

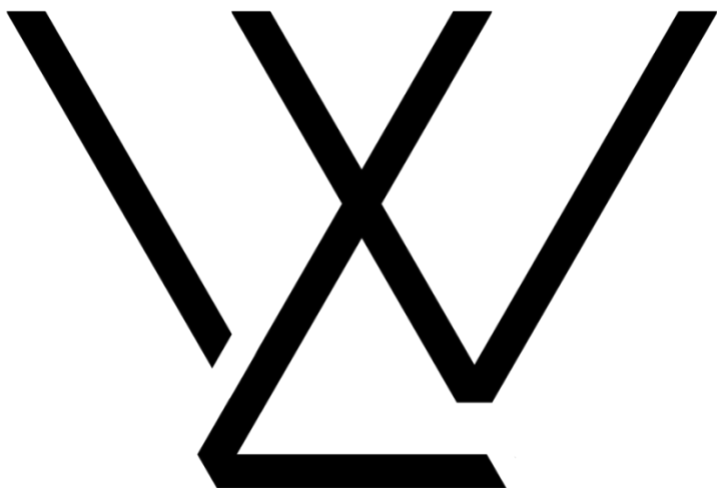


WORD TO LIFE

WEEKS 13 - 17



ACTS 10:34 - 12:25



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!

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Week 13: Acts 10:34-48

Day 1: Right and Acceptable

READ: Acts 10:34-48

EXPLORE:

“Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”¹ — Peter

The idea that God shows no partiality is a powerful and yet misunderstood reality that radically altered Peter’s worldview. As a result of what God was doing in the life of Cornelius and his family, Peter was beginning to realize that the gospel belongs not only to the Jews, but to people from every nation. We need to notice that while God does not discriminate based on ethnicity, the Lord does draw a distinction between those whose behavior is acceptable and unacceptable. To understand this concept fully, we need to slow down and take closer look.

Peter’s sermon is unique. Not only is it given during his interaction with Cornelius, but it is also directed toward Gentiles. At first glance, it can seem as though Peter’s conclusion in Acts 10:34-35 was communicating a works-based salvation for Cornelius and his family. Peter’s conclusion raises a critical question about faith and works. The question is often raised, “Was Cornelius’s acceptance based on his works rather than his faith?” As we will discover, Scripture is not silent on this question.

Cornelius does not represent a person who was saved without responding to the gospel. He embodies God’s intention to redeem and purify people from every nation who would be transformed by the salvific work of Christ. Even in Luke’s retelling of the Cornelius story, the Holy Spirit does not fall until Peter proclaims the role of belief and forgiveness in the process of salvation.²

¹ See Acts 10:34-35 and Romans 2:9-11 for reference.

² See Acts 10:43 as it is connected to vv. 44-46.

We need to be reminded that salvation is a gift given by grace through faith and not from works.³ Humanity was and is utterly incapable of earning a right relationship with God apart from God's grace in Christ.⁴ It is the grace of God that makes it possible for those who repent and believe to be saved and to be conformed into the image of Christ. When Peter later explained this moment before the Jerusalem Council, he said, *"And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith."*⁵ Within the house of Cornelius, there was a perceptible readiness to receive the gospel. Their hearts were ready to respond to the good news about Christ.

Peter's words are not intended to elevate works over faith. They actually protect us against the false doctrine that attempts to separate salvation by God's grace from works of righteousness. Acts 10 joins the large message of Scripture to remind us that the transformative grace of God is designed to have deep implications on the way we live every day.

BIG IDEA: Like the Gentiles who responded to Peter's speech in Acts 10, our lives should be responsive to the gospel, submissive to the Holy Spirit, and acceptable before God.

APPLY:

- **Questions:** Acts 10:34-35 has been a challenging passage to understand throughout church history. Why do you think this is the case? How can a full reading of Acts 10 in its context help us to rightly understand what Peter was intending at the beginning of his speech?

- **Activity:** Rewrite Acts 10:34-35 in your own words.

³ See Ephesians 2:8-9 for reference.

⁴ Hebrews 11:6 is a massively beneficial verse undergirding this concept.

⁵ See Acts 15:8-9 for reference.

Week 13: Acts 10:34-48

Day 2: The Missing Peace

READ: Acts 10:34-36 and Isaiah 52:7

EXPLORE:

One of the most powerful ways to experience God in His Word is to read, pray, and meditate through a biblical passage.⁶ Today, we are going to focus on the concept of peace through three different biblical texts. As you slowly read through the passages, spend time making notes, praying, and meditating. Ask that God would speak to you and give you a greater understanding of His peace. It may be beneficial to repeat the process multiple times.

Acts 10:36

“As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all).”

- Read
- Pray
- Meditate

Ephesians 2:17

“And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.”

- Read
- Pray
- Meditate

Isaiah 52:7

*“How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of him who brings good news,*

⁶ See Psalm 77:6 for reference.

*who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness,
who publishes salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."*

- Read
- Pray
- Meditate

APPLY:

- **Question:** As you read Isaiah and Acts, what connection do you notice between the peace of God and the lordship of Christ?

- **Question:** In what area(s) of your life do you most need to experience God's peace?

Week 13: Acts 10:34-48

Day 3: Tongues and the Gentiles

READ: Acts 10:34-48

EXPLORE:

Throughout Acts, we see a common occurrence of the Spirit of God moving mightily among new believers. Today, our text brings up a common misunderstanding which has led many to false teaching and misapplication of what was taking place in these texts which show believers receiving the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. Throughout Acts and the Epistles, we see a heavy emphasis on the Spirit of God as the active agent in the building of the church. We would do well to consider a few important observations about what we see.

- 1. Tongues was *not* given every time the Spirit fell.** There are about 56 mentions of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts and in only 3 situations do we see the Spirit causing believers to speak in tongues.⁷ Most people that believe and receive the Spirit do not speak in tongues as far as we can tell in the New Testament.
- 2. Tongues was given as a sign for unbelievers.**⁸ In Acts 2, we see that the tongues spoken are actual languages of those in the crowd so that they could hear the gospel in their own language.⁹
- 3. Not everyone is given the gift of tongues.** Though some are able to speak in tongues, there are many other spiritual gifts that the Holy Spirit gives. No single person has all the gifts.¹⁰
- 4. Tongues is a gift that the Holy Spirit can still use today.** Though in our context it doesn't seem as necessary, the Spirit of God can choose to give the gift of tongues today if He deems it necessary for the advancement of the gospel.

⁷ See Acts 2:4; 10:46; 19:6 for reference

⁸ See 1 Corinthians 14:22 for reference

⁹ See Acts 2:7 for reference.

¹⁰ See 1 Corinthians 12 for reference.

In looking at our text today, we should ask, “What is the significance of the Holy Spirit giving tongues in this passage?” Clues are given in vv. 34 and 46 to show tongues are given here specifically to the Gentiles to show that God sees Jews and Gentiles as equal participants under the new covenant of grace. Had tongues only fallen on the Jews, it is likely that they would have felt superior to the Gentiles.

The true meaning of this text is not to support that tongues is something the Spirit gives to every Christian. Rather, I (Josh) firmly believe that the purpose is to show God being very intentional to give the same blessings and experiences to both Jewish and Gentile believers. In Christ, God shows no partiality. All stand equal and participate in the salvation of God only by the grace of God.

BIG IDEA: Tongues was given a second time, not to the Jews, but now to the Gentiles to show that they are equal participants as God’s covenant people. God does not show partiality.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Have you experienced any false teachings or practices of tongues? If so, explain biblically how it was incorrect.

