



LIFE GROUP CURRICULUM

WHATEVER IT TAKES
for the gospel

COTTONWOOD CREEK CHURCH

7-Session Outline

1. Whatever It Takes To Work Together

Main Passage: Acts 2:40–47

Focus Verse: Acts 2:42

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Big Idea: We are called to do God's mission together.

2. Whatever It Takes To Grow

Main Passage: Acts 4:1–22

Focus Verse: Acts 4:13

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

Big Idea: Spending time with Jesus changes us.

3. Whatever It Takes To Join God's Plan

Main Passage: Acts 5:17–41

Focus Verses: Acts 5:38–39

Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. ³⁹ But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

Big Idea: God is calling us to join His perfect plan.

4. Whatever It Takes To Be Faithful

Main Passage: Acts 6:8–7:60

Focus Verses: Acts 6:8–9a

Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.⁹ Opposition arose, however...

Big Idea: We will always face opposition to the world as believers in Jesus.

5. **Whatever It Takes To Make the Most of Every Opportunity**

Main Passage: Acts 8:26–40

Focus Verses: Acts 8:29–30a

The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot...

Big Idea: God uses those who are willing, flexible and available for His purposes.

6. **Whatever It Takes To Pray**

Main Passage: Acts 12:1–19

Focus Verse: Acts 12:5

So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

Big Idea: We should pray big prayers for God’s will to be done.

7. **Whatever It Takes To Reach People**

Main Passage: Acts 15:1–21

Focus Verse: Acts 15:19

It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.

Big Idea: We need to share that salvation is readily available to all who believe.

Introduction: What Is a “Whatever It Takes” Mentality?

I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.

1 Corinthians 9:22b

Paul was radically saved on the road to Damascus. It was there that he came face to face with Jesus and his life changed forever. This credentialed Jew became a slave to Christ as he went from killing Christians to preaching life to sinners, and he spent the rest of his days sacrificing everything for the sake of the Gospel. He was thrown in prison, flogged on numerous occasions, exposed to death again and again, beaten with rods, pelted with stones, shipwrecked three times, moved around from one dangerous place to another, deprived of sleep, food, water, shelter, and given a thorn in the flesh (2 Cor 11:21–12:10). But he did whatever it took to see more people come to faith in Jesus Christ until he ultimately gave his life for the Gospel.

It’s one thing to observe Paul’s life and say, “What a great man of faith!” It is an entirely different matter to say, “How do you have this same kind of *Whatever It Takes* mentality?”

We exist to love God and honor Him with our lives. In everything we do, we are called to worship Him and point others to the reality the Truth: that everyone stands guilty in their sin and must call upon the name of Jesus to be saved.

In this 7-Session Series, your group will be challenged by the lives and ministries of the early church in the book of Acts. We encourage you use the teaching videos in conjunction with this teaching curriculum in order to not only learn the passages but discuss them and challenge one another to apply them. God has called us to be a “**Whatever It Takes for the Gospel**” kind of people. May we embrace and pursue that mission!

Lesson 1: Whatever It Takes To Work Together

Main Passage: Acts 2:40–47

Focus Verse: Acts 2:42

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Big Idea: We are called to do God's mission together.

This entire series is focused on how we can develop a “Whatever It Takes for the Gospel” mentality. This first lesson is all about unpacking the importance of community as we look at pursuing the mission of God together.

What is the mission of God? This is why God exists: That He would receive all the glory and worship from all things. If that's God's mission, then what does that mean for us? We were created to carry out His mission! In everything we do, we have a call to represent Him so that all creatures will worship Him. But we aren't made to do this alone: We are called to do this together.

Four Truths About Working Together:

1) You Have a TEAM

Acts 2:42, *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

In the first chapters of Acts, Jesus ascends to Heaven, the Holy Spirit comes, Peter preaches at Pentecost and thousands are saved. What happens next? They begin meeting together! When you become a believer, you join a team. God did not leave you alone. Notice how the team of the early church functions: meet together regularly, fellowship, pray, eat, serve together and share the Gospel. We were not made to carry out God's mission alone.

Discussion Questions:

- Based on this passage and the pattern of the early church, how would you answer the person who claims that they have no need to be plugged into a community to grow spiritually?
- Read through those verses again. In what area(s) does your group operate in a similar manner? Are there area(s) where you need to improve?
- Why is a team important in the life of a Christian?

2) Your Team Has a PURPOSE

Acts 2:36, *“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”*

Every team needs a unified purpose. Antione de Saint-Exupery once said, “If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people together to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.” What does this mean? *Don’t teach team members to hammer planks. Talk to them about the ocean.* What was the early church’s unified purpose?

In summary, this verse is the Pentecost sermon in its simplicity. Make much of this Jesus who is ruler over all and Savior of all. We exist as a team to make much of this Jesus and Lord. What happens when we lose sight of this? We get sidetracked and start making other things more important. We go our own way and do our own things and we fail to be “purpose driven people.”

Discussion Questions:

- How does having clarity of purpose help your team accomplish its goals?
- What is the purpose of your group? Is there consensus or differing of opinions?
- How do you help your team accomplish its purpose?

3) Your Team Has a MISSION

Acts 2:37, *When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”* ³⁸ Peter replied, *“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.* ³⁹ *The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”* ⁴⁰ *With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.”* ⁴¹ *Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.*

If purpose is “why” something exists, then “mission” is how you go about fulfilling that purpose. We exist to make much of Jesus because He is our Lord and Messiah! How do we do that? What are we called to do?

In order to make much of Jesus, we must live out the transformation of Jesus in our lives in actions and words. We are called to look different than the rest of the world. This is not simply to be a good person, but to show the world who Jesus is. We also need to speak the Truth of Jesus. Tell the world that Jesus alone saves, and help people come face to face with the reality that they need a Savior. We exist to make much of Jesus and we accomplish this by living out the transformation of our lives in word and deed.

Discussion Questions:

- Is living out the good news of the Gospel of Christ central to your group's mission? If so, how do you know how your team is doing? (Do you track any metrics? Highlight and celebrate encounters – both positive and negative? Actively train people to be comfortable living out and sharing in a variety of different situations?)
- If this isn't an area that is currently being measured, what could be done to change that?
- How do you encourage your group to remain focused on their mission?

4) Your Team Has the POWER TO SUCCEED

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

The apostles were only able to accomplish all they did through the power of the Holy Spirit. By His might, the Church has a guaranteed plan of success in carrying out God's mission. This doesn't mean everyone will repent or everyone will welcome us with open arms. But this does mean that when we are dependent on Him (keeping in mind our team, purpose and mission), we will make much of Jesus with our lives.

Discussion Questions:

- How can you tell if you're being led by the Spirit?
- Where are all the places God has placed you to be a witness?
- What does a “Whatever It Takes” attitude look like in your biblical community?

Lesson 1 Additional Commentary (Acts 2:42-47)¹

2:42 This section comprises the first extensive “summary” in Acts. Luke perhaps provided two summaries here: v. 42 pictures the community life in itself and has much in common with the more extensive treatment beginning in v. 43. Quite possibly v. 42 should be viewed separately, as a conclusion to the Pentecost narrative. Thus viewed, it provides a glimpse into the manner in which the new converts were incorporated into the believing community. Verses 43–46 thus would appear to introduce a new section that deals with the life of the whole Christian community and to prepare for the narratives of the witness in Jerusalem that follow in chaps. 3–5. That this is so is supported by the fact that the latter summary begins with a reference to the apostolic miracles (v. 43), one of which follows immediately after the summary (3:1–10).

In v. 42 the believers are said to have “devoted themselves” to four practices in their new life together. First was the teaching of the apostles. Just as the apostles had been instructed by Jesus, so they passed along that instruction to the new Christians. In keeping with Jesus’ teaching to them (chap. 1), this would have included such subjects as his resurrection, the Old Testament Scriptures, the Christian witness, and surely their own reminiscences of Jesus’ earthly ministry and teachings. The second activity to which they devoted themselves was “the fellowship.” The Greek word used here (*koinōnia*) is one Paul often employed, but it appears only here in all of Luke-Acts. Its basic meaning is “association, communion, fellowship, close relationship.” In secular Greek it could involve the sharing of goods, and Paul seems to have used it this way in 2 Cor 9:13. It was also used of communion with a god, especially in the context of a sacred meal; and Paul used it in that sense in 1 Cor 10:16. Since it appears in a list in Acts 2:42, it is not easy to determine its exact nuance in this context. The key may be to see the terms “breaking of bread” and “prayer” in apposition to “fellowship.” The meaning would then be that they devoted themselves to a fellowship that was expressed in their mutual meals and in their prayer life together. If this is so, then the meaning of the third element, “the breaking of bread,” would be further clarified. Joined with fellowship, it would likely carry the cultic sense of sharing a meal with the Lord, participating in the Lord’s Supper. It probably also involved as well their participation in a main *agapē* meal together. The fourth and final element of their life together, another expression of their fellowship, was “the prayers” (RSV). The presence of the article in the Greek text before prayers has led some interpreters to see this as a reference to their keeping the formal prayer hours of Judaism in the temple. They may well have done so to some extent, for their faithfulness in attending temple worship is noted in 2:46 and 3:1. The reference, however, is probably much broader and involves primarily their sharing in prayer together in their private house worship.

2:43 The longer summary gives a fuller description of the life of the entire Christian community. It begins in v. 43 by referring to the miracles performed by the apostles. The miracles are described with the characteristic combination “signs” and “wonders.” The same phrase continues to be used of the apostles’ miracle-working in 4:30 and 5:12 and is applied to others as well: Jesus (2:22), Stephen (6:8), Moses (7:36), Philip (8:13), and Paul and Barnabas (14:3; 15:12). It is interesting to note that the phrase is no longer used after chap. 15, although Paul continued to work miracles.

¹ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 118–122.

An example of one such miraculous sign is given in 3:1–10. Luke’s summary statement would indicate that this healing story is only one example of many miracles worked by the apostles in this early stage of their ministry. The response of the people is a reverent fear (*phobos*, “awe,” NIV). “Everyone” probably refers to those outside the Christian community who were awed by apostolic miracles (cf. 5:12–13).

2:44–45 Verse 44 elaborates on the fellowship enjoyed by the Christians. The word *koinōnia* is not used, but other terms express the same reality. First, they are said to have been “together” (*epi to auto*). This Greek phrase is notoriously difficult to translate, occurring five times in Acts (1:15; 2:1, 44, 47; 4:26). It seems to depict the gathered community, with a strong emphasis on their unity. This unity is further expressed by their holding “everything in common” (which is described in v. 45 as selling their goods for the benefit of others whenever a need arose).

Here two ideals for a community of goods seem to be combined. First is the Greek ideal of a community in which everything is held in common and shared equally. It is a basically utopian concept, which can be traced as far back as the Pythagorean communities and is often expressed by the same phrase Luke employed in v. 44, “holding all in common” (*echein hapanta koina*). Verse 45, however, speaks against the early Christian community adopting a practice of community ownership. The imperfect tense is used, indicating that this was a recurrent, continuing practice: their practice was to sell their property and goods and apportion the proceeds whenever a need arose. This is much more in keeping with the Old Testament ideal of community equality, of sharing with the needy so that “there will be no poor among you” (Deut 15:4f.).

2:46–47 Verse 46 sets forth the dual locale of their life together. They remained faithful to their Jewish worship, devoting themselves “with one accord” (“together”) in the temple. The word translated “with one accord” (*homothymadon*) is commonly used in Acts to express unity of purpose and particularly applies to the “one heart and mind” (4:32) of the Christian fellowship (cf. 1:14; 2:1; 4:24; 5:12; 15:25). F. Stagg, however, points out that single-mindedness is not always a good thing. The same word is used of the angry mobs that rushed upon Stephen (7:57) and Paul (19:29). For the Christian community, fellowship and unity of purpose are salutary only when rooted in fellowship with Christ and in the unity of his Spirit. The structure of Acts should remind us of this—the unity of the Christian community derives from and is guided by the gift of the Spirit that lies at the heart of its life together.

The Christian presence in the temple testifies not only to their remaining faithful to their Jewish heritage but also evidences their zeal for witness. In Jerusalem the temple was the primary place where crowds would be found, and there the Christians went to bear their witness (3:11–12; 5:21, 42). If the temple was the place of witness, homes were the place for fellowship. In the intimacy of the home setting, a common meal was shared together, probably including the Lord’s Supper as well. It was a time marked by rejoicing in their fellowship with one another and with the Spirit and by their own openness and sincerity (*aphelotēs*). On the giving end, they expressed their joy by praising God for his presence in their life together (v. 47). On the receiving end, they experienced the favor of the nonbelieving Jewish community in Jerusalem. God responded to their faith and blessed the young community, adding new converts daily. Indeed, as with the young Jesus, so it was for the growing church—favor with God and favor with humanity (Luke 2:52).

Verses 43–46 give an ideal portrait of the young Christian community, witnessing the Spirit’s presence in the miracles of the apostles, sharing their possessions with the needy among them, sharing their witness in the temple, sharing themselves in the intimacy of their table fellowship.

Their common life was marked by praise of God, joy in the faith, and sincerity of heart. And in it all they experienced the favor of the nonbelievers and continual blessings of God-given growth. It was an ideal, almost blissful time marked by the joy of their life together and the warmth of the Spirit's presence among them. It could almost be described as the young church's "age of innocence." The subsequent narrative of Acts will show that it did not always remain so. Sincerity sometimes gave way to dishonesty, joy was blotched by rifts in the fellowship, and the favor of the people was overshadowed by persecutions from the Jewish officials. Luke's summaries present an ideal for the Christian community which it must always strive for, constantly return to, and discover anew if it is to have that unity of spirit and purpose essential for an effective witness.

Lesson 1: Whatever It Takes To Work Together – Missionary Story

C. T. Studd (December 2, 1860 – July 16, 1931)

Charles Thomas (C.T.) Studd was born on December 2, 1860, in the United Kingdom. He was the son of a very wealthy family and grew up with great privilege. An outstanding athlete, C.T. excelled in the game of Cricket. He was known throughout the United Kingdom as one of the best Cricketer's to ever play the sport.

The Gospel was introduced to C.T. and he accepted Christ as his personal Savior early in his college years. Before he graduated college, he had fully committed his life to serving Christ and made the decision to go to China as a missionary. He, along with six other young men from Cambridge University, became part of the China Inland Mission and began their preparations to go to China. This small group of committed young men began to be referred to as the Cambridge Seven and captured the imagination of the public throughout the United Kingdom. Perhaps it was because C.T. and three of the others were all well-known athletes and one was an officer of the Royal Artillery. Each of the Cambridge Seven had turned their back on promising careers to follow God's leading to take the Gospel to a foreign land. C.T., accustomed to being a part of a winning team, now demonstrated that same drive and determination with this team so that he and his teammates could take the Gospel to China.

His purpose shifted from being a successful athlete with a promising future to being a submitted and committed servant of Christ trusting fully in God to direct his steps. C.T. wrote that he went down on his knees and gave himself up to God, praying *Take my life and let it be, consecrated, Lord, to thee*. The same words as the words of Frances Ridley Havergal's consecration hymn.

C.T. believed that he was to trust only in Christ; and Christ would work in C.T.'s life to do His good pleasure.

A significant amount of money was left to C.T. from his father's estate. However, he believed that to fully trust God and not be diverted from his new purpose he must divest himself of his fortune. So, he sent large checks to several different ministry groups leaving himself only a small amount of money which he planned to give to his wife when they married. He was engaged to Priscilla Stewart, a single missionary from Ireland, who was serving in China. C.T. told her that he had given away all his fortune except for this small amount that he was giving to her. Priscilla also believed that they should trust God for all their needs. She sent the money that C.T. had given to her to another missionary whom she knew had a significant need due to an illness. Together C.T. and Priscilla shared the purpose of being fully consecrated to Christ and depending on and trusting only Him with their every need.

During his years as a famous Cricket player, C.T.'s mission had been to win the game. However, after his conversion to Christ, his mission changed. Now his mission was to take the Gospel to as many people as he could. This mission to preach the Gospel took him not only to China but also to India and finally to Africa where he preached the Gospel until his death.

After serving almost 10 years in China, the Studds returned home to England in 1894 for a time of rest and to recover from ill health. C.T. and Priscilla each served as single missionaries, then married and four daughters were born to them during the 10 years that they were in China. (Two children did not survive infancy.)

C.T. was not to be deterred from his mission of preaching the Gospel even by his own ill health or that of Priscilla's. As soon as his health improved, he began to travel throughout the United Kingdom speaking

at colleges, universities and churches sharing the Gospel, and when he wasn't speaking to groups, he was visiting his own family members that were not saved, in order to share the Gospel with them.

In 1900 C.T. and his family had the opportunity to go to India for him to preach the Gospel in the same area where his father had made much of his fortune. C.T. had long felt a responsibility to take the Gospel to this part of India. This initial preaching trip ended with he and his family staying there and ministering for six years before returning to England to rest. Another reason that they returned to England was for the girls to have an opportunity to attend school. Their intention was to someday return to India to continue his mission of preaching the Gospel in India.

However, God has a way of expanding "our" mission to accomplish "His" mission. This was true for C.T. In 1908 after returning from India and while in Liverpool, C.T. saw a sign that captured his attention, "Cannibals want missionaries." His reaction was that of being a little amused and somewhat curious. He went into the building where he saw the sign to learn more. It was there that he met a man named, Dr. Karl Kumm who had walked across Africa and was telling his story to a group a people gathered in the building. He related that there were numbers of tribes in Africa who had never heard the story of Jesus Christ. Dr. Kumm related that many explorers, big-game hunters, traders, etc. had gone to the African continent but no Christian had gone there to tell the people of Jesus. C.T.'s heart was pricked with compassion for these lost tribes; however, his heart was also conflicted by his desire to return to India. He didn't believe that his health would allow him to be approved by physicians to go to Africa. He also knew that Priscilla's health was too fragile to embark on such an undertaking. However, the burden on his heart did not subside and he began to pray for God's clear direction as he also began to explore the possibility of taking the Gospel to Africa.

Once again C.T. Studd witnessed God's miraculous power on his mission as one by one the obstacles were overcome, and he succeeded in taking the Gospel to Africa. On December 15, 1910, C.T. Studd set sail for Africa. The team looked a little different on this trip. This time C.T. was alone on the voyage while Priscilla and the girls remained in England due to Priscilla's fragile health. Through the 20 plus years that C.T. Studd served the Lord in Africa, his team was comprised primarily of Africans who heard the Gospel message through his preaching. From time to time someone from England would join him for a short time to help with the preaching. During those same years, Priscilla served the Lord and served the mission of taking the Gospel to Africa by speaking to groups in England to encourage prayer and financial support, writing letters of encouragement and keeping the home fires burning. The Heart of Africa Missions founded by C.T. Studd ultimately became the Worldwide Evangelization Crusade with each separate field having its own title, i.e., Heart of Africa, Heart of Amazonia, etc. as the organization grew and more areas were reached with the Gospel.

Studd's work in Africa saw thousands accept Christ, churches established, and scores of African workers become a part of His team to reach Africa with the Gospel.

C. T. Studd's life was marked by his courage for Christ and his willingness to sacrifice for Him – doing whatever it takes to spread the Gospel. He once said: "I have searched into my life and do not know of anything else that I can sacrifice to the Lord Jesus." Alfred Buxton, his son-in-law, and fellow pioneer in Africa, stated "C. T.'s life stands as a sign to all succeeding generations that it is worthwhile to lose all this world can offer and stake everything on the world to come. His life will be an eternal rebuke to easy-going Christianity. He demonstrated what it means to follow Christ without counting the cost and without looking back."

C.T. Studd was a whatever it takes Christian.

Lesson 2: Whatever It Takes To Grow

Main Passage: Acts 4:1–22

Focus Verse: Acts 4:13

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

Big Idea: Spending time with Jesus changes us.

In Acts 4 Peter and John give evidence that they had been changed by Jesus. We are called to grow in our relationship with Jesus. When we are saved, He changes us. He transforms us and sets us on the path of looking, acting and speaking different. Jesus wants you to grow in your relationship because in doing so you will have strength to live a whatever it takes kind of life.

Four Ways a Relationship With Jesus Changes Us:

1) A Relationship With Jesus Changes What We LOVE

***Acts 4:1,** The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. ² They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. ³ They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. ⁴ But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.*

In Acts 4, Peter and John healed a lame man and then continued preaching the good news of Jesus in the temple to people who claimed to love God. But notice how the apostles' love is different than the crowds.

There is a contrast between the love of Peter and John and the love of the Sadducees. Peter and John focused their love around Jesus. The religious leaders focused their love around tradition and the law and their minds were closed to the workings of God. They held onto their love and failed to see how God worked through Jesus to bring about a kind of transformation. But the apostles love Jesus more than the opinions of others.

By nature, we point people to what we love most. When Jesus changes our primary love, He changes our primary worship and praise from self-focus to doing whatever it takes to make much of the name of Jesus.

Discussion Questions:

- How does your primary love affect how you live? What are sacrifices you make for the sake of what you care about most?
- Can you share a time you've received negative feedback when sharing the Gospel with someone?

2) A Relationship With Jesus Changes How We THINK

Acts 4:5, *The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem.*

⁶ *Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family.* ⁷ *They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"* ⁸ *Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! ⁹ If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, ¹⁰ then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. ¹¹ Jesus is "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone." ¹² Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."*

The Jews who witnessed the healing of the lame man failed to see the act as one of kindness and the power of God because their minds remained closed. But the apostles knew these things were evidence of God working in and through them. Jesus changed their thinking and perspective as they saw every opportunity as a "God moment."

In the book *Experiencing God*, Henry Blackaby states, "Right now, God is working all around you." When we stop and realize this, our perspective in every situation changes. We stop focusing on our agendas and we focus on what God is doing. Jesus changes our thinking, because we realize that He is always working.

Discussion Questions:

- How does a relationship with Jesus change the way we think?
- How can you be more aware of "God moments" in your life?

3) A Relationship With Jesus Changes How We LOOK

Acts 4:13, *When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. ¹⁴ But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say.*

These ordinary, unschooled men looked like extraordinary, learned men because they "had been with Jesus." And this can be our story too. The more time we spend with Jesus, the more He changes how we look, operate, and act. It doesn't matter who you are, where you come from or what you've done: God can use anyone and everyone.

The enemy tries to remind us of who we are apart from Christ. Jesus tells us who we can be by spending time with Him. Walk in His forgiveness, be transformed by His working and let Him change you into who you are called to be.

