

# ACTS Bible Reading Schedule

## 5 Weeks

### WEEK 1

I have prayerfully considered our approach to the Book of Acts. This might be the most significant book for us because it highlights the possibilities of life in Christ as a church community. Because of that, I want us to tackle one chapter a day with the idea of reading that chapter twice. I couldn't imagine focusing on more than one chapter because so much is said in each of these chapters.

#### IMMERSED IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

What occurred during Jesus' brief ministry on earth was limited to a small corner of the world. Most of the world didn't notice Jesus bringing hope to a hurting and seemingly forsaken group of people. But just as Jesus predicted, the small band of disciples that met in Jerusalem following his death and resurrection turned the whole world upside down. Life on planet earth hasn't been the same since. We will read about the power of the Holy Spirit page after page. We will witness incredible courage and the perseverance necessary to overcome opposition. We will be inspired by the Gospel as lives are saved, changed, and transformed forever. This is a historical book with the movement of the early church recorded for us. There is no doubt that the characters will jump off the page as we read their story. Welcome to the Book that tells us how it began, where it is going, and what we can do to join in.

#### DAY 1 – Acts 1

This may be the shortest chapter in the book. So, this might help you to begin as I suggested by reading Acts 1 twice. This chapter connects us to how the author, Luke ended his Gospel message in Luke 24. He references Theophilus again who is a friend of Luke's who probably enjoyed a high social status. Luke wanted to encourage his friend with the truth about Jesus and the launch of the church, or he wanted to convince him of the truth so that he might come to faith. Luke is good with details and is inspired by the Spirit to record a marvelous account of what Jesus and the Good News can do in a person's life and in the surrounding world. Every commentary I read makes Acts 1:8 the theme, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." This one verse tells us so much. What do you notice? What is our source? What is the plan that God begins on Pentecost? (Acts 2) I am curious about what else you might have noticed in this chapter that gets your attention. I have verse 11 and verse 14 in mind. These are two different topics but both give me hope and challenge me. Verse 11 tells us that Jesus will return in the clouds. That reminds me of Matthew 24:30, "And then at last, the sign that the Son of Man is coming will appear in the heavens, and there will be deep mourning among all the people of the earth (the truth of Jesus will be revealed and many will see him in their unbelief). And they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory!" Don't you just love it! But also verse 14 simply says they were praying together. They could have been doing any number of things but they chose to pray. You will notice the emphasis on prayer in this book: the power of prayer; the effects of prayer; the community of prayer; the importance of prayer... How do you respond to this first chapter as we begin?

#### DAY 2 – Acts 2

I think I have mentioned to you that I am reading these Scriptures from the New Living Translation (NLT). I have read from NIV and ESV for several years now so a change for me is refreshing. The NLT is an accurate translation of modern language. The idea is to find words and phrases in 21st-century English that matches the original Greek script so that it conveys the message correctly. I want you to feel confident that you are reading an accurate record of God's Word in our modern language if you use the NLT with me. For example, verse 38 reads, "Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God..." That phrase is one Greek word but it means remorse over sin and turning to God. It usually is translated as "repent." Literally, it means to change your mind. Once you did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah and now the resurrected One, but now you do. You have had a change of mind. That means you have repented. In this chapter, we see the power of proclamation; the necessity for baptism; the launch of the church; and, the nature of God's community with generosity and togetherness. If you did not read it twice, please take my challenge and read this chapter again right now. I know you will be surprised how much more jumps off the page. Peter utilizes Joel 2, Psalm 16, and Psalm 110 in his sermon on Pentecost. The Old Testament predicted this day; Jesus told his disciples to anticipate the coming of the Spirit; 3000 people open their hearts to the meaning of this day. What does this chapter represent to you? How might you join the early church by living verse 42? It is quite simple and amazingly profound. On this day the church was birthed and it still is going strong 2000 years later. Jesus said, "I will build my church and the power of hell will not conquer it." (Matthew 16:18) If verses 42-47 are the description of the church, how are we doing as His Body? What does that mean for you?

