

JEREMIAH, LAMENTATIONS, HABAKKUK, ZEPHANIAH & ACTS

Bible Reading Schedule

12 Weeks

WEEK 1

DAY 1 – Jeremiah 1 & Acts 1:1-5

This first chapter of Jeremiah is insightful and inspiring as you meet the prophet who we will get to know in the next ten weeks. We will read a chapter every day, five times a week, and listen to his challenging words to God's people around 600 BC. Each day, I will choose an inspiring verse that might be worth some reflection and meditation. Verse 5 is such a verse! The Southern Kingdom of Judah is very vulnerable and disobedient to God. Jeremiah pours himself into warning them of impending disaster unless they repent. Essentially, this first chapter introduces us to Jeremiah and tells us the time frame when he served God as a prophet and what God wanted him to do courageously. We learn that this was God's plan for his life even before he was born. What stands out to you from this chapter? Will you commit to reading through Jeremiah with me one chapter a day?

The Book of Acts needs no introduction. The launch of the church, as recorded in Acts, gives us direction and instruction for the call of God on the church today. I hope you have as much anticipation and excitement as I do. These readings will be shorter so that we might absorb more deeply what God is saying through this historic book. Acts is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke, as Luke is also the author of this book, and he begins Acts just like he finished Luke. You will notice that Luke is writing to the same person, Theophilus. In Luke it says, the most excellent Theophilus. He was most likely a person of high standing. He may have even helped Luke with some of his expenses. The promise that Jesus would baptize his followers with the Holy Spirit is also mentioned in Luke 3:16 by John the Baptist. The topic of the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts cannot be overemphasized. Right around the corner, Luke will tell us about Pentecost and the influence of the Holy Spirit will be launched in dramatic fashion. The gift, filling, and baptism of the Holy Spirit are somewhat interchangeable. All in all, the presence of God's Spirit was/is the One who is making the impact that is miraculous and world changing. How would you describe the baptism of the Holy Spirit in your life? (V5)

DAY 2 – Jeremiah 2 & Acts 1:6-11

This chapter is much longer as Jeremiah is beginning the recording of his prophecy as he proclaims God's message of rebuke. Israel is likened to a bride who has forsaken her husband for promiscuous connections with other men, making herself like a common prostitute. The idolatry of God's people is that they are finding satisfaction in lesser gods (which are no gods at all); this is nothing short of forsaking the Lord. Verse 13 is a touch point for me. In Dr Larry Crabb's book "Inside Out," this verse was

highlighted as a contemporary issue for believers as we look to other sources besides the Lord for our satisfaction, security, and status. What other wells might you be tempted to dig?

The theme verse for Acts is often given as 1:8. Again, this points to the key role of the Holy Spirit. Plus, the expansion of the Gospel is the mission of the church which is easily identified in this verse as well. The concluding phrase, “to the ends of the earth,” has livened me to God’s heart for the world. I am inspired by those who first heard these words from Jesus and lived them out. They courageously shared God’s Word and did so to their last breath. There’s also an event highlighted in these verses that is almost ignored by the church. But the Lord’s ascension is not only miraculous; it is a foreshadowing of his return as “One coming on the clouds.” Plus, there is no question that our Lord has ultimate power and authority as he is seated at the right hand of the Father. Even though it has been 2000 years since Jesus ascended, I take great comfort in the fact that the angels told the disciples (and us) that he would return one day. His ascension points to him descending in such a way as to reign forever and ever. I encourage you to read these 6 verses again and contemplate what God might be saying to you!

DAY 3 – Jeremiah 3 & Acts 1:12-26

The theme of a wife to a husband continues in this chapter with the unfaithfulness of God’s people. In chapter 2, “Israel” means the whole nation. In this chapter it means the Northern Kingdom, which 300 years before had split off from Judah. The Northern Kingdom had been in Assyrian captivity for 100 years already, and Judah was on the cusp of their own captivity as exiles since they did not repent. Verse 19 gets my attention as we read of God’s desire to be called “Father” as he thought of his own as precious children. But the Lord could not overlook their sin.

I have been utilizing the NLT for my daily readings, as I think many of you know. There is a fresh sense to this translation for me and the flow of it does make the meaning clearer at times. In our reading from Acts, it seems important to realize that Jesus ascended 40 days after the resurrection, but Pentecost did not take place for another 10 days. Verse 14 takes on greater meaning because it tells us that the first followers of Christ “met together and were constantly united in prayer” until the promise of the Spirit arrived 10 days later. Prayer is central to God’s people throughout the Bible but takes on greater meaning as the church is launched. All believers are invited to approach God through prayer with access to his throne of grace. The emphasis and the inclusion of all for prayer make it the primary spiritual connection to God. One concern for these gathered believers was the significance of 12 apostles, not just 11. To me, 11 apostles would be totally acceptable. But these believers seem to have a glimpse of God’s desire to form a new people. Peter wrote about it in 1 Peter 2:9-10 (worth a look). Like Israel, the early church would be a reflection of God’s covenant people who would enjoy the promises of the new covenant. Filling the position that Judas held was more significant than we would perceive. How might you honor the importance of prayer and the call to unite with others in prayer?

DAY 4 – Jeremiah 4 & Acts 2:1-13

Sometimes, Jeremiah is called the “weeping” prophet. There are some specific verses in the book that actually say he was weeping. Verse 19 points in that direction as Jeremiah is in anguish, “my heart pounds within me! I cannot be still.” He knows disaster is coming, and it causes him deep grief. Jeremiah

told the people that terrible destruction was coming from the north. (V6) This refers to Babylon, who would wage war on Judah and Jerusalem from 606 to 586 BC when Jerusalem would eventually fall. You get a glimpse of Jeremiah's soft heart in verse 19, which is my focus today.

Pentecost is an exceptional event in the life of God's people. By the time we are finished reading chapter 2, 3000 people will come to faith and be baptized. It is easy to notice the primary message of verses 1 to 13: the Holy Spirit comes as a mighty wind, with flames of fire on each head, and miraculous languages as a sign to the devout Jews gathered that God was in this. "And we all hear these people speaking in our own languages about the wonderful things God has done!" (V11) The Festival of Pentecost came 50 days after Passover which is when Jesus was crucified. We learned yesterday of their united prayer and their desire to be together. So, on this day, they are together, and the Holy Spirit reveals himself to them and then to people visiting Jerusalem for the festival. The message of these verses elevates the role of the Holy Spirit, but it also reveals that the Good News is for all nations, as Pentecost was a pilgrimage festival. Three festivals a year would bring people from distant places to celebrate together – Passover, Pentecost, and Shelters. How do you respond to the coming of the Spirit? Luke recorded these words in Luke 24:49, "I am going to send you what my Father has promised, but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power on high." That verse from Jesus promised the arrival of the Spirit, and Pentecost is when he arrived. What does it mean to you that the same Spirit who filled the hearts of the apostles fills your heart as well?

DAY 5 – Jeremiah 5 & Acts 2:14-36

Congratulations on a unique week of reading both Old & New Testaments. I enjoyed the accomplishment of reading Jeremiah 1 through 5, which is more challenging, of course. And I never get tired of reading in Acts. Jer 5:3 gives such a clear message about why God is punishing his people. They "refuse to repent." God had disciplined them more than once, and "they paid no attention." Verse 19 also gives a clear message about why. "You rejected him (the Lord) and gave yourselves to foreign gods in your own land. Now you will serve foreigners in a land that is not your own." Verse 19 is my verse of contemplation from this chapter. It makes me realize that all the while God's people are drifting away, Yahweh still loves his own even though they have grieved his heart. "I have loved, my people, with an everlasting love." (Jeremiah 31:3)

What do you think about Peter's sermon? Our reading today in Acts is a sermon. Peter had denied the Lord (Luke 22:54-62) and could be filled with shame and deem himself useless. But here he is proclaiming the truth about Jesus and the resurrection so effectively that 3000 people respond in faith and will be baptized (but that is our first reading next week). Why was Peter's sermon so effective? Peter was an ordinary man, a fisherman. But he spoke boldly and with truth, tying Jesus' ministry and identity to the prophetic Word in Psalm 16, Psalm 110, and Joel 2. Also, Peter said something incredibly profound in verse 23, "But God knew what would happen, and his prearranged (foreknowledge) plan was carried out when..." All that Jesus went through was ordained by God: the betrayal, the lawless Gentiles (Roman authorities), the suffering and mockery, the nails, the cross... you name it, God knew it beforehand as was foretold in the Old Testament. Peter elevated Jesus and not himself. Peter pointed to God's plan and purpose and not his position or notoriety. It reminds me of Acts 4:13, "The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they

were ordinary men with no special training in the Scriptures. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus.” Isn’t that cool!? As Peter ends his sermon, he summarizes what he has been saying with “God made Jesus, whom you crucified, to be both Lord and Messiah!” Jesus said if I am lifted up, I will draw all men to myself. That is what Peter did, and people responded in faith. How does this sermon speak to you; how does it inspire you?

WEEK 2

Jeremiah continues his concern for the people of Judah as invasion is predicted and severe punishment is pronounced. We are called to pay attention to what grieves God's heart. Our God is still the same. He said clearly, "Have no other gods before Me." At the same time, we are reading the Book of Acts. Our readings this week are especially relevant to our daily Christian life in community with other believers. I am so glad we are making our way SLOWLY through this foundational book on the early church.

DAY 6 – Jeremiah 6 & Acts 2:37-41

Destruction is coming from the north which is clearly the Babylonian invaders (verses 22-26). The theme of chapter 5, verse 3 continues, "They are determined, with faces set like stone; they have refused to repent." Repentance would be their last possible chance to escape ruin. Jeremiah gives them a similar warning with instruction that points back to Moses and the early prophets, "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. But you said, 'We will not walk in it.'" (V16, is my verse of meditation) To me, it challenges me to live by the truth I have already been taught. If I could focus on what God has already shown me in His Word, I would surely walk in obedience. But the people of God ignore Jeremiah's warnings.

The paragraph in Acts summarizes the proper response to the Gospel that will save one's soul. I have found that there are five different responses to the Gospel: Unconcerned, Concerned; Conviction (V37), Repentance (turn to Christ); and Saving faith (baptism). Some people hear the message of Christ and remain disinterested; some listen and feel the need, but it doesn't go any farther than that; some are pierced to the heart and feel badly about their sins, and they either move forward toward Christ or not; finally, some say yes to Jesus and receive forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. It's all there in these five verses. There were more than 3000 people gathered on that day so the various responses to Peter's Gospel message are to be understood. But 3000 did believe and were baptized. Why do you think baptism was an important step in the process?

DAY 7 – Jeremiah 7 & Acts 2:42-47

You have to admit that chapter 7 has a final type ring to it. "The land will lie in complete destruction." (Last line of the chapter) The Lord's message has not changed over time, it is still the ancient path he wants for them: "Obey me, and I will be your God, and you will be my people. Do everything as I say, and all will be well!" (V23 is my verse for today) The temple is no longer a place of safety but of idols. The people thought that they could live recklessly outside the temple but run into the temple, and everything would be OK. But the temple was also desecrated by their sinful idolatry. What the people of God permitted in their land and near the temple was horrid to the Lord as the chapter closes.

Acts – As I have thought about the church and what it means to be a healthy church, I often focus on these verses that describe God's community then and now. What stands out to you in this paragraph? Verse 42 has a simplicity to it with a very relevant message. These four components of church life and discipleship have shaped my approach as a pastor. The shared meals actually had an evangelistic aspect to it. They generously distributed food and resources as people had need and what happened? People's

needs were met, and the church grew, “each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.” (V47) What if we could possess this kind of enthusiasm and generosity at New Harvest? It seems to me that God intended to duplicate this kind of ministry and spiritual fervor then and now. What strikes you about this paragraph that encourages you or convicts you?

DAY 8 – Jeremiah 8 & Acts 3:1-11

Jeremiah speaks forcefully about the destruction of Judah. Verse after verse, he speaks about their impending doom. But the other “so-called” prophets are giving assurance of peace (V11) which Jeremiah calls superficial and shameless. But I identify with Jeremiah when he says, “I hurt with the hurt of my people. I mourn and am overcome with grief.” (V21) There have been times when the Lord urged me to confront people in a sermon or a ministry meeting with a warning. But later, I would question myself and wonder if I had done the right thing. Jeremiah actually has a soft heart, even though his words are quite harsh. Nonetheless, his appeals and rebukes are futile. Obviously, the people don’t listen. Jeremiah was the best spokesman for God because he loved the people in spite of the heavy message he was called to share. Love is the prerequisite for rebuke or correction. Do you agree? Why or why not?

There is a principle governing this story in Acts 3. Most people have an earthly perspective, which means they think that their greatest need is “money.” (V3) In other words, their greatest need has to do with “things.” Most men and women getting released after incarceration want things. Money, shelter, or clothing... instead of realizing their greatest need is Jesus and a community of supportive brothers and sisters in Christ. I will often say, in so many words, “I don’t have any silver or gold, but what I do have is the hope of Jesus, forgiveness of sins, the gift of life that lasts forever, and a community of believers who want to help.” These gifts are not often deemed as valuable as “stuff,” but I know connection with Jesus and his people will make the biggest difference in a person’s life. Just ask the crippled beggar in this story. Amen! What is your takeaway from this reading?

DAY 9 – Jeremiah 9 & Acts 3:12-26

My verse of meditation highlights a principle that is also front and center in the New Testament. Verse 24 is about boasting in the Lord (1 COR 1:31; 2 COR 10:17). The previous verse says don’t boast about wisdom, or power, or riches... Boast in the Lord because of his unfailing love, his justice, and his righteousness. Truly, Jeremiah is the broken-hearted prophet. He has no choice but to identify the people’s sinfulness and warn them of destruction. He is tempted to run away and forget God’s call on his life (verses 1 & 2). Jeremiah’s purpose in life as a prophet is not pleasant at all. But he remains faithful.

