

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

A Study based on the Book of Acts

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Introduction to the series

The Book of Acts is long and full of action, sermons, travels and travails, supernatural guidance, and other miracles. A study of the book could focus on any number of themes, such as the geographic and ethnic expansion of the church, or the role of the Holy Spirit in spreading the gospel. Indeed, some have suggested that it should be called “The Acts of the Holy Spirit” in preference to “The Acts of the Apostles.” That might be considered especially appropriate in view of the fact that non-apostles like Stephen and Philip figure prominently at some significant turning points, as do Priscilla and Aquila later on.

For purposes of this series, I have chosen to focus on a particular activity of the Holy Spirit which involves every believer, and not just the named characters in Acts. For truly it is the whole church (including every individual member) which the Holy Spirit empowers to make the invisible truths of the Kingdom of God visible (and audible) realities in the world. As Lesson One unfolds, we will find that the resurrected Jesus physically disappeared. Yet Peter boldly proclaims that God has made this invisible Jesus “both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). What is his evidence for this claim?

Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are *seeing* and *hearing* [Acts 2:33, emphasis added].

Peter pointed to the visible and audible work of the Holy Spirit in the 120 disciples on Pentecost as evidence for the invisible exaltation of Jesus to “the right hand of God.” If the ascension in chapter one made Jesus invisible, the pouring out of the Spirit in chapter two is visible evidence of the otherwise invisible lordship of Jesus.

We could say that this is the whole purpose of the church: to make the invisible realities of the Kingdom visible realities in our world. That is what this series will explore through attention to selected portions of The Book of Acts.

Note that Scripture quotations throughout the series will be from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise indicated.

Making the Invisible Visible

Lesson 1: Acts 1-2

Introduction to the Lesson: “Seeing the Invisible”

The Book of Acts is not alone in the biblical paradox of “seeing the invisible.” The Apostle Paul says that “God’s *invisible* qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been *clearly seen*, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20, New International Version, emphasis added). Romans 1 argues that people who have no exposure to the revealed Word of God are nonetheless responsible for what they could and should know about God from observing the visible world. The visible creation bears witness to God’s “eternal power and divine nature,” i.e., that God pre-dates creation as its Creator and that he transcends creation by owing his existence (“nature”) to no one, in contrast to all of creation which owes its existence to its Maker. So, in other words, we *ought to see the invisible by seeing and reflecting on the visible*. But instead of acknowledging God (the invisible source of all the visible creation), humanity rebelliously chose to elevate visible, created things to the status of “god” or “gods” (see Rom. 1:21-23; cf. Heb. 11:3).

Thanks to God’s grace, some did not follow the rebellious pattern of most of humanity. Abram *heard* from God (Gen. 12:1, etc.) in some unspecified manner, and he *obeyed* God, even though he had not seen him. Only after he had obeyed are we told that “the LORD appeared to Abram” (Gen. 12:7). Nothing in the context indicates whether this was in a dream or a waking vision, but in some manner Abram saw the (usually) invisible God, Creator of heaven and earth.

Sometime later, Genesis 15 records that “the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision” (vs. 1). So Abram *saw* and *heard* God on this occasion, when God promised to bless him and multiply him (Gen. 15:1-5). Abram’s response—“he believed the LORD”—was “counted . . . to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6, a verse that figures prominently in Paul’s teaching about how to be right with God [Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6, etc.]).

Abraham and other Old Testament heroes of faith are described in the Book of Hebrews as people who had “seen” the promises of God “from afar” (Heb. 11:13). Moses is described as someone who “persevered because he saw him who is invisible” (Heb. 11:27, NIV). There’s a real sense in the “faith” chapter that being the people of God in this world involves “seeing the invisible” until it becomes visible. It would be interesting to observe how often Hebrews 11 speaks of the “invisible” or “not seen,” but this is a lesson on Acts 1-2, to which we now turn.

Acts 1:1-26—The Visible/Invisible Jesus and a Visible Band of Apostles

After the resurrection, Jesus’ body could be seen and touched, but he could also mysteriously appear and disappear (John 20:19-29; Luke 24:13-43, etc.). Acts 1:3 says that “He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.” Sometimes he was visible, just as he had been with them during his earthly ministry. At other times Jesus was not visible to them (perhaps for days?—see John 20:26). He chose when and to whom to reveal himself visibly after his resurrection (Paul summarizes several appearances in 1 Cor. 15:5-8).

Luke is the only Gospel to tell about Jesus' final visible appearance during those forty days. His account of Jesus' ascension in Luke 24:50-53 is brief, rather abruptly attached to an appearance that happened on the evening after the resurrection (Luke 24:36-49). Luke, so to speak, jumps to the end of "volume one" (the Gospel of Luke), only to give us more detail about the ascension at the beginning of "volume two" (the Book of Acts). [Some have suggested Luke's two long books would fill up the manageable length of two manuscript scrolls as used at the time. Books with "pages" were a later development.]

Luke begins "volume two" in a style similar to his Gospel, referring to a certain "Theophilus" (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). "Theophilus" could mean "friend of God," or it could be the name of an actual person. I'm inclined toward the latter idea, but no proof exists either way.

We should note that Luke describes "volume one" as dealing "with all that Jesus began to do and to teach" (Acts 1:1). The wording is suggestive: Jesus will continue to be active—in speaking and doing—by the power of the Holy Spirit through Jesus' disciples.

Again Luke mentions "the day when he was taken up" (Acts 1:2), as he had briefly described it at the end of his Gospel. But now he makes clear that the ascension came forty days after the resurrection (Acts 1:3), something left ambiguous in "volume one."

Jesus' ascension is described in both contexts in close proximity to Jesus' command and promise concerning the Holy Spirit. In Luke 24:49, Jesus says, "And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." In Acts 1:2, before his ascension, Jesus gave "commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen." Perhaps this refers to the way Jesus (after the resurrection) interpreted "to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27).

The connection between Jesus' commands and the coming of the Holy Spirit is evident again in Acts 1:4-5. Jesus orders "them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father" (vs. 4). The "promise" is specified in verse five: "you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now," i.e., "soon."

Jesus' role as the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit is so important that it is mentioned in all four Gospels and here again in Acts 1:5 (see Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; also Acts 11:16). Only a few incidents or statements are included in all four Gospels, beyond the key events of the crucifixion and resurrection. For all four Gospels and the Book of Acts to record this is an indication of how important it is. Jesus died for us to take away our sins (e.g., John 1:29), but he also rose from the dead and poured out the Holy Spirit on his church so that the church could carry out our God-given task: taking the good news about Jesus to all the world. [Submitting to John the Baptist's water baptism was an indication of your desire to repent of your sins and get ready for the coming Kingdom of God. John's baptism was for readiness; Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit is for empowerment to live in the Kingdom and represent Jesus and the Father's will to the world.]

The most well-known mention of the Holy Spirit in Acts 1 is, of course, in verse eight: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my

witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” This is a key to the entire book, as Luke narrates the church’s expansion at least as far as Rome (the capital of the Empire, from which the gospel could spread in every direction). It’s also a key verse for this series because it connects the promised power of the Holy Spirit with the disciples’ commission to be witnesses for Jesus, ultimately to the whole world. The Holy Spirit will be the *invisible* power at work in their witness and the *invisible* power responsible for *visible* manifestations such as the miracles Luke reports in Acts.

For the disciples to be “witnesses” means to tell about Jesus—what they have seen and heard in his presence. Especially for those first disciples, they were “witnesses” to tell others they had seen Jesus after his resurrection, as well as telling all they witnessed during his earthly ministry. For us to be witnesses means we get to tell others what Jesus has done in our lives, as well as declare the reality of what the first witnesses saw. Consider how vital this witnessing is. How will people know the story of Jesus unless someone tells them? Aren’t you glad someone told you? And in the context of the theme of this series—making the invisible visible—how could we be sure of the invisible reality of Jesus’ Lordship unless someone made it visible to us, by their words and deeds? (Remember Scripture’s insistence that salvation comes by confessing that “Jesus is Lord” and believing that Jesus has been raised from the dead [Rom. 10:9-10].)

Acts 1:8 could be a place to jump right to Acts 2, where Jesus’ promise of the Spirit’s coming with power is fulfilled. Before we do that, however, let’s follow briefly the narrative in Acts 1. After his promise of the Spirit and his command to take the message to “the end of the earth,” Jesus is lifted up from the earth! “And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight” (Acts 1:9). The disciples, understandably, “were gazing into heaven as he went” (vs. 10). How would you have reacted?

Perhaps the disciples would have gazed into heaven until their necks got stiff, but “two men . . . in white robes” appeared to assure them that “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:10-11). Jesus had just become *invisible*, but these angelic messengers promised that Jesus would not remain invisible forever. He had *visibly* ascended until he was *invisible*; he will someday descend *visibly* (see 1 Thess. 4:16-18).

In the meantime, the visible group of disciples hastened to obey their Lord, who had just ascended and become invisible for the indeterminate future. They returned to Jerusalem to await the promised arrival of the Holy Spirit’s power (Acts 1:12-14). They went “to the upper room” (possibly but not certainly the same place they gathered on the night before Jesus’ arrest). In verses 13-14 Luke names some who were there: Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James (i.e., not Judas Iscariot, who was dead). Did you count how many apostles were named?

Luke also mentions certain “women” disciples among the group (see Luke 8:2-3; 23:49, 55). Remember that they were first to the empty tomb and first to encounter the risen Jesus (e.g., John 20:1-18). Mary the mother of Jesus is mentioned by name, along with Jesus’ “brothers,” whose names are not given (we could safely assume these included the authors of the epistles James and Jude; see also 1 Cor. 15:7).

In Acts 1:15, Luke says about 120 persons were in the group, waiting in the upper room. But another number was the subject of Peter's thoughts: There needed to be **twelve** apostles. In Acts 1:15-26, we read how the disciples went about replacing the traitor, Judas Iscariot, eventually choosing Matthias to complete the number. He was chosen by casting lots (1:26), but also because he qualified as someone who "accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²²beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us" and because he was "a witness to his resurrection" (Acts 1:21-22).

Jesus had chosen twelve; Peter seemed to think it was important to keep that number intact. The symbolic significance that led Jesus to pick twelve would not be properly represented by eleven! Twelve apostles represented in a **visible** way God's intention to renew Israel (the **Twelve Tribes**, all descendants of Jacob). Some have suggested Peter and the others acted hastily and should have waited for Saul to be converted on the road to Damascus! But Luke never suggests there was anything improper in what Peter and the other disciples did in Acts 1. The fact that you never hear another thing about Matthias in Acts is beside the point; you never hear anything more about Simon the Zealot and several of the Twelve. The point for us is that the **visible** foundation of witnesses needed to be **twelve** (in the minds of the first disciples), even though there were hundreds of witnesses who had seen the risen Jesus (1 Cor. 15:6). The number **twelve** was itself a testimony, a witness, to the rest of Israel (and ultimately to the world) that God's plan, which started with Abraham, was being carried out in a way that fulfilled a renewed Israel and would spread to "the end of the earth" (1:8).

Acts 2:1-41—Visible Power from an Invisible God

"Fifty days" (Lev. 23:16) is what gave "Pentecost" its name in the Greek New Testament; in the Old Testament it is called the "Feast of Weeks" (see Lev. 23:15-21, etc.). Originally it was devoted to thanking God for the wheat harvest, but later it came to be associated with renewal of the covenant. Whether Luke had that association in mind is unclear, but it is interesting that God's OT promises to renew Israel included such passages as Ezekiel 36:26-27: "I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. . . . I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." The "new covenant" which Jesus **inaugurated** by his death (see Luke 22:20; Jere. 31:31-34; 2 Cor. 3:6) would now be **empowered** by the coming of the Holy Spirit in power. Jesus had not specified the exact day this would happen ("not many days from now," Acts 1:5), but Pentecost was certainly an appropriate day! It's a day of renewal for God's people like nothing before!

The first manifestation Luke mentions is "a sound like a mighty rushing wind," which "filled the entire house" (Acts 2:2). The second manifestation mentioned is even more dramatic: "divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them" (2:3). Wind and fire both represent the Holy Spirit, moving in life-giving power (see Ezek. 37; Exod. 19:18; Luke 3:16). But it's the next manifestation described by Luke which makes this move of God "public": "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:4).

The wind and the fire were observable to the 120 disciples and might have been observable to someone looking in through a window. But that is not how the powerful presence

of the Holy Spirit became known to the non-disciples outside. Rather it was the Spirit-empowered speaking of the disciples. That is what drew the curious crowd of “Jews and proselytes” (Gentile converts to Judaism) who were in the city for the feast. The 120 must have made quite a noise!

Luke identifies some regions from which the crowd came (2:9-11). These are places the gospel would spread in the early decades of the church (note particularly “Rome” in vs. 10, where Acts 28 will conclude its narrative). The curious crowd heard the 120 speaking praises to God, not in Greek (the *lingua franca* of the eastern part of the Roman Empire) or Aramaic or Hebrew but “in our own tongues” (2:11), that is, the languages used in their native regions. They were “amazed and perplexed” to hear “Galileans” (2:7) speaking in their “own native language” (2:8). No wonder they asked, “What does this mean?” (2:12). Others in the crowd—perhaps not hearing as distinctly or just because they were cynical—mocked the disciples: “They are filled with new wine” (2:13). That was Peter’s cue to start his sermon, which would explain the significance of what the crowd was seeing and hearing (2:14ff.).

Peter points out that it’s only about 9:00 a.m. (Acts 2:15), not a likely time for a large group to be drunk! Rather, he proclaims, “this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel” (2:16). What follows (2:17-36) is Peter’s Pentecost sermon, which is interesting for lots of reasons. For one thing, Peter uses the OT prophecy to explain what is happening in front of their eyes. The crowd is seeing and hearing the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy. Joel’s prophecy is the answer to the question asked in Acts 2:12: “What does this mean?” At the same time, what is happening (the outpouring of the Spirit, the praising of God in various languages) is interpreting the Joel passage—this is what Joel’s prophecy means. The Scripture illuminates the experience; the experience illuminates the Scripture. [This is like what Jesus did in Luke 4:18-21. What Jesus *does* shows what Isaiah *meant*; Isaiah’s prophecy shows what Jesus’ *ministry means*.]

Peter quotes Joel 2:28-32, which predicted a time (“in the last days”) when God’s Spirit would be given abundantly (“pour out”) to all kinds of people (“all flesh,” 2:17; the NIV has “people” instead of “flesh,” which is a good interpretation in this context.) It’s interesting that Peter, though quoting the words “all flesh” (or “all kinds of flesh”) seems not to have grasped the full significance of this until Acts 10, where God orchestrates the circumstances which finally convince Peter that “all flesh” includes Gentiles! (More on that in Lesson 5.)

Joel’s prophecy predicted visible and audible manifestations of the outpouring of God’s Spirit on “all flesh”: “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams” (Acts 2:17). The point of this is not that God will communicate to different age groups in different ways! Quite the contrary! The revelatory actions of the Spirit will be experienced by people of all ages. The mention of “sons” and “daughters” is meant to be inclusive; likewise with “young men” and “old men.” This inclusive language is emphasized by repetition in 2:18: “my male servants and female servants . . . shall prophesy.” (Notice also the repetition of “pour out,” vss. 17-18.)

The significance of Joel’s prophecy for the speaking of tongues and prophesying by both men and women is apparent enough. But what are we to make of the visible manifestations described in Acts 2:19-20? What could be meant by “wonders in the heavens above”? Could

“signs on the earth below” refer to Jesus’ miracles and to what was happening right then (Pentecost) in Jerusalem? Perhaps, but what about “blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke”? (2:19). Some argue that the sun being “turned to darkness” (2:20) would have reminded people of events surrounding Jesus’ crucifixion (Luke 23:44-45), but no Gospel mentions a turning of “the moon to blood” in connection with Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Rather than strain and stretch to make these visible (cosmic) phenomena connect somehow to Jesus’ death and/or resurrection, we are on safer ground to take the language of Acts 2:19-20 in the same way similar phenomena are spoken of (by Jesus!) in Matthew 24:29. This is apocalyptic, end-of-the-world language, and that is almost certainly Joel’s and Peter’s intention in citing these words. The Spirit-empowered prophesying by all kinds of people was a predicted sign that “the day of the Lord” was coming; “wonders in the heavens above” and other phenomena described in Acts 2:19-20 would also happen “before the day of the Lord comes.” Peter is not saying they have happened already; like Joel, he affirms that they will. Peter can say that some (not all) of Joel’s prophecy is already being fulfilled by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the resulting prophesying and speaking in tongues. Peter can also announce that now is the time (quoting again from Joel 2:32) when “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21). “The day of the Lord” is approaching, as evidenced by Pentecost, adding urgency to the need to call on the name of the Lord in order to be saved (Acts 2:21, quoting Joel 2:32).