#### DAY 3 – Acts 3

I was tempted to have us read chapter 4 as well because the story continues, of course. But my plan has not changed. If we read a chapter a day, we definitely have time to read it twice. I believe the story will be even more meaningful to you if you read it twice. Peter demonstrates a principle I try to live by and I also have mentioned to our Body several times. Show and Tell! Peter had amazing faith to respond to the lame man in a very similar way that he had seen in Jesus. There's no question that Peter was showing his faith in Jesus: "In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, get up and walk!" (Verse 6) But my favorite sentence in the story is verse 12, "Peter saw the opportunity and addressed the crowd." The word opportunity is optimistic and represents a door to be opened. If I open the door, the possibilities are very optimistic. "Live wisely among those who are not believers, and make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone." (Colossians 4:5-6) Peter lived these verses in Acts 3. His message was exceptional. He displays both tough and tender love with challenging words about repentance in verse 19 and also affirming words about God's chosen love for them, "You are the children of those prophets, and you are included in the covenant God promised to your ancestors." (Verse 25) He speaks to them about the predicted prophet Moses spoke about and reminds them that they are the people of the Messiah. These affirming words are meant to tell them about God's kindness towards them. Romans 2:4 says, "Don't you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you? Does this mean nothing to you? Can't you see that his kindness is intended to turn you from your sins?" Peter gives us a good example of show and tell. What do you learn from this chapter?

#### DAY 4 – Acts 4

You can see why I am sticking with one chapter a day. This chapter is packed with inspiring moments and timeless truth. In fact, Acts 4:12 could be thought of as the theme verse for Acts even though I already picked Acts 1:8. "There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved." This is a foundational truth for the Christian faith and stirs our hearts with gratitude but also with mission. We have the only One who saves in our lives and he is the only One who gives salvation to a world in need of salvation. Then, verse 13 is one of my favorites as the religious

leaders realize that the disciples were ordinary men, like me, who demonstrated courage and boldness as followers of Jesus. "They (the religious leaders) also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus." Can you relate to the idea of being ordinary?! God uses ordinary people like you & me. But, because of my passion for community prayer, verses 23 to 31 are the most inspiring to me. The believers were together and the first thing they did as Peter and John arrived is pray. Plus, their prayer, as a community, is exceptional; it must be a model for us in prayer. They acknowledged the Sovereign Lord with worshipful words in prayer and included the Word of God in their prayers. (Verses 25-26) After expressing their worship and devotion, they ask for God's help in spreading the message as well as asking him to do the miraculous for the honor of his name. The nature of their community prayer was one of surrender to the purposes of God. I find this prayer to be an especially helpful model for personal and group prayer. Pete Greig wrote a book entitled, "How to Pray." He wrote, P.R.A.Y. which can mean pause, rejoice, ask, and yield. I see that emphasis in Acts 4:23-31. How might this inspire and shape your prayers?

#### DAY 5 – Acts 5

In the formation of the Early Church much was at stake. One of the most important character traits would be authentic faith. Barnabas demonstrated an authentic faith that was affirmed by the Apostles. But as we begin this chapter, we read about the opposite. Ananias and Sapphira looked the part but were actually motivated by deception and pretense. If their posture went unnoticed, it could jeopardize the integrity of the church. In verse 13 we read, "...all the people had a high regard for them (believers)." But this could have crumbled if deceit entered the church. This past Sunday I spoke on Tough Love. There's no question that this fits in that category. Confrontation and discipline are necessary in the church but must be done in love. This unique event can seem disturbing to us but denial and pretense, lies, and half-truths can birth sinful and destructive patterns like a virus spreading to others. The integrity of the church is a high priority to our God as we are called the bride of Christ. This extreme example would be used by God to protect and promote the mission of the church. There is another thought that came to mind as Gamaliel addresses the council in verse 35. First, the high council had decided to kill the apostles in verse 33. But God intervenes through this respected leader in their midst. Nothing in Gamaliel would want to promote Christianity but that was the end result. Again, God used an enemy for his good and the good of his people. One thing that Gamaliel says is especially powerful and absolutely true, "But if it is from God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You may even find yourselves fighting against God!" (Verse 39) Is God sovereign or not? Of course, you know that he is. How does that relate to your life? How many things happen in your life that surprise God? The activity of God is 24/7. How do you sense God speaking to you through this chapter?

## WEEK 2

#### DAY 1 – Acts 6 & 7

Time and again I told you we would only read one chapter a day. That is mostly true:). Now and then, I will have us read two chapters so that we finish in five weeks, in time for some Advent readings to take us to Christ's birth. The focal point of our reading today is the martyr, Stephen. But first, let me applaud the Apostles for their priorities and willingness to delegate. The first seven verses of chapter 6 are a great example for us of how to empower others to serve in the Body of Christ. There's the courage to face the problem; there's a wise process for selection; there are priorities to be honored; there's the expanding results of God's message going forth. These are practical words for me as a pastor. Honestly, I have tried to live by this example of the Apostles. Priorities and delegation are front and center as this

chapter begins. But the main emphasis is found in a Spirit-filled man named Stephen. He is one of the men selected to serve in the food distribution for widows. He is humble enough to serve in any way the Apostles directed. You can see that his main gift is not serving, but rather prophecy (one who proclaims the truth of God's revelation with boldness.) His story seems tragic because he demonstrated remarkable faith and extraordinary gifts. He was sure to make a big difference for Jesus. His strong witness got the attention of jealous religious leaders who brought him before the high council. But his contribution was cut short and his life was snuffed out just like that. However, his courage spills over into the believers in such a way that the message went forth even as persecution broke out. His life exemplifies the well-known maxim, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Stephen said, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man STANDING in the place of honor at God's right hand!" (Verse 56) Jesus stood up for Stephen and welcomed him into his eternal home. What about Stephen's story stands out to you? Why?

