



EMPOWERED

The Acts of the Holy Spirit



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LETTER FROM KURT

The book of Acts, in my opinion, is the most indispensable book of the New Testament. We have four Gospel accounts, 13 letters from Paul, and many letters from other writers which are all equally important. But Acts stands alone as a unique book unlike no other in our New Testament. It describes what the early church looks like, and prescribes what all churches should aspire to.

Acts is more than just a historical documentary...it is a personal narrative telling the story of God's followers. This narrative includes many scenes, acts (no pun intended), characters, and plot lines which lead us back to God. There is one person who ties everything together and is woven throughout the narrative as the main character with the leading role..and it may not be who you think it is.

Luke wrote the book of Acts, but he rarely mentions himself. Peter and John were the pillars of the early church, but they take a back seat in this story. Over half of the narrative follows the life and journey of the Apostle Paul, but he is still not the most important person in the book.

The main character in the book of Acts is the person of the Holy Spirit! You see his presence, power, and influence throughout every story and plot twist. Before Jesus left, he promised his followers something better was coming...the Holy Spirit (John 16:7).

We learn more about who the Holy Spirit is and how he operates in the book of Acts than any other book in the Bible. In this book, we see the power of the Holy Spirit and how he empowered followers of Jesus to accomplish the will of God (Acts 1:8).

It is my hope and prayer throughout this LIFE Group season, you not only learn about Jesus and his first followers...but you receive, follow and EMPOWERED by the Holy Spirit!

May God bless,

Kurt Charlton



Lead Minister

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE:

The purpose of this guide is to help you dive deeper into the book of Acts and the works of the Holy Spirit.

SERMON NOTES:

Bring this workbook to church each Sunday. As you listen to the sermon, make a note when you hear something that surprises you, intrigues you, bothers you, challenges you, or encourages you. Use this as a starting point for your group discussion.

ACTS OVERVIEW:

Each week, we will provide extra insight into the background of the text as you begin your own study. These notes are meant to help the scriptures come alive for us. They will add a depth of meaning and help us see the continuity of the central themes throughout the book of Acts.

CONNECT QUESTIONS:

These questions will help you and your group members become more comfortable with talking and sharing with each other. Not only will you learn more about one another, the questions will help to steer the discussion in the direction of the topic.

DIGGING IN:

These questions are the “meat” of the discussion and will point back to the sermon each week. Feel free to read and answer the questions before your group meets. They will also help you dig deeper into the Scriptures during your group discussions.

CHANGE QUESTIONS:

Conviction leads people to significant actions. At the end of Jesus’ most famous sermon, he says if you do not put his words into practice, then you are a fool (Matthew 7:24-27). Life transformation is the ultimate goal of a follower of Christ. This happens through personal reflection and a genuine response to what you have heard from God. Feel free to answer the questions out loud when your leader reads them or you can quietly reflect and write a response in your workbook. This is the time to go deep and make it personal!

WRAP UP:

This section is a summary of that week's study.

CARE FOR ONE ANOTHER:

Please focus this time on your own personal praises and requests instead of listing all of the bad things that happened to someone you know. We challenge you to get “deep” with one another relationally, which means becoming a little bit vulnerable as you are honest with one-another.

LEADER LEARNING:

This information may help you in preparing for the material you will be leading and anticipate some of the questions the group may ask. This section will not appear in the student’s workbook.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN THE BOOK OF ACTS:

INTRODUCTION

Acts is written by Luke, the physician, who is the only Gentile author of the New Testament. Luke covertly includes himself into the narrative a few times by saying we/us. The Gospel of Luke is episode one; Acts is episode two. The movement of the church in Acts follows the general flow of Jesus’ instructions in Acts 1:8; Jerusalem (Acts 1:1-8:1a); Judea/Samaria (Acts 8:1b-12:25); Ends of the world (Acts 13-28).