- **Question:** Have you experienced tongues in a way that was God-honoring and biblical? If so, explain.

Week 13: Acts 10:34-48

Day 4: The Power of Diversity

READ: Acts 10:34-48 and Psalm 96:3-4

EXPLORE:

There is nothing quite like a well-executed vocal harmony. One powerful voice can capture your attention, but there is something truly special about different voices coming together to form one unified sound. The beauty of a good harmony is not found in their sameness, but in the fact that their differences can be formed together into one cohesive noise. Their unity amidst their diversity results in something truly incredible.

Peter's speech in Acts 10 serves as a reminder that God's people are designed to be diverse and simultaneously unified. From Peter's God-given dream on the rooftop, to his observation of Cornelius's life, he remarked that Christians can and will be found in a variety of ethnic, cultural, national, and linguistic backgrounds.¹¹ Although the gospel applies to specific cultural contexts, it is not limited to any one culture. In fact, Scripture continually reminds us of God's intentional design for diversity. Look at what the Psalmist wrote in in Psalm 67:1-3.

*¹May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us,*

*²that your way may be known on earth,
your saving power among all nations.*

*³Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you!*

In this short passage, we can see that one of the main purposes of God's blessing is that His glory and power would be made known throughout the nations. Fundamentally, the blessings of God are designed to be funneled to and through the diversity of different people groups. In Psalm 96:3-4, the greatness of God is uniquely expressed and magnified in multicultural worship.

¹¹ See Acts 10:34-35 for reference

When the church is diverse and united, it proclaims that the gospel holds more power than anything that could possibly bring about division. Those outside the Christian faith ought to be able to look at the fellowship of believers and see a model of togetherness.

In the same way that a vocal harmony surpasses each individual part, the unity of the church body is meant to elevate and exceed its individual members. Diversity that remains unified in the gospel glorifies God and it adds value to the fellowship of the saints. When we live in Christian community across cultural lines, it is possible for us to learn and grow from people of various perspectives.

BIG IDEA: Diverse community that remains unified in the gospel is a powerful witness to the world.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Today's Word to Life expressed the idea that the gospel is expressed in culture, but it is not bound by one specific culture. How might this idea challenge us to think about unity and diversity in the Christian faith?

- **Activity:** Read Revelation 5:9-10 and pray that God would give you a passion and motivation for His work around the world.

Week 13: Acts 10:34-48

Day 5: After the Water

READ: Acts 10:44-48

EXPLORE:

Baptism is a public declaration that, through Christ, we have a glorious hope which we await, a gracious gospel which we proclaim, and a godly family to which we belong. In the believer's decision to be baptized, they are deciding to outwardly proclaim the inward working of God by the Holy Spirit. They are obediently following Jesus by declaring in front of their Church family that they have repented of sin and placed their faith in Christ.

This biblical understanding of baptism begs the question, "What should happen for someone who has recently been baptized?" When the waters split, the baptized immerses, and the church family cheers, what happens next? What comes after baptism? As we will study today, the person who has been recently baptized needs to be intentionally taught and carefully developed.

Following the Gentiles' baptism in Acts 10:47-48, they asked Peter to remain with them for a little while longer. We could easily skip over this detail in the Cornelius story, but it is crucial. First, we need to notice that Peter was not hesitant to stay there for several days. Peter did not just say "*God shows no partiality.*" He lived it out. He was willing to talk the talk and he was willing to walk the walk. The fact that Peter was hosted by Gentile Christians was a major difficulty for the conservative Jews in the first century.

Apparently, Peter's desire to spend time with the new believers was worth the scrutiny and questioning that he later endured from his Jewish counterparts. In the time that Peter was able to spend in the house of Cornelius, he was able to confirm the legitimacy of their faith. In a sense, the post-baptism days of discipleship helped to cement the reality of God's work in Peter's mind and ministry!

Second, we need to notice that the recently baptized believers wanted to fellowship with and learn from a mature follower of Christ. Baptism was naturally followed by intentional teaching and careful development. The fact that Peter stayed for several days implies that they were involved in shared meals, household fellowship, teaching, and the beginning stages of a long faith journey. For those in the house of Cornelius and for us today, baptism is not an end destination, but a critical step in the journey.

Sometimes we emphasize baptism in such a way that we forget about discipleship. When the water parts and a baptized believer immerses, communal fellowship is not optional. Baptism is designed to be followed by discipleship. We need help to follow Jesus. We need to learn how to wait well, listen intently, and incline our wills to God's good design. Baptism is an invitation for those who have placed their hope and faith in Christ to be intentionally disciplined.

BIG IDEA: Baptism should be followed by teaching, discipleship, and communal fellowship.

APPLY:

- **Question:** How would the idea of discipleship immediately following baptism potentially influence the way in which we practice baptism as a Church?

- **Activity:** Reread the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 with today's Word to Life in mind.
 - o Pray that God would provide you with opportunities to be disciplined and to disciple.

Week 14: Acts 11:1-18

Day 1: God in The Details

READ: Acts 11:1-18

EXPLORE:

Have you ever witnessed a T-bone car accident at high speed in the middle of an intersection? It is a sight to behold. An unsuspecting driver moving in the wrong place at the wrong time, has no idea that another car is in route for a violent collision. Every detail must be precise for the two vehicles to meet at the same moment. The direction, speed, and timing are among the specific factors that need to be exact for this type of accident to take place.

In our text today, we see that God works behind the scenes to orchestrate situations in the lives of his people to bring about his purposes. With precision and intentionality, God is arranging peoples' lives to intersect with one another. Unlike the car accident, this precise timing does not bring about destruction, but blessing!

Peter was continuing to follow the Lord in obedience. God gave him a vision clarifying that the Gentiles were not unclean and that they were acceptable in His sight. At that very moment that these truths were unfolding in the life of Peter, men entered to take him to see a Gentile man named Cornelius. Eventually, his whole household would come to believe in Christ. We can see in this text that God had been working behind the scenes to bring these men together with precise timing and intentionality.

We need to notice that God had been preparing these men for this meeting far in advance. God had been preparing Cornelius by instructing him to send men onward to Joppa. In fact, Peter did not even have to go out of his way to figure out how God wanted him to apply the truths that were being revealed in the vision. As with Peter and Cornelius, the reality is that the Lord is way ahead of us.

This text should give us such assurance. Although we only see what is right in front of us, we serve a God who is constantly and carefully at

Week 14: Acts 11:1-18

Day 2: Faithfully Describe What God Has Done

READ: Acts 11:1-18

EXPLORE:

It is common in the Scriptures for a biblical character to repeat verbatim a message from God. Rather than broadly summarize what the Lord had said or done, the Bible often goes out of its way to literally repeat every detail as it was communicated by God. There is a sense in which the words and deeds of God demand exact precision. Peter certainly followed this model as he faithfully described what the Lord had done amongst the Gentiles. In fact, Peter refused to compromise despite the surrounding pressure. Let's take a closer look.

It is hard to imagine how intense Acts 11 must have been in the life and development of the early church. Although God had done great things in the house of Cornelius, it did not take long before opposition arose. Luke records that a group known as the circumcision party (*an unfortunate name*) had risen against Peter. Specifically, this group of conservative first century Jews were angry that Peter had fellowshiped with Gentiles who were ritually unclean and impure. It is interesting and worthwhile to note that this group was more concerned with their customs than they were with the outpouring of God's presence or even the fact that the Gentiles were being baptized.