#### DAY 2 – Acts 8

Two days in a row we get to be inspired by godly men used by the Lord as the Early Church is moving beyond Jerusalem. Philip, like Stephen, was selected to organize the food distribution for widows. But his strongest spiritual gift is evangelism. In fact, in Acts 21:8, he is called Philip the Evangelist. Pretty cool and he raised four daughters who had the gift of prophecy (21:9). We also get a teaser about Saul who we know is Paul the Apostle. He is persecuting the church and throwing believers in prison. Tomorrow we will read about his glorious story that includes the marvelous intervention of Jesus on the road to Damascus. I really appreciate the character of Philip. He is ready in a moment's notice. His interaction with the Ethiopian eunuch is an example of his readiness to witness and be used by God. He was a godly man who was sensitive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. "Go over and walk along beside the carriage." (V29) I love this story but I thought I could give you a little lesson on the credibility of the Bible. You probably notice that verse 37 is missing. Some more recent manuscripts read, "You can," Philip answered, "if you believe with all your heart." And the eunuch replied, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." The reason this verse is not included in our newer translations is that we have more ancient scrolls of the Book of Acts now that were not available when the English translation of the Bible came to be in 1611. Most likely some scribe added the words I just typed out for you because they wanted the story to remind the reader that baptism was a profession of faith. The words added are truthful and presented in many other places in the Bible. But now we have fragments of Scriptural text that date back to the 2nd century. The Bible is verified time and again that what we are reading is what was passed down. Scholars have omitted verse 37 because it does not appear in the earliest original manuscripts. You can have confidence in the English translation of God's Word! How might God be speaking to you today?

#### DAY 3 – Acts 9

No one would have thought that Saul would play an even more significant role than Stephen, Philip, or even Peter. People had a hard time believing his conversion was genuine. "But Lord," exclaimed Ananias, "I've heard many people talk about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem!" (Verse 13) It was well-known what Saul was doing. The very first words of Jesus to Saul were, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" (Verse 4) Jesus identified with his followers so closely that when they were being persecuted, he was too. To add to the depth of their fear of Saul, verse 26 reads, "When Saul arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to meet with the believers, but they were afraid of him. They did not believe he had truly become a believer." You can't blame them since Stephen was martyred under Saul and many others were imprisoned because of him. The radical change in Saul was even beyond the faith of most believers in Jerusalem. But that is the message of this chapter. When the Gospel is received personally, there is a radical change. The Bible calls it from death to life. "...even

though we were dead because of our sins, God gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead.” (Ephesians 2:5) Saul, who we know as Paul, would have firsthand experience in the radical spiritual change that receiving Christ produces. There are many significant aspects to the Christian faith, but the power of the Gospel stands taller, in my opinion. Paul wrote, “For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes...” (Romans 1:16) Saul’s conversion stirs my heart to have faith that God is still changing lives through the Good News of Jesus Christ. Plus, God had declared to send Paul to the Gentiles and no scheme of man could keep that from happening even though they plotted to kill him (Verse 23). How does Saul’s conversion stir your heart? What stands out to you in this chapter?

#### DAY 4 – Acts 10

This chapter snuck up on us because it happens to be one of the most profound moments in the Early Church. The Gentiles are welcomed, redeemed, and stand alongside the Jews equally in the sight of God. To Peter and the rest of the Jews, Gentiles were unclean and to be avoided at all costs. The exclusive posture of the Jews was especially grievous to God. He would get Peter’s attention and the door would swing open for all people to be recipients of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Both Peter and Cornelius would need a special encounter with the Lord. Peter would receive a repeated vision and Cornelius would face an angel of the Lord. This shift in understanding that had become so oppositional needed the miraculous affirmation of God to get these two key characters to lead the way to freedom. Previously, Peter and Cornelius would not have even spoken to each other. “Peter told them, ‘You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you. But God (He makes all the difference) has shown me that I should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean.’” (Verse 28) God had worked to remove the prejudices so that they could both share the unusual things that they had seen and heard. As a result, the Holy Spirit filled all the Gentiles who were in Cornelius’s home. God drew people close who had once been separated by immense barriers. Jesus Christ came to demolish the wall of hostility that separated the two groups. “He did this by ending the system of the law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups.” (Ephesians 2:15) There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism... one Body of Christ. May God help us to bridge the gap that so often characterizes our world. How do you respond to this monumental chapter?

