

CHRIST'S KINGDOM GROWS:  
Meditations on Acts through Revelation

INTRODUCTION

In the first volume of this devotional trilogy, we went through the Old Testament and saw how Christ was extensively prefigured. In the second, we saw how he was presented in the Gospels while on earth. In this third volume, we see how his followers looked back at his life to be able to carry his message and his story throughout the earth. In each reflection we will see how each passage connects back to the gospels in some way and how it guides us today.

ACTS: CHRIST: OUR MESSAGE

PREACHING JESUS: Chapters 1-12

January 1

Acts 1:1-8 Promised kingdom

As we begin a new year, it is appropriate to have the perspective that we live with a risen Christ who is powerfully at God's right hand and concerned about each one of us. Luke gave the account of forty days between the resurrection and ascension, and said Jesus convinced them he was alive and talked to them about God's kingdom. The kingdom theme, so central in the gospels, provided them with the framework for their task. Jesus promised the power of his Spirit to enable them to take this message to the ends of the earth.

Forty days to prepare for resurrection  
Is a long tradition.  
Noah on the ark,  
Moses on the mountain,  
Israel, Elijah, and Jesus in the wilderness.  
To  
Safety  
Community  
Home  
Life.

I like Lent's reversal  
The forty days after resurrection  
When Jesus was there but not there  
Slipped in and out

Before stepping into heaven.  
My Eastertide is  
Cheerful waiting in this in between time  
When Jesus is here and not here  
Slipping in and out of my life  
Waiting to take me to  
Safety  
Community  
Home  
Life.

*Have I learned to celebrate that Christ's kingdom has begun?*

January 2  
Acts 1:9-10 Promised return

Jesus had told Nathanael he would see the heavens open, and angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man. Nathanael surely remembered this promise and realized it had come about. The angels connected this moment to a future return on the clouds, something Jesus spoke of in end times teachings. This promise of return, 2000 years later, is still eagerly awaited.

The Ascension encourages me to have a perspective beyond that of daily life. Paul urged us, because we have been raised with Christ, to focus on heaven where Christ is seated in honor. Heaven is to fill our thoughts (Colossians 3:1-20). When we are disheartened by struggle and difficulty, attention on Christ's victory raises our spirits, enabling us to be confident of a future when all will be well.

A chain of angels  
Holding hands through the centuries  
Brings us here to heaven's doorstep.  
Sitting under the tree with Abraham  
Walking up and down stairs with Jacob,  
Encouraging Joshua and Gideon,  
Preparing Samson's parents,  
Protecting Elisha,  
Preparing John's parents,  
Preparing Jesus' mother,  
Calling the shepherds,  
Warning Jesus' father,  
Comforting Jesus,  
Announcing joy to the women,

Announcing joy to the men,

This chain of angels,  
Holding hands through the centuries,  
On this Ascension Day  
Brings us reverently,  
To where we, on tiptoes,  
On heaven's doorstep,  
Look through the door.

*Do I return to a heavenly perspective when disheartened?*

*January 3*

Acts 1:12-14 Praying together

The core disciples joined together in Jerusalem for prayer. Beautifully, their small community now included Jesus' mother and his brothers, and the other loyal women. We remember how skeptical Jesus' siblings had been, thinking he was crazy, mocking him about being a public figure, and being very much a part of the skeptical hometown crowd.

We are told, however, that Jesus made a point after the resurrection to see his brother James even before the other apostles (I Corinthians 15:7). Jesus' mother was at the crucifixion and with the multiplicity of women named Mary, she could have been one of the women who went to the tomb and saw Jesus. However it was, at this point she had become embedded in that faith community

*Do I have a faith context where I can participate in protracted community prayer?*

*January 4*

Acts 1:15-26. Position as apostle

The yeast or seeds of the kingdom were already growing from the small group of disciples, family and friends, to 120 people. Peter's acknowledged leadership role despite his recent shameful lapse into denial, caused him to encourage the selection of a replacement for Judas. Based on a prophetic Psalm, they used five methods to decide. Scripture, discussion, reason, prayer, and taking a risk.

These methods are still useful to us in decision-making. They agreed as a group regarding what to do. They had the rational criteria of nominating two people who had been with them all along. Spiritually, they prayed and put the matter in God's hands. Letting circumstances dictate, they chose straws.

The important number twelve was preserved. Twelve tribes of Israel, twelve disciples, and twelve gates to come in heaven.

*Do I rely on a variety of resources to make decisions?*

*January 5*

Acts 2:1-12 Power of Spirit

The believers prayed during ten days between Ascension and Pentecost, and the supernatural result was a dramatic move of the Spirit. These are not things hidden in a book, but are part of our world today. Poet Luci Shaw tried to capture that connection:

*God's Act in Acts*

A blast of wind grates its weight  
across our church's slate roof, tugs  
at the stained glass windows. And just at  
this moment a wild morning sun blazes  
through the nave like a signal, blessing  
the altar, lighting the preacher's face.

And I remember the ancient story--  
about a sacred wind that carried Your  
hot breath. A wildfire, it licked  
the heads of the locals, formed words,  
spread in a conflagration of gospel speech,  
flew until whole languages roared  
beyond all border.

Strike our dull matches. Light us today  
even if our dark wicks only flicker in a corner  
Translate our lives into Your words. --Luci Shaw

*Am I allowing God's fire to light up my life?*

*January 6*

Acts 2:14-21 Peter preaches

Peter began preaching and drew on three Old Testament scriptures as his point of departure. The first, from Joel, predicted a pouring out of God's Spirit not just on certain leaders as in the Old Testament, but on all people regardless of gender, class, or age. This gift, available to anyone, had now begun with this group of 120 people.

The gift is clearly available to us today. Jesus had promised this repeatedly, assuring his followers that in this way he would be present to them, even when physically gone. In fact, he said, it was better that he go, since this would allow for an even more intimate relationship.

*Do I have an intimate relationship with God's Spirit? If not, do I know someone who can help me with this?*

*January 7*

Acts 2:22-32 Prophecy of resurrection

Peter's second Old Testament text was from Psalm 16 which contains one of the clearest prophecies of the resurrection. Doubtless this was one of the texts that Jesus had referenced in Luke when he met with the disciples and explicated the scriptures after the resurrection. (Luke 24:25-27)

Peter firmly connected this to Jesus and his resurrection, and explained that this was prophecy on David's part. He pulled no punches in letting the crowd know they nailed Jesus to the cross and murdered him. He then softened his accusation by saying that this terrible action was in God's prearranged plan.

*Do I see God's glory in planning crucifixion and resurrection?*

*January 8*

Acts 2:33-36. Jesus was Messiah

Peter came to the high point of his sermon and quoted Psalm 110:1 which Jesus himself had used in his arguments with the religious leaders. He said that this promise that Messiah would be seated in power and triumph at God's right hand had been fulfilled by Jesus.

Just as he had been the first disciple to openly declare that Jesus was Messiah, he now proclaimed that this crucified one had been raised up. Peter had seen the post-resurrection Jesus and only ten days before had seen the ascension. He was convinced that Psalm 110 had been fulfilled.

His sermon points were: 1) All can receive the Spirit as we have, 2) Jesus has been resurrected, and 3) Jesus is the ruler of all. This gives us a template for our message and we can feel comfortable that this is a good presentation of the gospel.

*Do I have this message clearly in mind to share with others?*

*January 9*

Acts 2:37-42. People respond

Peter, the Spirit speaking through him, convicted his hearers and they asked how they must respond. He instructed them in the same way Jesus had: "Repent!". "Be baptized!" "Receive the Spirit!"

The promise of the Holy Spirit had been made even when John the Baptist was preaching. God had told him, "When you see the Holy Spirit descending and resting on someone, he is the one you are looking for. He is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." (John 1:33)

This persuasive preaching brought 3000 new people into the community. The remarkable spread of the kingdom had begun. The seed of the word had been planted and was growing.

*Do I feel comfortable encouraging repentance, baptism and being filled with the Spirit? If not, what do I need to learn?*

*January 10*

Acts 2:43-47 Performing wonders

What came about was a community in what we might call revival mode. These moves of the Spirit have happened over and over in history and are characterized by people actually doing what Jesus told his followers to do.

They performed miracles. They sold what they had and gave to the poor. They worshipped in Spirit and truth. They gathered for meals together. They fed the hungry. And they welcomed new people into their community. All of these were things Jesus had taught them.

This level of joy and enthusiasm comes and goes through history, but it repeats itself often enough that the Christian message keeps spreading. I long for it to be even more amazing and beautiful in my lifetime beyond the remarkable things I have already seen.

*Do I have a clear vision for a worshipping, committed community today?*

*January 11*

Acts 3:1-11 Lame man healed

Jesus had healed many who were lame, and Peter and John followed his method of giving a verbal command to stand and walk. The man was brought to beg, having as so often is the case in the world at large, no other economic option because of his disability. What a privilege that Peter and John could repeat the striking miracle prophesied for the Messianic age.

What was transformative is the resulting inclusion. In Leviticus 21:16-23 priests with physical defects were forbidden to serve in the temple, symbolizing their purity. The requirement

extended beyond the priesthood. Beautifully, the first act of this man lame from birth was to enter the temple. In this new situation he held on tightly to Peter and John. Observers were in awe.