After quoting Joel 2:28-32, Peter begins his Christ-centered explanation of the manifestations of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:22ff.). This is a point not to be missed: What drew the crowd and prompted their question (“What does this mean?” in Acts 2:12) was the activity of the Holy Spirit through the disciples. The answer to their question, however, was not simply to quote an appropriate OT prophecy; that was just part of the answer. The rest of the answer to their question had to do with Jesus. Yes, Peter can say that the Pentecostal outpouring fulfills Scripture, but the Pentecostal outpouring has happened because of Jesus!

Peter first reminds his audience of Jesus’ earthly ministry. Peter rightly assumes they would have at least heard something about him—how God had “attested” to the truth of Jesus by “mighty works and wonders and signs” (2:22). “This Jesus,” Peter boldly proclaims, was the one “you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men” (2:23). Notice how Peter speaks directly to his fellow Jews, “you,” as somehow responsible for Jesus’ death (although it was the high priest and Sanhedrin who pushed for Jesus’ crucifixion). “Lawless men” means the Romans, who reserved for themselves the death penalty prerogative. (Theologically speaking, we are all responsible for Jesus’ crucifixion; we cannot blame anyone else.)

Peter can be bold (in contrast to his cowardice after Jesus’ arrest, Luke 22:54-62) for two important reasons: (1) he is freshly empowered by the Holy Spirit; and (2) Peter knows that “God raised” Jesus from the dead (2:24). Peter is not afraid of death as he evidently had been when Jesus was arrested.

Peter proceeds to cite another OT text, Psalm 16:8-11, in Acts 2:25-28. In that Psalm, David seems clearly to speak about himself: “I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken” (Acts 2:25; Ps. 16:8). Thus far, and even through the next

verse (Acts 2:26; Psa. 16:9), David might have been expressing confidence that God was with him in this life. But Acts 2:27-28 (Psa. 16:10-11) goes another step, to speak confidently of victory over death itself:

²⁷ For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,
or let your Holy One see corruption.

²⁸ You have made known to me the paths of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your presence.

At this point, Peter makes an indisputable observation: David “died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day” (Acts. 2:29; even today, you can visit David’s tomb in Jerusalem.) So David died and his body is still entombed, but since he was “a prophet” (2:30) as well as a king, David “foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption” (2:31). David’s prophecy about deliverance from the “corruption” of death had not been fulfilled (yet!) in David’s own body, but it had been fulfilled in the body of David’s promised descendant, the Messiah, the Christ! In raising Christ from the dead, God had fulfilled his promise to David that David’s descendant would sit on his throne forever (Acts 2:30; see also 2 Sam. 7:12-13, 16; Psa. 89:4; Isa. 9:6-7, etc.).

None of David’s merely mortal descendants could fulfill this prophecy, but “This Jesus God raised up,” a fact to which Peter and hundreds of disciples could bear witness (Acts 2:32; 1 Cor. 15:3-8). So Peter could point to David’s not-empty tomb as part of his argument, but he could also point to Jesus’ empty tomb along with his and others’ eye-witness encounters with the risen Jesus. But Peter could point to still more evidence.

Evidence that God raised Jesus from the dead and that God “exalted” him to “the right hand of God” was right there in front of the Pentecost crowd: Jesus had “received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit” and “has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing” (Acts 2:32-33). Peter and others who saw Jesus after the resurrection had access to evidence of Jesus’ victory that others could not have now (after the ascension). But potentially everyone in the world has access to evidence of Jesus’ resurrection, ascension, and exaltation to God’s right hand: the activity of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ disciples.

Continuing his argument a bit further, Peter observes that “David did not ascend into the heavens,” but he did speak prophetically of one who has now done exactly that. In Acts 2:34-35, Peter cites Psalm 110:1: “The Lord said to my Lord,

‘Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your footstool.’”

So Peter has linked two prophetic psalms (16 and 110) to make the case that Jesus has fulfilled what David could not. Jesus has conquered death and ascended to the right hand of the Father to reign forever as Messiah. The linking of David’s prophecies (along with the evident non-fulfilment of them by David himself) helps make Peter’s case: the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is evidence in the here-and-now that God has raised and exalted Jesus (a non-repeatable, historical event). [Note that Jesus had earlier Psa. 110 to great effect in Matt. 22:41-46, showing from Scripture that the Messiah was paradoxically David’s Son and David’s Lord!]

Peter and the other disciples had seen what the Pentecost crowd could not see—Jesus in his resurrected body. But the Pentecost crowd could see and hear the evidence that Jesus was exactly who Peter proclaimed Jesus to be. Thus Peter concludes his sermon: “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). The *invisible* status of Jesus—“both Lord and Christ”—was made *visible* to the world by the Holy Spirit’s powerful presence in the new-born church. Isn’t that God’s desire for the church today? Isn’t that what people need to see in us—observable evidence of Christ’s Lordship? If it’s not evident in the people who belong to Jesus, how will the people who don’t know Jesus come to know him?

The combination of Holy Spirit evidence and Peter’s Spirit-empowered preaching was amazingly effective that day as “about three thousand souls” were added to the number of Jesus’ disciples (Acts 2:41). (The visible church grew!) They responded to Peter’s instructions to “repent and be baptized . . . in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins” and to his promise that “you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (2:38). This gift would make a visible difference in their lives just as it had in the 120 in the Upper Room. This was not to be a singular event of the Spirit being poured out on just the first disciples. “The promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (2:39). As noted earlier, Peter did not appreciate how “far off” the “far off” could be. As the continuing narrative of Acts shows, “the promise” is truly for all who believe in Jesus, whether they be Jew, Samaritan, or Gentile. Jesus’ Lordship is to become *visibly* effective everywhere the gospel is preached, received, and lived out, everywhere the Holy Spirit works to make the invisible visible.

Making the Invisible Visible

Lesson 2: Acts 3-4

Acts 3:1-10—An Invisible Source Makes the Impossible Happen

Luke does not say how much time passed from Pentecost to the events of Acts 3. Nor does he give us the name of the lame man. He does give us some rather precise information otherwise. Peter and John are going into the temple precincts “at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour” (i.e., 3:00 pm, vs. 1). A man “**lame from birth** was being carried,” by family or friends, to a place where he could “ask alms” (i.e., “beg for donations”) from people entering the temple. Later Luke says the man “was more than forty years old” (4:22). Still we wonder about some things: Who knows how many years he had been lying at the “Beautiful Gate” (3:2)? Had Jesus ever seen him? Had Peter and John ever seen him before?

It appears from the wording (“was being carried”) that the lame man had not yet reached his usual spot. Seeing Peter and John on their way into the temple, he asked to receive alms from them (3:3). They were accustomed to receiving such requests, as would anyone entering the temple to pray. Indeed, visitors to churches and cathedrals around the world have perhaps encountered such people, whose only contribution to their family’s care for them comes from begging. Ironically, the presence of so many beggars at such a holy site can make them almost “invisible” to those who habitually pass by.

Perhaps Peter and John had passed by this lame beggar before, or certainly others like him. But today was different. Notice the emphasis on seeing: “Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, ‘Look at us’” (3:4). The man did as he was told; “he fixed his attention on them” (3:5). It’s not that Peter and John saw the man (as though for the first time); rather, they saw him as the Holy Spirit directed them to see him. This was what we sometimes call “a divine appointment.” Just as Jesus did not heal everyone at the pool of Bethesda (John 5), the apostles did not heal everyone in Jerusalem. Peter spoke to him as the Father directed, empowered by the Holy Spirit: “I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!” (3:6)

Peter’s words contain an explicit contrast: “**I have no silver** and gold, but **what I do have** I give to you.” But there’s also an implicit contrast to note: the beggar is asking for visible resources; Peter and John have only an invisible resource. That invisible resource, however, is more than enough to meet the man’s visible need. Their invisible resource could be identified as “the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.” Or we could say their *faith* in Jesus’ name is the invisible resource, as Peter later says it is “by faith in his name” that the man was healed (3:16).

Notice that Peter offered a visible gesture of help along with the command to “rise up and walk.” Peter “took him by the right hand and raised him up” (3:7). This, remember, is a forty-year old man who has never walked, but “immediately his feet and ankles were made strong” (3:7). Simply to stand would have been an astonishing miracle for him, but God uses Peter’s hand to help the man up, and then the man goes far beyond merely standing! In vivid language Luke describes the unfolding of the miracle: “leaping up, he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God” (3:8). The “leaping” is repeated for emphasis.

What a sight this was! All the people in the vicinity saw him walking and leaping (3:9), and they heard his continuing praise to God. Important for our purposes is that they “recognized him” (3:10). Although beggars sitting at temple gates can become “invisible” to passers-by, these people had seen this man placed helplessly at the gate for decades. Now he’s dancing a jig, going into the house of God! No wonder they are “filled with wonder”! (3:10) They are seeing him like they have never seen him before!

When God performs a miracle like this, we can reflect on how completely and drastically things can change. That morning, when the man awakened, he could not walk; he had never walked. It was like every other morning in his life thus far. But this afternoon, after all the excitement at the temple he will be able to walk home, something he has never done before. And tomorrow, when he awakens, he will get up and go wherever he decides to go, something he has never been able to do before. One day, the miracle hadn’t happened; the next day it did; the days after that would be different from his first forty years. Can you point to an experience in your own life when everything was different from that day on? (It doesn’t have to be miraculous, but it might be.)

Acts 3:11—Peter’s message

The visible and audible excitement of the man’s healing drew a crowd, and Peter was quick to take advantage. What the people **were seeing and hearing** made them an audience for a message about the otherwise **invisible** reality of Jesus’ identity and lordship. Notice how quickly Peter moves the focus of attention from himself and John, redirecting their attention to Jesus: “Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk?” (3:12)

This is not about Peter and John; this is about God! “The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers” (vs. 13) has done something—not just the obvious visible health of the beggar but something even more momentous, to which the man’s healing points:

¹³ The God . . . of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. ¹⁴ But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, ¹⁵ and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. ¹⁶ And his name—by faith in his name—has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all. [Acts 3:13–16]

This is just the beginning of Peter’s sermon (Luke, who was not present, probably preserved just the essence rather than the full message), but notice how Peter goes right to the point. Peter is talking to his fellow-Jews in strong, accusatory words (which he will soften in 3:17ff.): “you delivered over and denied”; “you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer [Barabbas]”; “you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead.” By our modern standards, we might consider Peter’s words unfair, since he is accusing the whole crowd of complicity in the death of Jesus! And of course there may have been persons there (in

the temple precincts) who had been complicit, but surely not everyone present!? But Peter is preaching boldly and truthfully, and to people who thought of themselves with a “group mentality” that is alien to most of us. If their Jewish leaders (not the Roman occupiers) had done these things Peter mentioned, they would consider themselves implicated. Indeed, Peter would be aware of his own implication in the death of Jesus. Peter’s people, God’s chosen people, had denied Jesus and allowed (indeed insisted on) the Roman execution. And who had been more specific and repetitive in denying Jesus than the man preaching this sermon? (You too have denied him; I have denied him; we all have denied him and his lordship at points in our lives. Denial of God is the root of all sins, according to Rom. 1:18ff.)

Notice also in the passage quoted above how Peter sounds a refrain often encountered in Acts: “we are witnesses” (3:15). Not everyone saw the resurrected Jesus, but those who did were commissioned to be Jesus’ witnesses, eventually to the uttermost parts of the earth (1:8). In this context of chapter three, Peter and John are the witnesses who testify of Jesus’ resurrection and connect that to the healing of the man who stands, walks, and leaps in the sight of the crowd in the temple precincts.

What **everyone can see** is explained by what Peter and John (and several hundred, 1 Cor. 15:6) **had seen** but which is now invisible: Jesus has been raised and exalted to God’s right hand. Because Jesus has been vindicated by Almighty God who restored him to life, Jesus’ name and faith in Jesus’ name makes possible what the crowd is astonished to see: “this man . . . whom you see and know,” now stands in “perfect health in the presence of you all” (3:16). The invisible status of Jesus makes a miracle happen in visible form. (Is there anything evident/visible in your life that can be explained only by the reality of Jesus?)

Having made his point that Jesus is still alive and working miracles (just as he did in the Gospels), Peter now begins his invitation for his audience to repent. Notice that his language in verse 17 is softened compared to the direct accusations made in verses 13-15. “I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers” (3:17). In fact, God had “foretold by the mouth of all the prophets” that the Messiah would suffer (3:18). (At this point, in my imagination, Peter might have cited some passages such as Isaiah 53. Remember, Luke is probably giving us an abbreviated account of Peter’s sermon.)

Although Peter acknowledges the “ignorance” of those who denied Jesus and were complicit in his death (as you and I are), he does not let them off the hook. He still says “you acted . . . as did your rulers” (vs. 17). And even though God saw it coming centuries before and gave prophetic words to his servants who predicted the Messiah’s suffering (vs. 18), Peter’s audience (and we) must respond by owning their (and our) responsibility for the necessity of Jesus’ death. Peter’s audience that day, and we in our day, must “repent . . . and turn back, that your [our] sins may be blotted out” (vs. 19).

Everyone is implicated in Jesus’ death, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), but, thanks be to God, we can all be “justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:24). We were all God’s “enemies” because of our rebellion against God, but Jesus died for us so that we could be “reconciled” and “saved by his life” (Rom. 5:10).

Back in Acts 3, Peter continues his message with the promise that repentance will bring about the blotting out of our sins, but also “that times of refreshing” will “come from the presence of the Lord,” and that God will “send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus” (3:19-20). For the present, Jesus is invisible, in “heaven . . . until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago” (3:21).

In 2 Corinthians 1:20, Paul indicates that all the promises of God will be fulfilled in Jesus. Here in Peter’s sermon in Acts 3, he refers to one very important promise that everyone there would have known about. In Deuteronomy 18:15-19, Moses made a prediction which Peter quotes in Acts 3:22-23: “The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you.²³ And it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people.”

Of course God had sent many prophets to Israel during their history, some more like Moses than others (Peter mentions Samuel in vs. 24). But none of them had fulfilled the promise that God made to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 and 22:18—to bless “all the families of the earth” (Acts 3:25). In raising Jesus from the dead, Peter concludes, God has begun to fulfill that promised blessing to the whole world, but “first” the blessing comes to the Jews who are listening to Peter’s sermon: “to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness.”

Acts 4:1-22—Undeniable Truth and Denying Its True Meaning

While Peter and John were still speaking to the people, perhaps answering questions or expanding on Peter’s message recorded at the end of chapter 3, “the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them” (4:1). The healing and following sermon of chapter three happened in the temple precincts; so it is not surprising that the temple authorities would investigate what was going on. But it was not a neutral or merely curious investigation, as Luke tells us in verse two: they were “greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead” (4:2).

The Sadducees controlled the office of high priest and therefore felt they were authorized to control whatever was going on in the temple area (see Matt. 21:23-27 for an interesting exchange between Jesus and the temple “authorities” on the issue of authority). But the Sadducees were a minority among the Jews of their time, because they denied that there would be a resurrection (see Acts 23:8). They were “greatly annoyed” not simply because Peter and John were preaching on their ‘turf’; they were angry at the message itself. They arrested the messengers and held them overnight for questioning the following day (4:3). Unfortunately (from the Sadducees’ perspective) they had arrived on the scene too late. Peter’s preaching, anointed by the Holy Spirit, had convinced many to repent and follow Jesus (4:4; the “five thousand” should probably be understood as the approximate total of all Jesus followers so far, rather than as 5000 being converted on just this occasion).