#### DAY 5 – Acts 11 & 12

Surprise! Surprise! Another day to read two chapters. Chapter 11 is special but over half of the chapter is a repeat of what happened to Peter. I feel good about us reading two chapters today. Plus, you have the weekend to catch up if you are behind. It is interesting to realize that the people of the Way were referred to as Christians in Antioch for the first time. (11:26) The name Christian was an affirmation that the people of Antioch noticed Christ in these believers. But the fact that the Apostle James was executed (12:2) and Peter is thrown in prison is a big deal. Obviously, Peter would be next. But Peter’s miraculous escape from prison shows that nothing can thwart God’s plans (Job said that very thing in 42:2). It clearly tells us that the church prayed earnestly for him. God can always overcome the obstacles that stand in our way but he often does so because of prayer. Our God is a miracle-working God. This does not mean we will never face difficulties in our walk with God. Even as the early church enjoyed amazing success, it still suffered severe trials. We will always face obstacles as we seek to live out God’s plan for our lives. But since God wants us to prosper, nothing can stand in the way of our success if we entrust our lives to his care. Peter is an example of this. The Lord had more for him to do. No scheme of the devil was going to stop the set plans of God. This is true for you and me as well. What thoughts arise in your mind and heart because of the fact that the Lord will always have his way? How would you describe God’s purpose for you?

## WEEK 3

### DAY 1 – Acts 13

There are many touch points in this chapter for me. I will identify two of them for you. The first three verses stand out to me because they have inspired a long line of passionate missionaries who carry the Gospel around the world. I love that. In 1982, I began seminary and one of the first things the leaders in the seminary asked us to do was to pick a Christian movement (denomination) that you most closely identified with. I began attending a Christian & Missionary Alliance Church. I affiliated with the CM&A for 25 years of my ministry life. Why? "Missionary" was the key. I wanted to be with leaders and believers who wanted to reach the world for Jesus. Paul and Barnabas launched a missionary movement that continues until Jesus returns. But another topic that caught my eye is quite a bit different than that. "There John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem." (Verse 13) We aren't sure why he deserted the team; perhaps it was due to a lack of faith, possibly concern about the Gentile culture, or he was fearful of what might happen. Maybe he was just homesick as a younger man. I have been critical of John Mark as I think about his abandonment of the mission. But I have backed away from some situations out of fear or a lack of faith. His failure reminds me that we are fragile human beings. This is not the end of John Mark's story. You can know that he was restored to fellowship and to missions. Barnabas took him under his wing, even when Paul rejected the idea (15:37-39, an unsettling story of Paul and Barnabas going their separate ways). But, from Paul's letters a decade later (Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11), we know that John Mark became a faithful minister in the early church. I like the reminder that failure is only God's opportunity to redeem and restore. Don't let a setback keep you from starting over with greater humility and maturity. Look up Philippians 3:13-14. What does the challenge to "press on" mean to you?

### DAY 2 – Acts 14

This shorter chapter is full of action. Some of the actions seem scary and violent. There's no doubt that Paul is severely injured because the people thought he was dead. It doesn't say that God raised him up but it sure seems like a miraculous recovery to me. "They stoned Paul and dragged him out of town, thinking he was dead." (Verse 19) The story tells us that the people of Lystra wanted to worship Paul and Barnabas as Greek gods (Verse 12). But a quick shift in thinking and they ended up stoning Paul. People are very fickle. We often interpret our ministry to others by their response. This people-pleasing approach is very unpredictable. Paul and Barnabas would leave that town only to come back again so they could encourage the new believers. "After preaching the Good News in Derbe and making many disciples, Paul and Barnabas returned to Lystra..." (Verse 21) We might think that Paul's number one goal was to get converts to the faith. But he shows his concern for the new believers and the importance of establishing churches by returning to the cities he had previously served. This was a decision that meant he had to take a longer route. We read why they returned in verses 22 & 23. He shared encouragement and told them they needed courage to face hardship and the importance of leaders in the Body of Christ as Paul appointed elders in every church. This is an ideal chapter to read through twice and identify how the Lord might be speaking to you through it. What stands out to you? Why?

