

A D V A N C E



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# ACTS DISCUSSION GUIDES

February 4 - April 1, 2018

## SERIES INTRO

Throughout spring and as a part of Advance 2018 we'll be studying the book of Acts. You may notice this sermon series has a slightly faster pace than normal. The goal of this series is to study a broad overview of Acts, to impress the overarching themes of the book on our hearts and minds.

The main theme of Acts is that the Holy Spirit continues the work of Jesus by building his Church on earth. Throughout the book we see the Spirit do amazing things through the Apostles and early believers, from miracles to facing down martyrdom. We'll see Peter preach at Pentecost, where 3000 people get saved in one day. We'll see Stephen pray for his murderers as he's being stoned. And we'll see average, everyday believers walking in radical faith, living generously and seeking for others to know about the new life available in Jesus.

This theme out of Acts is still true of the church today; the Holy Spirit is still actively building Jesus' church on earth. As we go through this series our prayer as a church is that the Holy Spirit would move in mighty ways, that people would be healed and lives changed by the power of God working through his people, and that the Lord would continue to add to his number day by day those who are being saved. (Acts 2:47)

## New: Main Idea and Main Application

You'll see each week below has a new sort of summary section, the Main Idea and Main Application. The Main Idea is a summarized version of the main thought or teaching in each passage. This won't cover every single idea in the passage, but will address the idea that is most clear or most crucial regarding our faith in Jesus. This section will naturally favor primary theological concepts over secondary/tertiary ones and closed-handed theological positions over open-handed ones.

The Main Application is a summary of the main ways we can apply this passage to our daily lives. This covers how the passage affects our beliefs, thoughts, feelings, community life, and prayer. Again, this section won't cover every point possible, but aims at poignant and timely applications both for your group and our church overall.



# February 4 – The Promise of the Holy Spirit

**Main idea:** In some of his last interactions with his disciples, Jesus prepares them for ministry by telling them about the coming of the Holy Spirit. This reveals the main theme of the book of Acts: the Holy Spirit continuing Jesus' work and accomplishing amazing things through the Apostles and early Christians. Though Jesus is no longer with us on earth, he continues to build his Church through the work of the Holy Spirit, who is ever present with us and empowers all believers to go out as Jesus' witnesses to the ends of the earth.

**Main application:** Jesus calls us to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth, which includes our family and friends and workplaces. That witness (and people responding to it by believing in Jesus) is empowered by the Spirit, who continues to build Jesus' church. As believers we're called to live faithful lives by the power of the Spirit, which leads us to trust the Lord's strength and power above our own and to pray for deeper reliance upon the Spirit in our daily lives.

## Discussion

- **Let's look at Acts 1:1-11**
- What stood out to you from the passage?
- How does this passage characterize the Holy Spirit?
- What do you think Jesus was asking his disciples to believe here?
- What do you think Jesus was trying to accomplish in this conversation?
- What implications might this passage have for us today?



# February 11 – Fellowship

**Main idea:** After a massive influx of new believers at Pentecost (Acts 2:41) the community of believers in Jerusalem began living in ways that reflected their radically new life in Jesus. Their attachment to the Apostles teaching, which the Apostles received directly from Jesus, and to gathering together and praying together led these believer to live in incredibly distinct, counter-cultural ways that reflected their newfound priorities.

**Main application:** The goal for us, in reading this passage, is not to simply replicate the way these believers lived; instead, we should examine their gospel-shaped priorities and apply those to our lives. For example, we don't have a temple to meet in, so we shouldn't build one to reproduce Acts 2:46. Instead, with the same spirit we can prioritize church gatherings and community groups and the like "with glad and generous hearts." In looking at these priorities we can praise God that he produces these priorities in the lives of believers, ask God to produce them in us, and pray that God uses our lives to add lost sons and daughters to the Kingdom.

## Discussion

- **Let's look at Acts 2:42-47**
- What stands out to you most about the gatherings of these believers?
- What do you think was motivating them to be this way?
- How do their actions and motives speak to God's character?
- How does this passage teach us what it means to follow Jesus?
- After reading this passage, in what areas of your life do you want to see growth?