The next day, “Annas the high priest and Caiaphas” (who apparently took turns being high priest with his father-in-law, Annas; cf. Luke 3:2 and John 18:13, 24) convene the council, which includes “all who were of the high-priestly family” (Acts 4:5-6). Their interrogation

focuses not on whether the lame man was really healed but rather on the source of Peter's and John's power to perform the miracle: "By what power or by what name did you do this?" (4:7)

Peter, "filled with the Holy Spirit" (4:8), was bold in his reply: "Let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well" (4:10). That answered their question! It also challenged one of their core doctrines (no resurrection). Even more, it charged them with the death of the Messiah! (Note the inclusion of the term "Christ.") And since God had overturned their verdict, Peter is not on trial; they are! The Sadducees and the high priest are charged with murdering the Messiah (by the hands of the Roman government). But Peter is not finished.

He proceeds to declare that Jesus is the prophesied "stone" that the builders "rejected" but whom God made "the cornerstone" (4:11, referencing Psa. 118:22; the NIV has "capstone," but the Greek is literally "head of the corner"). Jesus, in other words, is more important and necessary than the high priest and his Sadducee associates. Going still further, Peter declares that Jesus is the only Savior, "for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (4:12). Remember, this whole interrogation had been about the "name" used in the previous day's healing. They have their answer and then some!

Peter has explained that the visible, undeniable miracle occurred because of faith in the name of Jesus. Jesus, the invisible Christ, caused the visible miracle. But that's Peter's explanation, and they choose not to accept it! (Can you think of a miracle in your life or in the life of someone you know that could be interpreted differently by a skeptic?)

These rulers of the people, the priestly class, were not stupid, but they were stubbornly committed to their own views: Jesus was a blasphemer, and resurrections don't happen. Peter's sermon yesterday convinced hundreds, perhaps thousands. His Spirit-filled sermon today (recall 4:8) seems to have been ineffective to this audience of a handful of skeptics, even though they were looking at the same evidence. This is a capacity we humans have, to interpret the same reality in different ways. The real danger is in the presumption that our interpretation is the reality. In that case no contrary evidence is allowed.

The rulers refused to recognize that Jesus was raised from the dead; they refused to believe that he was now the cornerstone of God's work on earth; they refused to believe that Jesus was the name they needed for their own salvation. They did, however, recognize that Peter and John had been with Jesus. Jesus' boldness must have rubbed off on these "uneducated, common men" (4:13). They also recognized that there was nothing they could say to contradict the fact that the once-lame man was standing right in front of them, alongside Peter and John (4:14). As rulers and priests of the people, they have to say something, but what?

In private consultation they admitted they could not deny the miracle (4:15-16). But they decided they could order Peter and John (and by extension the rest of the growing number of

disciples) “to speak no more to anyone in this name” (4:17). Calling Peter and John back in, they conveyed this command “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” (4:18). The disciples’ answer back to the rulers is classic in its defiance but also its logic: “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (4:19-20).

The disciples know what they have seen and heard from Jesus. They know Jesus is alive. The rulers think Jesus is dead (they can’t “know” it because they can’t produce a corpse!). The rulers know the lame man is no longer lame, and for that they have no explanation. But they also know they don’t want people spreading stories about Jesus. That is decisive for these frustrated rulers. What is decisive is not what they know or what they see right in front of them (the healed lame man). What is decisive is they don’t want people talking about Jesus. What is decisive is what they want, not what they can prove or disprove. (This, I would argue, is the decisive factor in many people’s decisions, including those who choose not to believe in God’s existence, despite the complexity of DNA and other things that seem to require a designer rather than random chance.)

The rulers (wisely) decide not to punish Peter and John. They (unwisely) issue more threats, to which the disciples have already indicated they will not yield, since they fear God more than men. The trial has reached an impasse, and the rulers release Peter and John. It will not be the end of the story, however, as the opposition to the Christian message will find themselves facing a movement they cannot stop. (You can read the following passage, 4:23-31, to see how the whole church responded to the threats from the council.)

Making the Invisible Visible

Lesson 3: Acts 5

Invisible things can be detected by their visible effects. Jesus used the wind to illustrate the movement of the Holy Spirit in John 3. Another example would be magnetism: we cannot see it, but we can observe its effects. Earlier lessons noted visible effects which pointed to the invisible presence and power of the Holy Spirit, and to the exalted position of Jesus Christ. In this lesson we'll see what we might call a negative example. Peter's words have a visible effect in the first part of the chapter, but we would have to explain the effect by referring to an invisible presence—God's own Holy Spirit. Later we'll see other examples of the Spirit's invisible power producing surprising visible effects.

Acts 5:1-11—Playing with Invisible Fire

The preceding context (4:32-37) portrays the early Christian community as one of extraordinary generosity. "No one" claimed exclusive rights to their property, "but they had everything in common" (4:32). This kind of generosity meant that "there was not a needy person among them" (4:34). Those with property sold it, if necessary, to provide for the needs of others. What they brought as a contribution "was distributed to each as any had need" (4:35). Exactly how many of the early believers practiced this is hard to tell; Luke may be speaking only of the believers in Jerusalem, where the apostles were, and not necessarily those who left the city after Pentecost and went back to their farms and businesses in Galilee and elsewhere.

Luke singles out by name one early Christian who thus disposed of his property: Barnabas (4:36-37). Barnabas becomes a prominent figure in Acts, especially as Paul's partner on the first missionary journey (see Acts 13ff.). Notice that he "sold a field" (4:37) and brought the proceeds to the apostles. We are not told whether he owned other property, perhaps in his native Cyprus (4:36). For our purposes, it is enough to imagine the impact his generous gift must have made on the Jerusalem church. No doubt the word spread quickly among the believers, and Barnabas would have been viewed with great respect. That is the set-up for the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira in 5:1-11.

Just like Barnabas, Ananias and Sapphira owned some property, which they sold. Unlike Barnabas, they kept part of the proceeds from the sale for themselves and gave part to the apostles for meeting needs among the believers. That action, in itself, was not a sin; what turned out to be a deadly sin was the pretense of having made a sacrifice as complete as that of Barnabas (5:4).

Peter's words to Ananias are bold and could only be based on a Holy Spirit-given "word of knowledge" (see 1 Cor. 12:8, KJV): "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?" (5:3). By Spirit-given insight, Peter perceived the lie in the heart of Ananias, a lie inspired by Satan himself! This is a vivid example of the Holy Spirit giving Peter knowledge of something invisible—the plot of Ananias and Sapphira to gain more credit (from the church) than they deserved.

Again, giving only part of the profit from the sale was not the problem; pretending they had given all was the problem! Peter calls the pretense for what it is: "You have not lied to man

but to God” (5:4). [Their attempt to deceive the church being equated with lying to God might be compared to Jesus’ words to Saul of Tarsus in Acts 9:4-5: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? . . . I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” How we treat the children of God is how we treat the Lord!]

Peter once tried to cut a man’s throat in the mob arresting Jesus; he missed and cut off only the man’s ear. Jesus rebuked Peter and ordered him to put the sword away (John 18:10-11). Now, however, speaking with the authority of the Holy Spirit’s knowledge of Ananias’s heart, Peter wields a more powerful weapon: the Word of God (cf. Heb. 4:12-13).

“When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last” (5:5). Was it merely Peter’s words that frightened him into a heart attack? We can only speculate in the absence of an autopsy. What is clear—what Luke clearly intended us to see—is the connection between the lie of Ananias and the power of God’s judgment, pronounced by the Spirit-filled and Spirit-guided Peter. Peter did not end the man’s life; God’s word did. In all four Gospels and the Book of Acts, God’s word is often shown to be powerful for giving life (even to someone dead four days, John 11) but also for taking life away (Matt. 21:18-19) or limiting the use of a person’s abilities (Acts 9:8-9; 13:9-11).

Ananias’s demise made a profound impression: “And great fear came upon all who heard of it” (5:5). No doubt the news spread rapidly, but not rapidly enough for Sapphira to avoid falling victim to the same judgment “about three hours later” (5:7). How could it be that no friend or fellow-Christian had told her about her husband’s death? She must not have been at home! But Luke plainly says she did not know (5:7).

Peter’s question (5:8) gives her a chance to tell the truth, but she had already agreed with her husband to tell people that they received a certain price for their property, the amount they presented “at the apostles’ feet” (5:2). Not knowing about her husband’s death, she sticks to the story she had agreed to tell: “Yes, for so much” (5:8).

Peter had apparently not told Ananias he was about to die. Perhaps Peter was as surprised as others when that happened. But since Sapphira is presenting the same lie (not to people but to God), Peter can speak with Holy Spirit conviction: “How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out” (5:9). Notice also how Luke repeats for emphasis the reaction of others: “great fear” is mentioned in 5:5 and 5:11.

Reverent fear of God would have prevented the scheme of Ananias and Sapphira. Reverent fear of God (inside and outside the church, vs. 11) was fostered by the judgment that fell on the scheming couple. Perhaps Ananias and Sapphira had not been present on the Day of Pentecost to see the fire and feel the rushing wind. Perhaps that helps account for their foolish plot (the fear of the Lord is essential to wisdom in the New Testament era just as much as it was in the Old Testament, e.g., Prov. 9:10). They didn’t realize that by lying to God they were playing with invisible fire!

If the fate of Ananias and Sapphira seems harsh to us (a little too much like OT passages that make us uncomfortable), we might consider the following as reasons why God would do such a thing: God wants to show the early church that he is present among them, not just when miracles of healing are happening but also when the offering is being received. And God wants all of us to realize that how we treat his church is how we treat God.

We can't say with certainty that Ananias and Sapphira died and went to hell (the text says nothing about that). We can say with confidence that their mortal lives were cut short by their duplicity and foolish behavior. Instead of becoming an admired example of generosity to their contemporaries, they became (for the church of all time) an example of the opposite (craving more credit than they were willing to earn). The church of all times and places can look at Ananias and Sapphira as a lesson in the presence of a holy God in the midst of his people, a holy presence not to be trifled with!

Acts 5:12-16—More Positive Examples of the Spirit's Presence

After the sobering account of Ananias and Sapphira, it's a relief to move on with Luke's account of "many signs and wonders" being "regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles" (5:12; recall the prayer in 4:30). This summary statement does not specify any particular miracle, but Luke concludes the paragraph with mention of people coming from neighboring towns, including "the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed" (5:16).

Especially when we read this section in tandem with 5:1-11, we get a picture of how powerfully present the Holy Spirit was in their midst—whether in judgment or in healing miracles. There was a sense of awe about this presence, so much so that "none of the rest dared join them" (5:13), yet "more than ever believers were added to the Lord" (5:14). Is there a contradiction here? Probably "none of the rest" refers to non-believers, who might have been attracted to the dynamism of the young church but who had not become true believers. The story of Ananias and Sapphira would warn off anyone contemplating joining the movement as the fad of the moment. (There is an example of such a person in 8:9-13, 18-24.)

The believers' overall impression on the larger community was positive (5:13). This positive regard would not have been shared by the ruling elite, whom the apostles continued to defy by preaching Jesus' resurrection (cf. 4:18). The general regard toward Peter and the other apostles is shown by the actions of carrying "the sick into the streets" so that Peter's shadow "might fall on some of them" (5:15). This is one measure of the people's perception that some invisible power was at work in Jesus' disciples.

Acts 5:17-41—Invisible Escape and Visible Escapees

Of course the high priest and other ruling elites (Sadducees) were not positively impressed by the continued growth of the church and the continued healings attributed to Jesus, the man they had condemned as a blasphemer. Luke says they were "filled with jealousy" (5:17), using the same word for "filled" as in Acts 2:4. Jesus' disciples were filled with power and motivation by God's Spirit; the supposed spiritual leaders were motivated by another spirit.

The authorities “arrested the apostles” (5:18, presumably all twelve, although that is not specified) and put them in prison, no doubt for the purpose of another public inquiry, similar to what happened to Peter and John in Acts 4. But this time, before they could be confronted and questioned by their adversaries, the apostles were released from prison “during the night” by “an angel of the Lord” (5:19; Peter will have another experience like this in Acts 12:6ff.). The angel who delivered the apostles from prison also delivered a message to them: “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life” (5:20). The apostles did as God’s messenger instructed (5:21a).

What a surprise and mystery confounded the high priest, the council, and the guards that morning (5:21b-26)! The doors of the prison were locked and the guards were on duty, but the apostolic prisoners were gone! What could have happened? How long they remained mystified we are not told, but then the report arrives: “Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people” (5:25).

This is another fascinating (even comical) juxtaposition of invisible and visible. Having been freed from prison, the apostles’ natural instinct might be to hide. Instead, they are right outside the “courthouse,” boldly continuing to do what the council had previously forbidden (4:18), teaching and preaching Jesus’ resurrection. The invisible escape (5:23) had produced very visible escapees!

The council still wants to interrogate and chastise the apostles. So they send “the captain with the officers” to bring the apostles in, “but not by force,” since that might provoke a violent response from the people listening to the apostles (5:26). The apostles offer no resistance to the summons. The confrontation inside the council hall begins almost as a replay of the face-off in chapter 4.

The high priest reminds them, “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man’s blood upon us” (5:28; cf. 4:18; 4:10). Peter’s response, “We must obey God rather than men” (5:29), echoes 4:19-20. Peter proceeds to announce yet again that God has raised from the dead the man whom the council had condemned (5:30), and that the risen Jesus is God’s appointed Savior, who offers forgiveness to those who repent (5:31). In other words, “God overturned your verdict, and you should acknowledge the Judge who is higher than you!”

Peter repeats an important theme of Acts when he says, “And we are **witnesses** to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him” (5:32). The apostles had been commissioned to be Jesus’ witnesses, with the promise that the Holy Spirit would empower that witness (1:8). The Holy Spirit events of Acts 2 had borne witness to Jesus’ exaltation to the right hand of the Father (2:32-33, 36). The witness of the apostles came through visible men; the witness of the Holy Spirit was by his invisible power producing visible and audible effects. The key point is that the witness of the apostles agrees with the witness of the Holy Spirit; it is the same witness to the same facts: Jesus has been raised from the dead, exalted to God’s right hand, and reigns as Lord and only Savior (cf. 4:12 and 5:31). To be in agreement with God, the apostles must proclaim this witness. To oppose this witness is to oppose God (a possibility Gamaliel warns about in 5:39).

The council correctly perceives that the apostolic witness condemns them (and calls for their repentance, which they are not willing to offer). So of course they are “enraged” (5:33). They want to kill them (as they would later stone Stephen to death), even though, under Roman law, they had no right to execute anyone. At this point, the council are not thinking about Roman repercussions; they just want to snuff out these rebellious followers of Jesus. Fortunately for the apostles, there was one cool head in the council, Gamaliel, who had the moral authority and influence to keep the council from turning into a murderous mob.

Notice that Gamaliel is a Pharisee, not a Sadducee like the high priestly family. Remember the differences between the two groups. The Sadducees denied the resurrection and the existence of angels. An educated Pharisee like Gamaliel would at least be open to the possibility that a resurrection had happened and that an angel had liberated the apostles from prison. But he doesn’t use such arguments in his attempt to calm the anger of the Sadducees. Rather, he reminds them of some fairly recent movements, which had been exciting and then fizzled after the death of the instigator of the movement. He mentions Theudas (5:36) and Judas the Galilean (5:37) as examples. (Both men were executed by the Romans. See commentaries for further information if desired.)

The point of Gamaliel’s argument is that the council should be cautious in how they treat the apostles of Jesus (5:35). If the Jesus movement depends on Jesus’ visible presence (as did the movements once led by Theudas and Judas the Galilean), with enough time the enthusiasm would die down and things would return to normal (5:38; i.e., the high priest and other elites would remain in control). On the other hand, if this Jesus movement “is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” (5:39).

