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FOR STUDENTS**

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CONTENTS

From the Editor 02

About the Authors 03

How to Use 04

UNIT 1: THE SPIRIT WHO EMPOWERS

SUGGESTED FOR
THE WEEK OF

December 3 **Session 1:** The Day of Pentecost 06

December 10 **Session 2:** The Spread of the Gospel 16

December 17 **Session 3:** The Church Grew in Unity 26

December 24 **Special Session:** The First Christmas Carol 36

December 31 **Session 4:** The First Martyr of the Church 46

January 7 **Session 5:** Philip the Evangelist 56

January 14 **Session 6:** God Doesn't Show Favoritism 66

UNIT 2: THE GOD WHO SENDS

January 21 **Session 7:** Paul's Conversion 76

January 28 **Session 8:** The Church Sends Missionaries 86

February 4 **Session 9:** The Message of the Gospel 96

February 11 **Session 10:** The Gospel is for Everyone 106

February 18 **Session 11:** The Gospel Meets Culture 116

February 25 **Session 12:** Intentional Living 126

FROM THE EDITOR



Andy McLean

Editor

*The Gospel Project
for Students*

Our journey picks up on a hillside near Jerusalem, forty days after Jesus' resurrection. The once timid and frightened disciples became confident and assured after being with Jesus for over a month. They fully expected, surely, Jesus would then restore the kingdom to Israel and overthrow Roman oppression. Once again, they learned that their expectations and Jesus' plans are not the same. Jesus instructed them to wait in Jerusalem for a promise to be fulfilled—one that would empower the disciples for their mission of taking the gospel to the end of the earth.

In this volume of *The Church on Mission*, we see this promise fulfilled with the arrival and indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. From the moment we open the Book of Acts (acts of the Apostles) and witness the Spirit's arrival at the day of Pentecost, we'll quickly see how the Spirit empowered and transformed. He empowered the disciples to carry out the mission Jesus gave and transformed the hearts of men and women, bringing them together for the building up of the church of God. He empowered people to speak the Word of God boldly. He strengthened and comforted those who experienced suffering and persecution to value Christ more than their own safety. He softened Lydia's heart to receive the gospel, strengthened Stephen to reflect Christ even in his death, and transformed Saul the persecutor into Saul the missionary. The Spirit of God is constantly at work in the lives of God's people.

The Book of Acts is certainly about the acts of the Apostles and their missionary efforts in spreading the gospel throughout the world. However, it is really about the acts of the Holy Spirit in and through the hearts and lives of the disciples. He is the third Person of the Trinity, the One Jesus promised would arrive after He departed. And it is the Holy Spirit who still empowers and equips the church to move forward with the mission God entrusted to us.

AUTHORS

UNIT 1



Mike Cospers (Sessions 1-6) is the founder and director of Harbor Media, where he develops podcasts that help Christians navigate a post-Christian world. He previously served for sixteen years as one of the founding pastors of Sojourn Community Church in Louisville, Kentucky, where he oversaw Sojourn Music—a collective of musicians writing songs for the local church. He is the author of four books, including (most recently) *Recapturing the Wonder*.



Katie Orr (Special Session), creator of the *FOCUSed15* Bible study method, is passionate about equipping busy women to experience God daily. She is a teacher, speaker, podcaster, and prolific writer for blogs, magazines, and Sunday School curriculum. A former Cru (Campus Crusade for Christ) staff member and mother to three young children, Katie and pastor-husband, Chris, are part of the church revitalization movement.

UNIT 2



Jason C. Dukes (Sessions 7-9) has been a church starter, a church renewer, and tries to be a disciple-maker. He's currently the Multiplication Minister with Brentwood Baptist Church near Nashville, Tennessee. He has authored books and periodically authored blogs, which you can learn more about at livesentresources.wordpress.com. He and his wife, Jen, are thankful for their seven children.



Daniel Im (Sessions 10-12) serves as the Director of Church Multiplication for NewChurches.com at LifeWay Christian Resources. He is also a teaching pastor at The Fellowship in Nashville, Tennessee, and author of *No Silver Bullets: Five Small Shifts That Will Transform Your Ministry* and *Planting Missional Churches*. He is married to Christina, and they have three children, Victoria, Adelyn, and Makarios.

HOW TO USE

▶ INTRO

The two introductory pages begin with a summary that provides a brief overview of the session, including a list of Scriptures. The main point is also listed here, as well as two introductory options to choose from to begin the session.

▶ HIS STORY

The five His Story pages contain the main teaching material for each session. This section follows the storyline of the Bible, focusing on what God has done in redemptive history throughout the pages of Scripture. The first page restates the main point that is to be emphasized throughout the session and is followed by an overview of the main characters. There is also an introductory plot that serves as a transitional entryway to the main part of the session that begins on the following page.

In addition to these, there are other things to notice throughout the His Story section:

- **Personal Study Guide:** Any time you see a vertical bar in the His Story section, it indicates that the material can also be found in the student's personal study guide.
- **Timeline:** Each session features a timeline of events that corresponds to the timeline located in the student's personal study guide.
- **Going Further With The Story:** Most sessions will include at least one of these. They contain additional material that allows leaders to go deeper into the biblical story. It is up to the leader's discretion whether he or she would like to utilize this material in any way. One can simply bypass this option, however, and not miss anything vital to the session.

01 SESSION ONE

The Day of Pentecost

THE POINT
God calls us to rely on the Holy Spirit as we share the gospel.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1
What is the best gift you have ever received (outside of children)? Who gave it to you? What made it so special? What was the occasion?
Gifts are powerful things. A gift, given graciously and lovingly, is a way of making or affirming a bond. They are the preeminent marks of relationship. When a gift is given without the need for anything in return, without any sense of obligation, it is a powerful bond.
• What gift story do you have to tell, whether about a gift you received or a gift you gave?

Option 2
Most of us do not only require an external source of power. For example, cars run on batteries, our phones need electricity to charge their batteries, and hair dryers and coffee makers must be plugged in to function. It comes without further notice power up the TV and I keep that one plugged in, I won't flood the room with light. Batteries and electricity empower electronics to work the way they're designed to work.
• When have you tried to use an electronic device, only to realize the battery was dead? Or tried to flip the switch for a light that wasn't plugged in? What happened?

Throughout His ministry, Jesus spoke of a Helper who would come as His followers when He returned as the Father. This Helper is the Holy Spirit. Just as electricity or human employee lights and cars in our assembly, the Holy Spirit empowers God's people to boldly His work (John 14:26, Acts 1:8).

6 Leader Guide / Session 1

The Gospel Project for Students 7

HIS STORY 15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT
God calls us to rely on the Holy Spirit as we share the gospel.

CHARACTERS

- The Holy Spirit: the person of the Trinity
- The Disciples: initial group of men Jesus chose to follow Him, take part in His ministry, and share the gospel with others

PLOT

Not long before Pentecost, Jesus had arrived in Jerusalem like a king for His coronation. The whole city groined Him, hailing the one King of the Jews. A few days later, He died on a cross with a sign marked by the cross itself. But three days after that, He rose from the dead. In the Gospel accounts, the disciples seemed bewildered by what took place—was it too far from them that they'd expected Rome to descend in judgment? There would be no new land, no freedom from the tyranny of their oppressors. Yet, so much more had happened. Jesus had risen from the dead. They'd shared meals and conversations with Him. They'd touched His scars. They'd found Him alive and behind locked doors in a glorified body that was all at once recognizable and unrecognizable, familiar and new. They'd seen Him take up His abode with the promise that He would come again in the same way. Before His return, though, the Spirit would come as Jesus had promised.

THE HOLY SPIRIT EMPOWERS OF THE GOSPEL

It didn't take long after the Holy Spirit's arrival for passion and purpose. The sound of the rushing wind, great crowd of Jews in Jerusalem who were there to

Remember, every time you see this bar in the leader guide, it indicates the same material is also found in the personal study guide as well.

THE HOLY SPIRIT INDWELT THE BELIEVERS AT PENTECOST

During Jesus' final hours on earth, both before His crucifixion and up to His ascension, He promised the disciples another Comforter would come to carry on His work. He promised this Comforter would be with us forever and would remain in us (John 14:15-17). This Comforter is the Holy Spirit. Here's how the Book of Acts describes the Holy Spirit's arrival.

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Acts 2:1-4)

After Jesus gave His final instructions to the disciples and ascended into heaven, the disciples would have felt lost and afraid. How do we do anything together in an open room in Jerusalem praying for the Father's promise to be fulfilled? Without warning, the Spirit rushed into the world, the room, and their hearts as He manifested Himself in ways you'll appreciate His flocking flames coming on each person there.

In the Spirit's coming, Jesus' promise to always be with us makes sense, as does the prophet Joel's promise that God would one day pour out His Spirit on all people (Joel 2:28). When we respond to the gospel each day in Jesus, we receive this extraordinary gift—the promised Holy Spirit. The Spirit brings us the revelation and the power to participate in God's redemptive work, as well as the assurance that we are never alone in this work. The promise of Jerusalem, "I will walk with you," was fulfilled in Jesus (John 14:18), who took our pain and walked among us, and His Holy Spirit (which we do not see) is on the side of the age.

- How would you have responded if you had seen what happened at Pentecost? (p. 28, P56)
- In what way does the Spirit enabling the believers that day give you confidence to do what God has called you to do? (p. 28, P56)

WHENEVER YOU SEE THIS PAGE NUMBER, INDICATE THAT THERE IS AN OPTION IN THE PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE FOR STUDENTS TO INTERACT WITH.

TIMELINE

PENTECOST
The Holy Spirit empowers the spread of the gospel.

COURAGE OF THE DISCIPLES
The Holy Spirit empowers performance and growth of the gospel.

COMMUNITY OF DISCIPLES
The Holy Spirit empowers unity and growth.

6 Leader Guide / Session 1

The Gospel Project for Students 9

THE HOLY SPIRIT EMPOWERS THE SPREAD OF THE GOSPEL

Peter couldn't contain himself. He nearly exploded with this sermon, urgently pointing to Jesus as the Messiah, the One who came to liberate Israel from the oppressive burden of sin and death. Love compels us to speak out. Many of us have had some experience of being that hot as to speak up, to overflow with joy and share with the world. "I'm glad!" is the very best. We've said something unexpectedly joyful about a burger or a great day of play. The pain is what you love, and pleasure leads to words—either they are a love message to the people around us about what we've experienced. "I'm so love!" "I've had the best movie ever!" "That place has the best pizza restaurant on the planet!"

What we're looking at the Book of Acts is that the Spirit compels us to speak out as well. The mission of the church—the great joy of the church—is the good news of God's redeeming work in Jesus—as a reflection of the heart of the Holy Spirit, who is more eager than anyone to calibrate the work of the Father and the Son.

- What has been the joy in each of you? (p. 28, P56)

THE HOLY SPIRIT BUILDS THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH

When the Spirit comes, He brings life and growth, and this growth involves a new way of thinking and acting. The tongue speaks out the world through words and creates new characteristics of the church's mission. The manifestation of the Spirit's coming and growth, the tongue also gives us new words to use with us in our communities—the new—meaning in faith, ability, and holy relationships. This second gift was also visible in Acts 2.

- So those who received this word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common, and they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:41-47)

This passage mentions many aspects of God's grace and God's work. Wonders and signs referred to miracle such as healing the sick and casting out demons, which characterized both Jesus' ministry and the apostles' ministry; however, more subtle miracles occurred as well. These include shared possessions and awe whereas they had in order to give away the proceeds to those in need among them, and new people and about many.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

There's a window here into the life and nature of the Trinity. It's not merely Peter's love for the great apostle, but the Spirit's love for the Father and the Spirit's love for the Son. Each Person of the Trinity is intertwined with the others. At Jesus' baptism, the Father said all we could hear. "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am pleased." Matt. 3:17. Jesus submitted joyfully about the Spirit's arrival and the good that would come with Him. And here, a Spirit that Peter preached about what Jesus accomplished and the Father honored by sending the promised Christ His gift back. When the apostle says what God's love, we don't have to look any further for the relationships within the Trinity that have allowed.

Remember, these sections are optional and can be skipped if preferred.

10 Leader Guide / Session 1

The Gospel Project for Students 11

THIS STUDY

- **Essential Doctrines:** Each session will also contain an essential doctrine that directly relates to the Bible study material. The essential doctrine is also located in the student's personal study guide, though in an abbreviated format.
- **Christ Connection:** Each session will end with a direct look at how the content studied connects with Christ, emphasizing to students how all of Scripture is pointing to Him. The material in the Christ Connection will also be provided in the student's personal study guide.

▶ YOUR STORY

The Your Story section is designed to connect what God has done in the past to students' lives today by introducing group discussion questions that highlight how God's Story connects with their story. There are lead-ins with each question in the Leader Guide to help the leader walk students through each question.

▶ YOUR MISSION

The Your Mission section is designed to show how God's Story is capable of creating lasting transformation into how we think, feel, and live from day to day. By doing so, we emphasize to students that every session goes beyond mere Bible study to a calling to be on mission with God.

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

The final page of each session points leaders to additional resources that can be used in conjunction with each study. The resources listed, such as teaching tips videos and One Conversations, are designed to help leaders prepare for each session. There is also information about the leader pack posters that can be used with each session.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

Each of these questions has been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our nation made sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your story.

- **How should the revelation of God as Trinity shape the way we pray? The way we worship?** Jesus teaches us to pray to the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Spirit. In other words, the Trinity is involved in all aspects of our prayer lives and in other aspects of our daily lives.
- **What are some obstacles that might prevent people from experiencing true community? Why do you think we sometimes struggle with overcoming these obstacles?** Answers will vary.
- **What are some ways we can contribute to this Spirit-filled community of faith? Some ways might include having a genuine concern for others, an attitude of generosity toward those in need, encouraging others with the Word of God, and so on.**
- **How was the gospel of Jesus communicated in Peter's sermon? What implications should it have for how we share the gospel? Peter used the Old Testament in his sermon, knowing the people he spoke to would relate to it. Also, because he was speaking with his audience, we get a real sense that Peter cared deeply for the people, a fact we should always imitate as we share the gospel with others.**

CHRIST CONNECTION

John had his 7th revelation, Jesus instructed His disciples to wait in Jerusalem "for the Father's promise" (Acts 1:4)—the Holy Spirit, who would empower Christ's church as He His witness on earth. God gave the Holy Spirit to those who trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior, and the Spirit changes us so we can love like Jesus.

While receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit is a one-and-for-all occasion when we put our faith in Jesus, being filled with the Spirit is lifelong. **lifelong responsibility!** This requires trusting in God in faith and joy and learning to love with a deeper and more abiding love in Him. As we are filled, we should therefore—love friends, neighbors, families, and more—with the love and joy that come from abiding in the gospel of our Savior. This is our greatest joy of being renewed on the beginning. I should do this even though I don't always feel kind of empty but the natural joy-filled heart is made to be renewed. This comes only as a gift, only we're filled with the Spirit, and only as we turn our own attention to this good news.

BIG STORY

See **Session 1** through **Session 10**.

YOUR STORY

See **Session 11** through **Session 15**.

The Gospel Project for Students 13

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES

LEADER PACK

For this session, you'll study to pack items A and B. The first contains a timeline overview of the Book of Acts, and the other contains an informational chart regarding the various roles of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer. You can also find them in pack items 1-3, which contain general information about this quarter such as essential doctrines and some key figures you'll see along the way.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies** (to access your Midweek Study, go to www.gospelproject.com/TFP/Midweek)
- **Circle Time Poster**
- **App** (for both leader and student)

Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources. And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit MessyKids.com/web/TheGospelProject.

Don't forget to check out these additional resources to help equip you for each session.

HANDS

This account in Acts 2 challenges the way we think about sharing the gospel. Many people struggle to speak up, know when to share their faith, or start conversations about Jesus. Different techniques are often suggested for making those conversations, and in fact, many churches offer whole classes on the subject, and they're not wrong at all. But if you're not sure, maybe the easiest way to become bold in sharing the gospel is talking to be filled with the Spirit.

- **What struggles might you have as Christians from sharing the gospel with others?** Answers will vary.
- **How does being filled with the Holy Spirit overcome these struggles and empower our evangelism?** Answers will vary.

The Gospel Project for Students 15



01

SESSION ONE

The Day of Pentecost

SESSION SUMMARY

Not only did God reconcile us to Himself in Christ's death and promise us eternal life in His resurrection, but God also gives us the greatest gift we can imagine in the Holy Spirit—the gift of Himself. The Holy Spirit comes to indwell every believer in Christ, empower the spread of the gospel throughout the world, and build the community of faith.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 2:1-4,32-47

THE POINT

God calls us to rely on the Holy Spirit as we share the gospel.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

What is the best gift you have ever received (outside of salvation)? Who gave it to you? What made it so special? What was the occasion?

Gifts are powerful things. A gift, given genuinely and lovingly, is a way of making or affirming a bond. They are like punctuation marks on relationships. When a gift is given without the need for anything in return, without any sense of obligation, it's a powerful thing.

- **What gift story do you have to tell, whether about a gift you received or a gift you gave?**

The gospel is the free gift of grace from God: foreshadowed in the Old Testament, revealed first in the stories of the Gospels, and then proclaimed and expounded upon throughout the Book of Acts and the rest of the New Testament (Rom. 6:23).

The gospel not only comes from God, but is also spread by God's own handiwork. The Book of Acts communicates the spread of the gospel to all people through the apostles and the churches they planted (Acts 1:8). However, the primary Actor in the Book of Acts—spreading the gospel, building up the church, and healing the sick—is God Himself. More specifically, God in the person of the Holy Spirit who gave gifts of life and redemption and advanced God's kingdom.

Option 2

Much of what we use today requires an external source of power. For example, cars run on batteries, our phones need electricity to charge their batteries, and hair dryers and coffee makers must be plugged in to function. A remote without batteries won't power up the TV, and a lamp that's not plugged in won't flood the room with light. Batteries and electricity empower electronics to work the way they're supposed to work.

- **When have you tried to use an electronic device, only to realize the battery was dead? Or tried to flip the switch for a light that wasn't plugged in? What happened?**

Throughout His ministry, Jesus spoke of a Helper who would come to His followers when He returned to the Father. That Helper is the Holy Spirit. Just as electricity or batteries empower lights and cars to run smoothly, the Holy Spirit empowers God's people to boldly do His work (John 14:26; Acts 1:8).

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God calls us to rely on the Holy Spirit as we share the gospel.

CHARACTERS

- **The Holy Spirit:** third person of the Trinity
- **The Disciples:** initial group of men Jesus chose to follow Him, take part in His ministry, and share the gospel with others

PLOT

Not long before Pentecost, Jesus had arrived in Jerusalem like a king for His coronation: The whole city greeted Him, hailing the new King of the Jews. A few days later, He died on a cross with a sign marked by the same title. But three days after that, He rose from the dead.

In the Gospel accounts, the disciples seemed bewildered by what took place—it was far less than they'd expected. Rome remained in control of Jerusalem. There would be no new Israel, no freedom from the tyranny of their oppressors. Yet, so much more had happened. Jesus had risen from the dead. They'd shared meals and conversations with Him. They'd touched His scars. They'd seen Him appear behind locked doors in a glorified body that was all at once recognizable and unrecognizable, familiar and new. They'd seen Him taken up into the heavens with the promise that He would come again in the same way. Before His return, though, the Spirit would come as Jesus had promised.

Remember, every time you see this bar in the leader guide, it indicates the same material is also found in the personal study guide as well.

THE HOLY SPIRIT INDWELT THE BELIEVERS AT PENTECOST

During Jesus' final days on earth, both before His crucifixion and up to His ascension, He promised the disciples another Counselor would come to carry on His work. He promised this Counselor would be with us forever and would remain in us (John 14:15-17). This Counselor is the Holy Spirit. Here's how the Book of Acts describes the Holy Spirit's arrival:

¹When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. ⁴And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Acts 2:1-4)

After Jesus gave His final instructions to the disciples and ascended into heaven, the disciples would leave from there and spend the next ten days gathered together in an upstairs room in Jerusalem praying for the Father's promise to be fulfilled. Without warning, the Spirit rushed into the world, the room, and their hearts as He manifested Himself in what appeared like flickering flames resting on each person there.

In the Spirit's coming, Jesus' promise to always be with us makes sense, as does the prophet Joel's promise that God would one day pour out His Spirit on all people (Joel 2:28). When we respond to the gospel with faith in Jesus, we receive this extraordinary gift—the promised Holy Spirit. The Spirit brings us the invitation and the power to participate in God's redeeming work, as well as the assurance that we are never alone in this work. The promise of Immanuel, "God with us," was fulfilled in Jesus (Matt 1:23), who took on flesh and walked among us, and His Holy Spirit is with us and in us, even to the end of the age.

- **How would you have responded if you had seen what happened at Pentecost? (p. 10, PSG)**
- **In what way does the Spirit enabling the believers that day give you confidence to do what God has called you to do? (p. 10, PSG)**

TIMELINE

PENTECOST
The Holy Spirit empowers the spread of the gospel.

COURAGE OF THE DISCIPLES
John and Peter perform miracles and preach the gospel with boldness.

COMMUNITY OF GENEROSITY
The church displays unity and generosity.

Whenever you see PSG page numbers listed, it indicates that there is a section in the personal study guide for students to interact with.

