



# *The Church Begins*

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**Acts 1-12**





# The Church Begins

## Acts ~ Chapters 1-12

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# The Church Begins

## *Acts ~ The Ascension* Lesson Intro – Chapter 1:1-26

Acts 1 bridges Jesus's earthly ministry and the church's birth, opening with forty days of post-resurrection teaching about God's kingdom before Jesus ascends to heaven with the promise that He will return "in the same way." As believers gathered together in unified prayer, they waited for the promised Holy Spirit who would soon empower them to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. In this chapter, we will find the foundational blocks of the early church as they waited – be on the lookout for their commitment to Scripture and prayer, the importance of community, and seeking God's guidance.

Today as you read the chapter together, make as many observations as possible. Consider what does the text say, what does it mean, and how should you respond? Ask yourself "What does this teach me about God? How does this challenge my view of myself or the world? How should I respond to God in light of this?"

### ***Step One – Observation***

Read through the entire chapter. Using a pen and highlighter, engage with the text. Underline key words and highlight key phrases. Look for repeated words or patterns. Journal your questions, observations and insights in the space on the right.

#### ***Chapter 1***

<sup>1</sup>In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach <sup>2</sup>until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. <sup>3</sup>After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. <sup>4</sup>On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. <sup>5</sup>For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

<sup>6</sup>Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

<sup>7</sup>He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup>But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my

witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

<sup>9</sup> After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

<sup>10</sup> They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. <sup>11</sup> “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

<sup>12</sup> Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s walk from the city. <sup>13</sup> When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. <sup>14</sup> They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

<sup>15</sup> In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) <sup>16</sup> and said, “Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus. <sup>17</sup> He was one of our number and shared in our ministry.”

<sup>18</sup> (With the payment he received for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. <sup>19</sup> Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)

<sup>20</sup> “For,” said Peter, “it is written in the Book of Psalms:

“May his place be deserted;  
let there be no one to dwell in it,’ and,

“May another take his place of leadership.”

<sup>21</sup> Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, <sup>22</sup> beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was

taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.”

<sup>23</sup> So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. <sup>24</sup> Then they prayed, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen <sup>25</sup> to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs.” <sup>26</sup> Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.

## ***Questions***

### **Background information**

- Who wrote this book, and what's their background?
- Who was the original audience, and what was their situation?
- When and where was it written (historical setting)?
- What is the main purpose or theme of the book?
- What is the literary genre (history, law, wisdom, poetry, narrative, epistle, prophecy & apocalyptic)?
- How does this book fit into the larger biblical story

### **Group Discussion:**

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. ~ Acts 1:8*

1. Acts 1:8 is a blueprint for the entire Book of Acts and Jesus’ mandate to all believers. Break the verse into significant components and share your thoughts about each. What does this teach me about God? How does this challenge my view of myself or the world? How should I respond to God in light of this?
2. Jesus gives us both a command (Matthew 28:19-20) and a promise (Acts 1:8). Which do you tend to focus on more—the “what” you’re supposed to do or the “how” God will empower you? What changes when you hold both together?



# The Church Begins

## Acts ~ Pentecost Lesson 1 – Chapter 2:1-47

*Without the Holy Spirit, God is far away...With the Holy Spirit, the Gospel is the power of life.*  
~ St. Athanasius

Acts 2 opens fifty days after Passover and ten days after the Ascension. Jesus had instructed his disciples to stay in Jerusalem for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, and so they waited, praying and preparing their hearts for the next astonishing event to unfold. As they assembled, wind and fire—two miraculous symbols of God’s presence and power—were experienced by everyone gathered, and nothing was ever the same. This chapter gives us a beautiful picture of how dynamic a church on mission can be—loving one another, sharing faith boldly, and worshipping God in unity and truth. In this week’s lesson, we will unpack this incredible story of the early church and find inspiration in the promise and power of the Holy Spirit for our Christian community today.

### **Step One – Observation**

Read through the entire chapter. Using a pen and highlighter, engage with the text. Underline key words and highlight key phrases. Look for repeated words or patterns. Journal your questions, observations and insights in the space on the right.

#### **Chapter 2**

<sup>1</sup>When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup>Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup>They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. <sup>4</sup>All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

<sup>5</sup>Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. <sup>6</sup>When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. <sup>7</sup>Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? <sup>8</sup>Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? <sup>9</sup>Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup>Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome <sup>11</sup>(both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our

own tongues!”<sup>12</sup> Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”<sup>13</sup> Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”

<sup>14</sup> Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say.<sup>15</sup> These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning!<sup>16</sup> No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

<sup>17</sup> “In the last days, God says,

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.  
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,  
your young men will see visions,  
your old men will dream dreams.

<sup>18</sup> Even on my servants, both men and women,  
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,  
and they will prophesy.

<sup>19</sup> I will show wonders in the heavens above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood and fire and billows of smoke.

<sup>20</sup> The sun will be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood  
before the coming of the great and glorious  
day of the Lord.

<sup>21</sup> And everyone who calls  
on the name of the Lord will be saved.’

<sup>22</sup> “Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.<sup>23</sup> This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.<sup>24</sup> But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.<sup>25</sup> David said about him:

“I saw the Lord always before me.  
Because he is at my right hand,  
I will not be shaken.

<sup>26</sup> Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue  
rejoices;

my body also will rest in hope,  
<sup>27</sup> because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, you will not let your holy one see decay.

<sup>28</sup> You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.’ life;

<sup>29</sup> ‘Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. <sup>30</sup> But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. <sup>31</sup> Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. <sup>32</sup> God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. <sup>33</sup> Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. <sup>34</sup> For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said,

“The Lord said to my Lord:  
“Sit at my right hand  
<sup>35</sup> until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.”

<sup>36</sup> ‘Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.’

<sup>37</sup> When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’

<sup>38</sup> Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup> The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.’

<sup>40</sup> With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.’ <sup>41</sup> Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

<sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. <sup>43</sup> Everyone was filled with

awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.<sup>44</sup> All the believers were together and had everything in common.<sup>45</sup> They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.<sup>46</sup> Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,<sup>47</sup> praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

### ***Step Two – Key Verse***

Looking back over this week's reading, pick one verse that stands out to you. Write it down below and explain why you chose it. Commit it to memory as your verse for the week.

### ***Step Three – Questions***

1. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit lit a fire that has burned brightly ever since. The significance of this event cannot be overstated. Because of Jesus' atoning work on the cross, the Spirit of God has arrived (John 16:7-15). He is now able to dwell within the hearts of all believers, guiding, instructing and empowering us in how to continue Jesus' Kingdom work in the world. Being filled with the Holy Spirit doesn't have to be scary or weird - it's what we are made for! What does being "filled with the Holy Spirit" mean to you? Consider what you've been taught about this throughout your life (traditions, background, exposure). How has your understanding of the Holy Spirit been challenged and matured and what questions do you still have?

