

The Dots Connected is a fun journey of seeing how the teachings of the Old Testament find their completion in the New Testament. This is seeing the dots connected. This group of devotions complete the earthly ministry of Jesus culminating with His ascension. There He departs from His followers giving them departing instructions. The instructions included lingering in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit. The event on the Day of Pentecost resulted in the birth of the church and the beginning of the spread of the gospel to Jerusalem, Judea and the rest of the world. These devotions close with the conversion of Paul on the Damascus Road and the gospel beginning to go to the gentiles. Enjoy this amazing journey that opens the door to the reaching of all the people groups of the world with the gospel.

WEEK 53 DOUBTING THOMAS ----- Chris Watson

It has been said, “We all have our doubts.” We doubt if the meteorologist will get it right, we doubt if someone will hold up their end of a bargain, we often doubt things will work out the way we would like them to, and, like Thomas, we may have doubts concerning faith issues. The issue is not about our doubts themselves, but what we do with those doubts. Do we dwell on them or learn and grow from them? Do we take them to the Lord? Thomas, a Christ follower, had doubts that after His crucifixion Jesus was, in fact, alive. In this week’s study, we will see those doubts went away when He saw Jesus face to face.

Day 1

Read Luke 24:13-35

“The two men walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus were discouraged disciples who had no reason to be discouraged. They had heard the reports of the women that the tomb was empty and that Jesus was alive, but they did not believe them. They had hoped that Jesus would redeem Israel, but their hopes had been shattered. We get the impression that these men were discouraged and disappointed because God did not do what they wanted Him to do. They saw the glory of the kingdom, but they failed to see the suffering.”¹

How much more evidence did these two need? Witnesses had seen the empty tomb, angels had announced Jesus was alive, and other witnesses had seen Him alive and heard Him speak. The proof was there, yet, these two failed to believe or put any weight on what Jesus had said prior to His death or on what the prophets had written about the Messiah. They saw the glory, but not the suffering. They saw the crown, but not the cross.

Jesus later opened their eyes and they realized Whose presence they were in, though they had failed to understand it earlier. God’s Word is 100% true. We can count on it, live by it, trust it, and let it guide us. However, we are not to take mere bits and pieces of His Word, but the whole counsel of Scripture. When we take the whole counsel of Scripture, we can then, through God’s leading, see what

¹ Be Courageous, Warren Wiersbe

God has done and is doing (at least, to an extent). However, if we focus only on a portion of the truth, as these two disciples did, we may miss the whole boat. Of course, God is the One who truly opens our eyes and He often uses His Word to do so. Treasure God's Word, ingest the Truth and instruction it gives, and consider all of Scripture. When we do this, God allows us to see the rest of the story.

Day 2

Read John 20:19-23

What must it have been like to be in that room when Jesus entered? The disciples were hiding for fear of the Jews. Remember, the Jews and religious leaders were the ones who put Jesus to death, though they should have been the ones bowing down and worshipping Him. As the disciples hid in the room, Jesus entered and His first word was “Shalom” which means peace. In essence, He was saying, “Don’t be afraid; it is I.”

What happened next must have been quite an experience. Jesus showed them His hands and His side, just in case they had any remaining doubts that He was truly Jesus. I imagine this was a lot for the disciples to take in, but there was more to come. Jesus said, “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” **John 20:21** There, in that closed room, Jesus commissioned His disciples to go out into the world. He then breathed on them, giving them the Holy Spirit. Jesus would soon ascend to Heaven, but He left the Holy Spirit with them. If He had not done so, they would have remained ordinary men. With God’s forgiveness and the Holy Spirit inside of them, they had everything they needed to carry out Jesus’ commission.

Jesus then proceeded to say, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” **John 20:23** This isn’t saying that the disciples had the authority per se to forgive sins, but rather it goes along with the end of **Verse 21** in which Jesus told them, “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” Jesus was preparing His disciples for what was to come, including His impending departure. He was giving them His Spirit (just as He has done for us) and the authority (just as He has done for us) to go into all the world and preach the gospel. He didn’t ask them, solicit their input, or seek to know in any way whether or not this met with their approval; He simply sent them because they were Christ followers and they desired to share the greatest news ever.

Thanks be to God that He has also given us His Spirit and commissioned us to go into the world, which includes our homes, workplaces, schools, ball fields, and perhaps across the ocean to preach the gospel and to share with others that Jesus can forgive sins so all who believe can have peace with God. Just as the disciples were commissioned to do this, we are commissioned, too. Have you trusted Jesus? If so, you have His Spirit and His command to go and tell. Can you think of someone with whom you can share the gospel this week? How will you use today to be on mission in your home, at your workplace, or at school? This year, what mission trip might you be a part of so you can tell the world about Jesus and what He has done?

Day 3

Read John 20:24-29

We often refer to Thomas as doubting Thomas. “Jesus did not rebuke him for his doubts. He rebuked him for unbelief: ‘be not faithless, but believing.’ Doubt is often an intellectual problem; we want to believe, but faith is overwhelmed by problems and questions. Unbelief is a moral problem; we simply will not believe.” Warren Wiersbe wrote. Doubt says, “I cannot believe,” whereas unbelief says, “I will not believe unless you give me evidence or meet my demands.” Therefore, Thomas had more of a problem with unbelief than with doubt.

Thankfully, Jesus met Thomas where he was and gave him the evidence he needed. Upon seeing Jesus’ hands and side, Thomas cried out, “My Lord and my God,” **John 20:28** as he believed. Jesus went on to say that those who believe without seeing, those who don’t require evidence to believe, are blessed. This included many others who heard, but didn’t see Jesus after His resurrection and it also includes us. We have believed without physically seeing Him. I would argue that those of us who know and are walking with Jesus daily have ample evidence of His presence in our relationship with Him. The evidence we have is just as good as seeing Him in person, at least until we can see Him in heaven. If you have doubts, take them to the Lord. If you have unbelief, take that to the Lord as well. Ask God to work on your heart. As believers, we have and will face doubts that creep up from time to time. The important thing is what do we do with those doubts. Do we ponder and worry over them again and again or do we take them to the Lord and lay them at His feet?

Let’s go back to the beginning of today’s passage. Thomas wasn’t with the other disciples when Jesus first appeared. We don’t know for certain why Thomas was not there. This should be a great reminder for us to be where we are supposed to be, particularly when it comes to worshipping with other believers. We may never know whether God may have us there for someone else, whether we may need to be there to hear what someone else has to say, or for God to speak especially to us. When we do things on our own and become

careless with our spiritual walk, we have the potential to hurt others and ourselves. Just ask Thomas. He endured a week of unbelief and fear, most likely because he simply wasn't with the other disciples, as he should have been.

This week, take any unbelief or doubts to the Lord. May we be where we are supposed to be, even when we don't feel like it. We never know what we miss if we are not.

Day 4

Read John 20:30-31

We know we do not have all the details of Jesus' life and miracles. If we did, we would have many more books. What we do have is exactly what God intended. We have enough to know who Jesus is, and we have enough to know the Truth.

We have the Word of God, as Verse 31 says, so we may believe in Jesus and in doing so have life in His name. In John and the other Gospels, we see Jesus' works, His walk, and His words. As C.S. Lewis proposed, we have a trilemma, a choice between three options. Jesus was a liar, a lunatic (crazy), or Lord. The more we read of God's Word and the more work He does in our lives, we know more certainly He truly is Lord; He is all we have ever needed or will ever need.

The word life is used 36 times in John's Gospel. Jesus offers sinners eternal and abundant life if they place their faith in Him. As we read God's Word, we can know more of Jesus and grow in our belief. In a recent article by Dr. Al Mohler, entitled [The Scandal of Biblical Illiteracy: It's Our Problem](#), he shares that we as believers often don't truly know the Word of God simply because we are not reading it. You are reading God's Word as you are doing today's devotion and for this I am thankful. We need to study God's Word and understand more fully what it says. In his article, Mohler says, "60% of Christians can't name five of the ten commandments, 82% believe the phrase "God helps those who help themselves" is a Bible verse, and 12% believe Joan of Arc was Noah's wife."

This helps us see how much we need to absorb God's Word. We need to study it day in and day out, learn it, grow in it, and live it out. Again, John said these things are written so, "... you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name." **Verse 51** The more we read and study and teach others God's Word, the more the Word is proclaimed. God's Word can never be overly read, overly studied or overly proclaimed! Are you truly soaking up God's Word?

Day 5

Read Psalm 80

Psalm 80 is a prayer for Israel's restoration. The nation of Israel had turned her back on God and was seeking after other things, including false gods. In this psalm, Asaph cried out to God to do what only He can do. Three times Asaph asked God to shine His face on His people. We know that the Son of Man, (Verse 17) Jesus, is the light of the world. This was also a foreshadowing of what God would do to save Israel and anyone else who would call on the name of the Lord.

We are reminded that Israel is God's chosen people and as Gentiles we have been grafted in. Jesus has made the gospel for all people, but from the beginning of time, His chosen people were the people of Israel. We need to pray for Israel. We need to pray for their (the Jews) eyes to be opened and for them to see the Messiah for Who He really is. Many Jews have not been told or allowed to hear the rest of the story and when they do hear it, they are amazed. Take some time to watch this video link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1XSBR047MMk> and see how Jews are really beginning to connect God with Jesus/The Messiah.

Jesus is the only One who can restore Israel. Jesus is the only One who can save and restore us. When we call on God's name, we are saved and we know even in our wandering, God loves us and disciplines us as His children. He wants the best for us. Take some time to thank the Lord for saving you. If you have walked away, repent and return to Him. Take some time to pray for those who have walked away or who do not yet know Him.

WEEK 54 ANOTHER MIRACULOUS CATCH----- -----Dennis Watson

This week, we will look at several significant events, the most significant being the restoration of Peter. Jesus had been crucified, had been raised from the dead, and had appeared to His disciples and to others. He was now showing Himself, once again, to a group of His disciples. It was more than just an appearance. It was an appearance with a particular purpose. The purpose was to restore Peter and prepare him for what would happen on the upcoming day of Pentecost after Jesus' ascension into heaven.

Day 1

Read John 21:1-4

Fishing again? Really? Could it be that Peter was so quickly returning to his former employment, or was it just that fishing was what he knew and the stress pushed him to a point of needing a break? At least he was still in Galilee. Jesus appeared to His disciples after He rose from the dead and told them He would meet them in Galilee. The seven disciples who were fishermen returned to fishing, with Peter leading the way. Peter was the strongest leader of the group. So when he went fishing, the others followed his lead. Always keep in mind that other people are watching you. They will follow you. Where are you leading?

Peter led the way on the fishing trip, but they fished all night and caught nothing, as had happened on another occasion. Jesus stood on the beach as they returned, but they did not recognize Him. There are at least two reasons they did not recognize Him. First of all, they were not looking for Him, they were busy fishing. It seemed natural for them to give up their new work of fishing for men and return to their former fishing occupation. The second reason they did not recognize Him was because His appearance had probably changed. He had been beaten beyond recognition and His beard plucked out.

There have been times in my life when it seemed nothing was going right and everything was going wrong. I was not looking for Jesus and if He had appeared before me, I probably would not have

recognized Him either. Several times in the Bible we read that if a person seeks the Lord, he will find Him, if he seeks Him with all his heart. (Deuteronomy 4:29 and Jeremiah 29:13). For whatever reason, the seven disciples who were fishermen were not looking for Jesus. Instead, it seems they had buried themselves in their work, but even that was not going as planned.

Their whole lives had been turned upside down. Jesus had been crucified and buried. They knew He had risen from the dead, but everything was not adding up for them. They were not able to connect the dots. I am thankful we know the outcome and have the promise of the ultimate outcome. When things seem to be going wrong, remember that God is still in control and is working out His plan. Let Him finish.

Day 2

Read John 21:5-14

This was a case of been there, done that for the disciples. They did not recognize the man on the shore, but He gave them very familiar instructions that they surely should have recognized from just two years earlier. He called out to them, asking literally, “You didn’t catch any fish did you?” (Verse 5) I don’t think He was inquiring about how the fishing was going. It was more like He was making the statement they had not caught anything. They told Him, “No.” Jesus instructed them, as before, to cast the net again, this time on the right side of the boat, and, as before, there was an abundance of fish caught - 153, to be exact! This time, the net did not tear as in the previous account and they made it to shore with all the fish. John recognized Jesus and said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" **(Verse 7b)** Peter, with his characteristic impulsive style, jumped in the water and swam to shore. The others followed in the boat with the fish.

Consider a few things. First, they did not recognize Jesus because they were not looking for or expecting Him. It seems as though they should have been looking out for Him because He had told them He would meet them in Galilee. We should always be expecting Jesus. We should be looking for Him. Secondly, apart from Jesus, we cannot do anything. Jesus told us this in John 15:5. We must abide in Him, and by His power we will be able to accomplish things. He supplies and we must do our part of obedience. Someone told me the other day that God supplies the manna, but we have to go get it. Thirdly, Jesus told them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. Would this really make a difference? Jesus often gives us instructions which make no sense to us. However, we are to obey Him and leave the outcome to Him. Too often, followers of Jesus miss out on seeing Him at work because we think what He tells us to do makes no sense. As the old hymn says, “Trust and obey.” Just do what He says!

This obedience is an ongoing, eager willingness to obey. This is not a begrudging obedience like a child who obeys because she has to, but an obedience that comes out of trust in God and a desire to

see His will and His best carried out. This is a willing and expectant obedience. This eagerness entails wanting to know what to do from the Word of God so we might experience His best.

Be eager to see Jesus, to hear Him, and to obey.

