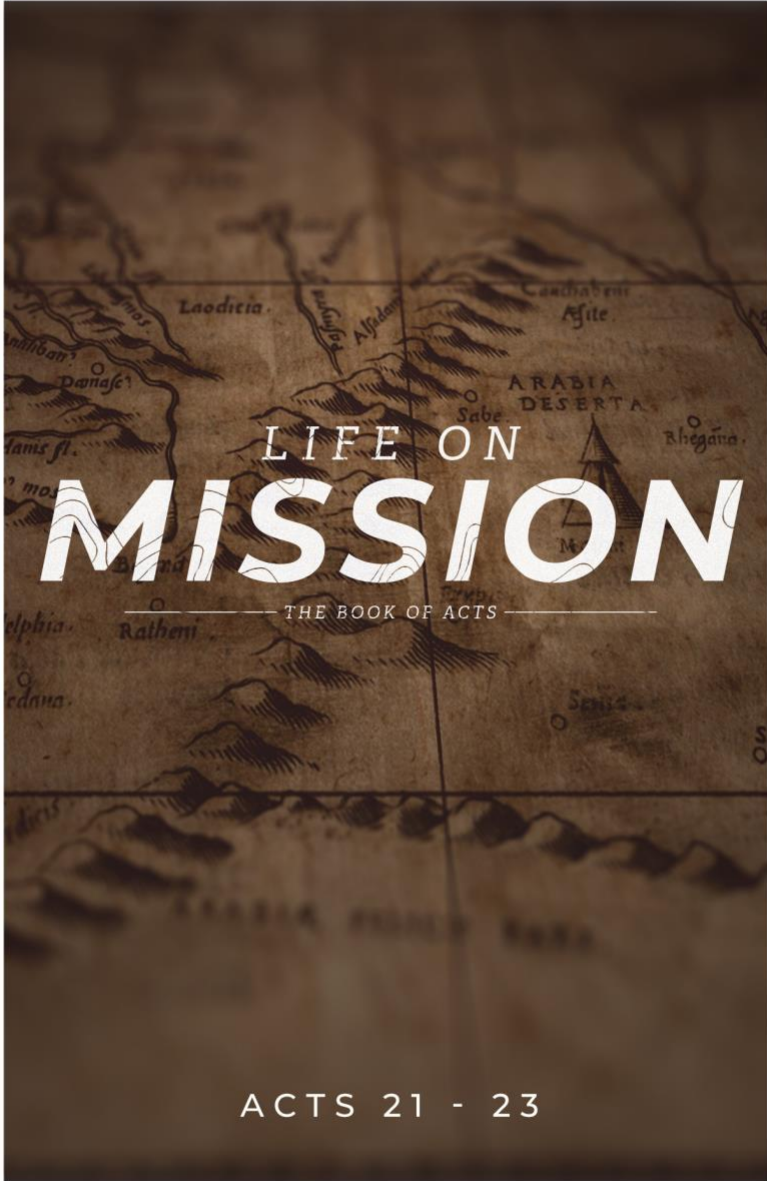




WORD TO LIFE

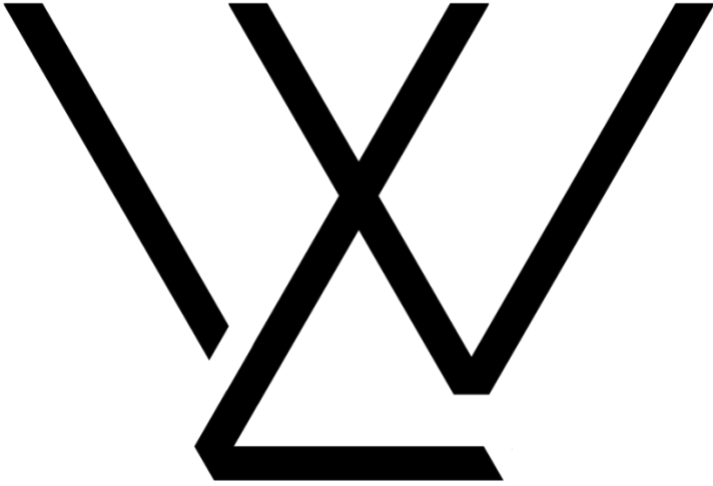
WEEKS 1 - 5



LIFE ON MISSION

— THE BOOK OF ACTS —

ACTS 21 - 23



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!

Contributors

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Week 1: Acts 21:1-16

Day 1: Exploring the Biblical Text

READ: Acts 21:1-16

EXPLORE:

Instructions: Spend time reading Acts 21:1-16 and complete the activities below.

- **Activity:** Paul was given advice in Tyre and in Caesarea. In your own words, summarize not only the advice he received, but the response that transpired afterward.

- **Questions:** Have you ever had an experience in which you and another person disagreed, but both parties were seeking to be godly in their approach and actions?
 - If so, what was the disagreement, how was it resolved, and what did you learn in the process?

- **Question:** Read Acts 21:13-14. What do you notice about how Paul responded to the word of caution which was given in Caesarea?

- **Question and Activity:** How would you advise someone who was seeking to follow God's will for their life, but it took them into a dangerous situation? Explain your answer using Scripture.

Week 1: Acts 21:1-16

Day 2: A Dangerous Calling

READ: Acts 21:1-12 and Romans 15:30-33

EXPLORE:

This week's Scripture takes us into the wonderfully complicated space of biblical decision-making. On more than one occasion, Paul and his traveling companions had been encouraged by others to not travel toward Jerusalem because of its apparent danger. Despite this counsel, the apostle remained resolute and continued onward. This biblical text and others like it beg the question, "What should we do when we receive Holy Spirit empowered guidance that seems to contradict what we feel the Lord has called us to do?"

When Paul arrived in Tyre, the Greek verbiage¹ would seem to indicate that neither the apostle nor his companions knew the Christian community there. The leaders in the Tyrian church urged Paul not to travel to Jerusalem because they had anticipated the danger ahead.² In much the same way, the prophet named Agabus warned against Paul's imminent trip to Jerusalem. On both occasions, however, Paul decided to continue onward. In fact, the Spirit-empowered warnings of imprisonment did not dissuade Paul, they prepared him well for what he was about to face.³

We need to notice the tension that is inherent in this moment. The Holy Spirit seemed to simultaneously lead Paul toward Jerusalem and direct others to warn against it. The nuanced, but powerful truth that is evident in this text is extremely important! Namely, the Holy Spirit does not give contradictory messages, even if it seems so. In both Tyre and Caesarea, the Holy Spirit did not give contradictory

¹ The Greek verb *aneurisko* indicates that Paul and his companions had to seek them out because they did not know the Christian community there.

² See Acts 21:4 for reference.

³ See Acts 20:23 and 21:4, 11-12 for reference to warnings about Jerusalem.

messages, there were contradictory applications of the same, unwavering message. Paul did not disagree with the fact that he would experience danger and disappointment in Jerusalem. However, Paul did not allow the danger to deter what God had called him to do.

Knowing that genuine leading from the Holy Spirit is not contradictory, Paul was able to embrace the incoming danger without disobeying the Lord's call on his life. He considered their counsel with humility and ultimately disagreed not with their message, but with its application. For Paul and many godly ministers who would follow, certain danger was not allowed to fuel disobedience. In this text we are reminded that the Holy Spirit provided not only a warning and commissioning, but also the strength to endure all that would come to pass. We ought to notice in Paul's discernment that the place of costly obedience is simultaneously excruciating and good.

BIG IDEA: The Holy Spirit did not give contradictory messages, but the believers had contradictory applications. Paul did not allow the inevitable danger to deter his obedience.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Paul's calling from God involved earthly risk and inevitable danger. How should aspects of danger factor into the decision-making process of the believer?

