



ACTS
DEVOTIONAL

By Pastor Phil Emerson

NAME: _____

OUR DISCIPLESHIP FLOW

At Emmanuel Church, we are passionate about living out the call to be disciples of Jesus Christ, and make it our goal to see His Kingdom come in our lives and the world in which we live. We recognise that in Biblical times, a disciple was someone who followed a teacher or rabbi, not simply to gain head knowledge to pass an examination, but to be fully immersed in the life of the rabbi, and *learn his ways*, so that they in turn could replicate this to the world around them. As Christians, we are now those who have been invited to ‘follow’ Jesus and all of His ways, and we therefore call ourselves His disciples.

“This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.” 1 John 2:5,6

We therefore want to take seriously the words of Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20 to make disciples and also commit to an ongoing journey of teaching and discipleship together.

We all have differing personalities and learning styles. At Emmanuel, we recognise this diversity within the church body and therefore desire to support and journey together as we relate with God and each other in some of the following environments:

- **Public (20+)**

In the Bible, we see Jesus seeking to make disciples as He engaged with larger numbers of people, e.g., His interaction with the crowds (Matthew 4:25; Luke 14:25), and the 72 (Luke 10:1-24).

At Emmanuel, we want to use each of our **larger gathered environments** as an opportunity to make disciples, e.g., **Sunday services, Friday Youth/Kids’** environments, **men’s/women’s** gatherings.

- **Social (10-15)**

Jesus demonstrated the necessity for **smaller accountable relationships** as an essential part of the life of a disciple. He did this by teaching and doing life with his twelve disciples (e.g., Matthew 10).

At Emmanuel, small accountable relationships are offered through:

Lifegroup 12s

These are **gatherings of 10-15 people** who meet bi-weekly in homes or around specific interests, e.g., crafts, football.

- **Personal (2-5)**

As well as having smaller accountable relationships amongst His twelve friends, Jesus also seemed to go to even deeper levels of trust with three in particular – Peter, James and John (Matthew 17; Mark 9). At Emmanuel, we seek to do this through:

Lifegroup 3s

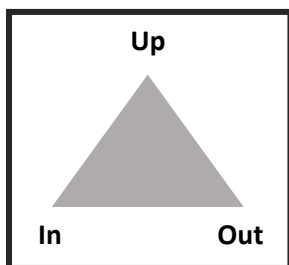
These are smaller **gatherings of 2-5 people** who are committed to transparent and accountable relationships in order to grow together in following Jesus. The aim for these groups is that after 1-2 years, each person in the group would be able to lead a smaller number of people themselves and replicate the process... **disciples making disciples!**

- **Intimate (1-1)**

Jesus regularly withdrew to spend time alone with the Father. This is the ultimate goal of discipleship, that each member of our church family would increasingly spend time alone with the Father and grow in devotion and desire to see the Kingdom come.

A TOOL TO USE

As stated previously, 1 John 2:6 makes it clear that for those of us who call ourselves disciples of Jesus, our goal should be to daily walk in the ways of Jesus, our Rabbi. As we examine the New Testament we see that Jesus lived His life based on three relationships: **Up** – with His Father; **In** – with His chosen followers; **Out** – with the hurting world around Him. This is illustrated in the following triangle:



Jesus taught and modelled out to His disciples how to live into each of these areas in life.

Up

Jesus frequently left the disciples to spend personal time with the Father (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16). He taught them the significance of prayer, and how to pray and communicate with the Father (Luke 11:1-13). When comparisons with one another or insecurities presented themselves, He spoke into it in love and challenged them into a greater depth of living (Mark 9:33-37; Matthew 18:1-5).

In

Jesus had significant relationships with others in which He intentionally invested (12s and 3s). When He went to engage with the Father He brought the three with Him (Matthew 17:1). He taught them and modelled out the significance of Sabbath and rhythms of rest (Mark 6:31). He demonstrated with His life the significance of generosity and sacrificial love for others (John 13:1-17).

Out

Jesus personally lived a life that engaged with the crowds and the broken world around Him. He healed the sick (Matthew 8:1-4), fed the poor (Mark 6:30-44), and cast out demons (Matthew 8:28-34). But with the people who were closest to Him, He challenged them to do the same (Mark 6:37), and when they took risks themselves He critiqued and gave honest feedback to call out more for them (Luke 10:17-20).

As we spend time alone or together in this devotional, we want to help and encourage you to engage in each of these ways – UP, IN, and OUT.

HOW TO USE THE BOOK

First

If you haven't already done so, please take a second to fill in your name on the inside of the front cover. There'll be a lot of identical books floating around, and we don't want yours to get lost.

Prepare

Get ready for each session by spending some time to invite the Holy Spirit to speak to you. The Bible is a written word (logos), which becomes a living word (rhema) as the Holy Spirit breathes upon it and speaks directly to our lives through it.

Commit

Commit to the journey. Discipleship is not a commitment to a moment, but to a lifetime journey. As you personally commit to journeying with God daily, commit to others by sharing what you are learning (possibly in Lifegroup 12s or 3s), and in this way encouraging one another in what God is saying.

Reflect & Respond

Each day, as you spend personal time with God, we encourage you to ask the following two questions:

- 1) What is God saying to me?
- 2) What am I going to do about it?

This is how we become doers and not just hearers of what God is saying.

INTRODUCTION TO ACTS

Welcome to this fascinating book of the Acts of the Apostles, which records the birth and growth of the early church beginning in the Jewish capital of Jerusalem and ending in Rome. The time period of the twenty-eight chapters spans some thirty years. Acts is written by Luke, who also penned the Gospel of Luke, and it highlights two main characters, Peter and Paul. Of course, we will be introduced to many other interesting and noble characters, but these two men hold massive importance: Peter, opening the hearts of Jewish believers to the Gentile world; and Paul, the one to whom was given the ministry to those Gentile nations.

Acts is a book of explosive Christian history; it is also a book of theology. It interprets the words, actions, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and it forms the basis of much of what Christians have believed for the past 2,000 years. We are introduced to the Holy Spirit, who appears in chapter 2. We will see miracles and martyrdom, forgiveness and faith, and much, much more.

So, coffee on, Bible opened, journal and pen ready. Take your seat in a comfy chair, and let's go on the ride of our life!