I am in awe of what people with disabilities do today thanks to new laws that open up space in workplaces, new technologies, and inclusion in public life. While not the same level of miracle, it has the same joyful feel. Jesus' parable of the feast we look forward to included those who were lame, and our kingdom life today needs to have that openness to any disability.

*Do I celebrate the inclusion for the disabled that Jesus can bring about?*

*January 12*

Acts 3:12-21 Preaching in the temple

Peter saw an opportunity and told them Jesus had healed this man. He let them know that they were guilty of Jesus' death, but God had raised him from the dead. He softened the accusation by excusing their ignorance and pointing to Messianic prophecy. It had taken the disciples three years with Jesus to realize that Messianic prophecies included suffering, but they knew it now.

Once more his message was simple: Jesus died and rose again, he is Messiah, and you can be cleansed from your sin. He then pointed to Christ's return with the summation that he must remain in heaven until the final restoration.

For us who live in the wonderful times of refreshment from God in the present, we can live in hope and joy. Ours is a happy faith when we consider the gifts of healing, forgiveness, a future vision, and God's refreshing presence.

*Am I rejoicing in the gifts our faith brings us?*

*January 13*

Acts 3:22-26 Promised prophet

Peter concluded his sermon by connecting Moses' prophecy of a prophet like himself to whom they must listen. Peter said all the prophets from Samuel on were looking forward to Jesus. The promise to Abraham that he would bless the world was fulfilled through Jesus. As the people of these prophecies they had the first opportunity to hear of the resurrection.

Jesus' post-resurrection instructions had opened their eyes to how he was prefigured, predicted and foreshadowed in the Old Testament. As we read through that lens, the Old Testament becomes much more meaningful. In his preaching Peter comfortably drew from familiar texts, but drew out new meaning.

*Do I reverently appreciate how crucial Jewish culture and lineage was to prepare for Christ?*

*January 14*

Acts 4:1-7 Proclaiming Jesus

Just as Jesus received persistent opposition from religious leaders, John and Peter were arrested by these same people. The anti-resurrection Sadducees were upset by their resurrection message. The same High Priest who had condemned Jesus to death less than two months before confronted them, demanding details on the miracle.

The crowds responded, however, and the believers were up to 5,000 men plus families as a result of this preaching. Jesus had warned of the opposition, said they would be blessed in it. If handed over to courts as was the case now for Peter and John, they should not be anxious.

*Have I experienced criticism for a positive action? How did I react?*

*January 15*

Acts 4:9-13 Privilege of suffering

Peter was able to experience what Jesus had said: "When you are arrested, don't worry about what to say in your defense, because you will be given the right words at the right time. For it won't be you doing the talking--it will be the Spirit of your Father speaking through you." (Matthew 10:19,20)

Filled with the Spirit, he said something similar to Jesus when reproached for healing a man on the Sabbath. Peter quoted the same Psalm Jesus had used in arguments with them in the temple. Surely they remembered this painful encounter that had increased their desire to arrest Jesus.

Just as the pro-Jesus feeling in the crowd had silenced Jesus' opponents, the disturbing presence of the man recently healed also silenced them.

*Have I experienced feeling that the Holy Spirit is speaking through me?*

*January 16*

Acts 4:16-23 Pressed to be silent

Peter and John were threatened and told not to speak. They were experiencing Jesus' imagery of being sheep among wolves. They now acted as wise as serpents and innocent as doves as he had told them to do. When told to not speak of Jesus they said they needed to obey God.

The council had to let them go, because the miracle and the peoples' joy in it had made them harmless as doves. In the US we have strong support for Christianity, with over half of our population identifying as church-goers. We also have the constitutional guarantee of free speech. We need to have a vision of the world and concern for those in much more difficult circumstances where Christian testimony can be silenced.

*Do I respond wisely to any opponents?*

*January 17*

Acts 4:24-31 Praying for courage

The prayer in response to Peter and John's release quoted Psalm 2 and applied the rage of nations against the Messiah to what had just happened to Jesus. Once more, however, what happened was referred to as God's plan. Jesus had predicted his own suffering as God's plan, and we can see that great good has come from it.

We wish suffering was not ever in God's plan for us or those we love, and there are great stories of rescue and relief. I want God's perfect will for everyone, yet somehow he makes a good plan out of even messy and wrong things. We live in situations when the desires of people come into conflict, and some level of violence results. Our goal is to be like Jesus and suffer well.

*Do I trust that God can bring good out of evil, and that his overall plan is good?*

*January 18*

Acts 4:32-37. Poverty gone

In Deuteronomy 15 a vision of an ideal community which had eliminated poverty was presented, and here they had achieved it. Jesus had modeled living without attachment to possessions, and had told his disciples to seek the kingdom first and serve God rather than money. This new Christian community was enthusiastically carrying that out. Presumably land and houses sold were not needed for daily life, and we are introduced to Barnabas from Cyprus who will become a companion to Paul. Our introduction to him is his divesting.

Sometimes to follow God's call today it is necessary to divest and be willing to make some economic sacrifices. Their goal was to be sure that everyone had the basics, a vision we still need in our world where we have poverty and extreme poverty despite generally increasing prosperity.

*How willing am I to let go of anything to be able to contribute to eliminating poverty?*

*January 19*

### Acts 5:1-11 Lies about money

Unfortunately, human nature is deceitful, so a couple wanted credit for more generosity than they really were exercising. Peter's discernment allowed him to point this out. Jesus had said that those who liked public recognition for their generosity were the Pharisees. He wanted his disciples to give as anonymously as possible. This dangerous possibility of Phariseeism in their community ended with their dramatic deaths.

It shows how seriously God took this breach of faith, much as the rebellion in Moses' day had resulted in quick deaths. Today we are in a time when we have an expectation that we will receive attention and affirmation for our generosity, and when we don't, we feel like it is time to look for somewhere else to give. Perhaps we need a dose of the shock the early church got, that image is not the point.

*Am I honest and straightforward in dealing with money, including in my giving?*

*January 20*

### Acts 5:12-25 Performing miracles

Throughout the gospel of Luke he consistently called the twelve closest followers of Jesus the "disciples" which means learners. When Jesus sent them out to preach, he called them "apostles", meaning "ones sent out." In Acts he called them apostles. With this identity, they took on Jesus' work of performing miracles, healing others, removing evil spirits, and teaching.

They also inherited Jesus' enemies, the high priest and his followers. Just as the high priest and temple guards had repeatedly tried to arrest Jesus and after six failures, finally succeeded, the apostles were arrested. Jesus had warned them this would happen, but in this case an angel released them and sent them to the temple to teach.

The high priest and captain of the temple guard thought they were convening a trial, but to their surprise they discovered an empty jail and the apostles teaching in the temple. Rather than suppressing one man, Jesus, who they had seen as a menace, they had just multiplied him by twelve.

Our identities as believers include both the role of learners/disciples and apostles/sent ones. Our ability to deliver Jesus' message needs to mature as we grow. We see such a great change in the disciples from frightened men behind locked doors to bold men preaching publicly as jailbreakers.

*Does my identity include being sent into the world to share Jesus?*

January 21

### Acts 5:26-42 Suffering joyfully

Just as had happened to Jesus when brought before the council, the proclamation of Jesus' identity enraged them to the point of wanting to kill them. But this time an intervention came from an unlikely source, a highly respected member of their own group. Gamaliel, recognized by the Jewish Mishnah as one of the great teachers of all time, and in the New Testament identified as Paul's teacher, spoke up. His argument was that they should take a hands off approach.

The movement would either die away as had many others, or it would survive and show itself to be of God. They accepted the wisdom of his argument enough to flog rather than kill the apostles. This group of disciples who had wasted considerable time arguing over which of them would be the greatest, now so understood the upside down kingdom so well that they were happy they had been disgraced.

And they kept preaching. Gamaliel was right, because their message was of God, it could not be stopped. We are among the millions who are a result of those early days. They boldly proclaimed "The Messiah you are looking for is Jesus."

*Do I rejoice in the spreading of the gospel, and do I rejoice in opposition and disgrace?*

January 22

### Acts 6:1-7 Serving the poor

Since Jesus had urged them to care generously for those who were poor, the project soon overwhelmed them and complaints arose. How very human! Solution? More leaders to help. They chose seven who were well-respected, full of the Holy Spirit, and full of wisdom. Though their primary task was good distribution, some soon were preaching and doing miracles.

Believers increased, and many Jewish priests understood that Jesus was the one they had been looking for. The ever widening circles where Jesus was preached have continued to widen so that the gospel has reached every corner of the world in our time.

*No matter what practical service I do, do I simultaneously tell others about Jesus?*

January 23

### Acts 6:8-15 Placed under arrest

Stephen, one of those serving food, got into a debate with international Jews. His skill in winning the debates reminds us how effectively Jesus did this in his encounters with the religious leaders. The same kind of false accusations made against Jesus, and the same

process of taking him before the Council occurred. Just as lying witnesses had spoken against Jesus, lying witnesses spoke against Stephen.