MAJOR THEMES

- HOLY SPIRIT (and his power)
Holy Spirit is mentioned 56 times, which is more per chapter than any other book of the Bible. He is responsible for every major turning point in the narrative. (1:2; 1:8; 2:1-4; 4:28-31; 5:32; 8:15-17; 10:44-46; 11:15; 13:2; 15:28; 16:6; 19:4-6; 20:22)
- PERSECUTION (and its results)
Early Christians suffered intense persecution, but Luke always records the positive attitudes and results. (4:3-4; 4:23-24; 5:40-42; 8:1-4; 11:19-21; 12:1-19; 14:1-7; 14:8-22; 16:25-34; 18:1-8; 21:11)
- BAPTISM (and its importance)
Baptism was clearly commanded as a response to faith in Jesus (2:38) and was the common practice for all new believers. (2:37-41; 8:5-13; 8:36-38; 9:10-12; 9:17-19; 10:47-48; 16:13-15; 16:27-34; 18:5-8; 19:1-5; 22:14-17)
- THE CHURCH (and its ups/downs)
Luke gives church summary statements like a narrator who wants to inform the readers of what they missed in-between each scene. (2:42-27; 4:32-37; 5:12-16; 5:42; 6:7; 9:31; 12: 24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:19-20)
- PRAYER (and its effects)
Prayer is intentionally scattered throughout the entire narrative. It is almost like a supporting character beside the Holy Spirit. (1:14; 1:21; 4:31; 6:6; 9:40; 10:1-9; 12:12; 13:1-3; 14:23; 16:25; 20:36; 21:5; 22:17; 28:8)

DESCRIPTIVE VS. PRESCRIPTIVE

Be careful not to read the book of Acts as a prescription for how every single church should operate today. There are times when Luke is merely describing the events as they unfold. It is up to us to interpret and apply what these descriptions mean for us today. One way to do this is to seek the underlying principle that is described, and then turn that into a principle for life.

Should we cast lots or draw names out of a hat when choosing leaders for our church? Should we meet together every single day of the week? Should we sell all of our possessions and give our money to the poor? Should we speak in tongues when we accept the Holy Spirit? These are examples of descriptions not prescriptions for everyone, everywhere.

An example of turning a description into a principle can be found in Acts 2:42. Luke says the first converts devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and to fellowship. The principle for our lives today is: we us in we should be devoted to God’s Word and to living in community with other Christ followers. Acts 2:46 says they met daily in the temple courts and in homes. The principle for us is we should regularly gather corporately and privately with other believers.



*And they were
all filled with
the Holy Spirit
and spoke the
word of God boldly.*

Acts 4:31



Week 18 - Changed Perception

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WEEK 18 - CHANGED PERCEPTION

TEXT

Acts 10:1-48 NIV

¹ At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. ² He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. ³ One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!"

⁴ Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked.

The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. ⁵ Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. ⁶ He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea."

⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. ⁸ He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

⁹ About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. ¹³ Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

¹⁴ "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

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

¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

¹⁷ While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. ¹⁸ They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

¹⁹ While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. ²⁰ So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

²¹ Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?"

²² The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." ²³ Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went along. ²⁴ The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. ²⁶ But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself."

²⁷ Talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. ²⁸ He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?"

³⁰ Cornelius answered: "Four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me ³¹ and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. ³² Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.' ³³ So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. ³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷ You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached-- ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

³⁹ "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹ He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen-- by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." ⁴⁸ So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

ACTS OVERVIEW

WHO WAS CORNELIUS?