### DAY 3 – Acts 15

This chapter marks such an important point in the history of Christianity. At the center of the crisis was Jewish law. Jewish Christians thought Gentile Christians should be required to keep the law of Moses, including the rite of circumcision. So much was at stake. But Peter's words clarified the issue and also

pointed to the purpose of the law. “So why are you now challenging God by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus.” (Verses 10-11) That seems like such a significant statement to me. I will tell you why. Ever since I believed, I have heard about stuff you have to do to be OK with God. It seems to me that human beings are very prone to want to add to the Gospel with man-made effort. Religious zeal stirs up a desire to look a little better and seem like you are in better standing with God by what you do or don’t do. Paul wrote to the Galatians these words, “Let me ask you this one question: Did you receive the Holy Spirit by obeying the law of Moses? Of course not! You received the Spirit because you believed the message you heard about Christ. How foolish can you be? After starting your new lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect by your own human effort?” (Galatians 3:2-3) Exactly! Romans 3:20 reads, “For no one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are.” The law has a purpose. No one has ever lived a flawless life by following the law. The law reveals how flawed we are. Acts 15 defends the sufficiency of Christ and affirms the Gospel of grace. I want you to realize what a monumental shift this is for the church and for the definition of our faith. Read it again with that in mind. The Lord directed the Apostles and we are participants in the salvation that is received as a gift. Tell the Lord how grateful you are to be received by Him.

#### DAY 4 – Acts 16

Obviously, the point of inspiration for me and others is when Paul and Silas were worshiping the Lord just after being beaten with rods and imprisoned in the inner dungeon with clamps on their feet. This was in Philippi. “Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening.” (Verse 25) This reminds me of when the disciples were flogged by the authorities in chapter 5, “rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus.” (5:41) The wounds that Paul and Silas experienced from their beatings were sure to be painful and would probably even feel worse by midnight. But they are praying and worshiping. I don’t know if the jailer heard their praises but he definitely was touched by their kindness, “Stop! Don’t kill yourself! We are all here.” (Verse 28) This is also impressive because Paul and Silas could escape which would be better for them. However, they used the moment to point the jailer and his family to Christ. These are marvelous examples that are convicting to us because this mindset is not our usual approach. Our response to God in difficult times reveals the nature of our faith. If our faith is shallow, our response will often be selfish and even resentful. But if we are firm in our faith, a courageous response points to God’s power at work within us. And maybe it might result in people around us believing in God, like the jailer and his family. Isn’t that our greatest purpose in life?! How does one of my favorite chapters in Acts (16) speak to you?

#### DAY 5– Acts 17

Paul shows his purpose in life throughout this chapter. Each place provides an opportunity for him to point people to Christ. Each time some are open and receptive and others are not. The first city was Thessalonica which ended up being the least receptive and his ministry was cut short. Berea was an encouraging place to share the message and study the Scriptures with eager people who wanted to know the truth. In Athens, Paul was especially sensitive to the Holy Spirit by utilizing a cultural emphasis on idols and altars with one idol dedicated to the “Unknown” God. He identified this God who can be known. Paul is passionate about his mission to share the truth of Jesus Christ with the pagan world. “That ended Paul’s discussion with them, but some joined him and became believers.” (Verses 33-34) It seems to me that Paul didn’t expect anyone to receive Christ by faith in Athens but some did. This chapter is an example of follow-through, I think. Paul received his call from God and he would continue to proclaim to the Gentile world, Jesus is the Messiah. “But the Lord said (to Ananias), ‘Go, for Saul is my

chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings (which will be fulfilled soon), as well as to the people of Israel. And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake.'" (9:15-16) How's your determination to fulfill a similar commission from Jesus? "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations..." (Matthew 28:18) Do you get too discouraged when people walk away without interest? How can you continue to persevere as a person on mission for Christ?

## WEEK 4

### DAY 1 – Acts 18

"For I am with you, and no one will attack and harm you, for many people in this city belong to me." (Verse 10) In my Bible, these are red letters which means the Lord spoke these very words to Paul. This had to be comforting to him since he had experienced opposition in Corinth. Verse 11 says, "So Paul stayed there for the next year and a half, teaching the word of God." His encounter with the Lord inspired him to persevere and the result was a vibrant church in Corinth. I actually have thought a lot about these words from Jesus to Paul. It says that many would come to faith in Corinth. It is a powerful truth to realize that God knows everything before it even happens. Because of that, we might think that we don't need to be serious about reaching people because they will come to faith anyway. But God knew Paul and he knew that these words would cause him to persist and that his role was part of God's plan. This motivated Paul. I have thought about God's plans for Salem and felt those very same words; "many more are destined to receive Christ in our city." In fact, some of them are God's assignment for us. That's how I understand those words. Ephesians 2:10 says that God has prepared ministry in advance for us to do. I sure wouldn't want to miss those opportunities, right!? Paul felt the same way; he put his whole self into it. I think that is what Paul means in 1 Corinthians 15:10, "But whatever I am now, it is all because God poured out his special favor on me—and not without results. For I worked harder than any of the other apostles; yet it was not I but God who was working through me by his grace." God has a plan and he wants you to be a part of it. I hope this thought motivates you as it did Paul. How do you respond to this chapter about the church in Corinth?