Suddenly Stephen's face was as bright as an angel's. This reminds us of the story of the transfiguration when three privileged disciples saw Jesus' glory and his face shone. In his time of suffering, Jesus' prayer that God would give his followers glory was answered for Stephen. Can we be conformed to the pattern of Jesus' life as Stephen was, even if it involves suffering? Can we have God's glory on us?

*Do you spend time in God's presence so he can put his glory on you?*

January 24

Acts 7:1-38 Stephen's defense

For years I was puzzled why Stephen summarized so much Old Testaments history and then lambasted his listeners. It does not seem like a particularly effective sermon. But as a defense to their accusations, it makes much more sense. His accusers had said he spoke against the temple and Mosaic law, and had said Jesus would destroy the temple and change the laws.

Jesus had said the temple would be destroyed (which implied an end to the sacrificial system he had fulfilled, which is what happened.). Stephen presumably could not respond by saying "no I never said that" since he doubtless was repeating Jesus' message. But he put the temple and its practices in the larger context of the overall story of faith by explaining how much history of relationship with God's people predated the temple. Neither Abraham, nor Joseph, nor Moses had even lived in the land of Israel.

But Moses had prophesied that a prophet like himself would come and should be listened to. In all this early history the people's' relationship with God was not mediated through the temple. Jesus was, of course, the prophetic mediator Moses had predicted. And, as Jesus himself had said, he was the fulfillment of all the temple imagery, the reality behind the shadow.

*Do I appreciate the history of relationship to God among the Jewish people that prepared for Jesus?*

January 25

Acts 7:34-50 Encountering God anywhere

Stephen's defense continued with another key idea: though God had reached out to the Jewish people, there was a long history of rebellion. Even in the time of Moses they asked for Aaron to make an idol. Stephen quoted God's frustration with his rebellious people from Amos' message.

Rather than the temple, the portable tabernacle continued for several centuries until it occurred to King David to want to make a permanent building. His son Solomon was the one who finally built the structure that they had seen rebuilt twice. They were so offended by his warning that it was on the verge of destruction and replacement.

His climactic argument from Isaiah was that God does not need a building to live in. He had been accused of downgrading the temple, but authoritative Isaiah had already done this. Stephen was not presenting an original idea, since the Old Testament often presented God as creator of all, much bigger than a building.

*Do I realize that I can encounter God in any place?*

January 26

Acts 7:51-60 Stephen martyred

Stephen's conclusion of his defence was to accuse his accusers. They had followed in the footsteps of their rebellious ancestors who killed the prophets who were promising the Messiah, but they had now killed Messiah himself.

Not surprisingly, this accusation infuriated his listeners. He was accusing them of a crime against their own religious traditions and defending himself with texts from that tradition. Stephen then exclaimed that he saw Jesus standing at God's right hand. Their angry response was to drag him out to stone him.

Jesus had predicted that people would arrest and kill his followers (Matthew 24:9). Stephen was the first to have this privilege in a long history of martyrdom. Stephen asked forgiveness for his killers, setting a high standard for future martyrs. To this day we honor those killed for their loyalty to Christ. More research is needed, but a reasonable current estimate is that 8,000 are martyred each year for their faith. Even one is too many, but so many follow faithfully in Stephen's footsteps.

*Do I appreciate, honor, and pray for those martyred today?*

January 27

Acts 8:1-8 Persecution scatters

Saul, who will later learn had been one of Gamaliel's students, had apparently not bought the argument that they should just let the disciples be and see if this was of God. Instead, he was inspired by being present at Stephen's martyrdom and was determined to help squelch this heresy. Jesus had predicted arrests and Saul was fanatically fulfilling that.

When he later told his story he said he sent many to prison, condemned them to death, had them whipped in synagogues, and hounded them in distant cities in foreign lands. (Acts 26:9-11). He was a successful and violent fanatic.

But the main effect was that as believers sensibly left from where they were in danger, the news spread. Philip's miracles gained him a hearing in Samaria. Luke cites his experiences as just one example of what was happening. Moving out of danger to preach in a new place has a solid precedent here as well as in the instructions Jesus had given his disciples.

*Do I respond wisely to danger?*

January 28

Acts 8:9-25 Sheep among wolves

Jesus had warned he was sending out his people as sheep among wolves. Philip met one of these wolves who claimed great spiritual power and had built up a reputation, Simon. Clearly he was impressed with Philip's power and was baptized. Philip called in Peter and John to pray for the baptism of the Holy Spirit and Simon was blown away by this evidence of power and asked if he could buy it.

Peter heartily reproached him for his unregenerate thinking. At this point it appears the wolf changed, truly repented, and became one of the sheep. Just as Jesus had encountered a penitent Samaritan woman and his message had begun to spread in that region, now Philip and the others were continuing it in this area of people who had non-Jewish heritage.

Today, with so many remarkable evidences of the supernatural, Christians can admire and want to exercise spiritual power. It can even lead to fakery or at the very least, pride. Paul warned that powerful mountain-moving faith is nothing without love.

*Am I overly impressed by or overly desirous of spiritual power?*

January 29

Acts 8:26-40 Philip and the Ethiopian

Philip and Stephen, recruited to distribute food, both started doing something above their initial task: miracles. Stephen is the star of Chapter 7 and Philip is the star of Chapter 8. Philip's encounter with a foreign official included an angel calling him to the task, and mystifying miraculous transportation afterwards.

This tender and beautiful story recalls the many Gentiles that Jesus healed and responded to despite his focus on the Jewish people. This Ethiopian eunuch would not have been allowed

into the central portion of the temple where he had gone to worship in Jerusalem because he was a Gentile and a eunuch.

The Ethiopian wondered who he was reading about in Isaiah, and when Philip explained, he believed and was baptized. A great harvest among the Gentiles had been started by Jesus, was continued here and would continue to grow. Christians from every nation are part of the kingdom today. Color of skin, nationality, sexuality--none of these are barriers to faith.

When Philip encountered this important official it says the Holy Spirit told him to go and walk by the carriage. We also can listen to the Spirit's prompting on how to approach others, and so appropriately and helpfully engage with strangers.

*Am I listening to the Spirit about how to approach others?*

January 30

Acts 9:1-9 Saul's conversion

Saul was a fanatic, eager to destroy this new heresy. He obtained letters for synagogues to get help in arresting Jesus' followers. Jesus had warned his people would be beaten in synagogues (Matthew 10:17) and Saul was eager to carry this out.

He was stopped by a brilliant light and voice from heaven. Jesus began his ministry with a call to repentance, which means to change one's mind. This was one of the most dramatic changes of mind of all time. Saul changed from a persecutor to an effective preacher, church planter, writer, and hero of the faith he had scorned. He will retell this dramatic story three more times in Acts, making it one of the central themes of the book.

Blinded, having heard Jesus speak, he fasted for three days and simply waited to be told what to do. I admire dramatic conversion stories, and though mine is not dramatic, I can identify with waiting on God to see what to do.

*No matter my past, am I eager to hear from God and obey?*

January 31

Acts 9:10-19 Visions

Now the Holy Spirit spoke to another believer, Ananias, this time through another vision. He was told Saul had a vision of Ananias praying to restore his sight. So this conversion story was confirmed with three visions--Saul's vision on the road, Ananias' vision, and Saul's vision of Ananias.

Ananias knew Saul's plan to arrest believers, but was told God had intervened for the purpose of changing Saul from persecutor to preacher. Ananias obeyed and Saul was healed. Jesus had a primary mission to Jews, but did reach out to Gentiles, but his parables had repeatedly explained that the Jews needed to make room because the door was opening to all people. Now he had recruited someone who would preach to all people with the intensity transformed into something positive rather than violent. Jesus called Saul a chosen instrument.

In our times, many people are having remarkable visions. Among Maya Christians in Guatemala this is more common than in our American culture. One remarkable story of a vision well-confirmed by events that ensued is in *Escaping the Fire: How an Ixil Mayan Pastor Led His People Out of a Holocaust During the Guatemalan Civil War*. Visions happen.

*Am I open to seeing what God wants me to see?*

February 1

Acts 9:19-25. Persecutor to preacher

Saul was well-versed enough he did not need the class Jesus gave after the resurrection to show how scripture had predicted all he went through. His arguments were so convincing he gained a hearing and his preaching became more and more powerful.

The Jewish leaders had supposed he was stamping out this movement and were alarmed he had become such an effective advocate. They put him on a death list. He escaped secretly in the night through an opening in the city wall. This is a dramatic instance of obedience to Jesus' warning that when rejected in one city one should move on.

Saul's core message can be ours as well, that Jesus "is indeed the Son of God."

*Am I practicing enough that my presentations of Jesus are becoming more and more powerful?*

February 2

Acts 9:26-31 Preaching in peace

Barnabas played an important role in making accurate information about Saul available, and connecting him with the apostles. Saul stayed with them in Jerusalem, preaching boldly. His effectiveness as a debater aroused another murder plot.

They spirited him out of the city and he went to hometown Tarsus. After these chapters of persecution, largely from Jerusalem, the church was given a time to preach in peace and continued to grow.