THE HOLY SPIRIT EMPOWERS THE SPREAD OF THE GOSPEL

It didn't take long after the Holy Spirit's arrival for Him to reveal His great passion and purpose. The sound of the rushing wind caught the attention of a great crowd of Jews in Jerusalem who were there for the festival of Pentecost. These Jews from every nation gathered together to investigate and heard the good news of Jesus—each in their own language, as the Spirit enabled the disciples to speak in different languages. Filled with the Spirit, the Apostle Peter responded to the crowd's confusion as he stood before them and preached this sermon:

³² “This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. ³³ Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. ³⁴ For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, “The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, ³⁵ until I make your enemies your footstool.” ³⁶ Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” ³⁷ Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” ³⁸ And Peter said to them, “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. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” ⁴⁰ And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” (Acts 2:32-40)

**For a full reading of this account, read verses 22-40.*

Remember, —● **these sections are optional and can be skipped if preferred.**

● GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

There's a window here into the life and nature of the Trinity. It's not merely Peter's love for the gospel on display but the Spirit's love for the gospel and the Spirit's love for the Son. Each Person of the Trinity is enamored with the others. At Jesus' baptism, the Father told all who would listen, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased" (Matt. 3:17). Jesus talked joyfully about the Spirit's arrival and the good that would come with Him. And here, a Spirit-filled Peter preached about what Jesus accomplished and how the Father honored Him, seating the resurrected Christ at His right hand. When the Apostle John wrote that God is love, we don't have to look any further than the relationships within the Trinity to see that love displayed.

Peter couldn't contain himself. He nearly exploded with this sermon, urgently pointing to Jesus as the Messiah, the One who came to liberate Israel from the oppressive burdens of sin and death. Love compels us to speak out. Most of us have had some experience of love that led us to speak out, to overflow with joy and burst out with the words "I love you!" At the very least, we've said something excessively joyful about a great burger or a great slice of pizza. The point is that joy, love, and pleasure lead us to words—they lead us to bear witness to the people around us about what we've experienced: "I'm in love"; "That was the best movie I've ever seen"; "That place has the best spicy marinara on the planet."

What we learn by looking at the Book of Acts is that the Spirit compels us to speak out as well. The mission of the church—to go out into the world and share the good news of God's reconciling work in Jesus—is a reflection of the heart of the Holy Spirit, who is more eager than anyone to celebrate the work of the Father and the Son.

- **When has love led you to speak out?** (*p. 11, PSG*)

THE HOLY SPIRIT BUILDS THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH

When the Spirit comes, He brings life and growth, and this growth resembles a tree with its branches and roots. The kingdom spreads into the world through visible and extensive ways characteristic of the church's mission. The momentum of this growth is overflowing and outward. The kingdom also grows in less visible ways with an inward momentum—like the roots—resulting in depth, stability, and holy relationships. This inward growth was also visible in Acts 2.

⁴¹ So those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand people were added to them. ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and signs were being performed through the apostles. ⁴⁴ Now all the believers were together and held all things in common. ⁴⁵ They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with joyful and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. Every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:41-47)

This passage mentions many signs of God's grace and God's work. Wonders and signs referred to miracles such as healing the sick and casting out demons, which characterized both Jesus' ministry and the apostles' ministry; however, more subtle miracles occurred as well. These believers shared their possessions, sold whatever extra they had in order to give away the proceeds to those in need among them, and met regularly and shared meals.

TIMELINE

** Bonus Session* **FROM HUMILIATION TO EXALTATION**

Jesus' arrival is one of humility, obedience, and exaltation.

THE FIRST MARTYR

Stephen reflects Jesus in his life and his death.

THE ETHIOPIAN TRAVELER

Philip faithfully shares the message of the gospel.

This kind of abundant, intense, and dedicated community life should be seen for the miracle it is. This kind of living doesn't just happen. When you force people to live in small, shared spaces, usually the opposite occurs. Closeness leads to conflicts, and conflicts lead to strengthened borders. In Acts 2, this newly formed community pressed into one another's lives and the boundaries around possessions and wealth disappeared. As believers were moved by the Spirit, their interests shifted from self to the good of the community of faith.

When the Holy Spirit takes up residence in our hearts, we begin to overflow with love for God and love for our neighbors, especially those who share our faith. These twin loves for God and others fuel the whole of the Christian life. Love of God leads us to bear witness to the gospel around the world, and love of our brothers and sisters leads us to develop rich, deeply committed relationships with God's people.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Deity of the Holy Spirit (p. 12, PSG)

The Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Trinity, possessing the fullness of deity like the Father and Son. His deity can be seen in the fact that He is eternal (Heb. 9:14), omnipresent (Ps. 139:7-8), the Creator and Giver of life (Gen. 1:2; Ps. 104:30; John 3:5-7), and directly identified with the Triune God (Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14).

CHRIST CONNECTION

Just before His ascension, Jesus instructed His disciples to wait in Jerusalem “for the Father’s promise” (Acts 1:4)—the Holy Spirit, who would empower Christ’s disciples to be His witnesses on earth. God gives the Holy Spirit to those who trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior, and the Spirit changes us to be more like Jesus.

While receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit is a once-and-for-all occasion when we put our faith in Jesus, being filled with the Spirit is believers’ lifelong responsibility. This requires turning to God in faith and joy and learning to live with a deeper and more abiding trust in Him. As we are filled, we should overflow—to our friends, neighbors, families, and more—with the love and joy that come from abiding in the gospel of our Savior. This is our greatest way of bearing witness: not the begrudging, I-should-do-this-even-though-I-feel-awkward kind of evangelism but the natural joy-filled heart’s reaction to redemption. This comes only as a gift, only as we’re filled with the Spirit, and only as we turn our own attention to this good news.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **How should the revelation of God as Trinity shape the way we pray? The way we worship?** *Jesus teaches us to pray to the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Spirit. In other words, the Trinity is involved in all aspects of our prayer lives and in other aspects of our daily lives.*
- **What are some obstacles that might prevent people from experiencing true community? Why do you think we sometimes struggle with overcoming these obstacles?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are some ways we can contribute to this Spirit-filled community of faith?** *Some ways might include having a genuine concern for others, an attitude of generosity toward those in need, encouraging others with the Word of God, and so on.*
- **How was the gospel of Jesus communicated in Peter's sermon? What implications should it have for how we share the gospel?** *Peter used the Old Testament in his sermon, knowing the people he spoke to would relate to it. Also, because he was pleading with his audience, we get a real sense that Peter cared deeply for the people, a trait we should always imitate as we share the gospel with others.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

Too often we act as if the gospel story ends with Jesus' resurrection and ascension. If that were the case, then the church exists only to retell the story. However, we need to see that the Holy Spirit's coming at Pentecost not only adds to the gospel story, but also completes the revelation of God as Trinity and serves as our direct line to both the Father and the Son.

- **What thoughts or expectations do you have about believers being filled with the Holy Spirit?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How would you explain the importance of the Spirit's presence in believers' lives?** *It would be impossible to overstate the Spirit's importance, especially given that He is highly involved in matters like conviction, regeneration, glorification, and so forth (for a complete chart of the Spirit's workings in the life of a believer, refer to this session's pack item in the Leader Pack).*



HEART

In Ephesians 5:18-19, Paul described being filled with the Spirit in the language of worship: speaking/singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Likewise, the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit as they faced resistance to the gospel (Acts 13:50-52). The Spirit fills us as we find our joy in God—not in our circumstances and our successes. This filling from the Spirit will also overflow with words of love and praise for our Savior to those who need to hear about what He has done for us.

- **Read Ephesians 5:18-19 and Acts 13:50-52. What stands out most to you about these passages?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How should the indwelling of the Spirit change the way believers live?** *One of the Spirit's roles is sanctification (making Christians look more like Jesus). While sanctification begins on the inside with a heart transformation, it eventually works its way outward into a believer's everyday decisions, actions, speech, and so on.*



HANDS

This account in Acts 2 challenges the way we think about sharing the gospel. Many people struggle to speak up, know when to share their faith, or start conversations about Jesus. Different techniques are often suggested for making those conversations easier. In fact, many churches offer whole classes on the subject, and that's not a bad thing at all. But at its most basic level, maybe the easiest way to become bold in sharing the gospel is by seeking to be filled with the Spirit.

- **What struggles might keep Christians from sharing the gospel with others?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How does being filled with the Holy Spirit overcome these struggles and empower our evangelism?** *Answers will vary.*

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack items #4 and #5. The first contains a timeline overview of the Book of Acts, and the other contains an informational chart explaining the various roles of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer. You can also show them pack items 1–3, which contain general information about this quarter such as essential doctrines and some key figures they will see along the way.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPMissionWin18)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at
GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject

Don't forget to check out these additional resources to help equip you for each session.

02

SESSION TWO

The Spread of the Gospel

SESSION SUMMARY

Christian boldness isn't something we simply have to work up for ourselves; it comes through faith in Jesus and through the gift of His Holy Spirit, who empowers and gives us the boldness to live for the glory of our Savior. Jesus deserves first place in our lives, which will be reflected in our actions for His name's sake. If we are convinced the gospel is true, then we must act on what we believe, asking God for boldness and then proclaiming the truth. We should be compelled to say and do bold things for the sake of the gospel.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 3:1-10; 4:5-31

THE POINT

When Christians are bold in their faith, the gospel will spread.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Circumstances in our lives sometimes lead us to make risky decisions or do brave things because of a sudden burst of boldness and daring. Many stories of boldness are obvious and familiar, like the mother who sees her child in harm's way and confronts a grizzly bear, a moving car, or a rattlesnake. Something that would normally make someone run away in fear can be confronted with boldness (and a surge of adrenaline). Firefighters, policemen, and EMS workers often make bold and fearless decisions in moments of crisis.

The stakes aren't always life and death. Pursuing a career of almost any kind takes boldness, as does trying to be an artist or an entrepreneur. In all of these cases, boldness leads to something good. Boldness saves lives and allows us to pursue our dreams and callings. Boldness leads to love, reconciliation, and the deep community that can only thrive in a family.

Being a Christian in the world we live in today demands a certain kind of boldness in the face of this spiritual resistance. We live in a world where faith and spirituality are constantly resisted, where the vast majority of the ideas shaping our world treat God as though He were unnecessary or nonexistent. And Christians believe some daring (or audacious) things: God made the world, sin broke it, and God is reconciling all the world to Himself through Jesus—His Son who lived, died, and rose again. Simply confessing this belief is a bold claim and living it out demands even more boldness.

- **What bold acts have you taken in your life? What were the results?**

Option 2

As students settle in, ask them to think of people who were accused of something they didn't do or a situation in which someone made a false accusation about them. On a dry-erase board or large poster board, jot down some of the names and situations they describe. Then ask:

- **How did these people respond to the accusations? What happened as a result?**

Through Peter and John, God healed a lame man, and they made sure everyone knew the man was healed in Jesus' name and authority. They were arrested because the religious leaders didn't like what they were teaching about Jesus and the resurrection of the dead. Instead of backing down or arguing, Peter simply presented the gospel. The religious leaders couldn't find anything against them, so Peter and John were released. Even in the midst of seemingly bad circumstances, we stick to the truth, proclaim the gospel with boldness, and trust God with the outcome.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

When Christians are bold in their faith, the gospel will spread.

CHARACTERS

- **Holy Spirit:** third person of the Trinity
- **Peter:** formerly called Simon, brother of Andrew, known as the apostle to the Jews
- **John:** most known for being the “beloved disciple”; wrote the Gospel of John; 1, 2, and 3 John; and Revelation
- **High priest, Elders, and Scribes:** a group of prominent spiritual and political individuals during Jesus’ earthly ministry who oversaw temple worship in Jerusalem and were in charge of Jewish Law and interpretation of Scripture

PLOT

Following the arrival of God’s indwelling Spirit, the disciples’ lives began to change. These once timid and fearful disciples became bold communicators of the gospel and were able to even perform signs and miracles that validated the truthfulness of their message and mission. In this session, we will see one of these miracles and its outcome.

TIMELINE

COURAGE OF THE DISCIPLES

John and Peter perform miracles and preach the gospel with boldness.

COMMUNITY OF GENEROSITY

The church displays unity and generosity.

** Bonus Session*

FROM HUMILIATION TO EXALTATION

Jesus' arrival is one of humility, obedience, and exaltation.

PETER AND JOHN HEALED A MAN

Acts 3–4 tells a story of Spirit-empowered boldness. Peter and John healed a crippled man and had to deal with some of the consequences of following in Jesus' steps.

¹ Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. ² And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple. ³ Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms. ⁴ And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." ⁵ And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶ But Peter said, "I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" ⁷ And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. ⁸ And leaping up, he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. ⁹ And all the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰ and recognized him as the one who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, asking for alms. And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. ... ⁵ On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, ⁶ with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. ⁷ And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" ⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹ if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. ¹¹ This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. ¹² And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 3:1-10; 4:5-12)

Peter and John may have seen this same man many times before, since the Scriptures tell us the man was carried to this gate to beg every day. Yet on this day, they noticed him. The Spirit of God led them to pay attention, and Peter was moved to offer the man much more than he asked for.

In a public space, for all to see, Peter told the crippled man to get up and walk. The man took Peter's hand, stood, and began walking, leaping, and praising God. Peter seized the opportunity to speak to the gathering crowd about Jesus being the crucified and risen Messiah, in whose name this healing occurred (Acts 3:11-26).

After being arrested for this scene (Acts 4:1-3), Peter and John were called before the Jewish leaders to explain themselves. Don't miss the tension of this moment. They healed a crippled man in a public setting in the name of a "convicted heretic" these leaders had killed. This wasn't merely a theological exam; this was a life-and-death encounter with authorities who had a distinct interest in silencing anyone doing anything in the name of Jesus.

Peter's response to their interrogation was revolutionary. He could have sought to save his own skin, deny any knowledge of the events, or minimize the involvement of Jesus' name. (Let's not forget that denying Jesus was something Peter had struggled with before.) Instead, he confronted them directly. He defied their hatred of Jesus and clearly accused them of murdering the Messiah. Peter was not trying to be a hero by taking a bold stand and defying the religious authorities. He was simply telling them the truth about who Jesus is—the cornerstone of all creation, the only source of salvation in the world. This marks the difference between spiritual boldness and being a jerk—Peter wasn't just trying to prove a point, he was pointing to Jesus. Peter allowed his Spirit-filled witness to be driven by his Jesus-focused worship.

- **If you were there with Peter and John, or faced a similar situation today, how would you respond to the leaders' questions?** (*p. 17, PSG*)
- **How do you think people today would respond to what Peter said about Jesus being the only One who can save?** (*p. 17, PSG*)

PETER AND JOHN WERE THREATENED BY THE AUTHORITIES

The Jewish leaders knew they were facing a crisis. They had executed Jesus as a heretic, but His followers continued to carry out miraculous works in His name. The religious leaders wanted to manage the crisis.

¹³ Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus. ¹⁴ But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. ¹⁵ But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, ¹⁶ saying, "What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. ¹⁷ But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name." ¹⁸ So they called them and charged them not to speak or

teach at all in the name of Jesus.¹⁹ Peter and John answered them, “Whether it’s right in the sight of God for us to listen to you rather than to God, you decide;²⁰ for we are unable to stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.”²¹ After threatening them further, they released them. They found no way to punish them because the people were all giving glory to God over what had been done.²² For this sign of healing had been performed on a man over forty years old. (Acts 4:13-22)

Rather than own their obvious failure to recognize Jesus or acknowledge the miraculous work being done in front of them, they chose to try and silence it, not unlike how they paid the soldiers to say Jesus’ disciples stole His body from the tomb (Matt. 28:11-15). This reaction isn’t something new. Throughout the past two thousand years, efforts have been made by religious, political, and cultural leaders to ban the name of Jesus and to silence His followers.

We need three things to resist the pressure to minimize Jesus. First, we need to keep our eyes on Jesus—on who He is and what His life, death, and resurrection have accomplished for us. Second, we need the gathering of God’s people. When we gather with the church, we’re reminded that we’re citizens of a different kind of kingdom, and we’re under a different kind of authority than the political and social kingdoms we live in now. Third, we need the boldness that comes from being filled with the Holy Spirit. According to Acts 4:19-22, Peter and John were prepared for this moment. Filled with the Spirit of God, they answered their oppressors with faith and boldness, refusing to deny Jesus in order to satisfy the Jewish leaders.

GOD’S PEOPLE ARE UNAFRAID TO SHARE THE GOSPEL

After standing up to the Sanhedrin, the apostles went back to the church. Take a look at what happened next:

23 After they were released, they went to their own people and reported everything the chief priests and the elders had said to them. **24 When they heard this, they raised their voices together to God and said, “Master, you are the one who made the heaven, the earth, and the sea, and everything in them.** **25 You said through the Holy Spirit, by the mouth of our father David your servant: Why do the Gentiles rage and the peoples plot futile things?** **26 The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers assemble together against the Lord and against his Messiah.** **27 “For, in fact, in this city both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, assembled together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed,** **28 to do whatever your hand and your will had predestined to take place.** **29 And now, Lord, consider their threats, and grant that your servants may speak your word with all boldness,** **30 while**

TIMELINE

THE FIRST MARTYR

Stephen reflects Jesus in his life and his death.

THE ETHIOPIAN TRAVELER

Philip faithfully shares the message of the gospel.

PETER VISITS CORNELIUS

The gospel goes to the Gentiles.

30 while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” 31 And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:23-31)

There’s an important connection here between bold prayer and bold ministry. After a string of Spirit-filled ministry victories, even in the context of an unjust imprisonment, the church responded by seeking God in worshipful prayer. These Christians were extremely aware that all that had happened—the healing, the bold confrontation with the Jewish leaders, the favor of the crowds—was the work of God, and more specifically, the work of the Holy Spirit. In response, the church looked to God and asked Him to continue His work. They prayed for continued boldness, for healing, signs, and wonders to happen in the name of Jesus.

- **How do you think your life would change if you prayed with the same kind of boldness as the early church?** (p. 18, PSG)

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Personality of the Holy Spirit (p. 17, PSG)

The Bible not only affirms the full divinity of the Holy Spirit but also His personhood. Many people have mistakenly believed that the Spirit is a force or power, not a person. However, Scripture affirms His personhood by acknowledging that He is treated as a person (Acts 5:3; 7:51; Heb. 10:29), acts like a person (John 14:26; 15:26; Rom. 8:14), has attributes of a person (1 Cor. 2:10-11; Eph. 4:30), and acts in personal ways (Isa. 63:10; Acts 13:2). In addition to these, the Bible also affirms that Christians relate to Him personally (Acts 5:3-4; 7:51).

CHRIST CONNECTION

Once the Holy Spirit arrived, the disciples began proclaiming Jesus as Lord and Savior. They put on display the power of His kingdom by performing miracles in His name. When confronted by earthly authorities, they reaffirmed their allegiance to Jesus and continued to declare the gospel with confidence that Jesus is mighty to save.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What risks are involved in proclaiming Jesus as the only way of salvation in the world?** *At the very minimum, we could be labeled intolerant of other belief systems or at worst be severely persecuted for believing Jesus is the only way, truth, and life.*
- **What attitudes and motivations should we resist as we share the gospel of Jesus with others?** *We should resist pride and all the ways it might try to manifest itself, such as trying to win an argument or prove people wrong just to make them look inferior, and so forth.*
- **What are some ways you have experienced the pressure to minimize your witness to Jesus?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why should we pray both in response to circumstances and in preparation for our acts of ministry?** *We pray because we recognize our need for God to be at work in what we are experiencing and what lies ahead. We trust God for what has happened, is happening, and what will happen.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

We can follow in the disciples' footsteps by dedicating time and energy to the prayers surrounding our own ministries. By taking prayer as seriously as we take the "actual" work in our ministry—be it music ministry, feeding people in need, sharing the gospel with friends and neighbors—we put the work of ministry in its proper place. Bold ministry requires bold prayer, and bold prayer enables bold ministry.

- **What things might keep us from praying for God's power and boldness in the ministry of our group/church?** *Unbelief in the power of prayer, pride in thinking our ministries are ultimately dependent upon us, and so on.*
- **What are some ways you can include a more structured time of prayer in your life each day?** *Answers will vary.*



HEART

There's a wonderful sense of perspective in the prayer from Acts 4. These Christians saw that God's work began long before them, and they were merely participating in the bigger story. This perspective humbled them because they knew God's story was much larger than their own. This perspective also empowered them because they saw how God had faithfully carried out the work for centuries. So, the people were able to go out with boldness. The pressure was off of them; God had been doing and will continue this work.

- **How does praying through the story of God's work in Scripture, in history, and in our lives embolden our prayers?** *It reminds us of God's powerful story of redemption and our role in it.*
- **How does the continuous act of reminding ourselves of what God is doing give us boldness in our everyday lives?** *If we truly believe God is at work in the world, then we will be motivated to live boldly for Him as we carry out the mission He has called us to.*



HANDS

Like the first Christians, we face spiritual resistance. Most of us haven't had to risk our lives (though some Christians in the world certainly do), but we do risk ridicule and rejection from an unbelieving culture, friends, neighbors, and family. It's tempting to try to prove ourselves right when we confront resistance, but we should take a cue from the way Peter and John responded to the Jewish leaders. Rather than trying to win an argument, Peter simply declared what he knew to be true—Jesus is the cornerstone and salvation comes by no other name.