Discussion Questions:

- How is your life different when you are spending time with the Lord versus when you are not?
- How does this passage impact the excuse: “I just don’t know enough about the Bible to be a good witness.”

4) A Relationship With Jesus Changes How We TALK

Acts 4:15, *So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. ¹⁶ “What are we going to do with these men?” they asked. “Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it. ¹⁷ But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name.” ¹⁸ Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹ But Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! ²⁰ As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” ²¹ After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. ²² For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.*

Have you ever spent time with someone who is passionate about a particular subject? Our mouth is the overflow of our heart. The apostles were overwhelmed by Jesus and they couldn’t help but proclaim Him! When you are changed by Jesus, you can’t help but speak about Jesus.

As we allow the Spirit to transform us, we grow closer to Jesus and we are able to live out a “Whatever It Takes” kind of life.

Discussion Questions:

- If someone recorded every word that came out of your mouth the previous 24 hours, would they conclude that you had been spending time with Jesus?
- What does a “Whatever It Takes” attitude look like in your own spiritual growth?

Lesson 2 Additional Commentary (Acts 4:1–22)²

Peter and John Before the Sanhedrin (4:1–22)

Up until this point in Acts, there had been no resistance to the Christians on the part of the Jews. Indeed, the picture has been that of the general acceptance and favor accorded them by the people (cf. 2:47). In chap. 4 the picture changes. Not, however, with the people. They still were responding favorably to the message of the apostles, indeed, in an overwhelming way (cf. 4:4). It was the officials who turned against the apostles, and not even all of them. The primary enemy was the priestly Sadducean aristocracy for whom the Christians were a serious threat to the status quo. Twice they arrested the apostles. The first time occurred here, as they descended upon Peter and John in the course of their witness in the temple square. This time the two apostles were given a “preliminary hearing” in their proclamation of Christ. Because the apostles did not heed this warning and preached Christ all the more, the Sadducees were enraged, and they arrested and tried all the apostles (5:17–42).

This section falls into two natural divisions, corresponding to the arrest of the apostles (4:3) and their release (4:21). The first section treats the arrest, interrogation, and defense of Peter and John (4:1–12). The second relates the deliberations of the court, the warning to the apostles, their response, and their release (4:13–22).

(1) Arrested and Interrogated (4:1–12)

THE ARREST (4:1–4)

4:1 Peter’s sermon was suddenly interrupted by an official contingency comprised of priests, the captain of the temple guard, and Sadducees, who “descended upon” the apostles. That Luke used the plural “while *they* were speaking” is interesting. It was Peter’s sermon that was interrupted. As always he was the spokesman, but the plural shows that John was not silent. Like all the apostles, he also was bearing his witness to Christ.

The priests who were present in the arresting company were perhaps those who were on duty that day for the evening sacrifice. The captain of the temple (*stratēgos*) was probably the official whom the *Mishna* designates the *sagan*. The *sagan* had extensive duties, which included assisting the high priest in all ceremonies and serving as his alternate in such capacities. Ranking second in the priestly hierarchy, he was always chosen from one of the families of the priestly aristocracy. Indeed, serving as *sagan* was viewed as a stepping-stone to appointment as high priest. The *sagan*’s involvement in this scene is particularly appropriate since he had ultimate responsibility for order in the temple grounds and had the power to arrest. His linkage with the Sadducees here is also quite natural. Representing the priestly aristocracy, he belonged to their ranks.

The Sadducees were clearly the powers behind the arrest of the two. Josephus listed them as one of the three “schools of thought” among the Jews of the first century, along with the Pharisees and Essenes (*Ant.* 13.171). The origin of their name is disputed but may go back to Zadok, the high priest in Solomon’s day. The Sadducees of the first century represented the “conservative” viewpoint. They rejected the oral traditions of the Pharisees and considered only the written Torah

² John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 137–147.

of the Pentateuch as valid. They considered the concepts of demons and angels, immortality and resurrection as innovations, believing in no life beyond this life.

More important than their theology, however, was their political orientation. Coming largely from the landed aristocracy, they were accommodationists with regard to the Roman occupation of Israel. Possessing considerable economic interests, their concern was to make peace with the Romans, preserve the status quo, and thus protect their own holdings. In return the Romans accorded the Sadducees considerable power, invariably appointing the high priest from their ranks, who was the most powerful political figure among the Jews in that day. The prime concern of the Sadducean aristocracy, of whom the high priest was the chief spokesman, was the preservation of order, the avoidance at all costs of any confrontation with the Roman authorities.

4:2 The Sadducees' annoyance at Peter and John's witness to the resurrection was not so much theological as political, as was generally the case with the Sadducees. Note the wording in v. 2: not "they were proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus" but "they were proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead." The idea of a general resurrection was an apocalyptic concept with all sorts of messianic overtones. Messianic ideas among the Jews of that day meant revolt, overthrow of the foreign overlords, and restoration of the Davidic kingdom. There had been such movements before (cf. 5:36–37), and the Romans had put them down. There would be many more in the future. In fact, the worst fears of the Sadducees were indeed realized when war broke out with the Romans in A.D. 66, with terrible consequences for the Jews. Here, with the large crowds surrounding Peter and John, their fears were aroused. The notes of Peter's sermon alarmed them: resurrection, Author of life, a new Moses. These were revolutionary ideas. The movement must not spread. It must be nipped in the bud.

4:3 So they arrested Peter and John and placed them "in jail" until next morning. The Jewish high court, the Sanhedrin, had jurisdiction over matters of temple violation. It met regularly each day, with the exception of Sabbaths and feast days. Since it was now already evening and the Sanhedrin had already recessed, Peter and John would have to be detained until the court reconvened in the morning.

4:4 Verse 4 comes almost as an intrusion in the narrative. It is not so. The interruption had been the arrest. Luke returned to Peter's temple sermon. Despite adversities the sermon was no failure. Many did respond and place their faith in the Author of life. So much was this the case that the total number of Jewish Christians came to 5,000. Not only does this serve as a suitable climax to the sermon of chap. 3, but it also serves as an introduction to the trial scene of 4:5–22. The Sadducees tried their best to stop the witness of the apostles. They did not succeed. The Christian message was finding too much acceptance with the people. The rulers raged, but it was all in vain (4:25).

THE COUNCIL'S INQUIRY (4:5–7)

4:5 The next morning the council convened to hear the apostles, just as they had tried Jesus in a morning session (Luke 22:66). At this point Luke did not use the term Sanhedrin, but it appears at v. 15. The term was also used of minor, local courts; but the reference here was to the supreme court of the land, which held the jurisdiction over the temple area. Exactly where it met is uncertain. Josephus indicated that it met outside the temple precincts and just to the west of it, while the rabbinic sources placed it within the temple area in a room especially designated for it

on the south side of the forecourt. Its origin seems to date to Hellenistic times when Israel was a client-nation and no longer had a king as its supreme political authority.

Matters regarding local jurisdiction were entrusted by the Hellenistic overlords to a council of Jews, which developed into the Sanhedrin of New Testament times. It seems to have consisted of seventy-one members, based on Num 11:16, counting the seventy elders mentioned there plus Moses as presiding officer. The presiding officer in the New Testament period was the high priest. At first the Council seems to have consisted primarily of the leading priests and lay elders from the aristocracy. From the time of Queen Alexandra (76–67 B.C.), however, Pharisees were admitted on the Council. Probably always in the minority, the latter still had considerable clout because of their popularity with the people (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 13.298).

The picture of the assembly here in v. 5 comports well with the known composition of the body. It consisted of the ruling priests, the elders, and the scribes. Luke used the term “rulers,” but this almost certainly refers to the priestly representation on the Sanhedrin. Verse 6 mentions four of these plus an unspecified additional number of members from the high-priestly families. The “elders” were the lay members from the Jewish aristocracy, probably comprising the bulk of the entire body and being of Sadducean persuasion. The “teachers” were the scribes, students of the law and responsible for interpreting it before the body. Most scribes were of Pharisaic outlook, so it was likely in this group that the Pharisees were represented on the Sanhedrin.

4:6 In v. 6 Luke gave an “aside” that mentions by name several of the high-priestly group represented on the Council. Annas is named as high priest. Actually, Annas was high priest from A.D. 6–15, and at this time (early A.D. 30s) his son-in-law Caiaphas was the reigning high priest. Luke’s attribution of the title to Annas may reflect the actual state of affairs. Annas was the most powerful political figure among the Jews at that time. Five of his sons, one grandson, and a son-in-law all acquired the rank of high priest. He may well have been the power behind the scenes, calling all the shots. Caiaphas, Annas’s son-in-law, was high priest from A.D. 18–36, the longest tenure of any high priest during New Testament times. He seems to have struck it off well with Pilate, since he survived the entire period of the latter’s term of office. He and his father-in-law were instrumental in the conviction of Jesus (John 11:49f.; 18:13f.). At this time they were considering a pair of his followers whom they probably saw as equally threatening to the peace and consequently to their own considerable interests.

There is no known John among those who held the office of high priest. Codex Bezae, however, reads “Jonathan” in this verse. If one follows that variant, he would then be the Jonathan, son of Annas, who served as high priest in A.D. 36–37. No record exists of an Alexander who served as high priest in the New Testament period. He may have belonged to one of the families of the priestly aristocracy.

4:7 The interrogation began with the apostles being brought before the Council. The Greek says literally “in the middle” (v. 7), which comports well with the rabbinic statement that the Sanhedrin sat in a semicircle: “The Sanhedrin was arranged like the half of a round threshing-floor so that they might all see one another. Before them stood the two scribes of the judges, one to the right and one to the left, and they wrote down the words of them that favored acquittal and the words of them that favored conviction.” The question was then posed to the apostles: “By what power or what name did you do this?” The verb is plural, as if the Court asked the question in unison; but one would assume that the high priest, as presiding officer, served as spokesman in beginning the interrogation. Some interpreters assume that the question has to do with the man’s

healing, but the main reason for the arrest had been the preaching of the apostles (v. 2). They were concerned about the source of the disciples' teaching and the possibility that their emphasis on the resurrection could lead to a major messianic insurrection with serious political repercussions. They were concerned about authority, proper accreditation, law and order, keeping the peace.

PETER'S RESPONSE (4:8–12)

4:8 The question as to the “name” behind their preaching was a question of accreditation and authorization, but Peter could not let this one get by. The lame man was healed by the name of Jesus. If the Sanhedrin wanted to know about that name, he would tell them all about it. Instead of the expected defense, Peter gave them a sermon. In fulfillment of Jesus' promise (Luke 12:11f.), he was given a special endowment of the Holy Spirit to bear his witness with boldness.

Verses 9–12 comprise a minisermon on “the name that brings salvation.” It begins with the reference to the name raised by the Sanhedrin and repeated by Peter (vv. 7, 10), which is linked to the word “saved” with regard to the healing of the man (v. 9). These two concepts are brought back together at the conclusion, with the reference to salvation in no other name (v. 12). The crux of the sermon is a play on the Greek word *sōzō*, which means both physical “salvation” in the sense of healing (v. 9) as well as the spiritual, eschatological sense of salvation (v. 12). The physical “salvation” of the lame man through the name of Jesus is thus a pointer to the far greater salvation that comes to all who call upon his name in faith.

4:9 In many ways Peter's testimony before the Sanhedrin is a condensed form of his address in Solomon's Colonnade. It began with a reference to the healing of the lame man (v. 9). The crowd in the temple wondered about the source of the lame man's healing, and Peter pointed to the name of Jesus. The Sanhedrin wanted to know about the name, and Peter pointed them to the healing of the lame man. The two go together: wholeness, salvation, is in the name of Jesus; the name of Jesus brings wholeness. Peter's words contain a bit of irony. The rulers were worried about the political dangers of the “name” the apostles were preaching. “This name is not destructive,” said Peter; “it brings good things; it brings wholeness” (author's paraphrase). Peter underlined his point. “Be very sure of this,” he said, “you and everyone else in Israel.”

4:10–11 Peter was ready to preach to all, even the Sanhedrin. But like the crowd in the Colonnade, the judges in the Sanhedrin rejected the *name* that could bring them salvation. Peter repeated the familiar kerygmatic formula: “Whom you crucified, but whom God raised.” Indeed, it is by the very fact that God has exalted him that the power had come for healing the man. The themes are the same as before: the healing name of Jesus, which proves his resurrection and points to his salvation, the guilt of the Jews who rejected him. Also, as before, there is a proof from Scripture, this time from Ps 118:22. It establishes the guilt of the Sanhedrin. They were the “builders,” the leaders of the nation, who rejected the very rock on which God's people are to be built. Very early Ps 118:22 came to be viewed by the Christians as pointing to Christ, the one rejected by his own people, whom God made the crowning stone of his people. This text also appears in Luke 20:17 as well as in 1 Pet 2:7 and in both passages is linked to other Old Testament texts that incorporate a “stone” motif. Many see this as evidence that the early Christian community made collections of Old Testament texts that were applied to Christ.

4:12 All Peter's sermons to this point ended with an appeal, but there seems to be none here. The appeal, however, is present implicitly. If there is salvation in no other name (v. 12), then obviously one must make a commitment to that sole name that brings salvation. But the appeal is

even stronger than that. Peter switched to the first person at the end of the verse, “by which we must be saved,” amounting to a direct appeal to the Sanhedrin. Peter had been bold indeed. He had come full circle. They asked for the name in whom his authority rested. He answered their question. It was the name, the power of Jesus. He directed the charges. The Council had rejected the one who bore this powerful name. The ultimate verdict rested with them. Would they continue to reject the one whom God had placed as the final stone for his people, the only name under heaven in which they would find their own salvation? The final verdict would rest in their own decision.

(2) Warned and Released (4:13–22)

4:13–14 Peter had borne his testimony. It was now time for the Council to deliberate. They assessed the evidence (vv. 13–14). First, there was the courage, the sheer freedom with which Peter spoke. They hardly expected this from men who had no formal education in matters of the law, who were ordinary laymen. Then there was the fact that they had been with Jesus. He too had been just a “commoner” but also with an amazing boldness and knowledge beyond his training. But he too had been a dangerous person, a threat to their peace; and they consequently had condemned him to death. Finally, there was the healed man, standing with them before the Tribunal. Whether he was there voluntarily in support of Peter and John or whether he had been summoned as a witness, we are not told. In any event there he was, standing there, “exhibit A,” a “known sign” (v. 16). He was hard to overlook. It was hardly a clear-cut case. The Council sat in silence. At this point there was nothing they could say. Indeed, Jesus’ promise was being fulfilled before the apostles’ eyes (Luke 21:15). The irony can scarcely be missed—the accused spoke with utter boldness and freedom; their accusers sat in stony silence.

4:15–17 When the Sanhedrin ordered Peter and John out of the courtroom (v. 15), they were following normal procedure. Their custom after hearing the witnesses was to dismiss them in order to have as clear and open a discussion among themselves as possible. In this instance they were at something of a loss. They really had no charge to lay upon them. Further, the accused were popular with the people, for the news about healing of the lame man had already spread throughout Jerusalem. There was only one thing they could do—they could threaten. They would warn the apostles to no longer speak “in this name” (v. 17).

4:18–19 Although only implicit at this point, this would also establish culpability should the apostles decide to transgress the interdiction of the court (cf. 5:28). So the apostles were brought back into the court and given the warning. They were no longer “to speak and teach in the name of Jesus” (v. 18). The warning was given in narrative style rather than in direct speech, perhaps Luke’s way of underlining the timidity of the Council on the whole matter. The response of Peter and John was in direct discourse; it was bold and almost defiant: “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God.”

4:20–22 The response was much the same as that given by Socrates to his Athenian accusers who warned him to desist from his teaching. The saying had become quite proverbial, however, and was widely used by Jews and Greeks. It would seem a bit ironic if these unlearned and common men (v. 13) were throwing the words of the Greek philosopher at them. The stronger irony, however, is in the boldness of the apostles and the timidity of their accusers. The apostles could only speak of what they had seen and heard (v. 20). They were the eyewitnesses of Jesus’ entire

ministry (1:21f.), the witnesses to his resurrection (2:32; 3:15). Peter and John had no choice but to defy the court's order, for it had "stepped in between the conscience and God." The court had no alternative but to threaten them further and release them (v. 21). They could find no grounds for punishing them at this point, and they feared the apostles' popularity with the populace. The man, born lame, was over forty years old (v. 22), so the miracle was particularly striking; and the people took it for what it was, an act of God, a sign. The little word "sign" should not be overlooked in the Greek text of v. 22. That is what the man's healing had been—a sign to the temple crowd in Solomon's Colonnade that attracted them to the gospel and ultimately to faith. It had been a sign to the Sanhedrin as well, a pointer to the sole name in which salvation (ultimate "healing") is to be found. There is no record of response for Peter's appeal to the Sanhedrin, as there was for his temple sermon (v. 4). Here for the first time is found a theme that will recur throughout Acts—the rejection of the Messiah by the Jews. For many of them, particularly their official leadership, he was, and continued to be, the stone rejected by the builders.

Lesson 2 – Whatever It Takes To Grow – Missionary Story

Hudson Taylor (May 21, 1832 – June 3, 1905)

Hudson Taylor, an early missionary to China, shows us by his life and by his work that he indeed was a whatever it takes Christian so that the Chinese people could hear the Gospel. His story is a story of spiritual growth.

Hudson was born to parents who had a deep interest in China and who had prayed that their newborn son would “work for You in China.” On a quiet afternoon when he was 17, he was reading one of his father’s books and was confronted with the message of salvation. Reading that Christ died for our sins and not for our sins only, but also for the sins of the world, he was struck by the thought that the whole work of salvation was finished, the debt paid and the only thing that he could do was to accept God’s gift of salvation and then thank Him for it. That is exactly what he did. This began a lifetime of serving God to reach others, in particular the Chinese people with the Gospel.

The next several years Hudson dedicated himself to preparing to go to China. Not only did he immerse himself in the study of God’s Word, but he also learned the elementary rudiments of medicine, became a licensed midwife, and began to learn Mandarin.

September 19, 1853, found Hudson Taylor leaving behind his love of England and family for his love for Christ and for the Chinese people. On that day, as an agent of the Chinese Evangelization Society, he boarded the *Dumfries*, a small clipper ship headed for China. He knew no one on board and he knew no one in China. He did have in his pocket three letters of introduction to people that could help him once he arrived. He had received two of these letters from casual acquaintances, and the third letter came from a virtual stranger.

When he arrived in China, he learned that one of the persons for whom he had a letter of introduction had died two months previously, and the second person had sailed to America a few weeks prior. His hope was diminishing. His last potential contact was the one he knew the least about and the one he had not expected to be of much help. To his surprise this gentleman, Rev. Dr. Medhurst, who was in China with the London Mission, welcomed him into his home where Hudson lived for the first six months after arriving in China. Dr. Medhurst also helped to secure Hudson’s first Chinese language teacher. The letter of introduction that Hudson thought would be of no help was the instrument that God used to get Hudson Taylor started on his work to bring the Gospel to China.

Hudson was not in China very long when he decided that his appearance was a distraction to reaching the Chinese people with the Gospel. He believed that if he looked more like the Chinese people that they would be more willing to talk with him. He began to dress in Chinese clothing, he grew his hair long enough to have a pigtail (like the Chinese men) and he colored his hair black with shoe polish. While his fellow Protestants in China were either incredulous or critical of his decision, God blessed his commitment. He began to have successful conversations with the Chinese people and shared the Gospel with them.

It was not long before Hudson came to believe that many of the missionaries he met and observed were “worldly” and spent too much time with English businessmen and diplomats who desired and needed their services as translators. Their “talk” was that of the world concerning worldly activities. He committed that his talk was to be the talk of God’s Word.

Hudson Taylor's heart yearned to take the Gospel to the interior of China. So, only a few months after arriving in China and with a very limited ability to speak Chinese, he and a fellow missionary, Joseph Edkins, set sail down the Huangpu River handing out Chinese Bibles and salvation tracts. Before many months passed, he had established a church in the interior and the work began to grow.

Before six years passed, Hudson Taylor resigned from the Chinese Evangelization Society (because they had proved incapable of paying their missionaries) and became an independent missionary trusting God to meet his needs. He married Maria Dyer, who was in China with her missionary parents, all the while pouring himself into his missionary work. By the summer of 1860, he was exhausted and very ill. He and Maria were forced to return to England to recover.

This time spent in England proved to be a turning point both in Hudson's health and his life and ministry. Once he was somewhat recovered, he began the work of revising the Chinese translation of the New Testament. The vision for the China Inland Mission began to develop in his mind and heart. He could not escape the truth that a million souls a month were dying without God. He began to pray for workers to go with him to China. As he prayed for workers, God spoke to his heart about the need for leadership for these workers. In time Hudson surrendered his heart to God to be the leadership of that endeavor, if indeed that was God's will for him. He began to pray specifically for 24 missionaries for China. The 24 workers included 2 for each of the eleven provinces of China and 2 for Mongolia.

Hudson Taylor began to make the vision a reality when he took his last \$50 and opened a bank account in the name of "China Inland Mission." He then wrote a pamphlet entitled *China's Spiritual Need and Claims* to inform the Christians in England about the great need in China. As this pamphlet circulated across England, hearts were moved for the spiritual needs of China. People were moved to pray, to give and to go!

On May 26, 1866, Hudson Taylor with his wife and children sailed with 14 other missionaries back to China as the first group of missionaries for the China Inland Mission. Only eternity will reveal the numbers of people that came to Christ because Hudson Taylor surrendered his life to God's plan to do whatever it takes to grow in Christ and to reach people with the Gospel.

Hudson Taylor continued his work in China until his death on June 3, 1905. He had sacrificed much personally. Maria died after only 12 years of marriage, his second wife also died, and four of his eight children died when they were very young. By the time Hudson died in 1905, there were 825 missionaries serving in every province of China, 300 mission stations, 500 local Chinese helpers, and over 25,000 new Chinese Christians. The China Inland Mission remained active in spreading the Gospel in China until 1950 when its main operation was moved to Singapore to protect the Chinese churches. In 1964, the name of the agency was changed to Overseas Missionary Fellowship and this agency continues to send the Gospel around the world and particularly to Asian countries.

The heartbeat of Hudson Taylor's vision and work is best described by his own words . . .

China is not to be won for Christ by quiet, ease-loving men and women. . . The stamp of men and women we need is such as will put Jesus, China and souls first and foremost in everything and at every time – even life itself must be secondary.

Hudson Taylor was a whatever it takes Christian to reach the Chinese people with the Gospel.