Jesus had been murdered by people who did not want to hear either a message of renewal or recognize his role as the greatest of prophets. He had warned that his followers would

experience similar rejection. This had happened for Peter and John, for Stephen, the disciples in general, and now for Paul. But for a moment the persecution abated and the church could grow in peace.

Beautifully, the believers walked in the fear of God and comfort of the Spirit. That is a pattern for us to aspire to.

*Am I living in the comfort of the Holy Spirit?*

February 3

Acts 9:32-43 Peter in Samaria

Peter replicated Jesus' itinerant ministry and even replicated some of Jesus' miracles. He healed a man who had been paralyzed eight years, and he raised a woman from the dead. The details of both stories are appealing and the miracles brought many to faith.

Joppa, Lydda, and Sharon were all part of Samaria. Joppa is the modern city of Jaffa, the southern and older part of Tel Aviv. Lydda is to the southwest, and Sharon is a large plain toward the north and the sea. Samaria had been settled by many non-Jewish people, so this was a stretch beyond Peter's comfort zone.

Peter and the others had done well in carrying out Jesus' commission to preach in Jerusalem and Judea. Now Peter's long stay in Joppa carried out the commission to preach in Samaria. (Acts 1:8). The next challenge for Peter would be to understand the implications of the final part of the commission to go to the ends of the earth.

*Am I willing to stretch myself to share Jesus more widely?*

February 4

Acts 10:1-8. Cornelius' prayer

Jesus had told the apostles to go into all the world and preach about him. We are now introduced to a figure who is the kind of person that can be found in every culture. Though a Roman army officer, not a Jew, Cornelius already had a relationship with God.

He was devout, recognized the God of Israel, had influenced his household, was generous, and prayed. This kind of prepared heart is one that God responds to with yet more knowledge. This is fruitful soil for the word. An angel came with commendation and directions to send for Peter. Though alarmed by his vision, he sent messengers immediately.

Today we hear stories of those who see Jesus in a dream, who find a book, whose traditions have prepared them for an evangelist, or in some fashion bring a prepared heart as Cornelius

did. We need to approach all people with an eye to how the Spirit is already working in their lives.

*Do I keep my eyes open for those with prepared hearts?*

February 5

Acts 10:9-23 Peter's prayer

Peter knew, in theory, that the gospel was to be taken into the world. But he and the other Jewish believers had not yet thought through the implications. Would the Gentiles who came to Jesus need to become good Jews before or after their conversion?

Peter's vision told him to eat things the law forbade. The answer was that if God said something was acceptable, so it was. This was repeated three times and he was perplexed and puzzled. The food code had been given for health and to be a way of living obediently and purely. Jesus had challenged the Pharisaical rigidity about food, by emphasizing that what is in our hearts is most important.

Peter was alerted that three men had come to get him and the Holy Spirit said to go. He was ready to cross a great barrier to learn that it was possible to follow Jesus without being a Jew.

*Do I understand that God loves every person from every nation without exception?*

February 6

Acts 10:24-30 All people are pure

When Peter arrived at Cornelius' house, Cornelius worshipped him, a not unlikely response to someone sent by an angel. But Peter reassured him he was merely human and they went inside to talk.

Peter had correctly interpreted the vision to mean God did not think of anyone as impure and he must not do so either. It must have developed as a custom that Jews should not enter Gentile homes, since there is not such law in the Old Testament. It added a layer of protection for eating correctly. Jesus had challenged the rigid additions to the law made by the Pharisees and would have challenged this. Though a Roman officer told Jesus he was not worthy to receive him in his home, Jesus marveled at the man's faith and healed his servant. Cornelius shared the vision he had, and thanked Peter for coming. They were ready to hear the message.

Caesarea was a significant place for this turning point. It was the first artificial port in the world built with impressive engineering by King Herod the Great. It increased trade and prosperity which contributed to his many lavish building projects. His amphitheater has been restored and

is used today, and. ruins being excavated by archaeologists dig back through centuries of Muslim and Christian occupation. Herod's lavish seaside palace would later be used by Pontius Pilate and be the site of Paul's two year imprisonment. To gain favor with Caesar, Herod built a Temple to Augustus and the Roman goddess. It was a very Roman city in the land of the Jews, and included a hippodrome, gladiatorial games, and the idols that offended the Jews. This was a striking place to begin Christ's outreach to the Gentiles through Peter.

*Have I learned not to categorize anyone negatively?*

February 7

Acts 10:31-48. Peter's surprise

Peter started by saying he could see God doesn't show partiality, but in every nation he accepts people who fear him and do right. He then told the story of Jesus and concluded that Jesus was the one the prophets spoke of who could bring forgiveness of sins.

The Holy Spirit fell on all of them to the amazement of all the Jewish believers who had come with Peter. It was clear that baptism and the message of Jesus were for Gentiles, too. Peter had not understood this despite the many times Jesus healed or fed or taught non-Jews.

Peter had stretched enough to preach to the semi-Jewish Samaritans, and now he stretched to preach to a Gentile. It was a paradigm shift to realize that when Jesus said "all the world" he actually meant it.

*Do I accept that God has people in every nation that he knows are following him even before they hear of Jesus?*

February 8

Acts 11:1-18 Privileges for Gentiles

If the paradigm shift had been a struggle for Peter, it was even harder for the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. The importance of this momentous change is emphasized in Luke's narrative by repeating the story in Peter's words.

The positive result was that this experience answered their objections. They realized the Gentiles could receive eternal life. In Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus he had made it clear the message of eternal life was for the whole world. It just had been one of many things too hard for the disciples to grasp.

Even today we sometimes set up barriers and think it is unlikely some people could respond to God. The wrong step taken is to become contemptuous, and reject people for reasons that should not matter: nationality, political persuasions, race, sexual history, etc. etc.

*Do I open my heart to all people?*

February 9

Acts 11:19-30 Proof of God's favor

Believers who had scattered farther because of persecution had limited themselves by sharing with other Jews. This message was still part of the landscape of Judaism, not yet seen as a message for all people. In Antioch they started preaching to responsive Gentiles. The Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to make sure things were not out of control. He was impressed. He then once more sought out Saul and the two of them worked together for a year in Antioch.

Because of raising money for a coming famine, Saul and Barnabas headed to Jerusalem to take money. Saul had fled a murder plot the last time he was there, and now he kept a low profile. Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit, and strong in faith. He encouraged the believers in Antioch, and encouraged Saul by drawing him into ministry. He had the qualities of a good shepherd like Jesus.

*Am I an encourager?*

February 10

Acts 12:1-17 Peter freed

Jesus had warned his followers they would be taken before kings (Matthew 10:18). Herod Agrippa's grandfather had tried to kill the infant Jesus, and Herod's uncle had successfully killed John the Baptist. Now this Herod arrested and killed James. He was Herodias' brother and shared the same murderous impulses.

Surely all the followers of Jesus grieved this second martyr, but particularly grieved would have been his brother John and their former business partner, Peter. When Peter was imprisoned at Passover as Jesus had been not many years before, he surely thought that Jesus' prophecy of his death must be coming true. (John 21:18,19). It was not the right time, and so instead, this was to be a story of resurrection.

There are delightful details in the story of his release: the angel tapped him on the side, he thought he was having a vision until he was outside the prison, it took a little thought to figure out what to do, Rhoda the servant was so happy she forgot to let him in, he had to motion to quiet the group, he asked them to let James know, and then he went elsewhere. Jesus had told them not to be afraid of those who wanted to kill them. Peter, who had once denied Jesus, had learned not to be afraid.

*Have I learned to entrust my life to God?*

February 11

Acts 12:18-25 Herod punished

The commotion over Peter's escape led to an unsuccessful search, and Herod killed the guards who had been outsmarted by an angel. Then he gave up and left town. Herod, a proud man, accepted the peoples' praise when they called him a god. It says he died because of accepting the people's worship. We can date this to 44 AD.

Once more the good news spread. Barnabas and Saul had presumably been in Jerusalem during the drama of Peter's imprisonment and release, but now they left, taking John Mark with them. It was John Mark's home where Peter had gone to announce himself. Since John Mark and Barnabas were relatives it is quite possible that he and Saul were there when Peter came to the house.

What a contrast between the humble believers who gave glory to God for Peter's release and Herod who took glory to himself. We have the same stark choice of who we are going to honor.

*Do I consistently give God glory?*

PAUL PREACHES: Chapters 13-20

February 12

Acts 13:1-12 Power of God

The Antioch church leaders received a message to send out Saul and Barnabas. After fasting, praying, and laying hands on them, they did so. John Mark went along as their assistant. In Cyprus their successful ministry was challenged by a sorcerer. Saul, who now begins to be known by his Greek name Paul, pronounced a harsh judgment. He himself had experienced blindness at his conversion, and now he pronounced blindness on this man.

Jesus reserved his harsh rhetoric for religious leaders who he called "blind guides" leading others astray. The sorcerer was one such Jewish religious leader, a false prophet. In the Old Testament false prophets were to die. Here the choice existed that he could repent (which we probably would have been told if he had done so), and his sight could have been restored as had happened for Paul. This frightening exhibition of power showed that the sorcerer was the less powerful one.