Phil

Read

Acts 1

Live

As I begin this incredible book of Acts, I feel like a baby bird with my mouth wide open. My prayer is, *“Lord, come, feed and nourish my heart with the riches of Your grace through this story of the birth of the church.”* If we didn’t have this wonderful book, we would be playing a guessing game at how the gospel made it to the Gentiles. How did it get out of Jerusalem to end up in Rome and even as far as Spain? Dr Luke writes what he calls *“an orderly account”* to a chap called Theophilus who may have been a Christian wanting instruction. Some theories romanticise the name Theophilus because it means ‘God lover’, although I tend to swing to the idea he may have been a Roman official to whom Luke is telling the history of the Christian movement. Some think that Luke was writing this as a defence for Paul, who, at the end of the book, ends up in prison awaiting his sentence. It is important to remember that Luke takes a specific vein of the church. He does not record all the happenings. Places like Galilee hardly get a mention. The church was booming into life in loads of other places as well.

I think I could someday write a book on the first eleven verses of this chapter. I’d love to let my imagination run a little wild around these forty days of the resurrected Christ: His surprise visits to many of His followers; His final sayings and prompts as He prepares His friends for His soon departure to glory; His reassurance of the soon-coming Holy Spirit, Who would come, and stay, for the next couple of thousand years. And oh boy, I imagine watching the Son of man rise (slowly, I think) up into the clouds, talking to me as He moves steadily upwards. I feel the emotion as He disappears, and then I realise two angels are standing in the middle of our group saying, ‘Take a chill pill, Phil.’ Sorry, I’m getting carried away!

Pray

Father, I don’t have to feel guilty or make excuses when I’m with You. You still cry out for the thirsty ones to come to You and drink. You still call to the weary and heavy laden to come to You for rest. So, to You I come today. In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

Today is the incredible and beautiful story of the Holy Spirit arriving on planet earth. He comes as our teacher, comforter and life companion to equip us and teach us about Jesus and the Father. The Greek word is 'Parakletos'; it pictures a rescue vessel, meaning one who draws alongside. I love this. He came two thousand years ago and He is as fresh and available for us today. However, it is important to realise that before we can be filled, we must recognise our emptiness. By gathering together for prayer, according to what they had been instructed, these followers of Jesus were in obedience. They hadn't a clue what was coming or what to expect, but they knew they couldn't do it by themselves. While we mightn't get the wind and the fire as displayed here, it is really important to note that we need to be filled with the Holy Spirit just as much as these people did. Remember, before Jesus went out to fast, pray and be tempted of the devil, the Spirit of God came and rested on Him. If Jesus needed this before He faced the battles of life, how much more do we need it? We can take a leaf from the book of these disciples in today's story; they obeyed Jesus' teaching, they were together in complete unity, and they had faith to wait for what was promised.

In this book of Acts, we see the dynamics of the earliest church, the nature of their fellowship, the intensity of their prayer life, and their out-and-out zeal to declare the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. Through this example, our own situation is called into question. What does it mean to be the church today and what are we to be doing? Their primary focus was evangelism, but not just in words. In Acts, we see the entire process of calling, healing, empowering, and sending people forth to love and obey Jesus Christ. If we allow it, this book will challenge us to a spirituality that can renew our churches today.

Pray

Father, as I read of the Holy Spirit coming, I believe that You've forgiven my unbelief; now free me even more from its insidious presence. Turn my eyes outward to my lost and broken community, and make me bold to proclaim Your Kingdom. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

I love this forging of a new sense of identity that the Holy Spirit was doing ever so gradually but nonetheless powerfully in the disciples. They slowly began to understand that they were part of a new community of the Spirit, and they saw the need to call all people, Jews and Gentiles, to repentance and fellowship with this new community, the church. As we saw in the last chapter, baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the Lord's Supper became outward signs of inward grace. In this chapter, we have healing breaking out and the emphasis is very much on relationships. We are told this lame man was each day, *“put beside the temple gate named Beautiful”*. It would seem that nothing in his life matched the name of the gate until one day he asked Peter and John for a few pence, and boy did he get his money's worth. They gave him more than he asked for, for when they prayed, he leapt and jumped and worshipped. I love it!

The explosive energy and dynamite of the early church is so contagious to read; the power of this living document will touch you. As you work through these quiet times, may you experience the calling, healing, empowering and sending dynamic of the Holy Spirit! I love the day and age in which we live; it's a great time to be alive, for even as there's growing turmoil in the world, there's unruffled triumph in heaven. There is a peaceful certainty that the gospel will win the day, the nations, and the cosmos. What a gem it is to have these writings, to consider the acts of God's grace, the good news of His Kingdom, the dominion of redemption and restoration. My hope is that by reading this story of the expansion of the gospel, it will increasingly impact us and our communities the same way it landed on the hearts of the men and women of Peter's day, not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.

Pray

Father, I pray for my spiritual eyes to open ever increasingly to the fact that the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead lives in me. The very things the early apostles did, and even Jesus did, I can do. Oh, I do love that. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

When God starts to move, it doesn't take long before the old flesh reacts. Five thousand men, not counting women and children, have come to faith in Jesus and the religious spirits are doing handstands and backflips. Peter and John get hauled in to be asked the big question, 'Whose name are you boys operating in?' Of course, we now know that this book of Acts calls us to a vital experience with the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised power to the disciples after the Holy Spirit came upon them and that's what we are now witnessing. The book of Acts reveals the Holy Spirit as the driving force behind all meaningful ministry in Jesus' name. It makes me ask, where do we look for spiritual power today? Education? Work? Religious upbringing? Acts calls us to a Spirit-filled life and we need to ask God to fill us with the Spirit as we face constant challenge. We really need Him to fill us with power for the task of experiencing and communicating the gospel. I am feeling very challenged about how I personally often try to do life and ministry apart from the Holy Spirit.

All Peter and John did was to allow the Spirit to work through them and glorify God, and things just couldn't be thwarted now. This whole situation started out pretty grim for these two boys. Peter and John were on trial before the same court that sent Jesus to Pilate to be condemned to death. Satan meant it all for great evil, but see what God does ... loads more people come to believe in Jesus, Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit yet again, and he gets to preach Jesus to the leaders of the Jews. These hostile examiners are pushed into a corner and have to confirm a miraculous healing, which in turn leads to all kinds of confusion among the enemies' ranks. And to top it all, God gets all the glory, and Peter and John are bolder for Jesus than ever before. I so love this!

Pray

Father, help me today to wait on You knowing that, according to Isaiah 40, if I wait on YOU, YOU will renew my strength. I will soar on wings like eagles; I will run and not grow weary; I will walk and not be faint. Help me to be that person today. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

This is one of those chapters that makes you sit up and pay attention. It's like that moment when the teacher bangs his hand on the desk to bring you back from your little meander out through the window. From reading the last few verses in the previous chapter, you can imagine how Ananias and Sapphira were watching the results and reaction to people giving large sums of money, people who were selling homes and land to further the work of the growing church. The word for 'kept back' used here means 'to misappropriate'. It's the same word used in the story of Achan in Joshua 7. Titus records the meaning of the word as 'stealing'. Bruce's commentary puts it this way, *"The story of Ananias is to the book of Acts what the story of Achan is to the book of Joshua. In both narratives an act of deceit interrupts the victorious progress of the people of God."* It was their money to do as they pleased with, but the fact they said they gave all when they held some back riled the anger of the hand of God.