- **Questions:** Have you ever encountered a situation like Paul's in which you were counseled against something into which you were called by God?
 - a. Have you ever encountered a situation in which you rightly submitted your plans because of someone else's wise counsel?

Week 1: Acts 21:1-16

Day 3: Letting Go in a Godly Way

READ: Acts 21:1-6

EXPLORE:

The scene that unfolds on the shores of Tyre is perhaps one of the most thorough and illustrative exits recorded in all of Luke's recording of church history. Acts 21:5-6, when read rightly, should leave us with a deep awareness of the emotion and spiritual depth that filled the Tyrian believers as Paul and his companions pushed off from the shore toward inevitable pain and imprisonment.

Luke, inspired by the Holy Spirit, records the moment, writing, *"When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home."*⁴

We need to remember that the Tyrian church had just urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem and yet, as he was departing their city, they all collectively gathered to pray together. There is nothing insignificant about their unity, this exit, and the powerful example set on the shores of Tyre. As we will discover today, this text models what it looks like to "let go" in a godly way.

Unlike the deep and prayer-filled fellowship in Tyre, impassioned disagreements about the Holy Spirit's leading in the church do not often result in deeper unity and communion with one another. Perhaps Paul's exit from Tyre is so detailed and compelling precisely because it was so rare.

⁴ See Acts 21:5-6 for reference.

Everyone came. Everyone knelt. Everyone prayed. Their response to Paul's continual dangerous commitment to Jerusalem was not to divide in disappointment, but to unify in their reliance upon God and His provision. Paul had not taken their advice and yet they covered his future ministry in prayer and compassion. The Tyrian believers give us a window into what it looks like to concede without becoming bitter. They "let go" in a godly way. They did not merely "give up" they "let go" and placed the churches' ministry rightfully in the hands of God!

When I (Stephen) read biblical texts like this, I wonder about all the ways in which I have failed to "let go" in a godly way. How many opportunities have I missed to care and commission like the Tyrian church? Paul's exit from Tyre ought to challenge each and every one of us to consider how we might allow the will of God and our love for one another to eclipse our own selfishness and pride. May our awareness of God's mission and our communal calling bring us together, pull us to our knees, and prayerfully awaken our hearts to His will!

BIG IDEA: The Tyrian Christians model what it looks like to "let go" in a godly way.

APPLY:

- **Questions:** What do you think it would have been like to be with Paul, his companions, and the Tyrian church upon their departure?
 - a. In what way(s) should their example shape our own process of "letting go?"

- **Question:** In your opinion, what factors enabled the Tyrian believers to join Paul and his companions in such a unifying way?

Week 1: Acts 21:1-16

Day 4: No Accidental Details: Philip's Daughters

READ: Acts 21:8-16

EXPLORE:

Have you ever read the biblical text and been surprised by a seemingly inconsequential piece of information that was included in a story? If you have had this experience, you are not alone. At first glance, some details in biblical stories can appear random or seemingly irrelevant to the primary scene that is unfolding in Scripture. However, as we have continually uncovered in our Word to Life studies, no detail in the biblical text is accidental or inconsequential. All of it, by God's grace, is significant. This fundamental truth of biblical interpretation is evident in the mentioning of Philip's daughters in Acts 21:9. Let's take a closer look to learn more!

According to earlier sections of Acts, Paul was already familiar with the Caesarean church upon his arrival.⁵ It is possible that he had even encountered Philip, the evangelist, who settled there to minister in his earlier missions.⁶ Rather surprisingly, however, Acts 21:9 moves on from Philip to his four unmarried daughters who function as prophetesses in Caesarea. As far as we can tell, the daughters do not play a direct role in Paul's stay in Caesarea and their mention in the story seems rather unexpected. However, their inclusion in the story is important for a few different reasons.

First, it is significant that Philip's daughters are mentioned because it bears witness to the crucial role of women in the development of the early church. On several occasions in the book of Acts, we have been reminded of the crucial role that women continually played in the community of faith and its mission in the world. This text testifies to

⁵ See Acts 9:30 and 18:22 for reference.

⁶ See Acts 8:40 for reference.

the apparent gifting and influence which was afforded to women in the earliest days of the church.

Second, the gift of prophesy which was evident in Philip's daughters was a fulfillment of what had been promised because of the Holy Spirit's presence in the church. Similar to the prophetess Anna who foretold the redemptive role of Jesus in Luke 2:36-38, the ministry of Philip's daughters was a living embodiment of the powerful hope which was being poured out through the work of the Holy Spirit.⁷

Finally, according to later church tradition, Philip and his daughters were incredibly important witnesses and preservers of the tradition of the apostles to the next phase in church history and development. In a sense, Philip and his daughters help to maintain the connection from the apostolic age of the church leaders onward. Their mention in the text may be brief, but it is profound in several ways.

BIG IDEA: Philip's daughters are purposefully mentioned to remind us of the crucial role of women in the early church and as a reminder God's promises being fulfilled.

APPLY:

- **Question:** It can be difficult to balance between keeping the main thing central and not missing the seemingly trivial details in the biblical text. How have you learned to balance between the two extremes in your study of Scripture?
- **Activity:** Philip's daughters have often been cited as evidence for women functioning in pastoral roles in the early church. In your opinion, do you think this is good evidence for women functioning in pastor/elder roles? Defend your opinion biblically.

⁷ See Acts 2:17 for reference the promise-fulfillment language.

Week 1: Acts 21:1-16

Day 5: A Spirit-Filled Trip

READ TOGETHER: Acts 20:22, 2 Timothy 3:12

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EXPLORE TOGETHER:

Have you ever had one of those Spirit-filled experiences? In Christian circles we call them “mountain top experiences.” Those times where there is an overwhelming sense of the presence of God and fullness of joy when God is near, and we know He is ministering to us. This is what we probably think of when we read the title, “Spirit-Filled Trip.” However, Paul’s Spirit-filled trip was not one of good news or blissful delight. Paul’s Spirit-filled trip was one that predicted imprisonment and harm.

The apostle Paul and his traveling companions were on their way to Jerusalem and the Spirit was giving Paul a message along the way. In Tyre, the message from the disciples was to not go on to Jerusalem. It seems that through the Spirit they learned that Paul would be persecuted in Jerusalem. Therefore, they did not want him to go because they loved him and wanted him to be safe. This did not deter Paul from his travels though. While he was in Caesarea, the prophet Agabus came down from Judea, full of the Spirit and prophesied that Paul’s hands and feet would be bound in Jerusalem. Once again, the disciples urged him not to go, but Paul was determined to go being constrained by the Spirit.⁸ This journey for

⁸ See Acts 20:22 for reference.

the apostle Paul was Spirit-filled but the message was one of persecution.

Did you know that we have also received Spirit-filled messages like the apostle Paul. For example, Paul tells us in 2 Timothy that all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.⁹ A Spirit-filled message may not always predict future comfort. But God is with us, and even though painful times may come, we can be certain that God will ultimately keep us safe. We are always safe in the arms of Christ. No one can dislodge us from His arms.

For the apostle Paul, death was not his biggest threat or greatest enemy. His biggest threat was not being in the will of God. The same is true for us. As we travel this trial-filled life may we keep our eyes on Jesus knowing that He will bring us safely to our eternal home.

BIG IDEA: The Spirit of God does not always predict health and wealth in this life.

APPLY TOGETHER:

- **Question:** How do you think Paul still resolved to go to Jerusalem after he learned persecution awaited him?

- **Question:** How can we make the will of God more important than our comfort?

⁹ See 2 Timothy 3:12 for reference.