Acts – This is the second sermon we have read from Peter. Obviously, the miracle of healing got the people’s attention. I like how the NLT translates verse 12, “Peter saw the opportunity and addressed the crowd...” This wording is added to the original Greek but really expresses the motivation of Peter. The Lord has got everyone’s attention, now let’s use this opportunity in the fullest way possible. So, what does he do? He shares the Gospel. What stands out to you from Peter’s message? I appreciate his boldness. This is a sign of the Holy Spirit’s presence. Tomorrow, we will read that Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit (4:8). In 2:4, Peter and the others were filled with the Holy Spirit in the Upper Room. In Acts 4:31, Peter and those with him were filled with the Holy Spirit and preached the word of God boldly.

The Holy Spirit was actively and repeatedly empowering Peter to be the Lord's witness. By the power of the Spirit, the Lord will enable us also to use every opportunity to share his love and message. This is actually the theme of the Book of Acts as we read in Acts 1:8. "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." How does Peter's example inspire you?

DAY 10 – Jeremiah 10 & Acts 4:1-12

This chapter in Jeremiah is definitely my favorite since chapter 1. It includes a message about God the Creator; it teaches the people about the emptiness of idols; it includes a prayer from Jeremiah at the close of this chapter. There is still a section that warns the people of what is coming, "Listen! Hear the terrifying roar of great armies as they roll down from the north." (V22) But Jeremiah is asking them to consider the difference between the living God and their attraction to idols. It even seems that they were making more idols as they anticipated the attack from the north. Even though verse 6 is short, I have made it my meditation. "Lord, there is no one like you! For you are great, and your name is full of power." I wonder if this chapter stirs your heart like mine. The world we live in has plenty of idols. These modern-day idols have the potential to pull us away from our allegiance and devotion to God. What might be some of those idols that tempt you? My reading in Jeremiah has surprised me. I find it quite intriguing and more relevant than I anticipated. I hope you are experiencing the same thing.

This chapter in Acts connects with the preaching of Peter and the healing of the crippled beggar. I remind you of the presence of the Spirit and the multiple times that the Scriptures say Peter and others were filled with the Spirit. It has always confused me that some teach about a one-time anointing of the Spirit, which is sometimes referred to as the "baptism of the Holy Spirit." In my class on the Holy Spirit I taught that the baptism of the Spirit is more often connected to the beginning of the Christian life as the Holy Spirit enters internally into the hearts of believers as they trust Christ for salvation. But you understand that there is more to living the Christian life than being saved. So, the Lord continues his work in us as we yield to the Spirit, and he fills us more and more. That is what I notice in Peter, and has been my personal experience. Peter emphasizes the resurrection and the identity of Christ as the Messiah with the Old Testament prediction of the Messiah being the cornerstone even though rejected by his own people. Verse 12 says it powerfully, with Jesus being the only way to salvation. We live in a world that promotes many legitimate ways to go to heaven. But Peter says it boldly: Jesus is the only way! Let me encourage you to ask God to fill you with His Spirit, knowing that, as a believer, you need more of Him.

WEEK 3

Jeremiah and Acts are an interesting combination for us but I am really challenged and blessed by these readings. I am reading an Old Testament book that I haven't read all the way through for some time and back to the amazing story of the early church. These are meaningful days in God's Word for me and I hope you are feeling the same.

DAY 11 – Jeremiah 11 & Acts 4:13-22

It is not surprising that Jeremiah faces opposition as he speaks a prophetic word boldly. But Jeremiah continues to trust God and speak out. Verse 20 gets my attention because it corresponds to the New Testament. "But you, Lord Almighty, who judge righteously and test the heart and mind, let me see your vengeance on them (those who have threatened him), for to you I have committed my cause." The Lord knows the deepest thoughts and intentions of our hearts. He always judges rightly. In a way, Jeremiah represents the journey of Christ on earth as our suffering Messiah, "like a gentle lamb led to slaughter." (V19) In Romans 12:17-19, we are admonished to let the Lord judge and avenge injustice. This truly is a timeless principle, and Jesus modeled it for us very well. Plus, as a genuine believer who courageously shares the truth of God's Word, we know that at times we will experience opposition like Jeremiah.

Acts – Our reading in Acts overlaps with the topic of Jeremiah and persecution. Peter and John had been in jail overnight without cause. The members of the council wanted to silence them from speaking about Jesus and his resurrection. But their response was bold, "Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him?" (V19) This is just the beginning of persecution and opposition in the Book of Acts. I might suggest that persecution is more prevalent than the successes in Acts. But this did not detour the apostles or the early church. We know that the church was born by the blood of Christ and the blood of many followers. We will one day honor the martyrs who stood strong like Peter and John. May this be said of us, "The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men with no special training in the Scriptures. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus." (V13) How does that statement impact you? Why?

DAY 12 – Jeremiah 12 & Acts 4:23-31

The words of verse 3 get my attention, "But as for me, Lord, you know my heart. You see me and test my thoughts." This sounds so much like David's words in Psalm 139:23, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts." Jeremiah knows that God knows everything. He cannot hide any deceptive way in his heart. Jeremiah has confidence in his love for God and God's awareness of him even to the depths of his heart. Plus, this chapter actually mentioned some future deliverance for the people of God in verses 15 to 17.

Acts – This is definitely an event in the Book of Acts that truly inspires me. They prayed, and the place shook. I also love the prayer that this community of believers shared. I love that they did it together, which is an especially effective way to pray, as united prayer moves the Kingdom of God forward, just like it did here. They honor God with their prayer; they include Scripture in their prayer from Psalm 2; they let their need be known to God; they ask God to go before them, and they yield their lives to the Lord in

prayer. I pray P.R.A.Y. almost every day. Pause, rejoice, ask, & yield, which means surrender to his purposes in my life. I see each one of these aspects of prayer in their prayer. How might you participate in community prayer? I notice that very few believers pray with others consistently. Obviously, there is a private side to prayer with God. Jesus encouraged private prayer in the Sermon on the Mount (MT 6). But I have experienced the power of community prayer. I hope you will seek out a place of prayer with others. How does this paragraph from the Early Church stir your heart?

DAY 13 – Jeremiah 13 & Acts 4:32-37

Each chapter in Jeremiah continues with judgment. The future is bleak, to say the least. The symbol of the loincloth is one of many times that Jeremiah will illustrate a spiritual lesson of judgment. But verse 18 is my verse of contemplation because even though the impending doom is predicted, still there remains an opportunity to make things right with God. “Give glory to God before it is too late.” (It actually seems too late already but there is a crack in the door.) Acknowledge him before he brings darkness upon you, causing you to stumble and fall on the darkening mountains. For then, when you look for the light, you will find terrible darkness and gloom.” What comes to mind is that whether the punishment is certain or not, it is still best to repent and make things right with God. A few times in my life, I have been with people who are on their deathbeds and have lived far from God. I speak to them about the love of God, and I encourage them to repent even though they are dying with little hope in this life. Making things right with God is always the best decision. How does that idea resonate with you?

This is another paragraph in the Book of Acts that summarizes the nature of the Early Church. Obviously, generosity is the predominant theme, but I see the message of the resurrection taking first place, which inspired them to be generous. I bet you might have missed the fact that Barnabas’ real name was Joseph. The character of Barnabas will surface again in a few chapters as he will play an important role in the launch of missionary zeal for the Gospel. His choices will inspire many for years to come (Acts 11 & 13). The virtue of generosity was quite remarkable and also helped many believers in need. The Holy Spirit stirred this young church to give freely. The giving was voluntary and prompted by Christian love and concern for one another. Why is generosity so important? What if people called you the “Son of Encouragement?” Why might they do that?

DAY 14 – Jeremiah 14 & Acts 5:1-11

As this chapter ends, Jeremiah prays. It seems like God has already told him that his prayers don’t matter. They will not help. But Jeremiah keeps praying. I am actually drawn to that. I believe his prayer was stored in heaven, nonetheless. “For the sake of your reputation, Lord, do not abandon us.” (V21) Jeremiah’s prayer begins in verse 19. What aspect of his prayer are you drawn to? I am sure that reading Jeremiah is challenging but the gift of Jeremiah is his humility and his honesty. He is a man who weeps for others and yet a man who says it like it is. The last line of this chapter fits many of our own circumstances, “We will wait for you to help us.”

This story in Acts 5 tends to be one of the more upsetting stories in the New Testament. Ananias and Sapphira drop dead. Their sin, lying? I bet you get my point. Who hasn’t lied at some point, even as a Christian? We might not understand the gravity of God’s discipline in this case but I assure you, lots was

at stake. This is the beginning of the church. Deception could easily undo it. When people prayed that God would protect his church, their prayer was answered in this story. The Lord was protecting his young church. Some people wonder whether Ananias and Sapphira went to heaven. I don't wonder about it. They were in the community faith and yet they were immature and tried to look impressive in front of the others. You don't have to agree with me; it's okay. But I am quite sure that God takes people when their purpose on earth has been accomplished or when their lives discredited their testimony, and God brought them home. Only God knows why and when someone's time on earth is up. How does this story affect you? How strong is your integrity? Be warned, the devil wants to deceive us like he did Ananias and Sapphira.

DAY 15 – Jeremiah 15 & Acts 5:12-25

Something jumps off the page for me in this chapter. The wickedness of the people is related to King Manasseh's reign. He was king for 55 years, even before Jeremiah became a prophet. Manasseh is thought of as the most wicked king in Judah's history. In 2 Kings 21, he is compared to King Ahab of the Northern Kingdom, who was as wicked as they come. If you choose to read 2 Kings 21:1-18, be ready to be appalled. Verse 4 of our reading tells us about the ongoing influence of the devilish character of Manasseh. If the people learned from him and practiced what he taught, there is no wonder they were wretched. There's an interesting dynamic in the story. Hezekiah, a righteous king, is very sick in 2 Kings 20. He asks God to heal him, and the Lord gives him 15 more years. Guess who is born to Hezekiah during that time? You're right, Manasseh. Oh, that Hezekiah would have died and saved the people of Judah from the terrible influence of Manasseh. In the record of kings, it attributes Isaiah's death to Manasseh. As you are feeling sorry for the people of Judah, you must realize that their sin of idolatry and immortality was so dark and inhumane that destruction became the only solution.

In Acts we read a combination of inspiring miracles and unjust imprisonment. Luke will often pair up something marvelous with something difficult. Life is like that, right?! But I especially like the assurance of God's plan being accomplished as the Lord rescues them and directs them to speak boldly the "message of life." (V20) They might have been tempted to feel discouraged as they were thrown in jail. Just days before this, God is doing marvelous miracles through them. But God is always up to something. The surprise to the Temple guards and the religious leaders would have been a high point for the disciples. There is an irony in the story as well. The Sadducees are the ones who placed the apostles in jail; they didn't even believe in angels. But an angel was used by God to rescue the apostles. Our story in life will have its ups and downs, but we know God is in charge. How does that truth sustain you?

WEEK 4

Jeremiah is forbidden to marry; he utilizes the potter and the clay; he shatters the exquisite vase; all this leads Pashhur to throw him in prison, one of the chief officers in the Temple. This matches the Apostles being flogged in the Book of Acts, chapter 5, which moves us to shared leadership and the stoning of Stephen. These are intense readings, but they also demonstrate amazing courage in both books. Could it be that the world is intensifying for believers? God's Word tells us it is sure to come.

DAY 16 – Jeremiah 16 & Acts 5:26-42

Even though the warnings from Jeremiah are as intense as ever, verses 14 & 15 prophesy that the Lord will never give up on his people and promise them restoration on par with the exodus from Egypt. But verse 19 is my focus as we read Jeremiah's prayer, "Lord, you are my strength and fortress, my refuge in the day of trouble." God told him to not marry because he would only birth children into destruction. This prayer for God's help and strength would be repeated by Jeremiah many times as he would face many troubles.

In Acts 5 I can't help but notice the response of the Apostles; it is especially inspiring to me. Verse 41 tells us that the Apostles were honored to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus. Before being flogged, it seemed like the religious leaders were going to kill the Apostles ("When they heard this, the high council was furious and decided to kill them." V33). But God moved a man named Gamaliel, a famous teacher of the law, to speak with a level head and confront them about the futility of opposing God. It was a crucial moment in the life of the Early Church, and God's Spirit was active, making sure the Kingdom would advance in spite of opposition and threats. There is another phrase that gets my attention and has shaped my thinking on the ministry of the church. The idea emphasizes large and small. "And every day, in the Temple and from house to house, they continued to teach and preach this message, 'Jesus is the Messiah.'" I have thought that the ministry of the church should be large and small as well. We gather in a bigger setting for teaching and worship. Plus, we meet in smaller settings (homes or classrooms) for discipleship and relational connection to one another. And doesn't this mention the most significant reality for our faith? Jesus is truly the Messiah, the Christ, the One Predicted, the hinge of history, right?! (V42) How do these events speak to you? How might you respond with a similar strength and optimism as the Apostles?

DAY 17 – Jeremiah 17 & Acts 6:1-7

I could identify with several statements of instruction in this chapter. I am definitely drawn to verses 7 & 8. It seems like Jeremiah is quoting Psalm 1, don't you think? "But blessed are those who trust in the Lord..." It promises spiritual prosperity for those who trust in the Lord as they put their confidence in the Lord alone. It also reminds me of Matthew 7:24-27 which tells us that the one who builds his house on the rock of God will not be shaken when the difficulties of life happen. Jeremiah's emphasis on the Sabbath (Verses 19-27) is very much connected to the devotion of the people, and their top priority should be the Lord, but they have allowed idols and evil practices to consume them. Setting aside the Sabbath seems to be a forgotten practice that would lessen their worship and pursuit of the Lord. It is

still true today that believers who neglect worship and focus on the teaching of God's Word will drift. Is there any chance that you might be drifting in your devotion and allegiance to God?

Acts 6 begins with the challenge of the Early Church growing faster than the leadership could respond to the needs. This need for more capable leaders in the church has been my life for the 40 years I have been a pastor. It has often been a struggle for me to stay focused as this Scripture presents: the spiritual leaders (pastors & teachers) must give themselves first and foremost to prayer and the Word. This is essential for the health and vitality of the church. Pastors/Teachers (Ephesians 4:12) are called to equip the body so that they grow and are ready to use their gifts for the glory of God. The strongest churches are ones that have shared leadership and much participation from the Body. Every time I had the privilege of encouraging and training pastors in Chile, Kenya, and the Dominican Republic, the same issue surfaced in each situation. The pastor was trying to do it all. Delegation was a foreign subject. So, I would teach this passage and Exodus 18 when Moses was trying to do it all. There were reasons why these third-world pastors struggled to delegate but it still was absolutely necessary. The Early Church was learning about the importance of the Body of Christ. What part of you playing? Are you willing to serve alongside the leaders of the church? And if you are a leader, remember how important it is to delegate and ask for help.