- **What will it look like when a Christian's ultimate allegiance is to Jesus?** *Ultimate allegiance doesn't mean perfection; it means pursuing repentance when we sin, knowing Jesus is far better than anything this world can offer.*
- **How can your story of hearing and believing the gospel open doors for sharing the gospel with others?** *Answers will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #6, which contains a quote poster related to the session.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPMissionWin18)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



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GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit

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03

SESSION THREE

The Church Grew in Unity

SESSION SUMMARY

Generosity should be a defining characteristic of the church because God is generous. The Father gave His Son. The Son gave His life. The Father and the Son gave the Spirit. The Spirit gives Christ-followers hearts of generosity. The Spirit works through our hearts to bring unity to the body of Christ through loving support for one another. Greed is contrary to who God is and invites His judgment. The Holy Spirit of God helps us distinguish between generous and greedy giving.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 4:32–5:11

THE POINT

God calls us to show our unity with other believers.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

In early 2016, Hamdi Ulukaya, founder of the Chobani Yogurt company, made front page news with a business decision. The company had recently experienced raging success, riding the wave of protein-rich fad diets that made Greek yogurt more popular than its ordinary siblings.

To celebrate the success, Ulukaya called together his company's employees and announced that he was giving ten percent of the company's stock to be distributed amongst them. If the company ever goes public or sells to someone else, the stock will be incredibly valuable. The result is that some of these employees—working at a dairy company—will be millionaires.¹

Contrast this with the story of Martin Shkreli, the CEO of a pharmaceutical company, who raised the price of a medication from \$13.50/pill to \$750/pill. Shkreli was universally disliked for this decision. Yet, it was perfectly legal and permissible.²

What differences would you expect between these two business leaders in their outlooks on the world and personal actions? For Ulukaya, the world would seem to be an abundant place, and the proper response to success, wealth, and thriving would be extending it to others—especially to those who made the success possible. For Shkreli, the world would seem to have a scarcity of resources, so the more one can acquire the better, no matter the cost. In other words, it might destroy your reputation to raise the price of a drug 5,000 percent, but if it makes you rich, then it is worth it.

The Bible is clear that the world is a place of abundance, and God calls us to a life of joyful generosity in response, whether that is with our money, our possessions, our time, or our very lives.

- **Do you find your heart and actions are pulled more in the direction of Shkreli or Ulukaya?**

Option 2

Have you ever heard someone say, “Pay it forward?” The idea could be summed up in this: When someone does something nice for you, go and do something nice for someone else in return. For example, if the person at the table next to you in a restaurant buys your meal, maybe you pay it forward by serving a meal at a homeless shelter.

- **When have you seen someone pay it forward? How did that affect you?**

While “paying it forward” is not a bad thing, we should constantly live kind and generous lives—no matter what others do or don't do for us. The early church's unity didn't leave room for greed or selfishness; they modeled complete generosity by giving to all who had needs among them.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God calls us to show our unity with other believers.

CHARACTERS

- **Holy Spirit:** third person of the Trinity
- **Barnabas:** a Levite from Cyprus who sold his property and gave the proceeds to the Jerusalem church; later attended several missionary journeys as recorded in the Book of Acts
- **Ananias and Sapphira:** a married couple who demonstrated material and spiritual greed by lying to God and the Apostles about their financial contribution to the church

PLOT

Jesus modeled generous giving for us when He set aside heavenly riches to share His inheritance with all who trust in Him. In obedience to the Holy Spirit's prompting, the early Christians shared their resources and gave generously to those in need. But Ananias and Sapphira's deceptive action was a sin against the church and against the Spirit. The Spirit distinguishes between giving from a heart of generosity and giving that is greedy and deceitful.

**COMMUNITY OF
GENEROSITY***The church displays
unity and generosity.*** Bonus Session*
**FROM HUMILIATION
TO EXALTATION***Jesus' arrival is one of
humility, obedience,
and exaltation.***THE FIRST MARTYR***Stephen reflects Jesus in
his life and his death.*

THE CHURCH GREW IN UNITY

The Holy Spirit inspired radical generosity in the early church, leading them to share all they had and to take care of one another's needs.

³² Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:32-35)

It's important not to misunderstand what's happening here. This isn't a call to poverty or a demand for Christians to sell everything they have and give it to the poor. In fact, it isn't a demand at all; it's an invitation. These new Christians found themselves as part of this new family. If someone had a need, then they responded with radical generosity. Those who were wealthy and had more than they needed sold their resources to provide for others in their new family.

Generosity is a fruit of God's grace, something people should be internally motivated to do (2 Cor. 9:7). While in one way this understanding liberates us from any legalism around giving, it also heightens our expectations for giving. Because generosity flows from the heart, it is a tangible way of seeing the condition of the heart. This is why Jesus said our hearts are where our treasures are (Matt. 6:21).

We give to what we love. The picture in Acts 4 is of a church united by the Spirit and motivated by love for one another to radical generosity. Love for the family of God is the centerpiece of the passage. We might be shocked by the radical steps these believers took, but we should be more stunned by the love that motivated them. When we examine our own lives, we should ask how we've made space for that kind of generosity with other Christians.

- **What are some ways our group and our church can show this kind of generosity today?** (p. 22, PSG)

GENEROUS AND GREEDY GIVING

The heart is always what concerns God when it comes to our giving, not the gift itself. Joyful giving—whether it’s a lot or a little, whether it’s all we have or just a portion—is something God delights in. By contrast, reluctant giving, constrained giving, or giving meant to impress the people around us is not pleasing to God.

36 Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, 37 sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. ... 1 But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property,² and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4:36-5:2)

There’s a familiar story here that many of us can probably identify with on some level. Joseph, more popularly known as Barnabas, was moved by the gospel and by his love for the church. He chose to sell a field he owned and give the money to the apostles for them to distribute to those in need. We can imagine that there was some kind of applause or acknowledgment for what was genuinely and certainly a generous action. This recognition, whether it came from the apostles or the disciples as a whole, was what also motivated Ananias. He didn’t necessarily want to be generous but wanted to be seen as generous.

The problem with Ananias and Sapphira’s gift wasn’t that they held back a portion of the profit but that they presented it as if it were the whole value of what they sold. The lie revealed the truth of Ananias and Sapphira’s hearts. They weren’t giving out of generous hearts but greedy ones, and their greed wasn’t simply material; it was spiritual. They wanted to give so they would be seen as radically generous. They wanted the praise of the crowd.

Their story invites us to examine our own motivations in how and why we give. Are we giving with joyful hearts? Are we giving in response to God’s goodness to us? Or are we giving to ensure that others talk about our giving? Are we generous because we’re joyful or because we want to display generosity?

The difference between Barnabas and Ananias was their sense of what kind of world we live in. Barnabas viewed the world as abundant; he could share what he had with confidence because he knew all he had came from God and he could rely on God and God’s people for his needs. Ananias lived in a world of scarcity. He didn’t just cling to his wealth, he grasped for praise and applause. Ananias soon found he would have neither.

THE SPIRIT JUDGES AND PURIFIES THE CHURCH

What happened to Ananias as a result of his lies is rather shocking.

3 But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? 4 While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God.” 5 When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. 6 The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. 7 After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter said to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for so much.” And she said, “Yes, for so much.” 9 But Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.” 10 Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. 11 And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things. (Acts 5:3-11)

Ananias was confronted for his deception, and he dropped dead. Later, his wife did too. Some might think this was a harsh punishment, but it was a sign of the depth and severity of their sin, and ours too, for that matter. This wasn't about an accounting error, and it really wasn't about money at all. Instead, the issue was the unity of the family of God and how sin violates the trust, intimacy, and communion of His family.

Because of the gospel, these Christians were living sacrificial and generous lives and enjoying the fruit of that generosity. Those with more than they needed took joy in giving to others. Those in need rejoiced in having their needs met. Ananias and Sapphira wanted the credit for their giving. More specifically, they wanted the credit for a greater sacrifice than they were willing to make. They wanted the apostles to think they had given all they had received from the sale of their land, just as Barnabas had done. It seems unlikely that they'd have dropped dead if they'd either truly given it all or been honest about keeping a portion for themselves. Judgment came because they pursued their own glory rather than God's, their own good rather than the church's.

The Spirit's judgment and discipline were necessary in the life of the church. Ananias and Sapphira's story is a dramatic example, but discipline comes in many forms, and often in subtle ones. It doesn't come because God is cranky or an intolerant overseer but because He loves His church and longs for its purity (Heb. 12:5-11).

TIMELINE

THE ETHIOPIAN TRAVELER

Philip faithfully shares the message of the gospel.

PETER VISITS CORNELIUS

The gospel goes to the Gentiles.

FROM PERSECUTOR TO PREACHER

The opposition leader, Paul, is forever changed when he encounters the risen Christ.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Social Concern (p. 23, PSG)

All Christians are under obligation to seek to make the will of Christ supreme in our own lives and in human society. Means and methods used for the improvement of society and the establishment of righteousness among men can be truly and permanently helpful only when they are rooted in the regeneration of the individual by the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. In the Spirit of Christ, Christians should oppose racism, every form of greed, selfishness, vice, and all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality, and pornography. We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick. We should speak on behalf of the unborn and contend for the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death. Every Christian should seek to bring industry, government, and society as a whole under the sway of the principles of righteousness, truth, and brotherly love. In order to promote these ends, Christians should be ready to work with all men of good will in any good cause, always being careful to act in the spirit of love without compromising their loyalty to Christ and His truth (Mic. 6:8; Eph. 6:5-9; 1 Thess. 3:12).

CHRIST CONNECTION

We live in an abundant world, as seen in the way God made the world and the way He pursues and provides for His people—whether it’s a ram in a bush, a lamb at Passover, or manna in the desert. Of course, we also see His extravagant giving in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In this abundant world, giving somehow yields more than keeping. Jesus, our supreme example, became exalted above every name in giving His life away (Phil. 2:5-11).

In following Jesus, we’re invited to do the same, not clinging to what we have but giving it away and becoming servants. We’re invited to allow God to multiply it for His good and glory in His church and in the world around us. The Holy Spirit’s presence in our lives should inspire such radical generosity, transforming our hearts to mirror Jesus’ own so we don’t cling to what’s “ours” by rights.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What would a life of radical generosity in the church look like today?**
Answers will vary.
- **How can reflecting on the gospel of Jesus lead us to joy in generous giving for the benefit of others in need?** *Reflecting on the gospel partly means recognizing the generous and undeserved gift we have been given in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Such grace, mercy, and generosity should motivate us to extend generosity toward others.*
- **How might this biblical narrative feed into some misconceptions people have about the God of the Bible?** *Some people may try to say God is unloving, unfair, too harsh, and so on.*
- **What truths of the Bible help us respond to those misconceptions?** *For starters, it is helpful to state at the outset that God is incapable of wrong doing or injustice. Further, He is under no obligation to show grace or mercy to any of us because of our sin. However, He has done exactly that time and time again since creation. In our journey through Scripture, we have seen God constantly show grace and mercy when He didn't have to, the greatest example being when He sent His Son to bear our sins on the cross.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

The discipline we experience may not be as severe as Ananias and Sapphira's, but sin always has consequences. The pain of those consequences is one way God purifies and shapes us. The Spirit works through and bears that pain with us and can heal us. He brings us to an awareness of our sin and to the possibility of being purified from our sin.

- **What are some ways dishonesty might creep into our giving?** *Dishonesty can creep into our giving when we give for show, expect something in return for our giving, and so forth.*
- **How can we guard ourselves against dishonesty in giving?** *Answers will vary.*



HEART

It's worth saying again that the key to this story isn't in the details of Ananias and Sapphira's accounting. It's in their hearts, motives, and desire to grab fame and glory for themselves. If we seek to live a life in the Spirit, then we must begin to pay careful attention to our hearts—where the Spirit meets us and carries out His work. If what we find there is self-centered, self-glorifying, and self-seeking, then we must take it as our cue to turn to Jesus and ask for His Spirit to transform our hearts.

- **What do Ananias and Sapphira's deaths say about the purity of the church?** *This consequence says God takes the unity and purity of the church seriously and so should we.*
- **What role do the people of God have in preserving the purity of the church?** *To preserve the purity of the church, the people of God should hold one another accountable, practice church discipline when necessary, cling to the gospel, and so forth.*



HANDS

This account emphasizes two things: the importance of family unity in the body of Christ and the role of generosity in the heart and life of a Christian. These two important truths are not necessarily separate, as we see in the story itself. In order to have genuine church unity in a culture that is already very individualistic and greedy, generosity is needed.

- **How have you experienced the blessing of the family of God?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are some biblical examples of radical generosity that inspire you?** *Answers will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

SOURCES

1. Yuki Noguchi, “Why Chobani gave employees a financial stake in company's future,” *NPR*, April 28, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2016/04/28/476021520/why-chobani-gave-employees-a-financial-stake-in-companys-future>.
2. Robert Mclean, “Martin Shkreli on drug price hike: ‘\$1 billion here we come,’” *CNN Money*, February 3, 2016, <http://money.cnn.com/2016/02/03/news/shkreli-turing-daraprim-price-house-hearing/>.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPMissionWin18)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



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And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit
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04

SESSION FOUR

The First Martyr of the Church

SESSION SUMMARY

God's Holy Spirit empowers Christ-followers to endure suffering for His sake. Whether that suffering takes the form of false accusations, death, or other variations, our faithful witness in the midst of suffering is a testimony to Jesus Christ—the One who came to fulfill the law and the prophets and to save us from our sin. When we suffer in faith, we are following in the footsteps of our Savior and confirming His worth above all things, even our very lives.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 6:8-15; 7:44-60

THE POINT

God calls us to make much of Jesus, even when we are persecuted.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Have you ever heard the phrase “delayed gratification”? It is commonly understood to be the conscious choice to avoid one pleasurable thing because avoiding it will lead to greater pleasure in the long run. For example, I may stay in school for a better paying future job even though staying may not be the most fun thing to do. I may avoid having the extra piece of cheesecake for the delayed gratification of not gaining the weight later.

- **What are some additional examples of delayed gratification? How have you personally experienced it?**

In one sense, Christians operate according to this idea of delayed gratification, especially when it comes to persecution. Persecution can be defined as “any hostility experienced from the world as a result of one’s identification as a Christian. From verbal harassment to hostile feelings, attitudes and actions, Christians in areas with severe religious restrictions pay a heavy price for their faith.”¹ Websites devoted to missions tell you that some of these persecutions result in “beatings, physical torture, confinement, isolation...imprisonment, slavery”² just to name a few.

Why would someone endure all of that? What stops them from simply denying their faith and changing their lifestyles to avoid persecution? Answer: Delayed gratification in knowing that the sufferings of this age are both light and momentary compared to the “eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor. 4:17) awaiting those who remain steadfast in their belief in Christ.

Option 2

Today, we commonly hear the word *persecution*, particularly concerning the church. *Persecution* essentially means *someone causes harm or suffering for others because of their beliefs*. Sometimes persecution is only in word or attitude, but sometimes persecution includes being beaten, tortured, or even killed.

- **What do you usually think of when you hear the word *persecution*?**

Tell students that the top ten countries where Christians are persecuted are: North Korea, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sudan, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, and Eritrea.³ If you can find a map of these countries to use as a reference, display that at the front of the room. Before you dig into today’s session, spend some time praying for the Christians in these countries as they endure persecution, that they would stand strong, continue to live for Christ, and help others know Him.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God calls us to make much of Jesus, even when we are persecuted.

CHARACTERS

- **Holy Spirit:** third Person of the Trinity
- **Stephen:** recognized as the first martyr of the early church who was stoned to death because he preached the gospel and because of the good deeds he performed

PLOT

As the number of disciples grew, the Twelve set apart seven godly men to make sure the widows in the church would be cared for. One of the seven was a man named Stephen, who was recognized for his faith and being filled with the Spirit (Acts 6:5). Stephen performed signs and wonders among the people and showed the Sanhedrin how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament. When the leaders heard his testimony, they were outraged. They dragged him outside of the city and stoned him to death.

TIMELINE

THE FIRST MARTYR

Stephen reflects Jesus in his life and his death.

THE ETHIOPIAN TRAVELER

Philip faithfully shares the message of the gospel.

PETER VISITS CORNELIUS

The gospel goes to the Gentiles.

STEPHEN FACED HIS ACCUSERS

One of the earliest and most powerful stories of Christians staring down suffering and death comes from Acts 6–7, where a disciple named Stephen was persecuted for his testimony about Jesus. Look how the story begins:

⁸ And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. ¹¹ Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” ¹² And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, ¹³ and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.” ¹⁵ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. (Acts 6:8-15)

Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, received a reputation for performing signs and wonders while testifying to the Jews about who Jesus is. As a result, he attracted the attention of men who wanted to argue with him. They challenged him and hoped to stop his testimony, but because he was wise and filled with the Spirit of God, their efforts fell short.

This is a consistent theme in the Book of Acts: ordinary men like Stephen and Peter taking up debates with well-educated clergy and winning. Their unfair advantage in these debates was twofold. First, they were on the side of the truth (which makes winning any debate much easier). Second, they were filled with the Holy Spirit, which gave them supernatural wisdom in what to say and when.

As the story went on, Stephen was taken before the Sanhedrin, a body of religious leaders who oversaw the Jewish community. There, his opponents resorted to low and dirty tactics, lying about what Stephen had been preaching and teaching.

- **When has someone lied about something you said or did in order to get you in trouble? How did the false witnesses do the same to Stephen?**
(p. 34, PSG)

STEPHEN SPOKE TO HIS ACCUSERS

Eventually, they called on Stephen to speak. When he spoke throughout Acts 7, he delivered a clear testimony that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament, the very book they accused him of blaspheming.

⁴⁴ “Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. ⁴⁵ Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, ⁴⁶ who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷ But it was Solomon who built a house for him. ⁴⁸ Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says,

⁴⁹ “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? ⁵⁰ Did not my hand make all these things?’

⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.” (Acts 7:44-53)

Stephen’s sermon might sound a little odd us. In order to understand how powerful this message was and why the reaction against it was so strong, we need to keep two things in mind as we read Stephen’s words.

First, to Stephen’s Jewish audience, nothing on earth was as sacred as the temple. The temple in Jerusalem was the high point of all of Jewish history. Their exclusive claim as Jews was that the one true God dwelled with Israel. First, He dwelled with them when they wandered in the desert, manifesting Himself in the tabernacle they carried through the wilderness. After they conquered the promised land, Solomon commissioned a temple to be built in Jerusalem.

Second, Israel was unfaithful to their covenant with God. They turned to the gods and idols of their neighbors. Eventually, they were conquered, the temple was destroyed, and the nation was crushed. For generations, the temple was no more than rubble. The temple’s reconstruction came with a revival. Its presence in Jerusalem was seen as a sign that God would be coming back to Israel and that the Israelites would one day be free from the tyranny of the nations.

When Stephen spoke about where God dwelled, the audience had this history of the temple in mind. God had never been confined to these dwelling places, which no one in Israel disputed, but Stephen also told them that they were missing the point of what was happening in Israel right then. God had come back to Israel, but He wasn’t manifesting Himself in the temple; He was there in flesh and blood. The Righteous One had come, and they had killed Him.

STEPHEN GLORIFIED CHRIST IN HIS DEATH

The response to Stephen's words was swift and terrible.

54 When they heard these things, they were enraged and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven. He saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 He said, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" 57 They yelled at the top of their voices, covered their ears, and together rushed against him. 58 They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. And the witnesses laid their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 While they were stoning Stephen, he called out: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" 60 He knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" And after saying this, he died. (Acts 7:54-60)

It is important to notice how God was with Stephen during the final moments in his life. We often hear stories of Christians enduring beatings, torture, and the threat of death while refusing to deny their faith. We might wonder how someone would be able to keep faith under such pressure. It would be tempting to deny our faith to save ourselves. Wouldn't God forgive us if we did?

Stephen may have felt that immense pressure but didn't cave, and Scripture tells us why: He was full of the Holy Spirit. As the pressure of persecution increased in intensity, so did God's sustaining provision—Stephen looked into heaven and saw God's glory with Jesus standing at God's right hand. Stephen couldn't deny Jesus' lordship in that moment because he saw it clearly, so he cried out in joy and worship, even as the mob raged against him.

A common principle throughout the Scriptures is also at work here: God supplies all we need to obey and follow Him. He provided a ram to Abraham in order to spare Isaac; He gave manna to the nation of Israel as they wandered the desert; He gave us Jesus as an atoning sacrifice to pay for our sins; and here, in a moment of acute suffering and persecution, He gave the power and vision to sustain Stephen. When suffering and trials come into our lives, we can be confident God will supply the strength, support, and encouragement we need to remain faithful.

- **What stands out about Stephen's final words in these verses? Why?**
(p. 36, PSG)

TIMELINE

FROM PERSECUTOR TO PREACHER

The opposition leader, Paul, is forever changed when he encounters the risen Christ.

EARLY MISSIONARIES

Paul and Barnabas set out to plant churches among the nations.

CHRIST ALONE

Salvation comes by grace alone through faith in Christ alone.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Life After Death (p. 36, PSG)

The Bible teaches that when a Christian dies, he or she immediately is with the Lord (Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 5:8). This is what some people call an intermediate state, given that the final state for believers takes place at the future resurrection (Rev. 6:10-11). For those who are not in Christ, life after death results in being separated from Christ in a state of suffering, even though future judgment remains (Luke 16:19-31).

CHRIST CONNECTION

The church has a rich history, filled with stories of Christians who were given boldness by the Spirit to face suffering and death while testifying to Jesus. Missionaries have died while sharing the gospel with hostile people. Countless martyrs all over the world and through the years have faced torture and death for their faith in the risen Savior.

In almost every case, these tragedies don't slow down the spread of the gospel message or end with the gospel being silenced. In fact, it's quite the opposite. The persecution of the church and its martyrs is like pruning a plant—the church grows stronger, richer, and more deeply rooted as a result. This pattern can be traced all the way back to the first Christians, beginning with Stephen.