Lesson 3: Whatever It Takes To Join God’s Plan

Main Passage: Acts 5:17–41

Focus Verses: Acts 5:38–39

Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. ³⁹ But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”

Big Idea: God is calling us to join His perfect plan.

As the disciples continue to share the name of Jesus, they are constantly challenged. But our God is sovereign and He has been working since the beginning to bring salvation to His people. We are foolish if we think we can make a better or more fulfilling plan than God. Therefore, we are called to do “Whatever It Takes” to join His plan.

To Join God’s Plan, We Must Believe:

The World’s Plans Are WORTHLESS

Acts 5:29, Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings! ³⁰ The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. ³¹ God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. ³² We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.” ³³ When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death.

In Acts 5, the apostles continued to preach and as a result they were thrown in jail. But an angel let them out and told them to go stand in the Temple to preach to the ones who had just persecuted them. As they do, the High Priest finds out and questions them, “Didn’t we tell you not to preach the name of Jesus?”

Over and over again in the book of Acts, opposition arises and the world tries to make plans against God’s people. This has also been true through the history of the Church. But God’s plan always prevails. Psalm 2:1–4 reads, “*Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed, saying, ‘Let us break their chains and throw off their shackles.’ The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.*” God laughs at the plans of the world because He knows all things and is working in all things to bring them to their full and final completion. Nothing will deter His work.

Discussion Questions:

- How often do you consider God’s plan when you make your plans?
- Think about your own life – what excuses do you most often use as a “reason” for not doing something you know that God wants you to do?

God Can Use ANYTHING TO ACCOMPLISH HIS PLAN

Acts 5:34, *But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. ³⁵ Then he addressed the Sanhedrin: “Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. ³⁶ Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. ³⁷ After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. ³⁸ Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. ³⁹ But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”*

While the apostles are before the Jewish counsel, notice that God uses a Pharisee to communicate an extraordinary truth: The plans of man fail, but God’s plans will never fail! All throughout history, God uses believers and unbelievers alike to accomplish His plans. When the world seems to crumble and all around us darkness seems to prevail, it won’t. We have peace in God and He should calm our fears and anxieties. Additionally, we have hope in God knowing that nothing will stop His plan to redeem and rescue the world back to Himself. God can use anyone and anything to make that happen.

Discussion Questions:

- How does knowing that God’s plan will be accomplished regardless of your personal actions impact your acts of obedience or disobedience?
- What do we miss when we fail to be obedient?

Joining God’s Plan FILLS US WITH JOY

Acts 5:40, *His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. ⁴¹ The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. ⁴² Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.*

Some may ask: why should we join His plans if they are going to happen anyway? Listen to the joy of the apostles in this passage. Their joy was unending and couldn’t be stopped. Their contentedness was not found in their circumstances or the fact that they were suffering, but their joy was in Jesus alone. No matter what happened to them, they knew they were joining God’s plans, and that filled them with joy because they were able to live out their purpose.

Can God accomplish His purposes without us? YES. But we will be miserable and joyless apart from walking in what He has called us to do!

Discussion Questions:

- How does our own obedience to God's mission fill us with joy – regardless of the outcome?
- Can you think of a time where your own act of obedience impacted others who witnessed/heard about the situation? Please explain.
- What does a “Whatever It Takes” attitude look like in following God's plan?

Lesson 3 Additional Commentary (Acts 5:17–42)³

All the Apostles Before the Council (5:17–42)

As in 3:1–4:5, the apostles' healing led to their arrest by the temple authorities and to a hearing before the Jewish Sanhedrin. Many similarities exist between this section and other portions of Acts, especially the twofold trial scenes of 4:5–22 and 5:27–40 and the escape scenes of 5:17–26 and 12:6–11. This has led many scholars to postulate Luke's use of different sources that covered the same events, but this tends to overlook the real progression that takes place in the narrative. The conflict between the Christians and the Jews steadily intensified. With the growing success of the Christian witness, there is a heightened reaction on the part of the Jewish authorities—at first only a hearing, warning, and release (4:5–22). Now those on the Council would impose the death penalty (5:33) and were only thwarted in their intentions by the sage advice of a Pharisee (5:34–39). The apostles were again released, but this time the Council had them whipped before so doing (5:40). The conflict became even stronger with the killing of Stephen (6:8–8:2) and the resulting persecution of the Christians in Jerusalem (8:1); and it reached its apex in chap. 12, where the execution of James and the attempt to do the same to Peter found the support not only of the Jewish officials but the populace as well (12:3).

This second encounter with the Sanhedrin can be divided into three main parts: the initial arrest and its almost ludicrous result (5:17–26), the hearing before the Sanhedrin (5:27–40), and the release of the apostles with their continued witness (5:41–42).

(1) Arrest, Escape, and Rearrest (5:17–26)

5:17–18 As before, the Sadducees were enraged by the apostles' preaching. They were described as being “filled with jealousy,” undoubtedly over the tremendous success of the Christian witness (5:15–16). The word translated “jealousy” can also mean *zeal*, and there may well have been an element of zeal in their determination to stamp out this growing messianic movement before its increasing popularity aroused the concern of the Roman authorities and led to severe reprisals. The high priest was again the spokesman. He was ultimately responsible for the proper maintenance of the temple precincts and its cultus, and so it was very much on his turf where the Christians were having all their success (cf. v. 12b). His cohorts in the local party of Sadducees would have shared his concern for preserving the peace against such popular movements and supported him in putting the apostles in the public jail (v. 18). One should not miss the irony of their being placed in the public jail, i.e., openly and for everyone to see. Soon they would be unable to find these very ones who were so openly placed in jail.

5:19–21a The miraculous escape of the apostles is told with the greatest economy here. In vv. 21b–26 it will be retold in far greater detail. The emphasis is placed on the total helplessness of the Jewish authorities. In this way the lesson of Gamaliel's speech is illustrated vividly beforehand—“If it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men” (v. 39).

An “angel” of the Lord appeared to the imprisoned apostles at night, opened the prison doors, and led them out (v. 19). The angel gave the apostles God's instructions. They were to return to

³ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 164–174.

the temple and speak “the full message of this new life.” They were to resume their witness, preaching the gospel that leads to life, the message of salvation. The apostles went and did as the angel bade them, early in the morning when the crowds would be gathering in the temple to observe the morning sacrifice. They obviously were not concerned for their safety. They returned to the very spot where they had been arrested, preaching the same words of life for which they were arrested. Perhaps there is irony in their deliverance by the angel. Sadducees did not believe in angels.

5:21b–24 Now the interesting part of the story begins. The scene shifts to the Council chambers where the Sanhedrin had gathered for its morning session. The first item on the agenda was the interrogation of the apostles; so officers were sent to the jail to fetch them. But they were not there. The officers hastened back to deliver the startling news. The prison doors were securely locked. The guards were duly *standing* at their posts (and thus evidently awake). Yet there was no one inside. How in the world did they get out through locked gates, past the guards? The Council was at a total loss.

5:25–26 Finally someone arrived with the good news, or was it bad news? The prisoners hadn’t totally escaped. They were on the temple grounds, back to their old tricks, teaching the people. Now the captain, the *sagan*, decided he had better handle the matter personally. After all, he was second in rank to the high priest himself and ultimately responsible for order on the temple grounds. Unusual circumstances like this had best not be left to lesser officials. So he went with his officers to gently persuade the apostles to accompany him to the Council chambers. He personally might have desired their execution by the usual procedure of stoning, but at this point he was more concerned about being stoned to death himself by the people, who held the apostles in the highest regard (cf. v. 13). One must not miss the irony in this entire fiasco.

The Sanhedrin was totally thwarted in its designs, totally helpless to control the situation. All was in God’s hands. The only reason the apostles finally appeared before the Council was their own willingness to do so. And they were willing to do so because the events of the night had convinced them once more that they were very much in God’s hands.

(2) Appearance Before Sanhedrin (5:27–40)

This second appearance before the Sanhedrin is significantly different from the first (4:5–22). That one only involved two apostles, Peter and John. Here all the apostles stood before the Council. There was no formal charge leveled against Peter and John; the questions mainly regarded their authorization (4:7). The apostles now were confronted with violation of the Council’s interdiction (5:28). The possibility of a verdict of death was not raised before, but at this point it became explicit (5:33). Most significant of all, there was no particular spokesperson for the Christians. Now there was, and he was a Pharisee (5:34–40). The trial scene falls into two rather balanced parts, focusing on the witness of the Christians (5:27–32) and the intercession of Gamaliel (5:33–40).

5:27–28 The trial began with the apostles being brought before the Sanhedrin. The Greek text has them “stood up” (*estēsan*) before the body, and this was the usual procedure, the defendants standing, the judges sitting. The high priest as presiding officer began the interrogation, charging the apostles with two offenses. First, they had broken the interdiction of the Sanhedrin and continued to preach “in this name.” Second, they were determined to lay the guilt for “this man’s blood” on them, the Jewish leaders.

What the high priest did not say is perhaps more significant than what he did say. He made absolutely no reference to the apostles' escape. Was this out of total embarrassment? Further, he scrupulously avoided mentioning Jesus by name. Does this reflect that already at this early stage mentioning the name of Jesus was considered in some circles as blasphemous? In any event, there were formal charges this time. The apostles had been duly warned by the court not to continue further witness, and the interdiction had been fully ignored. They were unmistakably culpable. The high priest's concern about being charged with responsibility for Jesus' "blood" may have had more significance than appears at first sight. To "lay someone's blood" on someone is an Old Testament expression for a charge of murder and in accordance with the *ius Talionis* demanded the death of the guilty party. In essence the high priest was saying, "You are trying to get us killed for responsibility in this man's death" (author's paraphrase).

5:29 Peter, of course, was not trying to get the leaders killed but rather to get them saved. As in the first trial, his response was more of a witness than a defense. As then, he referred to the basic principle of obeying God rather than man (cf. 4:19), this time the form being even closer to that of Socrates' famous quote in Plato's *Apology* 29d. This principle underlies this entire section of Acts. Where God's will lay in this instance was fully demonstrated in the escape with its command to resume the preaching in the temple. Not impeding God's purposes would be the main thrust of Gamaliel's speech. Peter had no choice. He had to remain true to the divine leading. His saying has continued to be used by Christians throughout the centuries, by Christian martyrs making the ultimate sacrifice in obedience to their Lord, and by power-hungry medieval popes exerting their influence over the secular rulers. It is a dangerous saying, subject to abuse and misappropriation; and one should be as clear as Peter was about what God's purposes really are before ever using it.

5:30–32 Peter's witness before the Sanhedrin was basically a summary of the Christian *kerygma*, as it had been at his first trial (4:10–12). The basic elements are all there—the guilt of the Jewish leaders for crucifying Jesus, the resurrection and exaltation, repentance and forgiveness in his name, the apostolic witness. There are some differences in detail. Jesus' crucifixion is described as "hanging on a tree," probably in allusion to Deut 21:23, an Old Testament text the early Christians saw as pointing to Christ.

In v. 31 the exalted Christ is described as "Prince" and "Savior." Neither term was new to Peter's sermons. The first term occurred in his temple sermon (3:15), where it had the nuance of author or originator of the resurrection life. Here it has the sense of "leader" or "prince" but still in close connection with the new life he brings through repentance and forgiveness of sins. It is thus closely connected with the title "Savior," which Peter had not used before. The concept of the salvation in his name, however, was at the very heart of his previous witness before the Sanhedrin (cf. 4:12). Here as there Peter's purpose was the same—to demonstrate that Christ is indeed the risen Savior and to urge repentance and commitment to his name. Peter was issuing an invitation to the Sanhedrin. They had indeed sinned in hanging Jesus on the cross, but there is forgiveness and salvation for Israel in him. If they needed further proof that he is their deliverer, risen and exalted to God's right hand, the apostles could bear eyewitness testimony to these realities (v. 32).

The pouring out of the Holy Spirit, so evident in all the miraculous works that were being accomplished, was bearing his own witness. Then as now, the Spirit is granted to all who obey God. Peter had been obedient, obeying God rather than man. Now his implicit appeal was that the Sanhedrin follow him in the same obedience.

5:33–34 The Jewish leaders were not the least inclined to respond to Peter’s appeal. Their reaction was quite the opposite. They were infuriated (*dieprionto*; lit., “sawn in two”). Some called for the death penalty, undoubtedly the Sadducees on the Council. Theologically they were not inclined to be convinced by Peter’s appeal to the resurrection, and politically Peter’s messianic message only served to further confirm that this was a dangerous, rabble-rousing group. They might have passed the verdict then and there had not a voice been raised urging moderation. It was a voice from the Pharisaic minority on the Council.

One wonders how much of a part politics played in the Sanhedrin’s decision on this particular occasion. Josephus said that the Sadducean officials usually yielded to the recommendations of the Pharisees because the latter enjoyed the support of the masses. Gamaliel may have used this occasion as another opportunity to assert this Pharisaic ascendancy over the Sadducees. As a Pharisee he would have had more sympathy with the Christians theologically. Pharisees believed in a coming Messiah, in the resurrection, and in a life after death, none of which the Sadducees accepted. The Pharisees also had an oral tradition of interpretation of the Torah that gave them considerable flexibility and openness to change. Not so the Sadducees, who accepted only the written Torah and were far more rigid and conservative in attitude. Such differences must have contributed considerably to Gamaliel’s more tolerant stance toward the apostles.

The Gamaliel in question here was Gamaliel I, who is referred to in several places in the rabbinic literature, though surprisingly sparsely for a man of his stature. He was the son or grandson of the famous Hillel and seemed to have been at the prime of his influence from about A.D. 25–50. Rabbinic tradition gives him the title of Nasi, or president of the high court, and has his son Simeon follow him in that role. His grandson Gamaliel II held the presidency after A.D. 90, when the court met at Jamnia. Perhaps nowhere is the esteem in which he was held better expressed than in the following statement of the *Mishna*: “When Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died, the glory of the Law ceased and purity and abstinence died.” For Christians he is best known through his pupil, Paul (Acts 22:3).

5:34–39 Gamaliel’s power in the Sanhedrin is subtly reflected in his ordering the apostles to be removed “for a little while.” Such matters were generally the prerogative of the high priest, and his reference to “a little while” reflects his confidence that it wouldn’t take him long to sway the court. He began by urging the court to “consider carefully” what they were about to do to the apostles. Considering that the death penalty had just been suggested, he was implying that this might be a bit rash and bring unfortunate results down on them, particularly given the Christian popularity with the masses. There was a better way. Simply leave the movement alone. Leave it to God. If he was not in it, it would fizzle out (vv. 38–39).

5:36–37 To make his point, Gamaliel cited two examples of similar messianic movements in recent Jewish history. His reasoning was simple. Neither movement succeeded—God was not in them. The examples he chose, however, raise serious historical problems. These revolve primarily around the first example—Theudas. According to Gamaliel, this Theudas appeared “some time ago,” claiming to be somebody (cf. 8:9), raised a following of about 400 men, and was killed. With his death the followers scattered in every direction, and the whole movement ended. The only other Theudas during this period of whom there is record is mentioned in Josephus’s *Antiquities* (20.97–99). According to Josephus, this Theudas raised a considerable following from the masses, persuading them to take along all their possessions and join him at the Jordan River. Claiming to

be a prophet, he insisted that at his command the waters of the Jordan would part (as in the days of Joshua). Getting wind of the movement, the Roman procurator arrived on the scene with a squadron of cavalry, took many prisoners, and beheaded Theudas, taking the trophy to Jerusalem (for a public object lesson).

If Luke and Josephus were talking about the same Theudas, there is a serious anachronism, for Josephus's Theudas is dated during the procuratorship of Fadus, whose term began in A.D. 44, some ten to fifteen years later than the time when Gamaliel would have delivered this address. To make matters worse, Gamaliel then gave the example of Judas the Galilean, who he said arose after Theudas, when in fact Judas's rebellion occurred in A.D. 6, nearly forty years earlier than Theudas's movement.

Many approaches have been taken in dealing with this problem, but basically three possibilities emerge: (1) either Josephus was in error, (2) or Luke was responsible for the anachronisms, or (3) they refer to two different Theudas. It is unlikely that Josephus would have made such an error. He lived in Palestine during the period of Fadus and would have had personal recollection of such events as the movement under Theudas. This leads many scholars to attribute the anachronism to Luke. Obviously for those who are impressed with Luke's general historical accuracy elsewhere and who are not disposed to according him such a mistake, the third option remains the most viable route.

Although it is an argument from silence, there is solid basis for arguing that the Theudas of Acts may be a different person from the one mentioned by Josephus. For one, the Acts account is very brief and could be applied to any number of messianic pretenders. Apart from the name Theudas and the fact of his death, it has little in common with Josephus's account. All the colorful highlights are missing—the parting of the Jordan, the arrival of the cavalry, the beheading. Acts gives the modest following of 400 men; Josephus spoke of “the majority of the masses” following Theudas. Acts says they were dispersed; Josephus, that many were arrested.

A second consideration is that the name Theudas may be a nickname or a Greek form of a common Hebrew name. In such a case the Theudas of Acts may be identified elsewhere by a different, Hebrew name. Finally, Josephus spoke of innumerable tumults and insurrections that arose in Judea following the death of Herod the Great (4 B.C.). Though he mentioned no leaders of these movements by name, this would be a plausible context for the Theudas incident mentioned in Gamaliel's speech.

Gamaliel's second example is less problematic. He referred to Judas the Galilean who arose “in the days of the census.” This is almost surely the same Judas who is referred to by Josephus in both his *Jewish War* and his *Antiquities*. He started a major rebellion in protest of the census under Quirinius (A.D. 6–7), which was undertaken for purposes of taxation. Josephus did not mention his death, but Gamaliel referred to his being killed and all his followers being scattered. Although the original rebellion under Judas was stifled by the Romans, such was not the case with the general movement begun by Judas. According to Josephus, he laid the foundations of the Zealot movement within Judaism, a movement that would grow to such proportions that in less than twenty-five years after Gamaliel's speech, it would initiate all-out war with the Romans.

5:38–39 Gamaliel's point is clear (vv. 38–39). God will work out his will. A movement that has his backing will prevail. Otherwise it will abort. So leave these men alone, lest you find yourselves fighting God. At this point in time Gamaliel might also have been concerned about their finding themselves fighting the Jewish populace. In any event he enunciated a sound rabbinic principle: “Any assembling together that is for the sake of Heaven shall in the end be established,

but any that is not for the sake of Heaven shall not in the end be established.” Gamaliel’s advice was sound and yet also a bit ironical. Already his counsel was finding fulfillment—in the growing Christian community, in their signs and wonders, in their escape from jail just the night before. It had become obvious whose side God was on. Already the Council were finding themselves fighters against God.

5:40 The Sanhedrin concurred with Gamaliel’s advice. Again they released the apostles, but this time with a flogging. The flogging referred to was the customary punishment used as a warning not to persist in an offense. It consisted of thirty-nine lashes, often referred to as the forty less one (cf. 2 Cor 11:24). Based on the provision for forty stripes given in Deut 25:3, the practice had developed of only giving thirty-nine in the event of miscounting, preferring to err on the side of clemency rather than severity. It was still a cruel punishment. With bared chest and in a kneeling position, one was beaten with a tripled strap of calf hide across both chest and back, two on the back for each stripe across the chest. Men were known to have died from the ordeal. As before, the apostles were warned not to continue their witness in Jesus’ name. This time the warning was reinforced with somewhat stronger persuasion.

(3) Release and Witness (5:41–42)

5:41–42 The apostles were not persuaded. They would continue to obey God rather than men. In fact, they rejoiced at having suffered for the name, very much in accord with the beatitude of their Lord (Luke 6:22f.). And the witness to the name continued—publicly in the temple and privately in the homes of the Christians. Luke seems to have used a common Greek rhetorical construction in v. 42 called a chiasm, which is most easily pictured as an A-B-B-A pattern. In the temple (A) and in homes (B), the apostles taught (B) and preached the gospel (A). Teaching was the task within the Christian fellowship, preaching the public task in the temple grounds. If there is any significance to his using such a device, it would be to give emphasis to the beginning and concluding elements. Their witness, their preaching of the gospel, was their primary task and occupation.

Lesson 3 – Whatever It Takes To Join God’s Plan – Missionary Story

William Carey (August 17, 1761 – June 9, 1834)

William Carey, who is often credited as being the Father of modern Protestant missions, was born in a small, obscure village in middle England. His father was a school master and instilled in William the practice of diligent study and hard work. However, it was his Uncle Peter who told him stories of ships and the sea, of people in other countries, of wildlife, and of trees and flowers which created in William a great fascination of the New World.

In spite of the daily ritual of Bible reading by his parents and their insistence on strict church attendance, William had little interest in religious books or things of a spiritual nature. He later acknowledged it was this early training that remained in his heart and mind and were of great influence in his adult life. His real interest was to be a gardener like his favorite uncle. However, William suffered with an illness that caused a severe skin irritation to get much worse when he was in the sun; and after two years he had to abandon his plan to be a gardener. It is interesting to note that he was able to later spend more than 40 years in the heat and sun of Bengal when he had been unable to withstand the sun of England. This is perhaps an illustration of what can happen when one follows God’s plan for their life rather than one’s own plan or the world’s plan.

When his work as a gardener ended, his father arranged for him to be an apprentice to a cobbler. Another apprentice in this shop was a young man named John Warr. Though not a believer in Christ when he and William initially met, John Warr soon after accepted Christ and in William’s words, “he became importunate with me, lending me books which gradually wrought a change in my thinking, and my inward uneasiness increased.”

Warr’s changed life along with his persuasive witness to William soon had Carey attending prayer meetings and church services with John. Within a few months, William Carey accepted Christ and there found peace and joy, and an unsatiable thirst for the Word of God. The more he learned of God’s truth, the more he wanted to know. This combined with his interest in the world beyond England, led him to think of those in the regions beyond who did not know God.

This compelling thirst for knowledge and his growing questions about taking the Gospel beyond England was proving to be a terrible distraction for his work as a cobbler. He had begun an evening school to supplement his income and he had also started to do some preaching. One of the most interesting things to note about William Carey’s life is that while he was diligent and described himself as a “plodder and one who could persevere,” he did not experience “success”. He was not successful at being a cobbler; in fact, his shoemaker employer agreed to continue to pay him his part-time salary if he would stop making shoes and just focus on his studies -- Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. He was not popular as a preacher either. His sister said to someone after he had preached in his hometown, that his family preferred for him to go away home than come home to preach.