DAY 18 – Jeremiah 18 & Acts 6:8-15

The potter and the clay are a familiar object lesson for us. In this case, the lesson is that the potter has chosen to crush the pot that he made with punishment being the result. Again, the Lord is promising a path of escape by rejecting evil and doing what is right. The response of the people doesn't change as they remain stubborn. As Jeremiah continues with his prophetic warnings, the people plot to stop him, so they "spread rumors about him and ignore what he says." (V18) The reason that they hated Jeremiah is that he shared truthful messages that challenged the other voices who were promising peace and prosperity. Jeremiah did not let the peer pressure force him to say positive things when the Lord was grieved at the idolatry of his people. What does it mean that the Lord is the potter and we are the clay? Verse 6 is my verse of reflection: "O Israel, can I not do to you as this potter has done to his clay? As the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand." This illustration has the potential to remind us who is in charge and why we must submit to him. Amen!

Acts – we meet Stephen for the first time. The way the Bible describes him is very positive: "full of faith and the Holy Spirit." (6:5) Verse 8 is very similar, and he is also performing amazing miracles through God's grace and power. What do we know about Stephen? He is known as the first Christian martyr. He was also one of the seven men who were chosen to help administer the distribution of food to those in need. In this we can know that Stephen has a servant's heart with the ability to lead. We will read tomorrow about his boldness and ability to teach the Word of God. Before we really get to know him, the authorities arrest him, and he is interrogated by the high council. Like Jesus, he was accused of crimes he did not do and will end up being executed by the angry people who stone him. After Stephen's death, persecution will cause the believers to scatter in the surrounding regions of Judea and Samaria. Stephen's life reminds us of the determined opposition that a faithful Christian witness is sure to stir up throughout the world. But we will notice that it is also the sovereign method of God to spread the Good News to "then ends of the earth."

DAY 19 – Jeremiah 19 & Acts 7:1-45

Jeremiah's message seems closely related to what he shared in chapter 18 with the clay jar (an exquisite vase, actually). In verse 10, he will smash the vase just like the potter did with his clay in the last chapter. Why is God disappointed and grieved by the people? In verses 4 & 5, we read the words "the blood of innocent children." It is hard to imagine God's people sacrificing their children to Baal. King Ahab of Israel and King Manasseh of Judah were known as kings who promoted such detestable things that they became the most wicked kings in Israel's history. The reality of Jeremiah's day is hard to believe. The dark and devilish nature of their lives, especially worshipping idols, is the most grievous behavior to God that anyone could practice associated with his first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me." (Exodus 20:3) Also showing a stubborn response is showing pride as someone turns their back on God, "stubbornly refused to listen to me." (V15)

Acts – What do you think of Stephen's reply to his accusers? To me, this is like having two Old Testament readings today, as Stephen gives us a history lesson from Old Testament times, right? In some ways, we should probably read the whole chapter to get the full impact, but I want us to think about this without the punch line in verse 51. Abraham and Moses are front and center. This is not surprising because these two men are the most "decorated" leaders in Israel's history. David will be brought into the mix tomorrow in verse 46. It isn't until verse 37 that we get to the crux of the salvation message with the promise of a "Prophet like me." "God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among your own people." The rejection of Moses' leadership and his message reminds them of their own rejection of God's leaders that Stephen is addressing. Why are Abraham and Moses so important to God's plan and people? Are there things that Stephen proclaims that stand out to you? Verse 37 stood out to me.

DAY 20 – Jeremiah 20 & Acts 7:46-60

This is quite a chapter as Jeremiah is imprisoned and then he speaks so honestly about himself and the difficulty of his life. So, the priest, who was second in authority to the High Priest, thought Jeremiah should be punished for prophesying the destruction of the Temple. Imprisonment in those days was a terrible fate. "Stocks" (V2) consisted of a wooden frame in which feet, neck, and hands were fastened so as to hold the body in a distorted and painful position. Jeremiah is an increasingly amazing guy to me. He is straight with God and yet cannot keep the Lord's message from bursting forth from his mouth. "O Lord, you misled me" (V7) shows his honesty with God. But my verse for today is 9, "his word burns in my heart like a fire." Jeremiah found it impossible not to speak the words of God and his intense warnings since they would not repent. I want to have that kind of spiritual fervor for God's Word. Also, everyone would probably like to speak about the future being positive, as Pashhur, the priest, did even though it was a lie. "There (in Babylon) you will die and be buried, you and all your friends to whom you prophesied that everything would be all right." Who wouldn't rather predict victory and prosperity? But Jeremiah was a man of integrity and courage as well as honesty and prayerfulness. I thought this chapter even revealed more about Jeremiah as his life becomes our example. What did you learn?

Acts – There's no question that the stoning of Stephen is meant to stir up courage in our lives. He was courageous like Jeremiah and spoke judgment because of their hard hearts and their resistance to the

Holy Spirit (V51). I might have advised Stephen to lessen the harsh words because his life was in the balance. But that's why Stephen is in the Bible, and even if I lived then, I wouldn't make the grade. It was God's plan to bring Stephen home to heaven. His sacrifice would challenge many believers to lay their lives down. There is a fascinating statement in these verses: "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man (Jesus) standing in the place of honor at God's right hand." (V56) Do you get the significance of that statement? Not only does Stephen get a vision of heaven as he is about to die, but he sees Jesus standing. The Bible teaches that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God, right?! Well, Stephen, as the first martyr, causes Jesus to stand upon Stephen's arrival in heaven. The Lord our Savior was expressing honor to Stephen as he stood. Don't you love that?! Then, to top it off, Stephen asks the Lord to forgive his executioners just like Jesus. This is a marvelous way to wrap up this week in our readings from Jeremiah and Acts. How does Stephen impress you? How has God touched your heart today and through this week from His Word? Might God's Word burn in our hearts!

WEEK 5

Jeremiah is the prophet who has the calling from God to warn people and announce punishment because of their idolatry and wickedness. However, right in the middle of our readings this week, we read of the righteous branch, the Lord our Righteous Savior. But the warnings will far outnumber the words of promise. The Book of Acts takes off with the spread of the Gospel and the conversion of Saul, who we know as Paul. There is a meaningful week ahead in God's Word.

DAY 21 – Jeremiah 21 & Acts 8:1-8

This chapter belongs to the last days of Jeremiah's life. King Zedekiah, frightened at the approach of the Babylonian army, appeals to Jeremiah to intercede with God. Jeremiah advises Zedekiah to yield the city to the Babylonians in order to save the people from death. The crux of this chapter is to accept defeat and surrender, which the prophet tells them will lead to life. But if they assume that God will help them now even though they have been hard-hearted toward God, be assured this will not end well. "Take your choice of life or death!" (V8) The interesting thing is life is found in surrender and death will result in assuming things will go just fine. Surrender is a pathway to life because that is releasing your life and future to God. How do you understand surrender and faith?

Acts 8 begins with the scattered church, which is right in step with God's plan for the Early Church. The Lord has always been about spreading his blessing and hope of salvation to all the nations. This is the beginning of that mission. We are introduced to Saul and his determination to bring the people of the Way down. His intensity will make sense by the end of the week, as God has exceptional plans for him. His zeal will be converted for the cause of Christ. The rest of the chapter will tell us about the marvelous ministry and gifting of Philip. God shines through him as he is empowered to do miracles like the Apostles. These miracles served as a sign confirming the truth of the message of Christ. This is still true as people will observe our actions and sincerity as we reveal the Lord through our deeds so that we may have the opportunity to impact their lives. Philip is an example of this and made a huge impact in Samaria. Persecution, Saul, Philip, and miracles fill these eight verses. How do you respond to these topics?

DAY 22 – Jeremiah 22 & Acts 8:8-25

The Lord was very disappointed in the Kings of Judah. They did not follow the ways of Josiah, and because of it, this would be the last earthly kings to sit on David's throne. The theme that I noticed at least twice would be the neglect of the king to meet the needs of the people, like verses 3 & 17. "Help those who have been robbed; rescue them from their oppressors." "Do not mistreat foreigners, orphans, and widows." Plus, "You murder the innocent, oppress the poor, and reign ruthlessly." Verse 3 reminds me to "Be fair-minded and just. Do what is right!" These verses may seem so obvious to you and me. But the arrogance of Judah's kings had reached a devilish level of pride and ungodliness. The punishment would be severe, resulting in the end of the temporal kingdom of Judah. Jeremiah's calling as a prophet was never popular but he persevered, nonetheless.

Acts – Do you think Simon came to genuine faith? Some might think that his pursuit of power was so selfish that his baptism was only a show. But I actually think Simon believed in Jesus and was a follower but he had lived many years apart from Christ and had previously been elevated by the people. These human accolades can get planted deep in one's soul, as I believe they were in Simon. Peter rebuked him for his selfish motivation. But don't get too judgmental because our souls can also be gripped by the things of this world and give into the temptations of the devil. Simon listens to Peter's word to him and asks for prayer. The message that I am receiving from this story is the strong possibility that I might have blind-spots in my spiritual life also. Simon was ignorant of his sinful pursuit of power and needed to be corrected. I don't think that Simon went away and no longer followed Christ, but he definitely needed a heart change. How might you need a heart change?

DAY 23 – Jeremiah 23 & Acts 8:26-40

This has to be Jeremiah's strongest prophecy so far about the Davidic Messiah in verses 5 to 8. Plus, they are my focus as I reread the message shared and the truth of one who will be called, "The Lord is Our Righteousness." (V6) What the Messiah will bring as a new king will be far different from the kings mentioned in the last chapter and the first four verses of this chapter. Literally, he is called a righteous Branch, similar to what Isaiah says in chapter 11. According to Romans 10:4, Jesus will be our righteousness. The fact that the Lord is my righteousness is my focus for today from Jeremiah. Meanwhile, the false prophets speak against Jeremiah with a summarized message of, "Jeremiah is lying. We are prophets of God, and God has told us Jerusalem is safe." But Jeremiah doesn't back off, out of love for God and the people, even if it means tough love. How might God be asking you to exhibit tough love for someone close to you?

Acts gives us the clearest description of Philip, as seen in our reading today. We actually meet Philip in Acts 6 as he is appointed to be one of the leaders to oversee the food-distribution program. When Christians were forced to flee Jerusalem, as chapter 8 begins, Philip carried the Good News north to the ethnically mixed city of Samaria. After ministering with great success there, an angel of the Lord directed him south on the desert road, where he ran into an Ethiopian leader who was reading from the scroll of Isaiah 53. The Holy Spirit told Philip, "Go over and walk along beside the carriage." (V29) This is none other than a divine appointment! It is an exciting story of how God directs our steps so that we might represent him. Philip was obedient and brave as he ministered to this foreigner. Don't you just love this story?! The activity of the Holy Spirit in Philip's life is stirring to me because it is an example of how the Spirit can still help us and work through us. Amen! Philip will surface again in the Book of Acts (21:8-9). How do you respond to this story? How might you be more sensitive to the Spirit's guidance?

DAY 24 – Jeremiah 24 & Acts 9:1-9

This is quite a picture for us with good figs and bad figs. The exiled people are better off since they seem to understand how much they need the Lord. The Lord would do marvelous work in the hearts of the exiles. Those with King Zedekiah would come to ruin just as Jeremiah predicted. Verse 7 is a promise that I want for myself and for our church: "I will give them hearts that recognize me as the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me wholeheartedly." Israel's history is replete with cycles of courage and success followed by disaster. Men of God led Israel into periods of prosperity,

but the nation repeatedly fell into worshipping many deities instead of the one true God. Repeatedly, God's people fell under judgment as their culture disintegrated and their political independence was replaced with servitude and oppression. Tomorrow, Jeremiah will predict 70 years of captivity.

Acts – the conversion of Saul is such a significant event because he would influence the church as much as any other human being besides Jesus. Acts 9 tells us that Saul (who we call Paul) was headed to Damascus to arrest and even kill the Lord's followers. What an unexpected set of events for the man breathing out vengeance who is ready to sever the launch of the church for good; he is God's chosen instrument for reaching the world with the Good News of Jesus. Shocking! If this doesn't show us how God can use anyone, I am not sure what will. No one is beyond the power of God to reach, redeem, and use them for his purposes—nothing is impossible with God. I appreciate the strong connection Jesus offers as he asks Saul, "Why are you persecuting ME?" But actually, Paul was persecuting believers, yet Jesus identifies so strongly with his followers that he says Paul is persecuting him. Saul's encounter with Jesus is especially personal and would inspire Paul throughout his life. But this event was not his imagination because the people with him saw the light and the sound associated with this miracle. But it was still especially meant for Paul, and he would never stop talking about it. In the Book of Acts alone, he testifies to this special visitation from Jesus three different times. What catches your eye this time about Saul's conversion?

DAY 25 – Jeremiah 25 & Acts 9:10-19

Of course, the amazing thing about this chapter is that it gives us an exact time frame for Judah's exile and captivity. For 70 years, you will serve the king of Babylon. (V11) The specifics are surprising, but the exact duration is spot on. I am inclined to connect the 70 years to the destruction of the Temple in 586 BC and the dedication of the Second Temple in 515 BC. God's judgment on Jerusalem would last a lifetime. There's no possible way for Jeremiah to know that except by direct revelation from God. But that is not the end of Jeremiah's prophecy in this chapter. He proclaims that God will eventually punish those who treat God's people with such oppression. Verse 14 tells us, "Many nations and great kings will enslave the Babylonians, just as they enslaved my people. I will punish them in proportion to the suffering they have caused my people." Our God is a God of justice. Many times in the Bible, the Lord tells us to be assured of God's justice and not retaliate. "It is mine to avenge, I will repay," says the Lord. (Rm 12:19) What does God's assurance of justice mean to you?