Day 3

Read John 21:15-23

It must have been surreal for Peter as he went through this experience. I wonder about his feelings and thoughts about what had happened on that night when around another fire Peter had denied knowing Jesus. Now, here he was in another moment. This time, around the fire, the resurrected Jesus began a conversation with Peter in which He would fully restore him. The scene was designed to awaken Peter's conscience and open his eyes. The catch of fish reminded him of his call to leave his nets and follow Jesus. The fire would have reminded him of his denial. Being at the Sea of Galilee should have reminded him of many other experiences like the feeding of the 5,000 and his walking on water toward Jesus. The stage was set for restoring him to his calling.

Peter had denied Jesus three times. Jesus even told Peter at the last Passover meal He shared with them that Peter would deny Him, but after he had been restored Peter would "...strengthen your brethren." **Luke 22:32** The time of restoration had come. Jesus patiently asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Peter affirmed his love for Jesus each time. Every time, Jesus gave the instruction for Peter to *feed my sheep*. Each time the wording was slightly different, but each time the goal was the same—for Peter to affirm his love and be assured he had been restored to his place of service. Peter had failed Jesus with his denials, but in answer to Jesus' prayer, Peter's faith had not failed.

Peter, like all people, was sinful and subject to failure. It is true of all of us. We will let people down—ourselves, our family, leaders, and the Lord, but He is faithful and, although others may give up on us, He never will. He wants us to succeed and be about the work to which He has called us.

Have you failed Him recently? His desire is to restore you and get you back on track. Tell Him of your love for Him. Return to your first love and get back on track.

Day 4

Read John 21:24-25

Jesus very graciously restored Peter and prepared him for his coming leadership role which we find recorded in the book of Acts. Jesus told Peter that he would also die by crucifixion. Peter then asked Jesus about John because he wanted to know what would happen to him. Jesus told Peter that was not his business. Peter was to get about following and doing what he had been called to do. This same problem plagues Jesus' followers today. Many people get bogged down looking around to see what is happening with other people. In doing so, we lose our focus. We may need to be reminded of what Jesus asked Peter, "...what is that to you?" (**Verse 22**) Let's focus on what He has called and commissioned us to do.

John closed his account of the gospel of Jesus Christ by confirming the reliability of his witness. John uses the words witness and testify forty-seven times in his gospel. John had witnessed these events himself and wrote them for us. He tells us in **John 21:13**, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God."

He tells us he could have included much more, but he had written what the Holy Spirit told him to write. Often in preaching, there is so much more that could be said, but I seek to say only what the Spirit leads me to say and no more. John said that if everything about Jesus and His ministry were written, the world could not hold all the books. It must have been difficult trying to figure out what to put in. What a relief to have the Holy Spirit directing the project.

The gospel of John ends with the account of Jesus, Peter, and John. These two men were transformed by Jesus. They were ready to walk right into the future which would be recounted in the book of Acts. Jesus is still transforming lives today. He has done this for you and for me that we too, might walk into the next adventure of sharing the gospel with a world in need.

Day 5

Read Isaiah 32:1-4

We have been on this journey now off and on for 8 years. We have been connecting the dots through the Old Testament. In the New Testament, we see the dots connected, but there is another time of anticipating the dots connected as we look forward to the end time events described in both the Old and New Testaments. Today's passage in Isaiah fans the flame of that anticipation. To begin, take a look at one of my favorite passages from the book of Revelation. "Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!" **Revelation 11:15**

Today's passage anticipates this. In Isaiah 32:1, we read "a king," while Isaiah 33:17 refers to "the king." A few verses later in Isaiah 33:22, we read "our king." This progression is intentional. Jesus is a King. Ultimately He will be the King. This is pictured in Revelation 11:15. Jesus will come and reign in perfect righteousness. His people will know and understand. His people will be safe and secure. Don't forget the progression in Isaiah 32 and 33. Jesus is not just a king or the King; He must be acknowledged as our King.

Is Jesus your King? He is a king. He is the King. He ultimately will be the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! Most importantly, He is our King. The kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord!

WEEK 55 THE GREAT COMMISSION---- Chris Watson

My dad, Dennis Watson, has often said if all God wanted to do was save us, He would have done it and immediately taken us to be with Him. God left us here for a purpose. In our readings this week, we will see a large part of our purpose is to go into all the world and make disciples, not just converts. Going into the whole world includes crossing the street as well as crossing the ocean. As you read this week's devotions, ask this question, "How is God making disciples through me?"

Day 1

Read Matthew 28:16-17

These eleven men had been with Jesus for almost His entire ministry. They had walked and talked with Him, watched Him heal many, seen Him feed thousands, and a few of them were even with Him at the Transfiguration. In **Verse 17**, "When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted." We know one of those doubting was Thomas, but others also doubted. After years spent with Jesus, hearing His teaching and seeing His work, some still doubted even while they worshiped Him.

Is this not what happens today? Many people who are strong in their faith face doubts. Again, these men had been among the chosen twelve and, yet, some of them doubted. I have doubted God before, have you? I have doubted whether God knew what He was doing and I have doubted if God was really in control. I have doubted if God would be on time and I have doubted whether God even knew what was going on. Deep down, I knew that He did, but I have still struggled with these thoughts at times.

The disciples wanted to fully believe too, yet, they doubted. The important thing here is where do you take your doubt? Do you seek to have it answered by others or by God? When you doubt, do you search the internet or do you search the Scriptures? Do you ever go back and remember a time when God was faithful, even though you may have doubted His faithfulness at that particular time?

Remember the man who had the son with the evil spirit? He truly believed Jesus could heal his son. Everything else had failed; Jesus was his only hope. He believed. He said so himself, but he followed it up with, “Help my unbelief.” **Mark 9:24** Maybe this needs to be our prayer today: “God, I trust You. I believe You. I know You are in control, but in these moments where doubt, sometimes from the enemy, creeps in, please help my unbelief.”

Maybe you can agree with me and say a prayer like this. “God, I know You are faithful. You have been faithful in Scripture and faithful in my life. In fact, I can think of many times where You were faithful and directed or answered me at just the right time. God, as I continue my week, help me to fully believe and follow You. If I begin to doubt or waver in my trust and belief in You, please help my unbelief.”

Day 2

Read Matthew 28:18-20

The word authority is synonymous with power. We understand from Verse 18 that Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth. All of Matthew and the Gospels confirm this. There was authority in Jesus' teaching and He demonstrated His authority in the healing of many. He confirmed His authority as He forgave sins and He displayed His authority over the enemy and death. In His words at the end of Matthew, He delegated this authority to His disciples. It was God's authority, not theirs, but He was passing it on to them because the task He was giving them could not be done on their own.

Notice, in Verse 19, Jesus didn't say, "Go and make converts." He said, "Go and make disciples." This meant they were to go and make followers of Jesus Christ. Again, we know God does the work, but we are often the channel He chooses to use for that work. We are to make disciples of our families, those on the other side of the world, and everywhere in between.

With this being said, how are you making disciples? Who are you teaching, mentoring, and who are you sharing the Gospel with? For the most part, making disciples doesn't happen inadvertently or by chance, but rather by intention and out of love for Jesus. How are you discipling your spouse, your kids, your grandkids, neighbors, and those around the world? How are you leading them to Jesus? Jesus makes disciples, but He uses us in the process.

As you work through this morning's devotion, answer these questions:

- Who am I currently discipling?
- Who would God have me to disciple?
- Who is discipling or mentoring me? If there is no one doing this with you, pray that God would give you someone.
- Logistically, how can I begin discipling others?

Day 3

Read Luke 24:46-49

It has been said that meekness is power under control. Jesus shared with His disciples it was necessary for Him to suffer, die, and to rise from the grave in three days. It was necessary so many could be saved by the Gospel. The gospel story is to be preached so all people may come to repentance and faith in Jesus.

Read Verses 48 and 49 again. Jesus called the disciples His witnesses. A witness is one who sincerely tells what he/she has seen, heard, or experienced (Acts 4:20). Jesus shared with the disciples that they would share the good news of Jesus Christ with the world beginning in Jerusalem.

Notice what He said in Verse 49. He told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they had received power from the Holy Spirit. The disciples would not be witnesses on their own or under their own power, but would go and do great work under the power of the Holy Spirit. “Witnessing is not something that we do for the Lord; it is something that He does through us, if we are filled with the Holy Spirit. There is a great difference between a ‘sales talk’ and a Spirit-empowered witness. People do not come to Christ at the end of an argument,” said Vance Havner. “Simon Peter came to Jesus because Andrew went after him with a testimony. We go forth in the authority of His name, in the power of His spirit, heralding His gospel of His grace.”²

On their own, the disciples could not do anything. They could not convert people; they could not make disciples, heal, or do other great things on their own. They needed Jesus in the form of the Holy Spirit. The salvation of people is not dependent on us or on our great skill or mastery of words, but rather dependent on what the Holy Spirit can do and how the Holy Spirit might want to use us.

Are you depending on your own power these days? Are you trying to make things happen on your own? Depend on God, pray to Him, and watch Him work. Then, if He gives you specific instruction, go. If not, pray and seek Him even more.

² Be Courageous, Warren Wiersbe

Day 4

Read Genesis 18:17-19

The Great Commission began when God promised Abraham that he would be a great blessing to all nations. Long before Jesus or Abraham were born, God knew He would send Jesus to die on the cross for every nation. Jesus was in Abraham's lineage. Abraham became a blessing to Israel and to the entire world as he was the far off great grandfather of Jesus, the Savior of the world.

God's plan to save us from our sins was not Plan B because Plan A was wrong. He knew we would sin and choose to disobey Him. Jesus' life, crucifixion, and resurrection was not an afterthought. God knows everything and this was in His plans from the beginning. When He blessed Abraham, this was setting the stage for Israel and for Jesus, the Messiah, to come and die on the cross for the sins of the world.

When Jesus died on the cross, He died for all the sins in the past and for all the sins in the future. He died for the sins of Moses, Elijah, Paul, Peter, me, you, and anyone who came before or who comes after us. Thankfully, Jesus' offer of salvation is to any and all who would receive it. It is for Jews, Muslims, Gentiles, the white, the black, children, adults, or anyone who will call on the name of the Lord.

Take some time today and thank God that He sent His Son Jesus to pay for our sins. Thank God for your salvation and what He has been and is doing in your life right now.

Day 5

Read Micah 5:4-5

Hundreds of years before Jesus' birth, Micah wrote about an elaborate and miraculous plan of the coming Messiah. Notice the beginning of **Verse 4**, "And He shall stand and feed His flock in the strength of the Lord." God provides for us both physically and spiritually. He feeds us and guides us. Read Psalm 23:

The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.

He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters.
He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness
For His name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;
For You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

The Lord is a good God and He gives us what we need, not necessarily what we want. As we know, needs and wants can sometimes be very different. Note, the end of **Verse 4** in today's reading, "... and they shall abide." How are we fed spiritually? By abiding in Him. When I think of the word abide, I get a picture of what we do to get ready to send out a letter. After writing the letter, we fold it up and put it inside the envelope. The letter is abiding in the envelope. It is surrounded by the envelope, covered by the envelope; wherever the envelope goes, so does the letter. We should be like this picture of abiding, being in Jesus all the time.

WEEK 56 THE ASCENSION-----Dennis Watson

The book of Acts is the account of the huge transition from the life of Jesus on earth to the spread of the gospel message of Jesus throughout the earth. The small band of followers had grown to 120. They had experienced the ups and downs of faith that all believers experience. Jesus had prepared them and was now about to empower them for the task of taking His message to the world. The followers had to wait for the promised Holy Spirit to come and when He came, the world was changed forever. More importantly, the eternal destiny of billions has been changed! Dig in this week as the gospel message explodes onto the world scene.

Day 1

Read Acts 1:1-5

Get ready, get set...go! For three years the disciples had been with Jesus. They had seen miraculous things and seen Jesus lead and challenge them. He had been rejected, even by His own. They watched as He was mocked and crucified. After He was raised from the dead, they saw Him on several occasions. They heard His departing words to take the message of the gospel to the whole world and make disciples. He was with the people for forty days after His resurrection. He had gotten His followers as ready as they could be. He told them to wait in Jerusalem until He sent His Holy Spirit to empower them for the task He had given—to go to the world and make disciples. They were ready, but not yet set. The setting was to wait for the power. Ten days later, after Jesus ascended, the Holy Spirit came. They had been readied, now they were set. The book of Acts is the go part. They sputtered a bit, but the church was off to a booming start.

Luke had written his first volume to a man named Theophilus and then he wrote a follow up volume to tell him what took place after Jesus was crucified and resurrected. In volume two, also known as Acts, Luke began where the four gospels ended—with the resurrection. Probably one of the best known events of all of history is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He demonstrated that He was really alive. He ate with His disciples. He showed Himself, even His scars, to them. He continued to teach them and work miracles in their presence.

The resurrection of Jesus is the cornerstone of all the biblical historical events. Now that He had resurrected and ascended back to the Father's side in heaven, He was going to send the Holy Spirit to inhabit and empower His followers, enabling them to complete the task of seeking and saving the lost. When Jesus gives us a task, He gives the means to accomplish that task. In this case, the means was His Holy Spirit. They waited in obedience. Now, as Paul Harvey would say, we see "the rest of the story."

We are blessed to be the recipients of the work of waiting and surrendering on the part of that little band of followers. Let us be equally obedient so future generations will likewise be blessed by our waiting and surrendering.

