first few verses of this chapter to see a few realities: first the Spirit of God equips the people of God to do the work of God, second the account of Pentecost is not meant to be a normative account of church work for all centuries instead it is meant to illustrate the consummation of a new covenantal era in which the Gospel has been revealed.

First, notice that the Spirit equips for God's work. You will remember that we mentioned yesterday that the command of Christ in verse 8 of chapter 1 is all-encompassing in nature. Jesus was intent that the disciples carry the good news literally all over the world. This required both great sacrifice and frankly skills that the disciples did not have. How would these "ordinary, untrained men" (Acts 4) fulfill Christ's massive command? The answer of course was given by Christ when He commanded them to wait upon the Spirit and now as we see the Spirit descend, we get a glimpse as to why.

The Spirit's initial inhabitation of the disciples is marked by their immediate proclamation in "tongues". One will notice that there is absolutely no doubt that these tongues were actual languages. Contrary to many who would claim that biblical tongues are a dialect that the world has not known, typically manifested as gibberish, the Bible's clear testimony is that tongues were actual languages that were simply not known by the speaker previous to their proclamation. This account is meant to illustrate the reality that the Spirit will equip the believer to fulfill the calling that is placed before them. Just like the disciples, you and I are constantly called to serve in ways that would be impossible except for the Spirit's gifting. God does not call the equipped, He equips the called.

Notice here as well that the Spirit's presence immediately glorifies Christ through the announcement of the Gospel. I know this may seem like beating a dead horse but the consistent biblical teaching is that the Spirit does not draw attention to Himself (although He is God and deserving of our reverence) instead His mission is to call attention to the identity of Christ as our Savior and Lord.

As we close today, I do want to give two reasons why we do not believe this event is supposed to be normative. Many (if not all) of you have made the connection that the root word "Pentecost" is found in a loose denomination of folks we call "Pentecostals". To be charitable there are all kinds of Pentecostals just as there are all kinds of Baptists. Some are more "extreme" in their beliefs than others but regardless their belief that Pentecost should somehow be recreated or emulated in our churches often, if not weekly, is simply not the case. The first reason I make this assertion is found in the actual event itself. The clear fact of the matter is that Pentecost was an event where the Spirit descended palpably (the sound of rushing wind) and prompted the people to share the Gospel in known languages with those who used those same languages as their native tongue. The absolute truth is that there is nothing even resembling this taking place in our American culture today. What those in the church have done is attempt to replicate a version of this without substance. Instead of the Spirit indwelling believers and prompting them to speak truth about Christ, the modern imitation of this is nothing but emotionalism which prompts people not to utter meaningful truths in known languages but to, in effect, turn off the cognitive ability of their brain in favor of becoming enraptured in sheer emotion. The point quite simply is this, we can claim this is not normative because if it were it would be obvious that these tongues were known to the rest of the world and the people involved would be used to usher many into the Kingdom.

Second, we can know that this is not meant to be normative because of the function of Pentecost. Remember Christ's desire that the witness of the Gospel would extend to the ends of the earth in concert with this event. What is happening here is that literally the nations are hearing the Gospel all at once! This was a jump as it were on taking the Good News and dispersing it to the world. This Gospel had never been heard in these tongues before as it was only a few short days after the Resurrection which inaugurated the New Covenant era. Today, the Gospel has expanded into most parts of the globe. While there are certainly people groups who have never heard they tend to be isolated, furthermore the base of believers who are called to go to these localities has greatly expanded over the centuries. It is quite possible that the miraculous accompanies these men and women as they share the Good News in a tongue for the first time but those localities are far away from America. The Gospel does not need to be voiced in a different language in our churches, it needs to be rightly preached and subsequently embraced.



### **Acts 3 – July 17**

To this point we've seen that the Acts of the Apostles (the namesake of our book) is informed by the clear command to be Christ's witnesses (chapter 1) as well as the truth that the Holy Spirit inspires and empowers the witness to effectiveness (chapter 2). Before we travel any farther into the book of Acts let's take a look today at the content of the message that witnesses to Christ as we study Peter's testimony in chapter 3.

The biblical student will notice the familiar pattern that Peter followed in chapter 3. Like Jesus, the miracle (in this case healing a lame man) was just a means to an end. The supernatural work secured an audience for Peter but the real purpose of his ministry is demonstrated as he is a faithful witness to Christ subsequent to the healing. Peter's goal was to share the Gospel but what did that Gospel include?

First, we see the truth that mankind is hopelessly lost in sin. In this case Peter calls the Jews to repent and turn to God so that their sins may be washed away (v. 19). Specifically, the sin in mind is the horrific act of crucifying Christ which the Jews loudly desired. However, the biblical testimony is that all sin is ultimately an egregious affront to God and therefore deserves to be punished. Peter's proclamation then is appropriate for us as well, the Gospel requires that we understand that we are sinners and therefore in desperate need of salvation.