Our world today is full of lies. It takes a lot of discernment to see when and where we are being led astray theologically or in any other way. We need to ask for God's wisdom and recognize how strongly Jesus condemned false teaching.

*Am I good at discerning lies?*

February 13

Acts 13:13-41 Preaching in the synagogue

After the resurrection, Jesus opened the minds of the apostles to the Old Testament prophecies regarding him. (Luke 24:44-45). When Paul was invited to preach in the synagogue, he gave an exposition that drew on that content. His sermon outline connected the prophetic past to Christ.

- I. God liberated his people and gave them a national territory. He then established a kingdom. The first king failed, but the second, David, had a heart for God.
- II. Jesus is the promised Savior, the son of King David, who fulfills that kingdom. His death fulfilled prophecy as did his resurrection from the dead.
- III. The Old Testament prophesied the resurrection   A. Psalm 2 describes the Son being given the kingdom   B. Isaiah 55:3 This text refers to the everlasting covenant of an eternal kingdom promised to David.   C. Psalm 16:10 A promise was made that the Holy One would not remain in the grave. It could not apply to David who died, but it applies to Jesus.
- IV. Conclusion: Respond to Jesus and receive forgiveness. Habakkuk 1:5 is being fulfilled that something new is happening in our time.

*Do I understand the amazing connections between Old Testament prophecy and Christ?*

February 14

Acts 13:42-52 Persecution

At first it seemed that Paul's sermon had gotten a good response. But when the whole city came to hear him the following week, this aroused jealousy in the local leaders who started slandering Paul.

Jesus told several striking parables about the unresponsiveness of those who were invited to a feast but refused to come. Others had to be called to replace them. This fulfilled the prophecy from Isaiah that Jesus is a light to the Gentiles to bring salvation to every corner of the earth.

This made the Gentiles happy and the Jews angry. As they were run out of town, Paul and Barnabas followed Jesus' instructions to shake dust off their feet.

*Am I willing to go anywhere, even something I perceive as to the far corners of the earth?*

February 15

Acts 14:1-10 Proving the message

Escaping Antioch in Asia Minor was by no means the last time Paul and Barnabas had to flee for their lives. In a new town, Iconium, they had success with some and were opposed by others.

This divided opinion had also been part of Jesus' ministry (John 6) and he had warned that the students would have experiences similar to their teacher, servants to their master. If he had been called the prince of demons, they could expect similar calumny. (Matthew 10:24,25)

Religious leaders had twice picked up stones to kill Jesus, and Paul and Barnabas faced the same. They fled. But a man with deformed feet who had never been able to walk had faith to be healed. When Paul ordered him to stand, he jumped to his feet and began walking. Miracles had not convinced Jesus' opponents and they would not convince these opponents either.

*Do I hand any opposition to my commitment to Jesus with grace, knowing it is to be expected?*

February 16

Acts 14:11-20 Practically dead

That a crippled man was healed astonished all of Lystra. Because they spoke their local language rather than Greek, Paul and Barnabas did not realize the people had decided they were gods walking on earth: Barnabas was Zeus and Paul was Hermes. They started to organize a sacrifice in their honor.

Paul and Barnabas were horrified, and they urged the people to turn from worthless things (idols), to the creator God. God's good gifts to all serve as his witness. Unfortunately, the opponents from other cities came and dragged Paul out of the city, leaving him half dead. But getting up, they left town again.

John began his gospel saying that Jesus, the creator, came to earth. Jesus said that the creator gives good gifts to all and we should do the same. For those without any background in the Jewish scriptures, appealing to this knowledge of the creator was where to start. The creation and what it means is a good point of departure for discussion today as well.

*Am I grateful for God's gifts in creation?*

February 17

Acts 14:21-28 Placing leaders

Paul and Barnabas now retraced their steps and taught the new believers. Part of their content was Jesus' great theme of the Kingdom of God, as well as Jesus' call to endure suffering. They selected elders, fasted for them, and left them in God's care. When they returned to Antioch they shared their stories of all that had happened.

Church planting and a nascent leadership structure were God's responsibility, so they felt free to go. God's greatness could be seen as the church spread through ordinary people. Jesus was right. He had prayed believers would love one another to a point that would draw others to believe. (John 17)

*Do I trust God to develop the church through his Spirit even if leaders are young and relatively untrained?*

February 18

Acts 15:1-12 Promise to Gentiles

The issue of how to deal with new Gentile believers was unsettled and some unnamed leaders went to Antioch from Jerusalem and encouraged the Gentiles to be circumcised. The idea was that they should become observant Jews as part of following Jesus. Paul and Barnabas objected, but to resolve the issue a group traveled to Jerusalem to consult the apostles.

Even after Paul and Barnabas' report, converted Pharisees thought the new Gentile converts needed to change their culture and follow Mosaic law. Peter reminded them of his experience with Cornelius and how God gave the Spirit without them becoming Jews. His comments settled the discussion and Paul and Barnabas could share their stories.

They trusted that the Holy Spirit was guiding them into truth as Jesus had promised. This first church council was followed by many more through the centuries to discern difficult theological disputes and resolve them.

*Do I believe the Holy Spirit can lead a community of believers to wisdom?*

February 19

Acts 15:13-21 Essentials

James quoted from Amos and Isaiah to reinforce that both Jews and Gentiles were being called into the kingdom. He proposed that even though Gentiles need not become Jews they should follow some basic things: no idolatry, no sexual immorality, and respect for life in not eating blood.

This may seem contradictory to the idea that Gentiles need not follow the law and change cultures. But, as we recall, Jesus emphasized that the wisdom of the law is not negated, and in fact, deeper more heartfelt changes are required. Their perception of what the new believers would need to guard against in an immoral, idolatrous, and violent culture that did not value life were these points.

This delicate matter of what cultural practices can be maintained once people become Christians and what they need to discard is a living question whenever there are new believers. Each cultural group has to ask these questions and resolve them. Foreign missionaries can easily make mistakes in these areas since we all carry cultural baggage. We need to have great respect for how the Holy Spirit can lead people into the truths they need.

*Do I understand that the gospel is not culture-bound and there are legitimate variations in how Christianity is expressed?*

February 20

Acts 15:22-35 Problem solved

The apostles codified their decisions in a letter which was taken back to the believers in Antioch who received it with great joy. A great decision had been made that Christians do not also have to be Jewish, though they can be. The pattern of writing down the results of discussion set a precedent followed through the centuries.

We benefit from the wisdom accumulated through centuries on resolving theological conflicts, making theology practical, and the work of building consensus. Unfortunately our history is full of so many instances when all of that has failed, even to the point of violent warfare. As we struggle today with issues that divide us, we can look back at this wise process for some wisdom.

*Am I part of building consensus in conflict situations?*

February 21

Acts 15:36-41 Paul and Barnabas separate

When Jesus had predicted Peter's denial, he had said that when he repented he should strengthen and build up his brothers (Luke 22:32). It was this role that Judas and Silas played for the Antioch believers.

Paul consulted Barnabas about doing the same for those they had led to faith. Because they disagreed over whether to take John Mark again, they separated. Barnabas took John Mark to Cyprus where they had begun. Paul chose Silas (the same prophet who had been a delegate from Jerusalem?), and they they went to Syria and Asia.

We know Barnabas was a good man filled with the Spirit. We know John Mark helped both Peter and Paul, so we can make no negative assumptions about them. But from this point on, Luke focused on Paul's work even though all the apostles and many other new converts were spreading the news. Whether our ministry gets publicity (like Paul) or not (like Barnabas), the goal is obedience to our own calling.

*Am I eager to be obedient whether or not I get attention?*

February 22

Acts 16:1-10 Paul recruits Timothy and Luke

Jesus' method of leadership development included calling specific disciples to travel with him. Paul replicated this when he met Timothy, helped him claim the Jewish half of his heritage by being circumcised, and took him on the journey.

From the epistles we learn that Timothy became a right hand man, a dear son, and an important church leader. Luke does not explain how or when he joined the team, but by the time Paul had a vision of a call to go to Greece, Luke was there.

At the end of II Timothy we see who some of Paul's core disciples were: Crescens, Titus, Luke, Mark, Tychicus, Carpas, Priscilla, Aquila, Onesiphorus, Trophimus, Eubulus, Pudens, Linus, and Claudia. Many had gone out to do ministry in various locations. Timothy was asked to come and bring a coat, books and papers to Paul in prison. (II Timothy 4:10-22) We see in Paul a man who understood and imitated Jesus' model of building up leaders.

*Am I learning from a mentor and mentoring others?*

February 23

Acts 16:11-15. Paul meets Lydia

In Jesus' ministry there were women who gave financial support and who traveled with him. (Luke 8:13). He also had an intimate friendship with the siblings Mary, Martha and Lazarus, often staying at their home (John 12:1-3)

Now Paul and team met a group of women who gathered for prayer. Once again we have a Gentile, Lydia, a successful businesswoman, who is described as a "worshipper of God." She was fertile soil, ready to receive the seed of the word. She believed as did her household, and they were baptized.

Lydia opened her home to the four in Paul's group and this became the starting point of the Philippian church. Paul loved this church and described them as partners in spreading the good news from the moment they heard it.