Week 2: Acts 21:17-36

Day 1: Exploring the Biblical Text

READ: Acts 21:17-36

EXPLORE:

Instructions: Spend time reading Acts 21:17-36 and complete the activities below.

- **Question:** What do you notice about the Jewish leaders' response to the news about Gentile conversions to the Christian faith in vv. 20-21?

- **Activity:** In your own words, summarize the problem and the proposed solution that occurred in Acts 21:21-24.

- **Question:** Paul was accused of teaching against the people, the law, and the temple. Why was that accusation so serious? Who else in the Scripture was accused of such things and what were the repercussions?

- **Question:** Paul certainly encountered a lot of misunderstandings and hostility. What do his actions and ultimately the example of Christ teach us about handling adversity and misconceptions?

Week 2: Acts 21:17-36

Day 2: Cheers and Concerns: The Complexity of Success

READ: Acts 15:1-11 and 21:17-26

EXPLORE:

Maybe you have noticed this to be true, but success in life is often met with a mixed response. As we will see in today's biblical text, ministry success may be met with cheers and concerns at the exact same time. In view of the Jewish leaders' response to Paul's missionary success with the Gentiles, we are going to study Acts 21:17-26 and ask the question, "How can we handle the complexity of success in a godly way?"

The conversion of Gentiles to faith in Jesus was always a complicated subject for Jewish followers of their Messiah. Early church history tells the story of how the community of faith tried to understand laws and customs from the Old Testament in the establishment of the new covenant under Christ.¹⁰ When Paul relayed the success of his first missionary journey with the Gentiles, he was met with silence.¹¹ In Acts 21, however, the ministry success was met with better, but still mixed reviews. He was met with cheers and concerns.

The first and primary response of Jewish leadership was elation and the worship of God.¹² The reaction of his fellow Jewish believers was notably better than the silence he had experienced after previous missionary journeys. After an initially positive reaction, the response quickly moved to that of concern. Much like Paul's ministry to the Gentiles, the leadership had experienced growth in their corresponding mission to their Jewish brothers and sisters. These

¹⁰ The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 concluded that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised to be Christians.

¹¹ See Acts 15:12 for reference.

¹² See Acts 21:20 for reference.

Jewish converts were zealous for the law.¹³ As you might imagine, Jewish converts, who were zealous for the law, and Gentile converts, who had a drastically different cultural background, had quite the challenge integrating together.

To maintain unity and clarify misconceptions without having to sideline his powerful ministry with the Gentiles, the Jewish leaders counseled Paul to undergo a Jewish purification ritual. The Jewish concern about Paul's ministry progress was largely unwarranted,¹⁴ but out of a desire for continual comradery and success, Paul chose to submit to their request and undergo purity rites. In this act, Paul set a good example of how to handle the complexity of success, both the cheers and the concerns. Cheers should not make us conceited, and concerns should not leave us defeated. Like Paul, we ought to handle the complex responses to success in ways that proclaim the supremacy of Christ and the surpassing significance of His gospel in the world.

BIG IDEA: Responses to success are often diverse and complex. Our responsibility as followers of Christ is to handle the cheers and the concerns in a godly way.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Are you more likely to become inflated with self-importance because of cheers or are you more likely to be defeated in view of people's concerns?

- **Question:** If you were in Paul's position and you received "cheers" and "concerns" how would you have responded? What do you think enabled him to respond the way he did?

¹³ Historian Josephus described this time around AD 56-57 as a time of intense Jewish nationalism and zeal. Oppression led to widespread anti-Gentile sentiments.

¹⁴ The unsubstantiated rumor was the Paul told Jewish believers that they did not need to be circumcised.

Week 2: Acts 21:17-36

Day 3: Christianity and the Old Testament Law

READ: Acts 21:20-21 and Matthew 5:17-18

EXPLORE:

Today we are taking a closer look at the sticky situation in which Paul found himself in his visit to Jerusalem. Acts 21:20-21 records that Jewish converts to the lordship of Jesus had been told that Paul was teaching everyone to forsake Moses.¹⁵ Not only was this accusation incredibly serious, but it was unsubstantiated. The claims against Paul functioned from entirely a faulty understanding of what the apostle taught about Moses and the Law.

There is no question that Paul argued strongly against considering the law, customs, and circumcision as a means by which someone is saved.¹⁶ He clearly taught that neither Jews or Gentiles could earn God's favor and salvation by keeping a set of behaviors or practices. On the other hand, it needs to be understood that there is no evidence for Paul encouraging Jews to abandon circumcision as a culturally significant practice. In fact, there is considerable evidence that Paul encouraged circumcision as a general and even helpful practice.¹⁷ In the same way that a Gentile did not need to become a Jew to follow Jesus, a Jew would not need to lose their Jewishness to embrace Christ.¹⁸

The misconceptions and rumors that were spreading about Paul were unsupported and they represented a misunderstanding of Jesus' teaching on the law at a heart level. Allow me (Stephen) to briefly explain.

¹⁵ See Acts 21:20-21 for reference.

¹⁶ See Galatians 5-6 for one example of his clear teaching against a salvific understanding of the Law.

¹⁷ See Acts 16:3 and I Corinthians 7:18 for reference.

¹⁸ See I Corinthians 9:19 for reference.

Unlike humanity, Jesus kept the law perfectly. Without error, Jesus embodied the heart of the law and sinlessly reflected the grace and truth of God in the world. Christ was given as the path of righteousness. The goal of the law was designed to lead humanity towards Jesus. As such, the entirety of Scripture witnesses to Christ.¹⁹ This truth is ratified in what Jesus Himself said about the law. He did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it and all that it required.²⁰ To put it plainly, Jesus did not arrive to demolish the system that came before; He came to redeem it.

It was in view of these truths that Paul was able to respect the role of the law without prescribing the letter of the law to the new community of faith that was being formed under the lordship of Christ.

BIG IDEA: Christ came not to abolish the law, but to serve as its fulfillment. Considering this truth, Paul was able to adjust for his Jewish brothers without burdening the Gentile converts.

APPLY:

- **Question:** What do you think are some common misconceptions about the Old Testament Law and its relationship to the person and work of Christ?

- **Question:** In your opinion, why do you think Paul chose to undergo the purification ritual instead of fighting to clarify a widely held misunderstanding of his teaching?

¹⁹ See John 5:39, 46, Luke 24:27, and 2 Corinthians 1:20 for reference.

²⁰ See Matthew 5:17-18 for reference.

Week 2: Acts 21:17-36

Day 4: Did Paul violate the temple... and why it matters?

READ: Acts 21:27-36, Deuteronomy 23:1, Isaiah 56:3-5, and Acts 8:26-39

EXPLORE:

Have you ever bent over backwards to please someone only to find out they were still displeased? I (Stephen) imagine this must have been how Paul felt after he almost completed a seven-day purification process only to have a mob seize him in anger. This should not come as a surprise, but the allegation against Paul was unfounded.

This time, those who opposed Paul assumed that he had not only defamed the law and Moses, but also the temple.²¹ It is hard to imagine a more serious accusation. Specifically, they accused Paul of desecrating the temple by bringing an Ephesian Gentile into the very Jewish portion of the sacred temple.²²

Historically, the temple was designed with several courts for different types of people. A large outer court for the Gentiles was open virtually to all. A stone barrier separated the court of the Gentiles and first courtyard of the temple proper. Inside the temple proper, hierarchical courts were successively designed for women, men, priests and ultimately an inner section that was made available only to the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. The Old Testament was abundantly clear that the temple was meant to reflect the holiness and majesty of God. Blamelessness and purity were required to be in the temple. As a result, a Greek's presence in the Jewish sections of the temple proper would have been seen as deeply offensive and defiling.