The perspective of Luke and the apostles was that the Jesus movement did not depend on Jesus’ physical and visible presence. Rather, the energy and direction of the growing church depended on the invisible presence of the Holy Spirit. Gamaliel’s perspective probably did not persuade a single Sadducee to change his mind about the resurrection and angels, but his counsel was persuasive enough for them to take a wait-and-see course, at least for now (things change dramatically in Acts 7).

So the council decided not to kill the apostles. They did subject them to a beating, however, and repeated their demand that the apostles stop speaking in the name of Jesus (cf. 4:18; 5:28). It’s hard to believe that they believed this would stop the apostles! Of course it didn’t! In fact, the apostles “left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (5:41). Just as before, they continued “in the temple and from house to house . . . teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” (5:42). Jesus was not visible; the Holy Spirit was not visible; but Jesus’ disciples simply refused to disappear. So the invisible Jesus and the invisible Holy Spirit continue to work, through these visible and vulnerable disciples. That vulnerability comes into more dramatic focus in the following chapters.

Making the Invisible Visible

Lesson 4: Acts 6-7

Acts 6:1-7—A Visible Problem Solved by Visible People, Invisibly Empowered

Because the church contains real people, problems and misunderstandings are inevitable. But the church has more than visible resources on which to draw in addressing problems. The church contains people, but we are also indwelt by God himself, who possesses infinite wisdom and power to overcome any challenge.

The “Hellenists” in this context are Greek-speaking Jews, in contrast to the “Hebrews,” natives of Judah and Galilee, whose native tongue was Hebrew (or Aramaic, a related language). The Hellenists had a different native tongue and a different native culture from those who grew up in Israel. Still, with all they had in common (first the Jewish faith and now faith in Jesus as Messiah), is it surprising that a dispute arose between the two groups? No. People have a tendency to divide and sub-divide as much as needed to look after their own interests.

The dispute arises in a rapidly-growing church, centered in Jerusalem, where (in theory at least) “there was not a needy person among them” (4:34) as they shared their material goods with fellow-believers. But some “Hellenists” in the church felt that “Hebrew” widows were being better supported than “Hellenist” widows (6:1). In such cases, perception is reality, and there was potential for bitterness and suspicion, if not schism.

“The twelve” apostles recognize the negative possibilities and take action to prevent further trouble. First, they announce that God has not commissioned them “to serve tables” if it means neglecting their calling to preach the word of God and be constantly in prayer (6:2, 4). Feeding the hungry is not unimportant, but someone else needs to take responsibility for the food distribution. Next, the apostles assign the “brothers” (6:3, other Christians) the task of picking out seven reputable men to oversee the distribution. The apostles could have made the picks, but they asked the church to identify people they could trust. But that was not the only quality they should seek.

The apostles said the selected men should be “full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (6:3). Wisdom and a good reputation for honesty might be seen as ‘natural’ qualities, desirable in any organization looking for leaders of a sensitive project. But “full of the Spirit” means these should be candidates whose lives show evidence of the Holy Spirit, that invisible presence who makes a person visibly different.

It’s notable that the seven men named in 6:5 all have Greek names. The seventh, Nicolaus, is a proselyte from Antioch, a man not born Jewish as the other six presumably were. Although it’s not beyond dispute completely, the seven Greek names probably indicate that they were all “Hellenists.” Since the complaint about unfairness in food distribution had come from the “Hellenists,” this was a wise and generous move by the church, and it was approved by the apostles, who “prayed and laid their hands on them” (6:6). This oversight of food distribution was to be a spiritually empowered task. [The verb for “serve” in vs. 2 is *diakoneō* (“dee-ah-kah-NEH-oh”). From that verb we get the noun, “deacon.” And these seven are sometimes referred

to as “deacons,” but that term is not used in the text, certainly not in the technical sense that “deacon” gains in later times. These seven are simply “servants,” but Spirit-filled servants.]

Luke provides another summary statement of the gospel’s progress and the church’s continuing growth at this point, including some converts from among the priests (6:8), perhaps to underline the importance of resolving the issue raised in 6:1. But this summary statement is also prelude to the following accounts of the ministries of two of “the seven”: Stephen and Philip (6:5; note that this is a different Philip from the Philip included in “the twelve”).

Acts 6:8-15—More than Serving Tables: Stephen, the First Martyr

Luke does not specify what “great wonders and signs” Stephen was doing. We might assume miraculous healings were included. This would have gotten people’s attention, but it was Stephen’s preaching and teaching which prompted serious opposition.

The people who disputed (and no doubt distorted) Stephen’s teaching were Hellenists, like Stephen except they were not followers of Jesus. When we get to chapter seven, we’ll find a sample of how powerful Stephen could be in making a case. These Hellenists who found fault with him “could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking” (6:10). Like Jesus (and by the same power, the Holy Spirit), Stephen was powerful in words and deeds (recall Peter’s sermon, Acts 2:22; also see 7:22 when Stephen describes Moses).

Not being able to refute Stephen, his opponents “instigated” rumors that he had spoken blasphemy “against Moses and God” (6:11). Enough people believed it to seize Stephen and drag him before the council, where the apostles had earlier been chastised for preaching and healing in Jesus’ name. Against Stephen the charges are more numerous: he is slandering Moses (or the Law of Moses) and God, and he “never ceases to speak words against this holy place [the temple] and the law” (6:11-13). He is charged with saying “this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place [the temple] and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us” (6:14).

Threatening to destroy the temple was a charge made against Jesus (Matt. 26:61; cf. John 2:19). Perhaps Stephen was proclaiming Jesus as more important than the temple; perhaps he was teaching that Jesus’ sacrifice rendered the temple rituals unnecessary. Perhaps, but we should be careful about taking as truth everything his opponents said about him. Still, as becomes clear in the next chapter, Stephen was not afraid to critique the temple “establishment” as being rebels against God (7:51-53).

The end of Acts 6 remarks on Stephen’s countenance as he stands before his accusers, who would soon act out their rage against him with an unlawful execution (the Romans reserved the death penalty for their sole discretion). Luke was not present in the council. Where did he get the information that “all who sat in the council saw that [Stephen’s] face was like the face of an angel” (6:15)? Luke’s second-hand knowledge could have come from anyone who was there that day. One person we know was present was Saul of Tarsus (8:1). Could the Apostle Paul be the source of the description of Stephen’s face? Could Paul be Luke’s source for knowing what Stephen says to the council in Acts 7? Whoever passed this memory on to Luke, it stands as a singular instance of a **visible disciple** being evidence of the **invisible presence** (the Holy Spirit) who gave Stephen courage and words for the critical moment (cf. Luke 12:11-12).

Acts 7:1-53—Stephen’s Speech to the Council

Of the many speeches or sermons recorded or summarized in Acts, this is one of the most interesting. Stephen gives a history lesson to the Sanhedrin. Wouldn’t they know this history? Yes, they know the events he speaks of, but Stephen’s interpretation of the history and his application to the present moment drives them to a murderous rage. The speech is too long for us to examine everything in it, but it’s too important to ignore, as it repeatedly highlights our emphasis in this series on the invisible and visible.

Stephen goes all the way back to Abraham to start his lesson (roughly 2000 years before Christ). God “appeared” to Abraham “in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran” and told him to leave the familiar “and go into the land that I will show you” (7:2-3), to a place Abraham could not see until he got there years later. Even after he arrived in Canaan, it remained a “promised” land, since Abraham owned none of it during his lifetime (Acts 7:5; except for the place to bury Sarah, Gen. 23). God made it clear to Abraham that future generations would possess the land, and only after a time of slavery and affliction (Acts 7:6-7). In his earthly lifetime, all Abraham got to see was the mere beginning of fulfillment (which is still continuing, as Abraham’s descendant, Jesus, spreads God’s blessings to all the families of the earth, Gen. 12:3, etc.). Stephen also mentions “the covenant of circumcision” and how that was passed down from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve tribes (7:8).

At this point, Stephen’s lecture to the council becomes more interesting. Stephen quickly moves on to Joseph, who was “sold into Egypt” because his brothers were “jealous” of him (7:9). Although his brothers rejected him, and he suffered further “afflictions” in Egypt, Joseph was eventually exalted to the highest position in the land, next to Pharaoh (7:9-10). What an unlikely development this led to: the rejected brother, Joseph, became the means of saving his entire family in their time of desperate need, a prolonged famine (7:11-16). This is a key part of Stephen’s argument: the **rejected** one became the **deliverer**! In a real sense, Joseph was enabled to be their deliverer precisely because of their rejection!

The family of Israel went into Egypt to get food, thanks to the brother for whom they had earlier been so ungrateful. The 75 of them came in as free (even favored) guests. How long they were favored is hard to tell exactly, but at some point, after Israel had multiplied greatly, “another king who did not know Joseph” arose (7:18). This Pharaoh made slaves of the Israelites and even attempted to have all their male children killed (7:19).

Israel is desperate for deliverance again, and God sends a deliverer, although he is not recognized as such for many, many years. Providentially, he was brought up in Pharaoh’s house, “instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds” (7:21-22). When he was “forty years old” he intervened to help his Israelite brethren (7:23-24). But like Joseph, he was not appreciated! He thought he was offering “salvation,” but “they did not understand” (7:25). Indeed, his intervention was rejected with harsh words: “Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?” (7:26-28)

So, just as Joseph had been made to disappear by his jealous brothers, Moses had to disappear from Egypt (7:29); he went to Midian, presumably to live out his days. But God’s

plan again was for the **rejected** one to be the appointed **deliverer**. Stephen recounts for his audience how this surprising development occurred after 40 years (7:30ff.). Notice how Stephen makes his point with deliberate, unmistakable repetition: “**This Moses**, whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’—**this man** God sent as both ruler and redeemer” (7:35). “**This man** led them out, performing wonders and signs” (7:36). “**This is the Moses**” who predicted the coming of another “prophet like me from your brothers” (7:37). Do you see where Stephen is going with this? A prophet like Moses would have to be mighty in word and deed, but he would also have to be **rejected** by Israel before he could become Israel’s **deliverer**! (On the divine choice to deliver by the rejected one, you could see also Isaiah 50:6-7; 53:3-5.)

Before we leave this section on Moses, we might note also how Moses was attracted to the burning bush by what he **saw** (Acts 7:30-31, referring back to Exodus 3). But what he **heard** from God (whose face was not seen) changed Moses’ life and the history of Israel. God reveals himself as “the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob” (7:32). He reveals also that he has “seen the affliction” of Israel and has come to deliver them by sending Moses back to Egypt (7:34). While Israel suffered oppression in slavery, they did not see God, but he saw them. This is something to take encouragement from when we are going through difficulties and find it hard to perceive God’s hand in our circumstances.

Even after God used Moses mightily to deliver Israel out of Egypt, the rescued people persisted in their preference for visible “gods” over the invisible God who had worked the visible miracles. This is astonishing, but Stephen quotes the Israelites themselves from Exodus 32:1, 23: “Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him” (7:4). Many (not all) of the Israelites who walked across the bottom of the Red Sea wanted a “god” they could see, since Moses had disappeared from their sight into God’s presence on Sinai for a prolonged time (7:41).

Quoting from Amos 5:25-27 (from 700+ years before Christ), Stephen refers to the idolatry the Israelites continued to practice throughout the 40 years in the wilderness and up to the exile in Babylon, centuries later (7:42-43). What is the significance of this for Stephen’s presentation? Some Israelites practiced idolatry even though they had “the tent of witness in the wilderness,” that is, the tabernacle Moses made as God had shown him on the mountain (7:44). They were never fully free of idolatry just because they had a divinely designed place of worship in their midst. Having a structure supposedly devoted to God in your midst serves as no guarantee against idolatry—whether it is a tent or a temple like Solomon’s (7:45-47)!

Indeed, having a temple (Herod’s temple in Stephen’s time) is no guarantee that God is “with” you, since God is bigger than any dwelling humans can build (7:48-50, which also quotes Psa. 11:4 and Isa. 66:1-2). God is too big to be contained or constrained by our constructions.

Stephen now goes right to the heart of the matter. His audience, the supposed keepers and defenders of God’s holy house, are just as rebellious—just as resistant to the work of the Holy Spirit—as their ancestors had been (7:51). Their ancestors persecuted and killed (some of) the prophets God sent them, and the present generation of rulers “betrayed and murdered” the promised “Righteous One” (7:52). By rejecting Jesus and persecuting his disciples, they reject God’s word, even while making pious claims about the law being delivered to Israel by angels (angelic involvement is not spelled out in Exodus, but it became part of many Jews’ beliefs about God’s communication with Moses; see Acts 7:38; Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:2; Deut. 33:2).

Stephen's history lesson has shown how people regularly **reject the deliverer** God sends, and how persistently we can hang on to idolatry, even while verbalizing respect for the symbols of God's presence (e.g., temple, Torah). Focused on the visible signs of a religion they have domesticated and claim to defend, the rulers in Stephen's time were blind to the visible signs performed in their midst by people filled with the invisible Holy Spirit. Why is this so often the case, then and today? Perhaps the visible things we can control are more suited to our self-centeredness; visible things caused by an invisible presence we cannot control make us uncomfortable.

The council was more than uncomfortable with Stephen's history lesson and accusations against them: "they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him" (7:54). In contrast, Stephen, "full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (7:55). What a place and time to have such a vision! Stephen saw the invisible God and the invisible "Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (7:56; see also Dan. 7:13; Matt. 26:64).

For those who cannot see what Stephen sees, his words are outrageous blasphemy. They can stand it no longer! Never mind the Roman prohibition against anyone else executing anyone, for any reason. Reason has nothing to do with their reaction to Stephen! They "cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him" (7:57). The honorable council has become an out-of-control mob. They take Stephen out of the city and stone him to death, laying "their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul" (7:58).

As he is being pounded to death, because of what he sees and his executioners don't see, Stephen is able to greet Jesus: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (7:59; cf. Luke 23:46). There is such peace in that prayer. But even more remarkable, and unforgettable for the witness Saul, were Stephen's final words on earth, spoken while kneeling: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (7:60). Thus he obeys one of Jesus' commands, from Matthew 5:44: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." And he follows the example of his Lord, who prayed from the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

Stephen is able to pray for mercy for those who show him no mercy. How can he do that? Some of you know the answer to the "how?" question. Stephen is filled with the invisible power of the invisible Holy Spirit. That's how he can make such a dramatic, Christlike exit, filled with such peace that he can seek peace for those who are killing him, and then peacefully fall asleep (7:60).

Making the Invisible Visible

Lesson 5: Acts 8, 10, and 19

This lesson covers material from several chapters in Acts. Obviously we cannot cover everything. Instead we will continue our focus on the work of the invisible Holy Spirit as the visible church continues to expand and cross borders (culturally and geographically). By putting these particular chapters together in one lesson, we can notice one aspect of the Holy Spirit's work that needs to be appreciated by everyone: the Holy Spirit cannot be put into a box, nor can we prescribe for others what their initial experience of the Spirit *must* be like. Here's a preview:

In Acts 8, we see people who have been converted and baptized in water in Jesus' name; they receive a powerful impartation of the Holy Spirit only later, after Peter and John place their hands on them and pray. That is, empowerment by the Holy Spirit was *subsequent* to their conversion (the usual sequence expected in Pentecostal churches).

In Acts 10, we see people empowered by the Holy Spirit *before* they receive water baptism. Their empowerment and conversion are, it seems, simultaneous. Or at least their empowerment and water baptism reverse the sequence found in chapter eight.

In Acts 19, we see people called "disciples" but who know nothing about the Holy Spirit. Their previous baptism was for repentance (like John the Baptist's), but Paul re-baptizes them in Jesus' name, and *then* they are filled with the Holy Spirit's power.

Acts 8:1-3—Persecution Following Stephen's Martyrdom

These verses are transitional, between the long chapter devoted to Stephen's speech and death and the subsequent ministry of another of "the seven" chosen to supervise the food distribution (6:1-6). Philip, as seen in the next section, crosses a cultural boundary to take the gospel to a Samaritan city.

Acts 8:1 mentions the same Saul referred to in 7:58. Perhaps Saul did not throw a single stone at Stephen, but he stood guard over the outer garments of the "witnesses" (i.e., those who testified against Stephen, who would have been the first to throw stones). Thus "Saul approved of his execution" (8:1).