However, it was William’s desire to see the Gospel taken to the ends of the earth that gave him the courage to speak up at a local minister’s association meeting and propose that they discuss the topic “Whether the command given to the apostles to teach all nations was not binding on all succeeding ministers to the end of the world.” An older pastor in the meeting strongly rebuked Carey publicly. He shouted at him, “Young man, sit down, sit down! You are an enthusiast. When God pleases to convert the heathen, he’ll do it without consulting you or me.” Carey sat down, but the fire in his heart to reach the lost with the Gospel was not quenched. Rather, he went home and wrote the pamphlet, “An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens” which called upon the

churches to engage in taking the Gospel to foreign lands. At a later association meeting that year, he was asked to preach and again in his sermon he pressed them to heed Scripture (Isaiah 54:2-3 KJV) to “enlarge the place of thy tent . . . lengthen thy cords.” It was in this sermon that he declared that they should “Expect great things!” And that they should “Attempt great things!” From this, the Particular Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel amongst the Heathen was formed. The name was later changed to the Baptist Missionary Society.

William Carey believed that God would use anyone and anything to accomplish His Plan and he knew that it was God’s plan for the Gospel to go to the ends of the earth. Carey told his pastor friends in England that he was willing to go if they would hold the ropes. With the assurance that he had the support of the Society, he began to make plans to leave for India. To the human mind it was a daunting venture -- just the cost of passage seemed insurmountable, his father said he was “mad” for even considering it, and his wife, Dorothy, was vehemently opposed and refused to go with him. Though she relented and finally agreed to go if her sister could go with them. None of this discouraged Carey – he pressed forward and on June 13, 1793, Carey and his family boarded a boat and sailed for five months before reaching India. It was a difficult and perilous journey. However, William Carey knew that he was following God’s plan and with that assurance he never looked back.

Life was not easy for the Carey family. Yet, William Carey the plodder pressed on, studying Bengali and in a few weeks began to preach to small gatherings through a translator. He also began a rudimentary Bible translation. The work continued and so did the hardships with the family suffering severe illness. Their 5-year-old son Peter died, and his wife Dorothy suffered from debilitating depression and delusions. In it all, Carey clung to his faith, finding joy in knowing that this was God’s plan, and he wrote, “But I rejoice that I am here, notwithstanding; and God is here, Who not only can have compassion, but is able to save to the uttermost.”

In 1799 a group of eight adults and five children arrived from England to help him. Included in this group was a printer who would set up a printing press for the mission; and a teacher who would start a school. Since this mission group was no longer just Carey and his family, he made the decision to move the base of the work to Serampore, a city near Calcutta. In December 1800 after seven years of labor, Carey baptized his first Indian convert. In February 1801, the first Bengali New Testament was printed. Carey was appointed as a teacher of Bengali and Sanskrit at Fort Williams College in April of 1801. (Fort Williams College was a school for British civil servants in Calcutta.) The mission also gained prestige in the country as well as government printing contracts which provided much needed funds for the mission.

Carey’s work in India had a slow start yet he left a huge legacy all owing to the truth that God can use anything or anyone to accomplish His plans. Carey’s accomplishments for God included more than 1,407 converts baptized by him or his associates; the Bible translated into Bengali, Sanskrit and several other dialects. He and his team promoted education, founding the Serampore College which educated both believers and unbelievers, with its primary goal to train indigenous ministers.

William Carey was a missionary who did whatever it took to become a part of God’s Plan.

Lesson 4: Whatever It Takes To Be Faithful

Main Passage: Acts 6:8–7:60

Focus Verses: Acts 6:8–9a

Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.⁹ Opposition arose, however...

Big Idea: We will always face opposition to the world as believers in Jesus.

In Acts 6–7, Acts records the story of the earliest recorded Christian martyr, Stephen. His testimony is a reminder that we are called to remain faithful to God no matter the circumstances that come our way. This is hard, but if we want to be the kind of people who have a whatever it takes mentality, then we must explore our call to faithfulness.

What Does It Mean To Be Faithful?

Know the OPPOSITION

Acts 6:8, *Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen.... ¹¹ Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." ¹² So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. ¹³ They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴ For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us." ¹⁵ All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.*

In this passage we are introduced to Stephen and quickly we see there were people who opposed him in a variety of ways: they persuaded others against him; they lied about his teachings; they incited opposition; they produced false witnesses; and they misrepresented and twisted his words. Yet Stephen stood his ground and did not waiver.

There is no doubt we live in a world that is growing increasingly hostile to the Gospel. The world will bring a variety of lies against us, but don't be surprised by this opposition. Jesus says "Everyone will hate you because of me" (Luke 21:17). If you want to stay faithful, you must realize that the enemy is looking to oppose you.

Discussion Questions:

- What forms of opposition do we face today?
- Do you ever find yourself being concerned that you are not experiencing enough persecution in your life? Why or why not?

- What is the difference between being “filled and controlled by the Spirit” or acting on your own?

Believe God Is GREATER

Acts 6:10, *But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.*

The world will always have their lies and their false testimonies, but we will always have our God who is Truth and who is greater than all of the opposition. The enemy can’t stand up against the work of the Spirit in and through us. In part, this verse is a call to work and operate in the Spirit and cultivate a relationship with God through His Spirit. Additionally, the verse is affirming the power of the Spirit from Acts 1, that as we go God is faithful to back us up.

Many people say, “I can’t share my faith because I don’t have all the answers.” The truth is that no one has all the answers to everything other than God Himself! But God promises to empower you and give you wisdom that can stand up against the world.

Discussion Questions:

- How do the promises of Scripture help to prepare, comfort and encourage us in the midst of persecution?
- How does this verse help to encourage Christians who may be hesitant about speaking up because they are afraid of being asked questions that they will be unable to answer?

Hold To the TRUTH

Acts 7:51, *“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵² Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— ⁵³ you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”*

Though this section seems harsh, the surrounding context offers one of the greatest single messages concerning the continuity and truthfulness of all the Scriptures. In his message, Stephen lovingly and unswervingly presents that they need Jesus to be saved. Without Jesus, they are stiff-necked (see Exodus 32) and stuck in their sin.

The Christian truth will stand in contrast to the world’s truth and people will reject it because they are stuck in their sin. But we are called to hold to the Truth of the Gospel and live it out in love.

Discussion Questions:

- How do we hold on to the Truth in a “truth is relative” culture?
- Can you share an example of when someone has spoken (or failed to speak!) the “truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15)? What did you learn from the experience?

Embrace SUFFERING

Acts 7:54, *When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.⁵⁶ “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him,⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”*

As Stephen faithfully held to the truth in the face of opposition, it cost him his earthly life. But he understood that his call to die was greater than compromising or turning from his Jesus. All over the Gospels Jesus tells His disciples to count the cost of discipleship. We should embrace those moments of opposition and “praise God for being counted worthy to suffer for the sake of the Gospel.” Embracing suffering doesn’t mean we walk naively or that it won’t hurt. But it does mean that we see our call to follow Jesus is greater than anything that we may lose in the process. Embrace what you may lose in the Gospel for you have gained everything in Jesus.

Discussion Questions:

- How did Stephen’s focus on the Lord enable him to maintain his witness, even to the point of death?
- How do you think you would fare if faced with similar circumstances? Why?

Walk in LOVE AND GRACE

Acts 7:60, *Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.*

Stephen is facing those who are throwing large rocks with every intent to kill him, and he prays that the Lord would forgive them. Stephen models the grace He was given. As we face the opposition, we are called to model Jesus’ love and forgiveness as we walk in love and grace. Every apostle suffered for their faith, and the Church was built on their faithfulness. Jesus is better than worldly sorrow. We are called to do whatever it takes to remain faithful, no matter the cost.

Discussion Questions:

- What does it look like to have Stephen’s attitude in the midst of suffering and persecution?
- What does a “Whatever It Takes” attitude look like in our faithfulness, even in the midst of persecution?

Lesson 4 Additional Commentary (Acts 6:8–7:1; 7:51–8:1a)⁴

Stephen's Arrest and Trial (6:8–7:1)

The narrative about Stephen constitutes a major turning point in Acts. It ends a series of three trials before the Sanhedrin. The first ended in a warning (4:21), the second in a flogging (5:40), and Stephen's in his death. The Stephen episode is the culmination in the witness to the Jews of Jerusalem, which has been the major subject of Acts 2–5. To this point a growing opposition toward the Christians from the Jewish leaders had been thwarted by the favor of the people toward the young movement. Then the picture changed. The people joined in the resistance to Stephen. With the death of Stephen and the dispersal of his fellow Hellenists, the focus would no longer be on Jerusalem but on Samaria and all of Palestine and, finally, with Paul on the further reaches of the Roman Empire. Stephen is thus a key figure in the narrative of the wider Christian mission, and the lengthy treatment of his martyrdom is no coincidence. The account begins with his arrest and trial (6:8–7:1). There follows a lengthy speech of Stephen (7:2–53), which, though set in the context of his defense before the Sanhedrin, was more a critique of his contemporary fellow Jews than a defense. As a result, he was stoned to death by his enraged audience (7:54–8:1a). Stephen thus set the scene for Philip's work in Samaria.

(1) Stephen's Debate with the Hellenist Synagogue (6:8–10)

6:8–10 Luke began by telling us that Stephen was “full of God's grace and power.” We have been well prepared for this. As one of the seven he met the qualification of being filled with the Spirit and wisdom (v. 3) and was personally described as full of faith and the Holy Spirit (v. 5). Faith, wisdom, grace, power, and above all the presence of the Spirit were the personal qualities that equipped him for the ultimate witness he would soon bear. The Spirit and power are closely linked and led him to perform signs and wonders among the people. He was the first other than the apostles to be described as working miracles. He quite naturally witnessed in the synagogue of his fellow Greek-speaking Jews. Luke named it the Synagogue of the Freedmen, which indicates that many of its members formerly may have been slaves or were the descendants of former slaves. Its membership included Jews from the north African and Asian Diaspora. There is ample literary and inscriptional evidence for Cyrenian Jews settling in Jerusalem, and the rabbinic writings mention an Alexandrian synagogue in Jerusalem. Paul himself was a Cilician Jew who had come to live in Jerusalem, and it was Asian Jews who later would accuse him of having violated the temple (Acts 21:27f.). In fact, Paul himself may have attended this synagogue, and it may be there where he debated his fellow Greek-speaking Jews after becoming a Christian (Acts 9:29). In any event, they were unable to refute Stephen. He was too filled with the Spirit and wisdom (cf. v. 3).

(2) The Frame-Up (6:11–12)

6:11–12 Unable to resist Stephen's persuasive power and his logic, the Hellenist Jews resorted to underhanded methods. They “hatched a frame-up.” The Greek word (*hypoballō*) is really stronger than the NIV's “secretly persuaded,” usually implying that one “puts someone else up”

⁴ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 205–210.

something, giving them the words to say. In this case the words were to the effect that Stephen had spoken blasphemy against Moses and against God. This charge reappeared in slightly different terms when Stephen was taken before the Sanhedrin. This time the opposition was more formidable. The scandalous charges were spread all over town—Stephen, the blasphemer. This time the populace was moved against Stephen, the first time in Acts they came into active opposition against the Christians. Likewise, the elders of Jerusalem and the scribes became alarmed. The former represented the Sadducees, the latter the Pharisees. Both had their representatives on the Sanhedrin. The stage was set. Stephen was arrested and taken to the Sanhedrin.

It may come as something of a surprise that the Diaspora Jews were so incensed at Stephen. As Hellenistic Jews, would they not have been more tolerant, more receptive of his new ideas, less nationalistic? No, the evidence is that exactly the opposite was the case. The Jews who came from the Diaspora were usually highly nationalistic Jews, having left their homes in the dispersion to migrate to the holy city, the temple city. They were highly zealous for both law and temple. B. Reicke, with considerable justification, labels them “Zionists.” They would not at all have been open to Stephen’s prophetic critique of their religion and worship. They were wrong in their charge of blasphemy, but blind zealotism is incapable of taking even the most constructive critique.

(3) The Trial (6:13–7:1)

6:13–14 Before the Sanhedrin the plotters presented the charges against Stephen. He is described as speaking “against this holy place” and “against the law.” These are really the same as the original charges of blasphemy against Moses and against God made in v. 11. Moses was identified in their minds with the receipt of the law at Sinai and its transmission in the Pentateuch. To speak against Moses was thus to attack the law itself. “This holy place” was the temple, which was considered by contemporary Jews as the dwelling place of God, containing his very presence in the holy of holies. To attack the temple was seen as a direct affront to God himself. The charges are given a third time in v. 14, this time in a more polemical form: Stephen was accused of saying that Jesus would destroy the temple and change the customs handed down by Moses. This time the charges were more threatening, not just blasphemy but destruction of the temple, alteration of the law. In the background to v. 14 stands the charge of blasphemy directed against Jesus at his own trial when he was accused of threatening to destroy the temple (Mark 14:57–58). Luke did not include that tradition in the narrative of Jesus’ trial in his Gospel, but its inclusion here is highly significant. It put Jesus back on trial once again. Stephen had only been faithful in his witness to the teaching of Jesus. To reject the testimony of Stephen was ultimately to reject Jesus. That is what his trial was all about. The violent rejection of Stephen represented a rejection of Jesus the Messiah. Ultimately it was not Stephen but the Sanhedrin on trial that day.

6:15–7:1 All attention then turned to Stephen to see how he would respond to the charges. What they saw was a visage transfigured, a face like that of an angel. It is a picture of the martyr inspired by the heavenly vision, filled with the Spirit and empowered for fearless testimony before his accusers. As presiding officer in the Sanhedrin, the high priest followed the proper protocol and allowed the accused to respond to the charges—“Are these charges true?” “How do you plead, guilty or innocent?” (author’s translation).

The Rejection of the Messiah (7:51–53)

7:51–53 The final portion of Stephen’s speech could be described in classical rhetorical terms as the “peroration,” where the speaker applies the lessons learned from the previous material in his speech in a direct, frequently emotional appeal to his hearers to act. The aim was to secure their awareness of their own culpability in these matters and motivate them to take remedial action. It is an ancient form of argumentation found in both Greek rhetoric and Hebrew prophecy. The function of the peroration of Stephen’s speech was not simply to malign his Jewish audience. In Christian terms his ultimate goal was their remedial action, their repentance.

The polemical nature of these verses is immediately evident in Stephen’s switch from first to second person. Before now, Stephen had included himself in his references to the Jews. It was always “our fathers” (cf. vv. 19, 38, 39, 44). Now it was “your fathers.” It was no longer a question of Jewish history with which Stephen identified but a direct personal appeal to his hearers. Using the language of the prophets, he accused them of being “stiff-necked . . . , with uncircumcised hearts and ears,” always resisting the Holy Spirit (v. 51). His entire historical sketch has illustrated this point, the consistent pattern on Israel’s part of rejecting its leaders. Stephen, who was “filled with the Spirit” (6:3, 5), had already experienced their resistance (6:10). He would experience it in this instance as well (7:55–58). He reminded them of how they had always resisted and even killed their prophets—the very ones who in the Spirit spoke the words of the Lord. More significantly these very prophets were the ones who predicted the coming of the Messiah (cf. 3:18, 24). Stephen referred to the Messiah as the “Righteous One,” a term already employed by Peter in his temple sermon (3:14). Indeed, the linkages between the two sermons are even closer still, for Peter likewise accused his Jewish hearers of having betrayed and murdered the Righteous One (3:14–15).

The whole purpose of Stephen’s speech now becomes clear. His historical survey had illustrated Israel’s constant rejection of God’s chosen leaders. Moses, Joseph, the prophets are all types of and pointers to Christ; and Stephen pointed out to his hearers that they had already rejected and killed him. Is this a final condemnation? One is reminded of Peter’s temple sermon with all its resemblances to this portion of Stephen’s speech. For Peter it was not a final condemnation, but the door remained open to repent and receive the Christ at his second coming (3:19–21). Stephen already had shown how deliverance came for Israel on their second encounters with Joseph and Moses. Was there not an implicit second chance offered to his hearers here? Was Stephen making an appeal for them to take the needed remedial steps to their apostasy and repent?

Summary. It has often been stated that Stephen’s speech does not address the charge that had been leveled against him, that of blasphemy against the temple and the law. Already we have seen that Stephen gave considerable attention to the temple charge. In effect, he turned back that charge on his accusers. They were the guilty parties in turning the temple into an object for human manipulation and distorting its true purpose of prayer and worship. He did virtually the same with the charge of blasphemy against the law. In his speech he never once criticized the law. He gave only positive treatment of its provisions, such as circumcision (v. 8), and described it as “living words” (v. 38). No, it was not he but his Jewish accusers who were the real lawbreakers (v. 53). They were the apostates and idolaters who had constantly transgressed the first Commandments.

Overall one gets the impression that Stephen realized his defense was a lost cause from the start. He would never secure his acquittal without compromising his convictions. He determined to use the situation as one last opportunity to share those convictions, one last chance to appeal to his Jewish contemporaries to abandon their pattern of rejection and accept the Messiah God had sent them. This is why Luke made constant reference to his being filled with the Spirit (cf. Luke

21:12–15). It took courage and inspiration to do what he did. Ultimately his speech was not a defense at all but a witness.

4. Stephen's Martyrdom (7:54–8:1a)

7:54–55 Whether Stephen intended to give a direct appeal for his hearers to repent we will never know, for they abruptly broke him off. They were absolutely livid at Stephen's placing them on trial. Luke described their rage in terms of their being "cut to the heart" (*dieprionto*, cf. 5:33) and "grinding their teeth" (cf. Ps 35:16). Stephen's response to their rage certainly did nothing to assuage it. Looking into heaven, he had the beatific vision; he beheld the glory of the heavenly throne room and Jesus standing at God's right hand (v. 55).

7:56 Having first given this vision in narrative form, Luke underlined its importance by repeating it in direct discourse, as Stephen shared the experience with the infuriated Sanhedrin: "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." Jesus had spoken similar words at his own appearance before the Sanhedrin (Luke 22:69), and what had been a prediction on his part became a reality for Stephen. Jesus is indeed now risen and exalted to his position of authority at God's right hand. The vision confirmed Stephen's testimony. His messianic claims for Jesus were verified in his vision of the exalted Son of Man. Significantly, Stephen referred to him as "the Son of Man," not simply as "Jesus," as in the narrative of v. 55. This is the only instance in the New Testament where the term is spoken by another than Jesus himself. Even more striking is the reference to his standing. Generally the reference is to his being seated at God's right hand, as in Luke 22:69. Scholarly opinion differs about the significance of the uncharacteristic standing position in Stephen's speech. Some see no significance other than a variation in expression. Others see it as a reference to Christ having risen from his seat to welcome the martyr Stephen.

The view with the most far-reaching implications, however, is that Stephen's vision links up with the original Son of Man vision in Dan 7:13–14, where the Son of Man is depicted as standing before the Ancient of Days. The primary role of the Danielic Son of Man was that of judgment, and the New Testament consistently depicts Christ in this role of eschatological judge (cf. Matt 25:31–46). The standing position may thus depict the exalted Christ in his role of judge. If so, Stephen's vision not only confirmed his testimony, but it showed Christ rising to render judgment on his accusers. They, not he, were the guilty parties. In Dan 7:14 the Son of Man was given dominion over "all peoples, nations, and men of every language." If this is a further implication of Stephen's Son of Man vision, it ties in well with his understanding of God as not being bound to one nation or people. It is a vision of the boundless reign of Christ, which was soon to begin with the Samaritan mission of Stephen's fellow Hellenist Philip.

7:57–59 One can understand the furious response in the Sanhedrin at Stephen's testimony to his vision (v. 57). If he indeed had such a vision, they stood condemned. There was only one conclusion they could draw. Stephen was lying, claiming to have a vision of God. It was blasphemy! They put their fingers in their ears to shut out his words lest God come and consume them for listening to such blasphemy (v. 57). Screaming, they descended violently on him, threw him outside the city gates, and began to stone him. There was a certain irony in their action. Out of concern for the sanctity of the city, they performed their unholy deed outside its bounds. It has often been debated whether Stephen was "lynched" or condemned by formal verdict of the Sanhedrin, for which stoning was one of the chief manners of execution. In favor of the latter is the fact that Stephen was on trial before the Sanhedrin and was killed by stoning. Luke's account, however, gives more the picture of mob action. There is also the question of whether the Sanhedrin

had the legal right to carry out capital sentences during the Roman period. The evidence seems to indicate that they did not (cf. John 18:31). Also the picture of Stephen's stoning does not fit what is known of Jewish execution by stoning. According to the Mishna, *Sanhedrin* 6:1–6, stoning took place outside the city and the actual stoning was done by those who had witnessed against the condemned person.

These details fit the present scene, but they are about all that does. In formal stonings victims were stripped and pushed over a cliff ten- to twelve-feet high. They were then rolled over on their chests, and the first witness pushed a boulder (as large a stone as he could manage) from the cliff above. In the unlikely event the victim survived this first smashing, the second witness was to roll a second boulder from above. The picture of Stephen's stoning is radically different. He was not stripped. The witnesses stripped, evidently to give them greater freedom for throwing. It is doubtful Stephen could have knelt or uttered prayers after being pounded by a huge boulder from ten feet above. The picture in Acts is of an angry mob pelting Stephen with stones. His death was not instantaneous as was the case with Jewish executions. Whether the Sanhedrin participated in Stephen's "lynching" is another question. A later incident when Paul faced the Sanhedrin shows that body was not beyond forsaking decorum when sufficiently aroused (23:10).

7:59–60 Stephen died as only one who was "full of the Holy Spirit" could (v. 55). He seems to have consciously followed the pattern of his Master as he faced his own death. His last words, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," echoed those Jesus prayed from the cross. This was the same basic commitment of his life to his Lord that Jesus made to the Father in his own dying moments (Luke 23:46). There is a certain trusting innocence in these dying words of Stephen and of Jesus. The words are an ancient Jewish prayer, based on Ps 31:5, which children were taught to pray at bedtime. "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" reminds us of Jesus' prayer for the forgiveness of those who crucified him (Luke 23:34). And so Stephen "fell asleep," perhaps in fulfillment of his prayer in v. 59. The early Christians often used the concept of "sleep" for death, a confession of their assurance of resurrection. No one ever died with greater assurance than Stephen. He fell asleep with the vision of his risen Lord at God's right hand still fresh on his mind.