*Do I depend on God's providence to lead me to the right people?*

February 24

Acts 16:16-40 Prison escape

An important part of Jesus' ministry was liberating people from demonic forces, and while previously mentioned, here we have an instance. Why Paul waited until he was exasperated to do it, it is hard to say. But the result was that Paul and Silas were beaten and put in prison.

Jesus had warned his followers they would be arrested, but he never mentioned how often he would get them out of jail. This the third instance in Acts. The first two involved angels (reminding us of Jesus mention that he could call on legions of them to help him but would not) and this involved an earthquake (reminding us of stories of his command over the natural world).

Paul and Silas and other prisoners did not escape, and the jailer and his family were converted as a result. The next morning, when told they could go free, Paul insisted on some respect for having been mistreated as Roman citizens.

This liberation story parallels our tough circumstances when Christ intervenes to help us, uses us to draw others, and allows us to require legitimate respect. As Paul and Silas prayed and sang in jail, we can do the same in our troubles.

*Do I endure suffering with hope and praise and delight in God's intervention?*

February 25

Acts 17:1-15 Persecution

Jesus presented himself as Messiah, King of the Jews announcing a kingdom for all people. In his lifetime it was perceived as a political threat and was part of the reason for his crucifixion. In Thessalonica Paul and Silas presented Jesus as Messiah to the synagogue. While some converted, others resisted the message and accused them of treason against Caesar. "They profess allegiance to another king, Jesus."

The leaders attacked Jason, who was hosting the team, and he and other believers had to post bail. Moving on, Paul and Silas preached in Berea where their listeners diligently checked up on their interpretation of scripture. But the Thessalonians came and caused trouble and Paul was taken to safety in Athens.

The message of Jesus' kingship challenged people in Paul's day, and still challenges us today. Do we really put him and his kingdom above all else, including current politicians of any stripe?

*Is Christ my king?*

February 26

Acts 17:16-34 Persuasive in Athens

Jesus limited his ministry largely to those who had the background of scripture, prophecy, and the expectation of Messiah. Even Greeks who sought him out had some background as he spoke of his coming death and resurrection (John 12:20-28)

Paul had a different audience, and he started debating philosophers. They were intelligent and curious unbelievers who loved to discuss the latest ideas. Paul tried to reach them by saying they honored an unknown God he could tell them about. This God was creator, is near each person, and even as one of their poets had said, is like our parent. Therefore, he cannot be an idol and we need to ignore those and learn about Jesus who was proven to represent God by rising from the dead.

Some laughed, some wanted more discussion, and some believed. Today that mix is likely to be the response we get. But creation and creator make good starting points for a dialogue.

*Am I willing to dialogue about faith and accept mixed reactions?*

February 27

Acts 18:1-17 Rejection from the Jews

In Corinth Paul was telling Jews, "the Messiah is Jesus". Remember that Messiah is the long-expected king, the Son of David, who announced the kingdom of God. But the Jews rejected his message, and he withdrew. He even moved from a Jewish home to a Gentile one. Jesus had warned they would be expelled from the synagogues (John 16:2), and here there was a mutual parting of the ways.

Paul needed to know what to do, and Jesus appeared in a vision and he was told not to be afraid, and to keep preaching because there were many who would believe. He was reassured he would be protected, doubtless good news after the many times he had been thrown out of town. It was presumably in this time of relative calm that he wrote his letter to Galatians and two to the church in Thessaloniki.

After a year and a half, the Jews thought they could get the new governor to do something to Paul. But Gallio was unimpressed, said it was their words and names and law and he would not deal with any of that.

*Have I experienced times of protection from opponents?*

February 28

Acts 18:18-28 Priscilla and Aquila

Paul left town and his first stop was the port of Ephesus. Priscilla and Aquila went with him, and went on to Ephesus. Paul continued to travel with Luke and perhaps others. We will hear about Timothy, but Silas apparently went on to ministry elsewhere.

Paul's time in Corinth had begun his relationship with this couple we, though we are not told when they became believers, were friends and co-workers with whom he lived for a time. They had left Rome sometime mid-century when Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from that City. In the epistles we learn they formed a house church in Ephesus, but later returned to Rome, presumably after Claudius' death.

Paul called them his co-workers and said they risked their lives for him. (Romans 16:4). Jesus expressed a high and honored view of marriage, and Priscilla and Aquila are a stellar example of Christian marriage. They shared a business, worked in ministry, were hospitable, were coached by Paul, and wisely coached young Apollos. They graciously corrected his theology privately, and supported him to move to Corinth. Just as Paul did, he was teaching that Jesus was Messiah, the promised king.

Priscilla and Aquila's names appear together always, but often Priscilla comes first, showing a very united and equal pair. For Christian marriages today, their model is a helpful and admirable example of commitment to ministry together.

*Do I see the possibilities in a marriage devoted to ministry?*

March 1

Acts 19:1-11 Preaching in Ephesus

Jesus had promised the Holy Spirit, but the Ephesians Paul met did not know about this gift. A dozen men were baptized in Jesus' name and received the Spirit. As Paul preached, he argued persuasively about the Kingdom of God. Jesus had announced the Kingdom, and Paul did the same. Jesus had announced himself as the Way, and this became a term for following Jesus. Jesus did miracles and expelled demons, and so did Paul, fulfilling Jesus' promise that his followers would have these powers.

The Ephesians became faithful followers with strong faith and love according to the beautiful letter Paul later wrote to them. These twelve men multiplied to many, just as Jesus' twelve disciples were changing their world. We too can become part of small change communities, and can share the Holy Spirit, kingdom of God, the Way, and help for the hurting.

At this point Paul probably wrote the first letter to the Corinthians, concerned about problems he was hearing about in that church.

*Are we part of small teams that are following "the Way?"*

March 2

Acts 19:12-20. Power convinces the people

A Jewish priest, Sceva, and his seven sons were casting out demons in Jesus' name and referring to Paul. Jesus had once said to leave a man alone who was doing this, since he could hardly criticize the one whose name he was using. In this case, the evil spirits themselves said they did not recognize them and any power over them, so attacked these men.

This caused people to honor Christ's name, and burn magic books. Paul felt that the Holy Spirit was telling him to move on and he wanted to go to Jerusalem and then Rome. This desire becomes the story of the rest of the book of Acts.

The combination of preaching and the miraculous had an enormous impact in transforming minds and hearts. That is today's reality as well and one reason that the charismatic movement has grown so quickly--the evidence of God's power at work today helps people believe. Rejecting unhealthy spiritual influences is part of this.

*Have I let go of ("burned") anything in my life that could be a spiritual hindrance?*

March 3

Acts 19:21-41 Pressure from the mob

Transformed people were threatening the business interests of those who made idols. Paul was persuading people that "handmade gods aren't gods at all." Instead, he presented Jesus as the true God. In response to the agitation of the businessmen, a riot ensued and Paul had to be persuaded not to go in and try to rescue his companions.

Idolatry, such an enormous theme in the Old Testament, was never mentioned in the gospels even though numerous pagan temples had been built in the land. Jesus was sent to the Jews and so ignored the idols they had learned to reject. But Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles and repeatedly confronted idolatry in his travels, and this was one of the most dramatic and explosive moments. The riot was finally quelled and Paul moved on.

For us, anything that is out of proportion in regard to our relationship with God can be considered an idol. In our techno age, it actually is easy for something manufactured to become a "handmade god.". But it is also easy for our work, romance, children, or our reputations to take over our lives in unhealthy ways that can be considered idolatrous.

*Am I willing to give up whatever has become idolatrous in my life?*

March 4

Acts 20:1-16 Paul's team

During his three months in Greece, Paul may have written to the Romans. Romans was written to a church he had never visited, but he had set a goal for himself of going there on his way to preach in Spain. In the letter to the Romans, Paul mentioned that he was staying at Gaius' house where a church met (Romans 16:23). He may be the same Gaius Paul baptized in Corinth (I Corinthians 1:14)

When he began to travel, Paul had a new team: Aristarchus and Gaius had been through the riot in Ephesus with him. Timothy we have met. Tychicus would later serve as Paul's messenger to carry a letter to Ephesus (Ephesians 6:21). Trophimus was incidentally the cause of Paul's arrest in Jerusalem because the people assumed Paul had taken this Ephesian Gentile into the Temple. (Acts 21:29) Once in Rome Paul mentioned having left him sick at Miletus (II Timothy 4:20). He had picked up Sopater from Berea, and mentioned him in the letter sent to Rome. Secundus was from Thessalonica. "Us" means that Luke was one of these nine travelers.

So many close relationships in Paul's life show us a tender hearted man behind the intense personality. Discovering yet another plot against Paul's life caused them to change their travel route. When they reached Troas, a young man fell three stories to his death as Paul preached, but fortunately was unhurt once Paul prayed for him. Paul was saying goodbye to all of these people and places and he preached all night.

Luke give more travel details than we need, perhaps based on a travel journal. But the goal of the travel was to arrive at Jerusalem for the Pentecost feast. Jesus had set his face for Jerusalem for Passover, and Paul was headed for similar suffering.