Day 2

Read Acts 1:6-8

Luke recorded the disciples had gathered with Jesus and asked Him a question before He ascended to heaven. The question is ageless and unchanging—“When?” When will You restore the kingdom? This was the question about the summit of Jesus’ ministry. They wanted to know whether He would now restore the kingdom of Israel. They wanted the political upheaval which would defeat Roman rule and exalt Israel’s rule and kingdom. They were guilty of small thinking. Like us, they wanted Jesus to fix their little corner of the world. Many times, for purely selfish reasons, I have wanted Jesus to come and take the church out of the world and establish His kingdom. This is small-minded thinking. Jesus came for something much larger and far-reaching than that. He gave them a short answer which said, in my own words, “That is not for you to know. but soon you will be given power to get with the task of being my witnesses to the whole world.” He was seeking to lead them beyond small-minded, selfish thinking to others-thinking and kingdom focus.

I have to confess, I am often guilty of small-minded, selfish thinking. I want Jesus to come and get me out of this crazy world. I want Him to come and establish His eternal, righteous reign. In thinking this way, excuse my language, it is as if we are saying, “To hell with everyone else, come take care of me.” The longing is there. I long for His appearing. However, we must all remember that God is patient, “Not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.” **2 Peter 3:9**

Jesus shaped a vision in the minds of His disciples. A vision of the whole world, starting right where they were in Jerusalem, becoming disciples of Jesus. He had to transform their small-minded thinking into a vision far beyond themselves and their own little piece of real estate.

This is what we need. We need a vision of all people having an opportunity to come to know Jesus personally and to become His

disciple-followers. Jesus wanted His disciples to grasp the fact that a disciple of His was a disciple-maker.

Think about it—you are, as His disciple, a disciple-maker.

Day 3

Read Acts 1:9-11

What must that have been like? Jesus was speaking to His disciples, instructing them to wait in Jerusalem for Him to send the Holy Spirit to equip, enable and empower them for the task He had given them. Suddenly, He was hoisted away, in the literal wording. It was the word for hoisting a sail on a boat. They watched as He was suddenly hoisted away and a cloud took Him. That had to have been an amazing experience. They must have had mixed feelings. It was certainly a special moment, but He was gone. The past three years must have flashed through their minds as they stood gazing up into heaven. Yet, it was necessary for Him to leave, because in leaving, He had told them He would send the Helper. This Helper was the Holy Spirit.

"Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you." **John 16:7**

He was not just randomly leaving them, He was leaving them for a purpose. He had been with them for three years and now it was time to send His Spirit to be with them to give them what they needed for the mission. We also know that Jesus is in heaven as our High Priest (Hebrews 4:14-16). He is interceding for us (Romans 8:34). He had not abandoned them. He was departing for a higher purpose.

They were perhaps ready. They were preparing to get set. There were two angels which appeared to them as they watched Jesus being taken up and away from them. The angels had a message for them that was part of their preparation to go and get about the mission. Their message was to stop gazing into heaven. They told them just as Jesus was taken into heaven, He would return the same way.

Are you anticipating and expecting His return? We know He will return the same way He left, in a cloud. We are not sure if this refers to His coming for the church or His final coming at the end of the age. Regardless, Jesus is coming again. He could come at

any moment; even before you finish reading this sentence. I do long for His appearing in His time.

"Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day--and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing."

2 Timothy 4:8

Do you long for His appearing?

Day 4

Read Acts 1:12-14

It was the Sabbath when the disciples returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. Since it was the Sabbath, they were allowed to travel less than a mile in distance, so it was a short trip. Jerusalem was crowded with people coming for the celebration of Pentecost. The people were staying in or around Jerusalem. Jesus had given them His plan—stay in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit comes and then you will be empowered and equipped to be witnesses in the whole world. It was time to move forward. The events of the past were in the past. There had been Peter's failure and Judas' betrayal and death. Jesus' brothers had not believed He was the Messiah, but after the resurrection they believed. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was there along with other women and the eleven remaining disciples.

Oftentimes, we get stuck in the past due to hurt or a failure and it does not seem possible to move forward. Jesus had taught and prepared His disciples for the next phase of His ministry in the world. There is, for all of us, a need to move forward. In order to do this, we must abstain from clinging to the past—the failures, successes, hurt, accomplishments, and disappointments. Now is the time to move forward. When is the now in which we are to move forward? Every day! This group had a task. It was a task they could not do alone, so the Lord sent His Spirit to empower and equip them.

The next step for them was to pray and wait. They gathered together in an upstairs room. It was the eleven remaining disciples, the women, Jesus' mother Mary, and His brothers. There were 120 people gathered, united in prayer, and waiting for the promise He had given—His Holy Spirit. They probably felt powerless, but were anticipating the coming power which must have contributed to the unity and humility of their prayers. They were waiting on Him to send the power. I heard someone say they were waiting on Him to empower. Now, He is waiting on us to obey in the mission.

Let's pray that we will get about the task He has prepared and equipped us for. May He not be waiting on us to obey!

Day 5

Read Zechariah 12:10-11

The Lord has dealt very graciously with you and me. Are you aware of that? I am assuming, if you are reading this, at some point in your life, the Holy Spirit of God convicted you of your sin and convinced you that you needed a Savior. However, these passages today are dealing with God's chosen people, the Jews. He is speaking of the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. In addition to us, the Jews will be the objects of the outpouring of the divine "... Spirit of grace and supplication." (**Verse 10**) The Lord God through His grace will enable them to look on Him, "... whom they pierced." (**Verse 10**) They will be broken and convicted of their sin and will mourn and grieve. In other words, they will recognize Jesus as the Messiah of God, their Savior, and many will turn to Him.

In his gospel, John wrote of the soldiers piercing Jesus' side. The passage in John 19:37 quotes Zechariah 12:10, connecting the event of the soldiers piercing Jesus' side to the prophecy of Zechariah. Although the people crucified Jesus, God poured out His grace on them. This outpouring makes people aware of who Jesus is and their need for Him, leading to a change of heart and a crying out for mercy.

For all who come to believe in the reality of Jesus, they mourn His crucifixion and the brutal treatment He received. We do mourn, but we also rejoice as we turn to God and cry out for mercy which is how all people who come to Him arrive at salvation. The gospel is all about the good news that Jesus was crucified, pierced, and put to death to bring forgiveness of sin.

Jesus was put on the cross because of sin—the sin of all people. We were not there when He was crucified, but He died because of our sin too, not just for the sins of the ones who were there and did the actual deed in the historical setting. It was as though we were there participating as well.

Give thanks to the Lord God for the salvation He offers to all through the death of Jesus Christ.

WEEK 57 PENTECOST -----Chris Watson

We are helpless and hopeless without the Spirit of God; we are absolutely dependent on the Lord to move. Many believers and churches try to carry out God's work on their own and often wonder why they feel like they are spinning their wheels. Only the Spirit can do the work in our lives and in the lives of others. As you read through the devotions this week, ask whether you are depending on yourself or on the Holy Spirit.

Day 1

Read Acts 1:15-26

Psalm 41:9 and Psalm 55 are clear prophecies concerning Judas. In Acts 1:16 and Acts 1:20, when Peter stood up to address the crowd, they knew who he was talking about. He also gave a little more information concerning Judas and his betrayal that led up to Matthias taking Judas' spot. How did they choose Matthias?

“It will be observed that the brethren did not themselves select Matthias; but, having first appointed two persons between whom the choice should be made, they prayed the Lord to show which one he had chosen, and then cast lots, understanding that the one upon whom the lot fell was the Lord's choice. The reason that they did not make the selection themselves was evidently because they thought proper that the Lord, who had chosen Judas, should also choose his successor. If it be inquired why, then, they ventured to confine the Lord's choice to these two, the most plausible answer is that suggested by Dr. Alexander, that, after careful examination of the parties present, they were the only two who possessed the qualifications named by Peter. Whether the selection of these two was made by the body of disciples, or by the apostles alone, it is unimportant to determine. The case does not, as many have supposed, furnish a precedent on the subject of popular election of church officers; for the selection of the two persons between whom an election was to be made, was not the election itself; and when the election took place, it was made by the Lord, and not by the disciples or the apostles. One of them cast or drew the lots, but the Lord determined on whom the lot should fall.”³

³ A Commentary on Acts of Apostles, with a Revised Version of the Text

The disciples did not carry out this process alone; they sought the Lord. They realized they did not want to get this wrong and they needed God's direction. In what do you need God's direction? Are you trying to make a decision on your own? How do you make decisions? Do you first make a choice and ask the Lord to bless it, or pray about it and ask God to guide your steps? The latter is obviously what God wants. In making any choice, seek God's counsel, ask what He desires and what His plans are. After all, He knows best.

Day 2

Read Acts 2:1-6

“Pentecost means ‘fiftieth’ because this feast was held fifty days after the Feast of Firstfruits (Lev. 23:15-22). The calendar of Jewish feasts in Leviticus 23 is an outline of the work of Jesus Christ. Passover pictures His death as the Lamb of God (John 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7), and the Feast of Firstfruits pictures His resurrection from the dead (1 Cor. 15:20-23). Fifty days after Firstfruits is the Feast of Pentecost, which pictures the formation of the church. At Pentecost, the Jews celebrated the giving of the Law, but Christians celebrate it because of the giving of the Holy Spirit to the church. Now, if Pentecost was fifty days later—seven weeks plus one day—then Pentecost also took place on the first day of the week. Christians assemble and worship on Sunday, the first day of the week, because on that day our Lord arose from the dead, but it was also the day on which the Holy Spirit was given to the church.”⁴

The Holy Spirit came at Pentecost. God was obviously at work in the Old Testament and up until this time in history, but at this particular point, the Holy Spirit was poured out. The Holy Spirit’s coming meant that God’s Spirit now dwelt among followers of Jesus; it would not be temporary (John 14:16-17). The Spirit could not have arrived earlier, as it was essential that Jesus first come into the world, die, be buried, rise again, and ascend before this took place.

In **Verse 4** we read, “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.” Anything which happened after this, if they were indeed yielding to the Holy Spirit, was because of the Spirit’s work, not due to that of the people. Today, we often try to make things happen, draw attention to ourselves, see what we can do, and try to get the glory for it, but God won’t share His glory. When God works and speaks, it’s always for His glory, never for any glory of our own. Could it be, sometimes, while we desire to be under the control of the Holy Spirit, we are also seeking glory or have a sense of pride in ourselves, quenching the Holy Spirit?

⁴ Warren Wiersbe, BE Series

Ask God today to rid you of yourself and fill you completely with Him so only He will shine through. Just imagine if it could be said of your family, workplace, and church, that they were filled with the Holy Spirit. What would happen if everyone yielded themselves to the Spirit? Just think how God could use those who are not only filled but yielded to His Spirit.

Day 3

Read Numbers 28: 26-31

Today, we return to the Old Testament to look at Jesus. God gave the people specific instructions through Moses for making offerings and sacrifices. Although, at this time of the New Testament Pentecost, no offering or sacrifices were required. The Lamb of God, the ultimate sacrifice, had taken care of the sins of the world and there would never be a need for another sacrifice.

Numbers 28:31 tells us the offerings were to be without blemish. This was what God desired from them, but it also specifically pointed to Jesus because Jesus would be without blemish (sin), the perfect sacrifice. God always knew Jesus would be the ultimate sacrifice and His plan would prevail. Jesus died, not just for some, but for all of the sins we would ever commit.

Have you ever taken the time to simply express your love and thanks to God for the gift of salvation? This is not thanking God for His blessings, making requests, or praying for someone else, but taking the time just to be thankful for your salvation through His death on the cross! Use this space below to write out a prayer to the Lord for His salvation that was made possible through Jesus.

Now think and pray through how you can live your life based on your thankfulness today for what Jesus has done for you!

Day 4

Read Acts 2:7-12

Warren Wiersbe writes that the believers were praising God, not preaching the Gospel and that they used known languages not an unknown tongue (Acts 2:6, 8). Luke named fifteen different geographical locations and clearly stated that the citizens of those places heard Peter and the others declare God's wonderful works in languages they could understand. The Greek word translated language in Acts 2:6 and tongue in Acts 2:8 to *dialektos* and refers to a language or dialect of some country or district (Acts 21:40; 22:2; 26:14). Unless we are instructed otherwise in Scripture, we must assume that when speaking in tongues is mentioned elsewhere in Acts or in 1 Corinthians, it refers to an identical experience: believers praising God in the Spirit in languages that are known.

Why did God do this? Pentecost was a reversal of the judgment at the Tower of Babel when God confused man's language (Gen. 11:1-9). God's judgment at Babel scattered the people, but God's blessing at Pentecost united the believers in the Spirit. At Babel, the people were unable to understand each other, but at Pentecost, men heard God's praises and understood what was said. The Tower of Babel was a scheme designed to praise men and make a name for men, but Pentecost brought praise to God. The building of Babel was an act of rebellion, but Pentecost was a ministry of humble submission to God. What a contrast!

Another reason for this gift of tongues was to let the people know the Gospel was for the whole world. God wants to speak to every person in his or her own language and give the saving message of salvation in Jesus Christ. The emphasis in the Book of Acts is on worldwide evangelization, "... unto the uttermost part of the earth." **Acts 1:8** "The Spirit of Christ is the spirit of missions," said Henry Martyn, "and the nearer we get to Him, the more intensely missionary we must become."

Thank God for the work of the Holy Spirit and realize our true dependency on Him. Are you drawing nearer to God daily? Spread the gospel to your family, your friends, and your co-workers, we all need Jesus.

Day 5

Read Ezekiel 36:24-28

This prophecy was fulfilled mainly in the restoration from Babylon, but will ultimately be fulfilled in the restoration from all other countries. Remember, Israel is God's chosen people. **Ezekiel 36:27** of today's passages says "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them." While this passage mainly is spoken to and about Israel, it also applies to us as believers.