Excerpts from *Acts*, by Mark Moore, pg. 189-190:

- Centurion - A career soldier in the Roman army and leader of at least 100 men. Centurions are always spoken well of in the New Testament (Luke 7:1-10; Luke 23:47; Acts 10; Acts 22; Acts 27). They would have been excellent leaders, effective communicators, and well trusted.
- Italian Regiment - This was probably a special designation for those who would protect the Emperor, possibly as bodyguards. Similar to the Secret Service today.
- He and all his family - He was also a leader in his home, especially with a spiritual leader.
- Devout and God-fearing - “God fearers” were Gentiles who had come to honor God, but could not bring themselves to commit to circumcision or the other required ceremonial rituals of the Jews.
- Gave generously to those in need, gifts to the poor - Giving to the poor, regular prayer, and fasting were the 3 key tenets of Jewish piety. See Matthew 6:1-8.
- Prayed to God regularly, three in the afternoon - Devout Jews would pray at regular times throughout the day. It was not commanded, but it was customary for this to happen in the morning, midday, and evening. Many would follow three hour blocks consisting of sunrise, 9:00am, noon, 3:00pm, and sundown.

CLEAN AND UNCLEAR ANIMALS

Excerpts from *Acts*, by Mark Moore, pg. 189-190:

Peter saw many different animals consisting of three main categories: land mammals, reptiles/creepy crawlies, and birds. These categories come from Genesis 6:20. God clearly and authoritatively commanded Peter to kill and eat these creatures. Peter objected because he had remained “kosher” his entire life (See Leviticus 11:4-7, 13-19, and 29-30).

To obey this command would have been more than just trying something weird at a buffet. It would have been a personal, religious, legal, and cultural faux-paux. It would cause someone to become ceremonially unclean and become ostracized from family and friends (See Acts 11:1-18). Dietary laws, observing the Sabbath, and circumcision were the key markers of Judaism. Removing these would place Peter’s identity as a Jew in jeopardy.

GENTILE PENTECOST

This conversion story is sometimes referred to as the “Gentile Pentecost.” Its importance cannot be overstated. Luke sets the stage for this story to be the climax and turning point of his narrative. Just as Pentecost inaugurated the arrival of the Holy Spirit on Judaism, this event serves as the commencement of the Holy Spirit being poured out upon the Gentile world. This conversion is told three times in Acts, as well as Saul’s conversion. This is a Jewish style of storytelling which places extreme emphasis on the event.

NOTE: Some may argue that the Ethiopian eunuch or the some of the Samaritans were the first Gentile converts. The Ethiopian (Acts 8:26-40) could have been Jewish. In the first century, there were more than 1,000,000 Jews living in Africa. The Samaritans (Acts 8:4-25) had a shared ancestry with the Jews. They were children of Abraham, but possibly not children of Jacob/Israel. They had intermarried with the descendants of Ishmael, Esau, and the Canaanites. The Jewish religion had tiers of followers: Jewish birthright; Proselyte or Jewish Convert; and God-fearing Gentiles.

REFLECTING

- **Think back to the message on Sunday. What stood out to you? What did you discover that was a new thought for you?**

OPENING QUESTIONS

1. **What places have you visited, or would like to visit, which have different cultural practices from what you are used to?**
2. **What are some weird or exotic foods you have eaten?**
3. **What are some weird or exotic foods you would never eat?**

DIGGING IN

1. **Read Acts 10:1-8. What descriptions are given about who Cornelius was? Why do you think Luke includes these?**

2. When have you had to navigate cultural differences which made you feel a little uncomfortable?

3. How does Acts 10:15 have multiple meanings? Why would this statement be considered a climax in this story and the entire book of Acts?

4. Read Acts 10:17-33. Did Peter immediately understand the vision? How did he come to realize the complete truth God was sharing with him?

5. Examine Acts 10:34-48. How do you think Cornelius would have felt to hear Peter's words in vs. 34-35?

6. What do we learn about Jesus vision for all nations in this passage?

7. Why do you think the Holy Spirit arrived in such a dramatic way in this story? What response did everyone have to this?

