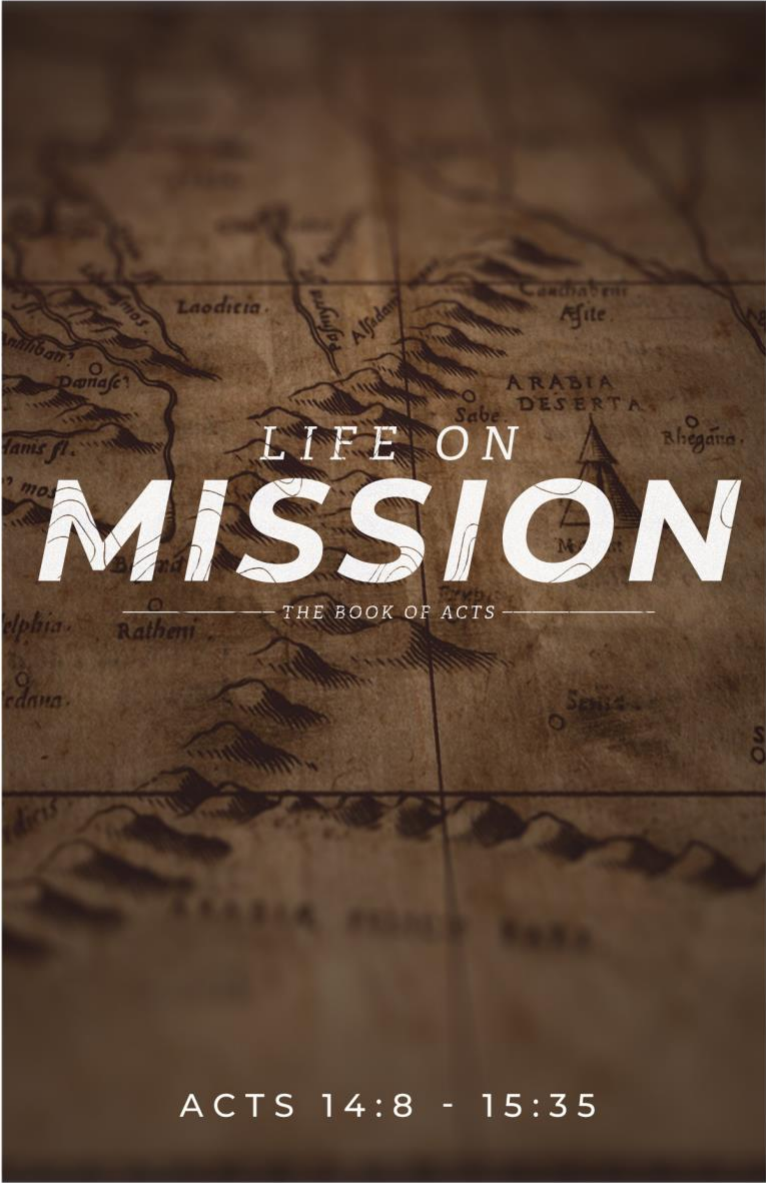




WORD TO LIFE

WEEKS 5 - 8



LIFE ON  
**MISSION**

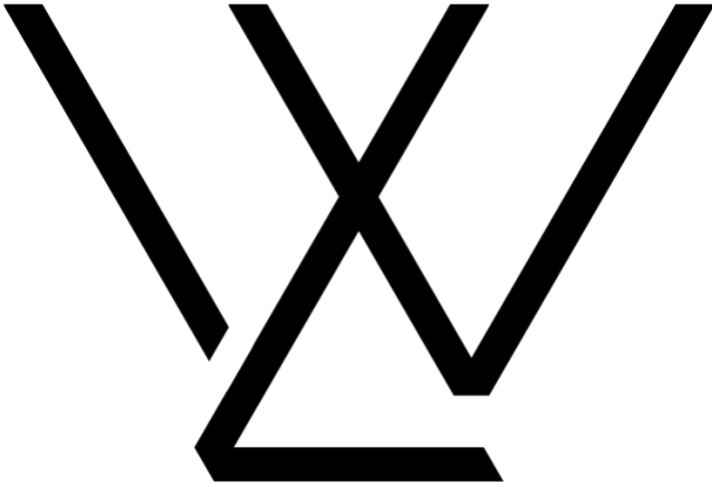
— THE BOOK OF ACTS —

ACTS 14:8 - 15:35









**Word to Life's** are sermon-aligned study guides, created to help the church dive even deeper into the passages we study together on Sundays.

Each week there will be five studies to help you prepare for the upcoming weekend sermon. This will also be a great discussion tool at your next LifeGroup meeting.

We hope you enjoy and grow deeper in your faith!



— **WEEK 5** —

- FEB. 7
- FEB. 8
- FEB. 9
- FEB. 10
- FEB. 11

— **WEEK 6** —

- FEB. 14
- FEB. 15
- FEB. 16
- FEB. 17
- FEB. 18

— **WEEK 7** —

- FEB. 21
- FEB. 22
- FEB. 23
- FEB. 24
- FEB. 25

— **WEEK 8** —

- FEB. 28
- MAR. 1
- MAR. 2
- MAR. 3
- MAR. 4





## Week 5: Acts 14:8-18

### Day 1: Exploring the Biblical Text

#### READ: Acts 14:8-18

#### EXPLORE:

Instructions: Spend time reading Acts 14:8-18 and complete the questions below.

- **Question:** When Paul had finished speaking, he noticed that the crippled man had faith to be made well.<sup>1</sup> What do you think enabled Paul to see faith in the man?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- **Question:** After reading verse 10, what do you notice about how Paul spoke to the crippled man? Why do you think he chose to speak in this way?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- **Question:** What conclusion did the crowd and the priest of Zeus reach about Paul and Barnabas? Why do you think they reached this conclusion?

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<sup>1</sup> Some translations render the Greek verbiage "*faith to be saved.*"

- **Question:** How did Paul and Barnabas respond to the claims that they were gods? What do we learn from their example?
  
- **Question:** Paul and Barnabas stressed creation in their response to the people of Lystra.<sup>2</sup> Why do you think creation was such a pivotal piece of their response to the false worship?