Verse 25 talks about the cleansing. Jesus died for our sins on the cross. We were cleansed or forgiven for our sins when we put our faith in Jesus, the ultimate sacrifice. Verse 26 reminds us that when we put our faith in Jesus, we are given the Holy Spirit and a new heart. Think about this for a minute. We give Jesus our sin and ourselves and, in exchange, He gives us new hearts and His Spirit. What an exchange! As we read in Verse 27, God gives us His Spirit so we can walk with Him and obey Him.

If you have ever heard someone tune a guitar, you have heard them try and get just the right sound to come out for each chord. The reason for this is when a song is played it sounds complete and together. Each chord is tuned differently, but they are all in tune so when played correctly together, beautiful music comes out. We need to be so in tune with the Holy Spirit that when God speaks and works in us, His music comes out and does what only He can do. Are you in tune with the Holy Spirit? Does God need to do some major or minor tuning in you? Though it may be painful at the time, it is worth it. Remember, He wants to grow and use you for His glory.

WEEK 58 PETER & THE PROPHET JOEL----- -----Dennis Watson

Jesus had been diligent to prepare Peter for what He had in mind for him at the inception of His church. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter preached the first gospel message and 3,000 were saved. He spoke of Old Testament prophecies which were fulfilled in Jesus. This is an exciting transition continuing as the Holy Spirit comes upon the people and the church is empowered for the mission. What an exciting week of Scripture!

Day 1

Read Acts 2:13-20

Peter had been personally prepared for this day by Jesus. Peter had made the great confession of Jesus as The Christ. Right after this confession, he sought to correct Jesus when He spoke of His death and resurrection. Peter had denied Jesus just before the crucifixion. Jesus went to great lengths to restore Peter after a great and miraculous catch of fish following the resurrection. Peter was prepared for this. The Holy Spirit had come upon the small band of followers and Peter was filled with the Spirit. In response to the accusation that the people were drunk because of all of the excitement, Peter began to preach and tell what had just taken place. He did this by referring to two Old Testament prophecies.

The first prophecy Peter used was from Joel 2:28-32. It is the clearest passage in the Old Testament which deals with the promise of the Holy Spirit. In the Hebrew Bible, these verses make up a separate chapter. In this passage, the promise of the Holy Spirit is followed by end-time prophecy. The entire prophecy of Joel was not fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, but the prophecy in Joel did include that which they had just seen happen—the coming of the Holy Spirit. It was the start of Joel’s prophecy being fulfilled and the rest will happen at the very end of history as we know it.

Peter was led by the Spirit to see in the prophecy an application to the church. He is saying the Spirit Joel wrote about was with them that day. In the Old Testament, the Spirit was given to only a few select people, but now He was given it to many. These 120 Jews,

both men and women, received the very same Spirit who had empowered Moses, David, and the prophets. A new day had come. Something totally new was upon them. This was the beginning of the last days, the beginning of the church, empowered by God's Holy Spirit. Pentecost began what Joel had described. However, the prophecies of Joel quoted in Acts 2:19-20 were not yet fulfilled. They had only begun.

Almighty God had finished the work of redemption and salvation. Now the work of taking the message of redemption and salvation to the whole world had begun. He provided the redemption, salvation, and, now, the power.

Thank God for His empowering Holy Spirit!

Day 2

Read Acts 2:21

Peter explained this was the beginning. We now know, with the advantage of hindsight, this was the beginning of Jesus' body—the Church. The Church was birthed into existence by the power of God and the empowerment of His Spirit. Peter connected the event on the Day of Pentecost with the prophecy of Joel, but then, he gave us a new word, also from Joel, “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (**Verse 21**) Is this an oversimplification? Peter quoted from Joel 2:32. Paul quoted the same verse from Joel in Romans 10:13. I don't think it is an oversimplification; rather, it is the gospel simply stated. The thief called on Jesus. Jesus told him he would be with Him in paradise that very day. Peter cried out to Jesus and Jesus saved Peter from drowning.

Some are concerned about easy believism. Is it easy? Yes! Some are concerned about cheapening the gospel message. The gospel is not cheap. The gospel is extravagant! It was bought and paid for by the blood of the only begotten Son of God. It cost Him everything. It costs us nothing. As the old hymn says, “Jesus paid it all.”

This is the extravagant love of God with no strings attached. Not exactly how we do things, is it? Simply put, any and all who call on the wonderful name of the Lord revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ will be saved! Have you called on Him? If not, why not cry out to Jesus for salvation right now?

Day 3

Read Acts 2:22-24

As Peter continued his sermon, he gave a two-point reason behind what happened to Jesus. He noted that Jesus had been confirmed by God who had sent Him with miracles, wonders, and signs. The word attested means to show off. It is not the showing off that we do, but a showing off that declares real power and authority. Then, Peter gave the two reasons Jesus was put to death, though there was really only one.

The one overarching reason for the death of Jesus on the cross was "... the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God." (**Verse 23**) That settles it all. It was not man's decision at all, but God's decision from before time began. God knew it all beforehand. He not only knew it, but He purposed it. The word foreknowledge is the word "*prognósis*" from which we get our word prognosis. God knew the sinful condition of man, so He determined from before time to treat the sin. The condition of man was sinful and God's prognosis was to send Jesus to deal with it through His death.

The other reason for His death was sinful man. The problem was sin and that sin, by God's design, put Jesus on the cross. So, who was guilty of putting Him on the cross? Peter says, "Him you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death." (**Verse 23**) The you was the Jewish religious leaders. The you was the Roman authorities. The you was the Roman soldiers. The you was you and me. All sinners put Jesus on the cross. It was as if we were there participating in the shouts to crucify Him. It was as though we were there shouting obscenities at Him. It was as if we were there gambling for His clothes. It was as though we were there driving the nails in His hands and feet and piercing His side. Guilty! When man was at his worst, God accomplished our best.

There is an old song that says, "Were you there when they crucified our Lord?" The answer is, "Yes!" We were all there. We did it, but God did it first because of His grace, mercy, and love toward us. Give thanks to Him for taking our worst and making it our best!

Day 4

Read Acts 2:25-32

In his sermon, Peter used at least two Old Testament prophecies as his text. We have already looked at the passage in Joel 2. Now, we see Peter also quoted from David in Psalm 16. This is a passage we may not have fully understood unless Peter gave this commentary in his sermon. Acts 2:24 closes with Peter saying God raised Jesus up because it was not possible He could be held by death. Then, considering his Jewish listeners, he once again delved back into their scriptures, quoting from David in Psalms.

As Peter preached, he was directed by the Holy Spirit who had just come upon the believers. He had come because Jesus had promised that He would come and teach and remind them of Truth. Peter, who was full of the Holy Spirit, was prompted by the Spirit to use Psalm 16. Peter could probably point to Mount Zion from where he was standing. Mount Zion was where David had been buried, so he could direct their attention to David's Psalm which spoke of the resurrection and that David died and was still buried there. So, it was obvious that David was not referring to himself in Psalm 16. Peter said David was talking about Jesus and His resurrection. Peter, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in regard to his Jewish listeners, told them in no uncertain terms that David was speaking prophetically of Jesus. Peter asserted this was what had taken place and this was what allowed the people to be empowered by the Spirit. This Jesus, who was crucified, dead, and buried, had been raised up by the power of God. It was an event prophesied by their own scriptures. He was confirming it had been prophesied. Now, we have seen it, too.

The first sermon preached in the church age was an Easter sermon. The resurrection is what our faith is all about! For there to have been a resurrection, there had to be a death. Give thanks for His death and the fact that He is alive. We serve a risen Savior!

Day 5

Read Isaiah 49:7-13

We read yesterday in Psalm 16 that David wrote about Jesus and His resurrection. He used the name Holy One and Peter then applied that to Jesus. The name Holy One is used in 29 different verses in the book of Isaiah. We now know we could insert Jesus' name each time this name is used. Jesus is the Holy One. On the last day of each week, we look at one of the Old Testament Prophets or a Psalm to see Jesus. Today, we see that Isaiah spoke of Jesus, the Holy One who saves.

In today's passage, Jesus, the Holy One, would once again be rejected, but we also see He would be the basis of salvation. He helps, preserves, and restores the earth. For Israel, He provided their heritage. He sets prisoners free. He causes those in darkness to be brought into the light. Hunger and thirst will be eliminated. These words should make us think of Psalm 23, in which the shepherd is shown to guide his sheep by springs of water. In all of this, there is to be celebration and worship.

As gentiles, we have been grafted into God's kingdom. This inestimable blessing should cause us to rejoice and celebrate. According to this and other passages in the Bible, He is not finished with Israel. They will come to Him and surrender to Him and there will be great worship. Jesus, the Holy One, will be confirmed to them as their true Savior. There is much to enjoy now and to anticipate as God finishes what He has started.

Keep your eyes open. Enjoy the unfolding of what the Holy One is doing and going to do.

WEEK 59 NEW BELIEVERS -----Chris Watson

The early church often saw many believers, sometimes thousands, come and place their faith in Jesus. It wasn't anything any human was doing; rather, God was speaking through them as they were sensitive to the Holy Spirit. I want to be so in tune with the Spirit that God uses me often to share the gospel. Whether they believe or trust in Jesus is up to God, but I want to be an instrument which is used by Him. What about you?

Day 1

Read Acts 2:36-39

Peter had just delivered a very heartfelt, powerful, and convicting sermon. He came to the end of the sermon and said, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified both Lord and Christ." (Verse 36) We get the picture they were intently listening to Peter's sermon, hanging on every word. The more he preached, the stronger the conviction grew in the hearts of his listeners. He delivered the final blow when he told them they crucified the Christ, the Lord of all. Can you imagine what went through their minds when they heard this? I am sure it took time to really penetrate, but they understood it enough they were distraught. Scripture tells us they were cut to the heart. They asked what they could do because they realized they put Jesus on the cross. They all understood their sin had caused His death and they wanted to know what they needed to do to make it right.

Peter responded to them with the same invitation which has been given to us; we are to share this invitation with others. When anyone realizes they have sinned against God and their sin separates them from God (God cannot look on sin), they realize something must be done about it. One must repent, which is to turn from their sin to God, believing He died for their sins, putting their hope in Him. Peter went on to tell them, "Be baptized." Some say you must be baptized to be saved; however, taking the whole context of scripture, this is not what Peter was saying at all. Warren Wiersbe says, "It is unfortunate that the translation of Acts 2:38 in the King

James Verson suggests that people must be baptized in order to be saved, because this is not what the Bible teaches. The Greek word *eis* (which is translated "for" in the phrase "for the remission of sins") can mean "on account of" or "on the basis of." John the Baptist baptized on the basis that people had repented of their sins (Matthew 3:11). Acts 2:38 should not be used to teach salvation by baptism. If baptism is essential for salvation, it seems strange that Peter said nothing about baptism in his other sermons (Acts 3:12-26; 5:29-32; 10:34-43). In fact, the people in the home of Cornelius received the Holy Spirit before they were baptized! (Acts 10:44-48) Since believers are commanded to be baptized, it is important that we have a clean conscience by obeying (1 Peter 3:21), but we must not think that baptism is a part of salvation. If so, then nobody in Hebrews 11 was saved because none of them was ever baptized."

In order to be saved I must repent and believe, exactly what Peter taught. If I have repented and believed then I will be obedient and follow the Lord in baptism. What about you? Have you repented and believed? If not, why not today? Call on the Lord to save you from your sins. If you have been saved, have you been baptized? If not, confess your disobedience and take care of the baptism as soon as possible. Thank the Lord for His grace and love. Although we put Jesus on the cross, He is able and will save us. This is incredible grace and love.

Day 2

Read Acts 2:40-41

Do you remember there were about 120 people who waited for the promised Holy Spirit? However, after the Holy Spirit came and Peter preached, 3000 people were saved and followed Jesus. Jesus told His disciples “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father.” **John 14:12**

Jesus had sent the Holy Spirit and, obviously, at Peter’s sermon, the Holy Spirit was moving. It wasn’t Peter or his sermon that saved anyone or drew people to Jesus, but God used Peter and His sermon to draw people to salvation. Peter and the others could only be used by God because the Holy Spirit allowed it. Peter and the others were vessels or willing followers of Jesus that God used to carry out the work of the Holy Spirit. Just think, because of Peter’s obedience and the Holy Spirit working, 3000 were saved that one day.

How might the Holy Spirit want to work through you? Again, God desires to do great things in and through us for His glory, most importantly to see lost people become followers of Jesus Christ (John 14:12). The Holy Spirit wants and desires to work through us just like He did Peter; we must be willing and available. You probably won’t ever preach to a crowd of over 3,000 people, but that’s not the point. Rather, who can you influence right now? Who can you share the love of God with at your home, work, school and ball field? Who needs to hear the gospel? Who needs to hear the truth? The good news is that God does the drawing and the work, while He uses us to share the gospel. Who will you show Jesus to and who will you share the gospel with today?

Day 3

Read Acts 2:42-45

The verses we read today and tomorrow are a result of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Reread Verse 42. Note it says they continued steadfastly (continually) in:

The apostle's doctrine – This is the doctrine given by Jesus, the truth of the gospel. It was understood that salvation was by God alone, that only God was to be glorified, and that the gospel was to be spread to others.

Fellowship – This creates the picture that believers loved to be with other believers; they enjoyed the fellowship of each other, but especially the oneness they shared in their belief and need of Jesus. This conveys what we see in Verse 45, their fellowship included meeting each other's needs. This is a vital practice of the local church. We do this at Harp's, mainly through our Sunday School classes which is one reason it is so important to be connected to a class. Not only does fellowship and oneness happen, so does meeting the needs of others, especially during difficult times.