This chapter enforces the utter importance of truth. May our prayer be to ask God to uphold truth in His church and to help us speak the truth before others. We are told in verse 11 that *"great fear gripped the entire church"*. I'm not surprised about that at all. I can only imagine it was one of those schoolroom 'sit up and listen' moments. It's funny too how the hand of judgement brought with it a growth spurt. In the next section, from verses 12-16, we read phrases like *"more and more people believed"*, and *"crowds of people were brought along"*. We even read how the sick were carried out into the street so Peter's shadow might fall on them as he passed by. I think we would call that 'revival'. The same Holy Spirit, Who is no respecter of persons, places or times, is the One Who lives in you and me. Could we join with faith to believe it will happen again? Come on, let's believe together!

Pray

Father, I'm not afraid of You as my judge, but I revere and love You as my Father. I intend to continue to make Your glory my supreme passion over my default mode of wanting a predictable, safe, manageable, hassle-free life. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

By this chapter, the early church has grown at an alarming rate: 3,000 saved and baptised in chapter 2; and 5,000 men (not counting women and children) in chapter 4. Now all kinds of issues are presenting themselves. The compassion project is maxed out and so the apostles call a meeting. This is a 'sorting the priorities' meeting where they realise that someone needed to keep the main thing the main thing, and that was connection with heaven's throne. I love that even for tasks we would view as downright practical, these apostles chose Spirit-filled people to do them. It wasn't viewed as a lesser job, just a different job, and this is so important to note. Although we know that God is in complete control of the universe, we often forget that He also has specific plans for our individual lives. Always remember He is sovereign everywhere, including in the secrecy of your own heart.

I am thankful for those people in my life who make me long to know God better. That's who I think Stephen might have been to me. He reminds me of people who have graced my life, those who, because of God's character in them, make me hunger and thirst for Him. This is what happens to me when I am exposed to Stephen. I read about him and I want to know God. Stephen is described as *"full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, full of God's grace and power."* He was a gift to the early church but could not be tolerated by her enemies. Think of a person who makes you want to know God better. Reflect on the qualities you see in him or her.

Our God is our Wonderful Counsellor, that is, our wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and redemption. There is no salvation apart from Him. Truth like this makes me long to be eternally one with the Father, co-equal, co-glorious along with Jesus and the Holy Spirit. There's nothing God can't do. He never just 'tries' to do anything. God simply executes His pleasure at His discretion.

Pray

Father, thank You for the beautiful Trinity Who perfectly reveals Your image and riches to me. It's because of ALL of You that I've been adopted into Your family and have been given all the rights and delights of a child. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

In terms of famous last words, Acts 7 has to hold the record for me. I'd love my last sermon to have the power and wisdom of this one. We are told that Stephen's face glowed like an angel's, and oh boy, did his words glow every bit as much. He displays a divine knowledge of the God story and then to top it all off, he shoots straight from the hip and tells these boys, 'You deliberately disobeyed God!' They were so enraged they stoned him to death. The vision Stephen had of his resurrected Lord waiting to receive him into glory causes me to weep as I write! The example of Stephen provides a ready case to illustrate the point that the Christian's duty is to serve God and have faith in Christ. Stephen also provides an example of Luke's main thesis in Acts: the growth of the church and the spread of the gospel is not the work of human beings, rather, both increase because the Holy Spirit is at work among His people. The Holy Spirit is leading the way, opening new avenues of spiritual understanding, thrusting the gospel into new geographical areas. At best, God's human servants are struggling to keep up the pace.

How could you allow the Holy Spirit to work in your situation today? What courage, what boldness, what clarity of vision we see in this chapter about someone who was full of the Holy Spirit. The first martyr of faith inspires wisdom and hope into our present day. I find this a fuelling, heart-encouraging, life-shaping summary of faith. What an amazing passage, and I'm so thankful it has been written to empower and inspire us. It is an interesting note at the end of this chapter that introduces us to the great Apostle Paul. Obviously, he didn't know that's who he was yet, as he is a hater of the Christ followers. I believe that this experience of watching Stephen die deeply affected and wrecked Saul. His death was a model of Jesus Himself, *"Lord, don't charge them with this sin."* One could not witness that and not be changed. Paul was about to be changed forever!

Pray

Father, all of these blessings come to me so freely because You've given Jesus for me so fully. Stephen must have truly seen You to have lived and died this way. Come on me afresh, Holy Spirit. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

After the death of Stephen, who has become known as the first martyr, it is interesting that chapter 8 begins with *“a great wave of persecution”*. Now we see the church scattered into Judea and Samaria. This always makes me smile. God used persecution to scatter His people. It was like spreading jam on your bread; it just goes everywhere. As the church grew dramatically, we see all kinds of peculiarities and people having no understanding of what was going on, like this man Simon, whom we are told was a sorcerer. He, being a man of much wealth, wanted to buy the gifts that he saw Peter and John use in healing the sick and giving sight to the blind. Peter rebuked him openly and Simon asked for prayer. These are powerful moments as the bride of Christ, the church, explodes on the scene.

We were introduced to Saul in the last chapter, one who will soon become a prominent figure in the gospel. Here, we have a magician, one who practiced the black arts, now coming to faith in Christ. And then we see the gospel introduced to Africa. One of the apostles, Philip, obediently followed the leading of the Holy Spirit and left a revival in Samaria for the sake of one man, willingly bearing testimony to the Lord Jesus. I love this. Philip never once questioned the Holy Spirit’s leading, even though he was being used mightily in Samaria. He just did as he was directed and headed from a bustling, busy, reviving city out into the desert. We are told that he spied a chariot and in drawing close heard the rider reading aloud from Isaiah 53. Philip knew the Scriptures so well he could take up from the very text the eunuch was reading, and beginning there, he proclaimed the Lord Jesus. May we be that kind of instrument in God’s hands for the salvation of the lost and for the glory of God. It’s good to know the God story and be ready at every opportunity to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ.