8:1a So ends the witness of Stephen. But there was another there that day whose story was just beginning. Luke introduced Saul for the first time at the stoning of Stephen. He was the young man who watched over the garments of the witnesses as they stoned Stephen (v. 58). There is no indication that Paul himself actually lifted a stone, but he was in total agreement with the action (8:1). Paul likely had a deeper involvement with the whole incident than appears in these brief references. He was himself a Greek-speaking Jew, a Cilician, who perhaps had argued with Stephen in the Hellenist synagogue in Jerusalem (6:9f.) We would like to know if he heard the speech. If he did, it would be eloquent testimony that Stephen's words did not fall only on deaf ears; for ultimately no one carried out more fully the implications of Stephen's words than did Paul. The incident of Stephen's martyrdom in any event surely had a profound effect as Paul himself later attested (Acts 22:20).

Lesson 4 -Whatever It Takes To Be Faithful – Missionary Story

John and Betty Stam

(John: January 18, 1907 – December 8, 1934)

(Betty: February 22, 1906 – December 8, 1934)

When you look at the lives of John and Betty Stam one cannot help but believe that they were born to a life of faithful service to the Lord. John was the seventh child of a Christian couple in Paterson, New Jersey, who had a heart for missions. They founded the Star of Hope Mission where large evangelistic meetings were held and the Gospel faithfully proclaimed to all who came to listen. Many young people including John Stam who served in ministry at the mission went on to serve God both in the United States as well as in countries around the globe.

Betty was born in Albion, Michigan, to a couple preparing to go to China as missionaries. When she was six months old, she and her parents sailed to China for her parents to begin their work of evangelism and Bible Teaching. Betty grew up in China and returned to the U.S. to attend college.

Both young people were from similar yet different backgrounds and grew to become committed Christians, seeking God's will for their lives no matter the cost. Each of them committed their lives to serving God in China independent of the other. They met at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago when they attended prayer meetings on campus specifically to pray for the work of the China Inland Mission (CIM). This was the beginning of a lengthy friendship that ultimately blossomed into a deep love for one another.

Betty was approved as a missionary by the China Inland Mission and departed for China in the fall of 1931. John was not approved by the CIM until July 1, 1932 and sailed for China September 24, 1932. He arrived in Shanghai, China on October 12 ready to begin his ministry. Little did he know that Betty was also in Shanghai and soon they would be reunited. John and Betty were married on October 25, 1933, at the mission compound in Tsinan where Betty's parents served. After a two-week honeymoon in Tsingtao, Betty's childhood home, they traveled up the Yangtze river to Wuhu and then to Suancheng where they would base their missionary work.

The great opposition they knew they would face in China as Gospel missionaries was an accepted fact for each of them; yet they also believed that God was greater than any opposition they might face. During the years prior to their arrival in the country, there was great political unrest as the Chinese Civil War was moving across the country. The Chinese Communist movement was known to kill Christians and especially foreign Christian missionaries. As single missionaries they had both faced great danger from bandits, rebel soldiers, and Communist soldiers. John wrote to his parents, "And so we can praise God that for us everything is well. If we should go on before, it is only the quicker to enjoy the bliss of the Savior's presence, then soon to be released from the fight against sin and Satan. Meanwhile, we can continue to praise Him from whom all blessings flow."

They eagerly settled into their home in Suancheng, and were quickly immersed in the ministry, holding Bible studies, leading children's meetings and doing one-on-one evangelism and discipleship training. In addition, they each continued their language studies to be more proficient in the language. By January of 1934, they were traveling into the countryside to do evangelism and meet with faithful bands of believers while maintaining the work at Suancheng.

In July of 1934, they were asked to return to Wuhu to look over the duties of the CIM's local secretary at the CIM office so that the secretary and his wife could take a much needed two-month rest. While the office duties were not what John enjoyed doing, he was glad to be in Wuhu because Betty was pregnant and there was a good hospital to care for her when she delivered their child. Helen Priscilla Stam was

born on September 11, 1934. John and Betty were ecstatic to have this little one join their family and to be returning to their work of evangelism and church building.

They were planning to go to an area in southern Anhwei, instead of returning to Suancheng. Even though rumors continued of increasing unrest and trouble in this area, the district magistrate of that area assured John and a fellow missionary that there was no danger of Communists in the area. He went on to tell them that they could move to the area immediately and that he would guarantee their safety. It was with that assurance from the district magistrate that the CIM officials gave permission for the Stams and the other missionary family to move to southern Anhwei.

The Stam family set out for their new home in Southern Anhwei on November 22, 1934, and held their first Church service on Sunday, November 25th. On that Sunday, the service was attended by the missionaries, their household servants, a carrier they hired, two unbelievers from the community and one young girl from the immediate neighborhood. The next Sunday it was only the missionaries and their household servants who attended the service. Things were changing quickly in the area and not for good.

On December 6, 1934, 2,000 Communist soldiers (known as Red soldiers) attacked and quickly overpowered the city. Within hours there were 6,000 Red soldiers in their area. The city was overtaken, three city officials were killed, the town was ransacked with the soldiers looting and taking food, money and anything of value. The soldiers went on to kill 14 of the city's leaders, and captured John, Betty and little Helen. The soldiers talked openly in front of John and Betty of killing the baby. However, an anonymous onlooker objected to them killing the baby. Instead, the soldiers killed the onlooker.

The Stams and other captives were forced to march 12 miles over mountain roads by their captors to the city of Miaosheo with John carrying the baby on his back. Part of the way, Betty was allowed to ride a horse that the soldiers confiscated. Once they reached Miaosheo, the Stams were left in the oversight of the local postmaster who turned out to be sympathetic to them. John was able to write a quick note to the CIM officials in Shanghai informing them that he and his family had been taken captive by the Communist soldiers. He asked the postmaster to make sure his letter was delivered. That evening, the Stams were taken to a deserted home for the night where John was tied to a pole standing up. Betty was left without restraints so that she could care for the baby. The soldiers guarded the house to ensure that the Stams did not escape.

Early the next morning, the soldiers seized John and Betty leaving baby Helen behind. Just before the soldiers came into the house early in the morning, Betty had wrapped the sleeping baby tightly in a blanket, hiding two \$5.00 bills in the baby's clothing and prayed that Helen would be protected. Within hours, first John and then Betty met the enemy's sword and found themselves immediately in God's presence.

Chinese believers who fled to the mountains to hide from the soldiers slowly returned to the town of Miaosheo, which by now was deserted by the Communist soldiers who had moved on to other towns. A Chinese evangelist named Lo learned of the death of the Stams and together with a handful of believers rescued the bodies. An elderly woman told Evangelist Lo that there had also been a foreign baby with them and led him to the house where the Stams had spent the night. Evangelist Lo entered the home and heard baby Helen crying. He rescued her and, together with a believer named Mrs. Wang, her son and three others, held a burial service for John and Betty Stam. The local citizens gathered to watch this burial and then Evangelist Lo preached a Gospel message to them.

Because rumors were flying that the Communist army was going to return to Miaosheo, Evangelist Lo and his wife took the baby and fled to Shanghai. Along the way they found local village women to nurse

the baby until they could deliver her to one of the CIM missionaries in Shanghai. The baby was ultimately reunited with Betty's parents.

There were many memorial services to honor John and Betty Stam's lives and ministry, including services at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, and at Wilson College (Betty's alma mater) in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. Following the memorial service at Moody more than 700 students from Moody and another 200 from Wheaton College committed their lives to missionary service.

It can be said of John and Betty Stam that they were faithful, they knew the opposition, they held to the truth of God, they embraced suffering and even in death they walked in love and grace.

**John and Betty Stam did whatever it took to be faithful,
even giving their lives to spread the Gospel message around the world.**

Lesson 5: Whatever It Takes To Make the Most of Every Opportunity

Main Passage: Acts 8:26–40

Focus Verses: Acts 8:29–30a

The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot...

Big Idea: God uses those who are willing, flexible and available for His purposes.

Introduction:

We must do whatever it takes to make the most of every opportunity. Ephesians 5:16 commands us to “*make the most of every opportunity because the days are evil.*” Colossians 4:5 also says, “*Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.*” We see this in action in Acts 8. We have opportunities every day to make much of the name of Jesus!

Five Steps To Seize Every Opportunity as a Gospel Opportunity:

1) Stay CONNECTED With God

Acts 8:26, *Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.”*

As we open Acts 8, we are introduced to a believer named Philip who gets an unusual calling from the Lord through an angel. As Philip is going about his day, he is seemingly called out and told to “Go!” Acts 8:4 records Philip’s ministry and that in his preaching he had brought joy to the city of Samaria. Now we see Philip again, this time called to go, not to a city, but to an individual. Philip was connected with God and as a result, he was in tune with where God was leading. As he went, he knew the Gospel, preached the Gospel, lived out the Gospel and the Lord used him in this story.

It would be an awesome thing to hear the audible voice of an angel telling us what to do! But though this angel spoke to Philip for a specific time and purpose, we can still learn something from this encounter. In many ways, we have something better than an angel: We have the Word of God. Like a parent to a child (see 2 Timothy 3:16–17), the Bible teaches, rebukes, corrects and trains us to have a relationship with God. Further, we also have prayer. As the Word is God’s mouth, prayer gives us God’s ear—that’s how we stay connected with Him!

Discussion Questions:

- What are ways you can stay connected with God?
- How do you know when God is speaking to you?
- When you think, God is speaking to you do you act on it, or look for another sign?

2) Maintain MARGIN in Your Life

Acts 8:27, *So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.” ³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet.*

Not only did Philip drop what he was doing, but he ran to the chariot! Philip had enough margin in his life to go where God called him.

When you stay connected with God, He calls you to go and do. One of the greatest hinderances to the Lord using you is that you stay too busy to use. We often prioritize our “stuff” so that there is no margin to be moved outside of our plans. Satan wants to keep you too busy to make the most of every opportunity. He wants to keep you so self-focused and concerned with what you have going on that you fail to go where God leads. But to do whatever it takes for the Gospel, we must prioritize His leading over our plans.

Discussion Questions:

- How can the worries of this world distract or even prevent us from hearing and responding to the Lord?
- What measures have you taken that help you to remain available to God throughout the day?
- How could He use you in one specific person's life today?

3) Foster a GENUINE CARE for People

Acts 8:30, . . . *“Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. ³¹ “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.*

Staying connected and maintaining margin are important for seizing Gospel opportunities, but they are worthless if you fail to care for the people. Jesus looked at the crowds with compassion, knowing that they were a sheep without a Shepherd. Philip didn't go into this conversation with his own agenda, he asked good questions and met the Ethiopian where he was. The difference between seeing God's moving as obligations or opportunities lies in our care and concern for people.

Every person is made in the image of God and is in desperate need of salvation. To make the most of every opportunity we must see people like Jesus and Philip saw them: Image bearers in need of a Savior.

Discussion Questions:

- How would you rate your love for people on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest)? How would others rank you?
- What were your actions toward others that determined your rating?

4) Guide People to the WORD

Acts 8:32, *This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ³³ In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.” ³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” ³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.*

Philip understood that this man needed Jesus. All of Scripture unquestionably points every person face to face with salvation in Jesus. When we take advantage of the opportunity the Lord has put before us, we should always drive people to the truths that are found in Scripture: the God who created us; the sinfulness of humanity; the effects of going our own way; God’s work in bringing salvation since the beginning; the fullness of God’s Word revealed in Jesus; salvation in Christ alone; how we should live; and where we place our hope. To make the most of every opportunity, we need to get people to the truth of the Word.

Discussion Questions:

- How often do you share and discuss the Bible in your everyday conversations?
- What is your primary source of wisdom and advice in your life?
- Do you share the Gospel when an opportunity arises or do you make the excuse this is not the time?

5) Call People to ACTION

Acts 8:36, *As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” . . . ³⁸ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.*

As Philip presented the Gospel, he called this man to believe. And we see the Ethiopians response: “What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” As we seize opportunities for the Gospel, we must call people to action. We must ask questions that cause them to think through the Gospel implications in their life. Ultimately, as we seize the opportunities for the Gospel, we must help guide that person to take the next step toward God’s way and away from their own.

Discussion Questions:

- How are we sometimes guilty of placing obstacles in the way of others when they are trying to respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit?
- What does a “Whatever It Takes” attitude look like in our responsiveness to the Gospel opportunities we encounter every day?
- Do you feel equipped to share the Gospel?

Lesson 5 Additional Commentary (Acts 8:26–40)⁵

The Witness to the Ethiopian Treasurer (8:26–40)

Having established the mission to the Samaritans, Philip then became involved in an even more far-reaching missionary breakthrough, as he was led to witness to an Ethiopian. Indeed, Philip's witness to the eunuch may be considered the first conversion of a Gentile and in many ways parallels the story of Cornelius in chap. 10. Ethiopia was considered "the end of the earth" by the Greeks and Romans, and Philip's witness to the Samaritans and the Ethiopian comprises a "foretaste" of the completion of Christ's commission (1:8) by the whole church in the subsequent chapters of Acts.

A pronounced emphasis is on the activity of the Spirit in this passage. In fact, chaps. 8–10 witness an ever-increasing degree of the Spirit's involvement. It has already been seen in the "Samaritan Pentecost" (8:17). It is more pronounced still in Philip's conversion of the eunuch. Paul's conversion is depicted as totally due to God's activity apart from human agency (9:1–30). Finally, the conversion of Cornelius and his fellow Gentiles caps the picture and emphasizes God's activity more thoroughly than any of the preceding narratives. All of these conversion stories mark major advances in the Christian mission, and the heightened emphasis on the Spirit underlines that all the initiative lies ultimately with God, even through a variety of means. The story of Philip and the eunuch falls into three natural parts: the preparation (vv. 26–29), the witness (vv. 30–35), and the commitment (vv. 36–40).

THE PREPARATION (8:26–29)

God's initiative in this story is unquestionable. An angel of the Lord came to Philip in a vision and called him to witness in a most unlikely place. The angel was God's mouthpiece and was the functional equivalent to the Spirit, who continued to lead Philip throughout the story (vv. 29, 39).

8:26 The place of witness was the road to the south of Jerusalem that leads to Gaza, the last watering place before the desert on the route to Egypt. Obeying the divine directive, Philip started out and on his way encountered an unusual prospect for witness. He was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, an official in charge of the queen's treasury (v. 27). The Ethiopia referred to is in all probability the ancient kingdom of Meroe, the ancient Nubian empire that lay south of Aswan between the first and sixth cataracts of the Nile. It is not to be confused with modern Ethiopia, or Abyssinia, which is in the hill country to the east of the upper Nile. The ancient kingdom of Meroe was a flourishing culture from the eighth century B.C. until the fourth century A.D. Referred to in the Old Testament as the Kingdom of Cush, its population consisted of blacks. This remote, advanced culture was an object of endless curiosity for the Greeks and Romans and represented for them the extreme limits of the civilized world. Their kings were viewed as incarnations of the sun god and held a primarily ceremonial role. The real administration of the kingdom was in the hands of powerful queen mothers who had the title of "the Candace."

⁵ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 221–228.

8:27 In modern terminology the Ethiopian whom Philip encountered would perhaps be called the Minister of Finance. Whether he was an actual physical eunuch is not certain. In the ancient world slaves were often castrated as boys in order to be used as keepers of the harem and the treasury. Eunuchs were found to be particularly trustworthy and loyal to their rulers. So widespread was the practice of placing them over the treasury that in time the term “eunuch” became a synonym for “treasurer” and did not necessarily imply that the one bearing the title was castrated. In the present passage it is likely that Philip’s Ethiopian was an actual physical eunuch, however, since the terms “eunuch” and “official over the treasury” are both given. His physical status was then highly significant for the story. He had been on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and was in all probability, like Cornelius, one of those “God-fearing” Gentiles who believed in the God of Israel but had not become a proselyte, a full convert, to Judaism. In his case, as a eunuch, full membership in the congregation of Israel was not even possible because of his physical blemish (cf. Deut 23:1). He could visit the temple in Jerusalem, as he had done; but he could never enter it.

8:28–29 Probably not by accident, the eunuch was reading from a scroll of the prophet Isaiah as his carriage lumbered slowly homeward (v. 28). In all the Old Testament, Isaiah holds forth the greatest hope for the eunuch in his picture of God’s ideal future, a future that promises them a monument in God’s house, a name better than sons and daughters, an “everlasting name which will not be cut off” (Isa 56:3–8). Little did the eunuch know that he was about to experience the fulfillment of those promises. And little did Philip know his own role in their fulfillment. He probably was still wondering why in the world God had sent him to this lonely place, and perhaps he was a bit bemused by the strange spectacle of the carriage plodding in front of him with its exotic passenger and retinue of servants. Philip had to be prodded by the Spirit: “Go to that chariot and stay near it” (v. 29). Philip had no idea what he should do. The Spirit assumed the lead all the way.

THE WITNESS (8:30–35)

8:30–31a Complying with the Spirit’s directions, Philip ran up to the slow-moving wagon and began to trot alongside it. He heard the Ethiopian as he read aloud from the text of Isaiah (v. 30). There was nothing unusual about this. The letters on ancient manuscripts were often crowded and difficult to decipher, and reading aloud was the customary manner in that day. Philip’s question to the eunuch contains a play on words that is not reproducible in English: “Do you understand [*ginōskeis*] what you are reading [*anaginōskeis*]?” “How can I ... unless someone explains it to me?” replied the eunuch (v. 31). His response enunciates a basic principle that runs throughout Luke-Acts concerning the interpretation of the Old Testament prophetic texts—the need for a Christian interpreter. The disciples themselves had needed such guidance, and Christ had “opened ... the Scriptures” for them (Luke 24:45). They in turn sought to explain the Scripture in light of Christ to the Jews in Jerusalem. How indeed would this Gentile pilgrim from a distant land understand the real meaning of Isaiah’s servant psalms without a guide?

8:31b–33 Responding to the eunuch’s invitation, Philip mounted the wagon and sat down beside him. Luke produced the text from which he had been reading, the Septuagintal translation of Isa 53:7–8. The passage is one of the most difficult texts to interpret of all the servant psalms and even more obscure in the Greek than the Hebrew. In general, however, it depicts the basic pattern of the suffering, humiliation, and exaltation of Christ. The picture of the slaughtered lamb evokes the image of Jesus’ crucifixion, the lamb before his shearers, that of Jesus’ silence before his accusers. The deprivation of justice reminds one of the false accusations of blasphemy leveled

at Christ and the equivocation of Pilate. But what does “who can speak of his descendants?” mean—that his life was cut off short or perhaps the opposite, that the tragedy of his death had been followed by a whole host of disciples who had come to believe and trust in him? In addition to the silent suffering and humiliation, the question concerning descendants likely was a point of identification that attracted the eunuch to this text. There is no question what the final phrase would mean to a Christian like Philip. When Christ’s life was taken from the earth, it was taken up in the glory of the resurrection, exalted to the right hand of God.

8:34–35 Isaiah 53:7–8 was not the whole story, just the starting place for Philip as he “opened the Scriptures” about Christ to his Ethiopian inquirer. The Ethiopian’s question was extremely intelligent and not a little informed: “Who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” (v. 34). Contemporary Jews debated about whether the prophet was speaking of his own suffering or of that of the nation as a whole or of the Messiah. One cannot doubt how Philip answered him. What we would like to know is what other texts Philip shared with him. Perhaps we have them already, in the many scriptural proofs in Peter’s speeches earlier in Acts. Most striking of all, of course, is that the eunuch was reading from the servant psalms of Isaiah, the Old Testament texts that point most clearly to the suffering death of Christ. What a perfect introduction for Philip to share the gospel! This was surely no mere coincidence. It is further evidence of the Spirit’s activity in the whole incident.

THE COMMITMENT (8:36–40)

8:36 Philip had shared the gospel with the Ethiopian treasurer and had surely ended on a note of invitation and commitment. The wagon passed a pool of water, and the Ethiopian was ready. “Is there anything to prevent my being baptized *right now*?” (author’s paraphrase). Many have sought to determine the exact site of the spring in question, but surely the more significant consideration is that at precisely the critical time they came to water, there along the arid route they were traveling (cf. v. 26). The coincidences are too numerous to be coincidences. The Spirit was in *all* of this. Significance has often been seen in the verb “hinder/prevent” which the eunuch employed when asking if there was any reason why he should not be baptized (*kōlyō*, v. 36). Some see this as part of an early Christian baptismal formula uttered before the baptism of new candidates: “Is there anything to hinder their being baptized?” Surely F. Stagg’s view is more on target. The verb indicates that barriers have been removed, hindrances to the spread of the gospel to all people. In this case a double barrier of both physical and racial prejudice had fallen. A eunuch, a Gentile, a black, was baptized and received into full membership in the people of Jesus Christ.

[8:37] Verse 37 is omitted from the NIV text of Acts, and for good reasons. It is not found in the early manuscripts of Acts and seems to be a later scribal addition. It is given in a footnote of the NIV and consists of a profession of faith on the part of the eunuch. Evidently a scribe felt this was lacking and so provided the missing confession of faith. He did not need to do so. Luke had summarized Philip’s sharing the gospel with the eunuch in v. 35, and one can assume it included an appeal for the eunuch to respond. The eunuch’s desire for baptism would indicate a favorable response to Philip’s appeal. The added verse, however, has considerable value. It seems to embody a very early Christian baptismal confession where the one baptizing asked the candidate if he believed in Christ with all his heart, to which the candidate would respond by confessing Jesus Christ as the Son of God. This old confession is of real significance to the history of early Christian

confessions and would be appropriate to the baptismal ceremony today. To that extent we can be grateful to the pious scribe who ascribed to the eunuch the baptismal confession of his own day.

8:38–39 Verse 38 relates the baptism of the Ethiopian treasurer. Since the verb employed is *baptizō*, which always carried the idea of total submersion, there is no reason to assume that the eunuch was baptized in any other way than the consistent New Testament pattern of immersion. When the two emerged from the water, they departed in opposite directions. Philip disappeared, being snatched up by the Spirit, much like the prophet Elijah (1 Kgs 18:12; 2 Kgs 2:16). The Spirit had led him to this encounter. Now, the witness completed, the Spirit closed the scene and transported Philip to further witness in the coastal cities to the north. The eunuch continued southward on his long journey home. Somehow it did not now seem so arduous. He was filled with joy, a genuine manifestation of the Spirit’s work in his life.