*Am I willing to build relationships with a spiritual purpose? Am I willing to travel with a spiritual purpose?*

March 5

Acts 20:17-38 Paul's farewell

Paul's touching farewell to the Ephesian elders reminds us of Jesus who gave a long farewell address to his disciples at the last supper. He had set his face resolutely for Jerusalem as Jesus did, and both knew that suffering awaited them there. He said he had preached the kingdom, Jesus' main message. Both warned against false teachers. Both advocated for and lived anti-materialistic lives.

Paul and the elders wept, embraced, and then walked to the ship. Our lives have the potential to impact others with what we do, how we teach, and our lifestyle. The genuine affection felt for Paul is something I admire and wish to emulate.

*Am I sharing my heart? Am I a warm person?*

#### PAUL IMPRISONED: Chapters 21-28

March 6

Acts 21:1-14 Prophesying danger

The gospel of Luke particularly focused on Jesus' intention to go to Jerusalem, knowing he would suffer and die. Surely that was in his mind as he wrote about Paul's determination to do the same.

Peter had reproached Jesus, saying surely he would not suffer and die, and Jesus rebuked him. When Paul was told not to go, including by a prophet saying the Spirit was advising this, he must have thought that his guidance from the Spirit was stronger.

Luke's travelogue details continue, and as they sailed from port to port, we can trace their progress on a map. When yet another prophet warned that there was suffering and arrest ahead, Paul could not be persuaded to change plans. His friends entrusted all to God's will.

*Am I committed to obedience, no matter what?*

March 7

Acts 21:15-26 Problem in Jerusalem

When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, he and his team went to see the apostles and report on their ministry. This issue of Christians following the Mosaic law was still a hot topic in Jerusalem, and the supposition was that Paul had taken on Gentile ways. Those in Jerusalem had found an accommodation on these matters and they encouraged Paul to accommodate as well. The leaders suggested he participate in a purification ceremony with four other men which would demonstrate that he still observed the law.

Paul agreed to this and they went to the temple, prepared to offer sacrifices. Within less than 15 years the temple would be destroyed and the sacrificial system would end. At this point the Christians in Jerusalem saw no contradiction between sacrifices and their reverence for Christ's sacrifice. Christ had identified himself as the sacrifice and knew that his actions would complete and fulfill all these details of the Mosaic law.

What they did not know is that the combination of someone whose ministry was to the Gentiles as had been prophesied at the time of his conversion, and the intense nationalism attached to the temple, would result in an explosion. The general public that did not accept that Jesus was Messiah felt very threatened by Paul.

*Do I understand how Jesus completed all the sacrificial imagery?*

March 8

Acts 21:27-40 Paul beaten

Just as Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem had resulted in his arrest, so also for Paul. There were significant differences, though. Jesus was arrested at Passover and his death fulfilled the prophetic meaning of that feast. Paul was arrested at Pentecost in a symbolic fulfillment of that feast.

Pentecost was a harvest festival, the moment the disciples received the Holy Spirit's power and spoke in the languages of visitors from all over. This feast was therefore beautifully symbolic that the kingdom was for all people, for the Gentiles as Paul preached.

But his commitment to the Gentiles is what got him arrested. Paul was accused of having taken his friend Trophimus, a Gentile from Ephesus, into the temple which provoked a mob to want to kill him. The Roman officer arrested him, assuming Paul was one of the current revolutionary leaders. After Paul identified himself, he asked to preach.

From this point on Paul spent most of his life as a prisoner. He believed this was his destiny and yet he wanted to use every possible opportunity to preach.

*Do I seek to use any limitations in my life for a positive end?*

March 9

Acts 22:1-23 Presenting testimony

At first Paul had the attention of the crowd as he told how he persecuted the followers of Jesus' Way, until his vision on the road to Damascus. What is new in this retelling is a vision of Jesus telling him to leave unresponsive Jerusalem. Paul protested and Jesus' response was that he

would send Paul to the Gentiles. That very word enraged the crowd to the point of wanting to kill him.

Jesus enraged the crowd by his claim to be Messiah, a claim they rejected. The rage against Paul was for preaching to Gentiles. Jesus insisted if they really knew their scriptures, they would recognize him as fulfilling prophecy. Paul could have made a similar argument. In his letter to the Romans, he had already written an analysis of quotes from Hosea, Joel, Isaiah and Psalms to make the point that God's intention was to bless all people. But somehow this angry crowd had missed this in their study of scripture. It is a warning of how blind we can be and how easily we can misinterpret scripture even today.

*Do I overreact if my interpretation of scripture is challenged in some way?*

March 10

Acts 22:24-30, 23:1-5 Injustice

Paul was taken to be whipped. Unlike Jesus who suffered scourging, Paul was able to avoid it by making his privileged Roman citizenship known. Then he was taken to the High Council on the next day. Jesus had been taken in the dead of night after his arrest. So in both these instances, Paul's situation was slightly better.

At the Council Paul's response elicited a slap on the mouth. Jesus also had been struck on the face in his encounter with the high priest. (John 18:19-24). Jesus' mildly responded "should you hit a man for telling the truth?" Paul's response was a feisty objection to the hypocrisy of a judge breaking the law. He apologized when told this was the high priest.

Though Paul's experience was similar to Jesus' passion, his suffering was less. Any suffering I have experienced does not come even close to Paul's. But we can all be grateful that Jesus bears suffering for us, and makes ours lighter.

*Have I experienced Jesus carrying my suffering?*

March 11

Acts 23:6-11 Pharisees vs. Sadducees

Paul knew he had a simple lever to divide the High Council. He had probably spent a lot of time in the arguments between the supernaturalists (Pharisees) and the naturalists (Sadducees). He declared himself a Pharisee on trial for belief in resurrection. That turned the firepower of argument into something that was familiar and heated, and the commander had to rescue him once again.

A vision of Christ reassured him he was on the right track. He had preached in Jerusalem, and the next goal was Rome. In the next chapters we will see the three year process of getting to Rome. Once there he would write seven more epistles in addition to the six he had already written. This imprisoned life did not stop his ministry; it amplified his voice for all time and all people.

*Do I stay sensitive to the Spirit regarding where my work can be most effective?*

March 12

Acts 23:12-35 Plot to kill Paul

The plot to kill Paul discovered by Paul's nephew was foiled. We are fully aware today of the group-think that religious fanatics can fall into that result in violent plots. Fortunately for Paul, his agenda of going to Rome was more important to God's purposes, and the journey began with 470 guards taking him the 75 miles to Caesarea. The local commander sent a memo that presented his own actions in the best possible light. Paul arrived safely.

We can ask for protection and receive it today. We may not need 470 soldiers on our side, but we can trust that if we are walking in God's purposes for us, reversals of fortune can be expected.

*Do I trust God's willingness to protect me?*

March 13

Acts 24:1-22 Before Felix

Paul demonstrated that a humble Christian can be assertive, tell the truth, defend self, and not accept the lies of others. Jesus had said "You must stand trial before governors and kings because you are my followers. This will be your opportunity to tell them about me--yes, to witness to the world." (Matthew 10:18). For the rest of the book of Acts, this was Paul's story.

The first governor was Felix, and Paul told him that he worshipped the Old Testament God, believed the Law and prophets, and believed in resurrection. He ended his account with another affirmation of the resurrection.

Felix was quite familiar with the Way of Jesus, and now he could hear from one of the leading teachers of that Way. Most of us live in contexts of religious freedom where any opportunity to speak to high officials comes without suffering or trial. We take any opportunity that comes to us.

*Can I share about Jesus in any context?*

March 14

Acts 24:22-27 Two year imprisonment

Felix kept Paul under confinement that allowed him to have visitors. He then brought his Jewish wife Drusilla to listen to Paul talk about faith in Jesus. Though Felix was convicted, he sent Paul away and would periodically call him back. This went on for two years until Felix's term ended. Out of people-pleasing, Paul stayed in prison.

Jesus did not have an extended imprisonment, but John the Baptist did. It appears he may have been in prison for two years, similar to this time for Paul. In that time he began to wonder if he had been right to point to Jesus as Messiah, and Jesus sent him reassurance. We are not told of any letters Paul wrote in this time, but during all of his imprisonments, he witnessed to his guards and visitors. This unjust and prolonged imprisonment reminds us of Jeremiah, and even of many political prisoners in our time. Felix and Paul's accusers may have thought they had silenced Paul, but we know his voice just became louder.

*Do I trust God's sovereignty through long waits in my life?*

March 15

Acts 25:1-22 Before Festus

Paul had yet another governor before whom he would testify, Festus. Once more there was a plot to kill him in a transfer to Jerusalem. Paul foiled the plot by appealing to Caesar. No one had a real case against him, but now he would go to Rome at state expense. Paul declared his innocence before Festus, and declared he did not want to be unjustly killed.

We recall that Pilate also knew that Jesus was innocent (Matthew 27: 24) but nevertheless turned him over to be killed. Paul was not killed, but his unjust imprisonment continued. He trusted that good would come from his suffering. With an emphasis today on God's desire for our prosperity, we may forget how much good can come from suffering, embraced for Jesus.

*Am I eager to see God turn my suffering to good ends?*

March 16

Acts 25:23-27 Prisoner without cause

Festus knew Paul did not deserve his fate, and so he tried to kick the problem up the political ladder to the King over him. Paul's next audience was to be with King Agrippa and his sister Berenice at Festus' request.