2. In verses 14-36, after the Holy Spirit is poured out, Peter stands up and explains how the extraordinary events they have witnessed over the past several months had all been predicted hundreds of years earlier. He ties the Gospel message of Jesus in with the prophesies of David and Joel, demonstrating how this was all a part of God's plan. The assembled Jews would have been very familiar with these passages because the Bible was *their* story, and they greatly valued knowing it. How exciting to think that it is our story too! Knowing God's Word and how our own story fits within it is our testimony, giving us reason to share the hope we have. Read 1 Peter 3:15. How comfortable are you at sharing the Good News of Jesus? Where do you need to grow (knowledge, confidence, clarity, etc.)? If you have never done so, spend some time tying your story in with the Gospel message and pray for a person you could share it with this week.
  
3. Reflecting on Peter's sermon, it is remarkable to observe the undeniable transformation in his life. Only 53 days after the death of Jesus, he had gone from denying Christ (John 18:15-27) to being utterly sold out for Him. Peter was a changed man. Dr. Steve Schell notes three major differences in Peter's life: he loved his enemies, he didn't fear death, and he was baptized in the Holy Spirit. There is a confidence and fearlessness, borne of the highest of highs and the lowest of lows, that he has embraced. Transformation is a process. If an outsider observed your life before and after Jesus, what would they notice? The believer should always be moving towards greater fruit – read Galatians 5:22-25 to help reveal areas of further growth and share where you're still desiring transformation.

4. As Peter concludes his sermon in verse 37, we are told those who heard it were “cut to the heart.” What does he direct them to do next in response to their conviction? This is a directive repeated many times throughout the New Testament. Thoughtfully consider why you think these two commands are essential for a Christian. What promises does Peter give if they obey (verses 38-39)? If you are a believer, expound on how these promises have proven true in your own life.
  
5. No sooner was the Spirit poured out on the day of Pentecost than a close-knit community began to form. The word “fellowship” comes from the Greek word *koinonia*, which means a deep and abiding intimate connection with others. Look at the dynamics described in verses 42-47 and underline key words in the passage. Reflect on these and take inventory of your current relational reality. Does it look anything like what is described here? What are some common obstacles that hinder your ability to live with a *glad and sincere heart*? What practical steps can you take this week to bring a greater sense of *koinonia* into your life and relationships?

### ***Step Four – Application & Prayer***

Take what you’ve learned from reading and journaling to the next level – apply it to your own life. How might this week’s reading impact your thinking and actions?

Take some time with the Lord. Seek Him, listen, and write a prayer based on what you've learned or anything else on your heart this week.

### ***Step Five – Personal Enrichment***

Use the bordered space to deepen your connection to what you're learning. Think inside or outside of the box and bring in a creative, personal or academic element. Perhaps it's a poem, song or drawing. Possibly it's sharing your findings learned from additional outside study. This exercise is purposefully open-ended. Use your imagination and bring something unique and relevant to this week's lesson.

## *NOTES*

# The Church Begins

## Acts ~ Early Church & Persecution

### Lesson 2 – Chapters 3:1-4:31

*Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it. ~ Helen Keller*

In Acts 1 and 2, we read about incredible events: the resurrected Jesus ascends to heaven, the early church takes its first steps, and Peter preaches a message of repentance that leads to the salvation of 3,000 people. This week, we will look at how persecution began to impact the early church soon after the Day of Pentecost. In Acts 3–4:3, we will cover nearly two chapters across three different locations in this pivotal historical narrative. We will clearly see that when the Lord moves in power and brings healing, challenges are sure to follow—and, just as He did for the disciples, the Lord provides exactly what we need.

#### **Step One – Observation**

Read through the entire chapter. Using a pen and highlighter, engage with the text. Underline key words and highlight key phrases. Look for repeated words or patterns. Journal your questions, observations and insights in the space on the right.

#### **Chapter 3**

<sup>1</sup> One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. <sup>2</sup> Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. <sup>3</sup> When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. <sup>4</sup> Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!” <sup>5</sup> So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.

<sup>6</sup> Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” <sup>7</sup> Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. <sup>8</sup> He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. <sup>9</sup> When all the people saw him walking and praising God, <sup>10</sup> they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

<sup>11</sup> While the man held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade. <sup>12</sup> When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? <sup>13</sup> The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. <sup>14</sup> You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. <sup>15</sup> You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. <sup>16</sup> By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.

<sup>17</sup> "Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. <sup>18</sup> But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. <sup>19</sup> Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, <sup>20</sup> and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. <sup>21</sup> Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. <sup>22</sup> For Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. <sup>23</sup> Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from their people.'

<sup>24</sup> "Indeed, beginning with Samuel, all the prophets who have spoken have foretold these days. <sup>25</sup> And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.' <sup>26</sup> When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to

you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.”

#### ***Chapter 4***

**4** The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. **2** They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. **3** They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. **4** But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.

**5** The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. **6** Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest’s family. **7** They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: “By what power or what name did you do this?”

**8** Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: “Rulers and elders of the people! **9** If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, **10** then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. **11** Jesus is

“the stone you builders rejected,  
which has become the cornerstone.”

**12** Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”

**13** When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. **14** But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. **15** So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then

conferred together. <sup>16</sup>“What are we going to do with these men?” they asked. “Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it. <sup>17</sup>But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name.”

<sup>18</sup>Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. <sup>19</sup>But Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! <sup>20</sup>As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

<sup>21</sup>After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. <sup>22</sup>For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.

<sup>23</sup>On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. <sup>24</sup>When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. <sup>25</sup>You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

“Why do the nations rage  
and the peoples plot in vain?

<sup>26</sup>The kings of the earth rise up  
and the rulers band together  
against the Lord  
and against his anointed one.

<sup>27</sup>Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. <sup>28</sup>They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. <sup>29</sup>Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. <sup>30</sup>Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

<sup>31</sup>After they prayed, the place where they were

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

### ***Step Two – Key Verse***

Looking back over this week's reading, pick one verse that stands out to you. Write it down below and explain why you chose it. Commit it to memory as your verse for the week.