The second truth is that Christ is holy. Peter describes Jesus as the "Righteous One" (v. 14). While we are sinners and therefore deserving of God's wrath, Jesus was perfect and therefore not deserving of God's ire. This gives way to the third truth which is that Jesus suffered in our place. Peter mentioned in verse 18 that the prophets foretold this Messianic suffering. While there are many places that fit this description in the Old Testament Isaiah 53 is perhaps the most explicit. In that text we read that Jesus was bruised for our transgressions and crushed for our sin. The theological term here is "penal substitution". Literally Jesus paid the penalty in our place.

The fourth truth is that Christ rose from the dead (v. 15). While the wages of sin is death, Jesus overcame death and therefore offers us the same opportunity as well. Jesus is indeed our Messiah or Savior because He has made a way to defeat death and demonstrated this truth to us in the resurrection.

Finally, Peter proclaims that repenting and turning (or believing) to Christ in light of His sacrifice is the means of salvation (v. 19). The substitutionary work of Christ guarantees that God has rightly punished our sin in Jesus making Him righteous but in so doing He can offer us grace if we believe in the sufficiency of Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf. The Good News then is that while we were sinners deserving of God's wrath, Christ died in our place, paid the penalty for our sin, overcame death which defeats mankind and offers us His righteous standing before God if we will believe! This is the message that believers are to proclaim to a lost and dying world and what a message of hope it is!

## **Acts 4 – July 18**

Acts 4 is the first account of many in the book which detail the inevitable conflict which arises between the world and faithful Christian witnesses. What befell Peter and John is not unique to them instead history is replete with examples of men and women who run afoul of the government as they complete their God given mandate to make disciples. The obvious question is how are we to think of governing authorities in light of this conflict and what should our posture be as Christians? In essence, the question I want to answer today is how should believers act towards an imperfect government in a fallen world?

The Bible explicitly states that the government was established by God (Romans 13). This means among other things that the government is not inherently evil, in fact it has a good and valid purpose for existence. The clear teaching of the Bible is that all men (including and even especially Christians) are to submit to the government but while this is normative it is not absolute. What we learn from Peter and John is that the governing authorities are to be obeyed in as much as they do not require us to disobey the higher authority which is God's Word.

If you remember, the apostles had explicit commands from Jesus to be witnesses (Acts 1:8). Their behavior in chapter 2 and 3 is therefore not only acceptable but necessary in order to be faithful followers of Jesus. The command of Christ in Acts 1 is in total conflict with the command of the governing authorities in chapter 4. Whereas Jesus said to be His "witnesses" the government forbid speaking of Christ at all! The conflict left Peter and John with no choice; they must obey the higher authority which is the very Word of God. This explains their response in chapter 4 stating that they "can't stop speaking". They couldn't stop because they weren't permitted to stop by their Lord!

Their decision makes total sense and it serves as a template for believers in subsequent generations. The government was established by God and only has authority because God has allowed it to exist. This means that its authority is derived, it flows from God Himself. While many governments do not understand or submit to this truth, the reality remains that government is not absolute instead it is a servant of the only governing authority that is absolute in this universe, God Almighty. Derived authority does not stand on its own merit instead it is given or entrusted by the true authority which is God. God's authority on the other hand is not derived but inherent. God is to be obeyed because of who He is. What this means is that there is not a scenario in which government trumps God. Historically, government has often attempted to usurp God both in word and deed but believers know the truth and are unable and unwilling to submit to this fraudulent entity.

Putting this together we realize that God requires of us that we be kind and compassionate all the while remaining firm and obedient to His truth. The practical implication of this is that we must obey government because we obey God but every command of the government must be processed through a biblical prism. Obey the government, pay taxes, abide by the law (even the ones you selfishly don't like) up until the point that the law requires you to violate God's revelation. This is the principle we see in Acts 4 and it helps us navigate these difficult days!

## Acts 5 – July 19

The book of Acts is predominately about bearing witness to the truth but chapter 5 diverts from that theme, at least briefly, when it records the unfortunate case of Ananias and Sapphira. These two were evidently members of the church there in Jerusalem at a time of both explosive growth and almost unfathomable sacrifice. Chapter 4 ends with a brief description of the kind of giving that was descriptive of the church as we read that “no one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had” (4:32).

While we are left to speculate somewhat, we are more than justified to believe that Ananias and Sapphira endeavored to fit in amongst their converted contemporaries but they were unwilling to totally imitate the sacrificial actions of the others in the church. Now, it is imperative to note that what is being described in Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-37 is totally voluntary and not commanded. Ananias and Sapphira are not condemned because they violated a law in only giving a portion of what they had to the church, they are killed because of their dishonesty before the Lord. For our purposes today let us look at two truths we learn from this tragic passage.