Pray

Father, when overwhelming need is staring me down, when hard things over which I have zero control arise, and when I hear stories which seem to contradict Your goodness and sovereignty, help me to see from the perspective of eternity. In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

This chapter contains the greatest set up. We begin with this boy Saul still on his rampage of ridding the earth of this new movement of Christ followers. He was soon to learn it was not just a flash in the pan; this was never going to go away. He runs right into a divinely organised encounter with the living God that would change his life and his eternal destiny, and affect possibly billions of others down through the centuries. Now that's a pretty cool plan. I love this story. It is one of my most read passages in Scripture as I love to try and experience the encounter. The more I study Saul's conversion, the more convinced I am that his conversion is typical. I know you're saying his experience was unique and dramatic, and few Christians will encounter the risen, glorified Lord as Saul did here, but *every* conversion which is recorded in heaven is unique. That is because our Lord always confronts, convicts, and converts men and women individually, in the light of their own actions and beliefs. Jesus dealt with Nicodemus very differently from the Samaritan woman. Nevertheless, conversion has certain elements which are vital and to be present in any salvation experience. I think about my own today when I was just a boy. I remember walking in from school and an old friend of my mum's was sitting at our kitchen table. Before I knew what was happening, I'm up beside him with a bun in hand, listening to him relay the story of the jailer in Acts 16. I could feel tears burn in my young eyes as my old mentor showed me the truth of Jesus dying for me, yes, imagine that, for me! I called on the name of the Lord that day, now over 50 years ago. Was it a divinely set up appointment? You bet it was. I got set up and I love it! There's not a day passes that I don't thank Him for revealing Himself as the God of hope. Because the gospel is true, I live by hope not by hype, by having faith in Him, not by pulling myself up by my spiritual bootstraps.

Pray

Father, thank You for Your great salvation. My hope is in Your steadfast love. My hope is in Your commitment to father me, pursue me, change me, and complete Your good work in me. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

This is another massive chapter containing another strategic step in the furthering of this eternal Kingdom. Today, we witness the gospel span out from the Jewish nation to the Gentile world, which was the start of it reaching you and me. As we look at this passage, there are a couple of lessons that would be good to note. First, the experience of Cornelius has a great deal to say to us; it indicates that even the righteous works of a man like Cornelius are not sufficient to save a man. If any of us were able to be saved by good works, it would not have been necessary for Peter to go to this man's house and preach the gospel. There is only one way into this amazing Kingdom and that is through grace alone, by faith alone, in Christ alone. It is only the blood of Christ that can atone for our souls. In the Old Testament, the cleansing that took place annually on the Day of Atonement was but a temporary setting aside of sin. The full and final cleansing to which the Day of Atonement looked forward was the cleansing that Jesus made by the shedding of His blood on the Cross of Calvary, once for all.

The second big lesson comes from the Apostle Peter himself. We have no call and no claim on who will be called into the marvellous light of the gospel of Christ. God had to bring this to Peter's knowledge by way of a vision. In this vision God declared that we have no right to say who deserves salvation and who doesn't. Isn't it funny how we can get above our station sometimes and think we are better than someone else, like the man down the street with the drink problem or the loner at the school gate who doesn't seem to mix? We are all born in sin, we are all in desperate need of God's grace, and so we are not to judge but to love all people everywhere.

Pray

Father, because You will bring my salvation to completion, throughout eternity I will celebrate the only love that was ever enough for me, the only love that will never let go of me, the only love that is better than life. No other spouse or lover, friend or child, church or club can possibly be to me and for me what You alone are. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

Peter gets called on the carpet today to explain what has been going on. I love this dynamic, life-changing chapter. Regardless of doubts from some members, the Jerusalem congregation confirms Peter's action in baptising the first Gentiles. More importantly, God is showing His will that Gentiles should receive salvation and become part of the spiritual community, the church. The stage is now set for Gentile evangelisation with this movement gathering momentum like a snowball rolling down a hill. Luke is ready to launch into the main theme of his book: to show the expansion of the gospel and the church throughout the Roman world. Luke leaves Peter in Jerusalem. He will return to him in chapter 12 and then again briefly in chapter 15, but after that, we won't hear of Peter again. Luke will focus on Paul.

This story leaves me breathless. God's forbearance is immeasurable; His kindness is inexhaustible; His plans are past finding out. As I read over and again this amazing story of the birth of the church, I see how when God leads us into difficult seasons, it's not to punish us but to prosper us. When He permits hardships, it's not to bring us harm but to give us hope. When He disciplines us, it's not to send us into the doghouse of His displeasure but to guarantee our good future. God knows exactly what He is doing with His people. He knows the plans He has for us. There are no mistakes in heaven, nor does He make things up as He goes along. He is not a God who reacts out of irritation, but One who always acts out of great affection. There are no coincidences in Him, just providences. That's what I see when I read today of the church at Antioch being born, a place where believers receive their name, 'little Christs' or 'Christ ones'. I love this man Barnabas, one who, when seeing what was going on, realises Paul is the right man for this job. He heads to Tarsus to look for him and brings him back to Antioch. Enter Paul!

Pray

Father, thank You that with You, things don't just happen. You turn my sighs into songs, my cynicism into servanthood. One day all will be revealed. The King will come in all His glory. What a day that will surely be. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Read

Acts 12

Live

Another new development in the history of the church arises today. James is the first of the twelve who followed Jesus to be martyred. Up to Acts 12, the church has been on a run, experiencing multiple exciting conversions one after another. Among them was Saul of Tarsus, then the Gentile centurion, then the mixed crowd of Jews and Gentiles in Antioch. Today, we are shown the ugly opposition inspired by Satan raising its head again. James was not the first Christian to die in faithfulness to Jesus. In chapter 7, Stephen was martyred and I'm sure, even though not recorded, others were too. But the death of James shattered the illusion that somehow the 'twelve' enjoyed a unique divine protection. James was one of the special 'three' of Jesus, often mentioned with his brother John and Peter. It is interesting that Jesus promised no special protection for even His closest followers; He warned them to be ready for persecution; they knew what they were signing up to.

I often use this passage in Acts 12 to try to explain the concept of the tension we live in today, especially when it comes to the subject of healing. I'm aware some will not agree, but from what I see, the Kingdom of God was revealed when the King (Jesus) came to earth. Whilst the Kingdom is here, it has yet to be fully revealed or consummated; this will happen when Jesus returns. So we live in a 'now' and 'not yet' tension. There are moments when the Kingdom breaks in and we see the 'now' of this reality – a terminally sick person gets gloriously healed, or a friend gets wonderfully saved and set free from the grip of sin. But then we watch a loved one die, or another tsunami wipes out thousands of lives and we know we are still in the 'not yet'. This is the only way I can explain Peter getting a supernatural prison breakout and James getting beheaded, all in a few verses. Another big lesson today surrounds Herod, teaching us that God takes His glory very seriously and never shares His glory with another.