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<sup>2</sup> See Acts 14:15-17 for reference.

## **Week 5: Acts 14:8-18**

### **Day 2: Worship Misdirection**

**READ: Acts 14:11-14 and Acts 10:25-26**

#### **EXPLORE:**

At first glance, it might seem a bit strange that the people in Lystra responded to the miracle they saw by declaring that Paul and Barnabas were the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes. They then attempt to sacrifice an offering to them. However, we must always remember that when we read the Bible we are being transported to ancient times and are engaged in an array of different cultures and beliefs. We would do well to gain a deeper understanding before drawing any conclusions.

Lystra was a small country town that carried little significance, except that there was a Roman military post there. The post connected Lystra with another colony city in the region, Pisidian Antioch, about 100 miles northwest. The people were almost exclusively Gentile pagans; we don't have evidence that there was even a Jewish synagogue in the town, so their beliefs were predominantly shaped by the Greek mythology prevalent in their time.

There was an ancient legend told in this region that Zeus and Hermes had come to earth before as humans. The story is told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that, "Seeking hospitality, these gods were rejected by everyone except for an impoverished elderly couple by the name of Philemon and Baucis. The couple not only took them in but forfeited their own meager repast to give it to the strangers. The gods rewarded the generous couple by transforming their cottage into a magnificent temple with a gilded roof. The inhospitable neighbors were punished by being inundated by a severe flood. The populace at Lystra may well have wanted to avoid the same mistake

with regard to the miracle-working pair that now had come to visit them.”<sup>3</sup>

In this light, the people’s response makes sense. I suppose we might have responded as they did if we were in their shoes. However, imagine Paul and Barnabas’s emotion as they picked up on what was happening. The missionary pair would have been aware that the first of the Ten Commandments are all about worshipping only the one true God! Their response was fitting. They swiftly put a stop to the misdirected worship and redirected all glory to God.

In honesty, I (Josh) don’t imagine any of us run the risk of being worshipped in this way. We should recognize that when people begin to see the Christian life and message on display, they will process it based on their past experiences and current beliefs. We should not be surprised when others draw strange conclusions about our faith and how it should be lived out. Like Paul and Barnabas, we ought to be ready and willing to redirect their misguided understanding by pointing them to the truth of God’s Word. Let us abide by God’s instruction to “*not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil.*”<sup>4</sup>

**BIG IDEA: Be patient with people and lead them to God’s Word. Remember, their journey starts from where *they* are, not from where *you* are.**

**APPLY:**

- **Assignment:** Consider for a moment the significance of understanding a person’s background, upbringing, or beliefs as it pertains to leading them to the truth of God. Write down some things you think might be important to know in this process.

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<sup>3</sup> *ExpTim* 37 (1925–26): 528.

<sup>4</sup> See 2 Timothy 2:24-26 for reference.

- **Question:** Have you ever found yourself frustrated with an unbeliever/new believer because they had misguided beliefs and practices? If so, what was your response and how would you respond similarly or differently next time?



## Week 5: Acts 14:8-18

### Day 3: The Place of Protest

**READ:** Acts 14:8-18 and Mark 14:53-65

#### EXPLORE:

Deep grief and passionate frustration have a way of shaking us from the seemingly mundane side of life. Theologian and prolific writer C.S. Lewis once wrote, “Pain is God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” Profound moments of sadness often hold the potential to awaken us from an often-unacknowledged place of spiritual lethargy toward that which God desires to accomplish. This truth is put on full display in the apostles’ response to the priest of Zeus in Acts 14:14-15.

After healing a crippled man in Lystra, the priest of Zeus wanted to inappropriately offer a sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas. The pagan priest misunderstood the spiritual power that belonged not to the apostles, but to God alone. Luke records the apostles’ response, writing, *“But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it [the attempted sacrifice], they tore their garments and rushed into the crowd, crying out.”*<sup>5</sup>

I (Stephen) don’t know about you but seeing Paul and Barnabas tearing their clothes and running toward the people would be quite a sight. The apostles’ response was intensely visceral and was designed to awaken the crowd to the deeper spiritual reality. The act of tearing their clothes was designed to protest the priest’s attempted sacrifice and to shake any sense of normalcy from the situation.

Tearing of one’s clothes appears in the Scriptures on several occasions and for several reasons. First, it is most often used as an expression of grief. For example, in the story of Joseph in Genesis 37,

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<sup>5</sup> See Acts 14:14 for reference.

both Reuben and Jacob tore their clothes in profound sadness.<sup>6</sup> Second, the tearing of clothes can communicate a feeling of great distress. When Joshua was in distress after the defeat at Ai, he and the elders of Israel tore their clothes in response.<sup>7</sup> Israel had been left in a vulnerable position and the tearing of clothes was meant to express intense concern before God. Finally, the tearing of clothes is used within the biblical text to express a rightful response to a statement of blasphemy. In the passage that we read today, the chief priests, scribes, and elders falsely accused Jesus of making blasphemous claims. As a result, the chief priest tore his clothes.<sup>8</sup>

In the context of the apostles' interaction in Lystra, it is most likely that they tore their clothes to express deep grief and to protest the blasphemous claim being made by the priest of Zeus. In their minds, the severity of their situation did not leave them with the option of a calm persuasion. Instead, they chose to follow the biblical mode of peaceful, yet intense, protest from a place of deep grief regarding a blasphemous claim.

**BIG IDEA: The apostles tore their clothes in grief-filled protest to the attempted blasphemy by the priest of Zeus.**

**APPLY:**

- **Question:** Following the apostles' example and the whole counsel of Scripture, how can we protect against either underreacting or overreacting to the intense situations we might face in our lives?
- **Question:** As they traveled and ministered, the apostles responded differently depending on the context of their situation. Why do you think they chose to respond in this way in Acts 14:14-18?

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<sup>6</sup> See Genesis 37:29, 34 for reference.

<sup>7</sup> See Joshua 7:6 for reference.

<sup>8</sup> See Mark 14:63 for reference.



