

Nov 12-18

## **Week 46**

This week we will continue our exciting trek through the book of Acts. We will witness how God continued to surprise the earliest Christians by doing the unexpected. He converted an archenemy of the movement and brought salvation to those who were not Jewish.

We will also witness the continuing expansion of Christianity, with the first and second missionary trips of Paul. The church moved across Asia Minor and into what we know today as Europe. As the gospel moved forward, the churches experienced struggles and theological questions, prompting the apostles to address difficult issues through letters. James and Galatians, for example, addressed the question of faith and work from different vantage points because they were dealing with different problems. James spoke to those who claimed to be Christians but did not grasp that real faith manifests in righteous works. In Galatians, on the other hand, Paul castigated those who suggested that circumcision was necessary for salvation. For Paul, faith alone in Christ alone establishes a relationship with God.

This topic would also be central to the Jerusalem Council, recounted in Acts 15. Notice the way the church arrived at a decision in that council. This week imagine both the excitement and the frustrations the earliest Christians must have experienced.

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**Day 1****Read Acts 9-11****Act 3 - Scene 4 - Reading 4**

We continue today with very significant events outside Jerusalem as the church continued to expand, the gospel breaking down barriers in unexpected ways. Watch for the elements of surprise in these stories as God did the unexpected through the gospel. Paul, as well as the Christians he encountered, was caught completely off guard by his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus ©. AD 34).

Peter and the church were shocked that God would save Gentiles (see Acts 10–11). Notice in Acts 10 the sequence of miraculous occurrences one after the other. It is as if God were saying to Peter, “You can’t miss this. Salvation is for the Gentiles too!” To this point the Jews thought the Messiah had come only for the Jewish people. That he had come for Gentiles too was so unexpected that Peter had to defend his baptism of Cornelius and his household before those in Jerusalem who stressed circumcision. Yet the conclusion was clear: the baptism of the Spirit, the entrance and cleansing of the Spirit at conversion, had come to Gentiles who had repented. God had cleansed them from sin and had given them spiritual life (see Acts 11:15-18). It is still amazing when this happens.

*How have you been surprised lately by the work of the Spirit through the gospel?*

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## **Day 2**

### **Read Acts 12-14**

#### **Act 3 - Scene 4 - Reading 5**

At the end of yesterday's reading we were introduced to the multiethnic church in Antioch in Syria (north of Palestine), where believers were first called Christians. That church would be very important as a missions-sending center.

In the reading today Peter was miraculously released from prison, and King Herod was judged by God.

Acts 13–14 focuses on the first major missionary trip (AD 47–48), when God sent Paul and Barnabas to the island of Cyprus, the home area of Barnabas, and to a region we refer to as south Galatia, just west of Paul's home, Tarsus, in Asia Minor. Notice the mix of reactions to the missionary work. Miracles, mistaken identities, and mean-spirited opposition mixed in fairly equal measures, moving the story along. The big news here is that lots of Gentiles came to faith in Christ. Churches were planted in a context of persecution. The kingdom of God was expanding outward across the Mediterranean world, tracking especially with the mission of Paul.

*Pray for Christian missionaries today, who carry the gospel and plant churches in contexts of persecution around the world.*

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**Day 3****Read James 1-5****Act 3 - Scene 4 - Reading 6**

Because of its practical teaching and orientation to wisdom, some have called James the Proverbs of the New Testament. James was probably writing to a number of Jewish-Christian churches in Palestine as early as the mid-40s AD. He seemed to have Leviticus 19 as a backdrop, as well as the teachings of his half brother, the Lord Jesus. James was concerned about how we as believers respond to trials in life, and for James, righteous wisdom means living decisively according to God's will, which is revealed in God's Word.

Doubters are "like the surging sea" (James 1:6); they cannot make up their minds as to whether they will follow God wholeheartedly. In fact, to have head knowledge about God is worthless apart from being a doer of the Word. Even demons know God exists.