²¹ Jesus, Stephen, and now Paul were all accused of the same wrongdoing.

²² See Acts 21:29 for reference.

However, in the person and ministry of Jesus, we are kept from a sense of despair and hopelessness that we could ever survive in the presence of God and His holiness. At all times and in all contexts, God is infinitely holy and righteous. By the grace of God and through faith in the saving work of Christ, the redeemed do not merely survive God's presence, but experience it indwelling them through the power of the Holy Spirit. Although Paul was innocent of violating Jewish custom, the reality was that God, in Christ, had fundamentally altered the temple understanding and its restrictions. Allow me to briefly demonstrate this through one example in three biblical texts.

According to Deuteronomy 23:1, eunuchs were not allowed to enter the temple. When Isaiah spoke of eunuchs and temple regulations, however, he prophesied about how God was grafting in those who were previously outside.²³ Finally, in Acts 8:26-39 we are given a powerful example of how a Jesus follower, a eunuch who would have been previously excluded in the temple, was included in the people of faith by grace alone through faith alone. The progression of eunuchs and their invitation to experience God's presence is a powerful reminder of how Jesus' work is radically inclusive toward those who would place their faith in Him.

BIG IDEA: The justifying work of Christ on the cross is the saving work that makes it possible for us to dwell in and belong to the presence of God.

APPLY:

- **Question:** The temple was designed to serve as a reminder of the intense holiness that accompanied God's presence. Do you think we have a right understanding of God's holiness? Why or why not?

²³ See Isaiah 56:3-5 for reference.

Week 2: Acts 21:17-36

Day 5: Walk a Mile in My Shoes

READ TOGETHER: Luke 23:18-25 and Galatians 2:20

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EXPLORE TOGETHER:

We have all heard the expression, “walk a mile in my shoes”. This expression challenges us to think about what it would be like to experience the difficulties of someone else’s life. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to “walk a mile” in His shoes. We are called to follow Him and experience what He experienced. There is probably no other disciple who did this more closely and vividly than the apostle Paul.

Paul finally arrived in Jerusalem, and he was immediately misunderstood by his Jewish brethren. There was a rumor going around that on his missionary journeys, Paul taught the Jews to forsake Moses. This rumor of course was false, but it had stuck. The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem wanted some reassurances from the apostle Paul concerning this rumor. So, Paul undertook a vow with four other men in the temple to prove that his teachings were in accordance with the law. In this way Paul “walked a mile” in Jesus’ shoes. Jesus was often misunderstood by the Jewish people. They thought that He also rejected the teachings of Moses.

Before Paul’s vow was completed, the Jews stirred up the crowds by claiming that Paul taught against the people, the law, and the temple. They also falsely claimed that Paul had brought a Gentile into the temple, which was forbidden in the law. All this commotion

led to the beating of Paul up until the point of him needing to be rescued by the Roman authorities. He was bound in two chains just as Agabus had prophesied. Once again, in this way, Paul “walked a mile” in Jesus’ shoes. The Jews also sought to kill Jesus and He was also delivered into the hands of the Roman authorities. While in Roman custody, the Jews cried out, “Away with him!” We see the same phrase uttered here with the apostle Paul.

Paul walked a similar path as our Lord Jesus Christ. We may never go to Jerusalem or have a mob attack us, but all disciples must “walk a mile” in Jesus’ shoes. In fact, the Scriptures tell us that the life of Christ is in us.²⁴ As we simply walk by faith, we will experience some of the same trials Jesus did, and God will safely guide us through.

BIG IDEA: Paul followed the footsteps of Christ in his ministry under misconceptions.

APPLY TOGETHER:

- **Activity:** Describe some ways you have experienced the same trials that Jesus did.

- **Question:** Why should walking a mile in Jesus’ shoes give us hope and joy rather than fear?

²⁴ See Galatians 2:20 for reference.

Week 3: Acts 21:37-22:21

Day 1: Exploring the Biblical Text

READ: Acts 21:37-22:21

EXPLORE:

Instructions: Spend time reading Acts 21:37-22:21 and complete the activities below.

- **Question:** When Paul spoke to the tribune in the barracks, he used aspects of his life and personal story that existed before he was a Christ follower. How have you seen God redeem and use your story from before you were actively following Jesus?

- **Question:** Paul certainly communicated amidst a very confusing environment. Have you ever tried to communicate the gospel amidst confusion and misunderstanding?
 - If so, what was the situation and how did it go?

 - If no, why do you think you've never had that experience?

- **Question:** Paul could have made a logical line of argument against their allegations, but he did not. Why do you think Paul chose to share his testimony as a defense against their accusations?

- **Activity:** Spend time in the space below working to craft your own personal testimony. (*We will spend Day 3 this week unpacking what a testimony is and why we don't often share one.*)

Week 3: Acts 21:37-22:21

Day 2: Communicating out of Confusion

READ: Acts 21:37-22:2

EXPLORE:

Today we are focusing on the chaos that was swirling around Paul in his interaction with the tribune in front of the barracks. It is safe to say that the apostle Paul being labeled the Egyptian leader of assassins immediately following an interaction with an angry mob is a perfect storm of confusion and intensity. Yet, as we will study today, Paul stepped into the moment of confusion with clear communication.

At first glance and without any historical context, the conversation between the tribune and Paul seems entirely out of the blue. We are left with several important questions. Why was the tribune surprised Paul knew Greek? Why was Paul assumed to be an Egyptian revolutionary with assassins? Who were the Assassins anyway and why were they in the wilderness? If you are confused by these questions and more, you would fit right in with this story's setting.

According to ancient Jewish history recorded by Josephus, there was an Egyptian false prophet who stirred up thousands and began an uprising. This collection of disgruntled people was led into the wilderness and promised the overthrow of Rome and the inauguration of new freedom. Unfortunately for the revolutionaries, history records that those assassins failed and were quickly conquered by the Roman leadership. In Paul's conversation with the tribune in front of the barracks, he was assumed to be the leader of that revolutionary force. They must have assumed, because of the mob's anger, that Paul was mixed up in the leadership of that organization. The Greek term used to describe the assassins was the *sicarion*. *Sicarion* could be translated literally as dagger men. The *sicarion* were zealous Jewish freedom fighters who would sneak into a crowd and secretly stab pro-Rome individuals only to sneak away

unnoticed. Paul was assumed to be a primary instigator of this type of violence who was now mixed up in the anger and violence of the moment in front of the barracks. Even then, Paul was given a chance to slice through the chaos with a word of clarity.²⁵

When Paul opened his mouth before the tribune, he did not shy away from the moment, but rather communicated out of the confusion. Paul corrected misidentifications, clarified terminology, and established his goal for communication. He had been misidentified, so he corrected. They mislabeled his leadership, so he clarified. Finally, they misunderstood his purpose, so he stated his goal and made his defense. In a moment of incredible intensity and confusion, Paul demonstrated a God-honoring heart to notice confusion and communicate clearly amidst it. We, as the Church, would do well to learn from the Christ-like example of Paul in not only recognizing confusion, but working hard to bring clarity whenever and wherever it may be possible.

BIG IDEA: Paul demonstrates the deeply Christian calling to clearly communicate amidst confusion and chaos.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Clear communication in a setting of confusion can be a challenge on its own. Moreover, the challenge is amplified when we don't recognize confusion in the first place. How have you learned not only to recognize confusion, but also to communicate clearly amidst it?
- **Optional Activity:** Read Acts 22:1-21. What else do you notice about Paul's communication style and how does it mirror the example first set in the life of Christ?

²⁵ See the New American Commentary's discussion of this text for reference.

Week 3: Acts 21:37-22:21

Day 3: What is a testimony and why don't we share?