## **Week 5: Acts 14:8-18**

### **Day 4: Sharing Faith with the Unfamiliar**

#### **READ: Acts 14:8-18**

#### **EXPLORE:**

In contemporary American culture we are often presented with the opportunity to share our faith with people who have some level of familiarity with biblical truths or ideas. Maybe they have heard of several biblical passages or maybe they were “raised in church.” It is probable that they will even have some correct ideas about what the biblical text has to say about the nature and character of God. However, as in this week’s study, the prevalence of surface level biblical understanding is not always the case.

The backdrop of Acts 14:8-18 forces us to ask the question, “How could you share the truth about Jesus in a context in which there was no semblance of a Judeo-Christian underpinning?” How would you begin to communicate the truths about God in an environment in which there was minimal familiarity with biblical truth? Thankfully, the miniature sermon delivered by the apostles provides us with some helpful insight into these questions and others like them. In many ways, Acts 14:15-17 provides a pattern for evangelism of people who are largely unfamiliar with the Christian faith.

First, we ought to develop and communicate the idea of monotheism to these people. The predominant practice in Lystra was to worship numerous gods, but the apostles stressed the supremacy of the one true God. Simply stated, the apostles established the legitimacy of monotheism in a pagan, polytheistic environment. As we continue our study of Acts, we will see the many ways in which Paul’s sermon in the Areopagus follows this pattern.<sup>9</sup> Human beings are designed to worship—inescapably so. Knowing this truth, the apostles sought to redirect the erroneous worship of many gods to the one true God.

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<sup>9</sup> See Acts 17:22-31 for reference.

Second, in an environment that is unfamiliar with Christian doctrine and the biblical text, we ought to stress the significance and role of creation. In formal, academic terms, the apostles were establishing the triune God of the Bible as the true, prime reality.<sup>10</sup> All of humanity must answer the question, “What is the uncaused first cause of the universe?” According to the biblical text, God is the supreme designer of all things. He is the originator of life and all things created.

Finally, when we are given the opportunity to share the good news of Christ in an environment with little biblical literacy, we ought to remember that the one, true, creating, and sustaining God has not left us without witness to His presence and truth.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the polytheism that was present in Lystra, the apostles spoke about the mercy and intentionality of the one true God who desires to make Himself known to humanity!

**BIG IDEA: In an environment with minimal awareness of biblical truth, the apostles model teaching the significance of monotheism, creation, and the fact that God has made himself known to us.**

**APPLY:**

- **Question:** Would you agree that a lot of people in your immediate context have some level of familiarity with some biblical passages and conceptions about God? Why or why not?
  
- **Question:** Do you think it would be easier to share your faith with someone who is familiar with biblical truth, but is not a believer, or with someone who is not familiar with the biblical truth at all?
  
- **Question:** Read Acts 14:18. What do you think we should take away from this mini-sermon with that verse in mind?

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<sup>10</sup> The prime reality can be defined as *the thing from which everything else comes*.

<sup>11</sup> See Acts 14:17 for reference.

## **Week 5: Acts 14:8-18**

### **Day 5: From Empty to Full Worship**

#### **READ TOGETHER: Acts 14:8-18**

***Instructions:** We believe that biblical study and spiritual growth are meant to be shared. This Word to Life has that exact focus in mind. For some, Day 5 might be a good opportunity to lead your family in a devotional. For others, this study might serve as a simple reminder to tactfully communicate your faith with those around you. Regardless, Day 5 of each week is designed to help you grow in your faith by sharing it with others.*

#### **EXPLORE TOGETHER:**

We all know what it is like to run out of something. It happens almost every day of our lives. We run out of milk in our milk carton. We run out of gas in our car. We run out snacks in our pantry. We run out of money in our piggy bank. We run out of toilet paper on the roll. You get the idea. Things go from full to empty on a regular basis.

Now imagine that when you run out of something that you decide to keep using it. The milk has run out, but you decide to leave the carton in your refrigerator and keep using it. The gas has run out in your car, but you still get inside of it each morning. We quickly recognize how silly and worthless this would be. Yet our story today in the book of Acts teaches us that this is exactly what humanity does concerning their relationship with God.

The people of Lystra have seen a miracle done by the hand of Paul and they decide they want to worship both Paul and Barnabas. But Paul and Barnabas are men just like them. They are not worthy of worship. Worshipping a created thing (Paul and Barnabas) is empty and worthless. It is like trying to drink milk after the carton is empty. It is pointless and a waste of time.

Paul and Barnabas point the people of Lystra to a better way. Instead of worshipping vain things and false gods they can worship the one true God. They can go from empty and pointless worship to true and full worship. It is only when something is full that it is useful to us. It is only when our milk carton is full that it is useful to us. It is only when our car is full of gas that it is useful to us. The God of the Bible is alive and full of glory. It is neither a waste of time nor a pointless endeavor to worship Him. In fact, to worship God is the highest and most life-giving thing we can do. We are most full of life when we are worshipping the God who is full of glory.

We all tend to worship created things. We must remember this worship is always empty. If we desire a rich life that is full of worship, we must turn our gaze to the living God!

**BIG IDEA: Paul and Barnabas preached the good news that the people of Lystra can go from vain, empty worship to rich, full worship.**

**APPLY TOGETHER:**

- **Question:** What are some created things that you are tempted to idolize/worship in your own heart?
  
- **Question:** What are some practical steps we can take to stop these created things listed above from becoming idols in our hearts?

## Week 6: Acts 14:19-28

### Day 1: Exploring the Biblical Text

READ: Acts 14:19-28

#### EXPLORE:

*Instructions:* Spend time reading Acts 14:19-28 and complete the activities below.

- **Activity:** Summarize the events of Acts 14:19-23. To the best of your ability, summarize the text using cause and effect language.
  - o Examples:
    - Paul spoke the truth about Christ which resulted in him being stoned.
    - The stoning of Paul resulted in the disciples gathering and ministering together.
    - 
    - 
    - 
    -
  
- **Question and Activity:** How did Paul respond following his stoning in Lystra? Spend time listing out the full range of possible responses that Paul could have had to the violence in Lystra.

- **Question:** What example do we learn from the disciples who surrounded Paul after his life-threatening encounter in Lystra?
  