### DAY 2 – Acts 19

Paul ministers in Ephesus longer than any other city, "This went on for the next two years..." (Verse 10) In fact, Paul spoke these words during his farewell speech to the leaders in Ephesus, "Remember the three years I was with you—my constant watch and care over you night and day, and my many tears for you." (20:31) My point is that Paul demonstrated the importance of this church in Ephesus by being there so long and then asking Timothy to be the pastor as we have studied on Sunday mornings for 11 weeks. More than this fact, I noticed these words about the church in Ephesus, "A solemn fear descended on the city, and the name of the Lord Jesus was greatly honored." (Verse 17) This is a fascinating chapter with books on sorcery being burnt (worth \$6 million in today's currency) and demons being cast out along with intense opposition as a riot broke out that threatened Paul's life and other believers. But all was secure in the hands of God with people who honored the name of Jesus. Ephesus experienced a genuine revival of repentance and incredible growth. I would suggest that the key to it all was that believers honored the name of Jesus and others did the same. But this would not be true in Ephesus for very long. We sense the drifting of the believers in 1 Timothy and we read some challenging words in Revelation 2 about the church in Ephesus as spoken by Jesus with red letters, "But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first." (REV 2:4) They were to repent because they had lost their first love. To honor and love Jesus are central to any community of faith. Without it, the church will drift. As one commentary pointed out - When the church



was first established (Acts 19), their love for Christ and for each other had been strong. Struggles with false teachers and persecution had caused that original love to grow cold. Do you think that can still happen? Of course. How would you evaluate your honor and love for Christ? How do you think we are doing in that way as a church?

#### DAY 3 – Acts 20

Verse 28 always gets my attention as it is directed to leaders in the church: “So guard yourselves and God’s people. Feed and shepherd God’s flock—his church, purchased with his own blood—over which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as leaders.” The total message of this verse is significant to me but the first phrase stands out the strongest. It tells me what needs to take place first. I must guard my heart and life. I know the verse pertains to leaders but I am sure you realize that watching your own life is a fitting command for you as well. It reminds me of James 4:7, “Humble yourselves before God...” To me, that means I intentionally reject my selfish tendency and instead view myself in a humble way who needs grace from God just as much as anyone else. This idea surfaces in Proverbs, “Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life.” (4:23) I am to take personal responsibility for what I let into my heart and what I allow to stay there. Sometimes I get the impression that believers feel like they are a puppet and nothing they do or don’t do matters that much because God is in control and he will do what he pleases. But time and again the Bible teaches us to be fully engaged in our journey through life realizing that our choices and decisions matter a great deal. Otherwise, the Bible would just point out God’s activity and eliminate the importance of our lives. But don’t be duped into a passive life. Guard yourself; watch yourself; humble yourself; encourage yourself; love yourself... The Christian life is a call to be all in. Let’s be self-aware enough to implement these principles that are necessary to live a godly life. Which idea is one that you would do well to initiate in your life?

#### DAY 4 – Acts 21 & 22

This is a longer reading today compared to others but the two chapters flow into each other. Plus, I want us to wrap up our reading in Acts within 5 days next week, and reading two chapters today will allow us to do so. You will notice that there is no break between chapters 21 & 22. The first verse in chapter 22 says, “Brothers and esteemed fathers,” Paul said, “listen to me as I offer my defense (testimony).” I have often pointed out how Paul presented his testimony. This is really Paul’s story. Most often we must share our story before people will listen to Christ’s story, right? I think Paul models for us an effective way to share our story. His outline is easy to see. He tells them what was happening before he met Christ. Then, he shares how he met Christ. After that, he tells them what life was like after meeting Christ. I think this is a marvelous outline for us as well. “Before, How, & After.” The audience could easily relate to his life before Christ since most of them were Jews. They might even be impressed that he persecuted the early believers. Secondly, his encounter with Jesus is very compelling. He is not exaggerating which is very important. We don’t have to make our story bigger than it is. Finally, he briefly gets to tell them what Christ has done in him after the encounter. As a young adult, I experienced a season of despair (before). Then I met some people my age who were excited about life and had genuine faith in Christ. Their friendship made me want to have what they had (How!). After receiving Christ, my heart was filled with joy because of Jesus in my life. That’s my story and I have shared it many times. Often the people I am talking to can relate to despair or the difficulties of life weighing them down. I tell them, my story can become their story because of Christ’s story. Amen! Why not write out your story!? What was life like before Jesus? How did he come into your life? And, what is life like now that you have received him into your life?