Breaking of bread – Warren Wiersbe tells us this probably refers both to regular meals and enjoying the Lord's Supper with each other, as they were reminded of His provision and direction.

Prayers – Prayer is conversation with God that involves both speaking and listening. As believers, we need to pray individually, but also pray corporately with God's people. Who are you praying for? Who is praying for you? How might God want to begin a passion for prayer in you?

Our passage today ends with the words, "...as anyone had need." **(Verse 45)** In other words, the Church sought to meet the needs of others. This is just one of the reasons we need a church body. We all have needs, some which can only be met by God, and yet, God also uses His Church to meet needs. How can God use you to meet the needs of others?

Day 4

Read Acts 2:46-47

This passage is a great picture of the New Testament Church. They shared together, laughed together, ate together, shared the Lord's Supper together, and Scripture tells us they did it with both gladness and simplicity of heart. This passage also tells us they were not doing it because they had to or because someone was forcing them to do so, it was what they wanted to do. Christ's love compelled them.

In addition, they were constantly praising God because of what He had done for them. The Scripture tells us they had favor with all people. The culmination of all of this was the Lord was constantly adding to the number of those being saved. Note that salvation and the Church working together and loving God only happened because of what God was doing; the people were simply surrendering to Him.

This is truly a beautiful picture. This was God's Church loving on each other, meeting the needs of others, all while seeing other people come to know Jesus. Others began to see the changes in those who followed Jesus and we can be sure they were sharing the reason for these changes and because of this, people were coming to know Jesus. The love they had was showing in action and the people were sharing the message with those who didn't know Jesus.

What about us? Is this what our church looks like? Are we breaking bread together, meeting each other's needs, and doing so with gladness of heart? I think at times we are. The other question is, are we seeing people being added daily to God's Kingdom? Is our life exemplifying Christ and are we using our words to share the gospel with those which are lost? Imagine what God might do through our actions and our words, if we spoke His name at all times. How does God want to use us as vessels to proclaim His love and truth so many will be added daily to God's Kingdom?

Day 5

Read Isaiah 35:4-7

This week, we have been reading of the Holy Spirit coming on the people leading to the beginning of the New Testament Church. Isn't it exciting to think that something so powerful which began over 2,000 years ago continues today? Not only that it continues today, but you and I are a part of this miracle known as the Church. Jesus' Spirit did some incredible things in the beginning of the Church and, praise the Lord, He still does such things today.

Our passage today, points to a time in the future where Jesus will return again. It tells us God will come and save us. God has already saved us through Jesus' death and resurrection, but we will eventually spend eternity with the Lord in a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21). One day there will be no more pain and no more sorrow. There will be no more struggles and no more difficulties. God will take care of all of this and we will spend eternity with Him. It's hard to imagine what that would be like because it will be so different than what we experience now. Just think, there will be no need for hospitals, policemen, lawyers, or preachers.

Take some time today to thank God for what He has already done in your life and what He will do in the future. Thank Him for what the future holds, especially eternity with Him. As you pray through this, ask the Lord to show you who needs Him, so they can join Him in eternity. Someone shared with you, who do you need to share with?

WEEK 60 THE LAME BEGGAR WALKS-----

-----Dennis Watson

The emphasis in the passages this week is the name of the Lord Jesus. It is through the power of His name the lame man is made to walk. It is His name that is the power behind the message Peter preaches after the lame man is healed. When Peter, John, and the lame man were taken into custody, they were questioned by what name they had done this. Then, they were told by those in authority not to speak anymore in His name. Remember, the name of Jesus is the name that is above every name!

Day 1

Read Acts 3:1-8

The fledgling church was off to a booming start. The Holy Spirit had come and the people were empowered. Peter preached and thousands came to salvation through Jesus Christ. Now the first occasion of persecution was about to come. Peter and John continued, as did all the early believers, to go to the temple. Remember, at this point, all of the new believers were Jewish. As they came to one of the gates of the temple area they encountered a man who had been lame and unable to walk since birth. He appealed to them for alms. In those days, people in his condition could do nothing but beg for alms. As Peter and John approached the man, he anticipated that they would give him some money. Peter said, "Silver and gold I do not have but what I do, I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk." **Acts 3:6** The man was immediately healed. He was not only walking, he was leaping and praising God. There was no keeping him down or quiet.

A new breakthrough! A door swung open. This was not simply the case of a man that was healed. It set the stage for another message by Peter. There are two things for us to consider today. First, the wonderful and powerful name of Jesus. The song expresses it, "There is strength in the name of the Lord. There is power in the name of the Lord. There is hope in the name of the Lord." What a wonderful reminder. We see it here right at the beginning of the church.

Secondly, there is the testimony that opens doors. This opened the door not only to tell about Jesus, it also precipitated the first persecution for the church. We will see over the next few days that Peter was given a platform to tell how this miracle of healing came to be. Afterwards, Peter, John and the man who was healed were taken into custody and brought before the authorities.

Today, we have platforms brought to us by God working in our lives and in the lives of others. Are you taking advantage of these to tell people about Jesus? Tell people what He has done in your life and use it as an occasion to tell of His might and power.

Day 2

Read Acts 3:9-16

The people saw a changed man. They saw him walking around and praising God. What they saw was a walking billboard pointing to Jesus. This is the way it is when you are experiencing the life changing power of true salvation. They remembered this was the man who had been begging alms at the Beautiful Gate. They were amazed at the transformation. The changed life set the stage for a moment to proclaim the gospel message. A crowd gathered at Solomon's porch to see what was going on. When Peter saw all of the people, he took full advantage of the moment and began to preach to the crowd.

Peter's message was twofold. The first part was an explanation regarding the healed man and the second was an exhortation to repent and turn to Jesus for salvation. Today, we will look at Peter's explanation.

Peter did a quick review of who Jesus was. He connected Jesus to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He said although Jesus had been sent to them by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they had rejected Him and set a murderer free and chose to have Jesus crucified. He said this because his audience was Jewish. He addressed them as men of Israel. Then, he told them it was by faith in the name of this man, Jesus, that the crippled man had been healed and made strong.

Healing comes through the name of Jesus. His name is power. Luke spoke of the name of Jesus at least 33 times in the book of Acts. In Bible times, a person's name represented him and his character. His name is above every name. Peter introduces those listeners to something new about the man, Jesus, who they had crucified. His name has power over what plagues people—sickness, disease, death, and hell.

It was not just that Jesus healed the crippled man, Luke tells us even the faith for the healing came through Jesus. Jesus is a miracle. Keep in mind that faith, too, is a miracle which comes from God through Jesus Christ. Rejoice in the healing Jesus has brought to you. Rejoice also in the gift of faith.

Day 3

Read Acts 3:17-26

In Peter's explanation yesterday, he connected Jesus to the fathers of Israel - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Today, we'll see how he connected Jesus to the prophets. Remember, his listeners were Jewish and it was important to connect Jesus to the Old Testament scriptures. Peter was helping them get the dots connected. The first part of his message was the explanation and this part is exhortation for them to repent and turn to Jesus. This is serious dot connecting. Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophecies of the prophets. He told them that what took place in all of this was what God foretold through the prophets. He connected the suffering of Jesus as fulfillment of the prophet's message. He told them this had been preached to them before by their prophets. This was, according to Peter, the prophecy of times of refreshing spoken of by the prophets. From Samuel and those who followed, these days had been foretold. The final and most dramatic appeal came when Peter told them what had taken place in Jesus Christ, fulfilled the promise made to Abraham regarding the covenant when He told Abraham, "...and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed." **(Verse 26)** Peter certainly gave the Jews something to think about.

His appeal was not just for them to consider, but to realize the truth about Jesus, His life, suffering, crucifixion, resurrection, and now the healing of this lame man were all fulfilled prophecies given by their founding fathers and their prophets! He sought to make it clear that Jesus was the prophet Moses spoke of when he said, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear in all things, whatever He says to you." **Deuteronomy 18:15** Peter had very clearly made his case. He called them to turn to Jesus as Savior and have their sins blotted out.

I would like to think if I had been a Jew hearing this message, I would have immediately repented and turned to follow Jesus as the One who had been prophesied as the coming Messiah. Studying the whole Bible is about connecting all of the dots regarding who Jesus is. This is what the Bible is all about. I hope you have connected the dots and have turned to Jesus as God's Messiah, your Savior and Lord.

Day 4

Read Acts 4:1-22

Peter preached the message and obviously many were convinced. On that day, 5,000 men believed the word. However, while they preached, the Jewish religious leaders came up and had the three of them, Peter, John, and the man who had been healed, taken into custody. The religious leaders were upset about their preaching the resurrection of the dead in Jesus. They did not make a charge against them, but asked them about the authority they had to do this healing and preaching. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, boldly and confidently told them it was by the authority of the name of Jesus they healed this man. He goes on to tell them that Jesus, whom they crucified, was the stone the builders rejected. Again, Peter is connecting Jesus to their scriptural roots. He tells them Jesus is the chief cornerstone. Then he drives home a very significant biblical truth in **Acts 4:12**, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." It was true then and it is true now. It was not politically correct then, nor is it now. Peter and John were not concerned with political correctness, nor should we be.

The religious leaders were surprised by the boldness of Peter and all that he knew. It was obvious these men had been with Jesus. They were in a quandary as to what to do with the three men. They could not deny a great miracle had taken place, they simply told them to stop preaching and teaching in the name of Jesus. Peter and John told them they had to keep preaching because they had a greater responsibility to God than to mere men.

What a great lesson for us. Peter and John were not disrespectful. They gave their answer as to what they had done and the miracle that had taken place. They did not demand their rights. They just gave the answer. They respectfully and truthfully presented the truth about what had taken place and about Jesus. We need to do the same. Don't cry out about your rights. Just present the truth kindly and respectfully and leave the rest in the hands of the Lord. There are times when obedience to God will leave us in conflict with governing authorities.

Pray and be prepared as we move forward in a nation that is less and less sympathetic to the things of God.

Day 5

Read Psalm 49:7-15

It does not matter how much wealth of the world you have; you cannot pay enough to eliminate your sin and guilt. This Psalm tells us that sin debt cannot be paid off by any amount of wealth or by any man. There is no way to get salvation by any human means. You cannot buy it with wealth, you cannot trade anything for it and you cannot earn it by good works. In the passage today, the words redeem and ransom are used. Redeem means to buy back or make an exchange. Ransom means to pay the penalty. No human being can pay to redeem someone from the enemy and there is no amount a person can pay to discharge the penalty or fine for sin. The only redeeming and the only ransom has to be accomplished by someone who is worthy. The only one worthy is one who lived a perfect sinless life. Since all men born of man are sinful, none of us can accomplish this. So, we will all see the pit or die. All people are hopeless.

However, there was One who was sinless. He was not born of man. Jesus is the only One. He was born of the seed of the woman conceived by the Holy Spirit. He was born like all people, except His conception was miraculous. He was not born with Adam's sin heritage. He was perfect. He never sinned. He, alone, was worthy.

Paul tells us Jesus gave His life as a ransom for all (1 Timothy 2:6). In Acts 4:12, we read there is no other name by which we must be saved. God paid the ransom to redeem all people. It is through the only begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ, that we can be redeemed and ransomed—saved.

Rejoice that our hope is found only in Jesus Christ!

WEEK 61 PETER AND JOHN ARRESTED-----

-----Chris Watson

I remember my parents telling me when I was growing up that if I told a lie, (and I was found out) I would be in more trouble than if I had just told the truth to begin with. In our account this week, Peter and John told the truth and soon found themselves in trouble. They were in trouble with the religious leaders. No matter what, we should always speak the truth.

Day 1

Read Acts 4:1-12

In the precious chapter of Acts 3, God uses Peter to heal a lame man. The same lame man who sat just inside the gate whom everyone knew had been lame since birth so there was no ignoring the fact that a miracle had indeed taken place. In Chapter 4, we read that the religious leaders (priests, captain of the temple and the Sadducees) were disturbed by the miracle performed as well as the resurrection of Christ being preached. Between the time of the healing of the lame man and up until our chapter today, we learn that many believed Peter's words. The leaders were very distraught, so they arrested Peter and John.

The leaders of Israel had already rejected the ministry of John the Baptist and the ministry of Jesus, here was another chance for them to believe.

“Peter respectfully began with an explanation of how the miracle occurred. Certainly the members of the Sanhedrin had seen the crippled beggar many times, and perhaps they had even given alms to him and piously prayed for him. How was this well-known man healed? “By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth!” Those words must have pierced the hearts of the members of the council! They thought they had finished with the Prophet from Nazareth, and now His followers were telling everybody that Jesus was alive! Since the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, Peter's statement was almost a declaration of war!

But the Spirit was telling Peter what to say (see Luke 21:12–15), and the apostle quoted Psalm 118:22, definitely a messianic reference (see Matt. 21:42; 1 Peter 2:4–8). He made it clear that the members of the council were “the builders” and that they had rejected God’s Stone, Jesus, the Son of God.

The image of “the stone” was not new to these men who were experts in the Old Testament Scriptures. They knew that the “rock” was a symbol of God (Deut. 32:4, 15, 18, 31; 2 Sam. 22:2; Ps. 18:2; Isa. 28:16), and that the Prophet Daniel had used the rock to picture Messiah and the coming of His kingdom on earth (Dan. 2:31–45). The Jews stumbled over the Rock (Rom. 9:32; 1 Cor. 1:23) and rejected Him, just as Psalm 118:22 had predicted. However, to those who have trusted Him, Jesus Christ is the precious Cornerstone (1 Peter 2:4–8) and the chief Cornerstone (Eph. 2:20).