CHANGE

1. Why is it easy to think Christianity is exclusive to people who are just like me?

2. What beliefs or traditions do I need to let go of in order to lead other people to follow Jesus?

3. Where is God in the process of working on my understanding or practice?

WRAP UP

There is much to take away from this passage. This story is vital for the Gentiles all over the world. Without God leading Peter to include the Gentiles in faith, the Jewish believers would not have willing done so. For millennium, the Jews had lived apart from the world. They did not consider themselves as world influencers, but as a remnant of people who were preserving God's law. God's revelation to Peter pushed the limits of his faith even though he had been a follower of Jesus for nearly a decade at this point. God is at work revealing his truth to the world. God is not confined to our abilities or narrow-mindedness. He can just show up and alter the course of his people. Even if we are mature in our faith, there are still things we need to learn as we grow.

CARE

- **How can we pray for each other?**
- **How can we pray for our church?**

ADDITIONAL NOTES



WEEK 19 - CHANGED TRADITIONS

TEXT

Acts 11:1-18 NIV

Peter Explains His Actions

¹ The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him ³ and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

⁴ Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: ⁵ “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. ⁶ I looked into it and saw fourfooted animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. ⁷ Then I heard a voice telling me, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’

⁸ “I replied, ‘Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’

⁹ “The voice spoke from heaven a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ ¹⁰ This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.

¹¹ “Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. ¹² The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³ He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. ¹⁴ He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.’

¹⁵ “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. ¹⁶ Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷ So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?”

¹⁸ When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

ACTS OVERVIEW

RACIAL/CULTURAL TENSION

As a country, America has made great advances in racial equality over the last 60 years, yet racial tension is still a growing problem in our society. Racial prejudice is nothing new; it was even present in the early days of the church. We will see in this study how believers had to face their own prejudices when God worked among those they despised. We will come to understand that our God is a God who celebrates diversity, and His salvation is for everyone. (See Galatians 3:28; Acts 17:26; John 7:24; Romans 10:12; Revelation 7:9)

IT IS AGAINST OUR LAW (10:28)

In Acts 10:28, Peter says “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile.” This is interesting because there are no such commands in the Old Testament. Instead, Peter was referring to the oral tradition of the religious leaders which was ingrained into the hearts and minds of the Jewish culture.

“The word Peter used (*athemitos*) does not mean ‘illegal’ but ‘contrary to custom’ – it was taboo.” (Mark Moore, *Acts*, pg. 196.) So, when word got around that Peter had entered the home of Cornelius and had eaten with him, the Jewish Christian leaders were furious. Peter made a major cultural and religious faux-paux, and now he was receiving criticism because of it.

DID GOD DISCRIMINATE?

The short answer is no. But at times the Old Testament may seem to imply that God had some prejudice against the Gentiles. For example, in the book of Deuteronomy God gives the Israelites the 10 commandments. Then he explains more restrictions He has for His holy nation. In Deuteronomy 7:3, God says “Do not intermarry with them,” speaking of the other nations. This seems prejudicial, but the prohibition had nothing to do with race or skin color. It had everything to do with religious purity and pagan idol worship.

God explains the reason he does not allow intermarriage with pagans. “For they will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods” (Deuteronomy 7:4). God’s prohibition seems racist on the surface, but it is instead a protection so that his people do not turn to idol worship (both individually and overall as a nation). See 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 about being unequally yoked.

REFLECTING

- Think back to the message on Sunday. What stood out to you? What did you discover that was a new thought for you?

OPENING QUESTIONS:

1. What are some cultural or social rules you have experienced which were different from how you grew up?
2. When have you been really excited to tell a story, but people kept focusing on the wrong details?
3. When has your opinion of a person changed for the better once you got to know him or her?

DIGGING IN:

1. Look at Acts 11:1-3. Why did the Apostles and believers assume it was wrong for Peter to eat with the Gentiles? (See Acts 10:28)
2. Look up the following scriptures. What are some examples of Jesus breaking the cultural and religious rules of the Jewish leaders?
 - a. Mark 3:2
 - b. Matthew 8:2-3
 - c. John 4:7-9
 - d. Luke 5:29-32
 - e. Luke 5:33-39

3. Review Acts 11:4-17. As Peter defends his actions, what details of his story did he share? Why do you think he includes these details?