Peter's response to their hostility, as we highlighted previously, was to faithfully describe what God had done in and through the Gentiles. His aim was simply to retell what the Lord had so visibly accomplished in the house of Cornelius. It is almost as though Peter said, "Hey, don't blame me; blame God." As a follower of Christ who was only beginning to perceive what God was doing, Peter simply remained faithful to recount the wondrous works of God. There are a few things we need to notice and apply to our lives.

First and foremost, Peter's story rightly featured the work of God and not himself. We often need to be reminded and challenged to keep God at the center of stories which rightly belong to Him. Second and simply,

Peter demonstrates the power of stories. Personal encounters with God's grace in everyday life need to be told. I (Stephen) often wonder how often we undervalue the significance of the stories we choose to tell and those that unfortunately remain unspoken. We have good evidence in Scripture to believe that these stories of God demand to be told! Finally, Peter demonstrates the value of faithfully retelling even when the pressure is on. The intensity of his situation did not cause him to recant or back down! We ought to learn from the example of Peter and faithfully retell the stories of God.

BIG IDEA: As followers of Christ, we ought to be faithful to retell what God has done in His word and in our lives.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Do you think we rightly value the significance of telling stories in the formation of a person's faith? Why or why not?
- **Activity:** If time allows, read through Acts 11:5-18 again and notice the brilliance and precision with which Peter recounts the works of God.

Week 14: Acts 11:1-18

Day 3: Change the Question

READ: Acts 11:1-18

EXPLORE:

God might change your question before He gives you an answer. For example, you could wonder about which house you want to buy, and God might prefer you ask about which neighborhood He desires you to impact for His glory. Now, this exact homebuying scenario might not apply to you specifically, but the concept of God wanting to change your question prior to an answer certainly does. Could it be that God desires to change the questions you ask before he will provide the answers you seek?

We often ask questions about convenience. What will increase comfort, enhance ease, and reduce stress? We often ask questions about status. What will secure our reputation? What will solidify our life of luxury? These may not be the exact questions you ask, but you undoubtedly have lingering questions of the soul which need to be radically changed by God. The fact is that God often revises the questions we ask before He gives us the answers we seek.

We see this reality played out in the context of Acts 11. The circumcision party was a conservative Jewish group that taught a strict observance of both law and customs. Therefore, when they heard that Peter had fellowshiped with people who were ceremonially unclean, they were outraged. How could Peter eat with those who were uncircumcised? How could a man of Jewish descent be so brash and irresponsible? Fortunately, Peter was not too distracted by the questions they asked to give them the answers that they truly needed.

Through the retelling of the Holy Spirit's work in the house of Cornelius, Peter elevated the conversation rather than disputing their lower-tier question. As it turns out, the salvation of not only Cornelius, but also his household has a way of sorting out the issue of supposed ceremonial

uncleanness.¹³ Rather than settling for a lesser point of disagreement, Peter chose to simply retell what God had accomplished. In that story, Peter was able to change their question and provide them with an answer. Instead of asking about a shared meal, the conservative Jews would now be forced to ponder a shared salvation.

In fairness, the church throughout the New Testament continued to wrestle with the observance of customs and rituals. However, it was conversations like Acts 11:1-18 that began to shift the question rather than simply settling for a lower-tier answer. Like the Church in the first century, we ought to also ask ourselves how God might want to change our questions before He provides us with answers.

BIG IDEA: God might want to change the questions we ask to provide us with the answers we need.

APPLY:

- **Question:** When have you experienced a change in perspective that forced you to alter or enhance the question you were asking?

- **Question:** A Christian apologist named John Lennox once said, *“It is not about the answers we give, but about the ways in which we respond that make a difference for the unbeliever.”*¹⁴
 - o Evaluate Lennox’s statement. Do you think it is helpful? Why or why not?

¹³ See Acts 11:14 for reference.

¹⁴ John Lennox gave a lecture on the intersection artificial intelligence and Christian ethics in South Florida. This is my (Stephen’s) restatement of his words.

Week 14: Acts 11:1-18

Day 3: Remembering the Word of the Lord

READ: Acts 11:1-18

EXPLORE:

I (Leeanna Porter) grew up in The South, immersed in prejudice. It was only by the work of the Holy Spirit in the revealed Word of God that these generational mindsets were broken. At first glance we might not realize how similar this situation is to Acts 10-11. Overcoming prejudice is one of the main themes in the story of Peter, Cornelius, and the Jewish leaders.

Peter took his Jewish faith very seriously. Some of the regulations that comprised his faith led to a place of deeply seated prejudice. For Peter, his prejudice would need to be exposed and dealt with for him to be the witness that Christ desired him to be. This transformation was made possible as Peter was challenged to remember the life and teaching of Jesus. Peter needed to remember how Jesus picked grain and healed people on the Sabbath.¹⁵ He would need to remember how Jesus spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well.¹⁶ Remembering the work of Christ was crucial for him to overcome prejudice.

By His actions, Jesus taught His disciples about the Father's heart for the human soul that triumphed over cultural and religious customs. Christ's words and actions revealed His desire that all people might be saved. Unsurprisingly, Peter's struggle to understand lingered well into Acts 10. God, in His patience, sent a vision to Peter that instructed him to eat of the unclean animals. It was a lesson and Peter was learning.

He was beginning to understand that salvation was expanding beyond the Jewish people to Gentile brothers and sisters in the faith. They were receiving the promised Holy Spirit and Peter was remembering the word of the Lord. Peter explained these truths to his fellow Jews, saying, "*And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with*

¹⁵ See Matthew 12 and John 5 for reference.

¹⁶ See John 4 for reference.

*water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”*¹⁷ Simply, Peter remembered the word of the Lord and began to make sense of what was occurring all around him.

We ought to be reminded that this baptism with the Holy Spirit was not an act of man, but of God. This was a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the hearts and minds of the new believers that had been promised by Christ and remembered by Peter.¹⁸ It was and is God alone who grants the gift of the indwelling, life-transforming, mind-renewing presence of the Holy Spirit. Peter was positioned to remember and apply this truth. Similarly, you and I have the opportunity to remember the word of the Lord and see it fulfilled in hearts and lives!

BIG IDEA: Remembering the Word of the Lord was crucial for overcoming prejudice and discerning the work of the Holy Spirit.

APPLY:

- **Question:** How does our ability to remember the Word of the Lord affect our ability to overcome prejudice and discern the work of the Holy Spirit? How have you experienced this in your own life?

- **Question:** Have you experienced an outpouring of the Holy Spirit’s presence in your own life?

¹⁷ See John 11:16 for reference.

¹⁸ See Acts 1:8 for reference.

Week 14: Acts 11:1-18

Day 5: Powerful Silence

READ: Acts 11:18 and Lamentations 3:26

EXPLORE:

I (Stephen) don't know about you, but I have experienced several moments in life that seemed to leave me speechless. Whether it was a shocking turn of events or the revelation of a profound truth, I have had quite a few moments that took my breath away. Sometimes, these speechless moments come upon us because of sudden, devastating news. On other occasions, we might experience a lack of words in the light of God's overwhelming truth. The latter is what takes place in response to Peter's report in Acts 11.

Luke records the crowd's response in Acts 11:18, writing, *"When they heard these things, they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.'"* Their reaction to Peter's speech was a remarkable turnaround from their initial response to his ministry in the house of Cornelius. In a very real sense, the silence of Peter's audience created space for them to receive a challenging truth from the Lord.

There are quite a few moments in the Bible in which silence is the response to a profound truth from the Lord. This quietness before the Lord and His truth provides a precious opportunity for teaching, revelation, and transformation. Similarly, the silence of Peter's audience in Acts 11 was used by God to completely change their perspective. The crowd was moved from a place of vehement opposition to wholehearted support. Their conflict was not resolved by Peter's exercise of authority or by his eloquence. Rather, through Peter's faithful retelling of what had occurred, God transformed hearts during a time of silence.