# Conversation on the Gospel and Race

## ALTERNATE DISCUSSION

This is an alternate discussion guide based on the Tuesday, February 13 gathering, the *Conversation on the Gospel and Race* with Leonce Crump. This guide is intended to extend the conversation from Tuesday by looking at Philippians 2:1-11. Our hope is that this passage would ground us both in service towards others (“count others as more important than yourselves”) and humility (“have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus”). Even if your group members aren’t asking a lot of questions following the gathering, I’d encourage you to have this discussion together. Just because they aren’t asking questions doesn’t mean they have all the answers they need, and besides, we all have room to grow both in dealing with race-based issues and in advocating for the interests of others. (Phil. 2:4)

## Discussion

- **Read Philippians 2:1-11**
- What stood out to you from the Conversation on the Gospel and Race?
- How could this passage in Philippians help us in dealing with issues of race today?
- How does this passage describe Jesus' disposition towards others?
- In what ways do you think Jesus wants to expand your heart towards other people?
- What are some ways we can continue to grow in counting others as more significant than ourselves?

# February 18 – The Healing of a Beggar

**Main idea:** The first section of this passage, 3:1-10, is a straightforward miracle. By healing this man Peter proved his apostolic authority with a display of God's power, which drew a crowd to hear what would be his second sermon in Acts. The second section of this passage, 3:11-16, is the beginning of that sermon. Speaking to a largely Jewish context, Peter links the broader scope of biblical history to the work of Jesus and uses the display of God's power to attest to the saving power of God through Jesus.

**Main application:** The Holy Spirit most often calls people to follow God by working through believers, and the Spirit is absolutely still capable of doing incredible things today. And while a man was healed in this passage, the gospel was also preached. We should pray earnestly that the Spirit would move in our lives and the lives of others as a testimony to God's saving power through Jesus, and we shouldn't hesitate to link this movement to the work of Jesus through God's word.

## Discussion

- **Let's look at Acts 3:1-16**
- Imagine you were a face in the crowd that day. What would you have thought about all this?
- Why do you think this healing lead to Peter preaching about Jesus?
- What echoes of the Gospel do you see in this man's healing?
- What does this passage tell us about how God reveals himself through his followers?
- What are some of the implications for us today from this passage?



# February 25 – Peter and John Before the Council

**Main idea:** Following Peter's sermon and the healing of the man at the temple, the Sadducean leaders had Peter and John arrested. The next day the apostles were put in front of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council of leaders, the same men who just a few months prior had given Jesus over to Pilate to be crucified. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, began to testify to the name of Jesus, both for the healing of the man at the temple and for eternal salvation. The council threatened Peter and John unless they stopped speaking about Jesus. To this Peter boldly replied, "We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."

**Main application:** Jesus predicted that his followers would be drug into courts for his name's sake. (Luke 21:12) You're probably not going to be put before a Sanhedrin in 2018, but there are thousands of courts in our society, online, and in the minds of others in which you can be tried because of the name of Jesus. In these instances our instinct might be to keep our heads down or lash out in anger, neither of which are good testimony to the work of Jesus. Because of that work Peter knew he had an unshakeable hope in a much higher court than the Sanhedrin, which allowed him to testify boldly, peacefully, and without fear. This leads us to pray that God would give us courage and produce the same unyielding allegiance to Jesus within us.

## Discussion

- **Let's look at Acts 4:1-22**
- Why do you think Peter and John were arrested?
- How do you think Peter and John were feeling when the council was questioning them?
- What do you think they believed about God in this moment?
- What does this passage reveal about God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?
- What might this passage be telling us about following Jesus?



# March 4 – Praying for Boldness

**Main idea:** With the threats of the Sanhedrin still ringing in their ears, Peter and John returned to the gathering of believers and praised God for his sovereignty over all things. They affirmed God's control over all things, looking back to the death of Jesus as proof of God's perfect plan being worked out despite the evil of man. Clearly they were anticipating their own possible death at the hands of the same men that had crucified Jesus. In response to their belief regarding the sovereignty of God they then prayed for boldness, that they would continue to proclaim the gospel and not fear what other men could do to them.