Summary. Many interpreters have seen parallels in this story to various Old Testament traditions. Many of the same places occur in Zeph 2—Ethiopia, which is identical with Cush (Zeph 2:12; 3:10) and the Philistine cities of Gaza and Ashdod, which is identical with Azotus (2:4). The strong picture of Philip’s control by the Spirit reminds one of Elijah. The most interesting correspondences, however, are to be found in the Emmaus story of Luke 24:13–32—the presence of travelers, the sudden appearances of Jesus and Philip, the opening of the Scriptures to a new understanding of Christ (Luke 24:27; Acts 8:35), and the disappearance of Jesus in the breaking of bread and of Philip on completion of the baptism. The differences are too great to argue that Luke based either story on the other, but perhaps he saw a pattern of common witness to strangers in the stories, with Philip very much following the example of his master in witness through the interpretation of Scripture. Whatever one makes of such parallels, they do not comprise the main point of the story. The main point is the remarkable missionary advance taken in the conversion of the Ethiopian. Even were he a “God-fearer,” the witness was still to a *Gentile* and in this instance a Gentile who was not eligible for full proselyte status within Judaism because of his physical status as a eunuch. It was a radical step for a Jew, even for a Hellenist Jew like Philip. Still, Philip was not the radical. The *Spirit* was the radical. Philip’s openness to the Spirit’s leading enabled this major progress toward fulfilling Christ’s commission for a worldwide gospel.

What became of the Ethiopian eunuch? Later church fathers relate that he became a missionary to Ethiopia. Such traditions are often legendary and should not be accepted uncritically. More certain evidence dates the evangelization of the Nubian area as beginning in the fourth century. Archaeology has uncovered a flourishing Christian community there between the fifth and tenth centuries. One is tempted to see the converted treasurer as at least planting the seed. It is in any event of interest to note that the first converted Christian “foreigner” in Acts was an African, and one could say that the mission began there, long before Paul ever took it to European soil.

8:40 Verse 40 concludes the story of Philip’s missionary activity. He appeared in Azotus, Old Testament Ashdod, and traveled about, preaching in the coastal cities. Finally arriving at Caesarea, he seems to have settled there. In Caesarea he appeared in Acts on the occasion of Paul’s visit with him (Acts 21:8) some twenty years or so after the events of chap. 8. We are told that at the time he had four unmarried daughters who all prophesied (21:9). Like their father, evidently they were open to the Spirit. All in all, Philip’s accomplishments had been considerable. He had pioneered the Samaritan mission. He had paved the way for the Gentile mission. Peter would later follow

him in this with the conversion of Cornelius—interestingly in Caesarea—just as Peter followed him in Samaria. Peter was instrumental in securing community endorsement of the new missionary efforts, but Philip stood in the background as the Hellenist who first caught the vision.

Lesson 5: Whatever It Takes To Make The Most Of Every Opportunity – Missionary Story

Adoniram Judson (August 9, 1788 – April 12, 1850)

Adoniram Judson is one of the earliest American missionaries to leave the United States to take the Gospel to another country. In spite of his father being a pastor and him being reared in a very devout and Godly home, Adoniram became a deist while attending college and professed that he no longer believed in the existence of a personal God or Savior. Following his college graduation, Adoniram ran a school for a short time before going to New York City to become an actor.

An event that happened while he was traveling as an itinerant actor ultimately brought Adoniram back to the faith of his father. He was spending the night in a small inn and in the next room a man lay dying. Adoniram heard his groans most of the night. The next morning Adoniram asked the innkeeper at the desk about the man in the room next to him and learned that the man died before morning. Adoniram asked the man's name and was shocked to learn that the man who died was a friend of his. In fact, it was the friend who had influenced him to leave his childhood faith. Adoniram was stunned by the thought of what awaited this friend after death; and rather than continue his journey, he immediately returned to his father's home.

Judson enrolled at Andover, a newly founded divinity school. He did not enroll as a ministerial student but as a special student because he had not yet come to grips with his own relationship with God. It is said that he often took long walks in the woods behind the college and on December 8, 1808, he wrote in his journal that he had made a solemn dedication of his life to God. A few months later he made a public profession of his faith and joined the Congregational Church in Plymouth, Massachusetts, where his father was the pastor.

Several months after making that solemn dedication to God, he read a sermon by an Anglican chaplain for the East India Company in which the chaplain told of the need for the Gospel message in that part of the world. He also told of how he was advocating for missionaries to be allowed to come to the territories controlled by the East India Company. That sermon, along with a book about Burma that Judson read, influenced him greatly and it was not long until he determined that he should go as a missionary to India or Burma.

Over the next couple of years, Judson became part of a group of like-minded young men who had also determined that God's plan for their life was to take the Gospel to other countries around the world. A new Board for Foreign Missions was formed in June of 1810. This would prove to be a key event in Adoniram's journey to the foreign field as it would provide supporters as well as a sponsoring agency. That same month, Adoniram met Ann (Nancy) Hasseltine and at first sight fell in love with her. Just a little over a month after meeting her for the first time, Adoniram wrote to Nancy's father to ask if he could marry her. Mr. Hasseltine said that the decision was Nancy's to make, and he would support her no matter her decision. Suffice it to say that about 18 months later, Adoniram and Nancy were married and the next day, they along with Samuel Newell and his new wife, set sail on a small cargo ship headed for Calcutta.

The Judsons left America as Congregational missionaries. During the four-month voyage to Calcutta, Adoniram carefully studied the New Testament. His primary purpose was to discern the difference between the beliefs of the Congregationalists and the Baptists on the subject of baptism. His study brought him to the conviction that the Baptist view was correct. This was a hard thing for Judson because he knew that by taking this position, he would be cutting ties with his friends and his supporters. He and

Nancy agreed on this issue and after arriving in India, the Judsons asked William Carey's associate, William Ward to baptize them.

Making the decision to be baptized by immersion and to become Baptists resulted in Adoniram resigning from the Congregationalist American Board, which left them in a foreign country with no base of support and no sponsoring agency. In addition, even though the sermon that Adoniram had read about the East India Company's chaplain advocating for missionaries to come to that area, neither the East India Company nor the local authorities were friendly to new missionaries arriving there to preach the Gospel.

The political and government situation in India resulted in the Judsons not being allowed to stay in the country and their only option was to get on a boat headed to Rangoon, Burma. The trip to Burma was difficult and resulted in Nancy going into labor and delivering their first child who did not survive. This was only the first of many tragedies that Judson and his family experienced while in Burma. Nancy and two additional children born after they arrived in Burma, died and were buried in Burma. Adoniram and his second wife, Sarah Boardman Judson had eight children and three of them did not survive childhood. Sarah died shortly before her forty-second birthday. Emily Chubbuck Judson was Adoniram's third wife and she survived Adoniram by four years.

Despite suffering the many tragedies of death and being held in prison for 17 months in insufferable conditions, Judson's work in Burma was monumental.

Judson was diligent, disciplined and innovative. Initially after his arrival in Burma, he found it difficult to engage people in conversation because he was a foreigner. He noted that one of the customs of the Burmese men was to congregate in zayats. (Something like a tea house where men would gather for beverage and conversation.) So, Adoniram built a zayat on the street near his home to have a place where the Burmese men could gather and gave him the opportunity to have conversations with them. Long term this did not prove to be as successful as Adoniram thought that it would. However, it did provide an entrance into the community and two months after building the zayat, Adoniram baptized his first convert.

Judson is best known for translating the Bible into Burmese as well as creating an English/ Burmese dictionary which was long considered to be the standard and was widely used for many years. (Judson died before he completed the Burmese/English half of the dictionary.) However, Adoniram Judson never failed to make the most of every opportunity and to do whatever was necessary to share the Gospel with the people of Burma no matter whether they were village peasants, prison guards or the emperor himself.

Adoniram Judson did whatever it took to make the most of every opportunity to share the Gospel.

Lesson 6: Whatever It Takes To Pray

Main Passage: Acts 12:1–19

Focus Verse: Acts 12:5

So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

Big Idea: We should pray big prayers for God’s will to be done.

Prayer is a spiritual discipline. One that takes practice, patience and diligence. While there is no doubt that we need to pray personally, we also need to pray together. We need to be the kind of people who gather and pray for the Lord to do big things in and through us. When we pray together, we express the fullness of our worship and trust in God’s leading and direction.

How Should We Pray?

Pray With PURPOSE

Acts 12:3, *When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.*

In Acts 5 Peter was thrown in jail and he was rescued miraculously by an angel. There was no account of the people praying but God still acted. Once again, Acts 12 recounts a story where Peter was thrown in jail for preaching the name of Jesus. But the difference between the two accounts is the church is said to be praying for Peter in Acts 12. Why would the church stop everything and pray when God worked previously without their prayers?

Jerry Bridges says, “Prayer is the expression of our trust in the sovereignty of God.” Prayer is admitting that only God can do what God can do. Our prayers have a purpose: They are an act of worship! They express trust and faith in God. They humble us. They remind us of who God is. And they soften our hearts. Our prayers praise God.

Discussion Questions:

- How often do you pray?
- What are some of the main reasons you pray?

Pray With BOLDNESS

Acts 12:5, *So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.*

The early church prayed earnestly, fervently, and boldly. If prayer is an expression of our trust in God’s sovereignty, then in prayer we trust the Almighty is listening to us! When we understand who we are praying to, we are able to pray big bold prayers to God. Our understanding of God drives both our purpose and our boldness in prayer.

When the Church prays boldly, we begin to impact our community as we become a beacon of hope and light to the world. We are good at praying safe prayers. But what if we as the Church started praying big bold prayers, that God would use us in a way so that He alone can receive the honor and glory? With a heart of worship, let's pray boldly that God would be made known in and through us.

Discussion Questions:

- Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire? Is prayer your first response or a last resort?
- Do you pray bold prayers? If not, why?
- When have you been frustrated in prayer, and when have you seen God move in a powerful to answer prayer?

Pray With DILIGENCE

Acts 12:6, *The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. ⁷ Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists. ⁸ Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. ⁹ Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him. ¹¹ Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent His angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen." ¹² When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying.*

In this passage we read a miracle takes place, and what was the Church doing? They were still praying! It's easy to pray for something once or occasionally. But the beauty of ongoing community is that we would be praying diligently and persistently for a variety of things. Many times when we pray big bold prayers, it takes time and years of faithful praying and walking in obedience. But this is the case all over Scripture. Look at: Abraham, Joseph, Joshua, Ruth, David and Esther just to name a few. They all believed God but continued to diligently wait and pray to the Lord.

Discussion Questions:

- What lessons can we learn about the power of ongoing prayer?
- Have you ever stopped praying for something because you grew weary or didn't feel like God was listening? How can you continue in prayer?
- But why is prayer such a powerful weapon?
- How does God use prayer to bring the kingdom to the one praying?

Pray With HUMILITY

Acts 12:13, Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!" ¹⁵ "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel." ¹⁶ But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.

This passage is both ironic and challenging. It is ironic because it almost reads like they don't believe God did the very thing that they had been praying for. It is challenging because God answered their prayer in a way that only God could have answered. It is humbling when God answers our prayers with a yes. Not because God submitted to our authority but because God heard our heart and He acted.

God always answers our prayers and in the case above, it was "Yes! I will act!" But he also answers in two other ways: "No" and "Wait." What do we do when God's answer isn't what we had prayed for?

Acts 12:1, It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. ² He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. ³ When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread.

The Church had been praying for all of the apostles, and while we read the story of Peter and God clearly delivered him, what about James? Did God not care or listen to their prayers for him? Not at all! Again, prayer is our expression of our trust in God's sovereignty and our act of worship. We pray boldly and diligently, but we also pray humbly knowing that God knows what is best. And this is hard. We may ask: Why would God not protect James? Or maybe you think of this in the context of someone being sick, or other situations. Praying with humility is admitting that your perspective is limited. It's also admitting that God's plans are never thwarted. Though sometimes prayers aren't answered the way we want them to be, God is still sovereign and we will continue expressing our trust in Him.

Discussion Questions:

- Have you ever been surprised when God answered a prayer? Please explain and share what you learned through that situation.
- How have you responded when God answered your prayer differently than you had hoped?

Pray With THANKSGIVING

Acts 12:17, Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this," he said, and then he left for another place. ¹⁸ In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter.

Peter was released and he immediately told everyone to tell everyone. When God answers your prayer, be thankful and tell others about God's work. We shouldn't keep it to ourselves. God will make Himself known through His sovereign working. But we need to respond with outward thanksgiving as God works in our lives.

Thanksgiving is one of the most important aspects of worship. Thanksgiving is remembering Who God is, how He works, and giving credit where credit is due. We can't let our prayers stop with the request. Let thanksgiving become the fuel for whatever is coming, so we can continue to do whatever it takes for the Gospel.

Discussion Questions:

- After God answers a prayer, do you take the time to thank Him?
- How does hearing the testimonies of answered prayer requests encourage your walk with the Lord?
- What does a "Whatever It Takes" attitude look like in your prayer life?

Lesson 6 Additional Commentary (Acts 12:1–25)⁶

Persecution Again in Jerusalem (12:1–25)

After the glimpse at the Antioch church, attention focused once more on Jerusalem in chap. 12. If the apostles had remained largely untouched by the persecution that followed Stephen's death, the situation radically changed when Herod Agrippa assumed rule over Judea. The apostles then became the specific target of the king's efforts to suppress the Christians. James was beheaded, and Peter was put in prison in anticipation of the same fate. But not even the king was able to stem the tide when God was behind it. Indeed, the king found himself fighting against God and suffered the consequences (cf. 5:39; 11:17).

The whole story is told in one of the most delightful and engaging narratives in all of Acts. The villainy of Herod is established in vv. 1–5 with his execution of James and arrest of Peter. His designs were thwarted in the latter instance, however, when God delivered Peter in a miraculous manner (vv. 6–19). Peter's escape is told in two scenes, both related with consummate artistry. The first scene pictures the angel delivering Peter from jail (vv. 6–11). It has a vivid, almost comic touch; the angel had to prompt the groggy Peter every step of the way. One can almost hear Peter telling the story: "I tell you, I was completely out of it. It was all God's doing. I thought I was having a particularly pleasant dream." The second scene is no less entertaining, as Peter hastened to the house of John Mark's mother (vv. 12–19a). There is again a comic touch (with Rhoda leaving him knocking at the gate) and also a decidedly dramatic effect. Would he get inside before Herod's men discovered his escape and came after him? The story was still not over. There was a final deliverance of the apostles, as God dealt with their persecutor, Herod, in a definitive manner (vv. 19b–23). Once more at peace, the witness of the church prospered (vv. 24–25). The whole story of the deliverance of the apostles from Herod's clutches is bracketed by references to Paul and Barnabas's delivery of the Antioch relief offering (11:30; 12:25). It is the last narrative in Acts that deals exclusively with the apostles and the Jerusalem church. From this point on, whenever Jerusalem was involved, it would be in connection with Paul's ministry. Peter and his fellow apostles faded into the background, and Paul took center stage.

(1) Herod Agrippa's Persecution of the Apostles (12:1–5)

12:1 The story begins with a vague time reference. It was "about this time." Evidently Luke meant about the time the Antioch church was preparing its relief offering for the Jerusalem church (11:27–30). Considering the history of Herod Agrippa I, the Herod of this story, the time most likely would have been the spring of A.D. 42 or 43. The Greek of v. 1 is quite vivid: Herod "laid violent hands" on some of the Christians. To understand why he would do this, it is necessary to understand something of Herod Agrippa I and his relationship to the Jews. Agrippa was the grandson of Herod the Great. His father, Aristobulus, had been executed in 7 B.C. by his grandfather for fear that he might usurp his throne. After his father's death, while still a child, Agrippa was sent to Rome with his mother, where he was reared and educated along with the children of the Roman aristocracy. These childhood friendships eventually led to his ruling over a Jewish kingdom nearly the extent of that of his grandfather. In A.D. 37 the emperor Caligula gave

⁶ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 276–286.

him the title of king and made him ruler over the territories formerly ruled by his uncle Philip, lands in the Transjordan and the Ten Cities (Decapolis) north of Galilee. In A.D. 39 Caligula extended Agrippa's rule by giving him Galilee and Perea, the territory of his uncle Antipas, who had been sent into exile. Finally, when his former schoolmate Claudius became emperor in A.D. 41, he was given rule of Judea and Samaria, which had been under Roman procurators for thirty-five years. He was truly "king of the Jews" now, ruling over all of Judea, Samaria, Galilee, the Transjordan, and the Decapolis.

Though king, Agrippa was hardly secure. Much of his good fortune was due to his friendship with Caligula, and Caligula had not been a popular emperor with the Romans. In fact, Agrippa could not count on always being in the good graces of Rome. It became all the more important for him to win the loyalty of his Jewish subjects in order to give him at least a firm footing at home. Everything Josephus said about Agrippa would indicate that he made every attempt to please the Jews, particularly currying the favor of the influential Pharisees. His "Jewishness," however, seems to have been largely a face he put on when at home. When away, he lived in a thoroughly Roman fashion. Why persecution of the Christians was particularly pleasing to them at this time is not stated. Perhaps the acceptance of uncircumcised Gentiles as related in chap. 11 had something to do with their disfavor.

12:2 Agrippa began his persecution of the Christians by having James killed "with a sword." This James is described as "brother of John" and thus was the apostle, the son of Zebedee. Some interpreters have suggested that his brother John was also executed at this time, interpreting Mark 10:39 as a prediction that both would be martyred. John 21:23, however, seems to predict the opposite; and early church tradition has John living to an old age and dying a natural death. If Herod executed James in the Roman fashion "with the sword," he was beheaded. If he used the Jewish mode of execution, which forbade beheading as a desecration to the body, he had "the edge of the sword" thrust through his body. The martyrdom of James is told with the utmost brevity. Luke did not want to dwell on it but used the incident to set the stage for his main emphasis—God's deliverance of Peter.

12:3–5 Having won points with the Jews by the execution of James, Agrippa then moved against the chief of the apostles, Peter, arresting him and placing him in prison. Luke noted that it was the Feast of the Unleavened Bread. Herod would not risk his favor with the Jews by executing Peter during this time, since that would be considered a desecration. The Passover was eaten on the eve of Nisan 14 and was followed by seven days of eating unleavened bread, ending on Nisan 21. Luke used the term "Passover" for the entire period. It would have been after the holy days had ended that Agrippa would have brought Peter forth for public trial and surely also for execution (v. 4). Peter was placed under heavy security, being guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. This was the usual Roman practice, changing guards every three hours throughout the twelve night hours to assure maximum alertness. Why the heavy guard? Perhaps the Sanhedrin had informed Agrippa of their own experience in jailing the apostles on a previous occasion (5:19). While Peter waited in prison, the Christians used their most effective means of assistance. They prayed continually for him (v. 5).

(2) Peter's Miraculous Deliverance from Prison (12:6–19a)

12:6–8a The story of Peter's deliverance begins with the notice that it was the night before Peter's trial. This heightens its dramatic impact. It was the last minute before the sealing of the

apostle's doom. Peter is described as sleeping, bound with two chains, each fastened to a guard, one on his right and one on his left. The other two guards of the squadron of four stood watch at the doors of the prison. Perhaps one stood at each of the two inner gates of the prison (cf. v. 10). That Peter could sleep so soundly the night before his trial is perhaps indicative of his calm assurance that he was in God's hands. It may also reflect that the guards were asleep on either side of him. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared, and a flash of heavenly light filled the cell. Peter was still fast asleep, and the angel had to arouse him, perhaps with a kick in the ribs. Still not fully alert, Peter really had no idea what was happening. The angel had to direct every single movement of the apostle: "get up"; "put your coat on"; "tie your sandals"; "follow me." Obviously, this was not Peter's *escape*. It was rather his *deliverance*. Peter was totally passive throughout the entire incident.

12:8b–11 Peter dutifully followed the angel's direction. Still half-asleep, he imagined that he was having some sort of vision (v. 9). With a pronounced dramatic tone, each step of their progress was noted. They safely passed the first sentry guarding the inner gate to the cell. Perhaps a "deep sleep from the Lord" had fallen upon the guards (cf. 1 Sam 26:12). Suspense mounted: Would they make it past the rest of the guard? They passed the second gate safely and then came to the outer gate that led into the city, a forbidding iron barrier.

Most likely the place of Peter's confinement was the Tower of Antonia, where the Roman troops were barracked. Located at the northeastern corner of the temple complex, its eastern entrance led into the streets of the city. Even this formidable iron barrier proved no hindrance to Peter and the angel, opening of its own accord and allowing their safe passage. The angel led Peter down the length of the first street from the prison. Perhaps coming to a corner and allowing Peter to turn into a side street and out of sight of the prison and having delivered the apostle to safety, the angel disappeared. Only then did Peter come to full alertness and realize that God had indeed delivered him from Herod's clutches and his anticipated death (v. 11).

12:12 The scene shifts to the Christian community who had been praying fervently for Peter (vv. 12–17). One group had gathered at the home of John Mark's mother, and Peter headed there. It is unusual that Mary was identified through Mark; usually the child was identified by the parent. The reason possibly is that Mark was the better known of the two in Christian circles, or it may be that there were several prominent women named Mary in the early church. They were perhaps distinguished by their children. John Mark would soon play a significant role in the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas (12:25; 13:5, 13; 15:37, 39).

12:13–14 The scene at Mary's house is played out in a delightful fashion with the servant-girl Rhoda as the main character. Rhoda was a common Greek name, often borne by servants and meaning *rose*. When Peter arrived, he stood at the outer gate that entered into the courtyard. Rhoda probably was responsible for keeping the gate, a task often delegated to female servants (cf. John 18:16f.). Responding to Peter's knocking, she hurried out to the gate and discovered who was there. For all her joy, she ran back into the house to announce the good news, forgetting altogether that Peter would really like to have come in. This heightened the suspense all the more. Peter did not need to be standing outside in the street, exposed to possible recapture. "Peter is at the door!" Rhoda announced excitedly, interrupting the prayers of the Christians who had gathered there. "No, it can't be," they replied; "it must be his angel."

12:15–16 This response reflects the Jewish belief that each person has a guardian angel as his or her spiritual counterpart. It was believed that one’s angel often appeared immediately after the person’s death, and that idea may lurk behind the response to Rhoda. “You’ve seen his ghost,” we would say. Such a reply is remarkable coming from a group that had been totally occupied in prayer for Peter’s deliverance. They found it easier to believe that Peter had died and gone to heaven than that their prayers had been answered. In any event, who could trust a hysterical servant girl? “You’re crazy,” they said. Some things are just too good to be true (cf. Luke 24:11). But it was true, and Peter’s persistent knocking finally got a response (v. 16).