The mob killing of Stephen vented the Sanhedrin's anger, which had been building over the apostles' persistent refusal to obey them rather than God (4:19; 5:29). Gamaliel's wise advice to the council (5:34-39) was forgotten, especially by one of his students—Saul (see Acts 22:3)! Saul became the leader of a fierce persecution against the followers of Jesus (8:3). Later this role takes him as far as Damascus, where his life takes a surprising turn (Acts 9).

The outbreak of overt persecution caused the majority of the church in Jerusalem to scatter, to avoid being imprisoned by the Sanhedrin (8:1, 3). The apostles, however, remained in Jerusalem (with probably a few other brave souls) for reasons not explained by Luke.

Acts 8:4-25—Philip's Ministry in Samaria

Philip was one of many who "scattered" from Jerusalem and "went about preaching the word" (8:4). The Sanhedrin did not want the name of Jesus spread in Jerusalem; their

persecution of Jesus' followers caused the name to be spread throughout the region! Persecution of the church (against Gamaliel's advice) proved counter-productive, as persecution of Christianity has always proved eventually.

It's unclear from the Greek manuscripts of Acts whether Philip went to "a city in Samaria" (8:5, NIV) or to "the city of Samaria" (ESV). It's of no consequence theologically. (Presumably it is not the same Samaritan town, Sychar, visited by Jesus and the Twelve in John 4:4-42.) What is significant is that he took the gospel to **Samaritans**. We could ask, though Luke does not, why the apostles were staying in Jerusalem and not yet taking the initiative to go to "all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (1:8). Eventually the Twelve will become involved in missions beyond the borders, but the pioneers are those who fled Jerusalem (8:2, "the regions of Judea and Samaria").

Philip's preaching of Jesus was accompanied by "signs" (8:6), including casting out of demons and healing of "paralyzed or lame" people (8:7). The city experienced "much joy" (8:8). So there were **visible results** as Philip preached and taught, impressive enough to attract the attention of a magician named Simon, who had a reputation for possessing great power from God (8:9-11). Simon joined many others in being baptized by Philip (8:10-13). Was he really converted to Jesus? Or were his motives more mixed?

Simon's genuineness is not the only ambiguity in this passage. In 8:14-17, we read that Peter and John were sent by the other apostles (still in Jerusalem) to check out the report "that Samaria had received the word of God" (8:14). Peter and John "prayed for them" (the recently baptized converts) "that they might receive the Holy Spirit" (8:15). Often theologians argue about this passage. Were they not really Christians until Peter and John prayed and the Holy Spirit came? Was the Holy Spirit already in them (giving them new birth) but not present in manifest—visible, audible—ways that would show his presence, such as spiritual gifts? (After all, Paul says you can't make the basic Christian confession that "Jesus is Lord" without the Holy Spirit [1 Cor. 12:3]. He also says you cannot belong to Jesus without the Holy Spirit [Rom. 8:9].) Or was this a unique boundary crossing (Jews to Samaritans) that needed apostolic approval for other Jewish Christians to be persuaded it was genuine? All of these and other explanations have been put forward by Bible scholars, but usually without persuasive effect on those whose experience (or denomination) leans in a different direction.

Luke says the apostles prayed for them to receive the Holy Spirit because "he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus" (8:16). Something happened, something different, as a result of the apostles' prayer and laying on of hands. What was it? Some say it must have been the gift of tongues, as at Pentecost (Acts 2) or at Cornelius's home (Acts 10). But Luke simply does not say. Whatever it was so impressed Simon that he offered money to Peter and John and requested, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit" (8:18-19). (From this incident, we get the word "simony," used in later church history to name the corrupt practice of buying a high position in the church, such as elevation to be a bishop.)

Given the information in Acts 8, it is evident that the prayer of the apostles made some kind of visible/audible difference in the people who had already been baptized in Jesus' name.

We can't say more than that without speculation. As for the apparent conflict with the passages from Paul cited above, my own view is that the Holy Spirit had indeed drawn the Samaritans to Christ. But Luke's emphasis on the Holy Spirit always involves **empowerment** to speak or act in ways that bear witness to the truth about Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Luke never addresses the question of whether a person can be "born again" and not have the Spirit (John 3 and the Paul passages cited above are more explicit on that point). Luke connects the Holy Spirit with power, not so much with new life.

So, when Luke says the Holy Spirit "had not yet fallen on any of them" (8:16), he probably means there had been **no visible manifestation** of the Spirit's power in these Samaritan believers. I think it's fair to say the new believers were genuinely converted and had begun to live as followers of Jesus. It's also fair to say, however, that something was missing. Why else would the apostles lay hands on them and pray for them to receive the Holy Spirit?

We won't find answers in Acts 8 to all our questions about the timing of the Holy Spirit's presence in someone's life. What we do find is something important. Put in terms of our theme for this series, the point can be stated this way: **leaving it invisible is unsatisfactory and incomplete**. At least Peter and John seemed to think so! Are we satisfied simply to have head knowledge of God? Are we satisfied to have had an experience that moved us to put our faith in Jesus as Savior (conversion)? Is our past experience of meeting Jesus and finding forgiveness all we need? Is our relationship with God something no one else can see? Are we content with an **invisible** presence with no **visible** evidence? The more important question is this: Is **God** satisfied with the current state of our relationship with him?

[Acts 8:26-40 is interesting for our theme: Philip is directed to the desert, where there is likely no one to see! The voice of an invisible presence—the Holy Spirit—directs Philip to go to the man in the chariot. The Ethiopian eunuch is reading Scripture, but he just can't "see" what it means, until Philip explains it. Once he sees the truth, the eunuch asks to be baptized. Once Philip completes this divine appointment, he disappears from the eunuch, as "the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more" (8:39). It's an intriguing passage, but we have more than enough to think about in this lesson!]

Acts 10:1-48—Peter's Surprising Ministry in Caesarea

Cornelius is a centurion in the Roman army. The Jews regarded the Roman legions as unwanted "occupation forces." But Cornelius is also described as "a devout man who feared God" (10:2). That means he is a "God-fearer," a Gentile who worships the God of Israel but who has not "converted" in the formal sense of receiving circumcision, observing the food laws, etc. Cornelius was personally regarded favorably by the Jews, despite being part of Rome's army, because "he gave alms generously to the people" (10:2; 10:22; cf. Luke 7:1-5).

Luke also says that Cornelius "prayed continually to God" (10:2). This is noteworthy in terms of our theme of invisible/visible. Cornelius was from a **pagan** background, accustomed to many **visible gods** across the Roman world, but here in Caesarea, a city on the Mediterranean coast of the Holy Land, he is continually praying **to an invisible God**. Something attracted him

to change his worship from the dead idols of paganism to the living God of Israel. His life-story before this point would be interesting, but we have no access to it. But in this chapter, we'll find Cornelius experiencing the invisible God of Israel in ways that become visible and audible.

First, God gave Cornelius a startling **vision** of an angel, bearing a message which is quite detailed about Peter's current location (10:3-6). Cornelius wastes no time in sending trusted messengers (including another God-fearing soldier) to Joppa to find Peter (10:7-8).

The following day, Peter is praying (as he has since childhood) to an **invisible** God (10:9ff.). But God gives him a startling and puzzling **vision**: "a great sheet" in which were "all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air" (10:11-12). More surprising was the command: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat" (10:13). Reptiles and many "birds of the air" are not on the kosher menu, from which Peter claims never to have strayed: "I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean" (10:14; see passages like Lev. 11:2-47; 20:25; Deut. 14:4-20). But God has a word for Peter that supersedes his religious training: "What God has made clean, do not call common" (10:15). This sequence occurred **three** times, either to emphasize by repetition or perhaps to match the call that Peter was about to receive from **three** messengers (10:16, 19).

Peter tries to figure out the significance of his vision (10:19), but it will turn out to have more to do with people than with diet! The words Peter heard about animals are to prepare Peter to change his thinking about people—uncircumcised Gentiles specifically. While he's still pondering the vision, the invisible Holy Spirit speaks to Peter, not to interpret the vision but to give him information and instruction: "Behold, three men are looking for you. Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them" (10:19-20).

The messengers tell Peter why they have come (10:21-22). He invites them in to be his guests (10:23). This kind of hospitality shown by Jews to Gentiles was in keeping with the customs of the time. Later, when Peter accepts the hospitality of Cornelius—well that's another story!

The next day, when Peter begins the journey to Caesarea with the messengers, he does something very wise: he takes along "some of the brothers from Joppa" (10:23). These "six brothers" would be important witnesses in Acts 11:12, when some of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem found fault with Peter: "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them."

Without comment here, we'll pass over the next few verses after 23. What Peter says in 10:28, however, shows how Peter now understands the vision of "unclean" animals and the words "kill and eat." God had not been ordering him to violate his Jewish diet; God had been getting him ready to violate a strong Jewish taboo against entering Gentile houses. Peter's words sound almost ungracious as he begins to address the gathering: "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean" (10:28).

Implicitly Peter is admitting that he has previously thought of Gentiles as "unclean," as unfit company for a Law-abiding Jew! But the vision God gave him he now understands as being about people that God cleansed: Peter "should not call any person common or unclean," especially if God has "cleansed their hearts by faith" (15:9, when Peter explains yet again what happened at Cornelius's house).

After Cornelius tells Peter in person what he had essentially communicated earlier by his messengers, and after he announces the gathering's readiness "to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord" (10:30-33), Peter continues with more interpretation of the vision of unclean animals and of the string of events that led up to this moment—one of the most important moments in church history: "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" (10:34-35). This is an amazing statement from an observant Jew, but it's just the introduction. The real message he has to share with the gathering is the same message Peter has already been preaching, apparently only to Jewish people (with the partial but important exception of the Samaritans in Acts 8, who were considered half-Jews). He's going to tell them about Jesus (10:36-43).

Peter can assume they have heard something about the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus (10:37-38). But they had not heard it as a message of salvation for **them, Gentiles**, until now. Peter's message for them is his usual gospel proclamation: Jesus of Nazareth was anointed "with the Holy Spirit and with power." With that **invisible** anointing, Jesus had done great and **visible** things—"doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him" (10:38).

Just as he did at Pentecost, Peter says, "we are witnesses" of what Jesus did, of how he was crucified, and of how "God raised him on the third day" (10:39-40). He also says Jesus "commanded us to preach to the people" (10:42). Had Peter not understood Gentiles to be part of "the people" before now? Let's not be too hard on Peter; he has not been slower than the other apostles to evangelize the Gentiles, nor has he been slower than we perhaps have been about sharing the gospel with our neighbors!

As on other occasions in Acts, Luke may give us just a summary of Peter's message. Importantly, Luke includes the proclamation "that everyone who believes in him [Jesus] receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (10:43). What happens next shows that "everyone" truly means "everyone," Gentile or Jew!

"While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word" (10:44). This goes beyond the surprising events of Acts 8, in Samaria. "The believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles" (10:45). How did they know? They couldn't see the Holy Spirit, but they could hear "them speaking in tongues and extolling God" (10:46). Once again the invisible presence of the Holy Spirit had made himself "visible" (audible) to witnesses of his activity.

In the case of the Samaritan believers in Acts 8, something had been missing or incomplete about their water baptism in Jesus's name. That lack was remedied by the prayers of John and Peter, which brought the manifestation of the Holy Spirit (in some way that Luke does spell out). In this case, in Acts 10, Gentiles who have not been baptized in water have been baptized in the Holy Spirit. It's wonderful and amazing, but Peter sees a need to add water baptism in Jesus' name to their powerful experience of the Holy Spirit: "Can anyone withhold water" for their baptism, since they "have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (10:47). They were baptized in water, and Peter remained with them "for some days" (10:48).

Acts 11—Peter Has to Explain

Peter must have expected some negative comments from the conservative Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, who didn't yet understand the global, cross-cultural implications of the Jewish Messiah's death and resurrection. Perhaps some voiced theological complaints, but Luke focuses on their complaint about Peter's fellowship with Gentiles: "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them" (11:3). (Does this sound a little like the complaint critics voiced against Jesus? Recall Luke 15:2.)

To explain (defend?) himself, Peter recounts some of the details from chapter 10 (11:4-17). He concludes his explanation with these persuasive words: "If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" (11:17). The length of Peter's reply is remarkable. Peter will repeat part of this story again in Acts 15:7-9. Luke's emphasis on this event shows how important it was, not just for Luke (a Gentile himself!) but also for the expansion of the church beyond the social and cultural boundaries of Judaism.

Although the question would come up again as to whether Gentile believers could be saved without circumcision and observance of other laws (Acts 15:1), at least for the time being, Peter's critics in Jerusalem were silenced by his question in 11:17. "They fell silent" in the sense that they stopped arguing. But Luke also notes that they "glorified God" and acknowledged that (to their surprise) "God has granted repentance that leads to life" to Gentiles (11:18). The manifest, **visible** work of the Holy Spirit had compelled them to change their minds about the Gentiles' chances of being saved! Have you ever been surprised by someone being changed by the Lord when you had given up all such hope for that person?

Just a quick notice: Many of those who had scattered from Jerusalem to escape the persecution (8:1, 4) spread the gospel of Jesus only to Jews (11:19). But "some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene" spoke also to "Greeks" (NIV) or "Hellenists" (11:20). In this context (unlike chapter 6), the reference is clearly to non-Jews, Gentiles. Thus began the great missionary church of Antioch—with a mixture of Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus. This church in Antioch (not the one in Jerusalem) would send out Paul and Barnabas on the "first missionary journey of Paul," and it would be Paul's "home base" for his second and third journeys, accompanied by Silas. [Luke also reports that Antioch of Syria was where the disciples "were first called Christians" (11:26).]

Acts 19:1-7—"Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"

We only need to look at the first seven verses. Our interest is mainly in noticing the variety among the chapters we're looking at (recall the overview at the beginning of the lesson).

Paul is traveling overland from his home-church base in Antioch, re-visiting churches planted earlier (18:23). After those encouraging visits he makes his way to Ephesus, where he will remain for more than two years. There were Christians already in Ephesus (18:26). But Paul's first encounter in Ephesus on this trip is not with his friends, Priscilla and Aquila, but with a group of about twelve men described by Luke as "disciples" (19:1, 7).

The term “disciples” is hard to pin down in this context. Usually in Acts, “disciples” refers to Jesus’ followers, but these men could better be described as disciples of John the Baptist, although they had probably never met him. (This passage hints at how far the influence of John had gone. Ephesus is a long way from the Jordan River!) Paul asked whether they had received the Holy Spirit when they became believers. Why would he ask this question? Perhaps because he discerned what the answer would be! They “have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit” (19:2).

Because Luke doesn’t tell us specifically, we don’t know whether these men had even heard of Jesus. But since they don’t know about the Holy Spirit, they certainly don’t know much about Jesus. Thus Paul asks his follow-up question: “Into what then were you baptized?” “Into John’s baptism,” they replied (19:3).

John’s baptism had its place and time (even Jesus insisted on it for himself! See Matt. 3:15). Paul explains to them that “John baptized with the baptism of repentance” (19:4). In other words, receiving John’s baptism was an admission of one’s need for cleansing (except for Jesus, who was baptized to identify himself with us who needed cleansing).

John’s baptism was an act expressing repentance but also preparation, since John told his audiences “to believe in the one who was to come after him” (19:4), i.e., to believe in the Messiah, which John staunchly denied being (see Luke 3:15-17; John 1:7-8, 20-27). Paul informs these “disciples” that John had been speaking of “Jesus” (19:4).

Again we reasonably assume Paul told them more about Jesus than Luke reports here. Suffice it to say, however, they proved to be good “disciples” of John because they did what John had told people to do: they looked in faith to Jesus, about whom Paul had just informed them. They received water baptism again (the only recorded instance in the NT), but this time “in the name of the Lord Jesus” (19:5).