In his death as the first martyr, Stephen followed in the footsteps of his Savior. Both Jesus and Stephen were falsely accused and charged with blasphemy. Both Jesus and Stephen prayed for their executioners. Both Jesus and Stephen entrusted their spirits to God as they died. As a follower of Jesus Christ, Stephen reflected his Master in life and death.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What are some stories you've heard of Christians suffering for their faith? How have those stories influenced your faith?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What can the church learn from the suffering and persecution of saints and martyrs who have gone before us?** *Their example encourages us in our own faith, reminding us that life is short and we should live in light of eternity.*
- **How can looking to Jesus help us keep our motives in check when we need to defend our faith?** *Jesus' own example of humility can serve as a great reminder for us when we feel the prideful urge to win an argument instead of lovingly defending the faith with the goal of helping others believe.*
- **How have you experienced the Holy Spirit sustaining your faith in the midst of trials?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

As the culture around us becomes more hostile to Christianity and a Christian worldview, we shouldn't be surprised if we experience hostility similar to Stephen's. Stephen was accused of speaking blasphemy against the temple. In our case, it's more likely that we'll be accused of hateful speech, bias, and intolerance, simply because we hold to biblical beliefs about the value of human life, the meaning of marriage, and the origins of sexuality.

- **How have you seen Christians be falsely accused?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What role does the Holy Spirit play in our response to opposition?** *Among other things, the Holy Spirit gives us courage, boldness, and an eternal perspective during opposition.*



HEART

Stephen didn't let the fact that he was right make him judgmental or arrogant in his speech. He may have had some harsh rebukes for the religious leaders, but as he died, he cried out for God not to hold their actions against them. Like Jesus, he asked for mercy for his persecutors. His actions were not motivated by pride—an eagerness to be right and to prove his rightness—but by love. He wanted them to believe in Jesus, not simply to believe him. Preaching, evangelizing, and defending the faith must come from a heart of love and compassion for the lost, not from an ego that simply wants to win.

- **Why do you think people respond better to a humble person than an arrogant one?** *Humility is attractive and desirable to people, while arrogance is generally seen as unfavorable.*
- **What are some ways our inner motives of love can be outwardly demonstrated?** *We won't shy away from sharing the truth in a loving manner or loving others with our deeds and actions instead of just our words, and so on.*



HANDS

Spirit-filled Christians find themselves doing many strange and wonderful things. Perhaps nothing is so strange and powerful as the fearlessness with which they can face suffering and death. A supernatural strength sustains them, and it's just as powerful when they face a mob as when they face cancer. Empowered by the Spirit and looking with hope to Jesus, we have a confidence that overshadows the power of death (1 Cor. 15:51-58). Stephen died at the hands of persecutors, but he died with confidence because Jesus is alive, the grave is defeated, and we have nothing to fear in this world.

- **How have you seen faithful suffering encourage believers?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How have you seen suffering open doors to sharing the gospel with unbelievers?** *Answers will vary.*

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack items #7 and #8. Item #7 contains a brief biographical sketch of several Christian martyrs throughout the centuries. Item #8 displays an informational map highlighting locations around the globe where persecution takes place today.

SOURCES

1. “Christian Persecution,” *OpenDoors*, accessed May 22, 2017, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/>.
2. Ibid.
3. “World Watch List,” *OpenDoors*, accessed May 24, 2017, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/>.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
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05

SESSION FIVE

Philip the Evangelist

SESSION SUMMARY

Throughout the Book of Acts, we see examples of seemingly “chance encounters” that proved to be providential. In this session, we’ll read more about one of these encounters in which Philip, an evangelist and follower of Jesus, was prompted by God to go on a journey. Philip’s journey led him to meeting an Ethiopian and the expansion of the kingdom. The Spirit orchestrated Philip’s meeting, and He continues this work today, leading Christians to use the Scriptures to show others Jesus and how they can believe in Him for eternal life.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 8:26-40

THE POINT

God calls us to be faithful and obedient witnesses.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

If we are to believe the secular narrative for how the world works, then most of life is a game of chance. The events that shape our lives, careers, and relationships are all an accident. We are in the right place at the right time, and suddenly we meet our spouse. A chance encounter leads to a dream job. Or worse, happenstance leads to horrible accidents, mistakes, and misery. If this story is true, then all we have to hope for in the world is good luck, and all we can point to for what makes life good and beautiful comes by accident.

But then there are true stories like this one of how a couple met and fell in love. It began while he was on a mission trip with his church, and she was on a mission trip with another church. They happened to be in the same place and their trips only overlapped by a day. They served together for an afternoon at a medical clinic in the middle of a jungle in Central America and went their separate ways. Almost a year later, they bumped into each other at a wedding, and they were married six months later. Ten years later, they're still going strong.

- **What “chance encounters” have you experienced in life or heard about?**

We could fill books with stories of “chance encounters.” Does it make sense that all of these stories are accidental? Is “chance” the best description of what’s going on? Does that fit what we experience? In the Scriptures, there are no accidents, and there is no such thing as chance. Instead, these chance encounters are actually divine appointments. Consider Joseph in Egypt, David fighting Goliath, and Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. For the Christian, this way of seeing the world is a call to pay attention.

Option 2

Connection. Coincidence. Happy accident. By chance. Luck of the draw. All of these words or phrases describe an unexpected meeting of people or details that would otherwise be completely unconnected. For example, a guy finding a telephone number on a slip of paper in the middle of a theme park with the name “Ben” written on it; then calling the number and finding on the other end of the line his best friend from elementary school.

- **When have you experienced a coincidence? What happened?**

While these occurrences may seem random, believers know God is sovereign over all things. As in today’s session, Philip taking a different road was not a coincidence, but part of God’s plan. In the same way, we can view coincidences in our own lives as opportunities from God.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God calls us to be faithful and obedient witnesses.

CHARACTERS

- **Holy Spirit:** third Person of the Trinity
- **Philip:** an evangelist and Christ-follower, well known for a Spirit-led encounter he had with an Ethiopian traveler

PLOT

After Stephen was martyred, the church began to experience extreme persecution and many of Jesus' followers fled throughout Judea and Samaria. Philip, a Christ-follower, first went to Samaria. However, God called him to take a road which traveled between Jerusalem and Gaza. Philip obeyed and God used him to teach Scripture to an Ethiopian man on that road.

TIMELINE

THE ETHIOPIAN TRAVELER

Philip faithfully shares the message of the gospel.

PETER VISITS CORNELIUS

The gospel goes to the Gentiles.

FROM PERSECUTOR TO PREACHER

The opposition leader, Paul, is forever changed when he encounters the risen Christ.

PHILIP OBEYED GOD

There's a thread throughout the Gospels and the Book of Acts that sheds light on the reality of God's providence and planning. People find themselves suddenly prompted to hit the road, or they suddenly show up just in time to encounter Jesus or the apostles. Through these many surprise encounters, God built up His church. On one such occasion, one of Jesus' followers was sent to the middle of nowhere without explanation.

26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. 27 And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship 28 and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29 And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." (Acts 8:26-29)

This story is significant in the Book of Acts. For starters, during that time, Ethiopia was about as far away as you could get. Talking about Ethiopia would be like talking about the other side of the world, even though these regions don't seem so far apart on modern maps. In the minds of the original readers of Acts, the introduction of an Ethiopian to the story was a big deal. Especially one who had to come to Jerusalem in search of God. This story introduces the global scope of the gospel message—it's a word for the nations, not just the Jews.

Philip was sent by God to be on mission for Him. Upon hearing the angel's command, Philip obeyed immediately. Just a few verses earlier, Philip was enjoying a thriving ministry in Samaria (8:4-8). One could imagine that a command like this—to undertake a lengthy journey, prompted only by the voice of God—might be met with some inner resistance. Any thriving work is difficult to leave and doing so takes a great deal of faith.

- **Philip's response was immediate. If you had a thriving ministry like Philip and God asked you to leave, how would you respond?** (p. 40, PSG)
- **When has God asked you to leave something familiar for the unknown?** (p. 40, PSG)

PHILIP GUIDED HIM THROUGH THE SCRIPTURES

Philip approached the chariot and heard the Ethiopian reading the Scriptures. Look at what he heard and how he responded:

³⁰ When Philip ran up to it, he heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, “Do you understand what you’re reading?”

³¹ “How can I,” he said, “unless someone guides me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Now the Scripture passage he was reading was this: He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb is silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who will describe his generation? For his life is taken from the earth. ³⁴ The eunuch said to Philip, “I ask you, who is the prophet saying this about — himself or someone else?” ³⁵ Philip proceeded to tell him the good news about Jesus, beginning with that Scripture. (Acts 8:30-35)

More evidence appears here to show how God prepared both men for this encounter. The Ethiopian was immediately receptive to Philip, inviting him up onto the chariot to explain the Scriptures to him. Not only that, but he also *happened* to be reading a passage from the Book of Isaiah which clearly talks about the sacrificial death of Jesus. The whole conversation was set up for Philip to point this man to Jesus.

Philip didn’t have the credentials of a Bible scholar or a teacher of the law—he was an ordinary guy. However, because he was filled with the Spirit and because of what he’d seen and experienced in his own life of faith, he responded with confidence and clarity. They read a passage from Isaiah, and the Ethiopian invited Philip to explain it. This gave Philip a starting point to share the gospel with the man.

The whole story of the Bible, from one end to the other, points to Jesus. The story of Israel and the whole of the Old Testament are about anticipating Jesus. We see it in how they longed for a king, though all their kings fell short of the glory they aspired to. We see it in the high demands of the law, which no person can attain. We see it in the countless sorrows described in the Psalms and Prophets, where the brokenness of the world was displayed and the people cried out, “How long, oh Lord?” Jesus manages to embody all that the Old Testament longs for and points to. Even the broader story of the Old Testament—exile from the garden of Eden, longing for the promised land, and exile (again) at the hands of the Babylonians—points to Jesus as the conquering King who defeats Satan, sin, and death and brings us back home to God.

- **Like Philip, you probably aren’t a Bible scholar. What are some ways you can use Scripture you know to share the gospel and point others to Jesus, right where you are?** (*p. 41, PSG*)

PHILIP LED HIM TO RESPOND IN FAITH

The Ethiopian official was clearly moved by the story Philip shared and was eager to respond.

36 And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” 38 And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. 39 And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. 40 But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea. (Acts 8:36-40)

All of the elements of true conversion are on display here. The Ethiopian was eager to believe, not forced to believe or pressured to convert. Philip explained how the passage of Scripture he was reading pointed to Jesus, whose death and resurrection reconciles us to God. It seems Philip also explained enough that the Ethiopian was eager to identify with Jesus through baptism. His question was crucial: What reason was there that he shouldn't have been baptized that very moment? Some might have offered a variety of reasons not to baptize him: He was an Ethiopian, a foreigner—not an ethnic Jew. Philip was filled with the Spirit and didn't put any stock in those hindrances. It is clear the Ethiopian believed what he heard about Jesus, so Philip baptized him without delay.

Evangelism and conversion really are that simple. Guided by the Holy Spirit, we point people to Jesus and invite them to trust that He alone can save us from our sins. If they believe, we welcome them into God's family as believers. We can share “just the facts” without asking people to make something of them, but that's not the goal of evangelism. We don't just share what we know, we invite others to join us in following Jesus. The hope of an evangelist is to help someone see Jesus as Lord; to see how His life, death, and resurrection takes away the sins of the world and brings us home to God the Father. In Philip's short conversation with the Ethiopian, this miracle happened. The Ethiopian saw Jesus as Lord and was ready to follow Him into the waters of baptism.

As this story concludes, we see the two parted ways just as suddenly as they came together. It's implied here that the Spirit carried him away and deposited him in Azotus. The Ethiopian, filled with the joy of being a new Christian and filled with the Holy Spirit, went on his own way. We must imagine the Spirit continued His work through this man and the story of Jesus spread and grew roots in Africa.

TIMELINE

EARLY MISSIONARIES

Paul and Barnabas set out to plant churches among the nations.

CHRIST ALONE

Salvation comes by grace alone through faith in Christ alone.

SALVATION AVAILABLE TO ALL

The message of the gospel reaches people of different backgrounds.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Mission of the Church (p. 42, PSG)

The church is a sign and instrument of the kingdom of God, a people united by faith in the gospel announcement of the crucified and risen king, Jesus. The mission of the church is to go into the world in the power of the Spirit and make disciples by proclaiming this gospel, calling people to respond in ongoing repentance and faith, and demonstrating the truth and power of the gospel by living under the lordship of Christ for the glory of God and the good of the world.

CHRIST CONNECTION

The most ordinary of circumstances might be a divine appointment.

A “chance encounter,” as the world often sees it, might be a crucial moment in someone’s life. There are no coincidences. Before we let this make us anxious or fearful of missing an important moment, let’s not forget that we never experience these moments alone. The Holy Spirit accompanies us, guides us, and provides us with these opportunities. He empowers us for this work with boldness and with words, and He has already gone ahead of us to soften hearts and open ears to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. As we go on our way in the world, let us go and make disciples for Jesus.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What are some ways you've been surprised by how God has led you, your church, or your friends to be on mission?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Do you think it is possible to tell the good news about Jesus from anywhere in the Scriptures? Why or why not?** *We can certainly share the gospel from any place in Scripture since all Scripture points to Jesus (Luke 24:27).*
- **What are some reasons we might feel intimidated to try explaining the Scriptures to an unbeliever?** *Reasons might include a sense of inadequacy in being able to explain the gospel correctly, a fear that we might not be able to answer any objections that are raised, a feeling of personal unworthiness in sharing the gospel, and so forth.*
- **How can we grow in our ability and confidence to share Christ from the Scriptures?** *One simple way to grow in this area is by simply sharing. Make it a personal goal to naturally direct everyday conversations with people toward the gospel.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

It would have been easy for Philip to cling to this spiritually rich moment, much like Peter, James, and John during the transfiguration in Matthew 17. We see that temptation at work, when Jesus allowed them to witness His transfiguration. Peter offered to build shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, as if to say, “Let’s just stay here and keep this thing going.” Almost as soon as he said it, the moment ended—Jesus’ physical appearance returned to normal and Moses and Elijah were gone. This is a perfect metaphor for what we all experience in similar situations. We want to make the good times last, to stay where we are, to linger over what God has done. We feel this way sometimes at the end of a retreat, camp, or in the midst of a rich worship experience.

- **Why do you think God doesn’t mean for us to linger in these moments for now?**
While these moments are a gift and can be useful to our own growth and maturity, there is still work to be done. Our prize in running this great race of faith is in the future, when Christ returns. Until then, there are others who still need to hear the good news about what God has done for them.
- **How can these spiritually rich moments fuel us toward faithful witnessing?** *They can provide a sense of urgency toward evangelism, as well as an empathy for those who have never heard the gospel.*



HEART

When we think about sharing the gospel with a lost world, we often focus on the hostility and resistance Christians experience. However, resistance and hostility aren’t always the reactions to the gospel. The story of the Ethiopian reminds us that many are seeking God as a result of God first seeking them. In this case, the Ethiopian knew enough to come to Jerusalem to look for Him, but in many cases, people will look wherever some semblance of hope and spirituality can be found.

- **How have you witnessed people looking for God in all the wrong places?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How can we cultivate hearts willing to respond obediently to the Spirit’s leading, no matter the risks?** *One way is by listening to the stories of other faithful believers who treasure Christ above the things this world offers.*



HANDS

The next leg in Philip’s journey continued his ministry of expanding the kingdom among the Gentiles. Azotus, where he suddenly appeared, was about nineteen miles away. This expansion of the kingdom happened because someone with a willing and submissive heart obeyed God’s call to leave a thriving ministry in Samaria and seek out one person who needed to hear the gospel.

- **What are some ways you can do the work of a Spirit-empowered evangelist in the coming days?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Where are some places in your life where you imagine this work will occur?**
Answers will vary.

► ADDITIONAL INFO

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPMissionWin18)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit

MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject



06

SESSION SIX

God Doesn't Show Favoritism

SESSION SUMMARY

The gospel resists and tears down the boundaries that often separate people in the world. The writers of the New Testament often confronted the church when it failed to unite around the gospel and break these walls down. Peter, who struggled with such issues himself, learned the importance of calling the church to brotherly unity. However, his journey toward unity began with the Holy Spirit paving the way in the heart of a Gentile and then in his own heart. With God, there is no favoritism. Salvation is offered to people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 10:1-16,34-48

THE POINT

God shows no favoritism but offers salvation to people of every ethnicity.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

The Bible contains some vivid analogies when talking about the people of God: the temple in which God's Spirit dwells, the planted and nourished vine, the flock Jesus shepherds, the bride of Christ, the family of God, and so on. Each of these images not only provides insight into our individual identity, but also our corporate identity as the ransomed, rescued, and redeemed people of God.

- **Can you think of any additional analogies the Bible uses when talking about the people of God? Which one strikes you as being more helpful in your understanding of the church? Explain your answer.**

These images and analogies can help church members better understand themselves, as well as how they should respond to one another. For instance, these images show us that while we may have individual and unique differences created by God, we are still one because of our shared union with Christ. The gospel unites us and overcomes any major obstacles to our unity with one another. As seen in this session, God shows no favoritism between people groups, inviting all to a place at the table of grace and entrance into His family.

Option 2

Place students in groups of two. Give them the following list of questions and instruct them to interview each other:

- **What is your favorite color?**
- **What's your favorite movie?**
- **Who is your favorite singer? Actor?**
- **When you have free time, what's your favorite activity?**
- **Would you rather play sports, create art, or make music?**
- **How many siblings do you have?**
- **What's your family like?**

Allow students about fifteen minutes to discuss, then ask them to share one thing they have in common with their partners and one difference. God created all people differently, and that's a good thing. Instead of minimizing people because of their differences, we should use those differences to maximize our influence in the world and the ways we share the gospel. God loves all people and so should we. God doesn't show favoritism toward one people group or another and neither should we.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God shows no favoritism but offers salvation to people of every ethnicity.

CHARACTERS

- **Holy Spirit:** third Person of the Trinity
- **Cornelius:** a Roman commander stationed at Caesarea; Peter was led to Cornelius to share the gospel with him and his family.

PLOT

As we saw in the previous story with Philip and the Ethiopian, God is continually searching to save and redeem what is lost, including those outside the Jewish heritage. As we continue through the Book of Acts, we're constantly reminded of God's graciousness as He calls people from all backgrounds and ethnicities to know and follow Him.

TIMELINE

PETER VISITS CORNELIUS

The gospel goes to the Gentiles.

FROM PERSECUTOR TO PREACHER

The opposition leader, Paul, is forever changed when he encounters the risen Christ.

EARLY MISSIONARIES

Paul and Barnabas set out to plant churches among the nations.

GOD WORKED IN CORNELIUS' HEART

The Holy Spirit began the work of taking the gospel to the Gentiles and helping the fledgling church see this as God's plan. He began a new stage of this work with a man named Cornelius. Take a look:

¹ At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, ² a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. ³ About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, "Cornelius." ⁴ And he stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵ And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. ⁶ He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea." ⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, ⁸ and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa. (Acts 10:1-8)

Cornelius seems to be someone who sought God for a long time. He was a Roman living in Judea, overseeing several hundred Roman soldiers stationed at Caesarea. He was not a foot soldier; he was more like a battalion commander, a person with political and military power at his disposal.

God had been cultivating a hunger for Himself in Cornelius. When He commended Cornelius' good heart and good work, He described his efforts as a "memorial offering" (v. 4), a worthy sacrifice before the Lord. Notice how God drew Cornelius into a deeper relationship with Himself. He didn't simply reveal Jesus to Cornelius in this vision. Instead, God commanded Cornelius to meet with Peter, one of Jesus' disciples. God-fearing Cornelius obeyed, gathering some servants and sending them off to find Peter.

That's one of the most surprising things about Cornelius' story. As pious as he was and as much as his heart seemed to be in the right place, he needed more than good motives to find God. He needed the church, the community of faithful saints who are filled with the Spirit and telling the world about Jesus.

- **When has a more mature believer helped you understand the Bible or know God better?** (p. 46, PSG)

GOD CHALLENGED PETER'S THINKING

Meanwhile, in another part of Judea, the Apostle Peter was having a vision of his own that would challenge his understanding of God and His image-bearers.

⁹ The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. ¹⁰ And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance ¹¹ and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. ¹² In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³ And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." ¹⁴ But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." ¹⁵ And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common." ¹⁶ This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven. (Acts 10:9-16)

In the vision God gave him, Peter saw something coming down from the heavens, lowered by "four corners" (v. 11). More than describing the geometrical shape of this sheet, this phrase indicated an occurrence with big implications. The sheet with four corners resembles the four corners of the Earth (Isa. 11:12; Rev. 7:1). In other words, whatever God revealed to Peter had world-wide consequences.

In the sheet, Peter saw all the animals and birds of the earth represented. Peter, who lived according to the rules and traditions of Jewish culture, would have been scandalized by this sight and even more scandalized by the command to "kill and eat" (v. 13). Dietary laws were integral to Jewish national and cultural identity. God gave the law to Israel as a way of distinguishing them from the culture of their neighbors. Breaking with this pattern was seen as dishonoring to God, family, and nation.

Therefore, Peter's response to the voice of the Lord was a firm *no*. Maybe Peter thought he was being tested—was his hunger so strong that it could overcome his convictions about the dietary laws he had kept from birth? The voice responded by telling him God had made these animals clean and Peter could not call them impure anymore.