It is important to note that it is not silence alone that transforms, but the truth of God which is allowed to take root and grow in a place of quiet contemplation. How can we expect the Lord to speak into our lives if we are not willing to silently listen? We ought to make space for

silence. As believers, we are called to maximize times of silence before the Lord. In fact, listening well necessitates prolonged periods of purposeful quietness. It could be said like this, “A life that is dedicated to following Jesus well will prioritize times of silence in God’s Word.”

Sometimes, those moments of silent contemplation will arise because of a newly discovered truth about God. On other occasions, this silent space will need to be purposefully scheduled and deliberately protected. Silence can be purposed for God’s glory. It is a tool that He will often use to awaken us in our indifference and alert us to His ways.

BIG IDEA: We need to prioritize silence because God often uses times of quietness to challenge and transform us.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Silence is a complicated thing. Often when we are trying to be silent and attentive to God’s truth, our minds seem busier than ever before. How do you think you can manage the tension between busyness and silence?

- **Question:** How could you prioritize intentional times of silence with God throughout your week? After you write down some ideas, ask your LifeGroup to hold you accountable toward that end.

- **Optional Activity:** Read and pray through the passages included below.
 - Proverbs 29:11
 - Psalm 46:10
 - Habakkuk 2:20
 - Psalm 141:3
 - Psalm 62:5
 - Isaiah 53:7

Week 15: Acts 11:19-30

Day 1: Mapping Acts 11

READ: Acts 11:19-30

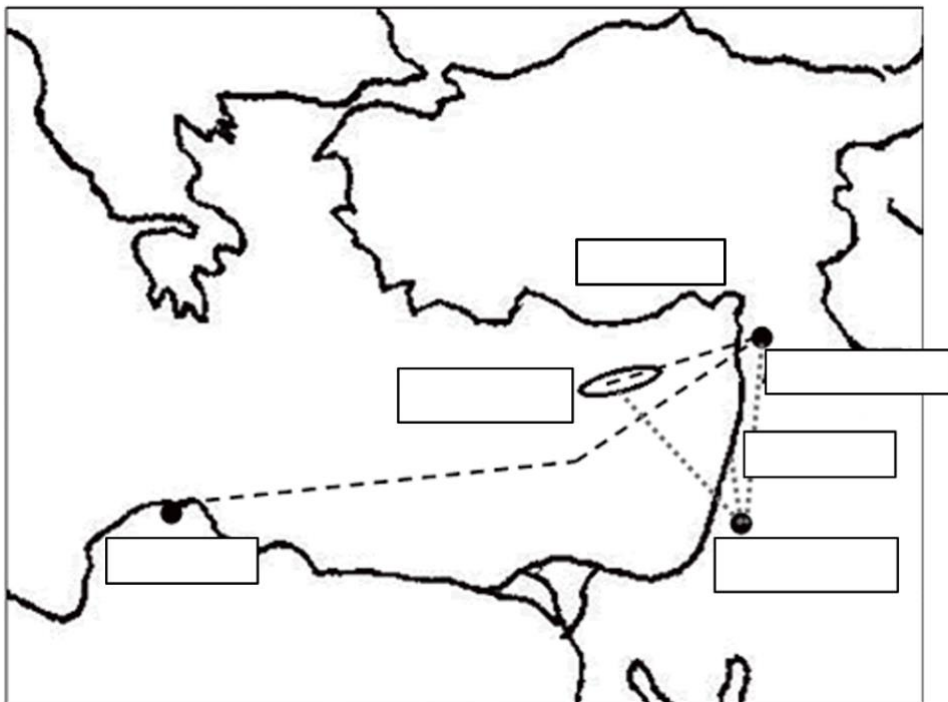
EXPLORE:

The opening words of this section remind us of a painful moment in the life of the early church following the martyrdom of Stephen. Because of the persecution in Jerusalem, Greek-speaking Jewish Christians scattered throughout the ancient world and continued to spread the news about Jesus.¹⁹ They broke barriers and continued Christianity's expansive mission throughout the ancient world.

When you first read through Acts 11:19-30, it can be challenging to get a clear mental picture of all that is taking place. To fully appreciate the events surrounding the church in Antioch, we ought to become familiar with the places mentioned in the biblical text. Do that using your Bible and the map below.

Activity Instructions: Search online for a map of Acts 11, complete the map, read the vv. 19-30, and take notes about what you notice. It may be helpful to color coat different journeys.

¹⁹ See Acts 8:4 for reference.



BIG IDEA: The geographical details in the biblical text mattered for the ancient audience and they ought to matter for us today.

APPLY:

- **Activity Question:** As you completed the map and read through the passage again, what details did you notice?

- **Activity Question:** Antioch is a crucial place in the continuing story of Acts. How might the geographical details of Acts 11 help us appreciate the significance of Antioch in later stories?

Week 15: Acts 11:19-30

Day 2: The Spark and the Blaze

READ: Acts 11:19-30

EXPLORE:

If you have ever been camping, you know the value of fire. It can transform the most unassuming of hot dogs into the most delicious of feasts. Even its smoke can ward off the unrelenting onslaught of the Texas state bird... the mosquito. A well-built campfire can provide warmth, light, and a great spot for a story or two.

Typically, a fire is begun by igniting small pieces of flammable material called tinder. After the tinder is on fire, medium pieces of kindling are added to the flames. Finally, larger pieces of firewood are ready to be ignited. Unless you use an accelerant, building a long-lasting fire is a careful process of intentionally adding larger pieces of wood to the pile. With time and a little bit of strategy, a small spark can grow into a life-giving blaze. Even though it takes time for larger pieces of wood to catch on fire, they are crucial for long-lasting warmth and light. Tinder and kindling are helpful, but they cannot sustain a fire on their own.

As we read Acts 11:19-30, there is no doubt that the faith of the church in Antioch was on fire. Multitudes were turning to the Lord in belief. The grace of God was visible in their community; they reflected the gospel and Barnabas could see it. Knowing that Tarsus was not too far away, Barnabas retrieved Saul and brought him back to Antioch. We are told in Acts 11:26 that there was a yearlong process of growth and discipleship. It was in a time like this that the kindling of the early church in Antioch ignited into an enduring community of faith, which would spread the light of Jesus for years to come.

It is interesting that early church leaders chose to pause for a year to fan the flame of faith that had been carefully built in Antioch into a full blaze. We need to remember that the Christian movement was still in its infancy. The gospel message had spread throughout the ancient world because of widespread persecution. Given these circumstances, we should notice the intentional pause that took place in Antioch. Saul

and Barnabas knew what all good fire makers have come to realize: growing a small spark into an enduring flame requires time, patience, and intentionality.

Saul and Barnabas were willing to pause and patiently teach these baby Christians even though they could have been distracted by other things. They knew that the patient establishment of a solid church in Antioch would bless the surrounding areas.²⁰ They took time to cultivate the flame of the Holy Spirit's work in Antioch and it made a difference. They were not complacent, even when they were stationary, because they knew God was at work. When I (Stephen) read texts like this²¹, I am challenged by all the times my impatience and lack of intentionality have caused me to snuff out what I ought to have continued to feed. I wonder how often we want our lives to be on fire for the Lord while we are simultaneously unwilling to feed the small spark.

BIG IDEA: The cultivation of enduring faith involves time, patience, and intentionality.

APPLY:

- **Question:** What factors do you think contributed to Saul and Barnabas's decision to stay in Antioch for a year teaching a great many people?