Pray

Father, the battle for my heart's worship continues, daily and relentlessly. This conflict will persist until the Day Jesus returns to finish making all things new. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

In Acts 11, we have the birth of a great church in Antioch. We see many people coming to faith and the Gentile church growing at full speed. Then persecution hits. As we saw yesterday, even the highest and most esteemed offices of the apostles were not immune from this. With the Apostle James now dead and persecution breathing down their necks, this great church changes from a good seating church to a great sending church. It is easy to be a back seat driver in the ministry, to say “I’ll have the burden” as long as someone else does the work. God’s typical way of working is to send the people who have the burden to do the work. It tells us here that the Holy Spirit sends Barnabas and Saul. They were sent with fasting and prayer and by the laying on of hands. The laying on of hands was a formal commissioning to this ministry. Barnabas and Saul were certainly ordained before this, but they were now entering a different sphere of ministry. They were supported and sent by a specific congregation, the church in Antioch. As far as we can see, this had never happened before in the history of the church. There was no committee, no real processes. Barnabas and Saul were going out only with the call and power of the Holy Spirit. There is no doubt that whatever had happened to Paul in the years between his conversion and this moment, his call is now to the Gentile nations and not primarily to the Jews.

I love that God raises people for seasons, for times, and for peoples. We find that throughout the Old and New Testaments where God has His man or woman in the right place at the right time with all the necessary requirements built in to fulfil their call, destiny, and the work of the Kingdom. 1 Kings 17 is such a passage. In one of Israel’s darkest hours, we read, “*Then Elijah the Tishbite...*” He just appears. No genealogy, no introduction. Just BOOM! The right man for the job has been prepared.

Pray

Father, because of Jesus’ perfect and finished work, my transgressions are forgiven (all of them), my sins are covered (every one of them), and You will never hold me guilty for them. How can I not tell others, just as these folks in Acts did? In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

Today we arrive in Iconium, which is in modern day Turkey. It is a bit of a seesaw chapter really. 'We like you,' 'We don't like you,' on and on it goes. It starts off with lots of people believing in the message being preached, but then quickly swings to Paul and Barnabas almost being stoned. This chapter reminds me how easily we are swayed by the opinions of people. We all know it is common for people to change their minds so quickly. In verses 11-13, after Paul and Barnabas heal the lame man, the excited crowd in Lystra declare Paul and Barnabas are Greek gods visiting the earth. In Greek mythology, it was common for the 'gods' to come to earth in human form. There is an interesting little statement in verse 19, *"Then some Jews arrived from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowds onto their side."* These Jews were not just content to kick Paul out of their own region; they followed him and brought their persecution with them, stoning him, leaving him for dead. Some of these unfriendly, persecuting Jews from Antioch and Iconium would have travelled more than 100 miles just to make Paul miserable and to kill him! It says in verse 20 that when the believers gathered around Paul, he just got up. I think this is either a supernatural healing or a raising to life from the dead, something that we could miss in a quick reading. Paul had been stoned with huge stones thrown with venom and force. They obviously thought he was dead as they walked off and left him. But Paul is only getting started and God raises him up again.

We know the mob is fickle. People can be your friend one day and your enemy the next. Jesus knew this. The people who shouted, *"Hail the King of the Jews!"* as they threw their coats for Him to walk on were the very same people who shouted, *"Crucify Him! We won't have this man to reign over us."* Let's be careful we don't get swayed with every wind of doctrine.

Pray

Father, who do I have in heaven but You, or what could I possibly desire more on this earth? You alone have words of eternal life, grace sufficient for my soul, peace that passes all understanding, and the joy I desperately crave. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Read

Acts 15

Live

It was very difficult for some Jewish Christians to accept Gentiles could be brought into the church as 'equal partners' without first coming through the Law of Moses. It was one thing to accept the occasional God-fearer into the church, someone already in sympathy with Jewish ways, it was quite another to welcome large numbers of Gentiles who had no regard for the Law and no intention of keeping it. This was huge for the Jewish church leaders. They obviously felt threatened in so many ways. The questions raised by the Jerusalem council was immense. Are Christians saved by faith alone, or by a combination of faith and obedience to the Law of Moses? Is the work of Jesus by itself enough to save the one who trusts in Him, or must we add our work to His work in order to be saved? The questions still go on today. Saved through faith alone, by grace alone, in Christ alone. That's it! I sometimes think that we feel we know better than God, which is crazy. These leaders were going to have to trust the Holy Spirit in this process or they were doomed. I see this throughout Scripture in stories like Sarah, who laughed at the thought of having a baby in her nineties, and Mary, who was shocked at the thought of giving birth to Jesus as a virgin. Her response in Luke 1:38 is what I'd like mine to be. Though overwhelmed, Mary believed: *"I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word"*. Jesus told many parables around this very subject of the people He calls, parables like the persistent widow, the crooked servant, the story of wages being given out for people who had worked all day and the ones who had worked for only an hour receiving the same. All of this challenges our thinking about the people whom Jesus would call. May God redeem us from any elder brother thinking, someone who was as far removed from the embrace of the father as the prodigal in a pig pen was.

Pray

Father, thank You for the freedom to acknowledge when life feels like its demands are a little too much. It's so good to remember today that the gospel calls me to hope, to believe, to pray, and to trust. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

Today we will see the powerful leading of the Holy Spirit at work. We will see Paul's sensitivity, understanding when God says 'yes' and 'no'. I think if I was hindered to go and tell someone about Jesus, I would blame it on the devil. In this chapter, we find Paul on his second missionary journey that began in chapter 15 with Paul and Silas passing through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening churches along the way. In Derbe and Lystra, Paul enlisted a young disciple named Timothy who would become a life-long fellow-worker and friend in the Kingdom. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they found themselves in Troas, where Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia asking for help.

From Troas to Samothrace and then Neapolis, the company finally arrived in Philippi, a major city of Macedonia and a Roman colony. It marked Paul's first ministry on the European continent, which by the way is pretty good for us. Here they found themselves in prison, beaten, whipped and bloodied, but instead of licking their wounds or complaining about demonic attacks, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns at midnight, lifting their worship to heaven. While this was happening, a great earthquake shook the prison and broke free their chains. Assuming all had fled, the jailor, knowing what would happen to him as a result of the prisoners getting away, was about to kill himself when Paul stopped him. When the jailor asked what he must do to be saved, Paul and Silas told him to believe on the Lord Jesus. They then proceeded to teach him and his family the Word of the Lord. That same night, the entire family of the jailor were saved and baptised.

What an incredible story! This is my own personal story. I came to faith through this passage and always refer to it as my 'note from heaven'. This chapter shows the complete guidance of a holy God working through people whose hearts were fully devoted and given over to Him.