**Main application:** We see in this passage the application of God's sovereignty for our timid hearts. The disciples could have prayed for God to rain down destruction on the Sanhedrin, or for safety and protection, but they didn't. Instead of asking God to use his control for their temporal benefit they asked him to use it to the eternal benefit of others, that God would use them to continue preaching the gospel so that more would be saved. This leads us to the Lord in the same prayer for boldness in proclaiming the Good News despite repercussions.

## Discussion

- **Let's look at Acts 4:23-31**
- What's your first reaction to this passage?
- What do you think it was like to be there that day?
- Looking at the prayer in verse 29-30, why do you think they asked for these things?
- What is this passage calling you to believe about God?
- How could this passage inform the way you pray?





# March 11 – The First Deacons

**Main idea:** Early in the life of the church we see believers gathering together, being taught the word, but already fulfilling other ministry functions as well, such as distributing food to widows and orphans. After this workload became too much for the 12 apostles, and after some people started to suffer because of mismanagement, the apostles instituted a new church office to help out: the deacon. This is the first organizational change to the church, which demonstrates the freedom we have to organize our churches under the grace of God, the priority we have in caring for people in the church, and having leaders in the church doing specific jobs like teaching or managing ministry.

**Main application:** God is concerned with the care of the Church, and he entrusts his Church to men and women who will care for her. This passage helps us prioritize both preaching and ministry; the church should always be proclaiming the Gospel while helping those who need help. It shows us the need for us to become the hands and feet of the church, and the need for men and women to step into leadership roles to the benefit of the church. It also leads us to the Lord in prayer, that he would help us serve joyfully and raise up more leaders.

## Discussion

- **Let's look at Acts 6:1-7**
- What stood out to you from this passage?
- Why do you think this passage is in the bible?
- How does this passage communicate the priorities of the early church?
- What do you think this passage reveals about God's wishes for his church?
- How might this passage lead us in stepping up to care for others?



# March 18 – The Stoning of Stephen

**Main idea:** In Acts 6 and 7 we see Stephen become the first Christian martyr. His death mirrored Jesus'; he was plotted against by those in power, arrested on false charges, and even prayed for the forgiveness of his murderers. There's so much in this passage, Stephen's historical overview of Israel's need for salvation, the response of the Jewish leaders in power, Stephen's faithful death for his profession, etc. The main thing that stands out is the resistance of the crowd to the gospel. Just a few chapters ago Peter preached a very similar sermon and 3000 people became believers. Here, Stephen preached and was stoned for it.

**Main application:** All human beings inherently resist God. This is Genesis 3 and Romans 1; until he changes our affections we don't want any part of him. We shouldn't be surprised when people don't want anything to do with his Good News or his followers. We shouldn't be surprised if we personally suffer for following Jesus. This suffering actually assists in our witness, even to the point of death, as a testimony to what we believe and to who Jesus is. (2 Corinthians 4:11) This leads us to pray that our allegiance to Jesus would be stronger than our fear of suffering, and that we would never cease to bear witness.

## Discussion

- **For the leader: Give everyone a few minutes to read Acts 6:8–7:60. Alternatively you can ask someone to just read Acts 7:51–60 aloud.**
- What questions does this passage raise for you?
- Why do you think the crowd was so mad at Stephen for saying these things?
- What do you think Stephen was thinking while this happened?
- What does Stephen's stoning tell us about his faith in Jesus?
- How does this passage help us understand what it means to be a follower of Jesus?



# March 25 (Palm Sunday) – Pentecost, part I

**Main idea:** Over Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday we'll be looking at sections of Peter's sermon at Pentecost, the first public proclamation of the gospel following Jesus' death and resurrection. This sermon can be broken into three sections: 2:14–21, where Peter quotes the Old Testament prophet Joel; 2:22–36, in which he explains Jesus as the Messiah; and 2:37–41, in which he calls people to repent and be baptized. Peter was preaching to a primarily Jewish audience, so the first section grounds what they're witnessing (the miracle of tongues and the proclamation of the gospel) in their pre-existing beliefs from the OT. He then goes on to tell the crowd that Jesus was the Messiah that had also been prophesied, and yet just a month prior they had crucified him.