- **Question:** Using Acts 14:22 as our focal text, when have you experienced suffering that resulted in deeper strength and encouragement?
  
- **Question:** Why do you think that God chose to include the details of Acts 14:23 into Luke's recounting of the early church history? Why are the concepts of that verse important to the unfolding story?

## **Week 6: Acts 14:19-28**

### **Day 2: A Miscarriage of Justice and A Resolve for Ministry**

**READ: Acts 14:19-23**

#### **EXPLORE:**

The once positive response of the people in Lystra officially turned sour as the opposing Jewish leaders came from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium to stop the work of Paul and Barnabas. Unlike other sections in Acts in which theological disagreement resulted in relatively peaceful conversations, the Jewish violence was swift and severe. To grasp the gravity of this situation, we need to put the response of Jewish opposition in Acts 14:19 into its appropriate context.

First, we need to realize that bitter Jewish opposition from Pisidian Antioch traveled roughly 100 miles to violently end the teaching of Paul. Although it is unclear why they only harmed Paul and not Barnabas, their persistence and violence are unquestionable. Their anger and cruelty were on display not only in what they did, but in how they chose to do it. Let's take a closer look.

According to the ancient Jewish writing called the Mishnah, there were strict rules and regulations meant to govern any form of deadly punishment. Regarding stoning, there were guidelines meant to protect the act from becoming a brash outburst of anger instead of a calculated process of ancient justice.

If you remember our study of Acts 7 and the stoning of the Christian martyr named Stephen, you will recall that the Jewish leadership first cast him out of the city before they stoned him. According to the ancient practices and law codes, a person was to be killed outside the walls to keep the city "clean." Although Stephen's murder was certainly unjustified, the leaders at least honored that minute aspect of ancient law in their stoning of Stephen. In stark contrast, the Jews of Pisidian Antioch and Iconium swiftly enacted a false form of punishment in direct contradiction to the texts that they were claiming to preserve.

Additionally, stoning was designed and meant to be enacted as an unwelcome, but sometimes necessary punishment in the ancient culture. It was not designed to be entered into lightly or frivolously. For the person who was to be stoned, they were supposed to be given numerous opportunities to repent and ultimately avoid death if possible.<sup>12</sup> It is clear in Acts 14 that no such process was enacted for Paul in Lystra. Ironically, the Jewish opposition were living in contradiction to the very heartbeat of the faith they erroneously claimed to support. With this brief view of context in mind, it is possible to see the heinous nature of Acts 14:19-23.

We should remember and be encouraged, however, that despite this level of corruption, Paul and the disciples continued to minister faithfully in the very places that had caused them great physical harm. Through the severity of their opposition and by the strength of their resilience, may we be encouraged to continue in an unwavering commitment to godly ministry.

**BIG IDEA: The church's unwavering commitment to ministry in view of an incredible miscarriage of justice ought to encourage our faith and resolve for serving the Lord.**

**APPLY:**

- **Question:** How does the added context of ancient Jewish guidelines for stoning help you better understand the actions taken by Jewish opposition in Acts 14?
- **Question:** How would you have responded if you were placed in Paul's position?
- **Question:** What are some lessons we can learn through the examples of both Paul and the other disciples who came alongside him?

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<sup>12</sup> This guideline for stoning was seldom applied throughout Jewish history.



## Week 6: Acts 14:19-28

### Day 3: Growing through Grit

READ: Acts 14:19-28

#### EXPLORE:

Preseason for high school football was one of the most challenging experiences of my life. I (Josh) remember the relentless onslaught of wind sprints, dead lifts, bench presses, pushups, and other exercises that are not natural to common men. There were times I was so fatigued, I literally couldn't lift my arms to wash my body in the shower. Our coaches drilled into us that this punishment, though it seemed excessive, was exactly what we needed if we were going to taste victory on the field. We were growing through the grit.

Jesus tells his disciples that following him would mean that the world will hate and reject them.<sup>13</sup> From what we see in our text today, Paul and Barnabas are great at grit! After nearly being stoned to death, they went back into the city before leaving to their next destination to preach in Derbe. After Derbe, they returned. Persecution did not stop them from finishing the work God had for them. In fact, just as with Jesus, it became a central part of building up the Church.

Don't miss this. Paul and Barnabas could have been totally justified in not returning to Lystra and Iconium. No one would have blamed them for this. However, they had courage in the face of opposition and would not allow persecution to hinder their work. As a result, the church was strengthened in their souls and encouraged to continue in their faith. In other words, because of their grit, the persecution had the exact opposite effect!

Paul says, *"through many trials we must enter the kingdom of God."* It is important to recognize what he is and is not saying. He is not saying that it is the trials that enable them to enter the kingdom of God. This would lead to a works-based faith where one could

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<sup>13</sup> See John 15:18-25 for reference.

conclude that if they suffer enough, they can enter God's Kingdom. Instead, he alludes to the suffering that often accompanies those who, by faith in Christ, are entering the Kingdom of God.

In conclusion, we should recognize that we are not immune to the same opposition and trial as we genuinely live out our faith with courage. James tells us to *"count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."*<sup>14</sup> This means we will grow through the grit as we press on through the hardships of our faith.

**BIG IDEA: Our faith will come with opposition. As you show grit, you will experience growth in your faith and the faith of others.**

**APPLY:**

- **Question:** What opposition do you face because of your genuine faith in Jesus? Explain.
  
- **Question:** What are some ways you can respond to this opposition with grit?

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<sup>14</sup> See James 1:2-4 for reference.

## Week 6: Acts 14:19-28

### Day 4: Behind Open Doors

READ: Acts 14:24-28

#### EXPLORE:

If you have been around the church for a while or if you are fluent in *Christianeze*, you have probably heard some variation of this simple phrase hundreds of times... “God opened a door.” Depending on the way in which the metaphor is implemented, a person using this phrase is attempting to articulate how the will of God has affected a certain decision, relationship, or perceived path forward. Hopefully, they do not view God as a glorified bellhop, but are alluding to the sovereignty and plan of God as they see it affecting their next best step in obedience.