Acts 9 continues with Saul's conversion and the ministry of Ananias. Ananias has reason to be nervous about God's instruction to help Saul. The word was out that Saul came with authority to arrest believers in Damascus. (VV13-14) The words from the Lord to Ananias give us insight into the life of Saul, who will become Paul. The message in verses 15 & 16 obviously comes true, as we will read throughout the Book of Acts. Isn't it interesting that the first thing Saul wants is to be baptized?! So, Saul is healed, filled with the Spirit, and baptized before anything else happens. It does not say that Saul believed, but everything that is written tells us he did believe. He would waste no time in speaking out about Jesus, as we will read tomorrow. The about-face of Saul is so dramatic and gives us clear evidence that his heart had been converted and changed through the life-giving power of Jesus and the work of the Spirit in his soul. How does this reading stir your emotions? What phrase or sentence gets your attention? Why?

WEEK 6

This week will seem similar to previous weeks except for the last reading, which begins with a section on “future hope.” Jeremiah has been courageously sharing the word of the Lord by warning the people to repent before disaster happens. The religious leaders have had enough and threaten to kill Jeremiah. In fact, they do end up killing another prophet who shares a similar message. His name was Uriah. Most of this week in Acts will be the monumental encounter with Cornelius, a Gentile. Peter will be given a divine vision and Spirit-led direction which will lead to the launch of the Gentile church north and east of Jerusalem. It is actually very thrilling since all of us are Gentiles and appreciate the open invitation to receive salvation through Jesus. I, for one, am looking forward to this week of readings.

DAY 26 – Jeremiah 26 & Acts 9:20-30

Often as I am reading about Jeremiah, I make a connection to Jesus. Jeremiah and Jesus said the Temple would be destroyed, and the religious leaders wanted to kill both of them. Jeremiah stood up for what he said as words given to him by God. He was looking at death in the eye and yet remained brave and resolute. It took a friend named Ahikam to rescue him (V24). The Temple seemed to be a trigger for the leaders, which I think was also true for Jesus. I do think Jeremiah is a foreshadowing of the heartbeat of Jesus to do the will of the Father, knowing it would eventually take his life. Jeremiah reminds them that genuine repentance would result in God’s mercy, but they are so sure of themselves that no one listens to God’s man, both in this Book and with Jesus. Why do you think the Jews rejected God’s prophets and God’s Son?

Acts – the theme of these verses is clearly the launch of Saul/Paul’s ministry as he preaches with boldness. Along with his Gospel ministry, there are Jews who want to take his life. The Apostle Paul will face death time and again in Acts. God has plans for him, as Ananias learned in 9:15-16: “Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name’s sake.” And we know that those verses will come true as Saul will be known as Paul who is the greatest missionary in history. But his suffering will be immense at the same time. The escape to Tarsus, Saul’s hometown, was God-ordained as well. Saul needed time to hear from God and prepare for a lifelong mission of success and hardship like no one had ever experienced up to this point. We won’t hear about Saul for the rest of this week’s readings, but you know he will surface again as a dynamic partnership is developed between himself and Barnabas (11:25). Preaching is the main verb associated with Saul in this reading. His message, “Jesus is indeed the Son of God!” Isn’t that the main message?! Why is Christ’s identity as the Son of God so important?

DAY 27 – Jeremiah 27 & Acts 9:31-43

Jeremiah is a very creative prophet, and this chapter highlights one of his methods of sharing his warnings; he becomes an illustration of captivity by placing a yoke of bondage on his own body. He then tells the people of the city that Babylon will put a yoke on the necks of these people. He doesn’t limit it to Judah but also includes Edom, Moab, and more. Jeremiah assures the people this will happen and that they should submit to Nebuchadnezzar. It is ten years after Jehoiakim and other leaders, along with talented young men like Daniel, are taken captive in Babylon. It will be another ten years before the fall

of Jerusalem and the Temple when Nebuchadnezzar will carry away the treasured furnishings to a foreign land. The prophets of Judah are saying that this will not happen and Jeremiah is calling them liars. These so-called prophets were more like fortune-tellers claiming to have special abilities to predict future events by reading stars, staring into crystal balls, analyzing people's dreams, and explaining what will happen. Jeremiah really did have to stand alone. God's people had become idol worshipers.

Acts – Peter reenters the scene with boldness and confidence that God would move in miraculous ways just as he had done through his Son, Jesus. Peter not only displays the power of Jesus, but he reminds me of Elisha, who raised a boy to life. Resurrection is the hope for every believer, and Peter reminds us that the Lord has power over death. I have always appreciated Peter and his energy and confidence, but this reading reveals a deeper, more anchored Peter, in my opinion. He doesn't have to leave this town so that he can make a name for himself in other towns but rather stays in Joppa to bless the new believers. Also, Dorcas is mentioned only once in the Bible, and yet she will easily be famous in heaven as someone who was raised from the dead. She did nothing to deserve such a miracle, but the story tells us she was especially generous and compassionate. These qualities are affirmed by God. The Early Church took root in the 1st century. The power of God is evident around every corner. The foundation for a vibrant church that will multiply again and again has been established. I am so grateful for the courage and boldness of the men and women whom God used to plant his church, and she is still on the move. Why is the church so precious to Jesus? How do these stories stir your heart?

DAY 28 – Jeremiah 28 & Acts 10:1-33

Soon after the events of the last chapter, a false prophet named Hananiah publicly confronts Jeremiah in the Temple courtyard. Just like the other prophets, Hananiah gave what he claimed was a message from the Lord, but only Jeremiah's predictions came true. Not only was Hananiah's prediction a lie, but he said that within two years the Temple treasures would be returned. Babylon was a long way away. He wants the approval of the crowd instead of obeying the Lord. He broke the yoke that Jeremiah had used to illustrate the bondage that would soon sweep over all of Judah. It is interesting to me that Jeremiah did not react to Hananiah's harsh treatment. But rather sought the Lord for a word to give to Hananiah (Verses 12-14). The death of Hananiah may seem a bit harsh, but a lying prophet is subjected to punishment, as we read in Deuteronomy 13:1- 5.

Acts – this is one of our longest readings in the Book of Acts so far. As I read this section, I couldn't put it down, so I think reading all 33 verses in one setting will work for you as well. What impresses you about these events? God is at work in Caesarea and Joppa at the same time. Isn't that always true of our God?! The meeting of these two men was crucial to God's plan for the Gentiles. The significance of this encounter cannot be overemphasized. God chose Cornelius for many reasons, but the greatest to me is his openness and teachable heart. He was a man who God knew would follow through. Cornelius is the focus for me because he teaches me something about the kind of person God can use. We already know Peter. Even though Peter may be the most important character in this story, Cornelius is just as essential. Cornelius had the respect of many in his town, and Peter was the apostle who was especially close to Jesus. It is a perfect union as God sets the course for the Good News for ALL the world. How do you personally respond to what takes place in our reading for today?

DAY 29 – Jeremiah 29 & Acts 10:34-48

We are noticing how significant prophets are to the people because that is how God spoke to them about current affairs and the importance of living in obedience to God. A lying prophet can confuse the people and misrepresent the Lord. This is no small matter, as you can tell. At the same time, these are some of our favorite promises and instructions from the Lord through Jeremiah. After Jeremiah predicts the 70 years of captivity, he gives us one of our favorite promises in the whole Book from verses 11-14. “I promise you a future and a hope, not continuous disaster and captivity.” People today still put these verses on their mirrors and underline them in their Bibles. They are exceptional and reveal the heart of God. If your life is especially difficult, I am sure these words come alive for you because they are so marvelous. But don’t forget the condition: “When you seek me with all your heart, you will find me.” (V13). Another relevant message that Jeremiah gives to the exiled people is to “invest where you are planted.” (Those are my words for verses 5 & 6.) Jeremiah urges the exiled people to plan to stay and work for the welfare of those cities and citizens where they live. Make a home there, right?! Recently, I have noticed that people are leaving their place of residency (like Oregon) and moving to other states for their preferences. But couldn’t a plan be to stay for the peace and prosperity where you are planted (live)? I think these words suggest that kind of challenge. Verses 4 to 14 are often thought of as some of the most encouraging and applicable words for us today in the Book of Jeremiah. Why so? How do you respond to Jeremiah's words?

The reading in Acts expresses the Good News to Gentiles. These verses are especially inspiring, don’t you think?! Peter includes the miracle of the Gospel emphasizing “peace with God,” “raised him to life on the third day,” “sins forgiven through his name,” and everyone should know about this Jesus who “is the one appointed by God.” And we, too, are called to witness to the world until everyone has had a chance to hear about who Jesus is and what he has done. Peter’s presentation of the Gospel is powerful and he shares it in an understandable way. How does this help you to be bold and also know what to emphasize? The sign of the Holy Spirit confirming their genuine response to Jesus is also a great part of the story. When I said yes to Jesus, something changed in me; even though it wasn’t as dramatic as this story, it was still so real. The Gospel, when received, changes us from the inside out. Let these verses stir up your testimony and witness to those who need Christ. Amen!

DAY 30 – Jeremiah 30 & Acts 11:1-18

As much as this is hopeful, it is also hard because the people are suffering as he shares this word of hope and deliverance. A sentence that got my attention is verse 11, “I will discipline you, but with justice; I cannot let you go unpunished.” Then he repeats this sentence in verses 14 & 15, “I have had to punish you because your sins are many and your guilt is great.” God’s justice demanded that they be punished. So, too, with you and me without Jesus. Jesus had not arrived as Messiah, Savior, and Deliverer yet. But you know Jesus did take on the cup of God’s wrath and bear our punishment. Otherwise, God would need to punish us like he did in Jeremiah’s day. Our Lord loves us enough to discipline us for our good. But he does not hold our sins against us, because of Jesus. Our next reading in Jeremiah includes the high point of the Book, in my opinion, with the New Covenant. It tells us what Jesus would provide through his sacrificial death. These words in chapter 30 are a foreshadowing of what Jeremiah is leading to in chapter 31. Did you notice that the Lord directed him to write down these words in verse 2? I think

that is very interesting because how could he remember everything he told the people of Judah? He couldn't, so God had him write these warnings and promises down for us. The justice of God is revealed in this chapter with the promise that the evil empire of Babylon will not go unpunished.

As much as we are excited about Peter's message of Good News to the Gentiles of Cornelius' household, this took some explaining, which is the theme of today's reading in Acts. It might seem repetitive from yesterday's reading, but the testimony of Peter highlights the miraculous nature of how God saved a household of Gentile God-fearers. As I have already mentioned, this is a monumental moment in the history of the church and the inclusion of Gentiles, who by definition include anyone who is not a Jew. What a fantastic point in history! Let's review: Peter had eaten with Gentiles because God had made it clear that he should. Peter recognized the activity of the Holy Spirit coming upon the Gentiles so that they should be accepted and blessed just like Jewish believers were blessed by God. Peter was submitting to God's will in admitting Gentiles into the church. The leaders accepted Peter's story and praised God for this new revelation of how God meant for the Gospel to be for everyone. Don't you appreciate that, you Gentile 😊?!

WEEK 7

For most of this week, we will read about the promises of God to his people after a time of exile. But some of these promises extend past deliverance from Babylon and still speak to us today. One of the very first verses we will read this week is one of my favorites: “I have loved you, my people, with an everlasting love. With unfailing love, I have drawn you to myself.” (31:3) How does that set the stage for the hopeful words of these next few chapters in Jeremiah? The Book of Acts is on the move, with the Gospel spreading to Antioch and beyond. Our first missionaries are sent out which propels the mission of Christ up to this very day. Let’s remember we represent Acts 29!

DAY 31 – Jeremiah 31 & Acts 11:19-30

This chapter is definitely a high point in the Book because it includes the New Covenant. Jeremiah gives us the clearest and most complete prophecy about the NC. It is outlined succinctly in verses 31 to 34, but the implications are incredible. Plus, I treasure the simple promise of God’s love in verse 3 which I quoted in the introduction located in the above paragraph. The New Covenant is not the only important message in this chapter, but it’s the most important. Jesus refers to it at the Last Supper, and Hebrews 8:8-12 quotes it word for word. I like everything about the NC compared to the Old. The internal work of the Spirit, the identity we receive as children of God, the access we have to know the Lord, and the wonder of being cleansed from all our sins outline this special work of God through his Son, the Messiah. It is hard for me to notice anything else because my eyes are fixed on what this covenant means to me. Of course, Jeremiah includes other words of promise. Do any of them also get your attention? I like “For the Lord will cause something new to happen—Israel will embrace her God.” (V22)

In Acts, we jump from Jerusalem and Peter’s revelation of the inclusion of the Gentiles to Antioch of Syria. This is no small distance from Jerusalem. I estimate it to be about 500 miles. But Antioch of Syria was an especially important city. It was a thriving cosmopolitan city. The third largest city in the Roman Empire behind Rome and Alexandria. Antioch was an ideal launching pad for the spread of the Gospel to the Gentile world. Barnabas finds Saul in Tarsus and they both minister in Antioch together for a whole year. The believers were referred to as Christians in Antioch, and this identification would stick. Actually, the Book of Acts only uses the term one more time in 26:28, but after the launch of the Early Church, it became the religious description for followers of Christ. Out of appreciation for the believers in Jerusalem and their anticipated need, these believers sent financial aid to Jerusalem as Barnabas and Saul journeyed back to the church in Judea. What impresses you about these new believers?