- **Question:** Is it difficult or easy for you to stay content in serving the Lord where you are here and now? Why or why not?

²⁰ See Acts 13, 14, 15, and 18 for reference to Antioch.

²¹ See Acts 11:26 specifically.

Week 15: Acts 11:19-30

Day 3: What does it mean to be Christian?

READ: Acts 11:19-30 and 2 Corinthians 5:14-15

EXPLORE:

Depending on where you are in the world, some words can have incredibly different meanings. For example, when someone asks for a biscuit in the United States, they expect to receive a flaky baked good. If someone were to ask for a biscuit in the United Kingdom however, they would receive what Americans call a cookie. For some, football is a sport with helmets and pads. For most of the world, however, football is a game with kicking and goals.

Often, these differences are laughable, but on some occasions, the definitions can have more significant consequences. “Wicked” is a positive term for New Englanders but carries a drastically different connotation in other areas of the country. “Mist” is often used as a description of fog or a light drizzle, but in Germany it is a term for manure. Using the same words with different meanings is quite challenging. Imagine now that all these language issues existed and you had no awareness of the problem. Your conversation would be filled with misunderstandings whether you knew it or not. It is not just the words we use, but the definitions we understand them to have that make a difference for communication.

It is no accident that we are presented with the first scriptural example of the term “Christian” in reference to the community of Christ followers in Antioch who diligently grew together in the faith. They, alongside Saul and Barnabas, cultivated a sense of dependency upon the Holy Spirit and dedication to communal learning. Despite its clear usage in Acts 11:26, the term “Christian” is one of the most nebulous words in the world today. There simply is not a great sense of clarity about what it means to truly be a Christian.

For some, Christianity is no more than a box to be checked. For others, Christianity is defined by church attendance, agreement to an ethical code of conduct, a checking of a box, or a repeated prayer. Biblical

Christianity, however, is simply recognizing the lordship, sacrifice, and victory of Christ in such a way that it causes us to repent of our sin and experience the grace-filled redemption of God in Christ as He, by His Holy Spirit, begins to shape our lives according to His will.

Correcting misconceptions in the Corinthian church, the Apostle Paul wrote, *“For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.”*²² To be a Christian is to experience the grace of God as it transforms your heart and life to be more like Jesus.

BIG IDEA: Possessing a biblically accurate definition of Christianity is often neglected, but is extremely important.

APPLY:

- **Question:** How do the verses surrounding Acts 11:26 help us to understand what Luke meant when he used the term “Christian” to describe the church in Antioch?

- **Question:** When people use the term “Christian,” what do you think they have in mind?

- **Question:** Today’s study defined Christianity by stating, *“Biblical Christianity is recognizing the lordship, sacrifice, and victory of Christ in such a way that it causes us to repent of our sin and experience the grace-filled redemption of God in Christ as He, by His Holy Spirit, begins to shape our lives according to His will.”*
 - o In what ways would you modify this definition to be more helpful or in alignment with Scripture?

- **Continued Reading:** For continued reading on this subject, read the online article entitled “What is a Christian?” written by John Piper.

²² See 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 for reference.

Week 15: Acts 11:19-30

Day 4: Faith and Finances

READ: Acts 15:29-30, 2 Corinthians 9:7

EXPLORE:

True faith affects our finances. Due to corruption and irresponsibility in churches, the conversation about finances has become tarnished.

However, our text today reveals some important aspects of how our finances play a significant role in our faith being put into practice. For the sake of the church in Judea, we see the church in Antioch donate, Saul and Barnabas deliver, and the elders distribute as they determine the need. Today we will reflect on three overarching New Testament principles of generosity.

First, giving is for the glory of God. Giving is always meant to be done out of joy and never out of obligation, nor to be seen as a type of law. Our text reveals that “everyone” is expected to give and that this giving is not based on a specific amount but according to their own ability. In Christ, we no longer have to fulfill the tithe offerings of the Old Testament. In fact, the tithe is never mentioned to the church in the New Testament. Today, we give out of an overflow of worship to God because of the gift he has given us in Jesus. Every Christian is expected to give and to do so cheerfully as they have decided in their hearts.

Second, giving is for the good of others. Offerings are to be used for the care and building up of the church. Whether for sending relief to another church community, benevolent care for those in the immediate context,²³ or providing for pastors/elders²⁴ or missionaries,²⁵ offerings are meant to be used for the good of others.

Third, giving is for gospel advancement. Although our context is much different than the first century church, there is a key similarity. As a church gives generously for the glory of God and the good of others, it

²³ See Acts 2:42-48; 4:32-37 for reference.

²⁴ See 1 Timothy 5:17 for reference.

²⁵ See 2 Corinthians 11:7-9 for reference.

Week 15: Acts 11:19-30

Day 5: Moving for the Mission

READ: Acts 11:19-26 and Romans 10:13-15

EXPLORE:

“For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’” —Romans 10:13-15

Paul’s series of questions in Romans 10 invites us into the same ministry that breathed life into the church at Antioch. People willingly moved in response to their mission. For Saul, Barnabas, and others like them, the message of the gospel was worth the disruption and the discomfort. Their encounter with the grace of Christ necessitated that they move on mission. We ought to be challenged, and even unsettled, as we read Acts 11:19-26. Are we willing to have our lives disrupted because of the magnitude of the gospel and the immensity of lostness in our world? Are we willing to be moved for the mission?

Today’s Word to Life study is formulated in response to questions like these. As you read Scripture, pray, and complete the activities, may your heart be challenged to move for the mission.

APPLY:

Activity One: Read and pray through the Scriptures below.

- **1 Samuel 12:24** “But be sure to fear the LORD and serve Him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things He has done for you.”
- **Jeremiah 20:9** “If I say, “I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,” there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.”

- **Galatians 6:9** “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”
- **1 Peter 4:10** “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.”

Activity Two: Spend time reading through and praying about the Great Commission work that is occurring around the globe. As you do so, pray that God would challenge your heart and shape your life so that you are available to move for His mission.

- **Stratus Index:** The Stratus Index is a recently created online tool that synthesizes reliable data from different sources to display the world’s most urgent physical and spiritual needs.
 - o **Instructions:** Perform an online search for Stratus Index or stratus.earth and begin to pray for the needs in different countries.
- **LifePoint Missions’ Partners:** Consider how God might use you in our immediate context with various missions’ partners in the Greater Houston Area and beyond. The LifePoint Missions page might be a great place to get started.
 - o **Instructions:** Visit golpc.org and visit the missions page under the ministries tab.
- **Timothy Initiative:** The Timothy Initiative (TTI) is a non-profit missions organization based in Raleigh, North Carolina, committed to multiplying disciples of Jesus in the most statistically unreached places around the globe.
 - o **Instructions:** Perform an online search for The Timothy Initiative to learn more.

Week 16: Acts 12:1-19

Day 1: Earnest Prayer in Unspeakable Pain

READ: Acts 12:1-19

EXPLORE:

The opening words of Acts 12 are yet another reminder that the church's season of widespread peace had come to a swift end in the reign of King Herod. Although the church had encountered a temporary reprieve from pervasive hatred, things were heating up. As we will study this week, this rise developed from the leadership of King Herod.

Those who are familiar with the story of Jesus' birth in the Gospel of Matthew may be confused to hear about Herod persecuting the early Church. After all, didn't Herod die when Jesus was still a little child?²⁶ Simply, the Herod mentioned in Acts is a different king. The Herod of Jesus' birth story was Herod the Great. Acts 12 introduces us to his grandson, Herod Agrippa I, (known historically as Agrippa) who reigned between 41 and 44 AD. Although the biblical text does not specifically indicate why he persecuted the Church, it does tell us he was interested in the Jews' approval.