First, God will not be mocked. It is imperative to see that the chief crime committed was not lying to other believers (although this is certainly reprehensible) instead it was not only lying to human beings but lying to God (v. 5). The cold hard truth is that the Bible paints a picture of God who is very uncomfortable and unfamiliar to many in the church today. God has unfortunately been cast as a benevolent soul who may have been righteous, just and jealous at some point in His eternal life but is now nothing but a shell of that once terrifying Being. To lie, or to commit any other sin for that matter, before the Lord does not strike fear in our hearts but it should. The very penalty for this infraction, paid by both Ananias and Sapphira, should serve to remind the modern reader that our God is not to be trifled with. On the contrary it is imperative that we see that God is to be obeyed not just out of love and thanksgiving but also out of good and holy fear.

Second, we see a testimony that the Spirit is God. While this is admittedly not the main thrust of the text it is both helpful and necessary to see that Peter uses the terms “Holy Spirit” (v. 3) and “God” (v. 4) interchangeably. What we can surmise from Peter’s statements then are that the Spirit and God are One. There is simply no difference in title between God and the Holy Spirit. Now, I don’t have the time nor the desire to attempt to unpack the Trinity in a one-page devotion but I do believe it necessary to see this affirmation in light of the reality that we do believe in a Triune God.

This means that God the Spirit is not to be lied to (as evidenced by the day’s text) but it also means that God the Spirit is not to be mocked or misrepresented in other ways as well. We ought to be sure that we know what the Spirit does and that we only attribute to Him the works that truly bear His Name. It is an unfortunate reality that even conservative, non-charismatic churches are replete with examples of lies bearing the name of the Spirit. The Spirit is blamed often for poorly thought out, spontaneous statements or actions. So many are often guilty of claiming that the Spirit led them to say this or that the Spirit led us to invest in this venture and so on. Routinely this is a flippant statement that rolls off our tongues often to justify our own premonitions or even more unfortunately our selfish desires. When we are tempted to “blame” the Spirit for our own actions remember that lying to Him or about Him is a serious sin!

## **Acts 6 – July 20**

The book of Acts is an invaluable resource for the church member because it provides both an explanation for and example of various functions of offices within the local church. Today's text is exemplary in this manner as we read of the need for and calling of the very first deacons of the church. The point of today's devotion is to try to explore both why the office of deacon was created and how deacons are to function within the life of the church.

Unfortunately, the scene of Acts 6 is all too familiar. Even in the church's infancy there were folks grumbling! In this case the issue had to do with physical needs of widows of a specific subset of people that were not being met, or at least the perception that these ladies were lacking. If you remember in the earlier chapters of Acts we have read about the church's concern for the well-being of all their members and this would certainly include widows who were among the most helpless.

The problem was brought to the twelve who were the leaders of the church and during their discussion they come to the conclusion that this issue is simultaneously real but not their chief concern. The twelve realize that the ministry of the Word (to include teaching, prayer, encouragement, counseling, etc.) is time consuming and their priority all the while understanding that people have physical needs as well. Instead of stretching themselves too thin and taking away time and energy from their own calling and giftedness the twelve decide to create the office of a deacon. Of note here is that the Greek term "diakonos" is a word that simply means servant. In fact, it is often used not in terms of an official office but as an adjective for anyone who would serve in any capacity. Putting this together then we understand that deacons are to be servants and that God has created an office for them so that by their example they can lead others to serve as well as help ensure that the church is functioning smoothly.

We see here that deacons were to be men of "Spirit and wisdom" (v. 3). They were to be godly men and this truth is echoed in 1 Timothy 3 when we read of the qualifications for deacons! However, it is imperative to note that the function of the deacon was, and is, not to carry out the spiritual leadership of the church instead deacons are concerned with the physical needs of the church (this is what "wait on tables" means in v. 2).

The point of the lesson is quite clear. In God's wisdom He has established deacons to serve the church faithfully. These are to be Godly men who love the Lord deeply and their main focus is supposed to be meeting the physical needs of those in the body. This is a far cry from what deacons have become in many circles today unfortunately. Many have erroneously ascribed to the office of deacon that which is reserved for the elder. This leads to confusion and unhealthy churches because they are organized and function in a way that God has not ordained.

## Acts 7 – July 21

Acts 7 is a masterpiece is it not? Every time I read this text, I can't help but rejoice and thank God for His wisdom and marvelous plan. Sometimes the struggle in writing a one-page devotion really lies in trying to discern what to pick out of an absolutely loaded chapter... that struggle is real today. Although there are a variety of places we could go to spend our time together I wanted to deal with the overarching narrative of Stephen's sermon to the Sanhedrin. We have entitled these devotions the "Emmaus Road" devotions because of the text that details what happened on the Emmaus Road between Christ and His disciples. The point of the text of course is that Jesus shows these men that the entirety of the Bible points to or is about Him! Today's sermon is yet another example of this truth.