**Main application:** The big kicker in this passage is Peter pointing his finger at the crowd and saying, "this Jesus...you crucified." Not having witnessed or participated in Jesus' crucifixion, it's hard for us today to really feel culpable. Yet by our disobedience to God we're responsible for the sin that Jesus bore on the cross. We too were "lawless men" (and women). This doesn't mean we should respond by trying to feel extra guilty for our sins this week. Instead, we can reflect on our massive need for mercy and stand in awe that God would give it at his expense.

## Discussion

- **Let's look at Acts 2:14–23**
- What stood out to you from this passage?
- Why do you think Peter pointed out that the crowd was responsible for Jesus' death?
- Why do you think Peter quoted the prophet Joel here?
- What might God have been trying to accomplish through Peter that day?
- How do you think this passage is calling you to respond to Jesus' crucifixion?



# April 1 (Easter Sunday) – Pentecost, part II

**Main idea:** Reference last week's Main Idea for an overview of Acts 2:14–41. In this week's passage (2:24–41) Peter continues his explanation of Jesus as the Messiah, pointing again to Old Testament prophecy regarding the Messiah's inevitable resurrection and declaring its fulfillment in Jesus.

**Main application:** Remember last week, Peter specifically pointed out to the crowd that they had crucified Jesus. This cut them to the heart, and in response they asked, "What shall we do?" In this passage we see parallels for what happens when someone becomes a follower. They hear the gospel, experience conviction over their sin, and realize their inability to make up for it. The solution, though, isn't to become a Christian and start doing all the right things. Instead of preaching moralism, Peter tells the crowd to repent (turn away from sin and towards Jesus) and be baptized (profess faith in Jesus). This is both what happens when someone becomes a follower and what happens as followers live the Christian life and encounter conviction along the way. This leads us to pray that we would be consistently repenting from sin and growing in our faith.

## Discussion

- **Let's look at Acts 2:22–41**
- What is most compelling to you in this passage?
- Why do you think Peter kept quoting from David in his sermon?
- What are some of the conclusions Peter reaches about Jesus here?
- How might this passage help us see the greatness of God?
- In what ways are we called to respond to this passage?



# April 8 – The Conversion of Saul

**Main idea:** Due to the persecution that arose from Stephen's stoning (Acts 8:1), Christians scattered out from Jerusalem into the surrounding areas. Saul of Tarsus, one of the main progenitors of the persecution, began tracking these Christians down, and on his way to Damascus encountered the risen Jesus. Jesus appeared to Paul, temporarily blinded him, sent him into seclusion, and sent him another Christian to declare the Lord's purpose for him and give him his sight back. Jesus' actions towards Paul were equal parts ostentatious and nurturing; his encounter serves as a broader message to the watching world, that God turns his enemies into his chosen instruments, and a very intimate message to Paul, that God wanted to reveal himself to him.

**Main application:** God turns his enemies into his chosen instruments. He's given us every reason to believe he can save anyone and use them for the sake of his name. Followers of Jesus, as former enemies of God, can rejoice at this truth from lived experience; they know full well that God is mighty to save. And as we live our lives alongside doubters and seekers, we can take heart that they aren't outside the reach of God. We can pray that God will deal with them like he dealt with Paul, that he would make himself known to them and shed light on his purpose for them.

## Discussion

- **Let's look at Acts 9:1-19**
- Why do you think Jesus came to Paul specifically?
- Why do you think Jesus made Paul blind and sent him Ananias?
- What's your reaction to verse 16?
- What do you think this passage is calling you to believe about God?
- How does this help you understand how people become followers of Jesus?



# April 15 – Peter and Cornelius

**Main idea:** In this passage a huge shift in the story of redemption occurs. This is what Paul describes in Romans 11 as the grafting in of the Gentiles, and what was spoken of through the prophets Isaiah and Amos, that God was saving Jews and non-Jews through the work of Jesus. For the early church, which was almost exclusively ethnically Jewish, this was astonishing, and some were incredulous. They had never imagined that God would give eternal life to anyone other than the Jews. Yet God, acting through Peter the Jew and Cornelius the Gentile, demonstrated to his people that he would not show partiality with the outpouring of his Spirit.