Agrippa's violence toward the Church resulted not only in the death of James, the brother of John, but also in Peter's dramatic prison experience. What is truly remarkable in this gripping narrative is the Church's response to the increasing cruelty and persecution. Luke characterizes the church's reaction, writing, *"So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church."*²⁷

When the early church was met with immense pain and suffering, their response was reflective of their spiritual priority: fervent, earnest prayer. Depending on which English translation you read, the prayers of the suffering church are described as earnest, persistent, unceasing, intense, or unyielding. The original Greek word used in this passage carries the idea of stretching out intently and intensely. Translated

²⁶ See Matthew 2:19 for reference.

²⁷ See Acts 12:5 for reference.

from the Greek in a very formulaic manner, the passage would read, “An earnest prayer became in the church without ceasing.”

When Peter later wrote to the persecuted church in the ancient world, he encouraged them using the same Greek word. He wrote, “*Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.*”²⁸ In the same way that the church earnestly prayed for Peter, he encouraged the persecuted church to earnestly love one another. Peter encouraged in others what he had experienced through the Church and in his life.

The people of God are called to earnestly pray even when we encounter unspeakable pain. Our seasons of hardship may not look exactly like the violent reign of Agrippa, but our response ought to mirror that of the early church. Do we faithfully reach out toward God when all hope seems lost? Do we earnestly pray when we’re in unspeakable pain? As we continue to immerse ourselves in this story in the coming days, make time to earnestly pray to God.

BIG IDEA: The people of God are called to earnestly pray, especially when we encounter unspeakable pain.

APPLY:

- **Question:** What is an example from your life when you earnestly prayed to God? What was the result of those prayers?

- **Question:** The Greek word for “*earnestly*” is rare. Its form is only used here in Acts 12 and in I Peter 4:8. Why do you think Peter chose to use the same word/idea when he was encouraging the church to *earnestly* love one another?

²⁸ See I Peter 4:8

Week 16: Acts 12:1-19

Day 2: Who is James?

READ: Acts 12:1-19

EXPLORE:

Have you ever noticed how confusing biblical names can be? Now, I know all of you reading this Word to Life study have every biblical name memorized, but it is a different story for the rest of us commonfolk. The truth is that biblical names can be challenging. Sometimes, we encounter different characters with distressingly similar names. On other occasions, we get to know a biblical character only to have their name changed halfway through the story. If we don't stop to carefully sort through the biblical names, things can quickly get tricky.

Before we unpack the character of James the brother of John, who was murdered by Agrippa, we need to point out two tricky spots in the text. First, the Mary referenced in Acts 12:12 is not the mother of Jesus, but of John (whose other name was Mark). Second, the James who Peter referenced in Acts 12:17 is not the one who died in verse 2, but is most likely the half-brother of Jesus.²⁹ Some poor readings of Acts 12 can be avoided if the names are rightly understood. With that in mind, we can now explore the significance of James who was killed by Agrippa.

The James in Acts 12:2 was the brother of John and the son of Zebedee. He was listed as one of the disciples selected to follow Jesus during his earthly ministry.³⁰ He was one of the first disciples chosen; ³¹ Jesus nicknamed James and John the "*Sons of Thunder*".⁷ As the ministry of Jesus progressed over the years, James was part of an informal "inner circle" of disciples. For example, there were times when only James, Peter, and John were allowed to experience an aspect of Christ's character or teaching.³² James loved Jesus and was loved by Him.

²⁹ See Mark 6:3 for reference.

³⁰ Luke 6:14 lists him among the twelve after Simon Peter and his brother named Andrew.

³¹ See Luke 5:10 for his call narrative.

³² See Mark 5:37 and Matthew 17 for examples.

In an instant, the earthly life of James was literally cut short. He was beheaded because of his allegiance to Christ and his role in the church. Agrippa's choice to have James executed by beheading instead of another more gruesome, painful way tells us that the Romans thought of Christianity as a nuisance rather than a legitimate threat to their rule. His execution demonstrates the violence and severity of Agrippa against one of the most beloved believers in the early church.

There is a subtle, but important truth for us in the recounting of James's death. Even though the early church lost a crucial leader, the gospel ministry continued. The death of James could not stop the church's ministry or silence their prayers. Through times of incredible violence and unspeakable pain, God has been and will continue to be faithful!

BIG IDEA: Even though James's death was a crucial loss for the early church, the mission of God continued.

APPLY:

- **Question:** How do you think James's background, written about in the gospels, helps us understand the impact his death had on the church?

- **Question:** It can be hard to trust that God's mission will continue after a major hardship. How have you learned to trust God despite major setbacks?

Week 16: Acts 12:1-19

Day 3: More to the Story

READ: Acts 12:6-17

EXPLORE:

Following his arrest, the events of Peter's imprisonment and escape accelerated rapidly. Peter transitioned from being bound and imprisoned to being surprisingly reunited with his community in only a few verses. A lot takes place!

To study this narrative well, it is necessary to keep all these details in order. Today's activities and questions are designed to promote an organized and edifying understanding of Acts 12:6-17. Complete the following activities and questions in order.

Activity 1: List the events of Acts 12:6-17 in order.

Question: (Acts 12:6-8) Given all the commotion and activity of Peter's escape, why do you think the guards were not awakened?

Question: (Acts 12:9,11) What do you think is the significance of Peter not immediately realizing the reality of his own rescue? Based on what Peter experienced in Acts 10:9-17a, why do you think he assumed the angel-rescue was a vision?

Question: (Acts 12:16) Why would the people in Mary's house be ready to believe Peter's angel was at the door rather than Peter himself?

Question: (Acts 12:17) Why do you think Luke included the detail about Peter quieting the people in Mary's house?

Week 16: Acts 12:1-19

Day 4: Surprised by the Answer

READ: Acts 12:6-19

EXPLORE:

I (Stephen) doubt Luke intended to make his readers laugh in the interaction between Rhoda and Peter, but the mental image created by the story is almost too much to handle. The idea of Peter being stranded outside while Rhoda joyously ran away is hilarious.

Certainly, the situation would have been tense in the moment, but the whole scenario is ironically hysterical. Think about the events in our story. Rhoda was so excited that she left Peter outside. Peter was only recently made aware that his freedom was more than another bizarre dream. At the same time, the prayer-filled church was simultaneously requesting and refuting the deliverance of Peter. This, my friends, is comedic gold! Stories like this remind me of how thankful I am that God works in us despite our shortcomings.

There is a specific moment in the flood of hysterical irony that deserves our attention for today's Word to Life study: the disbelief that occurred in the church even as they prayed for Peter. The men scoffed at Rhoda's words and thought she was crazy. They heard the news about Peter, but they assumed it was too good to be true; they doubted a God-given answer for which they had prayed. The church refused what they had requested.

Luke records the events writing, *"And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!" But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed."*³³

³³ See Acts 12:13-16 for reference.

When they finally opened the door and let Peter inside, they were amazed. I cannot help but think that the scene that took place in Mary's house two thousand years ago still takes place today. We earnestly pray for an answer but we are truly surprised when we get one. As believers in the same wonder-working God, we should not be surprised when our fervent, earnest prayers are met with an answer more incredible than we dreamed possible.

James (the half-brother of Jesus) wrote, *"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind."*³⁴ I pray that God would mold us into a people who embrace a sense of open-ended expectancy in our prayers and with our lives.