Thankfully, this common metaphor is not just popular, it is deeply biblical! In Acts 14:27, we are told that the early missionaries experienced God opening *a door of faith for the Gentiles*. In this simple phrase, we are reminded that God had enabled life, hope, and faith to take root and grow in new territories behind open doors.

I (Stephen) want to invite you to explore the idea of God opening doors for ministry as we can see it in the Scriptures. We are going to look in three specific areas of the biblical text and write down what we discover.

**Scripture Focus 1: (Jesus)** Remember that the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts were both written by Luke. Acts 14 is not the first time that our author, Luke, has written about how God opens doors in his record of the teachings of Christ. Read the texts below and write down what you notice.

- Luke 12:35-36

- Luke 13:22-30

**Scripture Focus 2: (Acts)** The metaphor of an open door of the gospel to the Gentiles is incredibly significant for the Jerusalem Council in the next chapter of Acts. Read the text below and write down what you notice.

- Acts 15:6-14

**Scripture Focus 3: (Paul)** The concept of a door being opened is repeated numerous times by Paul in his future ministry. Read the texts below and write down what you notice.

- 1 Corinthians 16:5-11
  
- 2 Corinthians 2:12-17

**BIG IDEA: The idea of open doors is not a cheap cliché; it is a deeply biblical invitation to step into God’s work.**

**APPLY:**

- **Activity:** Read Colossians 4:2-4 and ask that God would transform your heart for others to match His own.
  - o *Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak. —Colossians 4:2-4*
  
- **Question:** What doors has the Lord opened for you to serve Him faithfully?

## Week 6: Acts 14:19-28

### Day 5: Persevering through Hard Times

#### READ TOGETHER: Acts 14:19-28

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#### EXPLORE TOGETHER:

What does it feel like to be doing all the right things and then to be punished for doing them? This is what is taking place with the apostle Paul. He has obeyed the Lord and left the church of Antioch to go on this first missionary journey. He has obeyed the Lord and not allowed the people of Lystra to worship him when they wanted to. He has been obedient to the Lord to preach the gospel to them. And what does he get for this obedience? He gets stoned.

Jews from Antioch and Iconium come down to Lystra and persuade them to stone the apostle, Paul. Now stoning in ancient times was no small affair. It wasn't like people were picking up little stones or pebbles that they saw lying around, throwing them at someone with hopes that they might hit them. No, in a stoning, large rocks or boulders were used to heap upon an individual. Bones would be broken, and major injuries would occur immediately. The point of the stoning was to punish and ultimately to kill. This is what Paul had to endure and when they thought he was dead, they dragged him out of the city. We can probably be sure that he had lost consciousness for a time. Why am I telling this story in such a vivid, brutal way? It is because I (Sabino) want us to sense the weightiness of it. Paul is treated violently and experiences major injuries, yet how does he respond?

Paul gets up and goes back into the city. He doesn't sulk and ask, "so why me, God"? He doesn't complain to God or even take a break from his missionary journey. No, the next day he continues and preaches the gospel to Derbe, where many disciples are made. Then he goes back to the city in which he was stoned and strengthens the faith of the disciples that had just been converted under his ministry. We are told that he encouraged them to continue in the faith and that through many trials we must enter the kingdom of God. Paul used his own life as an example of how we must enter the kingdom of God.

At times as believers, we may be punished for doing the right thing. At times as believers, we are going to go through difficult trials and seasons of life. Do not be afraid, do not be dismayed and do not grow weary doing good. For the Lord is with you and through the many trials, we must enter the kingdom of God.

**BIG IDEA: We must persevere through hard times, for it is through many trials that we can enter the kingdom of God.**

**APPLY TOGETHER:**

- **Question:** Why do you think a believer must go through many trials before they enter the kingdom of God?
- **Question:** Paul seemed to not allow anything to deter him from carrying out the call of God upon his life. How can we also persevere through hard times and keep going with the same fervor as the apostle Paul?



- **Activity:** Read Colossians 2:11-12. What do you notice about the circumcision that is mentioned in this passage? How is it connected to baptism?
  - *<sup>11</sup> In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, <sup>12</sup> having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.*
  
- **Question:** Peter asked, *“Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?”<sup>15</sup>* What do you think this question means and why did he ask it to the assembly?

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<sup>15</sup> See Acts 15:10 for reference.



## Week 7: Acts 15:1-21

### Day 2: The New Sign

READ: Acts 15:1-5

#### EXPLORE:

Our text today is central in two different ways. First, it is central, literally, in the book of Acts. We mark the halfway point as we continue to explore the history of the initial expansion of the church. Second, this text is central to a fundamental transition that takes place concerning what it means to “belong to the covenant community” of God’s people.

In the Old Testament, God’s people were marked with a sign of the covenant (or promise). This sign of circumcision was to be received by all the men, their sons, and any foreigners that wanted to belong to the covenant community. If they did not receive it, they would not be permitted to belong.<sup>16</sup> When Jesus arrived, He brought with him the New Covenant in His blood which brings forgiveness of sins.<sup>17</sup> As the church expanded to the Gentiles (non-Jewish people) the big issue arose about what sign now marks God’s people. Is it still circumcision as the Jewish church leaders were proposing? Is it something different? So, early church leaders gathered to discuss this issue further in an event that was known as the Jerusalem Council.

Ultimately, what was concluded was that circumcision, which was part of the Old Testament Law, is no longer necessary because God’s people are no longer bound by the Old Testament Law. Now, under the new covenant through faith in Christ, we have received a new sign of belonging to God’s people through baptism.

Paul writes to the church in Colossae, “*In Him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off*

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<sup>16</sup> Genesis 17:9-14

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 26:28

*the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised with Him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our trespasses."*

The Jerusalem council solidified that the Church, though having Jewish roots, is not bound by Jewish laws. This new people of God, both Jew and Gentile, are now united under Jesus Christ. This is symbolized with the new covenant sign of baptism where a person goes down under the water and out again in the same way that Christ went down into the grave and came out on the third day. God's people are united around the death and resurrection of our Lord which is the means by which we are forgiven of our sins and made right with God. This should instill in us a deep sense of reverence and important for receiving the sign of baptism as Christians. To believe in the gospel and receive the sign of God's covenant people is the highest honor and most precious opportunity. **BIG IDEA: The Jerusalem Council solidified the truth that people are now made right with God through Jesus and are united through baptism which is the sign of the new covenant.**

**APPLY:**

- **Question:** Explain in your words why the Jerusalem Council was so important?
  