4. Read Acts 11:18. Why do you think the Christians who had such a big problem with the Gentiles were so quickly convinced by Peter's story?

5. What are the specific words that describe the reactions of the believers? (vs. 18)

6. Where do you see issues of division in our churches, culture, nation, and world?

7. Read Galatians 3:28 and Ephesians 2:11-16. How can the message of Jesus bridge these divides?

CHANGE

(These questions are for personal application. They can be answered aloud if someone wants to share, but do not force it. Ask each question and give time for personal reflection.)

- 1. When have I been guilty of thinking someone was not worthy of my time, energy, or association?**
- 2. How can I build bridges with people from different backgrounds or cultures?**
- 3. What customs or unwritten rules do I need to overcome in order to accept those who are different from me?**

WRAP UP

When traditions stand in the way of the teachings of Christ, those traditions need to change. Traditions that divide us need to change. God sent Jesus to this world to serve the whole world, not just the Jews. His Commission to us does not end until we reached the ends of the earth. That included all of the earth. We too need to look outside our zone of comfort to accept those who are racially, economically, politically, and geographically different than ourselves. But the goal of our reaching is not inclusiveness. The goal of our reaching is transformation. We are called to transform all life to the priority of Christ.

CARE

- **How can we pray for each other?**
- **How can we pray for our church?**

WEEK 20 - CHANGED STRATEGY

TEXT

Acts 11:19-30

The Church in Antioch

¹⁹ Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. ²⁰ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

²² News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. ²⁴ He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

²⁵ Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

²⁷ During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) ²⁹ The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. ³⁰ This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

ACTS OVERVIEW

DIASPORA (11:19)

The word translated as “scattered” in Acts 11:19 is the same Greek word (*diaspora*) used in Acts 8:1 and 8:4. There are the only three times this word appears in the New Testament, and all three occurrences refer to this same event. In the well known Greek translation of the Old Testament (Septuagint), Jews used this same word (*diaspora*) to describe the Old Testament scattering of the Jews. It is no accident Luke uses this word to describe the scattering of the New Testament church to the Gentiles. He is connecting the Old Testament persecution and scattering of the Jews into the Gentile territories with the New Testament Christians, God's new chosen nation (see 1 Peter 2:9).

DECENTRALIZED LEADERSHIP (11:27-30)

The final details in chapter 11 show the subtle shift that is happening in the early Christian leadership structure. The Christians in Judea, the heart of the Jewish world, have been the head of the Christian church since its conception. Luke describes that they needed financial help from the Christians in Antioch, the heart of the Gentile world. This is perhaps some foreshadowing of what is to come throughout the rest of the book of Acts.

The leadership structure and the focus of the Holy Spirit's work continues to spread from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8; 8:1). Here we see the healthy and successful church in Antioch passing along brotherly support to the Christians in Judea/Jerusalem. This not only shows us a model of generosity, but it shows us that the Holy Spirit is growing other churches throughout the world in numbers and in health.

HAND OF GOD (11:21, 30)

Sometimes Bible translations help us to better understand Scripture in our own language. Sometimes they miss the mark, and we miss nuances the author intended us to see. Acts 11:30 may be one of the latter instances. Compare the following translations:

- “This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.” (NIV)
- “And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.” [ESV]

The NIV is technically correct in this translation, but unfortunately it leaves out the word “hand” which was in the original Greek. It is apparent that Luke is intentionally connecting the following verses in this section:

- “And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.” (Acts 11:21 ESV)
- “And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.” (Acts 11:30 ESV)

Furthermore, look at the very next verse (Acts 12:1) in the ESV translation: King Herod “laid violent hands” on the Christians. Luke continues his intentional literary connection with the word “hand.” Another interesting note is that when Luke says “hand of the Lord” (Acts 11:21), he is clearly talking about Jesus since he just said “Lord Jesus” in vs. 20. This shows us that Luke was equating the hand of Jesus with the hand of God himself! (The word “hand” is used 46 times in the book of Acts!)