Peter went on to explain that Jesus is not only the Stone, but He is also the Saviour (Acts 4:12). Peter saw in the healing of the beggar a picture of the spiritual healing that comes in salvation. “Made whole” in Acts 4:9 is a translation of the same Greek word that is translated “saved” in Acts 4:12, for salvation means wholeness and spiritual health. Jesus Christ is the Great Physician who alone can heal mankind’s greatest malady, the sickness of sin (Mark 2:14–17). Of course, Peter also had “all the people of Israel” in mind as he spoke (see Acts 4:10) because the message was still going out exclusively to the Jews. Even Psalm 118, from which Peter quoted, speaks of a future national salvation for Israel.”⁵

The leaders had Peter and John arrested because they didn’t like them healing a crippled man in the name of Jesus. They didn’t know what to do about it. Everyone in this account had seen or heard what Jesus had done and they had to choose to believe in Him or not. The same is true for us and our society today. We either believe and follow Jesus or we choose to turn our backs on Him. There is no middle ground. Today may we trust and obey.

⁵ The Bible Exposition Commentary, Warren Wiersbe

Day 2

Read Acts 4:13-22

In Verse 13, Peter and John are accused of four things: being uneducated, being untrained, having boldness, and having been with Jesus. Verse 14 goes on to tell us the leaders could say nothing as no one could argue that the man was healed. The men realized Peter and John really had no formal education, and yet they were bold and according to the religious leaders, they had been with Jesus. God is not looking for the most educated or even the most qualified, but rather one who is obedient and who has been with Jesus. I have often heard that the world has yet to see what God can do with one man or woman who is completely sold out to the Lord.

Peter and John were pretty sold out by this time. They were accused of having been with Jesus and they had been. Can the same thing be said about you and me? Can others see we have been with Jesus? Will they notice it by our attitudes, love, grace, truth and boldness? Wouldn't we all love to be accused of being bold and having been with Jesus?

After they were accused of being bold and it being realized they did nothing wrong, the members of the council let them go, but not before commanding them "...not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus." **(Verse 18)** Their response was, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." **(Verse 19)** They were being held for something they had been a part of and upon being let go, they still decided they would not stop speaking of what they have seen and heard. They knew above all else, they worshipped the Lord and obeying God rather than men is what mattered.

It is becoming clearer and clearer in our culture that we will have to choose to listen to man or listen to the Lord and His Word. I don't think it's unrealistic to say that in my lifetime many may be imprisoned for speaking their faith or parts of their faith even here in America. Will you and I follow the Lord or follow man?

Day 3

Read Acts 4:23-31

After being let go, the believers celebrated on what the chief priests and elders had said to Peter and John. They didn't grumble and fuss about the fact they had been arrested, but they worshipped the Lord and were thankful they had been given the chance to lift up His name.

Let's read **Verse 29** again, "Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word." Peter and John were arrested, accused and then let go. Notice their prayer was not, "God, get the bad guys." Their prayer wasn't, "Lord, take this trial or difficulty from us." Their prayer wasn't, "God, why is this happening to us?" Rather their prayer was, "... grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word." **Verse 29**

I am not sure about you but I find this very convicting. As Americans, we often want the difficulty, struggle, or problem to go away. Peter and John didn't pray for this, rather they prayed for boldness in the face of opposition. They saw this as an opportunity, an opportunity for God to work, for God to be glorified, and for others to be drawn to Him. I am convinced so many times we may be praying for God to take the thing away in our life or situation that He is using to conform us and to get His name out. "May our light so shine before men that they see His good works and glorify our Father in Heaven." **Matthew 5:16**

Day 4

Read Acts 4:32-37

I really enjoy studying the book of Acts for many reasons, especially since it is the history of the New Testament Church. In Acts 2, we see the church eating, sharing and communing with each other. Today, we read of the church meeting the needs of each other. The church people were selling their property so they could take care of needs of others (Verse 35).

This is one of the biggest reasons to be connected to God and His Church. God often uses others to meet needs that are in the church. We often think of physical or financial needs, but it's also spiritual, emotional and mental needs. We have heard it said, "No man is an island", and yet sometimes people set themselves up for just that. God has called us to not only be the church to the world who so desperately needs Him, but also to be the church to each other. I am 41 years old and for 41 years of my life + 9 months, I have been in church. As I reflect over my life, I can't begin to imagine how my life would be if I had not been connected to God and His church. Outside of Lisa's and my family, our church is also our family. These people are who we spend the most time with, we encourage each other, we struggle with each other, we cry with each other, and we laugh together. How would you answer this question, "Where would I be without God's church?" Crazy to think of, isn't it?

Take some time today to thank God for His church and for what He has done in and through it to minister to you and ask how you can continue to minister to others?

Day 5

Read Joshua 24:14-18

From our passage this week, Peter and John drew a line in the sand to indicate they served one God and one God only and that was the one True God, the maker of heaven and earth. It did not matter to them that they might be arrested or persecuted, they were following and serving God.

Our Old Testament passage holds the same truth today. For thousands of years followers of the Lord have drawn lines in the sand saying you serve who you will serve but we are serving the Lord. This is nothing new, and today we have to make that choice daily. Will we serve political correctness or the Lord, will we serve appeasement or the Lord, will we serve what others say is right or will we serve the Lord, and will we serve our own agenda or will we serve the Lord?

Today, we must choose who we will follow. Man tells us to follow our heart and the Bible warns us that our hearts are evil. The world says do what makes you happy, the Bible says do what makes you holy.

WEEK 62 ANANIAS & SAPPHIRA -----Chris Watson

I never want to quench the Spirit, meaning I never want to get in the way of what God wants to do. This week, we encounter a husband and wife who lied to the Lord. When given a chance to make it right, or at least confess, one of them stuck to the story and God did what He needed to do. As you read through these devotions, make it your prayer to be in tune with the Holy Spirit and not a Spirit quencher.

Day 1

Read Acts 4:32-37

Over the years, I have often heard, “I don’t know what I would do without my church family.” I echo that sentiment. Some don’t understand this feeling, either because they are not part of a church body or because they have never experienced or gone through something difficult and truly felt the love of God’s church around them. Many have and they realize the importance of their church family. Paul admonishes us to keep meeting together (Hebrews 10:25). Others in Scripture also remind us that we are to love each other and be there for each other.

Today’s passage reminds us again of the importance of the church. Those in the New Testament church didn’t see their possessions as belonging to them alone, but to God first and then to others. The New Testament church didn’t follow a socialist model; rather, we see that everyone did their part so when needs arose they were met. Sometimes, many in the church are too prideful or wonder what people will think if they go to someone about their needs, whether they are physical, mental, spiritual, or financial. However, if we don’t express our needs to others, those needs might not be met. We must be vulnerable enough to share our needs and to accept guidance, help, and instruction.

Luke tells us they were meeting each other’s needs. (Acts 4:25) We all know our needs and our wants are often very different. The people in the early church were not living lavishly or in some way which was out of the will of God. Instead, they sought to meet the real needs of each other.

How might God want you to meet the needs of others? Do you know someone who has a financial need? Would God have you provide for that need? Do you know of someone who has a spiritual need? Would God have you pray for that person and perhaps even offer godly counsel, through His direction? Does someone need help moving or with something else at their house for which you have a particular ability to provide? Ask God to show you how He would have you help your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Day 2

Read Acts 5:1-6

Matthew Henry says it best, “The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was, that they were ambitious of being thought eminent disciples, when they were not true disciples. Hypocrites may deny themselves, may forego their worldly advantage in one instance, with a prospect of finding their account in something else. They were covetous of the wealth of the world, and distrustful of God and his providence. They thought they might serve both God and mammon. They thought to deceive the apostles. The Spirit of God in Peter discerned the principle of unbelief reigning in the heart of Ananias. But whatever Satan might suggest, he could not have filled the heart of Ananias with this wickedness had he not been consenting. The falsehood was an attempt to deceive the Spirit of truth, who so manifestly spoke and acted by the apostles. The crime of Ananias was not his retaining part of the price of the land; he might have kept it all, had he pleased; but his endeavoring to impose upon the apostles with an awful lie, from a desire to make a vain show, joined with covetousness. But if we think to put a cheat upon God, we shall put a fatal cheat upon our own souls. How sad to see those relations who should quicken one another to that which is good, hardening one another in that which is evil! And this punishment was in reality mercy to vast numbers. It would cause strict self-examination, prayer, and dread of hypocrisy, covetousness, and vain-glory, and it should still do so. It would prevent the increase of false professors. Let us learn hence how hateful falsehood is to the God of truth, and not only shun a direct lie, but all advantages from the use of doubtful expressions, and double meaning in our speech.”

The sin these two committed was they had lied, not just to Peter, but more specifically to the Holy Spirit. Instead of keeping it all or even letting Peter and the others know they were keeping some, they lied and said they were giving the entire sum to the apostles. We may or may not be able to fool others with our actions. We may put up a good front, look all spiritual, and seem to have all the answers. However, God knows. God knows our hearts, He knows whether we are His children, and He knows if we are seeking to put on a front or trying to truly walk step-in-step with Him.

Are you living rightly before the Lord? If not, you may be able to fool your spouse, kids, parents, classmates, and peers, but you won't fool God. Is there something you need to get right before the Lord even now? If so, spend some time with Him doing so. And whether you have anything to confess or not, ask God to always help you live in tune with the Holy Spirit.

Day 3

Read Acts 5:7-11

Go back and read Verse 8 again. Peter was giving Sapphira a chance to come clean and tell the truth which was in part a reason he asked the question. She lied to him and told him they sold it for the amount that Ananias also said. It was bad enough her husband had tested the Holy Spirit, but it was compounded when she persisted in the lie, even when given the opportunity to repent and tell the truth.

There had been some incredible things going on; God was working, people were getting saved, they were meeting each other's needs, and then this. God was not going to let the enemy interfere with His work. God takes sin seriously and, in case we forget, we are reminded of this in today's account. Sometimes, we think of sin as no big deal or we try and compare our sins with those of others and assert that ours aren't as bad. The truth is, all sin is against God. Whether we have committed only one sin in our lives, which is highly unlikely, or have committed 101,000, those sins all separate us from God.

We know Jesus takes our sin seriously; He died for it. You have probably heard it said that when we sin, especially blatantly and willfully, it is as though we were spitting at Jesus while He hung on the cross. And that doesn't take into account how our sin affects others around us. We know we can't stop sinning and live a good life on our own. We constantly need Jesus to walk with us and to know us so He can fix our hearts. Only through Him and His leading can we avoid or have victory over the temptations that come our way.

Take another look at Acts 5:11. I think I would have been fearful, too. They had just seen two people who lied to the Holy Spirit literally taken out by the Lord. It's a wonder God hasn't taken you or me out, to be truthful. I know I certainly deserve it; I deserve hell and to be wiped out, but God has shown His grace and mercy to me. Sin should scare us. Sinning against a holy and righteous God should send chills up our spines, not because we may lose our salvation, but because of what it does to our relationship to God and how it affects those around us.

Are you involved in any willful sin in your life right now? Are you living in sin and know it? Have people spoken with you about it, but you have ignored them? Heed God's call, repent, and come running back to Him. If you are walking in tune with God, continuously ask Him to save you from yourself; all it takes is one step off, so ask God to keep you on the straight and narrow.

Day 4

Read Acts 5:12-16

Notice in Verse 13, "... yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly." It has been debated on who the rest were, but from what I see in reading and studying the rest were those who were not quite sure about Jesus. They were interested, questioning, and even fearful as to what had just happened to Ananias and Sapphira. These may have included some of the fringe folks, even some of the leaders and such.

Many were being added to the number of those saved, many were being physically healed, and those who were under the control of unclean spirits were being healed as well. The healing was just as it was in the gospels; it was not only for the sake of healing, but for God to be made known and for people to call on Him for salvation. We read in Luke 17, about ten lepers being healed. Scripture says only one of them came back to thank Jesus; only he seemed to give glory to God. Jesus told him, "Arise, go your way, your faith has made you well" **Luke 17:19**. In the Greek, it's translated, "your faith has saved you." In essence, all ten were healed, but only one was given eternal life! Why is this? Because the Samaritan leper put his trust in God, he recognized who God was and not only came back to give thanks, but put his faith in Him, as well. The others received only the physical healing, but this one leper received both physical and spiritual healing.

Again, Jesus healed people and allowed the disciples to do so, not only for physical healing, but so they would put their trust in Jesus for salvation, the spiritual healing. Often, when God works in your life or does something totally incredible, it's not just for you, but for others to see and give God the glory. The healing may even cause others to begin asking about your God. How has God worked in your life? How is He working now? You might never know, but it's probably true that non-believers are watching your life, seeing what you do, and, hopefully, seeing God work. Use this as an opportunity to grow in Jesus and to share with others, believers and non-believers alike, what God is doing.

Day 5

Read Isaiah 56:7

In Matthew 21:13, Jesus quoted today's verse from Isaiah. Many were doing things in the temple which should not have been done, including cheating people out of their money. Jesus, in His righteous anger, told them His house (temple) would not be a den of robbers, but rather a house of prayer.

Today, we are God's temple; Jesus lives in us and He is with us everywhere we go. If I am God's temple, then how I take care of the temple physically, spiritually, and mentally is important. If Jesus resides in me, I want to honor His dwelling place. When I think of this, it is quite convicting. One of the biggest needs we have as believers is communication with God; this goes right along with taking care of the temple. We know this as prayer and our scripture today reminds us that we are to be a people of prayer.