Pray

Father, as distant and disconnected as I was from You as a sinner, I'm now one with You through the perfect work of redemption finished by Jesus at the Cross. Thank You a thousand times over for the Macedonian call to Paul. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Read

Acts 17

Live

The church is like a runaway steam train gathering more and more momentum and becoming impossible to stop. All of heaven is shovelling on the coal and all of hell can't stop this eternal movement. Is it any wonder Paul says to the church at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 2:8, *"None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."* If Satan had foreknowledge (he has none) he would have levelled every tree in Palestine so none could be found to nail the Saviour to. I love this chapter which shows us how to find every opportunity to preach Christ. Upon arrival in Athens, Paul's spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. Again, he went to the synagogue daily to reason with the Jewish and Gentile worshippers. He also reasoned with others each day in the marketplace. Paul spoke to them by finding common ground from which to launch into his gospel message. He keyed into the inscription, *'To the unknown god'* and began to preach about the real King, the real, only wise God. What inspired wisdom!

I love that nothing, and no one, can resist God's will, alter His plans, or derail His decrees. Paul found every opportunity to gossip the gospel, even finding ways and means through worldly idols. May God help us today to not be ashamed of our God but to make Him known at every given moment. Paul's cycle was simple but powerful; he would find strategic cities, see some people converted, create home groups, plant churches and elect leaders to lead when he moved on. He would then do the rounds when he could, teaching and equipping leaders, and when he couldn't travel, he would write letters to direct, correct, and encourage. Paul was a master builder and had been given a divine download from heaven, a revelation of the mystery of the Kingdom, and here we see it unfolding beautifully. This is the bride of Christ in all her splendour, the church.

Pray

Father, may I be like Paul and seize every opportunity to enlarge the Kingdom. May I live today to the praise of Your glorious gospel and gossip Your name at every corner. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Read

Acts 18

Live

In this chapter, we have Paul's coming to Corinth. This was a commercial city with two harbours and a sordid reputation for sexual misconduct. To act like a Corinthian was to practice fornication, and a 'Corinthian companion' was a prostitute. This sexual immorality was permitted by the worship of Aphrodite, the goddess of fertility and sexuality. It was here in Corinth where Paul became acquainted with Aquila and Priscilla who shared his profession, tentmaker. This was a special relationship for Paul in church planting and in moral and spiritual encouragement. After he had a night vision, Paul stayed for eighteen months, ministering and teaching these people. Of course, he would suffer opposition, but one word from God was worth every voice from every dialect combined. We see his public reasonings with the Jews, and when they rejected him, he turned to the Gentiles. There is no stopping Paul. He was anointed and equipped to do the biz of church planting, so when one door closes, he just heads to the next open one. This guy was a machine when it came to church planting, and his strategy of looking for able-bodied leaders to leave in charge was incredible. What an example the apostle Paul is. Just reading about him makes me aware that nothing is more revealing than my words, both the conversations I carry on in my mind and the communications I share with others. This is both sobering and encouraging, for we all bear the responsibility to tell others of the hope that is within us.

Verse 18 mentions briefly that Paul had made a vow. It doesn't labour why, but the purpose of the vow of a Nazirite was to express a unique consecration to God, promising to abstain from all products of the grapevine, to not cut one's hair, and to never come near a dead body. I wonder if the intensity of immorality in Corinth made Paul want to express his dedication and separation unto the Lord more than ever. Sin will either take us from God or drive us to Him. Paul chose the latter!

Pray

Father, I want to listen to what You are constantly saying to me, Your beloved child. I want my heart to be so full of Your grace that it will be difficult not to speak with grace-seasoned words today. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

In the last chapter, we left Paul on his circuit visiting and building up the churches, but we have not forgotten, nor has he, the promise he made to his friends at Ephesus to return. This chapter shows us his performance of that promise, his coming to Ephesus, and his continuance there for two years. Paul laboured in the Word in Ephesus, starting off with helping some weak believers who had gone no further than John's baptism. There has been some controversy over these people at Ephesus as to whether or not they were believers. Not to get into controversy, but it is important to point out the use of the term 'disciple' which was used for a follower. Some will say they were only followers of John the Baptist, but the text doesn't define that. I think it is safe to say they were believers who hadn't moved on, for whatever reason. They got through the door but had progressed no further. Paul was here to fix that. He taught for three months in the synagogue of the Jews, and when he was driven from there, he taught the Gentiles in a public school, the hall of Tyrannus, confirming his doctrine with miracles all along the way.

This man Paul leaves me breathless when I study him. Stuff was happening at an alarming God-rate, people getting healed through handkerchiefs. And, of course, hell is alerted. The devil hates this stuff and along comes the counterfeit spirits and people. The sons of Sceva think they will jump in on this only to be left bloodied and beaten by the evil spirits. The city of Ephesus was a demonic stronghold. The malpractice of the enemy, sorcery, superstition and idolatry were all present in this place. There would have been no shortage of books in this city containing sorcery and other ungodly and forbidden arts. We are told in verses 19 and 20 that the conviction of God fell upon the people practicing these dark arts and they brought their books out to be burned. I did a little Google calculation of today's value and realised it would have been in excess of four million pounds.

Pray

Father, nothing can alter Your plan for my life, or for the entire cosmos. From the overflow of such amazing grace I will purpose to speak to others today and be like the Apostle Paul. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

Here we see Paul's travels up and down Macedonia, Greece, and Asia, and his coming to Troas. I love this story of Paul the visiting speaker spending one Lord's Day at Troas. He started well but it says, "*he prolonged his speech*". We would say he was 'rabbiting on'! The problem was he preached on until midnight and a young man fell asleep. If you've ever fallen asleep when a preacher rabbited on, you will feel this young man's plight. The only issue was he was sitting on the window sill ... three floors up. And yes, he fell out and died. Paul just took this in his stride and raised Eutychus to life. And then, believe it or not, he went back up and picked up where he had left off. He continued right through the night until daybreak. How cool is that!

In this chapter Paul preaches his farewell sermon to his friends at Ephesus, now that he was leaving that country. He had no way of knowing what lay ahead of him but it would appear by today's reading that he knew it wasn't good. Yet none of that deterred him. Paul thought of himself as a runner who had a race to finish, and nothing would keep him from finishing the race with joy. Paul speaks of "*my race*" which I love because just as he had his race to run, so we have our own race to run and the great thing is that God calls us to finish it with joy. Paul knew, as all these believers knew also, that they would never see him again. His parting words are, "*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*" This is the best beatitude of all. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told us how to be blessed, and here God tells us how to be more blessed! The Ephesians would see Paul's face no more. They part with prayer, tears, and a sending-off party, believing they would only meet again in eternity. Sometimes we think of Paul as being hard and unemotional, a dispenser of doctrine, but here we see his pastoral, loving side, a man of deep love and emotion.