Stephen's sermon is really geared towards unpacking God's grand plan of redemption through Israel and her forefathers. He begins with Abraham the father of the faith and proceeds to tell the story of how God worked and moved through various forefathers to bring about the prophesied Messiah. He details the history of the Old Covenant's origin, the preservation and salvation of the people from Egypt, the gift of the Promised Land and the rejection of the prophets by the Jews. All along the way his eyes are geared towards arriving at the person of Jesus.

You see, it was through Abraham that all nations would be blessed... how? Through the sacrifice of Christ which makes possible the salvation of the world. It was the Old Covenant that was a shadow of God's plan of salvation... how? Through the sacrifice of Christ whose blood atones for the sins of those who believe. It was the preservation and salvation of Israel that was a picture of God's future plans to save and redeem. Like Israel you and I were oppressed and enslaved to a tyrannical master, we were up against the proverbial wall with no plan or hope of escape but God in His mercy parted the seas as it were and made it possible for us to cross the great chasm separating us from Himself all the while defeating our enemy drowning Him in the blood of our great Savior. It was the prophets who spoke of this great Messiah who was coming soon and it was John the Baptist, the prophesied forerunner who announced that He had arrived.

Indeed, all of the Scripture is fulfilled in Jesus and Stephen understood this perfectly. Unfortunately, the testimony of the Old Testament is synonymous with the story of Jesus and those that follow Him today, while the evidence is absolutely astounding and overwhelming mankind continues to be "stiff-necked" (v. 51) in their unwillingness to see and believe the truth about Christ. The good news for us is that God has even taken this horrible truth and turned it into good! Because the Jews rejected the Messiah the Gentiles are grafted into the body (Romans 9-11). Now you and I are a part of the kingdom because God's own people, the nation of Israel, have refused to obey Him. Lest we think this took God off guard let us remember that this was a part of the plan from the beginning. God promised Abraham that all people would be blessed through His offspring, indeed He knew this would happen from the beginning and this is one more reason to praise Him for who He is and what He has done. What a mighty, wise, marvelous, powerful and sovereign God we serve!

## Acts 8 – July 22

So, I'll admit that the majority of the text we are going to examine today is really in chapter 7 but it bleeds over into chapter 8 and it is a continuation of yesterday's devotion so please forgive me if this bothers you! Stephen's sermon didn't go over well with his audience unfortunately. Instead of reacting in repentance and faith, which would have been appropriate, the people become angry and violent. The Bible records for us the account of Stephen's stoning but the point of the devotion today is to look at the result of Stephen's sermon from an eternal perspective. This text shows us two realities, the first is the destination that awaits the faithful and the second is the approval of the King towards those who are true heralds.

Some may read Acts 7-8 as a tragedy and in many respects it certainly was. After all, the world lost a powerful preacher on this day in history! However, the Bible does not paint this experience as negative for Stephen at all, instead it points us to the truth that those who obey God are rewarded with something far greater than the approval of man or any temporal gift of this world. The Scripture tells us in this text that Stephen looked up and saw "heaven open". We don't know exactly what this means but what we do know is that Stephen was preparing to enter heaven for the first time. While we could get lost in speculation as to what exactly Stephen saw what we ought to do is focus on the truth that eternal reward awaited Stephen because of his obedience to Christ's command which flowed from his faith in Jesus.

My purpose in bringing this up today is to serve as a mere reminder that we ought to focus on the right things in our faithful service to the Lord. The Bible is crystal clear that the world will not universally receive the Gospel with joy (although many absolutely will), instead the Bible's promise is far more spectacular than momentary acceptance. The truth of the Word is that God will receive those who love and serve Him! What we do from day to day then is not geared towards the momentary response it is predicated on an eternal joy!

The second truth I want us to see is a bit more mysterious but I do believe it is incredibly encouraging. The Bible says that when Stephen looked into heaven, he saw the Son of Man (Jesus) standing at the right hand of the Father. Now, this may not strike us as all that odd but if we compare this text with others that refer to Jesus at the right hand of God, we see a discrepancy. Generally, when Christ is discussed as being at the right hand of the Father the Bible speaks of Him "sitting" (i.e. Psalm 110:1, Luke 20:42, Ephesians 1:20). Some may say that this is just an aberration but my belief is that the standing of the Son in this text is indicative of His approval of Stephen's actions. He is standing to welcome home a faithful martyr!

We often warn you not to build a theology on one verse and so I want to be careful here but I do think it is inspiring to think of the welcome one may receive and to consider the possibility of Jesus standing to welcome us home as disciples of His. Brothers and sisters there is nothing I want more in life than to hear my Savior say "well done". I know I'm not perfect (you know that as well, ha!) but I do want to be genuine. May we live in light of texts such as these which remind us that we will see our Savior again one day.