After baptizing the men in Jesus’ name (an act of identification with Jesus and trusting him for salvation (see Romans 6:3-4), Paul “laid his hands on them” and “the Holy Spirit came on them” (19:6). How did Paul and Luke (and how do we) know this was the case? “They began speaking in tongues and prophesying” (19:6). This is what happened on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2; this is what happened at Cornelius’s house in Acts 10; is this what happened in Acts 8, with the Samaritans? Perhaps. But we shouldn’t use this passage in Acts 19 to read into Acts 8 things that Luke didn’t say.

Perhaps every time someone received the Holy Spirit in Acts they spoke in tongues (the argument made by many of our Pentecostal friends). But to be honest with the text, Luke does not say that. When he tells us about Paul’s conversion and Ananias laying hands on him to receive the Spirit, Luke doesn’t tell us that Paul began to speak in tongues right away (Acts 9:17-19). We know from Paul’s epistles that he spoke in tongues “more than all of you” (1 Cor. 14:18). But he also asked the question, “Do all speak with tongues?” (1 Cor. 12:30) in a way that grammatically and contextually expects the answer to be “no.”

So, to be honest and faithful to the text of Acts and the rest of the New Testament, and to be honest about the experience of many Christians, being baptized or filled with the Holy Spirit does not always include tongues. We should be open to all the gifts, and Paul certainly encouraged the exercise of the gift of tongues (1 Cor. 14). But it is not the only gift of the Spirit, and we should be open to other gifts and not elevate one above others as the necessary evidence.

On the other hand, to be faithful to the New Testament and the experience of many Christians, we should expect some **visible** evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence in someone's life, either from the gifts named in 1 Corinthians 12 or the spiritual fruit named in Galatians 5:22-23. And we shouldn't insist that it happen immediately, but we should be expecting it to happen at some time, in some way that makes it visible (to ourselves and others) that the invisible Holy Spirit is present and working in us and through us.

I say all of the above as someone who grew up in a Pentecostal environment where "tongues" was expected to be the "initial physical evidence" of being filled with the Spirit. I won't tell the whole story here. I will say that when I was seeking the "baptism of the Spirit" I experienced undeniable (visible/audible) evidence that the Holy Spirit was working through me with gifts of "the utterance of wisdom (see 1 Cor. 12:8) many weeks before I received the gift of tongues, which I value highly. But looking back now I would say I was baptized in the Spirit before I ever spoke in tongues. My experience was at odds with what I had heard preached all my life, but it would be hard to talk me out of believing what I know happened to me!

Quite apart from traditional, denominational differences on this point of "initial evidence," I think the most important point is that there should be some evidence, some visible/audible difference in us because of the Holy Spirit. If God the Holy Spirit has the freedom to do as he pleases in our lives, he will give us words that speak God's heart, and he will use our lives to make a difference in the lives of others (with or without words).

Making the Invisible Visible

Lesson 6: Acts 9 (with parallels in 22 & 26)

Acts 9:1-22—Blinded to See Again and Anew

The narrative of Saul of Tarsus begins in Acts 7:58 and 8:1-3, only to be resumed here in chapter 9. Except for chapters 10-12, Paul (as he comes to be known from 13:9) will be the main character for the rest of Acts. (“Saul” is a Hebrew or Aramaic name. Saul was the first king of Israel, and he was from the tribe of Benjamin, as was the Apostle Paul [see Phil. 3:5]. “Paul” is based on the Greek “Paulus,” which might have been the name Saul used when among Greek-speaking people, as he was most of the time in Acts.)

Saul’s zeal in trying to eradicate Christianity is illustrated by 8:3 (“Saul was ravaging the church”) and emphasized again in 9:1-2. He was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” He got the high priest in Jerusalem to authorize his hunt as far as Damascus, to arrest and bring back to Jerusalem anyone “belonging to the Way, men or women.” Later Paul refers to his persecution of the church as evidence for his zeal for the truth as he had learned it in Judaism (Phil. 3:6).

How long Saul persecuted Christians is a matter of approximation and guesswork. We cannot say for sure when Stephen became the first martyr in Acts 7, and we cannot put a precise date on Saul’s conversion in Acts 9. (Some scholars date his conversion about 33 A.D., about three years after Jesus’ death and resurrection.) The more important point is not *when* Saul was converted but rather *how thoroughly*. From being the most dangerous enemy of Jesus’ disciples, Saul became, in time, the most influential individual in spreading the Christian faith. Beyond the many churches he planted, his influence endures through the many letters attributed to him in the New Testament. (For his assessment of his work, see 1 Cor. 15:10.)

When Saul was persecuting the church, he thought he was serving God and defending the true faith (see Acts 22:3-4; Gal. 1:13-14; 1 Cor. 15:9). In his eyes the **visible church** (or “the Way” as they referred to themselves then) was an enemy of the truth, an enemy that needed to be eliminated. He zealously made war against the **visible church** until he met the **invisible Lord** of the church in Acts 9. His meeting with the Lord was so dramatic that it gave rise to an expression still in use, for religious or non-religious changes: “a Damascus Road experience.”

Saul and his company were getting close to Damascus when “suddenly a light from heaven shone around him” (9:3). Even more dramatic and life-changing are the words Saul heard spoken to him: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (9:4) Saul knew he was persecuting followers of Jesus, for he thought they were deluded and dangerous, but who is this who speaks with such power and authority (along with the blinding light)?

Saul asks, “Who are you, Lord?” (9:5). As Christian readers of the New Testament, we are accustomed to thinking of “the Lord” as Jesus. But here Saul probably meant “lord” in the sense of “sir” (the Greek word *kurios* can have either meaning). Saul is implicitly recognizing the dignity and power of the person addressing him, but who is it? The answer Saul receives changes him from persecutor to repentant follower, and later makes him an apostle with a view of the church fundamentally shaped by the revelation Saul received that day.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (9:5). What a shock to Saul, beyond our calculation! First, Saul thought Jesus was dead. Second, Saul thought he was persecuting followers of Jesus; he had not imagined he was persecuting Jesus himself! This is important for us to appreciate, just as it was for Saul from that day on: What we do to Christians is what we do to Christ!

We can only imagine Saul’s initial confusion over this heavenly declaration. He would have three days of darkness to think about Jesus’ words (9:9), but it would take years to work out the implications as, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Saul first preached that Jesus “is the Son of God” (9:20) and later wrote the epistles explaining Jesus’ lordship and Jesus’ connection to his people, as the head of the church, the Body of Christ (see, for example Col. 1:15-20). Jesus is always present in his visible body on earth, although Jesus himself cannot be seen (except in extraordinary appearances, in visions and dreams). What we do—what anyone does—to Christ’s body is done to **him**, the Son of God and Lord of all (see Phil. 2:1-13).

After identifying himself as “Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” the Lord instructs Saul to “rise and enter the city” of Damascus, where he will receive further instructions (9:6). Meanwhile, Luke notes that Saul’s traveling companions were also traumatized. They could hear the voice, but they did not see the speaker (9:7). Years later, giving his testimony to a hostile mob in Jerusalem, the Apostle Paul says others present that day saw the light but did not understand the voice that spoke to him personally. (This is similar to John 12:28-30, when God’s voice from heaven came for Jesus’ benefit, but the people around questioned whether the sound was thunder or an angel. They heard something but couldn’t say what.)

When Saul stood up and opened his eyes, “he saw nothing” (9:8). Ironically the light had physically blinded him while inside his soul the light was dawning. Led by his traveling companions, he arrived in Damascus, where “for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank” (9:8-9). Again, we can only imagine his thoughts during that time. We know, from the text, that he was praying and the Lord was communicating to him (9:11-12).

One of the men who might have been arrested by Saul (if Jesus had not arrested him first) was Ananias (not to be confused with the unfortunate Ananias of Acts 5!) The Lord speaks to Ananias “in a vision” (9:10) and tells him precisely where to find Saul of Tarsus (9:11). The Lord informs Ananias that Saul has seen “in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight” (9:12).

Let’s try to appreciate the reality of this. A *blind* man (Saul) has seen a *vision* and heard the name of the person who will pray for him to be healed. Saul’s vision was not something there for everyone to see; it was something he saw in his mind or his spirit. That would undoubtedly have encouraged the faith of Saul for his healing. On the other hand, Ananias has a vision with quite specific instructions, but he is (understandably) hesitant.

Ananias voices his misgivings to the Lord in 9:13-14. It’s easy to identify with Ananias in this situation. I would ask for confirmation of some kind before walking into the presence of the chief human enemy of Christians. The Lord is patient with Ananias and gives him a confirming, encouraging word: “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” (9:15). The Lord also tells Ananias something (I imagine) Ananias at some point relayed to Saul, “For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (9:16). Whether or not Ananias actually said that to Saul,

Saul would soon enough suffer for his new faith: first a plot to kill him in Damascus (9:23); then mistrust from Christian brothers and sisters back in Jerusalem (9:26); then another plot to kill him (9:29). The chief persecutor of Christians was about to become a ‘lightning rod’ for persecution.

Perhaps still with some apprehension, Ananias obeys God’s instructions. He goes to the place where Saul is staying and praying. He lays his hands on Saul and boldly addresses him: “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (9:17).

As mentioned in an earlier lesson, Luke does not report whether Saul spoke in tongues or prophesied or did anything else that demonstrated immediately that he was “filled with the Holy Spirit.” I think, however, we might take it on faith that Ananias’s prayer was effective for that infilling of the Spirit, since his prayer for Saul’s visual healing happened “immediately” (9:18). Saul received Christian baptism, apparently even before breaking his three-day fast (9:18-19).

Saul was happy to see again (physically), but now he sees everyone differently. Those he had previously regarded as enemies of the true faith he now sees as brothers and sisters in Christ, indeed as members of the Body of Christ. Later, after years of reflecting and preaching the gospel, the Apostle Paul would write that seeing people in the light of Christ’s death and resurrection changed how he saw everyone in the world (2 Cor. 5:14-17).

If we look for evidence that Saul was filled with the Holy Spirit when Ananias prayed for him, we need go no further than Acts 9:20. In one of the Damascus synagogues where Saul had planned to hunt for Christians and take them prisoner, Saul begins his preaching ministry, proclaiming that Jesus “is the Son of God.” This astonishes the audience who had expected something totally different from the notorious Saul of Tarsus (9:21). But this is visible/audible evidence that Saul has indeed been filled with God’s Spirit. Saul’s energy to persecute Christians has been transformed into energy to preach the gospel of Christ. Luke notes that “Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the [non-Christian] Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ” (9:22).

Acts 22 and 26—Paul’s Testimony Expanded

In writing Acts, Luke gives us two other significant opportunities to learn about Saul/Paul’s conversion.

In Acts 21:28-36, Paul was attacked by a mob in Jerusalem who were ready to kill him (21:31). He was rescued by Roman soldiers stationed nearby (21:32ff.). But before they carry Paul into their barracks, Paul asks for permission to speak to the mob (21:39). His speech to the crowd actually begins in 22:1 and goes through verse 21.

He points out that he had once been a zealous opponent of Christianity, sincerely believing he was thus serving God, as he credits his attackers with being zealous as he had been (22:3-5). In 22:6ff, he testifies about his Damascus Road encounter with Jesus. The words closely parallel the account we looked at in Acts 9, but with some additional details. He tells about Ananias, “a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there” (22:12) coming to him and praying for his sight to be restored (22:13). He adds some words spoken by Ananias which Luke did not record earlier: “The God of our fathers appointed

you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; ¹⁵ for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (22:14-16).

The mob which had been trying to kill Paul a few moments before listened with remarkable restraint, even when he told how God warned him to flee Jerusalem (22:18). But all their patience was exhausted by Paul’s claim that God had sent him “far away to the Gentiles” (22:21). At this point, the Romans took Paul into custody, where he would remain for many years—first in Jerusalem, then in Caesarea, and finally in Rome at the end of the Book of Acts.

While in Roman custody in Caesarea, Paul had another opportunity to tell the story of his conversion to Christ. This time it was not before a frenzied mob but before the dignified figures of Festus, Agrippa, and Bernice (Acts 25:23). Paul’s testimony begins in 26:2.

Paul admits that he had been “convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth” (26:9). He recounts some of his activities as a persecutor of Christians in 26:10-11. In 26:12-18, he provides more details about what Jesus had said to him directly that day on the Road to Damascus.

Of particular note are the words at the end of 26:14, not reported in either of the two earlier accounts of what Jesus said to him that day: “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” These words seem to indicate that Jesus knew Saul/Paul had been fighting an inner battle before his trip to Damascus. On the one hand he was zealous to persecute the church as an enemy of the faith of his ancestors. On the other hand, perhaps he felt some conflict about going against the counsel of his revered rabbi, Gamaliel (recall Acts 5:34-39, when Gamaliel warned the council that they might find themselves fighting against God!). Or perhaps Saul had simply been under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, even before he met Jesus just outside Damascus!

Paul repeats Jesus’ revelation of his identity: “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting” (26:15). But he adds some words from Jesus not found in Acts 9 or 22.

¹⁶ But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, ¹⁷ delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you ¹⁸ to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’ Acts 26:16–18 (ESV)

This recitation gives us more detail about how Saul/Paul understood his call into ministry from the beginning of his acquaintance with Jesus. (There is no evidence that Saul of Tarsus had ever seen or heard Jesus before the Damascus Road experience; 2 Cor. 5:16 is best understood as a refutation of those who wanted to claim superior knowledge of Christ because of their prior knowledge “according to the flesh.”) Saul/Paul knew from the beginning of his call that he was to be Jesus’ “servant and witness” (26:16). He had the Lord’s promise that he would be delivered from “your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you” (26:17). That is, Saul understood he was to preach to Jews and Gentiles (something Peter learned later at the house of Cornelius, in Acts 10).

Saul/Paul received the commission “to open their eyes” (26:18)—an interesting thing to say to a man who had just been blinded! Saul’s healing by the hands of Ananias (9:18) would

have confirmed that commission heard on the Road to Damascus. Paul's ministry, by the power of the Holy Spirit, would turn people "from darkness to light," from not seeing to seeing.

*The most important way the **invisible** needs to become **visible** is for people who haven't seen the truth about Jesus to be able (by his grace) to see who Jesus really is.* That's what happened to Saul of Tarsus just outside Damascus. He had not been able to see Jesus' true identity; henceforth he would see everyone in the light of Jesus, the Son of God and Lord of all. Persons of our acquaintance who 'just don't see it' need our prayers that God will 'turn the lights on' for them. People of other religions or no religion need the same prayer. It's so important to pray for light for them to see Jesus, the light of the world (John 8:12; also John 1:4-5, 9).

Saul/Paul's ministry will turn people "from the power of Satan to God" (Acts 26:18; cf. Col. 1:11-14). Repentant sinners will "receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:18; cf. Eph. 2:11-22). Repeatedly Paul's epistles show that he never forgot Jesus' commissioning words as recorded in Acts 26:15-18. Jesus knew what he was calling Saul to do, in greater detail than Acts 9 provides, and the Acts 22 account was cut short by a frenzied mob.

Paul tells King Agrippa that obedience to "the heavenly vision" was the explanation for his ministry (26:19), and for the persistent animosity toward him among the rulers in Jerusalem (26:21). Because that Damascus Road encounter was a turning point for Saul of Tarsus but also for the mission of the whole church, Luke has relayed the story of Saul's conversion three times, giving more details especially in this third telling.

Making the Invisible Visible

Lesson 7: Acts 13-14

Like anyone reporting historical events, Luke cannot tell everything done or said. He has to be selective, as we do in writing or teaching a lesson! For the first twelve chapters of Acts, he focuses somewhat on Peter, but also on Stephen and Philip for significant events, and especially on the conversion of the fiercest persecutor of the young church, Saul of Tarsus. From chapter 13 through the end of the book, Saul/Paul will be the main character. The simplest explanation for this focus is Luke's personal acquaintance with Paul; in fact Luke shares many experiences reported in the latter part of the book (Acts 16:11 has Luke's first use of "we" in the narrative).

For this series, we're skipping chapter 11 (except for the few remarks in Lesson 5) and chapter 12. Both chapters contain interesting events, but we move on to Acts 13-14 for what is often called "Paul's first missionary journey."