#### DAY 5 – Acts 23

This chapter also has some red letters as the Lord appeared to Paul in the night. The Lord said, “Be encouraged, Paul. Just as you have been a witness to me here in Jerusalem, you must preach the Good News in Rome as well.” (Verse 11) So, what can we be sure of? Paul will preach in Rome one day! But at the same time, 40 men have taken an oath to kill Paul. They have a sneaky plan to ambush him and take his life. The whisper of God at night and the devilish plans of 40 men can be weighed in the balance. How often do we believe that the weight falls on the side of devilish men? The comparison is undeniable; Paul’s encounter with the Lord or the human plans of men. From this point on there will be numerous situations that threaten the fulfillment of Paul going to Rome. I could list them all but you will read about them time and again next week from this chapter on until the end. As you know, Paul reaches Rome in chapter 28 but there are so many worrisome events that appear to thwart God’s plan. But we should know that is impossible. How would God intervene so that the conspiracy to kill Paul is squashed? What about Paul’s nephew? He is a likely candidate to be used by God to protect Paul. Not really! The chances are very rare, don’t you think? Again, the story of Acts keeps us on the edge of our seats. In the nick of time (exactly when needed, according to the dictionary), the commander hears about the plot from Paul’s nephew, and Paul is escorted to Caesarea by 470 soldiers (Verse 23). Paul’s nephew hears about the devilish plot; the boy speaks to an officer and he listens; the commander believes him and rescues Paul in a mighty way. What are the probabilities for each of these going ahead with the outcome being Paul’s safety? Did you know as a math major; I loved probabilities & statistics? I have multiplied the possibilities and think the odds are about 1 in 10,000 and I think I am being modest. But God defies possibilities because with him nothing is impossible. How does this event speak to you? How might you apply this to your circumstances?

## WEEK 5

### DAY 1 – Acts 24

“Because of this (life beyond our earthly existence), I always try to maintain a clear conscience before God and all people.” (Verse 16) There are times when I am reading the Word that something gets my attention in a significant way. The idea of a clear conscience jumped off the page for me. The Bible affirms the reality of our conscience. Job held to the truth that “My conscience is clear for as long as I live.” (Job 27:6) He was not saying he was sinless but that he had a right relationship with God who forgives. Paul admonished Timothy to keep a clear conscience, “Cling to your faith in Christ, and keep a clear conscience.” (1 Timothy 1:19) How can you hold on to a good conscience? I think this is such an important question. I would suggest that the key is your relationship with Christ. As we walk with the Lord, he will speak to us through our conscience. But if we ignore our conscience, our sensitivity to Christ can weaken. The result, over time, can diminish our discernment of right and wrong. Eventually, the devil will try to deceive you if your conscience has been ignored. This is when the devil’s temptations have the potential to pull you down. I am reminded of the gift God has given us in our conscience. Closeness with Christ is the key and keeping short accounts with God and people will lead to maintaining a clear conscience. “Let us go right into the presence of God with sincere hearts fully trusting him. For our guilty consciences have been sprinkled with Christ’s blood to make us clean, and our bodies have been washed with pure water.” (Hebrews 10:22) What does it mean to you to have a clear conscience?

### DAY 2 – Acts 25

It is not difficult to admire the Apostle Paul. Some of his best qualities present themselves in this chapter. The first one comes from the last verse of our previous chapter, “After two years went by in

this way..." (24:27) Paul continued to minister to Governor Felix. At the same time, he was detained in Caesarea for two full years. I am quite sure that no one gave him any hope of being released or going back to trial. He truly demonstrates contentment in such a difficult situation (Philippians 4:12) But Paul was not passive and when given the opportunity to defend himself, he does so in verses 8 through 11. Paul could defend himself with a clear conscience like we highlighted yesterday. Paul knew that he was innocent of the charges against him and as a Roman citizen could appeal to Caesar's judgment. He utilized the protection available to him as a Roman citizen. Each time Paul was accused, he looked for a chance to share his hope in Christ. This chapter ends with the anticipation of what Paul will present to King Agrippa and Bernice, plus the military officers and prominent men of the city. (Verse 23) Paul had the Gospel on his mind all the time. He wrote several times in his letter that we are to make the most of every opportunity. He did not just say that to us but he lived it. Colossians 4:2-6 is one of my favorite paragraphs from the Apostle Paul because it gives me simple and wise instructions on how to live: Prayer, Care, and Share. "Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart. Pray for us, too, that God will give us many opportunities to speak about his mysterious plan concerning Christ. That is why I am here in chains. Pray that I will proclaim this message as clearly as I should. Live wisely among those who are not believers, and make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone." How might you apply these words to your life?