What does your prayer life look like? Is it up and down like a roller coaster? We have all been there. Is it nonexistent? Many have been there, too. Or is it in tune with Jesus? Prayer is not intended to change God, but through prayer, God changes us. Prayer enables our hearts to beat as one with His heart, our minds to be transformed by His mind, and our worries and cares of the world to be put on Him. At times we may treat prayer with complacency or wonder whether it makes any difference. Perhaps the only prayer we have to offer is the one we prayed when we asked Jesus to come into our heart. Prayer is not meant to be drudgery, burdensome, or something we have to do, but something we need and want to do. There are times when I don't have the desire to pray, but those are the times I need to be on my knees the most. Once I begin praying, God changes me.

I am currently reading Praying the Bible by Donald Whitney. He shares how to take the things you read in God's word and turn them into prayers for yourself and others. I would highly encourage you to read it. The intent, though, is for us to pray without ceasing, as Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 5:17. As a child I wondered how this was possible; as an adult, I now wonder how it's not possible.

I need God to change me, work in my heart, and guide me. Prayer does this. How is your prayer life? What are you believing God for? Who are you praying for? Who are you praying to be saved? Are you praying for your spirit to be in tune with His? Spend some focused time today seeking God in prayer.

WEEK 63 THE DEATH OF STEPHEN----Dennis Watson

Jesus told His disciples they would be persecuted, “If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.” **John 15:20** The new church had needs which required a new group to be formed—deacons. The deacons were selected for the purpose of serving the needs of the widows in the church who were being neglected. The disciples did not want to be distracted from the word of God, so they had the people select seven men to take on this role. One of these first deacons was Stephen. This week we look at the ministry and the martyrdom of Stephen. Persecution breaks out and leads to the church surging beyond Jerusalem.

Day 1

Read Acts 6:8-15

Stephen was more than a deacon. He worked miracles, he was full of faith and power, and he became a lightning rod among the first believers. Through his life and actions, persecution broke out against the church with historical ramifications.

There are some really strong contrasts here regarding Stephen and his accusers. The first contrast I see is Stephen was honest, upright, and filled with the Spirit and others around him were false witnesses. These false witnesses took Stephen’s words and twisted them to make it appear he was saying something he was not saying. The second contrast I see is how viciously his accusers attacked him while finding it difficult to resist the wisdom and Spirit with which he spoke. The third contrast is while his accusers were red-faced and angry, they “... saw his face as the face of an angel.” (**Verse 15**) Stephen was calm and confident because of Whom he represented.

Stephen’s demeanor is an example for us. He was not acting calm. He did not adopt the appearance of an angel. These grew from within him as the Holy Spirit guided him. He was an ambassador of Christ. He was not there on his own account, but he was there to represent the truth of Jesus Christ. As we abide in Christ and He abides in us, we do not have to defend ourselves or become agitated at those who go on the attack against us. It is not us they are

attacking. Stephen's attackers were not really attacking him, they were attacking the message of Jesus. The same is true today. When you feel attacked because of your faith or your stance on the truth of the Bible, don't argue or fight back. Present the truth. Say what you believe and, like Stephen, explain why you believe it. Then, leave the outcome to the Lord God.

Give thanks when you, like Stephen, are given a platform to present the truth of Jesus Christ!

Day 2

Read Acts 7:1-50

Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin which was the highest Jewish council in the first century. The council had seventy-one members and was presided over by the high priest. Stephen was likely brought before them because the council was angry that many priests had also come to believe the gospel. Chapter 7 opens with a short question from the High Priest, probably Caiaphas. He asked whether the accusations against Stephen were true. Stephen then launched into a history lesson, most of which would have been familiar to all on the council. They had accused him of speaking against the Law. The religious leaders saw this as a threat to their faith and the starting of a new religion, but Stephen reviewed their history and connected Jesus to their heritage.

He linked the promise which was given to Abraham to Jesus. The promise to Abraham was all of the people of the earth would be blessed through him and his descendants would be more than the sand on the seashore and stars in the heavens. Stephen was saying that Jesus did not start a new religion, but that Jesus was the link from Abraham to the complete fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham. Jesus was for the Jewish faith the true sacrificial lamb. He was the hope, not only of Israel, but for all people. He did not inaugurate something new, but brought to completion what was prophesied in the Law and by the prophets.

Not only did Stephen make the connection to Abraham and the other patriarchs but also to Moses. Stephen said Jesus was the One Moses spoke of when he said, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren, Him you shall hear.”
Acts 7:37

Stephen traced the tabernacle and the temple in their history, but reminded them their God did not dwell in buildings made by hands. He was letting them know Jesus was the living tabernacle of God.

I would like to think if I had been a Jew living then I would have been able to connect the dots and realize God had done all

of this and Jesus was the focus of all of the events Stephen spoke about. I am concerned I may have been so caught up in religion, just like they were, that I might have missed Jesus, too.

Give thanks we were born when we were and we have the continued witness, not only of the Old Testament, but also the gospels and the remainder of the New Testament writings. He has made His full counsel known to us.

Day 3

Read Acts 7:51-60

It was time for Stephen to offer his conclusion and invitation. It did not go well for Stephen or his listeners. His listeners were "...cut to the heart." **Verse 54** Stephen included the Sanhedrin in with their forefathers in their rejection of God's messengers, prophets and leaders. In his address, he told them how they had rejected their God-sent deliverers. Their forefathers had rejected Joseph. First he was rejected by his brothers and sold into slavery. Later, they accepted him and allowed him to deliver them from the famine. Moses was also rejected but later followed as he led them out of their Egyptian bondage. Most recently, they had rejected Jesus and crucified Him. There will come a time when all Jews will recognize Jesus as God's Messiah.

Stephen did not mince words when he called them "... stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears!" **Verse 51** They were physically circumcised, according to the Law, but they had rejected the Holy Spirit just as many of their forefathers had done. They had turned a deaf ear to all God had done through their history as recorded in their own scriptures. Ultimately, they had killed the Messiah. Stephen, in no uncertain terms, declared that they were guilty sinners! They became angry and lashed out at the messenger. They were cut to the heart. Instead of being brokenhearted over killing the prophets, killing John the Baptist, and killing Jesus, they got angry and killed Stephen as well.

For Stephen, his death was his coronation. He saw God's glory and Jesus, who was normally seated at the right hand of God, standing to receive Stephen into heaven. For Israel and their leaders, Stephen's death was a condemnation. This was the beginning of the final rejection of the Jews and the beginning of salvation being offered to all the nations. For the church, Stephen's death was liberation. The movement of God in salvation through Jesus would be taken to the whole world, no longer limited to the Jews.

On the occasion of Stephen's murder, we encounter a man by the name of Saul for the first time. All of this is important in God's scheme of things. The gospel message was about to be launched

on the whole world during this time of great suffering among the believers.

Pray for God's grace, that we can all be like Stephen, loving our enemies enough to give them the truth without anger or malice.

Day 4

Read Acts 8:1-8

In case you have not noticed, we are seeing a rapid pace of gospel expansion in this passage. In Acts 1:8, Jesus gave the geographical mandate. They were in Jerusalem and they were to start presenting the gospel right there they were. Then, they were to go to Judea and Samaria. This week, we see the gospel make a leap beyond Jerusalem to Samaria.

Chapter 7 closed with two very significant young men. One was Stephen, who was put to death. It was his death which brought persecution that catapulted the gospel out of Jerusalem. The other young man, of whom we only saw a glimpse in Chapter 7, was Saul. All that is written about him in Chapter 7 is that the people who were stoning Stephen had placed their coats at his feet. What do you suppose Stephen saw as he looked up into heaven and cried out, “Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit, and do not charge them with this sin.” **Acts 7:59** Then he died. This must have had an impact on Saul. Chapter 8 opens with Saul giving approval to Stephen’s death. He was more than a coat rack.

Afterward, Saul took a much more active role in the persecution of Christians, going into their homes to arrest them and send them to prison. This resulted in believers fleeing the area for safety. As they fled, they took the gospel message with them. The gospel has always spread and thrived under persecution. I don’t think it is God’s will for His people to be persecuted, but He did tell us it would happen. When it does happen, the gospel grows and spreads. This was no exception.

In the outward move from Jerusalem, we read that Phillip went down to Samaria and preached the gospel of Christ. The gospel spread, people were healed, and lives were transformed. Where Christ was preached there was great joy.

Just as Jesus said, they became witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and very soon the gospel would be taken to the whole world. Are you bearing witness to what Jesus has done in your life? Spread the word—the gospel!

Day 5

Read Isaiah 24:10-16

In the translation you are reading, **Isaiah 24:16**, may be written, “Glory to the righteous!” This is translated, “Glory to the righteous one” in the NIV. The actual context makes the righteous one more preferable. In Isaiah 24:10-16, two different groups of people are pictured. There are those who are willfully, sinfully rejecting the things of the Lord. They fill themselves with too much wine and waste their lives on things contrary to the Lord. The other group of people gives praise and worship to the One mentioned in Verse 16 as the righteous (one). This group is often referred to in Scripture as the remnant. The remnant is a people who remain faithful to God and worship Him, even in a world which totally rejects God and despises Him. This remnant sings a song of glory and worship to the righteous one.

In our passage this week, Stephen called Jesus the Just One (Acts 7:52). This could also be translated the Righteous One. Stephen connected Jesus to the passage in Isaiah by calling Him the Righteous One. Stephen was saying the Righteous One in Isaiah who was to be worshipped was Jesus. Jesus would be worshipped, but the Sanhedrin and their forefathers had rejected Him. Stephen connected the dots for the Sanhedrin, but they were not willing to accept the truth. It was at this point they became enraged and had Stephen stoned to death.

Stephen represents for us the manner and disposition of the remnant. He was one who stood on the truth of who Jesus was. He connected the dots for himself and sought to help others do the same. We, too, are part of the believing remnant. Although we are not Jewish, we stand firm proclaiming Jesus to all people so they may also know the truth.

Stand firm, no matter what is happening, and make Jesus known.

WEEK 64 PHILIP'S MINISTRY AMONG THE SAMARITANS-----Dennis Watson

The gospel began to spread following the intense persecution after the stoning of Stephen. Many of the believers left Jerusalem and took the gospel with them. Philip was one of the first deacons (Acts 6:5) present with those who gathered for prayer after Jesus ascended (Acts 1:13). He was probably present with the group when the Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost and he was also one of the first to obey Jesus' command to take the gospel to all people. This week, we will be introduced to the beginning of the spread of the gospel beyond Jerusalem and the Jewish people.

Day 1

Read Acts 7:57-8:3

At the end of Acts 7 and the opening of Acts 8, we see a pretty intense event. I have really come to appreciate the word in Luke 10:31 translated *chance*. It is only used one time in the New Testament. It was used regarding the priest who *by chance* came up on the nearly dead man who was finally rescued by the good Samaritan. The word means the concurrence of events, not chance or coincidence. The day Stephen was stoned to death there was a man taking care of the coats of the people doing the stoning. That man's name was Saul who later became Paul. So we have the convergence of persecution, the martyrdom of Stephen, the one who was doing the persecuting, and the first to go and take the gospel to the Samaritans.

It feels like this is the starting line of the church spreading the gospel to the world and while it may seem insignificant, it is such a huge event with major players drawing a line in the sand and moving on. We have Stephen's death, we have Saul seeking to stop the message carriers by persecution, (The one doing the persecuting would soon become the great missionary and author of a large part of the New Testament, Paul.) and we have Philip going to Samaria to lead people to Jesus. Others would branch out with the message and all of history would be changed forever.

There are no coincidences and no coincidental people. We all are in on the work of God to participate in the activity of seeking and saving those which are lost. All people participate in one way or another. Some are obediently delivering the message. Others are hindering the message through disobedience. Many are opposing the message. Then there are those who are receiving or waiting to receive the message. So, which are you? In that moment in history, many were opposing the message by stoning Stephen. Saul was in on the stoning and continued to actively persecute Christians. Many just went back to their homes in Jerusalem and did nothing. Philip and a few others moved on and in so doing made the message known and the gospel spread. So, one more time, which are you?

Day 2

Read Acts 8:4-8

There were those who left Jerusalem and in doing so they "... went everywhere preaching the word." (**Verse 4**) My friend and evangelist, Keith Fordham, likes to make a distinction between two words. One is the word *kurusso* which means to preach or proclaim. The other word is *euangeledzo* which is the word evangelize. Here, the people went everywhere evangelizing, not preaching. They went with the purpose and plan to lead people to accept Jesus as Savior and Lord.

Philip was the first to go out evangelizing. Who was this man named Philip? He was not the Philip who was one of the twelve apostles listed in Matthew 10. He was one of the first seven deacons selected in Acts 6 and he was present with the followers of Jesus who gathered for prayer in Acts 1 after Jesus ascended into heaven. He was with the group waiting for the sending of the Holy Spirit. He was most likely present on the Day of Pentecost when God sent the Holy Spirit to empower the church. We know that he had four daughters who prophesied. We also know that about twenty years after the events recorded in Acts 8, Paul (Saul) was a house guest of Philip in his home in Caesarea. I am sure this made for an interesting visit after Saul's (Paul's) involvement in Stephen's death and the persecution led by Saul (Paul) in those early days.

Philip had forgiven and moved on and the gospel was being spread. The book of Acts ends with the words without hindrance. Philip obviously did not let Paul's (Saul's) earlier days of persecuting Christians hinder his evangelizing. Anything hindering you?