DAY 32 – Jeremiah 32 & Acts 12:1-19

This is an interesting chapter. It is especially significant since it takes place one year before Jerusalem falls. The burning of the city and the destruction of Judah were almost at hand. (587BC) Amid the gloom and despair of the hour, Jeremiah was commanded by God to buy a field in a public ceremony and put away the deed for safekeeping. This gave emphasis to his prediction that the captives would return and the land again would be cultivated. Even though Jeremiah’s prayer acknowledges the takeover by Babylon, I still am drawn to it. Jeremiah is calm, affirming, and full of worship for God. I love the prayers

of the Bible as they model meaningful expressions of adoration and honesty for us. His prayer was my focus as I prayed similar words to the Lord. (Verses 16-25)

Acts takes us to some extremes with the execution of James and the possibility of Peter experiencing the same outcome as the servant girl, Rhoda, who, in her excitement, forgets to open the door for Peter. It is also fascinating to me that Peter isn't exactly sure what is real and what might be his imagination. I notice another irony as the church gathers, praying for Peter earnestly in verse 5. But when he is rescued and comes to the door, no one believes it can be Peter. Earnest prayer and yet little faith sounds like an oxymoron. Peter told them to quiet down, which seemed wise since he had just escaped from jail. Peter did not presume that he would continue to be safe and began to make choices that would benefit his safety, like leaving that house and moving on. Our human responses to the challenges of life are also important, right!? The next time we read about Peter is in chapter 15 with the Jerusalem council. How do you respond to this inspiring event?

DAY 33 – Jeremiah 33 & Acts 12:20-13:3

As the city of Jerusalem and the king of Judah were falling to the invaders, God gave Jeremiah a greater understanding of his long-range plan. These promises could only come true after the destruction, which God would use to purify and humble the people. Jeremiah was confined in the royal palace in 587 BC as the siege was underway. Instead of trembling in fear, Jeremiah predicts restoration and even prosperity in the future. There's no doubt that Jeremiah's use of the title, "The Lord is Our Righteousness," is messianic as this would be a title for Jesus during the Early Church and especially during the end times when Jesus will reign forever. This is hopeful because the kings of that day were poor examples of righteousness. The promise is that One, who is righteous from the line of David, will bring salvation to the captives. Do you know what else is an amazing theme in the Bible, from cover to cover? The Lord will not abandon his people. (V26) "I will never leave you or forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5, Deuteronomy 31:6,8)

Acts touches on the demise of Herod, the mission of the church, and the sending of Barnabas and Saul. Herod is an example of taking God's glory for himself. The Lord has clearly stated he will not share his glory with another. Lucifer wanted to possess God's glory. How did that work out? Herod gives us a sobering example of God's punishment for human pride and accepting the praise of man as if he were divine. But my greatest attention is directed to the intentional sending of the first missionaries. I knew something like this was sure to take place because the Lord gave specific instruction of sharing the Good News "to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8) I appreciate the leaders' sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not only the one to empower believers to witness but also the sender who is on the move still today. How are you called to witness of Jesus?

DAY 34 – Jeremiah 34 & Acts 13:4-12

I was enjoying the promises of Chapters 30 to 33, but now things have come to a head as the Babylonians besiege Jerusalem. The finality of this word is that there is nothing Zedekiah or the Jews can do to divert the overthrow. The directive of God about slaves was freedom every seven years, but the people had ignored it. Now, Zedekiah reinstates this law to free slaves. He did it to bargain with God and

did not actually enforce it. I would call Zedekiah a manipulator. He was working with Nebuchadnezzar for a peaceful surrender but then didn't follow through. He said one thing and then did another. He would be punished severely (2 Kings 25 and the Fall of Jerusalem will fill you in on the devastating story that Jeremiah is predicting.) Zedekiah would be the last king of Judah.

Our first missionary story from Barnabas and Saul reveals a boldness and confrontation that draws people to Christ. Not every conflict for these men would work out so powerfully but as they begin, God is revealing his presence through miracles and the proclamation of God's Word. Did you notice that Saul was now recognized as Paul? We know him as the Apostle Paul, but here we read about the change. It could be as simple as Saul being a Hebrew name and Paul being a Greek name. I know this is a short reading, but I thought this first step into the mission field was especially inspiring. John Mark is included as he played a predominant role in the Early Church because he is identified as the one who wrote the Gospel of Mark. You can read about John Mark in Acts 13:13 & 15:36-41, Colossians 4:10, Philemon 1:24, 2 Timothy 4:11, and 1 Peter 5:13. John Mark displayed some immaturity in the beginning but we clearly get a picture of him growing and becoming reliable. Early failures do not disqualify a believer from a life of effective service and lasting significance, as we see in John Mark. Something to think about...

DAY 35 – Jeremiah 35 & Acts 13:13-43

I am not sure I remember ever reading about the Rechabites. The Jeremiah in verse 3 is not our prophet just another man in this tribe with the same name. The obedience of these devout people are elevated by Jeremiah in comparison to how hard-hearted and ungodly the Jews had become. There were still people who listened to their ancestors and did what was right. God promises to preserve the Rechabites because of their devotion and obedience (V19).

Acts shares a powerful message from Paul that reminds me of Peter's sermon at Pentecost. He is speaking to devout Jews who seem very interested but don't actually profess faith in Christ, right?! I am impressed with Paul's presentation but surprised by the lack of evidence that people were being saved. In other settings, the Holy Spirit fell on the group, and people were baptized, for example. I know what happens next, so I am already anticipating the resistance from Jewish leaders and other Jews. However, I reread the sermon for myself and underlined the words about David, "a man after my own heart." (V22) I love that statement and want nothing more than for those words to be true for me. Is there a verse or statement in Paul's sermon that caught your eye? How so?

WEEK 8

We are entering a section of Jeremiah's life that explains his journey more specifically and his personal interactions with those in authority. Jeremiah's perseverance is impressive again. It isn't surprising to me that Jeremiah wrote down his prophetic words through a scribe named Baruch. That is an interesting aspect of his story. I think you are going to find these next chapters equally interesting. Our readings in Acts include the rest of Paul and Barnabas' first missionary trip. Then, the Council at Jerusalem is very important to the history of the church. We will wrap up with a heavy moment in the Early Church when Paul and Barnabas have such an intense disagreement that they separate. But, as we can always know, God uses it for good in the bigger picture of events.

DAY 36 – Jeremiah 36 & Acts 13:44-52

Jeremiah had been prophesying for 23 years, from the 13th year of Josiah to the 4th year of Jehoiakim (605 BC). When Jeremiah's ministry was in crisis during his public trial in the Temple grounds (ch 26), friends saved his life, but now he was banned from speaking. No wonder the Lord wanted him to write these prophetic words down for the people. It took a year or so to write the book. Baruch was his secretary. The reading of the book made a strong impression on some of the princes, but the king defiantly burned the book. Then Jeremiah wrote it all over again. Thus, the king would be under the curse of God and would be subject to Nebuchadnezzar for the rest of his life.

The events of our passage in Acts have long-term effects in some sobering ways. The Jews were blatantly rejecting the message of Christ, which hasn't changed much in 2000 years. But the Gentiles "were very glad and thanked the Lord for his message." (V48) The Christian Church is basically a Gentile Church with the definition of Gentile being "not a Jew." The inclusion of Gentiles is clearly announced as God's plan from the beginning. Luke's quote from Isaiah 49:6 is evidence of God's plan from the beginning to reach Gentiles with salvation. Despite the opposition, verse 52 tells us, "the believers were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit." Joy is a theme for me this year. I have dozens of reasons to be grateful and full of joy. I want to be more intentional and appreciative. Joy has to be one of the clearest reflections of Jesus. How would you evaluate your joy and being filled with the Holy Spirit?

DAY 37 – Jeremiah 37 & Acts 14:1-28

The next two chapters will highlight the interaction between Zedekiah and Jeremiah. Zedekiah was basically friendly to Jeremiah but had divided loyalties. The tension surfaced as Jeremiah tried to leave the city. Jeremiah had several enemies because of his strong words of warning to the Jews. He was planning to visit his hometown of Anathoth. Both the Egyptians and the Babylonians had withdrawn from Jerusalem for a short time, giving Jeremiah a small window of opportunity. But those against Jeremiah accused him of escaping and siding with the Babylonians as a traitor. Thank God his imprisonment didn't last too long, or he might have died due to flogging and confinement without medical help. Plus, he probably received very little in the way of food. Zedekiah secretly believes that Jeremiah is a true prophet even though that stance doesn't seem popular at this point. Nonetheless, the king came to his side.

Our reading in Acts records the first encounters on their missionary journey through Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, which were far from predictable. One minute, they are identified as gods, and the next minute, they are stoning Paul and leaving him for dead. The idea that comes to mind is one of tilling the ground. Before any seeds can take root, the ground must be plowed and cultivated. These first visits were challenging, no doubt. But two years later, Paul and Silas will visit these same cities. Their purpose would be to strengthen the churches there. Plus, they would meet Timothy. It might appear that nothing permanent took place in the cities of Acts 14, but that is not the case. I appreciate that reality because I don't often notice something happening in a person's heart but God is at work. He was working in these cities even after Paul and Barnabas left and stayed in Antioch, Syria, for a long time. Paul said this once, "I planted the seed in your hearts (Corinthians), and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow." (1 COR 3:6) I need to keep that in mind when I am sharing the Lord with people I know and especially those that I am just getting to know. What does it mean to plant seeds for Jesus?

DAY 38 – Jeremiah 38 & Acts 15:1-21

There are two stories in this chapter. The overall theme is how fickle Zedekiah is, from washing his hands of Jeremiah, who would be left for dead, to asking Jeremiah to privately help him know what God has planned. Zedekiah would not listen to Jeremiah, so tomorrow, we will read of the devastating results of his disobedience. Jeremiah told him to surrender to Nebuchadnezzar, but he never did. Jeremiah was a faithful prophet, and one important court official begs for his life. Zedekiah told Ebed-Melech to take 30 of my men to rescue Jeremiah. It would not take that many men to pull Jeremiah out of the cistern, of course. But other leaders hated Jeremiah for his strong messages of warning and doom. Thirty men were there to protect Jeremiah. Just think about how often Jeremiah's life was in jeopardy. Even in tomorrow's reading, Nebuchadnezzar shows Jeremiah favor while other officials are executed. No one can violate God's plan; he is bigger than any human force. Jeremiah's life is proof of that.

This is a significant moment for the kingdom of God and the affirmation that the Gospel is meant for the whole world. The story might seem to end abruptly in verse 21, but I wanted us to concentrate on the essence of the Gospel, which Peter clearly proclaimed in verses 10 & 11 by announcing what the Jews couldn't do (and never have been able to fulfill the law) and how much they also needed the grace of God found in Christ. The issue of circumcision is symbolic of the overall concern for how things look on the outside. Jesus confronted the religious leaders by saying that they washed the outside of the cup, but on the inside, they were filled with dead man's bones (Matthew 23, specifically verses 25 & 26). There are a few groups who promote baptism as necessary for salvation. This is the same idea with circumcision that doing something is necessary to be accepted by God. But the teaching of the New Testament clearly tells us that people are saved by grace through faith in Christ alone! Nothing else is added; faith in Jesus only because of the cross of Christ is the way that sinners enter into a covenant with God. Amen? Amen! Why is this such a monumental moment in the history of the Christian faith?

DAY 39 – Jeremiah 39 & Acts 15:22-35

This story is well documented as it is repeated in Jeremiah 52, 2 Kings 25, 2 Chronicles 36, and Ezekiel 24. Zedekiah will see his sons executed, and then he will not be able to see another thing. This is a terrible conclusion to the fall of Jerusalem. What if Zedekiah had listened to Jeremiah and surrendered to

Nebuchadnezzar? Sometimes, disobedience is very costly. Isn't it interesting that both Jeremiah and his rescuer in chapter 38, Ebed-Melech, were spared? God sees all and rewards accordingly. Sometimes, the rewards are received in this life, and sometimes they are received more so in heaven. Beginning tomorrow, we will continue to read about what happened historically at that time. Jeremiah is not finished with his prophetic warnings, as surrounding countries will be under the judgment of God. This begins in chapter 46, which is more than a week away for us as we progress through Jeremiah. Your perseverance in reading the words and events of Jeremiah's life is admirable. Thank you for wanting to share this experience with me.

Acts tells us what happens next as the Jerusalem council concludes with minimal expectations for the new Gentile believers. One expectation will not be circumcision. The few requirements outlined in verse 29 make perfect sense to me. Anything having to do with idolatry is forbidden, of course. The health hazard of eating a strangled animal and the blood is undeniable, plus, it is also usually connected to something idolatrous. Sexual immorality is a crucial concern of violating another person and damaging the marriage covenant. These restrictions are for the good of Gentiles and show us that our allegiance to God affects our behaviors. The response of the church in Antioch is so good when they express great joy (V31) as the letter is read. This has a way of uniting the believers at such a strategic point in the life of the Early Church. What do you think about their compromise and their conclusion? The Book of Acts is so inspiring to me because God is moving, and people are listening to the Holy Spirit's direction. The same can still be true today.

DAY 40 – Jeremiah 40 & Acts 15:36-41

As I finished reading this chapter, I couldn't help but read on. You might do the same. Aren't you impressed with how gracious Nebuzaradan (try pronouncing that on your own), the captain of the guard, is toward Jeremiah?! He gives him total freedom to move about in Judah but suggests going to his hometown with people who support him. He also knew about Jeremiah's ministry and his prophecies. That is a very interesting detail in the story to me. Plus, Gedaliah, the new governor of Judah, had family connections that had supported Jeremiah previously. His father was Ahikam, who saved Jeremiah's life in 26:24. The Babylonians only left a small number of people in Judah with many of those being the poorest. The history of Jeremiah shows the faithfulness of God, who is watching over him. (Psalm 121)

Our reading in Acts is very short, but the situation is worth investigating. Paul and Barnabas had served side by side up to this moment. Some of the details are worth noting: John Mark was the cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10). Paul and John Mark eventually reconcile with Paul's expression of appreciation (2 Timothy 4:11). John Mark is known as the author (with Peter's help) of the Gospel of Mark. Ministry would continue, and the Gospel would go forth. But it is hard to understand how two godly men would get stuck with such a strong disagreement. However, these two men are human beings also. The relational challenges we face in this life are real and, in some ways, unavoidable. But this doesn't throw off our God. In his sovereignty, God doubled missionary advancement as Barnabas went to strengthen the churches in Cyprus, and Paul went to the churches in Syria, Cilicia, and then Galatia. Plus, Mark and Silas, their partner, respectively, both had a significant impact for the Gospel. The same is true today as the Lord moves in our world to draw people to himself. Amen?!