REFLECTING

- **Think back to the message on Sunday. What stood out to you? What did you discover that was a new thought for you?**

OPENING QUESTIONS:

1. What are some examples of people who have adapted and overcome obstacles?
2. What is the most difficult thing you have had to overcome?

DIGGING IN:

1. Read Acts 11:19-21. Why did persecution break out as a result of Stephen's death? (Look back at Acts 8:1-4)
2. How did persecution lead to the spread of the Gospel? What lessons can we learn from this today?
3. What does it take to "remain true to the Lord with all their heart?" (Acts 11:23)

4. Examine Acts 11:23-26. How do we see Barnabas making an impact on the early church?
5. Read Acts 11:27-30. Why do you think Luke includes these details in his narrative? Why would we care that Antioch Christians are helping Christians in Judea/Jerusalem?
6. Acts 11:21 and 11:24 show numerical growth of the church in Antioch. What kind of growth does 11:27-30 show?
7. What is the significance of the new name Christian?

CHANGE

1. What can I learn from how the early church responded to persecution and opposition?

2. How can I help our church grow numerically? How can I help our church grow spiritually?

3. How can I be the hand of the Lord to those in need around me this week?

WRAP UP

This and many other scriptures after this indicate that the strategy for church growth is happening more outside of the Jewish communities than inside the Jewish communities. There were many more Gentiles in the world than there were Jews, and the belief in Jesus was beginning to be popular among Gentile populations. It will not be long before this church in Antioch sees the opportunity to send Paul and Barnabas on the very first missionary journey. While Christianity has been growing because Christians are being scattered through the Roman world, we will soon see a shift to an aggressive missionary mindset to send the gospel to the end of the earth.

CARE

- How can we pray for each other?
- How can we pray for our church?

EMPOWERED

The Acts of the Holy Spirit

Week 21 - Changed Hope

WEEK 21 - CHANGED HOPE

TEXT

Acts 12:1-24

Peter's Miraculous Escape From Prison

¹ It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. ² He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. ³ When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

⁶ The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. ⁷ Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

⁸ Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. ⁹ Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

¹¹ Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen."

¹² When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. ¹³ Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

¹⁵ "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

¹⁶ But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. ¹⁷ Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

¹⁸ In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. ¹⁹ After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

Herod's Death

Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there. ²⁰ He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. After securing the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply.

²¹ On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. ²² They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." ²³ Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.

²⁴ But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.

Acts Overview

KING HEROD

King Herod was a generic name used by many of the Jewish kings. It is sometimes difficult to keep these wicked rulers straight. King Agrippa I is who we see in Acts 12.

Herod the Great (ruled 37-4 B.C)

- Tried to kill Jesus in the famous Christmas narrative (Matthew 2:1-20).

Herod Archelaus (ruled 4 B.C.-A.D. 6)

- Son of Herod the Great who ruled Judea and Samaria after his father died. He also wanted Jesus dead, so Joseph, Mary, and Jesus fled from Egypt to Nazareth (Matthew 2:21-23). He was replaced by the Roman procurators, which is why Pontius Pilate was in charge in Jerusalem during Jesus' crucifixion.

Herod Antipas (ruled 4 B.C.-A.D. 39)

- Another Son of Herod the Great who ruled in Galilee and Perea. Jesus called him "the Fox" (Luke 13:32). He divorced his first wife and married Herodias, the wife of his brother, who was yet another Herod. He killed John the Baptist after John spoke out against his sinful marriage (Mark 6:14-29).