Peter's vision marked a turning point in the life of the church. Luke told the story in a way that shows us God's providence at work. Cornelius' heart was being drawn to God just as Peter's heart was being opened to new possibilities. The command to ignore Israel's dietary laws indicated that the time of Israel's being separate from the rest of the world on account of the Law of Moses had come to an end. What would set them apart from the world from that point on would be their faith in Jesus, not their cultural and religious traditions. Peter would soon discover that he had more in common with a Gentile centurion who trusted in Jesus than with a Jewish brother or sister who didn't believe.

GOD CALLS ALL PEOPLE TO BELIEVE

As Peter was contemplating his vision and its meaning, the three men Cornelius sent arrived at Simon the tanner's house. They invited Peter to come to Caesarea to meet Cornelius, recounting his visit from an angel, and the next day they set out for Caesarea. It's telling that Peter went along with these men. As he later explained to Cornelius, it was forbidden for a Jewish man to associate with a foreigner (Acts 10:28). He only went because he understood his vision—God was telling him Gentiles were no longer unclean and were not to be excluded from the good news of the gospel.

When they arrived, Cornelius fell down to worship Peter, believing that was the proper response to meeting the one God spoke of. But Peter told him to get up and explained that he was only a human and unworthy of worship. Cornelius then told him about his own vision. Look at Peter's response:

³⁴ So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), ³⁷ you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” ⁴⁴ While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. ⁴⁵ And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, ⁴⁷ “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” ⁴⁸ And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days. (Acts 10:34-48)

TIMELINE

CHRIST ALONE
Salvation comes by grace alone through faith in Christ alone.

SALVATION AVAILABLE TO ALL
The message of the gospel reaches people of different backgrounds.

ENGAGING CULTURE
Paul engages the surrounding culture with the message of Christ.

Peter's message to Cornelius and all the people who had gathered reflected God's vision for the inclusion of Gentiles into the church. God's desire has always been a restored humanity and in Jesus that's possible. Yes, Jesus came through Israel—but through Israel He came to the world. What matters is not your religious or ethnic pedigree but your faith in the One God sent.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

God's Plan and Human Action (p. 48, PSG)

God's sovereignty over all of life encompasses the free actions of human beings. Proverbs 19:21 says, "Many plans are in a person's heart, but the Lord's decree will prevail." In ways we are unable to fully comprehend, the Lord's plan goes forward through the choices of human beings as moral agents. Even freely chosen sinful actions are factored into God's overarching plan, as is the case with the crucifixion of Jesus—an event both purposed by God through foreknowledge that was also carried out by the wicked decisions of human beings (Acts 2:23). Knowing that God is working all things for the good of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28), we trust in His promise to fulfill His plan, even when we do not understand our present circumstances.

CHRIST CONNECTION

God challenged Peter's tradition of "clean" and "unclean" foods in order to further challenge his perspective of "clean" and "unclean" people. Peter learned God does not show favoritism. Rather, God calls His people to proclaim the message of Jesus' death and resurrection to all people, to celebrate His work in their lives, and to welcome believers into His family, regardless of their ethnicity.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Why do you think God chooses to use Christians to spread the gospel?**
In one sense, sharing the gospel is partly for our benefit since we grow as Christians through sharing.
- **What are some ways God has surprised you or disrupted your expectations?**
Answers will vary.
- **How have you been surprised by God's grace getting through to someone and calling them to faith in Jesus?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How has this story challenged you personally in your own efforts to share the gospel?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

We can still find people who are seeking after God but don't know Jesus. We live in an age where, alongside rigid secularism, religion abounds. If we pay attention to what motivates and attracts people to their various religious practices, we might discover hearts that are truly seeking God. We might discover hearts that long for truth. We might discover people with an awareness of their spiritual poverty, people who are looking everywhere for the possibility of an encounter with the Divine. At the same time, we shouldn't expect those people to find what they're looking for apart from God's own miraculous intervention. Moreover, we shouldn't expect them to find God apart from His church.

- **What are some ways you see non-Christians seeking God in the world around you?**

Answers will vary.

- **How might you point them to Jesus in light of their misguided efforts to find God?** *One way we can point others to Jesus is by pointing out that their motivation to know God is from God. He is the One pursuing them, which means it is important for them to come to God on His terms.*



HEART

While the story of Peter and Cornelius might be familiar, we may still be unaware of the way our own hearts are biased toward certain people. We would be wise to pause, examine our consciences, and ask whether our attitudes toward people—especially those who are not like us for racial, social, economic, or political reasons—might be hindering the unity of the body of Christ. It's a tough question but one worth pressing into for the sake of a church that knows no favoritism or distinctions among believers.

- **How can we protect our hearts from developing negative attitudes toward other people?**

One way would be to remember what we were like before God saved us by His grace.

- **What will your response be if you uncover biases in your heart toward others?**

Answers will vary.



HANDS

We should consider how this story can be translated in our own contexts. For any number of cultural, political, racial, and social reasons, Christians throughout church history have had to wrestle with the temptation to write off certain people as potential Christians. We assume "that person" would never get saved or "that group" is too hostile to the gospel. We assume those who are different from us would be unwilling to hear us. Sometimes we just assume certain people are too sinful or too "something" to hear us. It is always a mistake to think this way. The gospel once surprised us with grace, and through sharing the gospel, we might be surprised at who else accepts His grace.

- **What groups of people might we be prone to write off as too resistant to the gospel?**

Answers will vary.

- **What are some specific ways this story should change our perspective?** *Through knowing God may be at work in others even when we can't see it, and we have biases God wants to change.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
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SPECIAL SESSION

The First Christmas Carol

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we see Christ as the ultimate example of humility, leaving heaven to come willingly to Earth as a fragile and lowly infant. His human life provided us with an example of obedience, moving from the manger to the cross continually choosing God's will over His own comfort. Ultimately, He was exalted by the Father after the cross when He was raised to the throne. One day, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess Jesus is Lord (Phil. 2:10-11).

SCRIPTURE

Philippians 2:5-11

THE POINT

God calls us to adopt the posture of a humble servant we see in Christ.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Let's be honest, it can be difficult for us to remember the reason for the Christmas season—celebrating *Immanuel, God with us*. With what seem like endless parties, shopping lists, and family gatherings, the season leading up to Christmas day is typically rushed and stressful. Beyond this busyness is a constant temptation to indulge ourselves. From grandma's cooking to the latest gadget, the inclinations of our hearts and flesh to be gratified through toys and treats is in overdrive. This season gives us countless opportunities to think about ourselves, our wants, and our wishes.

Busyness, excess, and self-gratification are all problems of the season, but the biggest hurdle in the way of celebrating and honoring Christ this Christmas is not primarily in the external distractions; it's in our tendency to want what we want, how we want it, and when we want it. We forget that life is not all about us, and Christmas surely isn't either. We must intentionally remember that Christmas is about Christ. Christmas is not primarily about celebrating time with family, making memories, or showing love through gift-giving.

The actions we take during this Christmas season (and every other day of the year) ought to be acts of worship toward the God who sent His only Son for us. As we dive into what some might call "the first Christmas carol," let's study with an attitude of worship.

- **What are some of your biggest distractions during Christmas? What holiday traditions help you remember to worship God for sending Jesus to save us?**

Option 2

How do humility and service go together? Essentially, humility is being submissive rather than proud or arrogant. Humble people also tend to defer to others' needs and desires. Service means to be of use to or help others. It would seem obvious that humility and service go together because both uplift others above self. This doesn't mean we forget ourselves completely, just that we think of others more than we think of ourselves.

- **Name someone you know who displays the characteristics of humility and service.**
- **What are some behaviors and attitudes you can model after this person?**

Ultimately, Jesus is our model for humility and service. Though He is God, He humbled Himself to live as a man and served us by living a perfect life and dying for our sin. Who has helped anyone more than Jesus helped humanity? He submitted to the Father and placed our needs above His own. He teaches us to do the same for others.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God calls us to adopt the posture of a humble servant we see in Christ.

CHARACTERS

- **Jesus:** eternal Son of God; second Person of the Trinity

PLOT

This session takes us to Paul's letter to the Philippian church. This passage contains parts of an early church hymn, a carol relating to who Jesus is and what He did for us. May it shine brightly into your Christmas season, allowing you to see more of Christ and your need for Him during this time.

CHRIST'S HUMILITY: FROM HEAVEN TO EARTH

Though examples of humility can be rare, the Bible gives us many snapshots of Jesus' humility, so we can follow His example.

⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant. (Phil. 2:5-7a)

This one great act of voluntary demotion Jesus took demonstrated the depths of both His love for us and His love for His Father. There are two parts to this great story in which the Son of God moved from heaven and took up residence on Earth: He let go and He took on.

We first need to see and believe Jesus indeed existed in the form of God before He came to earth in order to understand what He let go. Jesus—the Word—was in the beginning with God. He created all things, and without Him nothing exists (John 1:1-3). Jesus, in a great act of grace-filled humility, set aside His privileges of being God (without ceasing to be God) so He could join the human race for the sake of humankind.

For our sake, Jesus let go of more than we can ever imagine so we could enter into an eternal relationship with God the Father. As the apostle Paul wrote, Jesus demonstrated His grace to us by becoming poor so we might become rich in Him (2 Cor. 8:9). Christ temporarily gave up His exalted seat next to the Father so that we might enjoy God's exalted presence for eternity.

Not only did Christ let go, but He also took on. It's one thing to pass up a first-class ticket. It's quite another to move to the worst seat and choose to serve the rest of the people on the plane. Jesus emptied Himself of His right to glory and privilege and instead took on limitation and servitude. This was not a one-time decision. Throughout His human life, the Son of God followed the calling of a humble servant and lived a life of stripped-down humanity, beginning with Him being born as a defenseless, dependent infant. He continually chose the posture of a servant. He voluntarily washed feet. He faithfully endured insult and injury. Why? Because He came to serve and give His life for us, not to be served by us (Mark 10:45).

- **Jesus' whole life was drenched in humility. What can you learn about the way you should live your life from the way He lived His?**
(p. 28, PSG)

TIMELINE

** Bonus Session*
FROM HUMILIATION TO EXALTATION
Jesus' arrival is one of humility, obedience, and exaltation.

THE FIRST MARTYR
Stephen reflects Jesus in his life and his death.

THE ETHIOPIAN TRAVELER
Philip faithfully shares the message of the gospel.

CHRIST'S OBEDIENCE: FROM THE MANGER TO THE CROSS

From birth to His last day on earth, complete obedience—though not automatic—was the only option Jesus entertained. He was always about His Father's business, despite the consequences He knew would come and because He knew what would ultimately result from His suffering.

7 ... being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:7b-8)

- **List some of the ways Jesus was tempted in Scripture and ways He would have been tempted because of His human nature. What encouragement should we receive because Jesus remained perfectly obedient to the Father?** (*p. 29, PSG*)

Selfishness. Pride. Laziness. Gluttony. Lust. You name it, He faced it. Yet He rightly chose to resist and fight against each temptation, every single time. He didn't make all the right choices because they were easy or because He was without opportunity to sin. Christ obeyed because of His underlying desire and determination to do the will of the Father.

On the night of His betrayal in the garden of Gethsemane, we have a glimpse into what might be the most critical moment of Jesus' life of obedience. Knowing the pain and suffering that awaited Him, the Son of God so fervently prayed for another way that His sweat was like blood drops (Matt. 26:39; Luke 22:44). Jesus agonized over this obedient choice, and He even petitioned for another way. Because He was human, obedience was not easy. Yet because of His love and commitment to the plan and glory of God, obedience was the only choice He would make. For the sake of God's purpose for humankind, He deliberately and joyfully took every agonizing step toward the cross. Enduring torture and taunting, Jesus remained on the cross until God's plan for that step of redemption was finished.

CHRIST'S EXALTATION: FROM THE CROSS TO THE THRONE

So far in this passage, the focus has been on Jesus, but Paul turned the focus from Jesus Christ's attitude to the actions of God the Father. And with a crescendo, the apostle gave us a beautiful refrain of celebratory praise.

⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:9-11)

Anytime we see *therefore* or *for this reason* in Scripture, we need to pay attention and figure out what is going on. Typically, the author is concluding with an important statement. In this case, the transition takes place in verse 9. Because verses 5-8 are true, verses 9-11 came to be. In other words, since Jesus humbled Himself by becoming a man and obediently followed God's plan all the way to death on a cross, God exalted Him and gave Him the greatest name of all: Lord of all. The Old Testament prophecy in Isaiah pointed to the exalted name of the Christ child long ago: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6). The majestic reign of Jesus Christ was restored through the Father's act of exaltation because of His complete obedience.

Just as the word *therefore* or the phrase *for this reason* in Scripture is often important, the phrase *so that* is as well. In this passage, both phrases "for this reason" and "so that," help us see a very important theme in the Bible: All things are for God's glory. God's exaltation of Christ had purpose; it wasn't simply to celebrate the acts of Jesus as we tend to celebrate them here on earth. Granting Christ the name above every name was not a one-time gift like a trophy for Christ to leave on His bookcase. This name was a giving and restoring of the honored position He left behind when He entered Earth as a child in Mary's womb. Jesus' exaltation continues to echo throughout all of history. All of this, in turn, glorified the Father, the One who glorified the Son as He had been before the foundation of the world (John 17:4-5).

TIMELINE

PETER VISITS CORNELIUS

The gospel goes to the Gentiles.

FROM PERSECUTOR TO PREACHER

The opposition leader, Paul, is forever changed when he encounters the risen Christ.

EARLY MISSIONARIES

Paul and Barnabas set out to plant churches among the nations.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Jesus' Humanity (p. 30, PSG)

In addition to being fully divine, the Bible also affirms that Jesus is fully human. Not only does the Old Testament affirm that the Promised One (Messiah) would be a man (Isa. 7:14; 9:6; Mic. 5:3), but the New Testament also affirms that Jesus' earthly life bore all the marks of being a human. He experienced the circumstances common to living as a human being, such as hunger (Matt. 4:2), thirst (John 19:28), weariness (Matt. 8:24), sorrow (John 11:35), and pain (the crucifixion).

CHRIST CONNECTION

The early Christians celebrated the significance of Christ coming to earth (incarnation), His death on the cross for our sins, and His exaltation as the Lord of the world.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Have you encountered people giving up their rights and/or comforts for the sake of others? If so, how did it make you feel? Why do you think this type of sacrifice is so rare?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How can we demonstrate in our lives the humble attitude Jesus displayed in becoming a human being?** *We demonstrate humility when we seek the good of others rather than our own, consider others as more important than ourselves, look out for the interests of others, and so forth.*
- **What is the connection between humility and obedience?** *Humility and obedience are two sides to the same coin—those who are humbled before God and recognize their need for Him are also willing to walk in obedience. Their obedience arises out of love for God because of His gracious forgiveness towards them.*
- **How can we prepare ourselves for the potential consequences of our own obedience to the Father as we share in Jesus' humble attitude?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

Setting aside His glory and privilege, Jesus took on servitude and suffering for the sake of God's will. A monumental example to follow, no doubt, but one we must pursue. Instead of giving in to the cravings of consumerism, Paul encourages us to take on the mind of Christ and follow the example of His life. Just as Christ lived and died for the sake of God's glory, we also give our humble attitudes and sacrificial actions as a continual offering of praise to the Father.

- **How can you adjust your plans to make this Christmas season even more about the celebration of your Savior and all He's done for you?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What types of New Year's resolutions will you make that challenge you to deny yourself and pursue humility?** *Answers will vary.*



HEART

Many commentators agree that Philippians 2:5-11 was part of an early church hymn. If this is true, Paul would then be pointing to well-known and loved words that celebrated and affirmed the lordship of Jesus. Most of us can sing songs from our childhood, even after years of not hearing them. The early church carried on this beautiful tradition of memory and worship through song. The tradition continues to this day as we worship both individually and corporately for the glory of the Father in the name of Jesus through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

- **What are some of your favorite songs and hymns that point to the truth of who Christ is?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How can you use the words of these songs to encourage Christians in the faith and even call others to turn to Jesus in saving faith?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

Glorifying God in our humility will work itself out in our interactions with other Christians and in our actions in the world. In the midst of a Christmas season when people are easily driven to observe a holiday for selfish reasons, we should stand out as we unselfishly celebrate our Savior (Phil. 2:15). We should humbly serve one another rather than seeking to be served. We should live as pure children of God in the sight of all people so they glorify God when they see our good works (Matt. 5:16). And like Christ, though we will suffer in this world living lives of humility, we will be exalted when the time is right (1 Pet. 5:6).

- **In what ways do your Christmas celebrations point you to the accomplishments of Christ?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How can you better demonstrate humility toward those around you?** *You can demonstrate humility toward others by placing others' needs before your own, thinking of ways you can serve others, following through with serving those needs, and so forth.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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07

SESSION SEVEN

Paul's Conversion

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session Saul, also known as Paul, collided with God on a road to Damascus. More precisely, it was the God who sends who collided with Paul, and the Pharisee's life was never the same. Paul's story reminds us how God can transform even the hardest of hearts and what it looks like to become a converted, called messenger of the God who sends us on mission with His Son.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 9:1-25

THE POINT

Only Jesus can transform hearts and turn lives around for His glory.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Carlos was hired by a Fortune 500 company fresh out of grad school with every intention of climbing the corporate ladder. Then, a friend shared his dream of creating a nonprofit to help the underprivileged in their city. Soon after, Carlos resigned his position and helped form a clothing company that provides funds for several community agencies and employs men and women recovering from enslaving addictions.

Angie went overseas on vacation and fell in love with the people of the country she visited. She returned burdened to take the gospel to the people from that nation who lived in her city. Angie moved out of the suburbs and moved to the city block where many of these immigrants lived. She began developing friendships and sharing the gospel with the “unreached nations” who immigrated within her reach.

The most meaningful changes in life are the ones that move us closer to fulfilling our God-given purpose—starting with being converted as new followers of Christ. We don’t change and grow to be better people with better lives, with the goal of feeling better about who we are. We change and grow to declare and demonstrate the gospel to others—to help people discover whose they are in Christ—while we continue to remember our gospel-given identity in Christ too. We grow to become Christ-followers sent by the God who sends.

- **What stories of dramatic life change have you heard of or experienced?**

Option 2

Before becoming the superhero we know, Wonder Woman was an Amazon princess named Diana. The population of her entire island was made up of female warriors. The island was all the world she knew until a pilot crashed there. He told her about the war consuming the world (World War I), and she decided to use her superpowers to help them. On her island, her strength may have been normal, though greater than some. But when she stepped out into the world, her strength transformed into a superpower.

- **What other superheroes can you think of who have different identities or transform into something else to fight crime?**

Transformations like these are obvious. The differences between Wonder Woman and the rest of humanity were obvious. In a similar way, Paul was the best of the best when it came to the Pharisees. When Paul became a Christian, the difference was obvious; he was completely transformed.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Only Jesus can transform hearts and turn lives around for His glory.

CHARACTERS

- **Jesus:** eternal Son of God; second Person of the Trinity
- **Paul:** also known by his Hebrew name Saul; violent persecutor turned follower and apostle of Christ; known as the missionary to the Gentiles

PLOT

The conversion of the Apostle Paul (also known as Saul) is one of the most fascinating developments in the Book of Acts. God transformed the heart of the very man who collected the coats at Stephen's stoning—the same man who was adamant about eliminating the Christian church.

FROM PERSECUTOR TO PREACHER

The opposition leader, Paul, is forever changed when he encounters the risen Christ.

EARLY MISSIONARIES

Paul and Barnabas set out to plant churches among the nations.

CHRIST ALONE

Salvation comes by grace alone through faith in Christ alone.

SAUL ENCOUNTERED JESUS

If you recall from a previous session, those wanting to stone Stephen for proclaiming the gospel laid their coats at the feet of a young, zealous, Jewish leader named Saul. Stephen's death pushed those who loved him into a tailspin of deep mourning and also caused the followers of Jesus to scatter throughout the region (Acts 8:2,4). Acts chapter 8 gives several brief accounts of how believers went in all directions, taking the gospel with them. For those fleeing, Damascus would have been one of the closest major towns, just a few days travel away. Therefore, Saul turned his fury from Jerusalem toward Damascus.

¹ But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" ⁵ And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸ Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (Acts 9:1-9)

- **In what ways do you think Saul's thoughts about Jesus started to change in that moment? What about the way he thought about himself? (p. 54, PSG)**

Saul approached Damascus, planning on capturing and eliminating those who followed Jesus of Nazareth. On his way, he encountered a voice, an overwhelmingly bright light, and a question. The question confused Saul. He did not recognize the voice as Jesus because he did not know Jesus. Jesus identified Himself as the One being persecuted, because Saul was persecuting His followers. What Saul was doing to the disciples, he was actually doing to Christ Himself. At that moment, humiliation and humility began to set in. The world as Saul knew it was about to change.

Jesus instructed Saul to go into the city and wait for instructions. Saul's traveling companions were stunned by what they could hear but not see. However, they weren't the only ones who couldn't see. Saul had become blind. The author, Luke, described Saul like this: "though his eyes were open, he could see nothing" (v. 8). This was a clear reference back to Jesus' teachings when He had called the Jewish religious leaders "blind guides" multiple times in Matthew 23. The men led Saul by the hand to Damascus. He did not arrive as a protector of the Jewish faith as he had intended, but as a blind, humbled man waiting to hear from the very One he had come to persecute. Broken for the first time in his life, Saul did not see, eat, or drink for three days.

ANANIAS OBEYED GOD AND WENT TO SAUL

As all of this was going on, God prepared Ananias for a mission.

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord."¹¹ And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying,¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight."¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem.¹⁴ And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name."¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."¹⁷ So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized;¹⁹ and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. (Acts 9:10-19)

Ananias began processing this baffling instruction from God. He and his fellow Christ-followers had heard of Saul, but he wasn't someone they planned on hanging out with.