READ: Acts 22:1-21

EXPLORE:

Acts 22 is not the first and it certainly will not be the last time that the notorious details of Paul's testimony were shared for the edification of the early church. Including the good, the bad, and the ugly, Paul freely shared how his life had been rescued by the redemptive work of God's grace through Christ for the glory of God. In his speech before the "brothers and fathers" we are given a chance to reflect on what a testimony truly is, what it is not, and how we might effectively do the same.

Like Paul, your testimony ought to include you, but it should not only be about you. First and foremost, a godly testimony is about the glorious grace of God and how it worked to rescue you from sin and brokenness and transform your life and those around you through the power of the Holy Spirit. A biblical testimony is not the unfiltered sharing that accompanies therapy or counseling, though that transparency certainly has its place. Rather, a testimony is an overt opportunity to clearly explain how God, through His grace, became your Lord and Savior. Many of us in the church are aware of what a testimony is but have remained unfortunately ignorant to the obstacles in the way of sharing a godly story.

One obstacle to a person's desire and ability to share their testimony is a small understanding of the gospel. If a person has a minimal comprehension of the grace of God that is made available through faith in Christ, a great hesitancy to share their testimony will arise. A second obstacle of Gospel communication is a sense of fear, accompanied by a lack of preparation. Simply stated, if you never prepare to share your testimony, fear can easily keep you from boldly proclaiming what God has done. If something is important in life, we ought to prepare for it! Preparing a testimony does not rule

out flexibility or freedom in the moment. Rather, it allows you to always be ready to explain your hope in Christ with gentleness and respect.²⁶ It helps you to not forget things, not get side-tracked, and not be nervous – to focus on how God, in His grace, has changed your life through a relationship with Him. A good, godly testimony will trump a bad argument. Plan and communicate accordingly.

A third obstacle that keeps people from sharing their testimony is a sense of apathy and an uncompassionate heart. Brothers and sisters, we ought to pray that God would transform our eyes to see, hearts to care, and lives to love as Christ modeled first. A godly desire to share a testimony will always be accompanied by compassion and intentionality. A final obstacle to sharing your testimony is having unrealistic expectations. It can be demoralizing if you always expect hostility or always expect immediate receptivity to the gospel. Our motivation for sharing a testimony is the love of God, obedience to His commands, assurance in His plan, and patient urgency for His mission. Do not underestimate the value of your testimony or the significance of your pre-existent expectations. As we have found in the book of Acts and will find throughout the whole of Scripture, God is glorified in and through the testimonies of His people. In view of these things, prepare well and share your story for the glory of God!

BIG IDEA: Personal testimonies ought to be God-centered and gospel-saturated stories that are given from a place of preparation, obedience, compassion, and balanced expectations.

APPLY:

- **Question:** How might Paul’s speech serve as a model for how we ought to craft our testimony?
- **Activity:** Have you written your testimony? If not, spend time beginning to intentionally write your testimony.

²⁶ See I Peter 3:15-16 for reference.

Week 3: Acts 21:37-22:21

Day 4: It Wasn't Paul's Idea

READ: Acts 22:17-22

EXPLORE:

While addressing the people at Jerusalem, Paul describes a conversation that he and Jesus had many years back. Jesus had already risen from the dead, ascended into Heaven, and converted Paul on the Road to Damascus. Paul described how some time after his conversion, while praying in the temple, he fell into a trance. He saw Jesus and heard Him say, *“Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.”*

Paul's reply to Jesus is confusing at first. He described how he had persecuted Christians in the past. Why does Paul mention this? Jesus' response is revealing: *“Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.”* Paul and Jesus were wrestling with each other over Paul's calling. Although Jesus told him to get out of Jerusalem, Paul wanted to stay in Jerusalem and preach the Gospel to Jews like himself. He contested Jesus' warning that *“they will not accept your testimony about me.”* Paul thought, *“Of course they will. I'm just the man to convert the Pharisees. I was the most zealous of all the Pharisees! I used to hunt down Christians to the death. How could they not accept my testimony?”* Jesus had a better plan: *“I will send you far away to the Gentiles.”*

Could God be calling you to reach out to people who are different from you? God could be calling you to travel somewhere with the good news of Jesus. Or God could be calling you to reach someone right here in the Houston area who is different from you? We are blessed to live in a multi-cultural metropolis with people from all over the world, all walks of life, speaking many languages, and practicing many religions (or no religion at all). Jesus sent Paul “far away” to the Gentiles – but you don't have to go very far to find someone unlike you.

Now let's observe the crowd's response to Paul's speech. When did the crowd raise their voices and shout "*he should not be allowed to live?*" Not when he admitted to persecuting Christians to the death; not when he claimed to have seen and heard the risen Jesus; not when he called Jesus, "Lord" and "Righteous One;" and not when he claimed to know God's will. The crowd listened to Paul right up until he claimed that Jesus sent him to the Gentiles.

Paul already knew that this was what irked them, so his whole speech can be seen as a justification for *why* he was travelling everywhere telling Gentiles about Jesus and *not* requiring them to first follow the Jewish Law. It's like he's saying, "It wasn't my plan; I wanted to stay here in Jerusalem and work among *you*. But what could I do? GOD sent me to the Gentiles!"

The gospel is always offensive to some. The gospel never changes, but the reason people are offended by it keeps changing. At that time, the offensive part was that Gentiles could be part of God's family without first becoming Jews and following the whole Jewish law. The crowd was happy to hear Paul speak about Jesus, as long as he didn't include the Gentiles. Is there a part of the Gospel that offends you or people you've spoken with? Ponder this deeply and submit it unto the Lord.

BIG IDEAS: God may be calling you to reach out to people who are different from you. The Gospel is offensive to many.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Have you ever reached out to someone unlike you, and told him or her the wonderful news about Jesus? Pray for opportunities to do this. Pray specifically for those who God brings to your mind as you consider this.
- **Question:** Is there a part of the gospel that offends you or people you've spoken with?

Week 3: Acts 21:37-22:21

Day 5: Paul's Testimony

READ TOGETHER: 1 Timothy 5:1-2 and Colossians 4:6

***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:

Paul has finally arrived in Jerusalem after a long and eventful journey. As we saw yesterday, Paul was the most polarizing figure in Jerusalem. The believers were unsure about him, and the rest of the Jews were ready to pounce on him at any moment. Paul's presence caused an uproar. Had it not been for the Roman authorities he would have been beaten nearly to death. Still, he asked the Roman official for an opportunity to speak to the people. Paul's goal was to communicate two things: solidarity with them as a Jew and the personal journey that the God of their fathers had taken him on.

Paul first builds solidarity with the Jews by speaking in the Hebrew language. This demonstrates that he is authentically a Jew, and it gives the crowd a listening ear. He addresses them as brothers and fathers; Paul is their relative and the terms he uses are endearing. Next, he mentions how he is a Jew and was brought up under the teaching of Gamaliel. Gamaliel was a well-known teacher in Israel, so Paul would have been an expert in the law. He was also zealous for God, even to the point of persecuting Christians. The persecution of Christians by religious authorities was acceptable, even encouraged, in those days.

It was while Paul was on his way to persecute Christians that the Lord Jesus appeared to him and Paul was compelled to obey. The

light of Jesus' presence was so bright that Paul was blinded by it. It wasn't until Ananias, a devout man according to the law, came to pray for him that Paul regained his sight. Ananias told Paul that he would be a witness of Jesus to everyone, then he baptized Paul. Remember from our biblical text this week, It wasn't until Paul mentioned that God sent him to preach to the Gentiles that the Jews could no longer listen to him.