## Acts 9 – July 23

Acts 9 is yet another example of a faithful witness. I hope by this point you've seen the pattern of the disciples carrying out their marching orders. You've got Peter and the boys sharing the good news at Pentecost, Peter's faithful sermon in Acts 3, their refusal to stop speaking in Acts 4, the harm of bearing false witness in Acts 5, the refusal to stop the dedication to the Word in Acts 6, Stephen's faithful sermon in Acts 7, the Ethiopian Eunuch's conversion through the Word and Philip's explanation in Acts 8 and now the conversion of Saul through the miraculous and the ministry of Ananias in Acts 9.

The Bible tells us a little about Saul (who would become Paul) prior to Acts 9. We read of course that he was present when Stephen was stoned and looked upon Stephen's murder with approval. We know from his later writings that he was a Pharisee and therefore staunchly opposed to this new movement as he saw it as departing from the traditional faith. We pick up in verse 1 and see that not much has changed! The Bible says that he is "still breathing murderous threats" in verse 1 and he is on the way to persecute believers who have been scattered at this point because of persecution.

There are many truths to focus on here but let's drill down on one for our time today. The reality is that Paul was not on anyone's "most likely to convert" list at this moment. Nobody looked at Paul and thought that he was close to coming to know Christ and yet the testimony of his conversion is a reminder that our great God is capable of changing whoever He wants! God took and molded a murderous man into the greatest Apostle who ever lived! There is no heart too dark and no person too far gone for the redemptive work of God.

In line with our theme however I want to call your attention to something that is often overlooked in Paul's conversion. We focus on the miraculous, and rightly so, when we consider this text typically. After all it's not every day that a man is simply traveling down the road only to be blinded and spoken to audibly by God! This is an amazing story but what is just as fascinating to me is that God did not share the totality of truth with Saul in this moment, instead He referred Saul to a faithful witness in Ananias.

I am not saying today that God was incapable of converting Saul on His own, I'm not arguing that God somehow needed Ananias, instead what I am saying is that God uses the means He has established to bring about His plan. God's plan includes faithful evangelists! This is how we can rightly say that we preach, teach, or proclaim the Good News and God converts. He uses our speech just like He used Ananias to remove the scales from the spiritual eyes of those we come into contact with. My prayer for us today is that we would see that our great God can change anyone and that the story of Saul would embolden us to share the Gospel with those we meet. Remember, those who are converted are changed because of God's power but God has ordained that you and I be the messengers that share the news that alters lives.

## Acts 10 – July 24

Acts 10 marks the beginning of a narrative that will carry through the rest of Acts. If you remember, Acts 1:8 mentions that the Gospel witness will begin in Jerusalem and Judea but Christ did not stop with these localities. In our 21<sup>st</sup> century brains this seems obvious, the Gospel is for the whole world! However, for the Jews of Jesus' day this was a radical departure from what they understood and believed. They weren't well versed yet in the reality that God has sent Christ to redeem a people from every tribe, tongue and nation. Instead, they believed their religion really was to be centered on their ethnic tribe.

The inclusion of the "Gentiles" (a word that literally means anyone who isn't Jewish) was a new concept for these folks and in Acts 10 God is beginning His work of reorienting His disciples towards the larger mission or reaching the world. This is the point in sending Peter to Cornelius and it is the reason behind Peter's vision.

Cornelius was a Roman centurion. This meant that he was a commander of approximately 100 men in the Roman military and therefore outside of the realm of the Jewish community in every respect. He is described as a "God-fearer" meaning that he worshipped the God of the Jews but was not fully ingratiated into their community. The narrative revolves around Cornelius and Peter.

Cornelius has a vision which instructed him to call for Peter. The point of Peter's presence is obvious, like Ananias, Peter was to be the vehicle or "means" by which Cornelius and the house would come to faith. What's interesting about this text however is that Cornelius needs instruction and so does Peter! God primes the pump so to speak with our favorite brash apostle by revealing to him the truth that the Old Covenant deity laws are no more. In the New Covenant era, there is no such thing as an "unclean animal" (sidebar this is an excellent text to remember if and when someone asks why we as believers eat shellfish even though the Bible condemns it). The larger point however isn't about what food to eat, instead God is marking for Peter a change in the covenantal realities of the day. No longer is man to be governed by what he eats, no longer is God concerned with such ceremonial realities, instead now what marks a man as "clean" or "unclean" is simply his posture or faith towards Christ.

The climax of the account is found in verse 28 when Peter acknowledges, perhaps begrudgingly, that the old way of delineating between Jews and Gentiles is no longer operative. Instead, now God "no longer shows favoritism" (v. 35) meaning He is not concerned with ethnic background only that all people hear the good news.