His reply was basically, "Maybe you have the wrong guy and wrong address, Lord. We have heard why Saul was coming here. Maybe You forgot why Saul came to Damascus." This was not about Ananias questioning Jesus. Ananias wanted to understand why Jesus would call on him to run straight toward danger.

Ananias obeyed and his heart was opened to a man who should have been his enemy, but became his brother. Saul's eyes were opened to the gospel of Jesus, he was filled with the Holy Spirit, and baptized as a sign of being a true disciple of Jesus. The former Christ-persecutor became a Christ-follower.

SAUL PROCLAIMED JESUS AS MESSIAH

Saul's tune changed quickly. He went where he was originally planning to go, the synagogues, but with a much different message than he originally planned.

20 And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." 21 And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?" 22 But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. 23 When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, 24 but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, 25 but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. (Acts 9:20-25)

Imagine the surprise of those who knew of Saul, the zealous persecutor of the church, when they heard him proclaim the very thing Stephen was executed for proclaiming. This was Saul, the new believer empowered by the dynamite-like power and presence of the Holy Spirit sharing what had changed his life—the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This news and Saul's conversion did not sit well with the Jewish leaders of Damascus so they made a plan to kill him. The Damascus believers knew the call Jesus placed on Saul's life. He would be sent by the God who sends! So, they protected Saul and used a basket to sneak him out of the city to safety, reminiscent of Rahab helping the two spies escape out of Jericho (Josh. 2).

Most of the early church probably saw Saul in only one way: an enemy of the gospel to be avoided at all cost. But God taught them, and us, a vital lesson through the conversion of Saul. No one is outside of the scope of God's generous grace. No one is beyond the reach of Jesus Christ. God's power to save has no limit and could even extend to one of the world's most militant persecutors of Jesus Christ—Saul of Tarsus. If the gospel could transform Saul, it can transform anyone.

The God who delights in doing the unexpected didn't stop with Saul's conversion. God transformed Saul through the power of the gospel and graciously called him to be the greatest missionary in history. God's conversion and calling of Saul reveals His heart as the God who sends.

- **When have you been tempted to view someone as too far beyond the reach of God's redemptive power? Why?** (p. 55, PSG)
- **How might the story of Saul's conversion change your perspective?** (p. 55, PSG)

TIMELINE

SALVATION AVAILABLE TO ALL

The message of the gospel reaches people of different backgrounds.

ENGAGING CULTURE

Paul engages the surrounding culture with the message of Christ.

LIVING ON MISSION

Paul viewed his day-to-day work as an opportunity to spread the gospel.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Calling (p. 56, PSG)

The calling of God to salvation happens in two ways: externally through the proclamation of the gospel and internally through the Holy Spirit working in the heart of the person who hears. Both of these callings are essential, and both work together to bring someone to faith in Christ (2 Tim. 1:8-10).

CHRIST CONNECTION

The conversion and calling of Saul (Paul) is a demonstration of God's power to save. Through an encounter with the crucified and risen Jesus, this once-hardened persecutor of God's people began his journey to becoming the greatest missionary the world has ever known. Only the gospel can transform a public opponent of Christ into a fervent witness to His salvation.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **God used a unique collision with Saul to get his attention. In what ways do you see Jesus "colliding" with people today?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Have you thought God called on you to do something that didn't make sense or that you didn't want to do? How did you respond?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Ananias needed courage to obey Jesus and go to Saul. How can we have courage to obey God no matter what? Where do we get this courage and what is it based on?** *Courage grows those who believe in God—in His Word and His character—knowing He will be with us even until the end of the age.*
- **How does Saul's story of conversion deepen your own gratitude for God's grace and mercy?** *We remember that we were just as needy of God's grace and mercy as Saul.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

As in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), the challenge here is not for the self-indulgent, wandering younger brother who clearly rejected his father, left home, and wasted his inheritance. Instead, the challenge is for the self-righteous older brother who stayed home and worked diligently for his dad, believing he had earned his father's love. Saul was like the older brother because he also sincerely believed he was obeying and pleasing God.

- **What are some of the challenges we often face when it comes to sharing the gospel with others?** *We often fear rejection, failure, selfishness and laziness, pride, or don't feel as if we know enough, and so forth.*
- **What can we do to overcome these challenges?** *Answers will vary.*



HEART

Jesus doesn't collide with us to produce superficial, religious obedience. Saul excelled in that before his encounter with Jesus. Jesus meets with us to show us who He is and to transform our hearts, leading to loving, genuine obedience. Jesus' encounter with Saul shows that He can soften the hardest hearts, even the hearts of people who are full of themselves.

- **What are some ways we can be blind and confuse religious obedience with what truly pleases God?** *Examples might include going to church, praying, spending time in the Word, participating in Bible study, serving others in the community, and so forth.*
- **What is at the heart of your story of following Jesus? How can you tell your story in a compelling way?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

Put yourself in Ananias' shoes. Imagine what it would be like to be called to go to Damascus to share the gospel with a man known to be hostile to Christianity. Imagine traveling to the Middle East today, knocking on that man's door, and sharing how Jesus sent you there to share the gospel with him. Would you obey? Would you go? It's difficult to say, but Ananias did. We should all be grateful for this Damascus resident's obedience, because God used him to encourage the man who would become possibly the greatest missionary and theologian of the church.

- **We normally think of being sent by God as being sent to share the gospel to unbelievers. How does God send us to other believers too?** *We are sent to encourage other believers, hold them accountable, partner with them in spreading the gospel, and so forth.*
- **How have other believers come alongside you like Ananias did for Saul?** *Answers will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #9, which contains a map of Paul's three missionary journeys recorded in the Book of Acts.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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08

SESSION EIGHT

The Church Sends Missionaries

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we see how God sent out some of the first missionaries through His church. These missionaries were committed to following Jesus wherever He led them, even if that meant facing opposition to and suffering for the gospel message they proclaimed. God used these missionaries to not only bring others into His family, but also to strengthen and encourage the church as they saw God at work.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 13:1-3; 14:8-28

THE POINT

God calls His church to send and support missionaries to those who have never heard the gospel.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Ask for volunteers to share about any missionary experiences they may have, whether local or abroad. You can begin with your own story or give a brief biography of missionaries such as Adoniram Judson, William Carey, or Jim Elliot. After students have had a chance to speak, ask the following question:

- **How would you define the term *missionary*?**

Defining the term *missionary* matters, because God's revealed method of advancing the gospel to the ends of the earth—across all ethnic, language, and national boundaries—is by sending missionaries through the church. If we want to join with God in this plan, then we first have to understand it.

We see God's method of sending missionaries all throughout the Book of Acts, and if we pay attention to the big story of Scripture—we see this plan throughout the Bible. God is a sending God. Page after page of Scripture shows how God sent His people out to make Him known, but we can see this most clearly in the incarnation.

Jesus was sent. God Himself left His place of glory, took on the flesh, and dwelt among people to reveal God's goodness and His plan to redeem them. Sending and going is the very heart of God, and it should be for us as well.

Option 2

Have you ever been on a mission trip? Maybe you worked on houses—painting, building wheelchair ramps, or landscaping. Maybe you led a Vacation Bible School in a small town, inner-city area, or foreign country. Maybe you packed and delivered boxed lunches or did face painting at a carnival.

- **Where have you gone on mission trips and what did you do?**

On a white-board or poster at the front of the room, list all the areas students mention. If available, point out those areas on a map. Discuss the fact that, although there are missionaries who serve full-time in areas in the US and overseas, students don't have to be missionaries or go to another city or country in order to do mission work. They can do mission work right where they are by sharing the gospel in their schools, communities, and wherever they may go every day.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God calls His church to send and support missionaries to those who have never heard the gospel.

CHARACTERS:

- **Paul:** also known by his Hebrew name Saul; violent persecutor turned follower and apostle of Christ; known as the missionary to the Gentiles
- **Barnabas:** traveled with Paul during his first missionary journey

PLOT

Being on mission. Living missionally. Being mission-minded. These are all terms and phrases you may have heard within the church, which are just different ways of expressing the mandate all Christians have been given from Jesus. In essence, they refer to being missionaries—those called and sent by God to deliver His good news to those who are lost.

TIMELINE

EARLY MISSIONARIES

Paul and Barnabas set out to plant churches among the nations.

CHRIST ALONE

Salvation comes by grace alone through faith in Christ alone.

SALVATION AVAILABLE TO ALL

The message of the gospel reaches people of different backgrounds.

PAUL AND BARNABAS WERE COMMISSIONED AS MISSIONARIES

After his conversion (Acts 9), Saul was not mentioned for a few chapters as Peter took center stage in the book. We see Saul again at the end of Acts 12 when he returned to Jerusalem along with Barnabas and Mark. The men had been on a relief mission because famine had spread across the Empire (Acts 11:27-30).

Somehow, Saul and Barnabas end up in close fellowship with the church at Antioch. There, these two men were called and set apart for the first recorded missionary journey in Scripture. This missionary journey would span eight cities in several regions of the eastern portion of the Roman Empire, laying the foundation for two other missionary journeys to follow, and eventually, Paul delivering the gospel to Rome.

¹ Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. (Acts 13:1-3)

As the leaders were worshipping and fasting, they heard from the Holy Spirit. These leaders, and the church, were in the right posture to hear from God and respond accordingly when the time came.

The Holy Spirit instructed them to set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work God had called them to do. God separated these two men from the normal rhythms of being part of the church at Antioch for something else. Barnabas and Saul would leave their church and life as they knew it in Antioch to advance the gospel to unreached regions as missionaries.

- **When have you experienced a church praying over or sending off people to do short- or long-term mission work? How does that experience compare to what happened to Barnabas and Saul?**
(p. 60, PSG)

GOD SUSTAINED PAUL AND BARNABAS THROUGH OPPOSITION AND SUFFERING

Separating from a church, leaving family behind, and going to a new land makes life as a sent missionary difficult. However, it is even more difficult when the gospel begins to challenge the status quo and the culturally-accepted norms where you are sent. This is what happened to Paul and Barnabas in Lystra.

⁸ Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. ⁹ He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, ¹⁰ said in a loud voice, “Stand upright on your feet.” And he sprang up and began walking. ¹¹ And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” ¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. ¹³ And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. ¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, ¹⁵ “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. ¹⁶ In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. ¹⁷ Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.” ¹⁸ Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them. ¹⁹ But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. ²⁰ But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. (Acts 14:8-20)

As Paul preached the gospel in Lystra, a man who was lame and had never walked was listening. Paul took notice of him and saw that he had faith to be healed. The language indicates a sort of supernatural understanding by Paul. Paul called for him to stand. The man jumped up and began walking around. However, this created quite a problem for Paul and Barnabas.

When the crowds saw what happened, the people began to praise Paul and Barnabas in their own language, declaring they were gods who had come down in human form. Lystra was located in a region of the world where, according to legend, Zeus and Hermes had visited the Earth; the people saw Barnabas as Zeus and Paul as Hermes. This distinction was made because Paul was the vocal messenger of the two in the same way Hermes was the messenger god. The local priest to Zeus intended to offer a sacrifice to Barnabas and Paul.

Paul and Barnabas had heard and seen what happened to men who steal God's glory, and they wanted nothing to do with that. So, they attempted to show the crowd that they were ordinary men while highlighting the extraordinary God who made everything (Ex. 20:11). Barnabas and Paul quoted Exodus 20:11 and Psalm 146:6 to the Lycaonians, most likely because the gods they worshiped related specifically to elements of nature. Paul and Barnabas were barely able to stop the people from sacrificing to them.

Some Jews came from where Paul and Barnabas had previously journeyed, with the sole purpose of causing them harm. They won over the crowd and turned them against Paul and Barnabas. They even stoned Paul and left him for dead.

Paul was stubbornly courageous though. After the disciples gathered around him, he got up and went right back into town. He was willing to lose everything, even his life, for the sake of the gospel. This is the call of the missionary—to trust God completely for every need, even in the midst of opposition and suffering.

- **Why do you think Paul returned to Lystra?** (p. 61, PSG)

GOD STRENGTHENS HIS CHURCH

Paul and Barnabas went from Lystra to Derbe. Then, as they traveled on their way back to Antioch, the two missionaries went back through the cities they had previously preached in.

21 When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. 23 And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. 24 Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. 25 And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia, 26 and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. 27 And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. 28 And they remained no little time with the disciples. (Acts 14:21-28)

First, Paul and Barnabas wanted to strengthen the new believers in each city with the encouragement to endure, especially since living with faith would not be easy in an Empire that was growing increasingly hostile to Christianity. But in addition to that, Paul and Barnabas wanted to assure the churches they could count on troubles. Jesus had predicted that His followers would be hated and persecuted for His sake (John 15:18-25). Paul and Barnabas echoed that promise after having experienced it for themselves.

TIMELINE

ENGAGING CULTURE

Paul engages the surrounding culture with the message of Christ.

LIVING ON MISSION

Paul viewed his day-to-day work as an opportunity to spread the gospel.

**Beginning in Spring 2018*

STANDING STRONG

Refuse compromise when the truth of the gospel is at stake.

Notice the method Paul and Barnabas used to encourage the churches about facing hardships. Paul and Barnabas did not encourage the churches to pray for God to spare them from hardship. They did not minimize hardship. Instead, they encouraged the churches by helping them embrace the reality and certainty of difficulties. Hardship will come because God uses it for His kingdom purposes, so prepare for it.

This is a message we still need to hear today; maybe now more than ever. If too few of us are prepared to forsake our comfort for the sake of the gospel, how many are prepared to embrace hardship and suffering for it? Our problem may be that we have the wrong perspective of comfort and hardship; we have it upside down. We believe Christ wants to give us comfortable, easy lives with minimal hardship. However, that is not what Jesus promised—He promised the opposite really. We should know and expect hardship in life for His sake. Hardships are often a necessary part of following Christ. We should encourage and be encouraged so we can be faithful to our calling.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Church and Kingdom (p. 62, PSG)

The church and the kingdom of God are closely related, though not identical. When the Bible speaks of the kingdom of God, it is referring to the reign of God in the world. The church is the people of God who live under His loving rule now, anticipating the full manifestation of God's kingdom in the future. The church's mission is to witness to God's kingdom, proclaiming God's message of salvation through Christ and demonstrating the power of the gospel through good works so that others may be brought to live under God's reign.

CHRIST CONNECTION

Jesus told His disciples the gates of hell would not prevail against His church. This image helps us see God's people as “on offense,” taking the powerful and good news of Jesus to places of deep spiritual darkness. All the while, we have full confidence that Jesus will build His church.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Would you be willing to be sent somewhere else as a missionary? Why or why not?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What would be difficult about surrendering as a missionary? What would be most difficult for you if God called you to be a missionary?** *Answers may include leaving family and friends, learning a new language, not having all the restaurants and stores we're used to having, and so forth.*
- **What ways can you sacrifice to live on mission more or support missionary efforts to deliver the gospel where it is needed most around the world?** *Not spending as much money on coffee or snacks, music, video games, and so on.*
- **How has this story challenged you when it comes to your own efforts to share the good news with others?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

Paul and Barnabas took on an identity as being sent by God away from their home for the purpose of helping others discover their Christ-given identity (Acts 13:2). We also have this compelling identity. This is why we make disciples. This is why we “go” wherever we are. The good news of the gospel we believe pushes us to go and help others believe it too. We are disciples of Jesus sent to make disciples with Jesus among our neighbors and the nations.

- **How do you see yourself—through what you do or who God has made you to be in Christ? Why does it matter how we see ourselves?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How does your understanding of your identity frame how you live each day?** *It helps us not to live in fear of needing to do more to please God. We seek to live out our true identity in Christ out of gratitude and joy.*



HEART

Encouragement has a much more significant purpose than making someone feel good. At the heart of encouragement is the goal of motivating another to action. Encouraging others gives them confidence to do what they need to do, even if the action is difficult or comes with big risk. As we encourage other believers, we should do so with the goal of living more and more like Christ.

- **How does experiencing hardship and suffering advance the gospel?** *Much like it did in Paul's life, our hardship and suffering can also advance the gospel by showing others the gospel means more to us than our own comfort and ease.*
- **What are some ways you were encouraged by someone else and then able to act in faith?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

The God who sends continues to call us to share His heart for unreached people and to send more missionaries around the world. If we want to be faithful to His calling, we need to personalize this sending. We must each ask ourselves: *Where is God sending me as a missionary?* If God's answer is that we should stay where we are, then we ask how we will support those who have been sent.

- **How are you making disciples of Jesus wherever you are?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How do you support missionaries sent by your local church?** *Answers will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #10, which contains a quote poster related to the session.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPMissionWin18)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit

MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject

09

SESSION NINE

The Message of the Gospel

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we see how the church handled a heated disagreement about the nature of salvation for Gentiles. Were Gentiles saved by faith alone, or did they have to enter into salvation through the path of obedience to the Law first? The Jerusalem Council that was assembled to answer this critical question offers us a good example of how to handle disputes in the church and was vital in preserving the gospel message of “Christ Alone.”

SCRIPTURE

Acts 15:1-21

THE POINT

God calls us to proclaim the message that salvation is available through faith in Christ alone, not through works.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Faith is often a common theme in pop-culture. There are bestselling songs that tell people to “just believe,” and never give up the faith you need to follow your dreams. There are popular books that encourage their readers to just believe in themselves in order to achieve their goals in life. And there are movies that portray their main character as only needing to have faith in order to reach their destiny. However, whatever pop-culture medium is used, the common denominator is this: If you just believe in yourself enough, you’ll be able to do wonderful things.

- **Can you think of any songs, movies, or books that talk about “just believing” or “having faith”? How does their understanding of faith differ from faith in the Bible?**

It’s important to not just talk about faith in this generic sense, as if only having “faith” is important. Faith needs an object. Despite what pop-culture says, that object can’t be ourselves or our own strength. Biblical faith isn’t just about the person who believes; it’s about the Person in whom we believe. It’s not about having faith in a general sense, but trusting in Someone who is fully worthy of our faith. The object of our faith is what matters. It doesn’t matter how much you believe, if you put your faith in the wrong thing.

Option 2

As a child, how many of you went outside to play, got a little muddy, and then were told: “You’re not coming into my house until you clean off that mess”? When it comes to the keepers of our homes, cleanliness is important. Tracking in mud from playing outside is not acceptable.

- **Did you ever get in trouble for dragging mud into the house? What happened?**
- **Why do you think keeping the mud outside of the house is such a big deal?**

Becoming a Christian is like walking into the house with the mud still on your shoes, knowing someone will help you clean them off and clean up the mess you’ve made. Jesus doesn’t ask for your heart to be clean when you come to Him—He wants to make it clean for you. Nothing you do can earn your salvation, because Jesus paid the only price required when He died on the cross for you.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God calls us to proclaim the message that salvation is available through faith in Christ alone, not through works.

CHARACTERS

- **Paul:** also known by his Hebrew name Saul; violent persecutor turned follower and apostle of Christ; known as the missionary to the Gentiles
- **Barnabas:** traveled with Paul during his first missionary journey

PLOT

Like today's church, the early church had some disputes and controversies. These were imperfect people, like us, who were trying to live out their new lives in Christ together. Our story today takes us into one of these disputes—one that touches on the very heart of the gospel—the issue of whether Jesus alone is enough to save.

THE QUESTION OF WHETHER JESUS ALONE IS ENOUGH TO SAVE

In Acts 13–14 we saw how the early church sent the first missionaries, Paul and Barnabas, to take the gospel farther out from Jerusalem as Jesus had instructed (Acts 1:8). The trip was difficult for the two missionaries, but many had come to faith in Christ, including a number of Gentiles. News of what God had done spread, but not everyone in the church was pleased with it.

¹ But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” ² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. ³ So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. ⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. ⁵ But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.” (Acts 15:1-5)

The dispute began when some men who evidently had heard the reports of Gentiles coming to faith in Christ came down from Judea to Antioch. These men did not deny the possibility of Gentiles being saved, but the possibility of anyone being saved apart from obedience to the Law. When the men arrived, they began to teach that circumcision was necessary for salvation.

When Paul and Barnabas heard what the men were teaching, they confronted them and argued about this matter with them. The whole debate can be boiled down to the question of whether Jesus alone is sufficient for salvation, or if something else—such as circumcision in this case—was needed in addition.

Paul and Barnabas rejected their teaching for at least two reasons. The primary reason concerned the core of the gospel—salvation by grace through faith alone (Eph. 2:8-9). The men from Judea were teaching that faith alone was not sufficient for salvation. They argued that a person first had to belong to God’s covenant community, the people of Israel, and that becoming part of God’s community required the mark of circumcision. Paul and Barnabas understood that you do not have to be part of the right people before you can be saved; anyone, anywhere can be saved the moment they trust in Jesus Christ.

TIMELINE

CHRIST ALONE
Salvation comes by grace alone through faith in Christ alone.

SALVATION AVAILABLE TO ALL
The message of the gospel reaches people of different backgrounds.

ENGAGING CULTURE
Paul engages the surrounding culture with the message of Christ.

Another reason Paul and Barnabas confronted the men from Judea might have been linked to their hearts as missionaries. Most missionaries engage people right where they are as they encourage people to consider the gospel. Requiring circumcision of the Gentiles would be an added burden and hindrance to the gospel.

When it became apparent such an important issue could not be settled in Antioch and that the debate had broad implications for the church, Paul, Barnabas, and some others were sent to Jerusalem to take the case to the elders and apostles there. As Paul and Barnabas traveled the 250 miles to Jerusalem, they stopped along the way and shared with the believers what God was doing among the Gentiles. It is no wonder those believers were excited! Not only had Jesus made it clear that His gospel was intended for all the nations, not just the Jews (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; John 10:16), but this was also exactly what God had told Abram so many years before (Gen. 12:3).