BIG IDEA: Pray big prayers and do not be surprised when your expectations are surpassed or transformed by His answers.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Has there been a time in your life when you received an answer to prayer, but did not realize it in the moment? If so, explain.
- **Question:** Does your prayer life reflect a belief that God can and will powerfully respond? Why or why not?

³⁴ See James 1:5-6 for reference.

Week 16: Acts 12:1-19

Day 5: Peter or Angel?

READ: Psalm 91:11, Luke 16:22, Matthew 18:10, and Hebrews 1:14

EXPLORE:

Several of the passages we have studied in Acts have been used to form unhelpful and even unbiblical doctrinal stances. This may occur in several ways and for several reasons. A bad interpretation of a biblical passage can occur when a text is read out of its context or in isolation from the whole of Scripture. In this case and others like it, we need to recalibrate our understanding to read the passage rightly.

For example, the people who tried to refute Rhoda's experience with Peter responded to her by saying, "*It is his angel.*" In this single verse, some have attempted to craft an entire angelology. This is a problematic reading of this passage for a few reasons.

First, the disciples who challenged Rhoda and denied Peter's deliverance are hardly an example for us to follow. Their unceasing prayer is certainly good, but Luke does not present them as a model of good discernment. It is rather interesting that the praying community was more inclined to believe that a ghost rather than Peter himself had appeared. It seems it was easier for them to think Peter had died than that he had been liberated from prison.

Second, we need to notice that there was a common Jewish conception that people possessed a guardian angel. This concept is presented in sources other than the Bible, not explicitly in the Scriptures themselves.³⁵ When Scripture references protective angels, it typically alludes to a group of angels rather than an individual or personal protector.³⁶ With this in mind, it is highly unlikely that the disciples were referring to a guardian angel.

³⁵ The extrabiblical work, Tobit 5:4-16 references the common Jewish idea that each person had a guardian angel as his or her counterpart.

³⁶ See Psalm 91:11, Luke 16:22, Matthew 18:10, and Hebrews 1:14 for reference.

Finally, we should see that the Bible does include examples of encountering righteous people who had previously died.³⁷ This reading of the text is called the righteous-dead interpretation. Although this experience is not a normal occurrence in Scripture, it is possible the disciples believed the “ghost” of Peter had come to visit them. Even when the resurrected Christ came among his followers in Luke 24:37, they were frightened and thought they saw a spirit. In fairness to them, they were living amidst persecution and had experienced their fair share of inexplicable, supernatural occurrences.

BIG IDEA: We should read the disciples’ comments about Peter’s angel alongside the whole counsel of Scripture and within context.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Why do you think it was easier for the Jesus followers to believe Rhoda had encountered a ghost rather than Peter himself?

- **Question:** What are some other examples of biblical passages that can be unhelpful, problematic, and even dangerous when they are read out of context?

³⁷ Moses and Elijah appeared alongside Jesus in Matthew 17 on the mount of Transfiguration.

Week 17: Acts 12:20-25

Day 1: Merciful Provision and Righteous Judgment

READ: Acts 12:20-25 and Luke 6:17-19

EXPLORE:

It is likely that you will remember this week's passage for a long time. The brutal, immediate, and graphic death of a powerful leader is hard to forget. It is not every day that we encounter a worm-eating, robe-wearing, Herod-executing text in the Scriptures. We certainly have something unique instore. Although it is unlikely that we will forget this story, it is possible that we might miss what really deserves our attention. Our goal in today's Word to Life study is to set the stage for this narrative. Simply, we need to have a broad overview of the situation at hand so that we can understand it rightly.

In the opening verses of this section, Luke takes us into an angry dispute between Herod and the people of two Phoenician cities, Tyre and Sidon. Herod had just unsuccessfully attempted to take Peter down, but the drama was only beginning. Herod was furious and at his wit's end. The specific Greek verb that Luke uses to describe Herod's word only occurs once in the New Testament and it refers to an intense animosity and even exasperation.³⁸

Historically, we know that Tyre and Sidon were both important and long-lasting locations for trade in the ancient world.³⁹ These two cities depended on the commerce of the surrounding regions to thrive. Based on the details of Luke's account, it is most likely that Tyre and Sidon were under some form of trade restriction or even an embargo. Their situation was bleak, and they sought the help of Herod's chamberlain. In ancient times, the chamberlain functioned as the personal assistant to the ruler. Blastus most likely had the influence and authority over a significant portion of Herod's guard.

³⁸ The Greek word is *thymomacheō* (G2371) which has connotations of anger, animosity, exasperation, and fury.

³⁹ See I Kings 5 and Ezekiel 27 for reference.

As the story continues to unfold, it becomes clear that Herod's response to the people of Tyre and Sidon was satisfactory to them. It is interesting that Luke does not record Herod's speech, but only the events that followed. Herod apparently developed a new agreement and the crowd responded joyously to this new success. In response to Herod's decision, the people shouted, "*The voice of a god, and not of a man!*" What occurred immediately afterward is the portion of our story which is quite challenging to forget. In his pride, Herod was struck down. His body was consumed by worms and died.

We will certainly spend time unpacking smaller elements of this story, but we should not miss the overarching context that is unfolding. The vulnerable and helpless Peter was liberated by God. The mighty and powerful Herod was brought to a swift end. In all of it, the Word of God increased and multiplied throughout the world. Luke includes these details intentionally. The story of Herod's demise is not accidental. In this narrative, we are meant to simultaneously encounter the merciful provision and righteous judgment of God.

BIG IDEA: Luke connects Peter's liberation and Herod's death to simultaneously communicate God's merciful provision and His righteous judgment.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Imagine that you belonged to the early church. What would have been the effect of Herod's death on your life and faith?

- **Question:** Read Luke 6:17-19. What was Jesus's interaction with Tyre and Sidon during his earthly ministry? In what way or ways could it be helpful to read Acts 12 in light of Luke 6?

Week 17: Acts 12:20-25

Day 2: Real Peace in a World of Counterfeits

READ: Acts 12:20

EXPLORE:

A lifelong struggle with sleep walking has left me (Stephen) with plenty of interesting stories. I bring a whole new meaning to the term “active sleeper.” On one specific and admittedly recent occasion, I slept walked my way into the kitchen for a snack. Instead of grabbing food like an average sleeping zombie, I proceeded to grab my car keys located near the refrigerator. Understandably confused, I continued to click my car keys at the refrigerator door and wonder why nothing was happening. You now understand my confusion and frustration when I was awakened to the sound of my car horn, standing before the refrigerator. This story ought to be my official apology to all who have, at one time or another, bravely shared a house with me.

If I was awake and alert, I would have never tried to open the refrigerator by clicking a set of car keys. Simply, the keys are not designed for the task that I was asking them to do. When I think about silly stories like this, I am reminded of many instances in which I have expected created things to fulfill that which could only be accomplished by the Creator. Acts 12:20 is a reminder of this dynamic in the ancient world.

The people of Tyre and Sidon were understandably stressed and desperate. They went to Blastus for help and provision. Moreover, their distress led them to request peace from Herod. Historically, this request for peace makes a lot of sense. Prior to the birth of Christ and through the later years of the second century AD, the Romans developed a widespread harmony between the various regions that were controlled by their empire. The historical name for this dynamic is Pax Romana (Roman Peace). Although the Romans claimed to have developed widespread peace, their rule was opposed to the way of Christ and the kingdom of heaven.

Instead of providing peace through the transformation of hearts and lives through the grace of God in Christ, Pax Romana was militaristic, coercive, and violent. The compliance they established was nothing like the peace of Christ. Ultimately, the people of Tyre and Sidon asked Herod to supply what only God could give. Stories like Acts 12 make me wonder about the places to which we turn for peace that were never designed to supply it. I wonder how often we turn toward that which was created and wonder why it cannot give us what can only be provided in our Creator.