Pray

Father, if there's one thing I want to excel in, it's the academy of Your grace. Your grace brought salvation to me. I could never earn it through my own efforts apart from the Spirit's work. In Your strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

I love this story about the prophet Agabus who came down from Judea. It is one of my favourite stories. He took Paul's belt and bound his own hands and feet to indicate that Paul would be bound and delivered to the Gentiles in Jerusalem, as the Holy Spirit revealed. He was dead right. This is what was going to happen and both Paul's travelling companions and those in Caesarea pleaded with Paul not to go to Jerusalem. But Paul is insistent that he is going all the way even though it seems like the travels are over and Paul is coming to the crunch of his call with this final farewell. Reading about the Apostle Paul convicts me about how sporadic my prayer life has been on behalf of servants of the gospel, and I have no excuse, since we are all one of those servants. My great consolation is in knowing that no one is more watchful and devoted to prayer than Jesus. He lives to intercede for us; He is always praying for us; He never stops. And because Jesus prays, we can pray with boldness, joy, and confidence.

When Paul arrives in Jerusalem, he is seized by an angry crowd who aren't just set on roughing him up a bit; they wanted to kill him. Paul had been near death because of the attacks of murderous mobs before, and each time God preserved him, for Paul knew he was destined for Rome. Paul's only desire is to follow Jesus and one can't help but notice how like Jesus he has become. I get challenged when I read about Paul as I realise I am called to follow after Jesus also. We shouldn't be surprised when events in our lives are like events in Jesus' life. There may be a time of temptation in the wilderness, a time when people come to us with needs only God can meet, a time when we seem at the mercy of a storm, a time when we must cry out to God as in the Garden of Gethsemane, a time when we must simply lay down our lives and trust God will gloriously raise us up.

Pray

Father, may my passion to be more like Jesus surface today. May the gospel be made clear through me. Keep my heart alive to Your great affection and mercies. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

We have often heard it said that being in the will of God is the safest place to be. Going by the New Testament, that is definitely not true. Neither Jesus nor John the Baptist made it past thirty-five! Being under God's protection is not a guarantee of physical safety but it does guarantee that our Father is with us. He has ultimate purpose for us, and nothing happens to us that does not come through His gracious hands. We can live with confidence that our life on earth will not finish until that purpose for us is complete (unless we are really stupid and fly in the face of God). I love the line Horatio Spafford penned in his famous hymn, 'It Is Well With My Soul': *'But, Lord, 'tis for Thee, for Thy coming we wait / The sky, not the grave, is our goal'*, showing us we will end up safe and sound in heaven. Paul was so sure of God's hand in his life that he continued to move out boldly with the message of Jesus Christ in spite of intensifying physical danger. The protection of the Father's strong arms is always around us and His mighty but unseen acts keep us safe and secure as we walk through this life.

It is funny to see the reaction of people as the church grew at a mammoth rate. Paul had arrived in the city and these Jews didn't mind all this talk about Jesus, but they could not stand the idea that God might save Jews and Gentiles alike, and in the same way. These Jews did not have a problem with Gentiles becoming Jews but they were incredibly offended at the thought of Gentiles becoming Christians just as Jews became Christians, because it implied that Jews and Gentiles were equal, coming to God on the same terms. Paul was definitely one of a kind: an educated, intelligent, devout Jew who was also a Roman citizen. God would use this unique background to use Paul in a special way, even as He wants to use your unique background to use you in a special way.

Pray

Father, as I meditate and pray my way through these Scriptures, I'm deeply grateful You chose to reveal Yourself to me with words I can understand and trust. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

This man Paul has enthralled me in this study. How amazing to be able to say without fear of contradiction that he had lived before God with a clear conscience. Ananias was obviously offended by this as his own evil conscience was being challenged. He was well known for his greed. The ancient Jewish historian Josephus tells how Ananias stole the tithes that belonged to the common priests. There is nothing that reveals darkness more than light, and when Paul stood beside Ananias, we see that happen. We see in Paul the character of an honest man. He sets God before him and lives as if he is continually in God's sight. He is conscious of what he says and does, and, according to the best of his knowledge, he keeps from whatever is evil and cleaves to what is good. He is conscientious in all his words and conduct. Those who so live before God may, like Paul, have confidence toward both God and man. We certainly have every reason to trust God with all of our hearts because He loved us with all of His heart and sent Jesus into the world to be our Saviour. Since He has given Jesus to us and for us, we can depend on Him to give us everything else we need. So, leaning away from our own understanding, may we now lean fully upon His heart.

I love the decisiveness of Paul and his determination to come to Rome against all odds. Some decisions are no brainers, some require nothing more than sanctified common sense. It's incomparably comforting to know that it is God who determines our steps, even as we nervously punch an address into the satnav of our hearts. This doesn't mean we are to be passive in our decision making, but to realise that God is very present, opening doors we cannot shut and shutting doors we cannot open. Paul's desire was to go to Rome. It looked like he was going to die in Jerusalem, but Paul believed he had heard God. Never give up on the promise!

Pray

Father, I need Your peace to rule in my heart as I seek to choose wisely. I praise and bless You for Your sovereign, comprehensive, and constant engagement in my life. You are my ever present help in every matter, both urgent and mundane. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

Because Paul has set his life on the right path, we expect God to bless him by granting him a ‘not guilty’ verdict, and then a release from prison. Instead, Felix procrastinates, does not pronounce a verdict, and leaves Paul in prison for two years. When Paul is at his worst, God deals most gently and graciously with him, standing with him, and sparing him from almost certain death at the hands of assassins. Then Felix refuses to do his job, seeks to appease the Jews, looks for a bribe from Paul, and leaves him in prison for two years. (It probably would have been longer if Felix had not been removed from his position.)

Our problem is that we equate the goodness of God with material prosperity, physical health, and emotional well-being. Yet many are those saints who have come to savour the dark days of their lives because of the way God used adversity to draw near to them. Today, as I read this chapter, I can’t help but be drawn to God’s incredible faithfulness to me in some of the darkest valleys in my life. It felt at the time a little like I’d been forsaken, but as I look back, I see my God was never more present than in my pain, and for this I will always adore Him. The psalmist says it well in his third psalm when he declares, *“But You, O LORD, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high. I call out to the LORD, and He answers me from His holy mountain. I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me. I will not fear though tens of thousands assail me on every side.”* I’m sure Paul gathered strength from these amazing psalms of David, like the words in Psalm 73:26 *“My flesh and my heart fail; But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”* Paul has stood and witnessed before governors and officials and as we close out this chapter, we see him heading before another governor. He is one step closer to Rome.