Like Paul, God uses our testimonies in powerful ways. Even though the Jews did not respond favorably to Paul's testimony, they were now without excuse. As we read Paul's testimony, we have a model of how we can communicate our Jesus story to others. Paul demonstrates a godly heart for the people of Israel. They have just beaten him and now he speaks to them in words of kindness and compassion. May our hearts also be filled with kindness and compassion as we share our testimonies!

BIG IDEA: Sharing our personal testimony builds bridges to other people.

APPLY TOGETHER:

- **Question:** What makes a personal testimony so powerful?

- **Question:** Why did the Jews stop listening after Paul mentioned God sent him to the Gentiles?

Week 4: Acts 22:22-23:11

Day 2: Have Courage and Speak Wisely

READ: Acts 22:22-24

EXPLORE:

In today's WTL devotion, we find Paul facing extreme bodily threats that were intended to end his life. This persecution and wrath arose because Paul continually spoke about his personal encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus and faithfully preached the Gospel to the Gentiles.²⁷

Interrupting Paul's discourse, the Jewish leaders threw off their cloaks and cried out for Paul's death. The uproar was so violent that the Roman tribune, who could not understand the commotion, ordered Paul to be bound and stretched out for the whips.

Courageously, Paul challenged the centurion, who was standing by. He asked, "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?" When the centurion presented this dilemma to the tribune, he was afraid for he had unlawfully bound Paul. To comprehend the significance of this moment, we need to know more about the historical context.

Ancient Roman crucifixion was almost always preceded by a flogging. It would have been publicly humiliating, as the one on display would be stripped naked, bound to a post, and fully exposed for all to see. The Romans would, according to their custom, flog or scourge a criminal before putting him to death. This Roman scourge was a short wooden-handled whip, made of at least three leather thongs. These thongs were traditionally knotted together with small pieces of sharp bone and metal, such as iron or zinc. The Roman scourge was especially terrifying, with the end of the whip containing a hook, which was called "the scorpion". These

²⁷ See Acts 22:22-24 for reference.

instruments were created to interrogate, exact a confession, and even force a person to recant under the intensity of tortuous pain.

A Jewish flogging was limited to 39 stripes.²⁸ By comparison, the Roman flogging was much more severe because there was no legal limit to the number of blows they could inflict. Torn flesh, exposed muscles, bones, bowels, and excessive bleeding would often leave the prisoner half-dead or even take his life completely. If crucifixion was the ultimate punishment in mind, the centurion in charge would stop the flogging just short of death. This severity was probably why Jesus needed help carrying his cross the rest of the way to Golgotha.²⁹

Being aware of the type of torture his Savior endured,³⁰ Paul was well acquainted with the costly reality of the pain right around the corner. Even though Paul was saved from death because he self-disclosed his Roman citizenship, he still suffered with boldness and peace that is made possible only through the sustaining work of God by His Holy Spirit. In the face of incredible discomfort and injustice, he maintained his courage and spoke wisely.

BIG IDEA: Paul embodies godly attributes of wisdom and courage in the face of injustice and incredible discomfort. We should learn from his example and marvel at God's sustaining grace in the life of the apostle.

APPLY:

- **Question:** How would Paul's example encourage you to act, with godliness, amid a very difficult situation?

²⁸ See Deuteronomy 25:3, 2 Corinthians 11:24 for reference to the Jewish law.

²⁹ See Matthew 27:32 for reference.

³⁰ See Matthew 27:26 and Mark 15:15 for reference.

Week 4: Acts 22:22-23:11

Day 4: Keeping Up Appearances

READ: Read Acts 23:1-5

EXPLORE:

As a young teenager, I (Lucas) became very fond of Volkswagen Beetles. I worked at an ice cream shop for a year to save up enough money to make sure I could buy a bug when I turned 16. I would spend my days scouring the classified sections of any newspaper desperately trying to find one for sale. Finally, I saw the ad: "1966 VW bug, midnight blue, great paint."

I made an appointment to see it and asked my parents to drive me. As we rounded the corner, there it was, paint shimmering, chrome shining, I had found it! Before my parents parked the car, I told them, "This is the one!" My dad graciously explained, "Son, it looks great from the outside, but let's make sure everything is good on the inside too." Not wanting to be bothered with such "minor" details, I got out of the car, shook the seller's hand, and marveled at its beauty. After walking around it a few hundred times in awe, I finally decided to open the door and look inside. Disaster! The seats were ragged, the headliner was torn, and knobs were missing. There were rust holes in the floor big enough to stick your feet through and pedal like the Flintstones if the motor gave out which, upon listening to the engine struggle to run, seemed like a real possibility. I still tried to downplay the severity of these issues until my dad said, "It's better to have an ugly car that runs than a pretty car that sits in the driveway." As much as I didn't want to admit it, he was right.

The first few verses of this week's passage give a powerful comparison of outer appearances versus inner health. Chapter 22 details Paul's beating and arrest that happened the day before. He addressed the crowd by sharing how Jesus had changed his life, but their anger only intensified. The next day, Paul was given another opportunity to speak to his accusers, specifically the Jewish religious

authorities. This was the same religious leadership group that sentenced Jesus to die.

Paul had a deep familiarity with the perspectives of the religious leaders who arrested him. He grew up in the same city. He was trained under the renowned teacher Gamaliel³¹. It is likely that some of the students Paul trained with were in the persecuting audience that day. As a young man, he was noted for his zeal for God, specifically in the way that he persecuted Christians. Paul knew what it was like to see the world through their narrow and legalistic lens. Now he knew what it was like to see the world as a new creation in Christ. His heart desired that they would experience the freedom and new life in Christ that he had experienced years before.

In the first verse, we are told that Paul looked intently at the crowd. Perhaps this was to show that he wasn't intimidated by them. He could have been recalling the faces of those he knew from childhood. Maybe he was gratefully reflecting on the deliverance he had experienced from the empty and hypocritical lifestyle that they represented. Regardless of how Paul looked at them, they saw him as a man who had broken God's law. You can imagine their shock when Paul said, "Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day."³² In essence, Paul was telling them that he understood their perspective, but his eyes had been opened. He now saw the complete picture of the law and relationship with God.

The high priest, Ananias, responded by having Paul struck. This was a violation of God's law by issuing a punishment before having a proper trial.³³ In the face of this hypocrisy, and not knowing he was the high priest, Paul called him a "*whitewashed wall*" (more on that later). When Paul found out that he was the high priest, he

³¹ See Acts 22:3 for reference.

³² See Acts 23:1 for reference.

³³ See Deuteronomy 19:15-18 for reference.

apologized because it was against God's law to speak evil of a ruler.³⁴ Ananias, having also broken the law, offered no such apology. And herein lies the difference. Paul was interested in doing right by God. The religious leaders were interested in doing right by themselves. They put on a good show. They could quote the Scriptures. But all their religious activity was merely a perversion of God's law that had been manipulated to fit their self-serving agenda.

Paul called out their hypocrisy by using the term "whitewashed wall."³⁵ This carries the idea of a wall in a house that is not structurally sound. It is built with trash and dirt and then plastered over and painted. It only exists to look good on the outside. Jesus used a similar term to describe this group.³⁶ They were just like that 1966 midnight blue beetle. They looked great on the outside, but on the inside, they were broken down and falling apart. That used to be Paul's story until Jesus made him new. He used to be weighed down with the impossible task of producing his own righteousness. He now had the righteousness of Christ in him. Although he was in custody, Paul was the freest person in the room.

BIG IDEA: True righteousness can only be found in salvation through Jesus Christ.

APPLY:

- **Activity:** Meditate on 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 regarding where the righteousness of a believer is found.
- **Question:** How big of an issue is pride in your life? Taking some time to prayerfully consider this simple question can lead to very powerful insights.