- **What are some issues we need to defend, like Paul and Barnabas defended the Gentiles' salvation?** (p. 67, PSG)

LETTING SCRIPTURE SETTLE THE DISPUTE

The church leaders gathered to consider the issue in what has been called the Jerusalem Council. As we will read, settling the issue at stake was critically important, but so was the way the church would resolve it. To what would the church appeal to answer this question—tradition or God's Word and what they had seen God do around them?

⁶ The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. ⁷ And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, ⁹ and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." ¹² And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. ¹³ After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. ¹⁵ And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, ¹⁶ "After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, ¹⁷ that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things ¹⁸ known from of old.' ¹⁹ Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who

turn to God,²⁰ but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.²¹ For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.” (Acts 15:6-21)

Once again, the issue was debated for some time and then Peter stood to address the gathering and offered a strong defense of Gentiles being saved by grace alone apart from circumcision. Peter reminded the gathering of his experience with Cornelius (Acts 10–11) and how God had revealed Peter’s need to set aside a mindset fixed on tradition and replace it with one fixed on the gospel.

Peter then presented God’s gift of the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles as evidence of the Gentiles’ conversion apart from circumcision. God had given the Gentile believers the Holy Spirit just as He had given the Holy Spirit to them. No distinction was made based on circumcision or any other factor—everyone had been saved by faith, and the giving of the Holy Spirit confirmed that God accepted that faith.

After Peter finished, the entire assembly fell completely silent. Peter’s strong defense of the gospel resonated with the gathering. Paul and Barnabas then took the opportunity to echo Peter and share how God had worked through them to see Gentiles come to faith. Paul and Barnabas relayed story after story of how God had transformed the lives of many Gentiles.

Then it was James’ turn. He began by affirming Peter’s testimony but then he pointed the gathering to Scripture. James quoted Amos 9:11-12 to show that what they had experienced with Gentiles coming to faith was part of God’s plan all along. God had told their ancestors that everyone—Jews and Gentiles alike—would seek the Lord. The message of salvation had never been only for the Jews.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

In Acts 15:22-35, a letter came back with a rebuke of the men who had raised the issue about circumcision. The council wanted the Gentile believers in Antioch to know that those men did not speak on the church’s behalf. It was clear from the greeting that the church’s ruling was in favor of the Gentile believers and that they were considered brothers and sisters in Christ. The leaders then made it clear that their decision came through the Holy Spirit’s wisdom and guidance and that no burdens should be placed upon them except for four requirements.

But why single out these four practices? James and the other leaders were concerned that the Gentile believers might take their personal freedom in Christ too far and live in such a way as to be a stumbling block to the convictions of their Jewish brothers and sisters. These four practices were addressed in Leviticus 17–18 where they were forbidden of both Jews and Gentiles living among them. These four prohibitions would not surprise the Gentiles, and they were deeply significant to the Jewish believers. If the Gentile believers abstained from these four practices, they would safeguard themselves from being a burden to the Jewish believers or other Jews coming to faith in Christ.

TIMELINE

LIVING ON MISSION

Paul viewed his day-to-day work as an opportunity to spread the gospel.

**Beginning in Spring 2018*

STANDING STRONG

Refuse compromise when the truth of the gospel is at stake.

UNITY IN THE CROSS

Believers are united together in Christ.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Justification and Works (p. 68, PSG)

Justification is not the result of human effort or good works; it comes through faith in the righteousness of Christ. Although good works do not lead to justification, justification leads to good works in the life of a believer (Eph. 2:10). Faith without works is dead (Jas. 2:17). While good works do not establish justification, they do verify a genuine faith and make our justification evident to others.

CHRIST CONNECTION

The Jerusalem Council met to resolve a dispute in the early church: Was faith in Christ sufficient for salvation and inclusion into God's family or was something else needed? The early church's response affirmed the sufficiency of faith in Jesus for salvation. Because of His finished work on the cross, Jesus alone is all we need to be saved.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Why do some Christians struggle to accept that salvation is by grace alone and we don't need to do anything to earn or keep it?** *We have trouble believing anything is free. We are proud and want to do something to fix ourselves rather than accepting the free gift of grace.*
- **What are some of the dangers of relying on our experiences to validate what God is doing? How can we guard against those dangers?** *Our experiences, although they may be real, always need to be checked against the truth of Scripture. God's Word is our ultimate authority, which is why we should always view our experiences through Scripture.*
- **If someone said being a good person plus faith in Jesus is what saves a person, then how would you respond?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What can we learn from this account about how to deal with controversies within the church today?** *Answers to whatever controversies we might have can be settled by looking to Scripture. Setting aside our biases and agendas and looking to Scripture for answers will set us on the right path toward truth and reconciliation.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

The way the Jerusalem Council handled the dispute surrounding circumcision in Acts 15 is an example for how we should handle disputes in the church today. We address disagreements as they arise, appeal to Scripture and what God has done, and call for freedom in Christ and love to guide how we all live together after the issue has been resolved. The Jerusalem Council also emphasized the sufficiency of faith in Jesus for salvation and inclusion into God's family by stating that He alone is all we need for salvation. The early church protected the core message of the gospel.

- **Why is the doctrine of faith alone in Christ alone and not works so important?** *Essentially, this is the heart of the gospel. To deny faith alone in Christ alone is to deny the work of salvation Christ accomplished on the cross.*
- **What can we learn from the way the early church addressed controversy that applies to how we address controversy today?** *They dealt with it directly, appealed to Scripture, and pursued unity, and so forth.*



HEART

Circumcision had been a mark of purity and separateness from the world for God's people. Now, in Christ, that mark comes by faith. In Christ, purity and separateness do not lead into salvation, but instead flow out of it. Requiring circumcision before salvation undermined this essential aspect of the gospel. As the apostle Paul would say elsewhere, those who follow Christ experience a circumcision of the heart when they put off the old self and take up the new (Rom. 2:28-29). It is the inner life of faith in Christ that is important, not a ritual act.

- **Why is it important for us to stress that purity flows from faith rather than preceding faith?** *By emphasizing that good works are the natural outcome of a heart of faith, we are saying we are incapable of earning our salvation.*
- **What are some other ways our lives demonstrate a genuine faith in Christ?** *We demonstrate our faith by our love for others, the way we live, showing the fruits of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and so on.*



HANDS

Requiring a Gentile to be circumcised before salvation would mean they had to do something to earn the right to be saved, but no one is worthy to be saved. No one deserves an invitation into a relationship with the living God. Salvation is by grace. Grace initiated it. Grace sustained it. Grace fulfills it. Gentiles should not have to do something to earn salvation when no one else did anything to deserve it either.

- **What are some beliefs and traditions we hold onto that may interfere with others understanding the gospel?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How should the truth that salvation is by grace rather than works change the way we live?** *Answers will vary.*

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
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10

SESSION TEN

The Gospel is for Everyone

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, you will meet three different people who each had a unique encounter with the gospel and were changed. Through these three encounters, you will recognize that God uses different methods to reach different kinds of people. God calls us to be faithful to deliver His gospel message to all kinds of people, regardless of their past, their appearance, or their present circumstances.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 16:11-34

THE POINT

God uses different ways to communicate His gospel message to different kinds of people.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Have you ever caught yourself “people watching?” Before smart phones, if you wanted to hang out with your friends or family, you would set a time and place and expect people to be there. If you got there before everyone else, you would not take your phone out and check social media, since that did not exist. Instead, you just looked around. If someone did something out of the ordinary, you would notice. If a mother scolded her child for throwing a fit in public, you would look in that direction or slightly to the side, so as to not give the impression that you were eavesdropping. If a couple were on a date, you would try to guess where they were going, the status of their relationship, and if they were a good fit.

Because of smart phones and social media, you might think people watching has turned into a lost art, but that’s not necessarily true. People watching has simply moved from the physical sphere to the digital space. It has become incredibly easy to watch what others are doing by creeping on their social media profiles. Some apps even tell you where someone is every minute of the day.

- **Share a people watching story from your life. Is it possible to know people just by watching them? How much can you really know about them?**

When you people watch—either in person or online—one thing that you will notice is that there so many different people in this world, and each one of them has a unique story. All people hope and find meaning in something. Some find meaning in family; others in work, wealth, or fame. Some find meaning in religion that’s all about doing, works, and self-righteousness. The truth is, while people are different in so many ways, we are all the exact same in other ways. We are all loved by God and need the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Option 2

People learn in different ways, and it’s important for those who teach to understand how to teach different types of people. People are most often categorized as visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learners. Visual learners understand concepts better when they’re presented in pictures or diagrams. Auditory learners enjoy hearing concepts explained verbally, through words and sounds. Kinesthetic learners are more hands-on, preferring to learn by experience. God created each one of us uniquely, with a unique skill set and way of processing information. So, it would make sense that He provides for all people by revealing Himself and His truth to us in ways that we can understand individually.

- **What type of learner are you?**
- **How did you first learn about God? About what Jesus did for you?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God uses different ways to communicate His gospel message to different kinds of people.

CHARACTERS

- **Paul:** also known by his Hebrew name Saul; violent persecutor turned follower and apostle of Christ; known as the missionary to the Gentiles

PLOT

God's intention has always been to take the gospel to the nations. The stories in this session show different ways God gets His message to different types of people, emphasizing once again His desire for all to know Him and be saved.

TIMELINE

SALVATION AVAILABLE TO ALL

The message of the gospel reaches people of different backgrounds.

ENGAGING CULTURE

Paul engages the surrounding culture with the message of Christ.

LIVING ON MISSION

Paul viewed his day-to-day work as an opportunity to spread the gospel.

A BUSINESSWOMAN NAMED LYDIA

Paul seems to have been an outstanding people watcher. He had a strong awareness of the people around him, but he didn't just passively watch—he stepped into their lives no matter the situation. We will first see this in Paul's interaction with a woman named Lydia.

11 So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis,¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days.¹³ And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together.¹⁴ One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.¹⁵ And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us. (Acts 15:11-15)

The disciples were on a mission. They understood that the gospel was not just for their own benefit—they knew the truth and accepted it, and so they were commissioned to share it with others. That's why they travelled to Macedonia. In fact, in the verses preceding these, the Holy Spirit prevented these disciples from going to Asia to share the gospel (Acts 16:6-7). As a result, Paul received a vision in which a man from Macedonia pled with them to come and help them there (Acts 16:9). This vision was the reason the disciples set sail and ended up in Macedonia. God had a plan for them and He would accomplish His will.

When the disciples had finally arrived in Macedonia, they were probably full of expectation for God to work in a mighty way. However, after a few days in the city, they didn't experience any dramatic signs, miracles, or conversions. Maybe they had heard wrong? Maybe the vision they had received was made up? Who knows the numerous thoughts that probably went through their minds?

Instead of being discouraged, Paul and the others most likely followed their normal rhythm when they arrived in this new city, seeking out a synagogue to attend on the Sabbath. They didn't find one. A city needed at least ten Jewish men to form a synagogue. Apparently, there were not even that many, so a group of women gathered outside of the city by the river to pray. Paul and the disciples found this group of women and sat down to talk with them.

This is when the disciples met a woman named Lydia. One of the reasons—perhaps the only reason—God sent the disciples to Macedonia was so this woman might hear the gospel and be changed! However, this change in Lydia inspired even more change.

The Lord opened up this businesswoman's heart and she accepted the gospel. Then, her entire household was baptized and she invited the disciples to stay with her at her house. This was providential because, after Paul and Silas were imprisoned and released from jail, they went straight to Lydia's house where they met with and encouraged other believers (Acts 16:40). Lydia did not just hear the gospel and walk away; God used her to minister to and bless the disciples.

- **When have you seen the gospel change someone so much that it also affected the people around that person?** (*p. 72, PSG*)

A DEMON POSSESSED SLAVE GIRL

In this next section, the disciples encountered a slave girl who had a special gift—the ability to predict the future. As a result, she was probably on the receiving end of a lot of people watching in those days.

¹⁶ As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." ¹⁸ And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour. ¹⁹ But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. ²⁰ And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. ²¹ They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice." ²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. ²³ And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. ²⁴ Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. (Acts 16:16-24)

Paul exercised the authority he had in Jesus and commanded the spirit to leave the slave girl. What should have been a time to celebrate this girl's newfound freedom became an opportunity for her owners to get angry because they lost whatever profits they made through her fortune-telling. Their income had been cast out along with the evil spirit. As a result, her owners dragged Paul and Silas before the city leaders and leveled several charges against them hoping something would stick.

The slave girl and Lydia offer an interesting contrast. Lydia was a business owner who probably had significant financial means. She was probably open and eager to hear about Jesus. It was probably easy for Paul to step into her life with the gospel.

However, the slave girl had nothing, not even her freedom. She was not a worshiper of God and probably wasn't even looking for Him. While this girl might have received a lot of attention in public, she probably frightened most people away from her.

These accounts show two very different people with the very same need—deliverance through Jesus. The slave girl reminds us not to count anyone out and to always be ready to be used by God to meet others' needs, no matter who or what they may be.

A PRISON GUARD

In this last section, we see the importance of faithfulness and being ready to share the gospel in every situation and circumstance, to whomever God places before you.

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, ²⁶ and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. ²⁷ When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹ And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³² And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. ³⁴ Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God. (Acts 16:25-34)

Sometimes, God will use large, loud, and unusual circumstances to get our attention. In fact, it's only through experiencing circumstances like these that some people's hearts become postured in a place to re-examine long-held beliefs and convictions.

TIMELINE

**Beginning in Spring 2018*

STANDING STRONG

Refuse compromise when the truth of the gospel is at stake.

UNITY IN THE CROSS

Believers are united together in Christ.

SHOWING MERCY

Those who know mercy show mercy to others.

When the jailer woke up and saw that the doors of the prison were open, he believed his life was over. He was asleep on the job and thought all the prisoners had escaped. Roman jailers were personally responsible for their prisoners and could be executed for allowing them to escape. However, unknown to him at the time, no one left. Everyone stayed put.

When the jailer realized no one had escaped, something happened in his heart and he realized there really was a God and that Paul and Silas knew this God! Maybe the jailer had heard Paul and Silas preaching in the city before this. Maybe it was seeing them live selflessly and not try to escape when given the opportunity. Maybe it was their concern for his life, or maybe it was that he fell asleep listening to worship songs. Whatever prompted him, we know God was at work, and Paul and Silas were prepared to respond.

The encounter with the jailer gives an example of always being ready to respond with the gospel to those who have just experienced the unexpected power of God in their lives. No doubt the jailer began his day expecting yet another normal day of work. Surely, he had no idea how he would see God shake the very foundation of his life, or that he and his entire family would be forever changed.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

New Identity of the Believer (p. 73, PSG)

When a person places his or her faith in Christ, that person undergoes a fundamental change of identity. He or she goes from being an enemy under God's wrath to being welcomed into God's family as a beloved child (Eph. 2:1-3,19). The believer in Christ is declared righteous on account of Christ's perfect life and substitutionary death and resurrection. No longer is the person a slave to sin, defined by past failures or present struggles. The person has been delivered from the realm of darkness and now belongs to the kingdom of light (Col. 1:13). Anyone who is in Christ is a "new creation" in whom the old, sinful self is passed away and the new, redeemed self is alive and progressing, becoming more and more like Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

CHRIST CONNECTION

The gospel reaches different people in different ways. In Philippi, Paul and Silas saw converts from different social and economic backgrounds come to faith through their witness and testimony. Their message was the same for all: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31).

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What are some things people might be “enslaved” by today? What would it look like for people to be free from what enslaves them?** *Answers may include things like popularity, technology, money, drugs, relationships, and so on.*
- **Who are the people we most easily look past in our lives? Why? What can we do to not only notice them, but to also step into their lives to bring the hope of the gospel?** *We often look past the poor, people who are different from us, our teachers; and so forth.*
- **In what areas of your life do you need to experience freedom?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What did Paul and Silas' behavior (praying, singing hymns, etc.) in the prison communicate about their faith during those circumstances? What can we learn from their example?** *They trusted in God and worshiped Him based on who He is and not on their circumstances.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

Through Lydia's story, we discover that God doesn't just care about the large miraculous events or only about the masses. God also cares about the smallest of details, and He is deeply involved in the lives of all people—one person at a time—and we should be too. It is tempting for us to want to be used by God to teach large groups of people or lead many people to Christ, and there's nothing wrong with that. However, we also need to look for that one person, who may even be easy to look past, who is ready to hear and respond to the gospel.

- **Why is it so easy to value ministry to the masses over ministry to the individual?** *We may feel as if there is more impact and better use of our time, or we may feel more important if the crowd is bigger, and so on.*
- **In what ways are both types of ministry important?** *Large groups can be strategic because more people hear at once, but individual ministry is more discipleship focused, capable of addressing personal issues of growth with a specific individual.*



HEART

Experiences like the jailer's can happen all around us any day. While there may not be a literal earthquake involved, people around us are being shaken in different ways. Just like the jailer, many will experience something or receive news that causes them to despair and feel hopeless. Will we be ready to step in with the hope of the gospel? Others will hear, see, or experience something that opens the door for them to consider the gospel. Will we be ready to turn our attention away from ourselves and what we are doing to share Jesus with them?

- **How are you preaching the gospel with your life as well as your words?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why is this important?** *Like Paul and Silas singing and praising God in their terrible circumstances, our actions should be reflective of our inner faith and dependence upon God. Living this way isn't intended to draw attention to ourselves but to the faithfulness of God and the joy found in Him.*



HANDS

We often have the tendency to keep the good news of the gospel to ourselves after hearing it rather than sharing it with others. We say things like, "I need to grow deeper in my own faith before I can share the gospel with others," or "I need to take apologetic classes before I can share my faith." While it's important for us to grow in our knowledge of the Scriptures and understand how to share and defend the gospel, it's also vital for us to simply build relationships with our lost classmates, friends, and family. Live out the gospel before them, and pray for an opportunity to share the gospel with them.

- **How does this session encourage you in the mission of sharing the gospel?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Who are you burdened to share the good news with this week?** *Answers will vary.*

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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11

SESSION ELEVEN

The Gospel Meets Culture

SESSION SUMMARY

We should pay careful attention to how Paul interacted with the men and women of Athens since this has many parallels for us today. Paul understood that the gospel must be presented in a way that is easy for people in different cultures to understand. As a result, when Paul reasoned with those in Athens, he found points of contact between the biblical view of the world and that of Greek culture. Then, he proclaimed that all nations came from the first Adam and that the second Adam—Jesus Christ—would judge all nations. Paul’s message focused on the risen Jesus and included a fervent call to repentance. We need to allow ourselves to be distressed by the idolatry of our culture like Paul was so we can boldly and sensitively proclaim the gospel into it. By the end of this session, we will discover what it means to be in the world but not of it.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 17:16-33

THE POINT

The gospel must be presented in a way that is easy for people in different cultures to understand.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Throughout the history of the church, we read about people who believed the world was so evil that they had to get away and separate themselves as much as possible. These kinds of people are often called *ascetics*. As a result, many lived in the desert and created monastic communities where they could guard themselves from the idolatries in the culture. There were even some who believed their bodies were such a source of temptation and evil that they would *mortify* their bodies—meaning, they would inflict pain on themselves to discipline themselves to not do certain things.

Over the years, many people have had different opinions about how Christians should relate to their surrounding culture. Some have said to avoid it, as in the case of the ascetics. Some have also wrongly suggested the opposite approach of completely immersing oneself within the culture. However, for Christians, the proper response should be one of engagement; we engage culture in hopes of transforming others into the likeness of Christ. We aren't meant to run from culture or consume it entirely, but to live in it in such a way that we can be salt and light to those around us—the very thing we see in our study today of Acts 17.

- **What are some ways Christians can engage their culture with the Christian worldview?**

Option 2

In some cultures, eye contact is seen as negative, but it is a sign of respect or professionalism in others. Some cultures are more expressive with their hands and body language, others with facial expressions, and others with words. Some cultures prize individualism, and others thrive by relying on their communities. Parents in some cultures choose a spouse for their children, while other cultures allow their children to choose who they wish to marry. Other things in culture, like the appropriate age for someone to finish school or get married or the familiarity with which elders and strangers are addressed vary greatly.

- **What are some differences you've noticed in the way different people in your area go about their lives?**
- **What are some cultural differences you've noticed in your own travels or studies?**

All cultures, and even families within those cultures, have unique beliefs and experiences. As Christians, it is important to recognize these beliefs and the ways these beliefs and experiences may affect the way others will hear or understand the gospel. Christians should be prepared to find common ground and build from there in an explanation of the gospel.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

The gospel must be presented in a way that easy for people in different cultures to understand.

CHARACTERS

- **Paul:** also known by his Hebrew name Saul; violent persecutor turned follower and apostle of Christ; known as the missionary to the Gentiles

PLOT

This session is filled with what might be called “evangelistic strategy.” The Book of Acts contains several evangelistic encounters, in which the gospel message was preached and received (or rejected). However, this session’s encounter takes place in a culture not too different from our own in many respects.

TIMELINE

ENGAGING CULTURE

Paul engages the surrounding culture with the message of Christ.

LIVING ON MISSION

Paul viewed his day-to-day work as an opportunity to spread the gospel.

**Beginning in Spring 2018*

STANDING STRONG

Refuse compromise when the truth of the gospel is at stake.

PAUL GRIEVED FOR THE LOST

After preaching and proclaiming the gospel in a Jewish synagogue in Thessalonica and Berea, Paul found himself in Athens, an intellectual and religious center filled with idols.