### ***Step Three – Questions***

1. In Acts 3:1-10, a forty-year-old known beggar is healed. Put yourself for a moment in the place of both Peter and the beggar. Peter was just an ordinary guy. The beggar had not walked in forty years. How astonishing for a beggar who was only seeking some pocket change, to be offered a *complete physical healing!* When have you lost heart and lessened what you were willing to hope or ask for? Where might you need to believe for bigger things?
2. In Acts 3:11-25, Peter addresses the crowd by urging them to repent and follow Jesus, the Messiah foretold through God's prophets for generations. In verse 15, what sobering words does Peter say to his listeners? In verse 16, look at Peter's two reasons for healing the beggar. What does this reveal about Jesus? If you have chosen to follow Jesus, what did God use to teach you that He is Lord, Messiah, Savior – a person, book, song, or something else to initially reach toward you? (If you are still investigating the idea that Jesus is Lord, consider sharing your questions with your group.)

3. In Acts 4:1-12, Peter and John face immediate resistance and were brought before the religious leaders. Read Jesus' promise in John 16:33, spoken to the disciples just hours before He is crucified on the cross. It did not take long for trouble to come. When we align with Jesus, opposition always follows. Consider and list some areas or relationships in your life where you feel opposed because of your faith. Where might you need encouragement? Read Paul's words to young Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:8-13 and choose a verse to pray over your circumstances.
4. In Acts 4:13-21, the religious leaders continue to be baffled by the healed beggar and were unsure how to silence the disciples. In the end, the religious leaders settled on delivering threats to the disciples for their bold ministry. Threats and intimidation tactics were often used to undermine the people of God. Describe a time when you've been pressured or threatened to be silent about Jesus. Read 1 Peter 3:13-17 and list ways Peter teaches us to overcome threats, insults and slander. How can these verses help you to navigate any harsh or damaging words that you have experienced in the past or more recently? Take some time to bring any lingering, painful words spoken to the Lord for His healing.

5. After their release, the disciples immediately gathered to pray (4:23-31). They were not fearful – they were faithful in prayer and God responded in power. Read Colossians 1:9 and Ephesians 6:18. How do these verses encourage us to pray for one another? Too often, we bear our burdens alone, believing the lie that we will be too much for either Jesus or others to handle. But the disciples show us how to pray boldly with others and glorify God. In verse 31, how did God respond to their corporate prayer? What has been your experience with group prayer and what are some obstacles that keep you from praying with others?

### ***Step Four – Application & Prayer***

Take what you've learned from reading and journaling to the next level – apply it to your own life. How might this week's reading impact your thinking and actions?

Take some time with the Lord. Seek Him, listen, and write a prayer based on what you've learned or anything else on your heart this week.

### ***Step Five – Personal Enrichment***

Use the bordered space to deepen your connection to what you're learning. Think inside or outside of the box and bring in a creative, personal or academic element. Perhaps it's a poem, song or drawing. Possibly it's sharing your findings learned from additional outside study. This exercise is purposefully open-ended. Use your imagination and bring something unique and relevant to this week's lesson.



# The Church Begins

## Power & Purity

### Lesson 3 ~ Chapter 4:32-5:42

*We give thanks to you, Lord God, the Almighty, the one who is and who always was, for now you have assumed your great power and have begun to reign. ~ Revelation 11:17*

Chapters 4 and 5 record the continued miraculous work of the Holy Spirit through the apostles. Because of the rapid church growth, the need to care for each other and act in unity significantly increased. Early believers generously shared possessions, funds, and community – and persisted to boldly preach Jesus in all circumstances. Followers of Jesus refused to compromise their faith and operated confidently in His power. This week we will explore what authentic discipleship, the pursuit of holiness, and the empowering presence of the Spirit looks like as we reflect upon our own lives, finding areas of victory and growth.

#### **Step One – Observation**

Read through the entire chapter. Using a pen and highlighter, engage with the text. Underline key words and highlight key phrases. Look for repeated words or patterns. Journal your questions, observations and insights in the space on the right.

#### **Chapter 4**

<sup>32</sup> All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. <sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all <sup>34</sup> that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales <sup>35</sup> and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), <sup>37</sup> sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

#### **Chapter 5**

<sup>1</sup> Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. <sup>2</sup> With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet

<sup>3</sup> Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that

Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?

<sup>4</sup> Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

<sup>5</sup> When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. <sup>6</sup> Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

<sup>7</sup> About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. <sup>8</sup> Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"

"Yes," she said, "that is the price."

<sup>9</sup> Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

<sup>10</sup> At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. <sup>11</sup> Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

<sup>12</sup> The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. <sup>13</sup> No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. <sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. <sup>15</sup> As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. <sup>16</sup> Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed.

<sup>17</sup> Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. <sup>18</sup> They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. <sup>19</sup> But during the night an angel of the Lord

opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. <sup>20</sup>“Go, stand in the temple courts,” he said, “and tell the people all about this new life.”

<sup>21</sup> At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people.

When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin—the full assembly of the elders of Israel—and sent to the jail for the apostles. <sup>22</sup> But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, <sup>23</sup>“We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside.” <sup>24</sup>On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were at a loss, wondering what this might lead to.

<sup>25</sup> Then someone came and said, “Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people.” <sup>26</sup>At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them.

<sup>27</sup> The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. <sup>28</sup>“We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.”

<sup>29</sup> Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings! <sup>30</sup>The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. <sup>31</sup>God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. <sup>32</sup>We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

<sup>33</sup> When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. <sup>34</sup>But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put

outside for a little while.<sup>35</sup> Then he addressed the Sanhedrin: “Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men.<sup>36</sup> Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing.<sup>37</sup> After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail.<sup>39</sup> But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”

<sup>40</sup> His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

<sup>41</sup> The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.<sup>42</sup> Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

### ***Step Two – Key Verse***

Looking back over this week’s reading, pick one verse that stands out to you. Write it down below and explain why you chose it. Commit it to memory as your verse for the week.

### ***Step Three – Questions***

1. Review verses 4:32-36 and look how verse 33 is strategically embedded, linking unity of hearts, God's grace, and groundbreaking giving to the apostle's powerful testimony of Jesus. As a result, emboldened new Christ followers stepped into radical trust *and* action. By creating a community of refuge, believers' selfless giving went much deeper than good ethics or social justice – it was revolutionary generosity. Consider how the faith of these early believers might challenge you and what your current giving pattern reveals about your own beliefs, fears, and priorities. In terms of time, talent, or treasure, where has some of your most fruitful giving been? Are there sacrificial next steps the Lord is asking you to take – is there anything you're afraid that He might ask you to give?
2. Verses 5:1-11 are quite shocking, but they clearly reveal the importance of protecting the foundational purity of the emerging church. God takes holiness seriously. While Ananias and Sapphira's sin appears to be lying about money, there are deeper issues – disdain of God, recognition and status seeking, lack of trust, and hypocrisy. Reflect how understanding these underlying sins might help explain why God was so severe. Are there areas where you lean towards compromising truth or living inauthentically, even in small ways? Recall when being confronted with your sin or bad choices was helpful and share how you can grow in both accountability and receiving correction humbly.