The point of today's devotion is this, we must behave as Peter did to be faithful to our God. I'm not so sure we deal with the same kind of "prejudice" in our day but I do know that we are all guilty of believing that certain groups of folks are beneath us. I realize none of us would use that language and that many of us would not define those groups based on skin color, nonetheless there are certain subsets of the population that we are predisposed to dislike for various reasons. Understand that the Gospel transcends all of that! Like Peter, we must go to those we would never in our flesh speak to in order to share the Good News of what God has done.



## **Acts 11 – July 25**

Acts 11 is the fallout from Acts 10! Peter now has to explain his actions to the rest of the skeptical and probably unhappy congregation. Why would a man of God associate with those kinds of people? What was Peter thinking? Well the answer is that Peter was thinking what they were thinking but God was thinking something entirely different!

The reality of this text is that Peter and subsequently other disciples were put in a position where they realized they must yield to the activity and sovereignty of God. While they did not like the fact that God was now ministering to the Gentiles, they could not deny the reality that His Spirit was absolutely active and now indwelling these other ethnic groups.

I wonder sometimes how uncomfortable you and I can be with God's movements in our own lives. Are there people we know that we just as soon wish would never hear the Gospel? Are there folks who just make us squirm a little bit? Perhaps they are people with perverse sexual orientations or those with addictions. Maybe the people we don't understand have some weird belief systems or maybe its just a certain personality trait that turns us off when we are around them. Whatever the case may be, believers today are faced with a critical decision much like the one that the early church had to navigate. Do we truly take the Gospel to all people or do we sit back and only minister to those who are like us?

The truth is that the Bible is explicit on this topic. Christ died so that a diverse group of people from every walk of life would hear the Gospel and be converted thereby enjoying adoption into the family of God. What is so often the case in evangelism is that God's messengers are simply unwilling to go, share the truth.

One last point. Notice here the evidence that led the church to ultimately accept Gentiles. The point that Peter makes and the reality that the saints in Antioch observe is that the Spirit is indwelling these folks! I think often about the fact that we would like to control God's activity but we simply can't. The position the church ultimately adopted about the Gentiles was not based on excitement but on objective truth: God is our Lord, He calls the shots, and He is obviously saving folks from other ethnic backgrounds. To their credit, this was enough for the early church... is it enough for us?

## **Acts 12 – July 26**

We all face obstacles in life, don't we? There are challenges and difficulties that prove quite intimidating to every believer but texts like Acts 12 remind us that God is able to overcome even our most ardent opponents. The Bible says that Peter is imprisoned by Herod. There is little mystery as to how Peter arrived in jail, the movement that he largely spearheaded was an inconvenience and even an irritant to the Jews and Romans.

Herod is described in less than flattering terms in this text and rightly so! This was a man who had already had others from the infant church killed and now he had his eyes set on Peter. The point of the text and the devotion today is to simply remind us that God is powerful to overcome even the most powerful opposition.

We see God's power in two ways in this text: first we see his power to free Peter. The Bible says that the disciples who were free were gathered together to pray for Peter. We must see quickly that there is an inextricable link between God's power and His people's prayer. We've spoken about this already in regards to evangelism but don't miss the fact that God not only ordains the events that occur but the means by which they happen. It's not that God "needs" us to pray to act but it is that God requires us to pray for those things which we need! He has organized this universe in such a way that His power is unleashed when His people pray. In this case the power is miraculous, Peter is freed while the guards that surround him sleep! Our God provides salvation for His people! This does not mean that God must free all men who are imprisoned for His sake (remember John the Baptist?) what it does mean is that He is capable of doing so if He pleases!

Second, we see God's power to overcome and continue on even in the face of powerful opposition. Herod was a "problem" for the local church of the day but the Bible says that when God had enough of him, he simply "struck him down" (v. 23) and the next verse states that "the word of God continued to spread and flourish". What a wonderful truth! No one, no ruler, no principality, no military leader, no false religionist, not even Satan himself will thwart the plan of God to continue to spread and flourish His eternal Word.

When faced with difficulties today rest in the power of this God. He may not strike down your enemy like He did Herod and He may not miraculously free you like He did Peter but He will see to it that His Word and purposes continue on and He promises that those who are faithful will be liberated, vindicated and rewarded in the end.

## **Acts 13 – July 27**

What all does being a faithful witness entail? Have you ever considered this question? Today's text reminds us that faithfulness to the Gospel requires both a positive proclamation of what the Gospel is and a negative proclamation of what the Gospel isn't. To truly herald the truth one must also distinguish that which is false.

We see this illustrated for us in the account of Paul's encounter with the sorcerer Elymas. Admittedly much has changed in the world since the writing of this account nevertheless the basics are rather clear. There was another false prophet named "Bar-Jesus" ... do you ever read a text and just laugh for a moment? Regardless, this man wanted to hear the truth.