Herod Agrippa I (ruled A.D. 37-44, 41-44 in Judea)

- THIS is the King Herod from Acts 12. He was the grandson of Herod the Great and nephew of Herodias, Herod Antipas' wife. He killed James and then arrested Peter since it made him popular with the Jewish populace.

Herod Agrippa II (ruled A.D. 50s-70s)

- Last of the Herodian dynasty. He interviewed Paul, along with the Roman procurator Festus, when Paul was in prison in Caesarea (Acts 25-26).

GUARDIAN ANGELS (12:15)

Do we have guardian angels? Probably not. Since the Bible does not clearly teach this theology, we should be careful not to promote it. We certainly see the presence and power of angels throughout the Old and New Testaments, but there is no clear Scripture that indicates that individuals have their own angel assigned to them.

Acts 12:15 shows a common Jewish belief that each person had their own angel assigned to them. Many believed that after a person died their doppelganger angel would wander around for a few days before departing. Luke's reference to this known Jewish belief is not confirmation that it was true.

We certainly have angels who stand guard on God's behalf and carry out his missions on earth, but the idea that each person has a specific angel assigned to him or her is just not found in the Bible. If this were true, there are many times where God could have clearly taught it. Instead, Scripture gives the impression that angels are specifically assigned for specific tasks, not personally assigned to specific people. (Psalm 91:11 - many angels for one person. Daniel 3:28 - one angel for three people. Hebrews 1:14 - multiple angels for multiple people. Matthew 18:10 - children have angels, but they remain in heaven not earth.)

TWO MEN NAMED JAMES

At the beginning of this passage we read that the Apostle James was put to death with a sword. This James is the brother of John the Apostle, one of the original 12 disciples of Jesus. He was ministering in the city of Jerusalem, as were the rest of the apostles at this time.

Verse seventeen mentions another James. When asked that the story of Peter's release be told to others, Peter specifically wants James to know. While there was another James in the group of the 12 apostles (sometimes referred to as James the Lesser), we believe this to be James, the brother of Jesus, also one of the leaders of the early church in Jerusalem. James had a prominent role in the believers and wrote the book of James in our New Testament.

REFLECTING

- **Think back to the message on Sunday. What stood out to you? What did you discover that was a new thought for you?**

OPENING QUESTIONS:

1. **Who is the most surprising person to ever show up at your door?**
2. **How do you typically greet people, like solicitors, who show up unannounced?**
3. **How common is it that someone escapes from prison?**

DIGGING IN:

1. **Read Acts 12:1-5. What similarities do you see between this story and Jesus' story?**

2. Why would Peter have been given so much prison security? (See also Acts 5:17-19)

3. Examine Acts 12:6-11. What stands out to you about the details of Peter's escape?

4. Read John 16:3 and 1 Peter 4:12-14. Should Christians be surprised by trouble or persecution? What does God promise to us during persecution?

5. How does vs. 5 correspond with vs. 15? If they were praying for Peter, why do you think they were so shocked to see him? (Also refer to vs. 2)

6. Look at Acts 12:18-24. Why do you think Luke includes what happened to Herod?

7. What events happened in the story to restore hope that God was with them to an increasingly persecuted church?

CHANGE

1. Does my prayer life reflect a God who is powerful?

2. When have I been surprised by what God did in someone's life?

3. What are some big miracles I am praying for right now?

CARE

- How can we pray for each other?
- How can we pray for our church?

WRAP UP

The early church is nowhere near seeing its darkest hours of persecution, but in Jerusalem this was as bad as it had become so far. James, the apostle, was executed for his faith. Ten short words describe his death. His execution was not after some significant event, or some miraculous healing, or some great confrontation with the Sanhedrin. They had simply arrested him because they could, and Herod had him killed. As the persecution of the church increases, God shows that he is still with them. He does not always rescue, but He always rewards perseverance. The reward is not always given in this life, but definitely in the life to come. God gives us hope even in our darkest hours.