WEEK 9

The next week of readings in Jeremiah tells us about the final events of Jeremiah. The people will end up in Egypt because they again did not listen to Jeremiah. Other historical writings from that time tell us that the Jews actually stoned Jeremiah when he was in Egypt. Another possibility says that he was taken from Egypt by Nebuchadnezzar, with Baruch, to Babylon and died there. Either of these events is estimated to have taken place in the year 580 BC. We only have two more weeks in Jeremiah, but you can anticipate a week in Lamentations, which will bring us to the end of March. Acts will highlight the second missionary journey for Paul with Silas this time. We will visit prominent cities in the Early Church like Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, and Corinth. As always, this will be a rich week in God's Word.

DAY 41 – Jeremiah 41 & Acts 16:1-15

I hope you remember how chapter 40 ended as Gedaliah was told about a plot to murder him. But he ignored it and now those rumors became more than rumors. As was true about the way chapter 40 concluded, so too with this chapter. You are tempted to read on as I did. Chapter 41 relays what takes place in Judah three months after the fall of Jerusalem. It is a time of unrest, and the murder of Gedaliah doesn't help anything. While the formation of leadership and transition are the most vulnerable, the King of Ammon sends an assassin to take out the new leader, Gedaliah. After that, Ishmael of Ammon escapes, which adds to the chaos and undermines the hope of justice. The world for the Jews was exceedingly difficult and out of control. Their next step would be to seek out Jeremiah's advice which will take place in tomorrow's reading. The people of God have ignored the Lord so completely that nothing is left to build on. It is a very low point in the history of God's people. Why wouldn't they humble themselves before the Lord? How might we still be tempted to ignore God's ways and His plans for our lives?

In Acts, I am especially interested in the launch of Paul's second missionary endeavor because it happens after the intense separation from Barnabas. But we will learn quickly that Silas is a dynamic man of God and the right partner for Paul. Human conflict is disappointing but the spread of the Gospel is of bigger consequence. So, they return to the cities they evangelized, and "the churches were strengthened in their faith and grew larger every day." (V5) We meet Timothy who joins the team and will be a very significant contributor to the mission. We also understand that Luke steps on board in verse 10 because he now uses the pronoun "we" instead of "they." The writing will portray his personal testimony of God at work. Growing the team seems like a positive and important aspect of this trip. The impact could be more extensive, and the shared unity and ministry could be more complete. Since I am personally studying the Letter to the Philippians, I am riveted by the beginning days of evangelism in this city. We get the first glimpse of it today and a more extensive one tomorrow. What do you think of the truth presented in verse 6, "because the Holy Spirit prevented them from preaching" in that area? We might think that the Spirit's ministry is always forward, but here we read that the Spirit stopped them in their tracks. How in tune with the Spirit's guidance are you? Do you have a sense of his "yes" and also his "no?" Think about the activity of the Spirit in your life!

DAY 42 – Jeremiah 42 & Acts 16:16-40

Isn't this especially surprising? They seem sincere in asking Jeremiah to seek the Lord but they already had an answer that they wanted. Was Jeremiah just to put his stamp of approval on their desire to escape to Egypt? It seems like it. Maybe they were too impatient to wait for Jeremiah's word from the Lord since it took 10 days (V7). The biggest travesty centers around their trust in Egyptian protection instead of the Lord. From our vantage point, Jeremiah shares such good news with them. Their approach was so human-centered. I feel frustrated; it helps me to realize why God was so grieved and had to punish these disobedient, idolatrous people.

How's this for one the best stories in the Book of Acts? I'm sure you are with me in highlighting verse 25 as they are praying and singing in the dungeon of the prison. The Apostle Paul keeps the main thing the main thing as he and the other prisoners do not escape but rather minister to the Jailkeeper and his family. The outcome is glorious as each and every one of the people in the Jailer's household was baptized. (V33) The courage of Paul and Silas continues to impress me as they stand up to the officials of Philippi. After being released from jail, you might expect them to hightail it out of there. But they stay and encourage the believers. There's no doubt that the events of yesterday were used by God to establish a church in Philippi. One of the most endearing letters from Paul was written to this church 10 years later. Paul and Silas were in Philippi for a relatively short time, but God used it to birth a very significant church in Macedonia. What aspect of this story inspires you? How might we be full of faith in such a way that we praise God in the most difficult of circumstances?

DAY 43 – Jeremiah 43 & Acts 17:1-15

It is shocking that Johanan and the rest of the leaders accuse Jeremiah of lying. They directly betray their oath (promise) to listen to what Jeremiah brings from God. So, they head to Egypt to escape, but this would be the place of their destruction. Both Jeremiah and Baruch are included, probably forced to join them. The annals of Nebuchadnezzar state that the Babylonians did invade Egypt in 568 BC which is 18 years after Jeremiah shared his message to the people of Judah. The words of Jeremiah would come true even after he had died himself. God's words never fail, and his judgments are true in his timing and consistent with his plan. Why would the remnant of God's people in Judah refuse to listen to Jeremiah? Am I ever inclined to ignore God's direction and commands in my life? Surely, I deserve punishment, so with humility, I confess my disobedience, self-centeredness, and sin. (1 John 1:9)

Paul and Silas are on the move for the sake of the Gospel in Acts 17. The first stop was Thessalonica, where they began a ministry and obviously a church since we now have two letters addressed to the Church in Thessalonica. In three weeks, the Spirit of God moved in such a way as to establish a congregation. But as was the case previously, a certain group of Jews incited a riot. God protected Paul and Silas until nightfall, and then they made their way to Berea. Berea is well thought of by believers still today because they were open-minded and searched the Scriptures day after day (V11). Many a church congregation has named themselves after the Bereans because of their diligence and desire to know the Word of God. 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 captures the persecution and opposition that many Gentile believers were facing along with Paul and Silas. The Lord birthed the church in these cities through the bold witness and courage of these new believers. How does their testimony inspire you to realize that they are new in Christ and yet so determined and courageous?

DAY 44 – Jeremiah 44, plus 45 (only five verses long) & Acts 17:16-34

I wanted to include the short summary concerning Baruch, who was spared by the Lord, “I will give you your life as a reward wherever you go.” (45:5) The Lord protects Baruch, but he is not the only one. “Even though they (the Jews in Egypt) long to return home, only a handful will do so.” (44:14) This is a small glimpse of God rescuing a few who do not bow a knee to idols and false gods. However, it seems that almost everyone was completely committed to idolatry. They expressed allegiance to the “Queen of Heaven,” which is most often known as “Asherah.” She was associated with the planet Venus and with all types of reproduction among plants and animals, so she was a popular idol among farmers and herdsmen. Offerings of incense, food, and liquids were regarded as magical triggers that would induce reproduction and prosperity. Could the Jews have deviated from devotion to “Yahweh” any further? It is truly a sad story. But I get the sense there’s a small remnant of devoted Jews who remain faithful to the Living God and will be rescued. Too often, we are concerned about being the majority, but most of God’s people throughout history have been the minority. The song says, “Though none go with me, still I will follow.” How does that strike you?

I am sure there were others with Paul in Athens, as we read about his ministry there in Acts 17. But he seems to stand alone, at least publicly. At Tyler’s recent Evangelism class, he used Paul’s approach to the people of Athens as an example of adapting to their culture and making several points of connection to their beliefs. In other words, Paul began with their story before he spoke of God’s story. Even though the people seemed to discard his message when he spoke about the resurrection of the dead, “some joined him and became believers.” (V34) Do not think that Paul’s effort to share God’s story was in vain? No, in fact, two key leaders were among those who believed. I think we get discouraged easily. And I think we believe we must push hard to get results for the Gospel. But let Paul’s example help you know that sharing the truth and demonstrating a genuine concern for those who need Christ can be used by God even though it might seem like they aren’t interested. We plant, and we water, but God saves. Amen! What does Paul’s ministry in Athens teach you?

DAY 45 – Jeremiah 46 & Acts 18:1-17

This prophecy is not in chronological order because these are words of warning from 605 BC, and we left off yesterday with a record of life near a 580 BC date. Jeremiah shared these words of warning, reminding the reader about the defeat of King Jehoiakim that Egypt could not protect them from the Babylonians (Verses 2-12). Pharaoh Neco of Egypt had thought that the time was ripe to become the dominant power in the ancient Near East, so he moved north in 609 BC. After Neco spent several years trying to help fragments of the Assyrian army stop the westward movements of the Babylonian army, he was soundly defeated at Carchemish in 605 BC. Soon after that, the Babylonians surrounded Jerusalem and forced Jehoiakim to become a vassal of Babylon. Eventually, the Babylonians would overthrow Egypt as Jeremiah already prophesied in 43:8-13. The date that this was accomplished was between 568-567 BC, after Jeremiah had died. There is no hope for Egypt but Jeremiah speaks a word of hope for God’s people before concluding this message that they will be delivered from the grip of Babylon. “For I will bring you home again from distant lands...” (V27) “I will not completely destroy you. I will discipline you, but with justice; I cannot let you go unpunished.” (V28) Isn’t it amazing that Jeremiah predicted these

events and they were fulfilled years later but not 100's of years later. Jeremiah was so courageous, don't you think?

In Acts 18, we read about Paul's ministry in Corinth, which is a familiar name to us. One of my favorite concepts of God's omniscience is found in this chapter, verse 10, "For I am with you, and no one will attack and harm you, for many people in this city belong to me." I understand this statement to be a promise of foreknowledge that predicted many would come to faith in Christ in the city of Corinth. Paul had tremendous reason to stay and persevere. Plus, the Lord promised in this vision that he would be protected, and he was. Believers in Corinth played a very significant role in the Early Church. Their vibrancy and struggles are outlined in two letters that Paul wrote. We have been instructed and helped in so many ways from 1 & 2 Corinthians. We can understand that after 18 months of teaching and ministry, God had produced much spiritual fruit through Paul and others (V11). Corinth is located near Athens, so you might expect similar results of skepticism, but the Lord said there are many who will come to me, and it was so. Corinth is the farthest city from Israel, where Paul's missionary journeys took him until he was arrested and taken to Rome. I encourage you to read 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 to get a glimpse of Paul's affection for the believers there. The Corinthians had lots of problems but Paul delighted in their zeal for the Lord Jesus Christ. Their passion for Jesus made up for many mistakes. How might God be speaking to you through the message about the birth of the church in Corinth?

WEEK 10

This is our last week in Jeremiah, which is hard to believe as it went fast or slow, depending on your perspective. I thought it went by quickly. I cannot remember the last time I read through Jeremiah, so thank you for your help. There are several amazing truths from the “weeping” prophet that I will refer to again and again. Reading Acts along with Jeremiah has been a great idea, in my opinion. It is hard to plow through 52 chapters of warnings and prophecies that predict destruction. So, Acts tells us about the birth of something new called the church. It is such an inspiring book because what happens then can happen now. I think of Acts in that way.

DAY 46 – Jeremiah 47 & 48, also Acts 18:18-28

The short prophecy about Philistia makes reading a long chapter about Moab possible. Plus, I am scheduling five readings this week, and that is only possible if one of the days includes two chapters. This is that day. We have been learning about Moab on Sundays since Ruth is a Moabit,e and Naomi lived in Moab for at least ten years. Tyler has also told us about the beginning of Moab with a son born to Lot (Genesis 19:36-38) due to his oldest daughter’s deception of getting her father drunk and having sexual relations with him. From the get-go, the birth of Moab would be contrary to God’s design, and the result would be a nation of many gods and other immoral practices that dishonored the One True God. At the time, Moabites felt self-assured because they were relatively free from the military reach of the Babylonians. However, the Lord found the Moabites to be greedy and cruel, and their worship was pagan, with sensuous practices and arrogance against the God of the Israelites. They would not escape judgment. I think of verse 7 as a summary of the chapter: “Because you have trusted in your wealth and skill, you will be taken captive. Your god Chemosh (the national god who superseded the other gods they prayed to), with his priests and officials, will be hauled off to distant lands!” What stands out to you from Jeremiah’s prophecy against Moab?

By the end of this reading, we begin several chapters on the third missionary journey of Paul. In this section, Luke highlights Priscilla and Aquilla, plus Apollos. We already met this dynamic couple in our last reading last week from 18:2. The main focus is on the city of Ephesus as Paul leaves Priscilla and Aquilla there, who will connect with Apollos as he arrives in Ephesus preaching in the city the way of the Lord. These three characters are mentioned in several of Paul’s letters (Romans 16, 1 Corinthians 16, & 2 Timothy 4:19; with Apollos mentioned extensively in 1 Corinthians). I am impressed with Priscilla and Aquilla as they forthrightly “took him aside and explained the way of God even more accurately.” (V26) It seems that Apollos did not include the marvel of the Holy Spirit and his activity in a believer’s life. This short section

means a lot to me as the mature couple confronts Apollos courageously. I personally think this is essential to the health of the church but also demands gentleness and respect, which seem to be evident in Priscilla and Aquilla. As we learn more about them, we see how significant they are to the Early Church, making their home a house church in Rome (Romans 16:5). Apollos also experienced the favor of God in his ministry, and many followed him, especially in Corinth. These three stood up for Christ and stood out within the body of believers. How does their example stir your heart for ministry?

DAY 47 – Jeremiah 49 & Acts 19:1-22

The judgment of God was expressed in this chapter for several surrounding countries that will also be overthrown by Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah's most lengthy prophetic words are against Moab (yesterday's reading), but Ammon and Edom will not escape either. Several verses caught my eye and illuminated the reason for judgment. These were pagan countries with nothing more than idols for gods. "Weep and wail, hiding in the hedges, for your god Molech, with his priests and officials, will be hauled off to distant lands." (V3) Again, listen to these words from the Lord, "If the innocent must suffer, how much more must you! You will not go unpunished! You must drink this cup of judgment!" (V12) They deserved judgment. Then, Jeremiah includes less populated regions as well. Damascus, Kedar, Hazor, and Elam (which is located east of Babylon) will be attacked and defeated by Nebuchadnezzar. This devastation highlights the awful sins of these idol worshippers and also sets up the words against Babylon, which we will read tomorrow. I think is fascinating to realize that Jeremiah predicted a variety of results and one is the last verse of this chapter, "But I will restore the fortunes of Elam in days to come." (V39) The predominate prediction would be total destruction never to rise again. But a native of Elam named Cyrus (Isaiah 44:28-45:1) conquered Babylon (539 BC) and founded the Persian empire. Cyrus would also show favor to the people of Judah. Jeremiah truly did speak the truth even though it was probably difficult to share such a "hard" message against the people of his day.