³⁴ See Exodus 22:28 for reference.

³⁵ See Acts 23:3 for reference.

³⁶ See Matthew 23:27-28 for reference.

Week 4: Acts 22:22-23:11

Day 4: Break the Idol of Comfort

READ: Acts 22:22-23:11

EXPLORE:

Martin and Gracia Burnham alongside their entire family are incredible and somewhat unsung heroes of the Christian faith. For about seventeen years, the Burnham's served in the Philippines where Martin was a jungle pilot delivering mail, supplies and encouragement to missionaries who were serving in remote, challenging places. Their role in the Philippines also included transporting sick and injured people for distant medical treatment.

While celebrating their eighteenth wedding anniversary on a nearby island, Martin and Gracia were taken captive by a group of militant Muslims called the Abu Sayyaf. Several other guests at the resort were taken and transported to an extremist stronghold on the Basilan Island.

In the months that followed, many of the hostages were killed and several were released. Martin and Gracia, however, remained constantly on the move under the total control of the Abu Sayyaf. They lived in primitive conditions in the jungle and endured numerous gun fights with the Philippine army. In the wake of September 11, 2001, American news outlets began to publicize the Burnham's situation. Tragically, Martin was killed during a gunfight shortly before Gracia was rescued. Wounded, but alive, Gracia returned to the United States.

To the outside perspective, these events could seem like a pure tragedy. Certainly, the Burnham's story is wrought with pain. However, Gracia has refused to see the sacrificial living of her family and even the death of her husband as a mere tragedy. In the moments before the fatal gunfight that claimed the life of her husband, Martin told Gracia that God's grace and goodness were

sufficient for them even and especially as captives in the remote jungles of the Philippines. Gracia and her children have lived to tell the story, not just of their sacrifice, but of the satisfying and sustaining grace of God.

When I (Stephen) look at the apostle Paul and the story of the Burnham's I wonder how deeply entrenched we are in the idol of worldly comfort. Remember that after Paul was almost ripped apart by the mob, the Lord appeared to command courage, not an easy escape.³⁷ I wonder how many of our thoughts are consumed with how we can stay safe, comfortable, and at ease. We should, like the great heroes of the faith through Christian history, ask not about how we can avoid pain, but how God might sustain us within every circumstance. Friends, we have a problem with the idol of comfort. By God's grace and for His Kingdom, it needs to be broken!

BIG IDEA: We often worship at the idol of comfort. By God's grace and for His Kingdom, it needs to be broken.

APPLY:

- **Question:** How do you think that the Lord's promise that Paul would testify in Rome would have encouraged him in Jerusalem?

- **Question:** Where do you sense in your life that the idol of comfort/ease might be limiting your faith and obedience to Jesus?

³⁷ See Acts 23:10-11 for reference.

Week 4: Acts 22:22-23:11

Day 5: Courtroom Chaos

READ TOGETHER: Proverbs 15:1, Luke 22:63-71

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EXPLORE TOGETHER:

Have you ever seen one of those courtroom brawls on television or YouTube? Usually, the defendant is being talked to by the judge when suddenly he is attacked by a family member in the courtroom. The orderly courtroom turns quickly into a place of chaos. This is what we see in our passage this morning.

The apostle Paul has been brought before the Jewish council so that the Romans could understand the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews. The tension was already high. The council did not like Paul since they thought he was teaching things contrary to the law of Moses. When Paul mentioned that he had lived all his life before God in good conscience the high priest had him struck on the mouth. The high priest started the violence in the courtroom and raised the level of tension in the room.

Paul knew that he was not in a favorable circumstance. The council was already against him before he entered the courtroom. He was not going to have a fair trial and they were already acting violently towards him. What was he to do? Paul observed that there were both Pharisees and Sadducees in the courtroom and with one savvy move got them divided against one another. He knew that the Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead, so he said that it was for this belief that he was on trial. He was referring to the

resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead at Christ's return.

This clever move caused the Pharisees and Sadducees to argue with one another. Their argument spilled over into violence. Now there was pandemonium in the courtroom. Paul was going to be ripped apart had the Romans not pulled him out. With the Pharisees and Sadducees fighting with one another they could no longer give Paul a proper trial. His case was taken out of their hands.

The following day the Lord visited Paul and told him to take courage, for as he spoke in Jerusalem, he would also testify in Rome. Before the Lord spoke to him, Paul had no idea if he would make out of Jerusalem alive. This was the second time in the last couple of days that the Jews tried to kill him. Despite all the anger and tension surrounding Paul, God was with him and protecting him.

BIG IDEA: We can and should have faith in difficult circumstances in the protection and provision of God.

APPLY TOGETHER:

- **Activity:** Describe how Paul made wise and savvy moves in our passage.

- **Question:** How and why do arguments turn into violence and how can we prevent it?

Week 5: Acts 23:12-35

Day 1: Exploring the Biblical Text

READ: Acts 23:12-35

EXPLORE:

Instructions: Spend time reading Acts 23:12-35 and complete the activities below.

- **Question:** God's promise in Acts 23:11 immediately encounters the reality of Acts 23:12. When have you encountered a promise of God that was then immediately challenged?

- **Activity:** Read and summarize Paul's steps which led to the rescue from the forty men who had taken an oath to kill the apostle.

- **Question:** If you were Paul's nephew, how would you have felt following the tribune's command to tell no one about what had taken place?

- **Question:** Leaders in Rome's military force facilitated Paul's safe arrival in Caesarea. Why might the Roman soldiers' protection of Paul be deeply ironic in the scope of early church history?

Week 5: Acts 23:12-35

Day 2: Awaiting a Promises Fulfilment

READ: Acts 23:12-35

EXPLORE:

Charles Spurgeon once commented, “A divine decree ordains for you greater and more trying service than you have yet seen. A future awaits you, and no power on the earth or under the earth can rob you of it; therefore, be of good cheer.” The reality to which Spurgeon comments and the apostle Paul experienced is the glorious, yet agonizing wait that occurs between God’s promise and its fulfilment.

We need to remember that before a gang of forty Jewish leaders agreed to neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul, the apostle had been promised by Jesus that he would be given the opportunity to communicate the gospel in Rome. To echo Spurgeon’s sentiment in the story of Acts 22, Paul had encountered a divine decree coming against the powers of earth. God’s promise to Paul came face-to-face with the sobering reality of an angry mob. In this text, we are forced to ask the question, “What should we do when the promises of God and the sobering realities of life seem to be on a collision course?” How can we trust God of Acts 22:11 when life feels like Acts 22:12? It is precisely to these questions, that we now turn our attention.

As mentioned previously, forty men had agreed in an oath to have Paul killed. The Greek word that was used to express their pact was *anathematizo*. From this word we have the idea of an anathema or curse in modern English. This means that the forty men who agreed together to see Paul killed promised under the penalty of a curse or death. At the conclusion of this scriptural moment, we are left to wonder whether these men died of hunger, thirst, or if they merely gave up as Paul was successfully saved from their impending violence. Regardless, the severity of their threats cannot be overstated. With the most severe of repercussions, the forty men agreed to see Paul killed.

In the moment, it must have felt as though the only thing that Paul had was his nephew and a centurion, but we need to remember that he also had the promise of God. In that promise, Paul had more than enough. In the space that exists between the promise and its fulfillment Paul's life gives us the opportunity to ponder how we might learn to trust God. In the delivery of the divine decree in Acts 22:11 and its testing in Acts 22:12, we can reflect on the true nature of God's promises in this present age.