**Main application:** Over the next three weeks we'll unpack this huge shift. In short, by grafting in the Gentiles to the promise of salvation, God tore down the need for a specific ethnic identity to receive his mercy. In Acts 10:44 the outpouring of the Holy Spirit became the unifying factor for God's people across ethnic, linguistic, and social lines. However, we humans are excellent at building new lines with things like ethnicity, heritage, ideology, culture, vocabulary, you name it. Yet God has declared he shows no partiality, and as followers of Jesus we can be a force of peace and reconciliation to a divided world. We can go forth in the radical love that Jesus has shown us, praying that God would use us to break down divisions so that more people can know him.

## Discussion

- **Let's look at Acts 10:34-48**
- Why do you think the Jewish believers were amazed in verse 45?
- What do you think God was teaching Peter here?
- Why do you think showing "no partiality" is important to God?
- What people are you most likely to show partiality for or against?
- How can our being impartial reflect God's character to those around us?



## April 22 – The Founding of the Church in Antioch

**Main idea:** Looking back at chapter 10 and Peter's encounter with Cornelius, Acts 11:19–26 serves as confirmation of how God was beginning to move among the Gentiles. The explosive increase of believers in Antioch, most of whom were not Jews, drew the attention of the church leaders in Jerusalem. They then sent Barnabas to investigate and report back, and he was greatly encouraged at what he saw there. He and Paul then spent a whole year pouring into the church in Antioch, teaching these new believers about their new life in Christ. Note that this would become Paul's model for church planting throughout his ministry.

**Main application:** Again, looking back at last week and ahead towards next week we'll see an overarching movement of God to reshape in the minds of early church members what it meant to partake in the gift of grace through Jesus. Before Peter and Cornelius, Jewish believers thought it was faith in Christ plus their ethnic identity as Jews. Through Acts 10–15 we see that the gift of grace through Jesus is by faith alone, outside of any other affiliation we would add. Looking at Barnabas in this passage, we can delight when the gospel is received by anyone, no matter how different they are from us. That is such a timely message for us today, when the church is divided in countless ways. Unification and inclusion are a priority for our God; they should be for us as well.

### Discussion

- **Let's look at Acts 11:19–26**
- What are the different groups of people in this passage, and how does that help us understand what's going on here?
- Why do you think it was important to note that "the hand of the Lord was with them"?
- What stands out to you about Barnabas' role in this passage?
- How does the founding of the church in Antioch relate to us today?
- How can this passage inform the way we make disciples?



## April 29 – The Jerusalem Council

**Main idea:** Acts 10:1-48 happened roughly ten years before the Jerusalem council, yet throughout the decade many Jewish teachers continued to either deny that Gentiles could be saved or require that they follow the Law to be saved. This is the question at the core of Acts 15; Paul and Barnabas deny the requirement of the Mosaic Law for Gentiles and bring the issue to the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. Peter testifies to his experience from Acts 10, and James (the brother of Jesus) makes the ultimate decision: Gentiles would not be required to obey the law. This decree declared what had been revealed to Peter 10 years prior, that membership in the church was not determined by ethnic identity or by ceremonial law but by nothing other than the grace of Jesus.

**Main application:** The question about obeying the Mosaic Law isn't something we're still asking, but we humans have a tendency towards coming up with new laws and requirements for inclusion, particularly in the church. We do this with all kinds of things, like one's taste in music or political affiliation. We also tend to come up with restrictions, either explicitly or implicitly, on the "kinds" of people who are included in "our" church, notably in the US along ethnic and socioeconomic lines. Just like the early church, we need God to continually renew our hearts and strip off anything we would add to the identity that makes us truly Christian, an identity that's founded by and found only in Jesus. Again, if God makes such an effort towards unity and inclusion, so should we.

### Discussion

- **Let's look at Acts 15:1-21**
- Why do you think some folks were saying you had to follow the customs of Moses to be saved?
- What's the overall tone of this passage?
- What might Peter be teaching us about salvation in verses 7-11?
- How do you think this decision by the Apostles applies to us today?
- What would it be like for our group or our church to embody the spirit of this passage?