Day 3

Read Acts 8:9-13

The pure gospel was proclaimed. Philip was faithful to set forth the gospel. A person is saved only through the finished work of Jesus when He died on the cross for sin and was raised again to give victorious life through the Holy Spirit to those who receive Him. Unfortunately, when that happens, there are usually distractions which hamper the acceptance of the truth.

At the beginning of Verse 9 there is a conjunction in the opening sentence. " But there was a certain man called Simon..." Verse 9 It is the conjunction "but." Simon had professed belief in the gospel and had, along with many others, been baptized. His previous employment was that of a magician or sorcerer. All was going well until Simon, who had originally been the main show in town now had been top-billed by the gospel which was proclaimed by Philip and others. Anytime someone is saved, it is a reason to celebrate and rejoice, but often there are hindrances.

Let's focus on the message of the gospel of Jesus. There are three aspects of biblical faith which are clearly presented when the gospel is shared. First of all, salvation is through Christ alone. Peter, when speaking of Jesus and salvation says, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." **Acts 4:12** It is Jesus plus nothing. Secondly, salvation is through Christ alone by grace alone. Paul makes this clear in **Ephesians 2:8a**, "For by grace you have been saved." Grace is God's kindness and love given without any performance on the part of the one who receives His grace. It is all because of His grace and goodness. And lastly, it is through Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone. "Through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God" **Ephesians 2:8b** It is received by faith. Faith is belief in what God has done through Jesus Christ. The last part is in the last of Verse 8 and Verse 9, "...and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not of works, lest anyone should boast" **Ephesians 2:8-9** (NKJV). It is all the work of God. We only receive it by faith.

Have you received His greatest gift? If not, acknowledge your sin and receive the work of God through Jesus Christ on your behalf. He died for you to bring forgiveness and He was raised up to give you His life. Rejoice in His great salvation.

Day 4

Read Acts 8:14-27

When word reached Jerusalem that many Samaritans had been saved and had been baptized, Peter and John were sent to check on things. This was the first case of non-Jews becoming believers in Jesus Christ. They discovered the Samaritans had not yet received the Holy Spirit. They prayed for the newly baptized believers and they received the Holy Spirit. Here is how Warren Wiersbe explains it:

“Jesus had given Peter the “keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 16:13–20), which meant that Peter had the privilege of “opening the door of faith” to others. He opened the door to the Jews at Pentecost, and now he opened the door to the Samaritans. Later, he would open the door of faith to the Gentiles (Acts 10). Remember too that the first ten chapters of Acts record a period of transition, from the Jew to the Samaritan to the Gentile. God’s pattern for today is given in Acts 10: the sinner hears the Gospel, believes, receives the gift of the Spirit, and then is baptized. It is dangerous to base any doctrine or practice only on what is recorded in Acts 1–10, for you might be building on that which was temporary and transitional.”⁶

Simon had a bit of a problem, one which we all have, and that problem is pride. He had all the attention and the people were amazed at his performances. He wanted to buy the power to do what had just taken place—to give people the Holy Spirit. He was immediately rebuked by Peter and he was told to repent and he would be forgiven. Simon did what we often do-- he resorted to his old ways. He asked Peter to pray for him so he would not be destroyed.

Was Simon really saved? I do not know for sure, but here is what Tony Evans has to say: “It is clear that Simon was a believer (see 8:13)—though one in extreme error. Years of practicing magic and claiming to have divine power (see 8:9–11) had resulted in bitterness and wickedness in his heart (8:23). Repentance and prayer

⁶Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 436). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

were needed (8:22) to root out the evil ways and desires that had so long been a part of his life. God is not a slot machine to be used to fulfill our carnal desires.”⁷

The Lord saves and nothing can separate us from His love.

⁷Evans, T. (2019). *The Tony Evans Bible Commentary (Ac 8:21–24)*. Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

Day 5

Read Acts 8:26-40

After the events and successful gospel presentation in Samaria, the Holy Spirit instructed Philip to move on from there and go to a specific place on a specific road. It was there Philip encountered an Ethiopian who was in charge of the Queen of Ethiopia's treasury. This man was referred to as a eunuch although this does not necessarily mean he had been castrated. In those days, this was the case of many who were given authority over a harem or a particular treasury. This man believed in the God of the Jews and was returning home from worshipping in Jerusalem. He was a religious man and he was in his chariot reading from the book of Isaiah. Philip was instructed by the Spirit to catch up with the chariot. He approached the chariot and heard the man reading this passage from Isaiah: "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; ³²And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He opened not His mouth. ³³In His humiliation His justice was taken away, And who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth." **Acts 8:32-33**

Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading, but the man told him he needed someone to explain it. Peter preached (evangelized) to the man explaining the passage was about Jesus Christ. The man was so convicted and moved by the Word of God and the Spirit of God the man asked Philip to baptize him when they came to a body of water.

After baptizing the man, Philip was taken away and the man continued home rejoicing.

You probably know religious people who attend church, read the Bible, and do all the right things, but there may be a need to ask them if they are truly saved, truly born again. I believe there are going to be a lot of good church people who will miss the boat because they have never really come to Jesus Christ. Be bold. Ask the question are you saved?

WEEK 65 SAUL IS KNOCKED TO THE GROUND----

-----Chris Watson

Praise the Lord God can change anyone. No one is too far gone for Him to save. If He can change a a man who killed Christians into one of the greatest missionaries of all time, He can change anyone. God is into doing the impossible. As you read these devotions, what are you believing God for that only He can do? Who are you praying for? If you think God could never save them, remember our account this week.

Day 1

Read Acts 8:26-40

The Gospel will be proclaimed. Prior to today's passage and toward the beginning of Chapter 8, Saul was persecuting Christians and throwing them in jail. Christians dispersed all over proclaiming Jesus' name as they went on their way. In Bible times and up until today, the persecution of God's Church and His people has not hindered the gospel, but rather has helped in its spread.

In our passage today, Philip was visited by an angel of the Lord and told to go toward the desert. He didn't ask questions, he just went. He didn't request further instructions, and he didn't ask why or for how long, he just went. Can't we all learn from this? When the Holy Spirit asks us to do something, we should not play 20 questions, but take the step as He has instructed us. Philip obeyed at once.

The Spirit of the Lord continued speaking to Philip and he listened all the way until he met the eunuch and began to explain to him what he was reading from Isaiah 53. The eunuch clearly said he didn't understand what he was reading. He asked, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" Philip began to share with him what he was reading, sharing the gospel, and the eunuch responded to Jesus and was baptized. The eunuch declared, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." **Acts 8:37** The eunuch knew of God and knew something of his place before God. By saying he believed and understood the relationship between Jesus and God, he was

essentially calling on Jesus' name for salvation. Back then, the respect for God was incredible, but one of the things many struggled with was whether Jesus was really God's Son, the Messiah. When God showed the eunuch this, he knew he needed Jesus and trusted Him and was baptized.

Philip was a willing vessel and he was used by God at each step of obedience and, in the end, God used him to proclaim His name. This is incredible, because of Philip's obedience and God's plan, the eunuch followed Christ. God simply desires us to be obedient where we are and follow Him, speaking the truth and the gospel wherever we are. How are you sharing the truth where God has you now?

Day 2

Read Acts 9:1-9

Saul was not just some average guy. His father and mother were both native Jews and he called himself a Hebrew of the Hebrews. He was of the tribe of Benjamin which adhered to Judah. He was very educated in the things of God.

Warren Wiersbe writes “When you look at Saul on the road you see a very zealous man who actually thought that he was doing God a service by persecuting the church. Had you stopped him and asked for his reasons, he might have said something like this: ‘Jesus of Nazareth is dead. Do you expect me to believe that a crucified nobody is the promised Messiah? According to our law, anybody who is hung on a tree is cursed (Deut. 21:23). Would God take a cursed false prophet and make him the Messiah? No! His followers are preaching that Jesus is both alive and doing miracles through them. But their power comes from Satan, not God. This is a dangerous sect, and I intend to eliminate it before it destroys our Jewish faith.’”

Saul was spiritually blind and did not understand all the Old Testament taught about the Messiah. He stumbled over the cross and depended on his own good works. When Saul met God that day, the Lord revealed to him what others had tried to show him. He learned Jesus was the Messiah. In light of this, Saul realized his sin was against God and God totally changed him.

Saul had just encountered the holy and righteous God. Can you imagine what the Damascus road experience must have been like for him? What would the next three days have been like for him, to be blind and totally dependent on others? I am sure he and the Lord had some serious conversations during that time. The Lord had ample time to speak to him, as he could not see and did not eat or drink.

There is so much which can be taken away from this account. No one is too far gone from the Lord’s grasp. Have you been praying for a lost spouse, child, friend, co-worker, or other family member?

Don't stop. Remember, Saul was coordinating the jailing and killing of Christians before his conversion, so God can save anyone. Not only can God save anyone, but He can also use anyone He so chooses. No matter your past, it doesn't define you. While there are consequences for our choices, God can still use us, as He did with Saul/Paul.

As you wrap up today's devotions, pray for those which are lost and those you may feel are too far gone. Pray for them to have a Saul-like experience and for God to wake them up. Pray that God would also wake up believers and send revival in our lives and in our church.

Day 3

Read Acts 9:10-22

Can you put yourself in Ananias' shoes for a moment? I think we would have some of the same thoughts he was having. Contemplate what you would do if the Lord had just told you to go to Saul and lay your hands on him so he might see again and receive the Holy Spirit. What would your response be? I would like to think mine would be like Ananias' considering the command came from the Lord but I am sure I might have at least a few doubts and questions. Ananias knew the chief priest was on Saul's side and that he might in fact get jailed or sent away for doing what he was about to do. Nonetheless, Ananias obeyed.

The Holy Spirit spoke and Ananias obeyed and he was blessed by seeing what God did when he obeyed. He prayed for Saul who then received both his sight and the Holy Spirit. Immediately, Saul was baptized. It's understood Saul already trusted Christ while on the road to Damascus. His baptism followed his conversion and he received the Holy Spirit.

From this point, Saul went on to preach and share that Jesus was the Son of God. Those who saw him recognized Saul as the one who had gone against, arrested, and approved the killing of other Christians just days before he began preaching Jesus as the Christ. What a difference Jesus makes! Jesus changes us, praise the Lord. He changes our hearts, minds, actions, and words. Once we have had a true encounter with Jesus, we are never the same. Just three days prior, Saul was literally terrorizing Christians and yet, at this point, he was now one of them. The power of Jesus is incredible!

How has Jesus changed you? What has He done in your life and how did He save you from the power of sin and death? If He has done so, then the Holy Spirit should constantly be working in your life. If that's the case, you are being obedient to Him just like Ananias. What a joy it is to step out in faith and follow God. Like Ananias, we may have questions or not be so sure how everything will work out, but when we step out in faith, we see God do great things. How are you stepping out in faith right now? Ask God to help you step out in faith and follow Him.

Day 4

Read Acts 9:23-31

Much of the American Church today teaches trust Jesus, give Him your life, and your life will go well: as though life for a Christian is a bed of roses. In fact, it's often the total opposite. Teaching like this, which is contrary to reality, is the reason some people walk away from the faith. They are not disciplined or taught that being a Christ follower doesn't mean you will escape trouble or difficulties, it means you actually will have them (John 16:33). However, as you go through them, you have the strength of Jesus, Who has overcome the world. Knowing Him and having His peace and the life after this one beats any struggle or difficulty we will face in this life.

Not long after Saul's conversion, he was running for his life because many of the religious leaders didn't want to believe the truth. Notice what Luke writes in Verse 31 of today's passage. He tells us Paul was running for his life, people were questioning the disciples, and yet the gospel was.....SPREADING! Bible history, church history, closed-country history, and our own history tell us the gospel often spreads fastest in the midst of adversity. Not only does the gospel spread, but often the sheep and goats are separated during such times. I believe we see this happening today. It is no longer culturally popular or really acceptable to be a believer, so some believers are taking a back seat, dropping out, or turning their eyes from Jesus. It could be they were never a believer in the first place. When adversity and difficulty comes, true believers turn to God and then to God's Church. Those who turn away often never truly believed what they professed to believe.

Have you faced troubles lately? Remember James' words from **James 1:2-4**, "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing."

As believers we will face tough times. Our faith will be tested. While it is not the case yet, we may one day have to run for our lives as followers of Jesus. Even so, nothing beats knowing Jesus. Praise God for Paul's (Saul's) words, "For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." **Romans 8:38-39** Thank God today that He is in control. Though you may be facing difficulties and struggles, He is still sovereign and Lord over all.

Day 5

Read Psalm 130

“A watchman patrolling the wall of a city at night would be glad to see morning come, for dawn meant that his work was finished and he could go home and rest. Without a clock to tell the time, a watchman looked in the sky for the morning star rising on the horizon. The morning star signaled that night was almost over, so the watchman looked eagerly to see it. The psalmist compared a watchman waiting for the morning with how he eagerly waited for God to forgive his sin. As a sinner, he realized that his only hope—that Israel’s hope was for God to forgive them and redeem their sins.” Marty Machowski

We know God answered the psalmist’s prayer by sending Jesus. We know from Revelation 22:16 that Jesus is our bright morning star. He is also our rest and we will no longer battle with sin one day. Peter said in **2 Peter 1:19**, “And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”

Praise the Lord, Jesus has redeemed us. He has bought us back with His precious blood. Therefore, I have nothing or no one to fear, because He is in control. God is our rest; we can rest in Him. Isn’t this a great reminder? What are you facing? What are you dealing with? What worries you today? Let God be your rest; place it on His shoulders and let Him carry the burden because He can handle it.

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