12:17 Verse 17 is a key verse. Basically, it gives three pieces of information: (1) Peter’s report of his miraculous delivery, (2) his instruction to tell the news to James, and (3) his departure to “another place” where he would find refuge from the wrath of Agrippa. The first item is exactly what one would expect under the circumstances. That Peter had to motion them to silence in order to share his story is indicative of the excited hubbub created by his totally unexpected presence. The second item, though seemingly incidental, is actually a keynote for the subsequent text of Acts. The James who was to be informed of Peter’s deliverance was James the oldest of Jesus’ brothers, who from this point on assumed the leadership of the church in Jerusalem (cf. 15:13–21; 21:18). It is interesting that “the brothers” are to be informed along with James. Perhaps this refers to the elders, who were assuming an increasing role in the governance of the Jerusalem church (cf. 11:30). The other apostles are not mentioned. At this time they may have been absent from Jerusalem, having taken refuge from Agrippa’s persecution. The third piece of information in v. 17 has perhaps provoked more scholarly attention than it deserves, largely due to the tradition that the “other place” to which Peter went was Rome. Luke evidently did not consider the place all that important and did not specify where it was. The point is simply that he had to go elsewhere to find safety from Agrippa. Later, after Herod’s death, he was back in Jerusalem (15:7). That Peter went to Rome at this early date is most unlikely, and Paul’s Epistle to the Romans seems to speak against it (15:20).

12:18–19a The final scene in the story of Peter’s escape returns to the prison (vv. 18–19a). When the guards awoke in the morning, they found no one attached to their chains and likely no evidence of an escape other than the obvious fact that Peter was not there. After interrogating the guards and failing to locate Peter, Agrippa had the guards executed. This was in accordance with Roman law, which specified that a guard who allowed the escape of a prisoner was to bear the same penalty the escapee would have suffered. Agrippa had every intention of subjecting Peter to the same fate as James.

(3) Herod’s Self-Destructive Arrogance (12:19b–23)

12:19b–20 There are two climaxes to the account of Agrippa’s persecution. One is Peter’s escape from his clutches. The other is Agrippa’s own grisly fate. Chronologically, his death came anywhere from several months to a year after Peter’s escape, but the Christians viewed it very much as a divine retribution for what they had suffered under the king. Josephus also gave an account of Agrippa’s death (*Ant.* 19.343–52) which, though going into greater detail, is very much in agreement with the narrative in Acts. Josephus and Acts both set the event in Caesarea (Acts 12:19b). Josephus did not mention the quarrel with the Phoenician coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon. Evidently it was some sort of economic war in which Agrippa had the upper hand, since these coastal towns were indeed totally dependent for their food on the inland territories Agrippa ruled

(v. 20).¹⁶ We know nothing more of Blastus. He is described as being the king's "chamberlain," or "personal servant." As a trusted servant, he was evidently able to gain the king's ear on the matter and negotiate for a settlement suitable to the Tyrians and Sidonians. Blastus was likely given some "financial consideration" by them in exchange for his role as mediator.

12:21–23 Verse 21 describes Agrippa as appearing before the people "on the appointed day." Josephus specified that it was the day of a festival in honor of Caesar. Evidently the king chose this as the occasion for formally concluding the agreement with Tyre and Sidon. Josephus also went into greater detail on the "royal robes" worn by Agrippa. The garment was made of silver and glistened radiantly in the morning sun. As Herod, in all his glory, turned and addressed the people, they shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man" (v. 22). Josephus recorded a like response from the people, who hailed Herod as a god and "more than mortal." Josephus at this point added significant detail, noting that Herod neither affirmed nor denied the people's ascription of divinity to him. Then, looking up, he saw an owl. On an earlier occasion, when imprisoned in Rome, he had seen a vision of an owl; and a fellow prisoner told him it was the harbinger of good fortune for him. That had indeed proved true, for he was released and eventually became king of the Jews. The same prisoner, however, had warned him that if he ever again saw an owl, he would have but five days to live (*Ant.* 18.200). Josephus added that he was immediately stricken with pain and carried to his bed chamber, and he died exactly five days later. Luke's account also speaks of an immediate death, making explicit what is implicit in Josephus—he was struck down by "an angel of the Lord."

Once again we see a motif already familiar in Acts. There is both mercy and judgment with the Lord. The Spirit blessed the faithful Christians with miraculous works and great growth (5:12–16). The same Spirit brought judgment to Ananias and Sapphira (5:1–11). The Lord's angel delivered Peter from mortal danger (12:6–17). The Lord's angel struck Agrippa dead for all his arrogance (12:20–23). He did not "give praise to God"—neither in his acceptance of the people's blasphemous acclamation nor in his persecution of God's people. Josephus spoke of acute pain in Agrippa's abdomen. Luke said that he was "eaten by worms."

(4) Peace for the Church (12:24–25)

12:24 With Agrippa's sudden removal, the persecution of the church ended, and once more the word of God flourished. The Greek says literally that it "grew and multiplied," just as the seed that fell on good ground in Jesus' parable of the sower. This is the last summary of the Jerusalem church in Acts. It ends on a positive note. God continued to bless the witness of the Jerusalem community.

12:25 Verse 25 moves the narrative forward, mentioning the return of Paul and Barnabas to Antioch on completion of their mission of delivering the famine relief offering (11:30). Viewed chronologically, it would have most likely been around this time, around A.D. 46 and thus a couple of years after the death of Agrippa, that the famine struck Judea and Antioch sent its offering. The best manuscripts read "to," not "from," Jerusalem, but that would scarcely make sense. Clearly, the two were returning from Jerusalem to Antioch and were set for the following narrative, which took place in Antioch (13:1–3). The NIV has chosen, as most translations do, to follow the more poorly attested reading "from Jerusalem," since the context seems to demand it. Another solution, however, is to put the phrase "to Jerusalem" with "ministry," a construction found elsewhere in

Luke-Acts. The translation would then read, “Barnabas and Saul returned, having finished their ministry to Jerusalem.” In any event, they took a companion along with them—John Mark (cf. 12:12). The church at Antioch would soon send the three of them on a mission (13:1–3) that would result in tremendous success among the Gentiles. The witness to Judea and Samaria had now been well-established. The way to the Gentiles had already been paved by Philip, by Peter, and by the church at Antioch. From this point it would be Paul who above all would take up the Gentile witness and move the gospel to “the ends of the earth.”

Lesson 6: Whatever It Takes To Pray – Missionary Story

George Muller (September 27, 1805 – March 10, 1898)

George Muller is known throughout the Christian community as a man of prayer. However, it is very interesting to note that his life started out on a different path. Born in Prussia in 1805, no mention is ever made of the family's religious views or convictions other than his father desired for him to become a clergyman. He wanted this not because he wanted George to serve God, rather he wanted that for George because at that time it was one of the more respectable and profitable professions. He also saw it as a good retirement plan for himself.

George's early years did not bode well for him becoming a clergyman. By the age of ten, he was known as a thief and a liar. He left his father's home as a young teen to continue his life of deception, lying and stealing. He landed in prison before he was 16. His father was finally notified of his incarceration and made restitution so that George would be released from prison. What George learned from his time in prison was how to be a better liar and do it more persuasively. He used those persuasive skills to get his father to send him to school at Nordhausen the next fall.

George did manage to conduct himself in an outward manner that gained him great favor with the principal of Nordhausen. However, this changed behavior was only an outward façade as he continued to live a secret, sinful lifestyle. It was not until he was 20 years old and agreed to attend a Bible study with a friend that his life began to change. As he read the Bible and attended Christian prayer meetings regularly, he came to realize the power of God and the power of prayer. This is what brought him to bow before God, confess his sin, accept Christ's gift of salvation and seek to follow God in all he did from that time forward. He began preaching in nearby churches and determined that he wanted to become a missionary.

It was his interest in reaching Jewish people with the Gospel that took Muller to England. However, God changed the direction of his ministry shortly after his arrival in England. Rather than ministering to the Jews, God allowed him opportunities to preach in different place and to different groups. God began teaching him the power of prayer. George learned that it was only by going to God in prayer, asking God what the people should hear and obeying God's direction for his sermon that people would listen to the sermons and their lives were changed.

One of the things that George began to pray earnestly about was his desire to be married. God answered his prayers by bringing Mary Groves into his life and they were married on October 7, 1830. Their marriage began with the practice of praying about everything. Together they made the decision to trust God for everything in their lives, including funds to live. George gave up his salary from the church, and trusted God for every need. They learned to trust God in the moments when He supplied in a mighty way, and in the moments when the answer to prayer did not come in the time or way they expected.

Through the work of an agency that Muller founded in England which provided various types of assistance to Christian schools, missionaries and orphans, God opened the door for Muller's life's work. God burdened his heart to pray for the orphans and as he prayed, God showed him that he was the one to build an orphanage. On December 5, 1835, while reading God's Word and praying about the need for an orphanage (so that he could provide for more than just the few that he and his wife could care for in their home), God spoke to him. He read Psalm 81:10, "Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it." George believed that God was speaking to him directly about the orphanage. He immediately prayed and asked God for a building, for one thousand pounds and for suitable individuals to take care of the children. George was praying with purpose and he was praying boldly.

On December 7th he received the first shilling for the orphan house, on December 9th the first piece of furniture was given and on December 10th George received a letter from a couple offering their services to help manage the orphanage without a salary; they also offered all their furnishings and household goods to be used for the orphanage. On April 2, 1836 – just four months after George prayed that purposeful, bold prayer – the Orphan House was opened with seventeen children living in it. Ultimately, George Muller established orphanages that cared for as many as 2,000 orphans at any one time. Orphanages for babies, for younger children, and for older children.

Throughout his life George Muller continued to live a life of prayer – he was always diligent and humble in his prayers, never demanding that God do anything only trusting God to supply the needs in His time and in His way. Many times, George’s faith was tested as he waited expectantly for God to answer. One of the best-known stories of the faith of George Muller and the faithfulness of God to answer his prayers is told by a daughter of one of Muller’s workers. She often spent time at the orphanage. The children were all seated at the long dining table for morning prayer and breakfast. Only Muller and the workers knew that there was no bread, no milk, no food of any kind for the children to eat that morning. With the children seated at the table George in faith prayed and thanked God for the bread that He was going to give them to eat. Before Muller finished praying there was knocking at the door. It was the town baker who declared that he had not been able to sleep the night before because he was sure that God wanted him to bake bread for the children at the orphanage. He got out of bed, went to his kitchen and began to bake the bread he was now delivering. Muller accepted the bread and turned to the children and told them that they didn’t only have bread for breakfast – they had FRESH bread. Almost immediately there was another knock at the door. This time the person at the door was a man with a milk cart. The man told George that his milk cart had broken down on the road outside the orphanage and he couldn’t complete his deliveries. He asked if the orphanage could use the milk because it was going to spoil before he could get his cart repaired and complete his deliveries.

God honored George Muller’s humble prayer of thanksgiving that he prayed prior to the meal. God provided bread AND milk for the children. If God will honor the bold, humble prayer of George Muller that morning, He will also honor our prayers.

George Muller prayed for others needs as well and often gave to others out of his limited resources, especially to missionaries. He had often asked Hudson Taylor to pray for him and for the needs of the orphanages. There was a time when word came to George that Hudson Taylor had a great need as a result of riots that had destroyed much of his work in China. George wrote a letter to Hudson Taylor and included a check from his own meager bank account to help a fellow missionary in his time of need.

George Muller’s work was monumental. Several orphanages were built to care for England’s orphans. It is well documented that the children in the orphanages were happy, well cared for and educated in academics, music and the Word of God. However, his greatest legacy was his example of always being faithful in prayer. Praying with a purpose – asking God for a specific need, praying boldly, praying diligently without giving in to doubt and distrust. He also left us the example to pray with humility, and to pray with thanksgiving even when we can’t see the answer.

George Muller’s life exemplified whatever it takes to pray.

Lesson 7: Whatever It Takes To Reach People

Main Passage: Acts 15:1–21

Focus Verse: Acts 15:19

It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.

Big Idea: We need to share that salvation is readily available to all who believe.

This lesson appropriately serves as a summary of everything we have discussed the past seven weeks. We will look at our call to do “whatever it takes” to reach people from Acts 15. We want to be the kind of people who do whatever it takes to reach that next family, that next person, that next coworker, friend, neighbor, family member, waiter/waitress, uber driver, etc. We want to reach people with the Gospel because we know Jesus is the only way back to God, and without Him, people will never have a relationship with their Creator.

Three Keys To Reaching People With the Gospel:

1) Realize the Enemy Is Always WORKING TO DISTRACT US

Acts 15:4, *When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.* ⁵ *Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.”* ⁶ *The apostles and elders met to consider this question.*

Even in the early church, people got distracted from the mission before them. God had clearly worked to bring about the salvation of all people through Jesus. God shows no favoritism, rather He saves everyone who calls upon His name to be saved. But some among them took their eyes off their mission and began focusing on behavior management and legalism. They got distracted.

The enemy wants to distract the church from their central mission: to make much of the name of Jesus. Many times we end up fighting about unimportant things while neglecting to share the eternal things. This has been the case since the early church and there is no doubt this is the case in our culture. When it comes to the things of God, what do we spend most of our time addressing? Are they primary issues or secondary (or tertiary!) issues?

If we want to reach people with the Gospel then we can’t get distracted. God doesn’t want to **only** reach people who share your same opinions and preferences. He wants to reach everyone.

Discussion Questions:

- In what ways do we get distracted from the mission that God has given us?
- How can you and your group identify when the enemy is trying to distract us?

2) Remember the CORE OF THE GOSPEL

Acts 15:7, *After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the Gospel and believe. ⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹ He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” ¹² The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.*

Peter reminds them who they are and what they are about. What is central to the Gospel? God created the world, it was perfect, and sin entered the world and broke humanity’s relationship with God. But God has been working since the beginning to fix the problem. He showed us that He alone could bring salvation and sent His son Jesus to defeat sin and death on the cross, by raising to life on the third day. Anyone and everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved and our responsibility as God’s people is live a life that makes much of this Jesus until He returns!

We can’t get distracted. Every person you come in contact with needs Jesus. Other teachings are important, and our knowledge of God is vital as it becomes the fuel for our worship. But these things should never come at the detriment of the core of the Gospel.

Discussion Questions:

- How does focusing on the message of the Gospel help us to push through those distractions to fulfill the calling on our lives?
- In your own words, how would you explain the core message of the Gospel?
- How is the Gospel easily distorted in our day?

3) Live Out the Gospel With SIMPLICITY AND CLARITY

Acts 15:13, *When they finished, James spoke up. “Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. ¹⁴ Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. ¹⁵ The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: ¹⁶ “‘After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, ¹⁷ that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things’ — ¹⁸ things known from long ago. ¹⁹ **“It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.** ²⁰ Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. ²¹ For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”*

Acts 15:19 is the key to this whole section: Don’t make it hard for people to come to faith! Tell them of their sin. Tell them of their need for Jesus. And ask the question: Do you believe this? In

this situation in Acts 15, there were a group of people who got distracted and tried to make it hard for the Gentiles (another translation: *nations*) to come to faith. They required them to be circumcised and follow the law. But those things are not the good news of Jesus. The good news is that you can't do anything to earn your salvation, but Jesus has done everything! There are no prerequisites for salvation apart from repentance and belief.

We need to be careful about holding unbelievers to Gospel standards apart from the transforming work of Jesus. Further, we need to make sure we don't preach, teach and live out a Gospel that has strings attached. The Gospel, in its purity and simplicity, is salvation to all who believe. Of course, we need discipleship and growth after salvation. But we can't grow in sanctification if we haven't been saved.

This whole "Whatever It Takes" series has been challenging as we have looked at the early church. We saw that they often did whatever it took to reach people with the Gospel. May we be people who don't get distracted as we remember the core of the Gospel. May we keep the mission of God before us with simplicity and clarity. God wants to use us to make His name known to the nations. Don't make it hard for the nations to see Jesus, don't be an obstacle. Instead, may we be a guiding light that points people straight to Christ.

Discussion Questions:

- In what ways do we make it difficult for nonbelievers to turn to God today? How can we change that?
- What does a "Whatever It Takes" attitude look like in fulfilling the Great Commission?

Lesson 7 Additional Commentary (Acts 15:1–21)⁷

Debate in Jerusalem Over Acceptance of the Gentiles

Acts 15:1–35 stands at the very center of the book. Not only is this true of its position halfway through the text, but it is also central in the development of the total plot of the book. The first half of Acts has focused on the Jewish Christian community, particularly on the influential Jerusalem church. The Christian witness had begun there (chaps. 1–5). Through the Hellenists especially it had spread to Samaria and all of the land of the Jews (chaps. 6–9). Through the witness of Peter to Cornelius, the outreach of the Antioch church, and especially through the first major mission completed by Paul and Barnabas, the gospel had broken through to the Gentiles (chaps. 10–14). All the preliminary steps had been taken for a major effort to reach the Gentile world. The precedents had been established; the first major successes among the Gentiles had been witnessed. The stage was set for Paul’s mission to the heart of the Greco-Roman world as *the* missionary to the Gentiles.

There remained only one final hurdle, and that was the agreement of the whole church on the Gentile mission. There were still those among the Jewish Christians who had serious reservations about the way the outreach to Gentiles had been conducted. These reservations and the final solution to them worked out in a major conference in Jerusalem are the subject of 15:1–35. There the whole church agreed on the Gentile mission. The way was now open for the mission of Paul, and that will be the subject of the rest of Acts. Hereafter the Jerusalem church fades into the background. When it does reappear, as in chap. 21, it will be wholly in connection with Paul’s Gentile ministry. The focus is entirely on him.

The debate in Jerusalem revolved around the issue of *how* Gentiles were to be accepted into the Christian fellowship. The more conservative Jewish Christians felt that they should be received on the same basis that Jews had always accepted Gentiles into the covenant community—through proselyte initiation. This involved circumcision of the males and all proselytes taking upon themselves the total provisions of the Mosaic law. For all intents and purposes, a Gentile proselyte to Judaism *became a Jew*, not only in religious conviction but in lifestyle as well. That was the question the conservative group of Jewish Christians raised: Should not Gentiles be required to become Jews in order to share in the Christian community? It was a natural question. The first Christians were all Jews. Jesus was a Jew and the Jewish Messiah. God had only one covenant people—the Jews. Christianity was a messianic movement within Judaism. Jews had always demanded of all Gentile converts the requirements of circumcision and rituals of the Torah. Why should that change?

Evidently the requirements *had* changed. There was no indication that Peter had laid such requirements on Cornelius, or the Antioch church on the Gentiles who became a part of their fellowship, or Paul and Barnabas on the Gentiles converted in their mission. This was a cause for serious concern from the more conservative elements. Not only was it a departure from normal proselyte procedure; it also raised serious problems of fellowship. How could law-abiding Jewish Christians who seriously observed all the ritual laws have interaction with Gentile Christians who did not observe those laws? The Jewish Christians would run the risk of defilement from the Gentiles. These were the two issues that were faced and resolved in Jerusalem: (1) whether Gentile

⁷ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 320–332.

converts should submit to Jewish proselyte requirements, especially to circumcision and (2) how fellowship could be maintained between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

In Gal 2 Paul told of a conference in Jerusalem that had many similarities to Acts 15:1–35. Although the two accounts contain significant differences, the similarities seem to outweigh these, and it is probable that they relate to the same event. Both dealt with the issue of circumcision, Paul and Barnabas defended their views against the more conservative Jewish Christians in both accounts, and the final agreement was reached in both that the Gentiles would not be required to submit to Jewish proselyte circumcision. In Gal 2:1–10 Paul did not go into the question of table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians (though Gal 2:11–14 clearly concerns table fellowship between Gentile and Jewish Christians), but that issue was a natural outgrowth of the decision not to require Gentiles to live by the Torah. That it comprised part of the agenda at the Jerusalem Conference is highly plausible. In any event, it will be assumed in the commentary that follows that Paul and Luke were referring to the same conference, and where appropriate Paul's account will be cited to supplement that of Acts.

Acts 15:1–35 falls into four natural parts. The first comprises an *introduction* and relates how the debate arose in Antioch and led to the conference in Jerusalem to attempt some resolution (vv. 1–5). The second part focuses on the *debate* in Jerusalem (vv. 6–21) and primarily centers on the witness of Peter (vv. 6–11) and of James (vv. 12–21). The third part deals with the final *solution*, which takes the form of an official letter sent to Antioch (vv. 22–29). The narrative *concludes* where it began—in Antioch—with the delivering of the letter by two delegates of the Jerusalem church (vv. 30–35).

(1) The Criticism from the Circumcision Party (15:1–5)

15:1–2 There were many Gentiles in the church at Antioch (cf. 11:20f.). There is no indication that they had been circumcised when they joined the Christian fellowship. This was disturbing to some Jewish Christians who came from Judea and insisted that circumcision in strict obedience to the Jewish law was necessary for salvation (v. 1). Evidently they shared the views and perhaps were even some of the same persons as the “circumcision party,” who are identified in the Western text as belonging to the sect of the Pharisees and who challenged Peter for having table fellowship with Cornelius (11:2). The group evidently represented the strict Jewish viewpoint that there was no salvation apart from belonging to the covenant community, the people of Israel. To be a part of that community a Gentile must take on the physical sign of the covenant, the mark of circumcision, and live by all the precepts of the law of Moses, ritual as well as moral. In the sharp debate that this demand provoked, Paul and Barnabas were the main opponents to this Judaizing perspective (v. 2). They had laid no such requirements on the Gentiles converted in their recent mission. It is altogether likely that the large number of such converts in their successful mission had attracted the attention of this Judaizing group in the first place.

The group soon realized that such a basic issue could not be settled in Antioch. It needed the attention of the whole church, since all Christians, Jew and Gentile, would be affected by its resolution. An “ecumenical conference” was arranged in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the “mother church.” The apostles were there. It was the suitable site to debate such an important issue. It is unclear who appointed Paul and Barnabas and “some other believers” to represent Antioch in Jerusalem. The Western text has the Judaizing group summoning Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem “to be judged.” More likely the Antioch church appointed them as its official delegates to the meeting. Paul mentioned that Titus accompanied him and Barnabas to Jerusalem (Gal 2:1), so he may well have been one of the “others” of Acts 15:2.