Agrippa was the last king in the line of Herod the Great, and was the son of the Herod Agrippa who died suddenly in Acts 12. His sister Bernice had several failed marriages in her past and

would later have an affair with the emperor, but at this point she lived in her brother's court. During the 66 AD Jewish revolt, Agrippa and Berenice at first defended the Jews. But they turned against them when their palaces were burned down. Berenice's affair was with Titus, who besieged Jerusalem and destroyed it in 70 AD.

Berenice moved to Rome five years later and resumed the relationship and moved into the palace. Agrippa was made an army commander. For both, this was 15 years since their encounter with Paul. Unpopular with the people, Titus gave into pressure to send Berenice away, and her story after that is unknown.

To these powerful and influential people Paul had a chance to share his story. They arrived with great pomp, accompanied by military officers, leading men from the city, and Governor Festus. What an opportunity.

*Do I see God's providence in platforms I have been given?*

March 17

Acts 26:1-18 Before Agrippa

As Paul mounted his defense and gave his testimony to illustrious listeners, he emphasized that his offense was believing Jesus rose from the dead. He emphasized his own past of killing believers in Jesus. When telling of his encounter on the Damascus road, he gave a longer account of what Jesus said to him: you are appointed as my witness, you are to tell the world about this, I will protect you, and I am sending you to the Gentiles.

It was this personal vision of Jesus that he repeatedly returned to in his letters as the validation of his call as an apostle. He had seen Jesus with his own eyes and knew he had been entrusted with a personal task. The result of Paul's message would be that people would turn from darkness to light, from Satan to God, would be forgiven, and would be given a place with God's people. All of these blessings are for us.

In addition to these blessings, we who have believed also have the opportunity to serve in a very specific way. Discovering our call, or our vocation, or our sense of what the next step in obedience might be gives us the same meaningful life that Paul had.

*Do I know my calling?*

March 18

Acts 26:19-32 Problem of appeal

Paul concluded his story by saying he obeyed the vision of Jesus, preached widely, and was arrested for this. Having killed other followers of the Way himself, he surely knew how deep and fanatical the murderous rage was of his accusers.

He affirmed once more that he taught nothing except what the prophets and Moses had taught and predicted. They said Messiah would suffer, rise from the dead and be a light to Jews and Gentiles alike. Though Paul's opponents accepted none of this and rejected the idea that God cared about Gentiles, there are actually plenty of proof texts on the subject in the Old Testament. This is a strong and consistent message in Jesus and Paul's teachings. They saw a unity between Old Testament and New, a consistent message about Jesus, the Messiah, that was for the whole world.

Festus told Paul he was crazy, and Agrippa asked if he was about to become a Christian. The event ended and all agreed Paul could have been set free if he hadn't appealed to Caesar. They were not won over, but seeds were planted. Not all respond to us either.

*Am I faithful in sharing Jesus, no matter the response?*

March 19

Acts 27:1-12 Prisoners on the ship

Once more Luke lets his presence be known by saying "we set sail.". One presumes he had been a faithful friend visiting Paul in prison. Aristarchus was also with them. We remember that he was at the riot in Ephesus, and had traveled with the group of nine to Jerusalem. From a letter Paul would write to the Colossians we learn that the two were in prison (Colossians 4:10).

Luke made a point of how kind the Roman captain was in allowing a visit to friends who provided help. Once more we have the benefit of Luke's travel diary which allows us to trace their programs on a modern map. It was not all smooth sailing, and Paul warned that the delays had put them in potential danger, and he was right.

The three travelers not only shared this journey, they continued life together. When Paul wrote Philemon he mentioned his co-workers Mark and Demas, and Aristarchus and Luke. They were equals in the work and true friends who had shared an adventurous life together.

*Do I work with others as equal co-workers to spread the gospel?*

March 20

Acts 27:13-26 Promise of salvation

Luke's account of their shipwreck reads like an adventure short story. Their problems started with an abrupt change of wind that sent them out to sea. We recall a similar wind in a similar place in the story of Jonah. In both stories they began throwing cargo overboard. But here there was no disobedient prophet to throw overboard, but rather an obedient one who brought a reassuring message.

When Jesus' disciples were worried and anxious about a storm, he calmed it, to their amazement. Paul did not have the privilege of walking on earth with Jesus, but he had repeated visions. This time the vision was of an angel who told him not to be afraid, all would be saved, and his destiny was to stand trial before Caesar.

The unexpected winds in our lives may frighten us, but we can hear the same reassuring message, "Don't be afraid." God is with us. He may calm the storm, he may let us be blown before the winds, or he may allow a shipwreck, but we can be confident he is there and has good purposes.

*Do I put my fears in God's hands?*

March 21

Acts 27:27-44 Peril at sea

In this case, there was no immediate calming of the storm, rather they were driven by the wind for two weeks. When they realized they were near land, they anchored and sailors wanted to abandon ship. At Paul's urging, the soldiers prevented that.

Paul's kindness, compassion and leadership showed as he organized a meal for all 276 people on board. We are reminded of Jesus' similar meals provided in difficult circumstances for 5000 or 4000. Their attempts to reach shore failed, and the soldiers wanted to kill the prisoners. The respect of the commanding officer for Paul saved all their lives as the angel had predicted.

In difficult circumstances we have an opportunity to lead with compassion like Paul. It does not matter if something is not our responsibility or we have no official position. In Christ we have been given the skills and responsibilities of servant leaders. Preparing meals can be a loving, caring part of the work when people are in need or under stress. Neither Jesus nor Paul were above this tangible expression of love, and we do well to be like them.

*Do I lead with compassion?*

March 22

Acts 28:1-10 People of Malta

Luke mentioned the kindness of the people on the island, once more appreciating the kindness of others when they were in need. A poisonous snake attacked Paul and the people assumed it was God's judgment. Instead, it was a fulfillment of Jesus' promise for his followers: "They will be able to handle snakes with safety." (Mark 16:18). They then decided he must be a god.

That, and many healings through Paul impressed the people. We are not told that Publius, the chief official whose father was healed, became a believer. However, tradition says he was converted, became a bishop for 31 years, and was martyred in Athens. The grateful people honored them and were generous with provisions.

This was a providential encounter, and Paul used it, as always, for ministry. Here we see that Jesus' additional promise to his followers was fulfilled: "They will be able to place their hands on the sick and heal them." (Mark 16:18)

*Do I stay alert for providential opportunities for ministry?*

March 23

Acts 28:11-16 Arrival at Rome

When Paul and friends finally arrived at Rome they were welcomed by the believers. When Paul had previously written a letter to Roman Christians, he had said he wanted to see them en route to Spain. (Romans 15:24). Now he was confined and would preach in Rome.

In the last chapter of Romans written about four years before, he had sent greetings to 26 people he knew who had moved there. One hopes he was able to reconnect with all of them. There was the beloved couple Priscilla and Aquila who led a house church. There were Andronicus and Julia with whom he had been in prison. There was Rufus and his mother, who Paul claimed as a mother as well. And many more. The image that comes through is of a deeply affectionate man who had learned to love and be loved.

He was able to rent his own place and have a private guard. Prophecy had been fulfilled and he was now at the center of the empire. He was ready to start preaching.

*Have I learned to build strong friendships with other believers?*

March 24

Acts 28:17-29 Preaching under guard

When Paul arrived in Rome he went to the Jewish leaders. He assumed his opponents would have sent criticisms of him and his teachings, but they had not. He taught them that the Messiah had arrived, and he demonstrated from Moses and the prophets that Jesus was the

fulfillment of all the prophecies and promises. Jesus had announced his arrival as the coming of God's kingdom and Paul did the same.

Some believed, some did not, and they argued. As for all of Paul's ministry, many Jewish believers did not accept the message that Jesus fulfilled their hopes. He quoted the same scripture from Isaiah about hardened hearts that Jesus had quoted. (Matthew 13:14,15). He said the Gentiles could be saved and would accept the message.

The passage quoted by Jesus and Paul encourages me when I feel I must be sharing Jesus poorly if people are slow to believe. It introduces realism to our task.

*Do I share with others and accept that some will respond and some will not?*

March 25

Acts 28:30-31 Christ, Our Message

Acts has shown us all ways that Christ was preached in the early years, and so serves as a model for our sharing. The fundamental truth of the book is that Christ is our message.

Paul lived in his own house for two years with a guard, and boldly proclaimed the Kingdom of God. Jesus had announced his kingdom, and Paul was now at the center of worldly power, waiting to go before the most powerful ruler of his time.

During these two years he wrote Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians and Philippians. Tradition is that he was released in 62 AD, had four more years of missionary work as a free man during which he wrote the letters to Timothy and Titus. In 66 AD the Jewish revolt began, and Emperor Nero perhaps imprisoned and killed Paul.

Paul had faithfully proclaimed Jesus' message: Jesus is Messiah, he is proved to be so by Old Testament scriptures, and by raising from the dead, he brings a new kingdom, and forgiveness of sins. Both of them told us that the message is for every person in the world.

*Is Jesus the center of my communication?*