3. The night before His crucifixion, Jesus made an outrageous statement to His disciples. (Read John 14:12.) Soon after, we quickly learn Jesus meant what He said. In 5:12-16, we see ordinary men experiencing God's extraordinary presence, performing miraculous works as conduits of Holy Spirit power. NT Wright states these signs and wonders reveal God's Kingdom, the dawn of a new creation breaking into the present world – a place where heaven and earth overlap. As you're walking in this overlap, have you personally experienced God's supernatural work, or observed it others? How did it impact your faith and the faith of those around you? How can the church be a representation of heaven on earth?
4. When ordered to stop preaching, Peter responds with boldness and conviction, "We must obey God rather than human beings" (Acts 5:29). Compare this to Daniel's response in Daniel 6:10 and the three friends in Daniel 3:16-18. In today's time of cancel culture, there are great demands on society to follow specific ideologies and worldviews. How do these actions compel you in areas where cultural norms and even laws conflict with biblical truth? Have you ever missed an opportunity to stand for your convictions? Describe the experience and what you learned. When have you gone against the grain for the sake of righteousness and what were the outcomes and "costs"?

5. In verses 5:33-40, Gamaliel, who would later be known as Paul's rabbi, was a respected leader known for wisdom and careful judgment. Steeped in Scripture and deep understanding of God's character, he recognized the Lord's sovereignty and faithfulness. Because God proved faithful to fulfill all His purposes in the past, He could be trusted with the future. (See Psalm 33:10-11 & Proverbs 21:30.) Unlike the Sanhedrin, who reacted with fear, haste, and anger, Gamaliel demonstrated patience, wisdom and discernment. He embraced a "wait and see, let God be God" approach. When unsure whether an action or teaching aligns with God, how can believers discern the truth and navigate the tension between passive acceptance and immediate rejection? Where do you personally feel inclined to intervene or "fix" something – *or* someone? How does Gamaliel's approach challenge you and what actions (or non-actions) is God stirring you to take?

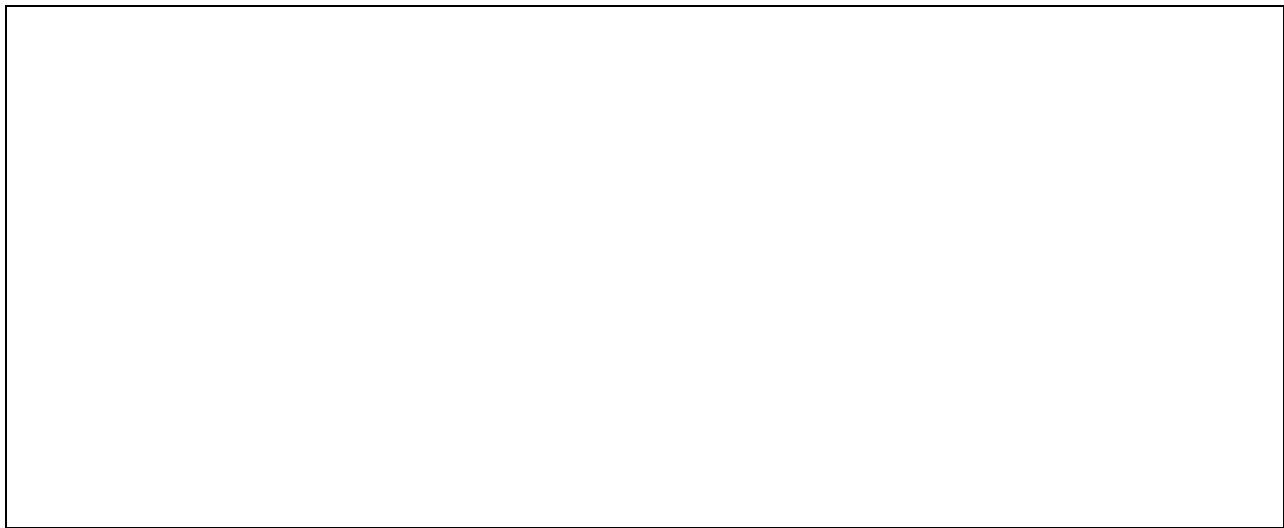
#### ***Step Four – Application & Prayer***

Take what you've learned from reading and journaling to the next level – apply it to your own life. How might this week's reading impact your thinking and actions?

Take some time with the Lord. Seek Him, listen, and write a prayer based on what you've learned or anything else on your heart this week.

### ***Step Five – Personal Enrichment***

Use the bordered space to deepen your connection to what you're learning. Think inside or outside of the box and bring in a creative, personal or academic element. Perhaps it's a poem, song or drawing. Possibly it's sharing your findings learned from additional outside study. This exercise is purposefully open-ended. Use your imagination and bring something unique and relevant to this week's lesson.



### ***NOTES***

# The Church Begins

## Acts ~ Expansion & Opposition

### Lesson 4 – Chapter 6:1-15

*“But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop them.” - Gamaliel, Acts 5:39*

In the blaze of signs and wonders, fervent preaching, and explosive growth, the early church soon met fierce opposition. Yet trouble also stirred within; as believers multiplied, new needs and old divisions sparked grumbling. Even as the apostles held fast to their calling – prayer and the ministry of the Word – and refused to be pulled away, jealous opponents began secretly stirring up the people and authorities against the believers. This week we will see how the early church’s example and the greater teaching in Scripture can embolden our faith and deeds amid conflict.

#### **Step One – Observation**

Read through the entire chapter. Using a pen and highlighter, engage with the text. Underline key words and highlight key phrases. Look for repeated words or patterns. Journal your questions, observations and insights in the space on the right.

#### **Chapter 6**

<sup>1</sup>In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. <sup>2</sup>So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. <sup>3</sup>Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them <sup>4</sup>and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

<sup>5</sup>This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. <sup>6</sup>They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

<sup>7</sup>So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

<sup>8</sup>Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup>Opposition arose,

however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen.<sup>10</sup> But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

<sup>11</sup> Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.”

<sup>12</sup> So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin.<sup>13</sup> They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law.<sup>14</sup> For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”

<sup>15</sup> All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

### ***Step Two – Key Verse***

Looking back over this week’s reading, pick one verse that stands out to you. Write it down below and explain why you chose it. Commit it to memory as your verse for the week.

### ***Step Three – Questions***

1. The church embraced both Hebrew believers rooted in Jerusalem and Hellenists—Greek-speaking Jews from distant lands—who differed in language, customs, and homeland. Think of a time you stepped into another culture, whether through travel, study, media, or friendship. What were some of the differences and similarities you noticed? List some difficulties that might arise in a multi-cultural community like we see in Acts. When the apostles acted with wisdom and humility, the whole group was pleased (v. 5). Consider what this moment teaches us about resolving conflict with grace and unity. How might you pursue that kind of peace in your own community today?