First, think about where you often turn to receive peace. Second, read through Acts 12:20 and the passages below and pray that God would become your ever-present source of peace.

- *Psalm 4:8 In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.*
- *Daniel 10:19 And he said, "O man greatly loved, fear not, peace be with you; be strong and of good courage." And as he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, "Let my lord speak, for you have strengthened me."*
- *Isaiah 32:17 And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.*

BIG IDEA: God is the source of our peace.

APPLY:

- **Activity:** In what ways do you need to be challenged to trust God's provision of peace in your life? Write down some answers to share with your LifeGroup.

Week 17: Acts 12:20-25

Day 3: The Ethics of Herod's Execution

READ: Acts 12:20-25

EXPLORE:

Anytime that we run into a story of God ending someone's life in Scripture it raises several ethical questions. Is it right for God to be able to forcefully end someone's life? How is God loving if He explicitly ends human life? These are questions that deserve our attention and warrant further exploration. As such, the aim of today's study is to expose some overarching truths that will be helpful for a right understanding of this dilemma.

We first need to notice that graphic death stories are common within the ancient world and within the biblical text. To put it simply, the way that a person died would often give the ancient audience an indication of what they were supposed to think about the recently deceased. In the ancient mindset, the gruesome and public death of Herod was understood as a statement of his open defiance and opposition toward God.⁴⁰

The idea of Herod being struck down is consistent with terminology that is used throughout the Old Testament. For any reader of Acts who was familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures, Luke alludes to God's judgment which either occurred or could have occurred throughout human history.⁴¹ Job remarked on this exact dilemma, proclaiming, *"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."*⁴² As the author and creator of life, God is justified and good in all that He does.

⁴⁰ The ancient historian, Josephus also records the event of Herod's death.

⁴¹ See Genesis 8:21, Exodus 9:15; 12:23, Numbers 14:12, Deuteronomy 28:22, 2 Samuel 12:15, 2 Kings 19:35, 1 Samuel 25:38 and 2 Chronicles 13:20 for reference.

⁴² See Job 1:21 for reference.

It is important to note that God does not merely adhere to or abide by a moral standard. Rather, as the supreme being and creator of all things, He is the standard. God is the standard of all goodness and all justice. In fact, God's goodness necessitates action against evil. The Scriptures rightly describe God as One who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.⁴³ Although He is righteous in distributing justice, the God of the Bible loves a repentant heart.⁴⁴

We may not always understand God's actions in our time, but we can rest in the fact that the Lord is abounding in steadfast love even as He is righteous in all His judgment. This Word to Life study is not a comprehensive apologetic for the morality or efficacy of God's actions. This brief discussion comes with an encouragement to study more using the resources below.

BIG IDEA: God is righteous in all His ways, even when it results in the ending of a life.

APPLY:

- **Additional Resources:**

- **Article:** "Reasonable Faith" is a fabulous online resource for evangelism and apologetics questions. The article entitled "*On the Goodness of God*" is a helpful response written by Dr. William Lane Craig.
- **Book:** *Mere Christianity* is a classic text written by CS Lewis that brilliantly develops this question and others.
- **YouTube Video:** Southern Seminary produced a video in 2018 concerning the question, "Why did God command the OT killing of women and children?" This video is helpful and can be found online via YouTube.

⁴³ See Exodus 34:6-7 for reference.

⁴⁴ See Mark 1:15, Luke 5:32; 15:10, and Proverbs 1:23 for reference.

Week 17: Acts 12:20-25

Day 4: Kill Pride or It Will Kill You

READ: Mark 7:14-21

EXPLORE:

The way that Luke records Herod's demise is visually striking. Draped in royal robes and seated upon his throne, the imposing figure and commanding speech of Herod fills the people of Tyre and Sidon with awe and wonder. Luke's writing makes it seem as though we are a part of the crowd, listening as the masses shout aloud, "*The voice of a god, and not of a man.*" Herod's pride is palpable and so was his passing. In a swift act of judgment, Herod refused to give God glory and breathed his last.

Regardless of how different our situation is from Herod, the consequences of pride are still severe. The reality is that Scripture repeatedly speaks to the deadliness of our pride and arrogance before God and one another. Pride compromises relationships, inflates egos, and destroys our ability to submit to God's will. It is pride that causes us to refuse God's good design for our lives. We are encouraged to kill pride, or it will be killing us. Acts 12:20-25 is a cautionary tale against self-centeredness and self-exaltation. In this text, we are compelled to acknowledge and uproot the pride that so easily grows within us.

Considering these truths. We are called to confess our pride, turn toward God, and allow the truth of God's Word to transform our hearts and lives through the Holy Spirit.

Directions: Read and Pray through the following passages.

- Proverbs 16:18 *Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.*
- James 4:6 *But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."*

- Jeremiah 9:23-24 *Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord."*
- 1 John 2:16 *For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.*

BIG IDEA: Whether we realize it or not, pride is deadly.

APPLY:

- **Question:** How would you define pride? Use scriptural truth to defend your definition.
- **Question:** In what situations do you find it most challenging to avoid pride?
- **Question:** Would you describe pride as subtle and/or deceptive? Why or why not?

Week 17: Acts 12:20-25

Day 5: Execution, Escape, and Expansion

READ: Acts 12:24-25; 13:5; 15:36-41

EXPLORE:

The last words of the saga between Herod and Peter are punctuated with a decisive reminder that no matter how intense the persecution may become, absolutely nothing can stop the progress of the church. Herod was no more, and, at the same time, the word of God continued to multiply and increase. I (Stephen) find it beautiful that a story which began with execution and narrow escapes was concluded with the resilient expansion of the gospel. The fact is that Acts 12:24-25 are incredibly important for the story that will continue to unfold in the next section of Luke's account.

In Acts 12:25, Luke switches his focal character from Peter to Barnabas and Saul. This shift is a necessary move as Acts will begin to focus on the missionary journeys stemming from Antioch and other regions of the ancient world. As we have discussed previously, Luke is able to seamlessly switch focuses because the central and unifying character of Acts is God Himself.

Luke concludes Acts 12 by introducing the man named John, whose other name was Mark. Simply, John was his Jewish name and Mark was his Roman name. He was the son of Mary in whose house the Jerusalem church gathered to pray.⁴⁵ When we begin studying the missionary journeys in Acts 13 and beyond, John Mark is an important character.

Although John Mark went on the first missionary journey, he did not unfortunately make it through until the end. Acts 13:13 reads, "*Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Paphlunia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem.*" Eventually, the controversy over John Mark's departure from the first missionary journey resulted in a sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas.

⁴⁵ See Acts 12:12 for reference.

In the end, Barnabas took John called Mark with him and Paul continued onward with Silas.

Luke's concluding words in Acts 12:24-25 are hopeful, necessary, and realistic. His words are hopeful because they allude to continued expansion of the Christian faith despite persecution. They are necessary because they begin to set a framework within which the missionary journeys will take place in Acts 13 and beyond. Finally, Luke's conclusion is realistic because it introduces us to the contentious relationship between Paul, Barnabas, and John called Mark. In these ways and more, the brilliance of God's Word and His plan are on display. May we walk and talk with the assurance that the same God who was active in Acts continues today!

BIG IDEA: Neither executions nor narrow escapes could stop the expansion of the church.

APPLY:

- **Activity:** Read Hebrews 12:1-3 and take time considering your hardships and struggles in light of Christ's example.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted."—Hebrews 12:1-3



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