16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. (Acts 17:16)

Paul had experience in cities where people worshiped idols, but Athens was on another level. This is why we read that Paul was troubled by the sight of a city so deep in idolatry. Paul was not troubled the way you might be troubled when you realize you forgot to study for an exam. Paul was not fearful of the idols or the amount of them in the city. Paul was more grieved that there were so many idols in the city. This provoked him to stop waiting for Silas and the others to join him and to begin sharing the gospel in the synagogue and the marketplace.

How did Paul know the city was full of idols in the first place? Did he read the latest travel guide for Athens? Did he read a brochure in the town's welcome center? Or did he research the city online?

No, Paul studied the city. He walked around and observed the culture. He became aware of his surroundings. Instead of running away, closing his eyes, or returning to a "safer" city, Paul allowed himself to grieve over the idolatry in Athens. He allowed the Holy Spirit to move his heart, creating the foundation for what he did next.

- **What are some "idols" you see in our culture today?** (*p. 78, PSG*)
- **What is your response to seeing how many idols our culture has? What can you do to help turn people toward Jesus?** (*p. 78, PSG*)

PAUL STUDIED THEIR CULTURE AND PROCLAIMED THE TRUTH TO THEM

Once the Lord grieved Paul's heart and opened his eyes to see the idolatry and the lost in the city, Paul stopped waiting around for Silas and the others to join him. Instead, he got up and went to both the synagogue and the marketplace to reason with the Jewish and Greek Athenians. He taught the gospel to them in a way they would understand.

17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. 18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babblers wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. 19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” 21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. 22 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. 26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, 27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, 28 for “‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “‘For we are indeed his offspring.’ 29 Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. 30 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”(Acts 17:17-31)

When Paul reasoned with the Athenians, he did not expect them to come to faith the way he did—by first becoming devout Jews and then Christians. Instead, he started with their worldview and with what they knew. Then, he laid a foundation for sharing the gospel with them.

Paul began by applauding the Athenians for wanting to explore and seek the truth since they gave him the opportunity to talk about the gospel to a large group of them (v. 20). After Paul was taken into the Areopagus to explain his message to them, he started his speech by affirming the good. He then commended them for being religious and for understanding that life was more than the here and now. At this point he made the transition from their culture’s idea of the divine to biblical truth, commenting on the unknown god they worshiped ignorantly and teaching them the truth about who God was.

Paul wanted to acknowledge that he understood where the Athenians were coming from before he shared the gospel with them. He wanted to explain that he was not ignorant about their ways before critiquing their beliefs. Instead of introducing a god they had never heard about, he pointed out the fact that they already knew something was missing in their belief system. After all, why would they have an altar with the inscription “To an Unknown God”?

From there, Paul built toward sharing the gospel with the Athenians. Notice the way he did it. He started by sharing how man-made idols are not necessary. After all, why would anyone want to worship a god they could make? In other words, he proclaimed the existence and self-sufficiency of the God of Scripture.

Paul rebuked the plethora of idols throughout Athens, saying that they were useless and meaningless. Instead, the real divine nature is both holy and above us, all-knowing and all-powerful, personal and intimate. This is the type of God the Athenians truly wanted and were deeply seeking.

The same is true for us today in the twenty-first century. As cliché as it might sound, there is a hole in each of our hearts that only God can satisfy and fill. The world tries to convince us we can satisfy ourselves by filling that hole with idols of our own making like sex, fame, money, possessions, drugs, and alcohol. But this never works. These are simply our modern day shrines. The only thing that will truly satisfy is the true and living God who created and sustains the world, not the idols of the human imagination.

PAUL ENCOUNTERED DIFFERENT FEEDBACK TO HIS MESSAGE

When Paul affirmed the good in their culture, this opened the door for him to rebuke the bad, and ultimately proclaim the truth of the gospel to the Athenians.

32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.”³³ So Paul went out from their midst. (Acts 17:32-33)

The Athenians’ response varied. Some people ridiculed him because resurrection was such a strange concept in their culture. When you share the gospel with those who are far from God, you need to give the results to God (1 Cor. 3:5-9). The best response to those who reject, ridicule, or laugh is to end the conversation and begin interceding for them. Pray that God would soften their hearts to the truth of the gospel and that He would change them.

When you share the gospel with others, you will encounter some who want to continue the discussion and ask more questions, just like some of the Athenians. In situations like these, allow them to ask questions and do your best to answer. If you do not know an answer, then find it out together with them. Let the process be a part of the journey, but always start and end with a study of the Scriptures. God’s truth will guide your way and the conversation.

TIMELINE

UNITY IN THE CROSS

Believers are united together in Christ.

SHOWING MERCY

Those who know mercy show mercy to others.

A NEW IDENTITY

Peter reminds God's people of their identity in Christ.

If you faithfully and consistently share the gospel with others, you will possibly see God transform many individuals. When this happens, make sure they are part of a local church that can disciple them from the start. Invite them into your Bible study, help them become involved in the life of the church, and meet with them one-on-one.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Evangelism (p. 80, PSG)

It is the duty and privilege of every Christian and of every church of the Lord Jesus Christ to make disciples of all nations. The new birth of man's spirit by God's Holy Spirit means the birth of love for others. Therefore, missionary effort from all believers rests upon a spiritual necessity of the regenerate life and is expressly and repeatedly commanded in Jesus' teachings. The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the preaching of the gospel to all nations. It is the duty of every child of God to seek constantly to win the lost to Christ by verbal witness supported by a Christian lifestyle.

CHRIST CONNECTION

When Paul reasoned with the men in Athens, he found points in common between the biblical view of the world and the Greek culture. Then, he explained that all nations came from the first Adam and that all nations will be judged by the second Adam (Jesus Christ). His message focused on the risen Jesus and included a fervent call to repentance.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **How does Paul's boldness in addressing the Athenian philosophers challenge you in your own mission of sharing the gospel?** *Answers may include things like: being bolder in sharing the gospel, being ready for different responses, trying to use what the person knows to talk about the gospel with him or her, and so forth.*
- **Scripture says, as children of God, we are to live in the world but not be of it (John 17:14,16). What does this mean for us today?** *We are to engage with others as a normal rhythm of life, but not conform to the ways of the world while doing so.*
- **Though God may ultimately be in charge of growing the fruit from our sowing and watering, this does not excuse us from planting a lot of seeds. How can you make sharing the gospel a part of your everyday life and regular rhythms?** *We can look for conversation starters like Paul did, build friendships, ask meaningful questions, and so forth.*
- **When people believe the gospel and come to know Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord, what should their next steps be? How should discipleship take place? What should they begin learning?** *Next steps should include getting them plugged into a local church, inviting them to participate in regular Bible study, teaching them the practice of spiritual disciplines, and so on.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

John Bunyan once said, “It is wounding work...this breaking of the hearts, but without wounding there is no saving...Conversion is not the smooth, easy-going process some men seem to think.”¹¹ Like Paul, Bunyan understood that evangelism involves more than repeating a few memorized lines. Evangelism also takes studying the culture around you to understand the best strategy to use in communicating the truth with others.

- **How might we use things within our culture (movies, music, internet, etc.) to reach people where they are?** *There are a number of mediums within our culture we can easily use to share the gospel with others. Whether it’s a popular movie or a song that talks about what is good or living right, there are all sorts of opportunities Christians have to ask questions and take the conversation further with our friends.*
- **Why is it important that we study our culture in order to make an impact for Christ within it?** *By studying and knowing the culture, we are in a better position to transform it with the message of Christ. Not only that, but it also shows that we truly care about the people around us.*



HEART

Like the Athenians, we also have an idol issue in modern day culture. It may not look the same with physical sculptures we bow down to and revere, but there are idols all around us nonetheless—many of these being hidden deep within our hearts. As Kyle Idleman says, “Idolatry isn’t just one of many sins; rather it’s the one great sin that all others come from. So if you start scratching at whatever struggle you’re dealing with, eventually you’ll find that underneath it is a false god. Until that god is dethroned, and the Lord God takes his rightful place, you will not have victory. Idolatry isn’t *an* issue; it is *the* issue.”¹²

- **Is your city full of idols? What would you say that they are?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are some of the heart idols you are struggling with? How does the gospel challenge your allegiance to them?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

Sadly, there are many Christians today who know what the gospel is, but fail to share it with others. However, the gospel is not only for knowing but also for sharing. So, pray for the lost in your neighborhood and at school. Engage with them, develop friendships with them, and look for opportunities to share the gospel with them through words and actions.

- **How do you begin spiritual conversations with your friends, neighbors, and family members who are far from God? Share some examples.** *Answers will vary.*
- **How does a repentant life display the work of the gospel to a lost world? How do you live a life of repentance?** *It shows that we are broken by sin and in need of forgiveness and grace.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

SOURCES

1. John Brown, *John Bunyan: His Life Times and Work* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1888), 389.
2. Kyle Idleman, *Gods at War: Defeating the Idols that Battle for Your Heart* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 22.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPMissionWin18)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
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12

SESSION TWELVE

Intentional Living

SESSION SUMMARY

While on his third missionary journey, the Apostle Paul focused on two things: spreading the gospel and strengthening the church. It didn't matter if someone was a Jew or a Gentile, Paul wanted all people to hear the gospel and experience the life-transforming power of Jesus Christ. In addition, he wanted to strengthen the church and fellow believers to more accurately speak about Christ and share the gospel with others. In this session, we will discover that God's primary calling on all of our lives is to carry out His mission in our everyday lives. As a result, we will also learn how to see our various roles and daily tasks as platforms for sharing the gospel and discover new ways to mentor and strengthen those around us. Focusing on these two things will help us leave a legacy of faithfulness for those behind us.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 18:1-4,24-28; 20:17-24

THE POINT

All God’s people are called to live on mission wherever He has placed them.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

When we imagine the Garden of Eden—in books, paintings, or movies—there seems to be a lot of lounging around. Adam and Eve are reclining, relaxing, and eating grapes as dopey lions look on and lazy lambs nap. It looks like a vacation on a picturesque landscape.

At the heart of these images is a major misconception about God’s original creation. It wasn’t a perpetual day spa where no one did anything. Instead, it was a vibrant, active community; a place where Adam and Eve had work to do and showed up to do it six days a week. In other words, the concept of work wasn’t the result of the fall—it was a gift designed by God for our benefit.

Sometimes we think work is bad. Not only that, but sometimes we think work can get in the way of “real” ministry, as if ministry can only be done if it’s full-time in the church. However, this couldn’t be further from the truth. God has always intended our work—whether as a farmer or business owner, a student or athlete—to be used as a way of ministering to others and sharing the gospel. We see this in the life and ministry of the apostle Paul who, though known primarily as a missionary and preacher of the gospel, was a tentmaker by trade.

- **What are some of the various roles you participate in on a weekly basis (student, athlete, hobbies, etc.)? How might these be used as a ministry to share Christ with others?**

Option 2

Instruct students to get into groups of three or four. Say: “Think about all the roles you have: son, daughter, sister, brother, cousin, classmate, friend, goalie, linebacker, dancer, guitarist, vocalist, pianist, and the list goes on.” Now, tell students to discuss with their group some roles they fill. Give students a few minutes to discuss, then ask:

- **What are some ways you can share the gospel with others through those roles?**

Allow students a few minutes to discuss, then gather together as a group and discuss the ideas students created. Encourage them to share the gospel, no matter where they are or what they do on a daily basis. Our lives are meant to share the gospel, even in our work.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

All God's people are called to live on mission wherever He has placed them.

CHARACTERS

- **Paul:** also known by his Hebrew name Saul; violent persecutor turned follower and apostle of Christ; known as the missionary to the Gentiles
- **Aquila and Priscilla:** married couple who accompanied Paul to Ephesus and hosted a church in their home; instrumental in instructing Apollos in the Christian faith

PLOT

Our last session in the Book of Acts helps us to see that God wants us to view every moment and interaction of our lives as opportunities to spread the gospel and strengthen the church. Sharing the gospel is not something you add to your schedule or something that has to happen at church. Instead, sharing the gospel is something you can do while sitting in class, hanging out in the park, or by talking with someone while playing video games online.

TIMELINE

LIVING ON MISSION

Paul viewed his day-to-day work as an opportunity to spread the gospel.

**Beginning in Spring 2018*

STANDING STRONG

Refuse compromise when the truth of the gospel is at stake.

UNITY IN THE CROSS

Believers are united together in Christ.

PAUL USED HIS JOB AS A TENTMAKER TO SPREAD THE GOSPEL

You and your pastor have the same primary calling in life: to know Christ and make Him known. No matter what job or occupation you will one day have, your primary calling in life will remain the same. If you consider yourself a Christ-follower, then you must see your occupation as a means to an end, rather than as an end in and of itself. Just like Paul understood, God wants us to see our roles and occupations in life as platforms for sharing the gospel.

¹ After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, ³ and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. ⁴ And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks. (Acts 18:1-4)

Paul left Athens for Corinth in order to continue spreading the gospel throughout the world. When we read about Paul in the New Testament, it is typically about him teaching, preaching, discipling, or evangelizing. Once in a while, we hear about Paul's other occupation—tentmaking (Acts 18:3). Paul shared that his work and his hands provided for his needs and those around him—referring to his tentmaking business (Acts 20:34). While Paul said those who preach the gospel should make their livings by doing so, he refused to use that privilege (1 Cor. 9:14-15). He went on to say that, although it would be okay and right for him to earn a living through preaching the gospel, he was called to do it “free of charge” (v. 18) because the Lord provided for him through his tentmaking business.

When Paul arrived in Corinth, he providentially met two others who were new to the city, Aquila and Priscilla, who were also tentmakers by trade. Obviously, this was not coincidence. As much as Paul took pride in the fact that he was a tentmaker and able to preach the gospel, “free of charge,” he knew God was the one who ultimately provided for him.

APOLLOS FOUND A MENTOR

It's so easy to see everything as a competition. Whether it's trying to get in line at the grocery store before the lady down the aisle or competing with your classmates for the highest grade on the math test, many of us have this incessant need for and addiction to winning. Unfortunately, we have also learned that in order to win, we need to push others down. However, it's actually possible to win by helping others win.

²⁴ Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. ²⁵ He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. ²⁶ He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. ²⁷ And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, ²⁸ for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus. (Acts 18:24-28)

Instead of viewing Apollos as competition, Priscilla and Aquila saw him as a brother in the Lord and a coworker in the gospel. So, they helped him “win.” After all, if he was able to powerfully and eloquently use the Scriptures to preach about Jesus Christ, even though he only knew about John’s baptism, how much better would he be able to proclaim the gospel after he learned from more knowledgeable believers?

So, we should help others take their next step. Guide others into a deeper relationship with Christ and help them live out the Great Commission. You can do this one-on-one as the Lord brings individuals to mind, or you can do this as a peer in your Bible study group. Or maybe this session is God’s call for you to step up and lead a study, trusting that God will go before you and give you what you need to help others draw nearer to Him.

- **What do you think would have happened if Priscilla and Aquila had seen Apollos as competition instead of helping him?** (*p. 85, PSG*)
- **Why do you think it’s our natural tendency to compete with others, even in ministry?** (*p. 85, PSG*)

PAUL VIEWED THE SPREAD OF THE GOSPEL AS MORE IMPORTANT THAN HIS OWN LIFE

Perspective is everything. Have you ever dug deep into a subject you thought you had a pretty good grasp on, only to discover just how much you didn't know? It's humbling, isn't it?

In the same way, when things are going well, it's easy to think that it was due to our good planning or foresight. However, when hard times hit, it can sometimes feel like you'll never see the light at the end of the tunnel. Many of us are often fickle in our emotions, plans, and perspective. That's why this passage matters.

17 Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. 18 And when they came to him, he said to them: "You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, 19 serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; 20 how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, 21 testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. 22 And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, 23 except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. 24 But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. (Acts 20:17-24)

**For a fuller understanding of these verses, continue reading through verse 38.*

Think about the conversations you've had with friends at school, around the bonfire, on a bus, or at camp. Have you taken advantage of every single opportunity to share the gospel to those you interact with regularly?

Or how about what Paul says in verse 24? Can you truthfully say that you view sharing the gospel with others as more important than your own life? Let's be honest here—most of us like our pleasures, comforts, and privileges too much to live this kind of unashamed life. We give our tithes and offerings, serve at our churches, pass an Easter invitation card to our neighbors, and say to ourselves, "That's better than most!" But it's not! You can't judge your Christian walk compared to your next-door neighbor's standards; you need to see how your life compares to the Scriptures.

- **Why do you think we measure our spiritual lives by comparing ourselves with our neighbors?** (*p. 86, PSG*)

TIMELINE

SHOWING MERCY

Those who know mercy show mercy to others.

A NEW IDENTITY

Peter reminds God's people of their identity in Christ.

LOVE IN ACTION

Love for God and others is the fruit of Christian living.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Discipleship (p. 85, PSG)

Discipleship is a process that takes place both formally and informally to effect spiritual maturity as people follow Jesus. Informal discipleship, as passages like Deuteronomy 6:4-9 suggest, happens everywhere, in every arena of life. Growing in our faith and deepening our walk with Christ is something that requires our whole life, not just the mind. Formal discipleship refers to periods of instruction. We make disciples through our words and actions, providing verbal instruction from God's Word and non-verbal examples through our lives (Acts 20:17-24).

CHRIST CONNECTION

On his third missionary journey, the apostle Paul saw whatever situation he was in as an opportunity for spreading the gospel and strengthening the church. His way of life reflected the selflessness and grace of Jesus, who taught us to tell the truth, help the weak, and give generously as an act of worship. Paul's endurance was a testimony to the supreme worth of Jesus Christ, the One who called him.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Read Ephesians 4:11-12. How does this support the notion that all believers, no matter what profession they are in, should see their jobs as their ministry? How does this challenge you personally when thinking about your future?** *It should be very freeing to know God wants godly lawyers, doctors, social workers, construction workers, and so on to see their profession and platform as a means of ministry. In other words, you don't have to grow up and go to college thinking what you are studying will have no impact on your calling and ministry as a Christian—they have everything to do with it and we should see our roles as a means of ministry.*
- **How can your platform (as a student, academic club member, band participant, etc.) be used for proclaiming the gospel?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How can we reflect in our own lives what Paul said in Acts 20:20?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What does it look like to leave a legacy of faithfulness in your home? At school? In your extra curricular activities?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

The story of Apollos should encourage us that the Lord can use anyone, regardless of their past and what they know or don't know. God is looking for those who are faithful, who have a humble heart, and want to do His will whenever, wherever, and whatever. We see this in Jesus' disciples and here with Apollos.

- **Why do you think God looks at our willingness rather than our natural talents, when it comes to using people for His kingdom?** *God can always equip people with the gifts and abilities they need for ministry. His first focus is on their hearts and desires to be used for His glory.*
- **How does this truth encourage you personally?** *Answers will vary.*



HEART

After reading an account like this in Scripture, it is important for us to pray that the Holy Spirit would internalize the account's truths within us, leading to both an inner and outer transformation. Consider making this your prayer in response to this session: "Lord, give me the strength to stand up and unashamedly share your gospel with those around me. Help me to stop valuing the things of this earth so much. Help me to be about Your kingdom rather than mine."

- **Considering the fact that your life is like a drop in the ocean in light of eternity, what sort of legacy do you want to leave?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What needs to change in your life today in order to reorient your perspective, priorities, and attitudes so that you see all of your life as being a part of God's mission?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

Sometimes we think we need to grow to a certain point, memorize enough Scripture verses, or know how to refute particular arguments before we can disciple others. This cannot be further from the truth. Just look at Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) or Jesus and the demon possessed man in the region of the Gerasenes (Mark 5:1-18). After experiencing the healing power of Christ, both the woman and the man went and told others about Christ. They did not take a class on evangelism or go to seminary. They simply went and testified about what they had experienced.

- **Looking back on this past year, share with your group one thing you've learned about living your life as a Christ-follower.** *Answers will vary.*
- **If someone asked you to be his or her mentor, what do you think you could offer to that person? What could you teach him or her?** *If students cannot answer for themselves, consider encouraging them and telling them what you could learn from them.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #11, which contains a quote poster related to the session.

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STUDY PLAN

YEAR 1

Fall 2015

God the Creator (Genesis 1-11)
God the Covenant-Maker
(Genesis 12-50)

Winter 2016

God the Redeemer
(Exodus)
God the Lawgiver
(Exodus, Leviticus,
Deuteronomy)

Spring 2016

God the Savior
(Numbers, Joshua)
God the Judge (Judges,
Ruth, 1 Samuel)

Summer 2016

God the King (1-2 Samuel)
God All Wise (1 Kings, Job,
Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Proverbs)

YEAR 2

Fall 2016

God the Revealer
(1-2 Kings, Isaiah)
God the Pursuer (Major
and Minor Prophets,
1-2 Chronicles)

Winter 2017

God the Sustainer
(Daniel, Ezra)
God the Provider (Esther,
Nehemiah, Malachi)

Spring 2017

God the Son (Gospels)
God Among Us (Gospels)

Summer 2017

Jesus the Storyteller
(Synoptic Gospels)
Jesus the Miracle-Worker
(Gospels)

YEAR 3

Fall 2017

Jesus the Savior (Gospels)
Jesus the Risen King
(Gospels, Acts)

Winter 2018

The Spirit Who
Empowers (Acts)
The God Who Sends (Acts)

Spring 2018

The God Who Directs His
People (Epistles)
The God Who Changes
Us (Epistles)

Summer 2018

God's Prisoner (Acts, Epistles)
The God Who Makes All
Things New (Epistles,
Revelation)