Acts 13—"Paul's First Missionary Journey" Begins

The church at Antioch was first mentioned in Acts 11:19-30. Apparently this church began as a mixture of Jewish and non-Jewish believers in Jesus and grew rapidly (11:21). The apostles in Jerusalem heard about it and sent Barnabas to get first-hand knowledge (11:22). Barnabas was excited by what he saw and went to Tarsus to get Saul to help with teaching and nurturing the young believers for an entire year (11:23-26). (Luke notes that Antioch was the first place followers of Jesus were called "Christians." Sometimes it is said that "Christian" means "little Christ," but it actually just means "a follower of Christ.")

This Antioch is in Syria, as distinct from Antioch in Pisidia, further north and west in what is now Turkey. Antioch in Syria was reasonably close to the Mediterranean, although Seleucia served as its port city. Thus the church in Antioch was in a good position to become the first mission-minded congregation, the 'sending' church for "Paul's first missionary journey."

Barnabas and Saul (as he is still called at this point) had already been on one mission together. The church at Antioch sent an offering to help the church in Judea, and they entrusted Barnabas and Saul to deliver it (11:30). In 12:25, Barnabas and Saul "returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark."

Acts 13 begins with a list of "prophets and teachers" in the Antioch church. Barnabas is mentioned first, showing he was first in influence. Next are mentioned Simeon, Lucius, Manaen, and Saul. Listing Saul last does not necessarily mean he was the least of the group. After all, he had been chosen to travel with Barnabas on the earlier trip to Judea.

Acts 13:2 is a good example of the Holy Spirit's initiative in every significant new step taken in the early church: "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'" The person through whom this prophetic direction came is not named. Probably it was not Barnabas or Saul, but it may not have been Simeon, Lucius, or Manaen either. Prophetic words can come through someone who does not have the title of "prophet" in the church (see 1 Cor. 14:31).

Acts 13:3 illustrates an important aspect of responding to the Holy Spirit's guidance. The prophetic word in 13:2 seemed clear enough, but the church kept on fasting and praying before laying hands on Barnabas and Saul to commission them and send them off. This is an example of doing what Paul says later in one of his letters: "Do not despise prophecies,²¹ but test everything; hold fast what is good" (1 Thess. 5:20–21). The prophecy of Acts 13:2 could stand up under further prayerful discernment. Hearing a prophetic word does not mean you can stop listening. To the contrary, hearing a prophetic word means you need to keep listening. There may be further instruction, clarification, or even correction.

This was a big step for the church at Antioch. Luke does not tell us so, but it's safe to assume they collected funds for the mission. Taking this step also meant sending away two of their best spiritual leaders and teachers. But collectively they perceived that, indeed, Barnabas and Saul were "being sent out by the Holy Spirit" (13:4).

The first stop on their journey was the island of Cyprus, a sensible choice as it was the homeland of Barnabas (see Acts 4:36) and not far from Antioch (about 60 miles from the port city of Seleucia). They began their mission by preaching in the Jewish synagogues in the city of Salamis (13:5). This would be their pattern of ministry—in every new place they started (if possible) with the Jews, who would have the background to make sense of the proclamation that Messiah had come and brought salvation. They would not stop with the Jews, however; at the first opportunity they would spread the message to willing Gentiles. (Note that "John," who is there "to assist them" (13:5) is the "John, whose other name was Mark" [12:25]).

The team goes from one end of the island to the other "as far as Paphos" (Acts 13:6, near the western end of Cyprus). There they have an interesting encounter with a Jew and a Gentile. The Jew is "Bar-Jesus" ("son of Joshua" in Aramaic). The Gentile is the Roman proconsul or governor, "Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God" (13:6-7).

This is an open door to preach the gospel to a significant Roman official, but Bar-Jesus, also known as "Elymas the magician," tries to get in the way. Apparently jealous for influence on the governor, he attempts "to turn the proconsul away from the faith" (13:8). At this point "Saul, who is also called Paul" (13:9) steps forward in the authority of the Holy Spirit to rebuke Bar-Jesus/Elymas: "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And now, behold the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time" (13:10-11). Wow! You had better know you are led by the Lord to speak that way to anyone!

But Paul (his name going forward in Acts) was led by the Lord. What is the evidence for that? Paul's prediction that Elymas would be blinded "for a time" (like Saul of Tarsus had been!) was immediately fulfilled. It is little wonder that "the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred." The "teaching of the Lord" at which he was "astonished" was not simply the persuasiveness of preaching; "the teaching of the Lord" includes the power of the Lord to speak through his servants and do miraculous things (13:12).

Compare the amazement of Jesus' audience in Mark 1:21-27. Especially note vs. 27: "a new teaching with authority." Jesus' words were wonderful, but he also worked wonders as part of his "teaching." Jesus didn't simply talk about God's kingdom; he demonstrated it with healings and exorcisms. From the beginning, the "teaching" of the church was meant to include 'showing' as well as 'telling.' The miracles we have looked at in this series should convince (and convict?) us of this truth: Jesus intends his followers to do the works he did (and even greater, according to John 14:12). Changed lives and lifestyles make an **invisible kingdom visible**, but so do miracles of healing, prophecies, exorcisms, and other manifestations of God's power at work through believers in Jesus.

Making the invisible kingdom visible in power, making an invisible Jesus real to people living in the physical world—this was important from the Day of Pentecost through the early church centuries as the gospel spread throughout the Roman Empire. Consider especially why these visible manifestations were important in the conversion of Gentiles.

Some Gentiles were already attracted to the superior ethics and values of the Jewish faith. Recall Cornelius in Acts 10. Such "God-fearers" (who had not received circumcision and all the Law's obligations) were among the first Gentiles to become believers in Jesus. These Gentiles would already be accustomed to the invisibility of Israel's God. But these Gentiles were a small minority in the Roman Empire and beyond the Empire practically non-existent. Gentiles generally (throughout the world) were accustomed to visible "gods" placed in their temples and homes. Such "gods" may have been "mute" (1 Cor. 12:2), but at least they could be seen. How would you try to convert someone away from worshiping an idol (after generations of tradition) to worshiping the true God?

In our western, rationalistic culture, we place a lot of confidence in logical persuasion. But that is not what won the centuries-long battle for Christianity to emerge from obscurity, through long years of persecution, eventually to acceptance, and ultimately to dominance in the Roman Empire. Persuasion is important, and Christian writers ("apologists") as early as the 100s made energetic efforts to explain Christianity to educated pagans. But the real persuasiveness of Christianity was in the lifestyles of Christian believers, in the power that made Christians different and bold enough to die for their faith, but also the power that worked miracles ("signs") to demonstrate the reality of the Christians' God and the superiority of Christ's power over dead idols. Christ's authority needed to be **seen** to be credible, especially by those enthralled with the claims and tricks of people like Simon (Acts 8), Elymas (Acts 13), the "slave girl who had a spirit of divination" (Acts 16:16), and the seven sons of Sceva (Acts 19:14-16).

This is still true today, very evidently in non-western cultures where belief in spiritual powers is pervasive, but even in our culture (which tends to ignore or deny the existence of spiritual powers, good or bad). People are more persuaded by a changed life than by a logical argument for Christ's Lordship. That's why *each* of us, as believers, makes it easier or more difficult for others to take seriously what the church preaches. And people who have seen or experienced a miracle find it difficult to deny. Making the **invisible kingdom** of God **visible** (in all these ways and others) is just as important here and now as it was in Paul's day.

After the incident with Elymas, the mission team leaves Cyprus and sails to the mainland, to “Perga in Pamphylia” (the southern coast of modern Turkey). Notice in Acts 13:13 that Paul has become the acknowledged leader of the mission. Before it was “Barnabas and Saul” (13:2). Now it is “Paul and his companions,” which included Barnabas (13:13). Perhaps the incident with Elymas made it apparent that Paul was the natural leader and more effective preacher.

This apparent shift in the team’s dynamics may have contributed to John Mark’s decision to go back to Jerusalem (where his mother had a home, Acts 12:12). Barnabas was John Mark’s cousin (Col. 4:10); perhaps Mark felt Barnabas was being slighted. Barnabas shows no resentment, however, as the mission trip continues into un-evangelized territory without John Mark’s assistance. [Later, when Paul suggests a second missionary journey, Barnabas wants John Mark to go with them (15:36-37). Paul opposes the suggestion so strongly that he and Barnabas decide not to work as a team any longer (15:38-39). Paul eventually comes to trust John Mark and value his presence, but that will be years later (2 Tim. 4:11). We should note also that this John Mark became the writer of the Gospel of Mark!]

Paul and Barnabas go straight north from Perga, to “Antioch in Pisidia,” a significant inland city where, “on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down” (13:14). After the Scripture readings, they were invited to share “any word of encouragement for the people” (13:15). Paul proceeds to deliver one of the longer sermons found in Acts (13:16-41; again, this is likely just a summary).

We won’t comment in detail on this sermon, but notice how Paul ties the message about Christ to Israel’s history and the fulfillment of prophecy. Notice also that he addresses Jews (“men of Israel”) and Gentiles (“you who fear God”) in beginning his message (13:16). A key point in his message is 13:23, when he reminds his audience of David and the messianic promises made to him: “Of this man’s offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised.” This would have been electrifying good news to the synagogue! The Messiah has come!

But the news is not all good. Paul tells them their spiritual leaders in Jerusalem “did not recognize him [the Messiah] nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath.” Ironically, they “fulfilled” the prophecies they did not understand “by condemning him” (13:27). The Jerusalem leaders knew the Scriptures, but they couldn’t see the fulfillment of them when he was standing right in front of them! (See Jesus’ words about this in John 5:39-40.)

The Sanhedrin condemned Jesus, but they had to get the Romans to carry out the death sentence (13:28). But God overturned the verdict of both the Sanhedrin and Pilate by raising Jesus from the dead, a reality witnessed by many of Jesus’ disciples (13:29-31; cf. 1 Cor. 15:3-8). For Paul’s sermon, this is most important point: **God has vindicated Jesus as the prophesied Messiah.** To solidify the point he turns to the Scriptures which Jesus fulfilled. He cites Psalm 2:7 in Acts 13:33 (a passage used also in Heb. 1:5; 5:5), which ascribes divine sonship to the Messiah. He cites part of Isaiah 55:3 in Acts 13:34. He cites Psalm 16:10 in Acts 13:35, as Peter did in Acts 2:27, and to the same effect: David had obviously not fulfilled the promise of not seeing corruption, since he died and was still entombed in Jerusalem, “but he whom God raised up did not see corruption” (13:36-37). David’s offspring, Jesus, was thus

shown to be the Messiah—something the Sanhedrin couldn't see, but Jesus' disciples did see as witnesses of the resurrected Lord.

The 'invitation' is extended to everyone in Paul's audience: "through this man [Jesus] forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed [literally 'justified'] from everything from which you could not be freed [justified] by the Law of Moses" (13:38-39). This is a stupendous claim: Jesus provides more than the Law of Moses can, and it's available to "everyone who believes"! (Later Paul writes this contrast out in some detail, in Galatians and Romans.)

Paul must have seen a stunned look on the faces of his Jewish brethren at this point (he had just made the Torah less than Jesus!). Perhaps that is why he goes directly from an 'invitation' to receive forgiveness to a stern warning in 13:40-41:

⁴⁰ Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about:

⁴¹ "Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish;
for I am doing a work in your days,
a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you."

Acts 13:41 is a quote from Habakkuk 1:5. Paul's point is that the Jerusalem Sanhedrin had already stumbled over the truth they refused to accept. He knew from personal experience what that was like, but God in great mercy had opened his eyes (after blinding him!). Paul warns the Jews of Antioch in Pisidia not to make the same mistake he and the Sanhedrin had made.

The initial response of the synagogue audience was positive enough, with some begging to hear more on the following Sabbath, with "many Jews and devout converts to Judaism" following Paul to hear more (13:42-43). Word spread through the town, and the synagogue was packed the next Sabbath with people who didn't usually come (13:44). The Jewish religious leaders (probably how we should understand "the Jews" in vs. 45) did not react positively. "They were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him" (13:45). People who are used to being in control sometimes resent a newcomer with a message that attracts more audience than they have been able to get before.

Both "Paul and Barnabas" responded, rebuking their Jewish brethren with stern words: "Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles" (13:46). As they point out, Israel's call, the Messiah's purpose, and now the church's mission was to be "a light for the Gentiles" to "bring salvation to the ends of the earth" (13:47; citing Isa. 49:6; see also Isa. 42:6 and Acts 1:8).

The Gentiles in the audience rejoiced, and many became believers (13:48), and the message about Jesus began to spread "throughout the whole region" (13:49). Influential people, however, "stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district" (13:50). But a church was planted, including believing Jews and Gentiles! Non-believers were left fuming, no doubt, "but the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit" (13:52).

Acts 14—“Paul’s First Missionary Journey” Continues and Concludes

The experience of Paul and Barnabas at Pisidian Antioch was repeated at their next stop, Iconium. They started at the synagogue, and “a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed” (14:1). Again they experienced opposition from Jews and Gentiles (14:2). The apostles continued “speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands” (14:3). Again the opposition increased to the point where they had to leave the city, but not without starting a church (14:4-7).

At the next town, Lystra (14:8ff.), a man “crippled from birth” was healed by the Spirit-empowered word from Paul: “Stand upright on your feet.” As with the event involving Peter in Acts 3, this Gentile man “sprang up and began walking” (14:10). The aftermath, however, was quite different from the healing in Acts 3.

In Acts 3, the healing of a lame man gave Peter an opportunity to preach to Jews in Jerusalem, and to explain that the healing was done in the name of Jesus, a name they had heard (3:16). Preaching Jesus’ resurrection got Peter and John brought before the Jewish authorities, who (on that occasion) decided they couldn’t do much more than warn the apostles to stop using that name! In Acts 14, the healing is similar, but the context is totally different.

The people in Lystra misunderstood the miracle and (speaking in their native Lycaonian language, not known by Paul and Barnabas), they proclaimed, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” (14:11). They called Barnabas “Zeus” and Paul “Hermes, because he was the chief speaker” (14:12; in Greek mythology, Hermes was the messenger of the gods to men). Paul and Barnabas did not realize what was happening at first, but when the priest of Zeus started to prepare a sacrifice to them, they were appalled and rushed to stop the proceedings (14:13-14). They explained that they were only men, and that the one true God, the maker and sustainer of all the earth, was giving them an opportunity to abandon their idols and turn to the “living God.” Even with strenuous protests, they were barely able to keep the people from worshipping them (14:15-18).

This illustrates the importance of having knowledge of Scripture to go with the demonstration of the Holy Spirit’s power. Miracles can be misunderstood, if witnesses of the miracles don’t have a proper knowledge of God and his character. Miracles can get the attention of people who need to know God, but meeting that need takes careful preaching and teaching. The ideal is to preach and teach right doctrine but also to have the Holy Spirit working through the church—to convince people that the Bible is true and that Jesus is God’s Son, who died, rose, and sent the Holy Spirit who works the miracles. Word and Spirit are inseparable in the church’s mission. When the Word is separated from the Spirit, we get lifeless ideologies. When the Spirit is separated from the Word, we get confusion and possible deception (see 1 John 4:1-6).

The people of Lystra did not remain in awe of Paul and Barnabas (14:19ff.). Opponents from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium followed the apostles to Lystra and were able to provoke a crowd to stone Paul and leave him for dead. Apparently in answer to prayers by the disciples (14:20), Paul was restored to life and walked back into the city on his own two feet! The following day he and Barnabas walked on to the next town, Derbe.

After they preached in Derbe and “made many disciples” (14:21), they re-traced their steps to Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch. In each city, they had established churches, but they had also been persecuted. On this return trip, they ministered to “the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (14:22). The latter point had been amply illustrated!

It’s important to note that the apostles took time to appoint “elders for them in every church” (14:23). They did not have the attitude that many in our time have fallen into—of thinking that personal faith is all you need and the church is unnecessary to your spiritual life and health. There needs to be a **visible** church bearing continuing witness to the invisible kingdom. Even now—with all the history we have behind us, with all the divisions that have occurred, with all the differences in the ways denominations and congregations are organized, and even granting that no one church ‘has it all together’—still, with all our flaws and fractures, the visible church is vital to the nurturing of disciples and bearing witness to those who are not yet disciples. It’s not enough to say you belong to the invisible church (although you do, if you’re a believer); you need to belong to the visible church, for your own spiritual health and to help the visible church be as strong as possible—to make the invisible visible.