Our reading in Acts takes us to the founding of the church in Ephesus. This location will become one of the largest Christian communities during the establishment of the Early Church. From our reading, we realize that Paul, Timothy, and Erastus stayed in Ephesus for almost three years. Remarkable things happened, and the church grew. The burning of the popular books in that society is noteworthy. The value would be worth several million dollars today. It was not difficult for Paul to discern that the Lord had big plans for this city. From the start, people were saved, filled with the Spirit, and demonstrated a faith that God honored with miracles. We pray many prayers in the "name of Jesus," right?! But the formula is only as powerful as the person who prays it. The group of Jews (V13) utilized this formula for a show rather than in honor of the

Lord and were not motivated by personal faith. I like praying prayers in the name of Jesus to declare that he is my hope for answered prayer. But, without faith, those words do not assure me of anything unless it is genuine. Amen! These 22 verses are especially inspiring because they have to do with the advancement of God's Kingdom in the Gentile world. We have the same hope and opportunity that they did. How does this stir your faith?

DAY 48 – Jeremiah 50 & Acts 19:23-41

This is only half of the message of judgment on Babylon. God used Babylon to punish his own people, but now they will be accountable for their many sins. Verse 15 points to this emphasis: "It is the Lord's vengeance, so take vengeance on her (Babylon). Do to her as she has done to others!" Our God is a God of justice. However, his justice is in his timing. Captivity for many of God's people would have lasted 70 years in Babylon. Many of these would obviously die before deliverance. But our timing is not God's timing. Interwoven in these prophecies against Babylon are hopeful words of promise for the people of Israel. History tells us that the Persians would invade and defeat Babylon, culminating in 539 BC. Jeremiah would have been dead for over 40 years, so he prophesied by revelation from God, which is affirming of the truth and inspiration of this Book. Both in this chapter and the next, Babylon is doomed to be a wasteland (V13) and never to rise again. And so it was, Babylon was never an important kingdom again. The city of Babylon was leveled in 485 BC. What we know about Babylon comes from Archaeological excavation to match the record of the Scriptures and other ancient writings. God would not cease in being the God of Israel and his restoration for them is also a historical fact beginning with Ezra and then Nehemiah. What does it mean to you that our God is just?

The Church in Ephesus has great significance to the Early Church, as we read in Acts 19. Because of that, we might expect opposition, and that is what we read about today. It is hard to imagine the scene, especially the fact that they were shouting for over two hours, "Great is Artemis." As the saying goes, "Level heads will prevail." The mayor was used by God to protect the believers, especially Paul. There was obvious tension, but the church was strongly established in Ephesus. Soon, Timothy will be called to lead this church. He is often thought of as one of the first pastors (James, the brother of Jesus, is thought of as the pastor to the church in Jerusalem, Acts 15:13f) mentioned in the Bible to a church that was also thought of as the largest Gentile church at that time. Artemis was more than a god among many gods to the Ephesians. They believed she visited them supernaturally, and the temple constructed in her honor was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The opposition was fierce, but the believers remained strong and faithful to the Gospel. Paul's letter to the Ephesians is one of my favorites because it presents the foundation of our faith and what our faith should look like in action. How does this event in Ephesus speak to you?

DAY 49 – Jeremiah 51 & Acts 20:1-12

As this chapter begins, it is obviously more of the same as yesterday's reading in chapter 50. Again, Jeremiah expresses a message of doom for Babylon. And as I said yesterday, Babylon will cease to be a kingdom nation never to rise again until the prophecy of Revelation comes to be. But I am quite sure that the Babylon of Revelation is an alliance of evil rulers inspired by Satan himself rather than one literal nation. The historical stories about Babylon record a ruthless and inhumane people. God's approach to this devilish Kingdom under Nebuchadnezzar is completely just. Again, right in the middle of this chapter are words of praise to God (Verses 15-19). Jeremiah elevates the name of our Lord and promotes the justice of God, "On the day of reckoning they (idols and those who worship them) will all be destroyed." (V17) Just as Babylon had destroyed Jerusalem, this great kingdom would itself be destroyed. This message from Jeremiah actually is written seven years before the fall of Jerusalem and over 50 years before Babylon is conquered. There is One God and he oversees the world. Because of that, Babylon could not go unpunished.

Acts 20 begins with Paul's itinerary. The story in Troas is the most memorable. But I am blessed to know that the Gospel was affecting lives in every city where Paul preached. "While there (Macedonia), he encouraged the believers in all the towns he passed through." (V2) There are two things that come to mind for me as I read that verse. First, Paul had a vision that told him to go to Macedonia (Acts 16:9-10). So, it is not surprising to me that people would receive Christ and be saved. But what if Paul hadn't responded to the vision? You get my point. Plus, the story of Eutychus might be a bit humorous if he hadn't fallen to his death. People are known to fall asleep during a sermon all the time. But his death was to bring glory to God and create an even greater hunger to know the Lord as they listened to Paul's preaching all night long. (V11) It says that they were together on the first day of the week (Sunday). Already in the first century, the early church was commemorating the Lord's resurrection by gathering together on Sunday. Obviously, we still do the same. The Gospel was changing lives then and the Gospel is still changing lives today. Why do you love the Gospel so much?

DAY 50 – Jeremiah 52 & Acts 20:13-38

CONGRATULATIONS! We did it. We have read through Jeremiah's prophetic book with thoughtfulness and great interest. Jeremiah was an incredible man of God. However, this last chapter might not have been written by him but was added to bring closure to the historical backdrop of all that he has written. I am thankful for Baruch, who recorded the words of Jeremiah, as we learned about earlier. We are still inspired by the Book of Jeremiah today

because of Baruch's diligence. For what other reason might this chapter be included as the last chapter in Jeremiah because the story has already been shared in Jeremiah 39 as well as 2 Kings 24? I think the repetition emphasizes Jeremiah's integrity and authenticity as a true prophet of God. Everything he predicted about the holy city and the kingdom of Judah came true. Likewise, we know that everything he said about the exile and the outcome of Babylon also came true. Jeremiah is sure to have a special place in heaven. How would you summarize your thoughts about Jeremiah and his ministry?

Most of our reading in Acts today highlights the message Paul gave to the elders of the church in Ephesus. It is a testimonial with the purpose of these leaders to follow in Paul's footsteps with a similar dedication and appreciation for the Gospel. Verse 28 has long been one of my favorites as a leader and pastor in the church. The first thing Paul says is, "Keep watch over yourselves..." Their leadership ministry was only as strong as their walk with God. Put on your own oxygen mask first, as the flight attendant would say. I have been mindful of that principle, and I especially realize its importance when I ignore it. I can often get depleted and feel empty. The Book of Acts often says they were filled with the Spirit, and then they preached boldly. The Spirit's nourishment, guidance, and empowerment are indispensable for the Christian leader as well as the people of God. Also, in verse 35, the Lord shared these words in his earthly ministry, but we don't see them in the Gospel record, "It is more blessed to give than receive." But my point earlier is that I won't have much to give if I'm neglecting my walk with Christ. There is joy in the giving, but I have to have something to give, right!? This farewell to the leaders in Ephesus demonstrates Paul's love for them (and theirs to him) and his hopefulness for the ministry of the church there. Timothy is part of Paul's team in this chapter, and he will later be thought of as the pastor of this church as he is called to be their shepherd (the same word for pastor). The Lord was working in a marvelous way among the believers in Ephesus. What might God be saying to you through Paul's message in this chapter?

WEEK 11

Similar to Jeremiah, I can't remember when I last read through Lamentations. There are several key verses in this book that I read often but it has been over ten years since I read through all five chapters. Lamentations represents the reality of a difficult world with dark valleys for all of us from time to time. Even though the book does not identify the author, Jeremiah is the traditional author and was known for his laments at the time of Josiah's death (2 Chronicles 35:25). Also, these words are associated with the fall of Jerusalem, which is very much connected to Jeremiah the prophet. We will journey in Acts from chapters 21 through 23. Paul will be the focal point with the challenge intensifying in Jerusalem. Paul's courage has helped persecuted believers throughout history. His example helps those beaten and imprisoned to remain strong.

DAY 51 – Lamentations 1 & Acts 21:1-17

Let's remember the setting as we begin our week-long journey through this book. After a long siege, the Babylonian army breached Jerusalem's defenses and took control. They deported many people of Judah to exile in Babylon, and they destroyed the city of Jerusalem, including the Temple of God. Only a few survivors were left in the land, including Jeremiah, the prophet. Nothing else was left, and the hopes of God's people were nearly dead. The remorse over Jerusalem and her exiled people begins with the very first verse and continues for most of this book. No wonder it is called Lamentations (many laments). This is easily seen as prophetic poetry because the writings are an acrostic following the Hebrew alphabet. This chapter represents the mourning of the people, and it is hard to read because of the heaviness of their grief. "For all these things I weep; tears flow down my cheeks. No one is here to comfort me; any who might encourage me are far away." (V16) When you have been sad and felt grief, how did you find comfort?

In our reading for Acts, we read that the believers greeted Paul and his companions four different times. Each time there was a sense of warmth and closeness because of the shared faith among the people. This is often referred to as "koinonia;" the common thread of Christ and his love in our hearts one to another. The believers of the Early Church are such great examples of genuine faith and love as they support each other no matter the cost. Paul was obviously determined to make it back to Jerusalem even though everywhere he went, people of faith warned him not to go there. Prophecy is highlighted in verse 9, declaring that Philip's daughters had the gift of prophecy, and so too Agabus. Most of the time, we think of prophecy as foretelling the future, which is clearly something Agabus is doing in this scene. But at the

core, prophecy is proclaiming God's word by preaching, exhorting, and explaining the will of God. This is mentioned several times in the NT as a gift from the Holy Spirit and it is usually mentioned first in any list since it has the potential of benefitting believers the most. Since it seems clear that Agabus is a genuine believer with the gift of prophecy, we can know that what he is saying about Paul will come true. But that didn't persuade Paul to change his mind about going to Jerusalem. How do you interpret Paul's stubborn determination? This junction in Paul's journey is fascinating to me. He felt it was God's will for him to face opposition, and he was completely willing. That challenges me; how about you?

DAY 52 – Lamentations 2 & Acts 21:18-36

This poetic lament makes it clear that the Lord is the One punishing his people. There are 22 verses, each beginning with the next letter in the Hebrew alphabet. I admit that this is a difficult chapter to read. Even Jeremiah, who I think is the author, questions the Lord in verse 20, "O Lord, think about this!" Beautiful Jerusalem is laid to waste because of their stubborn hearts and false hopes. The prophets of that day, besides Jeremiah, led them on a path that enabled them to continue to sin. "Your prophets have said so many foolish things, false to the core. They did not save you from exile by pointing out your sins. Instead, they painted false pictures, filling you with false hope." (V14) It is our tendency to encourage and speak positively to people, especially fellow believers. But the Lord calls us "to speak the truth in love." If we see a brother or sister caught in a sin, we are called to confront in love. The false hope that the false prophets brought to the people in Jeremiah's day did them no good. This is still true for us today.

Do you remember the prophecy from Agabus yesterday in our reading from Acts? Well, it didn't take long for it to come true. If the authorities hadn't intervened, the people would have beaten Paul to death (V32). Paul, a Jew, was willing to practice a purification ceremony to build trust with questioning Jewish leaders. The very next day, Paul was on his way to fulfill this vow and gain respect in order to earn the right to be heard in Jerusalem. But things went south when Jews from the province of Asia stirred up the crowd, which turned into a mob. But this was not Paul's time to die. God had already told him he would share the message of the Gospel in Rome. The intervention of Roman officials came in the nick of time. The facts are that nothing could happen to Paul without God's sovereignly allowing it. That's true for you and me too. Psalm 139:16 (NLT) reads, "You (God) saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day passed." NIV says all my days are ordained by You. What does that mean to you? How long will you live on earth? What does this teach us?

DAY 53 – Lamentations 3 & Acts 21:37 – 22:23

I know this is an especially long chapter, but it contains some of the most hopeful language and uplifting prayers. There's no doubt that verses 22 to 24 are the most familiar and most repeated promises in this book. He says "yet I still dare to hope..." (V21) I love that idea and want my posture in life to be shaped by the certainty of God's faithfulness. For me, the rest of the chapter was much easier to take in and appreciate. Like verses 31 & 32, "For no one is abandoned by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he also shows compassion because of his unfailing love." Those words do encourage me. Interwoven in this section are words and truths like these verses that I just read. What verse or phrase got your attention and blessed your life?

Acts 21 into 22 shares the testimonial message from Paul. His presentation has shaped my thinking about sharing my story as well as weaving in the truth of the Gospel. Paul began with his past before he met Christ. Then, he shared how he encountered the Lord and how it changed his life. He began to tell them what kind of difference the Lord had made in him. His outline is easily repeated with your story before Christ, how you met Christ, and what your life has been like after receiving Christ (Before – How – After). I have shared this approach many times in training believers to share the Good News in a way that people will listen. But, in this case, they shut Paul out, right? Tomorrow, we will obviously read what happens, but just know that not everyone is going to respond favorably. I was reading about one of our partners in ministry on the other side of the world in Indonesia. Pastor Roy shared the Gospel with 595 people, and 5 received Christ last year. God bless Pastor Roy and his perseverance! Please be on the lookout for opportunities to share about what Christ has done for you!

DAY 54 – Lamentations 4 & Acts 22:24-23:11

We read the sadness of the author (Jeremiah) in this chapter. When he mentions children, we all feel it. From the King to the ordinary people of Judah, devastation and doom are experienced by all. I take encouragement in verse 22, which is the only glimmer of hope in the chapter, "O beautiful Jerusalem, your punishment will end; you will soon return from exile." The Lord has not abandoned his people, but their punishment is very severe. It causes us to feel deeply and sadly for this time period in the life of God's idolatrous people.