15:3–4 The distance between Antioch and Jerusalem was in excess of 250 miles, and the apostles may well have spent a month or so on their journey. They used the opportunity to visit congregations along the way. It could almost be described as a “campaign trip,” since most of these congregations would likely be sympathetic with their viewpoint that Gentiles should not be burdened with circumcision and the Torah. This would be especially true of the Christians of Phoenicia whose congregations were likely established by the same Hellenists who reached out to the Gentiles in Antioch (11:19–20). The congregations along their route rejoiced at the news of Paul and Barnabas’s success among the Gentiles. Evidently they did not share the misgivings of the Judaizing Christians. When the Antioch delegation arrived in Jerusalem, they were well received by the “apostles and elders” (v. 4). These would be the central groups in the deliberation. Peter would be the spokesperson for the apostles, and James would represent the elders. Just as Paul and Barnabas had reported the success of their mission to the sponsoring church at Antioch (14:27) and to the congregations on their way (15:3), so now they shared with the leaders in Jerusalem what *God* had done through them. The emphasis on God’s blessing was essential. That God’s *leading* was so evident in accepting the Gentiles apart from the law would determine the final outcome of the conference.

15:5 The reception was somewhat cooler from a group of believers “who belonged to the party of the Pharisees” (v. 5). It was perhaps some of their group who had first stirred up the controversy in Antioch. They at least shared the same viewpoint: Gentiles who become Christians must undergo Jewish proselyte procedure. They must be circumcised. They must live by the entire Jewish law. It was not the moral aspects of the law that presented the problem but its ritual provisions. The moral law, such as embodied in the Ten Commandments, was never in question. Paul, for instance, constantly reminded his churches of God’s moral standards in his letters. The ritual aspects of the law presented a problem. These were the provisions that marked Jews off from other people—circumcision, the food laws, scrupulous ritual purity. They were what made the Jews Jews and seemed strange and arbitrary to most Gentiles. To have required these of Gentiles would in essence have made them into Jews and cut them off from the rest of the Gentiles. It would have severely restricted, perhaps even killed, any effective Gentile mission. The stakes were high in the Jerusalem Conference.

It should come as no surprise that some of the Pharisees had become Christians. Pharisees believed in resurrection, life after death, and the coming Messiah. They shared the basic convictions of the Christians. Because of this they are sometimes in Acts found defending the Christians against the Sadducees, who had much less in common with Christian views (cf. 5:17; 23:8f.). A major barrier between Christians and Pharisees was the extensive use of oral tradition by the Pharisees, which Jesus and Paul both rejected as human tradition. It is not surprising that some Pharisees came to embrace Christ as the Messiah in whom they had hoped. For all their emphasis on law, it is also not surprising that they would be reticent to receive anyone into the fellowship in a manner not in accordance with tradition. That tradition was well-established for proselytes—circumcision and the whole yoke of the law.

(2) *The Debate in Jerusalem (15:6–21)*

The central section of Acts 15:1–35 relates the debate in Jerusalem over the circumcision issue. There were two major witnesses, both in defense of the view that the Gentiles should not be burdened by circumcision and the law. Peter spoke first (vv. 7–11), followed by James (vv. 13–

21). Both speeches are preceded by brief summary notices that set the larger context of the conference (vv. 6, 12).

PETER'S WITNESS (15:6–11)

15:6 Verse 6 relates the gathering for the conference. Since it mentions only the apostles and elders, many interpreters see this as a reference to the private conference Paul mentioned in Gal 2:2 with “those who seemed to be leaders.” These interpreters would see the full church being first gathered together for the “discussion” in v. 7 or even later—with the mention of the whole assembly in v. 12. If Luke mentioned Paul’s private conference at all, it would more likely be the initial meeting with the apostles and elders in v. 4. Verses 6–29 are a continuous narrative, and one would assume the whole group was gathered together for the discussion—the apostles and elders, other members of the Jerusalem church (including the Pharisaic Christians), Paul and Barnabas, and the other members of the Antioch delegation. The apostles and elders were singled out as the leaders of the assembly. They initiated the formal inquiry.

15:7–9 The meeting began with a lively discussion (v. 7). After the various viewpoints had been aired, Peter rose to speak. He began by reminding the assembly of his own experience in the household of Cornelius (v. 7b). Even though it was “some time ago,” possibly as much as ten years before, the experience had made an indelible impression on Peter. God had chosen him to witness to the Gentiles (cf. 10:5, 20, 32). Peter could expect the Jerusalem Christians, including the circumcisers, to remember this because he had given them a full report following the incident (cf. 11:1–18). What he had learned on that occasion was that God looks on the heart, not on external matters. God is no respecter of persons (10:34). Perhaps Peter had in mind the distinction made by the prophets that God does not look to the external circumcision of the flesh but the internal circumcision of the heart (Jer 4:4; 9:26; cf. Rom 2:29). God had convicted Cornelius, looked to the inner circumcision of his heart, and accepted him on that basis. God had proved his acceptance of Cornelius and the Gentiles at his home by granting them the gift of his Spirit. God only grants his Spirit to those he has accepted (cf. 10:44, 47; 11:17). The fact that they had received the Spirit just as Peter and the Jewish Christians had was proof that God had accepted Cornelius and his fellow Gentiles on an equal footing (v. 9). He “purified their hearts” by faith. Peter undoubtedly was thinking of his vision: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (10:15). For the Jew circumcision was a mark of sanctity and purity, of belonging to God’s people and being acceptable to him. But in Cornelius God had shown Peter that true purity comes not by an external mark but by faith. In the account of Cornelius in chap. 10, his faith is never explicitly mentioned but is certainly evidenced in his following without question every direction God gave him. Here Peter made explicit what was implicit there: Cornelius had been accepted by God on the basis of his faith.

15:10–11 In v. 10 Peter gave his conclusion drawn from the experience with Cornelius. It was an emphatic no to the question of Gentile circumcision and the “yoke” of the law. God had accepted the Gentiles at Cornelius’s house without either of these. How could Jewish Christians demand anything more than the faith already shown? To demand more would be to put God to the test, to act against God’s declared will, to see if God really meant what he had already shown in accepting Gentiles apart from the law. Peter’s statement in v. 10 is strong but should not be misconstrued. By speaking of the “yoke” of the law, he did not mean that the law was an intolerable burden that Jewish Christians should abandon. Peter was using a common Jewish metaphor for the law that had the same positive meaning Jesus had given it (Matt 11:29f.). Peter did not urge *Jewish*

Christians to abandon the law, nor did they cease to live by it. Peter's meaning was that the law was something the Jews had not been able to fulfill. It had proven an inadequate basis of salvation for them. Neither they nor their fathers had been able to fully keep the law and so win acceptance with God (cf. Rom 2:17–24). For the Jewish Christians the law would remain a mark of God's covenant with them, a cherished heritage. It could not save them. Only one thing could—faith, believing in the saving grace of the Lord Jesus (v. 11).

Faith alone, grace alone—one could hardly sound more like Paul. Paul had said much the same thing at Pisidian Antioch (13:38f.). It is something of an irony that Paul had to remind Peter of this same truth just a short time later in Antioch when his actions went counter to his convictions (Gal 2:14–17). It is interesting to observe Peter's progression throughout his speech. He began by pointing out how God had accepted the Gentiles “just like he accepted us” (v. 8). Now the shoe was on the other foot. The Gentiles had become the example for the Jews—“we are saved, just as they are” (v. 11). God's acceptance of the Gentiles had drawn a basic lesson for the Jews as well. There is only *one* way of salvation—“through the grace of our Lord Jesus.” The emphasis on grace in 15:11 fits well with the emphasis on God's sovereign activity in the salvation of the Gentiles. Peter's ultimate point was that God is free to save whomever and however he pleases.

JAMES'S TESTIMONY (15:12–21)

15:12 At the end of Peter's speech the entire assembly sat in silence. The hubbub with which the conference began (v. 7) now ceased. Paul and Barnabas had already shared their missionary experience with the leaders (v. 4). Now they gave their testimony before the entire congregation (v. 12). Their emphasis was again on *God's* initiative in the mission, his work through them, the signs and wonders that had attested to his presence and affirmation of their ministry. This missionary report was the entire role that Paul and Barnabas had in the conference. The main arguments were offered by Peter and James, the leaders of the apostles and elders. Paul and Barnabas evidently offered no defense of their position on the Gentile question other than the implicit argument that God had endorsed it. This was wise procedure. Often those who are most involved in an issue cannot be heard objectively by their opponents. A third party can address the issue with less passion and more authority. This was the role filled by Peter and James, who were in essence the spokespersons for the two missionaries.

15:13 When Paul and Barnabas had completed their testimony, James rose to speak (v. 13). It was James the brother of Jesus. Paul also mentioned James's role at the Jerusalem Conference (Gal 2:9; cf. 1:19) and called him one of the “pillars” of the church, along with Peter and John. James had evidently become the leading elder of the Jerusalem congregation. His leadership of the church has already been indicated in 12:17. Upon Paul's final visit to Jerusalem he appears to have been the sole leader of the congregation, and the apostles no longer seem to have been present in the city (21:18–25). Here James continued the defense of Peter's position that the Gentiles should not be required to be circumcised or embrace the Jewish law. Peter's argument had been based primarily on his personal experience, which had shown that God had accepted the Gentiles by sending his Spirit on them solely on the basis of their faith. James furthered Peter's position by giving it scriptural grounding (vv. 14–18). Then, realizing that such a solution would create real problems for Jewish Christians in their fellowship with Gentile Christians, he offered a suggestion for alleviating that situation (vv. 19–21).

15:14–18 James began by referring to Peter's just-completed witness to God's acceptance of the Gentiles at Cornelius's home and described it as God's “taking from the Gentiles a people for

himself” (v. 14). James used the word *laos* to describe the Gentiles, a term usually applied to Israel. In Zech 2:11 (LXX 2:15), the Septuagint also applies the term *laos* to the Gentiles who will in the final days come to dwell in the renewed Zion and be a part of God’s people. Something like this seems to be the meaning here. In Christ God brings Jew and Gentile together into a single *laos*, a single people “for his name.”

James now showed how the coming of the Gentiles into the people of God was grounded in the Old Testament prophets. Basically he quoted from the Septuagint text of Amos 9:11–12, with possible allusions from Jer 12:15 and Isa 45:21. In the Hebrew text of Amos 9:11–12, the prophet spoke of the coming restoration of Israel, which God would bring about. The house of David would be rebuilt and the kingdom restored to its former glory. Edom and all the nations over which David ruled would once again be gathered into Israel. The Greek text differs significantly and speaks of the remnant of humankind and all the nations seeking the Lord. In both traditions there is the concept of “the nations which are called by my name,” which links directly with “a people for his name” (“for himself,” NIV) in v. 14. This is the main concept James wished to develop. In the Gentiles, God was choosing a people for himself, a new *restored* people of God, Jew and Gentile in Christ, the true Israel. In the total message of Acts it is clear that the rebuilt house of David occurred in the Messiah. Christ was the scion of David who fulfilled the covenant of David and established a kingdom that would last forever (2 Sam 7:12f.; cf. Acts 13:32–34). From the beginning the Jewish Christians had realized that the promises to David were fulfilled in Christ. What they were now beginning to see, and what James saw foretold in Amos, was that these promises included the Gentiles.

15:19–20 Having established from Scripture the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God, James drew his conclusion to the question of *requirements* for Gentile membership (v. 19). Gentiles should not be given undue difficulties; no unnecessary obstacles should be placed in their way. Though somewhat more restrained in expression, his conclusion was basically that of Peter (v. 10): Gentiles should not be burdened with the law and circumcision. The leading apostle and the leading elder were in agreement. The issue was all but settled. Resolving it, however, raised another problem. If Gentiles were not being required to observe the Jewish ritual laws, how would Jewish Christians who maintained strict Torah observance be able to fellowship with them without running the risk of being ritually defiled themselves? James saw the question coming and addressed it in his next remark (v. 20). Gentiles should be directed to abstain from four things: from food offered to idols, from sexual immorality (*porneia*), from the meat of strangled animals (*pnikton*), and from blood (*haima*).

When looked at closely, all four of these belong to the ritual sphere. Meat offered to idols was an abomination to Jews, who avoided any and everything associated with idolatry. “Strangled meat” referred to animals that had been slaughtered in a manner that left the blood in it. Blood was considered sacred to the Jews, and all meat was to be drained of blood before consuming it. The prohibition of “blood” came under the same requirement, referring to the consumption of the blood of animals in any form. These three requirements were thus all ritual, dealing with matters of clean and unclean foods. The fourth category seems somewhat less ritual and more moral: sexual immorality (*porneia*). It is possible that this category was also originally intended in a mainly ritual sense, referring to those “defiling” sexual relationships the Old Testament condemns, such as incest, marriage outside the covenant community, marriage with a close relative, bestiality, homosexuality, and the like. It is also possible that a broader meaning was intended including all illicit “natural” relationships as well, such as fornication, concubinage, and adultery. Gentile

sexual mores were lax compared to Jewish standards, and it was one of the areas where Jews saw themselves most radically differentiated from Gentiles. The boundary between ritual and ethical law is not always distinct, and sexual morality is one of those areas where it is most blurred. For the Jew sexual misbehavior was both immoral *and* impure. A Jew would find it difficult indeed to consort with a Gentile who did not live by his own standards of sexual morality.

The four requirements suggested by James were thus all basically ritual requirements aimed at making fellowship possible between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Often referred to as “the apostolic decrees,” they belonged to a period in the life of the church when there was close contact between Jewish and Gentile Christians, when table fellowship especially was common between them. In a later day, by the end of the first century, Jewish Christianity became isolated into small sects and separated from Gentile Christianity. There no longer existed any real fellowship between them. The original function of the decrees no longer had any force, and they tended to be viewed in wholly moral terms. This tendency is very much reflected in the textual tradition of Acts 15:20, 29 and 21:25, particularly in the Western text, which omits “strangled meat,” adds the negative form of the golden rule, and reads “idolatry” rather than idol meat. There are thus four moral prohibitions: no idolatry, no sexual immorality, no murder (“blood” now viewed as the shedding—not consuming—of blood), and “do not do to another what you wouldn’t wish done to yourself.”

15:21 The question might be raised: Why were the original decrees ritual rather than moral in the first place? The answer quite simply is that the moral rules, such as the Ten Commandments, were already assumed. *All* Christians, Jew and Gentile, lived by them. The Gentiles needed no reminder of such basic marks of Christian behavior. Morality was not the issue at the Jerusalem Conference. Fellowship was, and the decrees were a sort of minimum requirement placed on the Gentile Christians in deference to the scruples of their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ. They were really not something radically new. The Old Testament lays down similar rules for the resident alien dwelling in Israel and for much the same purpose: to assure the purity of the Jewish community and to allow for social interaction between the Jews and the non-Jews in their midst. In fact, all four of the “apostolic decrees” are found in Lev 17 and 18 as requirements expected of resident aliens: abstinence from pagan sacrifices (17:8), blood (17:10–14), strangled meat (17:13), and illicit sexual relationships (18:6–23). Perhaps this is what James meant in his rather obscure concluding remark (v. 21): the law of Moses is read in every synagogue everywhere; so these requirements should come as no shock to the Gentiles. They are in the Old Testament and have been required of Gentiles associating with Jews from the earliest times. James’s remark could also be taken in another sense, which would fit the context well: there are Jews in every city who cherish the Torah. Gentile Christians should be sensitive to their scruples and not give them offense in these ritual matters, for they too may be reached with the gospel.

Lesson 7: Whatever It Takes To Reach People – Missionary Story

Fred and Effie Donnelson

(Fred: November 16, 1897 – February 9, 1974)

(Effie: December 22, 1898 – January 6, 1994)

Both Fred and Effie Donnelson were from Marshalltown, Iowa and both from solid Christian families. Fred accepted Christ as a young boy and Effie accepted Christ in her teen years. As young people they were active in church and it was no surprise to anyone when Fred said that God wanted him in full-time ministry. They married during their college years. Shortly before Fred's graduation, he became the pastor of Messiah Baptist Church in Chicago which proved to be a wonderful training ground for their future work in China. It was at Messiah Baptist Church that the Donnelsons met Mrs. Josephine Sweet, a missionary to China. God used Mrs. Sweet's testimony of the missionary work she and her husband had done in China to burden the Donnelsons' hearts to go to China as missionaries. (Mr. Sweet had died a few months earlier.)

Early in Fred Donnelson's Christian life, Genesis 14:13-15 became the passage that carried him through his entire ministry. He believed that when God told the Children of Israel to go forward that it was also a command to every Christian. He saw every "challenge" (other people might view it as an "obstacle") that came his way as an opportunity to trust God and to "Go Forward" in faith and determination. It was this faith, this determination to always trust God and go forward that carried he and his family through many challenging times in China.

On February 25, 1933, the Donnelson family which now included two small children, Paul and Lois, boarded The Empress of Canada headed for China. The family sold their possessions and with no promise of financial support, they were going forward to take the Gospel to China.

They arrived in Shanghai and were met by their friend, Mrs. Sweet, who was a great help to them in their early days in China. After a few weeks, the family took a train to Hangchow which would be their home and base of operations. When the train arrived in Hangchow, the Donnelson family and their belongings were loaded onto rickshaws. (It took several to carry the family of four, Mrs. Sweet and all the baggage.) The rickshaw coolies rushed them through the streets, shouting all the way. The Donnelsons thought they were telling people to get out of the way. In reality, they were shouting "Get out of the way; the foreign devils are coming!" Little did the people of Hangchow know that these strange looking people were not foreign devils, rather they were people who loved them and had come to give them the good news of Jesus.

A group of young men who had accepted Christ through Mr. Sweet's ministry and wanted to be trained for ministry were waiting for Mr. Donnelson to arrive and begin to teach them. Mr. Donnelson was immediately thrust into both learning the Chinese language and training these young men for ministry. This was a daunting challenge for Mr. Donnelson; however, he was not overwhelmed. He saw it as an opportunity to "Go Forward" to do whatever it took to take the Gospel to the Chinese people. After six months of study, Donnelson was able to preach his first sermon in Chinese. As his language skills improved, he began to travel to neighboring villages and establish new preaching stations always taking a group of the young men with him.

One of the tools that was very effective in the early years of the Donnelsons' ministry in China was a large tent which they would take into the villages and set up in an open space. The tent was easily seen and a bit of a curiosity as well, so people were drawn to it. In the mornings, Mr. Donnelson and his helpers would teach Bible lessons. In the afternoon, they would go out into the village visiting as many homes as they could to share the Gospel, inviting people to attend the evening service, which included

music and preaching. Countless people were brought to Christ in the early years because of the meetings under the tent where the core of the Gospel was presented.

The Donnelsons' ministry was flourishing in the midst of the enemy's distractions. The Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1937 creating great danger for the Donnelsons and everyone in the area. Often while they were conducting services or having prayer meetings bombers were flying overhead, dropping bombs on nearby transportation and military centers. Soon the Donnelson family was forced to escape Hangchow under the cover of darkness. They made their way to Shanghai and soon returned to the United States. As they reflected on their five years' work in China, they were thankful for 20 churches established in surrounding villages, scores of Chinese believers trained as workers in the ministry and hundreds had accepted Christ. Their hearts rejoiced over God's goodness and desire burned in their hearts to return to China as soon as possible.

They did return to China after only eight months in the United States. They located in Shanghai and established a Bible School with a program for both young men and young women. This school was conducted much like the tent ministry always presenting the core message of the Gospel – Jesus lived, died and rose again so that they might have eternal life. In the mornings, the students were in classes taught by Mr. Donnelson, the afternoons were spent visiting homes and sharing the Gospel with people and evangelistic services were held in the evenings. Mr. Donnelson also continued to oversee the “country works” that had been established during their first journey to China. Young Chinese ministers were teaching and preaching in the country churches. The country church ministry, the Bible School ministry and a church in Shanghai were all flourishing. And then came Pearl Harbor.

On Monday, December 8, 1941, the Donnelsons along with other American missionaries were ordered to appear in downtown Shanghai to register and to receive an armband that had to be worn at all times. It was not long before Japanese soldiers came to the Donnelson home and marked their furniture and personal items with an “X” Sticker. Under the threat of being shot, they were instructed to not move or remove any of the marked items. Soon Mr. and Mrs. Donnelson and Lois were taken as prisoners and put in an internment camp. (Their son, Paul, had returned to the United States only a month before to attend college.) In the few moments they were given to pack a few belongings when the soldiers came for them, Mrs. Donnelson noticed that her yellow curtains and a yellow bedspread had not been marked, she grabbed them and put them in her suitcase.

Approximately 1,100 people were confined at an internment camp where multiple families were forced to live together in one room. The room that was assigned to the Donnelsons was about 45 feet by 12 feet and they shared the space with five other families. There was no heat, only cots for sleeping and little food. The Donnelsons were fortunate to have a corner space with a window and Mrs. Donnelson found a way to use her yellow spread and matching curtains to create some privacy for their family. The Donnelsons appreciated the privacy and the others in their room appreciated the “cheeriness” that the yellow curtains brought to the room and deemed it the “sunshine corner”. Yet, it was more than the yellow curtains that brought the warmth – it was the warmth of the Gospel that the Donnelsons shared with the others confined in the camp. The sunshine corner was a place where anyone was welcomed and given an encouraging word and a time of prayer. Their lives, even in these dire circumstances, reflected Christ in a clear and simple manner. This small corner of that large room was “home” for the Donnelsons for two years and during that time they saw a number of people come to Christ.

Early in December 1943, word came that some of the women and children were going to be released from the internment. When Mr. Donnelson told his wife that her name and their daughter's name was on the list of those to be released, Mrs. Donnelson insisted to him that he would be released as well. She said that she knew that God was going to answer her prayers of keeping their family together. Two days later, Mr. Donnelson saw that a “supplemental” list had been posted and his name was on it!

It was a long and difficult trip back to the states. Mrs. Donnelson was so ill and weak that she had to be carried on a stretcher when they boarded the boat to leave Shanghai. However, it was great relief and joy that filled their hearts as they finally sailed by the Statue of Liberty. They were in America for two years before being allowed to return to China.

Early in December of 1945, Fred and Effie Donnelson again boarded a ship headed back to China for their third term and were welcomed “home” by a small band of Christian believers. Unfortunately, the Donnelsons were in China not quite three years before being forced to leave again due to the Communist invasion. However, the work remained, and the Chinese believers trained by the Donnelsons continued the work of reaching the people of China with the Gospel.

Leaving China did not end the Donnelsons’ efforts to take the Gospel to China and around the world. When they returned to the states after their third journey, they joined the faculty of a Bible College in Missouri where Mr. Donnelson was the head of the Missions Department and Mrs. Donnelson was Dean of Women. Countless young people surrendered their lives to Christ to take the Gospel around the world under the ministry of Mr. and Mrs. Donnelson.

Fred and Effie Donnelson’s lives are examples of doing whatever it takes to reach people with the Gospel.

Whatever It Takes Missionary Stories

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Lesson 7

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