As is almost always the case, the desire of one man to hear the truth is opposed by others who are instruments of darkness. In this case the opposition comes from a man named Elymas. Elymas was also a sorcerer and was ardently opposed to the Gospel. It seems as if this man was actively speaking against the truth at the same time of Paul's presentation but the exact details matter little. What is instructive here is how Paul reacted and dealt with this false prophet.

Many in our day would have us believe that the "love of God" demands that we simply tolerate falsehood. Somehow love has been misconstrued with absolute, universal acceptance but Paul shows us that this is not the case at all. Instead when Paul is confronted with opposition, he labels deadly falsehood for what it is clearly and succinctly.

There is no beating around the bush with the Apostle here, instead he is straightforward in his condemnation of Elymas' message and all that he stands for. The lesson for the day is quite simple, as witnesses we must be willing to both proclaim truth and, by necessity, call out falsehood. There is nothing loving at all about allowing lies that will ultimately condemn men to hell if embraced to continue unopposed. In this case, Paul's condemnation of Elymas was for the benefit of both he and Bar-Jesus. Both of these men needed to understand that the deception they had fallen victim to was deadly as it was a direct assault on the truth of God. What may seem harsh to us today was truly love because Paul knew that those who continued down the road of falsehood would encounter a far more harsh reality than mere condemnation in the moment. Truth by definition is exclusive and therefore divisive. May we be faithful to divide where the Scripture divides in love for our fellow man.

## **Acts 14 – July 28**

Acts 14 is a helpful reminder that Gospel ministry does not simply stop at conversion. If we aren't careful we will miss the point that the apostles in Acts were not only concerned with momentary converts instead they were interested and labored towards building lasting structures for discipleship and ongoing Gospel proclamation. We know that structure today as the "church" and we see in Acts 14 the necessity of the church for continued development and nurturing in the faith.

The Bible tells us that Paul swings back through Antioch after he leaves for a while to proclaim the gospel in other locations. His return is for the reason of encouraging the disciples to remain true to the faith. What is informative about this text however is not the fact that Paul comes back to encourage and strengthen, its how he goes about his task.

We read that Paul gives one message and sets about one task in strengthening the new disciples. The message is that we must go through many hardships in order to enter the Kingdom. Far from denying difficulty, Paul sees it as encouraging to allow the new disciples in on the truth that this life will be hard! Some may wonder how this is meant to strengthen but the reality is that Paul knew what they needed was not a denial of their difficulty but an affirmation that they were on the right track. Unfortunately, many in our day have fallen prey to the idea that the best thing we can do is somehow deny or curse our difficulty. Like the stubborn man who refuses to go to the doctor in light of the mounting evidence that he is dealing with a severe disease, many in the church have chosen to deny and even outright ignore biblical texts about the reality of suffering. This does not lead to encouragement but discouragement as it causes us to believe that our experience is not normative. Paul encourages believers by stating that trials are a reality but also showing them that their hope is entrance into the Kingdom! What sustains is not utopian denial but future reality!

Second, we read that Paul strengthens believers by organizing and appointing leadership in the church. The simple lesson for us here is this, the church was designed by God for our edification, encouragement and growth. Paul understood that the goal of the Christian life was not achieved in totality at conversion. Instead the Christian life must be lived in community if those who are faithful are going to both endure and grow. Paul's methodology is also important. He goes about strengthening the church by appointing "elders" or "pastors". Folks, the church rises and falls on its leadership. It is imperative that churches have godly men who will preach the Word, shepherd the people and provide an example for others to imitate (1 Corinthians 11:1).

The point is quite simple today. Be encouraged that your difficulties are not unique! God doesn't hate you because you are suffering, in fact your suffering could well be an indication of His love for you as He works to use your trial to mold you into His image. The way forward in difficulty is not to deny suffering but to tether yourself to God through His church. Be involved in the community His Son died to establish and trust that collectively, through many sufferings, you will enter into the Kingdom of God!

## Acts 15 – July 29

What is required for salvation? This is the question being kicked around by the church in Acts 15. My belief is that none of us hold the same issues as they had! I haven't met too many 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians who still hold to circumcision as a necessary component of salvation but this does not mean that the general issue is not present. Let's try to learn today from the example of the early church as we consider what we must do to be saved.

The Bible has recorded for us the experiences of the apostles as they minister to the Gentiles. We've talked about the fact that some of them were very uncomfortable with God's activity amongst other peoples but that they eventually came to the conclusion that the Spirit was indeed moving and saving other peoples. This is all well and good but now they have to deal with the obvious question: how much of Jewish custom and Old Testament law do these new folks have to abide by? The specific, perhaps most crucial issue, revolved around circumcision.

Circumcision was a sign of the Old Covenant and required for males who would enter into God's people. It was necessary under the law and therefore was held in high esteem by the Jews. This led to obvious friction amongst Jews and Gentiles in the early church but by God's design the outcome of this conflict was edifying for the body.