Previously, I mentioned God's promise that Paul would proclaim the Good News in Rome. But I was out of order counting on my memory of the verse in our reading today (23:11). Paul had voiced his desire to make it to Rome and even to Spain, but I now think this is the first time God has granted this assurance. The likelihood of Paul getting to Rome, from a human point of view, is slim. But the certainty of it, because God said it will be so, is 100%. Paul seems to wait to

share the truth about his Roman citizenship until this moment. The intent of torture to get Paul to confess to a crime that he did not do is still alive in our world today. I have read about some of the most upsetting approaches to prosecutors' manipulation of the facts, as well as the unlawful bargaining with witnesses who lie. A truly heart-rending book is "Framed" by John Grisham. He tells the terrible stories of innocent people accused of murder and other horrendous crimes who spend years and years in prison even though they are innocent. Paul seems to be aware of the tipping point before him, so he reveals the fact of his Roman citizenship. Secondly, Jesus promised that the Spirit would give believers words to say when confronted by their persecutors. "But when you are arrested and stand trial, don't worry in advance about what to say. Just say what God tells you at the time, for it is not you who will be speaking, but the Holy Spirit." (Mark 13:11) Paul displays this kind of sensitivity to the Holy Spirit as he addresses the crowd who want nothing more than to do him in. He wisely gets them to focus on their differences, revealing their lack of unity and credibility. (23:7-10) How do you respond to Paul's wisdom?

DAY 55 – Lamentations 5 & Acts 23:12-35

The fifth chapter is unique being a prayer and not following a poetic outline through the Hebrew alphabet like the other chapters. I was reading about Moses and the burning bush in Exodus 3 when it says the Hebrews were crying out to God for rescue. God says he heard from heaven and was concerned for their plight. Moses would be used by God to deliver them. I think of the same thing is this prayer. Jeremiah is interceding with God on behalf of the exiles. "Restore us, O Lord, and bring us back to you again!" (V21) This prayer is a timeless prayer since we as humans often wander from the Lord as the hymn suggests, "Prone to wander, Lord feel it." I also pray in travail at times for those I know who are lost and without Christ in their hearts. But I also pray that fellow believers, myself included, would be brought back when they drift from the path. Lamentations closes with this prayer of travail. Do you believe that the Lord hears your cries for help and your prayers for others?

Acts includes something called a happenstance, or at least, that is how people often think about being at the right place, at the right time. It just so happens that Paul's nephew overhears something essential for Paul's survival. A coincidence, of course. Our Lord is watching over everything, as difficult as it is for us to understand and sometimes believe, he is in control! This is also one of my favorite stories in Acts because it involves the invisible hand of God and the courage of a young boy to relay the truth. If another boy had heard about this, he might not have done anything about it. But a nephew is very invested in the life of his uncle and obviously looks up to him. Secondly, a Roman officer is sympathetic to the boy's message; he doesn't blow him off. Don't you perceive the fingerprints of God on this event!? Get ready for Paul's

adventuresome journey to Rome. The rest of the Book is dedicated to the ups and downs of getting there. But the whole time, I sense a confidence in Paul because of God's promise to him in 23:11. Do you see what I mean?

WEEK 12

Why would I choose these two Minor Prophets as we finish up the Book of Acts? The reason is that these prophets spoke the word of the Lord at the same time Jeremiah prophesied. The order of their arrival on the scene is Zephaniah first (635 BC), then Habakkuk a few years later, with Jeremiah beginning his ministry shortly after these two in 627 BC. You can see that they are very close to each other and each of them spoke a warning about the idolatry and disobedience to the people of Judah. On the other hand, Acts has us on a journey to Rome with Paul and his companions. The promise of God is that Paul will make it to Rome to share the Gospel, but there are several times when we wonder. The life of Paul seemed to hang on a thin thread but the thread was the promise of God.

DAY 56 – Habakkuk 1 & Acts 24

Habakkuk is actually a very inspiring book, in my opinion. First of all, he is in genuine communication with the Lord. The prophet is forthright with God and asks him a few questions. Obviously, the Lord does not have to explain himself to Habakkuk, but the boldness of this prophet gets my attention. Habakkuk's honesty is the first thing I notice in verse 2, "How long, O Lord, must I call for help? But you do not listen!" He is suggesting that justice has been perverted. And the Lord replies with the promise to use the cruel people of Babylon to punish the people of God. Habakkuk is a prophet of God and he questions God's use of the corrupt leaders and warriors of Babylon; to Habakkuk, this seems out of character for him. This is a relatively short book that records an important interaction with the prophet and the Lord. What is your response to this first chapter?

The Book of Acts, chapter 24, records the interaction of Paul with Governor Felix. Felix seems interested and even convicted by Paul's message and teaching. How many people are like Felix who begin to see something that is real and life-changing, but end up discarding it because of fear and misunderstanding (V25)? Many people come up to the edge of faith in Christ and quickly turn away. Does Felix ever pursue the Christian faith again? I don't think so because he abandons Paul, leaving him in prison for two years. His motive for listening to Paul seems very self-centered, with the goal of having Paul bribe him. The resilience of Paul is impressive. He accepts what comes his way. The story of Acts continues with the witness of Paul before key leaders like Festus and Agrippa. He is always ready to bear witness to Jesus and what the Lord has done for him. He is worth emulating.

DAY 57 – Habakkuk 2 & Acts 25:1-22

I can relate to Habakkuk's searching and confusion. But at the same time, a vision of God's justice and glory leads to Habakkuk's New Testament truth, "the righteous will live by faith." (V4) Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews all quote the prophet whose words ring true to what Genesis 15:6 says of Abram, "And Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord counted him as righteous because of his faith." Another prevalent statement throughout the Bible is verse 14, "For as the waters fill the sea, the earth will be filled with the awareness of the glory of the Lord." Isaiah's famous prophecy in Isaiah 11 shares the same hopeful words in verse 9. The Lord voices his judgment over Babylon having five reasons: their oppressive measures, their dishonest dealings, their murder and corruption, their disgraceful acts, and their idolatry. "Let all the earth be silent before him." (V20)

Paul is dealing with Festus now in Acts 25. Paul could feel like he was at the mercy of Festus, but Paul knew by faith that God was in charge. There is a crucial moment in this reading. Verse 9 tells us that Festus wanted to please the Jews, which is a bad sign; so, he wanted to move the trial to Jerusalem. Paul was not passive at this point because he knew what was at stake. Sometimes we believe that trusting God means passively sitting by and letting what happens happen. But Paul has shown us time and again that he is fully engaged in the struggle and will depend on the Lord for what he should say and what he should do. We know that Paul was not afraid to die, but he opposed murder versus justice. King Agrippa comes on the scene and prepares us for a very interesting next chapter. Paul was an amazing person and will be someone I can't wait to meet in heaven. (But there might be a long line; however, time is no factor in heaven!) Is there anything you especially notice in this chapter about Paul? He continues to rely on the Spirit's guidance and on what to say. Jesus promised his followers that the Spirit would give us the right words at times like this.

DAY 58 – Habakkuk 3 & Acts 25:23 – 26:32

I remember the first time I discovered verses 17 to 19 in this chapter. They stirred my heart to the nth degree. Habakkuk shares words of God's power and greatness throughout this chapter; no god is as mighty as our God. He is the Lord alone, the One True God who is sovereign over all these things. However, the way that Habakkuk concludes his prophecy is as compelling as anything I have read in the Prophets. He says no matter what, I will rejoice in the Lord. Read verses 16 to 19 again! There is a book inspired by these verses, "Hinds Feet in High Places." The journey of Much Afraid. With growth and practice, a deer's hind feet can swiftly ascend to the mountaintops. That's the prophet's illustration and with a close relationship to Yahweh, we can have his strength to climb to the heights. This whole chapter is an amazing prayer about the might of God and the commitment of a prophet named Habakkuk!

The Book of Acts has Paul talking to King Agrippa in chapter 26. The rest of chapter 25 is setting up the testimony of Paul before Agrippa and the others. Isn't it exciting to hear Agrippa confront Paul about trying to persuade him to be a Christian (V28)? This is the third time that we have read through Paul's testimony, so we probably know it well. But the cool thing is, Paul gives us an example of how to share your story in a meaningful way so that others might be compelled, like Agrippa, to wrestle with the claims of Christ. Verses 15 to 18 go into greater detail than when he shared previously about what had happened to him. He tells them more about what Jesus said to him, which is interesting to me. He also makes it clear in his testimony about the need for faith and repentance by turning to God and being forgiven. In Tyler's evangelism class, he outlined the pathway for spiritual impact through the Gospel: 1st = Their story (listen); 2nd = Your story (testimony); 3rd = His story (the Gospel). How has the reading through the Book of Acts stirred up your desire to share the message of Christ with people in your life?

DAY 59 – Zephaniah 1 & Acts 27:1-26

I think you will find Zephaniah to be especially intriguing since it pertains to God's punishment over Judah and Jerusalem, but so often he mentions the whole world. "He will make a terrifying end of all people on earth." (V18) This is the last sentence in this chapter. Verse 14, NIV, reads, "The great day of the Lord is near..." The understanding of most scholars is that Zephaniah reveals a continuum from the time at hand to the distant future, which points to John's Revelation as the last book in the Bible and the coming of Christ (Mighty Warrior, in verse 14, NIV). God's intervention concerning the idolatry of Israel is a foreshadowing of judgment that is sure to come, portraying our Just God who will punish a world filled with sin. Because this points to Zephaniah's day, and also the end times, I am sure you will find his prophecy illuminating. What words of warning and doom seem to focus on Jerusalem then, and what parts point to a future Day that will culminate life on earth as we know it?

Isn't it fascinating how Paul had friends everywhere he traveled (V3). Paul was a decisive person, but he was also very encouraging and showed kindness to those he met. His trip was far from smooth, right?! I have not thought of Paul as a prophet, but he definitely heard from God; however, those in charge did not listen. (VV10-12) Verse 20, the human response that we are tempted to do ourselves is, "all hope was gone." As we have come to see, Paul had a bold faith and spoke with conviction to the people on the ship. (VV21-26) I find it challenging that the circumstances look very bleak but Paul believed the messenger (angel) no matter what. What do you think about angels? Paul had a visitation that became a manifestation of a heavenly being. This causes me to believe more so even though I have never had such a manifestation like that. However, I believe in the invisible protection and presence of angels, which brings me comfort and strength. What do you think? What might you learn from Paul, from this passage?

DAY 60 – Zephaniah 2 & Acts 27:27-28:16

The warning of Zephaniah is preceded by a call to repent (VV1-3). The Lord is ready to show mercy and give protection to those who realize their disobedience and repent of their idolatry. But doom is certain for the surrounding nations because of their pride and hard hearts. These pagan nations will never be restored, but God promised to return the remnant of his people to their land, care for them, and restore their prosperity again (V7). Of all the warnings of doom, the one forecasted about Nineveh is the most devastating in a long list of rebellious people who ignore the Living God. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered all the Philistine cities mentioned in verses 4 to ,7 just like Zephaniah announced. Verse 11 has a promise that one day will be fulfilled: “The Lord will terrify them as he destroys all the gods in the land. Then nations around the world will worship the Lord, each in their own land.” At the end of history, all people in all places will worship God alone. Amen!

Paul’s journey to Rome continues in our reading for today. The episode we read today could very well be made into an exciting movie with such intense action, and the survival of 276 people abroad hanging in the balance. But it doesn’t stop there; the whole bunch makes it to the island of Malta so that a poisonous snake can take a chunk out of Paul’s arm. Yikes! But this did not deter Paul or the work of God among the people of the island. These are exciting and heroic stories of Paul’s journey to Rome. The whole time, I am noticing how confident Paul is about the Lord getting him to Rome. Circumstance upon circumstance would say otherwise, but nothing would shake the faith of Paul. I imagine Paul had quite an impact on the sailors and prisoners but also on the people of that island. He made the most of every opportunity, just like he wrote in the letter to the Colossians (4:5-6). Somehow, fellow believers heard about his soon arrival in Rome and traveled 43 miles to greet him and escort him to Rome (V15). But when he arrived in Rome, he was chained to a guard and put under house arrest. We sometimes make that seem like an easier way to be imprisoned, but remember, he is innocent. How does this action-packed section strike you? What gets your attention? Why?

DAY 61 – Zephaniah & Acts 28:17-31

61 days in the Book of Acts plus the challenging prophetic warnings from Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah... very impressive. Zephaniah 3 begins with the same kind of warnings and doom that go with the territory of disobedience and idolatry. So, I won’t comment on those verses, but beginning in verse 9, the prophet shares hope and deliverance for God’s people. That is the heartbeat of our God to rescue and save. Within these 11 verses, we read a favorite Scripture for many believers: “The Lord your God is with you (Immanuel), the Mighty Warrior (also mentioned 1:14) who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer

rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.” (V17) Isn’t that fantastic! This verse is enough for me to think about and even memorize. It really portrays my picture of God. Which verse from the second half of chapter 3 stirs your heart? There are many to choose from.

Always remember that the heart of God is to redeem and restore, even though we are often disobedient and complacent. How does the unfailing love of God uplift your heart?

This concludes our journey through the Book of Acts. Each time I take the time to read through this New Testament book I am renewed again in the beauty of the church and the power of the Gospel. In some ways, this last section in Acts is disappointing because most of the Jews in Rome who heard the truth of the Gospel and the certainty of Christ’s resurrection but did not believe, and 2000 years later, that is mostly unchanged. After the Lord called Isaiah to be a prophet in Isaiah 6, these words quoted in verses 26 & 27 of our final chapter are spoken to Isaiah. The Jews would not listen to Isaiah and they wouldn’t listen to Paul. Isaiah proclaims more messianic prophecies about the coming Messiah than any other prophet. I like the idea of being an Acts 29 church, with the meaning of the Book of Acts continuing through our church and our lives. What ideas do you have about being an Acts 29 person? You might wonder about the life of Paul, like, did he ever get released? Paul is believed to have been under house arrest from 60 to 62 AD. Paul was later released and traveled freely. According to tradition, Paul was imprisoned again in Rome in about AD 64 and was martyred there during Nero’s persecution of believers. How does the life of Paul inspire you?