Acts 14 brings us full circle with Paul and Barnabas making their way back to the visible church in Antioch (Syria), “where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled” (14:26). They reported to that visible church “all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (14:27). Missionaries don’t get sent by invisible churches, or (usually) by Christian individuals who remain invisible. The work of the Holy Spirit is to make the **invisible Lordship** of Christ visible on earth in a **visible community** living under that Lordship and proclaiming the name of the risen Lord.

Making the Invisible Visible

Lesson 8: Acts 15

Sometimes we think an issue is settled but later find it is not settled after all. That can happen in any family or any organization. It happened in the early church. After Peter preached the gospel to the household of Cornelius; after the Holy Spirit filled them in a way Peter could not deny; after he commanded that they should be baptized in Jesus' name (Acts 10:44-48); and after Peter personally explained all this to his critics in the Jerusalem church (11:2-17), we might think the issue of Gentile inclusion in the church was settled: the critics "fell silent" and "glorified God, saying, 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life'" (11:18). That settles it, doesn't it? Apparently only for the time being, and not in the minds of all Jewish believers in Jesus, as we see in Acts 15.

Acts 15:1-33—What Outward Sign Is Required?

Some Jewish believers in Jesus came from Judea to Antioch (Syria) and created a great disturbance in the church by saying, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (15:1). Remember, the Antioch church was a mix of Jewish and Gentile believers from its inception. This church sent Paul and Barnabas on the "first missionary journey." This church heard the missionaries' report on "all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles" (14:27). That "door" was not opened by circumcision but by "God," and those who entered did so by "faith." In the minds of the Antioch church, circumcision was a non-issue, but Jewish Christians from Judea made it an issue.

Naturally Paul and Barnabas had a "debate" with them (15:2). This is a huge problem, with potential to split the young church, not only in Antioch but in all the cities Paul and Barnabas evangelized on the first missionary journey. Had the apostles introduced all those people to Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and appointed elders to lead the churches they planted, only to leave them **unsaved** because they left them **uncircumcised**?

The Antioch church could not decide this for themselves. If they decided one way and the Judean churches decided another way, the church as a whole could be permanently split between Christians who required circumcision and Christians who did not. Quite apart from the practical consequences of weakening a still-young church, there is the question of what is true, and that is the question of salvation and eternal life. The weight of this question cannot be exaggerated. (Luke, a Gentile, would have felt that weight when he recorded Acts 15 later. The events of Acts 15 occurred in 49 A.D.; Luke wrote Acts no earlier than the 60s and possibly as late as the 70s or 80s.)

This important and urgent issue prompted the sending of a delegation from Antioch to Jerusalem. "Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed" to represent the views and practices of the Antioch church and to consult with "the apostles and the elders" in Jerusalem" (15:2). Along the way, passing through Phoenicia and Samaria, they described "in detail the conversion of the Gentiles" (15:3), which was happening in Antioch and in the cities visited on the first missionary journey. Luke says this report "brought great joy to all the brothers." That response would have encouraged Paul and Barnabas, but it would have affected also the attitudes of these "brothers" in Phoenicia and Samaria toward the question to be debated in Jerusalem.

In 15:4, the Antioch delegation is welcomed in Jerusalem “by the church and the apostles and the elders,” to whom they “declared all that God had done with them.” We can assume Peter (after his experience at the house of Cornelius, in ch. 10) heard Paul and Barnabas with rejoicing. Probably John was also on ‘their side,’ since he took part in bringing the Samaritans into the church (ch. 8). But where do the other “apostles” and “elders” stand? And will it be left to a majority vote? Imagine how thick the tension was in the room, when “some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses’” (15:5).

To be fair to these Pharisees who believed in Jesus, we must assume their sincerity. They weren’t trying to be legalistic or ethnocentric. In their minds they were being faithful to the Scriptures. Genesis 17:9-14 makes clear that circumcision was a required sign for any male to belong to God’s covenant people. The requirement applied to those born into Israel and to those who joined Israel as a matter of choice or by being obtained as a servant. The language is unequivocal: “Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant” (Gen. 17:14). To argue their case, the Pharisee Christians in Acts 15 could point to this text and say, “Thus saith the LORD!”

The circumcision party argues from an *ideological* position, based on their understanding of Scripture and the covenant. Those protesting against the necessity of circumcising Gentile converts argue from a *pragmatic* position, based on their experience of God giving his Spirit to Gentiles. Both sides think they are right. Thus there was “much debate” (15:7) that day in Jerusalem (in 49 A.D.), and the future of the church seemed to be in the balance.

So what is the answer to those who argue for the necessity of circumcision and the other requirements of the Mosaic Law? Do Gentiles have to become practicing Jews in order to be “saved”? The answer—as put forward by Peter, Paul, and Barnabas—is that the Holy Spirit has already shown that Gentiles don’t have to become Jews in order to be saved (i.e., to have a saving relationship with God). It’s an argument from **experience**, but it’s backed by **Scripture** (as James later articulates the conclusion, 15:13-17). In contrast, the Pharisee Christians’ argument is from **Scripture alone**. They cannot demonstrate that God has *not* made his saving presence real in uncircumcised Gentiles (and perhaps they have never had fellowship with someone like Cornelius or the Gentile Christians in Antioch). On the other hand, Peter, Paul, and Barnabas have abundant *evidence* that God *has given his Spirit* to uncircumcised Gentiles.

Peter reminds everyone what happened to uncircumcised Gentiles at the home of Cornelius, but first he reminds them how he got to Cornelius’s house: “God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe” (15:7). Not Peter’s choice but *God’s choice* sent him there to preach the gospel and give them an opportunity to believe. Peter then reminds them what happened: “And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, ⁹ and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith” (15:8-9).

Peter’s argument in 15:8-9 is powerful: “**God** . . . knows the heart” in ways the circumcision party cannot! **God** “bore witness to them”; if the uncircumcised Gentiles were acceptable to God, how can they not be acceptable to the circumcision party? **God** gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles “just as he did to us,” not only accompanied by the gifts (such as

tongues and prophecy) but **as a gift**. Peter and other Jewish believers in Jesus know they did not earn the Holy Spirit by their circumcision and observation of food laws, etc. If anything ‘qualified’ them to receive the Holy Spirit, it was faith in Jesus, who “poured out” the “promise of the Holy Spirit,” which the exalted Son “received from the Father” (Acts 2:33). What Peter said to the Pentecost crowd proved valid for Gentiles: “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the **gift** of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38, emphasis added). Peter now sees the fuller truth of what he preached at Pentecost: “For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (2:39). In light of experience, Peter now understands that “all who are far off” includes the Gentiles (see Eph. 2:11-22; especially note Eph. 2:13: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ”).

Peter continues his argument in Acts 15:9: **God** “made no distinction between us and them”; how can we make a distinction or a division where God has not? **God** had “cleansed their hearts by faith.” And then, bringing his argument to an emphatic conclusion, Peter asks his fellow Jewish disciples of Jesus: “Now, therefore, why are you putting **God** to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ But we believe that we will be saved through the **grace** of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (15:10–11, emphasis added). If **God** did not place that “yoke on the neck of the disciples,” why would we require them to follow all those laws (not just circumcision) “that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?” Jewish disciples’ confidence for salvation should not be in their observation of the Law but in “the grace of the Lord Jesus” (15:10). Simply put, whether you are Jewish or Gentile, your salvation in Jesus is based on **God’s grace**, received by **faith**.

Peter’s case (and his standing among the Twelve) was persuasive. Perhaps that’s why Luke records more of Peter’s words here than the words from Barnabas and Paul, which are simply summarized in 15:12. Their words backed up what Peter said. **God** had worked “signs and wonders” “among the Gentiles.” The outward “sign” which shows people belong to God (i.e., are saved by faith in him) is **not circumcision**; the unambiguous “sign” is **God’s presence and power** in their lives, making them different (as temples of the Holy Spirit) and giving them power to serve God’s sanctifying and healing purposes in the world.

Finally, in 15:13, James (the ‘half- brother’ of Jesus, who seems to be presiding) weighs in. This is the same James referred to in 1 Corinthians 15:7, the writer of the Epistle of James, and apparently the *de facto* leader of the home church in Jerusalem (see Acts 12:17). James essentially agrees with Peter, Paul, and Barnabas (although he only names “Simeon” in 15:14, a variant spelling of “Simon,” NIV). Because it ties in with the Scripture he quotes in 15:16-17, it’s helpful to notice James’s wording in 15:14: “Simeon has related how God first visited the **Gentiles**, to take from them **a people for his name**” (emphasis added). This phenomenon of Gentiles being claimed by God for his own agrees with (we could say “fulfills”) “the words of the prophets” (15:15).

James quotes from Amos 9:11-12. Its relevance to the controversy is the mention of “Gentiles” being included in God’s people—“that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and **all the Gentiles who are called by my name**, says the Lord” (15:17, emphasis added). The influx of Gentiles into the church is one result of God’s rebuilding of “the tent of David” (15:16),

which is understood to be a messianic prophecy—the final and lasting restoration of David’s throne in the kingdom of God, in the person of David’s Son, Jesus.

“Therefore,” James concludes, “my judgment is that we should not trouble [NIV: make it difficult for] those of the Gentiles who turn to God” (15:19). That officially settles the issue: Gentile converts don’t need circumcision, the food laws, Sabbath observance on Saturday, or the other laws which applied to Israel in the past. Jewish believers could still live by those standards, if they so choose, but the church will not impose specifically Jewish laws on Gentile converts to Christ.

James go on to say the church in Jerusalem should write a letter to Gentile Christians, exhorting them “to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood” (15:20, essentially repeated but not word for word in 15:29, as part of the letter). It’s helpful to notice (briefly) the reasoning for each of these exhortations:

“Things polluted by idols” (15:20) are discussed at length by Paul in 1 Corinthians 8-10 (written about 55 A.D., six years after Acts 15). Paul’s understanding and application of the Jerusalem decision was that Gentile Christians should have no spiritual qualms about eating meat sold in the market. They should not ask whether the meat came from an animal sacrificed in a pagan temple. If eating in someone else’s home, Christians should not ask where the meat came from. If told it came from a pagan sacrifice, Christians should abstain from eating—not because the meat has inherent power to contaminate you but because of concern for the conscience of others (1 Cor. 8:7-12). This nuanced understanding shows Paul did not regard the Jerusalem letter of Acts 15 to be a binding law on the issue of food offered to idols, but rather as good counsel to avoid causing others to stumble.

The same reasoning would probably apply to the exhortation to “abstain . . . from what has been strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:20). James seems to be thinking of the consciences of others (especially Jews) when he states the following: “For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues” (15:21). In other words, Jews scattered throughout the Empire would be grossly offended by Gentile Christians consuming blood. This is a request from the church in Jerusalem for Gentile Christians to avoid the needless scandal, to which Jews would react viscerally, whether they were Christians or not.

An additional (or alternative) explanation for the request to abstain from consuming blood comes from the Torah (the Pentateuch, or the Books of Moses). In Genesis 9:3-4, after the flood, God gives humanity permission to eat “every moving thing that lives” (9:3). The one restriction placed on this was “you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood” (9:4). This was a prohibition for all humanity, not just for Israel (who did not yet exist as a nation). Later this prohibition was repeated specifically for Israel’s covenant with God (see Lev. 17:10-14; Deut. 12:16, 23). Especially in Leviticus 17:11, animal blood is connected with atonement. But

the general principle—applied to all animals, not just sacrifices—is that “life . . . is in the blood.” Thus blood possesses a sacredness all people should respect.

The reasoning for instructing Gentile Christians to “abstain . . . from sexual immorality” is different from the rationale to abstain from food offered to idols and from blood. Sexual immorality is, of course, forbidden by the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:14). But so is Sabbath-breaking (Exod. 20:8-11), and the Jerusalem letter makes no mention of the Sabbath (even though Gentile Christians would have no culture of observing the Sabbath, and if they were slaves they would not be able to adopt Sabbath observance). The Jerusalem letter makes no mention of other commandments, such as those against lying or stealing. Gentile values on such things were already in place. Sexual immorality is singled out in the letter because it was so widespread and culturally tolerated among Gentiles. Indeed, sexual immorality was actually encouraged as a frequent part of pagan temple ‘worship.’ The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem knew this would be a great cultural challenge for Christian converts who grew up as pagans.

The reality of this cultural challenge is illustrated repeatedly in 1 Corinthians. Paul has to instruct Corinthian *Christians* that their bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, not meant for sexual immorality (1 Cor. 6:13-20). In 1 Corinthians 10:7-8, Paul links idolatry with sexual immorality. And in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 he rebukes the whole church for tolerating what their pagan (but decently moral) neighbors would not tolerate: a man in the church “has his father’s wife” (5:1)! Given the scope of sexual impropriety in the Corinthian church, we can well understand why the Jerusalem letter to Gentile converts singled out this particular sin as something deserving vigilant attention.

As already noted, the letter sent to the Gentile converts (15:23-29) essentially contained the same exhortations articulated by James in 15:19-21. Importantly it also contained a disavowal of those who “have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions” (15:24). In other words, those people who told you to get circumcised and keep the Mosaic Law were not authorized to tell you such things. Of equal value is the letter’s commendation and approval of “our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (15:25-26). And in case someone might question the legitimacy of the letter, other witnesses from the council were sent out, to confirm the words of the letter and to encourage the Gentile Christians: “Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers” (15:22, named in the letter in 15:27). [Silas would become Paul’s partner on his second and third missionary journeys, from 15:40.]

The letter reports that the council of apostles and elders had reached “one accord” on the debated issue of circumcision and observance of Mosaic Law (15:25). But the council did not claim to have reached a merely human decision. They claimed divine guidance: “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (15:28). This is a point worth making. The same Holy Spirit who directed Peter to go to Cornelius’s house, and who later guided the direction taken by Paul and Silas (see Acts 16:6-10), was present in the council and guiding them to a correct decision. This guidance—which provided so much encouragement in Antioch (15:30-31) and in

the cities previously evangelized by Paul and Barnabas (16:4-5)—this arrival at a sense of the Holy Spirit’s direction is another example of the **invisible** becoming **visible**.

Acts 15 began with **visible lack of unity** in Antioch, as Paul and Barnabas debated the people who arrived from Judea with ideas to set things right (according to their way of thinking; see 15:1-2). Although it was not an easy task, the Jerusalem council made the right decision by the help of the Holy Spirit and by their willingness to listen to one another (see also 1 John 4:6). They reached **visible unity** (in the decision and in the letter) which encouraged the continued growth of the church toward completion of our mission: to make disciples of Jesus in “all nations” (Matt. 28:19). [For Jesus’ prayer for our unity, see John 17:11, 20-23.]

When we read passages like Philippians 3:2-11 (written after 60 A.D., more than a decade after the Jerusalem council in Acts 15, 49 A.D.), it’s apparent that not everyone ‘got on board’ with the council’s decision. Thus Paul had to make the case in Romans 4 that Abraham was justified in the eyes of God because of his faith, years before he was circumcised (Rom. 4:9-12, written in 57 A.D.). [It seems most scholars now believe Galatians was written in 48 or early 49 A.D., before the Jerusalem council. That is my own view. But certainly Paul had strong words then against imposing circumcision on Gentile converts. See Gal. 3:1-9; 5:1-12; 6:12-15.]

So we conclude this particular series of lessons approximately in the middle of Acts. As we know the Book of Acts ends with Paul as a prisoner in Rome, awaiting his hearing before the Emperor. Perhaps Luke deliberately left the reader with an unfinished story. But if the Apostle Paul has gotten to Rome (after starting as Saul the arch-persecutor of the church), perhaps we are to conclude that nothing can ultimately stop the plan and the power Jesus gave to the church: to “receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and . . . be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).