- **Question:** Have you been baptized? If not, talk to one of your Pastors about next steps in your faith.

## **Week 7: Acts 15:1-21**

### **Day 3: Yoke...**

**READ: Acts 15:10**

#### **EXPLORE:**

*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?—Acts 15:10*

In our contextual passage of Acts 15:5-11, we find Peter addressing a council which was brought together to discuss whether the Gentile believers in Jesus must become Jewish converts and follow Jewish law in order to be saved.

Some of those who supported necessary circumcision, were new followers of Jesus who still fundamentally identified as Pharisees. They insisted that these newly converted Gentile believers must be circumcised in keeping with the Mosaic Law. They viewed this as necessary to be saved by Christ and belong to his people. We need to notice that these proponents of necessary circumcision did not merely enforce the law of Moses, they sought to add to it. This “yoke” was completely unbearable. The idea of a yoke comes from a wooden crosspiece that was fastened to the necks of animals as they plowed a field. A yoke was heavy, cumbersome, and, as Peter said, “Unbearable.”

Paul and Barnabas sharply disagreed with these pharisaic leaders and took this issue to a collection of the apostles to settle. Since Peter was the first to witness the uncircumcised, unconverted to Judaism, Gentiles become followers of Jesus and subsequently be filled with the Holy Spirit,<sup>18</sup> he was qualified to settle the division by speaking his decision: that Gentiles and Jews alike, are saved through grace, and not by works.

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<sup>18</sup> See Acts 10:44 for an example/comparison between the Gentile and Jewish conversion experiences.

Peter responded to them in this way: *“God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.”*<sup>19</sup> If the Gentiles were to follow the law of circumcision, it would be a sign that they are falling under the law of Moses, and they would be rejecting salvation by grace and erroneously embracing a false salvation by following the law.<sup>20</sup>

Jesus taught his followers, *“They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as their finger. And they do all their deeds to be noticed by other people.”*<sup>21</sup> In contrast, Jesus said, *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*<sup>22</sup>

In our text today and others like it, we are reminded by God through Peter that we are incapable of perfect law-keeping. In view of that, we are invited to draw near to Christ, learn from Him, and experience the fullness of God-honoring freedom through our gracious Savior and King.

**BIG IDEA: Peter cautioned the Jerusalem Council against placing an unnecessary burden on the new followers of Jesus who had come from outside the Jewish faith.**

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<sup>19</sup> See Acts 15:8-9 for reference.

<sup>20</sup> See Galatians 5:1-6 for reference.

<sup>21</sup> See Matthew 23:4-5 for the full reference.

<sup>22</sup> See Matthew 11:28-30 for reference.

## **APPLY:**

- **Question:** Has anyone ever tried to yoke you to the heavy burden of law-based salvation? How would you summarize the clear teaching of the apostles regarding salvation in Acts 15?
  
- **Question:** In what ways do we see some believers today trying to make others follow their laws, to be saved?



## Week 7: Acts 15:1-21

### Day 4: The Family is Growing

**READ: Acts 15:1-21, Amos 9:11-12, and Zechariah 2:11**

#### EXPLORE:

Without having been there ourselves, it can be hard to imagine what exactly the Jerusalem Council was like. We are left to wonder about the passion that filled their fellowship and the intensity that fueled their disagreement. What we do know about, however, is the biblical truth upon which they stood and the conclusions they reached together.

We will focus today on one specific moment in the Jerusalem Council in which James spoke to those who had gathered.<sup>23</sup> The assembly, if only for a moment, fell silent as Barnabas and Paul related the signs and wonders that God had done in and amongst the Gentiles. After they had finished recounting these events, James had his turn.

James reiterated how the work of God and the Spirit of God were both present in the Gentile communities. He mentioned how *God visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for His name*.<sup>24</sup> In the specific wording that James chose to use, he alluded to Zechariah 2:11 and the Old Testament prophecy that people from many nations would be joined together into one unified people under the reign of God. Moreover, God promised through Zechariah to dwell amongst that multi-ethnic collection of people who are unified under the banner of His Lordship. The logic of James is simple. We are seeing this prophesy and others like it fulfilled before our eyes.

James continued this idea by quoting directly from Amos 9:11-12. The significance of this text and its usage in the Jerusalem Council cannot be overstated. As you may know, Amos is one of the minor prophets written to restore God's people to God's law and His

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<sup>23</sup> See Acts 15:12-21 for reference.

<sup>24</sup> See Acts 15:14 for reference.

justice. We need to notice how crucial this quotation is for the arguments favoring Gentile inclusion. James directly quotes Amos to show how the prophet who focused on a recovery of God's justice and law foresaw the inclusion of Gentiles into the new covenant family of God! God was crafting a new people under His name.

James was encouraging Jewish Christians to realize that the promises from the life of David were perfectly fulfilled in the person and ministry of Christ. Considering that truth, the church was beginning to not only experience, but also to embrace the fact that promises of old were now extended to Gentiles as well. James models how life-giving and powerful it can be to be filled with God's Word in everyday life and situations.

**BIG IDEA: James tactfully highlighted how Scripture foretold and now testified to the genuineness of the Gentiles' faith.**

**APPLY:**

- **Question:** James knew the word of God and was able to apply in a pivotal moment. What habits can we develop so that we can do likewise?