2. Because some of the Christian widows were being neglected, the twelve apostles proposed delegating this responsibility (v. 3). Read 1 Corinthians 12:12–27. How is this vivid picture of the body of Christ reflected in their solution? Do you tend to see your own role more like the apostles—devoted to prayer and the Word—or more like the Seven, serving practical needs with generosity and grace? All callings, though different, require people full of the Spirit and wisdom (v. 3). How does this passage free and inspire you to joyfully live out the unique contribution God has shaped for you in His body?
3. The same Stephen commissioned to care for widows is also preaching and doing miraculous signs. List all you know about Stephen from this chapter. The Jews of a local synagogue (a place of Jewish worship) began disputing with Stephen and were unable to stand up against his arguments (v. 10). Why? What did they do instead? Read Jesus’s own instructions to His disciples about this in Luke 21:12–19. Christians today still face lies, rumors and false charges for the faith. How does Jesus instruct us to respond, and how does Stephen’s shining example encourage us in the face of this difficulty?

4. The Council—the Great Sanhedrin, seventy-one of Israel’s most powerful religious leaders, presided over by the high priest—was the Jewish supreme court. They fiercely opposed Stephen, claiming he was speaking against God, Moses, the Temple and the Law (vs. 13-14). What claims had Jesus previously made in Matthew 12:6 and John 2:19–21? Why did this also anger the Council? Israel’s leaders, in their zeal to guard the holy things, missed the Holy One Himself and subtly turned the Law and Temple into idols. Describe a time you found yourself busy with “Christian duty” but perhaps lost sight of Jesus. What brought Him back to the center?
5. Though the young church was already notorious in Jerusalem, Acts 6 tells us that a small group of opponents deliberately stirred up the people against Stephen (v. 12). Imagine for a moment what that might have been like. Those incited were also the Jewish elders and the scribes, and only after that did the Council *arrest* Stephen. What are some ways that people “stir up” public opinion in our day? When the tide of public opinion suddenly turns unpredictable, hostile, or even dangerous, how do you believe followers of Jesus are called to respond? What passages of Scripture inform your response?

### ***Step Four – Application & Prayer***

Take what you've learned from reading and journaling to the next level – apply it to your own life. How might this week's reading impact your thinking and actions?

Take some time with the Lord. Seek Him, listen, and write a prayer based on what you've learned or anything else on your heart this week.

### ***Step Five – Personal Enrichment***

Use the bordered space to deepen your connection to what you're learning. Think inside or outside of the box and bring in a creative, personal or academic element. Perhaps it's a poem, song or drawing. Possibly it's sharing your findings learned from additional outside study. This exercise is purposefully open-ended. Use your imagination and bring something unique and relevant to this week's lesson.

## *NOTES*

# The Church Begins

## Acts ~ Stephen's Martyrdom Lesson 5 – Chapter 7

*"To endure the cross is not tragedy; it is the suffering which is the fruit of an exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ." ~ Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

The previous chapters in Acts recorded many bold proclamations of Christ by the apostles. Chapter seven narrows in on the man who becomes the first of many Christian martyrs. Despite this distinction, Stephen's sacrifice is not the center of the chapter, nor the message the author is ultimately conveying. Instead, Jesus' glory reigns supreme. At the pinnacle moment of his death, Stephen experiences the fulfillment of God's new covenant with mankind when he looks to heaven and sees Jesus enthroned at the right hand of God. This week we will consider how persecution is a privilege when considering Jesus' infinite glory.

### **Step One – Observation**

Read through the entire chapter. Using a pen and highlighter, engage with the text. Underline key words and highlight key phrases. Look for repeated words or patterns. Journal your questions, observations and insights in the space on the right.

#### **Chapter 7**

<sup>1</sup>Then the high priest asked Stephen, “Are these charges true?”

<sup>2</sup> To this he replied: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran. <sup>3</sup> ‘Leave your country and your people,’ God said, ‘and go to the land I will show you.’

<sup>4</sup> “So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. <sup>5</sup> He gave him no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. <sup>6</sup> God spoke to him in this way: ‘For four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated. <sup>7</sup> But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,’ God said, ‘and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.’ <sup>8</sup> Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him

eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.

<sup>9</sup> “Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him <sup>10</sup> and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.

<sup>11</sup> “Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our ancestors could not find food. <sup>12</sup> When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers on their first visit. <sup>13</sup> On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph’s family. <sup>14</sup> After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. <sup>15</sup> Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our ancestors died. <sup>16</sup> Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money.

<sup>17</sup> “As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt had greatly increased. <sup>18</sup> Then ‘a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.’ <sup>19</sup> He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our ancestors by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.

<sup>20</sup> “At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for by his family. <sup>21</sup> When he was placed brought him up as her own son. <sup>22</sup> Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.

<sup>23</sup> “When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his own people, the Israelites. <sup>24</sup> He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. <sup>25</sup> Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. <sup>26</sup> The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were

time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, each other?’

‘Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt  
27 “But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, ‘Who made you ruler and judge over us?’ 28 Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’ 29 When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons.

30 “After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. 31 When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to get a closer look, he heard the Lord say: 32 ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’ Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look.

33 “Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. 34 I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.’

35 “This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, ‘Who made you ruler and judge?’ He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. 36 He led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness.

37 “This is the Moses who told the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.’ 38 He was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us.

39 “But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. 40 They told Aaron, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don’t know

what has happened to him!'<sup>41</sup> That was the their own hands had made.<sup>42</sup> But God turned away from them and gave them over to they worship of the sun, moon and stars. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets: "Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel?

<sup>43</sup> You have taken up the tabernacle of Molek and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship. Therefore I will send you into exile' beyond Babylon.

<sup>44</sup> "Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen.<sup>45</sup> After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before the them. It remained in the land until the time of David,<sup>46</sup> who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.<sup>47</sup> But it was Solomon who built a house for him.

<sup>48</sup> "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says:

<sup>49</sup> "Heaven is my throne,  
and the earth is my footstool.

What kind of house will you build for me?  
says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be?<sup>50</sup> Has not my hand made all these things?"

<sup>51</sup> "You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit!<sup>52</sup> Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—<sup>53</sup> you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it."

<sup>54</sup> When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.<sup>55</sup> But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God,

and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.<sup>56</sup> “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

<sup>57</sup> At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, <sup>58</sup> dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

<sup>59</sup> While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” <sup>60</sup> Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

### ***Step Two – Key Verse***

Looking back over this week’s reading, pick one verse that stands out to you. Write it down below and explain why you chose it. Commit it to memory as your verse for the week.