For Paul and for us today, the promises of God do not end the journey; they sustain the traveler. Because Paul knew he would bear witness to Christ in Rome, he knew his journey could not end in Jerusalem or anywhere short. In the seasons of waiting for God's promises to be fulfilled, we can develop a trust in His future as though it has already come to pass. In Christ and through the Holy Spirit, we can have assurance that God has been, is, and always will be good on His word and the wonderful fulfiller of His promises.

BIG IDEA: Promises from God are not designed to simply end the journey, but to sustain the Christian traveler.

APPLY:

- **Question:** If you had received the promise of Christ in Acts 22:11 and then had experienced the unfolding of Acts 22:12, how do you think you would have responded?

- **Activity:** What promises in God's word do you need to know and trust in the seasons of waiting for their fulfillment?

Week 5: Acts 23:12-35

Day 3: Paul and His Family

READ: Acts 23:12-35

EXPLORE:

Paul's nephew plays an undeniably crucial role in the rescue of Paul from a seemingly deadly scenario. Apparently, Paul's sister's son heard about the premeditated ambush that was planned by the forty Jewish leaders who had agreed to kill Paul. Paul's nephew not only told his uncle, but also went with a centurion to see the tribune and make them aware of the dangerous plot. Today's Word to Life Study is not designed to unpack the significance of the nephew's role, but to answer a few pertinent questions that linger in the background of the story. The answers to the questions below will prove valuable as we understand not only Acts, but other texts in Scripture. I (Stephen) hope to briefly demonstrate this type of study below:

Question 1: What do we know about Paul's family?

The story we have been studying this week is the sole reference to Paul's sister and her son in the New Testament.³⁸ According to his letter to the Church in Corinth and his encouragement toward a godly celibacy, Paul remained unmarried in ministry.³⁹ Most significantly, when we look for familial language from the apostle Paul or about the apostle Paul, we most often see it connected to the local church. The rare reference to Paul's blood relatives serves as a reminder of just how important church belonging was in the life of the apostle.

Question 2: How did the nephew know about the plot?

There are many theories about how Paul's nephew knew about the plot of the forty men. Two are most likely in my estimation. Either Paul's nephew still participated in the Jewish faith and was included

³⁸ See Acts 23:16 for reference.

³⁹ See I Corinthians 7:8 for reference.

in the circles in which those conversations took place, or he was aware of the plot because the anger was so widespread and common knowledge amongst the people. Regardless, the nephew's knowledge and repetition of the threats in this story serves to increase the intensity of the Paul's plight.

Question 3: How did the nephew have free access to Paul if the apostle was in confinement?

The nephew's accessibility to Paul was not unusual. Prisoners of high rank and Roman citizens were given great liberty for visits from family and friends. It should not, therefore, be surprising that Paul received a visit from outside. In view this historic reality, we should recognize the severity of Paul's loneliness and desperation when he was writing later prison epistles. When we realize the accessibility of Paul to his family in Acts 23, we should notice the immense difficulty through which the apostle continued to minister in word and in deed.⁴⁰

BIG IDEA: In context, the seemingly minute details of Acts 23 add value and clarity to a wide variety of biblical texts. We ought to study the Scriptures with intentionality and thoughtfulness.

APPLY:

- **Activity:** Practice intentionally thoughtful reading in another area of Scripture. Read a chapter in the Bible, write down your thoughts, note some questions, and pray that God would be honored in your study and in your living.

⁴⁰ See Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon for examples of prison epistles of intense difficulty.

Week 5: Acts 23:12-35

Day 4: Promises and Expectations

READ: Acts 23:12-35

EXPLORE:

If the plot to kill Paul and the scene that unfolded around it were turned into a movie, it would be the type of film that would leave your pulse racing. If the events Acts 23 were made into a feature film, you wouldn't be able to watch it late at night. The suspense and intensity of oath-taking killers, a man wrongfully imprisoned, and hundreds of Roman soldiers would be too much for most. Nonetheless, that is the story that unfolds as God moves Paul onward to Rome.

Truly, Paul's rescue from the deadly plot is a biblical text about promises being fulfilled even when they don't match expectations.

In response to the nephew's news about Paul, the tribune dismissed him under the command of silence.⁴¹ Then, in an incredible show of force, two centurions were called to muster two hundred soldiers, with seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to accompany Paul under the cover of night toward Caesarea. Caesarea was the seat of the provincial government and the residence of the procurator. Paul would be protected by the soldiers and could safely move onward.

The immediate occasion for this powerful show of force was the imminent and sinister threat from the forty conspirators. However, it was not just a threat to Paul, it was a danger to the peace of the city! This was a strategic move by the Roman military, but we cannot miss what was truly happening in the life of the early church.

⁴¹ See Acts 23:22 for reference.

The Roman government, under God's sovereign plan, was a resource for continuing the spread of the gospel in the first-century Greco Roman world. We need to notice the incredible nature of this fact. Even the Roman empire, which was often opposed to the Christian movement, was useful in the plan of God. The events of Claudius Lysias and the surrounding officials is a potent reminder of God's plan, provision, and providence, even when it is not expected. God's promises of gospel expansion were coming true even if they were not how His people expected.

Like Paul and the spread of the gospel in the early church, we are often presented with the fulfillment of God's promises in ways that are contrary to our expectations. We may know God is going to refine our character, but we are unsure how. We may know that he desires us to embrace a new season, but we are not sure where. We may know he is going use us amongst His people, but we are not sure when. Our responsibility, like our brothers and sisters who have placed their faith in Christ throughout history, is to be ready to move in accordance with God's promises even when they don't match our expectations.

BIG IDEA: Christians ought to trust and obey God's promises even when they do not match our expectations.

APPLY:

- **Question:** When has God moved in your life in a way that did not match your expectations? How did you know it was His leading and not your own or the leading of another?

- **Question:** For the Christian, are expectations more helpful or harmful? Provide your answer and your reasoning.

Week 5: Acts 23:12-35

Day 5: Circumstantial Providence

READ TOGETHER: Matthew 26:1-5, Matthew 6:25-34

***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 have all experienced those “just so happened” moments. You need a new job and it “just so happens” that the gentleman in front of you offers you one. You need a specific amount of money and it “just so happens” that you receive a gift of the exact of money that you need. You lose an important possession and it “just so happens” that a friend has come across it and picked it up for you. We also know that as Christians these moments are not coincidence, but rather the providence of God. There aren’t “lucky” moments in the Christian life, just God’s loving care. We see this circumstantial providence in the life of the apostle Paul.

Forty Jews made a plot to kill the apostle Paul and they bound themselves to an oath to not eat or drink until it was accomplished. It “just so happened” that Paul’s nephew heard of the ambush. We are not told how he heard but we can be certain that it was due to God’s providence that he did. God was taking care of Paul through his relatives. Paul’s nephew informed the tribune of the Jew’s plot and the tribune moved quickly to up the security of the apostle Paul.

The Romans often did all that they could to provide justice and safety to citizens of Rome. It “just so happened” that Paul, a Jew, was also born a Roman citizen. God was sovereignly planning out

Paul's life from the very beginning. Paul's Roman citizenship was the only thing that protected him from this plot from the Jews.

Our lives have so many more examples than we can see with our natural eyes of God's good providence. Sometimes God allows us to see how He intervenes and helps us, but most of the times these things go unnoticed. This truth should bring us great encouragement and security as believers. God is always protecting us and providing for us even when we do not see it or feel it. We simply need to trust our Father in heaven and His good providence in our lives.

BIG IDEA: There is no good luck in the Christian's life, only God's providence.

APPLY TOGETHER:

- **Question:** Why do you think the Jews were so intent on killing Paul? Why was he such a big threat in their minds?

- **Activity:** Write down some of the most memorable times you have seen God's providence in your lives. Take time to praise God for them.



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