Real religion involves practical actions like caring for the poor and vulnerable and controlling the tongue. It also involves right relationships in the church. Such actions are manifestations of real faith.

*As you read this practical book, allow the words to penetrate your heart, pinpointing areas that need attention.*

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**Day 4****Read Galatians 1-3****Act 3 - Scene 4 - Reading 7**

As we saw yesterday, James dealt in part with a problem group that thought once they professed Christ, they didn't need to do any good works. Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, addressed those who sought to establish relationships with Christ by works of the law, especially circumcision.

After Paul and Barnabas left the churches of south Galatia, false teachers came and taught that to be saved, a person needed to have faith in Christ but also to be circumcised. In no uncertain terms Paul called this a false gospel. He shared the story of how he received the true gospel and then used the story of his confrontation of Peter as a launching point to proclaim faith in Christ alone as the means to salvation.

As you read these first three chapters of the book, notice the emphasis on faith and the contrast between faith and law. Paul pointed to God's covenant with Abraham, which came long before the law, as foundational to his understanding of a relationship with God through Christ.

*Do you have a clear understanding of the relationship between faith and law?*

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**Day 5**

**Read Galatians 4-6**

**Act 3 - Scene 4 - Reading 8**

In the remainder of Galatians, Paul continued to point out the contrasts between the true gospel and the false teaching offered to the Galatians by the intruders who had led them astray. As you read today, observe contrasts between sound and false ministry, between the flesh and the Spirit, and between freedom and slavery. Also notice the nuances of Paul's arguments and appeals to the Galatians.

Finally, notice that right thinking lays the foundation for right living. Theology is foundational for a Christian life.

*How is the fruit of the Spirit being manifested in your life today?*

*How strong is the root of right theology in your life and in your church?*

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**Day 6****Read Acts 15-16****Act 3 - Scene 4 - Reading 9**

Acts 15 narrates one of the greatest turning points in the history of the church (c. AD 49). It started with those in Antioch, who taught that a person had to be circumcised in order to be saved (see 15:1). Paul and Barnabas argued against this claim and, with others from the church, were sent to Jerusalem to discuss the matter with the apostles and elders there.

As you read, notice the various aspects of the discussion. Peter shared about the conversion of Cornelius (a Gentile) and his household, and Paul and Barnabas recounted the great works God had done among the Gentiles. James added passages from Amos and Isaiah, which pointed to God's heart and vision for the Gentiles. The decision of the Jerusalem Council was a resounding yes to the Gentiles and a no to those who wanted to impose Jewish religious rituals on them.

Acts 16 records the beginning of Paul's second mission trip (AD 49–51 or 52), as the apostle traveled back through Asia Minor and into Macedonia. As you read about the journeys, it will help if you have a map handy (probably labeled "Paul's Missionary Journeys" at the back of your Bible). Notice that Paul usually went to the Jewish synagogue first—those with whom he had things in common—and then preached to the Gentiles. As he planted churches, he faced persecution along the way.

*What religious rituals today can hinder the advance of the gospel?*

*How does the gospel cross barriers today?*

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**Day 7****Reading Summary for Week 46**

Persecution pushed the Christians out of Jerusalem. An unexpected convert, the brilliant Pharisee Saul, came to understand that the gospel was meant for Gentiles too. First in Antioch and then in his travels, Saul (Paul) proclaimed salvation by grace through faith alone. He wrote to the Galatians, passionately pleading for a law-free approach to the means of salvation. The Jerusalem council agreed to this approach. The letter James wrote provided the balancing truth: saving faith inevitably produces good works.

**Prayer/Meditation**

Lord of the churches, thank you for scattering believers so that more and more people could hear the words of eternal life. Thank you for calling Paul to be the apostle to the Gentiles and for showing him that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Let me never make the mistake of thinking I can earn one whit of my salvation. Help me also see with James that genuine faith will always be made evident by good works. Amen.

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