You see, whether the people understood it or not, the question really revolved around the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice to atone for sins and therefore save others. Was the blood of Jesus sufficient or did something needed to be added to it? The Jews, by virtue of their answer, stated categorically that circumcision was necessary to be saved but as we learned the leaders eventually arrived at the conclusion, through the leadership of the Spirit, that all that was necessary was repentance and faith.

The point for today's devotion is quite simply this, nothing must be added to the Gospel. There is no tradition, no action, no rule that must be followed save repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. We are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. So many of us have grown up in traditions which unknowingly seek to add to this truth with various rules but we must understand the destructive nature of such thinking. Christ is not exalted when we add to His sacrifice, we testify that what He did was not sufficient. May it never be!

## **Acts 16 – July 30**

Acts 16 is proof positive of what we talked about in chapter 15, namely that repentance and faith is all that is necessary for salvation. In this text, Paul and Silas find themselves in a rather familiar position in jail. They were imprisoned for their gospel ministry but they decided not to let their present circumstance stop them from their eternal joy (remember through much suffering we will enter the Kingdom).

The Bible states that around midnight these men were praying and singing songs when a great earthquake engulfed the prison. All of the prison doors sprung open which left the jailer in a very vulnerable position. You see, the jailer was accountable for guarding the prisoners and in those days his failure to do so regardless of the circumstance would result in his death. Instead of letting the authorities kill him, this man decided to do so himself but Paul and Silas intervened.

What's interesting about this intervention is that the jailer knew that they understood far more about salvation than he did. Remember, these men were exuding the love and joy of Christ in a jail cell! That's not common I'm sure. So, in light of their example and the obvious faith they displayed the jailer knew that they had something he did not. While this is not the main point of the devotion, I want to remind you never to underestimate the power of a joyful life lived in obedience to Christ.

The larger point is that the jailer is now in a desperate situation and he is getting ready to end it all when in a last attempt towards hope he asks Paul a fateful question "what must I do to be saved?" Remember yesterday? Paul didn't say "be circumcised" or "go to church" or "be baptized" Paul's answer is as simple as it is profound... his answer is simply "believe".

Now, what's interesting about this text, among other things, is that we see that saving belief immediately results in obedience. I know some of you are uncomfortable with just "believe" because you know that the Bible is replete with other commands! You may say yes, one must believe but then one must follow and this is absolutely true but understand that obedience is always a result of belief. We don't obey and then believe; we believe and then obey. True biblical belief is enough to justify us... we are justified (counted righteous before God) by faith alone but the kind of faith that justifies is never alone. Instead in this text we read that immediately this jailer believes and then behaves! He washes the wounds of Paul and Silas and then he follows in obedience to his new Lord in baptism.

Belief results in works but works never merit salvation.

## **Acts 17 – July 31**

Well, if you know me you already know what I'm going to write about when we come to Acts 17... my favorite folks in the Bible, the faithful Bereans! Paul is continuing on his missionary journey when he comes to Berea. These folks were god fearing Jews who had simply not heard the truth of Christ's death on the cross yet. One must remember that Acts takes place in a transitional time in which Jesus had just recently been crucified and word (at least true testimony) didn't always spread quickly.

The Bible describes the Bereans as of more "noble character" than those in Thessalonica because they received the word with eagerness. They were ready and willing to be taught but this does not mean that they ingested anything and everything they were told. Instead, what we read is a beautiful picture of the way true believers should function on a weekly basis in submission to the Word.

We read that Paul taught these folks, they received the word and then they searched the Scriptures to see if what Paul had taught them was true! What a picture of biblical faithfulness. They understood that the word was the authority but they were unwilling to simply blindly follow anyone even the great apostle and the Bible celebrates them for it! Think about this for a moment... the Apostle Paul, author of many New Testament books is in their midst and yet the people choose to do their own research to make sure that he isn't lying or misleading them and, to compound things even more, the Bible celebrates and commends this action!

This is a perfect picture of the way believers ought to think and react on a weekly basis even today. The authority of God's Word is what is binding. The pastor or preacher is only authoritative in as much as he accurately relays the truths of God's Word.

The point then for our time today is simple, hear the Word, receive the Word from faithful ministers and then search the Word in submission to the Spirit to lead you to truth. We ought not be combative towards preachers and teachers but we also must not blindly follow. Remember that the Bible teaches that mankind is prone to sin and that only God's Word is left unstained by our depravity. Furthermore, we believe that the Spirit of God indwells us to show us truth and teach us what is present in the Word. At the same time the Bible teaches that God has given us pastors and teachers to obey and submit to in as far as they are teaching in accordance with the Word.

So, love you pastors and teachers. Listen to them and do not embrace a combative mentality. At the same time, search the Word and see if these things are so!