### ***Step Three – Questions***

1. The length of Stephen’s speech makes it difficult for the reader to identify his point. Start by looking at the many promises God gave Abraham in verses 5-8. Despite being promised much, Abraham never saw their fulfillment in his lifetime. In this passage, Stephen is reminding his hearers of God’s covenant to the Israelites, encouraging them to be faithful. Are there promises from God’s Word (e.g., Isaiah 41:10 & Hebrews 13:5) or any given to you personally that have yet to be actualized? How does waiting for the fulfillment of these cultivate hope and trust in your life?

2. In the final section of Stephen's defense (verses 51-53), he confronts the Jews for their unbelief. Instead of waiting for the Righteous One, Stephen claims they've clung to the empty temple rituals and in so doing have shut their hearts to the leading of the Holy Spirit. In other words, the comfort of following a formulated religion has inhibited them from hearing from the living God. Describe what God's leadership in your life has looked like in the past. What are areas of comfort in your spiritual life that may currently be distracting you from his prompting? Take a moment to pray, asking God to soften your heart to his leadership in your life. Name some ways you personally can make room for disruption in your spiritual life so that you might be open to His guidance.
  
3. In the final moments before his death, Stephen looks to the heavens and sees a spectacular vision of God's infinite glory (verses 54-56). During his vision, Stephen identifies Jesus as the "Son of Man" which was a well-known term from the prophecies of Daniel. Read Daniel 7:13-14 and reflect on this description of Jesus. Using this title enraged the Jewish leaders, provoking them to stone Stephen. To this day, one of the greatest controversies about Jesus is his "Godship." Many claim that Jesus was just a good teacher or influential political leader. Even followers of Jesus often unintentionally interact with Him in this way rather than accepting His complete lordship. Why do people still take offense to the truth that Jesus is God? In your faith journey, where have you wrestled with Jesus' lordship?

4. Stephen, knowing death is imminent, encounters God's tangible nearness. Seeing the resurrected Jesus at the right hand of the Father, eclipsed all of Stephen's suffering. How might this experience have prepared him for martyrdom? When we endure difficulties, God promises his presence and companionship amid suffering (read Isaiah 43:2). How have you experienced His nearness in the past and how is He equipping you for the future?
5. With his final breath, Stephen directly echoed the final words of Jesus on the cross (verses 59-60). Stephen had learned to imitate his master in life as well as in death. The previous verses showed that Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit (6:5, 6:10, 7:55). It is by this power that Stephen was able to demonstrate incredible forgiveness and trust in God. What is an area in your life that requires a transformative miracle by the Holy Spirit for you to be able to extend supernatural trust, forgiveness, or love?

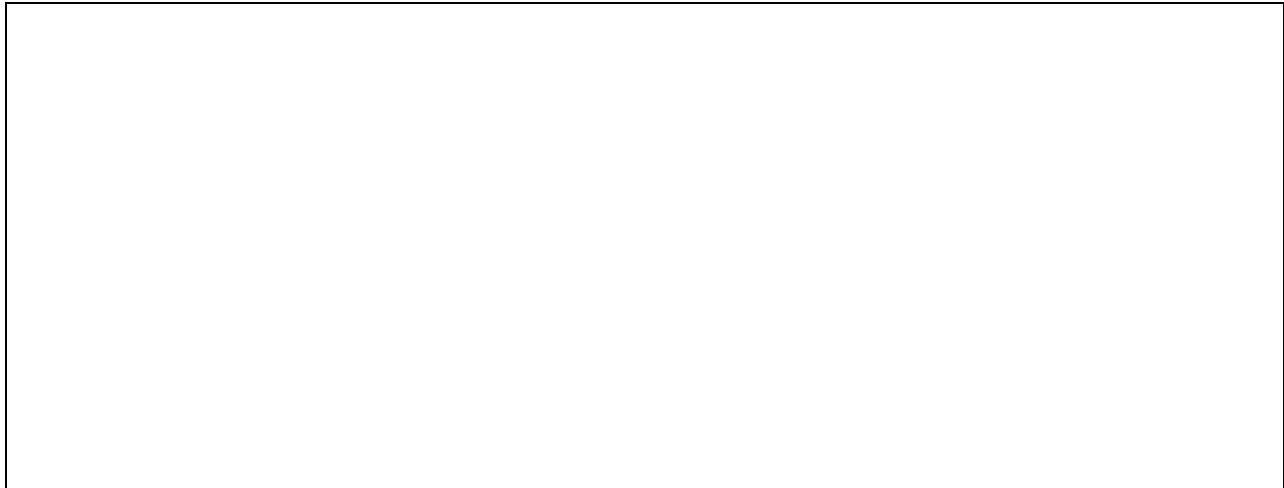
## ***Step Four – Application & Prayer***

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### ***Step Five – Personal Enrichment***

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### ***NOTES***

# The Church Begins

## Acts ~ The Gospel Spreads

### Lesson 6 – Chapter 8

*He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.” ~ Mark 16:15*

Immediately following the martyrdom of Stephen in Chapter 7, there arose a fierce persecution led by a young zealot named Saul. Yet what was intended to destroy the early church served as the very catalyst to propel it forward. As believers were scattered beyond the walls of Jerusalem, they didn't flee in silence; they went everywhere, turning a moment of great sorrow into a season of extraordinary joy. This week we will see how the Holy Spirit orchestrates divine appointments during chaos and find that even when we are scattered by life's storms, the promises of God remain steadfast, transforming our trials into a mission field and our obedience into rejoicing.

#### ***Step One – Observation***

Read through the entire chapter. Using a pen and highlighter, engage with the text. Underline key words and highlight key phrases. Look for repeated words or patterns. Journal your questions, observations and insights in the space on the right.

#### ***Chapter 8***

And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.<sup>2</sup> Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.<sup>3</sup> But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

<sup>4</sup> Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. <sup>5</sup> Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. <sup>6</sup> When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. <sup>7</sup> For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. <sup>8</sup> So there was great joy in that city.

<sup>9</sup> Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great,<sup>10</sup> and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, “This man is rightly called the Great Power of God.” <sup>11</sup> They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his

sorcery.<sup>12</sup> But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.<sup>13</sup> Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

<sup>14</sup> When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria.<sup>15</sup> When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit,<sup>16</sup> because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.<sup>17</sup> Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

<sup>18</sup> When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money<sup>19</sup> and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

<sup>20</sup> Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money!<sup>21</sup> You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God.<sup>22</sup> Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart.<sup>23</sup> For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."