Pray

Father, I love You for the way You love me, and I love the way You declare You will never ever leave me or forsake me. When I am weak, then I am strong in You. In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

Paul saw even the worst circumstances as an opportunity to proclaim Christ to the lost. In terms of his circumstances, this was not the best of times for Paul. He had been falsely accused of a crime, and there were numerous attempts on his life. Paul had been tried before the Sanhedrin, Felix, and now Festus, and none had the courage to declare him innocent even though his innocence was obvious. Now Paul stands before Agrippa, Bernice, Festus, and a group of other dignitaries. They cannot release him; they can only listen to him and suggest what to write when he is sent to Caesar. How easy it would have been for Paul to focus only on his innocence or to chastise Festus for his failure to execute justice, but Paul takes this opportunity when times are tough to preach the gospel.

I am drawn to this powerful prophecy in Habakkuk 3:17-19a *“Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength.”* The prophet is declaring that His praise should always be on our lips, no matter what the circumstances are. Whatever season we are in, let’s praise God for being the only One from whom all blessings flow, our loving Father Who does all things well, even when He doesn’t do all things easy. He is the sovereign Lord Who enthrones and dethrones rulers at His bidding. My mum always said her favourite little phrase in the Scriptures was, *“and it came to pass”*. She would say to me, “Son, everything comes and then it passes. That’s how life works.” Those were great words of wisdom for me then and for us today. Whatever we are going through, it comes, and it will pass. Paul’s eternal perspective was what kept this man ticking. He knew this life would pass but there was an incorruptible treasure waiting for him, stored up in heaven.

Pray

Father, You now count me righteous in Christ, Your beloved child, a citizen of the courts of heaven. I begin each day crowned with Your mercies, rooted in Your love, and standing in Your grace. In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

Paul just keeps telling his story well. The first time we hear him tell it, he says a light shone about him; the second time, he says it was a great light; today, he says it was a light brighter than the noonday sun. Every time he tells his story it seems to gather more momentum and what an incredible story this is becoming. When Felix called for Paul to speak with him, Paul spoke of *“righteousness, self-control, and the coming day of judgement,”* and it freaked poor Felix out (Acts 24:25). Today, we see King Agrippa looking for a bribe and governor Festus accusing Paul of being insane.

Divine judgment will render to every person according to their works. Our works will never justify us, actually, the opposite is true, they only condemn us. But I love the truth that divine grace satisfies divine judgment through the death and sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the Cross of Calvary. He paid the penalty for our sins – past, present and future. Full stop. He offers the forgiveness of sins and the assurance of eternal life to all who trust in Jesus. Choose divine grace; the only other option is disastrous – divine judgement! The beauty of grace is that the life we never deserved is given so freely by God. There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, and not only no condemnation, but also no separation. What a God we have, righteously hating sin but powerfully loving us the sinner. He is so good to us even when our lives are just as full of hard things as good things. Even when I feel, in heart and body, more like aging adult than renewed youth, even when the healing doesn't come on my schedule, and when there's more month left over at the end of the pay check, I will rejoice and take joy in Him, the Lord of my salvation, the strength of my heart, the God of all grace. Paul is insistent on going to Rome to stand before Caesar, and so as we see him leave Festus and Agrippa, that's exactly where he's headed.

Pray

Father, You are my good Father. In every season of life, You truly are the Vine and more and more I realise I am but the branch. I can only bear fruit when I remain in the Vine. May I stay strong in You. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Read

Acts 27

Live

If you are a Christian, God has a purpose for your life, and I assure you that God will ensure it will be accomplished. What a comfort the sovereignty of God is to the believer. It assures us that what God starts, God finishes. Paul will end up in Rome, awaiting the outcome of his appeal. He may never see the Philippian saints again. But Paul is not anxious over them because he knows that it was God who saved them, and He will finish what He started. He writes in Philippians 1:6, *“For I am sure of this very thing, that the One who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ.”*

Paul’s ship sets sail but soon gets blown off course and they make their way to ‘Fair Havens’. Then, against the advice of Paul, they set sail again but a storm comes, and what a storm it is. We are told in verse 20 that all hope was gone. That is pretty bleak, but Paul gets a vision from an angel of the Lord that all would be saved. That is the good news; God will fulfil His purposes and promises to Christians. The bad news is that if anyone tries to do it their own way, they are doomed; God will also make good on His warnings to unbelievers. Paul has such a relationship with God that he could say, *“an angel of the Lord, to whom I belong and whom I serve, stood beside me”*. What confidence. When everything in nature (and it would seem in hell itself) was roaring the opposite, Paul makes this bold claim, *“I believe God that it will be just as He said.”* Oh my word, I love this so much. The ship was lost but every life was saved. One little observation worthy of note: verse 41 tells us the ship struck a sand bar and the bow *“stuck fast and became unmovable”*. This is the same Greek word used in John 15 for abiding or remaining in Christ. Pretty cool, I think!

Pray

Father, don’t let me miss Your majesty revealed in the ocean and mountains, sunrises and sunsets, storms and rainbows. Help me to live at the pace of grace that I may notice more of the wonders of Your love everywhere. This is what I learn from Paul’s writings, to look through Your eyes, Father. In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

I'm not sure if you've noticed, but some of the books of the Bible end in interesting ways. The Book of Jonah has a weird ending with no real clue to what Jonah finally did. Then there are the feel-good endings, such as we find in the last chapter of Ruth where she meets her dream man and lives happily ever after. There is also the much-disputed ending of the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of John. The conclusion to the Book of Acts is unique in a different way; it does not answer some questions which are bombing through my mind! We read about Paul arriving on Malta and being bitten by a snake, which should have killed him, but didn't. Then we have a little throwaway line in verse 14, *"And so we came to Rome."* We read of him preaching to the Roman guards, but why is there no account of Paul standing before Caesar? Why are there accounts of one rescue after another which enable Paul to get to Rome, and then in the final chapter of the book, we are not given any account of his trial and its outcome? Ah, now I get it! This chapter is not about Paul standing before Caesar in Rome, or even about Paul being released by Rome. It is about the advance of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In particular, it is about the advance of the gospel in the Gentile world under the powerful ministry of this great servant of God, Paul. This is a monumental moment in history, far more important than the fate of any one man.

Oh, how amazing is the God Story into which we weave our part. As we think about the end, how long before there's no more warring nations or divisive personalities, no more sexual assaults or abuses of power? How long, O Lord, how long? How long until lambs and wolves live together? How long, O Lord, how long until the knowledge of Your glory will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea? Until that Day, Jesus, may we serve You fully!

Pray

Father, You are the Prince of Peace, sovereign over angels and disciples, kings and conflicts. Grant me grace-seed to sow today, in light of the ultimate Day of the harvest of peace. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