## **Week 7: Acts 15:1-21**

### **Day 5: By Grace Alone through Faith Alone**

#### **READ TOGETHER: Acts 15:1-21**

***Instructions:** We believe that Biblical study and spiritual growth are meant to be shared. This Word to Life has that exact focus in mind. For some, Day 5 might be a good opportunity to lead your family in a devotional. For others, this study might serve as a simple reminder to tactfully communicate your faith with those around you. Regardless, Day 5 of each week is designed to help you grow in your faith by sharing it with others.*

#### **EXPLORE TOGETHER:**

When Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch from their first missionary journey they did not have long to rest. Some men came down from Judea and were teaching the church at Antioch that unless you were circumcised you cannot be saved. Now many disciples at Antioch were Gentiles and this was the first time that they had heard any such thing. Paul and Barnabas had also just told them about all the Gentiles that were saved in their missionary journey, and they didn't mention anything about circumcision. We can then understand how disturbing this message would have been to hear for the Gentiles at Antioch.

So, Paul and Barnabas debated with these men from Judea and when they could not come to an agreement, they all decided to go up to Jerusalem to bring this matter before all the apostles. The question was whether the Gentiles should be circumcised and keep the law of Moses. In one sense the question is whether Gentiles need to be Jewish to be saved? This may seem obvious to us but back then there were still many questions being sorted out by the early church.

Peter gets up as one of the first to speak and reminds them of how God chose him to go to the Gentiles and through Him hear the gospel and believe. This is in reference to Cornelius and his household. Peter's point is that the Spirit came upon those Gentiles,

and they were baptized without being circumcised. Paul and Barnabas also shared all their stories preaching the gospel to the Gentiles. The Gentiles believed and were baptized, and they were also not circumcised. In other words, God was making no distinction between the circumcised and the uncircumcised. Both could believe, receive the Spirit, and be baptized into the family of God.

Finally, James the half-brother of Jesus also spoke of how Gentiles being converted was a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. God does not only save those who become Jewish. He saves those who remain Gentiles.

This brings us to a key point in the Bible and in the Reformation of the 1500's. How are we saved? The answer that we see in the Scriptures is by grace alone through faith alone. It is not by circumcision or any other work that we can do. Rather, it is only through faith in the work that Christ that has been done for us. We believe in the person of Christ and His work on our behalf, not through any work that we can do to earn salvation. Peter says it well in verse 11, *"But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."*

**BIG IDEA: We are not saved by circumcision or any other work but only by grace alone through faith alone.**

**APPLY TOGETHER:**

- **Activity:** Take some time and ask a few people (family, friends, co-workers) how they think a person can get to heaven. You will probably be surprised at the various answers. Look to see how many people talk about the works they or someone else should do to get to heaven. Also look to see if anyone answers the question with the work that Christ has done for them.
- **Activity:** Describe (as best you can) what it means to be saved by grace alone through faith alone. Write it down in a short paragraph to help you think it through.



- **Question:** What was the response to the letter in Antioch (vv. 30-35)?
  
- **Bonus Question:** What were the directions given in Acts 15:28-29? Why do you think they were given these instructions specifically?

## **Week 8: Acts 15:22-35**

### **Day 2: More than Mailmen**

**READ: Acts 15:22-29**

#### **EXPLORE:**

As a result of the missionary movement of early Christianity, congregations were established relatively quickly throughout the Roman Empire. Because of the speed with which they were established and the great distances that separated ancient church plants, the apostles were not always able to be present to teach and encourage the communities of faith. One of the strategies employed by the apostles was to send out reliable letter-carriers to communicate a desired message to a church in need. Acts 15:22-29 provides us with the unique opportunity to observe the significance and role of first century letter-carriers within the life of the early church.

Acts 15 is a collection of church leaders who met in Jerusalem and, under the leadership of James, resolved that Gentile Christians were not required to become culturally Jewish before they could faithfully follow Jesus. In short, Gentiles did not need to be circumcised. Notice the time Acts 15:22-29 spends talking about the letter-carriers: Barsabbas and Silas.

As messengers of incredibly significant information, letter-carriers would have been detail-oriented, resilient, and excellent communicators. They would have been extensions of the primary teacher, sent with the authority and influence of the sending apostle. Their role was challenging and risky. Their role in the first century church was to travel great distances, explain the biblical text, and even mediate disputes that had arisen within the community. We can see their resiliency on display in Acts 15:26 when Luke writes, *“Men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

It is important to note that letter-carriers were authorized by the sender to explain the contents of a given letter. The authority of a first century letter-carrier could have even extended into explaining the sender's usage of other Scripture. For example, letter-carriers of many Pauline epistles would have most likely helped Gentile audiences understand various allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures that could have potentially been confusing to them.<sup>25</sup> We could safely say, "Their role involved quite a bit more than your average mailman."

In summary, letter-carriers are an example of one of the many unsung New Testament heroes that served God by caring for His church. At great expense to themselves, they traveled vast distances to join the apostles and elders in leading the church, explaining the Scriptures, and even mediating disputes.

**BIG IDEA: Although they are often underappreciated or forgotten, letter-carriers would have played a crucial role in the development and growth of the early church.**

**APPLY:**

- **Question:** From today's Word to Life study, what were some of the primary roles of the letter-carrier and why were they important?
- **Question:** In your mind, what characteristics would have made a good letter-carrier? When you think of people that embody those characteristics who comes to mind?

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<sup>25</sup> We see examples of Judas and Silas who explained biblical truth over a long period of time as examples of the role of a first century letter-carrier.

## **Week 8: Acts 15:22-35**

### **Day 3: Idol Things**

**READ: Acts 15:22-30**

#### **EXPLORE:**

When I (Lucas) was a boy, we lived down a long country road with deep ditches on either side. On many occasions, my mom would let us drive the car down the road that led home. She would put us on her lap and let us hold the steering wheel while she controlled the brakes and gas. She would monitor the steering wheel closely and provide course correction if we veered towards a ditch.

I think of this analogy often as it applies to many areas of life in Christ. The road of Christian living offers much freedom, but elevating freedom above focus on Christ will put us in a ditch. This is the context of Acts 15 as the church leaders in Jerusalem write to the church in Antioch. The church in Antioch was made up of Jews and Gentiles who came from opposing cultures but sought to maintain fellowship and harmony in their new lives in Christ.

The Jewish believers came from a background that tended to elevate rule-following instead of a personal relationship with God based on grace. To use the driving analogy, the alignment of their "car" would pull towards the ditch of earning righteousness through behavior. The Gentile believers came from a background of idol worship filled with indulgences. Knowing that their new life in Christ was not earned by behavior, there could be a tendency to abuse the grace of God. Their "car" would pull towards the ditch of freedom to live as they pleased.