<sup>24</sup> Then Simon answered, "Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me."

<sup>25</sup> After they had further proclaimed the word of the Lord and testified about Jesus, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.

<sup>26</sup> Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."<sup>27</sup> So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had

gone to Jerusalem to worship,<sup>28</sup> and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet.<sup>29</sup> The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”<sup>30</sup> Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

<sup>31</sup> “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

<sup>32</sup> This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,  
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.

<sup>33</sup> In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.

Who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth.”

<sup>34</sup> The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?”<sup>35</sup> Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

<sup>36</sup> As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?”<sup>38</sup> And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.<sup>39</sup> When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.<sup>40</sup> Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

### ***Step Two – Key Verse***

Looking back over this week’s reading, pick one verse that stands out to you. Write it down below and explain why you chose it. Commit it to memory as your verse for the week.

### ***Step Three – Questions***

1. Acts 8 is the first time we see the church as a whole experiencing widespread persecution. While the apostles remained back in Jerusalem (verse 1), everyone else was scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. This is a prime example of God using what seems like a setback and using it to further His greater purposes. This is a theme we see throughout Scripture – can you think of some others? In what areas of your life are you currently experiencing (or have experienced) a 'scattering' or a setback, and how might God be using that discomfort to position you for a mission you wouldn't have chosen otherwise?
2. In Acts 8:1, we meet a man named Saul who is looking on with approval as a fellow human is being stoned to death. This is a jarring introduction to the man who will go on to write a substantial portion of the New Testament. Why do you think Luke chose to introduce him this way? In verse 3, Saul, utterly convinced concerning the rightness of his mission, went around destroying the church in any way he could, going house to house and dragging men and women off to prison. In his desire to be righteous, he became blinded with self-righteousness. Have you ever been like Saul, thinking you held the moral high ground, only to discover you were completely off base? How did you come to see truth? Jesus has much to say about this. Read Luke 18:9-14 and share how you can heed His great reversal.

3. In Acts 8:9-24, the story pivots to a man named Simon who had been deceiving people with his false “signs and wonders” for some time. Look at some clues given in the text that tell us he is not aligned with the Holy Spirit in his actions. What do Simon’s behaviors reveal about his understanding of salvation and God’s nature, and how does this contrast with true, saving faith? Simon wanted to buy God’s power and prestige, not follow Jesus as Lord. In verse 22, what two actions does Peter say are the appropriate responses to misaligned thoughts and actions? Have you ever had Simon-like moments, bargaining with Jesus for what He could do for you (comfort, blessings, personal success) versus simply seeking Him for who He is? If the Holy Spirit is bringing anything to mind, be quick to respond like Peter suggests. Our God is quick to forgive.
  
4. Keeping in mind that the Gospel of Luke and Acts share the same author, note the parallels between the story of Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40 and the account of Jesus on the Road to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-35. In both stories, the travelers were looking at the right Scriptures but couldn’t interpret their meaning until someone walked alongside them. Who is ‘on the road’ in your life right now – either a ‘perplexed traveler’ who needs the Scriptures explained or someone who could help *you* see Jesus more clearly? Read Proverbs 11:14. What next steps can you take in this discipleship journey?
  
5. In Acts 8:39, the Spirit of the Lord supernaturally removes Philip from the Ethiopian eunuch and immediately places him in Azotus to continue his ministry. Philip didn’t get to disciple the eunuch, see the fruit of his labor, or even say goodbye. The Lord simply, and abruptly, redirected Phillip to the next assignment. Because his mission was complete, God had more work for him elsewhere. Have you ever been redirected from a project, job, life assignment, or

ministry just as it was becoming successful? Consider how you responded – did you stay too long, accept that your role there was done, or want to control the outcome? It's a journey moving from our head to our heart – but God's timing is perfect, and His plans are trustworthy, even when they are unknown or challenging (Isaiah 55:8-9, Proverbs 19:21). Spend a moment reflecting: Does He have your full heart, are you willing to obey, and what might keep you from being willing?

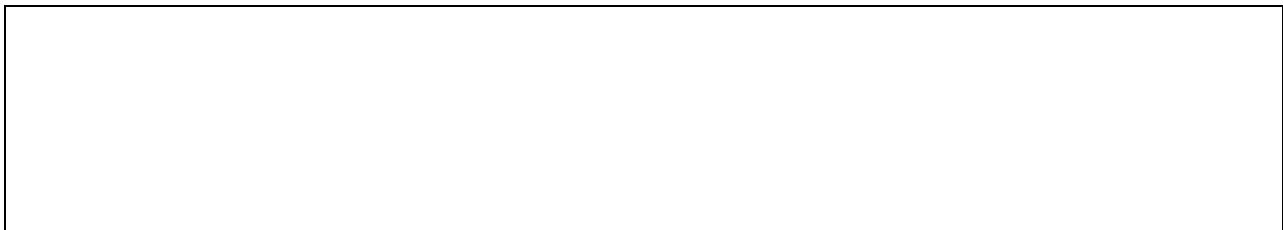
### ***Step Four – Application & Prayer***

Take what you've learned from reading and journaling to the next level – apply it to your own life. How might this week's reading impact your thinking and actions?

Take some time with the Lord. Seek Him, listen, and write a prayer based on what you've learned or anything else on your heart this week.

### ***Step Five – Personal Enrichment***

Use the bordered space to deepen your connection to what you're learning. Think inside or outside of the box and bring in a creative, personal or academic element. Perhaps it's a poem, song or drawing. Possibly it's sharing your findings learned from additional outside study. This exercise is purposefully open-ended. Use your imagination and bring something unique and relevant to this week's lesson.



# The Church Begins

## Acts ~ Conversion of Saul Lesson 7 – Chapter 9:1-31

*Consider this... The Apostle Paul entered heaven to the cheers of those he martyred.  
That's how the gospel works. ~ Unknown*

From the very start of His ministry, Jesus and His followers faced opposition. Even His brutal crucifixion could not extinguish the movement—rather, the Holy Spirit ignited an explosive spread of the gospel. Saul, who witnessed Stephen's steadfast faith as the church's first martyr, emerged as its fiercest persecutor, storming house to house to imprison believers and crush the Way. This week we encounter an extraordinary moment: Jesus Himself intervenes, dramatically redirecting Saul's life, the trajectory of the church, and ultimately the course of history. As we reflect on this turning point, we will consider our own life-altering encounters with Christ and our place in God's unfolding story of salvation.

### **Step One – Observation**

Read through the entire chapter. Using a pen and highlighter, engage with the text. Underline key words and highlight key phrases. Look for repeated words or patterns. Journal your questions, observations and insights in the space on the right.