#### DAY 3 – Acts 26

This is the third time in Acts we have heard Paul's testimony of receiving Christ. I have told you that Paul's example is compelling to me and I have suggested this same approach for all of us. Tell people what your life was like before Christ; how you came to know him; and, what your life is like now that Christ lives in your heart. It is a beautiful and powerful way to share your story. No one can refute your story. Just like Paul was used by God to stir the heart of King Agrippa (Verse 28), so too he can use you in the lives of people you meet. I have also emphasized the fact that God assured Paul he would testify of his faith in Rome. So, humanly speaking, King Agrippa can tell Festus that Paul could be released (Verse 32) but in God's providence, we know Paul will make his way to Rome. Let me also remind you that Paul is speaking to people who seemingly have the power to imprison him and even end his life. But that fact does not get in the way of Paul boldly replying to the King with a personal challenge. Agrippa opened the door ever so slightly and Paul wouldn't let it pass without sharing the possibility of Agrippa coming to personal faith. Verse 28 records Agrippa's words and Paul says, "Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that both you and everyone here in this audience might become the same as I am, except for these chains." (Verse 29) Again, Paul's example has been used by God for 2000 years. The boldness of proclaiming Christ to a lost world has been very fruitful. Paul risked his life for a message that was offensive to the Jews and unbelievable to the Gentiles and yet there are over 2 billion professing Christians on the globe today, in part, because of Paul's example. May this truth inspire you to do the same. What would it look like for you to follow Paul's example?

#### DAY 4 – Acts 27

Sometimes we get the impression that Paul is strong enough on his own that he doesn't really need anyone. But this chapter identifies at least two people who accompanied him on this long trip to Rome. "Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, was also with us (which clearly identifies Luke as one of the passengers and maybe others)." (Verse 2) Obviously, Luke was a loyal friend to Paul but someone less familiar was equally so. We have already met Aristarchus in Acts 19:29 when he was dragged into

the theater at the beginning of the riot in Ephesus. Everything was out of control and his life was in jeopardy. If he was a casual friend to Paul, I would imagine that he would abandon the idea of sticking with Paul. But in chapter 20:4, his name is mentioned again as a loyal traveling companion. Colossians 4:10 tells us that Aristarchus is a fellow prisoner with Paul. This friend gave up much for Paul. His name pops up a few times in the New Testament, but we know little about him. However, we do know that everything Paul experienced on this treacherous journey by boat to Rome, he did as well. Aristarchus represents faithful believers who are loyal and have a heart to serve. We know that God is aware of all the hidden people who love Him and serve sacrificially. Maybe you are someone like that. Be encouraged because the least noticed are still valuable in God's plan. "But when you give to someone in need, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you." (Matthew 6:3-4) Nothing is hidden from our Lord. Serving others is serving God. How does a loyal friend like Aristarchus inspire you?

#### DAY 5 – Acts 28

In one way, we are wrapping up the Book of Acts, and in another way, we are announcing that the church continues on with expansion and hope until Christ returns. This record is so inspiring and so relevant to our mission today. I am delighted that we have chosen this as our first reading in the New Testament. This chapter highlights Paul's arrival in Rome. Since we already know that Paul would make it to Rome, it isn't quite as impressive to us but the point is that God fulfills his purpose and plan. The poisonous snake couldn't get in the way; the extra resources needed to make it to Rome would not be a problem; the opposition of the Jews was actually expected since Isaiah shared this recorded prophecy in Isaiah 6:9, 10. So, what is the news reported about the Way? "But we want to hear what you believe, for the only thing we know about this movement is that it is denounced everywhere." (Verse 22) But the Apostle Paul was never afraid of a challenge and he would boldly minister in Rome. Most Jews would not believe and we don't know about the growth of the church in Rome as Paul was limited to freely move about and preach to large groups. But while Paul was under house arrest, he made the most of the opportunity. He wrote letters to the Ephesians, Colossians, and Philippians. He also wrote personal letters, such as the one to Philemon. We know from his writings that Luke was by his side; Timothy visited him more than once; he witnessed to the whole Roman guard (Philippians 1:13); he encouraged the believers in Rome throughout his imprisonment. Paul remained faithful to his calling to the Gentiles (Verse 28) even when, "Some were persuaded by the things he said, but others did not believe." (Verse 24) We owe so much to Paul. His courage, perseverance, and relentless desire to share the Good News with a lost world lives on still today in our lives. May his example motivate you and me to do the same.