The church in Jerusalem instructed the Gentiles to avoid practices associated with idol worship. These practices were so ingrained in their culture that they were difficult to avoid. One such example was purchasing meat in the marketplace. The meat of animals sacrificed in idol worship usually made its way to the market. Should a believer

buy such meat? Some thought the practice was acceptable, while others were against it.

Rather than cause division among believers, the church in Jerusalem directed the Gentiles to avoid these things in the name of unity. This concept is now known as the “Weaker Brother Principle”<sup>26</sup>. This mindset seeks fellowship over freedom. Writing to the Corinthian church, Paul explained it this way, *“Everything is permissible,” but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible,” but not everything builds up. No one is to seek his own good, but the good of the other person.*<sup>27</sup>

**BIG IDEA: The freedom that we have in Christ should never be exercised in a way that makes us or others stumble (Galatians 5:13).**

**APPLY:**

- **Question:** Are there idol things in your life that are permissible but not beneficial? If you’re unsure, prayerfully consider these two questions: Does this activity stir my affections for God and bring Him glory? Does this activity help other believers draw closer to God?
- **Question:** On the road of Christian living, does your car more often veer towards the ditch of earned righteousness or the ditch of unproductive freedom?

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<sup>26</sup> See 1 Corinthians 8:10-13 & Romans 14 for further study on this topic.

<sup>27</sup> See 1 Corinthians 10:23-24 for reference.



## **Week 8: Acts 15:22-35**

### **Day 4: Church Unity and Personal Rights**

**READ: Acts 15:22-35**

#### **EXPLORE:**

As the council of Jerusalem concludes they still have one final step to take. They must draft a letter of explanation to deliver to the church in Antioch. Upon seeing the message sent, indeed, we see that they did not require the Gentiles to receive circumcision as a sign of the covenant. However, you might have been surprised to see that they still require some other elements of the Old Testament law to still be followed. What are we to make of this?

First, unlike circumcision, which was a sign necessary to belong to the community, the regulations set in place are not given as requirements for belonging to the church. If it were, this would run contrary to the message throughout the rest of the New Testament that declares salvation comes by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, and not of works. Those who have faith then demonstrate this through baptism as the sign of this faith.

Second, the church in Antioch was filled with a large congregation of both Jew and Gentile believers. We must remember that this means much more than just having different religions. Each group comes from vastly different lifestyles and practices that are rooted deeply into their own cultures. It is one thing to say they are all united under Christ, it is another thing entirely to merge these people into sharing life in community.

Therefore, we see these regulations as an act of wisdom on behalf of the church leaders for the sake of the unity in Antioch. We ought to notice the continued encouragement to refrain from sexual immorality. Not only is this a part of the moral law of God, but it was also an indictment against the high levels of sexual immorality that would have prevalent and normative for most Gentile communities. The goal was that the church would find common ground as they

sought to live united together as a community that was all but outcast from society.

We should spend time pondering how this would apply to our churches today. The unity of the church is often under assault as Christians white knuckle “rights” they have without consideration to others around them. Before Jesus is crucified, He pleads to the Father that the church would be united and protected from the evil one.<sup>28</sup> Paul encourages the Christians to honor others above self,<sup>29</sup> and in the case of someone having a strong conviction on something God would permit, Christians should concede to the conviction instead of the rights.<sup>30</sup> This is an element of what it means to die to self within the church community.

**BIG IDEA: God cares more about the unity of the church than the individual rights of believers.**

**APPLY:**

- **Question:** Where have you seen disunity in the church when it was avoidable?
  
- **Question:** What is something you could let go of for the sake of unity in the church?

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<sup>28</sup> See John 17 for reference.

<sup>29</sup> See Philippians 2:3 for reference.

<sup>30</sup> See Romans 14 for reference.

## **Week 8: Acts 15:22-35**

### **Day 5: The Messengers**

#### **READ TOGETHER: Acts 15:22-35**

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#### **EXPLORE TOGETHER:**

Have you ever been sent somewhere with an important message? Depending on the message you share there can be a range of emotions. Some messages may make us shy and timid while other messages may make us bold and happy to deliver. Barsabbas and Silas in our story would be bold and happy to share their message. They knew it would be received with thankfulness and joy.

They also get to travel with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch to share with the Gentile believers the good news. We can be sure that Paul and Barnabas made great travel companions. Not only were they wise men of God but they also had incredible stories and life experiences. I think we would all thoroughly enjoy getting the opportunity to be traveling companions with Paul and Barnabas.

So off they went to share the good news. The good news to share is that the Gentile believers do not need to be circumcised to be saved. The Antioch believers were worried that this was so because some Jews from Judea came and told them they needed to be circumcised and follow the law of Moses to be saved.

Thankfully, the apostles and elders in Jerusalem cleared this all up and sent Barsabbas and Silas to deliver the good news. When they delivered the letter and gave testimony to what had been said in

Jerusalem, the believers in Antioch rejoiced. Barsabbas and Silas also decided to stay for a while and strengthen the brothers in Antioch. We are told that Barsabbas and Silas were not only messengers but also prophets. This means that they were able to teach the Word of God.

Barsabbas and Silas were received well by the church in Antioch, not only because they delivered the letter but also because they taught them the Word of God. After spending some time there in Antioch, they were sent back off to Jerusalem in peace. Their mission and message were complete. They had gone above and beyond their orders. Proverbs 13:17 says, *“A wicked messenger falls into trouble, but a faithful envoy brings healing.”* Barsabbas and Silas were faithful messengers who brought healing.

**BIG IDEA: Barsabbas and Silas were sent to Antioch to deliver the good news that Gentiles do not need to be circumcised to be saved.**

**APPLY TOGETHER:**

- **Activity:** Try to name at least 5 characteristics that a person would need to be a “good” messenger.
  
- **Activity:** Describe a time that you had a difficult message to share and the emotions that you felt with it. Describe a time you had a good message to share and the emotions you had with it.







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