#### **Chapter 9**

<sup>1</sup>Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup>As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup>He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

<sup>5</sup>“Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. <sup>6</sup>“Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

<sup>7</sup> The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. <sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

<sup>10</sup> In Damascus there was a disciple named

Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!”

“Yes, Lord,” he answered.

<sup>11</sup> The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. <sup>12</sup> In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”

<sup>13</sup> “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

<sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. <sup>16</sup> I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

<sup>17</sup> Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” <sup>18</sup> Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, <sup>19</sup> and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. <sup>20</sup> At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. <sup>21</sup> All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?” <sup>22</sup> Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

<sup>23</sup> After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, <sup>24</sup> but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. <sup>25</sup> But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

<sup>26</sup> When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join

the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.<sup>27</sup> But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.<sup>28</sup> So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.<sup>29</sup> He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews,<sup>[a]</sup> but they tried to kill him.<sup>30</sup> When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

<sup>31</sup> Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

### ***Step Two – Key Verse***

Looking back over this week's reading, pick one verse that stands out to you. Write it down below and explain why you chose it. Commit it to memory as your verse for the week.

### ***Step Three – Questions***

1. Saul burned with zeal in persecuting the church. Read Acts 26:9-11 where Saul confesses his fierce conviction in opposing Jesus. He was convinced, forceful, obsessed. Yet in Acts 9, Jesus Himself intervenes. He appears, speaks, and transforms everything. Look back at all Jesus does and declares, then mark His actions and commands in verses 6, 11, 12, 15, 17. Jesus is the true Author and Hero of Saul's story. If you are a follower of Jesus, reflect on how encountering Him has reshaped the very trajectory of your life. How has your purpose in life changed as you've gotten to know Him? Today, ask Him: Where might I be clinging to my old way of living and instead need to surrender?

2. Luke gives much detail on the travel and timeline in the Book of Acts. Track Saul's movements in 9:1-31 either by tracing his journey on a map or listing out his destinations in order. After six days of travel and three days blind, Ananias prays to restore Saul's sight, and he is filled with the Holy Spirit. What does Saul do "at once?" (verse 20). Instead of hauling Christians back to Jerusalem as prisoners, he stays in Damascus for *three years* (per Galatians 1:17–18), before eventually fleeing to safety and heading to Jerusalem. Has God ever led you on a surprising detour in your own life? How did your faith deepen through that unexpected turn? Pause today and praise Him, declaring trust in His plans for you.

3. Once a strong and skilled leader, Saul often found himself helpless and in need after meeting Jesus. List all the ways people helped Saul when he couldn't help himself. Later Saul (Paul) reflects on this pattern. Read his realizations and Jesus' message to him in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10. What does Paul discover about weakness? What can we learn from God's dealings with Paul and his acceptance of these hardships? Considering your own weaknesses and limitations, share where your perspective needs to shift and pray God transforms any pride into dependence, self-sufficiency into surrender, and hardship into holy ground where divine power flows freely.

4. God works through the faithful obedience of ordinary believers. Consider the faithfulness of Ananias—in Damascus, and Barnabas—in Jerusalem. Their response to Saul’s conversion stood in stark contrast to the suspicion and hesitation of many other Christians. Read more about Ananias in Acts 22:12 and Barnabas in Acts 11:24. Did they have great faith in Saul or in God? Explain. How has God used the faithfulness of others to impact your life? In what ways might your own obedience today, however small or costly, become the bridge that draws someone closer to Him?
5. What is God’s stated mission for Saul (verse 15)? The prophet Isaiah, when speaking 700 years earlier, about the coming Jewish Messiah shares His surprising intention in Isaiah 49:6. What is it? Now, read Saul’s understanding of this Old Testament passage in Acts 13:44-49. How incredible that God would use a once wicked, now fully surrendered man to partner with Him in the eternally significant business of bringing salvation to the world. How can Saul’s testimony sustain us as we pray for the non-Christians in our lives? Or when praying against evil in the world? Praise Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine!

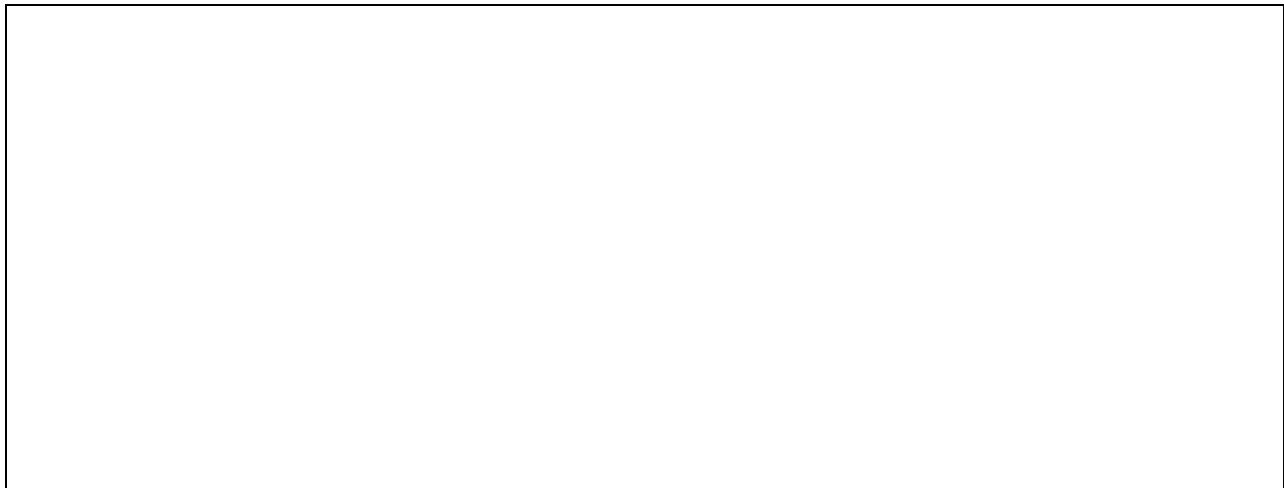
## ***Step Four – Application & Prayer***

Take what you've learned from reading and journaling to the next level – apply it to your own life. How might this week's reading impact your thinking and actions?

Take some time with the Lord. Seek Him, listen, and write a prayer based on what you've learned or anything else on your heart this week.

### ***Step Five – Personal Enrichment***

Use the bordered space to deepen your connection to what you're learning. Think inside or outside of the box and bring in a creative, personal or academic element. Perhaps it's a poem, song or drawing. Possibly it's sharing your findings learned from additional outside study. This exercise is purposefully open-ended. Use your imagination and bring something unique and relevant to this week's lesson.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the user to draw or write in.

### ***NOTES***